



The Black Shadow

Mark Chandler

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday, 10th July, 2008

Guankou, Chengdu, China

Beads of sweat rolled down his slim tanned face as his feet pounded the faded, broken concrete. His Nikes made contact with the ground in time to the beat of the music being fed into his ears from the iPod attached to his shorts. Arms and legs moved rhythmically, head held high, body drenched in sweat from the vigorous five mile run. Heart pumping, veins throbbing, muscles aching, he pushed himself to go further, faster. He clenched his teeth, mind set on his final goal, shutting out the pain that was starting to coarse through his body. He could see the end now, the finish, and envisioned the cool shower that awaited him on completion. With a final burst, he reached the garden of his home.

Forty minutes later, after a revitalising shower and a change of clothes, he sat in the garden on a lounge and let the warm rays of the sun pour over him. A glass of fresh cool orange juice in one hand, he absently played with a tennis ball with the other, contemplating what to do.

Three months earlier, his father had been asked to move to China to manage a new office that the firm was opening there. With better money, company car and house provided, financially it was a safe move. The family talked long and hard about it. Simon was only 14 and still in school. Lucas had just finished a two year college course in car mechanics, and was about to start work with a local car dealership. Initially, he would just be valeting the cars, but he hoped that in a short time he would be able to gain some experience in the repair of them too. Mum had the fitness club that she ran. Everyone had friends that they couldn't bear to leave. But, with better money and no mortgage to worry about, China seemed like the better option. So here they were.

As Lucas thought about the three hard months they had spent here, he couldn't help but wonder what life would be like if they were back in the UK. Simon had taken a year out of school, to try to get to grips with the language. It was hard, harder than any of them had expected. And Lucas had still not made any new friends. It was so difficult to find things to do. The language was such a barrier – even simple things like going to the cinema was pointless.

They were closer as a family because of it. Nights spent around the dining table, from early in the evening, to the early hours of the morning. Playing games, laughing about the day's events, learning Chinese words and expressions. Yes, they were definitely a closer family.

Lucas had begun an intensive fitness program. Every day he would run ten miles, five on a morning and five on an evening. At eleven o'clock in the morning, he would head to the gym for an hour's cardiovascular workout, then half an hour of light weight training. He'd been doing this for a month now, and could already see and feel the benefits to his body. He felt sharper mentally too, and knew that it would help him to master the language.

Today the family had gone to the city. Dad had a meeting at eleven, and mum and Simon were going shopping. The three of them were then going to meet for lunch. Lucas had arranged to meet them in the city park at three pm. He knew this meant that he would be forced to get the bus and speak some Chinese.

He sat back in his lounge, and turned the volume up on his iPod. He had some time to relax before he headed off to the gym.



As Lucas walked home from the gym, he felt a sense of great achievement. Not only had he just had the best workout yet, he had managed a conversation with the Chinese receptionist – okay, it was a mixture of English and Chinese, but still, it was a conversation. He had managed to pre-

book the rowing machine for tomorrow's session, and had even enquired about a year's membership for the swimming facilities. Lucas felt as if he had made significant progress.

As he strolled along the busy streets to his home, sun beating down on his bare arms, he glanced at his watch. He'd better pick up the pace – only an hour and a half until he got the bus.



After finishing a light salad of lettuce, cucumber, tomato and pineapple, Lucas went to his room to get ready to go. He tuned into a local radio station, and listened to the presenter talking. The language was spoken so fast that all the words seemed to just blur into one. Odd words jumped out at him that he recognised, enough for him to pick up on what was being said. It sounded as though it was a competition to win a car.

He looked out of the window. It was a clear, hot day. He debated with himself as to what to wear – a pair of white cotton pants, and light blue shirt, or the black shorts with white T-Shirt? Well, it was the middle of summer – Lucas decided to go for the shorts and T-Shirt. He quickly got dressed, and checked the time. 14:15. Time to leave. He'd walk to the bus stop, that was only five minutes away, and then get the number 25 into town. It would arrive at about quarter to three, which would leave him ample time to find his mum and Simon.

