

**THE
WILD BEASTS
OF
WUHAN**

Also in the Ava Lee Series
The Water Rat of Wanchai
The Disciple of Las Vegas

THE WILD BEASTS OF WUHAN

AN AVA LEE NOVEL

IAN HAMILTON



SPIDERLINE

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For Jill, Ian, Stephanie, and Alexis

(1)

AVA LEE SAT ON A BENCH ON THE OTROBANDA SIDE of Willemstad, the capital city of Curaçao, watching ships from China, Indonesia, Panama, and the Netherlands come and go. The crews stood by the railings, waving down at the onlookers as their vessels moved almost rhythmically in and out of St. Anna Bay. Ava waved back.

It was mid-afternoon. She had arrived that morning on a cruise ship that was moored about a kilometre away, at a fort that had once guarded the entrance to the harbour. The fort had been converted into a tourist spot with restaurants, shops, a hotel, and a casino.

She was on vacation with her family: her father, her mother, and her older sister, Marian, who had also brought her husband, Bruce, and their two daughters. They were eight days into the trip, with six to go. Ava wondered if they would survive the long journey back to Miami.

The Lees were not a traditional family by Western standards. Ava's mother, Jennie, was the second wife of Marcus. Following tradition, he had married her without divorcing his first wife. They had lived in Hong Kong until Ava was

two and Marian four, when Marcus had taken on a third wife. The new family dynamic had caused friction between Marcus and Jennie, so she and her daughters had been relocated to Canada. It was an arrangement that suited them both. He looked after all his families financially, spoke to Jennie every day by phone, and visited her for two weeks every year. Although Ava and Marian had grown up without the physical presence of their father, they knew that Marcus loved them. So, traditional or not, their time together was enjoyed, if only because everyone knew the rules and had the appropriate expectations.

This cruise, though, was a first. Marcus's visits usually consisted of a stay at Jennie's house north of Toronto, lunches and dinners with her and Ava, and a two-day trip to Ottawa to see Marian and the girls. The extended holiday had been Marcus's idea; the cruise, Marian's. In hindsight, Ava thought they should have known better. It hadn't taken long for discord to surface.

The main combatants were Jennie and Bruce. Bruce was a *gweilo*, a Westerner, and a senior civil servant with the Canadian government. But the fact that he wasn't Chinese wasn't the issue; it was the kind of *gweilo* he was — uptight and anal. The kind of person who got up early to secure deck chairs for the day. The kind who pre-organized a full day of activities at every port of call. The kind who made sure to use every facility and perk offered by the cruise. The kind who had to be in line at five forty-five for a six o'clock dinner.

Marian and the girls were used to Bruce's ways and didn't think twice about it. Marcus and Ava had rolled with the punches for the first few days before politely begging

off some of the group activities. But from the moment she stepped on the ship, Jennie Lee had refused to fall in line. She declined to go on any of Bruce's planned excursions, and she arrived later and later for every lunch and dinner. She never came to breakfast, being too tired from late nights at the gaming tables.

By day three, Bruce and Jennie had stopped talking. He had taken to glaring at her and she pretended he didn't exist. It was hard on Marian, and Ava felt sorry for her. Marian had always had a more difficult relationship with their mother than Ava did.

"Why did she come?" Marian demanded.

"What choice did she have? Daddy wanted to take us on a family holiday and you talked him into booking the cruise without discussing it with her first. Did you expect her to stay in Toronto for the two weeks of the year she has with her husband?"

"I thought it would be different."

"It's never different with her, or with Bruce," Ava said. "So don't make it one-sided. Neither of them is easy."

When they berthed at Willemstad, Bruce had organized a tour of Curaçao; a driver was waiting for them at the dock. Jennie didn't show. Marcus went on the tour, grudgingly. Ava had said she wanted to spend a quiet day in town.

