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TIN GIRL

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Chapter One

1936. Shanghai to Soochow.

Charcoal smeared on white rice paper. That was how the sky looked to me, unclean. The Shanghai skyline was littered with stars and stripes, the Union Jack and the ubiquitous rising sun. They flew from the gray steel hulls lining the quay, waving farewell as the ropes were unfastened. My head was filled with the loud noises of the port: Whistles, sirens and horns. In the distance, I saw the wide boulevards of the British sector and traffic coming and going in a myriad of directions. The boat pulled out of the dock, away from the steamers, dipping and inclining, mimicking my own heart. I watched the waves crash against the bow, bringing bitterness up in my throat. The need to purge never more poignant, if only *she* wasn't hollow.

The man studied me unabashedly, filling me in with lines and colors of his own imagining. His hands were like an artist's. Blue veins traveled up and down like canals charting a road map. They reflected his thoughtfulness, his history. The face was weather beaten and unshaven. A barely noticeable mole sat at the corner of his lip and moved with a widening grin.

“You smoke?” he asked.

I liked his mouth. Wide set and perched atop a square jaw. I deposited a tin into his hand; careful not to touch.

“It is rather remarkable. I like this kind of woman,” he said, pointing to the picture on the tin. The pair caught the eye of every man. Bodies slovenly draped across a gold bed covered in swatches of blue velvet. The girls with their wavy, short hair and

sheer dresses winked; not at each other, but at the man who noticed. One woman slunk lower; her body unnaturally long. The lightness of her chemise fell under the weight of a pearl choker and black leather heels. The other woman had a hand resting on the lying girl's hip. Her fingers slightly splayed from which a cigarette dangled precariously. The nails were painted a bright red. It was the same red in her ruby earrings and the color on her lips. They were the modern Chinese women where east met west.

He lit mine and returned the case to me. A wall of smoke filled the space between us. I squinted, watching as he sucked his cigarette in deeply. He too watched me while a lazy, swirling, sepia dragon danced between us. I pursed my lips. His grin grew wider. “Your father's? Brother's?” He asked. I shook my head, plucking the cigarette from my lips. His eyes shifted ephemerally to the side before returning to me. “A lover?”

A lover is what he had originally thought, but chose not to say for we were strangers sharing a boat ride together. I nodded and repeated his words. A lover. That is what he was. He could be no more.

The man sat back and laughed, not a hard laugh. It sounded like a grunt. His voice was deep and the manner of his speech was cultured, yet his clothes were traditional. A gray western hat was cast off to his side. He scratched his cheek and asked, “What will a city girl do in the Soochow countryside?” He had grown comfortable with me, with this boat. Hao would have never said something like that—make an accusation in the form of a question. My lover was gentle as were his words—chosen meticulously and never without purpose. This is what made him a great teacher, a most gentle man.

“I am going to teach.” I turned away from him, but not my eyes. He seemed surprised and studied me again. His inquisition began at the white of my ankle, a sliver of flesh and then the hem of a black skirt. He followed the pleating to the waist band. His eyes did not travel far before they wrapped themselves around the slenderness of my waist. He must have thought I was too skinny; not like the curvy girls on the tin. Perhaps he didn’t approve of the wavy style of my hair or the wide, open collar of my blouse.

“There is a school in the countryside?” he asked.

There wasn’t. He knew. As a man, he had earned the right to question everything I said.

“I have been commissioned by a noble house to teach their child.”

“Oh? I am quite familiar with the old families,” he said. “Which house?”

We stomped out our cigarettes simultaneously. I caught his smile. He caught mine.

“You won’t know them,” I answered. Some secrets should be kept. They made a woman powerful: Small words, open-ended answers and inviting smiles. I had known none of this until I loved.

“Will your lover join you?” he asked.

I sat back against the cold boards of the cabin and wondered the real intention behind the question.

“I am willing to care for you until he does—if he does,” he added, handing me a handkerchief.

I felt the pink peony on the corner. The handiwork of a domesticated woman was apparent in the threading.

“Write your address. Where you will be staying,” he said.

I turned his hand away. “I need no looking after.”

On the second day of the three-day journey to Soochow along the creek, I sat on deck, enjoying the lull of the boat, watching as the buffaloes turned waterwheels. My riding companion preferred the shade of the cabin and rarely endeavored out. There were men on bamboo rafts who sent their cormorants into the black water to fish. Dozens of houseboats hugged the shores and I could smell fish fry. First, insistently; now faintly. We had come by a large patch of field-like paddies of emerald and jade, where farmers swung their hoes. I heard children cry, women chattering, and laundry beaten against the stones. Up above, I saw the telegraph poles and wires weave through trees.

By the third day, the current had changed even more so. It was quieter. I could smell the wet earth and the woods of antiquity. Even the boat’s motor quieted to a hum. A flock of seagulls and men with nets vied for the refuse left behind by the foreign steamers. A man on a sampan maneuvered away from us, pushing off on a long thin bamboo pole. Two round eyes were painted on his little boat to ward off the river demons. A number of larger sampans were anchored at the side of the river. The families of these floating houses busied about. Hollowed gourds were tied around the children as they fetched water while women squatted by the charcoal stoves.

They watched us with hard squints. I did not think they were pleased we were here. I clasped my hands together, holding onto something familiar. Our boat moved from side to side before it managed to squeeze itself into a berth at the water gate. It

came up against one of the docked sampans, touching with a thud. Rope was cast to a skinny boy with rolled up pants on the planks. He tied it off. I turned back one last time and saw traces of our disruption in ivory white plumes washing back into the water.

There were hundreds of brown skinned farmers with oversized baskets in the square, peddlers displaying their goods on straw mats and dozens of idle rickshaws. I took my traveling companion’s hand and stepped off the boat. Soft, despite the ruggedness of his face. Strong, as I suspected.

“It is not safe for a woman to travel alone these days. Stay close till we are out of the port,” he whispered into my ear.

A strand of my hair caught in his mouth and I quickly reclaimed it, rolling it behind my ear. We were unexpectedly a breath apart and I saw his eyes ever so clearly. They were not dark and round like Hao’s. The passenger was not a tall man, but I was a tall woman. I looked away first and hooked my arm through his, waiting for him to lead.

I enjoyed the sound of my heels as they hit the wood planks. My strides were not small, but measured. He accommodated me, enjoying too the picture of this woman on his arm. I was not like the girls on the tin, yet I could be. The thought of something sublime kept his curiosity. I wanted to ask him if he knew girls like me. If he did, what did he call them? When he looked at me, did he see a ruined woman who has come all this way...to join her rural sisters...to hide her shame in the countryside?

A carrier pulled his rickshaw to us and stopped. His face was obscured by an oversized straw hat, despite a sunless sky. He bid us to embark. There were yellow stains, old and new, on his sleeveless cotton shirt.

“Share a ride?” My traveling companion asked. “I will be happy to accompany you to your destination.”

“No need,” I answered. “The noble family has arranged for their driver to greet me.”

He tipped his hat, a western etiquette. “Take care sweet woman,” he said.

“Song Lin,” I said.

He repeated my name slowly, enjoying the sound of it in his mouth.

Then, he walked away. I followed him into the distance, watching as his carrier took him to a small group of idle sedans. The man engaged a young puller and pointed in my direction. I quickly looked away. Later, I saw that money was exchanged between them. My traveling companion patted the bare-chested boy on the shoulder as if they were old acquaintances. And then he was headed toward the hills when he glanced back at me.

I blinked.

Gone. Like a speck on the mountain, he was swallowed by the vastness of the country. My eyes burned with fatigue. I was tired of watching, of looking, of searching. What would I find in the hills, in the trees, in a gray sky?

My shoes were creased and filled with mud. A woman’s path was never marked on her skin. It was in things that could be discarded so she would begin anew. Hao believed that a woman’s clothes told stories. Patches showed character and wisdom, loose threads showed courage, missing buttons showed sacrifice and loss. He admired the woman who allowed her clothes to fall into disgrace. The buttons on my blouse—how tempted I was—so easily one can go lost.

The boy with whom my traveling companion had a conversation with approached with his rickshaw. Gravel crunched underneath the two lumbering, squeaky wheels. He patted down the seat with the shirt draped over his shoulder. The leather seat had tears, its color most decadent—a dusty jade green turned almost gray.

“Sit, young Miss,” he said. “That man has paid for you to sit.”

“Did you get the man’s name?” I asked.

The boy shrugged and gave me a familiar handkerchief. “The man said to give you this. In case you need to get out.” He jerked his head to the dead wind, “The Japanese are always near.”

His name was Wai Kwok—for country—a most patriotic name. Beneath it was an address to a tea house. He must have been a man with political ties. I have heard stories of backroom offices. Perhaps this explained his understated clothes. I wondered if I would ever see him again, but that was nonsense. We weren’t friends. Everything was currency. Even love.

The boy asked if I was thirsty. For five coppers, he could find me something to drink. I had near exhausted my funds making the journey, so I lit a cigarette instead. And, a second. The longer I sat, the more crude the seat became, biting into my skin. I wanted to fill my lungs with the country air, new air; but it was parched and heavy. Leaves dripped off the trees like dead cicadas, crackling as they hit the dirt. They scuttled a short distance because the wind would only carry them so far.

I closed my eyes. I felt it. The silky petals of the cherry blossoms that once danced on my face. The smell, so sweet and fresh. How I loved to dance barefoot on a carpet of freshly fallen petals; only when the students had gone. Such a whimsical

streak. Imagine if the students had caught it? What would they think? It was Hao who caught me. Yet, I think I had caught him. With his books tucked underneath an arm, he coughed gently into his fist. At first, I was surprised, then I became embarrassed. The absurdity of what I was doing, a teacher dancing barefoot under a cherry blossom struck, and I let loose, laughing and dancing circles around him. He was stoic until my persistence shattered him. He again coughed gently into his fist; only his mouth remained buried there. It was the first smile line that betrayed him. A single smile line that revealed a netting of lines. In that moment, I saw how handsome he was.

“Young Miss, the sky will be dark very soon.”

“Indeed, it will,” I answered. I swept away the scent of cherry blossoms. My reality was the abysmal gray skies that had followed me. Only here, there was the possibility of forgiveness. In the largeness of everything, I could hide myself. I wondered how far the man’s arrangements would take me, but I did not ask.

It was the boy’s shrug that I first contemplated. His eyes asked me to repeat the address though he did not ask for it. In the youth and roundness of his face, I saw my former student, Siu Pei. It was a face that looked upon me with adoration and fondness which had turned to disgust and repulsion. In the end, I was that same woman who she wished to emulate. Love was not a sign of weakness. No, it was much more complicated than that.

How she hurt me with her departing words. She would never know. The way she hung by my door, watching as I packed my books. Siu Pei, I whispered, for I was almost afraid to hear the sound of my own voice. The scowl on her face invited no

further whisperings or words from me. I froze in place, advancing no further than the threshold, an invisible barrier, she placed between us.

“I’ve brought you a familiar item, Teacher Song,” she said, reading from a meticulously folded article. It was from the *Ling Long* magazine on “The Modern Girl’s Outward Appearance and Essence.” I recognized it immediately. I had cut out the page myself and presented it to her. I wanted to smile and I might have. A smile that would surely have appeared awkward. The sting in her voice was lacerating.

“First, her outward appearance,” she said with a quiver in her voice, “while it should be contemporary, it should not be extravagant. Being constrained by old fashioned things is not really a moral virtue.” Siu Pei stomped her foot. Her tone grew more authoritative. Confidence was built with each word. “Second,” she continued, “her spirit and brains are most important. How does she think? What is her outlook on life? What are her convictions? Of course it is not that we expect all modern girls to be extraordinary characters, but at the very least, they should measure up to the standard of a contemporary person.” She stomped her foot again.

I felt then as if we had switched roles.

“Your outside has become more than you are on the inside,” she said, spitting on the floor. “You have single-handedly, out of selfishness, destroyed the ethical values of Eastern women. Entanglements with men harm your gentleness and coyness. Have you not said this yourself, Teacher Song?”

“Siu Pei, I have said this. It is true. But, you mustn’t judge me on this alone. You know me, don’t you? Remember—”

“—I shall never forget you, Teacher Song, because you will always remind me of a failed woman!”

In that instance, I looked up and saw two bright lights. It drew near in a hurry, veering to the left to avoid a collision on the narrow path. Its sleek metal body rammed up against the side of our sedan. Then, I saw a flurry of images: Trees merging with the mountain and sky, the boy was thrown skyward, his limbs stretched in four directions. The sedan fell off the gravelly path, and the whole of my body was tilted on its side. I gripped my travel bag, clenching it to my chest as we toppled over and over. All the while, I saw shattered images of a hillside, Siu Pei, the man on the boat, and Hao.

Chapter Two

Soochow.

Song Lin blinked. She blinked again. Torpid. It was her right eye. She moved her fingers toward it and brushed up against the gauze. The image before her was at first hazy. With each blink, the picture became clearer and clearer. There were four lacquered panels, each with an embedded wood screen. The objects were faded. Magpies and plum blossoms.

“Eye twinkle with joy,” she transcribed. Her voice was raspy and her throat parched. Beyond the sheer curtains concealing the dark room was a brightly lit lantern. She drew one leaf of the curtain and hitched it. The room for a moment felt as if it moved away from her. When she swung her legs off the bed, she could not feel the floor and she braced herself on the cool, shiny post.

She wiggled her toes.

Her socks were speckled with mud.

She curled her toes.

There were shoes placed on top of a slip of winter melon silk over a footstool. They were the traditional black cotton shoes with a single strap running across the ankle. Song Lin dusted off her socks, inverted them and slipped them back on. Delicately, she put the shoes on and stumbled to the massive table in the center of the room. She wrapped her arms around her body and gazed at the grandeur and pageantry, held together with thick columns and ornate brackets lacquered almost red. Every piece of furniture had inlays, such that she felt she could peel back each layer into its infiniteness.

When she looked deeper, she realized where there had meant to be stone inlays, there weren't any. But, she imagined that here once lay a mother of pearl; that the mismatched pair of imperial chairs which flanked one side of the room did not have broken legs or broken arms; that the decorative screens on the cabinet had not been removed.

The lurch of the door brought a chill and slip of light from which a dainty figure emerged. The light in the lantern on the table flickered. Song Lin felt not the wind that slapped her cheeks, but a rush of voices with a sing song quality.

“You are awake,” the woman said. She shuffled in, planting one foot directly in front of the other, leaning to her left and right with such grace.

“You will want to clean up,” she said, placing a tin pan of water on the table.

“Where am I?” Song Lin asked.

“Where you should be,” the woman said, walking a semi circle around the teacher. She tapped a finger against her lip and sat on a stool closest to Song Lin.

In the scant light, Song Lin saw her face. It was powdered snow white. Her eyes were large and her lashes swept like the bristles of a generous brush. The woman's lips were painted smaller than they actually were. The color was a more subdued red, no longer in fashion. She was just shy of thirty, ten years older than Song Lin.

The woman's finger tapped its way inside her lips. She kissed it, plucking it like a mischievous child.

“You are the teacher,” she said, with neither delight nor distaste.

“Then, this is the House of Ko?” Song Lin confirmed with relief.

The woman forced a nod, righting a diminutive tea cup and tipping the pot.

The tea dripped slowly from the short sprout. Her hands were steady and patient, but bored.

“You were in an accident,” she said, watching the drips of tea. “Luckily, our driver found you.”

“The boy? What happened to the boy?”

The tiny woman frowned. Her painted-on eyebrows did not match her mood. She handed Song Lin the teacup, using her left hand as a plate. A dusting of ginger wafted underneath Song Lin’s nose.

“I don’t know about any boy,” the woman said. “We will make inquiry with the driver.” She patted the sides of her face in a criss-cross, descending pattern down to her neck.

“My shoes?” Song Lin asked tentatively.

“They have heels,” the woman answered, clucking with her tongue. “Too much noise for an old house like this.”

“My travel bag—”

“—I don’t know about any of that,” the woman said with agitation. “We will make inquiry with the driver and house man.”

The woman turned her legs to one side of the round stool and stood up. The hem on her cheongsam revealed her upper thigh where appeared several loose gold threads. She covered the over exposure with her hand and half smiled.

“After you have cleaned up, I will take you to meet the old master and the other members of the house.”

The open door gave way to a dark sky. “Is it morning already? Are the other family members up?” Song Lin asked.

“Didn’t you hear the roosters?” The woman answered, turning on her heel. “I will retrieve you in half an hour.”

“I haven’t even met you,” Song Lin said.

The woman shielded her smile with her hand. “I am embarrassed. With the excitement, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Mei, the third wife, the only one still living.” She giggled and continued to conceal it behind her hand.

“The child—” Song Lin asked.

“—I am not blessed with child. No station. You see, I am as if a servant here,” Mei said, closing the door behind her. She resumed her humming just as she had entered.

Song Lin saw her reflection in the pan and gasped. She used the handkerchief Mei had tucked underneath the pan to clean the dirt from her face. The powder on her lips had caked forming cracks that looked like bars. She washed it off, tucked her blouse in, and sat with her hands clasped while she waited.

When she grew restless, she crossed the room to the doors and slowly pulled it. The doors creaked, crying louder with each languorous tug. In a final, brisk pull, the doors flew open and with it came a single horrid howl. It was quiet again. Song Lin’s room was attached to two wings which formed a U-shape and was surrounded by corridors that opened to the courtyard. Above each room hung a single red lantern. The courtyard was covered in brick that seemed whitewashed. Empty ceramic and stone urns

were scattered throughout. An oak table and bench sat alone in the middle of the yard and a drum-shaped stool was lying on its side. Song Lin made her way across the yard to the opposite wall with a hanging flower gate and a row of dried pomegranate trees.

At the courtyard dwelling's entrance was a meandering sequence of corridors to the other courtyards, each with its own entry gate. Mei and Song Lin saw each other from across the veranda. The third wife walked hastily, taking several right and left turns through the winding path.

“You should have waited for me,” Mei said, hooking her arm through Song Lin's.

“I was curious to see the house,” Song Lin answered.

“You can do as you please,” Mei quivered, “when you have the blessing of the house. Until then, I am responsible for you.”

As the two women walked, Song Lin saw, despite the tall walls of the structure, that the entire dwelling was surrounded by tiger and dragon hills, the symbol of a mother's protection. This was something she never knew or felt as her own mother had died giving birth to her. She followed the wavy lines of the landscape silhouetted against a black sky when she was interrupted by a brusque tug. Mei had taken them off the meandering path and through one of the courtyard dwellings with connecting rooms that had no doors, but curtains which afforded little privacy.

“It is shorter this way,” Mei said. “If you dizzy from your injury, we will stop for a bit. Your dwelling is where the servants and daughters-in-law are situated; the furthest from the Old Master's Court. If it displeases you, we can discuss it at a later time. But, do not bring up such trivial matters before my husband. It is a woman's business after all.”

They turned off a corridor and ascended a bridge with a railing that had intricate cut-outs reminiscent of the royal Qing style: A flock of royal birds in flight with thick plumages and exaggerated beaks. Each weaved together by curvy lines that resembled a Heavenly skyline.

“To walk in a straight line is to welcome evil,” Mei said. “A meandering path is like a prosperous river, so do not complain.”

“I do not,” Song Lin answered.

They approached the gate of the largest courtyard where two stone guardians sat. The male lion had an imperial mane constructed of thirteen lumps and inside each lump were thirteen swirls. His heavy paw rested atop a giant ball of interlocking flowers. The female lion was missing both eyes and the cub that sat beneath her paw was missing its head.

“You will serve tea to Master Ko,” Mei said. “You remember how I served you earlier this morning?”

Song Lin nodded, running a hand along the female lion’s head.

Mei regarded the teacher’s wandering hand with an arched brow.

The master’s yard was private, kept at a distance from the other courtyards. Here, there was a narrow back yard and screen walls that deterred advancement unless permission was granted by the family dwelling within. One thing that became quickly apparent to Song Ling was that all corridors led to the Master’s dwelling.

Once inside the room, Mei handed Song Lin over to the houseman and retreated. Her dainty steps belied her quickness.

The houseman had a ghastly thin face with red circles about the eyes. He wore a dove-gray traditional long gown and stooped slightly, bidding Song Lin entrance. The dark woods and rich lacquer made the room glow red and orange. He smelled much like the room, earthy and pungent. An amber hue filled every corner where a thick film of smoke settled. Song Lin extinguished the fire from her eyes. The houseman placed a tray with a small porcelain teapot and teacup in her hands.

Song Lin kept to the runner in between two aisles of tall and wide mahogany chairs. Grotesque masks and puppets made of paper mache lined the walls. They were operatic with the bold colors and black eyes. The paint bled into one another, distorting the faces. The mastic had grown stale, producing black lines that cut across the masks like long knife marks. The eyeless, crimson face with the orange beard and down-turned lips mocked her. Her fingers felt numb. The rattling of the teapot and cup accompanied the soft echoes of her steps down the long runner.

At the other end of the room was a cumbersome *kang*. The man lying on it seemed a child. He was propped up on a bundle of pillows. Song Lin squinted, brushing up against the sheer curtains. The man's face was obscured by the high mandarin collar of his silk vest. His arm rested on a raised knee and from his mangled hand dangled a long ivory pipe. The man had no fingers. They were nubs.

Song Lin gasped, turning to the houseman who had stayed three steps behind her. His head and shoulders were permanently stooped. She rubbed her hands against her thighs and poured the tea as Mei had. She proceeded to draw back one curtain panel when she was thwarted by a frigid hand. The houseman took the cup from her and placed it on a raised panel at the foot of the bed.

“The master has accepted your tea. He will drink when he is thirsty,” the houseman said, ushering her exit.

Song Lin hesitated.

“Please young miss,” the houseman urged, “the master needs his rest.”

She was escorted out of the room and into another courtyard with a well in its center. The skies had opened up. A pair of white butterflies flew past her nose. She heard laughter and followed it along a walkway overgrown with blades of tall grass.

Two women and a man were sitting inside a small pavilion with a green shingled roof. Beside it were two tall Chinese aspens that leaned into one another. When Song Lin ascended the single step, everyone grew quiet. She recognized Mei. The other two she had not met. When she looked behind her waiting for introduction, the houseman was no longer there.

“Come,” Mei beckoned. “This is Jing Jing, the Ko family daughter.”

Jing Jing was tall, a head taller than Song Lin. Her hair was short and slicked back. She had eyes that were alert and cat-like, a narrow nose and permanently pursed lips. Traces of a faint rouge tinted her high cheekbones and a soft pink touched her lips. She wore a handsome jacket and pair of riding boots which accentuated her lean frame.

She extended her hand, “You are Teacher Song?”

Song Lin nodded and hesitated before taking the other woman’s hand.

“Do not be timid,” Mei said. “The Ko family daughter has this effect on everyone.”

“What do you mean?” Song Lin stuttered.

“You are gawking,” Mei answered. “She is striking, isn’t she?”

Jing Jing blushed and playfully tapped Mei’s face.

“Sit,” Jing Jing said to Song Lin, while introducing the man. “This is our driver, Pao.”

Pao wore a black suit and cap. The jacket was buttoned all the way up. His shoes were as shiny as the polished gold buttons on his suit. The thin mustache was carefully coiffed. There was a flatness to his appearance. He was broad shouldered, but thin.

Song Lin extended her hand. In return, Pao raised his gloved hand, turning it palm up to himself. He stared at it.

“Never mind Pao,” Mei said to Song Lin. “He is just the driver.”

Jing Jing rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Pao,” she said, “perhaps you should see to the car?”

Pao nodded his head and turned on his heel.

“Wait!” Song Lin reached out, grabbing a fistful of air. “I want to thank you for saving me. I was also wondering about the boy. How is he?”

With his back to the women, Pao inclined his head ever so slightly as if he sought the answer in the distance. He did not answer, did not turn back and continued on his way.

“The boy—yes—the boy is alright,” Jing Jing interjected. “Pao mentioned finding a boy and wanted to bring him to the house for medical attention, but the boy refused.”

“There, now, Teacher Song,” Mei said, tapping Song Lin’s hand. “Your boy is fine. Do you think a fine family such as the Ko’s would be so negligent?”

“I don’t think that is what she meant,” Jing Jing said.

“Of course it is,” Mei rebuked. “She has been asking about the boy since she came to.”

“It is a natural thing to inquire about,” Jing Jing said coolly.

“Already siding with the stranger, are you?”

The two women crossed their arms and turned their backs to one another.

“That is not what I meant at all,” Song Lin pleaded. “If he is hurt, I am responsible. He was taking me here—”

“—Your head,” Jing Jing interrupted. “How is it?”

She reached out to touch the Song Lin’s bandage when it was quickly snatched by Mei. They tugged. Jing Jing pulled free and straightened her cuffs.

“I’ve forgotten all about it,” Song Lin replied with reservation. “Strange. I don’t feel any pain now.”

“It must mean you have the blessing of the house,” Mei retorted as she walked away from the table. She leaned over the railing looking out toward the well. “How easy it is you reward strangers and turn a blind eye to all that I do. Without me, the house—”

“—That is enough,” Jing Jing said. “You’ve already had too much to drink and it is too early in the day. It is best you retire to your room.”

Mei spun around to face her. “I’ve not had a taste of luxury in so long! Oh, how I’ve missed it! But, I suppose I should pretend that I had been drinking, shouldn’t I? After all, we do much pretending here. Perhaps I can pretend I had been drinking the finest rose wine all morning. Ha! In due time, Teacher Song, you will play these pretend games with us.” She laughed, dramatically tossing her head back.

“I am sorry for Mei’s behavior,” Jing Jing said, overcome with melancholy.

“Her addiction turns her into something evil. I will take her to her room. Will you be alright here until I return?”

Song Lin watched as they departed, appearing as if they were the pair of Chinese aspens with their arms intertwined.

“Hello,” said a small voice.

Song Lin turned around. A little girl stood before her. She had on the traditional girl’s middle school uniform. It was a light blue cheongsam with black piping that fell mid calf. Her hair was long and twisted into a fat braid.

The little girl studied her own clothes. “This is what they wear, isn’t it?” she asked. “I hope it is almost the same. If it isn’t, you will tell me, won’t you? I can have the tailor make one—one that is proper.”

