

The China Contract

— A novel —

By Lance Mason

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Inspector Nigel Hawkins had turned his emotional life into an unraveling circus act, a situation about to be made worse by an airport bombing, three murders, and more in the works.

As the smiling woman lay on her back, languid in the late afternoon, Hawkins's fingertip drew slow circles around her bold, raspberry nipple. The hot perfumes of sex, so pungent in the room a short time before, now lay like cold smoke after a furious blaze. His passions were on idle here, as they were now in most of his life.

The woman was a little jaded. Arms outstretched, she said, "I think you should quit the police, Baby. I really do."

In a pig's ass, Hawkins thought, yet he grinned at her, anxious to avoid a row. "I thought you found it exciting, Julia, all the procedures and uniforms and soap-opera jargon."

"I suppose I did—once. But now it's become rather a bore," she said, feigning a yawn. "Most of what you people do is tiresome and boring."

Hawkins faked a smile. "No dash, eh?"

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

"I should quit?"

"Direttamente. Ciao, polizia!"

This galled him, too, her speaking in tongues. All of it was crap, really, but he wasn't ready to call her on it. More disruption he didn't need in his life just then. "Well, I'm sorry, Sweetheart"—*Sweetheart?* Even that felt cockeyed—"but a cop's what I am. It's all I'm good at."

Her hand stretched deep under the sheets, her eyes rolling up. "Oh, but you're good at so much *more*." A celebrity TV newsreader, she had a touch for the histrionic. Just then, though, Hawkins's old clamshell cellphone bleated from where it lay on the nightstand. Her voice iced over. "Don't answer that, Nigel."

Hawkins reached for the phone as it chirped away, but Julia grabbed it first. "Come on, now," he said, cajoling, "please hand me the phone. It'll be important. They wouldn't be ringing me on Sunday if—"

"I'm important! I'm *darned* important"—she was straining now—"and this is unfair. I won't be displaced by your job—I've told you that before." She held the phone away from him. It rang insistently.

"No one's trying to displace you. If they're ringing on my day off, they'll have a good reason."

Then the ringing stopped. "There," she said, appeased, "the service picked up."

Julia had been his lover for the past—what?—five, six months, the woman he'd left Sue for, a sin that had grown into a cancer. He lay back into the pillow, his smile gone. "It's not on the service."

"What? You let them ring right through? When you and I are together like this?"
 "Look, I told you—"

She leapt up from the bed, snatching a wrap around her firm, alabaster shoulders. With its sculpted angles and fine lengths of limb, her shape was a stark contrast to his squat, broad-shouldered slab of a body, all blunt flesh and muscle. She lit a cigarette, a habit Hawkins had always found unclean. Her gaze swiveled to the window and followed the rain rattling across St. Mary's Bay. "Your work is more important to you than I am."

Bloody well right it is, Hawkins thought. Yet, propped up on an elbow, he scrubbed his palm over his stubbly hair, hoping the body language of frustration looked genuine. "Julia, I gave up my marriage for you," he lied.

"Did you?" she said, giving his charade a sarcastic nod. "Did you, now?" Then her face went blank. "Well, that's bullshit, Nigel, and we both know it. You left your wife because you were bored rigid."

This was true, if painful.

"You wanted the adventure of being with someone worldly—being with me."

"Look, Julia, they know not to call me unless it's urgent. Police work can't just be put on hold while we 'indulge our passions,' so to speak."

"So—to—*speak*," she said, scoffing at him. "Well, it was on hold twenty minutes ago when you were *fucking me*, wasn't it." As she dropped the phone on the bed, it began ringing again. Hawkins reached for it guardedly, and Julia gave him a black look.

He clicked the phone open. "Hawkins here. Yeah, hello, Ted." He paused, then his words came in a clipped routine. "Yeah, yeah. I was, uh, indisposed, mate. This isn't something that could wait?" Ted Johns was Superintendent and District Commander for South Auckland. As he spoke, Hawkins sat up. He felt his face tighten. By the time Johns was finished, Hawkins's mouth was so dry that his tongue labored to shape his words. "Yeah, I'm up the hill in Shelley Beach Road. I'll be ready when McKegg gets here." He rang off and reached for his clothes.

Julia, arms akimbo, hit a high note. "You're *leaving*?"

"McKegg's on his way." He stood now, all five foot-seven of him in bare feet. "I can't give you any details of—"

"I don't want any details!" She'd been through this too many times. "I don't give a *shit* about your details."

Futility loomed at Hawkins's shoulder. "No, I don't suppose you do."