She shifted on the bench and gazed at the Queen Emma Bridge, which connected the Otrobanda and Punda quarters of the city. Willemstad was a busy commercial port — Curaçao was a major oil refiner and exporter — and the bridge was in constant motion, opening and closing for vessels coming in and out of the harbour. She looked across the bay, admiring the rows of two- and three-storey stucco

buildings painted in pastel blues, greens, and yellows, all of them topped with red tile roofs. The tiles had originally served as ballast on the ships that had brought Dutch settlers to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century. Ava felt as if she were in Amsterdam, in one of the old neighbourhoods built on the canals.

The cruise had come after a two-month break from chasing bad debts halfway around the world. Chasing bad debts was what Ava, a forensic accountant, did for a living, and after back-to-back jobs that had taxed her both physically and emotionally, she had needed some time off. She had spent time with friends, danced at salsa clubs, eaten more than she should, burned off the extra calories by running, eaten some more, and gone to her regular bak mei workouts. She had also been exploring a growing relationship with a Colombian woman named Maria Gonzalez.

Maria was an assistant trade commissioner at the Colombian consulate in Toronto, a newcomer to the city. Ava's best friend, Mimi, had met her at a function and done some matchmaking via email. The two women had connected while Ava was travelling, and when she flew home, Maria was waiting for her at the airport. The physical attraction had been instantaneous. Emotionally, Ava was still feeling tentative. She and Maria had vacationed in Thailand for two glorious weeks, and they had managed to end every day wanting to see each other the next. When they got back to Toronto, Maria had begun to hint that they move in together. Ava was relieved that the cruise would give her some breathing space.

The sun was higher in the sky now and the pastel buildings glistened in its light. She got up and walked towards

Kura Hulanda, a hotel, conference centre, and museum complex that Dutch businessman and philanthropist Jacob Gelt Dekker had created out of what were originally the city's slums. The original street layout, including the cobblestones, had been kept intact. The old housing had been demolished, and colourful new stucco and wooden houses had been built that now functioned as stand-alone hotel units.

Ava headed for the Kura Hulanda Museum, which was famous for a collection that described the history of the slave trade. The museum was made up of several low-lying buildings linked in an L shape; its dark painted walls and small windows made the edifice look gloomy.

She walked through the galleries, admiring the sculptures, masks, weapons, and descriptions of the societies and cultures of West Africa. All the exhibits were drawn from Dekker's private collection. The final section of the museum presented the two-hundred-year history of the Dutch slave trade. Curaçao had been an auction centre for slaves sold into the Caribbean and all of South America. *Kura hulanda* was a Papiamentu term meaning "Dutch courtyard." As Ava walked out the front door of the museum, she found herself standing in just such a courtyard, on the very spot where hundreds of thousands of enslaved people had been bought and sold. She shuddered.

She walked back into the bright sunlight and crossed the Queen Emma Bridge over the harbour to Punda. There she found an outdoor Italian restaurant and ordered a glass of Pinot Grigio and a plate of spaghetti *aglio e olio*.

She recognized an elderly couple from the cruise sitting at the next table. The woman kept looking at her until Ava

finally said hello. They introduced themselves as Henry and Bella from Singer Island, Florida, via New York. “I’ve seen you on the ship with your family. So attractive, all of you,” Bella said.

Ava smiled. “Thank you.”

“Your mother’s name is Jennie, right?”

“It is.”

“I thought so. Such a pistol! She and I close the casino most nights,” Bella said. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I don’t have any plans,” Ava said, digging into her spaghetti, which had just arrived.

“Henry and I are going to the Snoga Synagogue. It’s the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere.” She turned to her husband. “Henry, when was it built?”

“Sixteen something.”

“In the sixteen hundreds. Crazy, huh?”

“Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam,” Henry said. “They modelled it after the Esnoga Synagogue there.”

“It’s not far from here,” Bella said. “Would you like to join us? It’ll be interesting.”

Ava was in theory a Roman Catholic. She had been raised in the Church and her mother and sister were still devout. But in her mind the Church had rejected her with its views on homosexuality. She now preferred to think of herself as a Buddhist — live and let live. But she couldn’t explain why she still prayed to St. Jude in times of crisis and wore a gold crucifix around her neck.

“Sure, why not?” Ava said.

