

The Many Lies
of
Veronica Hawkins

Kristina Pérez



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Hungry Ghosts: Life and Death on the Peak

Martina Torres

Camden Press

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ADVANCED READER'S EDITION

When Martina Torres arrived in the glamorous and vibrant metropolis of Hong Kong newly married to her high-school sweetheart, the world seemed to be her oyster. But looks can be deceiving. Adrift in a foreign city, with no job and no friends, Martina chafed in her new role as Expat Wife.

Everything changed the day she met Veronica Hawkins.

Veronica was the epitome of old Hong Kong – the last surviving member of a British mercantile dynasty that built the city during its colonial heyday – gorgeous, filthy rich, the Gloria Vanderbilt of Hong Kong. Martina never expected to be taken under Veronica's wing. She certainly didn't expect Veronica's fierce kindness, unswerving loyalty, or the many things Veronica would teach Martina about herself.

The last thing she could ever have expected was Veronica's mysterious and tragic death. *What really happened to Veronica Hawkins?* asked tabloid headlines around the globe.

It's the wrong question.

Who really was Veronica Hawkins? That's the right one. In Martina's words, 'She was my best friend.'

Based on Martina's viral BuzzFeed article, '10 Things You Learn When Your Best Friend Dies', *Hungry Ghosts: Life and Death on the Peak* is an unflinching account of the complex nature of grief, the meaning of belonging, and the transformative power of friendship.

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Prologue

The End of the Beginning

*M*y mother always told me no relationship ends well. Either you break up or somebody dies.

I didn't believe her at the time. I was ten or eleven, watching her tweeze her eyebrows to within an inch of their lives (a seventies hangover, I presume). She caught my gaze in the mirror on her vanity and held it the way she did when I was in trouble. I can still smell her Cartier perfume – the one with the panther perched atop the bottle stopper: pepper and narcissus that made me sneeze.

I didn't believe her because I assumed she meant messy kissing relationships with boys who picked their noses and other body parts. I was still several years away from being interested in those. Now I know better.

But there's no word for a woman who loses her best friend. I can't call myself a widow or an orphan, although I often feel like both. Friendless isn't quite right, either, because I can still feel her close to me.

I became intoxicated with Hong Kong and Veronica Hawkins all at once. The charged scent in the air right before a black rain-storm strikes will forever mean Hong Kong and Veronica to me. No doubt you've seen the headlines surrounding the mysterious and tragic death that has captivated tabloids around the globe. Some say it was an accident, others suicide, still others murder.

Without incontrovertible proof, the police case is closed, but

the public speculation will remain cocktail-party chitchat forever. Veronica Hawkins's death has already become legend: joining the ranks of Natalie Wood, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana.

The world loves a beautiful dead white woman.

And yet none of the blind items, whispers or innuendo captures the Veronica I knew, the Veronica who drew me out of my shell and helped me find the Martina I was meant to be.

I'm the last person I'd ever have suspected would write a memoir. It's happened mostly by accident. My entire childhood, and most of my adult life, has been about polishing myself until my skin was so buffed it bled. Admitting I have any weaknesses or imperfections an impossibility. I became a journalist to write about other people, to prevent anyone from looking too closely at me – from finding me wanting.

When Veronica vanished one sultry night, my heart shattered. Broke wide open. At the depths of my grief, fuelled by a few too many glasses of Sauvignon Blanc, I poured my heart into words to try to make sense of a world without Veronica in it. If I'd never met her, I'd never have had the guts to send my ramblings to an editor at BuzzFeed. My friendship with Veronica altered me on a cellular level – she believed in me enough for both of us.

The response to my article was overwhelming and unexpected. I started by writing about Veronica and discovered I was really writing about myself, writing my way back to myself: someone new whom I still don't always recognise. I thought I'd said everything I'd needed to say, told the world the ten things I'd learned when my best friend died.

Some of the comments on my article (note: never read the comments) made me realise how much Veronica would have hated how her death became more grist for the mill. I needed to tell the whole story, the unvarnished truth of our friendship, of Veronica's final days, even if it meant revealing my own pain, letting the sun stream in through a magnifying glass. I owed it to Veronica. It was the only thing I had left to give her.

If you've picked up this book looking for a whodunnit or a true-crime exposé, apologies in advance, you're going to be disappointed.

This is a love story.

Veronica taught me to love her hometown the way she did, showed me a Hong Kong I never would have seen without her. This is a love letter to my best friend and to the city where we met. Both are gems made more precious by their flaws.