"Nigel, if you go now, don't come back. If you can't even spend a Sunday afternoon alone with me, we're finished."

There it was, Hawkins's own little Rubicon, but he'd try to finesse it, as he had before, trying to believe himself. "Yes, Sweetheart, as unfair as it is, it isn't something I can put off. You know I would if I could."

"I won't be pushed aside every time your mobile phone rings."

Hawkins's tolerance was fading. "Julia, I've seen you work. You'll push anything aside if it means a story or an interview for the nine o'clock news."

"That's different, Nigel. That's the public's need to know. What are they ringing you for—a motorway crash?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"You know I wouldn't reveal a source."

"That's not the point, Julia. It's against regulations. I'd tell you if I could."

"Oh! Of course you would!" she said, chipping at him again. "That's more bullshit, Nigel. It's just your little kingdom of power, your obsession with control." She swiveled away from him and then back, her fair hair whipping around her face. "What is it really, now? Did one of our ghastly black bastards kill another ghastly black bastard today?"

Revulsion washed over him. He tasted the rising bile. He'd seen her before when her self-absorbed social bias smoke-screened her blatant ignorance of the real world. When her delicate features hid the coarseness beneath. When her upper-middle-class conceits painted those unlike her as beneath contempt. Now he spit out his words. "You and your arrogant friends can wallow around all you like in your poncey, racist cliques, but next time I hear you use that kind of remark, I'll bring over a couple of my Maori mates so we can have a nice chat about it."

"You and your 'Maori mates?'" she said with a sneer. "Listen to the man, a true *tohunga* of our great native culture. Isn't that huge of him! Well, hear this and hear it good, *mate*," she said, aiming a manicured nail at his battle-scarred face. "There isn't going to be a *next time*." The gloves were off. "I'm sick of this bullshit, I'm sick of cop cars coming to my house to get you—it makes me feel *exposed*—and I'm sick of you. Get your things, and get out!"

Though wrapped in a fog of his own anger, Hawkins heard the lack of ambivalence, the clear finality, in Julia's wrath. He picked up his sports duffel and coat, muttered, "Have it your way," and turned for the door. On the way, he used his forearm to deflect a flying tea mug.

* * *

Four hours before, Auckland International Airport –

Inside the Departures Hall, Richard Telford wheeled his luggage trolley toward Air New Zealand's First Class check-in. A thin, bespectacled man, Telford flicked specks of lint from his chalk-stripe, navy blue suit, a custom-tailored garment by which his body would later be identified.

Once at the agent's counter, Telford handed over his tickets and passport to a liveried woman who spoke with the sharp vowels and wayward "r"s of a down-country New Zealander.

"NZ6 to Los Angeles?" *Enzeed-seeks toe Lohs Ain-juhleez?*

He'd grown use to the accent. "Yes, that's right."

"You've been here six weeks, Mr. Telford? Did you enjoy your stay in our wee country?"

Telford said he had, and expected to return soon, but the complexity of his plans, the motivations that consumed his life and compelled him to travel to this faraway corner of Western Civilization, were beyond the grasp of anyone not immersed in the science of nanotechnology, a discipline global in impact and microscopic in scale.

"Now, sir, before we check your bags, has anyone asked you to carry . . .?"

The assassin who had come to New Zealand to kill Telford watched from across the passenger hall. He was much taller, with a rat's nest of brown hair and an ugly gray suit that camouflaged a battle-hardened body. Scanning the front page of *The Dominion*, one of New Zealand's dailies, he seemed oblivious to any movements around him.

His check-in done, Telford pocketed his documents and headed for the escalator up to the second-floor boarding gates. The other man folded his newspaper, swept up a brown carry-on, and followed Telford to the escalator, closing the gap between them. As they rode up, the man gazed around idly, slipping something onto his left ring finger. When Telford stepped onto the second-floor landing, the killer raised his left hand, smacked it down on the American's shoulder, and swiveled up to his side.

"G'day, Gordy, me old mate! 'Ow're ya goin'?"

The hand-slap had masked the jab from the poisoned barb on the ring. Telford turned his head, still relaxed, accustomed now to the inordinate friendliness of New Zealanders. "I'm sorry, but I think you've got the wrong—"

"*Bloody Hell*, mate!" said the tall man. "My apologies! I thought you was a bloke I used to work with, eh."

"That's okay."

The wild-haired man shook his head. "No, crikey, mate, I'm sorry. A fella can't go 'round sneakin' up on blinkin' strangers like that, can he?"

