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*LIVE TO SEE
TOMORROW*

IRIS JOHANSEN

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*Who can say for sure that one will
live to see tomorrow?*

—TIBETAN PROVERB

*LIVE TO SEE
TOMORROW*

CHAPTER

1

HONG KONG

Why didn't she think of this city as home? Catherine Ling wondered as she looked down through the clouds from the window of the jet approaching Hong Kong. Other people would have found it strange that she had never regarded this exotic, wonderful, terrible city as her home place. She had spent her childhood here on the streets struggling, sometimes starving, always having to use her mind and wits just to stay alive. It was only when she was fourteen and had been chosen by Venable to go to work for the CIA that she had left the city. Perhaps it was because she had never been at ease enough to think of it as a haven. Wasn't a home supposed to offer safe haven?

Her cell phone was vibrating, and she frowned as she looked down at it.

Venable.

Should she ignore it? She had no desire to argue with him right now. Venable hadn't wanted her to go to Hong Kong to be with her son. He'd had that job for her to do in Guatemala City, and he could be as stubborn as he was devious. But if she didn't get the argument settled now, she'd have to face it when she was with Luke

and Hu Chang after the plane landed. Venable would keep trying until he reached her. He never gave up.

“What is it, Venable?” she asked curtly as she accessed the call. “I can’t talk very long. I should be landing within the next fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“I know. I timed the call that way. It had to not be enough time for you to smolder and build up resistance and just enough time to spark that mind of yours into gear.”

“I’m not going to Guatemala City. Forget it.”

“I’ve already forgotten it. I’ve sent Tolliver. I really didn’t want to send you there anyway. You were much more suited for this other job I’ve had in mind for you for the last week. It just had a few awkward ramifications I didn’t want to deal with.”

“And where was this job?”

“Tibet. I decided that since you were so determined to go to Hong Kong, I’d give you work closer to there.”

“Bullshit. It may be close in distance, but it’s a world away in every other aspect.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true. And this one isn’t going to be easy. If I didn’t need you, I’d give it to the local guy and let you take your vacation.”

Her voice was soft. “Let?”

He chuckled. “Wrong word. I’ll rephrase it. I wouldn’t try to persuade you to postpone your time with your son. There were a few headaches connected to bringing you into it. I actually was looking for another agent even though you’re as close to perfect as I could get.”

“No,” Catherine said with precision. “Not Guatemala. Not Tibet.”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “But I decided to leave it up to fate. If you’d agreed to Guatemala, I’d accept it. If not, you were mine.”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“I’m listening to every word. Believe me, if you weren’t so good, I’d let you out of this one. As I said, bringing you in may be a major headache.”

“Good. Then you won’t feel too disappointed if I refuse the assignment. Venable, for God’s sake, what can I say to convince you that I’m going to spend these next few weeks with my son and my friend, Hu Chang. Then I’m going to take Luke back to Louisville to start the school year. Period. End of discussion.”

“Not quite. You’ve not allowed me to offer my side of the discussion. Have you ever heard of Erin Sullivan?”

“No. Yes.” Memory was stirring as she made the connection. “She’s a journalist. There was some kind of big fuss about her a few years ago. I didn’t pay much attention to it. You were keeping me busy down in Venezuela at the time.”

“Not exactly a fuss. She won a Pulitzer for her stories about the earthquake at Qinghai Province in Tibet a few years ago.” He paused. “She also worked side by side with the monks and the Chinese soldiers rescuing the victims of the quake. By the time the Chinese government decided that Erin Sullivan was gaining too much star power and influence among the Tibetan people, it was too late. The villagers throughout the mountains were regarding her as their angel of mercy.

“Very admirable. And dangerous. China doesn’t appreciate interference in their policies in Tibet. But she’s an American, and that gave her an umbrella of safety. She had no desire to be an activist. She didn’t consider it her place. She just helped where she could.”

“So why are we talking about Erin Sullivan?”

