

**What will you do? How far will you go?
What will you become?**



DEAD ISLAND™

THE BOOK

M A R K M O R R I S

About the Book

Welcome to Banoi

A tropical island paradise where you can leave the world behind.

Welcome to the Royal Palms Resort

Offering its guests from around the world the ultimate in luxury and relaxation.

Welcome to the place where your dream holiday is about to become your worst nightmare...

Suddenly, and without warning, a terrifying plague breaks out on Banoi. Resort guests, hotel staff, islanders are infected overnight...and transformed into the ravening, flesh-craving living dead.

For those few who, for some reason, are immune to this apocalypse it becomes a race against time. To survive, to get off the island and warn the world before it's too late. But first they must escape the clutches of the zombie hordes...

Welcome to Dead Island

A paradise to die for...

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PROLOGUE

'BRING HER.'

In his full ceremonial regalia, the witch doctor was a terrifying sight. His leathery body, bedecked with rattling beads, was painted in symbolic swirls of white and red. Over his shoulders was a cape of cured crocodile skin and his long, matted hair was entwined with twists of coloured cloth. He wore bracelets and anklets made of human bones, and on the belt around his waist, resting on his stomach, was a grinning human skull.

He led the procession uphill, on a winding path through the bamboo and the lansan trees, through riotously coloured clusters of plumbago and allamanda and the red, saw-toothed lobster claw. Here in the jungle the vegetation grew quickly, and often the young men had to dart in front of the witch doctor to slash a path through the undergrowth with their machetes.

The girl the witch doctor had referred to had ropes tied round her wrists and was being dragged along by two powerful men who wore nothing but loin cloths, and whose muscular bodies were painted in the same swirling ritualistic symbols as those displayed by the witch doctor. The girl, by contrast, though her skin was dark like that of the natives around her, wore western clothes - jeans and a thin white cotton shirt. The clothes were torn and dirtied, however, and her face was bruised and bloodied. Her

fingernails were ragged from clawing and scrabbling in vain at the bodies of her attackers. She was weeping and begging for mercy, arms stretched out in front of her, stumbling along in bare feet.

In a straggling line behind the girl came the villagers, chanting and muttering the sacrificial incantations that had been passed down through generations. They swayed and jerked, their eyes glazed, as though they had been entranced or enchanted.

Finally, bringing up the rear, tied together at the necks and wrists and ankles, their mouths gagged with thick vines to stop them biting, came the *zombi*. There were sixteen of them and they shuffled and stumbled along, their eyes bleached of colour, their skin discoloured by death and blotched with green and white patches of rot. Four men, two at each side, lashed them with horse-hair whips to keep them in line and moving. The crack of the whips resounded through the air, mingling with the squawk of parrots overhead and the frogs calling somewhere off in the denser jungle in their clear, bell-like voices.

It took almost four hours to reach the burial site. It was situated halfway up a bare, jagged-peaked mountain, which rose from the thick green mass of the jungle, and was connected to a further range of mountains stretching into the distance. Up here the sun beat down mercilessly, and the girl, parched and exhausted, was almost out on her feet. For the last thirty minutes she had stumbled and fallen again and again, and her wrists were raw and slick with blood from being yanked continuously back to her feet by her captors.

The burial site itself was fronted by a vast stone mausoleum, constructed around the entrance to a cave which stretched deep into the mountain. The mausoleum had been built hundreds of years before, with stones that had been hacked from the living rock and then lovingly chiselled and hewn until the slabs fit snugly together like

pieces of a three-dimensional jigsaw. Ancient symbols similar to those daubed on the witch doctor's body had been carved into the walls of the mausoleum – symbols that were intended to protect the departed from evil spirits and ensure their souls a swift and safe journey to the afterlife.

Walking up to the mausoleum, the witch doctor placed his hands on the huge rock that had been rolled across its entrance. He muttered a few words, requesting ingress from the spirits of the dead, then he turned and raised his arms.

Instantly the chanting of the crowd subsided and the cracking of whips ceased. The only sound was the agitated shuffling and grunting of the shackled *zombi* captives and the soft trilling of insects in the dry and patchy undergrowth.

'My friends,' the witch doctor proclaimed in the centuries-old language of the Kuruni people, 'we have come here today in order to lift the curse on our village.' He pointed at the girl, who had dropped to her knees and whose head was slumped forward like a supplicant bowing before her god.

