

Chapter One

Song watched and waited miserably in the small car, his long legs jammed painfully under the steering wheel, chin buried in his scarf, as the snowflakes tumbled from the night sky and settled on his windscreen. Beijing's snow was desert snow, desiccated and fine, like the yellow sand that would blow in from the Gobi when spring came. Song's hands were rammed deep into the pockets of his sheepskin, his fingers stiff around a digital camera. The temperature had dropped to eight below zero. Normally he would have kept the engine running and the heat on, but for the sake of his mission he was attempting to become a non-person – the non-driver of a non-car. He concentrated for a moment. He could feel nothing from the waist down. His legs had become non-legs, his feet non-feet.

He tried wiggling his toes but he could sense only a distant twitch. He was risking frostbite for the client who had given him his orders in a voice like nails dragging across a black-board.

'They say you're clever, well, don't get clever with me. Just follow my husband like a dog follows a bitch.'

So here he was, faithful bloodhound Song pursuing the faithless husband, who had disappeared twenty minutes earlier into a brothel, waiting in a car parked opposite a public toilet. The outer wall of the toilet had turned into the unofficial neighbourhood dump and rubbish was overflowing from the pavement into the gutter. In this weather even the stench was frozen solid, along with the crap and the snot and the maggots. The cold had driven almost everyone off the streets to huddle inside, but a scavenger – a man – was picking through the mess, a basket over his shoulder. He glanced up at Song with fear in his eyes, then looked away. Song remembered how, during the summers of his youth, he and his neighbours had slept on makeshift beds in the open air to escape the stifling heat of their homes. Now the world was full of strangers and paranoia was rife. Neighbours had been uprooted by order of the city government and replanted at opposite ends of the city. They installed steel security doors and bars at their windows to fend off burglars, real or imaginary. Official notice boards in the streets warned women not to go out alone at night. In the past few weeks, tales of rape and murder and theft had spread across the city. No one knew what was true and what was not, and now everyone looked at strangers with... well, like the scavenger had looked at him.

'I'm up to my eyeballs in shit too, brother,' Song muttered. Matrimonials stank of treachery and deceit, the clients stank of it and the husbands stank of it, and Song could smell it on himself. Usually he turned matrimonials down, but this month he needed the money more than ever because his father was in hospital receiving treatment for bladder cancer, and the imported medicines and the doctor's bribes were bleeding the family dry. The final tally, whether his father lived or died, would be more than one hundred thousand *yuan*. Which happened to be more or less what Song had borrowed from his father to set up the agency a year before. Neither his father nor his sister had mentioned it, but Song couldn't help replaying in his mind how his father had queued outside the bank to withdraw his life savings, money scrimped and saved from a scrawny income. His

father had pressed wads of notes into this son's hands, and Song had accepted with gratitude, never dreaming how badly his father would need the cash, and how soon.

Song looked back towards the brothel, determined not to miss the husband. In Chinese, the massage parlour was called the Fragrant Companion. It had an English name too, and Song sounded out the letters one by one under his breath, 'O-r-g-a-s-i-n,' then tried the whole word: 'Orgasin.' He didn't recognize it, but then he'd had only a couple of years of English in school and his teacher had had less than that. He noticed that a black Santana with a white police number plate was parked on the other side of the road further down. It looked unoccupied, but given the dark street and the tinted windows he couldn't say for sure.

Inside the glass-fronted brothel, two girls sat on a sofa in the glow of pink neon. It was a slow night. They huddled, chatting and knitting, around an electric heater, its red bars almost touching their shins. Each wore a white down-filled jacket and high-heeled white boots that came to their knees, but underneath Song could see cleavage and thighs exposed. Their cheeks were rouged, their lips glossed purple, their hair dyed yellow: a rainbow of bravado. He wondered whether the women were frightened of their customers. Did they pay heed to rumour, or did their work require the quashing of imagination?

Song was afraid that if they spotted him loitering in the car they might come and extract him, like a snail from its shell, then carry him across the street and have their way with him whether he liked it or not. Once, on a business trip to Hainan Island, he had answered a knock at this hotel room door at midnight, thinking there was some emergency. He'd found a woman standing in the hallway. She had pressed herself hard up against him and attempted to kiss him – he'd been too sleepy to be interested and too sleepy to resist – then, when he refused to invite her in, she had demanded two hundred *yuan* in payment for services rendered, although of course he had required none and she had rendered none. Song had refused to pay and she had threatened to shout rape. In the end he'd haggled her down to one hundred *yuan*, paid her off and returned to his bed.

