

JINJIU VILLAGE IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA,
LAST DAY OF THE YEAR OF THE WATER DOG
FEBRUARY 15, 1923



CHAPTER 1

THE BOWL CRASHED on the tile floor and split into clattering shards at my feet.

“Clumsy girl! That was your grandmother’s,” Nushi said. “And one of the last fine pieces.”

“The table is full,” I pleaded, sweeping my hand over its collection of porcelain bowls. “It would not fit.”

“So you decided to break it apart!”

“Nushi, I *am* sorry.”

“As sorry as you were when you dropped the plucked chicken in the dirt this morning? Or maybe when you spilled syrup on my slippers?” She shook her head and bent to pick up the larger pieces from the floor.

“I’m cursed. I can’t help it,” I said.

Nushi snorted. “*You* are dangerous. It is the rest of us who are cursed.” She swept the remaining fragments into a pile by the door, then returned the broom to the cabinet and began to cut the chicken. “Where are the flowers you picked yesterday?” she asked me without looking up.

"The flowers?"

"Yes, the flowers, the flowers! The ones I asked you to get from the Wus' garden. You left for two hours!"

I stared at her. I *was* supposed to get flowers yesterday. And I had gone out intending to get them. Instead, I had walked to the flat rock, half-buried in the earth, that marked the farthest distance from home I had ever traveled.

I wanted to go past that rock. Then past the place where the road disappeared behind a hill. And, if it was possible, past the reach of marriages nursed by fears and desperation. The rock was a place for dreaming about what was beyond the hill, not for gathering flowers.

"Can't you send someone to get them now?"

"I sent *you*." Nushi gripped my arm, marched me to the door, opened it with one hand, and shoved me outside with the other. She was our servant, but also the closest thing to a mother I had.

"Nushi, no . . . I can't go to the Wus' house."

"Don't be gone longer than an hour. We have much more to do."

"But . . ."

The door slammed in my face.

The homes in the small village of Jinjiu were strung like pearls along the river. Our land began the string, followed by the Wus', then a thick cluster of smaller homes. From the outside, the structures that housed the Wu clan were much like ours — long brick buildings surrounding a courtyard, and enclosed by a gate. Both families owned vast expanses of terraces built over generations. In lucky years, the workers filled and fertilized their fields three times to produce the rice that fed us. Between the lines of rice we grew cabbage, spring onion, and corn. What we did not need, the men

traded or sold down the river, beyond the flat rock and past the bend in the road.

But behind the latticework windows and the tall double doors of our compounds, the differences between our family and the Wus' emerged. Their inner hall clamored with mouths and feet, as mothers had sons, and sons brought wives carrying gold and gifts, and those wives had more sons. Women embroidered caps with small tigers to protect the babies in their bellies, and children cried until one of their many aunties held them on her lap.

Our courtyard was quiet, with only me, my father, my grandfather, our servant Nushi, and bags of rice stored in empty rooms. No one bore children. No one brought wives or husbands. Since my birth, nothing had survived our walls — the curse of a Fire Horse.

When I reached the road that lay across from the Wu home, I took a deep breath and turned into the Wus' garden. Auntie Wu took a special pride in two of her accomplishments — the sons she bore and the flowers she grew. They were equally useless, but the flowers smelled better.

I wanted to get the flowers and fly from the yard without having to speak with anyone, so I slipped along the far edge of the garden, behind the corner of the house, and bent to yank some of the flowers growing at my feet.

One of the young Wu girls peered around the corner. It was Mei Mei. I had seen her the day before, trying to climb a tree, until her aunt dragged her down and sent her into the house. She looked up at me, her eyes big and dark like new moons. I turned back to the flowers, but I could still feel her watching me.

“Do you have something to say, Little Sister?” I said, jerking a fistful of stems.

She shook her head.

I stood. "Are you in trouble again?"

She nodded.

"Me too. I forgot to pick the flowers for the New Year's Eve meal," I said.

"I forgot to pull the weeds like Grandmother told me to," she said in a small voice.

"Then what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Watching you pull the weeds."

I stared at the collection of stems I had gathered. "These are weeds?" Mei Mei nodded. I dropped the bundle to the ground and tried to smile at her. "Well, now that we are done with that chore, maybe you can show me where the flowers are."