Song Lin patted down her hair, mindful of her own appearance. “You must be my new student?”

“I am Pearl,” she answered.

Chapter Three

The child took four steps closer like a child soldier. They were measured and precise. She held her clenched fists to her sides. Her skin and lips were the color of flour. Her eyes, though large and round, were dull and gray. If not for the kiss of pink lining her eyes, she would be translucent. Song Lin thought Pearl looked older than the eight years she had been told.

“Come, sit,” Song Lin said, sitting on the wide stone step of the pavilion. “I should like to get to know you.”

Pearl angled her head and stared at the gray slab where a line of green moss squiggled its way along the length of the stone. She proceeded toward it, turning her body this way and that way entreating for a position. Finally, she lowered herself, cushioning her seat with her hands.

“Would it be more comfortable if we sat there?” Song Lin asked, pointing to the stools inside the pavilion.

Pearl nodded quickly.

Song Lin stood up and offered Pearl her hand. The little girl hesitated. A subtle, fleeting smile came and went. They walked hand in hand toward the round table and sat across from one another.

“Tell me, Pearl. What would you most like for me to know about you?”

“That I am eager to learn,” Pearl said.

Song Lin laughed and clapped her hands together. “A studious student is a teacher’s gift.”

“My brother Jingchen is very studious too,” Pearl said in a flurry. “Though he does not think that I have need of it, he does not object to it.”

“Well, I am glad that he does not object. Certainly, girls can benefit from an education just as much as boys. There is so much that girls can do. She can become a journalist, she can teach, she can—”

“—No, I would not want to do any of those things,” Pearl shook her head. “To do those things would require that I leave the house and Jingchen. I would not want that.”

“I envy your relationship with your brother,” Song Lin said. “I am an only child, you see, so I have no sibling love to boast of.”

“I can understand, Teacher Song. See, my first mother had Jingchen, Jingmo and Jing Jing. My mother only had me and third mother has no children. So, although I have three siblings, we are not the same.”

“I see,” Song Lin said.

She thought of the Old Master she met earlier and wondered how he managed three wives, all of which become the children’s mothers—a hierarchy of wives and children. Though this was certainly customary in Old China, she did not think she could ever understand the politics of such family structures. In her letter, she was told that the first and second mothers had passed and the child was without direction. While the letter did not say as much, it was suggested that the third wife, Mei, was inept. It was deemed necessary, by whom the letter did not say, that the child be given proper womanly nurture and thus the commission which was sealed with the Ko name. Yet, she had not been introduced to the other men in the house and wondered if her position as teacher was too insignificant.

A whistle broke her thoughts. In the near distance, she watched as Mei and Jing Jing set a bird free from its cage. The gold finch made a zip line toward the sloping red bridge and cut low across the black pond, skimming the surface of the water. It veered straight toward the pavilion, touching down on the railing. Its wings were black and yellow with cinnamon brown specks. The face was radiant, like the color of a sweet, red orange.

The two women ambled toward the pavilion. Mei hid her giggles behind a cupped hand and Jing Jing leaned in as she spoke.

Pearl walked behind Song Lin to the railing and held out her palm for the finch. “I will take my leave now, Teacher Song,” Pearl said. “When shall we begin our lessons?”

Pearl’s mood had changed. Song Lin read it in the child’s frown and dejected eyes which sought solace from the ground.

“Will you not stay a little while longer?” Song Lin asked.

For a moment, Pearl said nothing. Her head tipped back just enough so that she saw Song Lin.

“I do not come here, to this courtyard, much. It is not for a child. That is what the adults say.”

“But, this is a beautiful courtyard, isn’t it?” Song Lin asked, peering up at the sky that smiled down on it where the other grounds slumbered underneath shadows.

“Oh, yes. Yes—it is the most beautiful courtyard. The others are not like this one.”

As Jing Jing and Mei entered the pavilion, Pearl back pedaled and waited for a proper dismissal.

Recognizing the child’s discomfort, Song Lin stood up. “Very well, Pearl. We will begin our lessons tomorrow, here, in this very spot.”

Jing Jing and Mei exchanged befuddled glances while Pearl scurried away.

The Ko family daughter sat in the now vacated stool. “So, you have met Pearl?”

“And, what do you think of her?” Mei asked hastily.

The two women hovered, waiting anxiously for Song Ling’s reply. Jing Jing, realizing the awkwardness, sat back. “A teacher might be good for our Pearl,” she said, closing the door on the dome-shaped bird cage.

“I hope it is alright that I have selected this spot to conduct my lessons with Pearl,” Song Lin said.

“I think it is a good idea,” Jing Jing said. “Good for our Pearl to get out more often.”

Mei grunted quietly and sat up on the railing, swinging both legs over.

“Mei,” Jing Jing said, tinkering with the swinging perch inside the cage. “Where should we leave the bird cage today? In the south courtyard or the east?”

The third wife crossed her arms and ankles. She looked out into the dense garden where the foliage covered the dirt like a layer of skin and stalks wrapped in withered vines poked out. It looked like a wild graveyard.

“We should bury it,” Mei said sharply.

Jing Jing shook her head. “If we do that, then it will not have a home to return to.”

“The finch is domesticated?” Song Lin asked.

“Yes,” Jing Jing answered. “The finch belongs to Jingchen, but Mei fell in love with it, so he gave it to her. ‘She could do better for the bird,’ he had said. The bird can sing too, but not as good as Mei.”

Jing Jing turned toward Mei and confirmed that a smile had found its way to her lips.

“I’ve not met your brothers,” Song Lin said.

“Oh, I am terribly sorry. My brother Jingchen would have given you a proper greeting had he been here. But, the family business in Tientsin keeps him away for months at a time. How I do miss him.”

“My mother always said that not all men are equal,” Mei sighed. “There are those who are born into magnificence. ‘Mei-Mei, she said, if you know what is good for you, you best marry one, or you are no good to anyone. Take that good rope and throw it over the tree. That is a good hanging tree. Spare yourself of the misery that comes to a woman who doesn’t marry a magnificent man.’ Look at me, mother—I’ve married the man whose son is magnificent—I’ve come close haven’t I?” Mei angled her face and twisted her lips. “But, of course, where there is the dignified, the undignified must also be present. Two brothers—not the same. It is as if one is just the scraps of—”

“Mei! Please,” Jing Jing pleaded.

“Let us introduce the teacher to the other brother, Jing Mo. Should not they meet?” Mei sneered. “But, Song Lin, you must promise not to run from him.”

Song Lin jerked back, unintentionally, and saw that Jing Jing had caught her reaction.

“Yes, I—I would like to meet the other brother,” Song Lin said. “I can’t see why I would run—”

“—Not today,” Jing Jing replied. “He is not feeling well. Perhaps another time?”

“Look!” Mei pointed toward the red bridge. “Shanbo and Yingtai.” She threw herself over the railing, running excitedly toward the bridge where two white butterflies flew spirals around each other, lingering where their paths crossed, toward a shared destiny.

Jing Jing walked over to the railing which gave her a direct view of the bridge. The sun cast a luminous sheen, blotting out all the imperfections. The crowns on the posts of the bridge looked like swans. The debris that floated on the surface of the water came together, forming what appeared like large lily fronds.

Jing Jing absentmindedly brushed the side of her hair back with a hand and continuously turned the button on her jacket. “You know the story of the butterfly lovers, Shanbo and Yingtai?”

Song Lin nodded. “Yes, of course. Quite tragic.”

“Tragic? Jing Jing asked. “Such a modern word for a modern reading. There is no charm or beauty in that.”

Song Lin eyed the Ko daughter’s short hair and riding jacket and boots. “Are you not yourself a modern woman?”

Jing Jing shook her head. “No, but I should say that I like modern things.”

“Oh? Tell me then,” Song Ling said with amusement. “Such stories have their place in history and legend, but they do not translate well for the new times.”

Jing Jing’s lips turned up, half smirking. She looked sheepishly at the teacher with a sideways glance. “First, we have to understand what love is. Poets have for centuries strived to capture it in all forms. But, it had always been already embodied in Yingtai. Who else falls in love with someone she has met in a dream? Only, here the lover is real and they do actually meet. But all stories of love are met with obstacles, as they should be. When the lovely Yingtai’s parents arrange for her to marry, Shanbo dies of a broken heart. On the day of Yingtai’s marriage, a whirlwind prevents the wedding procession from traversing beyond his grave. Recognizing that this is where Shanbo was buried, Yingtai descends to pay her respects. A clap of thunder opens the grave and Yingtai jumps in to join her lover. Their spirits turn into a pair of beautiful butterflies never to be separated. Their love dies in the earthly realm, but lives on in the supernatural realm.”

“It is impossible,” Song Lin said, deep in thought.

“You do not believe that the two realms can coexist?”

“It seems unlikely. Do you believe it?”

“I believe that if I experience this kind of love—a love that consumes me in such a way that I am in pain even when I am filled completely with bliss—I would find a way to come back.”

Song Lin felt a shiver and wrapped her arms around her body. She turned her face and sent a frosty whisper into the chill of a darkening sky. “It is already too painful to love in one realm,” she whispered.

Chapter Four

A small stack of books were piled atop the round table. The room was austere and devoid of human touch. It was guarded by furnishings like ancient warriors, old and tattered; its former glory remembered in the way the doors creak on the hinges, the battle scars and its jewels stripped. Seven days having passed, Song Ling felt now a great affinity with the old soldiers. They no longer frightened her and when they screamed or howled, she considered it conversation. The grand mahogany armoire with a medallion crest spoke the loudest. So, she named that one General Ban Chao, the Han hero.

With a piece of cloth, Song Lin dusted the furniture with gentle caresses till she made her way to the table where the books sat. She wrapped the books in a piece of gray cloth and notched the ends, slinging it over her shoulder. Before she pulled the doors closed, she winked at the general.

As she made her way toward the courtyard with the well, the sky brightened. Song Lin stopped to admire the bridge from the distance. It looked different than it had yesterday; smaller, less formidable. The garden around it was no longer alive. Song Lin wondered if the pavilion would look different, and quickly sought it. Pearl was sitting inside with her ankles crossed.

“Pearl,” Song Lin smiled. “You are early. Earlier than me.”

“I very much look forward to our sessions, Teacher Song.”

“I, as well, little Pearl. I, as well.”

The little girl had grown more pale and gaunt and Song Lin could no longer hide her concerns.

“Pearl, are you ill?”

“No, Teacher Song. I am healthy, so long as you continue to teach me.”

Suddenly, panic struck the little girl’s eyes. “You are not thinking of leaving, are you?”

“Why would I leave?”

“Maybe I am not what you expected. A good student. The kind of student you are accustomed to. If you tell me what they are like, I can be just like them. I’m sure of it.”

Song Lin took Pearl’s hand. “You are a most good student,” she said.

“Sometimes you remind me of a former student of mine. I see her in everyone. She has made it so. She is fifteen, your elder by seven years. But, you have learned so much faster.”

“So, you see her in me?” Pearl lit up.

Song Lin removed a book from the sack and smiled. “No,” she paused, turning the cover on the book. “I see you, Pearl. Just you.”

Pearl lowered her head.

“This is a good thing,” Song Lin said with a reassuring nod. “You have helped me immensely. It is not healthy to always think on a person.”

Pearl raised her head and glanced at the cover of the book. “We are reading Turgenov today?”

Song Lin angled her face. “What do you say we put Turgenov aside till tomorrow?”

“What will we read instead?”

“We will not read. We will take a walk, take a swim in the pond—”

“—Swim in the pond?” Pearl shook vehemently.

Song Lin laughed. “We don’t have to swim. We can run barefoot along the dried leaves, light all the lanterns, knock on all the doors.”

Pearl laughed, holding her stomach. She quickly took Song Lin’s hand.

Despite her sluggish movement and labored breathing, she sprinted barefoot alongside her teacher down the slope toward the pond where all the wildness of nature converged. A tall willow with spidery, brittle and coppery arms whipped back and forth, halting Pearl in her steps.

“Pearl, what is it?”

“Willow branches,” Pearl answered.

They were scattered just beneath the towering willow like a pile of twigs meant to incite an inferno. Indeed, an obstacle for the fairness of the child’s feet. Song Lin crouched and let Pearl climb onto her back. She carried Pearl while carefully stepping atop the frangible branches as they snapped underneath. Pearl held on tighter as Song Lin came up on a skirt of boulders, gripping each rock with her feet and planting them in grooves that fit into the natural arch of her foot. The rocks became larger so she widened her steps. Slow and steady at first. Then, she was leaping, emboldened by a rush of childlike spirits.

She found a low lying boulder where they sat. They tested the black water, dipping their toes and then plunking their feet in, squealing. Song Lin took Pearl’s hand and they ran across the red bridge, hearing the soft thud of naked feet slapping against

wood. They continued up a foot path marked with inlaid semi circular stones and knocked on the doors of the empty rooms, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind. A film of dust flurried behind them, awakened by their presence. It moved quickly to cover their trespass. Soon, they found their way to the pavilion again and mimicked the Chinese aspens, wrapping their arms around one another.

“It is like they are dancing,” Pearl giggled.

“In the west, they have this dance,” Song Lin said. “They call it ballroom dancing.

“Ballroom dancing?” Pearl repeated.

“Yes,” Song Lin nodded. “Like so,” she demonstrated, setting her right foot forward and sliding her left foot out.

Together they tried and stumbled. The last tumble had Pearl on her knees, so they retired to the pavilion. Song Lin wiped down Pearl’s feet one at a time.

The child shuddered, nibbling on her bottom lip. She followed the teacher’s caresses as they moved up and down her foot.

“If my Ma Ma was alive, I would wish her to be just like you.”

Song Lin paused, handing Pearl her shoes. “You’ve never spoken of your mother.”

The child slipped into her shoes and inched up to whisper in Song Lin’s ear, “It is forbidden.”

“Why? What happened to her?”

“Shh,” Pearl raised a finger to her lips and led Song Lin to the well. She swung her thick braid to her back and leaned the length of her upper body over the well. “Ma

Ma, this is my new teacher, Teacher Song,” she said, with her hands cupped around her mouth.

Song Lin pulled Pearl away from the well.

“Pearl?!”

“Teacher Song, it is already nearing five and if I am not in my room when the houseman comes with dinner, there will be trouble. He is very precise.”

With a jolt of sudden energy, Pearl collected her bearings. “I have never had this much fun, Teacher Song,” she said, dashing off. “I will be early tomorrow again.”

Song Lin, too, returned to her quarters and prepared for the houseman’s knock. She paced from one end of the room to the other recalling how and *where* Pearl spoke to her mother. When her thoughts led her to take some decisive action, she rushed the doors, knocking up against the houseman.

In his usual demeanor, he stooped. “My apologies Teacher Song. Forgive me.”

The tray was steady. Not a single plate, bowl or chopstick unsettled. Song Lin saw bright orange yams sliced into round moons in place of the dried fish.

“I will not be eating dinner in my room today,” Song Lin said.

The houseman turned his head left, then right, but always stooped. “In the yard?” he asked with caution.

“No,” Song Lin shook her head. “I will have my meal with Jing Jing or Mei.”

Without waiting for his disapproval, she walked ahead, thinking that from them, she

would find the answers. “I am sure they are in their rooms. You’ve already delivered their meals?”

The houseman hurriedly followed her. “This is—”

“—Do not tell me that sharing meals is forbidden.”

“Uncustomary, Teacher Song. This is uncustomary.”

The light in Jing Jing’s room brought a sigh of relief. Song Lin knocked on the door and was greeted by a smile and look of surprise. The Ko daughter’s room was very similar to her own, but more vibrant. Her curtains, bedspread and pillows created a palette of whispery blues, like waves lapping over a shore of mahogany sand.

Jing Jing noticed Song Lin’s tray and the houseman and paused noticeably.

“Come in, join me,” she finally said.

Song Lin followed Jing Jing in, admiring the way the cotton cheongsam fit the tall woman. The dress elongated her form, clinging loosely to the woman’s modest curves. The traditional garb suited her softness, unlike the riding clothes.

“You like it?” Jing Jing asked, pointing to the chrysanthemums embroidered over the left breast. “This is Mei’s handiwork. Hard to believe, isn’t it? But, yes, our Mei is also a gifted seamstress.”

Song Lin’s eyes swept over the identical plates on the table. A green vegetable and yams. A generous bowl of rice and a pair of red chopsticks with the Ko name engraved at the top.

“It is hard to believe that Mei possesses skill,” Song Lin said under her breath.

Jing Jing laughed, choking on a piece of vegetable.

“I’m sorry,” Song Lin said as she stroked the other woman’s back. “Words can have double meanings.”

“I think I caught your meaning,” Jing Jing said. “You are overly judgmental of our Mei. It was her voice that brought her to the Ko house.” Jing Jing glanced around the room, stopping at the four panel folding screen of gorgeous birds—a cockatoo, ducks, a rooster and a macaw. She settled on the parrot and smiled. “She is Soochow Opera. No one else can wear that moniker. I remember a time when all the men, in the city and countryside, would flock to hear the golden voice. My father among them. Women say that the songstress’s voice is laced with an aphrodisiac, but it is only because their voices are weak. How can any woman compare with a voice that is at once haunting and beautiful? Disquieting, yet compelling?”

Jing Jing’s right hand blanketed her left bosom. She patted softly, like soothing a crying baby back to sleep.

“So vivid,” Song Lin said. “You talk of it as if you were there?”

“I was,” Jing Jing said with a wink. “My older brother had loaned me one of his suits so that I could go to the gentleman’s club. He wanted to convince me that this singer is the finest woman in the East. Oh, I could not wait to see this business with the songstress and find some flaw. It was impossible and I, too, fell in with all the men. And, because my father was a man who wanted, Mei became Ko *tai tai* number three. Shortly after she married into the house, my father’s funds were depleted and he fell into ill health. The people say Mei is the cause. She isn’t.” Jing Jing’s voice trailed.

Song Lin’s chopsticks dug into an empty bowl.

“Are you still hungry?” Jing Jing asked, pushing her bowl toward the teacher.

“No,” Song Lin shook her head. “Jing Jing, can you tell me about Pearl’s—”

Mei crashed up against the open door frame waving a clear bottle of rice wine. Her silk robe had fallen off her shoulders and pooled at the feet. The flimsy label, yellowed and soiled, flitted like the sail of a drowning boat.

“Drink! Drink with me!” Mei slobbered, shifting from woman to woman. She squinted and pointed a finger at Song Lin. “You?! You are here? What is the happy occasion?”

Jing Jing helped Mei onto a stool. The actress pouted and leaned up against the Ko daughter. “Why would you leave me out?”

“We are not celebrating any occasion,” Jing Jing answered. “Teacher Song came by and I asked her to have her late meal with me.”

“Together?” Mei slurred.

“It is a good idea, isn’t it?” Jing Jing asked. “Maybe we can, the three of us, do this again tomorrow? Together.”

Mei smiled seductively and crooked her finger, waving it in the air till it poked out like a dagger at Song Lin. “It would be better without her.”

The sober women shared a tentative smile.

Mei felt the exchange and stood up on her wobbly legs. “Teacher Song does not fault me,” she waved dismissively, sitting beside the teacher. “Do you?”

“No, I do not Mei,” Song Lin answered playfully.

She felt the coarse cotton of Mei’s cheongsam as the woman leaned into her. The sparse sequins on Mei’s hair clip twinkled like dying stars. Her face was bare, like a child’s.

“You eye me with such befuddlement,” Mei giggled into her hand. “I was once the golden songstress of Soochow, you know?”

Mei made long, elegant orchid fingers, a customary trait of opera singers, and placed them underneath her chin, barely touching. She angled her head in the opposite direction. Her eyes wandered off into the leftmost corner and she smiled at the imaginary stranger in the audience. “Men threw themselves at my feet,” she said. “There was nothing I couldn’t have. Nothing. Even women were curious of me. Did Jing Jing tell you how we met?”

“Yes,” Song Lin answered.

“She did?” Mei glared across the table at Jing Jing. “Men are good. They have their auspiciousness.” She ran both hands along the insides of her thighs. “Women—women are better—they have their whimsy. But, they are even more dangerous. They lie better than men.”

Song Lin diverted her eyes from Mei’s needy hands.

The golden songstress leaned in harder, brushing her left breast against Song Lin’s side. “Women’s hearts wander more easily. Only you would never know it unless she wanted you to know.”

Song Lin scooted to the edge of the stool while Mei chased.

She stroked the side of Song Lin’s face with a heavy hand. “You know love, Teacher Song? You know what love can do?”

A porcelain cup clacked onto the table.

Song Lin’s hand went limp.

Jing Jing watched closely, her eyebrows pinched in concern.

Mei shot up from the table. A smile of victory graced her lips. “You do, don’t you? Your silence has betrayed everything!”

“It’s late. I wish to return to my room now.” Song Lin stood up.

Mei threw her arms around the teacher. “Don’t be stingy,” she said. “You are in good company. My room there,” she pointed across the courtyard, “I call it the broken heart palace. Only now I suppose I should call it the broken hearts parlor.” She laughed. “Come to me whenever you have the need. Tell me all about him. This man.”

Song Lin said nothing. Her body rigid.

Mei inched up and pressed her lips against the teacher’s ear. “Stupid!” She yelled, pushing Song Lin away. “Do not come if you think that hearts can be mended. You will only find the ears of one that is kindred. We are sisters of a sort. Since I am the elder, you will call me *jie jie*.”

Song Lin ran out of the room.

Chapter Five

1934. Shanghai.

A stack of loose papers sat by the ledges of the opened windows under the scorching sun. Its edges curled under the heat. The students sat slumped in their chairs reading Lu Xun. They wiped their faces with a handkerchief or the back of a hand as they turned the pages. Siu Pei caught a bead of sweat as it dripped off the tip of her nose. She flicked it away and resumed her reading when her teacher smiled at her from the opposite end of the classroom.

Song Lin fanned herself with a sheet of cardboard. The wide collar of her blouse had been parted so that its tips touched her shoulders. She pinched the back of her shirt and unstuck it from her flesh. Moving down the rows, she woke one student with a gentle pat and smiled at others as she continued to the twin windows. Through the first window, she caught Hao walking toward the cherry blossoms. The sleeves on his white shirt were rolled up, revealing his forearms. The topmost button on his collar was undone. His black trousers were cinched with a thin leather belt. The pant legs clung to his thighs and seemed more muscular than she thought.

Song Lin moved to the other window and continued to follow Hao's trek as he strode up a small hill. The brown and yellow patches of grass curved like a long serpent. His steps sunk into the earth like a quagmire. There was a book in his hand which moved in rhythm with his labored stride. Often, he reached up with his free hand and slipped his eyeglasses back into place. Under the shade of tree, he pressed his hand against the bark. Then, he gathered his pants at the pockets and sat down, leaning against the tree.

“Teacher Song,” a student called, interrupting Song Lin’s surveillance.

“Yes, Student Chen?” Song Lin smiled.

“Why does Lu Xun write of cannibals? Do people really eat people?”

A student in the front of the room lurched and ran out. Song Lin, feeling, too, a queasiness in her stomach on an oppressively hot day, dismissed the class early. She sat at her desk for long minutes with an open book. Her eyes frequently danced from the pages to the windows. She walked over to the sink where a small mirror hung from a bent nail. The glass was spattered with paint and covered in a permanent layer of mildew. Song Lin found her reflection in a small corner. Strands of hair clung to her face and the nape of her neck. She scooped it up, twisted it into a small bun and returned to the window.

He hadn’t moved and seemed cool under the shade of tree. Song Lin casually picked up a book and left the classroom. She followed his footprints, landing hers in his; lengthening her strides and imagining she was a man with a man’s gait. While she thought she’d arrive at the tree sooner, she hadn’t.

“Teacher Song,” Hao said, shielding the sun with his hand. “Am I in your spot?”

Song Lin felt her face flush. It seemed he had not forgotten their first meeting.

“Teacher Tzu,” she said, dipping her head ever so slightly. “Today, it is your spot.”

He smiled, patting the earth.

Song Lin sat next to him, leaving enough space so that another person could sit between them.

Hao stretched his legs out in front, crossed his ankles and resumed his reading. Song Lin noticed he was not wearing socks and followed the length of his pant leg up. The trousers had the look of plastic. The width of his thigh had once again caught her notice and the bump underneath the crotch of his pants stirred her to desire. Song Lin swallowed, cleared her thoughts and slunk lower.

Her subtle movements caught Hao’s notice and he turned his shoulders slightly toward her without removing his eyes from his book.

“I have developed a method,” he said softly. “Be still.”

His Adam’s apple dropped. Song Lin followed the line of his neck down to the clavicle.

“Imagine you are nothing,” he said. “A single particle of dust floating through space with neither will nor destination.”

Song Lin closed her eyes and soon her lips formed a smile.

“There,” he said, “are you more comfortable?”

“You condone nihilism?” She whispered.

“At this moment I do,” he answered back with a whisper softer than hers.

The lids of her eyes grew heavier and heavier. She drifted.

The days only grew hotter since that encounter. Her flesh smelled of desire. One early evening, she paced around her small room with an irritation she did not understand. From her bed, she walked to the small bathroom and from the small bathroom, she walked to the make up table. Taped to the mirror were three magazine clippings of

lipstick, face powder and perfume. The tabletop was otherwise free of any clutter, except for a wood box with a swan engraving. The space confined her; a space she was always so proud of now offered her no respite.

She exited her room and walked into the communal parlor where her roommates lounged. They were all young girls like herself: Independent women living together in one of many growing alleyway homes. One girl was a journalist working for the first women’s magazine, *Ling Long*. The other two were factory girls. Two of the girls sat opposite one another with their legs stretched across the settee; each with a foot on the other’s lap. They painted each other’s toe nails with an apple red polish and seemed oblivious to the radio’s static. Rare was it that the radio belted out the news or a song, but Tam, the journalist, had found it lying in the street one day and brought it home. They had celebrated its addition to their space. It was a symbol of their contemporariness.