It's fitting that I should be writing this on Qingming of all days. Tomb-sweeping Day, when families across Hong Kong tidy the tombstones or cremation urns on the terraced hills of the city's columbaria, the air filled with the sandalwood smoke of burning joss sticks and silvered spirit money to honour their ancestors. Some offer villas and Lamborghinis so they can live out their afterlife in style.

Veronica once took me to the old colonial cemetery in Happy Valley to sweep the grave of her first ancestor, who set foot on the island when it was still considered nothing more than a desolate rock. She never felt like she belonged in Britain, she told me. She thought of herself as a Hongkonger. It's where she was born.

It's where she died.

This memoir is my attempt to sweep up the rubbish and scandal surrounding her death and to celebrate her life. It's the story of us. We're inextricably bound now, Veronica and me, Veronica and the woman she believed I could be. When I feel that self slipping from my grasp, being pulled out to sea, feeling out of my depth, I remember that Veronica was there for me, and she always will be there – somewhere out there – watching over me.

I'm not sure what comes next but, tonight, I'll be burning a papier-mâché bottle of Dom Pérignon in Veronica's honour.

Wherever she is, I'm sure she's the life of the party.

Heiress goes overboard at charity gala on luxury junk

A search is underway for Veronica Hawkins, 35, scion of the Hawkins family and CEO of Hawkins Pacific Limited, who disappeared from a luxury cruise in Victoria Harbour last night.

The Fire Services Department received a report at 1.15 a.m. from the captain of the *Tin Hau 8* that a woman had fallen overboard. In a press briefing at around 6 a.m. this morning, the department's marine and diving division commander Cheung Pak Hei said that they were coordinating with helicopter pilots from the Government Flying Service to scour the waters near the West Kowloon Cultural District.

Ms Hawkins was a guest at the Lifting Hope charity fundraiser gala to benefit orphans in Cambodia.

The event was organised by Cressida Wong, daughter of shipping tycoon Donald Wong and wife of Jack Zhang, founder of the Beijing-based SinoTop, the leading Chinese defence and security firm.

The boat departed from the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club around 7.30 p.m. in the evening, carrying a veritable who's who of the city's elite, including film star Venus Lam.

Jean-Pierre Renard, 54, artist and husband to Ms Hawkins, was also in attendance.

Guests at the party told the *South China Daily* on the condition of anonymity that the missing heiress appeared intoxicated and disoriented shortly before her absence was noticed.

This is a developing story.

Chapter 1

An American in Hong Kong

You already know how this story ends. What you don't know is how it started. My life in Hong Kong truly began the day I met Veronica Hawkins.

The humidity was thick enough to chew as I battled my way down the steep, narrow streets of Central. I'd arrived in the Fragarant Harbour, as it's known, the month before and hadn't yet learned to keep a collapsible umbrella in my Longchamp tote bag at all times. Or the futility of wearing kitten heels on the jigsaw of tiles and pockmarked pavements.

A growl of thunder reverberated between the skyscrapers of the business district that nearly made me believe in the dragons supposedly dwelling beneath the serpentine Nine Hills of Kowloon across the filmy green strait. Fat raindrops fell on my raw-silk blouse and perspiration dampened the nape of my neck as I hustled down Queen's Road. Perfect, just perfect. I was late and I'd be a wet, sweaty mess by the time I reached the gallery to interview a notoriously formidable heiress. My heart sank. The article for *HK City Chic* was my first professional gig since arriving.

It took no time after landing in town to hear Veronica's name whispered at expat events with a mixture of envy and fear. Her family business, Hawkins Pacific, was one of the last remaining British hong, or foreign-owned trading houses, and had been instrumental in transforming Hong Kong from a collection of fishing villages

to the Pearl of the Orient. Veronica lived her life in regional and international society pages – especially following the tragic boating accident that orphaned her as a teenager.

I'd been primed to detest Veronica: obscenely wealthy and cloaked with elegant grief, practically a Gothic heroine. Which was why I'd been surprised when her PA had agreed so readily to an in-person interview without any pre-specified no-go topics.

Another crack of thunder resounded overhead. You'd think growing up in New York City, loud noises wouldn't set my teeth on edge, but there's something about a coming storm that unnerves me.

Skittering as fast as I could in my kitten heels, my gaze skimmed the expertly coiffed women, foreign and local, brandishing Harvey Nichols shopping bags like shields against downward mobility as they queued for red-and-white taxis outside the Landmark Mandarin Oriental. *Tái tais*, I would learn to call them: ladies who lunch. That had always been my mother's greatest ambition for me, why my parents insisted on sending me to a Manhattan private school we could barely afford. Status was the hit they craved.

I accosted a hotel bellboy, soggy map of Central in hand. 'I'm looking for the Gallery de Ladrones? Duddell Street?'

