THE HONG KONG WIDOW

By Kristen Loesch

The Porcelain Doll
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For Gong and Po

Prologue

Susanna has her lips pursed, like she is sucking on sweetroot. I am telling her what it is like to be attacked by an unknown assailant in a darkened room. How it feels to wake up half a day later, your head throbbing, one eye swollen shut, lying flat on a tatami, the straw beneath you turned sticky, your arms stiff at your sides, your fingers bent like you're holding a ball. One of those small spleeny organs that nobody knows about until they lose it – you've lost it.

You know it's normal not to be able to recall anything of the attack itself. Normal if you can't picture your attacker; normal if everything is hazy in your head.

The problem is that it isn't.

Imagine that you remember the events of your attack perfectly – but you remember it all the wrong way around. In your memory you see yourself on the ground, bleeding badly; in your memory you go closer, bending over your own form, your own face.

In your memory, you are not the victim. You are the attacker.

'Uh-huh,' Susanna says, jotting something down on her handheld electronic screen.

Susanna Thornton is an award-winning author of narrative nonfiction, known for her interest in murky historical mysteries, particularly crimes. Why else has she sat me down like this, if not for a story such as this one? Her initial request for an interview was shocking; her voice on the phone was clipped and stern and gave nothing away. But she can't just want the usual bland impressions of the decades I have lived through, the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, the Pacific War, the Chinese Communist Revolution.

I want her to want more.

I want to see her innate curiosity piqued. I want to hear her laugh openly at me. I want her to tell me that it's impossible, what I have just said, all while her mind spins with possibilities.

But it seems she has little concern for the darkened rooms of my life.

'That happened back in Shanghai?' says Susanna, but it's not quite a question and she doesn't wait for an answer. 'I don't want to waste your time – I'm here to ask you about Hong Kong. About Maidenhair House.'

For a moment it feels as if I am waking up half a day later, all over again.

'I'm sorry. I must have misheard you,' I say.

'Maidenhair House,' repeats Susanna, whose voice is very clear, whose voice regularly carries over the heads of hundreds of people. 'About the late-summer night in 1953 that's turned into an urban legend. About the alleged massacre. About how, when the police were called to the scene, they couldn't find a trace of it – and later called it a collective hallucination.'

'Then what is left to say?' I ask, but perhaps she can hear my heart beating slightly faster, just by my voice.

'It's been confirmed that several young women went up to the house that night and were never seen again,' says Susanna. 'Women who were refugees of the Revolution. Women with no family or friends. Women that nobody would have missed. I've spoken to some Canadian urban explorers who spent a night at Maidenhair about fifteen years back now,' she adds, with a hint of satisfaction, 'and I got one of them to admit that there was indeed blood. When they went over it with luminol, they found blood everywhere. Walls. Floors. Rugs.'

She says this like it is a revelation, blood beneath your feet.

Maybe in this country it is.

But in the place I come from, the dirt is always red, if you dig deep enough.

The balloon-whistle of the espresso maker sounds from another room, but Susanna doesn't budge. She thinks the silence will force me to speak. She sweeps her long mat of hair behind her shoulders. I have thought of other things to talk about by now: perhaps about the time my mother forced me to sell my own hair to a visitor to our village who was trying to add to his collection of female braids; how much I wanted to refuse; how if I were not so tragically proud, I might have begged. But we needed the money and in the end Ma got her way. She cut it just above the jaw.

'I intend to solve it,' says Susanna.

She can get my hair back for me?

Even if by now it is scattered across China like ashes?

'I'm going to uncover the truth about that night,' she insists. I am not sure this is an interview so much as it is a sounding board, because clearly the story she wants to tell is already

formed in her head. I can see it shining in her eyes. 'I'll do it with your help or without it, Mama, but I'm going to find out what happened at Maidenhair House. And I'm going to find out why *you* got away.'

PART ONE

1

Seattle, Washington, 2015

Susanna's dining table is long, meant for more people than just me and her. At every place setting there is a plate and enough slim silver cutlery that I could make a traditional Chinese cutting of the tablecloth; it is an eerie scene. Once there were three eating at this table every day, of course: Susanna; Peter, her first husband; and Liana, my granddaughter. Then came the divorce; then there were two. Then Susanna married Dean, and there were three again. Then Liana left for college. Then there were two again. And now Dean is gone.

