# Chapter 1: ……………..

## I

The air had a harsh chill the day Xi Wangmu presented herself to me. She squinted her eyes under the morning sun, raised her hands to greet me and composed a warm welcoming smile. A smile broken only by voids where teeth once stood upright but were now lost through years of malnutrition. I knew that I needed to meet her the moment I gazed upon her old frail body. Her faded navy tunic, mended multiple times with pale blue patches, was well worn and torn around the hip. The light cotton trousers extending from the bottom of her tunic were three inches short, exposing a pair of thick grey woolen socks. On her feet she wore a mud-stained slipper that appeared to provide insufficient comfort for the brutality of a cool autumn morning.

The exposed skin of Wangmu’s face, neck and hands was covered in pronounced wrinkles. The depth of which narrated the story of a difficult life. One consisting of manual labor and hard slogs. Of days worked in the terraced fields of ……. village and nights spent raising a family of four children. Her elderliness also evident by the fine strands of white-grey hair which fought their way loose from the black scarf wrapped tightly around her head. The scarfs presence, a conscious effort to protect herself from the cold mountain breeze.

Next to Xi Wangmu was her residence, a refuge shelter built from scavenged logs, tarpaulin and a variety of colorful canvases. The fast flowing waters of the …… river rushed behind her and was all that separated her shanty house from the steep landslide scarred slopes of the ….. mountains. The bubbling sounds of a boiling pot of water propagated from inside her house and the sweet aroma of Chinese green tea filled the cool air.

I called for my guide who was inspecting the ruin that lay directly behind me. Xun Guo treaded carefully through the rubble that lay between us and joined me on the rivers edge. I explained that I wanted to talk to Xi Wangmu and he begun speaking to her in ………… Xi Wangmu spoke of the horror that that had befallen this village four months earlier. She explained how the ground trembled, the mountains roared and the buildings fell. I glanced behind me where less than one in two hundred of the multi-storey buildings remain standing. The piles of rubble rose above my head and extended in all directions as far as I could see. The only route to where we stood, a bulldozer-cleared road barely wide enough for two vehicles.

Wangmu explained how the ground around the river turned to liquid under the heavy shaking; how the mountains on all sides of the valley failed to contain the landmass; and how boulders as large as double-decker buses rolled down the steep slopes, annihilating everything in their path. She spoke of the horror immediately following the earthquake and how the survivors, desperately searching for loved ones, became acutely aware of their isolation upon realization that the ubiquitous landslides had enclosed the valley within which we now stood. The residents of …. Village were left to fend for themselves in their greatest time of need.

Downstream, the path of the …… river had been dammed by one of thousands of massive landslides. The steep walls of the valley offered no place for the river to meander and the water began to rise. Within hours, the rapidly flowing waters engulfed the low lying ruins of ….. village, forcing survivors to flee to higher ground. Those who could, fought bravely against the odds treating the injured with whatever they could find until, some 20 hours later, paramedic paratroopers fell form the sky with supplies and much needed medical capabilities.

After describing the horrors of that day in May, I noticed Wangmu’s face turn to an expression of grief. She now explained the ill fate of her own family, four children their spouses and three grandchildren, among the ninety thousand lost during the earthquake and ensuing flood.

It was unfathomable to me, that after what she had been through, Wangmu could compose a smile. That she could great me, a foreigner unable to provide any hope of comfort or support, with such warmth and happiness. I knew immediately that there was something special about Xi Wangmu, that her resilience and desire to survive was incredible and that her ability to remain positive was a special trait, unique only to those who had experienced a severe trauma. Several months passed however, before the importance of this meeting to my own wellbeing and survival, truly dawn upon me.

## II

Earthquake details.

Fault scarp

My being there