Behind closed doors, her roommates rarely engaged one another in conversation even though the four of them had been living together for a year. A milestone since the girls rarely stayed beyond six months. Song Lin was the longest resident, having moved in almost two years ago when two girls transitioned out. The apartment was a place of transition. When they found their contemporariness, they left. Song Ling wondered where they’d gone. Had they married? Married a modern man?

They read together whenever Tam brought home the newest *Ling Long* issue. It was only then that they exchanged few bits of dialogue. They gossiped over which girls had already been initiated into the new, having bought the latest Western imports.

Tam noticed Song Lin first and nodded her head. The other two girls did the same. They often gave Song Lin long stares because the teacher was different from most young girls. Her hair was kept long and unstyled, she wore pleated skirts and drab blouses, and her face was kept bare of cosmetics. She never gossiped, only listened. When she looked through the magazines, she clipped items of interest, but never purchased them. She lived independently in an alleyway home, but never left.

“I am going out,” Song Lin said.

“So late?” Tam asked.

“I will not be long.”

“But, I have brought home the latest issue.”

“I will read it after you all have finished it,” Song Lin said. “I don’t mind.”

She walked into the long, narrow alley behind the house and retrieved her bicycle. Riding alongside the street, she strode past rows of Chinese parasol trees and other bicyclists. From time to time, she hopped the curb onto the sidewalk, letting a large car eek past her. She turned onto a small street away from the main thoroughfare, gazing at the window display of Soochow’s oldest textiles shop. Gone were the silks and heavily embroidered fabrics. The mannequins were all dressed in the new cheongsam, a style that bore more flesh. Two foreigners, both women, in black and white, smiled as she rounded the curb to avoid a collision. Song Lin cut across the park, following the circle of an empty ice skating rink before veering off along the silken green river.

She skidded to a stop realizing where she was. The mid day ride brought her back to the school. She remembered passing many bicyclists along the way, the foreigners, the

rink. She blushed at her intentions and continued to ride to the back where there was a small wood unit with a thatched roof.

The school built the hut for Hao because he chose not to live in a dorm, preferring privacy. There was a small well to the side. Beneath it was a sturdy wood basket with a beating stick. His shirts hung on hemp rope tied to two thick poles. Song Lin advanced, stopping behind a row of cypress bushes. Laying her bike down on its side, she crouched behind the thickest hedge.

Hao stepped out and faced the moon, rubbing his eyes and stretching. He looked much younger without his eyeglasses. Thick locks from his disheveled hair cascaded down his forehead. A boy’s face on a man’s body Song Lin thought. The white undershirt gave much; the way the light touched his arms and shoulders, lining every curve with a luminescent glow. Hao dug his hands deep into his trouser pockets and walked toward the small well. He placed a pan under the spout and cranked the lever.

Song Lin shifted to get a better view, brushing up against the leaves. Hao stopped and stared into the cypresses.

“Someone there?” He asked.

Song Lin looked left, then right and clapped her hands to her chest.

Hao advanced four steps and stopped again. He picked up an iron rod that was leaning up against a bucket and weighed it in his hands. He held it like a bat.

“Is someone there?” He asked again.

Song Lin stumbled out.

“Who’s there?” He asked.

“Song Lin.”

Hao lowered the rod. “Teacher Song, what are you doing here?”

“I—I couldn’t sleep. I got on my bike and started riding, not thinking of going anywhere in particular. Then, I—well, I must’ve unconsciously taken a route that was familiar to me.”

“Come out from there, fully,” he said.

Song Lin patted down her hair and dress.

Hao grabbed a shirt off the laundry line and put it on. “Come. Come inside.”

The room was small. A hammock hung from the two thickest beams. On one end a pair of white running shoes sat beneath a wood chest. There were books piled on top of books on the single shelf above. At the other end of the room next to a small wood table with a round top was another stack of books. Hao righted a long bench and placed it next to the table.

“Here,” he said, “have a seat. Would you like some tea?”

“No,” Song Lin said, trying to keep her eyes from wandering.

Hao sat across from her on the stack of books, brushing his knee up against hers.

Song Lin shot up. “I should go.”

Hao got up, disturbing the sturdy pile. *Fathers and Sons* tipped over, hitting the floor with a thud.

“Teacher Song, wait!”

Song Lin knelt and picked up the book. “Turgenev,” she said with a smile, replaying the sound of her name, spoken desperately from his mouth.

She returned to the table, flipped through the pages and settled on a passage: “But among them is one that no man has dared lay his hands on and which no animal has trampled. Only birds alight on it and sing at sunrise.”

“Hmm,” Hao answered. He reached above the shelf for his eyeglasses and pinched them at the nose bridge. Taking the book from Song Lin, he quickly turned the pages and found a spot toward the end. “This self assured Bazarov didn’t even suspect that in their eyes he had something of the look of a village idiot.” He looked up eagerly from text to woman.

“You do not approve of Bazarov?” Song Lin asked.

Hao closed the book and placed it at the center of the table. “He is not examination worthy. I find Kukshina a more compelling character. Tell me, what do you think of her?”

Song Lin ran a single finger along the cover of the book. She would not look at him. “You are making a comparison?” She shyly asked.

“No,” Hao said. “I know very little of you to make comparisons.”

Song Lin looked up sharply. “She is rather silly. Awkward. A contradiction, I suppose.”

“A contradiction because she is at once a woman and intelligent?” Hao asked.

“You twist my meaning,” Song Lin answered. “I am only pointing out that a woman who possesses intelligence should not have the need to amuse men. No, she needn’t have the occasion to try to impress when it is contrived.”

Hao had noticed the thin blue vein beside Song Lin’s brow and her lips which were pursed in defiance. He fought to suppress a smile.

“I make no comparisons,” he assured her. “On the contrary, I find Kukshina most fascinating. There is nothing wrong with a woman who wants. A woman who is free and unhinged; whimsical and romantic. What man would not want to be amused by such a woman? She is sublime.”

To Song Lin, he seemed to study her as he spoke of Kukshina. It was the way his eyes settled on her lips when he said *sublime*.

That evening when Song Lin returned to her apartment, she emptied her purse and counted her savings. The jingle of the coins, recounted and restacked, woke one of the other girls.

“Song Lin!” Tam barged in. “I am interviewing Mr. Johnson tomorrow and it is very important that I get my sleep.”

“I’m sorry, Tam.” Song Lin answered, watching the other woman dab underneath her eyes, the skin taut and smooth.

“What are you doing anyway?” Tam asked.

Song Lin plucked the advertisement clippings off the mirror and placed them like three cards onto the table. “Do I have enough money for all this?”

“You?!” Tam asked in astonishment.

Song Lin nodded, looking at Tam in earnest.

“You want to be a modern woman?” Tam asked, arching a brow.

Song Lin repeated her earlier gesture.

“Oh, I don’t know, Song Lin,” Tam said, lifting the teacher’s long black tresses while walking to the other side of her.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look,” Tam said crossing her arms. “I will just be straight with you. Since we’re the only ones in this room, there is no need for glossing over of words.”

Song Lin nodded quickly, impatiently.

“Well, it is not you,” Tam said, resting her palms on top of Song Lin’s shoulders. “You always have one foot in and one foot out. Besides, it is not easy, you know. Many girls try it, but they come off awkward.”

“Awkward is good,” Song Lin whispered.

Chapter Six

1936. Soochow.

“Come in,” Song Lin said.

“I hope I did not wake you,” Jing Jing entered, carrying an oblong bamboo and dark rattan basket. The long, red tassels adorning the handle swept back and forth, mimicking the woman’s long, casual stride.

“No, I was just on my way to meet Pearl.”

Jing Jing walked to the table and placed the basket down.

“I won’t be long. I’ve brought you something,” she said, peeling back the cotton coverlet.

“For me?” Song Lin asked, placing her sack of books onto the table.

“Look,” Jing Jing said, drawing out a white handkerchief with two butterflies embroidered in the corner.

Song Lin pinched the corners between two fingers. She placed it on the table, flattened it out and traced the threading.

“It is beautiful.”

“It is from Mei,” Jing Jing said, laying her hand atop the teacher’s retreating hand as it moved off the handkerchief. “It is an apology. Please, will you accept it? Mei indulged herself last night. The fragrance of Rose is her true vice. As soon as you left, she felt horrible and ran about my room, thinking it was hers, looking for a needle and thread. She insisted that she make something for you. But, it was late and I remembered

she had just finished this the other day. How nice and fitting it would be for you to have it, I thought.”

“Thank you,” Song Lin said. “You are very thoughtful.” She remembered her riding passenger—the moment his handkerchief was passed from his hand to hers—the pink peony in the corner—soft and silky, almost wet to the touch like warm breaths upon her skin. Now, the pair, Yingtai and Shanbo, captured for her. All the hushed, tender stories stitched into pieces of cloth to be worn, to be carried. Hers were carried in a tin.

“Then, you accept Mei’s apology?” Jing Jing asked.

“I would not be so rude as to stay angry with my hosts,” Song Lin answered. “It seems that I may have offended Mei. Only I do not know how, so I cannot fix it.”

“You are silly,” Jing Jing said. “You have nothing to fix because the fault does not lie with you. Mei is—is—is very possessive.”

“Possessive?”

“Yes. She is accustomed to being the main attraction. You cannot blame her. She has been so spoiled by men who give her all sorts of affection, even when they are unwarranted. Here in this house, she has become quite vulnerable. Being childless leaves her without a station. In her mind, she has overcome that in her own way. She fights for and holds onto every bit of affection she can. And, you, because you have just arrived—well, I should think you have disrupted the harmony in Mei’s heart. Perhaps she hasn’t found a place for you yet.”

“Places for people are not always easy to find,” Song Lin whispered.

“Did you say something?” Jing Jing asked.

Song Lin shook her head. “Thank you. Thank you for bringing this to me.”

Jing Jing smiled, took the handkerchief and folded it twice over into a triangle. She reached out and unclasped the frogs on Song Lin’s collar and the two beneath it which ran a bias along the breast.

Song Lin flinched. She watched as the Ko family daughter pulled a needle from a cushioned ball and pinned the cloth to the inside flap of her top.

“There,” Jing Jing said. “When you use it, you will think of the butterfly lovers.” She turned on her heel, the boots clacked together. Long and lean, the leather drank the polish well. The sails of the jodhpurs ballooned at the hips and moved in accord with the woman’s slender hips.

Song Lin remembered the billboard from her window’s view back in her little apartment in Shanghai. Split into three different panels, each foreigner promoted a different sport: Horse-riding, dancing and swimming. The women wore elegant fashionable sportswear and despite the athletic nature of the ad, the women also wore glamorous accessories such as exquisite brooches, necklaces, bracelets and rings. So alluring was the sparkle that Eastern women chased it. They wanted to learn to ride a horse, learn how to dance and learn how to swim. All the while, wearing the sparkle.

Jing Jing did not look like the woman rider on the billboard. Her neck, wrists and hands were not adorned with any accessory. The riding jacket, breeches and a hard hat with an unsightly dent were simple. Song Lin thought the Ko family daughter was modern despite the absence of sparkle.

She picked up her satchel, knocking it up against the bamboo rattan basket. Jing Jing had left it behind. She took it by the handle, letting it slip down the length of her forearm, and searched the confines of her courtyard in a frenzy. In the dull, gray square,

the woman left no trace. For a minute, the loneliness of the yard filled her ears. Her breathing was rampant. Song Lin did not understand what drove such haste on her part.

When she slowed her steps, her breathing and her thoughts, she heard the clacking of boots as they hit a concrete pavement, almost as if an echo stirring inside her head. She followed the sharp, yet gentle thuds out of her yard and into a dwelling in the southwest chamber where a kitchen sat in the south room facing its yard. A rustling of noise caught her attention. There, a small room where one door hung on a slant. Song Lin approached cautiously and peeked in. She saw empty cages which kept small livestock and a swarm of flies circling a big cleaving knife hacked into the butcher's table. Above it, hooks and steel instruments hung on a black rod. Song Lin covered her nose and mouth and stepped out of the butchery.

Hastily, she made her way toward the kitchen where she found the houseman crouched behind a huge water vat. Beside him was a half filled crate of clear bottled rice wine with cheap labels slapped on. On the other side of him were empty bottles which he poured into a large, glazed wing jug the color of an eggplant. The jug had a rolled rim and concentric circles impressed along its girth. A pink piece of paper shaped like a diamond was affixed to the body with the single character “Rose.”

“Teacher Song?!” A glass bottle shattered. The houseman fell back to avoid the flying glass. Song Lin placed the basket on a tabletop, apologized for giving him a fright and helped the man to his feet. The hem of his soiled gown turned a darker shade of blue. His face, a blossoming peony, blushed all shades of peach and pink. Song Lin yanked free a straw broom that was wedged in the corner and began to sweep the glass shards into a pile. All the while, she kept her eyes on her task and not at the man. With

every sweep, she heard a residual sweep. When she turned behind her, she caught the houseman shuffling forward as if to take the broom from her.

Song Lin tried to make light conversation, but only succeeded in speaking her thoughts out loud.

“I was wondering,” Song Lin said, all the while with her back to him, “have you any news of my travel bag? Has it been found?”

His eyes shifted from side to side.

As no answer came forth, Song Lin discarded the glass into a pan and brushed her hands together. “If it’s not too much trouble, would you make inquiry again? I wonder if the boy might know. The road we took seems little frequented. Might my things still be there on the side of the road?”

He nodded, never meeting her eyes.

She stepped over the raised floor sill twice apologizing for her disruption which invited the man’s apology in return. At the door frame of the entrance, a scraggly straw broom was leaning against it. On the other side of the frame was a tin pan of pyre. She scratched her head, wondering if those things were there before she entered.

Song Lin sprinted quickly to meet Pearl, wanting to be punctual, if not early so as not to disappoint. Enroute, she realized she had left the basket behind and found herself tugged in two directions. Remembering the delight in Pearl’s eyes drove her onward. She would retrieve the twice forgotten basket after the lesson.

She turned off the corridor and into the pavilion, momentarily relieved that it was empty. She had not disappointed little Pearl. There, on the table, as she sought to sit on the stool to relieve her feet, sat the rattan bamboo basket. The red tassels twined along the handle. She gasped in disbelief and looked around the yard, searching for the houseman. A dark silhouette emerged under the fray of the crying willow and Song Lin leapt forward, but the child’s call halted her pursuit.

“Teacher Song,” Pearl waved.

On a second look, into the deep of the black wilderness growing there, Song Lin found nothing. She took Pearl by the hand, leading her quickly up into the pavilion and away from the bridge that connected the two landforms.

“Your hands, what happened to your hands?” Song Lin asked.

Pearl balled her hands into fists and dug them into her pockets.

“Show them to me!”

Reluctantly, Pearl extended her hands, unfurling each finger. There were cuts on her palms and her fingernails were chipped as if she had been scratching at something all night.

“What has happened? You will not tell me that you fell,” Song Lin said, taking Pearl’s hands gently into hers.

“I cannot say, Teacher Song. I should not say.”

“That will not do,” Song Lin said. “I am your teacher and you are my charge.”

“Your charge?” Pearl asked with a smile.

Song Lin nodded. Her own fright momentarily cast aside.

Pearl inched up and spoke quietly into Song Lin’s ear.

“Jing Mo?” Song Lin asked.

“The other brother. Not the good one. The bad one,” Pearl answered in a hushed voice.

“Is he well enough to be out and about?” Song Lin asked.

Pearl nodded, constantly checking over both shoulders. “The bad brother is never well. He is usually kept locked in his room, but even animals need to be let out of their cages, the adults say.”

“Then we must tell someone,” Song Lin said, stealing a glance toward the willow.

“No, please. Please Teacher Song.” Pearl fell to her knees. “We mustn’t do anything to disrupt the house.”

“Stop this, Pearl!” Song Lin demanded. “The house is not alive. The people in it are.”

The coverlet in Jing Jing’s basket stirred. At first, sharply, then, a steady pulse like tiny heart palpitations. She drew Pearl behind her and watched the piece of cloth flutter.

Pearl inched around Song Lin’s backside, wondering what was inside the basket. Song Lin shuffled the child behind her again, plucking the edge of the coverlet. She held her breath and whipped the cover off in one fell swoop. A dazzle of fluorescent white. A single white butterfly emerged, fluttering its born again wings with vigor. Song Lin blinked swiftly in response. It made fast for the wild garden, stopping momentarily to perch on the underbelly of a leaf. Then, it shot toward the red bridge, flying continuously in a slanted eight motion. Soon, it was joined by its lover and the pair resumed their daily courtship.

Pearl giggled.

Song Lin took Pearl by the hand. The concubines’ dwelling was not too far from the old master’s. Somehow, she would navigate the intricate grid system, remembering that all corridors would eventually lead to his. For a flickering moment, she thought it unusual that Mei shared the Ko family daughter’s wing, rather than be situated where the liveliest courtyard sat: “A once thriving garden and a pond swimming of Koi.” These, as Mei had said, were the necessary elements for optimal energy; an energy carried by rain and water and moved by wind.

Song Lin and Pearl entered through the southeast chamber facing south where water would flow to the dragon. A narrow, in-ground drainage exit ran along the bottom of the east wall where water drained to the street. Pearl would not proceed beyond the formidable entrance gate with the stoic stone guardians.

“We cannot enter unless,” Pearl said, “one, if by request and two, if with proper announcement.”

“The circumstances on which we’ve come should be enough,” Song Lin answered with determination.

“No,” Pearl shook her head. “Ma Ma was disobedient.”

Song Lin knelt down on one knee, almost touching the threshold.

The child squeezed her eyes shut and trembled.

“Pearl, look at me. I am not afraid, and you needn’t be either.”

“Teacher Song, please, let us turn and go back the way we came,” quivered Pearl.

“Can you not wait till Jingchen returns?”

“Very well, Pearl. I will do as you wish, but we cannot wait until your brother’s return. We will take it up with Jing Jing.”

As they made their way toward the Ko family daughter’s dwelling, Song Lin thought to coax Pearl into talking of her mother, but felt she had upset the child too much already.

Jing Jing’s and Mei’s courtyard was very similar to Song Lin’s. It was sparse and gray, where permanent shadows resided underneath gargantuan trees. Pearl did not hesitate to enter through the gate. They made their way to Jing Jing’s chamber. Palm to door, Song Lin pounded heavily. The thick wood absorbed all her strength. Somewhere in the near distance, she heard a giggle. Song-like. It was Mei’s voice. The laughter came from some place beyond the yard.

Following the voice, they meandered along a short path, passing a shrine built inside a pagoda. Fat sticks of incense burned hungrily in a round, clay urn. The singing grew louder. They turned at the shrine and down a pebble ridden descent.

They had come to a grand gate that gave entrance to an outdoor theatre. In the center was an open, raised platform. An elevated sitting area was situated inside a wide walking corridor and joined by two smaller wings surrounding the court. Empty chairs and tables wrapped in cobwebs sat stone still. The railings had intricate scrollwork; long, looping lines that wrapped around like jasmine twigs. Jing Jing sat in the second row of the main sectional. The chairs in front were grander and wider with looping arm rests.

Mei, in full opera regalia, stood center stage. Her tiny steps and hips swayed. Her face was in full paint—eyes drawn with a dramatic slant—brows darkened with black powder. The headdress looked like a jeweled phoenix with feathers dressed in

sequins. Strands of pearls, sapphires and rubies fanned out, sprouting toward the sky. Long pink and gold tassels dangled from the sides, sweeping over her shoulders. A large plate of armor covered her chest and four pennants were worn on her back.

A wooden sword slipped out of her sleeve. Mei shuffled right, leaned in and stabbed. Even when her body was in profile, her head position never moved. She kept her audience captive to her gaze and continued to fend off her enemies until at last, as if war drums played to its climatic moment, she froze. The raised sword reclined to her side. She tilted her head toward the heavens and appealed with sultry eyes. As if she had been struck by the hand of Heaven, she staggered to the right and then to the left.

Jing Jing shifted right and left with her. Concern contorted her face and her complexion whitened with growing despair. When Mei reversed the sword, placing both hands on the hilt and running it alongside her waist, Jing Jing covered the imaginary wound on her side. One leg at a time, the actress went down on her knees and into a fetal position and Jing Jing’s head dipped, dropping like a puppet with its strings cut.

After a brief moment of utter stillness, Jing Jing stood and applauded. Her eyes were moist and she shook her head in adoration. All the while, a smile that bore all her teeth, was worn on her face.

Mei walked to the railing and reached up. The Ko daughter took the actress’s hands and kissed each one. “A superb performance,” she said. They held each other for long minutes as if the world had become a stage for this one courtyard theatre. When they heard Song Lin and Pearl at the arbor, they exchanged fleeting glances.

“Song Lin, Pearl, is everything alright?” Jing Jing asked, descending the box.

Song Lin gently tugged Pearl forward and nodded an acknowledgment to both women.

“Forgive our interruption,” she said to Jing Jing. “But, there’s a matter of urgency that we’ve come.”

Song Lin took both of Pearl’s hands, turned them palm up and emphasized the nails.

Jing Jing looked at Pearl. Pearl, however, would not meet the woman’s eyes.

“Must you ruin the mood?” Mei asked, sucking her teeth.

“Ruin the mood?” Song Lin asked. Her face turned dark.

“The girl gets into all kinds of accidents. She walks in her sleep—”

“—Mei, please don’t,” Jing Jing interrupted.

“This is not Pearl’s own doing,” Song Lin said.

“You are accusing Jing Jing or myself?” Mei asked, crossing her arms.

Song Lin looked at an immobile, expressionless Pearl. “No, it is the brother, Jing Mo,” she said.

Mei burst into sarcastic laughter. “Jing Mo? It is always Jing Mo, isn’t it?”

Jing Jing ignored Mei’s last comment and knelt down on one knee. “Pearl,” she said, “you are sure about this? Did you really mean to say that Jing Mo is responsible? Is this what you want? Is it possible you have mistaken—”

“—Stop it,” Song Lin shouted, shielding Pearl. “Why are you asking such questions? I believe Pearl.”

“There are things you don’t understand,” Jing Jing sighed.

“I don’t understand anything about this house,” Song Lin stammered.

“Houses like this have many secrets,” Mei cooed.

“That is not my concern,” Song Lin said. “My only concern is Pearl.”

Pearl wrapped her arms around Song Lin. “Let’s go Teacher Song, please let us go.”

“There,” Jing Jing smiled, patting Pearl on the head. “It is over.”

“What?!” Song Lin yelled slightly louder than she had meant to. “It is not over. How can your games be more important than the child’s injuries?”

Mei swept her sleeves, sucked her teeth again and walked briskly away.

“Very well,” Jing Jing said in resignation, watching Mei as she stomped out of the theatre. “What would you have me do, Song Lin?”

“Speak to Jing Mo!”

“I will speak to my brother tonight.”

“No. Now! I wish to have some words with him.”

“It’s not customary—”

“—I will find him myself then.”

“Song Lin!” Jing Jing called after her, looking at Pearl one last time. “I will take you, but leave Pearl in her room.”

They walked in silence, shoulders often brushing. Song Lin couldn’t keep her eyes ahead. The Ko family daughter was even prettier in profile. Hers was a natural beauty.

Such strong lines about her face that were masculine, yet exuded an uncommon

femininity. It was in the gentleness of her voice and her expression-filled eyes. A sadness was buried there—in the pink—where red veins sprouted like a venom.

When their shoulders touched again, Song Lin caught Jing Jing’s hand. The taller woman shuddered, following the length of the teacher’s arm down to her captured hand. Her mouth moved, but no words came.

“Jing Jing, it is true what you said earlier. There are things I don’t understand. I don’t suppose I will ever understand all of it. I realize now that I may have overstepped in asking, in demanding that you take me to your brother. I am just concerned for Pearl.”

“I—I understand,” Jing Jing answered, as if broken from a reverie. “You will see, though, that my brother is quite harmless. Anyway, I am in the wrong, not you. I should not have kept you from meeting Jing Mo. I do the best I can in Jingchen’s absence and as you can see, I am not very good at it.”

“I think you are. You are good in many things. Kind, thoughtful and—”

“No,” Jing Jing shook her head, shaking her hand free. “I am none of those things.”

“Why do you judge yourself so harshly?”

“Maybe if you had known me before, you might say the same.”

“I—”

“Shh,” Jing Jing hushed gently. “We are almost there. Let us walk quietly. We must respect my brother’s place.”

They continued to walk as their words faded into the shadows of the dark corridor. All the while, Song Lin felt the wall’s eyes on her and she lightened her steps so as not to be heard or seen.

A loud wail echoed down the long, narrow hall.

“What is that?” Song Lin asked.

“Come,” Jing Jing said pensively. “Let’s see my brother.”

They continued a short distance, stopping in front of a gate with dead apple trees. Song Lin stepped over them and wondered how Jing Jing managed to seemingly walk through them. Suddenly, she turned her ankle on a browned core, the flesh eaten away. The Ko family daughter bent down to sweep away the rotted fruit with her hands. She picked one up. “The symbol for brothers living in harmony,” she said, admiring the dead apple trees. The yard was long and narrow, converging at a point of utter darkness.

Jing Jing took Song Lin’s hand in hers and marched them up three wide steps to a door. The lantern above the door was not lit, but swung back and forth on a windless night. “Do not be afraid,” she said. “Jing Mo is not accustomed to people.”

Another wail sent a shiver up Song Lin’s spine.

Jing Jing knocked once, then twice. “Brother,” she said as she pushed open the doors. “May we enter? It is your sister. I have come to visit.”

The room was dark and smelled of rotted sweetness. Song Lin heard the lithic sound of steel rubbing against flint and saw a shower of sparks. The lantern in Jing Jing’s hand lit up and a pool of light filled the room. An old chain and padlock sat at the foot of the door. The curtains were soiled, shredded and hung over the bedpost like ghosts. Cabinet boards leaned against the tall windows. Some were nailed to the walls and some hung on a tilt from a loose, rusted nail. The chamber pot overflowed. Jing Jing placed the lantern on top of a grand, round oak table that had several cuts as if it had been

butchered. She knelt and said, “Brother, come out. I’ve brought Teacher Song. Would you like to meet her?”

A dark head poked out from beneath the table.

“The teacher?” he asked. The voice was pitchy, unsure and timid. “How many of you are out there?”