Rain pelting the golden fan logo on his cap, the bellboy flung an arm towards the busy road, an artery gushing through the island, while hoisting a suit bag over his shoulder that looked like it weighed more than he did.

'Across the street, turn right.'

Everyone knew the Gallery de Ladrones. Founded by Veronica's mother, it quickly became known for showing the most avant-garde Mainland artists. After Tiananmen, with fears of the implications for the Handover agreement in 1997 swirling, the gallery's gutsy stance held a certain cachet. On the eve of the gallery's twenty-fifth anniversary, the same fears were once again starting to swirl. Nearly losing an eye to a rogue umbrella spoke as I crossed the road, I found Duddell Street at last.

Still the most romantic street in Hong Kong, a flight of imposing granite stairs at the far end was dotted by Victorian gas lamps. Sprawling tree roots climbed the stone walls that supported Ice House Street above, lush green foliage shimmering in the hazy light, like the last gasp of empire. Sometimes it seemed the British had colonised Hong Kong not for its deep-water harbour but because the opaque white light and constant mist reminded them of home.

Boom!

My shoulders stiffened and my eyes widened as a waterfall began to gush from the top of the steps. Squinting, I made out the gallery logo – the distinctive red sail of a junk ship: curved, almost triangular, with bamboo battens for support like the ridges on the shell of a prehistoric crustacean.

The heel of my strappy, open-toed Jimmy Choo caught on a loose tile just outside the entrance. My ankle turned and I went splat. Pushing myself up from the pavement, I glanced around like a startled animal. I wanted – no, *needed* – to make the right first impression.

Grabbing the tattered map from the ground, I shoved it into my tote, and caught my reflection in the small mirror dangling above the door (a feng shui trick to ward off evil spirits). *Fuck*. I rearranged my dark caramel-streaked chignon and forced myself to unclench my jaw, pale cheeks neon pink. So much for casually chic.

A laughing figure approached me from inside.

The man who blasted me with a welcome polar vortex of aircon was a silver fox par excellence. His skin was a tanned brown that showed a complete disregard for SPF and yet it looked supple. It was almost impossible to resist smoothing the crow's feet around his eyes. He was slim, but not runner gaunt, in his early fifties. The cool blue of his linen suit contrasted with the warmth of his skin.

He looked nothing like my husband.

Spencer is blond and preppy. When we arrived in Hong Kong, Spence had just turned thirty-two and I was twenty-eight but his baby face made him look younger.

'*Bienvenue*,' the gentleman said breezily. He seemed like a gentleman, his wine-dark eyes glinting with amusement. 'Veronica is inside,' he added in a thick French accent; he said it in an offhand way, clearly on his way out, as if no one ever came to the gallery looking for him, which I found hard to believe.

The door swished shut behind me and the gallery went still. Only the sound of the whining A/C unit remained. I shivered as another arctic gust blew down my spine. I had also not yet learned to carry a cardigan with my umbrella at all times.

Sometime later, Veronica confessed she'd married a Frenchman because she'd wanted to fall in love with the same abandon her father had with her mother. A talented photojournalist, the much younger Geneviève Varenne had moved to Hong Kong from the remnants of French Indochina. She met Arthur Hawkins at the Foreign Correspondents' Club bar where many confessions have been made and even more confidences betrayed, and they eloped a week later.

I'd never wanted to fall in love like that, not truthfully, but Veronica was inherently braver than me. She lived boldly, and that's not me airbrushing her for posterity.

Surveying the teak floors and sparsely hung walls of the gallery, I noted two black leather Barcelona chairs on either side of an antique lacquer coffee table inlaid with mother-of-pearl flowers and adorned with a voluptuous orchid plant. Feeling as if I were being watched, my eyes were drawn back to a small oil painting just inside the door.

A young Chinese woman with an arresting stare commanded the canvas. Swathed in a diaphanous red robe, she floated above a seascape, her hands outstretched: a fish clasped in her right fist; a toy junk ship in the left. A flat-topped cap was positioned at a jaunty angle like a beret, her head held with imperial grace, red beads dripping from either side. I could almost hear them clacking in the wind.

'Tin Hau,' said a cultured British voice, throatier than I'd expected.

'Who is she?' I asked, not removing my eyes from the painting.

'Goddess of the sea. Patron saint of fishermen. Empress of heaven. Take your pick.' Veronica paused. 'She was just a girl, at the start. She died trying to save her father and brother when their boat sank in a storm. So they made her a goddess.'

From the corner of my eye, my focus snagged on a signature: *Varenne, '78.*

'I didn't realise your mother also painted.'

