

# V. E. N. O. M.

In Venenum Potentia

**TY MITCHELL**

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**Signed,**

**Special Agent Ethan Parker**

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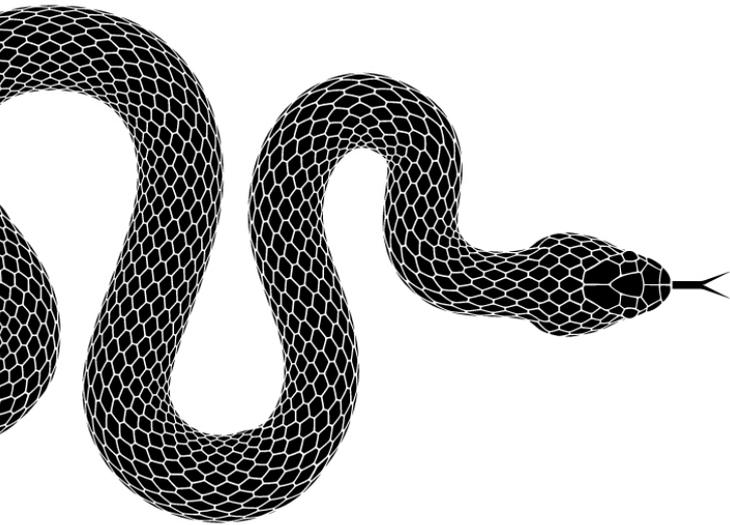
To my children Julian and Elena.  
Anything is possible if you put God first.

If the people cannot trust their government to do the job  
for which it exists- to protect and promote their common  
welfare- all else is lost.

-President Barack Obama

# 1.

Catskills, New York



The nighttime mountains seemed frozen in time, their wooded terrain as brutal as it was scenic. One wrong step in the darkness could turn a lost soul into the feast of the forest.

A string of snow-covered houses clung to the forest's edge, lifeless Christmas lights still hanging from the gutters, holiday spirit now little more than a memory. The home closest to the trees was old but sturdy, with a brick chimney and purlin rooftop. Dim light seeped from a second-story window. Three black cars were parked outside; two SUVs and a sedan.

Inside the house, the sound of laughing children echoed off dated wallpaper and wood trim whose once-bright paint had chipped away like smoker's lung. In the bedroom, a single light bulb hung from the ceiling. Two pushed-together twin beds and a dusty nightstand were the room's only furnishings.

A group of young Chinese children lay on their stomachs atop the mattresses, watching in rapt attention as Jun Li read their favorite folk story: *The Tale of Lok Lee and the Dwarf*. It was a story they'd all heard many times before yet longed to hear again. Their attention was unwavering as Jun Li's active voice captured their imaginations.

Jun Li was the complete opposite of what the listeners had expected. His hair was jet black and shoulder length. He wore a black leather jacket, crisp jeans and polished shoes. The children marveled at him because he was somewhat like a fairytale himself. They felt like they could close their eyes, make a wish, and magically become him.

Jun Li glanced up as he turned the page, smiling at the purity he'd felt as a child. Then he checked his watch and felt a lump in his throat. His audience was clearly expecting more, but he marked the page and closed the book. "I think that is enough for tonight," he said.

The children all whined together like a symphony.

"Can't you read just a little more, Jun Li?" asked the youngest.

Jun Li shook his head. "I can't. It's getting late, and you have to go back to sleep. I shouldn't have awakened you all in the first place."

The children did as they were told and climbed under the patchy comforter that covered the double-bed. But the oldest, a thirteen-year-old boy, stepped to the floor and headed for the door.

Jun Li stepped in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I have to go to the bathroom," the boy said.

Jun Li studied the boy's face. "Koa, is it?"

The boy gave Jun Li a suspicious look.

"I heard one of your brothers say it earlier," said Jun Li.

"Mr. Pei says I should go by my American name, John."

Jun Li grabbed Koa by the back of the neck and looked him dead in the eyes. "Koa is a strong name for a strong young man. Do you understand?"

Koa nodded.

Jun Li stepped aside. "All right, Koa, you may go, but

don't be gone for too long. You're the leader of this group, which means you lead by example."

Koa smiled with confidence—which was rare for him; his teeth overlapped, and he kept smiles to a minimum.

Jun Li turned toward the other children as Koa left for the bathroom. "As for the rest of you...sleep. We'll finish the story when you wake up."

Jun Li gave each of them a kiss on the foreheads. They said their goodnights and tucked themselves in. Jun Li pulled the ratty string connected to the light bulb and left the room.

In the hall, he waited for Koa to go into the bathroom and close the door. He stretched his neck, then proceeded down the creaky staircase.

The living room was nothing special, with modest furniture and a small wooden table for tea. The only things that gave the space any personality were the many black-and-white photos.

