

Prologue



When picking up a book for the first time and beginning to read, it can be tempting to skip the prologue and get into the 'real' story at the start of chapter 1.

Resist the temptation!

For the Snowfire story starts here...

How it all began...

David Carter escaped the clatter and din of the Hong Kong street, stumbled down three wooden steps and landed in a dingy shop not much wider than a bus. A flaming green dragon reared up in front of him, nostrils flared and ready to strike. David leapt back in alarm. The dragon's half-closed eyes held him in a flinty stare, and gingerly, David reached out a hand to the creature's knobby hide. Its scales were cool to the touch. David turned away from the jade statue and glanced around the shop.

The walls were lined with shelves that climbed into the shadows and disappeared. The shelves were crammed with

objects washed up from every corner of the globe - ancient pottery, stone statues, crusty, leatherbound books embossed with strange symbols and bronze artefacts, green with age. Hideous faces glared down from the heights. Wooden crates teetered one on top of the other, threatening to spill their contents across the floor. Everywhere was a jumble of mystery and confusion.

David heard a sound, and turned to see an ancient Chinese woman shuffling towards him, her lined face split by a toothless grin. Three wispy hairs sprouting from her chin wagged at David as she bobbed her head in greeting.

“You like to buy?” she asked.

“I’m looking for Jing Shi,” said David Carter. “Solomon Lee said I would find Jing Shi here, in this shop.”

“I very sorry,” the woman shrugged. “No Solomon Lee.”

“Solomon Lee sent me,” repeated David. “Solomon Lee said you would help me.”

The woman shrugged again and raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “No Solomon Lee.”

David was about to try again when he heard the rustle of a bamboo curtain. A man stood outlined in a doorway at the rear of the shop. He was very small, and very old. His eyes were dark and watchful. He bowed his head and smiled politely.

“I am Jing Shi. Can I help you, please?”

“I’m looking to buy a special gift,” said David. “Solomon Lee sent me.”

Jing Shi shook his head. “I am sorry,” he said. “I know of no Solomon Lee. It is impossible.”

“I’m seeking the Snowfire,” said David.

“Ahh, the Snowfire,” said Jing Shi, his lined face cracking into a broad smile. “You come from Solomon Lee.”

David grunted. “Like I said.”

“Your name please?” asked Jing Shi, his eyes narrowing, and David handed him a card. Jing Shi read it carefully. “You are American?”

“Australian.”

“Please,” said Jing Shi, stepping to one side and holding the bamboo curtain clear of the doorway. “Come with me, Mr Carter.”

David Carter followed the Chinese trader down a maze of narrow passages, climbed a flight of creaking stairs and finally stopped before a green door. David heard footsteps following a little way behind him. His pulse quickened. Jing Shi pulled a large keyring from his pocket. Fumbling through the keys, he selected one and unlocked the door.

“This way, please.”

They stepped into the room. A second man slipped through behind them, and the door clicked shut.

Light filtered down from a barred window high in one wall, and David caught his breath. He had stepped into Aladdin’s cave.

But Jing Shi’s treasures had not been crafted from the lifeless stuff of gold or diamonds. Jing Shi’s treasures were the treasures of the living. The blood pounded in David’s ears as he looked about him. The skins and teeth and horns of the Earth’s most endangered animals were piled high around him. He saw the pelt of the gorilla, the snow leopard and the polar bear. He saw the tusk of the elephant, the horn of the rhino, the shell of the giant turtle. He saw the skin of the leopard, the panther and the jaguar.

“You asked to see the Snowfire,” said Jing Shi softly.

David nodded.

The trader lifted a large bundle from a shelf, placed it on

a bench in the centre of the room and gently laid it out.

“Is it not beautiful?” breathed Jing Shi reverently, and David could only nod in silent wonder.

The Snowfire. The Siberian Tiger.

It was the most magnificent thing David had ever seen. The fur was thick and deep, and the black and orange stripes rippled through the pelt in a rich and intricate pattern. Every whisker was perfect. Every tooth, every claw.

