

THE GRAND CANDIDIUS HOTEL

歡迎光臨康堤紐斯大飯店

Welcome, dear guests, to the Grand Candidius Hotel: a five-star establishment complete with all the best accoutrements and modern facilities, a marriage of high style and elegance, a jewel overlooking the lake – truly a paradise on earth.

Or it was, until the morning its owner, Pai Wei-To, was found dead on a jogging path, with water in his lungs and a bullet in his back. An ensuing investigation carried out in this beautiful place of leisure begins to peel back one layer of intrigue after another. A famous avian biologist, a retired policeman, a lawyer with old ties to the victim's family, and an infamous criminal all surface in the case, but while everyone's guilty of something, no one was meant to die.

Veteran crime novelist Lee Po-Ching leads us down into the darkness, spinning riddles with riddles, unveiling a dark world beneath a beautiful surface. The hotel's inner world, like the book's narrative, is mercilessly captivating: as the Eagles famously sang, "you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave."

Lee Po-Ching 李柏青

In his ideal world, Lee Po-Ching is a professional writer who practices law on the side; unfortunately, reality is exactly the opposite. The well-known crime writer and essayist has published several books, including the historical novel *The Destruction of Shu*, and the mystery novels *Dearest You* and *The Last Train Home*.



Category: Crime Fiction

Publisher: Sharp Point

Date: 1/2017

Rights contact:

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Pages: 304

Length: 140,000 characters

(approx. 90,000 words in English)

Rights sold: Korean (Gimm-Young)

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By Lee Po-Ching

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Prologue

In 2015, the travel magazine *Crowded Sun* had this to say about the Grand Candidius Hotel:

The Candidius has everything a five-star hotel ought to have: comfortable rooms, good service, in-house spa, excellent cuisine and a quality wine list...Yet beyond that, the hotel is a dreamlike creation tucked away in the last patch of untouched scenery in Taiwan's central mountains. It perches on a two hundred-foot cliff above the blue waters of a perfect alpine lake, its two pure white wings outstretched like an angel's, embracing every shade of blue and green. You will scarcely mind the hundreds of stone steps you have to descend, when you find yourself immersed in nature on the narrow pathway between the cliff and the edge of the lake. What is that lapping, rustling, blowing sound? It is the ancient hymn of the forest. It is the drumming of this island's heartbeat.

But Prosecutor Wang Chun-Ying was in no mood to listen to hymns or heartbeats. As his department-issue car sped along the highway around the lake, Wang cursed himself for the bad decisions he'd made since last night.

"Shooting death of the Chairman of the Board of the Grand Candidius Hotel."

The name of the case alone indicated that it would be dangerously complicated. There would be political factors and big money, the public and the press. It might cause ripples beyond the local, up to the seats of national power. And it just had to happen on the first of January, 2016, when his wife and son were away in Japan, and Wang had arranged four days of uninterrupted leave for himself. It should have had nothing to do with him, if only that silly bitch from Fung Section hadn't broken her leg at a New Year's Eve party. What was she doing going to New Year parties at her age? Better if she'd broken her damn neck. And how did she know about Wang and Chia-Fen? Had she seen them at a motel? Had Chia-Fen told her?

Ratted out. Wasn't that just the story of his life? He was middle-aged, and he had been pushed about as long as he could remember. He had never done anything of note, and never managed to ride on anyone else's coattails, either. But he'd had plenty of practice handling the crap no one else wanted to deal with. Now he wasn't going to be able to afford to send his boy to a decent school overseas, his wife was just about ready to ask for a divorce, and Chia-Fen was going to leave him because he wasn't buying her any Chanel bags. Prosecutor Wang Chun-Ying, pride of his university, Prosecutor Level 12, the Republic of China's last line of defense against lawlessness, had little to look forward to beyond loneliness, diabetes, stroke, breathing tubes, wheelchairs, and sponge baths.

Even worse, the detective on the case was Tsai Kuo-An.

