

Chapter Nineteen

What's Gone is Gone

I ran down the twenty-two flights of steps, too fearful to take the lift in case Mrs Chen should arrive back unexpectedly and catch me in it. When I reached the front door, I checked carefully that no one was watching, slipped out on to the busy street and mingled with a passing group of pedestrians. The freezing air shocked me. It was the middle of winter. The dense, dull, grey sky threatened snow. I was glad I had taken the coat Mrs Chen had bought me, though what a waste of money it had proved until now.

I turned into the first side road I came to. Initially on a level, leading me back behind the row of new apartment blocks where the Chens lived, this road suddenly dropped steeply and took me towards the derelict buildings I had seen from my bedroom window. I glanced

back up at the new apartments, trying to work out which one was the Chens', hoping to wave one final farewell to Mrs Hong. But the windows were all blank canvases.

As I drew nearer to the derelict buildings, I was surprised to see that though they were appallingly dirty and crumbling, several of them were still occupied, their balconies hung with washing and cluttered with bicycles, tin baths, old stoves and other worldly possessions. A grubby-faced little girl waved at me from one of the higher balconies. I waved back and thought how lucky I was to have grown up with my father's luscious green terraces all around me, with fresh eggs every day, with the river running close by, and the air clean and transparent.

The road petered out. I turned right along another decaying street, and was surprised this time to find a row of shops, their owners trading as though nothing was happening around them and the new town above didn't exist. Was the attraction of a brand new apartment, a brand new shop, insufficient to tear them away from this squalor?

Yet how could I even ask myself such a question? This

was where their roots were, this was their home. I was looking at these people through the eyes of someone who had lived in a luxurious apartment for the past four months, and some of that must have rubbed off on me. I knew that I would not have questioned their decision to stay, nor even noticed the squalor, before I had been exposed to the Chens' immaculate lifestyle.

I walked faster, partly because of the sense of freedom I began to feel, partly because I did not want to attract too much attention. I turned down a quiet, narrow alleyway to continue my descent towards the river. Shortly, I came to the wasteland that had lain grey and melancholy as a backdrop to my bedroom panorama. The scale of it took my breath away. To the right and left, for as far as I could see, there was nothing but pile upon pile of dust-smothered rubble, the odd twisted pipe sticking up through it as though searching for a vital puff of air. I started to pick my way across it, my progress slowed by the unevenness of the ground. Looking at the rubble more closely, in order to avoid treading in potholes or cutting myself on jagged edges, I spotted tiny fragments of the lives that were once lived where I now stood. A doll's head, a strip of blue mater-

ial, an old shoe, a broken bowl. Ahead of me, I saw a man and a woman pulling at the rubble with their hands as though they were looking for something. Had they lived there once? I wondered if they had left some indispensable part of their lives behind them and were now engaged in a frantic search to find it. Or were they simply hoping to find treasure amongst the fallen landmarks of somebody else's life?

I reached a path and quickened my pace again. It narrowed and began to slope abruptly. I followed its meandering line with my eyes. It led all the way down to the river, where a ferry was moored and dozens of people were milling around. My heart skipped a beat. Nearly there. Freedom just a few hundred yards away.

I broke into a jog. The path gave way to coarse grass on either side. Ahead of me, the ferry passengers were strung out along the path, large bundles tied to their backs. I realised that they were coming in my direction, that the crowd by the ferry had disappeared. I saw then that the ferry was moving away. Even as I realised that I had missed it, I kept running towards it in some vague hope that it might stop.

"Fraid you're too late, dear," the first man I reached

said. 'There won't be another one till morning now.'

'But there's got to be,' I replied. 'Are you sure?'

'Seven o'clock tomorrow morning's the next one. Nothing till then.'

The straggle of climbers passed me one by one as I stood in the middle of the path gazing in utter dismay at the departing ferry. What was I to do? By now the Chens might well be scouring the streets of the old town for me. It was late afternoon. Where could I go until the morning?

The last of the ferry passengers walked by, several of them staring at me curiously. I hurried down the path and waited for them to disappear along the streets behind me. To the left of the path, some hundred yards away, the remains of a small dwelling protruded through the grass. When I was sure nobody was looking, I scrambled over to it. The stubs of the walls were just high enough, if I lay down, to screen me from the path and protect me from the bitter wind. I decided to stay there until darkness fell, then to find somewhere in the old town to spend the night.

With my coat wrapped tightly around me and my bag clutched in my hand, despite my fear of being found and

the constant noise from boats labouring along the river, I fell asleep.

It was twilight by the time I woke again. The surrounding peace was punctuated every so often by warning sirens from somewhere along the river, but otherwise all was quiet. I left the safety of my hideout and made my way back up the path through the wasteland towards the old town. As I drew closer, I could see that the shop-lined street was still busy with people fetching last-minute provisions, chatting with friends, playing cards, eating meals at pavement tables, the heat from ash-filled grill cookers keeping them warm. Although I was hungry by now, I dared not stop to buy food, nor to thaw my frozen fingers. I slipped quickly past the end of the street, and kept going until I found a whole row of deserted apartment blocks. The door of one of them was partially open. I pushed it hard to make enough room to squeeze through, listened for any sound that might mean it was occupied, then ran up the stairs right to the top floor and into a room at the front.

A meagre thread of light penetrated through the cracked windows. The room was bare apart from a filthy blanket in one corner, a pile of old electrical wire in

another, and a scattering of litter across the floor. It's only for one night, I told myself. I sat down on the broken floorboards with my back against a wall. I was too scared and too cold to go to sleep. I kept hearing unfamiliar noises: creaks and scratches and rasps and whines. I prayed that there were no rats around. Surely they wouldn't climb that high. Part of me began to long for the comfortable bed in my room at the Chens', but I reproached myself for even thinking that I wanted to go back.

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs. Two sets. Men's voices. I grabbed the filthy blanket and pulled it over me in terror. I shrank into the corner, hoping that if I made myself as small as possible I wouldn't be noticed. The footsteps kept on coming. The voices grew louder. They were outside the room. I heard a door creak, then close. The voices immediately became muffled. The two men had gone into the room opposite and closed the door behind them.

It was stifling under the foul-smelling blanket. I lifted it away from my face, only to be teased by the smell of food. The men were obviously eating next door. I could hear music too. I was desperate for them to leave. Why

couldn't they have chosen one of the other apartment blocks? Why mine? They were probably regular visitors. I wondered whether to steal out of the building while they had their door closed, but it was dark outside now, as well as freezing cold, and I was too scared to move in case they heard me. I could only hope that they would leave me alone in my room while they remained locked in theirs.

After perhaps an hour, maybe two hours, the voices and the music stopped. I was struggling to keep my eyes open, but I stayed awake for another half an hour or so, before deciding that the two men must be asleep and that I was safe at least for a while. I lay down, pulled the collar of my coat round my ears, wrapped the blanket round the lower part of my body and hid my bag under it as well, then fell asleep myself.

