

Acclaim for *Hong Kong On Air*

“A frenetic, obsessive, compulsive tale of people from all ends of the world who converge on a congested, self-absorbed epicenter of political upheaval. Muhammad Cohen’s tale about the chaos in the lives of players during Hong Kong’s handover in 1997 brought back many memories to an old hat TV anchor like myself . . . it’s uncanny how much of my own dysfunctional life I saw in his prose.”

—**Bernard Lo**, veteran Hong Kong news presenter

“*Hong Kong On Air* captures the soaring pulse of Hong Kong ahead of the handover and China’s rise from the crash that followed. It reveals timeless truths about television news as seen from the hot seats on both sides of the camera.”—**Lorraine Hahn**, broadcast journalist

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—**Dalton Tanonaka**, veteran Asia journalist

“A witty, clever and all-too-accurate peek at personalities in a (barely) functional television station.”—**James Chau**, television news anchor

Hong Kong On Air

Muhammad Cohen

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CHAPTER I

Television is My Lie

IT'S 5:58:43 A.M. HONG KONG STANDARD TIME, and Laura doesn't have her script.

What's gone wrong now? she wonders.

"Is anyone planning to bring me my fucking scripts?" Deng Jiang Mao asks from the news set behind her, his voice booming through the intercom into the control room on the other side of the glass. "Laura. . . ?"

She pushes the A-1 lever on the panel that still reminds her of a race car, an out-of-control race car, leans toward the microphone, and says in a throaty whisper, "Go with prompter." At that moment, Ashrami walks onto the *Asia Market Morning* set in a saffron sari, gold bracelets past her elbows jangling, and hands Deng his scripts. Leafing through the pages, he says, "This lead is from yesterday after-fucking-noon. . . ."

"Open in three, two, one. . . ." Quickie the cross-eyed director counts down, as if for a space shot or nuclear bomb test. He pronounces the first number as "flee," which always seems like a good idea to Laura at this moment of the day, then says, "Roll open."

"Let's hope someone commits news during the show, f'crissakes," Deng shrugs.

"Hi ho, stupid," Laura says without pushing the intercom lever as the first bars of *The William Tell Overture* blare over aerial photos of Tokyo, Hong Kong, Sydney, Seoul, Shanghai, and Singapore, separated by time-lapse stills of stock market trading floors, beaming to 42.3 million cable and satellite households from Melbourne to Mumbai. In all but a handful of television sets outside the studio, the signal dies unseen and unheard.

Few hear the voice of the Franklin Global Network's US nightly talk show host Grant Prebo say, in a much too bright and insufficiently

authoritative voice as the music recedes, “Good morning, Asia, and welcome to FGN’s *Asia Market Morning* . . . all the news Asia needs to get the market morning off and running . . . and much, much more.” The music rises to a final crescendo, and Quickie says, “Camera one . . . cue.”

“I’m Deng Jiang Mao in Hong Kong, and this is *Asia Market Morning* for January ninth, 1997. . . . *Jo saahn*, good morning. . . . Our top story. . . .”

Laura sighs, scrolls through the show rundown on her computer terminal, then picks up the phone. “Helios, Laura. How you doing on the back half of the show?. . . Message me as soon as they’re done, each one, so I can check. . . . Yeah, better. Still a few problems with ‘was’ and ‘were’ . . . and the US Treasury Secretary is a man. . . . No, that’s Roberta. . . . Okay, thanks.” She hangs up as the taped US market wrap rolls, the blond, rabbit-faced Lisa Ford in New York responding to the intro with “Jo sarn, Ding,” to give the illusion of live conversation.

“When’s that bitch gonna get my name right?” Deng complains, as he does every morning.

“Not today, Deng,” Laura replies with the intercom microphone lever down, speaking into Deng’s earpiece called an IFB, abbreviating something she can’t remember. “Don’t forget to thank Lisa in the tag. . . .”

“For what, screwing up my name? Maybe I should call her Linda Buick. Stupid bitch.”

“Her, right?”

“Yes. This time,” Deng says with a smile. “Laura, I was looking through the scripts and on B-4 we’ve got ‘Tiananmen Square massacre.’ Let’s just say sanctions were imposed in 1989. . . .”

“Oh, come on. . . .”

“Sometimes you just don’t understand . . . and ‘massacre’ is overkill.”

“I’ll settle for ‘crackdown’ this morning.”

“Deal. Fix it in prompter,” Deng says, and changes his paper copy. “And what is this bullshit about the ‘prime minister of China’ again? Li Peng is the premier.”

“Same as prime minister, again.”

“Is not, again.”

“Is.” Laura releases the lever. “Ashrami, get the dictionary from Lamont’s desk and bring it to Mister Deng next time you go on set.”

Laura returns to editing Helios' scripts for the show's C and D blocks, unbreaking his broken English, until Quickie says, "Back in ten."

