

THE DEAD CHIP SYNDICATE

By

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Based on the screenwriter's novel



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"You always cheat the ones closest to you."

- Chinese proverb

The Dead Chip Syndicate

FADE IN:

1. INT. ZHUHAI PEOPLE'S HOSPITAL - DAY

A chaotic madhouse. The early days of China's COVID crisis. Three-feet high BODY BAGS OF THE DEAD line the walls next to trashbags leaking medical waste. Sterility be damned.

Harried NURSES in full PPE rush about, trying to keep up with the DEATH AND CARNAGE; feeling for vital signs; administering shots; comforting the DYING; toe-tagging the DEAD.

An ORDERLY pushes in a gurney containing CASH CHEANG, a pale, sweaty, forty-year-old man, whose fingers are turning blue, a clear sign COVID is about to take another. Cash's gurney bumps against a bed containing a FRAIL SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD WOMAN, who thrashes about, struggling to breathe.

A PPE-covered MALE ORDERLY wheels in a ventilator -- the life saver. He looks to a NURSE for direction. But gets none.

DR. LING LING, a dignified woman in her sixties exuding stoic calmness, steps up to Cash's gurney. She grabs the chart dangling from it, then flinches at the sight of the man's name. A harried NURSE sidles up, looks between the two patients, and asks mechanically:

YOUNG NURSE
(in Mandarin)
Who gets the ventilator?

Seeing a flicker of recognition in Dr. Ling Ling's eyes, the Young Nurse interrogates the doctor with a harsh look.

YOUNG NURSE
(in Mandarin)
You know this man?

Dr. Ling Ling defiantly shakes her head while covering up her sneer. Too busy to probe further, the Young Nurse shoots the doctor another annoyed look, this time with palms up.

YOUNG NURSE
(in Mandarin)
Who gets the ventilator?

Without hesitation, Dr. Ling Ling points to the Old Lady. The Young Nurse fires off a confused look that says, "You sure?" Dr. Ling Ling nods with absolute certainty. The Young Nurse steps over to the Orderly to prepare the ventilator.

Eyes widening in fear, Cash pleads with Dr. Ling Ling, who ignores him. With cold penetrating eyes, she leans in close.

DR. LING LING
(whispering in Cantonese)
This is for my son.

DISSOLVE TO:

2. INT. AIRLINE CABIN - NIGHT

SUPERTITLE: Skies above Manila's Ninoy Aquino Airport

CRACKLING bolts of lightning FLASH-WHITEN the cabin, sending jolts throughout the plane. A series of CREAKS and RATTLES, then the GRINDING of the landing gear lowering. Lights flicker. An air of doom suffocates the place. Another jolt induces a round of desperate "Our Fathers" from the mostly Filipino, probably quite devout, Catholic PASSENGERS.

STEPHEN WILSON -- forties, lithe, with handsome, Western features and penetrating blue eyes that make him stand out from his fellow brown-eyed passengers -- glances at a FLIGHT ATTENDANT strapped into her exit row jump seat. He recognizes her wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and flared nostrils as classic signs of fear. He smiles at her, projecting calm.

The MALE PASSENGER sitting beside Stephen flinches as a CLAP OF THUNDER incites more "Our Fathers." A few rows back, a baby SQUEALS. Stephen glances out the window. Through a bank of thick fog, the haloed, misty lights of Resorts World Manila come into view as the plane descends toward the rain-slick tarmac.

A phone message PINGS in. Stephen pulls out his mobile and checks the WhatsApp message. One from Detective Fonseca with a screaming headline...

SHOT OF MESSAGE: MR. WILSON, YOU'RE IN GRAVE DANGER. SEVERAL HITMEN HIRED TO KILL YOU HAVE BEEN ARRESTED IN ZHUHAI.

ON STEPHEN'S eyes widening in shock. He clicks on the call-back feature. Within seconds, Detective Fonseca answers:

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)

You're a lucky man, Mr. Wilson.
Someone hired a hitman to kill you.
That hitman hired another hitman at half his price, who hired a third hitman at half his price, who then hired a fourth hitman. However, he was so disgusted by the lowball offer, he called the police.

Stephen stammers out a question:

STEPHEN

But who ordered the hit?

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)

You tell me.

STEPHEN

I have no idea.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Maybe a business partner you pissed
off? Say, Cash?

STEPHEN
Of all the people I know, he's the
least likely. You're suffering from
confirmation bias, detective.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
In law enforcement, we call that
"incarceration bias."