'This one,' he said contemptuously, 'has brought shame and misery upon us. By her selfish and foolhardy actions, she has angered the spirits that watch over us all and has brought their wrath down upon us in the form of pestilence and plague and banishment from their divine realm. There is only one way we can appease the spirits and lift this curse.' He paused dramatically. 'We must offer her to them, body and soul, so they may enact their punishment upon her.'

The people cheered and clapped and chanted.

'No,' the girl muttered. 'This is wrong. This is murder.' Unheard, drowned out by the uproar, she shook her head slowly, her face hidden beneath the swaying curtains of her dark hair.

A couple of younger men stepped from the throng to take the ends of the ropes binding the girl's wrists, while the two men who had dragged her through the jungle and up the mountain stepped forward to flank the witch doctor. At a nod from him, they reached out and began to push at the rock covering the entrance to the mausoleum. Sweat gleamed on their muscular bodies and thick veins stood out on their foreheads and biceps as they heaved with all their weight and strength. Finally, with a gritty grinding sound, the rock began to shift. At first it tilted and then, powered by its own momentum, rolled to one side.

The people fell silent again, as if half-expecting to see the spirits of the dead come swooping and curling from the depths of the mountain. Revealed behind the stone was the mausoleum's arched entrance, beyond which only shadowy darkness could be seen.

'Bring her forward,' the witch doctor said, pointing at the girl. The two men who had pushed aside the rock lumbered forward, took the ends of the ropes from the young men who had momentarily been watching over her, and then wrenched savagely on the ropes, causing the girl to scream in pain and sprawl face-first on to the dusty ground.

'Get to your feet,' the witch doctor commanded, his voice rising above the girl's sobs. 'If you do not walk to your fate, we will simply drag you there.'

Still sobbing, the girl clambered awkwardly to her feet. Blood was running down her hands now, dripping from her fingers on to the ground. The two men gave another tug, and she stumbled forward a few steps. Beaten and bloody, but still clearly defiant, she raised her head, hair falling away from her face, and suddenly screamed, 'This is barbaric! Can't you see that? There are no spirits! There is no curse! All you are doing here today is committing *murder!*'

The people gasped, but the witch doctor merely grinned in savage triumph and raised his arms once again.

'You see!' he cried. 'You see how the darkness within her tries to trick us even now?'

The people nodded and muttered. Her anger momentarily spent, the girl's shoulders slumped, but she fixed the witch doctor with an accusatory glare. 'How can you do this?' she muttered. 'You of all people?'

The witch doctor sneered at her, exposing teeth that had been filed into sharp points. 'Do not talk to me, demon,' he said. He looked at the two men and nodded towards the cave entrance. 'Take her inside.'

Pleading for mercy, for her captors to see reason, the girl was dragged into the cave. The witch doctor followed, while the people waited outside, silent and expectant. After a minute the girl's cries for mercy changed to screams of panic. As the sounds tore out of the cave entrance and echoed around the mountainside, the people looked at each other, nodding and murmuring in satisfaction. Eventually the girl's screams became muffled, and a moment later the witch doctor and his companions emerged from the cave entrance.

'It is done,' the witch doctor said. As the men rolled the rock back into place, he raised his hands and spoke the ritualistic words of allegiance and devotion. He offered his hope that the spirits would accept their sacrifice as penance and release them from their terrible burden of suffering. When he had finished the incantation, the people muttered the words of response, before lapsing into silence. The witch doctor looked out over the throng for a moment, his face grim. Then suddenly he grinned and cried, 'Let the feasting begin!'

The people cheered and turned as one, jostling for position in an effort to gain a good view of the ritual slaughter. The four men who had been herding the group of *zombi* tucked their whips into thick animal-hide belts

around their waists and produced gleaming machetes, which they brandished in the air in acknowledgement of the crowd's cheers. Then, with the practised skill of butchers or executioners, they stepped forward and began hacking at the *zombi*, severing their heads quickly and neatly from their shoulders. The people laughed as the *zombi* fell and the slaughterers' faces and arms and chests were spattered with stinking black-red blood. The heads were collected up and passed through the crowd, to be placed in a row at the witch doctor's feet. He nodded in approval as each head was propped on its dribbling stump of a neck before him. Finally sixteen heads were lined up, their eyes glazed and white, their slack mouths hanging open.