I woke again at dawn, stiff with cold and ravenous. All was quiet in the building. The ferry would leave, I judged, in about an hour. I had to be on it. I couldn't stay here another day and night, but how would I know whether it was safe to leave? I decided that the only thing I could do would be to make a dash for it. I waited for another nerve-racking stretch of time. There was

still no sound from the room across the hall. I stood up quietly and stretched my legs, picked up my bag, then moved silently towards the door. I peered round it and my heart skipped a beat. The door opposite was open. I listened hard. Not a sound. The men must have gone already. I took a deep breath, leapt out into the hallway, then belted down the stairs, two at a time, and out through the front door.

It had snowed during the night. A sprinkling covered the ground, smoothing its jagged edges and bleaching the greyness from the landscape. The murky sky suggested there was more to come. I hurried down the path, joining a steady stream of people who were also heading for the river. Their early-morning chatter cheered me, a sense of excitement eclipsed my fears.

As I drew closer to the waiting ferry, I scoured the quayside for the Chens, but saw no one of their grandeur. I mingled with a large group of women who, it appeared from their conversation, were on their way to work at a factory further down the river, and boarded the ferry with them. It seemed an eternity before the engines started up, but at last they roared into action. The horn sounded, and we moved slowly, slowly away

from the landing stage, away from a period of my life I was only too happy to leave behind.

The ferry picked up speed. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was safe at last. I would stay on the ferry for as long as possible, then make my way home somehow or other, by bus or by train. It couldn't be that difficult, I thought, to work out a route back. I stood by the edge and gazed over to the far side of the river, where buildings lower down had been obliterated and smallholdings abandoned. Higher up, another new town stood proud.

'Lucky people, aren't they?'

A rather overweight man had come to stand next to me. I looked at him, bewildered. He pointed across the water.

'Nice new homes they've got now. New jobs too, most of them. Nice warm factories instead of having to break their backs digging for a pittance.'

I didn't think my family would have agreed. Father had always refused to work in a factory, however much Uncle had tried to persuade him. I didn't want to talk to this man, though. I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

'Are you going far?' he asked.

I nodded but made no effort to continue the conversation, hoping he'd go away.

'Bit young to be on your own, aren't you?'

'I'm older than I look,' I said, trying to sound tough.

'Old enough to work?' he continued. 'My wife and I, we're always on the lookout for girls to work in our factories. You won't find better.'

'I don't want to work in a factory,' I said. 'I'm going home.'

'That's our loss, then,' said the man. 'I hope you have a good journey.' He flashed me a smile before turning away.

I was relieved that at that moment the ticket man approached me.

'Where to, Miss?' he asked.

'All the way, please.'

He told me how much I had to pay and I reached into my bag to take out the money. I delved down to the bottom, my fingers itching to touch the fat wad of crisp notes Mrs Hong had given me. I couldn't find it. I could feel my face turning red, my heart thumping. I searched around with my hand, then opened the bag wider and pulled out my clothes to look underneath. The money wasn't there.

'Got a problem, Miss?' asked the ticket man.

'My money – it's gone. Someone's taken my money,' I wailed. It hit me like a sledgehammer, the awful realisation that it must have been the men I had heard in the night. I knew something had been wrong that morning. It was the pile of electrical wire. It had gone. The men had come into my room for the wire. They had discovered me sound asleep. They had found my bag and stolen my money.

I must have fainted at the thought of it, for the next thing I knew I was sitting on the floor of the ferry being comforted by a tiny woman.

'Don't you worry, my darling,' said the woman. 'I've paid your fare. You just sit there until you feel better.'

'But the money,' I sobbed, as I realised again what had happened. 'I need it to get home. My mother's expecting me.'

'What a terrible stroke of luck you've suffered, but I'm afraid there's no use crying,' said the woman, not unkindly. 'What's gone is gone.'

I hauled myself to my feet, aware of the pitying stares of the other passengers.

'You don't understand,' I sobbed again. 'I need it for

my mother. I can't go home without it.'

'That bad, eh?' sympathised the woman. 'I wonder if there's anything my husband and I can do to help you.'

She called across the boat, and the fat man who had spoken to me earlier came over to us.

'This young lady's had her money stolen, poor thing,' she said to him. 'And there she was saving it to help her poor mother.'

'I don't know what the world's coming to,' said the man. 'It's always the good folk who get taken advantage of.'

'We can help her though, can't we?' urged the woman. 'Help her earn some money for her family.'

'Like I told her, we employ a lot of young girls in our factories,' said the man, 'but she doesn't want to work in a factory, so I'm afraid we can't really help.'

'Oh, but it's good pay, my dear,' the woman encouraged. 'Good pay. Good conditions. You come with us and you'll earn enough in no time.'

'You work hard enough,' said the man, 'and we'll have you home for Spring Festival. Plenty of young ladies would jump at the chance, but you must make up your own mind.'

Spring Festival. A month away. I could cope with that, couldn't I, after all I had been through? My heart skipped at the thought of how my mother's face would look if I walked through the door in time for Spring Festival, in time to give her a fistful of money to spend on our celebrations.

'What sort of factory?' I asked.

'The best,' said the man. 'A toy factory.'

'Dolls, teddy bears, furry animals, rubber ducks, plastic lorries. Everything,' enthused the woman. 'Lots of other young girls work there.'

Perhaps they would let me take something back for Li-hu, I smiled to myself.

'We're Mr and Mrs Wang.' The woman held out her hand. 'Trust us, my dear. We'll see you're all right.'

'I'm Lu Si-yan,' I said, shyly, shaking first her hand and then his. 'Thank you for your help.'

Mr and Mrs Wang shared some food with me and asked me about myself. I told them a little about my family, but when they began to pry into my recent past, I said that I had worked as a domestic, and left it at that. They seemed friendly enough, but I was worried at the thought that I was putting my well-being into the hands

of complete strangers, and I instinctively felt that the less they knew about me the better. I had no choice but to trust them, though. They were offering me a lifeline.

Chapter Twenty Only the Best

We left the ferry more than a dozen stops further on, by which time it was nearly midday. As soon as we were ashore, Mr Wang hailed a taxi. We were taken up a steep hill, through another partially demolished, deserted old town, beyond the new town above it, and out into the country, leaving the river far behind us. We travelled for several miles before we reached a small, shabby industrial town, where factory after factory belched foul-smelling smoke into the atmosphere, and where row upon row of concrete dormitories lined the roads. We pulled up outside the gates of one of the factories.

'Here we are,' said Mr Wang proudly. 'All this belongs to us. This factory and the two alongside. Three factories, three hundred workers.'

'And you will be one of them, Lu Si-yan,' added Mrs Wang brightly.

I looked at the grimy, featureless facade of the building, its windows tiny and too dirty to see through. Yellow smoke poured from its eight chimneys, otherwise there was no sign of life from the outside. Mr Wang unlocked the gates. We walked round to a side door, along a short, neon-lit corridor and into his office. A huge black desk dominated the room, which was decorated with an assortment of garish paintings, a red and gold silk carpet and an enormous red sofa.