I am here tonight, but my daughter acts like she is alone.

Susanna sits across from me, reading on her phone, her eyes moving visibly beneath the lids. All the food on the table has just been taken out of the fridge.

I take a sip of my tea. It is hard and gritty.

'Something wrong, Ma?' she asks.

'It's so cold in here, that's all. Did you take this whole house out of the fridge?'

A short sigh. 'You didn't have to stay for dinner.'

How could I go, after the conversation we have had?

I had not thought about Maidenhair House in several decades, but now the memory burns brighter than the light overhead. Susanna, naturally, does not see the effect her reminder has had on me; she thinks Maidenhair is like any other murder mystery she has ever encountered, gone rancid with time. I wonder how she learned that I was there that night, but it surely involves more devices, more squinting, more poorly-lit rooms.

I imagine a list of women's names, one after another. I imagine Susanna struggling to make sense of it, and in the end, believing what she sees.

The greatest surprise is not her discovery of my presence, nor her self-proclaimed investigation.

The greatest surprise is that my daughter has got out of bed.

She has hardly left the house since Dean died, three months ago.

'Yes, I was at Maidenhair,' I say, and her eyes widen. 'But I have never spoken of that night to anyone. Not because I have something to hide, but because I have had no desire to turn over the past like the dirt of a grave.'

It has the effect on her that I hoped for and simultaneously dreaded. Susanna sets down her phone and diverts her full attention to me.

'But you're willing to talk about it now?' she says.

I notice that she hasn't picked up anything to eat with; she has become as skinny as a bamboo stake. 'If you do something for me in exchange.'

'What is it?'

'I want you to find out why I remember being attacked, so many years ago, from the perspective of my attacker.'

'The thing you described earlier, you mean?'

'That is my condition.'

'Forgive my bluntness, Ma,' she says wearily, 'but I'd say it was a trick of your imagination. Your brain trying to protect itself from whatever happened. But if you want me to find out who attacked you, I suppose we can try. *When* was it? Not when you were growing up? Because 1930s Shanghai, we're talking Japanese soldiers, gangsters, drug dealers, criminal overlords,' she says, like I might not know, like I wasn't there. 'It might be difficult to—'

'I didn't say *who*. I said *why*.'

'Well, it'll have to wait either way. I've booked a flight to Hong Kong, for research.'

Susanna sucks air in through her nose, as if to prepare for my objections. I do have objections. I want to say: on the subject of somebody's brain trying to protect itself from what has happened, why are you suddenly so drawn to a story like Maidenhair? To old deaths; to open-ended deaths? You say you want answers; I think you do not want answers. You want to hunt. You want to chase. You want to run. You want to spend your time on people who cannot die in your arms, because they are already dead.

But at least she has got out of bed.

Perhaps this is the start of a new stage of grief. First, she could not move at all. And now she cannot stay still.

For the rest of the meal, Susanna keeps her head turned so that her hair hangs over her face, blocks my view of her. Her hair should be streaked with white, but it is dyed dark. Dollhouse hair. To go with the dollhouse food and the dollhouse house. All she is missing, now, is the dollhouse husband. I should

tell her about the day I ran into my own future husband, her future father, in a bustling marketplace in Tsim Sha Tsui. I was idling near the hundred-year-egg stall when a young man approached me. He had to stoop to speak to me. I had missed breakfast that morning, and I was hungry; over the rumbling of my stomach I heard him apologise for disturbing me. He was irresponsibly handsome, handsome enough that I forgot one hunger, and remembered another. He held out a hand, turned upward. *I think you've dropped this—*

I grabbed my white peony flower hairpin out of his palm.

This young man asked me if I wanted a hundred-year-egg.

By then I was corroding like iron, from the *wanting* of things.

'You have my condition,' I say to my daughter. 'Let me know what you decide.'

Susanna does not answer.

Hundred-year-egg has a tough, almost impenetrable crust, but on the inside, it is soft. It is weeping.