Now a child was pushed forward from the throng, a small boy of four or five years old. The people muttered encouragement as he walked shyly up to the witch doctor, carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle in his outstretched arms. The witch doctor thanked him solemnly and carefully unfolded the layers of cloth. Nestling within was a curved knife with symbols etched into the handle. The witch doctor took the knife and held it up. The people cheered.

Sitting cross-legged on the ground, the witch doctor picked up the first of the *zombi* heads and propped it between his knees. He then rammed the knife into the *zombi's* temple, just above its eyes, and began to hack and saw at the dead meat and the bone beneath, cutting around the top of the skull. It took several minutes of vigorous work before he was finally able to lift the skull-cap aside. When he did, exposing the grey-black putrefying brain within, the villagers went into raptures.

Grinning, the witch doctor dug his long fingers into the *zombi's* head and scooped out a porridge-like gobbet of brain matter. He held it out towards a little boy, who was still standing in front of him, wide-eyed with wonder. The boy looked at him uncertainly, but the witch doctor smiled

and nodded. Encouraged by whispers from his mother, the child stepped forward, opened his mouth and sucked the glistening lump of brain from the witch doctor's fingers.

A sigh of contentment ran through the crowd. 'Eat!' the witch doctor cried and dug his fingers into the *zombi's* head once more. As the villagers queued up for their share of the feast, he offered another portion of this most sacred of delicacies to the second recipient.

'Eat!' he cried. 'Eat! Eat!' When the first head was empty he reached for the second.

Behind him, in the tomb, drowned by the excited clamour of the feast, the muffled screams of the girl went ignored.

Chapter 1

IN-FLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

'HEY, YOU! GET me another of these, will ya?'

The guy with the short dark mohawk, both of his arms sleeved in tribal tattoos, leaned so far out of his seat that he almost tumbled into the aisle as he tried to grab the attention of the passing flight attendant. He reached out, and instead of grabbing her attention he accidentally grabbed her blue-skirted bottom as she bent over to talk to an elderly passenger who couldn't get his headphones to work.

'Whoa, sorry,' sniggered mohawk guy, hauling himself back into his seat and holding up his hands innocently as the stewardess glared at him. 'Didn't mean to do that. Truly. Nice ass, though.'

Having dealt with the elderly passenger, the stewardess turned back to mohawk guy. 'Is there something you need, sir?' she asked flintily.

Immediately the guy's smirk faded and his expression grew stony. 'There are many things I need, sweetheart,' he said, 'and one of them is for you to remember who the paying fucking customers are here.'

Smiling sweetly, the stewardess said, 'Oh, I do, sir. I remember that at all times.'

'Yeah? Well maybe you should remember to leave your shitty attitude at home too.'

Still smiling, the stewardess said, 'And maybe you should remember to keep your hands to yourself, sir. In this job molestation is still a crime, regardless of who's paying.'

'Hey, it was an accident, right?' mohawk guy said, loud enough to turn heads. 'I lost my balance.'

'In that case I accept your apology,' said the stewardess.

Mohawk guy scowled. 'I ain't apologizing to you. I got nothing to apologize *for*.'

The passenger sitting next to him was a young, muscle-bound black man with a sculpted, neatly trimmed beard. He was dressed in baggy jeans, a skinny black T-shirt and a red bandanna. Although he had given all the indications of being asleep, he now opened his eyes and removed the headphones from his ears.

'Why don't you stop giving the nice lady a hard time?' he rumbled.

Mohawk guy turned to look at him, sticking his jaw out pugnaciously. 'Who the hell asked you?'

'Nobody asked me,' said the black man. 'I'm jus' sayin'.'

'Yeah, well, butt out, brother. This has got nothing to do with you.'

The black man grinned, displaying a gold-plated upper canine among a mouthful of clearly expensive dental work. "'Brother"? Is that some kinda racial slur?' he enquired.

Mohawk guy rolled his eyes. 'What is this? Character assassination week? First she accuses me of being a sexual deviant, now you accuse me of being a damn racist.'

'I didn't accuse you of sexual deviancy, sir,' the stewardess said.

'Molestation, you said. Pretty much amounts to the same thing.'

'Well, you *did* grab the lady's butt,' said the black man.