Mr Wang plumped himself down at the desk. Very quickly he told me how much I would be paid and when, what hours I would work, and what I would earn if I worked extra hours.

'We're very generous with our overtime payments,' he said.

'Very generous,' echoed Mrs Wang.

It sounded like a fortune, for I had never earned money before. If I worked lots of extra hours I was sure I could leave after a month and be home, as Mr Wang had said, in time for the Spring Festival. That was all I could think of then, just getting through whatever the

work entailed, and handing my wages to my mother.

'You'll sleep in one of our dormitories with some of the other girls,' continued Mr Wang.

'It's very cosy and I'm sure you'll make lots of friends,' said Mrs Wang.

'And you'll be fed on the premises. We pay for that ourselves.' Mr Wang patted his paunch.

'It's good food, too,' smiled Mrs Wang. 'Only the best for our workers.'

'Off you go, then. Remember, work hard and you'll reap the rewards.' Mr Wang dismissed me with a wave of the hand.

'Come with me, dear,' said Mrs Wang. 'We'll look after your nice coat for you and get you kitted out like the other girls. We provide you with two sets of overalls which you must wear all the time and wash yourself.'

She took me along another corridor, into a changing room. From a cupboard, she pulled out some overalls and made me put them on instead of the clothes I was wearing. They were far too big, but Mrs Wang looked at me and nodded approvingly.

'Perfect,' she said. 'Now, keep your own clothes with you and you can put them in a locker in your dormitory

later on. One of the girls will find you a space.'

She led me from the room and down another corridor. 'Can you sew?' she asked.

I nodded, grimacing inwardly as I remembered the last time I had been asked that question.

'Then how would you like to make teddy bears? We've got lots of orders for those at the moment, so we could do with an extra pair of hands on the production line.'

I nodded again.

'Good.' Mrs Wang clapped her hands. 'Come on, then. I'll show you where to go and find out what you'll be doing.'

She led me down another corridor to a door at the end. She opened the door, pulled me through and shut it quickly behind her. The wave of heat made me gasp. The smell of stale air was nauseating. In front of me, rows of young women and girls were hunched over sewing machines. Not one of them looked up when we came in. Mrs Wang walked me between two of the rows to the far side of the room, where a supervisor sat watching the girls.

'Mrs Li, this is our new recruit, Lu Si-yan,' said Mrs

Wang. 'Where would you like her?'

'Eyes,' Mrs Li replied, looking at me sourly. 'A little young, isn't she?'

'Fifteen, and eager to do as much work as possible, aren't you, dear?' Mrs Wang answered quickly, staring at me for confirmation, though we hadn't discussed my age. I lowered my head in a half-nod.

'Will her hands do?' asked the supervisor.

'I'm sure they'll harden up in no time,' smiled Mrs Wang. 'I'll leave her to you.'

Mrs Wang disappeared back through the room and out through the door. The supervisor rose reluctantly from her table.

'This way, then,' she said, without looking at me.

I followed her to the end of a row, where she made a young woman stop what she was doing and move to another position. She sat me down at the vacated table and picked up a faceless bear from a box on the floor.

'This is all you have to do,' she said, pulling a carton of glass eyes towards her and taking two. 'Poke two small holes where the eyes are to go. Tie each eye into the middle of a strand of upholstery thread. Squeeze the eye wires together to form a pin. Ease the threads on to

a needle. Push the needle into the eyehole and pull the threads gently to work the wires into the eyehole to seat the eye.'

She continued apace, without checking to see that I understood her instructions, until both eyes were in place. It was amusing to see the bear's face begin to come to life, but I was anxious that I should find the procedure too difficult. I wished I could start with the nose, which I was sure would be much easier. The supervisor stood up and told me to sit down.

'You will have the rest of today to practise,' she said expressionlessly. 'You are lucky this is the quiet season. You will be expected to keep up with the rest of the girls. We do not tolerate slackness.'

She indicated that I should practise on the bears in the box, then returned to the far side of the room without another word. I peered round to see if anyone was looking at me, but the girls were all too busy concentrating on their own bit of bear-making. I pulled a bear out of the box, two eyes from the carton, and tried to remember what I had to do. Poking the holes, which had seemed the simplest part of the operation, proved to be the first difficulty. I ended up with one much higher than

the other, giving the bear a rather mischievous look once the eyes were in place. Threading the needle and pushing it through the dense stuffing and coarse-lined fur was the next major hurdle. I rammed it as hard as I could, joggling it around, but achieved no more than a shallow indentation. I tried again and again, my fingers growing redder and redder, perspiration pouring down my face.

I looked to either side of me for help. The girl to my left stole a glance in my direction and whispered, 'Use the needle-grabber.'

I had no idea what a needle-grabber was, but she pointed to a piece of leather on my table, then returned to her work.

'Thanks,' I whispered, but she made no acknowledgement.

I wrapped the needle in the leather and tried again to push it through the bear's head. It still refused to budge at first. With perseverance, though, I finally managed to work the needle out through the bear's neck. I breathed a sigh of relief and stretched my arms out, only to catch the disapproving look of the supervisor. I pulled hard on the threads to manoeuvre the eye into position, and was

pleased that it actually stayed put, even if it was a little too low.

I set to work on the second eye. I managed to push the needle through more quickly this time, but when it came to tying the threads together, they cut painfully into my fingers. I couldn't believe that making a bear could be so difficult.

At last, the two eyes were in place. I stood the bear up in front of me and couldn't help smiling at his cock-eyed look. I wished I could keep him. I traced with my finger where I would have sewn his nose and a big smiley mouth. I would have called him One Eye Up, One Eye Down Bear, I decided, were I allowed to keep him.

'You'll have to speed up if you want to keep your job here.' The supervisor's acid voice cut through my reverie. 'Two eyes are not much to show for over an hour's work. Two eyes that are far from straight.'

'It's making my hands sore,' I said, hoping that she might move me to noses or paws.

'It's the same for everyone when they start. You just have to get used to it.'

The supervisor returned to her seat. I picked up another bear and began the same process again, making

sure this time that the eyeholes were in alignment. For the rest of the afternoon, I threaded and shoved and jiggled and pulled until my shoulders ached and my hands were stiff and bloody. Yet I managed to complete only four bears. Each time, the stuffing resisted my most strenuous efforts to push the needle through it. I couldn't see how I was ever going to speed up, and the threat that I might lose my job petrified me.

A bell sounded. The other girls stopped what they were doing immediately and dashed for the door. I wasn't sure whether I should follow or wait for the supervisor to tell me what to do, but then I saw that she was disappearing just as quickly. The girl who had spoken to me previously told me to hurry up.

'Aren't you hungry?' she asked. 'It's suppertime.'

I dropped my work and jumped to my feet. I followed her along another corridor, through a door to the outside, and across a concrete courtyard towards one of two enormous corrugated iron buildings, where dozens of other workers were converging. We piled through the doors into a cavernous canteen furnished with endless lines of large round plastic tables and chairs. The tables were covered with metal tureens of steaming food.