Tonight, Song had already snapped a series of pictures for the client's album – the husband getting out of his car, pushing open the glass door of the brothel, a girl rising from her seat to attach herself to his arm, pushing and pulling him, while he laughed and pretended to protest, through the heavy velvet curtain into the back room. But he knew what every client really wanted – a photograph of genitalia gave an aggrieved wife excellent leverage.

The two girls were looking out at the car now and giggling. One of them got to her feet, tugging her skirt down over her thighs. She pulled open the door and, hunching her shoulders against the cold, picked her way across the icy street and straight for him. She stopped by his car and rapped on the window. Sighing, he turned the key in the ignition, pressed a button and the window hummed down. The woman bent and leaned in so that her face was just inches from his and he could smell garlic and rice and cheap scent.

'Want to come and play?'

Song shook his head. 'Aren't you afraid? Some men would pull a knife on you.'

'Are you threatening me?' Her voice – uneducated, heavily accented – was loud and challenging. Her eyes ran over the long body folded in the driving seat, the broad shoulders, the long bespectacled face and the shaved head. She smiled. 'I know you.'

You're the man who lives on Alley Number 10. I've seen you around. I'll give you a discount.'

'I've never seen you before in my life,' Song snapped. But she was right, of course. He lived on Alley Number 10, on the east side of the lake, in a one-storey brick building with a yard out front and a wall that enclosed the small compound. It doubled as his office. There was even a brass plaque by the tall iron gate: Sherlock Investigation and Legal Research Centre. Its neighbours on Alley Number 10 were a fruit stall and a tattoo parlour.

The Communist Party didn't much like to admit that private detectives existed or were necessary. But then the more the politicians talked about a 'harmonious socialist society', the less the country looked and felt like one. The economy was booming, and the necessity for private detective agencies was booming in line with what people perceived to be a rise in extramarital affairs, kidnapping, petty crime, violent crime, ID theft, insurance fraud, corruption and trickery in every facet of personal and commercial life. In many cases the police were in it up to their necks, and the justice system had teeth but no backbone. If private detectives had not mushroomed in this dark and steamy environment it would have been a socialist miracle.

Song had decided to be diplomatic and to name his agency in a euphemistic way in order to avoid unwanted political interference. 'Investigation and Legal Research' put him at the pale end of a spectrum that consisted only of shades of grey.

'So why are you sitting here in the cold talking to yourself?' Irritation had crept into the prostitute's voice. She'd left the comfort of the brothel and braved the freezing air outside to honour him with the offer of her body, and he'd rejected her. It was an insult. She glanced over toward the brothel, where the husband was still closeted, then back to the car, and Song saw in her eyes that she had worked it out. She banged her fist once on the hood of the car and stalked away from him, her high-heeled boots slipping and sliding on the ice.

He swore softly to himself. If he just sat here, she'd go inside and tell the husband that there was a man sitting outside watching him. He might as well follow her in, barge in on the husband in the act, at least try to get the photos the client wanted.

He pushed open the car door, still cursing. Paper trails were his thing – paper trails and internet searches and knocking on doors and watching and listening, and hearing what people said, not just with their words, but with their voices and their eyes. He hated matrimonials. It would all be a horrible mess, it always was, everyone would howl and shout, and the husband would give chase, and at the end of the day Song would have nothing to show for it but a digital image of an anonymous toe or an elbow.

He stepped out of the car, the smooth soles of his boots slipping on the ice. Then, as he took another step, a scream scythed through the air and shocked him to a halt.

The scream – female, high-pitched, terrified, breathless, a wordless, formless plea for mercy – arrived from silence and was cut off, abruptly strangled, leaving a gurgling echo in its airy wake. Song stopped still, listening for more. The scream jabbed at his memory and his memory expelled another scream. His earliest memory, one he'd tried to bury for four decades. His mother, hounded by a vicious mob of former pupils, pushed from the third-floor window of the school building, her scream reaching Song in an adjacent courtyard. His father grabbing him, holding him back, whispering urgently in his ear that he must not run to her, not yet, or they would turn on him too.

This time he could run, no one was holding him back. And he did, he ran, dimly aware that the husband had reappeared from the back room of the brothel and that the girls were turning towards him, flirting and joking with him. Song half slid, half stumbled on numb legs down Likang Alley, which cut away from the main road, towards the lake and the scream.

When he reached the back of the Red Flag Hotel he came to a gasping halt, staring around him, but there was no one to be seen. The strip of bars and nightclubs that ran along the south shore of the lake was mostly dark, and Song thought they had closed early for lack of custom. But the dull glow of the city cast everything in an orange half-light.