'I was trying to attract her attention is all,' mohawk guy protested. 'All I wanted was a damn drink.'

'How about I get you a drink and we say no more about it?' suggested the stewardess. She eyed the array of

miniature scotch bottles on the passenger's fold-down table, all of them empty. 'Same again, sir?'

Mohawk guy hesitated. For a moment he looked as though he wanted to prolong the argument. Then finally he nodded. 'Yeah, sure. And take these empties away, will ya?'

'Certainly, sir,' said the stewardess politely.

When she had gone, mohawk guy turned to the black man, who was eyeing him as if he was a weird and particularly repellent form of pondlife. 'What?' he said.

The black man shook his head slowly and deliberately. 'Nothin'. Nothin' at all.'

He reached for his headphones again, but before he could put them on mohawk guy said, 'Hey, don't I know you?'

The black man winced slightly. 'Probably not.'

'Yeah, sure I do. You're that rapper. Sam something.'

'Sam B,' the black man conceded with a sigh.

'Sam B! That's right! You had that song, didn't you? Back in the nineties. What was it now? "Voodoo Hoodoo"?''

"Who Do You Voodoo, Bitch," Sam corrected him.

Mohawk guy gave a gurgle of laughter. 'That's the one! Jeez, I loved that song when I was at school.' He paused, his eyes - the whites pink from the alcohol - narrowed shrewdly. 'So what happened to you, man?'

'Nothin' happened to me,' replied Sam. 'I'm right here.'

Mohawk guy laughed, as if he had made a joke. 'Sure you are. But how come you didn't do no more music after that one song?'

Sam closed his eyes briefly. He had answered this question so many times that he had grown to dread being asked it.

'I was young,' he said. 'Young and stupid. At nineteen I thought I knew it all. Took me a long time to realize I didn't know shit. That song was a blessing and a curse, y'know? It was a hit all over the world, made me an instant star, but it was too much fame too quickly.' He tapped the side of his

skull with his forefinger. 'I was just a dumb kid from New Orleans and success went straight to my head. I lost track of my roots, deserted the friends I'd grown up with to party with the rich and famous.'

'And you stopped writing music?' asked mohawk guy.

Sam shrugged. 'I couldn't take the pressure. The more people told me I needed to come up with another hit, the more it paralysed me. I started off playing big hotels in Vegas, then seedy lounges in Reno, then third-rate cruise ships.' He shook his head. 'But why the hell am I telling you this?'

'Because you recognize a kindred spirit?'

Sam snorted a laugh. 'Yeah, right.'

The stewardess returned with mohawk guy's drink. 'Anything for you, sir?' she asked Sam.

Sam shook his head. 'I'm good, thanks.'

The stewardess smiled and walked away. Mohawk guy opened the miniature bottle and took a swig. Smacking his lips, he turned back to Sam. 'You don't recognize me, do you?'

'Should I?'

Mohawk guy paused and said, 'I'm Logan Carter.'

Sam looked at him blankly.

The other man, Logan, looked a little put out. 'The football star, Logan Carter? First round NFL draft pick?'

Sam shrugged. 'Sorry, man. I don't follow sports.'

Logan gaped at him. 'You don't follow sports? That's like saying you don't follow life.'

Sam shrugged again. 'Sorry.' He was silent for a moment, and then, almost reluctantly, asked, 'So ... you still play?'

Logan's face darkened. He drained the rest of the bottle in one gulp. 'No, I ... er ... had to retire.'

'Why don't you tell him why?' said a voice from the seat in front.

Logan blinked and jerked upright as though someone had slapped him. 'Excuse me?'

The passenger turned and knelt on her seat, her head rising above the seat back. She was startlingly beautiful, her skin the colour of teak, her hair a silky black waterfall. She had a snub nose, plump, almost purple lips that Sam guessed could be wide and smiling but were currently pursed in something like disapproval, and wide, dark, penetrating eyes.

'I said why don't you tell him why you had to retire?' the girl repeated, her voice husky and warm.

'What the hell has it gotta do with you?' Logan asked.

The girl pointed at him. 'He didn't recognize you, but I do. I know what you did.'

'What I did? I didn't do anything.'

'You killed a girl.'

The accusation was so blunt that for a moment nobody moved or spoke. Then Logan, his face reddening with anger, spluttered, 'I didn't kill nobody.'