I kept close to the girl who had befriended me and sat down next to her, hoping she wouldn't mind. She took a plastic bowl from a pile in the middle and served herself from one of the tureens. As I did the same, she warned, 'Be sure to eat well, but don't take more than you can manage. They'll fine you if you leave any.'

I nodded, grateful but shocked at what she had said, though I was so hungry that I was sure I would have been able to eat anything that was put before me. However, my appetite quickly disappeared as I tried my first mouthful of the chewy, over-salted meat stew that was our dinner. For the second time since I had run away, I found I was imagining myself back at the Chens'; where the food had always been delicious, even if I was only given leftovers. Everyone around me was tucking in voraciously. Were they used to the food, no longer noticing its awfulness? Were they hungrier than me? Or had they simply never tasted anything better? How strange, I thought, that regardless of how dreadful my time with the Chens had been, it had opened my eyes to how good some things in life could be. I steeled myself and swallowed the remains of the food in my bowl, washed down with a cup of thin, tepid tea.

'Are you sure you've had enough?' said the girl next to me. 'You need it to keep you going.'

'I've had plenty,' I said. 'What do we do now? Can we go to our rooms?'

The girl shook her head. 'Not yet. We go back to work. There's overtime for another four hours. Compulsory overtime.'

I could feel myself beginning to shake. Another four hours. I couldn't cope with another four hours. Not today. Not any day.

'Are you all right? You get used to it, you know. Sort of. What's your name?'

'Lu Si-yan,' I whispered.

'My name is Li Mei. Don't think me rude, but you look too young to be working.'

'I didn't think it would be like this, working in a factory. They made it sound so special.'

'They would. That's how they tempt people like us, people with no hope of anything better. I've been here for six months. Another six months and I'll leave and take the money I've saved back to my family. Is that why you're here?'

I nodded. 'I thought if I could just do a month. They

promised that would be enough. But I don't think I can even last a week.'

Li Mei gazed at me in consternation. 'How old are you, Lu Si-yan?' she asked.

'Nearly twelve,' I muttered.

The bell rang at that moment. Everyone stood up and headed quickly for the doors. Li Mei helped me to my feet.

'Think of your family, Lu Si-yan. Remember their faces, remember their smiles, remember the good times. Think of them and you'll get through.'

I nodded, but just the mention of my family made me want to cry my heart out. We hurried back across the courtyard. Li Mei squeezed my hand encouragingly when we re-entered the machine room. I sat down at my table, picked up a bear, kept my head bowed and struggled to regain my composure.

'You can do it,' whispered Li Mei.

I wished I could believe it. My hands were so sore that I could scarcely hold the needle, let alone exert enough pressure to push it through. The supervisor came and stood behind me.

'I knew it,' she growled, after watching me for several

minutes. 'Why do they give me these girls who are not up to the job?'

'Why don't I change with her?' Li Mei smiled at the supervisor. 'I'm good at eyes. Lu Si-yan can sew on the ears instead of me.'

I glanced gratefully at Li Mei, then stared straight ahead of me, certain that the supervisor would say no just to spite me. After what seemed like an eternity, she replied, 'She had better be good at ears. We are not running a charity here.'

She left Li Mei to show me what to do.

By the time the final bell rang, at half past ten, I was so exhausted that I could barely keep my eyes open. Even though it had been easier to sew on the ears, my hands were still bruised and bloody from pushing the needle through several layers of fur. My back and shoulders had begun to protest at every effort. But at least the supervisor had grudgingly accepted that I was better at ears than eyes and might make the grade in a week or so.

Li Mei took me under her wing and told the supervisor that there was space for me in her dormitory and that she would show me where to go and what to do. I

was so relieved, for I was dreading having to sleep in a room full of strangers.

There were twenty beds crammed into our small dormitory. Five of them weren't yet being used because the busy season hadn't quite started at the factory. I chose the spare bed closest to Li Mei's. Like all the others, it was covered with a faded red blanket, there was a skinny pillow and at the end was a worn, discoloured towel. By the side of the bed was a small locker, into which I bundled my clothes and my bag.

Li Mei took me through to the washrooms. There were two basins and two showers to be shared by all of us. By the time we arrived, a queue had already formed outside the shower cubicle doors.

'It's always like this,' said Li Mei, grimacing. 'We have to wash our overalls in the basins or showers as well as ourselves. By the time we get to bed, it's almost time to get up again.'

'What time do we get up?' I asked, alarmed.

'Up at seven o'clock, start work at eight.'

Well, I was up at six o'clock at the Chens', I thought to myself, so seven o'clock wasn't so bad.

We joined the queue, though I was so desperate to go

to sleep that I would have been happy to go to bed as I was. While we waited, Li Mei introduced me to some of the other girls. They were all teenagers, I guessed, and I was by far the youngest. They laughed and joked as we stood there, relieved to be freed from the monotony of their individual tasks and the harsh regime of the workroom, even though they too were exhausted. I gathered that most of them would leave when they had made enough money, that they were never paid what they thought they were owed, that Mr Wang broke the law in forcing them to do overtime, that the supervisor told tales and was not to be trusted, and that from March onwards they would be working even longer hours to keep up with orders for Christmas toys from companies in other countries. I was so glad that by then I would have left.

Tired as I was, I found it difficult to sleep that night. The hard, unfamiliar bed, the relentless wheezes and snorts of the fifteen other girls, my fear that I would be unable to cope with a full day's work the next day and that I would be thrown out on to the street, all contributed to hours spent tossing and turning in the dark. I finally dropped off, only to be woken what seemed like minutes later by the wake-up bell.

Chapter Twenty-one

Just Like Family

Without the friendship of the girls and Li Mei's protectiveness, I should never have survived those first few days. I dragged myself from my bed each morning, not the slightest bit rested and longing to crawl back under the covers. My back, neck and shoulders ached constantly from sitting in the same position all day long. My fingers became so tender it was agony using the needle. My head throbbed under the blazing fluorescent lights and at times my eyes became blurred. The initial relief at being put on to ears was short-lived, to be replaced by despair at the tedium of the task.

It was the same for all of us, though. We lived for the bells that signalled a ten-minute break in the morning, half an hour at lunchtime, ten minutes in the afternoon, forty minutes at dinnertime and, most of all, the bell

that told us the day was over.

By the end of my third day, I had speeded up a lot, but I knew that I still had some way to go before the supervisor would be satisfied. Mrs Wang came to see me, looked at my work and said that I was doing well.

'Just ask for a meeting with me, dear, if you have any problems,' she said. 'We want you to be happy here. Our workers are just like family to us.'

In the dormitory that evening, the other girls imitated her.

'We want you to be happy here,' one of the girls said fawningly. 'Put up your hands if you're happy.'

They all sat on their hands, then fell about laughing.

'Our workers are just like family to us,' mocked another. 'Slaves, more like. How can she keep a straight face when she says such things?'