They paid their bills and left the restaurant. After walking past stores, cafés, and small office buildings, they stopped outside a bright gold stucco building. It was three

storeys high, with a red tile roof; the windows and double doors were painted white. Henry and Bella led her into an inner courtyard, where they were greeted by a woman seated at a table.

“The synagogue is there to the right,” the woman said. “It was built in 1692, and some additions were made in 1732.”

Henry and Bella walked tentatively towards the entrance, Ava trailing behind them. As they stepped inside, she heard them gasp. Ava peered over Bella’s shoulder and saw an almost perfect jewel box of a building. A straight line from the doorway led to a wooden pulpit at the opposite end; along either side of the aisle were rows of dark wooden benches. Just above, balconies ran down both sides, and four marble columns extended upwards to an arched ceiling from which hung three huge chandeliers.

They took several steps into the synagogue. As she entered, Ava noticed that Henry and Bella’s eyes were transfixed by the floor. She looked down and saw that it was covered entirely in thick white sand.

She watched as Bella and Henry pressed their feet into the sand. Then Bella began to cry. Henry put his arm around her shoulders and started to sob as well. Ava didn’t know why they were crying, but she felt their emotion all the same.

“The sand is the Sinai Desert,” Henry said. “They brought it here to remind them of Sinai.” He kneeled, picked up a handful, and pressed it to his lips.

“This isn’t common?” Ava asked softly.

“There’s maybe one other synagogue in the world with a floor like this,” he said.

Ava was about to follow Henry and Bella farther into the synagogue when her phone rang. She apologized and excused herself, stepping outside. “Ava Lee,” she answered. “Ava, it is Uncle.”

Uncle was her partner and mentor; they had been in the debt collection business together for more than ten years. He was in his seventies, but he showed no signs of slowing down and still maintained a massive network of contacts that provided them with business and support. It was a common rumour that in his past life he had ties to the triads. Ava didn’t know for certain; she had only the deepest respect for the man she knew.

“Uncle,” she said, glancing at her watch. It was two a.m. in Hong Kong, and he was usually asleep well before that. “You’re up late.”

“Am I disturbing you?”

“I’m in Curaçao. I’m sightseeing.”

“Still on that cruise?”

“Yes.”

“Can you talk?”

“Sure.”

“Are you ready to come back to work?”

She took a deep breath. “That depends on what you have. I have no interest in chasing after some scumbag from General Santos City who cheated people with tuna sashimi that’s been gas-flushed twenty times.”

“So you are ready.”

“What do you have?”

“How soon can you get to Hong Kong?”

“Uncle, is it that important?” she asked, knowing already that it probably was.

“Wong Changxing.”

“The Emperor of Hubei?”

“He hates being called that. Even if it is said respectfully, he worries that it is offensive to the government and military officials whose support he needs.”

“I’m sorry. Do you know him from Wuhan?”

Uncle had been born in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province. He had escaped the Communist regime and fled to Hong Kong when he was a young man, but he still maintained close ties there and had built a big enough reputation that his Wuhan roots were a source of pride to many people who lived there. “He knows me from Wuhan,” Uncle said.

“Ah.”

“He has a problem.”

“What is it?”

“I am not sure, but he sounded distressed.”

“Something personal?”

“Certainly pressing, if I read his manner correctly.”

“So it’s urgent?”

“He asked us to come to Wuhan to talk. He offered to pay our expenses and a fee of fifty thousand dollars for our time.”

“I’m still on the cruise for another week.”

“He said he needs to see us as soon as possible.”

“You mean, Uncle, that he needs to see you.”

“No, Ava. He was very specific that you come with me.”

“How does he know —”

“That does not matter. He does.”

“The cruise —”

“When he says as soon as possible, he does not mean a week from now.”

Ava paused. The idea of working for Wong Changxing intrigued her, and if her father hadn't been on the cruise she wouldn't have hesitated to leave for Hong Kong. But she couldn't abandon him so easily. "I'll have to talk to my father," she said.

"He is a man who has always understood the demands of business," Uncle said.

"Perhaps, but I still need to talk to him, and I can't assume he'll be that understanding. So let me call you back."

"I will wait up."