The boiler that served the hotel was belching steam. Kitchen detritus, mainly gelid cabbage leaves, was piled next to a mound of bricks and a stack of cement bags, all dusted with snow. Until recently a maze of alleys had backed onto the Red Flag Hotel. They'd been torn down by an army of men wielding hammers and picks, and a cavalry of donkeys had arrived to cart the bricks out of the city. A few ragged brick walls still stood, but mostly there was a Siberian landscape of snow-covered rubble. A spotlight placed on a squat metal stand illuminated the entrance to the construction site, where a boarding showed a golden sun rising over a red horizon. Where once there had been peasant homes, soon another of Nelson Li's luxury real estate projects would thrust skyward, a potent symbol of the ambition of both the man and the city.

Song strode across the loose stones and bricks, the snow crunching underfoot. Ahead of him lay the dark lake, which became solid ice most of the winter, thawing partially when the sun appeared, its surface pitted with puddles of water and ragged at the edges, then freezing hard again, new layers of ice forming over old.

Song stopped and sniffed the air. He smelled smoke. In front of him an army-issue tent had been erected as a night-watchman's shelter. Outside the tent, a spotlight was aimed at the stretch of construction site that bordered the lake, and in the distance Song saw a figure hurrying along the path that skirted the water, pushing a heavily laden cart. A wail of fear rose from inside the tent, a childish voice, and a different terror, a different kind of call for help. The sound, unlike that first awful scream, still held a germ of hope for salvation. In the same moment, he saw flames licking their way up the side of the canvas.

Song ran to the tent and pulled open the flap, standing clear, fearing that flames would billow out. He secured the canvas, twisting it around a pole, then pushed at the metal stand underneath the spotlight, manoeuvring it so that the light shone, intense and white, into the interior of the tent. Only then, covering his nose and mouth with his hand, did he peer inside. The stove had fallen or been pushed against the tenting and flames were advancing up the back wall. In the glare of the spotlight he could see something sprawled on the ground to his right.

He grabbed a handful of snow and then another, grinding it into the wool of his scarf and securing it across his mouth. Then he cursed, got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the burning tent, taking his first breath of searing smoke. He peered down – the light was too bright and the smoke burned his eyes – and stretched his hands towards the shape, bracing himself for the weight of a body. But instead his hands clutched what felt like empty skin, a slimy film which slithered from his grasp. He exclaimed in horror, pulling his hands back sharply, confusion overwhelming him. Then,

bracing himself again, he reached out and pulled the skin towards him. Now he saw that it was discarded clothing, fabric not flesh.

Song grunted with relief, laughing at himself, then stared at the dark sticky substance that was coating his hands and dripping onto his clothes. In alarm, without thinking, he rubbed his hands on his trousers. Then, squinting around him with eyes almost blind from the smoke, he saw other pieces of cloth soaking in a pool of this same dark liquid that stretched across the canvas groundsheet. A woman's shoulder bag lay where it had fallen or been hurled. What had happened here? A woman had died violently – the conclusion was instinctive and instantaneous – but who, and at whose hands? He grabbed at the bag, stuffing it inside his jacket pocket. Tears rolled down Song's cheeks, and his lungs rebelled, telling him to get out. He glanced up. Above him the roof was burning fiercely.

Behind him he heard coughing and he wheeled around, still hunkered down, to find a knife held at his throat. The knife shook, waving dangerously. Song's eyes followed from the blade, which was covered in blood, to a tiny hand on the metal handle, an arm that trembled as the ragged boy who held it coughed and gagged, eyes swollen and weeping, legs collapsing underneath him. Song snatched the knife away from the child, who cried out in fear and confusion. He scooped the child up, clutching boy and knife against his chest.

Dizzy now, with blackness seeping into his vision, he pulled the burning canvas aside where it had fallen across the entrance. The flames leaped to his right arm and started to feed on his sleeve, and then began to consume his skin. He propelled himself away from the fire and collapsed, rolling on the snow to extinguish the flames. The child fell away from him.

Song lay on his back on the snow, gagging and coughing, then eased himself onto his hands and knees until he could breathe again through a windpipe scorched raw. A stripe of agony burned from his right elbow to his hand, which still gripped the knife that he had snatched from the child. He scrambled to his feet, and as he did so a ball of muck rose from his lungs and he doubled up and spat it into the snow, retching, shredding the delicate tissues of his throat. Next to him in the snow lay the child, small and filthy, hair long and matted, huge eyes wide with terror, breathing rapidly, unnaturally.

From the street came the sound of voices, and Song sensed figures emerging from the shadows. The spotlight that illuminated him was also blinding him and he could not see their faces. Sobbing with pain from his arm he took a step backwards and realized that the child had flung himself forwards and was clinging to him, a skinny arm wrapped around his leg. Song tried to shake him off, but the child was stuck like glue, his face transfixed in terror. Song bent down. The only way to free his leg was to hoist the child up again, and this he did, with his left arm, his good arm. He thought about dropping the knife, but then he decided he wanted it for self-protection, in case they tried to lynch him.