Lucas grabbed his wallet, some loose change, his iPod, and headed out the house. He locked up, and started off at a leisurely pace towards the bus stop. When he got there, an old woman was also waiting, with a big empty bag – no doubt she was heading to the market to pick up some groceries, Lucas thought. He glanced at her, smiled, and said “Jo san.” She muttered the hello back, and stared at the floor. Lucas had noticed that people seemed confused and bewildered when he spoke Chinese to them, even if it was just to say hello. He looked at his watch. Another couple of minutes. He leaned

back against the concrete frame of the bus stop and turned the volume up on his iPod.

Lucas stood there, relaxed and content as the loud music throbbed into his ears. It was a great song, with a fast, heavy beat. As Lucas stood, it felt as if the ground was trembling. He thought that it was the effects of the run that morning, and the good workout. But then he felt the bus shelter itself trembling. He looked at the woman. Her face was one of pure terror. He looked around frantically, and noticed that the buildings around about were swaying slightly. He snatched his earphones from his ears, and could hear screams, screeching tyres, crunching metal. His heart quickened as he realised that he was experiencing an earthquake. He looked again at the Chinese woman, and as he did so, she pointed behind him, and screamed. Before he had the chance to spin around, Lucas felt a jarring pain in his back, and then the world faded away.



Thursday, 15th October, 2009

The Facility

Kielder, Northumberland, United Kingdom

As soon as he opened his eyes, he knew that something was wrong. The bed that he was lying in wasn't his. A dull pain pounded his head. The room was dark. Lucas tried to think what had happened - he'd been for a run. He'd gone to the gym. He'd had some lunch. He was at the bus stop. There was a Chinese woman.... And then he remembered - everything was shaking - it had been an earthquake. But where was he now? How long had he been knocked out?

A door softly opened, and a young nurse walked in. She glanced at the monitors. "Jo san", Lucas muttered feebly. He couldn't see the nurse

properly, but could see that she stiffened when he spoke. She slowly turned to him. He could see that she wasn't Chinese.

"Hello Lucas," she said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"I - I have a pain in my head. How do you know my name? Where am I?"

Lucas was confused. This was an English nurse - not a trace of Chinese in her accent.

"Lucas, I am going to get the doctor. He will explain everything to you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

The nurse left, and shut the door quietly behind her.

Lucas tried to peer into the room, but it was too dark. He could hear the hum of machines, and could faintly see some lights flickering on the machines, but that was all.

He rested his head on his pillow. He felt so weak.

As Lucas lay in bed, waiting for the nurse to return with the doctor, he wondered where his parents were - they would be worried about him not meeting them on time. Were they at the hospital waiting for him? What time was it now anyway?

The door quietly opened again, and Lucas could make out the forms of two people entering. A low light came on, and Lucas could see that he was in what looked like a private room in a hospital. He was linked up to a number of machines, all of which were producing numerical digital readouts.

The doctor walked up to Lucas' bed, and sat down in a chair next to him.

"Hello, Lucas, I am Doctor Williamson. You've had quite a sleep. Could I possibly ask you some questions?"

Lucas nodded his head in reply.

"Tell me, Lucas, what do you remember? Take your time."

Lucas closed his eyes, and thought.

"Well, I was waiting at the bus stop to head into town to meet my parents and brother. There was an old Chinese woman there too. As I

waited, the ground started shaking, and I could hear screams and shouts, all kinds of terrible noises. Then I felt a pain in my back, and everything went warm and fuzzy, and then black... and now I've woken up in this room."

Dr Williamson watched Lucas intently as he narrated the account, writing notes in a small green leather bound notebook.

"Where am I? I didn't know there were any private hospitals around here. Is dad's firm paying for this? What time is it now, they'll be worried about me."

"Lucas, I have some things to tell you, which may be hard for you to take in right now. You were in an earthquake, the most severe earthquake China has seen in a long time. The woman that you mentioned, at the bus stop. She didn't make it Lucas, she was crushed, and died before paramedics could get to her. You, too, were badly injured - we aren't sure exactly what happened, but it would seem that the main concrete wall of the bus stop fell on you, knocking you to the floor, and trapping you underneath. When paramedics got to you, you were barely breathing. You were rushed to the hospital, along with thousands of others. There, you were actually pronounced dead."