I felt more than saw a shrug. The shrug of someone unsurprised a total stranger knew who her mother was. 'This is her only portrait. She painted it for my father the year I was born.' An adoring expression softened Veronica's features. 'He was a keen sailor. The Hawkins empire was built on the sea, he never failed to remind me. The company always sponsors a dragon dance for Tin Hau's birthday.'

Neither of us spoke. We were both thinking the same thing. The goddess had failed to save Veronica's family.

And, in the end, she didn't come for Veronica, either.

At that moment, I heard what sounded like a slap. My eyes darted back to the gallery entrance where a wall of white water pounded the glass. The rest of the city had disappeared as if we were encased in a raincloud.

I must have seemed spooked because a gentle hand landed on my wet silk blouse.

'Black rain,' said Veronica. 'Your first storm?' I nodded. 'We have amber, red and black rainstorms here,' she explained and it sounded biblical. 'You don't have far to travel home?'

'Mid-Levels.'

'Ah, the domain of soulless condos.'

Which had been precisely my feeling about the tiny apartments that spackled the hills above Central and boasted ridiculous monthly price tags.

'It's just temporary,' I said, kicking myself for my knee-jerk

defensiveness. 'The bank put us in a serviced apartment while we find something permanent.'

Veronica nodded. 'Fresh off the boat.' I heard the tease in her voice. 'In my father's time, bored colonials would still greet new arrivals at the port. Tell your relocation coordinator to look for places on the Peak, above the fog line.'

'Our housing allowance barely covers a shoebox.' A nervy laugh escaped me. 'And I thought property in New York was bananas.'

I already knew that Veronica had been born on the Peak, which in Hong Kong is both literal and figurative. The lofty summit from which the former colonial governors looked down on their subjects and the container-ship-strewn South China Sea beyond, where the Chinese inhabitants were forbidden to live until after the Second World War, is still home to the most prestigious villas – if the most mould prone. There's also the chill of damp that never quite leaves your skin.

With a commiserating sigh, Veronica told me, 'Expat packages aren't what they used to be before the financial crisis. More like half-pat.'

'Half-pat – that's me.' In-between was how I'd always felt and it seemed that Hong Kong would be no different. I was certain Veronica would treat me like the wildly privileged girls at The Buxton School who'd tormented me because Papi spoke the door-man's language and I didn't summer in the south of France or at my family's compound in St Barths or even – most pedestrian of all – at a shingled summer house in Quogue.

'You came with your husband. Three-year contract, I suppose,' Veronica said and it was as if she could see the *DEPENDENT* stamped on my new Hong Kong Identity Card.

The HKD 800 fee I was making for the profile piece barely covered lunch in Central but I didn't care because it was a job. I'd been working at magazines since grad school and I didn't know what else I wanted to do. Plus, I was lonely.

Desperation tasted metallic and I choked it down. Shifting my shoulders as if preparing to look at an eclipse, I allowed my gaze to land fully on Veronica Hawkins for the first time.

The pinlights glittered on the gold dust sprinkled across her black T-shirt spelling out '14K'. She had paired it with linen capri pants and Chanel espadrille wedges with the ribbons laced as if she were about to hop *en pointe* and pirouette.

Curving my lips into my most arch smile, I nodded at the '14K' and said, 'I would have expected at least twenty-four carats.'

Veronica laughed and it was smoky, rich. Her porcelain skin was also sun-touched, emphasising her unusual hazel eyes. Smooth waves of auburn, not quite crimson hair swept around her shoulders.

'It's a joke,' she said. '14K is one of the biggest Triad groups.' I'd vaguely heard of the Triads operating in Chinatown back in New York and knew only that they were Chinese mafia.

Tracing the outline of the 'K', Veronica mused, 'The British taipans were the first gangsters in Hongkers, of course.' She spoke without judgement, unapologetic.

Hawkins Pacific Limited had been founded in the north of England at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Alistair Hawkins, an ambitious young Scotsman, opening an office in Shanghai before a second location in Hong Kong. Like the other heads of the hong, Veronica's ancestor was on the wrong side of history regarding the Opium War, running armed clipper ships up the Pearl River, making a fortune bolstered by British gunships. Alistair soon multiplied his initial packet by building railways in China and investing in telecommunications.

Standing there covered in gold dust, Veronica embodied the spirit of the taipans who had come before her, helming all of the Hawkins Pacific holdings since the age of nineteen.

'I'm Martina Torres,' I said abruptly, realising I hadn't introduced myself. 'From *HK City Chic*.' Veronica lifted an eyebrow in confirmation of what she'd presumed. 'My friends call me Marty,' I

offered. (Actually, I'd hated the nickname in elementary school but it stuck, and it made me sound WASPy, so I kept it. With the exception of our wedding vows, Spence has never called me Martina.)