Detective Tsai was the three-hundred-pound gorilla of the Central Taiwan Police. He was hard as nails and he always got his man. More importantly, he had friends at the National Police Agency and among the local gangs. The good, the bad, and the ugly, he knew them all. By rank, he was still only a junior detective, but police commissioners watched their mouths around Detective Tsai. In the prosecutor's office he already had a little "leave-it-to-Tsai" fan club, a bunch of clock watchers who were more than happy to hand over their responsibilities to him. "You give Tsai the hardest cases," they liked to explain, "then sign what he wants you to sign, issue the warrants he wants you to issue, and like

magic, a complete case appears on your desk a week later. All you have to do is stamp it and take it to court. You have a little more time to play with your kids, take your wife out to dinner, or take someone else out to dinner. And isn't that what life's all about?"

If he got his claws into this investigation...

Wang shook his head violently. Fuck, he's only a junior detective. The law says the Prosecutor's Office leads the investigation, let's not forget that! Wang clenched his fist, his face grim. "I'll have to show them who's in charge. I'll call a meeting first thing, and take every cop on the case down a peg or two, let them know who's boss....Just give them a little taste of me, and those blockheads won't know what's hit them. I'm the one who'll solve this case, no one else. Doesn't matter if they've got three heads and six arms, if I work this case, I'll see through their dirt and secrets. The press conference afterwards is the thing. All the police standing in a line behind me, Mr. Wang of the Prosecutor's Office—Oh!"

Wang's fantasy came to its climax as he pulled up at the entrance of the Grand Candidus Hotel. One of the uniformed police came over and politely opened his door for him, but the prosecutor was a moment too slow in returning from his reverie, and tripped as he stepped out of the car. He would have made a groveling entrance to the crime scene, but he was saved by a bear-sized paw that shot out and caught him by the head.

"Careful, now." The large hand, which seemed to grip Wang's head like a basketball, gently set him down on the ground. Wang was about to launch into a withering rebuke when he saw the insignia on the jacket in front of him. He took a step back, and his eyes met an icy stare that deflated him.

"Kuo-...Kuo-An! Thank you for your, uh, help."

"Just doing my job." Tsai's pitted face twisted into a smile which seemed only skin-deep. "Happy New Year, Prosecutor."

"Yes, happy New Year. How is the, ah, case?"

"Our station awaits your instructions, Prosecutor."

Wang straightened his suit and tie, and raised his voice. "Very good. It's good to be efficient about these things. Let's not waste time with any formalities then, lead on."

Tsai led the prosecutor through the lobby of the hotel, towards the north wing of the building. A scattering of guests sat around the lobby. They had heard rumors of a death, and now a whisper ran through them at the sight of Tsai and Wang sweeping past, comically mismatched in height.

Wang quickened his pace, drawing himself up taller and puffing out his chest. His patent leather shoes clacked on the marble floor. "You've been busy lately, I see. That investigation in town is not finished yet? The police are the right people to look into something like that, the death of a streetwalker. But this sort of affair, respectable members of society, business interests...it's best left to me. I majored in economics at university, you know. There are a lot of financial issues that you wouldn't really be able to handle. I'll make a call to your colonel and ask him to assign your best detectives. If it's just two or three of you little kittens—"

As he was still speaking, Tsai opened the door of the Second Banquet Hall. Inside was a hive of activity. A dozen police officers were bustling back and forth around the room, accompanied by the clacks and beeps of landlines, cell phones, keyboards, and fax machines. A whiteboard was covered in photographs, plans, and reports, and a printer was spitting out page after page of new documents.

"Two or three little kittens, you were saying, Prosecutor?" Tsai asked.

Wang gave a high-pitched chuckle. "I was...yes, my boy brought two or three little kittens home with him the other day. Look, my suit's covered in cat fur....My goodness, what a lot of people there are here! I didn't realize it was quite so...Should we have a little briefing, to talk about the latest progress?"

As he said it, several of the police looked up at him, the irritation plain on their faces.

"It's only been a few hours since the crime was reported. There's not much point in a briefing now," Tsai said. "Everybody's very busy, as you can see."

“Just a small-scale meeting? What if we just asked the lead people...”

“I’ll bring you up to date, Prosecutor. Perhaps we can talk as we go?” Without waiting for an answer, Tsai called over a young uniformed cop. “Yu-Cheng, bring a copy of the file. We’re going for a walk.”