“Just the two of us,” Jing Jing answered.

“The teacher?” he asked again.

“Yes, Pearl’s teacher,” Jing Jing corrected.

Slowly, he edged out. Song Lin saw patches of dried skin, bald spots where hair refused to grow. Then, a pair of eyes. The skin around the eyes sunk deep into his face. Something white foamed at the corner of his mouth. His lips were thick and pasty.

“The teacher,” he said, licking the corners of his mouth. “She doesn’t belong here. It’s not fair! I don’t want her here!”

A pair of large hands with blackened nails reached for Song Lin, wrapping themselves around her neck. She fell back. Her head knocked against the cold floor. She heard a ringing in her ears. He was on top of her, breathing heavily. She heard Jing Jing scream his name. Louder and louder. “Jing Mo! Jing Mo!”

The houseman ran in and pulled the decrepit brother off. Jing Mo scurried underneath the oak table and shrieked like a horrible siren.

Song Lin backed up against the wall and got up on her feet. She ran out of the room, knocking into a rickety end table with sharp edges. Once outside, she clasped her hands around her neck, still gasping for air.

Jing Jing ran out after her. “Song Lin,” she said. “I am sorry. My brother—he is—not well. I shouldn’t have brought you here.”

“What is wrong with him?”

“He is sick, that is all.”

“Sick? I don’t understand,” Song Lin said, trying to wipe the stench of his hands from her neck.

A loud click stirred her and she jumped, holding fast to the walls.

The houseman stood outside the closed doors while the chain and padlock were reinserted from the other side.

“Your knee,” Jing Jing said, gently ushering Song Lin away from the room.

“My knee?” Song Lin wondered.

She realized she had cut her knee on the edge of the end table as she made her hasty exit.

It was shaped like a swirling line. Not deep. Jing Jing dabbed at it with a wet handkerchief. Song Lin shifted in her seat, letting her eyes wander around the room, imagining Jing Jing moving about. At the foot of the panel were a pair of long riding boots and a brown, gentleman’s jacket hung over the dressing cabinet.

“Jing Mo—”

“—He is my brother.”

“Is Pearl of no concern to you?”

“He is my brother.” Jing Jing placed her hands on Song Lin’s knees and squeezed gently.

“I don’t understand. The locks—”

“—There are rules here,” Jing Jing said. “You ask to see things that you cannot comprehend. Thus, you see things wrongly. Please, you needn’t concern yourself with anything, but your duties as teacher. You are the teacher. Nothing more.”

There was nothing cruel in her tone. It was resigned, gentle and matter of fact.

Jing Jing walked the pan of water to the door and placed it outside. She stopped momentarily and glanced at the room across the yard. “Do not worry for Pearl,” she said, with her back to Song Lin.

The smell. The patches of skin. His mouth. His hands on her. Song Lin wrapped her arms around her body. “Can I stay here in your room for a little while longer?”

Jing Jing nodded and turned to smile before stepping over the raised floor sill.

“You are leaving?” Song Lin asked.

“Do not be afraid,” Jing Jing answered, looking across the way. “I need to see that Mei has calmed herself.”

As the Ko daughter left the room, Song Lin massaged her neck, unintentionally catching her reflection in a mirror. She moved one hand slowly up and cradled her chin. Feather light fingers danced their way up to her cheek and spread like a fan over her face.

She walked over to the dressing cabinet, running her fingers along the lapel of the brown suit that brought memories of her lover back. The chest pocket felt warm against her cheek. She reached for the two sleeves and wrapped them around her. “I should go

crazy very soon. I have missed your touches. Your smell. Your smile. I am hungry for you in every way,” she whispered. Water had collected in her eyes. She rubbed it away and pulled the suit off the hanger. One arm at a time, she slipped into the sleeves.

A yell broke her thoughts. It sounded like a one-sided quarrel. She walked to the open doors and glanced across the courtyard to Mei’s room. Behind the thin rice paper panel covering the tall windows, she saw the silhouette of two women in an embrace. It was there to be seen, to be watched, from one room into another. Privacy was not meant to be had anywhere in this house, yet it was completely private from the outside world. She closed the doors and climbed onto Jing Jing’s bed. Notching the lapels tight to her neck, she shut her eyes.

Chapter Seven

The houseman exited the old master's room, carrying a copper urn filled with ashes from which gray tails of smoke trailed. When he felt Song Lin's presence, he nodded without making direct eye contact.

“How is Pearl?” Song Lin chased after him. “Is she better? I think I will go see her, sit with her.”

He paused briefly. “My apologies, Teacher Song,” he said, and continued on his way.

She had not seen Pearl for three days; not since the encounter with Jing Mo. The announcement of Pearl's illness was most unusual. A knock came at her door that morning. Song Lin had but one visit from both Mei and Jing Jing since she arrived. No one had called on her since. She kept busy preparing lessons and sometimes endeavored on walks, all the while looking over both shoulders. Rather than sprint to the doors with enthusiasm, she found herself creeping up to it, often looking to Ban Chao and the other old warriors for protection. She was relieved to find the houseman whose familiar posture and mannerisms brought her comfort. He had brought a letter which he referred to as an announcement from Mei. The brushstrokes were wild; the mark of an unskilled hand. In it, she was informed that Pearl was ill and lessons were to be cancelled indefinitely. When she asked to see Pearl, she was denied. The houseman had told her that the illness might be contagious. However, Song Lin believed it was more of the games the house loved to play.

Today, she would not be denied. Enroute to Pearl’s quarters, the sound of her footsteps had changed. Something that crunched, but softer than gravel. She turned her right ankle in and saw that a piece of white paper had affixed itself to the sole of her shoe. She peeled it off, noticing the gold square foil in its center and the blackened edges. “Spirit money,” she said. A gust of wind rushed her, sweeping up a cloud of dirt. Song Lin squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the gust to roll pass. A pitter patter of debris poked her face like miniature arrows. When she opened her eyes, joss paper floated all around her as if leaves shook free from a paper tree. She grabbed one out of the air and realized they too were money burnt for the dead.

Song Lin picked up her pace, taking care not to look back. In her haste, she tripped and fell, finding herself knelt before a sparrow that was lying on its side in a pool of dark blood. It twitched. The right wing suddenly thrust out. Its feathers spread then closed in on itself. Song Lin crept a few steps back, kicking the object that caused her descent. It was a rock the size of her hand with an angular point that mimicked the shape of the bird’s beak. She picked it up, pressing a finger into a groove that had the look of an eye. The rock was sculpted like a bird wanting very much to break free of the stone. The bird twitched again, inclining its neck. Song Lin bit down, raised the rock over her head and plunged it straight down. She got up and sprinted away, leaving the rock just an inch from the writhing sparrow.

Pearl had the look of a corpse. Her face was long and absent the colors of youth. She was dressed in a thick cotton jacket with slack pockets and busted stitches. The sleeves

were long so that they were folded over several times into bulky cuffs. The child tossed a pebble a few feet ahead and hopped over to it on one foot. Over and over, she bent and collected the pebble and tossed it again, hopping over on the other foot. This time, she deliberately threw it further and hopped till her knee buckled and she fell face down. She slapped the dirt from her mouth, eyed the rock with determination and continued toward it. Again, her knee gave way and she ate a mouthful of dirt.

“Pearl!” Song Lin cried.

The child did not heed the teacher’s cries and stumbled again. She slapped at the gravelly pavement with both hands, scratching and clawing.

“Pearl, stop it!” Song Lin said, holding Pearl in her arms. The more the little girl fought to break free, the tighter Song Lin’s embrace.

Pearl’s heavy breathing fizzled to a steady drone.

“Why are you doing this?” Song Lin asked.

“Because you do not believe me.”

“You hurt yourself for me?”

Pearl nodded.

“You mustn’t. I have seen Jing Mo and I will speak to your brother, Jingchen, when he returns.”

“Jingchen?”

Song Lin brushed away the dirt from Pearl’s mouth. The skin on the lips were raw.

“You mustn’t do this again,” Song Lin said, taking Pearl’s hands.

The jagged finger nails and reopened wounds on the inside of Pearl’s palms left Song Lin muted for long minutes.

“Do you play this game often? Song Lin finally asked.

“Yes, but you mustn’t tell anyone. Only this courtyard knows.”

Song Lin looked around the courtyard which was enclosed by tall trees. It ran for some length like a forest. The deeper the court, the greater the secrets it kept. She saw a bush of copper foliage fall over like sparks from a parasol of fireworks forever frozen in time.

“You will not play this game anymore,” Song Lin said.

Pearl frowned and bit her bottom lip. “Your eyes,” she said, turning the teacher’s chin toward her, “are so sad. Tell me, what saddens my teacher?”

“I am not sad, Pearl. I am—”

“—Come with me, Teacher Song.”

“Where to?” Song Lin asked, as the child tugged her forward.

“To a place where you will find your smile again.”

In the family hall where the family dined together on special days, Jing Jing hung new paper lanterns over the entrance. She paused, leaning down from the short ladder, watching Song Lin and Pearl step over the thick, raised floor trim which was freshly painted. They breezed past Mei in the center of room, who was busy dusting off the large, round table. When Mei saw the two, she pouted and muttered under her breath: “See, I am as if a servant. I have no station here.” At the back of the room, Pao uncoiled

scrolls of rice paper and fanned them out like long pieces of cloth. Lines of calligraphy rolled out. Fluid, thick, black brushstrokes, undisturbed—flowed in a chain of unbroken melody—Poetry exchanged through the generations.

Pearl sat down on the host’s chair. Her feet dangled. Behind her was a handsome altar table adorned with hand carved images of double dragons flanked by a pair of protective Foo dogs. Ancestral tablets of similar height and width were arranged in three tiers.

Song Lin continued around the room, observing the preparations.

“Come,” Mei ushered. “Make yourself useful since you are here. To trek in here after we have cleaned the floors is an unkindness. Take this,” she said, handing Song Ling a long plump feather brush. “Start there,” she said, pointing across the table.

Song Lin buried her hand into the plush chicken feathers, unable to find its bone. The lushness of it tickled her. She stood across from Mei, trying to dust off the chair frames that were freshly spackled with a shiny black coating still sticky to the touch.

“What is the occasion?” she asked.

Mei pulled a chair out and sat. “Don’t you know?”

“How could I?”

Mei placed her elbows on the table and giggled behind both hands. “It is he. He returns. The young Master Ko.”

“Young Master Ko? Jingchen?”

“Ah, pictures of a handsome, youthful man, unlike my husband, fill your head with fanciful illusions. I see how your eyes begin to scheme, little *laoshi*.”

“Do not address me as little teacher,” Song Lin said with agitation.

“So delicate,” Mei shook her head, clucking her tongue. “You are not his type. He prefers the mature woman. You did not think that you would win the hearts of everyone in this house, did you?”

“I have never thought this a competition between us.”

Mei giggled aloud. She walked over to Song Lin and blew in her ear. “There, little *laoshi*, I have sent you into the wind. You are no competition for me.”

The sound of sheets flapping in the breeze on a clothesline diverted Song Lin’s agitation. The tall man in black uncoiled the last scroll. Each one equal in length were placed in a circle encompassing him. Pearl was no longer sitting in the host’s chair. Mei was no longer beside her. As she turned toward the entry, she was met with the scent of ginger.

“Some tea?” Jing Jing asked, holding two cups.

Song Lin took the cup in both hands.

“My brother, Jingchen, is coming home. He never stays long. The family business is very demanding.”

Song Lin panned around the room. “All this—for him—has he been away for a long time?”

Jing Jing sipped her tea, keeping her eyes downcast. “No. He is the head of the house. You saw that my father isn’t well. Jingchen has stepped into the position quite admirably. We do this to honor his presence. I love him most, as does Pearl.”

“Pearl.”

Jing Jing continued to sip her tea, ignoring Song Lin’s utterance.

“Will you tell me about Pearl’s mother?”

The Ko daughter rose from her seat and reached over Song Lin. The scent was familiar. A man’s suit had an essence; one that was stitched into the wool with each thread by a master’s hand. Song Lin felt a tug.

“I am sorry,” Jing Jing said, holding a square of tin foil and a knot of hair. “It had somehow twined its way into your hair.”

“I was on my way to see Pearl this morning when I happened upon a tempest—”

“—A tempest?”

Song Lin smiled, animating the muscles along her face which had long been dormant. She could not resist and ran a finger along that soft spot between her ear and her cheek. She liked the way the other woman watched her every nuance. Hao had done the same.

“Not quite a tempest,” Song Lin said. “A flurry of spirit money. I think a bird got caught up in it. Tell me, why all the incense? They are everywhere and burning at all hours.”

“The dead are always with us.”

Song Lin raised the miniature teacup to her lips and kissed the rim, whispering, “Is Pearl’s mother with us?”

Jing Jing resumed sipping her tea.

“You will not say, I know. I have no business to ask since I am just Pearl’s teacher.” Song Lin answered for the other woman.

Jing Jing shook vehemently. “That is not so. It is just that no one speaks of Pui-Yee. She has put a stain on the family. It is one that cannot easily be cleaned off. You ask us to revisit an ugliness that no one wishes to. Perhaps you can understand this.”

The way the woman’s eyes rested on her made Song Lin uncomfortable. She felt vulnerable, as if this woman had seen some intimate part of her. Song Lin searched about the room, ready to take flight.

Jing Jing placed her hand on top of the teacher’s. “Stay. Do not go.” Each word spoken lighter and softer like a caressing whisper. “Do not hasten to open all the doors for if you do, you will only misunderstand.”

“There are few doors here. Mostly curtains. I have noticed.”

Jing Jing wagged a finger in the air. “You sparkle when you are not busy being sad. And, you are not just a teacher. You are a wonderful and welcome addition to the house. Jingchen will feel the same. He is a great judge of character. It is as if he has spent a lifetime reading people.”

Song Lin leaned in on her elbows. “I am curious of your brother. I have heard so much about him from you and Pearl. He is so perfect that I’d imagine he can only be the most imperfect man alive.”

Jing Jing laughed. “Perhaps there is some truth to that. Jingchen has not want of anything because everything comes to him effortlessly. He is like that family heirloom—something to be admired and envied from a distance—always to be coveted.”

Song Lin unclasped the frog on her neck and released the handkerchief pinned inside. She wiped her eyes, feeling the burn from all the incense.

“You have kept it,” Jing Jing whispered.

“It is a gift.”

“Gifts can be easily replaced.”

A satirical laugh blew into the room. Mei strutted toward them. “Talking,” she said. “All this silly talking and yet so much work remains to be done. Now, Song Lin, best be on your way—you’re too much of a distraction here.”

“I could stay and help,” Song Lin persuaded.

“No, no. We have always managed on our own,” Mei insisted. “Go on.”

On the return trip to her quarters, Song Lin retraced her earlier path. The spirit money had all but vanished. The sparrow, too, was gone. In its place was the rock sculpture that bore a resemblance to the bird. Beneath it, a shadow that looked like a spill. When Song Lin looked closer, she realized it was not a shadow, but a black stain.

She heard Jing Jing’s voice in her head: “...no one speaks of Pui-Yee. She has put a stain on the family, one that cannot easily be cleaned off...”

Song Ling went to the courtyard where she and Pearl conducted their lessons. Once there, she leaned her upper body over the well as Pearl had done. Chalky lines filled with moss ran continuous spirals.

“I now know your name, Pui-Yee,” she said. “Who are you?”

Chapter Eight

1926. Tientsin.

Pui-Yee clacked down the aisle on her wood sandals. Her wide cotton trousers ballooned like boat sails. “Good morning, aunties,” she said, touching each woman on the shoulder as she passed them. She reached up and snatched the apron out of the air as it flew toward her. “Thank you, Lei,” she said. A huge metal pot with a girth that rivaled the room hissed. Clouds of steam rose like blowholes.

“Turn around,” Lei said. “Let me tie this for you. How lucky you are that the fat dog has not made his rounds yet.”

“Thank you,” Pui-Yee said, pecking the girl on the cheek.

“Where were you?”

Pui-Yee unhitched a long wooden pole with a spoon shaped bucket at the end. She leaned over the huge pot and scooped out the hot water, dumping it into a barrel.

“I went to see a friend,” Pui-Yee answered.

“Why are you smirking?” Lei asked. “What friend is this? Outside of the factory?”

Pui-Yee’s face was already flushed and her bangs were matted against her forehead. She swept at the bands of mist that created an ash white curtain between them.

“It is done, Lei,” Pui-Yee smiled.

“What? So soon?”

“No. Not just yet. A ship will come in two weeks.”

Lei dropped her spoon and picked Pui-Yee up by the waist. They spun. A single wood sandal clapped onto the floor.

“Watch yourselves,” one of the aunties smiled. “If the fat dog sees you so happy, he will be angry and we will all be miserable for it.”

Lei put her arm around the older woman. “We have cause for celebration,” she said, eyeing Pui-Yee.

“Oh,” the older woman answered, her thick arms working continuously. “What is the good news?”

“I have secured passage to Shanghai,” Pui-Yee answered. “And a job awaits me there.”

The auntie placed her spoon beside the pot and cupped Pui-Yee’s face in her calloused hands. “Shanghai? It is different there. You sure you are ready?”

“I have lived my entire life for this moment,” Pui-Yee said. “The world is changing and Shanghai is where it has begun.”

“But, what is wrong with living amongst your own rather than with the foreign devils? They have come to China to change her. People on the streets are calling our Shanghai the Bol-lis of the East.”

Pui-Yee laughed and clapped her hands together. “The Paris of the East. It will be quite changed. Electricity, telephones and automobiles. I don’t care much for these things. I go not because I want to live luxuriously like the foreign devils. I go because of the promise they bring.”

“I don’t understand all these modern words. I am too old to learn a new language. I speak the language of the mountains and the rivers. They have always understood me.

The only thing I know is that the foreign devils will corrupt Shanghai. Purity and virtue will be lost.”

Lei walked a circle around Pui-Yee. She eyed her friend with both curiosity and unfamiliarity. “Bol-lis. How do you know all these foreign words? Did the foreign devil in the brown robe teach them to you?”

“Yes,” Pui-Yee hugged Lei. “I wish you had come with me just once. He has taught me so many words. I find French the most pretty. But, he said English is the most useful because all business is done in English.

Lei dropped to her knees like a bag of rice.

“Lei, don’t cry,” Pui-Yee said, kneeling beside her.

“I will miss you,” Lei sobbed. “We have done everything together since we were five. Tilled the sorghum fields until we were sold to the silk factory. Do you remember the sorghum?”

“I remember it different,” Pui-Yee said. I remember you convinced your Ba and Ma to sell you so that I wouldn’t have to be alone in this place.” Pui-Yee placed her head on Lei’s shoulder. “I love you, Lei. When I get settled in Shanghai, we will figure something out so we can be together again.”

“Ah, stop that,” the older woman grunted. “If you both cry, you will make me want to cry.”

A woman struck her spoon against the tin pot three times.

“The fat dog!” The older woman said. “Quickly, let’s get back to our positions.”

“Who is with him?” Lei squinted. “He looks rich.”

“Have you set your eyes on him?” Pui-Yee chided.

“He is too old for me,” Lei answered, thrusting an elbow into Pui-Yee’s stomach.

The manager and the older man walked around the room. Though the older man had a cane with a handsome ivory head, he did not walk with a limp. Often, he reached up with his heavily jeweled fingers and stroked his long, black and thinly-braided beard. He paused when he noticed her. Swept her once over with his small, shifty eyes which began at the nape of her neck and all the way down to an exposed shoulder and arm. Through the wet, thin, white blouse, he found a mole on her lower back.

He whispered something in the manager’s ear and continued walking, closing the circle. A chair was brought for him and he sat with his hands placed evenly on the chair’s slightly sloped arms anchored with a pair of dragon heads. His boy servant rushed to his side, readjusting the length of his Master’s long silk gown so that it fell between his spread legs like an imperial runner.

“Listen up! Listen up!” The manager yelled. “This is Master Ko, your employer. What good fortune you have that he visits us today. He sees how hard you work and wishes to know your names.”

Several of the aunties grimaced, knowing full well that he had come to insure that the protests had not poisoned his factories with dissent. Since the Treaty granted the German holdings in China to Japan, there had been great unrest. War broke out between the Chinese warlords and the factory owners paid exorbitant sums for protection.

“Better for us if his son had come instead,” Lei whispered into her friend’s ear. “I hear he is very handsome.”

Pui-Yee giggled. “Have you forgotten about your man? He is waiting for you to return to the village, to marry you.”

“Then he will die an old man and still be waiting,” Lei waved dismissively. “I will never be able to pay back the factory.”

Pui-Yee acquiesced with a nod. “If Auntie Cho hadn’t left me with her earnings before she passed, I would not have been able to ransom back my life.”

“Ack, how degrading,” Lei said, pointing ahead. “The aunties will have much to gripe about tonight.”

Each woman knelt in between the old master’s legs and kowtowed. They announced their name with their heads lowered. The old master’s eyes, though, were not on them. They sought the young girl in the distance.

Pui-Yee reached the front of the line, watching as her friend, Lei, did the same. Lei’s kowtow was rushed and Pui-Yee winced at the insincerity of it. When it was her turn, she dropped down, one knee at a time. She placed her palms flat against the ground and kowtowed. Her head was so low that her semi-dried bangs swept the pavement.

“Wong Pui-Yee,” she announced.

She lifted her right leg, but felt the tip of a cane as it fell on her shoulder. The man had put so much weight into it that it felt like a great white albatross had descended upon her. The cane moved beneath her chin, forcing her to rear up slightly. It was cold and smooth. She was now level with the man’s jeweled hand as it slipped underneath the flap of his satin blue gown. She watched as he rubbed against his crotch. His pace all of a sudden quickened and his right leg trembled. He gasped, abruptly closed his legs, shot up and stormed out of the room.

“Back to work now!” The manager yelled, briskly following the old master out the door.

Pui-Yee looked over her shoulder. Lei was asleep. She rolled carefully and quietly out of the bed they shared and strolled over to the window. The moon was but a sliver against a midnight blue sky.

“Pui-Yee, what is it?” Lei asked, half asleep.

“I think a monsoon is coming.”

“What? It is not likely,” Lei said with a yawn. “It is late. Get back into bed.”

“Shanghai seems too far away now,” Pui-Yee stared into the starless sky.

“Hey, what is wrong with you?” Lei asked. “You have been acting strange since this afternoon.”

“I think trouble has found me,” Pui Yee turned toward her friend.

“Trouble? What do you mean? What kind of trouble?”

Pui-Yee walked over to the bed and crawled underneath the covers. She curled on her side. “You did not see it?”

“See what?”

“What he was doing?”

“What was he doing?”

“You did not see it then.”

“See what?” Lei’s voice grew impatient.

“Shhh. Never mind,” Pui-Yee said. “Go back to sleep.” She pecked Lei on the cheek and turned toward the window.

The oldest Auntie in the room, JuJu, cleared her throat and thrust out her chest. The expression on her face changed. All the lines of years gone by pruned like an old, dried plum that had been discarded by the side of the road. JuJu’s lips no longer thick, parted, and she wailed. A wail that rose and dropped in pitch, separating into three distinctive sounds. All the women in the room smiled as JuJu belted out the lyrics to a song of the mountain. There were two others, also from Hakka, who sang along to the chorus:

“She misses home,” Lei whispered to Pui-Yee.

Pui-Yee did not answer.

“Stop,” Lei said. “Why are you working at such a pace? Like a crazed animal?”

Pui-Yee wiped the sweat off her forehead and looked at her friend as if she had just saw her for the first time that day. All the familiar sounds and smells returned to her. “JuJu is singing,” she noticed.

“You have not been the same, not the same,” Lei said, shaking her head.

“Not the same,” Pui-Yee repeated. “Not the same since when?” she asked cuffing her friend’s hands.

Lei shook loose her wrists. “Ow,” she said rubbing the red rings around her skin. “I don’t like these questions. Not from you.”

“You are my dearest friend, Lei. You know why I am this way,” Pui-Yee said, her voice rising. “You have to. You couldn’t have not seen it. You were right there. In the corner of my eye, I saw you. Why, Lei? Why won’t you admit seeing it as I saw it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lei said, bumping her friend’s shoulder, as she bulldozed her way through. She put her arms around JuJu and another auntie and joined in the chorus.

Early next morning, despite the unusual amount of shuffling downstairs, Pui-Yee stayed in her room; a room filled with cots that she shared with others. She uncoiled her thick cotton travel bag, taking out her clothes and a small object wrapped in an unadorned handkerchief. She neatly refolded the tops and bottoms, carefully smoothing out the wrinkles. When she finished, she stacked them, placing them gently at the bottom of the bag. She smiled at the tiny bundle wrapped like a tasty morsel. “Twelve more days, Ma Ma,” she said, pulling loose the notch. “I will take you to Shanghai with me.” She raised the black hairclip with a single, scuffed pearl into the beam of sunlight. A dull yellow tint and a cloudy circle of dust danced around it. She instinctively reached behind her and scratched at the mole on her lower back. The one that mirrored her mother’s.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. It was Auntie Lu, the oldest auntie in the house, earning her the moniker, Daughter of the Silk. There was no one who wound the threads of silk onto the bobbin as deftly as Lu. Unlike most of the women, Lu embraced fate, marrying into the sisterhood where she would remain celibate and independent.

“Re-packing again,” she said, absent her usual cheer.

Pui-Yee half smiled, knowing that this Lu was not the woman who loved her.

“You are wanted downstairs,” Lu said. “Come, let me walk you.”

Pui-Yee folded the hairclip in the handkerchief and placed it in the hidden pocket on the underside of her waistband.

Lu hooked her arm through Pui-Yee’s. It was too tight and felt like shackles. It made Pui-Yee uncomfortable and frightened. Together, they walked down the stairs to the main room where all the women were gathered. Yet, it was quiet, too quiet. A shower of sweet smells assaulted Pui-Yee. She continued to the table against the wall, leaving Auntie Lu behind. The roast pig that sat on the table stared at her with a pair of dead eyes. A scattering of Dragon and Phoenix cakes sat on top of doilies. Swatches of fabric were fanned out next to a needle and thread kit. Pui-Yee picked up a red paper cut out off the floor—*Double Happiness*—and placed it beside the roast pig. She turned and stared into a swell of lamenters. “Who is the lucky girl,” she said playfully, finding Lei in a far corner. “Or, is it a lucky auntie?”