On Friday we had to present ourselves at Mr Wang's office, one by one, to receive our wages. I had no idea how much I was due, but with all the overtime I had worked, I was sure it must be a fair amount. I was excited at the prospect of coming away with my first sum of money towards the cost of my journey home and helping my mother. As I queued with the other girls, I

couldn't wait for it to be my turn.

I was summoned at last. I knocked on Mr Wang's door and he called for me to enter and sit down.

'Doing reasonably well, I hear,' he said. 'Not up to scratch yet, but coming on. Of course, we don't pay you while you're training, and there's the little matter of the fare to repay, but we feed you for free and provide you with accommodation. If you carry on the way you are, young lady, then I shall be only too happy to hand over your first wage packet at the end of next week. I can't say fairer than that, can I? Now, be a good girl and close the door behind you, would you.'

I felt faint. I stood up as though in a trance. I don't know how I made it to the door, but as soon as I was out in the corridor I collapsed. The girls who were still in the queue gathered round me. Mr Wang, hearing the commotion, opened his door and told two of them to take me to the dormitory.

'She's not ill, I hope,' he said. 'Can't afford to employ people who keep fainting.'

When we reached the dormitory, I had recovered enough to send the girls away. They had their own wages to collect, and they were expected back at work.

Besides, I was desperate to be alone, to think things through, to come to some decision about what I was going to do. But, once again, what choice did I have? None, and the Wangs knew it. 'You work hard enough and we'll have you home for Spring Festival,' Mr Wang had said. Well, I had worked, and I had earned precisely nothing. A whole week had gone by. Only three weeks left now and I was no better off. I lay on my bed, ignored the bell for dinner and, in the rare moment of quiet, fell asleep.

I was woken when the girls came back to the dormitory just after half past ten. Li Mei sat on my bed, asked if I was all right, and held out a bowl of cold noodles for me.

'Eat, Lu Si-yan. I stole these for you. You must eat to keep up your strength. Anyway, they're the best thing we've had all week,' she smiled.

I took the bowl and thanked her. I hadn't realised how hungry I was, but until then I had only picked at the uniformly grey dishes that had been put before us morning, noon and night.

'Was it the wages?' asked Li Mei. 'Did they pay you too little?'

'They didn't pay me anything,' I muttered between

mouthfuls, almost ashamed to admit that the Wangs didn't think I was worth paying.

'Why, the tight-fisted, penny-pinching -' Li Mei was furious. 'They never pay what we think we're due, but it's despicable not to pay you at all. They're just taking advantage of you because of your age.'

'They said I'm in training and should be grateful for the free food and lodging.'

'Very grateful,' said Li Mei sarcastically. Then she turned to the others. 'Come on, girls,' she called. 'Let's have a whip-round for Lu Si-yan.'

I saw instantly that one or two of the girls were opposed to the idea. I leapt to my feet, red with embarrassment. 'No, please don't. You're very kind, but please don't. Mr Wang is sure I will have earned my money next week.'

Li Mei looked at me doubtfully, but didn't argue. The next morning, however, I found a small amount of money in my locker. I challenged Li Mei about it, but she denied all knowledge.

'Whoever gave it to you wants you to have it and will be offended if you don't accept it,' she said. 'And when we go into town tomorrow you will need some money.'

She saw the puzzlement on my face.

'It's Sunday tomorrow, and Sunday is our day off! Didn't they tell you? We sleep, Lu Si-yan, oh, how we sleep. Like babies in their mothers' arms. Breakfast isn't until half past nine. After that we have to wash our overalls and clean the dormitory, but then we're free to do as we like.'

'Ice cream, here we come,' cheered Song Shuru.

'Karaoke, here we come,' called Shen Enqing.

'Boys, here we come,' laughed Dong Ying, and they all began to chatter excitedly.

Saturday crawled past after that. The thought of no wake-up bell, the thought of no ears to sew, the thought of going into town with my new friends filled me with impatience. I glanced up at the clock in the workroom over and over again, willing the hands to move round more quickly. Once, the supervisor warned me about slacking, but even she couldn't dampen my spirit. For the first time since I had left home, I was being given the freedom to go out without fear, and to have fun. As for the possibility of meeting with boys, the idea made me feel incredibly adult and like a timid little girl all at the same time. How would I know what to say? I wondered.

I pushed the little girl aside. I was growing up fast and I wanted to be accepted by my friends as one of them.

At last, the final bell sounded. We all tore out of the workroom and into our dormitory. Several of the girls leapt out of their overalls and cavorted round the room, swinging their clothes over their heads before hurling them to the ground and jumping on them. Others threw themselves on to their beds. Dong Ying and Song Shuru started a pillow fight. Their screams of delight were infectious. Soon, all of us joined in. Even when one of the pillows burst, sending feathers flying all over the room, we carried on.

Then Li Mei began to sing, and we all stopped to listen. Shen Enqing sang in harmony with her, a beautiful song about mist and mountains, rivers and waterfalls, a cormorant fisherman sailing quietly along in the golden light of an evening sun. The river. I had lost sight of it. My exhilaration at the freedom I would enjoy tomorrow ebbed with the realisation. The chains would still be attached. Real freedom was still a long way away.

'Don't look so sad,' said Li Mei, putting her arm round my shoulder. 'Tomorrow we will have fun. Don't spoil it by looking further ahead.'

I sighed, then grinned at her. 'All right, oh wise one. Race you to the shower.'

We charged down the gangway between the beds and out through the door. I reached the cubicles first, but slid on the wet floor outside and landed in a heap. Li Mei stepped over me and tried to open the cubicle door. I grabbed hold of her leg and pulled her down beside me. We sat there, in our soggy underwear, shrieking with laughter.

'You'll be all right,' said Li Mei. 'I'll make sure you're all right.'

Lazing in bed the next morning, in the euphoria of not having to get up for another half an hour, I suddenly remembered that I had no clothes to wear. All I had was my servant's uniform. I couldn't go out in that, especially not if there were going to be boys. The wild scenarios I had dreamed up about how the day would pass exploded into nothingness. I would have to stay in the dormitory on my own.

'I can't come out with you,' I said to Li Mei while we were washing our overalls.

'Why ever not?' she asked.

'I've got nothing to wear.'

Li Mei laughed. 'We all say that.'

'I mean it,' I said. 'All I have with me is my domestic's uniform.'

When she saw my face, she leapt to her feet, ran back to the dormitory and reappeared several minutes later as though nothing had happened. It wasn't until I returned to the dormitory myself, and discovered the neat pile of clothes on my bed, that I found out what she had done.

'Trousers courtesy of Dong Ying, blouse courtesy of Song Shuru, jacket courtesy of Li Mei, hair slide courtesy of Shen Enqing,' said Li Mei triumphantly.

'Try them on,' instructed Song Shuru.

'Fashion show coming up, girls,' announced Dong Ying.

I blushed shyly. 'You're so kind,' I said.

I took off my pyjamas and climbed carefully into the borrowed clothes. Although far from new, they were the prettiest clothes I had ever worn, and the most grown-up. If it hadn't been for my neatly bobbed hair and clumpy, sensible shoes, I should have felt like an empress.