Dr Williamson paused for a moment, allowing Lucas to take in what he was telling him. Lucas lay in his bed, eyes wide in astonishment. He whispered a hoarse, "They thought I was dead?"

Dr Williamson continued.

"The hospitals were inundated with earthquake victims. They probably didn't take the time to make a thorough analysis. The Chinese tried to contact your family, who were in town that day. The epicentre of the earthquake was just two miles from the town. They found out that your parents, and your brother, Simon, were sitting in a Café outside of the zoo when the earthquake happened. Lucas, I'm very sorry. They didn't make it."

Lucas was silent. His mind was racing. He thought back to that morning, how his mum had made him breakfast, his dad had told him not to

exert himself too much at the gym, how he'd mocked Simon for wearing that T-Shirt. They couldn't be dead.

A tear rolled down Lucas' face, as what Dr Williamson said sank in.

"Lucas, I can only guess how hard this is for you. However, there is more that you need to know."

Lucas looked at the doctor.

"My family is dead. I was with them this morning. And now they're dead. That... that's..." His words trailed off.

"Lucas, the hospital in China pronounced you dead. They sent your body to the morgue. They then contacted the British Embassy, who collected your body from the hospital, and flew it to England. Upon arrival, one of the mortuary technicians noticed that your middle finger was twitching. He contacted me, and when I got here, I realised that you were not at all dead, but were in a very, very deep coma. I transported you to here, my facilities in Northumberland, where I have been monitoring your progress."

"You mean, I'm not even in China anymore? They thought I was dead? How long have I been here?"

Dr Williamson took a deep breath, and looked at the nurse stood by his side. She looked away, uncomfortably.

"Lucas, as I mentioned, you were in a coma, a deep coma. I've been monitoring you now for almost fifteen months."

Lucas was visibly shocked. He began to tremble, and tears rolled down his white cheeks.

"Fifteen months? What's the date?"

It was the last question Dr Williamson expected him to ask, and it took him by surprise.

"It's the fifteenth of October, 2009, Lucas." The answer, softly spoken, came from the nurse.

"I'm very sorry that you have to hear this, Lucas, and I know that it is a lot to take in." Dr Williamson paused, and then continued. "But I feel that it

is best to tell you now, so that you know, and so that you can speed up your recovery.”

“Recovery? What exactly happened to me?”

“When the bus stop fell on you, it snapped your lower back. In effect, you were paralysed. However, during your coma, we’ve operated on your back, and are confident that you will be able to walk and run as before, in fact – better than before. When you came here, you were in a good physical state – it was evident that you had a healthy lifestyle. Your muscles were developing well, you had strong legs and arms, and a healthy heart. We believe that these factors strongly contributed to your survival.”

“So, can I walk?”

“You have been bedridden for a long time. However, we have been regularly exercising your legs and arms, about five times a day in fact. We did this firstly so that your joints didn’t seize up, but we then realised that this would also keep your muscles firm. So, although you will no doubt be weak and unsteady at first, yes, you will be able to walk and function as normal. But Lucas, all of this is so much to take in, so I would like you to get some rest. I know you’ll have many questions, and I will answer them to the best of my ability, but first, please rest.”

As Dr Williamson walked out of the room, rest was the last thing on Lucas’ mind. He was overcome with grief as the awful truth that his parents and brother had all died in that earthquake overrode his thoughts. Uncontrollably, Lucas wept.



“Mary, I need you to monitor him constantly. I’m amazed that he has come through this the way he has. We need to make sure that he doesn’t go into shock. We’ll feed him, and then we’ll show him some of the pictures of the quake. Nothing too strong though. This is amazing, I can’t wait to see his progress.”

“Don’t worry Dr Williamson, I’ll keep a close eye on him. He seems very alert, and quite calm despite what he’s been told. I’m going to do what I can to make sure he doesn’t suffer from Post Traumatic Stress.”

“Thanks Mary. If his condition changes, let me know immediately.”

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Thanks,

Mark Chandler