Her spirited mirth went unanswered. She could no longer look at their solemn faces, yet the table full of gifts offered her no diversion. “Such scrumptious cakes,” she said, picking one up. “Why isn’t anyone eating? It is not everyday that we get to sample such treats.” She heard a muffled sob, swallowed and put on a smile. She split the cake in half and drew it closer to her mouth. Her hand trembled and the pastry began to flake.

“You cannot eat it,” JuJu slapped the cake out of Pui-Yee’s hand.

She felt the strength of Lu again. Their arms interlocked, the older woman supported her weight and would not let her crumble.

“No,” Pui-Yee listlessly shook her head, “there is a mistake.”

From JuJu to Lu, she searched for confirmation, but the answers were found in their faces. Underneath the bags of skin on the Hakka woman’s face burrowed a sadness

because her eyes were seen. Lu had a frown that when angered, distorted her forehead.

“I am going to Shanghai in twelve days,” Pui-Yee whispered as she was helped onto a chair.

She felt the weight of JuJu’s hand on her lap. “They will come for you in two,” she said.

“No,” Pui-Yee said, sitting up. “That is not custom.”

“The man does what he wants,” JuJu replied.

Then, a woman called out: “We can’t let him take her.”

And, another: “We must help her.”

“Help her steal away in the night.”

“No, that is too dangerous. If they catch her, they will kill her.”

Pui-Yee shifted from woman to woman, hearing their voices. The words, though, were not heard. They were carried off by the monsoon brewing inside her. Her gaze settled once again on Lei, who was an ocean away and beyond her reach. She swallowed and opened her mouth. The words did not come. Lei would not hear them anyway.

“There is one way,” Lu said. She spoke to all the women as if seeking a consensus. She turned her back and threw a palm against the wall. “You must marry into the Sisterhood.”

“A spinster,” one woman cried. “It is not her fate.”

Lu looked over her shoulder at Pui-Yee. “You will remain here with the sisters of the silk. It is a decision that cannot be made lightly. Ours is a way of life that no man can deny. You must declare yourself the non-marrying kind. And, this, you must do quickly.”

All eyes were once again on the young bride-to-be. Her fingers worked frantically in her lap. “I have done everything to repay my debt as daughter. What more do you want of me?” She asked, looking up toward the giant rotating ceiling fan as it spun lethargically and endlessly. “If only—if only I can make my way to Shanghai.”

“He owns the ports in Tientsin. You will never make it,” Lu said firmly.

“It isn’t fair,” Pui-Yee said. “Have I not earned my chance? To see all that I have been working toward taken away from me in an instant, in a chance encounter is too cruel.” She brushed the mole on her back. “Both our lives ruined by men, Ma Ma. First by my father and now Master Ko. If it is my fate never to see Shanghai, then I shall not be taken as wife to this man.” Her hands were lying apart on her lap, palms upward, fingers listless. “So, be it,” she said. “I am my mother’s daughter. No man shall own me from this day forward.”

Chapter Nine

1936. Soochow.

So many voices culminated into the sound of laughter. And, then, a child’s giggle rose above all the other’s. Song Lin poked in. The family hall was moderately lit, emitting a warmth as if the entire room was gold washed. The massive round table in the center was encircled by eight matching chairs with high backs. Twin, tall folding screens stood on both sides of the room. Each panel depicted a section of a panorama of adults and children celebrating in front of a garden temple. Below the screens sat colorful porcelain vases filled with long orchid stems in a fury of fuchsia.

Song Lin felt as if she had found a room in this house that belonged in an idyllic past; a beautiful memory that could only belong to a woman. She continued to let her eyes wander about, marking each discovery with a lingering gaze. Mei, whose voice was the loudest, always in song, tipped a wine glass back. Beside her was the dark stranger, Pao. He stood with his hands locked behind him and his feet shoulder width apart. Seated at the head of the table was the old Master Ko. He wore a hat with a wide brim from which a thin, black veil hung. His hands, Song Lin remembered. They were shoved into his vest pockets, hidden from sight. When Song Lin approached, the houseman quickly lifted the immobile master off the seat and into a wheel chair and carted him out through one of the many curtained passageways.

Song Lin followed and stumbled into the young man crouched beside the plant. Chewed up peach flower petals fell out of his mouth. He shielded his eyes from her and began to cry.

“Jing Mo!” came a voice. He was seated with his back to her. Pearl hopped off his lap and ran to Song Lin.

The man stood and turned around. He was a beautiful man. When he walked toward her, he kept one hand in his trouser pocket and the other over the closed button on his suit.

“I am Jingchen,” he said. “You must be Teacher Song.”

Song Lin patted down her hair and gave a slow nod.

“Do I look strange to you?” he asked.

Song Lin placed her hand over her chest. “Forgive me. I did not mean to stare. I have been anxious to meet you.”

His skin was like alabaster and his eyes were slightly wide set. The mouth was full and strong like Jing Jing’s.

Jingchen plucked a peach blossom from the little tree and tucked it into her hair. “I have been looking forward to meeting you as well. Come,” he said, placing his hand over her lower back. He ushered her to a seat at the other end of the table, stooped and whispered into her ear: “Perhaps we can talk a little after dinner.”

Before she answered, he walked away, returning to take the host’s seat. Mei took the third seat from his left. The arrangement was deliberate such that there were wide gaps between them; places reserved for those no longer living. Only Pearl seemed to sit out of place as she sat beside Song Lin.

“Pao, Uncle, please sit with us,” Jingchen bid the driver and houseman.

Jing Mo would not sit. A frown and pout distorted his face. He counted the number of occupied chairs and was not happy. He pointed at Song Lin.

Jingchen shook his head and wagged a remonstrative finger. The younger brother ducked and shirked his shoulders.

“There are no servants or guests here,” Jingchen said, directing his speech toward the teacher. “I hope in my absence you have been made more than welcome. We are a family.”

Quickly, the laughter and chatter ensued.

“You look happy today,” Pearl said to Song Lin. “I knew that if you met Jingchen, you would be happy again.”

“What does my mood have anything to do with your brother,” Song Lin asked, playfully tapping Pearl’s nose.

“You don’t like him?” Pearl asked.

“I hardly know your brother. How can I say I dislike him?”

“You will like him very much Teacher Song. Jingchen is my favorite. The house likes him very much too.”

Indeed, Song Lin remembered that Jing Jing had said she loved her brother Jingchen most and searched about the room for her.

“Pearl, where is Jing Jing?”

“She is ill.”

“Not well? I will visit her later.”

“We do not visit the sick in this house. To visit a sick one will bring you sickness,” Pearl said.

“I am not afraid,” Song Lin smiled. “When you were ill, did you not want someone to sit with you? To read to you?”

Mei’s laugh brought all the attention to her. “The teacher has been good for our little Pearl,” she said, rising from her chair. She sashayed her way to Jingchen, running her fingers over his shoulders and across his back. She refilled his glass and lowered herself to whisper in his ear, but loud enough so that all could hear: “I have missed you.” Wearing the same cheongsam she wore the day she met Song Lin, she looked exquisite. The loose threads were re-stitched, but the slit had a habit of hiking up, leaving little else to the imagination.

The houseman, too, had left the seat of his chair more cold than warm, rhythmically refilling the young master’s plate with the silkiest and most tender parts of the chicken. Even though Jingchen hadn’t touched his food, he smiled and accepted it all the same. The houseman would only say “It is good to have you back” and then he would return to his seat.

Seeing how well the family honored Jingchen, Jing Mo clapped his hands excitedly and jumped off his chair. He climbed onto his brother’s lap, wrapped his arms around his neck and kissed his face.

Jingchen postured up against the stiff back of the chair. “Little brother, you are much too big now to sit on my lap,” he said, patting Jing Mo on the head. For a while, the sound of their voices faded into a milieu of several conversations.

From time to time, Jingchen and Song Ling’s eyes found each other and there they stopped briefly. How strange it was, Song Lin thought, that the two brothers would not look at each other directly. The houseman, too, avoided eye contact with everyone, but the younger Ko son. Perhaps the servant’s station was too low for everyone else and in the way Jing Mo was not right, they were a match for each other.

And, as if on cue, the room fell completely silent when Jingchen removed the handkerchief from his lap and placed it on his plate. He crossed his legs and looked at Mei, to which everyone in the room did the same and all eyes were on the songstress.

Mei covered her mouth and giggled. She stood and crossed her arms over her lower body, then over her chest. Her skin radiated a coppery yellow, flecked with gold. She parted her lips which had the color of a black rose and belted out a melodic hum, sustained in a single, long breath that mimicked the line of a string of sparrows cutting spirals in the sky. She moved around the table, letting her long fingers prance along a shoulder, an earlobe or a chin. To Song Lin, she touched no part of her, eyeing the peach blossom in the woman’s hair. Her pitch fell and she quickened to correct it.

When Mei had finished, Song Lin, too, applauded with verbosity, adding to the eruption of awe in the room. Pearl had moved to her most loved brother’s side, cuddling his arm like a doll.

“Your voice,” Jingchen said, “is the eight sounds of music. From the *pipa* to the *guqin* to a sorceress’ flute.”

“I will sing for you whenever you desire me,” Mei curtsied.

“Gods’ gifts are short lived. It is a shame that the world is deprived of it,” Jingchen shook his head.

Song Lin finished her wine glass. The houseman refilled it again. She noticed that no one had touched the food on their plates, except for Jing Mo. Although the driver’s body was turned toward her, she was sure he wasn’t looking at her. He hadn’t really moved at all since they sat down at the table.

“Teacher Song,” Jingchen said, “I have brought you something back from Tientsin. You will forgive me if it is not to your specifications as I do not know what your likes and dislikes are.”

“What is it like outside?” Song Lin asked absently, feeling the heat from the alcohol shoot up her throat. “Where are the Japanese armies?”

A hush hung over the room like a collapsing roof. The houseman fumbled over a pair of chopsticks. Jing Mo buried his face in his hands and began to weep.

“I was—it was just a question,” Song Lin offered, watching Jingchen. “You need not answer it if it makes you all uncomfortable.”

Jingchen made a loose fist with his left hand and raised it to his mouth, resting it against his lips in a contemplative manner.

Song Lin did not like the way he looked at her. She drained her wine glass again. It wobbled. A final, hastened prod sent it crashing down onto a plate. It rang in Song Lin’s ears, screaming.

“Refill your glass?” Mei asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“No, no,” Song Lin answered, sweeping a hand across her forehead.

“You wish to retire to your room, Teacher Song?” asked the houseman.

“No, I wish to stay,” Song Lin answered.

“No need to assail the handkerchief,” Mei said. “Your grip is rather brute-like.”

Song Lin released the handkerchief and hid her hand underneath it. “I—it has been a while—the company of others—I miss it.”

No one said a word. The child too looked upon Song Lin as if she had two hideous heads.

“Have I said something to offend you?” Song Lin asked all in the room, feeling the heat rise up to her face.

The silence persisted and Song Lin could no longer contain her dissatisfaction with the house.

“Why do you all sweep my questions under as if they are a disease? Have I no right to speak, no right to ask?”

“Mei, will you escort Teacher Song to her room?” Jingchen asked. “Uncle, will you prepare some ginger tea for her?”

“I do not wish to go to my room,” Song Lin said, pushing up and off her chair. The legs screeched, scraping across the floor.

Jingchen remained seated. His eyes grew darker. They did not have the same softness as Jing Jing’s. A frown line appeared against an otherwise perfect forehead like an unwritten upon canvas.

They stared at one another, unflinching, until Song Lin dizzyed and felt a quiver in her knees. She braced herself on the rounded table edge, gripping so tight that the veins in her hands turned a dark blue. Suddenly, Mei and the house man converged on her.

Mei’s steps were too small. Song Lin staggered forward, causing both women to crash into the door frame. Mei freed her hand from the teacher’s clumsy grapple and pushed open the door. She saw the nodes and freckled insides of the peach flower as it bore down on her. Quickly, she slapped at it, watching its slow descent as it drifted to the floor. She stomped on it, twisting her foot with such vigor that her entire hip swiveled.

“It does not suit you, little *laoshi*,” she said, as she escorted Song Ling to the bed.

“What are you talking of?” Song Lin asked, fighting hard to keep the drunkenness away. She was not anything like Mei. This was an unusual occasion and even she could not understand why she drank as much as she did.

Mei kissed the roof of her mouth twice. “A captive heart. A captive heart. This is the meaning of the peach flower. Don’t you know?” She scooted down the other end of the bed and removed Song Lin’s shoes, flicking them off so that they somersaulted onto the floor. “Do not let your imagination get the better of you. He may have given you the flower, but it means nothing. It is just the generosity of a man who pities a woman such as you.”

“Pity,” Song Lin repeated.

Mei dabbed the teacher’s eyes with a handkerchief. “Dry them little *laoshi*. Remember, I am the only person in this house who can understand your heart. We are kindred, remember?”

Song Lin turned defiantly away.

When Mei got up, she shook her head and sighed. Running a finger along the re-opened seam on her dress, she hummed a sad tune. “What once was can never be again,” she said.

Song Lin shifted. The sound of cotton rubbing against coarse silk drew a wince from Mei. The teacher had curled her body into a childlike position to which Mei giggled quietly to herself before walking toward the door. Once there, she kicked the crushed peach blossom over the threshold and into the cold night. Before pulling the doors closed, she looked on Song Lin again. “I will do you a kindness, little *laoshi*, and

let you in on a family tradition. We do not talk about the outside in this house. Perhaps one day you will return my kindness when I need it.”

“She did not know,” Song Lin mumbled.

The words sounded so distant, yet the wound was ever so present. Mei arched her brow and angled her head.

“She did not know he had wife and child.”

Mei leaned up against the door and smirked.

“But, she had to say otherwise. And, that was what she said. Should two people fall into disgrace when one can easily bear the full accounting of it? So, she became the seductress. It was her idea. Yes. He did not turn her from it. No....”

Chapter Ten

A single loud pop stirred Song Lin from sleep. She peeled back the blanket slowly, wiping the sliver of dried dribble at the corner of her lip. She sat up, rubbing the leaden weights that sat over her eyelids. Then came a relentless crackling of sounds; a succession of identical blasts. Song Lin clapped her hands against her ears, jumped out of bed and slipped into her shoes. Still in her clothes from yesterday evening’s banquet, she draped a thick shawl over her shoulders and ran frantically around the room. For a moment, there was silence. The popping had ceased, only to rent the skies once again. She imagined a firing squad in khaki. Grins that mimicked the roundness of the rising red sun on the armbands they wore. The block of wood which pillowed her head night after night would not budge. Song Lin threw her weight into it, pushing with both palms till it rotated onto its side. She grabbed her journal, rolling it over three times and held it like a scroll, making a frenzied dash toward the door.

The doors seemed to open of their own and the skies suddenly darkened as a frenetic flock of black birds tore into it, casting a huge shadow over the courtyard. The cawing of crows and hissing of shots were deafening, sending Song Lin’s heart racing. The tail end of the flock dipped low over the courtyard. Turgid wings slapped like toughened cowhide, murderously sharp. Song Lin crouched, covering her head with both hands. The shadow was lifted, following the flock’s hastened retreat. She thought to run with them, away from the gunshots. She couldn’t, so she ran toward it. “Pearl, I am coming.”

Song Lin ran faster and faster, gripping the journal like a baton. The faster her heart beat, the tighter her grip. There were small moments of dead silence when the firing ceased. The air smelled rancid. Rotten eggs fused with metal. When the crackling and popping resumed, Song Lin threw herself against the archway, inching out slowly till Pearl’s courtyard was in full view.

“What—is—this?” She whispered between pants.

The child stood atop a carpet of red debris as paper and tube parts hurled above her like a vault; the fragments falling in a downward trajectory. A pall of black smoke hung over her. The child did not blink despite being pelted with the refuse. Her long, disheveled sleeves ran down her sides. At the joint of the sleeves were fisted notches. The decrepit brother sat on his haunches, waving a long string of red firecrackers in one hand. He laughed heinously, leaping into the air like an amphibious creature, leaving a trail of blackened match heads.

He struck a match against the sole of his black leather shoes. It hissed but did not ignite. He made a barking grunt and tossed it, reaching inside his chest pocket for another. Before he could draw it out, he was violently pushed, and the string of red bangers cushioned his fall. He swung his legs like an animal trying to right itself and when he did, he cried profusely when he saw that he had crushed a whole line. Song Lin snatched it away from him and unraveled it, plucking each one off the vine till the cluster was almost bare.

Jing Mo leapt up in a final effort to salvage it. He found himself knelt before the teacher, his face stinging.

Song Lin’s hand was raised in mid air. She saw a trickle of blood on Jing Mo’s lip and her hand began to tremble. She steadied it in her other hand.

He fled from her, from the courtyard and out the archway.

“Pearl,” Song Lin ran and embraced the child. “You mustn’t let him do these things to you.”

Pearl’s face was soaked in red tears. “The house is his. He can do as he pleases. Do not worry for me.”

“That is nonsense!” Song Lin said. “I will speak to—to Jing Jing!”

“She is not well, remember? Really, we were just playing.”

Song Lin plucked the pieces of red tubing and paper from Pearl’s hair.

It was nearing five when Song Lin left Pearl’s quarters. She stopped by Jing Jing’s room, but the gaps and crevices emitted a coolness devoid of the woman’s warmth. Despite the sudden unfamiliarity, she knocked once, then twice.

“Who is there?” Came Jing Jing’s voice.

“It is Song Lin. I have come to visit you.”

“I am not well.”

“I know. That is why I have come. To check in on you.”

Song Lin heard a shuffle inside. One that moved away from the door.

“That is not necessary,” came the faint voice. “Go on. I will come see you when I am better.”

Song Lin pressed against the door. “Jing Jing, I—”

“—Please. Go on your way.”

Song Lin pulled herself from the door, hoping that they would open and Jing Jing would walk out. She might be wearing her riding boots or be in a traditional cheongsam. It didn't matter. Seeing the woman was somehow very important. She was the only adult in the house that Song Lin could talk to.

As she retreated, she wandered about aimlessly and found herself at the old master's courtyard. She paused, stared into the staunch pupil-less eyes of the stone guardian. In the second that her eyes diverted to the female guardian, the male seemed to rear up. Song Lin back pedaled and walked briskly away, breaking into a sprint, constantly looking over her shoulders.

A man sat on the stone stool in her courtyard. He had been reading a book which he tucked into his back pocket upon her arrival.

“You are just the person I wanted to see,” she said, comforted by another's presence.

Jingchen gestured for her to sit on the stool across from him. The lapels of his brown suit were drawn up and a silk scarf was tied handsomely like an ascot around his neck. He had only secured the middle button on his suit so that a slip of a green sweater showed through.

“I have been waiting for you,” he said. “I've lost almost an entire afternoon.” His thoughts were addled and he barely looked at her.

Her eyes fell into a natural squint as she watched how his finger ran an unintentional line down the middle of his lip before he spoke again.

“I could find no reason for it,” he shook his head.

His tone was curious, not hardened. So, Song Lin’s demeanor softened in response.

“Why did you do it?” His eyes, a satin brown against the copper light of a dipping sun, finally found her.

Song Lin clasped her hands together on her lap. “I was wrong to do it,” she said. “I didn’t mean to, but—”

“—You struck him.”

“Yes, but had you been there, you might understand how I was overcome with such anger.”

“Is it not enough to take and destroy his toys? Ought that not be enough of a punishment?”

“Toys?!”

“Yes. I’ve taken great trouble to bring him back the one thing that makes him happy. I have spoken to Mei as well and she has told me more than I can bear.” He sighed noticeably. “Why must you disrupt the harmony in this house?”

Song Lin stood up. “In your frequent absences, perhaps there is much that happens here that you do not know about. Everything appears out of place, but everyone acts as if it is nothing. The mishandling of Pearl—”

“—Pearl is well cared for,” Jingchen said, rising from his stool.

“A child’s smile is an innocent lie.”

“Pearl is happy here,” Jingchen said, unbuttoning his suit and finding his seat again. “Has she told you something different? Has she told you anything other than that what you saw this afternoon was the two of them playing a game?”

Song Lin swallowed, felt the rogue vein above her brow pulse. It was true. That is what Pearl had told her. Yet, she remembered Pearl had once told her in private that Jing Mo had been the cause of her distress, but she knew the child would not admit to it. She hadn't then and would not now.

“Please,” he said, gesturing with his hand. “Return to your seat.”

Song Lin stood a few seconds longer before she complied.

“It seems to me you have many complaints. You should seek redress from me as the head of the household, or in my absence, you may see my sister or Mei. There is an order to things and this is how it has always been—this house—our ways. But, first, there is the matter of my brother.”

Song Lin crossed her arms. “I will apologize to him.”

Jingchen shook his head.

“No? What then would you have me do?”

“You have taken his pride,” he said. “In order to restore it, I will strike you on his behalf.”

The way he sat there, perfectly still. The way he spoke to her, with an air of entitlement. In the way that he was handsome, he was very unattractive.

“You cannot believe that I would entertain such an idea,” Song Lin said, clenching her teeth as she walked toward her quarters. “I do not say that I am in the right, and I am fully prepared to accept any other form of redress.”

Jingchen, too, rose and followed her to her door. “I will need to think on it some more; to find something acceptable to the both of us.”

“You will let me know when you have. In the meantime, my complaints,” Song Lin said. “I wish to start with my travel bag. I should like my belongings returned to me.” She pushed the doors open with her back to him. “I will give you a full list of my complaints tomorrow.”

Jingchen unhitched one of the lit lanterns hanging over the canopy and held it inside her door, lighting her path.

“I came here with few things,” she said, taking the lantern from him.

Jingchen reached into his back pocket. “Then, you should have this,” he said, handing her a scrolled up book. “You left it in the courtyard earlier when you interrupted the children’s play time.”

Her face was flushed and she snatched it from him, holding it behind her as to hide it from view.

Jingchen leaned up against the door frame and scratched his eyebrow. He stared into the glow of the lantern and not at her. His eyes flashed with a yellow hue, flickering in rhythm with the lone dancer inside the paper lantern. “You are always someone—there or here—it is the place where you find yourself that matters.”

“You read it?!”

“Not intentionally,” Jingchen said with a dismissive shrug. “I saw the family seal on the cover and thought it was one of mine.”

Song Lin closed the doors with haste, such that Jingchen had to jump out of the way. Once inside, she untied the ribbon and drew open her journal, hurriedly flipping the pages. Finding the entry, she lit the candle on the table top and reread the passage:

So much has happened here. Strange things. All of it. The people in this house are most peculiar. I have grown attached to the child. You will

think this foolish of me. You will say that I have turned her into a Siu Pei. I haven't. She is different. Mature in the way that children are not supposed to be. This is perhaps because she is the daughter of a concubine. Her mother hangs over the house like a ghost. I have always heard that concubines in great houses hung themselves. I think this is what happened to her, Hao. The answer lies in the pit of a well, but I haven't worked up the nerve to investigate this further. You may think I should leave things as they are, but I cannot explain why I am driven to learn more of this woman. It was just the other day I learned her name and it felt as if an invitation from her to me.

And, then there is Jing Jing who I find most fascinating. The other day, she smiled when she saw I had kept her handkerchief. I knew the gift came from her, not Mei. I accepted it under pretense. Do not ask me why. It felt right at the time.

Mei.

Mei is hard toward me.

*I do not care for her; yet, she is the one I
have revealed the most to.*

She knows something of you.

It is hard to keep these things guarded against another woman. She is strong. She made me realize I have never had that. Conversations of the heart. Not with anyone, not even you, Hao. Do not be upset with me.

It is what I feel.

I am terribly alone here.

And lost.

*As I sit here writing,
I wonder if I had always been lost,
even when I was with you.*

If you were here, you would tell me how foolish I am for thinking such things.

I know you would.

Song Lin was surprised when a knock came at her door, so late in the day. Under other circumstances, she would have welcomed it with much delight. She tucked the journal underneath her pillow and haphazardly drew a shawl around her shoulders. At the door was the house man with a rectangular envelope tucked inside of his chest pocket. He presented it to her like a plate of food. There was a red border sprinkled with glitter and in the center was her name scrawled in black ink. Song Lin received it with apprehension, slowly plucking the seal. The brush strokes were lazy and heavy, leaving horrible black blots just over the tips of the characters.

“An invitation?” Song Lin asked the stooped house man.

He gestured with his hand, ushering her trip.

Song Lin shook her head in resignation. “What game do you play now, Mei?”

The formality of such an invitation was almost absurd. She had even signed the invitation with her title, the third wife of Master Ko.

“Will you bring me a tin pan tomorrow, something old, something for burning paper? Uncle?”

Song Lin watched him closely, the way his eyes shifted toward her, but would not look at her.

“Is it to your liking that I address you as Uncle? Jingchen has said we are as if a family, hadn’t he?” Her tone was full of sarcasm.

“You may address me as you please.”

“Very well, then. You will see if you can find me a pan?”

“For burning paper?” he asked.

“Yes, for burning paper.”

With the company of another, the journey seemed much shorter. Song Lin found herself at the entrance of Mei’s quarters. The room across from her was pitch black and Song Lin’s heart sunk.

The house man handed her the lantern. “For your trip back.”

“And, what about you?”

She thought she saw a childlike expression on his face. One that had never been cared for. She felt horrible for having treated him badly earlier—it was the house; not the people.

“I know the house and grounds well, Teacher Song. I am very sorry,” he said as he departed.

Song Lin held the lantern out, lighting his path until he was well out of view. She wondered why he frequently apologized to her, even when the occasion warranted none.

Mei’s voice stirred her to.

“Little *laoshi*, is that you outside my door? Come in, won’t you?”

Song Lin pushed the doors open, blew out the light in the lantern and hung it on a perch.