'Give us a twirl, then,' said Song Shuru.

'A little bit big, but otherwise perfect,' said Li Mei.

'Now, no more talk about not going out.'

I changed into my spare overalls to help clean the dormitory, which took quite a considerable time. We had to scrub out the showers and the latrines, hang our wet overalls out to dry, change the sheets on our beds, sweep and mop the floors throughout, empty the bins, and collect up the extraordinary number of white feathers that had drifted into every corner of the room and which clung to cobwebs, curtains and bedding.

'Better make sure we don't miss any,' muttered Li Mei. 'They'll use any excuse to fine us.'

At last, at one o'clock, we were all ready. Everyone looked so much more beautiful in their normal clothes. Some of the girls had put on make-up, which made them seem very sophisticated. I was sure they wouldn't want me tagging along with them, so I kept close to Li Mei when we gradually split up into smaller groups on the way into town. It was freezing cold, a fierce wind slowing our progress as we crocodiled along the road, but we were too intent on enjoying ourselves to let it bother us.

Ahead and behind us were bunches of boys and girls from other parts of the factory. They were as happy as

we were. Shouts of laughter, whistles and cheers echoed backwards and forwards. Whenever another group caught up with or overtook us, we exchanged greetings and bantered good-humouredly. I felt as though I were a member of a great big club. In my shiny red jacket, my soft black trousers, my hair blowing wildly but fashionably pinned at the back with Shen Enqing's jewel-encrusted slide, I was happier than I could remember and full of expectation.

Once we had passed the industrial outskirts of the town and numerous grimy side streets crammed with cheerless single-storey shacks, we turned a corner and the road widened into a tawdry, rackety shopping area. Multiple coloured neon lights flashed above the doorways and in the windows of the shops and eateries, even though it was still daylight. Music blared in a riot of competing tunes from shops selling jeans, cheap silk, ice creams, mobile phones and televisions. Hairdressers had chairs set out on the pavement regardless of the cold; there were mahjong parlours, photo parlours and karaoke bars.

I was startled by the brashness of it all. The market town I had visited with my father had been colourful

and bustling, the town I had visited with Mrs Chen had been sparkling and elegant. Here was something different again. The centre of this town throbbed with exuberance, in stark contrast to the grim reality of life in its factories and streets. Certainly, the workers from the factories, as soon as they reached the shopping area, became like dogs let off the leash.

'Ice cream, ice cream, give me that lovely ice cream,' chanted Dong Ying.

We piled into a shop selling ice creams in eight tempting flavours.

'I don't know which one to choose,' I said, desperate to avoid the disappointment of picking the least tasty.

'Choose more than one, then,' a boy in front turned to say. 'Who's counting?'

The thought of such extravagance made me blush, as did the mere fact of being spoken to by him, but then I saw that everyone ahead of me was coming away with three or four scoops.

'Spoil yourself,' said Dong Ying. 'You won't get many chances.'

'Not once the peak season begins,' grimaced Song Shuru.

I clutched the money that had been left in my locker. Whoever had given it to me had intended me to spend it on myself. I would start saving as soon as I received my own wages at the end of the week.

'Three scoops, please,' I said when I reached the front of the queue. 'Peach, vanilla and ginger.'

We walked slowly along the road, gazing at the clothes in the shops, licking at our ice creams, which would have tasted delicious after the food at the factory even if I hadn't made the best choice. Dong Ying darted into one shop to try on a jumper. While we waited, we browsed through the racks of blouses, skirts and trousers. Li Mei pounced on a long-sleeved, yellow blouse and held it up against me.

'This was made for you, Lu Si-yan. When you earn your first wages you must come into town and buy it.'

The other girls nodded enthusiastic agreement.

I looked at myself in a mirror, astonished to see how I had changed again. I was very thin, but my eyes sparkled with excitement and my cheeks were pink from the cold wind. The yellow blouse suited me. How I wished I could buy it, but I had only just committed myself to saving as soon as I received my first wage packet. Then

again, I thought, I couldn't expect to borrow my friends' clothes all the time. Having a valid reason to buy the blouse made me glow with pleasure momentarily, for I had never bought any clothes for myself before. And I told myself that the blouse was so cheap that it would eat up only a tiny amount of my wages.

We strolled in and out of shops all along the road. None of us had much money to spend, but we were happy to dream and to watch other people. The long hours and the monotony of their jobs made many of the factory workers reckless and extravagant when they found themselves suddenly free to do as they liked. The shopkeepers, reliant upon these once-weekly shopping sprees to feed their families, cajoled and encouraged us through their doors in the hopes of making a sale. The result was a carnival atmosphere, exuberant and infectious.

Li Mei linked her arm through mine.

'Come on, young lady,' she grinned. 'Let's go and sing.'

She pulled me towards a karaoke bar, urged on by Dong Ying and Song Shuru.

'I can't sing,' I protested, laughing.

'Of course you can,' coaxed Li Mei. 'We'll sing together.'

'But you're too good.'

'Singing is freedom and happiness. Today you are free and happy. Sing, Lu Si-yan.'

The darkened bar was crowded with people, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. Coloured spotlights lit a small platform where a young man was crooning and gyrating to an over-loud backing track. I put my fingers in my ears. I had never seen or heard anything like it.

'Nothing could be worse than that,' shouted Shen Enqing. 'For goodness sake put him out of his misery, Li Mei.'

'As soon as he's finished then, Lu Si-yan,' yelled Li Mei.

She went over to the man in charge of the karaoke machine and whispered something in his ear. He nodded and, after a few seconds, slowly faded out the previous music. The young man leapt from the platform to mocking applause, while Li Mei pulled me up in his place. The strains of a new tune gradually became audible and I realised that it was one of my father's favourites.

'I've heard you humming it,' grinned Li Mei. 'Let's show them how it's done.'

I couldn't believe I was standing up there in front of dozens of people I didn't know. I wanted to run away and hide. My heart thumped wildly, I felt sick. But when Li Mei began to sing, I found myself joining in, at first shyly, then, as the music took over, with more and more assurance. Dong Ying, Song Shuru and Shen Enqing danced exotically in front of us. People tapped their feet, rapped on the bar, clapped their hands. Attracted by the commotion, passers-by crammed into the entrance of the bar and joined in as well. The music reached a crescendo, Li Mei turned to me, and we shouted out the last notes smiling broadly at each other. It was exhilarating, and I loved it.

When the music came to an end, the crowd clapped wildly, shouting for more. Li Mei called over to the karaoke man. The opening strains of another of my father's favourites filtered through to me above the clamour. Li Mei laughed at the expression of amazement on my face, then we began again. I poured myself into the song, recalling precious fragments from my past, cherishing my friends who were my present. And

then the music changed again, to Li Mei's song. Shen Enqing stepped on to the platform to sing the harmony, and I moved aside.

As I rejoined Dong Ying and Song Shuru, I felt a hand tap me gently on the shoulder. I turned to find myself face to face with the boy from the ice-cream parlour.

'You sing so beautifully,' he said.

I blushed and looked away.