“Unfortunately, she’s become a problem for us.”

“How? You said that she’s not trying to stir up trouble.”

“Sometimes people cause turmoil just by being what they are.” He added dryly, “If an angel of mercy becomes a victim, then that means a martyr. Martyrs can ignite wars.”

She stiffened. “And has Erin Sullivan become a martyr?”

“I don’t know. I don’t believe it’s gone that far yet. What we do know is that she disappeared on her way to write a story about an orphanage in the mountains two months ago. She hasn’t been seen since.”

“Why hasn’t her newspaper raised hell?”

“She’s freelance.”

“She just dropped off the face of the Earth?”

“I didn’t say that. There have been rumors.”

“Rumors from what source?”

“The same source that sent me a tip that the unrest and revolt building among the Tibetans because of Sullivan’s disappearance might cause an upset with big brother China if it wasn’t addressed. It wouldn’t take much to do that. China has always been more ready to attack than negotiate.”

“And China was responsible for Sullivan’s disappearance?”

“Not that we can confirm.”

“Stop pussyfooting around. If she’s been missing two months, you must have an idea where she is. You wouldn’t want to send me in blind if you didn’t. She’s an American citizen.”

“And Tibet is still a wild and desolate land where anyone could be lost for decades and never found. We’ve been making inquiries and tapping our sources.”

“Sources, again. What sources, Venable?”

“Have I piqued your curiosity, Catherine?”

“No, I’ve been trained to question and probe. You had a hand in that training.” But she had been caught and held by the story of Erin Sullivan. It made her angry. She hated the idea of good people being thrown to the wolves as the journalist probably had been. She supposed she should be accustomed to the lack of fairness in the world by now, but she never got used to it. “And I won’t let you lure me into searching for her out of sheer curiosity. I left my son for over three weeks while I pulled your hot potatoes out of the fire in Colombia. I want Luke to remember that he has a mother who

cares about him. I'm sure whoever you send after Erin Sullivan will be competent."

"You've told me yourself that you have to walk carefully around your son to make sure that you don't overwhelm him. He got along without you for nine years just fine while you were searching for him."

"You know he didn't get along fine. Rakovac tried to destroy him and almost succeeded." She felt a ripple of pain as she remembered the torment of those years after Rakovac, a Russian criminal, had tried to punish Catherine by kidnapping her two-year-old son. He had kept him for nine long years and tried to turn him into everything that Catherine would hate. She had only recently managed to free Luke, and they were still tentative with each other. "He survived, but I probably won't know how damaged he is for years. Yes, he's had to be independent all his life just to avoid Rakovac's abuse, but now he has to know I'm there for him."

"He has his tutor, Sam O'Neill, and Hu Chang."

"I'm his mother, dammit."

"A mother who Luke isn't sure he knows what to do with," Venable said bluntly. "He knows about surviving neglect and torture. He knows about a man who put a gun in his hand when he was a small child and took him on guerrilla raids. He doesn't know about normal relations."

"He's learning," she said fiercely. "Every time we're together we get a little closer. Yes, I have to be careful not to let him know how much I—" She stopped. She wouldn't reveal to Venable the aching frustration of having to restrain the deep, boundless love she felt for Luke. She wanted to reach out, touch him, smother him with the affection that had been stolen from both of them. She couldn't do it. Luke was older than his age in many ways, but his lack of experience in ordinary emotions had stunted him, and he was only now beginning to open to her. She had to hold back, respect that reticence. But God it was hard.

“Do you think I don’t know why you’ve been letting me send you on assignments during these last six months?” Venable asked softly. “I believe Luke may be as torn and confused as you are about how to make the adjustment. You both have to occasionally step back and take a deep breath before you take another step forward.”

“Very perceptive,” Catherine said dryly. She wasn’t surprised that Venable had studied her situation and come so close to the exact truth. No one ever underestimated Venable’s cleverness. “And a convenient explanation for you in this case. Abandon my Luke and go off on CIA business because it’s good for us as well as the country. No deal, Venable.”