STEPHEN
Anyway, I have to go.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
We can offer you protection.

STEPHEN
That won't be necessary.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Where are you?

STEPHEN
Not in Macau.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Obviously. You just landed in
Manila.

STEPHEN
If you knew where I was, why'd you
ask?

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
A moral man doesn't lie to the
police, Mr. Wilson.

STEPHEN
It's called being protective,
detective. Not sure who I can trust
at this point. Many view that badge
you carry around with you as a
license to steal, not something
respectable.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
If that's so, I've been doing
something wrong my entire career.

STEPHEN
Look at that, I just gave you a
great idea for a side hustle.
Literally.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
When do you plan on returning to
Macau?

STEPHEN
Maybe never. Having a few contracts
taken out on your life kind of
takes all the fun out of that
black-sand beach place.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Wouldn't blame you if you never
returned, Mr. Wilson. Actually, I'd
advise it. Make my life a whole lot
easier.

STEPHEN
I'll keep that in mind while I'm
trying to stay alive, detective.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
I can put a notice out on you. Have
you picked up for questioning.

STEPHEN
Please don't. You know I'd be free
within an hour, but with my wallet
considerably lighter. And you know
how we Americans hate having our
freedom impinged upon.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
As do we Macanites, but, trust me,
you get used to it.

STEPHEN
Never. Look, I'm as much in the
dark about all of this as you are,
but trust me, I'll fly under the
radar. But call me if you beat a
confession out of anyone.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
If you can think of anyone who
might want you dead, please let us
know.

STEPHEN
You'll be the first.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
And you just better hope there's
not a fifth -- hitman that is.

Stephen hangs up. He glances out the window as the plane
touches down, safely skidding along the runway to a stop.

RAUCOUS CHEERS break out across the cabin.

STEPHEN'S POV: THE RAIN PELTING THE WINDOW PLEXIGLASS IS SO HARD IT'S LIKE BULLETS BEING FIRED FROM A GUN.

Gunshots RING OUT (O.S.).

DISSOLVE TO:

3. EXT. AMMO NATION - DAY

A 100-yard shooting range with twelve positions. The firing lines have concrete floors, concrete benches, and wooden targets. Stephen fires a Colt Marine Pistol at a bullseye.

The OWNER of the store, a middle-aged, portly Filipino man in his sixties, cocks an impressed eye as several bullets cluster around the center of the target.

STEPHEN
This for sale?

AMMO NATION GUNSHOP OWNER
Can't sell to foreigners.

Stephen pulls out a wad of American 100-dollar bills.

STEPHEN
Only foreigner here is my good old friend, Benjamin.

4. EXT. CEBU MARINA - DAY

SQUAWKING SEAGULLS divebomb for scraps around several rusting and barely seaworthy FISHING TRAWLERS that lazily bump against the marina's concrete, pock-marked walls.

Sweaty, dark-skinned, and thin-as-a-rail FISHERMEN yell at one another in singsong Tagalog as they expertly toss today's catch from ship-to-shore.

Sweat beading across his brow, Stephen holds an ArgoTrack screen before an OLD CAPTAIN -- a lithe man in his sixties, with green eyes that radiate brilliantly from his darkly tanned face.

STEPHEN
You know where this is?

The Old Captain nods noncommittally, his eyes roving back to his Crew Members chattering amongst themselves. He chides one of them in annoyed Tagalog.

STEPHEN
How long to get there?

OLD CAPTAIN
About an hour.

STEPHEN

You can take me?

The Old Captain shakes his head and points at the charcoal-black clouds swirling in the distant east.

OLD CAPTAIN

Typhoon's coming.

Point taken, but Stephen counters the Old Captain's hesitation with five crisp hundred dollars bills, which instantly disappear into the Old Captain's threadbare top pocket.

5. INT. BANGKA FISHING BOAT - DAY

Stephen dangles his legs over the bow, letting the splashing waves kiss his ankles, trying to ignore the GRINDING and PUTTERING ENGINE drowning out the deep serenity of the place.

Looking up, he sees the incredible beauty around him; it's as if some knowing hand had thrown a festival of dazzling Diwali colors across the crystal-clear waters of Kinatarkan Reef and the pigments had drifted down into the undulating depths, dissolving across the salty waters in a million hues of intermingling yellows, greens, and blues. Earthly Paradise.