'You are so beautiful,' he said, taking me gently by the chin and turning my head back towards him. 'Come for a walk with me.'

'She's also very young,' intervened Dong Ying, 'and the only walking she'll be doing is with us.'

A sudden burst of wild applause greeted the final note of Li Mei's song. She beckoned to me to rejoin her on the platform to enjoy the praise. Dong Ying pushed me forwards, but the boy held me back.

'You don't have to do as they say,' he shouted above the noise.

'They're my friends,' I countered, tearing myself from his grasp. 'I choose to do what they say.'

'More fool you then,' he sneered, and disappeared through the crowd.

The owner was so delighted with the number of people we had attracted to his bar that he thrust some coins into Li Mei's hands and asked us to come again. We tumbled back out into the street, flushed with our success.

'You're a real star, Lu Si-yan,' said Shen Enqing. 'Where did you learn to sing like that?'

'I used to sing with my father, all the way to market and back on his rickshaw.'

'I bet he would have been proud of you just now,' smiled Song Shuru.

'I bet he would have been worried that his little swallow is growing up and attracting unwanted attention,' said Dong Ying warningly.

I followed her gaze and saw that the same boy was across the road, lounging against a shop window, watching my every move. Li Mei and Dong Ying linked their arms through mine.

'Doesn't give up, that one, does he?' said Dong Ying, as they marched me away, Song Shuru and Shen Enqing following close behind.

'Forget him,' said Li Mei. 'He can't do anything while Lu Si-yan has her bodyguards with her. Let's go and get

our photo taken with the money we just earned.'

We piled into a photo parlour, made goofy smiles at the camera, stopped for chicken and noodles at a small cafe, then spent two hours in a mahjong parlour. Shen Enqing was happy just to watch, but each time it came to 'the twittering of the sparrows', the five of us collapsed into fits of giggles until we were threatened with expulsion if we didn't behave.

It was dark by the time we left, and I was yawning my head off. The girls insisted that I have one last look at 'my blouse' to keep me going through the week, we collected our photograph, which the girls gave me to put above my bed, and then we began the long walk back to our dormitory. It was bitterly cold now, the wind whipping through our scanty clothes, but we sang all the way home, and other returning groups joined in with us.

'I've had a wonderful day – thank you,' I said happily, as we walked across the factory grounds. 'I can't wait for next Sunday.'

Chapter Twenty-two

You Are Not Being Fair

There wasn't another Sunday like that first Sunday. When we were called, one by one, to collect our wages the following Friday, the news spread like wildfire that a big order had come in and that we were to work every day until it had been fulfilled, including on Sundays up until nine o'clock.

I was devastated when I heard. It was the thought of our Sunday outing that had kept me going during the week. The grinding, back-breaking monotony of sewing on ears, the supervisor's constant sniping, the foul meals, the lack of sleep – I could cope with all of them as long as there was that one day when we could go out, have fun, be ourselves, feel free. Now it was being taken from us.

'Ah well, at least we won't be tempted to spend our

hard-earned money,' sighed Li Mei, who always tried to look on the bright side.

I nodded and knew that I should have felt some relief, but I wouldn't be able to buy my blouse now. Because I had made up my mind to have it, it hit me harder that I was to be denied.

More bad news was to come. We had all had our wages docked to pay for the pillow we had torn, and a further amount had been subtracted because we had failed to pick up all the feathers.

'They could buy fifty luxury pillows with the amount they've taken from us,' fumed Dong Ying.

When it was my turn to see Mr Wang, I entered his office feeling angry and rebellious. I glared at him defiantly as I sat down, revolted by his vast paunch and a dribble of spit that clung to his chin.

'Well now, young lady, things are improving, definitely improving. Not up to scratch yet, a bit slow, but better. Just to show what a reasonable chap I am, I'm going to pay you half wages, even though you're still in training. No overtime, mind - that's only for fully-trained operatives, and there was your little bit of illness last Friday for which I've had to deduct an amount, and,

as you are probably aware, I've charged you all for the wanton destruction of company property. Lastly, of course I've kept back a small sum to go towards your repayment of the ferry fare, but I'm sure you'll agree that I've been remarkably generous.'

'But you promised I'd be home for Spring Festival. I'll never have enough money if you keep taking it away,' I complained.

'No promises, dear. I said if you worked hard enough, but you're not quite up to it yet and, of course, if I keep having to deduct sums for mindless vandalism ... I should have a word with your friends about that. Now, off you go, dear, and close the door behind you.'

'You are not being fair,' I yelled at him as I stood to leave. 'You're just not being fair.'

I slammed the door behind me and stormed back along the corridor.

In the dormitory, that evening, I opened my wage packet to discover that I hadn't been paid enough money to buy my blouse, even if we were to have gone into town on the Sunday.

'How am I ever going to get home?' I cried to Li Mei. She stroked my hair, but her awkward silence

smothered any lingering spark of hope.

I was constantly in trouble from that day. I struggled to keep up as the realisation that I wouldn't be home for Spring Festival, nor even for my birthday two weeks later, sank in deeper and deeper. I had been a fool even to think there was a possibility of earning enough money that quickly. I would look around at the other girls. Some of them had been there for months, even years, going home to visit periodically, but returning because there still wasn't sufficient income to keep their families in food and clothes. What was I working for, I kept wondering, if I wasn't going to be paid enough to go home and help my own family? The answer filled me with utter despair. I was there because I had no choice, and because at least, even if it took me two years, one day I would have earned enough.

But how was I to cope with two years? How was I to cope with one year, six months, three months even? The other girls managed, somehow, to keep going, to put on a brave face, to focus on some minute flicker of light at the end of an impossibly long tunnel. I was a child though, five years younger than the youngest of them. I was so physically and mentally exhausted by what I had

already been through – the growing up I had already had to do, the pitfalls that seemed to lie in wait for me round every corner – that I felt I would break into a hundred pieces at the slightest touch.

My journey of a thousand miles had led me here. Was I at the end of that journey? Was I to make what I could of my life from this point onwards, and accept that I wasn't going home, that I would never see my mother and my brother again?

Chapter Twenty-three

A Gesture of Goodwill

Much to my surprise, we were allowed a day's holiday on the Sunday of Spring Festival, as well as being allowed to finish at half past six on the Saturday evening. Quite a few of the workers from the local factories went home, some of them taking extra days of unpaid leave. By then I had been paid half wages for two more weeks, but at least there had been no further unforeseen deductions.

On the Friday before Spring Festival weekend, Mr Wang called us in one by one, as usual, only to announce that wages would henceforward be paid monthly in arrears, and that the week just gone by would be included in the first month. We were to receive no money that day, nor indeed until the end of the following three weeks. The delight we all felt at the

thought of a day off was immediately obliterated by the fact that some workers no longer had enough money to go home.

'They're doing it so that anyone who goes home is forced to return,' raged Dong Ying, who had herself planned to visit her parents but could now only afford the fare. 'How can I go home and eat my parents' food without contributing a penny to the cost?'

