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# Dark Winter

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## Chapter 1

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Penang, Malaysia  
Sunday 20 April, 20:15 hrs

The huge billboard explained in English, Chinese, Malaysian and even Hindi that the penalty for drug-dealing was death, and a picture of a hangman's noose rammed home the message in case a language had been missed. What it didn't say was that Malaysia had the highest concentration of al-Qaeda terrorists outside Afghanistan and Pakistan, these days, which made it a fucking strange place to take a holiday.

I rested my crash helmet in the crook of my right arm. I was too hot and sweaty even to bother saying no to the market traders waving tacky souvenirs in my face. The pavement wasn't wide enough for us to walk side by side, but I knew Suzy was close behind. Her estuary English was unmistakable, especially as she was shouting to make sure I heard her above the din: 'Hey, Nick, did I tell you my Dad came here to do his National Service?'

It had rained only an hour ago, a heavy tropical downpour, and the air was thick and sticky. The road through the market was narrow, packed with cars and rusting diesel buses; scooters and Honda 70s buzzed through the gaps between them like pissed-off mosquitoes. The beach front of Batu Feringhi, where we were staying at the Holiday Inn, was dotted with smart hotels and lined with casuarina trees, but the further we got from the not-so-white beaches, the more corrugated-iron shacks we saw. This was where the ordinary Malaysians lived and worked.

The Bali bombing, war in Iraq, then the SARS outbreak, had all affected the tourist trade, which made those of us who had turned up even more of a target for the guys trying to flog counterfeit Rolexes, pirated CDs, ethnic wooden masks and trinkets that had probably been made in China. Fumes poured out of the small petrol generators supplying power to stalls churning out chicken kebabs on home-made grills. Tacky neon signs did their best to entice us into streetside cafés.

Suzy wasn't deterred by no response: she kept prattling on regardless. 'Yeah, he was only here for a while. He wanted to join the Navy, but they shoved him into the Army Catering Corps and sent him out here.'

I gave a grunt of acknowledgement, not really listening. Our holiday wasn't going badly, apart from her chain-smoking. She didn't do it in the room, but I was sure she'd like to, just to annoy me.

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'He only stayed for a couple of months, then did a runner. Couldn't stand frying all those eggs, I s'pose. I guess he's still technically AWOL, still a deserter,' she said. 'Even though he's dead.'

I turned my head and gave her a quick smile. Most of her dark brown shoulder-length hair dropped forwards round her face as she looked down to avoid falling into the storm drain that ran parallel with the pavement. The rest of it was stuck to her neck by small beads of sweat.

We were nine days into a two-week romantic break after a chance meeting in a London bar a couple of months ago. I'd been sitting nursing a beer, and when she came up to give her order I made fun of her accent. She told me she was 'Bovis class' and proud of it - it meant she was one rung up from Barrett, apparently, several above Wimpey, and a whole ladderful ahead of me. We got talking, and I ended up with her number.

She worked in a travel agent's but, apart from that, I didn't know too much about her. Her parents were dead and she was an only child. She shared a flat with two other women in Shepherd's Bush. She didn't like tomatoes or the size of her feet - and that was about it.

Now that the war was over and the looting of Baghdad and Basra had calmed down a bit, SARS was really grabbing the headlines. Fuck knows why - I'd read in Newsweek that other forms of pneumonia killed more than forty thousand a year in the USA alone, malaria nearly three million worldwide, and tuberculosis about the same. Not to mention the fifteen hundred who died each year in the UK falling downstairs. But every cloud has a silver lining - that was how we'd come by the holiday so quickly and cheaply.

It was the first time we'd been together longer than a night; our jobs got in the way, but we were working on that.

Well, that was the cover story, anyway.

The flat in Shepherd's Bush really existed, and so did the two women who lived there - it was her CA [cover address]. The travel agent would vouch for Suzy.

The market was petering out and we'd got to where we wanted to be. Our rented Suzuki 250 was parked where we'd left it, between the roadside café and the Palace restaurant, which was just starting to get a few tourists for the evening. Maybe they were lured by the sign promising 'The Magic of Fine Indian and Western Cuisine'. The roadside caff suited us better. Opposite it, on the other side of the road, was the mosque, a solid brick-and-plaster building in the middle of the shanty town. Right now, though, I was more interested in the lone old, white and rusty Toyota Lite Ace people-carrier that was parked on the hard compacted mud alongside.

It seemed all you needed to set up in the catering trade round here were some corrugated-iron sheets, a few concrete slabs to cover the storm drains and a couple of rusty birdcages filled with little green birds that couldn't be arsed to sing. Suzy and I

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pulled out plastic garden chairs and faced each other across a long, flower-patterned Formica trestle table. As we sat down, someone inside the Palace began to knock out 'Climb Every Mountain' on an electric keyboard.

A barefooted Indian girl appeared and I asked for two orange juices. There was no need to ask Suzy what she wanted; we'd both been drinking gallons of the stuff since we'd arrived.

The smell of kebabs from a street stall fought its way through the diesel fumes and the stench of the drains as the English commentary blared from a TV set fixed on a bracket above our heads. Leeds United were playing someone or other, and a few British lads a couple of tables along were up for it.

Suzy was still in Catering Corps mode. 'Yeah, AWOL. But you know what? The strange thing is, until the day he died he'd sit in his chair and bang on about why they should bring back National Service to sort out the jobs.' She dumped her hemp beach bag on the table and fished out a purple disposable lighter, a fresh pack of duty-free Bensons, and a guidebook to Penang.

I looked around me as she lit up and started to flick through her book. A group of middle-aged Germans with shiny red faces wandered past, all dressed up for a night out. They reeked of scent and aftershave and looked far too hot for their own good. Coming the other way were half a dozen twentysomethings in faded T-shirts and shorts with Australian flags on their backpacks. One had an arm in plaster. Hiring a scooter was a big adventure until the rain got between the rubber and the tarmac, and we'd seen a constant stream of people coming back to the hotel with skin needing to be repaired.

The gold pack and purple disposable went back into the bag and Suzy blew a cloud of smoke in my direction. She sat back in her chair and grinned. 'Oh, stop whining. I have to pay for this stuff. You're getting nicotine for free. Besides, you're going to feel really stupid when you're lying in hospital dying of nothing.' She studied my face for a reaction, still smiling, her hand held high with the cigarette between her two fingers facing me. She soon realized she wasn't going to get one, so went back to thumbing through her guide. As I shifted to look up at the television I felt the small of my back sticking to the chair through my T-shirt.