Her face lit up. "There are some pretty ones by the door. They just bloomed yesterday." She skipped around the corner. I wiped my hands on my tunic and followed her.

When she stopped next to a bed of flowers, their tight white clusters just starting to open, I bent next to her. After I had snapped a few off, the girl asked, "Is it true you cursed Second Wife's embroidery last winter?"

"What?"

"Grandmother said she was getting careless, and Second Wife said she couldn't make a decent stitch since she crossed paths with you one morning."

"I have no power over embroidery. If I did, Nushi would not describe mine as the entrails of an ox."

She giggled. "I was going to ask you to curse First Brother. He's been tattling on me to Grandmother. I was thinking boils on his face. Or can you make one leg stop growing?"

The sound of a throat clearing interrupted us. I turned. Auntie Wu stood in the garden, a parasol tipped behind her shoulder. The roundness of the parasol mirrored the roundness of her figure, balanced on her tiny, useless bound feet. She looked at me, displeasure rolling off her. I quickly shifted my gaze to a point in the air just in front of her forehead. This was a technique I used often. It blurred people's faces and kept me from seeing the disdain in their eyes.

"Jade Moon, your betrothed was just here," she said sweetly.

"I don't have a betrothed." I stared at the ground, hiding my hot face.

"Maybe not yet, but soon. I hear your father is arranging a marriage with the brickmaker, Fourth Brother Gou." My heart froze. "At least you will not have to worry over him reading all night like my poor husband. And he does not have all the land to care for that my sons have."

Every word she said was an insult to my family. I knew that my father had hoped to match me with a wealthy farmer or scholar, not a brickmaker. But I was a Fire Horse, and I was going to be seventeen soon — too old for even Fourth Brother Gou.

"Nushi sent me to get flowers," I said, swallowing my anger.

"You are welcome to anything from my poor excuse for a garden," Auntie Wu said. "It is nothing compared to the garden your grandmother kept. When she was alive, I could open my window and smell the perfume of her roses, but so much is not as it used to be."

I nodded and picked a handful of the yellow-centered narcissus.

Auntie Wu's face kept its scowl. "Jade Moon. Please be careful. Those aren't weeds."

I bit my lips. "Thank you, Auntie," I said.

Mei Mei whispered to me, "She is just in a foul mood after another wart sprouted on her chin this morning."

Auntie Wu flicked her fan over her chin and fixed her gaze on the girl. "Get back inside the house."

Mei Mei moved to go. I grabbed her. "We know that I can't do any harm, but if your brother causes you any more trouble, tell him I taught you how to shrink his eyes to peas so they'll fall right out of his head."

I winked, and her face brightened.

After making my good-byes to Auntie Wu, I fled back to the river where I could hide. I dropped into the curve of a tree where it sent its roots into the river and brushed my fingers through the water. Tiny waves followed them on their trip across its gray surface as the trees stretched their branches in a canopy above me.

I was not ignorant of how ridiculous I seemed to people. My feet wandered the village with little purpose other than my own pleasure, my mind constructed ideas that no one seemed to understand, and my heart held hopes that were far beyond my reach. But I could not help my thoughts or my dreams. I watched the wind lead the leaves in a dance, and I wondered if any of them ever wished that they could find their own steps.

I sat there, trying to erase Auntie Wu's scorn from my head, imagining I was past the half-buried rock, until I heard voices from above. I realized that I had lost track of time, and I needed to return home before Nushi set out to find me. Tucking my legs underneath me, I prepared to stand. Then I recognized the high, sharp voice of Auntie Wu.

"Down this road. You will see their compound," she said.

Did Auntie Wu mean our house?

"Thank you," a strange voice said. A *man's* voice. Peering around the curve of the trunk, I found I could see them through a curtain of leaves. We didn't get many visitors in our village. Since we didn't have a market where merchants could sell their goods, and the road that led to the village ended at the river, there was no reason for people to travel here. Until now. The man was younger than Fourth Brother Gou, and he stood taller than Auntie Wu, maybe Father's height.

"Are you family? Visiting for the New Year?" Auntie Wu asked.

"I am here for the New Year," he said.