At 6:28 a.m. on Friday, January 1, 2016, the duty station received a telephone call reporting the discovery of the body of a man who may have been shot on the lakeside path behind the Grand Candidus Hotel. Local police arrived thirty minutes later, and secured the scene. Detectives and the medical examiner arrived at around 9 a.m. The victim proved to be Pai Wei-To, chairman of the board of the Grand Candidus Hotel. A bullet entry wound approximately 0.5 cm in diameter was observed on the victim’s back, to the left of the heart. Numerous minor scrapes were found on the victim’s face and hands. The victim wore a pale grey vest and black jogging pants, with sports socks on his feet, but no shoes. Except for 25 dollars in loose change, nothing else was found on the victim’s body, which was soaking wet, with wet sand all through his hair and clothing.

The police initially believed that the cause of death was the bullet wound, but the medical examiner found otherwise. The bullet entered the victim’s body from behind, passing through the thorax, and lodging between two ribs. However, it did not damage either the heart or an artery. Foam and sand were found in the victim’s trachea, suggesting that he was submerged in water while still alive. The medical examiner believes that the victim did not die instantly when shot, but fell into the lake, struggled back out, then finally died from loss of blood. When the body was discovered, it was not yet cold, and rigor mortis had not set in, so the death most likely occurred no more than 90 minutes before, perhaps between five and five-thirty a.m.

“Lakeside path?” Wang’s face registered confusion.

“That’s right, on the path. Is there a problem?”

“Er...I don’t see a path. What path?”

The three of them were standing in the parking lot on the north side of the hotel. The end of the lot gave directly onto the cliff, and Wang was leaning up against the railing, gazing out into the sparkling blue skies. Lake Candidus was as bright as quicksilver, a shining inlay among the mountain peaks.

“The path is at the foot of the cliff, Prosecutor, sir.” The speaker was the young police officer, Lo Yu-Cheng. He stood, back perfectly straight, face a picture of earnest focus.

Wang peered downwards. Through the rocks and branches, he could just make out a thin ribbon of a walkway, almost exactly level with the surface of the lake. Suddenly someone shoved him from behind, and Wang dropped straight to the ground with screech of fear. But when he turned to address the culprit, Tsai Kuo-An was already leading the way onto the stone steps that descended to the lake. “There is a way down here. We can talk as we go.”

A stream of obscenities rose and died on Wang’s lips, but he suddenly caught sight of two closed-circuit security cameras on street lights alongside, one of them pointing directly at the top of the stone stairway. He allowed himself a pleased little nod, and quickened his pace to catch up with them.

The victim, Pai Wei-To, was 50 years old. Resident of Taichung, married, no children. Founded the Wei-To Construction Company at age 33, now the owner of several companies including Wei-To Construction, Grand Candidus Hotel Company, Wei-To Developments, and Lan-Hsin Construction. Business interests include both construction and hotels. Personal wealth measured in the hundreds of millions.

The Grand Candidus Hotel opened in 2009. Pai Wei-To moved the offices of all his enterprises to the second floor of the hotel building, and he himself moved into staff accommodation nearby. (Naturally, it was the kind of staff accommodation that consists three apartments knocked together into one luxury suite with a lake view.) Initial inquiries made of Pai Wei-To’s widow and hotel staff members suggest that Pai spent most of his time working, and that his habits were ordinary. He worked from 8:00

a.m. to 9:00 p.m. every day, and did not appear to have enemies. Everyone seemed shocked and sorry that such a terrible thing should have happened to the chairman.

Police databases confirmed this. Beyond a few violations of zoning regulations, and an accusation of fraud that was clearly part of a business dispute, Pai had no criminal record whatsoever.

“Ha—have—have you found the murder weapon?” Wang panted. The stone steps had been cut into a natural crack in the cliff, and a handrail added for safety. They were not steep, but Wang had not slept, and his knees ached at the best of times. The descent was an ordeal.

“No. We haven’t found the gun, or any bullet casings. Only the bullet recovered from the body.” As Tsai spoke, the young Lo Yu-Cheng slid a sheet of A4 paper out of the file and handed it to Wang. It contained photographs of the bullet from four different angles.

“6.5 millimeter semi-rimmed, produced by the Japanese during World War II.”

“A rifle?”