“Think about it. Look Erin Sullivan up on the Internet. Get to know her.”

“The hell I will.”

Venable chuckled. “I think you will. I’ll get off the line now so you can check her out before your plane begins its descent.”

“Wait.” She had just thought of something else. “You said bringing me into the mission would cause you big problems. Why?”

“I was wondering when you’d ask that question. It all has to do with my source. He doesn’t want you involved.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“And how am I supposed to do that when you won’t tell me who he is? I take it you’ve changed your mind.” She stiffened as she began to have an outrageous suspicion. “Just who is your source?”

“Someone you know very well,” he said quietly. “Hu Chang.”

“What the hell? What’s Hu—”

But Venable had already hung up.

What did Hu Chang have to do with Erin Sullivan? He might slide in and out of political situations like a Las Vegas magician if he chose, but he seldom chose. At least, she didn’t think he often dabbled in the fates of nations any longer. What did she know? After all these years, he was still an enigma to her. She had met him

when she was only fourteen and had been on the streets selling information to the highest bidder. He had been a practitioner of Chinese medicine, and they had bonded and become friends. She had not learned until later that Hu Chang was also the foremost creator of poisons in the world and sold them to the highest bidder. By that time, it had not mattered to her. He was her friend. He had saved her life, and she had saved his. Two solitary people who had found one person they could trust to make the loneliness go away.

He doesn't want you involved.

Well, dammit, she didn't want to be involved.

But why did Hu Chang want to close her out?

She pulled out her computer and flipped it open.

The next moment, she had drawn up the story of the Qinghai earthquake. The second story she accessed she saw the photo of Erin Sullivan. She was standing beside a monk and a Chinese soldier, and she was frowning as she stared down at the wreckage below her.

Catherine had thought she'd be older, but the woman looked to be close to her own age. She wasn't over thirty, perhaps a little younger. She was tall, slim even in the bulky, cold-weather garments she was wearing. She had on a black, hooded jacket and matching pants and brown, fur-lined boots. A strand of copper red hair had escaped her hood and lay on her forehead above eyes that were large and a gray-green hazel. Not a beautiful woman, but she had an interesting bone structure and a full, wonderful mouth. Her expression was mature and intelligent and troubled as she looked down at the devastation in the valley below.

Who wouldn't have been troubled? Catherine thought. Several thousand people had been killed in that quake. She quickly scanned the info about Erin Sullivan. She had been an Army brat who had traveled all over Europe and the Middle East with her parents. She had earned a scholarship to Stanford University, majored in languages and journalism, held several minor jobs in cities around Europe, and

found a niche in a small television station in Calcutta, India. She had worked three years traveling for the station in Pakistan and Tibet, then had quit and become a freelance journalist. According to the story, she had traveled to the quake site on her own to write the story. Then she had stayed to help with the rescue that was being conducted by the monks of the area and the Chinese soldiers who had been sent from Beijing to help. They had needed all the help they could get because the soldiers had become disoriented and physically ill because of the altitude. Erin had worked in these mountains, and the altitude was no problem for her. Both the Tibetan monks and the Chinese soldiers had nothing but praise for her.

Clearly a remarkable woman. Why would someone want to target her?

“We are going to land.” The smiling, Asian flight attendant was standing beside her seat. “Please put away all electronic devices.”

“Sorry.” Catherine nodded, shut off her computer, and slipped it in her bag. She glanced out the window. They should be on the ground within a few minutes. She hoped Hu Chang would be there to meet her. She would see him walking toward her with a faint, mocking smile on that face that was totally ageless. She had questions to ask him that he might not answer. She could never tell if he would dance around or give her the simple truth. As if any truth was simple with a man so complicated.

“Just what the hell are you up to, Hu Chang?” she murmured.