Mei was lying on an auburn chaise decorated with turquoise and maize colored birds. Her head was propped up on a hand. The lids of her eyes were heavy and her pupils were covered over by a glossy sheen. She was smoking a long ivory pipe, exhaling clouds of yellow smoke. The smoke did not lift, it veiled her. All around the room were lush paintings of exotic birds, spirited and vibrant. Panels of cloth with embroidered creatures of the bird kingdom, finished and unfinished, were scattered

throughout the room. Some with the needle and thread still poking out of it. The small woman seemed to blend into room.

“It is as if a bird sanctum, no?” Mei asked. “See how that pair over there are perched? Are they not graceful and full of tranquility?”

It was a pair of red crowned cranes with their long necks intertwined and their white bodies enmeshed such that one began where the other ended. The black feathers fanned out like the coattails of a gentleman’s jacket. It was the red of their crowns that held them with grace.

“You have asked me here.” Song Lin said. “For what purpose?”

Mei tapped beside her. “Since Jing Jing is not well, I thought we might keep each other’s company, to ward off the monotony of such long sleepless nights.”

Song Lin sat on the other end of the long chaise.

“Your gown,” Song Lin said. “I can make a stitch that will stay.”

Mei laughed, throwing her head back. “Did you say that to hurt my feelings? Do you have the hands of a seamstress too? Mine are my poor mother’s hands. No matter how hard I try to change them, I cannot. Suppose I should have just cut them off.” She ran a finger down the unsightly seam, tracing its jagged line. “There is no stitch that will mend this. Perhaps I should have chosen to keep one of the other dresses.”

Mei sat up and swung her legs off the regal roost, handing the pipe to Song Lin, to which Song Lin declined. “You take no delight in sinful things?” Mei asked. “Jingchen brought this back for me. Always when he comes back, he brings us gifts. My husband and I had shared many an opium pleasure, you know. When we married, he was no longer the kind of husband who could satisfy a woman’s need. Of course he tried. I

think he wanted to very much, but his vitality; well, it was that of a tiger past its prime.” Mei drew her lips into a pout. “Such a sad, sad tiger. I felt so horribly bad for him, you know. Surely, you can understand that a man, well, a man must have his pride intact. So, I would say every time we returned from an opium sojourn, ‘husband, husband, you were ferocious.’ Then I would run my fingers just above my bosom and squeeze my eyes closed, then exhale—that one—the exhale of ecstasy.” Mei chuckled, covering her mouth with her hand, then took a long look at the teacher.

Song Lin wavered under the penetrating stare and walked over to the round table in the center of the room. She did not hear the small woman’s footsteps, but felt Mei’s fingers as they fluttered along her back. She jolted, an innate reflex that responds too easily to a sensuous touch.

“Tell me about him,” Mei whispered.

The breathy whisper made Song Lin shiver. One of Mei’s hands had snaked its way around her waist and now she felt the flat of the woman’s palm against her stomach. This time, the whole of her body, inside and outside, trembled.

Mei pressed harder and harder against Song Lin’s stomach and wrapped her right arm across the teacher’s chest. She held the long white tip of the pipe to the woman’s lips. “Take it,” she whispered. “It will loose your lips and you are just screaming to tell someone. Let it out. Let it out. There, there. Not too much at once.”

Chapter Eleven

1934. Shanghai.

Song Lin was thrown against the wall. The sheer force of it; she thought she had swallowed her own tongue. His hands worked quickly up her skirt, drawing down her underpants. She felt his thigh impose itself between her legs. How quick the hands moved, digging deep into her flesh, squeezing and molding. She felt the brass of knuckles as they rapped against her, then the sound of his zipper coming undone. Song Lin braced the heels of her palms against him, pushing and repelling, which encouraged his momentum. Each time, she felt the room shake as she was knocked up against the wood boards. Like the hide of an old drum, it was struck steadily and mightily.

Song Lin leaned back slowly, hearing the way her hair moved like tiny beetles on a plank of wood.

He leaned into her neck, rubbing his nose and face into her skin. When his lips found hers, he did not take them. He kissed it as if he found a droplet of perfumed wine on the rim of a cup.

Her eyes were fastened on the down turned picture frames on the bedside table.

He angled her chin so that their eyes met.

“Hao—”

“—What is wrong, Lin?”

“The photos. Why do you always put them face down?”

He noticed the clear button on her blouse which dangled from a single white thread.

Song Lin followed his gaze and pinched the button between two fingers. “I will have to mend this.”

“Leave it,” he said. “It marks you well.”

Hao walked over to the bedside table and righted the two picture frames. Next to it was a tin pan filled half way with water. He sank a white cloth in and squeezed out the excess. “It is out of respect, Lin. They need not bear witness to our love making.”

In one photograph, a much younger Hao stood to the right of the seated man in the center. The central figure was his father, the village director of Sanpo, a small fishing town. All the other men comprised three generations of the Tzu clan. They stood forthright, emitting prominence. All except for Hao who stood with his shoulders slumped. While all the faces were stoic, Hao’s was unhappy.

The woman and the little boy in the other photo were unremarkable and Hao never spoke of them. The woman was plain and had thick, large hands. She wore knee length wide pants and a cotton top that was buttoned to the neck. Her hair was tied up in a restricting bun, pulling taut the skin on her forehead. Her lips were a thin line. Such a hard face, Song Lin had thought. She imagined the woman was a very unforgiving mother. The little boy standing beside her was no more than eight and was round in the face. He had large tired eyes and a sullen grin. His hair was shorn to the skin, except for a patch on the crown.

Hao wiped the moisture from his neck and then underneath his chin. He watched Song Lin as she watched him and elongated each motion, dragging the cloth slowly across his skin. He wiped his mouth and saw that the cloth had stained. “I like the color on your lips. Is it new?”

“My roommate helped me pick it out,” Song Lin said, moving over to the bench.

Hao lit a cigarette and handed the open tin to her.

She removed one, holding it like a writing instrument. She held it to her lips and waited for him to light it. She inhaled and choked on the foulness of it. He sat beneath her on the blanket spread across the floor and watched as she took to it.

“Like this,” he said, pointing to the tin. “Hold it like she does.”

The women on the tin were almost naked. Song Lin quickly averted her eyes to the woman’s hand and imitated the casual, relaxed motion of her wrist and fingers, letting the cigarette fall into a natural groove.

Hao reached behind her neck and coiled the length of her long hair into a loose bob. He drew back, the cigarette clenched between his teeth, and admired the new look.

The women on the tin had short, wavy hair. She noticed.

He smiled, tucking the tin into her hands. “It is yours.”

Song Lin ran her fingers over the tin cover and secreted a smile. “Will you be gone long?”

“I will be back in ten days,” he said, cinching the belt on his trousers. “You will not miss me much. I will send my thoughts of you to you each day.”

“I could come with you, to meet—”

“—Silly girl,” he said, “my father’s heart is already weak. Do you wish to take his life?”

“No, but I could attend to him. I would not mind taking care of him for you.”

Hao buttoned the last button on his shirt and left it untucked. “Here,” he said, placing Song Lin’s high-heeled leather shoes at her feet. He fitted each one on her foot

and pulled her up. “We better get into town early. There are things—gifts—I will need to buy for my return trip to the village.”

The strip ahead was littered with rickshaws and pullers, street vendors, bicyclists, and a few automobiles blaring their horns. They had moved only a feet or two in the last minute. Hao asked the puller to drop them off in front of a Methodist Mission. The boy’s muscles contracted as he rested the rickshaw. On busy streets like this, the weight of idleness crippled the best pullers. Hao disembarked first, helping Song Lin descend. He quickly retracted his hand and offered her the parasol. There was something romantic about a woman underneath the shade of a lace trimmed parasol and Hao enjoyed sneaking glances at her. They walked shoulder to shoulder, but his hands were kept clasped behind him.

The smell of hot ginkgo nuts drew Song Lin toward a street vendor. Under a wide straw pointed hat, the woman stirred the nuts with a wide wood flat spoon. When she saw Song Lin, she awkwardly curtsied, noticing the made up face and the Western jacket with the heavy shoulder padding and banjo sleeves. “Only eight—No—ten coppers a package, little Miss,” she said. Song Lin signaled one with a raised finger and proceeded to take off the white glove on her right hand when Hao offered the woman ten coppers. He took the package of burning hot ginkgo and tossed them from one hand to the other.

Song Lin grimaced and almost laughed when he opened her purse and tossed them in. He held the lobes of his ears to cool his fingers. “Eat them later,” he nodded. As he turned, he slammed into a foreigner dressed in black wearing a black top hat. A

pair of bibles sat in the crook of his arm. “Two coppers,” the man said in perfect Chinese. Hao declined and took Song Ling’s wrist, escorting her away. In the background, Song Lin heard the man talk of the one God and sin. He spoke louder as if to chase them with his words.

They turned a corner and came into full view of an open space cafe; the phonograph blasting a Shirley Temple tune. A group of Chinese soldiers wearing ill fitted uniforms and insignias pinned sloppily to their shoulders smoked cigarettes by the curb. They shouted obscenities at Song Lin as she passed. She ignored them and kept her eyes on her lover who by now had kept to a pattern of three paces ahead. In front of him was a large billboard advertisement of Lux soap from Great Britain. That was the last advertisement she saw before they ambled their way into a small marketplace with several narrow and dank alleys.

Song Lin fastened her parasol and walked carefully over the sewage tunnels. She heard loud squawks and saw a man and a woman holding a large bird down on a crate. The man had a raised cleaver in his hand. When he saw Song Lin, his expressionless face turned quickly to one of anger. He spat a glob of phlegm the color of licorice in her direction and yelled, “Expatriate slut!” The broad knife fell full force onto the chicken’s neck. Song Lin swallowed and quickened her pace. She had come here before as there were things she was accustomed to purchasing in the old city, but she had never come dressed like this.

“Wait here,” Hao said, leaving her by a storefront wood bench. “I’ll only be a minute.”

Song Lin reached for him and then retracted her hand. She watched him as he ran across the street to Lee’s Specialties Shop. The faded sign hung on a slant. An emaciated dog with matted gray fur limped past her, followed by a group of six children with sticks and rocks. Their faces were smeared with streaks of brown and their hair was moist and hardened. The clothes hung on their bodies like sheets of dirty linen. They stopped and observed her.

“Is she real?” the little girl asked.

The tallest boy slapped her on the head. “Stupid pig! Of course she isn’t. She’s a mannequin.”

“Oh,” the little girl responded, twirling a strand of greasy hair with her finger.

Song Lin could not help but to chuckle. She realized she had sat completely still. The children gasped and stepped away from her.

“I am a person much like you and you,” she said, unbuttoning her jacket. “Tell me, what are your names?”

The children did not answer. They moved further away from her. Song Lin took her jacket off and folded it onto her lap. One by one, she undid the cluster of round pin curls behind her head until she had a mouthful of pins. She shook her head and her long unbound hair flowed free. “There,” she said, “is this better?”

The little girl stepped forward. “You looked like one of the women in the glass windows or the women on the big posters.”

The tallest boy dug his fingers into the neck of her collar and yanked hard. “Stupid pig!” he said. “I told you she is real.”

Song Lin sucked in her bottom lip and shook her head. “That will not do,” she said to the boy. “The little lady has a name and she would be most pleased if you would address her proper.”

The girl giggled. “Little lady?” She twirled her hair. “My name is Snow. Everyone in my family calls me Snow Pea. Suppose when I grow bigger, I will be called Snow.”

Song Lin patted beside her and Snow climbed onto the bench. “It is nice to meet you Snow,” Song Lin said, taking the ginkgo nuts out of her purse. The brown paper bag looked like a beggar’s purse, and crinkled when she unwound the top. She placed one in her mouth and then Snow’s. “One ginkgo,” Song Lin said to the crowd of children, “for every time you call Snow by her name.” The other five children rushed forward and repeated the name “Snow” as many times as they could without taking a single breath.

When Hao came out of the store, he ran toward Song Lin shouting, “Go on, get out of here!” He kicked at the air and the children scampered away. Song Lin picked Snow up off the bench. The little girl chased after her friends. Then, she suddenly turned and stopped. “You are much prettier like this,” she said, and ran off again.

“Hao, they weren’t doing anything. Why did you have to scare them off?”

“I thought they were hounding you for spare coins,” Hao said. “Beggar children can be quite aggressive.”

“They have taken nothing from me.”

“They have taken all your ginkgo.”

Song Lin held an open, empty brown bag in her lap. She looked down the dark alley in search of Snow. “I can always get more.”

Hao swept the long black tresses from Song Lin’s shoulders, all the while shaking his head. “Sometimes I think you are the Goddess Guanyin incarnate. Why do you always feel the need to be saving someone?”

Song Lin noticed the wind-up tin monkey poking out of Hao’s bag. She took the bag from him and pushed the monkey aside. It was sitting on top of a windup taxi with the American Ford Hire Service logo, one of four major taxi companies in Shanghai.

“Second hand,” Hao said. “I was lucky to find it. They’re quite popular with children.”

Song Lin nodded quietly. “Hao—”

“—Come,” Hao said. “I have a few more things to pick up.”

Song Lin followed him around the rest of the afternoon, always three paces behind. There were times when she noticed something and wished he had been beside her so that she could share these curiosities and random musings with him. He had reservations about being seen together by mutual friends and colleagues. He had said it was unprofessional and proposed that they present a platonic relationship in front of others. She had agreed, despite not understanding fully what she was agreeing to.

Later that evening, Song Lin parked her bike in the alley and sluggishly climbed the long stairway. She had worn herself out thinking about Hao and his visit home. Such fear and apprehension she had never experienced before and decided this is what it meant to love someone. When she turned the key in the lock, she opened the door to a one-sided

quarrel. Tam paced the room from one end to the other while the other two girls hovered over the latest issue of the *Ling Long* magazine.

“Contradictions!” Tam yelled. “Full of contradictions!”

Song Lin looked to the other two girls. They answered her with a shrug.

When Tam saw Song Lin at the door, she pulled her into the room and kicked the door shut with her foot, sending a slipper into the air. Tam punted the other one off and stomped over to the couch, sitting Song Lin down beside her. She plucked the magazine from the other two girls and planted it firmly down in front of Song Lin.

“Look at this!” Tam shouted. “It is horrible!”

Song Lin smiled at Tam, appreciative of the girl’s new attentions toward her. Tam had hardly noticed her then—not prior to her transformation. Before Song Lin completed reading the first line, Tam snatched the magazine and waved it around. “It says that the new woman has many faults—from excessive consumption to unrootedness. They call it an unbridled modernity; that the new woman has multiple identities because she cannot settle on one!”

“Do you know the writer?” Song Lin asked.

“Yes! I never thought they would publish her article.”

“Perhaps she has reasons for writing this?” Song Lin asked.

“No. You don’t get it! *Ling Long* is what women read. Without it, how will we know what the new woman is? What does a free and liberated woman mean? What does it mean to be sophisticated, educated and fashionable?” She knocked her head twice.

“We set the standard for the new woman. We cannot contradict ourselves like this!”

“What will you do?” Song Lin asked.

“I will quit my job tomorrow!” Tam blurted. “I cannot work for such a magazine.”

“That is drastic,” Song Lin answered, putting her arm around the ill-tempered and rash Tam.

Tam snapped her fingers and her eyes brightened. “I know! I will have them reprint the article on “The Modern Girl’s Outward Appearance and Essence.” She ran across the checkered tiles to the corner and sat cross legged in front of a tower of old *Ling Long* magazines piled three feet high.

The other two girls picked up the discarded issue and resumed reading it to themselves.

Song Lin tip-toed into her own room and quietly closed her door. She opened the cover on the wood jewelry box on the table top and drew out an article folded into a square. It was titled “The Modern Girl’s Outward Appearance and Essence.” She grimaced knowing Tam would have another explosion once she realized someone had torn out the page.

Siu Pei was a point of contention between her and Hao. It was the first time they argued. Although it was her voice that rose, and not his. She remembered arguing that arranged marriages were now considered backwards. When he countered that such things were a way of life, she offered that footbinding was once a mode of life as well, but did that make it right? He read that as her unwillingness to be reasonable and she did not think he was wrong. He was right in that she was meddling in the girl’s affairs and that as a teacher, she should hold herself to a higher standard. However, Song Lin thought of herself as both teacher and a woman. Perhaps it was wrong to befriend a

student who she could easily influence. She decided to present the article to Siu Pei and say nothing, remembering what Hao had said: “Lin, never underestimate the influence your words and actions have over others.”

Chapter Twelve

1936. Soochow.

On the single stoop by her door, Song Lin fanned out a few pages into the pan and lit a match. The flames consumed, scorched and disintegrated her innermost thoughts. She was frustrated that Jing Mo had been running about her courtyard all morning. In this very private act, she did not wish to share with anyone. From time to time, he crouched in the distance and watched as she tore page after page out of her journal and fed it to the fire. Such was his pleasure that he often clapped.

“You have become emboldened,” Song Lin said. “You no longer hide in the shadows. Why do you follow me? Watch me? I am not a child like Pearl, so I do not scare easily—”

Jing Mo clapped his hands to his ears and grinned from ear to ear.

When the tin pan was filled with a pyre of ashes, Song Lin stepped into her room, leaving the doors wide open. She glanced at the list on the table which she had spent the entire morning writing and walked straight to the vanity table. She moistened her hands with an oiled perfume, as traditional women in great houses have always done, and smoothed out her hair. There were two jade pins which she tucked to each side to keep the thick locks from sweeping across her face. Content that she was presentable, she took up the letter and slipped it into the bell sleeve of her mandarin jacket. The sleeves were too short for her arms and she suspected her generous donor was Mei.

“Come,” she said, stepping over the raised floor sill. “I am on my way to see your brother.”

Jing Mo followed, maintaining a short distance from her. Much like the houseman, he stooped in her presence such that eye contact could not be had.

“I do apologize for hurting you the other day,” Song Lin tossed over her shoulder. “Truly. This would never happen again. It shouldn’t have happened. I think it would be nice if you were to tell your brother that you have accepted my apology. At the very least, I hope you will consider it.”

Jing Mo had not spoken a word. If not for the few words he had on occasion muttered, Song Lin would have taken him for a mute. He had run ahead of her, sprinting as if the scent of his master beckoned. He called out to his big brother, “*Da-Gor! Da Gor!*”

Song Lin followed him into the study. The wood was polished a dark Ningpo varnish and big square gray tiles with an impressed medallion lined the floor. She had been here once before in search of new books for Pearl’s studies. Perhaps it was the poor lighting that day which made the room look dull and drab. Today, it was quite handsome, much like the man sitting behind the writing desk.

When Jingchen saw the two of them together, he startled. “Jing Mo! Come quickly,” he beckoned. He stood, wearing a long lined robe of satin blue, and shielded his brother behind him, all the while inspecting him.

“I have not harmed him,” Song Lin said. “He followed me here as I had the need to speak with you.”

Jingchen closed his account book and stepped out from behind the desk. “You might have first sent Uncle to announce your visit; to see if it was convenient for me.”

Song Lin clenched her teeth. “It did not seem necessary. After all, I am perfectly capable of announcing myself. If you are busy, I will come later.”

“Jing Mo,” Jingchen directed. “Go find Pearl and play in the yard. It is a beautiful day.”

The younger brother clapped his hands and nodded, “beautiful day, beautiful girl.”

When he had gone, Jingchen began to stack his account books one on top of the other. “You are already here,” he said, gesturing with his hand for her to sit. He continued to stack: “There are the house accounts, the clothes accounts, and the land accounts. With a family this large, it consumes all of my time.”

The family was hardly large, but the house was, Song Lin thought. She drew the list out from her sleeve and presented it to him.

He eyed it suspiciously. “This—”

“—My complaints,” Song Lin answered.

Jingchen cocked his head and took the list. He slouched back against his chair, kicking his legs up onto the table. He scratched his brow and read aloud:

“The child’s care is not up to standards and if I am to teach her proper, then I should be given full custody of the child’s activities, from morning till night. While she is studious, she is lacking in other areas of nurture. Her complexion is unhealthy. I propose that we be situated in the same court so that I may monitor the child’s progress.”

Jingchen half glanced up from the list to the teacher. “This is written with much purpose,” he spoke to no one in particular. “It is not unreasonable, but it is one request of—,” he ran his finger down the list, “—ten.”

“Yes,” Song Lin stuttered. “There are only three I absolutely need.”

“Oh?”

“Other than assuming full responsibility for Pearl, I will also need new books.”

“Are these books not sufficient?” Jingchen looked about the study.

Song Lin walked to a shelf and ran her fingers along the spines of the shelved books. “The Three Character Mottoes and The Six Classics of Confucian literature are outdated. They will teach her nothing of the modern world. What was adequate for our ancestors is not adequate today. In fact, it is quite fashionable for girls to read now.”

“I don’t disagree, but that has little purpose for our Pearl.” Jingchen put her list face down. “And, the third?”

“My things,” Song Lin said quietly. “For weeks now I have been chasing the things that matter most. And everyone in this house has worked together to keep them from me. It is what little I have. Are they here? Were they found?”

Jingchen walked over to her and leaned against the shelf. There was a softness in his eyes; a cold expression turned warm. He blew on the spines and a film of dust awoke. “Sometimes, when I look at old things, I imagine a great moth has fluttered forth with her pale yellow and black wings. Tell me, what sort of things did you covet in your bag? What things bind you to a past that no longer have any bearing on anything?”

Song Lin turned her back to him. “You think you know me because you have read a few of my scribblings? I should tell you that they reflect nothing of me. Fleeting. That’s all they were. Thoughts for the day, but gone tomorrow. A woman is much more complicated than her writing. She could never write herself honestly.”

There was a caged bird sitting by the tall window that chirped loudly all of a sudden. Jingchen walked over and knelt before the cage and whistled. In response, the bird trilled, inviting another song from him. Together, they made lovely music.

“My second mother,” he said, “loved to write. She would read to me from her journal sometimes. Her writing was terribly flawed, but it was honest. Do you know what things she wrote of?”

Song Lin found her chair again. There was something about him that commanded her.

“Tears were her constant companion,” Jingchen continued. “It was the house that made her cry. She would write how much she hated big houses like this and cursed the day it was written that she would marry into one. She carried no love for my father and insisted that men of big houses belonged not to their wives, but to the house. Men, she said, were not meant to stay with women. She made me promise that I would make my own way, and never forget that I was made by a woman.”

Song Lin took the bird cage from his extended hand.

“This is the gift I had brought back for you,” he said. “She loved them. She loved setting them free. It was her one joy; even her child could not compete.”

“What will I do with it?”

“As you will. It is yours.”

“I can have it domesticated like the one you gave Mei?”

Jingchen turned his eyes from her; his face half cloaked in shadows. He had gone somewhere; to some place that Song Lin wanted very much to understand.

They sat in their own solitude for a while. The sparrow too had retired its voice and gone to slumber.

Finally, Song Lin asked: “Jingchen, will you tell me about her?”

Chapter Thirteen

1926. Tientsin.

Beyond the door was heard the clatter of women; their shrills and protests rising higher and higher. Inside, it was peaceful. The small room scantily lit by a single oil lamp above the altar. Women, dressed in black, knelt on their knees to each side, watching nervously as the hair dressing ceremony began. This was not a marriage between a man and a woman, but of a woman to the sisterhood of silk workers. As she knelt before the diminutive God housed inside the red and gold shrine, Pui-Yee heard only the cadence of her heartbeat. The God's eyes were a yellow, orange yolk. A speck of black was dotted in the center. His scowl hurt her. Perhaps he had seen into the depth of her blackened soul.

Moisture collected in Pui-Yee's eyes until it flowed like a miniature fall. From river to brook, a different path was forged for her. She begged the God silently for forgiveness. Sincerity, she could learn. Honor, she would give to them, her sisters. Vows, she would never take lightly. She repeated these thoughts in her head over and over, shutting out all others. The voices that sang of Shanghai and the steamship's horn began to cave in, suffocating her. All the while, an absence filled the coldness to her right. The ghostly groom she will never take.

The door flew open and the manager fell face down, his arms and legs spread apart. Some of the girls toppled over him. They apologized to Lu and the Sisters for failing to defend the door. Lei's despising eyes sought Pui-Yee for the first time. Most of the girls poked in wide-eyed, having never seen such a ceremony. There were gasps of awe and whispers:

“So, this is what one must do if she doesn’t take a groom.”

“She looks weird kneeling there all by herself.”

“It’s too dark and serious.”

Lu picked up a broom and headed for the manager. He threw up his arms and shielded his bald head.

“You have no authority here!” Lu raised the broom. “It is a woman’s right to declare herself the non-marrying kind.”

“I’ve only come to say a few words to Pui-Yee,” the manager yelled frantically, turning to his side as the broom whacked the ground.

All the sisters looked to Pui-Yee for her decision.

“Go on then!” Lu spat. “Say what you will and leave us to our business.”

“In private. I’d like to have some words in private,” he said, standing up and brushing off his gown.

He seemed much smaller. His bark had no teeth. Here, in this place of women, he appeared average and Pui-Yee did not know what he could want from her. She did not think there was anything left of her to give, so she raised herself off the floor pillow to follow the manager out.

Lu drew her back. “You cannot,” she shook her head. “You mustn’t leave the room until after the ceremony.” Lu said this with the belief that the room had special powers and waved the other sisters out. “We will just be outside the door. Scream and we will come running in with brooms and sticks,” she squeezed Pui-Yee’s hand.

Pui-Yee watched as the women departed the room. On her tiptoes, she saw the back of Lei’s head as it bobbed away with the others. When the doors closed, she turned to face the manager.

Startled, he wobbled on his back heel.

“Well?” she said.

He swallowed and began to say something many times. His cheeks reddened, but not from anger.

“I have already paid you for my freedom,” Pui-Yee said impatiently. “You counted it and said it was satisfactory. The way I see it, you have the money and you still have a skilled worker. I am not leaving. I will pay you for room and board and you will continue to pay me my wages. Nothing has changed, has it? What else can you possibly want from me?”

He shook his head and buried his face in his hands. Then, he paced like a bull that had been struck repeatedly in the head. Till, finally, he thrust a brown cotton square pouch into her hand.

“This?” Pui-Yee asked. “This was mine...yours...the money I bought—”

“—Your freedom,” he finished.

“I don’t understand.”