'Let him go,' someone shouted.

'He won't let go,' Song attempted to shout, but nothing came out, not even a whisper. His throat was as dry as sandpaper, his tongue swollen, not a drop of saliva in his mouth. His heart was banging against his ribs. Was he about to have a heart attack? He began to panic. He moved his tongue awkwardly around his mouth, but still he could not speak, could not explain himself. He had been struck dumb, he was covered in a dead woman's blood, with a dead woman's bag in his pocket, he was brandishing a murder

weapon. At best he would face hours of interrogation, at worst a murder charge, an injection of poison into his veins or a bullet in the back of his neck.

‘He set fire to the tent!’ one voice shouted, and another called out, ‘He’s covered in blood – look at his clothes.’ A third voice started a chorus of fear that turned rapidly to accusation. ‘He’s got a knife...He’s a killer...He’s going to kill the child...Murderer!’

Song tried to retreat, but the child’s arm was locked tight around his neck, so when he fled, making for the woods that bordered the west shore of the lake, he ran with the child still in his arms, and the knife clutched awkwardly in his hand.

He carried the boy through the woods, forcing his legs to keep moving one ahead of the other, his feet sinking into the snow, his lungs begging for him to stop, his thirst – the need for moisture in his mouth – almost unbearable. It was his heart, labouring against the smoke that still billowed in his lungs, that nearly brought him to the ground. He held the boy’s thin body like a stick of wood against him, and the child moaned and spluttered and retched in his arms, then spat onto Song’s jacket.

Lights from the buildings around leaked between the trees, and Song could see just well enough that he was able to dodge between them and the mounds of dirt that were graves. He had never had reason to enter these woods before, but he knew that this was the graveyard for the village that bordered the lake. The city was encroaching, high-rise towers all around, but still the earth was dug here, in between the trees, for the dead from the village. Once he thought he heard a voice behind him and he turned in fear, knowing that a murderer might share these woods with him. When he saw no one he halted to heave air into himself and expel, or this was how it felt, the lining of his lungs. The child stank. He must have lost control of his bladder in the tent, and now the urine-soaked rags that clothed him were freezing stiffly onto his body. Well, he would have to fend for himself. Song began to disentangle himself and then, with shock – one shock on top of all the rest – realized that under the rags the boy had only the one, sinewy, arm. The one shoulder was a stump. Song dumped the child on the ground and stepped away from him. The child, too weak to get to his feet, lunged after him on his knees.

Song thrust the knife inside his clothing and felt it slice through the fabric. He broke into a staggering run and the point of the knife jabbed against his thigh as he ran, faster now without the burden of the child. Then he heard the child coughing. Song slowed, turning around, nursing his right arm against his body. In the gloom he saw the child huddled on the ground, heaving and sobbing, shoulders hunched, head turning this way and that, and it seemed in that moment that their pain was inseparable.

He watched for another moment. Then he returned to the child and crouched down beside him.

‘Come one, then, you little runt,’ he hissed, which was all the sound he could manage. He hoisted the child onto his back and hurried towards the road. It was clear now that none of the men and women by the lake had dared to follow him into the woods. But the police would arrive soon, and they would have no such qualms.

Just yards away the night-time streets were still busy with cars but he could not risk a taxi, not if the police were out looking for a blood-covered arsonist with a child in tow. He could not go home or to the office. If the woman from the brothel talked to the police, they would know where to come looking for him.

Eagle Run Plaza loomed above him, its mirrored glass reflecting the opaque sky. He lowered the boy from his back and took a good look at him for the first time. His body was as light as a five-year-old's, but his skinny face looked older, perhaps seven, even nine years old. The child's eyes were dark with fear, his mouth working to take in oxygen.

Song breathed a curse. Where could he hide a boy with one arm?

He dug in his pocket for his mobile phone, punched in a number with cold, clumsy fingers. The voice that answered was sleepy, protesting. Song started to interrupt, but all that came was a hail of coughing.

'Song?' His friend Wolf's voice came down the line, worried now. 'Song, what's the matter?'

Song moved his tongue around his mouth again, tried to summon some saliva.

'Bring the van,' he wheezed. 'I'm on Tianze Road, on the edge of the wood. Bring blankets.'

'What's happened?'

'Just get your arse over here.'

Song hung up. He thought he might pass out from the pain in his arm. He could hear a siren in the distance, getting closer. He waited, squatting, leaning his back against a tree, curling his body around the boy's to keep him as warm as he could. He could feel his heart pounding against the boy's chest.