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AN UNKNOWN VILLAGE

by EMMA NI

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EMMA NI

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CHAPTER ONE

My little brick house sat high atop a mountain ridge overlooking the sea where the wind whistles and the sun whispers. At night I slept with the curtains drawn. The rolling waves and the shimmering stars had become my friends—they rocked me to sleep. Sometimes I could feel the romance as I observed the dim, twinkling lights far off in the distance like fireflies on a warm summer night. At times I felt surrounded by a mysterious force from the sea. I couldn't quite define it, but it was there and I felt it.

My grandfather always told me I was a gift from God. I was on a special mission and one day I would know my true destiny. Although I didn't know why he told me this, I somehow had no doubts that it was true. I always sensed I had some hidden superpower—some kind of control over things others didn't have. I was sure most kids dream of superpowers. But there was always a difference between dream and reality.

I grew up in a very simple family and lived a simple life. My father was a construction manager; working long hours and endless days to ensure we lacked for nothing. My mother was a stay-at-home mom keeping everything obsessively neat and tidy and the hot sumptuous meals always ready to be devoured. The only thing that seemed to set our family apart was a secret room Mom had in our house. No one was allowed in there, not even my dad. This was a tremendous source of curiosity for me.

When I was seven years old, our family moved from China to Canada. It was a scary and exciting change for me. I felt I was losing part of my family, but I was embarking on a new adventure. I was so glad that I had been educated in two different cultures. I liked to read Chinese poetry and create Chinese brush paintings—something I learned from my grandfather. He was a mysterious man. He always seemed so deep in thought. He was also a very busy man. I was not sure what he did, but he told me that he was a messenger of justice. As far back as I could remember, I had visited his workplace in China three times. It was an isolated, lonely place. It was far from the city. I knew he must have been an important man because everyone there showed him great respect they called him Master.

Today was going to be a good day. Today was the last day of my 10th-grade class. I was moving on; only two more years of high school. As I came in for breakfast, father was watching the morning news as he always liked to do. Mother was making sandwiches for my school lunch. My dog, Ginger, was lying at the entrance door. This was Ginger's favorite place to doze off. She took it upon herself to be the guardian of the house. Ginger was a yellow Labrador. She was smart, loyal, and full of energy. No matter how sad I was as I sometimes tended to be, my dog was always there to bring my spirits up. She would stare up at me with big, round affectionate eyes. Her loving eyes would pierce into my soul. She couldn't speak, but she made me feel like she understood how I was and wanted to let me know I was her best friend.

Just as I was finishing breakfast, my phone rang. It was my friend, Hugh.

"Hi, Irene. Have you got any plans for this summer?" Hugh blurted suddenly then the pause as he waited for my response. I knew this was a loaded question. He was asking for a reason.

"Well, I have no plans this summer. Do you have any interesting suggestions?" I replied.

"Yeah! How about a summer camping trip in the Dark Forest? I mean, the most natural and

mysterious forest I have ever heard of. Paul will come with us. Imagine beautiful colorful birds flying everywhere, tall majestic trees, and inviting blue lakes, the sounds of water trickling over the rocks. Can you think of any place more inviting than that?" Hugh asked.

"Hugh, you forgot to mention the bears." I groaned.

Hugh never thought of the dangers of his adventures—things that could hurt us. He was always thinking of simple, happy things.

"It would take us almost eleven hours to drive there, and we don't have a car. None of us even has a driver's license." I said.

"I will ask my brother Rolf to come with us. He has a car. Rolf is an apprentice in an auto repair shop which makes it even better." Hugh responded.

"Are you serious? Do you really think Rolf's old rusty truck can get us to the Dark Forest?" I asked.

"Come on Irene, my brother can hunt, climb mountains, and is an excellent boxer. He is an almost invincible athlete. He is good with his hands and can repair almost anything. So, driving and repairing a car for him is second nature." Hugh retorted.

Hugh was right. Rolf was a tall, brilliant, incredibly strong man. He was always able to find ways to solve problems. We trusted him.

“Ok, I need to check with my parents first. This is a crazy idea but I like it. We should discuss this further at school.” Despite what I told Hugh, I didn’t think Mother would allow me to travel to a dangerous forest surrounded by bears and who knew what.

After I hung up on Hugh, I realized that my mother had been standing behind me the whole time.

“Oh, you heard Hugh and I? What do you think? Will you let me go, Mom?” I stared at her in apprehension with a desperate, pleading look.

“I know you will go one day. Why can’t you wait a little longer?” My mother replied. She was crying—something was really worrying her. There was something she wasn’t telling me.

“What do you mean, Mom? What will happen? Why are you crying? You are scaring me. This is just a camping trip.” I bellowed.