Jun Li noticed two cups filled with steaming tea. "I see that you were not able to finish your tea," he said. "My apologies." He turned to the old Chinese couple, bound and gagged in facing chairs. They kept their focus on each other, never breaking eye contact. Their clothes had been torn during their earlier struggle with the five henchmen standing over them.

Jun Li's footsteps triggered a panic in the old woman, and her breathing quickened. Her bloodshot eyes grew wide, pleading for her husband to do something. But there was nothing he could do but watch with the eye that wasn't swollen shut.

Jun Li stroked the woman's face while looking at the old man. "Those are some special children you have upstairs. Why don't you allow them to live by their birth names and

“speak in their native tongue? Are you trying so hard to forget your past that you would deprive our future of its heritage? Or are *they* making you do that?”

Jun Li ripped the gag from the old man’s mouth. The man took a moment to catch his breath through swollen lips still dappled with blood. Finally he whispered, “Those kids...they are not your future.”

Jun Li took a sip of tea. “Ban Tian Yao—not readily available here in the States. Who’s getting it for you? The Americans?”

The old man raised his head up and said in Mandarin, “I don’t know why you came into my home with such disrespect. Your reasoning is beneath me. But there’s still hope for you, lost boy. I will be generous and give you a chance to leave unharmed. I suggest you take it.”

Jun Li’s face tightened into a snarl as he snatched the teapot and dangled it over the old woman’s head. “You’re not in a position to be giving chances. Those days are over. Now give me what I came for.”

The old man scoffed, then winced at the sting in his cheeks. “You always were the ant that tried to push the mountain. If you possessed so much power, you wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

Jun Li smirked. The sight made the old man hold his breath and feel his heartbeat.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jun Li said. He tilted the teapot and poured the steaming liquid onto the old woman’s lap. Her screams pierced the gag and filled the room.

“*Jun Li!*” the old man yelled over her screams. He moved as far as his restraints would allow. His throat closed at the sight of his wife shaking from her hands to her tender red thighs.

“I hear that Ban Tain Yao is a great remedy for dry scalps,” Jun Li said. He grabbed the back of the old woman’s neck and held her head down on her lap. The old man’s lips quivered.

Jun Li grew tired of his silence and signaled for one of his men to go upstairs.

“Wait,” the old man finally said. “Please, don’t. I’ll take you to it but please, don’t hurt my family.”

Jun Li grinned and eased his grip on the old woman’s fragile neck. He placed the teapot down and spoke to his henchmen in Mandarin. “You three take him to the car. You two, stay here and watch her.”

As they carried the old man outside, Jun Li kneeled in front of the old woman. He tilted her head up so their eyes could meet. He took a second to observe her. She might have been beautiful in her youth, but the years had not been kind to her. “Don’t take this personally,” he said in Mandarin. “Everything I do is in the name of my country.” He let her head drop and then stood.

One of the henchmen went upstairs, while the other pulled out a nine-inch blade behind the old woman. Jun Li walked outside, where the old man was pinned against an SUV. “There was a time when honor meant something,” the old man said. “When your enemy plotted to kill you but still respected you enough to let you know he was the one trying to do so. You think this is going to bring honor back to what we had?” The old man shook his head. “This will only weaken you. Betraying your own makes you a coward. But it’s not too late to make this right. We can stay with the original plan if—”

The henchman walked out cleaning his blade with a piece of the old woman’s dress, then threw the bloody cloth on the ground.

Jun Li halted arm's-length from the old man. He loathed the man's horrified face. A part of him still respected the man. "This is me making it right, old friend," he said.

The old man ground his teeth and slipped a three-inch blade from his sleeve. He slashed the throat of the nearest henchman, who crashed to his knees. His blood flowed freely, soaking into the snow. A second henchman received four quick stabs to the abdomen, and joined the first on the ground. The old man sliced through the remaining henchmen with little effort. Jun Li stood still, admiring the old man's skill. He thought about the many lessons the old man had given him when he was younger. But this was a different time, and Jun Li was ready to prove himself.

After cutting down the last henchman, the old man wasted no time coming for Jun Li. The snow crunched under his feet as he sprinted for Jun Li.

Jun Li didn't move a muscle. The old man tried many times to cut the smirk off Jun Li's face. But Jun Li dodged with ease, calculating each move. He noticed something different in the old man. His swings had less power now, and his movements were not as sharp.

The old man propelled a stab, but Jun Li caught the blow by the wrist. The bloody blade shook inches from his face. Jun Li took a moment to stare at a ring on the old man's finger. It was a gold Chinese Cobra with green emeralds for eyes. Jun Li's ice block hands compressed the old man's wrist, making him fall to his knees.

"I remember you telling me the story of the Naja Atra when I was a child," Jun Li told him. "That used to mean something to me. *You* used to mean something to me. But I will restore what you have lost. The new V.E.N.O.M is here, and I am its leader."

Jun Li delivered a crushing blow to the old man, making his vision go black. Silence returned to the forest, and the clock was now ticking.