"Perhaps some good fortune for the Chans." She leaned toward the stranger. "Yes?"

The stranger folded his hands in front of him. "I think visitors always hope to bring fortune to the home they visit."

"I am sure they do," Auntie Wu said, leaning forward even more. But he only smiled politely. His clothes were not new, but crisp and clean, free of dirt and worn patches.

"Perhaps you bring wealth," she tried. "That is always welcome, although not as welcome as a son-in-law would be in that house."

The stranger only nodded. My heart started to pound, filling the hollow spot in my chest with its rhythm. I had spent years sneaking into my father's study to read letters from his faraway friends — the poetry of new scholars, the hopes of young officials, the dreams of men who wanted change. Lately, the letters were full of worry over the dragon that was China, the difficulties of waking her, and once woken, the impossibility of controlling her. If this man was the son of one of those friends, someone who might take

me to see important things happening in faraway places, I would never complain about going to the Wu house again.

"Well, if this poor self could be bold and offer some advice," Auntie Wu continued. "While the Chans have always raised rice carefully, they are careless with their children, especially the daughter there now."

"It is a dangerous thing to be careless with a daughter," the stranger said.

Anger bit at my skin. I tried to pull myself up to tell Auntie Wu to hold her tongue, but I had sunk deeper into the mud beside the river, and my knees and feet were stuck.

"Ah, true. You are like me, keeping to the old ways. These days girls stomp around on their giant, flat feet and children think they can marry whomever they wish. My sons were all matched the traditional way, but Elder Chan allowed his son to marry a girl he loved. Love matches always end in tragedy."

Had my father loved my mother? He never spoke of her. I always imagined a traditional marriage between them — one built with the strong bones of respect but stripped of the soft skin of love.

"I heard Younger Chan studied to be an official."

"That is true, but it seems to have brought him nothing but dissatisfaction and pride. He would have been better off staying at home."

"There are men who have much learning, but little wisdom," the stranger said. So, perhaps not the son of one of Father's friends. "Not that I know anything about it," he added quickly. "And the daughter?"

He wanted to hear more about me. I prayed it was a good sign.

If only he had asked someone else — maybe the mute man who lived at the edge of the village.

“Oh, yes.” Auntie Wu’s voice warmed to her favorite subject — my shortcomings. “She is the disgrace of the neighborhood, wild and headstrong. She runs alone through the village and the countryside. She was just here, tearing up my garden. Not that my garden is much,” she said with feigned modesty.

“Your garden is as fine as any in Hong Kong,” the stranger said.

Auntie Wu giggled, pleased with the compliment. “She has the red cheeks of a peasant farmer and the tongue of an old servant. Even if her skin was as pale as a lily, she would still be cursed.”

“She is unmarried, then?” the stranger asked.

“Yes, and almost seventeen. Her father is desperate to match her.” She paused to give this news weight. “Perhaps you were considering a match with her, sir?”

I prayed that he would say yes; it would cause Auntie Wu to lose face and save me from a lifetime of conversations about bricks. But I had barely begun to plead with the ancestors when he replied, “Me? No, I would never marry such a girl. I have business with the men of the house.”

My heart began to boil. Auntie Wu paused to see if he would reveal more. “During your stay, I invite you to visit my poor house and worthless sons. You may grow weary of the Chan house.”

“Thank you.” He bowed. “I hope I have the honor of visiting soon.”

I wanted to shout to Auntie Wu to mind her own business, and to the young stranger to return the way he came, but I knew that Nushi would not approve, and Father would be furious. And,

perhaps, coming from someone stuck in a bank by the side of the river, it would not have the effect I wanted.

When I heard their footsteps fade, I decided it was time to pull myself out. I tugged against the root of the tree, but I could not move my legs. Dirt and bark collected under my fingernails as I pushed and pulled. Finally, the ground released my stuck leg with a slurp and sent me flying forward. But as soon as I put my weight on the bank, my foot slipped. I grasped at a few branches, the limbs sliding through my mud-covered fingers, but I struggled and fought only to fall backward and tumble into the river.

When I stood up again, I found myself chest-deep in the water. And right as I thought that all my bad luck had been used up in creating this calamity, I heard the same smooth voice that had just said he would never marry me.

“Do you need help?”