I extended my hand but Veronica didn't shake it. Frowning, she took my hand and flipped it over to expose the palm. 'You're bleeding.'

A flush spread down my chest like a rash. Veronica reached for the other hand, the furrow on the bridge of her nose deepening. Both palms were grazed.

'I slipped,' I said and pointed at one of the guilty Jimmy Choos. 'On the tile.'

'I've been meaning to get that fixed. You're not going to sue me, are you? Isn't that what you Americans do?'

Fighting my flush, I countered, 'I think I'll invest in flats.'

Veronica lifted one of her feet, circling the espadrille at the end of her dainty ankle. 'They're knock-offs, but they're dead comfortable. Stanley Market.'

I bit the inside of my cheek because I hadn't noticed they weren't real Chanel. Before I married Spencer, living in Manhattan on a publishing salary, hamstrung by Ivy League debt, my only high-end designer goods were found at sample sales. Yes, I have class anxiety, but I came by it honestly.

'Nice,' I complimented her. 'Thanks for the tip.'

'Come, let's get you cleaned up.'

Veronica started walking towards the back of the gallery and I followed. The gallery was larger than it initially appeared, a wrought-iron staircase twisting its way towards a mezzanine that served as the offices. Sat pertly at a desk in a royal blue Marc Jacobs dress (which in a few months I'd assume to be a Shenzhen copy rather than original), a visibly annoyed Chinese woman yelled into her handset. 'That's Apple,' said Veronica. 'My PA. She's wrangling a missing sculpture for the anniversary exhibition.'

Veronica turned the handle on a door that blended seamlessly

into the wall, discreetly revealing a washroom. 'I'll make tea,' she said, leaving me to it.

A strange feeling settled over me, as if I were on a film set of a gallery in Hong Kong and not really here at all. When I re-emerged, Veronica had ensconced herself on one of the Barcelona chairs, a ceramic teapot and two round cups the colour of jade set upon the table.

'Better?' she said, glancing at my hands. Before I could reply, she went on, 'Jasmine. I hope that suits.'

'Perfect.' I seated myself in the chair opposite hers as she poured the tea. Thanking her, I raised the steaming cup to my mouth, hoping the leaves didn't get stuck between my teeth. The jasmine smelled sharp and clean, like the rain that continued to beat the pavement.

Veronica pushed a crystal dish in my direction with a flick of the wrist. 'You must try some ginger with the tea. Even Queen Victoria was a fan of Hong Kong's preserved ginger – after my great-great sold it to her. No fashionable table in London would be without it.'

I looked at the sparkling candied ginger in a new light. *Great-great*, I would discover, was how Veronica referred to any of her illustrious lineage older than her grandfather.

At my hesitation, she said, 'Don't tell me you're doing keto,' like it was a dare.

I chose the plumpiest piece I could find and popped it into my mouth.

Veronica spread her lips in a satisfied smile and I realised there were a lot of things I would do, that anybody would do, for that Cheshire cat smile.

'I'm curious,' she said. 'How did you get on Evelyn's radar?'

Evelyn Ho was the editor-in-chief of *HK City Chic* but no relation to Stanley Ho, the billionaire who controls a huge swathe of the Macau gambling industry – at least not as far as I'm aware, although billionaires tend to be discreet.

'Through a friend of a friend in New York,' I said. The opportunity had come up in a roundabout way from one of my college friends' friend at business school who was Evelyn's cousin.

Veronica sipped her tea demurely, gaze sharp, listening to the spaces between the words.

'Six degrees of separation makes the world go round,' she said after a few moments. 'You'll fit in here, Marty.' Coming from Veronica, I found myself suddenly liking the nickname; in her British accent the long 'ah' made it sound sophisticated rather than Long Island. But I'd never fit in anywhere, of that I was convinced.

The rain continued to pummel the windows. I swallowed the ginger, warmth spreading down my gullet as if it were an ember. Jasmine and ginger and black rain: a Hong Kong afternoon. There would be more, many more, before there would be none.

'Let's get to the interview,' Veronica said, leaning forward. 'Although I'd much rather hear about you. I know all about me, and it's not nearly so interesting as people like to think.'

I smiled, fidgeting a small piece of ginger with my tongue, as if I believed her.

I wanted to believe her.

With a resigned sigh, she said, 'But that's not why you're here. I know, I know.' Her eyes suddenly shone very bright. 'You're here for my hungry ghosts.'

My lips parted.

'I'll let you in on a secret. It's not just the living who want. The Chinese are right about hell – we all go on wanting when we're dead.'