DAKSHA PALACE

TIBET

“Get *out* of here, Jafar.” Erin Sullivan’s voice was shaking as she gazed at the young boy in desperation and fear. She had been stunned when she had seen the boy slip over the windowsill into

her bedroom only moments before. Stunned and sick with panic. "You should never have come. I'll get out on my own."

"I should have come. I was sent." Jafar's huge brown eyes were glowing in his small face. "I heard the calling, and I went to my father. He told me to follow the spirits. You can't get across the mountains on your own. I will lead you from this dark place."

His father had told him to come to this hellhole? Jafar couldn't be over eleven or twelve years old, Erin thought, agonized. She had grown to know Jafar and his family during the weeks she had spent in his village, but she had not dreamed they'd sacrifice their son like this. Perhaps she should have realized it could happen. Like the rest of the people in his village, Jafar was full of dreams and the belief that good would always triumph in the end. Erin knew better. Not here, not anywhere where Paul Kadmus could reach out to crush and mangle. But she wouldn't be able to persuade the child to leave her by using fear. The dreams were too strong, the belief too ingrained. She thought quickly, searching for a way that he would understand.

"Your father should not have sent you to me. I must fight this battle alone. My special spirit told me that's the only way to gain a higher plane of enlightenment."

He frowned. "But this is a dark place. We've heard stories that they hurt you here. *He* hurts you." He looked at her face. "You have bruises."

She couldn't deny it. The ugly stories must have been driven from the palace like ice pellets in the wind. Find an excuse. "Suffering sometimes cleanses the soul."

He was gazing at her doubtfully.

She changed the subject. "Jafar, how did you get past those soldiers and into the palace? Could you get out the same way?"

He nodded. "I crawled down a drainage pipe underneath the palace that goes from the compound wall to the courtyard. It leads toward the road that goes down the mountain. My father said the

monks who settled in our village after Kadmus drove them out of this palace told him about it.” He smiled proudly. “I was like a shadow. No one saw me.”

She hoped to God no one had seen him. “You’re very clever, Jafar. I’m sure that you were just as invisible as you claim.”

“As invisible as Shambhala.” He nodded solemnly. “I can take you out of here the same way. Once we reach that far mountain, no one will find us.”

And the minute anyone discovered Erin was gone, Kadmus’s mercenaries would be after her, and the boy would be considered collateral damage. She had experienced just how brutal Kadmus could be. She couldn’t risk it. “No, I can’t go with you.” Her hands closed on his thin shoulders, and she looked him in the eye. “I thank you with my whole heart. You have been very brave, and you must tell your father that no one else from the village should come here. I will leave this place on my own.” She gave him a quick, hard hug. “You have to go now. Good-bye, Jafar, safe journey.”

He didn’t move. “But the spirits want you free. My father said that was true. He said you had helped our people to live, and now we must help you.”

“You have helped me. When I’m ready to go, you’ve told me how to leave this place.” She was searching frantically for a way to make him go. She didn’t know how much time she had before Kadmus would show up. She was allowed the freedom of the ancient palace on this barren mountaintop because he considered it a safe prison, but he never left her alone for long. “Go now, please, Jafar.”

He nodded slowly. “But I will return if you don’t come to us soon. I told you, the spirits sent me to lead you from this place. And I don’t think the spirits want you to be hurt. That’s the work of the demon who took you.” He turned and slipped out the window.

Erin crossed to the window, but he’d already disappeared.

Madness. Bravery. Sacrifice.

The cold was biting, and the distant mountain was shrouded in icy mist.

Let the boy reach the mountain. Let him get back to his village.

Oh, let him *live*.

Then she heard the shot.

Her body jerked as if the bullet had struck her.

No. No. No.

“What did you expect, Erin?” Paul Kadmus was strolling out of the mist toward her from across the courtyard. He was carrying Jafar’s limp body. “If you wanted someone to save you, then you should have chosen someone besides this crazy kid.” He threw the boy’s body on the ground in front of her window. “But he’s probably the only male specimen in the mountains who would be willing to go up against me.”

