

THE
TERMS
— OF HIS —
SURVIVAL

MONEY • POWER • CONTROL

— CHAPTER TWO —
FLOOD

HONG KONG

*LONG BEFORE TAO LEARNED
TO DISAPPEAR, THE WATER
TAUGHT HIM WHAT SURVIVAL
REALLY MEANT.*

PORT TRINITY,
TEXAS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JULIE SCOTT

Chapter Two | Origins

As the plane cut through darkness, Taio shifted in his seat, the weight of everything behind him pressing in. At 35,000 feet he felt himself hurling like a bullet toward a destination almost a day away. He had bought the gun and pulled the trigger. Now all he could do was wait to see if his aim was true — and if he missed, well, he knew enough about consequences to understand they didn't care about intention.

The lights dimmed, the cabin settling into that manufactured twilight airlines use to convince you you're safe. He listened to the hum of the engines, the forced air, the quiet rustle of strangers trying to sleep, and he let the noise wrap around him like something that might hold him together if he didn't move too much. He closed his eyes. Adjusted the thin blanket. Felt it scrape against his wrist — too rough to be comforting, too flimsy to be warm.

His grandmother's voice rose in the dark, calm as a hand on his cheek. *Be like bamboo. Bend when you must. But do not break.*

Exhaustion took him, not gently, but like something pulling him under by the collar. And then he was there again, surfacing into cold that snapped his small body awake.

He heard her voice first, cutting through the crashing of wood

and metal as the world split apart around them. She said his name once. Not a cry. A command.

A hand closed around his wrist — her hand — and suddenly he was gasping for air he couldn't seem to find. Her fingers tightened, bony and certain, the only solid thing in a world that had stopped being a house and started being noise and water and motion.

The ground shifted. Or maybe it was the water shifting the ground. He didn't know then. He only knew the roar — water against stone, water against walls, water against everything that wasn't strong enough to hold.

He felt himself dragged forward, his feet scraping against rocks, debris rushing past — pieces of homes, pieces of lives, maybe bodies, though he didn't understand that then. His grandmother fought the current, her breath sharp, her grip unbreakable, her will the only thing keeping them from being taken.

He heard the temple bells above them, faint and impossibly far, and he saw a flash of light — a lantern, maybe, or morning trying to break through. He felt her push toward it, felt her body lean into the current as if she could force the river to obey.

Then another hand — larger, stronger — grabbed him, pulling them both toward the shore, toward the mud that had once been a village and now looked like something the water had reclaimed, as if it had always belonged to her.

They stood on the temple steps in the dark as the water raged below, both of them shaking, both of them trying to catch their breath. She half-carried, half-dragged him upward, his knees and feet scraping against the wet, worn stone. Inside the doorway, she paused, scanning the faces — searching, counting, hoping — and he watched the desperation creep across her

features in a way he didn't understand then.

They sat huddled with the others around a small fire, the flames thin and uncertain, everyone watching the doorway as if someone they loved might still walk through it. Hope stretched itself thin through the night and frayed into morning.

Dawn arrived slowly, bringing little warmth and no comfort. As they walked down the steps, the true devastation revealed itself. The village wasn't destroyed so much as erased — pieces scattered like a puzzle dumped across a floor, nothing where it belonged, nothing recognizable. A fishing net caught on what had once been a roof. A small boat lodged halfway up a hill, tangled in the remains of a tree. Everything coated in thick mud, the kind that looked almost soft from a distance, like melted frosting left too long in the sun.

He watched his grandmother's face as she stared toward where their home had been. There was nothing there. Not even the outline of a foundation. Just absence.

She moved before he could think to follow, frantic, pushing through the others who were gathering what they could, calling out names, clinging to whatever scraps the river had spared. Some homes stood untouched, as if the water had parted around them out of mercy or spite.

His grandmother dropped to her knees and began digging through the mud, her hands moving with a desperation he didn't yet have a name for. He held onto her sleeve, hoping she might turn toward him, offer some small reassurance, but she was too far inside her grief to feel anything but the pull of it. A small group gathered as she lifted something from the mud, her movements frantic, almost wild. He caught a glimpse — just a glimpse — of the body that had been his mother before villagers stepped in, shielding him, turning him away. But he

could still hear her. He could still hear his grandmother's voice breaking open, the sound of her pleading, the sound of others crying around him. His young mind tried to make sense of it, tried to understand why the world had suddenly become so loud and so quiet at the same time.

The remaining homes became makeshift morgues, temporary sanctuaries for the ones the river had taken. The village worked together, uncovering and carrying bodies on doors or broken boards, whatever they could find. Those whose homes had been spared brought fruit, candles, flowers — small offerings, gestures of love in a place where everything else had been stripped away. Clothing and sheets were washed in the river and given to the mourners. Tradition held, even here, even now, even in the mud.

His grandfather's body was found later that evening. Gone with him was the name that belonged to the land, the legacy that should have passed from father to son. They sat together with the others in quiet grief. His grandmother tended to the bodies with a tenderness that made something inside him ache, wrapping them carefully, placing small mementos near their hands as they became available. He watched her hold her husband's hand for the last time, her thumb brushing over his knuckles as if memorizing them. He tried to understand her sadness, tried to understand the grief of the others, but all he could do was remain near his mother's body, waiting for her to wake.

Days passed. People moved through the wreckage with a kind of stunned determination, trying to make sense of what had happened, trying to begin the slow work of recovery.

Then the low drone of engines rose in the distance. The village stilled. Heads turned. Hope flickered. A procession of vehicles

appeared on the horizon, growing larger as they approached. When they stopped, men in crisp suits stepped out, their shoes sinking into the mud. Among them was Taio's father, DeLun — composed, unpanicked, untouched by the chaos around him. He scanned the crowd until his eyes found them. No running. No calling out. No relief softening his face. He walked toward them with the same measured steps he used in every part of his life.

He placed a hand briefly on Taio's shoulder. "You're safe," he said — not comfort, not warmth, just a statement of fact.

His grandmother spoke her daughter's name. He nodded. "And your husband?" She looked down, unable to meet his eyes, and shook her head. He didn't pause. Didn't soften. Didn't grieve. He began asking about estate papers, the safe, the land boundaries. Business in the mud.

Something in her broke. Taio didn't understand the words, but he understood the shift — the anger rising in her voice, the disbelief, the hurt. Her face tightened as she pointed toward the place where the house had been, her hand trembling.

DeLun turned and began giving orders to the men who had come with him. They enlisted villagers, digging through the ruins, searching for whatever could be salvaged. Taio and his grandmother stood above the excavation, her hand wrapped around his, her grip steady despite everything.

"Taio," she whispered, her voice low, almost lost in the wind. "Remember this. Not the water. What people choose when no one is watching."

He didn't understand then. He only felt the weight of it. The meaning would come later.

When everything had been gathered and reviewed, his father led him toward the car without a word. Taio looked back — at the village, at the mud, at the bodies wrapped in cloth, at the people

who had lost everything, and at his grandmother standing alone, barefoot in the wreckage, her grief hardened into stillness.