'No?' said the girl, tilting her head to one side. 'So what would *you* call it?'

'I'd call it an accident. And that's what the judge called it too. So get out of my face, lady!'

For the first time the girl turned her attention to Sam. He felt a stirring in his gut as her dark-eyed gaze swept over him, a sensation somewhere between desire and unease. The girl was incredibly beautiful, but in the way a panther was beautiful. Sam had a feeling she could be predatory, dangerous.

'*You* ever killed anyone, Sam?' she challenged.

Sam's first instinct was to ask her how she knew his name, but then he realized she must have been listening in on their conversation. He shook his head. 'Nope.'

'Glad to hear it. The guilt of it twists you up inside. Isn't that right, Mr Carter?'

Logan glared at her. 'What part of "get out of my face" didn't you understand?'

Sam raised his hands. Peacemaker wasn't a role he was accustomed to, but then again he wasn't often in the presence of people who seemed even more fucked up than he was. 'Let's just cool it down a bit here, OK?' he said, turning to Logan. 'Listen ... Logan. Why don't you tell me what happened?'

Logan gave a bad-tempered sigh, glancing balefully at the girl. She smiled.

'Yeah, *Logan*, why don't you do that?'

'I don't have to justify myself to you,' Logan said to the girl.

She shrugged as if she couldn't care one way or the other, a faintly amused expression on her face. Sam touched Logan's arm briefly.

'Hey. *I'd* like to know, man. I'm interested. And I got an open mind here. Hell, I'd never even heard of you till ten minutes ago. No offence.'

Logan almost smiled at that. Then he pushed himself upright in his seat and said, 'I need another drink.'

'Why don't we *all* have one?' proposed the girl. 'On me. Sam?'

Sam shrugged. 'I'll have a soda, I guess.'

'Nothing stronger?'

He nodded at the empty miniature scotch bottle on Logan's table. 'I had enough problems of my own with that stuff. I ain't going there again.'

The girl attracted the attention of a stewardess and ordered their drinks - same again for Logan, a soda for Sam, a white wine spritzer for herself.

When the drinks arrived, she said, 'So, Mr Carter?'

Logan squinted at her. 'What are you, a cop?'

'Used to be,' she admitted.

'That figures.' He took a small sip of his drink - having poured the scotch into a plastic cup this time - and said to

Sam, 'I guess, like you, I was young and stupid. Unlike you, though, I had it all. I was a football star in high school and college, so I was ... protected.'

'Spoiled, you mean?' said the girl.

Logan scowled. 'Look, who's telling this story? Me or you?'

The girl held up her hands, as if allowing him the floor.

Still scowling, Logan said, 'We don't even know who you are.'

Shrugging as if it was no big deal, the girl said, 'My name's Purna.'

'Purna?' repeated Logan. 'What kind of a name's that?'

'It's Australian,' said the girl. 'Aborigine actually.'

'You're an Aborigine?' said Sam, interested.

'Half - on my mother's side.' She turned her attention back to Logan - and suddenly smiled. Sam almost gasped. Her smile was every bit as radiant as he'd imagined, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. 'You were saying, Mr Carter?'

For a moment Logan looked bemused, as if he'd been bewitched by her smile too. Then he nodded briefly and said, 'So ... er, yeah. Like I say, I was protected. I had pretty much whatever I wanted - fame, money, women, fast cars.' He grimaced. 'That last one was my downfall. Well ... those last two, I guess. I shoulda looked after myself more, but well ... there were a lot of parties back then. A *lot* of parties. Anyway, this one night, I'd had too much to drink, snorted some coke ... you know how it is. And this one guy, he started ragging me about my car, calling it a piece of shit, all that.'

'What kind of car was it?' Sam asked.

'Porsche Spyder. Like James Dean used to drive. Classy car, man ...' For a moment Logan's face softened and he looked almost as if he was going to cry.

Sam nodded brusquely. 'Sure thing. So what happened?'

Logan took a deep breath. 'I challenged him to a race. His fucked-up old Buick against my Spyder. I mean, he had no chance, but the dumb fuck took me on.' He shrugged. 'I wanted to teach him a lesson. Not just beat him, but *really* beat him, you know.'

'But you ended up beating yourself, didn't you?' said Purna softly.