6. INT. BANGKA FISHING BOAT - DAY

THE GAMBLER, a forty-two-foot yacht, appears on the horizon, anchored a mile off Kinatarkan Island, with its sails down, bobbing lazily in the calm waters.

7. EXT. KINATARKAN REEF - DAY

The Fishing TRAWLER'S engine THROTTLES DOWN and the boat glides towards *The Gambler*. Once the boat's starboard side almost kisses *The Gambler's* stern, Stephen slings his backpack over his shoulder, then springs across the water.

8. EXT. *THE GAMBLER* DECK - DAY

With his hands scaling along the boom to keep his balance, Stephen scrambles along the deck. His eyes scan for any sign of life or any indication of threat. He unzips his backpack, slips his hand inside it, releases the gun's safety, then slides his finger onto the cool metal trigger.

9. EXT. *THE GAMBLER* DECK - DAY

Stephen inches open the creaking cabin door. The stench of urine hits him like a punch in the face. He waves it away, glances in.

As his eyes adjust to the darkness, a dim blue light flickering somewhere inside reveals a disheveled mess. The WEAK GROAN OF A DYING MAN rises. Stephen cups his hand over his nose, coughs a few times, then descends into the cabin.

THUNDER CRACKS in the distance.

DISSOLVE TO:

10. EXT. MACAU ROOSEVELT HOTEL - POOL - DAY

SUPERTITLE: NINE MONTHS BEFORE

FIFTY HIP, BEAUTIFUL, NOUVEAU RICHE, CHINESE MILLENNIALS sway to Johnny Cash's RING OF FIRE. Enjoying the riches that have flooded into China over the past decade, these Revelers don designer clothes, which are lavishly accessorized with expensive watches, sparkling jewelry, and bling, bling, bling. The vibe: young, carefree, deep-diving into excessive Western self-indulgence.

Wearing a well-tailored suit, Stephen strides across the patio, catching sight of Cash at a table filled with chattering JUNKET GIRLS by the edge of the pool.

With expressive Tony Leung eyes made shadowy under a black L.A. baseball cap, Cash exudes a hip weirdness that is engaging in an odd and charming sort of way.

In slick designer clothes, Cash doesn't seem the country music type, but the Johnny Cash lyrics roll off his tongue as if he'd sung them a thousand times before. He spots Stephen, grabs a racing form off the table, rises, and approaches.

CASH

Find the place okay?

STEPHEN

Yeah. I know it well. Drove by a few times during its construction. It had a funny sign out front reading, "Historical Landmark: Opening Soon."

CASH

Another of our lost-in-translation signs. They're everywhere around here. Let me show you the view.

Cash leads Stephen up a flight of steps, to an infinity pool overlooking the Macau Jockey Club. In the shadow of Galaxy Macau's massive integrated resort, the racetrack contains both a dirt track and an outer turf track. A grandstand by the finish line appears about a QUARTER-FULL with FANS excitedly watching horses load into a starting gate.

Stephen marvels at the view. He glances to the east, seeing the towering, glass-encased skyscrapers of Henquin Island about a mile away. A mini-metropolis expanding into a new Hong Kong, or so the Chinese government hopes.

STEPHEN

World-class.

CASH

You like racing?

STEPHEN

My preferred form of gambling actually. That and betting against England at every major football tournament.

CASH

Football is a game in which twenty-two men kick around a ball for ninety minutes and England loses on penalties.

STEPHEN

Hundred-and-twenty with OT as we Brits prefer extending the pain. But, yeah, we lose every time.

Cash hands Stephen the racing form.

CASH

One of my horses is running in the fifth. I thought this would be a great place to watch the race. Guess which one is mine.

Stephen flips to the fifth race and looks over the horses' names. A Junket Girl hovering nearby digs out a handful of betting slips from her pocket. Offers them to Stephen.

CASH

Here's a clue.

Taking the tickets but not looking at them, Stephen spots the obvious horse in the program and says:

STEPHEN

Cowboy's Sweetheart?

Cash nods with an impressed smile.

STEPHEN

Tell me, Cash, what's with the country music fascination?

CASH

How can you ask -- a screenwriter like you? Every song tells a story. And don't you just love the wit -- "*I'm So Miserable Without You, It's Just Like Having You Around*", "*Live Like You Were Dying*", "*Man, I Feel Like a Woman?*" Someone as literate as you should respect titles like that.

STEPHEN

I respect the titles, it's the music underneath I have problems with. Shania Twain, really?

CASH

I was making a point about the song titles, not the songs. But you're right, she's trite, like most of today's alt-country acts.