There was a bullet hole in the center of Jafar’s head, and Erin couldn’t take her eyes from it. A few minutes ago, he had been vibrantly alive and now this . . .

“He wasn’t crazy,” she said dully. “He believed he was doing what was right. He had a calling. His people don’t consider age a factor in moving toward true enlightenment. I wasn’t going with him. I was afraid that you or your men would do this. You didn’t have to kill him, Kadmus.”

“No, it was a pleasure.” His face revealed the same fierce enjoyment as he looked up at her. Those craggy, high cheekbones and deep-set blue eyes were riveting, but even before she had realized what lay behind that face, she had never thought him handsome. She had always sensed the evil.

“You’re becoming used to the usual forms of torment, Erin,” he said mockingly. “I wanted to see your face when I gave you a new and different wound. Aren’t you tired of fighting me? This boy would never have had reason to die if you’d given me what I wanted.” His gaze went to the gold necklace around her neck. He said softly, “Tell me, Erin.”

“There’s nothing to tell you.” Her shaking hand instinctively went up to cradle the carved, eight-sided lotus that hung from the chain. “If you want this thing, take it. I don’t want it. I’ve told you before, you can pick one up like it at any market in Tibet.”

“Not like that one.” Kadmus smiled. “And I don’t want your pretty necklace. I want to know who gave it to you. I want you to take me to meet him.” His boot nudged the body of the boy at his feet. “And then we won’t have to kill any more of these simpletons who think you’re some kind of Mother Teresa. Wouldn’t that please you, Erin?”

“You’d still kill anyone who got in your way.”

“True. But they wouldn’t get in my way if they didn’t put themselves between you and me.” His gaze met her own over the boy’s body. “Where did you get that necklace, Erin?”

“I told you, I bought it at a market in Qinghai Province.”

He sighed. “I was hoping that the boy might be a breakthrough.” He turned on his heel. “But I’ll just have to think of something else that will bring about the same result.” He looked over his shoulder, and added quietly, “You do know it will be very bad for you tonight, Erin? I’m very angry that you’re being so stubborn.”

She tried not to show the tension his words brought. He always used the anticipation of pain to make the torture even more devastating. It was a small victory to not let him see that psychological whip had an effect on her. “I know,” she said steadily. “It won’t make any difference. The answer will be the same.”

She saw a flicker of anger cross his face. He muttered a curse, then strode across the courtyard. A moment later, he was lost behind the veil of icy precipitation.

Were they going to leave the boy lying there in the courtyard? Probably. Kadmus would like the idea of her seeing Jafar’s body every time she looked out the window. Because each time she saw that poor boy’s body, it would hurt her.

It *did* hurt her. But what did her pain matter, she thought impa-

tiently. A child had died. A life had been taken. A soul had taken the next step.

Smother the pain.

Say good-bye.

Say a prayer for that brave boy who had died to try to free her.

The faith of his village was Buddhist, and she didn't know any Buddhist rituals. But prayer was prayer.

"Please, God, take him," she whispered. "Care for him. He was so good here with us for the little time we had him. You're lucky to have him back. He gave his life to save mine. How often do you get someone who would do that? He deserves anything you can do for him." The tears were stinging her eyes. "Good-bye, Jafar. You have a great spirit. Your parents would be proud of you. You'll be with me always . . ."

She was wiping her wet cheeks with the backs of her hands as she turned away from the window. Kadmus would be coming soon, and he mustn't see that she'd been weeping. It would be a triumph, and she wouldn't allow the atrocity he'd committed tonight to give him that victory.

Start the mantra.

No triumphs tonight.

Close your eyes.

Go away from this place.

Suspend all hatred. It would get in the way.

Withdraw into yourself.

Nothing can really touch you.

She sat down in the chair facing the door and began to prepare herself for what was to come.