"You ready?" Laura asks Pussy, the graphics operator who speaks no English. They call her Pussy because she really knows dick, Laura thinks, as she does every morning, and suppresses a giggle. The teen's body geometry, however, is no laughing matter. With a waist that small, a bust that big, and no ass, why doesn't she just crack in half? Maybe that's why all those old ladies with the umbrellas on the escalator have those humps: they all looked like Pussy when they were seventeen. While Laura wears her standard worried expression throughout the broadcast, Pussy wears a brilliant, vacant smile along with a tube top that makes her pert teenage breasts seem suspended in mid-air, nipples like pencil points in the frigid control room air, and a pair of shorts inches long. Laura is dressed in jeans, running shoes and, for warmth over her blue knit top, a red flannel shirt she might've brought used at a Nirvana Fan Club meeting.

"Is she ready, Ashrami?" Laura asks her production assistant who helps Pussy type the words and arrange the graphics she can't read.

"Ready, yes," Ashrami replies. "I think the guest is here" she adds and leaves the control room, just in case she's thought wrong about Pussy's preparedness.

"Don't forget the dictionary for Deng." Laura rolls her chair a few inches toward Pussy and looks at her console. The graphic for the New Zealand stock exchange is loaded on the left screen, with the currency board waiting on the right screen. "Looks good," she nods and rolls back to her spot to edit scripts.

Deng reads the intro to the New Zealand stock report, the only market trading at this hour. Laura glances up from her computer screen to see the stock index graphic appear on cue, then looks out the 25th floor window with a view of Chai Wan harbor. Chai Wan leads Hong Kong Island in grime, home to dozens of auto repairs shops, each loaded with a couple million US dollars worth of Lamborghinis and Ferraris (where do people drive them? she wonders). The district is a throwback to when they made things in Hong Kong besides money: industrial laundries, food processors, metal bashers, bus depots, cemeteries, a fire department training ground with a four story tower for simulated rescues, and clusters of identical white concrete public housing towers. But the sunrise panorama from the FGN Asia control room window

shows only blue water and a small green island awaiting a solitary castaway.

The chorus from *One Moment in Time* beeping from Pussy's mobile phone snaps Laura back from this five-second tropical vacation. Laura has anticipated this moment and is pleased Pussy is the culprit. She grabs the phone from the counter, declares, "Pussy is busy right now. She'll call you later. *Bai-bai*," and ends the call.

Pussy looks shocked, then nods. "Okay, okay."

"Phones off during the show," Laura announces, and Quickie commences simultaneous translation into Cantonese. "Company rule, not mine. Next time it happens, I won't be so nice."

She turns back to the monitor and hears Deng say, "In currencies, as you see, the US dollar is. . . Well, you'll see as soon as we get that currency graphic for you. . ."

"Currency board!" Laura screams.

"Stuck," Quickie says, then barks instructions in Cantonese to Pussy, who shrugs and diffidently pushes buttons.

"When he says, 'In currencies,' you take the board. Okay?" Laura says to Quickie, while waiting for Pussy's fix.

"Okay-aaah," Pussy sings, and three seconds late, the currency board fills the broadcast monitor.

"Maybe you lock button when you talk on phone," Quickie tells Laura. "Or maybe she."

"Phones off," Laura repeats. "Off."

Deng, relaxed because today's graphic board glitch is out of the way, gives an especially lively rendition of foreign exchange prices. He then flatly reads a short lead in for a package on Bangkok's subway construction that takes the show to the end of Block A and the first commercial break.

"What the fuck is wrong in there?" Deng yells as the studio camera's red light fades. "How many times do I have to fuckin' tell you to change the board when I say 'in currencies'? What is the fucking problem?"

"Sorry. Better next time," Quickie promises.

"'In currencies . . .' This is not fuckin' brain surgery. Every time. . ."

"We're sorry," Laura apologizes. "We had a problem in here. . ."

"No shit. But you have a problem in there every fucking day. My ten o'clock doesn't have as many problems. . ."

“That’s because they dupe all the scripts we write and edit, roll all the tape we cut. . . .”

“I’ve got to be the producer and the director, too, which is damned difficult from the fuckin’ anchor desk. If I have to. . . .”

“Anything you’d like to do to assist is welcome and needed,” Laura says, “except for screaming at the director. Scream at me. I’ll scream at the director.” She slips a smile Quickie’s way, then turns to snarl at Pussy.

“Fuck you both,” Deng says.

“Thank you. Back in two-thirty.”

“Where are the second-half scripts?” Deng says.

“Coming.”

“It’s frequent industry practice to let the anchor see his copy before reading it on air. That’s standard procedure in professional television operations.” Deng gives a mock shrug. “I guess it was different at the *Financial Journal*, Laura. You’re not the only one here that ever worked on a fucking newspaper. But you know what? This is not a fucking newspaper. This is television, and it’s live, and there are no second chances. So instead of doing whatever the fuck you’re doing during the show, it would be nice if you tried to pay attention to what’s going on. Is anybody bringing me coffee, or is that something else I need to do myself? Two sugars.”