Another Junket Girl approaches with a pair of binoculars, which she offers to Cash with absurd aplomb.

CASH

Ah, the race is afoot. Literally, as you say.

Cash grabs the binoculars, then trains them on the track below. After a few moments, he announces:

CASH

They're off. Cyrus says you're a pretty good screenwriter.

STEPHEN

Not good enough to get produced.

CASH

Not an easy business. Maybe one of the hardest to make money in, unlike the casino business, where you just have to make sure the Chinese politicians keep the borders open.

A distant ROAR rises from the CROWD as the HORSES sprint into the first turn.

CASH

You want to write my story -- junket operator comes good after rising from the mean streets of Macau -- that how you say it?

Stephen's brow furrows, unsure what Cash means. Then he gets the film reference and smiles.

STEPHEN

You mean, *Mean Streets*, the Scorsese film?

Cash nods.

STEPHEN

Sounds fascinating, but there's an old adage about biographies -- "Everyone has a book in them, but for most people, that's where it should stay."

Cash laughs in a chiding but not arrogant way as if to say "Trust me, that won't be a problem with my story."

CASH

I tell you story. You decide, but I don't think it should stay here.

Cash taps his left pectoral.

STEPHEN

Maybe yours can touch that. But you're not worried about leaving evidence?

CASH

Of what? I think you have the wrong impression of me. I'm not triad.

STEPHEN

Too bad, that could make it more interesting.

CASH

(chuckling)
True that.

STEPHEN

But how do you know I'm any good?

CASH

Cyrus told me.

STEPHEN

I'll let you in on a little secret about brothers -- sometimes they bend the truth. Especially twins. And especially a born salesman like Cyrus. How about I send you one of my scripts?

CASH

No need. I go with my gut. It's worked for me for forty years. You want to write my story or what?

STEPHEN

I'm kind of busy right now with your facial recognition work.

CASH

(motioning towards race)
How about we make a wager? This is Macau, after all, the gambling capitol of the world.

STEPHEN

What kind of wager?

CASH

How about if one of those bets comes in, you agree to write my book?

STEPHEN

I'm not sure I'll be able to find time, actually.

CASH

This way you negotiate?

A demeaning yet playful smile dances across Cash's lips.

STEPHEN

This the way you do?

CASH

Always good to include a ticking clock, no? Adds nice suspense.

STEPHEN

You've seen too many movies.

CASH

I'll pay you two hundred US an hour. We do about ten-to-fifteen hours a week for a month. You hear my story, then you decide.

Cash lowers the binoculars, and offers his hand.

CASH

Deal?

STEPHEN

Deal.

Stephen shakes. Cash smiles while raising his binoculars. He watches the race unfold as the Crowd CHEERS the HORSES home. It's a tight finish as three HORSES hit the line together.

CASH

Ten, seven. Maybe Cowboy in third.

Cash takes the tickets from Stephen, hands them to the Junket Girl, fires off a couple of SENTENCES IN CANTONESE. The Junket Girl searches the tickets for a potential winner. After a few moments, the Junket Girl squeals in excited delight while thrusting the winning ticket high in the air.

Cash gestures for her to give the ticket to Stephen. She does so with an endearing fake pouty display.

Stephen checks the ticket -- a trifecta bet (first, second, and third) that includes a bunch of horses in the first slot and a field bet in the second slot, with Cowboy Sweetheart the lone show horse. He glances at the racing program.

STEPHEN

This'll pay massive.

CASH

Congratulations. My gift to you.

STEPHEN

I can't take it. It's worth hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars.

CASH

See it as an advance.

Stephen nods, at a loss for words.

CASH

Stick with me, my friend, and we'll be hitting longshots forever. Start tomorrow.

It's not a question. Stephen smiles and nods.

DISSOLVE TO:

11. INT. HERMES BOMBARDIER CHALLENGER 850 PRIVATE JET - DAY

Somewhere over the South China Sea, Stephen holds a champagne flute up to a Junket Girl, who pours in some Cristal. She then tops up Cash's raised glass as well.

Cash wears a Nudie Cohn-inspired outfit that is topped by a white Stetson cowboy hat, complete with a gold buckle set with 26 sparkling diamonds that glitter from the late-afternoon sun rays streaming into the cabin.

Cash scoops out some Beluga caviar from a tin sitting on a bed of crushed ice. He adds it to a toast point, munches it.

CASH

Caviar should never be strong or overpowering.

(MORE)