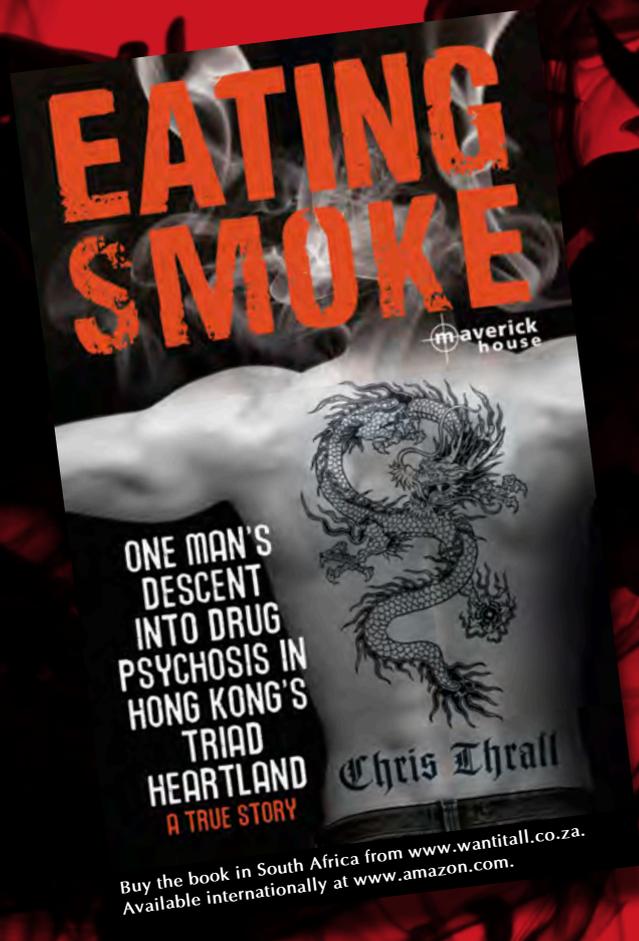


WANTED MURKIN

by chris thrall



CHRIS THRALL WAS BORN IN THE UK. AT EIGHTEEN, HE JOINED THE ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS. FOLLOWING ACTIVE SERVICE IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONFLICT AND TRAINING IN ARCTIC WARFARE AND SURVIVAL, HE EARNED HIS PARACHUTISTS WINGS AND WENT ON TO SERVE AS PART OF A HIGH-SECURITY DETACHMENT ONBOARD AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER.

IN 1995, CHRIS MOVED TO HONG KONG TO OVERSEE THE ASIA-PACIFIC EXPANSION OF A SUCCESSFUL NETWORK-MARKETING OPERATION HE'D BUILT, PART-TIME, WHILE SERVING IN THE FORCES. LESS THAN A YEAR LATER, HE WAS HOMELESS, IN PSYCHOSIS FROM CRYSTAL METH ADDICTION AND WORKING FOR THE 14K, A HONG KONG TRIAD CRIME FAMILY, AS A DOORMAN IN THE INFAMOUS WAN CHAI RED-LIGHT DISTRICT. *EATING SMOKE*, A HUMOROUS YET DEEPLY MOVING MEMOIR, IS HIS ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED. PLAYBOY OFFERS YOU AN EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE.

PROLOGUE

In 2004, I worked in a mental health unit. People often asked, "How can you stand it with all those nutters?" I'd quote from the textbook: "It's a misunderstood condition affecting one in four people at some stage in their lives." I never told the real reason. I worried that knowledge might confuse them. You see, in 1996, I went mad.

Now, this isn't necessarily as bad as it sounds. The UK has plenty of systems in place to help people who throw wobblers – doctors, medicine, hospitals, not to mention Incapacity Benefit and God. Unfortunately, these comforts were in short supply when it happened to me. Therefore, I must warn you: If your mind is planning on playing an away game, taking a sabbatical or simply fucking off, don't for Christ's sake let it happen while working as a nightclub doorman in Hong Kong's red-light district...

CHAPTER ONE

The man in the mirror

I stared into the largest shard of blood-splashed glass.

"Do I know you?"

"You've never known him at all..."

Sitting on the filthy concrete, I convulsed occasionally and whimpered like a sick dog. I hadn't slept for days, the crystal meth pulsing through my veins denying all refuge from the madness enveloping me.

Now that the anger had passed, I found myself suspended in a ghostly calm, trying to focus my mind and piece together a life as fragmented as the mirror I'd smashed. I needed to make sense of what happened and put a stop to the Voice.