Logan snorted a laugh, but it was hard, without humour. 'You could say that. Took a bend too quickly. Lost control. Hit a wall at ... I dunno ... eighty, ninety miles an hour?' He shuddered, took a drink. 'Shattered my knee. End of my career. But that wasn't the worst part.'

Sam glanced at Purna, and then back at Logan. 'The girl?' he asked.

Logan nodded. 'Her name was Drew Peters. She came along for the ride. She took the full impact ...'

'But you got off,' said Purna, her voice unreadable.

Logan nodded and glanced at her, his face almost defiant. 'Yeah, I got off. What can I say? I had a good lawyer.'

'Money talks,' she said, and this time there was a definite bitterness to her tone.

'It's what makes the world go round, baby,' Logan murmured. 'Always has, always will.'

Before Purna could respond, there was a crackle from the intercom and the voice of their pilot, who had introduced himself earlier as Captain Avery, announced, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we will shortly be beginning our descent to Banoi Island airport. Could you please now return to your seats, put on your seatbelts and return your tables to the upright position. It's a beautiful day on the island today, with temperatures in the region of 27 degrees Celsius, that's 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and the local time there is currently 11.52 a.m. In a few moments we will be descending through cloud cover, whereupon those of you on the right-hand side of the plane will be able to see the

island as we begin our approach. I hope that you have all had a pleasant flight, and on behalf of New Guinea International Airlines, I thank you for flying with us today.'

The pilot's voice clicked off, and a few seconds later the engines began to rise in pitch. Purna, Logan and Sam strapped themselves in, Sam gripping the arms of his seat and looking out of the window as wispy white clouds billowed past the aircraft. He was not a nervous flyer, but he was anxious about what awaited him on the island. The gig at Banoi's top resort hotel, the Royal Palm, had fallen into his lap like manna from heaven and he was determined not to blow it. This could be his last chance to prove he was not a joke, maybe his *only* chance to showcase his new material in front of a sizeable audience. And who knew, if even one or two of the record executives his manager had informed about the gig made the effort to turn up, it could even lead to a new record deal, his first in over six years. He was desperate to show the world he was not a one-hit wonder, that there was far more to him than 'Who Do You Voodoo, Bitch'. He swallowed to clear the pressure in his ears as the plane swooped towards the ground, but his mouth was dry.

'Hey, would you look at that!' said Logan beside him, craning forward as far as his seatbelt would allow. Sam followed his gaze and saw a lush tropical paradise below, surrounded by an ocean so placid and clear it seemed to sparkle like a plain of blue-white diamonds. On the nearside of the island was the resort area - hotels, restaurants, bars and stores clustered around a vast beach of pristine white sand. Beyond that, covering a good seventy per cent of Banoi, was dense tropical jungle, which eventually gave way, on the far side of the island, to a bare and jagged mountain range, rising up from the greenery like the gnarled back of some prehistoric beast.

'Looks like paradise, all right,' Sam said, though he still couldn't quell the nerves in his belly.

Logan pointed to the right of the island. 'What's that?'

Maybe a couple of miles offshore was a much smaller island, little more than a rock maybe half a mile in circumference, with a grey rectangular building situated on a plateau in the centre. The building resembled a huge but grim-looking office block, and was dominated by a flat-roofed tower at one end that jabbed up into the glorious blue sky like an accusatory finger.

'Looks like a prison,' Sam mused, noting the high electrified fence that encircled the building.

Purna's face appeared in the gap between the seats. 'It's Banoi high-security prison,' she confirmed. 'Full of psychos and terrorists. The locals call it ... well, I can't remember the actual word, but it translates as "hell in heaven".'

'How come you know so much?' Logan said.

'I read a lot,' replied Purna. 'You should try it.'

The prison wheeled away from them as the plane banked slightly on its final approach to the island. Logan looked at Sam with eyes a little bleary from drink.

'Welcome to paradise,' he said.

Chapter 2

FAMILY HONOUR

‘ROYAL PALM HOTEL. How can I help you?’

As she dealt with the customer request, Xian Mei wondered, not for the first time, what she was doing here. She hated living a lie, hated being out on a limb, and most of all she hated the fact that her life currently seemed to have no direction. She had been told that she was doing ‘important work for her country’, but what was so important about observing the habits of a bunch of wealthy western tourists? Banoi wasn’t exactly the front line, and being a receptionist on the desk of a luxury hotel in the middle of nowhere, far from her family and friends, was a long way from how she had envisaged honouring the memory of her father.

