

## CHAPTER ONE

*Wuhan Province, c 1875*

“My bicycle!” Sweet Li Jie cried in the second before toppling to the ground and hitting her head. Wind whipped up dew, roadside plants sneezed, were uprooted in the sudden storm. The second stretched out; she saw her plums tossed in the air and scattering – dozens of plums, the day’s succour, two yuans. Two yuans for noodles, salt, pepper, even a piece of bone with some meat clinging to it, if Butcher Shen was drunk and his knife (perfected in the battlefield) failed to scrape off every shred. Butcher Shen... Normally she would tremble when thinking of him, but not in the second which seemed to stretch into a season as she fell. Neither Butcher Shen nor the loss of fruit and the day’s livelihood affected her.

“My bicycle!” she cried before falling into unconsciousness. It had been nearly a year since the bicycle had become hers, a gift from Suitor Jia Yun, whom she had spurned.

The ‘Sweet’ was her mother’s doing, to entice her out of the despair, which was Sweet Li Jie’s sickness. “The girl’s head crawls with lice. They have put gu into her mind; can you rid her of the poison?” Ma Hongniang pleaded.

The village doctor, Du Fu, promised he would, in return for twenty-five yuans, paid over five months. “It will take months to purge her thoughts and bring her back to laughter,” Du Fu said, holding out a ball of herbs mixed in the gallbladder of a dog. “It is not just lice, but demons. Ordinary medicine can’t purge her on its own. She has to dream away demons. I will give you this special herb, boil it in salt water and give it to her at night, not to drink but to breathe in the vapours, and when the sun comes up, give her a different herb to make her daydream.”

"Will you make her a child again, a sweet child? Will you take two yuans and some plums?" Ma Hongniang asked in a mournful voice. She knew Quack Du Fu was a quack who demanded too much of the villagers – all poor except Rich-Beyond-Dreams Wang Changling, who was richer by far than Quack Du Fu. He owned the land which they tilled for a sickly living, blood-rents drawn from them week after month after year.

"I will cure her," Quack Du Fu lied.

Ma Hongniang sensed the lie. He had taken so many yuans from so many from the time he had come to the village, and most of his remedies had failed. But she could not know this for certain, since Quack Du Fu did, on occasion, bring health to the ailing, a limb healed, a stomach pacified – small acts but signs of hope which folk seized upon out of want. Quack Du Fu was better than nothing, so they gambled their yuans on his doubtful skill.

"Two yuan! Two yuan!" Quack Du Fu said, sucking his teeth, hawking and spitting on the ground just in front of Ma Hongniang's feet, at the doorway, knowing that she would not step past the phlegm, such was her superstition. Yellow phlegm. He had been careful to chew dried mango, fennel seeds and burdock before coming. Yellow as jaundice, as fever, as pus, which, if she walked over the spit, could afflict her with such diseases.

"Can you make her dream happy things, after the demons go?" Ma Hongniang asked, still wanting to believe. Her own dreams were unchanging. Many nights the broken body of her husband descended upon her, but less frequently as time passed. Sweet Li Jie had not witnessed the killing but she had heard the cries for mercy.

"I have proper herbs," Quack Du Fu assured her. Ma Hongniang paused, then gave him a coin. Maybe *her* dream was a boulder too massive to be moved, but Sweet Li Jie was a mere girl, her mind was only lightly dusted, so the demons made only faint footprints which might more easily be breathed away.

It was not lice that caused Sweet Li Jie's face to crease with worry or made her clench her mouth to prevent smiling.

"You're fifteen years of age today, and in all the time I have sought your affection, you have not once shed your sorrow,"

Suitor Jia Yun said, presenting her with his own bicycle, a rare and valuable offering, and looking upon her with deer eyes. As usual her eyes were lowered, avoiding his, and she said nothing.

"I'm going far; it will be many years before I return," he said. "Will you wait for my return? Will you run up to me as I approach with a sprig of bamboo?" Silence. A fretful look crossed her face.

Ma Hongniang, who was watching from afar, shouted to Sweet Li Jie. "Say words to comfort poor Suitor Jia Yun. Can you not see how his eyes bleed? At least give thanks for his bicycle. Pick flowers for him, a bit of fragrance clings to the hand that gives flowers."

Sweet Li Jie shuddered as Suitor Jia Yun reached out for her hand. She wanted to rise, kick away the stool, run to the barn and hide herself in the hay. Still, she let him caress her hand, stroking it as if to arouse some feeling. She remained numb within, and deaf to her mother's entreaty. She looked to the bicycle and opened her eyes wide in astonishment, and a show of gratitude.

"My burden, my curse," Ma Hongniang shouted. "To get her to smile... it's easier to cut water with a knife..." Afterwards, as she led Suitor Jia Yun out of the yard, Ma Hongniang consoled him with a hug. "She is a lonely angel inviting the night. She wants to be invisible but I will cure her before you return and I will keep her for matrimony. Come back with good health and a good fortune. Come back with glitter and sackfuls. Take this vase, it will keep her close to you."