I leant forward, slowly, to examine the claw

marks in my scalp and a haunted face I hardly recognised.

"Is this me?"

The only thing still familiar was the eyes – although now they were bloodshot and yellow with pupils raging deep and menacing. I wondered if these black abysses could dilate further, triumphing over the turquoise rings around them, heralding the madness that had claimed my soul.

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I was in my flat, the Killing House, with its strange blood splats on the walls, not knowing whose blood it was or how it got there.

The Voice had named it that after the Special Air Service's anti-terrorist training house at Hereford Camp back in England. I'd seen it in the film *Who Dares Wins* and on a visit to the base during my own military career.

In my mind, people surely suffered a terrible death up here, the top-floor apartment of a decaying tenement in a run-down part of Wan Chai.

As a mosquito whined in the glow of an underrated bulb, the sound of cats wailing, dogs barking and the hustle of the street scene below hardly made it up to the solitude of my smashed-up hovel.

I called it home; a humble abode by day that came alive at night, a place I loved a great deal more than the two-bedroomed new-build I owned in Plymouth. It was a flea-pit with character... my very own piece of Hong Kong... That's exactly what it was.

"Where's it all gone?"

"I don't know ... I don't know where."

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Memories of better days floated up out of the insanity like bubbles of clarity rising to burst atop a glass of mad soda... dining on

top of the World Trade Centre with Dan, as teenage marines on our first proper holiday. Windows on the World they called that place, its lift shaking as it went up a hundred floors of a building already swaying in the downtown Manhattan breeze, then the ritzy of gold, marble, glass, and satin tablecloths, lobster, strawberries and more of New York's awesome skyline to follow.

I'd chuckled to myself as the elderly toilet attendant ran the gold-plated taps and, with a respectful smile, handed me soap and a towel – only three days earlier we'd been lying armed to the teeth and covered in shit in a ditch in the Belfast countryside.

THE CHINESE HAVE AN EXPRESSION: *LIFE IS MEAT*. IT EXPLAINS HOW THE COUNTRY CAN LOSE A HUNDRED PEOPLE IN A COAL MINING ACCIDENT, HIDE IT FROM THE WORLD AND CARRY ON THE NEXT DAY, *BUSINESS AS USUAL*.

After our meal, the evening just got better. A limousine picked us up with the girls from Texas and we drank a load more champagne.



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"Great night... eh?"

"Yeah... a great night."

I'd left the Forces to run my own business in Hong Kong – or *Heung Gong*, to use the colony's rightful title: the Fragrant Harbour.

But that was all bullshit now. I had to think about my family. Despite all the difficulties, they were always there for me, my friends, too – the real ones, not the superficial ones struggling to understand themselves in this ego-fuelled city. There was no way I was going home, though, a failure with a bankrupt dream. How could I do that?

None of them would recognise me anyway. They certainly wouldn't like the dump I lived in, the amount of drugs I took, or that triads had followed me home, again, the other morning. I knew they were tailing me – hardly surprising after the bizarre chain of events that had unfolded that night...

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An inch from rock bottom, I'd taken a job

as doorman at Club Nemo. As with many nightclubs in Asia, although owned by a local businessman, the dominant crime syndicate organised the security, bar, prostitutes and drug deals. In Wan Chai, this was the 14-K – said to be the most ruthless brotherhood in existence.

It was "Paul" Eng, a cross-eyed psychopath, who'd asked me to come and work for them. He was the resident *Dai Lo*, or "Big Brother", a middle-ranking triad who managed Nemo's and the mobsters who ran it.

I was leaving the club the night they set me up. I hadn't been scared... okay... a little, but I wasn't going to show these guys that.

I laughed at them – frickin' gangsters with their sycophantic expat cronies and weird secret hand signs. I was still laughing when glancing over my shoulder I noticed a black Mercedes stalking me slowly from a distance through the morning-after litter adorning Jaffe Road.

I was heading back to the sanctuary of my flat, off my face on the meth I'd smoked the previous evening and looking forward to smoking some more, wondering if this would be another twenty-four hours clocked up without any sleep.

As the terror began to take hold, I decided to give them the slip by scooting up a back alley – a dark stinking shortcut that crawled with fat rats thriving on scraps thrown out of the back doors of restaurants. They weren't ordinary rodents, either. These dirt-matted mutants only scurried out of the way so they could watch with contempt as you passed through their patch, jeering as stale water dripped down from antiquated air conditioners.