Xian Mei still remembered that terrible night in October 1999 as if it were yesterday. She had been twelve at the time, at home with her mother, Jiao, her homework spread out on the kitchen table of their sixth-floor apartment in Beijing. She had been trying to finish early because her grandmother, Li, was coming to visit. When the front-door buzzer sounded, Xian Mei had at first assumed her grandmother had arrived early. Jiao, who had been preparing mutton dumplings for supper, raised her eyebrows good-humouredly at Xian Mei and strolled out into the hallway, drying her hands on a cloth. When she answered the buzzer, Xian Mei had been surprised, and

initially a little relieved, to hear a man's voice crackling from the intercom. Her first thought had been that she might have time to finish her homework before her grandmother arrived after all. She had no way of knowing at that moment that her homework would never get finished, that the mutton dumplings her mother had been preparing so lovingly would never get eaten, and that her life, and that of her mother's, would never be the same again.

The visitor was her father's friend and partner, Detective Sergeant Paul Ho. Many a time Paul and his pretty wife Huan had been guests at her parents' house, and their evenings together were full of laughter and good fun, and often - for the adults - a little too much wine. Xian Mei liked Paul, not only because he was full of jokes and compliments, but also because he often brought her a little present - a bow for her hair, a pocket-doll for her collection, a money box in the shape of a fat smiling cat.

Paul did not bring her a present on this evening, however. Nor was he full of jokes and laughter. It had been raining and when he turned up on their doorstep he had water running down his face and dripping off his jacket. He mumbled an apology, but Jiao told him not to worry. She fetched a towel, and as he dried his hair and face she asked him in a hushed voice - almost as if she was afraid of the answer - what was wrong.

Looking back, what Xian Mei now particularly remembered about that evening was the strange and uncomfortable tension that accompanied Paul's arrival. It was almost as if it clung to him, a kind of darkness that caused her stomach to tighten, her mouth to dry up, the ends of her fingers to tingle unpleasantly. She felt it as soon as he stepped through the door. It was so strong that it drew her, almost unwillingly, from the kitchen. She felt as though Paul was a magnet and she was a shred of metal being dragged helplessly towards him. She sidled into the

hallway but held on to the edge of the door, the only way of anchoring herself. Paul glanced up and saw her standing there, peering almost fearfully at him, and his eyes filled with such sadness and pity that it terrified her.

‘Can we talk privately?’ he asked Jiao.

Jiao flinched and clenched her fists, as if his words had punctured her like a flurry of arrows, but she nodded. She glanced briefly at Xian Mei, who was shocked to see that her mother looked as frightened as she herself felt. As Jiao ushered Paul towards the lounge, Xian Mei stepped forward. Though her mouth was dry she forced herself to speak.

‘What’s happened to my father?’

Once again, Paul turned those desperately sad eyes on her. Usually so confident, at that moment he looked lost, uncertain what to say. Jiao saved him from having to say anything by stepping in front of him.

‘Go back into the kitchen and finish your homework,’ she muttered almost angrily.

‘But—’ Xian Mei began.

‘No arguments! Just do as I say. Your grandmother will be here soon.’

Jiao all but pushed Paul into the lounge and closed the door. Xian Mei retreated into the kitchen but she didn’t finish her homework. Instead she sat cross-legged in the open kitchen doorway, listening. She heard Paul speaking, but his voice was too low and muffled for her to make out the words. Then he fell silent, and there was a pause that seemed to Xian Mei to stretch out for ever.

And then - suddenly, shockingly - her mother cried out. It was a harsh sound, the kind you might expect to hear from someone who had been stabbed through the heart. It made Xian Mei jump, then wrap her arms around herself protectively. But although the cry was bad, the sound that followed was much, much worse. Xian Mei had never heard her mother weep before, but now she began not just to

weep, but to *wail*, almost to scream. It was an awful, heart-rending sound; to Xian Mei it seemed to encapsulate all the despair and misery that existed in the world. Frightened by the intensity of her mother's grief, she clapped her hands to her ears and squeezed her eyes tight shut. If she had any doubts before, the noises her mother was making now had confirmed without question that whatever had happened tonight was the very worst thing ever.