Mother didn’t answer my prodding. Her behavior was very strange. She yanked the phone out of my hand and rushed to her room. I was completely perplexed.

“Father, it is happening now...” I could vaguely overhear her conversation with Grandfather.

This was just a camping trip! My mom was not a weeper. Why was she overreacting? I knew bears could be dangerous and scary, but why was Grandpa suddenly involved? Mother's overreaction startled me. I almost had an anxiety attack. It felt like something big was going to happen.

I found myself at school campus as these thoughts raced through my mind.

“Hi Irene,” Paul patted me on the shoulder from behind. “Did Hugh tell you about our plans to go camping in the Dark Forest? It is a very risky adventure.” Paul stared blankly into space as he spoke.

Paul was a small-framed man. A gust of wind could blow him over. He had sandy blonde hair, a freckled face, and piercing shiny grey eyes. It was no doubt his Brad Pitt lookalike features attracted the girls. His voice was spellbinding like a choir of angels. He dreamed of becoming the next John Denver, his mom and dad's favorite country western singer. John Denver was their idol and they played his songs almost every day.

“Hugh always teases me. He calls me a coward. You know what? I will go to the Dark Forest and

prove to him I am not weak.” Paul stated. You could see the frustration through his clenched fists. His knuckles were tense white beacons.

“You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. You are a great singer.” I suggested.

To be perfectly honest, I hated it when Hugh made fun of others—it was almost bully behavior. To me, it was a sign that he lacked confidence. Apart from this one character flaw, he was a caring, kind friend. Hugh loved helping others.

I was startled by the loud honking of a car horn. I turned to see Hugh and Rolf. Rolf was driving that fifteen-year-old beatup blue truck. What a conspicuous truck! It looked like an army tank with wheels.

Hugh appeared with his new red hair. He had just dyed his hair, sort of an odd color. He hated his brown hair. He considered it too common; “it lacked uniqueness,” he offered. He compared his hair to the colour of dull mud, lacking in rich red tones. He saw himself as a fashionista, a leader of style at school, so seeing his new “do” was no surprise.

“Hi Guys! we will pick you up at 5:00 am next Wednesday. It is supposed to be a sunny day. I checked the weather forecast. My brother and I are going shopping.” Hugh exclaimed.

“But my mother...” I muttered.

“It’s a done deal, mother’s girl.” Hugh laughed.

They raced away like the wind, wheels spinning up a dust ball as the drove back onto the road.

“I guess we are going to the Dark Forest,” Paul shrugged. “I need to bring my guitar. I need to pack my bag early in case I forget something. I need to...”

I didn’t hear what he was saying. My only thought was I needed to talk with Mom first.

When I arrived home after school, strangely, Ginger did not jump up to greet me. My dog had always welcomed me home with youthful exuberance. As I recall, this had only happened once before when I left her on my return to China. I almost had a car accident there. It was as if she knew before I left Canada that something was going to happen in China. It seemed Ginger could always sense the future somehow.

“Honey, you come back!” Mother ran to me and wrapped her arms around me.

“Mom, are you ok?” I asked.

“I’m sorry for what happened this morning. Look! I am packing for your camping trip.” Mother ushered me into the living room. She listed every item she

had prepared for me, “knives, matches, flashlight, Ziploc bags, towels, socks...”

“Mom, you are agreeing to let me go to the Dark Forest.” I chuckled with a tingle in my tummy.

“Of course, darling,” she confirmed. “You are almost an adult now. It's time for you to make your own decisions. I can't keep protecting you forever. But before you go, I want to give you something that your grandfather wants you to have.” Mother gently removed a small silk cloth bag from her pocket and opened it.

“A bracelet?” I asked surprisingly.

“Yes, a green jade bracelet.” My mother responded. “A special bracelet.”

“What is it for? It is fragile and old, very old. It looks like an antique dug out from a tomb.” I said.

“Yes, it's very old,” Mom nodded. “Maybe one thousand years old. I have kept it for you for a long time. Your grandfather said it was time for you to have it. Don't ask anymore questions, just wear it. It is a blessed and powerful bracelet.” Mother slipped the bracelet over my wrist. It fitted me perfectly—as if it was made just for me.

“Ok, wearing this thousand-year-old bracelet, I can't move my arm.” I snickered.

“Mom, I love you. I won't let you down!” I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a great big bear hug.

“I know, honey, I always know.” She kissed my cheek.

That night, the moon shone as bright as a floodlight on the school football field. I didn't recall ever seeing it that bright before. I leaned against my bed and listened to the roaring of the waves and the chant of the winds. As I stared out at the sea, I saw my grandfather's face hovering over the waves. He murmured in a very solemn voice, “Whatever is going to happen will happen, whether we worry or not. Be strong and courageous, take up the sword to fight. Evil can never overcome the goodness of God.”



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