“I know what you all call me behind my back,” he said, “thinking I don’t know. The funny thing is that I think I am a fat dog too.” He placed his palms on the roundness of his girth. “But, this is not so unsightly a thing. A man’s fortune is measured by his girth. I am a good catch. Good business prospect for the matchmakers.” He chuckled to himself, then realizing the serious demeanor of the woman standing before him,

continued: “I am a dog, the kind that does his master’s bidding without hesitation, even when I don’t like it. But, what choice do I have? When a dog’s master stops feeding him, he will starve. There are too many strays as it is. No one will take in another.”

“What is your meaning?” Pui-Yee asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I am really not such a horrible man. The girls, here, come when they are very young. I am only cruel so that they will not take advantage of me. I have never been cruel to you though. You are different. You are special. I’ve come to you with a business arrangement.”

Pui-Yee turned from him.

“I will treat you with nothing but kindness,” he said, wrapping his hands over hers, closing them like a giant lotus blossom.

She could feel the coarseness of her skin underneath his, marked with years suffered at the cruelty of heated basins and scalding hot water.

“Keep the money,” he said. “Such an arrangement will benefit you.”

Pui-Yee withdrew her hands from his and walked to the altar. The wood boards beneath her creaked, hollowed with time. She ran both hands over her sleek, freshly oiled black hair, prepared for the hairdressing ritual.

The manager stood slightly hunched and hands clasped behind his back. The smallness of her back and the narrowness of her shoulders seemed to him a delicate tree. A beautiful Peking willow, he decided. Her hair draped her body like long, slender, pliant and feathery branches.

“You present me with an arrangement that offers nothing to lessen my predicament. Whether I am married to him or you, I will still be owned.”

“Pui-Yee!” He rushed forward, closing the space between them. “I’ve taken big risk. If Master Ko finds out—”

“—You needn’t worry,” Pui-Yee said, throwing the brown cloth bundle onto the floor. “You have changed nothing.”

“The Silk Sisterhood is too cruel a punishment!” he clenched his fist. “Am I—am I such—”

“Marry you? Flee with you?” She knelt and picked up the brown cloth bundle. “With this money? Money that has become our money, but was meant to purchase my freedom! How am I any freer than I was when my father sold me?”

“I will be kind to you,” he said. “You will have your own things. I will not take governance over them. I am very forgiving as well. You will see. If you were to upset me, I would not take a stick to you. You will see. I am not so backwards.”

Pui-Yee led him by the hand and sat him down on a chair. “I believe you can be a most kind man. Even if we made it to Shanghai,” she said, her gaze lost in some far away place, “I would not be able to take care of you. You would require too much. But, to stay, here, on my own terms, is something I have never had before. The sisterhood is good. At least in this way, I can finally be independent.”

“And cease being a woman!” He begged.

“I am always a woman,” she said, urging the manager to his feet. “I will not speak of this to anyone. You needn’t worry.”

The manager inserted the brown cloth into the sleeve of his gown, squirmed his way through the mob of women and chanced to look back upon her one last time. He shook his head in utter disapproval.

Lu wrapped her arm around Pui-Yee’s shoulder as the other sisters filed in.

“What did he want?” She asked.

“To own me.”

Lu threw a fist into her palm. “One of these days, I will squash him—all of them—like bugs.”

Pui-Yee found her place on top of the floor pillow again as Lu leaned over her, lighting a stick of incense. She picked up the thick brush made of fragrant sandalwood and ran the bristles down Pui-Yee’s hair. Each stroke took Pui-Yee further and further away from the Sister’s sitting room, out of the dormitory and beyond the gates of the factory. She could hear the tinkering of metal and waves thrashing against boards, the cry of seagulls and the horn, like a great white’s moan. She leaned into the bristles of the brush as Lu chanted the felicitous ritual with each stroke. Her hair was divided, braided and coiled into a chignon, signifying her marriage to the sisterhood. Pui-Yee knew that her short straight bangs would need to be dealt with. Once married, a woman parted with the look of youth. She would look just like Lu and her soon-to-be sisters. She would sleep in their dorm, walk with them and wear the long, black silk shirts.

The chignon atop Pui-Yee’s head unraveled and hung like a hat with an open top. A combined gasp permeated the entire room. Pui-Yee turned quickly to the women, all older than her, and she saw as if for the first time that she was merely a child among them. Their smiles soothed her and she sat still for Lu. In all her years, Lu had never let a chignon drop. She applied more oil this time and began to coil it again when a rat-a-tat shattered Lu’s steady hands and the coil fell again. A second shot was heard, halting Lu.

Lu rushed the doors, single-handedly pushing a solid oak side table up against the door. The door shook when a heavy foot landed against it from the other side. Then another. This time, the wood cracked. Lu shoved Pui-Yee underneath the altar table, drawing the cloth closed. “Do not come out for anyone,” she said. The sisters moved quickly, positioning themselves on their knees in front of the altar.

Pui-Yee breathed heavily in the dark underbelly of the altar table. The heavy chignon fell forward, draping her eyes.

There were several more kicks and a shoulder butt. The side table flew across the room and the door came crashing down. There was one man with a rifle and several others behind them. They were coolies from the docks; Ko’s men.

“You can’t go in,” Ju Ju pleaded from the hall. “Don’t you know—it’s bad luck for a man to enter the ceremonial room?”

The men looked inside. They saw a band of women dressed in black silk tops and pants knelt in front of an altar which seemed to glow. The rifle wielding man prodded the others forward, but each had lost his nerve. “Send her out!” he finally demanded.

“Who are you looking for?” Lu asked, her eyes like steel.

“The one—,” the man stuttered, “named Wong Pui-Yee. The one that is to be Master Ko’s second wife.”

Lu scoffed inwardly at the cub wearing tiger’s skin.

He had thick and hardened arms from laboring at the docks. His pants were rolled up at the knee, giving way to a pair of calves like tree trunks. But, he had lips that were small and sun-dried and timid. Lu eyed the large knife that had been tucked into the front of his cotton waist belt.

“There is no one here by that name,” Lu answered. “All women go through a renaming after the hairdressing ceremony.”

“I will shoot,” he yelled. “I will keep shooting until she reclaims her name!”

“You dare!” shouted Lu. “We all work for Master Ko. How pleased do you think he would be to learn that you have eliminated a quarter of his best silk workers? And, the Gods? Do you want to anger them?” She measured and positioned herself so that she could make a lunge for his knife.

The coolie looked behind him. “You are sure she is inside?”

A young girl’s voice responded affirmatively.

“Then, go in and bring her out!” He poked his rifle at her.

Ju Ju cried loudly. “What have you done? Why have you done it?”

Pui-Yee slapped the chignon from her so that it dangled like a thick ball of thread to one side. She wanted desperately to run out from beneath the altar table. It was the girl’s voice. So familiar.

Lei stepped forward and into the room. All the sisters gasped in unison.

“You?” Lu asked. “You, her friend. You, our friend.”

Lei back pedaled away from the fire in Lu’s eyes. “Pui-Yee,” she said. “It’s me, Lei. You have been wanting to talk to me. Well, here I am. Let us talk.”

Lu felt Pui-Yee’s head brush up against the table cloth and nudged her back.

“Have you no shame?” she asked Lei. “You will speak to us, the sisterhood. Pui-Yee is with us now.” Her hands had by now worked their way into tight fists. With each word, anger seethed: “Now, tell me, why have you brought these men here? How well were you paid for alerting Master Ko of the ceremony?”

Lei swallowed the knot of tears in her heart. She looked around the room, but would not meet anyone’s eyes. “You have not completed the ceremony, Lu. We both know this, but I will speak to her, like this, if she will not come out.” Lei circled the room, stopped in the center and spoke to a corner: Pui-Yee, you know me best as I do you. You cannot replace me with your new sisters. I alone will always be your true sister. That can never change. Never.” She wiped back a rapid flow of tears. “You wanted to know if I saw it? Well, I did. I knew in that moment that things were going to change forever. How is it that fortune always finds you? First, with Shanghai and now the Ko house. I couldn’t do it anymore. Stand by and watch things turn out the better for you, while things stood still for me. It isn’t fair. I am the one who sacrificed everything.”

Lu gripped Lei by the collar and dragged her down onto her knees before the altar. “Stupid girl!” she said. “You are the selfish one! Tell the Gods how Pui-Yee has wronged you!”

Lei slapped away at Lu’s hands, freeing herself. She stifled her cries and her eyes had quickly swelled. “I love you, Pui-Yee. I left the life I knew, my parents, and the man I was to marry so that we could live twin lives, always a mirror of the other. Only your mirror is broken. My reflection isn’t there. For some reason, the Gods only see you. Fortune only finds you. Am I not good enough?” She braced herself on the altar table and shook it. “I am Lei. Don’t you see me?” All her pent up frustrations released in a single maniacal laugh. She leaned into the shrine and sought the diminutive God’s glowing eyes. His scowl intensified. Lei picked him up and threw him across the room. His head struck the wall, but he landed on his feet.

Lu tackled her to the ground, straddling her. She slapped the girl across the face.

The coolie fired a single shot into the room.

All the women crouched and quieted.

“She has lied to us,” he said to his gang of men. “Take her away!”

Two men entered the room, pushing Lu aside. They poked Lei in the stomach with the butt of the rifle, kicked her and dragged her up by the armpits.

“She is here!” Lei pleaded. “Please! Stop! She is here!”

Lei managed to grip the door frame, kicking wildly. She screamed for her friend.

Pui-Yee came running out from under the table, pushing past Lu.

Lei laughed like a crazy horse as the two women met eye to eye.

“I will go with you willingly,” Pui-Yee said to the men, “if you will let me speak to Lei first.”

“Make it quick,” the coolie snarled.

When they released Lei, she grunted and smoothed out her jacket. Taking small steps, she stood toe to toe with Pui-Yee. There was unbridled anger between them and each stalked the other like a pair of fighting dogs let out of their cages.

“Lei,” Pui-Yee said. The name, as it rolled off her tongue, suddenly calmed her. It brought her back to the sorghum fields when they would hide under the wide leaves of the tall stalks, calling each other by name. With each summon, they found themselves one step closer and closer until they found their way into the arms of the other. The loose grains had attached to their hairs and clothes. Each grain, they plucked and sent into the wind. In their quiet way, they spoke of love between two sisters.

“You are the sister of my heart,” Pui-Yee continued. She placed her hand on her left bosom. Her sister could only look away, desperately trying to lift the weight of the words which felt like concrete boulders.

“When my Ma Ma died,” Pui-Yee uttered, “I had clear purpose. To mind her work in her absence just as any honorable daughter would. I was the oldest and so it was my duty to become her. It was the hardest thing I had ever done. My Ma Ma was everything to me. I loved her with the heart of ten daughters and wanted her to be at peace wherever she was. I wanted her to look down from the Heavens and see how well I have managed the house. Father had other plans for me.”

“Enough,” Lei raised her hand, shielding herself from the memories. “You appeal to my sentiment knowing that I will crumble. You are more cruel than I thought!”

“I only want to tell you something that I couldn’t tell you before,” Pui-Yee said.

Lei inclined her chin, positioning her hands on her hips. “There is nothing you have kept from me. We have always shared everything between us. Do you now want to fabricate some lie so that everyone in this room will see how righteous you are? How evil I am?”

“How far you have drifted from me,” Pui-Yee shook her head. “What I have kept from you—I did so out of love—will now set us free.”

Lei silently grunted, but curiosity fell upon her face.

“When my father sold me to the silk factory,” Pui-Yee said, “I had a new purpose. I realized then that I could never be my Ma Ma. So, I was going to live for myself and I would take Ma Ma with me. My father had given me, unbeknownst to him, a real life in exchange for twenty bags of rice. All I need do is work hard and wait for opportunity. I

saw the factory as a temporary residence. I couldn't have seen it as anything else because if I had, I would have never made it this far.”

“You have presented nothing new,” Lei said, her fingers working furiously. “I too left everything for twenty bags of rice. My father was not kind to me, but he was not cruel like yours. My mother was alive when I left her and while she was even-hearted, we did not have the same love as you and your mother had. The truth is, Wong Pui-Yee, my life was not perfect, but it was good. It was good to me.”

“It was. It was good to you and you shouldn't have left,” Pui-Yee answered, startling Lei. “When I found out you were coming with me, I had to rethink everything. You see, I knew I would be responsible for you, and—”

“—This is the sister of my heart?!” Lei petitioned to the women in the room. “Wong Pui-Yee shows no gratitude or love for the sister who has given everything so that they could stay together. Instead, she finds fault.”

Lu and the other sisters turned away. They knew that it was not their place, though older and wiser, this was a matter of the heart between two women.

The coolie with the rifle scratched his head and gestured for his men to take Pui-Yee. Like Lu, she too saw the broad knife tucked in his sash. The gleam tempted her. How easy it would be to end it all here. She had lost everything again. But, the tiny God standing in the far end of the room seemed to scold her for having such thoughts.

The men did not touch her. Instead, they nudged her with an elbow.

Pui-Yee followed. Her feet felt like blocks of concrete. She turned back one final time: “Everything I have done, I have done for the both of us. My independence meant giving you yours. It was the only way I could give you back your life. Only, I realized in

the process that I never wanted our lives to be independent of each other. Together, always together.”

“Go Pui-Yee!” Lei pointed out the door. “There is nothing here that keeps you. There is nothing here worth your while. I break our vows before the God in this room. We are no longer sisters of the heart!”

Chapter Fourteen

1936. Soochow.

Song Lin had not slept the night. Thoughts of Pui-Yee had entered her dreams, drawing her ever closer to the well. She watched as Pao brought in Pearl’s belongings. There was the wooden chest that was as tall as Pearl. Inside of the chest was an ironbound wooden box the size of Pearl’s palm. The child had never shared the box’s holdings. It belonged to her mother and the mother before her.

At the wide step of the pavilion, the houseman sat with his body bent and elbows on his parted knees. Song Lin approached, sitting beside him.

“Stay,” she bid him.

He nodded and lowered his worn body.

“You have spent the entire morning moving Pearl’s things. How tired you must be,” Song Lin said. Her eyes followed the natural curvy path from the pavilion to the well. “Do you think Pearl will be happy here? Moving her into her mother’s dwelling—the concubine’s court—seems a good choice. What child does not seek a mother’s love and comfort from time to time, even when she is no longer alive?”

The houseman stood up abruptly and bid her, “Good day, Teacher Song,” before he hurried off.

At that moment, Pearl appeared at the courtyard entrance. Seeing Song, she rushed forward and into her arms.

“I have brought you something,” she said, reaching into the deep pockets of her vest. She drew out a peach blossom. “It is from Jingchen.”

Song Lin did not take it immediately. She remembered something Mei had said: *A captive heart*. She took it and tucked it into the clip in Pearl’s hair.

Pearl smiled, recalling for Song Lin the time her mother had weaved a hundred chrysanthemums into her freshly braided hair. One stem after another she dipped delicately into a bowl of oil so that it became pliant. The sliced melon she feverishly fed to Pearl although the child could no longer stomach another sliver. Her belly had swollen, but her mother hadn’t noticed. “So you will never have want of more,” was what her mother said, reaching for another stem. She had accidentally tipped the bowl of oil, spilling it onto the floor. She cried, sitting with her hands hanging over her knees. The tears had turned to laughter. Pearl took her mother’s hands and traced the scars. She blew on them. The mother studied the child’s face and the half dressed head. She knelt and desperately scooped up the oil in both hands. Her skin was covered in a sheen and for a moment, the scars were gone. Pearl climbed onto her mother’s lap and the hair dressing resumed. Each one the mother kissed after it had been secured and she leaned in to whisper in Pearl’s ear: “In your next life, it will not be so hard.” When Pearl asked what of her mother, she answered she hadn’t one.

The child inched up and whispered in Song Lin’s ear, “Ma Ma is still here.”

Song Lin pointed to the well, “There?”

Pearl shook her head, “Everywhere. They have tried to rid Ma Ma from the house.”

Believing that the malicious spirits would not leave the body at once, priests were called to exorcise and confine them. The house occupants were afraid that if the spirits escaped, they would wreak havoc on the house. Such was the messy outcome of a

suicide. Pui-Yee was not buried; though a coffin of cypress wood was ordered and carried into the family temple.

“Come close,” Song Lin said, as Pearl wrapped her arms around the teacher.

Later that day, after Pearl had settled into her new quarters, Song Lin headed out for Jing Jing’s courtyard. She carried the sparrow Jingchen had brought back for her, enjoying the sweet chirping which lightened her stride. The accompaniment of a second pair of feet did not bother her today. She thought not to acknowledge him. Let him follow her. After all, she was not hiding anything. She only resented the fact that she was made to feel as if she was.

She wondered if she had taken a wrong turn and thought she must have. Behind her, the maze was quite intricate. There were so many forks and divergent paths that it seemed they were in constant competition. The sparrow fluttered its wings wildly at the stone guardian. Song Lin pulled the curtain down over the cage and crept closer to the archway. The lanterns were stirred by a wind that blew them up and sent them crashing against the shingled roof. It was an ominous wind which was kept inside the square of the yard. She turned over her shoulder, “Jing Mo?”

The pitter patter of feet running across the yard turned her around. The stone tiles were covered in a layer of frost. “Who is there?” She asked. The double doors to the old Master’s room blew open. She checked behind her again. Right, then left. Left, then right. She clutched the cage handle with both hands and moved slowly across the yard, feeling the cold penetrate the soles of her cotton shoes. Her toes had gone numb.

Suddenly, loud heavy steps stomped toward her. She turned and saw a woman wearing a heavy red silk robe fall over and almost on top of her. The woman’s hands slapped heavily onto the stone tiles. The fingers worked themselves into a claw, digging and scratching. Her thin wrists were lashed with thick rope. The woman’s sprawled body squirmed like a cocoon drowning in a basin of water. She struggled to stand up as her ankles were also lashed with rope. Song Lin knelt and reached for the woman, but a heinous laugh halted her. She followed the four lines of rope that bound the woman to a man in the dark corner. He wore a gruesome mask twice the size of his head with long scraggly strands of black hair that moved like the tentacles of a kraken. He yanked the ropes and the woman was pulled from Song Lin’s outstretched hands.

Song Lin ran into the opened room. The doors blew shut from a gust. She crouched by the door, slowly rearing up. Finding a tear in the cotton panel of the tall latticed window, she peeked out. The courtyard was deathly still. She felt the eyes of the room on her and quickly found the theatrical masks lining the walls. The hideous, dried faces with the black eyes seemed to turn toward her.

The silk curtains dangling from the canopy sashayed like ghosts, drawing her closer to the *kang*. She saw a small figure and did not know if he was asleep or if he was awake, but wondered if he had heard the noises outside. Driven by fear, she advanced, stumbling over a round spittle jar. She collected herself, keeping the sparrow tucked close. By the square bed lay a gold rectangular tray with a long bone pipe. A dragon was carved onto its long stem. Beside the opium pipe was a little porcelain pipe-bowl lined with ash. And beside that was a handsome bell-shaped gold opium lamp with thick glass.

“Old master,” she said, drawing back the curtain.

She kept her head lowered and spoke to him softly. “I am Teacher Song—Pearl’s Teacher—we met. Do you remember?” She followed the length of his outstretched leg slowly up to the hem of his white silk vest. The nubs of his fingers were even more ghastly than she remembered. The skin was flaky and withered and there were peaks in his skin that seemed hardened with filthy mastic. Song Lin winced and slowly inched her way up to the high collar of his Mandarin vest. The same deterioration marred his neck, chin, cheeks. The skin was unusually parched and discolored. The nose was angular and the tip seemed to have come off. Where his eyes should have been were large, black vacuous sockets.

The bird cage fell out of her hand. She clapped a palm to her mouth to stifle a scream, a cry; afraid she might wake the sleeping puppet. In little steps, she sidestepped away from the *kang*, kicking the spittle jar. She tumbled and braced herself on the side table, knocking over the opium tray. A phantom gale thrashed soundly against the room and the doors flew open. Song Lin ran out, stopping momentarily in the center of the cold, gray courtyard. The apparitions were gone.

Quickly, she ran and kept to the corridors of Jing Jing’s courtyard, hoping she had remembered the route. Memory toyed with her tonight. As she sprinted along, the darkness immersed her. Red lanterns seemed to float in black space. Some came unusually close. At once, the tiger and dragon hills manifested their beastly faces. The essence of a mother’s protective arms was nowhere felt. She thought of Pui-Yee, the odd story relayed by Pearl of the hundred chrysanthemums and the empty coffin. She wanted to call out to Pui-Yee for protection.

There came a familiar voice, a pair of them. The fear began to seep out of her and she heard her own breaths again. The laugh was unmistakable. It was both melodious and vociferous when it wanted to be. Song Lin stopped at the corridor across the archway which framed the courtyard. A row of tall trees fanned out, leaning over the gate. Berries on the twig-like branches gleamed when it turned into the moonlight. The two women sat on drum-shaped stone stools across from one another. A satin red cloth draped the table. The skirt lifted like a balloon when the wind blew beneath it. Plump peaches and candied figs sat on round, gold trays with ornate trims, flanked by a pair of candles. A pear shaped lute, the body made from the wood of a Phoenix tree sat on Mei's lap. The scene was semi-divine and Song Lin imagined the Gods sitting beside them.

Jing Jing wore a brown suit that draped her lean body. Her short hair was slicked back and her pupils shone like glass beads as she watched Mei pluck at the *pipa's* twisted silk strings. The notes flowed like the smooth current of a river just awakened to Spring. When Mei pinched the last string, the river was drunk by a God never again to make a sound. Mei raised her bowl: “To love,” she smiled. Jing Jing nodded, draining her bowl.

They sat quietly, each admiring the other. Until, as if stirred by something unnatural, they turned simultaneously in Song Lin's direction.

From a distance, each seemed a porcelain figurine to Song Lin and the courtyard an elaborate prop.

Song Lin waited for an invitation, but none came. She wondered if she had upset the Ko family daughter and quickly concluded that Mei had whispered lies in the woman's ear. Her feet had moved of their own and she found herself at the archway.

The facial expressions were less than welcoming. Rather, they reflected wariness. Mei stood first, adjusting the slit on her cheongsam.

“Little *laoshi*,” she said. “Come in. It is late. What brings you out on such a brisk night?”

There was no bite in her tone. She said it matter-of-factly as she took Song Lin’s hand.

Jing Jing turned over a small bowl and filled it with wine from the Rose jug.

“You are freezing!” Mei cooed, as she stroked Song Lin’s arms

All the time, Song Lin had been watching the other woman, who not so much as glanced once in her direction.

Jing Jing unclasped the middle caramel button on her suit. “Here, take my jacket.” Before she could slip out of a sleeve, Song Lin declined. She had seen this jacket before and slept in it.

“Jing Jing,” Song Lin said, “are you all better now? I have been wanting to visit you since I heard you had taken ill.”

Mei walked beside the Ko family daughter, placing both hands on Jing Jing’s shoulders. “Only I can nurse Jing Jing back to health,” she said, while planting a kiss on the woman’s cheek. “Does it upset you,” she said, running her fingers down the suit’s lapel, “to see us like this?”

The taller woman turned her face to the side.

“By now, I have come to understand that there are games played in this house which I am not a part of,” Song Lin said.

“Games?” Mei chuckled, covering her mouth with a hand. “Indeed,” she said. “We were just now reenacting our first meeting. This is how Jing Jing first presented herself to me, in a borrowed suit. I should say how very handsome she looks.” She sighed. “We can only live in the memories of our past, no matter how glorious or ugly they may be. You are still shivering, little *laoshi*. Will you not take the jacket?”

Song Lin shook her head again as Jing Jing’s gaze found itself back to the table. “Will you tell us, Song Lin, what has you trembling?” She finally spoke.

“I was just at the old Master’s place,” Song Lin answered.

“What were you doing there?” Both women asked.

Song Lin ran a hand through her disheveled hair. “I saw something in the courtyard. Something strange.”

“Strange?” Mei asked. “How strange?”

“It was as if an apparition. A man and a woman. She fell in front of me and when I reached for her, she was dragged away, on strings, like a puppet.”

“That is strange,” Mei agreed. “Then what happened?”

“I ran into the old master’s room and saw him sitting atop the *kang* like when I first met him. I moved closer. He did not move. So, I moved closer still until I was at his bedside.” Song Lin paused, running both hands through her hair. “When I pulled back the curtain, I saw—I saw what I could not have possibly seen. He too was a puppet. How can it be?”

“It cannot be,” Jing Jing said. “You were frightened. When you went into the room, the masks on the walls frightened you further.”

“Yes!” Mei snapped her fingers. “That must be it. Jing Jing is always so logical, isn’t she?”

“I am not so sure,” Song Lin said. “I know what I saw, but how can it—”

“—it is Jingchen’s fault,” Mei answered. “He has told you stories about Pui-Yee, hasn’t he? No doubt, you have heard some stories from Pearl as well. That is enough to make anyone’s imagination go wild. He did say I should keep an eye on you, but—”

“—I need no looking after,” Song Lin insisted.

Jing Jing pushed the bowl toward the teacher. “Drink this,” she said. “Please, your teeth are clattering.”

Song Lin held the bowl in both hands and noticed how shaken she was. She could not keep the bowl steady and the wine sloshed over the rim.

“My, my,” Mei said. “You really should calm yourself. Might a cigarette help?” She asked, turning toward the taller woman.

Jing Jing put her thumb and forefinger into the pocket of her jacket and drew out a tin.

“Stop!” Song Lin pleaded. “Stop this!”

“Calm yourself, little *laoshi*,” Mei said as a grin formed upon her mouth. “It is just a tin.”

“Why are you doing this to me?!” Song Lin asked the woman she considered her friend.

“What is it?” Jing Jing responded with grave concern, depositing the tin back into her pocket, removing it from sight.

“My things,” Song Lin began to cry. “I have been here—how many days now—it seems I have lost track. The mornings blend into nights and the nights blend into day. It is as if one long dream; a dream from which I cannot wake.”

Jing Jing apologized and tossed her jacket over Song Lin’s shoulders. “I did not know.” As she said this, she eyed Mei with contempt.

“I cannot do this any longer,” Song Lin pleaded. “This house and I—I should go mad very soon—am I mad already? I think I am. It seems I am no longer of any good to Pearl. I think I was never good for anyone.”