The rest of the evening seemed to pass in a terrible, murky fog. When the door to the lounge finally opened, it wasn't Jiao who emerged, but Paul Ho. He let out a huge sigh and rubbed a trembling hand over his face. Then he realized Xian Mei was sitting in the kitchen doorway, staring at him. For a moment he looked almost guilty, as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't, then he walked across and knelt beside her. His damp jacket smelled of the city - of rain and petrol and dark places.

'You're going to have to be very brave and look after your mother, OK?' he said quietly.

Xian Mei looked up at him. His skin was saggy and his eyes were red, and for the first time she thought he looked old.

'Where's my father?' she asked.

Paul hesitated. 'You need to ask your mother that question.'

'Is he dead?' Xian Mei persisted.

Paul made a face as if he'd tasted something sour. Then he leaned forward and kissed Xian Mei gently on her forehead. 'I'll see you soon,' he said.

Xian Mei couldn't get her mother to speak to her. She tried, but Jiao had locked herself in the bathroom. She didn't emerge until grandmother Li arrived almost half an hour later. Even then the two women went into the bedroom and Xian Mei was forced to wait outside. When they finally came out, both were pale and grim-faced. Jiao

told Xian Mei that Li would look after her, then she went out without answering her daughter's questions.

'Why is Mother being so mean to me?' Xian Mei said.

Her grandmother shook her head wearily. 'She's not being mean. She's just upset. She's protecting you.'

'I don't need protecting,' Xian Mei said. 'I'm strong.'

Li smiled. 'Maybe you are.'

'I *am*,' Xian Mei insisted. She looked at her grandmother. 'Won't you tell me what's happened?'

Li averted her gaze. 'Maybe in the morning.'

'*Now*,' Xian Mei said. When her grandmother didn't reply, Xian Mei said almost defiantly, 'Father's dead, isn't he? Something happened to him tonight, and now he's dead.'

Li's eyes brimmed with tears, and she nodded. She wiped her face with a trembling hand. Eventually she said, 'He was very brave. He died a hero.'

It wasn't until the next day, or the day after that, that Xian Mei found out the full story. Her father had been killed in the line of duty, shot dead while trying to apprehend a gang of drug smugglers. It wasn't until he was gone that Xian Mei really discovered how loved and revered her father had been. In the days following his death, many people came to the house to pay their respects, and each of them had a story to tell about her father's courage, or humour, or kindness, or loyalty. As Xian Mei helped her mother prepare the house for his funeral - covering the statues of deities with red paper, removing the mirrors so the reflection of the coffin would not be glimpsed in the glass and bring bad luck, hanging the white cloth over the doorway and placing a gong to the left of the entrance - she vowed she would honour her father's name by following in his footsteps.

It was a vow she neither forgot nor relinquished. For the next few years, driven by a steely determination and a single-mindedness she liked to think she had inherited

directly from her father, she strove for excellence in all areas of her life. Always a good student, she now became an exceptional one, achieving the highest grades possible in every subject. But she knew that academia alone would not secure her a place in one of the toughest and most ruthlessly efficient police forces in the world, so she took up Changquan and trained tirelessly, day after day, pushing herself through physical barrier after physical barrier, until she became one of the foremost martial artists for her age and gender, not only in China but in the world.

The day she was inducted into China's first all-female Special Forces squad was the greatest day of her life. Throughout the ceremony, as she stood there in her beautiful black and grey uniform, she thought only of her father and how proud he would be. Indeed, she strongly believed his spirit was there with her, standing at her shoulder, revelling in her success.

It took almost no time at all for the dream to turn into a nightmare.

What became apparent to Xian Mei and her fellow inductees very quickly was that China's first all-female Special Forces squad was, in effect, little more than a glorified PR stunt. Xian Mei had had high hopes of becoming a pioneer, of helping to usher in a new age of equality in China, but almost as soon as the induction ceremony was over, the squad was broken up and its members distributed around the globe on 'special assignments'. Xian Mei's assignment was to come here, to the Royal Palm Hotel in Banoi, and to spy on the decadent rich, using her receptionist's job as cover. What Xian Mei found particularly insulting was that her superiors didn't even bother to *pretend* she was doing vital work. It was abundantly clear to her that she had been shunted aside simply for the sake of convenience - a case of out of sight, out of mind.