The two policemen turned and looked at him, a little surprised. “The kind the Japanese police used to carry. A lot of the aboriginal tribes use them as hunting rifles now. Last year we sent you a case of illegal possession involving a weapon of the same kind.”

“Oh—oh—yes. Secured a conviction on that one,” Wang panted. “So, you think this was a local? From the area around the lake?”

“Not necessarily. It could have been anyone who got hold of a gun and bullets. It’s not particularly hard. We’ll have to look into it.”

“What was Pai doing on the path so early in the morning?”

“Jogging. Hotel staff say he jogged for an hour at five o’clock every morning.”

“Jogged up and down these steps?”

“I’m sure he had strong knees.”

Just before Wang’s own knees buckled under the strain, the three of them reached the narrow walkway at the base of the cliff. It was an extension of the steps that snaked in sinuous curves between the rippling wall of rock and the misty expanse of the lake. The path was virtually level with the surface of the water, with a guardrail along the edge. It was wider and flatter than Wang had imagined. A string of LED lights ran along the rock face, one every few inches. Lo Yu-Cheng said that the lakeside path was open 24 hours a day. It was a selling point for the hotel: night time strollers could enjoy the lapping of the lake and a clear view of the Milky Way.

The three men walked along the path until a turn of the rocks brought them to where the scene had been taped off.

“This is where the body was lying. Pai fell like this,” said Tsai, as his junior handed over a sheaf of photographs: the victim lying with his body on the path, his legs in the water. A bullet wound in his back. Blood spreading on the shirt, his body covered in slime from the lake. He looked pitiful.

“What’s this?” Wang pointed at chalk marks on the path.

“Blood. This is probably where he was when he was shot, about ten feet from where we found the body. It matches what the examiner said: The victim fell into the lake when he was shot, floated a distance, then pulled himself back onto land, where he collapsed.”

“Which direction was Pai running?”

“The same direction we just walked. His residence – they call it ‘Staff Apartment One’ – is right next to that parking lot.”

“Gentlemen,” Wang said in an unnaturally deep voice. “I’ve got it. A revenge killing! It must have been. The killer must have found out that the victim jogs this route every day, and followed him down to the lakeside this morning with his rifle. As he ran, the killer shot him from behind.”

The two police officers exchanged a look. Wang did not wait for them to respond, but gave a knowing smile, then continued, “I know what you’re thinking. ‘Do we really need him to tell us the

obvious?' No, what I've seen is not what any fool would spot. This detail – detail, mark you, the devil is in the details – the street light next to the parking lot have cameras on them, and one is pointing right at the top of the stone steps. All we have to do is get the footage from this morning, and we'll have our suspect. It doesn't matter, I know you must be feeling a little foolish, but you can't be blamed for not spotting this kind of tiny detail."

Tsai, standing with his arms crossed, sighed as Lo pulled another sheet of paper from the file. "Prosecutor, I went through the footage from the camera on the street light you mentioned this morning. This is a still from 5:03 of Pai Wei-To jogging down towards the lake."

The image showed a man in a sweatshirt. It was grainy, but recognizable as Pai Wei-To.

"What about afterwards? What about the killer?"

Lo shook his head. "That's it. This is the only person to appear on the footage from that camera between 11:00 p.m. last night and 7:00 a.m. this morning."

Wang's face flushed scarlet. "How...How is that possible?" he exclaimed. "So where was the shooter?" Lo said nothing, so Wang continued. "Oh, no, no, no. Obviously, he must have come from the other end of the path. It still makes sense. When Pai saw him, he turned to run, the killer shot him in the back, and he fell into the water. It's a nasty way to go."

Tsai sighed again, as Lo quietly explained, "Prosecutor, there is a camera on the other end of the lakeside path as well. See here, between midnight last night and 7:00 a.m. this morning, the only people to go down were one couple...."

"Those are our suspects. Pick them up!"

"They are the people who reported the body."

Wang flushed so red that his face was like one big, throbbing vein. "That's impossible!" he shouted. "You must have missed something. Do the cameras have blind spots?"

"I don't think that's very likely, we—"

"Perhaps we should go on so that you can take a thorough look, Prosecutor?" Tsai ignored the prosecutor's frown and angrily crossed arms. He ducked under the crime scene tape and carried on along the path.