“Shh,” Jing Jing soothed. “Walk with me. I will take you to my room where you can lie down for a bit.”

“My things,” Song Lin rambled on. “They are what I have left of myself.”

“Alright,” Jing Jing answered. “We will talk more on this after you have slept.”

Mei crossed her arms as she watched Jing Jing escort the teacher away. Finding the *pipa* leaning against the stool, she kicked it. “My things, my things,” she mocked. “You are no different than any woman!”

Chapter Fifteen

Song Lin stood at the study doorway, watching Jingchen line up the bird cages. One was hers. The dome shaped wood cage beside it was empty. He refilled the blue and white ceramic water containers inside with a tin decanter that had a long, curvy thin spout. He faced the empty cage out, leaving the wiry door open. For Mei’s finch—Song Lin thought—the bird that did not long to take to the skies.

When Jingchen saw her leaning against the door frame, concern fell upon his deep set eyes. He approached her gently. “Teacher Song, I hope you do not mind that I have sent for you so quickly after last night—”

He did not complete the thought, gesturing for her to sit instead. Song Lin saw the account books stacked into a tidy pile on the desk corner. To the left sat a red sandalwood calligraphy brush and an ink stone. She did not think anyone still wrote in the old Chinese literati. At her unexpected display of interest, Jingchen bid her to come closer. “Calligraphy is a fading art,” he said. “There is hardly anyone left who can capture life’s essence in a brush.” He picked up the brush and wrote in the air and then corrected himself. “The energy of life in traces on paper,” he smiled as if to himself, and Song Lin responded with a smile very much like his.

“Your smile,” he said, “can lift the hearts of a hundred orphans.”

Song Lin wished to step over the floor sill and into the room. Though her heart had felt this, she could not will herself to. All the while, her thoughts answered him, but she did not speak.

Jingchen filled two cups with tea. The aromatic ginger began to heal her soul. He placed them on a small marble table closest to her. “I regret that we met the way we had. I take full responsibility for it. I had thought that you had become comfortable here; that you had taken to the house while I was away. I realize how presumptuous that was of me. Certainly, there are so many customs that one cannot possibly be expected to adapt them all at once.” He paused curiously awaiting her response and grew disappointed when she neither spoke nor moved.

Song Lin wanted to climb onto the shelf and tuck herself in like one of the many books. There were no books that came out of the May 4th Literary Revolution. She looked to the histories, to the legends, to the Yuan literature, but could not find a suitable place for her. At that moment, something stirred inside like the sparrow’s sudden chirp. Only she did not know the cause of it.

Jingchen opened his desk draw and brought out a familiar sack. His black leather shoes were polished to a shine and as he walked, the shoes caught a glint from the sun’s warm rays. He placed the cloth bag atop the marble table beside the teacup. “I apologize on behalf of Mei,” he said. His gray suit was pressed such that there were no creases and his shirt was a starch white. The collar button was undone and he seemed poised to take a woman dancing. Jingchen leaned up against one of the shelves and crossed his ankles. “I hope you will not fault her terribly. She can be quite mischievous.”

Song Lin turned her slouched body so that she faced him. “Did you ask her why she kept them?”

Jingchen stood upright, delighted at the sound of her voice. He stumbled at first at what to say. “She thought it would help you; help you transition into your new station here.”

“My new station—my station as a teacher?”

“No.” Jingchen whispered. “Your place. I think you will find that there is a place for you here.”

Song Lin raised her eyes to meet his. It seemed that all the light in the room fell upon him and she wanted to run to him, but he was not her lover. He was something different. Something she could not place.

“It is good,” she answered. “I do not think I am a good teacher. Not for Pearl. Not for anyone.”

She remembered Siu Pei and an exchange between her and Hao. *Never underestimate the influence your words and actions have over others.*

She remembered finding the girl outside the school one afternoon. Her books were strewn about the floor. When she asked her what was the matter, the girl’s face turned a beet red. She desperately tried to suppress her emotions until they nearly choked her and tears came pouring out like a broken water pipe. At last, the girl calmed and told Song Lin that she would not be able to finish her studies, apologizing profusely for having embarrassed them both.

Seeing the girl grow more and more distressed with each passing day, Song Lin could not let it go. She found opportunities to engage Siu Pei. Sometimes, after school, they rode their bikes together along the same route until they came upon the fork at the end of the road. Other times, Song Lin kept her after class, and they read together. Siu

Pei took instantly to Russian literature and had compiled a remarkable reading list; from Tolstoy to Turgenev. When Song Lin asked her what of Russian literature attracted her most, the girl answered: “It is a world I know nothing about. In my fantasies, I can add things and take away things. It is nothing at all like reality.” Song Lin had laughed, remarking that it was someone else’s reality and that perhaps Chinese literature offered a world of escape for someone else.

In this unexpected way, Siu Pei had confided in Song Ling. China would never be a modern nation she thought; simply because it was heavily entrenched in history and tradition. No amount of imagination would properly transform her without first destroying her. It is not a place one escapes to. It is a place that just is. In Siu Pei’s view, what distressed her most was that duty had no place in this new world. Her duty as daughter had been one she most coveted. It was the foundation of her identity; absent which, she was no one. Siu Pei found no disharmony between her parents’ traditional way of living and the one she adapted in Shanghai. As daughter, she would always honor their wishes, despite her own.

Song Lin thought of her own father who was a teacher and essayist, and among a group of visionaries who anticipated the League of Left-Wing Writers whose works reflected the revolutionary struggle and disillusionment of the 1920s. Her father, too, was influenced by Russian literature, often writing against the age old dominance of the Confucian ideology. He was a loving parent in the way he educated Song Lin, helping her adopt the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism; helping her see a future under communism. Little time was spent between them as his work often required him to travel for revolutionary meetings. For this reason, he sent Song Lin to live with his sister in

Shanghai. She would receive letters from him; once a month at first, then once every two months. With time, his writing became more and more incoherent. His meanings were difficult to comprehend. The jumbled thoughts moved around the page like a puzzle with missing pieces. Then, one day, Song Lin learned that her father had gone. He died writing at his desk in a room overfilled with writings which she was told was all gibberish.

Her father had never imposed duty on her. The relationship she shared with him was not one predicated upon it. How then could such a thing define her? Her means to identity were informed by a nation in transition. She had never thought one had to tow the line between tradition and modernity until she met Hao. Before him, she found utility in both things traditional and modern, despite her father's views. In that sense, her father did not shape her. It was Hao. From him, she learned what it meant to be a woman. Not a daughter, wife or mother. This is what she would teach Siu Pei.

Jingchen listened intently. It was in those small moments where she paused after a sentence or lingered on an inanimate object which most captivated him. Sometimes, she drew imaginary circles onto the scrolled, looping arms of the chair only to find a temporary resting place atop her lap.

Song Lin always found her way back to him, finding it difficult to maintain a lengthy gaze. The reason for this she was unsure of. He asked no questions and made no observations. She wondered if it was because nothing of her appealed to him. When she sipped from the teacup, she noticed that they were now sitting by his desk and wondered how they ended up here? When had he moved the teacups over? The scent of ginger warmed her from head to toe and she absently brushed her fingers along the frogs on her

top. Her finger caught and she realized one of the frogs had become loose. She thought she heard the thread snap and wondered if he had noticed. He was not Hao. Song Lin found the stacked account books that sat at the corner of the table again. Jingchen would not notice these small things.

He opened a draw to his left and brought out a small and round, silver plate. On top of it was a little pipe with an ivory stem and a dash of tobacco. He filled the pipe with the sweet dried leaves and lit it. When he drew in the smoke, a pair of dimples appeared. Song Lin immediately looked away. She felt as if she had seen something private; something that he had not meant to reveal to her.

“Her father,” Song Lin continued, “is a servant in a great house. I’d imagine it was much like this. For generations, the men of her family have served the same house while the women stayed to farm in the villages. It was by some chance that one day, while dressing the Master, the matter of the five year old Siu Pei was brought up. The Master had taken the liberty of speaking on his wife’s behalf, thus making a marriage proposal. Out of pure benevolence, he offered to take the servant’s daughter into the house. Not as a worker, but as a wife to his youngest son, who had just turned twenty.” Song Lin leaned forward, “You can imagine how full of questions I was.”

Jingchen nodded quietly, exhaling clouds of white smoke which dissipated into the room flushed in gold as the line of the horizon crept up.

“I asked why a girl of five?” Song Lin continued. “Why not find a bride more suitable for marrying? Siu Pei had only been told that the groom required a bride who could also serve as a playmate. From time to time, she was brought to the house to play with him. She did not know then that her father had consented to the proposal. When the

family found her a little rough, they arranged for her schooling. Ten years of her life had been paid for by the family and on her fifteenth birthday, they would claim her. It was then that I, as a teacher, spoke thusly of this ill-conceived marriage.”

The rogue vein above Song Lin’s brow turned a purplish, blue.

“This student,” Jingchen asked, “what did she think?”

“At first, she spoke only of her duty as daughter,” Song Lin answered. “It was all she allowed herself to know, until Russian literature gave her a new perspective. I knew it had awakened something in her and I chanced to introduce her to the *Ling Long* woman. For some reason, I thought, hoped, that it would all come together for her. I did not know, though, that she found in me a role model. Could I have been the *Ling Long* woman? I could not have known this. I had only wanted her to see herself as someone other than a daughter. You understand my reasoning? I think you do in the way you speak about Pui-Yee.”

Jingchen blinked several times at the mention of Pui-Yee’s name. He knocked the pipe bowl against the silver plate and emptied out the ashes.

“Pui-Yee,” he said, “was not like any woman I have ever known.” He stood, buried his hands into his trouser pockets and walked to the tall window. The falling sun caught in his glare. “Her way is not for everyone. It is difficult to say that what was right for one is right for another.”

“You, too, think I have meddled where I had no place to?” Song Lin stood.

“I think you did what felt right to you.” He did not turn to face her. “I only mean to say we must each find our own way.” He turned suddenly. “Tell me, what happened to her?”

Song Lin reached for the teapot and refilled the two cups. His upturned brows and the shy smile that fell upon his lips went unseen by her. She held the cup in her right hand and used her left as a plate. When it was offered to him, he took the miniature cup in both hands.

“She wrote a letter to her father,” Song Lin answered, blowing the wisps of steam from her cup. “In it, she said she would not marry into the house. That her duty was no longer to a single man, but to a nation. Still, in the end, she left school. She found new purpose in student groups that actively sought communist ideologies.”

“Does that bring you disappointment?” Jingchen asked.

Song Lin shook her head. In her heart, she knew that the disappointment came after and had little to do with Siu Pei’s new purpose. The thought that she had turned the girl from something other than a life that may have been good to her now troubled Song Lin. She thought of Pui-Yee and Lei and wondered in whose interest she was acting on. Had she inadvertently given the girl a purpose; advice that came from the *Ling Long* woman, and not her? “I have many flaws,” Song Lin whispered, taking a sip from her cup. The porcelain rim scalded her lip and the cup fell onto the floor, shattering into pieces.

They knelt simultaneously, knocking heads. With one hand upon her burning lip, she placed her other hand on his forehead. “I am so clumsy,” she said. “Are you alright?”

He was knelt on one knee. “Your lip?” He asked.

The burn had only caused a temporary jolt of pain. As quickly as it had come, it had left. Song Lin shook her head and smiled. Upon seeing the shattered pieces of perfect porcelain, her smile turned into a frown.

Jingchen supported her elbows on his palms and lifted her. “Leave it,” he said.

She angled her head, tilting her face at his and wondered aloud. “Is it because she is neither worth the time nor effort?”

The proximity of her lips to his caused him to back away from her and against the wall.

The thud broke her trance. She saw fear in his eyes and the beat of her own heart rapped quickly in response. “I am sorry,” she said, quickly looking for diversion. “I have taken your entire afternoon.” Song Lin excused herself and shuffled toward the door.

“Wait,” he said, “your things?”

She saw her travel bag atop the marble table and walked past it, returning to the window shelf where she retrieved her sparrow. She paused momentarily. “Thank you,” she said, keeping her profile to him. Just then, Mei’s finch had returned. The blood orange face looked up at her, its cinnamon specked wings kept close to its sides. It hopped over the ledge and into its cage.

“Do not go to my father’s court again,” Jingchen said. “The yard is generations’ old; the keeper of many secrets as the women frequently say. It makes you see and feel strange things. Promise me you will not go there again.”

Song Lin nodded, without turning to face him. As she walked toward the door, she paused again at the marble table. “Will you hold on to my things for me?” She asked.

“When I am ready, I will come back for them”

Chapter Sixteen

Mahjong tiles were shuffled loudly, then stacked in two rows of eighteen and pushed toward the center to create a wall. Song Lin sat back in her chair which was upholstered in a patterned silk of jasmine and berries. She reached toward the tray of yellow apples tinted red and small purple plums. Mei leaned forward and tossed the pair of dice onto the table. As they spun, Song Lin winked at Pearl, who sat across from her.

“The prevailing wind is south,” Mei announced to Song Lin, shifting the wine glass to her other hand as she changed the wind marker from east to south.

This was a new game for Song Lin. She had never learned how to play Sparrow though it was a popular pastime, even in Shanghai. The three dragon tiles she thought the most prettily drawn; each a symbol of the three Confucian virtues—Center, Prosperity and Benevolence.

When the dice rolled to a stop, Mei counted a total of nine and found her quarter of the wall to draw tiles from. Then, each took their turn drawing, including Pearl. Song Lin was surprised at how well Pearl knew the game.

“Little *laoshi*,” Mei said. “Do not forget to take your last tile.”

Song Lin nodded, repeating the rules quietly to herself: “Four melds and a pair of eyes.”

“Forgive me,” Mei chuckled into her hand. “It is hard for me to retrain my tongue.” She stuck her tongue out and gently patted it with her hand as if to scold it. “So stubborn like me. I hope you will take to my calling you little *laoshi* because it has

become your name. If I call you by any other, then it is just not you. I will try to mind it best I can as Jingchen has spoken to me about your sensitive nature.”

“Jingchen has spoken to you about me?” Song Lin asked.

Mei brushed back a neatly curled lock of hair which formed a wave over her forehead. Her hair was parted to the side and the length was rolled and pinned up into a row of curls on both sides of her head.

“He cares much for the business of women,” Mei said. “Oh, how I have tried to lessen his load. ‘Jingchen, Jingchen, leave the house matters to me,’ I had said. But, when men find purpose, even in places where they ought not to be, it is best we let them.” Mei waved her hands in the air. “All the better for us women. We can sit back and play mahjong.”

“Jingchen only wishes to keep harmony in the house,” Jing Jing defended.

“Oh, the royal daughter speaks,” Mei played at being startled. “How quiet you have been since your brother’s return. I think she wishes to punish me. She knows how I hate the quietness between two people.”

“She had been ill,” Song Lin said.

Mei drew a tile from the wall and gasped. She’d check her melds for a place; trying hard to fit it into her hand. Everyone knew that she had just drawn the bamboo tile designated One which was painted with a red and green bird. She sighed, tossing it into the center, which Pearl quickly snatched, revealing a meld with one, two and three; all of the bamboo suit.

“Her illness,” Mei said, lifting her hard squint off the child, “is an illness of the heart. It comes and goes, you know, whenever the green dragon appears.”

“Pay no mind to our Mei,” Jing Jing interjected. “Tell me, did you fix it?”

“Fix it?” Song Lin repeated.

“Yes. I saw the houseman earlier. He was walking through the corridors carrying a tray with broken pieces of porcelain. I asked him where he was taking it and he said that Jingchen wished for you to have it so that you might put it back together.”

The dark rings about the woman’s eyes troubled Song Lin. They lost the luster that was once there. It was a sensitive and quiet intelligence; one that wished to hide itself. “Not yet,” Song Lin answered. “I wish to take my time with it.”

“You will have much of it, little *laoshi*,” Mei drank from her glass. “Jingchen tells me, I am his sometimes mother after all, that you are taking a temporary relief from teaching. How sad for Pearl, I thought.” She reached and squeezed Pearl’s cheek.

The smile on Pearl’s lips reassured Song Lin that she had done the right thing. Instead of spending their time reading books, they tossed a ball or flew a phoenix kite in the courtyard, often with Jing Mo present.

Beyond the room, just outside the door, the women heard Jing Mo screaming, “Too loud! Too loud!”

“Shh,” Jing Jing pursed her lips. “The tiles are too loud.”

Mei clucked her tongue and shouted toward the door, “It is our time now. Leave us be!”

“Mei,” Jing Jing said, “he has the right to be here. We should stop playing now.”

“And, we were just beginning to have some fun,” Mei sighed as she placed her row of tiles face down. “Maybe I should go and check in on Jingchen.”

“Stay,” Jing Jing said. “I need you too.”

Mei yawned into her hand and stood. She picked up a plum as she walked toward Jing Jing. As soon as she bit into it, the sweet juice glossed her lips like a coating of sugary syrup. “It is sweet,” Mei said, propping her chin onto Jing Jing’s shoulder. “Will you have a taste?”

Song Lin looked away.

“Little *laoshi*,” Mei said, straightening her posture, “you are blushing. It is true what Jingchen said. How very sensitive you are.”

Jing Jing took the half eaten plum forcibly from Mei and threw it onto the tray.

“It seems I have upset everyone, except for Pearl,” Mei refilled her glass. “Come, let us not ruin the mood. We will drink to all the women in the house.” She raised and drained her glass. She refilled and raised it again, “And, now we will drink to all the men in the house.”

Jing Jing held her hand in place. “Find something better to pass your time.”

Mei shook her wrist free. “And, what will we do? We cannot play mahjong. What a happy afternoon it could have been!”

Song Lin had moved and sat by Pearl, wondering how often the child had been exposed to her young mother’s drunkardness, or the ways in which the two women amused themselves. In fact, the child had never expressed anything, but fear.

“Perhaps we can tell stories,” Song Lin offered.

“There’s an idea,” Mei whispered. “Between us, we have so many stories to share. We are always telling them to men, but rarely do we share them with another woman. It would be nice to tell something other than a fiction.” She walked over to the

teacher and Pearl, spreading her arms around the both of them. “What a splendid idea, little *laoshi*. Splendid!”

Song Lin felt the child’s body stiffen and gently brushed Mei’s hand off Pearl’s shoulder.

Freed to fully embrace the teacher, Mei hovered. “Tell us,” she said. “Tell us about him. The teacher in Shanghai. What is his name? Is it Hao?”

Pearl looked up at her teacher with sudden interest. This would be a very different story, not like the ones Song Lin often recited.

“Go on,” Jing Jing whispered. The brown of her pupils softened to the color of Tiger’s Eye. “I would like to know what kind of a man he is.”

Suddenly, Song Lin’s heart raced and she wondered how much Mei had already known. The woman, very much like a succubus, always managed to draw it out of her. Song Lin realized for the first time that she wanted to tell them about him. He was no longer a secret she had to protect. He was not even hers to protect. Curiosity gave her new strength. She wanted to know what these women thought of a man like Hao. However, she found it difficult to begin. How would she introduce her lover to the women? She thought of presenting him as a character in a novel, but she knew he would not be pleased. He would turn the book on her and find some Kukshina to talk about instead. So, she began where she felt was a proper beginning—at the cherry blossom tree.

Song Lin talked well into the afternoon. The rain which had at first been a light sprinkle—the pitter patter heard against the shingles—kept in stride with the cadence of

her heartbeat. It had now become a steady fall, beating against the roof, doors and latticed windows in clumps. A shout of thunder and lightning blew up the skies.

Mei who had been reclined against Jing Jing, roused. “The finch,” she remembered. “Where is it?”

“In the study with my brother,” Jing Jing answered.

“It is good that Jingchen is home,” Mei purred.

Even Pearl who had been lying with her head atop Song Lin’s lap stirred from the crackle of thunder. “Is he handsome like Jingchen?” She asked.

Song Lin closed her eyes and thought on the child’s question. When she opened them, she said, “He is handsome in ways that your brother is not just as your brother is handsome in ways that Hao is not.”

Pearl scratched her head and all the women laughed.

“Finish it,” Jing Jing said softly. “Did you see him again after he returned from the village?”

“Yes,” Song Lin answered, pausing for long seconds. “He had stayed much longer. The ten days had become twenty, then sixty. When we met at long last, I think we were never really together again.”

It had been raining hard that day as well. Sheets of rain fell from the sky, whipped by strong winds from the West and East. The light from an oil lamp was lit in his little wood house. Though he had two lamps, she knew it was the one with the creaky door closest to the window. Song Lin had placed her bike on its side by the well, running to the hanging roof with a cardigan draped over her head. Her blouse and skirt stuck to her like a sheet of wet pastry. The knock on the wood door had been carried away by the

drumming and thrashing of rain. She knocked a second time and then a third. The door opened slightly and Hao poked his head out. His hair was disheveled and his eyeglasses sat askew as if he had been roused from sleep. She smelled the slumber on him and longed to carry him in her arms, recalling the times he dozed in her embrace. When she reached for him, he caught her by the wrists and ushered her away from the door as he stepped out.

This was not the reunion she had expected. He looked confused and asked, “Lin, what are you doing here?”

She remembered trying to smile as she searched for a reason. His question hung over them like a third party. She was angry in the way she was suddenly made to feel. The little dry space she stood in enclosed her like a room. All the while, sharp stabs of rain poked at her backside and his eyes, bright as blinding light, interrogated her. “I have come to see you,” was all she could manage.

He sucked in his bottom lip and held it.

She saw a red satin string around his neck and followed it down to the huge medallion made from *fei tsui* jade, the fairest of stones. It was a pale green dragon framed inside a box of swirling clouds the size of her palm. This was newly acquired. She had never seen it before and rested a finger atop it.

“It was my father’s,” he said. “He is gone.”

She had wanted to reach for him again, but he had taken two steps to the side, away from her.

He removed his eyeglasses and cleaned the round lens, one at a time, on the tail of his untucked shirt, and spoke absently, as if to the sky. “I am the Patriarch now, as the eldest son.”

Song Lin then understood why he was delayed as forty nine-days was the custom upon a family member’s passing.

He chuckled, but it was saddled with contempt. “You know what I found most amusing, Lin? As our great procession made its way to the ancestral graveyard, all the shopkeepers and families erected paper houses and paper servants along our route. This was a showing of how much they honored my father as the dragon head; the man who kept prosperity and harmony in the village. I thought it odd that my father was more generous to them than his own eldest son. I saw in front of each shop and house a white mat so that I could kneel in reciprocation of the honor they bestowed upon him. But, I did not, would not kneel. So, my younger brother knelt in my place. I wondered where all the beggars had gone? Would they come and spoil this great occasion? I wanted them to come and uncover the great farce that is the Tze clan. But, I was certain that the clan took care to make a donation to the beggars’ guild so they would not come.” He turned toward Song Lin and his voice shook as he said, “I will not go back, Lin. This time, I have taken everything that is mine.” He clutched the jade medallion in one hand, and stepped out from under the rafter into the pounding rain. “This I took because I will show him that I can do better things for the Tze clan; things beyond the reach of a small fishing village. I have vowed to teach the new ways and not the backwards thinking of a village of fishermen.”

He approached Song Lin hurriedly, his feet stomping in puddles. Reaching for both her hands, he cupped them tightly in his. “I will need you more than ever now,” he said.

Song Lin freed her hands and squeezed out her cardigan. She wiped his face. It did little to dry him, but she sought to find the reflection in the glass. In them, she was not found; her own world had disappeared behind a crystal curtain. In his absence, she realized she had not existed.

She brushed her fingers along his cheek, feeling the stubble and knew he hadn’t shaved in days.

His hands fell upon her lower back and he collapsed into her.

She felt the jade—breakable but unbendable—press hard against her chest. The cardigan slipped from her hand and then her fingers. She made no effort to reclaim it.

A voice was heard from inside the door, in the quiet warmth of a single lit lamp. It was a child’s voice, beckoning for his father.

Pearl tugged at Song Lin’s sleeve. To her other side sat the Ko family daughter. Song Lin apologized. In her hand was the handkerchief with the butterfly lovers.

“You must think I am silly,” she said to Pearl. “A grown woman crying.”

The child shook her head. “My Ma Ma cried all the time. I didn’t know her when she didn’t cry.”

Mei, who had been standing by the lattice door facing the courtyard began to sing:

*Far away the clouds are fading
I see my lover in the moonlight*

*Tonight we are happy
Together again
On the crystal water
Swims a pair of ducks
Green leaves, red petals
The Lotus flowers open*

When she finished, she turned toward the women. “I have known many men like this. So full of self-importance aren’t they? Thinking they can cure society’s ills with foreign books.” She giggled. “A man who has tucked himself away in a wood house because he cannot face his reality is not worth your tears.”

“Do you cry?” Song Lin asked.

“You must think me a monster,” Mei laughed, as did Jing Jing and Pearl.

“You do not strike me as one who would is all,” Song Lin said, suppressing a giggle.

“Tears,” Mei said, wagging a finger, “are only for women who have not yet learned their place. The world is not so bad if she knows where she fits in. She must study her surroundings and the people in it. If she wants more than she can handle, then she will always cry.”

“Do you love no one?” Jing Jing asked.

“How quick the Ko daughter turns the discussion to one of love,” Mei arched a brow.

“Do you?” Song Lin repeated Jing Jing’s question.

“My heart,” Mei answered, “bears the scars of generations of women. It has lost the ability to speak the language of love.” She found her reflection in a glass panel and angled her chin this way and that, holding her chin higher and higher. Grazing a long,

thin finger just underneath her chin, she began to sulk. “Stupid hands! They are thick and rough! They are not mine, but my poor, dead mother’s!”

Song Lin had never seen the woman so clearly and knew then that Mei could do nothing to ever upset her again. Her sexuality was her strength and it was what defined her; a separate identity from her mother. The house knew this too. Song Lin now understood why her behavior was always excused and overlooked by the house occupants. Perhaps admiration could be found in the woman’s strength.

“Look!” Mei clapped. “The rains have ended. Let us go to the garden and see if we can find the butterfly lovers. Bring the nets, will you?”