Telford's vision began to blur, and the floor melted under him. The garrulous stranger grew a second head.

"Say, mate, you okay?"

"No," said Telford, "I . . . it seems—"

"'Ere, 'ere, let me getcha to a seat, old son. Over 'ere, 'way from the crowd." He reached for Telford's black briefcase. "I'll hold this for ya, now."

"No, not . . . not my . . . I . . ." Saliva spilled from Telford's lips, and the other man led him off to a padded bench and helped him lie down under floor-to-ceiling tinted windows overlooking the roadway.

Bystanders turned away, not wanting to stare at a man suddenly taken ill. As his victim's functions collapsed, the killer loosened Telford's necktie and shirt cuffs, and stole his platinum cufflinks. He slid a pen-sized device under the sleeve of the blue suit and injected its contents into a limp arm. While straightening Telford's clothes, the assailant lifted his passport, wallet, and boarding pass and dropped them into his own carry-on. He took out a small, firm cushion, placed it under the American's head, and applied a skin patch on the man's bare neck. Then he rose, picked up Telford's black briefcase, and walked briskly away.

Forty minutes to take-off.

The tall man strode out of the terminal under ranks of granite-gray clouds rolling in from the sea. Acrid jet-exhaust hung in the air. He crossed the parking lot to a solitary white van, climbed in, removed his wig, and changed his suit and shoes. He stripped Telford's wallet of money, IDs, and credit cards, put them in a used, empty wallet, and stowed it and the boarding pass in the black briefcase. He waited ten more minutes, tossed a second doctored passport into the briefcase, and then strolled back into the terminal with it and the brown carry-on.

A woman's voice on the public address system chanted, *"Last call for boarding NZ6 to Los Angeles. Will the following passengers please report to Gate Number 8? Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Burcher, Mr. Richard Telford . . ."*

The assassin rode up the escalator, bought some chocolates and a book, and saw that his target lay undisturbed.

Fifteen minutes to take-off. Five minutes passed.

"Last boarding call for Flight NZ6 to Los Angeles," the woman announced. *"Last and final call."*

At 2:06 PM, NZ6 lifted off the tarmac. A large, athletic man with trim black hair and tinted, horn-rim glasses jogged up to the Air New Zealand check-in counter.

"Oh my God! I'm awful sorry. I just missed my flight!"

The woman agent looked him up and down. "Are you Mr. Telford?"

"Yes, yes, I am." He rummaged in the black briefcase, grabbed the counterfeit passport, and pushed it across to her. She examined it and handed it back. "I'm *really* sorry," he said. "There's been a mix-up at the lab on the Shore. I've been on the phone for almost two hours trying to fix it, but no go. I'm going to have to stay another day or two. I suppose my bags are on the plane?"

"No, sir, security rules—we have to off-load unaccompanied bags."

A grimace of contrition. "I really am sorry. I feel terrible."

She nodded. "Emergencies happen. May I see your boarding pass?" He held it out. "Very well," she said, and pointed across the concourse. "Baggage Services there will help you reclaim your bags. They'll want to see your boarding pass and passport again."

Twenty minutes later, the man in the glasses left the building with Richard Telford's luggage for a final visit to the white van. Half an hour later, he was at Singapore Airlines' Economy check-in. In his one large bag were certain of Telford's belongings packed alongside his own, including several more forged passports.

"It's close to boarding call, Mr. Telford," said the coffee-colored gentleman at the Singapore Airlines' desk, "but you'll be fine. Here you are, sir, your passport and boarding card. Enjoy your flight."

"Telford" rode up to the Embarkation Lounge and sat down within sight of the real Richard Telford lying on the bench, the pillow under his head. Thirty minutes passed. Passers-by glanced over, but no one disturbed the tired passenger dozing through a long layover.

Telford's assassin stood with his belongings, checked through immigration and security, and boarded Flight 286. Twelve minutes later, through veils of drizzle, the airliner, bound for Singapore, began its take-off run. The tall man in spectacles reached down into the carry-on and, unseen, switched batteries on a cellphone. As 286 lifted off with a whine and a shudder, he switched on the phone and pressed SEND. A millisecond blip flashed on the pilot's instruments, and the abandoned van in the carpark below exploded red and golden against a cloud-packed horizon.

At the same instant, inside the terminal, a second, smaller blast decapitated Richard Telford, blowing out the windows beside him and scattering fragments of his skull and highly prized brain over the crowd of waiting passengers.

Nigel Hawkins got the call from Ted Johns within the hour.