"Oh, I've got it now!" Wang hurried over and planted himself in front of Tsai. "He fired from the cliff top. The killer is a marksman, and he shot Pai from long range, from a position up on the cliff top. It's obvious, and this will make the case much simpler. There can't be more than a handful people who can shoot like that in the whole country."

Lo was shaking his head. "We thought of that, too, but it's not possible. Prosecutor, can you see the top of the cliff from here? You can't, can you? Just the rocks and trees. Looking down from above, it's the same view. We walked back and forth along the cliff top. There's nowhere with a view of the place where the victim was shot. The angles are all wrong, or the sight lines are blocked by the rocks and trees on the cliff face. Unless the killer had bullets that can turn corners, there is no way he could have shot the victim from up on the cliff."

"That's impossible! You must have not looked carefully enough. Impossible..."

Tsai was impatient now. "That's why I suggest that you come and re-inspect the area, Prosecutor. Shall we?"

But within no more than a couple of minutes Wang clapped his hands and rushed to plant himself in front of his companions once again. "I know! I've really got it this time. The lake. The killer must have been firing from a boat on the lake. All we need to do is check the boats on the lake, and there'll be no escape for this killer!"

Lo once again shut him down with a shake of the head. "That's not possible, Prosecutor. Look, the boathouse is just over there." There was a rectangular concrete building on the other side of the lake. Next to it was a small jetty.

"There is someone on duty at the boathouse 24 hours a day, watching for any activity on the lake. We called the guy on duty last night, and he said that there wasn't a single boat out on the lake between 5:00 and 6:00 this morning."

"That's impossible. How is that possible? No, it's not right. So where did the killer shoot from?"

Tsai answered: "I'm sure that this kind of puzzling case is very interesting to you, Prosecutor. Perhaps if you stayed here for a week or two? Enjoy the clean air, put your other matters on hold. You would be able to break this case wide open. I'm certain of it. Mind your step, Prosecutor, we're going up again here."

The other end of the path led up to an outdoor seating area called the Peregrine Pavilion. To one side were some hotel villas that had not yet been officially opened. Lo called for a car, as the prosecutor could barely walk after the climb up from the lakeside.

As he watched the retreating vehicle, Lo said, "I've never heard of Wang Chun-Ying coming out to lead an investigation. You know they call him Duck-it Wang, because he manages to duck out of any duty that would take him out of the office. But he seems terribly interested in this case."

Tsai gave another one of his humorless smiles. "You never can tell which pig is going to break out of the pen. You just have to be ready."

"What if he really stays here, though?"

"I'll tell him about Tsai Chia-Fen."

"Who's Tsai Chia-Fen?"

"Works in the shop in the district court. Wang's girlfriend."

Lo's eyes opened a little wider. "And how do you know about that?"

"It's a policeman's job to investigate. We investigate everyone."

Lo nodded, more to change the subject than because he understood Tsai's answer. "But our problem remains, sir. Where did the killer shoot from?"

"I don't know," Tsai said. But then he added with flat certainty, "I'm going to find out."

In his car, Prosecutor Wang was rubbing his knees and calves. A feeling of weakness pulsed out from his joints.

Was he really going to let Tsai Kuo-An take charge? Hold briefings when Tsai said so? Write applications, request wiretaps when Tsai said so? And what about the press conference? It wasn't going to be Tsai fucking Kuo-An calling a press conference to announce the closure of the case, was it? I'm the media darling, where will I be?

But despite his worries, Wang never really intended to tell the driver to turn around and take him back to the crime scene. He couldn't get away with spending two days out of the office, let alone one or two weeks.

He would have to find another way to deal with Tsai Kuo-An. The way he went about investigations, heaven only knew what kind of a mess he would make.

Perhaps he would turn out to be a good choice. He was crazy, sure, but at least he was smart.

Wang picked up his phone, and call the Prosecutor's Office.

"Wen-fang? This is Prosecutor...Yes, listen, I need you to send an official notice to the police for me now. Yes, an email notice. No, not this afternoon, right now. Take down this name first, are you ready? Fu Erh-T'ai. Fu as in *kung fu*. Erh as in *er*. No, *er* with an H. And T'ai like in Thai food. No, of course without the H. Got it?"