I ducked into the doorway of one of the grey

buildings and shot up the back stairs, heart pounding the living daylights out of my rib cage, my breathing frenetic.

After several futile attempts at smashing through the ageing exit door, I found myself out on the roof, desperate for a place to hide and fumbling in the leather pouch around my waist for the Mini Maglite and chain.

Illumination I didn't need – only the blunt force the torch delivered when connecting with someone's head. I'd never had cause to use it in the club – at least not as a weapon. It had come in handy at the end of the night, though, for scouring the disco's dirt-caked floor for any drugs or valuables the customers may have dropped – a trick I'd learnt from Dai Su, the "Violent Hand" assassin.

They may well be coming with their meat cleavers – after all, that's a triad's prerogative – but it wouldn't faze me. Not much does when you're a mental ex-marine flying high on meth. I would do my utmost to fuck 'em up, and badly if necessary. This wasn't a place to mess around. There are no Queensberry Rules in Wan Chai.

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Still, a hiding place might prove worthwhile.

Scanning around I spied a recess set into the roof, some kind of utility shaft. I grabbed the rusting ladder but only managed to get a foot on a rung before slipping, falling headlong into the darkness and – "Umph!" – landing on some god-awful mess below.

Something broke my fall, but it was far from pleasant. I felt hair and cold, hardened flesh and smelt a stench – "Urrrh!" – that would have been unbearable in anything less than a crisis.

It wasn't just rancid, dead and

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decomposing... it was *human*. My mind flashed back to a corpse I'd stumbled upon on a riverbank in Cairo.

The next thing I knew the Maglite was on, and because this was Hong Kong, where situations can always get worse, I believed what I saw.

I don't know if it was a mother and *her* baby, or a woman and *a* baby. Nor what she'd done or why. What I did know was she'd been hacked to pieces as a result.

Her face - what was left of it - still contorted with fear, as if she'd realised death was imminent, grimaced and, after the chopper had sliced from crown to ear, her features had

stayed that way.

I wondered if her tormentor had lopped her arms and legs off before or after that fatal blow, as they now lay awkwardly against her torso.

The little boy was on his back, draped across her midriff, with eyes gently closed and mouth slightly ajar, as if in peaceful sleep.

His tiny belly wasn't so composed. Through a single slash, a rainbow of entrails spilled onto the woman's emaciated chest, time and bodily fluid welding them together.

I tried to back into a corner but could barely move my own limbs. Bodies or no bodies, I would lie low here until the danger passed. Although the meth had stolen it all - friends, health, career, possessions - I still respected myself and could sit in the darkness next to two corpses and say, "Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em all!"

The Chinese have an expression: *Life is meat*. It explains how the country can lose a hundred people in a coal mining accident, hide it from the world and carry on the next day, business as usual. Well, I had my own saying as I listened to my heartbeat in overdrive: *Meat is life*.

Besides, waiting shit out in adverse conditions is what the Forces train you for and the Royal Marines are the best at it. Lying up all night in an ambush position in the Norwegian Arctic has that effect on you. I could wait. I could wait as long as necessary...

I awoke later that day on the Hawaiian-patterned mattress covering my rickety bamboo bunk - the one I'd built to make use of the room space I didn't have. Cold in the tropical heat, ravenous and shivering

with exhaustion, I gathered my thoughts and contemplated my next move.

It slowly dawned on me that it was dark already and I should have been back at work. I reached over, flicked the light switch and checked the Casio G-Shock.

"Shit!"

It had gone 10 pm. I was over two hours late. Along with pawning my treasured Swiss watch, it was another reason to feel like crap.

I threw off the rough blanket lying across my midriff and eased my legs over the edge of the bed, hopping the five-foot drop to land unsteady on my feet.

In amongst the other junk littering my gone-to-pot attempt at tatami flooring was a crumpled page from an old newspaper. As I shoved a Marlboro between my lips and set it alight, an aerial photograph on the yellowing sheet caught my eye.

It was some kind of brick construction set into the roof of one of the colony's tower blocks. Filling the recess, as well as my attention, was the picture's focus. It looked as though someone had tried to create a grotesque three-dimensional Picasso using real people... although in reality, the woman and baby had been hacked to death in signature triad revenge.

An eerie *déjà vu* spread slowly through every cell in my body, like a banshee's wail building to a crescendo that both chilled and electrified my being.

Frantically I scanned for the date on the newspaper... *15 May 1995...* was *three days* before I'd arrived in Hong Kong... 📄