“How much?” asked David softly.

“Sixty thousand American dollars.”

David raised his eyebrows and nodded. “My client may wish to purchase a pair,” he said. “Do you have any others?”

Jing Shi turned back to the shelf to retrieve a second bundle, and as he did so, David slipped his hand into his pocket and took out a silver object the size of a matchbox. Taking care to position himself so the man standing by the door could not see his hand, David pointed the object and gently pressed it with his thumb. He pointed and pressed again, and then again, photographing different parts of the room. Jing Shi turned, the bundle in his arms, and sighed as he reached the bench and laid the pelt out.

“Even better than the first,” said David, concealing the camera in his hand. “It’s magnificent.” But he needed more photographs. “Is there anything else you might recommend?”

Jing Shi thought for a moment. “I have something very special, very rare.” He moved to the far end of the room, searching the shelves.

David pressed the camera again. His heart raced and his palms tingled. Again – point and click. Again – point and click.

“Would your client be interested in snow leopard?” Jing

Shi asked over his shoulder. But something had caught his eye. He turned. “What are you doing, please?”

“I’m cool,” shrugged David, and he raised his free hand and grinned. “No worries. Let’s have a look at the leopard.”

But Jing Shi’s expression had turned to stone. “Jumbo!” he snapped at the man standing by the door. “See what Mr Carter has in his hand.”

“Hey, everything’s cool,” said David, resting his free hand on the back of a cane stool standing next to the bench.

“Do not move, please,” said Jing Shi coldly.

David laughed. “I don’t want to make any trouble here.” He heard Jumbo’s footstep behind him. With a single, explosive movement, David leapt sideways, swinging the stool with all his strength. The move caught Jumbo off-guard, and the stool slammed into the side of his head. A pistol shot cracked, but the bullet went wide, and David sprang for the door. He grabbed the handle, wrenched the door open and dived through, pulling it shut behind him with a crash. Jing Shi’s screams could be heard from the other side.

But David wasn’t hanging around to find out what the Chinese trader had to say. He reached the end of the passage in half a dozen strides, tumbled down the stairs and darted around a corner, trying desperately to remember which way he’d come. A door stood open to one side, letting in light from an alley, and a man was feeling his way through the opening, two large cartons held in his arms and obscuring his view. Jumbo clattered down the stairs and turned the corner.

“Siberian!” cried Jumbo. “Stop him!”

“Gangway!” gasped David, and cannoned into the cartons. The man grunted and fell backwards, the cartons landing on top of him, and David leapt over the chaos and made it to the safety of the alley. The carton man was just getting to his

feet when Jumbo crashed into him, and down he went for a second time. When the two men finally stumbled into the alley, David Carter had vanished.

Jing Shi arrived, out of breath and hurling high and angry curses after David in his native Cantonese, and the carton man scratched his stubby chin, and looked thoughtfully up the alley. He was tall and dark. His face bore the proud and swarthy features of the Siberian steppes.

“I reckon I’ve seen that guy before,” he scowled.

Jing Shi thrust David’s card into the Siberian’s hand. “You must find him!” demanded the Chinese trader. “Find him!”

The Siberian nodded to himself and put the card in his pocket. “I’ll find him,” he grunted. “He’s dead man. You leave him to me.”

Chapter One



The Carnival

Crack! Crack! The elephant went down with a direct hit behind the eye. Crack! The lion disappeared. Crack! Down went the hippo.

Crack! Crack!

Another elephant bit the dust and the man grinned and lowered his gun. He was out of ammo.

“There you go sweetheart,” he laughed as he tossed his prize to the blonde woman with the short skirt and the ruby red lips. She squealed and tucked the fluffy pink lion under her arm. “Fancy a ride on the Zipper?” Arm in arm they disappeared into the carnival crowd.

“Try your ‘and at the Jungle Safari!” bellowed the muscular man behind the counter over the wail of carnival music and the shouts from other sideshows.

...continued