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CHAPTER ONE  
*Jia Yun in the Colony of Demerara c. 1876*

*3rd February*

Dear Sweet Li Jie, I write from Demerara, from a small town called Gladstone. Far, far away, but I have Ma Hongniang's vase to keep me company. It survived the crossing of many seas, though the images of you she painted on both sides have been badly breathed upon by the salt air, but there's not a single crack for ants to secrete themselves. I wrapped it in one of my vests to keep it close to my heart and placed it in the sturdiest corner of my trunk. My master, Yu Hao wanted me to put a bear paw in the trunk, to bring us luck and protect us in this alien place, but I was bold enough to rebuff him. I did not want an animal remnant to rest beside you. But now I am encrusted in guilt more savage than salt, for Master Yu Hao fell to cholera a few days after we left the port of Xiamen. I cried when the ship set sail, remembering you and my family, mostly you, and I have been crying ever since. I've inherited all his cash – so many banknotes – and all his goods: sets of scissors, rulers, needles, threads of a dozen colours and so many rolls of cloth that the canoe bringing me from the ship to the Demerara shore could barely contain them. And the bear paw, too – he had put it in his own trunk, with garlic, beads, prune stones, bark, smoked fish and other charms to bring us safely to the new land. They failed him, but worked for me for I am now in possession of a small fortune. Before we left, Master Yu Hao paid for a year's supply of cloth, so every month, when a ship from Xiamen arrives, my stock almost doubles. It seems I have enough to clothe the Colony, but there are many savages here who go about naked and beardless. At least we, in the olden days, in the

poorest parts of Fujian province, would gather beads and make aprons to guard our privacy. In another letter, I will tell you more. For now, I only wish to confess how Master Yu Hao's spirit has wrapped itself around me like a winding sheet, which my tears bleach with salt. Remembering you only drains more from me. At times, my eyes are cloudy; sometimes I can barely see the colours of the cloth I sell.

It has been six months since I arrived in Gladstone and started selling. I have learnt the speech of the people here, which is a corrupt version of what the Scottish Reverend Muir and Master Yu Hao taught me in China. This is what they said when they beheld me pining by the river: "Chinee, wha wrang man? Why you eye red-red? You smoke opium? Birdshit fall on your face? Chinee, don't look so glum. Here, let me give you a catfish. Go home and cook it and drink rum and when you belly full, you go sleep blacker than Rawan self." (I learnt later that Rawan was a dark-skinned villain in their Hindu folktales).

Sleep does not come easily to me; thoughts of Master Yu Hao, and of you, keep me awake. I long to dream, so you can appear, but I wake up blackly. In any case, the night air is full of noises, huge moths like kites, treefrogs calling, monkeys caterwauling, the death throes of animals and the glee of their predators. The jungle is maw and saliva. In the rainy months the jungle is a mouthful of phlegm. It threatens to swallow up my shop, and the whole town. I ventured into it once. I hurried out. The jungle reminds me of home – of killings and more killings. Demerara is backward but at least there are no warlords here, only the British, and they keep good order, mostly.

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*10th February.*

Dear Sweet Li Jie, today the rains came continuously and will persist for some time, according to Harris, my helper, who can read the sky and the fidgeting of animals. I stayed indoors to take stock, but could barely concentrate because of my grief on the anniversary of Master Yu Hao's death. All I am is because of him. He employed me as a shop assistant and over the years taught me the names of different threads, weaves, buttons, patterns. He was

so knowing of the world outside our town, since he traded with the British, buying fashionable goods from them to sell to the few Chinese who could afford such imports. So I learnt about edgings and laces, cambric, cassimere, muslin, Malabar handkerchiefs, Dutch linen, bobbins. The British merchants gave him the latest news of Europe. I had heard of the threat of war from Reverend Muir but Master Yu Hao was more up-to-date. When rumours of war were rife, he decided to sell up, before the fires moved from Europe to engulf China. The Germans, the French and the British had already made settlements in China, Master Yu Hao told me, and the Japanese were on the prowl. Our politicians had become warlords, squabbling over the remains of the Qing Dynasty. I threw my belongings into a trunk and visited you for the last time to leave my bicycle, which was originally a most generous gift from Master Yu Hao. It was only on board that I learnt about its dark history and I've been fearful ever since that the bicycle will bring calamity to you, that you will fall from it, break your neck and be crippled all your life...

How often have I prayed that a wild boar will stray into your garden and trample over it, rendering the bicycle useless. Or in my desperation I even hoped that crops have failed, that hunger has forced Ma Hongniang to sell the bicycle, albeit for some bowls of lukewarm soup, and you and she will follow me here...