The tapestry of clouds in the distance has lifted, revealing the outline of the Cascades. Susanna has surprisingly agreed to drive me home; bent over the steering wheel, she rubs at a red splotch of skin on her wrist. The car's touch screen display glowers rudely at us. I have no idea why the navigation is turned on. Susanna should not need directions to my home, at least not before nightfall. I wonder if it is always nightfall now, for my daughter.

A phone call flashes on the screen: Liana. Susanna doesn't pick up.

'Is Liana still having trouble sleeping?' I ask, after the ringing dies. 'The insomnia, the nightmares?'

'So Peter says,' she replies. 'Now apparently she's . . .'

'She's what?'

'*Seeing* things,' says Susanna, in a breath.

'What does my granddaughter see?'

'I don't know.'

'Perhaps if you took her calls you would know.'

'Peter says she isn't liking grad school. He doesn't think we should make a big deal out of it.'

'Have you spoken directly to him? To either of them? Or you only communicate through those bubble messages that make my temples ache?'

Susanna is too busy rubbing the red spot raw to respond. Liana came up from LA shortly before Dean's death, and mother and daughter have not seen each other in person since. Liana didn't visit for the funeral because there wasn't one; Susanna arranged a quick cremation before making a permanent burrow of her bedcovers. These past few months she has seen nobody but me, and only because I have a key to her house. Only because I refuse to go unseen.

I have been so gentle with her. I have hovered over her like a cloud.

What good has it done?

Now she is finally leaving her house, but going to Hong Kong instead of LA. Now she will finally raise her head again, but only as high as her touch screen.

'You really shouldn't be living alone any more, you know, Ma,' Susanna says, opting to go on the offensive. 'Weren't we talking once about getting you a place at—'

'At least I do not live in your house. It is a cube.'

She flinches at my tone.

'There are memories like nails sticking out of the walls in

that place, Susanna. No wonder you are so pallid and sick-looking. You are bleeding out. You should sell it.'

'All this was different for you, alright?' she says, her hands rigid on the wheel. 'You didn't love Dad the way I loved—'

She can't finish, but her voice is bitterly triumphant. As if to say *Admit you didn't love him. Admit that you don't know what it's like for me.*

'It depends on what you mean by *love*,' I say. 'I cherished him. I miss him. But I did not wring myself out like a cloth for him, and he would have not wanted it. You have to understand that by the time I met your father, I had no desire for something so fragile that it would fall to dust in my hands. I had been swimming, gasping for air, for so long. What I had with Dad was a boat. We built it together, knowing it would carry us however far we needed to go.'

'Well, I didn't want a boat. I wanted something else,' she says hotly, 'and I got it.'

'If you had a boat right now, maybe you wouldn't be so stuck in place.'

'You and *boats*. Sometimes you can't just – can't just move *forward* like that, Mama! That easily! That quickly! I'm not ready to sell the house. I'm just not. I—'

'Have you decided whether to accept my condition?'

Silence again, but this time it is more like static. It has begun to rain. Susanna turns on the wipers, which creak moodily across the windshield. 'I want to take care of Maidenhair first,' she says, 'and then – yes. I can look into your . . . attack.'

She scratches again at her wrist, and this time she draws blood.

* * *

It was September 1953, the last time I laid eyes on Maidenhair House.

But the real story begins many years before that.

I gaze at my daughter, the sweep of her jaw, the craters of her eyes, the frayed shawl of her hair, the way her sweater is buttoned all the way up the neck, nearly a noose.

'I'm going with you to Hong Kong,' I say, and she jolts back in surprise.

'Are you kidding?' she exclaims.

'Why shouldn't I go? I have been acquiring air miles for decades. It would be upsetting to die without having used them. I have achieved special status with the airline by now; I can get excellent upgrades.' Susanna is still protesting, but we have reached our destination, the small bungalow I shared with my late husband for almost half a century. I want to tell my daughter, do not go back to your cube house. Do not live in a box. Boxes are what people are buried in. 'There is even an extra fast line, for going through immigration,' I tell her. 'That is the most important thing.'

'*That's* the important thing? You're eighty-five years old, Ma! Who cares about extra fast lines in immigration? You can't just—'

Someone who is eighty-five, that's who. Someone who could fall down dead at any moment, anywhere, right where she is standing. Someone who lived too long on the line, between one country and another; who refuses to die in the in-between place.