“Ashrami?” Laura implores, but she’s still out of the control room, living up to her nickname G-Spot, because she can be so hard to find. Laura messages Helios to find Ashrami (as if that pimply Chinese nerd could find a G-Spot) and get the anchor some coffee, and her, too, and the dictionary. Laura can’t decide whether she’d prefer her coffee with valium or strychnine, though neither would likely work fast enough to make the remaining 112 live minutes of today’s show tolerable. She glances at that little island in the sunrise, imagining the soothing feeling of smashing through the control room windows and flying toward tropical paradise rather than plummeting 25 floors toward the Chai Wan pavement soaked in oil from minibuses and *dim sum*. Or the joy of watching Deng take the leap.

Every morning, Laura imagines she’s not flying but drowning, that it will be impossible for her to produce a show, to find enough news, write enough scripts, choose enough tape, fix enough of Helios’ copy, to fill two hours of live television time. She thinks each day will be the

one where she's pushed over the edge by the tension to make a hard deadline, by Deng's carping, by technical snafus. But so far, each day, Laura has survived and come back for more.

Ashrami appears on set, placing Deng's C and D block scripts on his anchor desk and then handing him the dictionary. He eyes her curiously, and she turns her head toward the control room. Laura watches via the monitor and wonders why this control room (and control rooms at other stations, Richard the next show producer has told her) faces away from the set, so the producer can only see what's going on via monitor or by turning away from the console. Inside the control room, the machine receiving the real-time data for graphics and the market price crawl across the bottom of the screen on later shows, the tape playback decks, and the teleprompter operators are also scattered behind her, providing an unruly audience of under-25s for the director, producer, audio technician and the graphics operator in the front row. Like everything in television, or at least at FGN Asia, the control room is backwards, overly complicated, too heavy on technology and light on common sense.

"Are we going to play dictionary?" Deng asks, his voice echoing around the control room. "Or have you thought of something else I can do while I'm reading the news, correcting your copy, timing the show. . . ."

"We haven't missed a time cue in three weeks," Laura protests.

"Then you're really overdue. . . . Shove a broomstick up my ass and I can sweep the fuckin' floor while I'm. . . ."

"Please look up 'premier,'" she says through the microphone into his ear.

"Okay, I'll play," he intones, flipping pages. "Got it."

"Please read the definition, aloud," she says, delighted that she's finally nailed him in full view.

Deng reads it to himself first. "Would you like me to wait until we're out of break and read it to the folks out in television land, or just for our studio audience?"

Laura feels a twinge of guilt because he's being such a good sport. "Studio audience will suffice."

"Premier, noun, prime minister, generally reserved for the head of a communist government."

"Thank you. Now that we've resolved. . . ."

“Yes, I hope that clears this up once and for all,” Deng says, slamming the book shut. “Premier and prime minister are the same fucking thing. I don’t want to have to tell you again. And we should use prime minister because premier is loaded. Until we call John Major the fucking Premier of England, we should call Li Peng the Prime Minister of China.”

“Back in ten,” Quickie says.

Laura is so angry she wants to scream at him or walk onto the set and slap him, but 112 minutes of an empty anchor chair would surely damage her career. She remembers what Old Hartman wrote in the issue of the *Rabbit Ears* newsletter faxed to her in New York before she came to Hong Kong: “Rule 1: On the set, the anchor is always right. Rule 2: When the anchor is wrong, see Rule 1.” That doesn’t diminish her desire to rip out Deng’s vocal cords, but it does remind her what a bad idea it is. She resolves not to speak to him, except in necessary monosyllables, for the rest of the show. By the time she hears Deng close with his standard, “That’s all for this edition of *Asia Market Morning*. Stay tuned as the *Money-Go-Round* starts turning with my pal Kathleen Trang, next on FGN Asia. Thanking you for your time this time until next time, I’m Deng Jiang Mao, saying, ‘Buy low, sell high,’ and have a profitable day,” she is almost back to normal.

“Two, one, clear,” Quickie says.

“Good show everyone,” Laura says, as she picks up her scripts and, before she can repeat the “phones off” edict one more time, sneezes because Richard Yakamoto, producer of the eight o’clock show has entered the control room, wearing his usual overdose of cologne. Laura wonders if he uses fragrance as an alternative to bathing.

“It fuckin’ sucked. Like every fuckin’ show fuckin’ sucks with you fuckin’ clowns,” Deng announces as he whips the IFB out of his ear, unclips his microphone and places it on the anchor desk adorned with the FGN golden eagle logo, and strides across the set, holding the door for Kathleen Trang, Melbourne’s Miss Little Saigon of 1992, as he exits.

Laura follows Deng to his cubicle, anger boiling up again, but before she can articulate it, he speaks. “I know,” Deng sighs as he drops into his chair. “I know it’s hard. I know you’re doing the best you can. Everybody is. I don’t want to say half the things I do in there. . . . Marvin, can I get some coffee here, buddy?” he yells past Laura, smiling to soften his order to the intern named Joseph. “Two sugars.”