She called her father's cellphone, which he answered on the first ring. She could hear kids shouting and water splashing in the background.

"Can you talk?" she asked.

"I'm at a dolphin sanctuary, or show, or something. Bruce paid several hundred dollars so that he, Marian, and the girls could swim with the dolphins. They're in the water now. I'm supposed to be taking pictures."

"Something has come up," she said.

"Business?"

"Yes, I just got a call from Uncle. He wants me to go to Hong Kong right away."

Her father had heard the rumours about Uncle's past and was quietly disapproving about her association with him. "Is it that important?"

"Wong Changxing."

"The Emperor of Hubei."

"I'm told we shouldn't refer to him as that."

"It doesn't change the fact that he's the most powerful man in the province."

"No matter, he's asked us to go to Wuhan for a meeting.

I asked if Uncle could go alone, and he said Wong specifically requested that I accompany him."

"And you're calling me to ask for permission."

"Yes."

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. This is your holiday, and if you think that my absence will cause any disruption I won't go."

"This holiday was the worst idea —"

"I've spoken to Marian about Bruce."

"And I've spoken to your mother."

"Two immovable forces."

"Bruce is a bureaucrat, professionally and personally. Your mother is every bureaucrat's nightmare. He wants a plan for everything and your mother can't think past her next meal."

"So do you need me? Do you want me to stay?"

"No, you go," he said quickly. "I'll try to spend as much time as I can with Marian and the girls and hope time flies."

"I love you."

"Me too. Be careful."

Ava went inside the synagogue to say goodbye to Henry and Bella. They were sitting on one of the benches, their eyes closed. She left as quietly as she could and made her way back to the ship to look for Jennie Lee.

She found her mother in the casino, sitting at the baccarat table with a stack of twenty-five-dollar chips in front of her.

"I have to leave," Ava said. "Uncle just called. We have a client in Wuhan who needs us."

"No."

"Yes."

"Your father won't be happy."

“I spoke to him first and asked his permission. He told me to go.”

Her mother shook her head. “You can’t leave me alone with them.”

“Marian and the girls love you to death. And Daddy is still here.”

“You are the only one who understands me.”

You mean who tolerates you, Ava thought. “That’s not true,” she said.

“Stay until we get back to Miami.”

“I can’t. It’s a crisis.”

Her mother stared at her. When Ava didn’t capitulate, she said, “I think Bruce may try to throw me into the sea somewhere between here and Miami.”

“He probably thinks the same of you.”

Her mother continued playing while she talked to Ava, her stack growing larger as she doubled her bet on the banker. When she won, she doubled her bet again, with success. “I suppose I can’t stop you from leaving, can I?”

“No.”

“Well, have a safe trip and call me whenever you can.”

“I need you to do something for me,” Ava said.

“What?”

“My clothes — I brought this ridiculous suitcase with me and I have all these clothes that I can’t wear anywhere else. Can you take them back to Toronto for me?”

“What will you wear?”

“I’ll take my running gear, some T-shirts, my toiletries, and some jewellery. I’ll throw everything in my carry-on. I can buy some business clothes when I get to Hong Kong. I need some new things anyway.”

Her mother sighed and passed her room key to Ava. “Leave your case in my room.”

Ava leaned over to kiss her mother on the forehead.

“Be careful,” Jennie said.

Ava went to her room and turned on her laptop. She found a flight that landed at eight a.m. in Hong Kong with a stop in Newark. She booked it and then called Uncle. He didn’t react when she told him she was coming, and she knew he had probably expected nothing less.

“There is an early Dragonair flight from Hong Kong to Wuhan,” he said.

“No, Uncle, I’m sorry. I have no business clothes with me and I need to shop. See if you can book something for later in the day.”

“Where do you want to shop?”

“There’s a Brooks Brothers store in Tsim Sha Tsui,” she said, knowing that his Kowloon apartment was no more than ten minutes from the popular shopping district and tourist destination.

“I will send Sonny to meet you at the airport. He will take you wherever you need to go. Wong will have to wait.” Uncle paused. “I hear that his wife is very attractive and a real power in their business. They should know that we have the whole package too.”