'I'm sure they would still prefer to see you,' reasoned Li Mei, 'even if you go home empty-handed. An extra mouth for two days will not make a lot of difference.'

'But I wanted to treat them. I was relying upon this week's wages to buy them something special.'

'For them, nothing will be more special than a visit from their only daughter,' Li Mei urged.

Dong Ying allowed herself to be persuaded and set off for the station in the early hours of Saturday morning. Li Mei, Song Shuru, Shen Enqing and I tried to console ourselves by making plans for our own Sunday. Everywhere in town would be closed, so we would have to entertain ourselves. Mrs Wang had announced that there would be a special feast in the canteen on Saturday, and notices went up encouraging those of us who

were staying to take part in a talent show on Sunday afternoon.

My friends started to chatter about what we might do. I couldn't help feeling that all I wanted to do was to sleep the day away, so that I could block out the invading images of my mother and Li-hu at home without me. So that I wouldn't have to remember the Spring Festivals gone by, when Father was still alive; when we used to sing our way to market to sell our pig and come back laden with special treats, because Spring Festival was a time of national celebration, a time to be extravagant, a time to forget about hardship; when we used to eat and laugh and go to the village for the parade and eat and laugh some more and wait for the firecrackers at midnight; when we were so happy that nothing, nothing could burst our bubble of joy.

The determined enthusiasm of my friends wore down my resistance, and I found myself agreeing to take part in a playlet, based upon *The Bridge of Magpies*, a popular folktale, which we were going to put together on the Sunday morning. I was to play a princess, separated from her husband by the River of Stars that divides the northern skies from the southern kingdom of the

heavens. Only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, is she allowed to be by his side, when all the magpies on earth fly up to heaven and form a bridge over the River of Stars. Shen Enqing was to be the prince, Song Shuru the king, and Li Mei the narrator.

After we had finished work on Saturday, we headed back to the dormitory, each of us full of our own far-away thoughts, but all of us wanting to be family to each other.

'We may not be able to be at home with our families, but I'd rather be here with my friends than anywhere else,' said Li Mei, voicing how we all felt.

We were surprised to find brightly coloured cut-outs of fish and birds hanging from the door and windows.

'They *are* making an effort,' said Shen Enqing sarcastically.

'Probably paid for with our wages,' grimaced Song Shuru.

'Take it as a gesture of goodwill,' said Li Mei, 'or we'll make ourselves miserable, and I for one don't want to be miserable. Not tonight. Not tomorrow.'

We changed for dinner, dressing ourselves up as though we were going out somewhere special. Dong

Ying had left a spare pair of trousers and a blouse for me to wear, and Shen Enqing lent me her jewel-encrusted slide. Song Shuru insisted that I put on some lipstick.

'You're going to be twelve in two weeks' time. Feel what it's like to be a woman for one evening. Prepare for your metamorphosis into a princess tomorrow.'

She painted my lips and held a mirror in front of me. I was shocked by the transformation. It was extraordinary how a little smudge of red could add years to my age.

'Give us a pout,' said Shen Enqing.

I puckered my lips and we dissolved with laughter.

'You'll do,' chuckled Li Mei. 'Come on, let's have fun.'

We did have fun. The workers who had stayed behind and who normally used the other canteen were to use our canteen that weekend, adding to the noisy air of festivity. The canteen ceiling had been decorated with huge red lanterns, the tables were covered with red cloths, and large, colourful fish, birds and animals made of paper covered the walls. Everyone had dressed up and a party atmosphere was evident the minute we entered the room. A table at the front of the room was covered

with a gold cloth and had two white ibises carved from turnips as a centrepiece.

'Looks like we've got special guests,' said Shen Enqing, admiring the centrepiece, which was beautiful.

'There's nothing special about the Wangs,' said Song Shuru.

She shut up quickly when Li Mei prodded her in the back and nodded towards the door. Mr Wang entered and waddled self-importantly across the room, followed by Mrs Wang, mincing in his wake, followed by his strutting managers and supervisors. We waited for a cue from him, then took our places at our own tables. Waiters immediately danced attention upon the top-table guests, serving each with sweet red wine. Large bottles of beer were placed on our tables. This was the first time we had ever been allowed alcohol. The bottles were passed round quickly, everyone eager to make the most of this rare treat from the Wangs. Mr Wang raised a first toast, to the health of his company.

'Just sip, Lu Si-yan,' warned Li Mei. 'There could be many toasts and you will be expected to join in with them all.'

I did as she said, which wasn't difficult because I had

no taste for the bitter, pale amber liquid before me. Then the food began to arrive. Enormous platters of chicken, beef, duck, fish and dumplings were carried ceremoniously to the top table. The dishes deposited on our tables were smaller and less varied, but still the food was delicious compared with our normal fare. Stiff and restricted at first by the presence of the Wangs, the workers gradually relaxed and the noise levels rose again. Conversations grew louder and more ribald amongst the males, and the girls grew giggly under the influence of the beer. The toasts came thick and fast: to the kindness of the factory owner; to the good fortune of the workers to be in his employ; to the health and wealth of the factory owner and his wife; to an increase in orders; to an increase in profits.

Shen Enqing, giggly herself by now, leant over to me and raised her glass. 'May he slip on a banana skin,' she chuckled. 'May he choke on his own self-importance.'

I raised my own glass to that, and drank deeply, spluttering as the bubbles caught the back of my throat. I lowered the glass and felt a hand on my shoulder. A head pressed against mine and a voice whispered, 'Are you still doing what they say?'

I turned to see the boy from the karaoke bar disappearing towards a table at the back of the room. I was so shocked that the colour must have drained from my face.

'You look as if you've seen a ghost,' chuckled Song Shuru. 'Is it the beer doing that?'

I tried to shrug it off. So what if he was there? So what if that meant that he worked in one of the factories? What could he do? I was with friends. They would look after me. But I couldn't help glancing round every so often to make sure that he was still at his table, worried that he might approach me again. I lost my appetite for the delicious food, and the cheerful buffoonery of the evening failed now to embrace me.

Li Mei put her hand over mine. 'Too many sips?' she smiled at me. 'Or too many sad thoughts?'

I didn't have to answer. Mr Wang banged on the table for attention and rose to make a speech. I heard little of it, except to register that it was largely self-congratulatory but contained one small word of thanks to us, his workers, before ending with a final toast to himself and his wife for hosting such a magnificent Spring Festival celebration.

We left the canteen arm in arm to the sounds of fire-crackers ringing in our ears from all over the town and the nearby countryside. The New Year had begun. I had been away from home for seven long months.

We slept late into the following morning, blissful in the knowledge that our time was our own. When, finally, we roused ourselves, slowly, delicately, the talk in the dormitory moved from the unexpected extravagance of the Wangs in providing the previous night's banquet, to their extraordinary arrogance, to the talent show and what a cheap way it was of keeping us entertained. We didn't mind. It was fun finding out who was going to do what and hearing them practise. Li Mei took us outside to run through *The Bridge of Magpies*. It was cold but bearable, though a shadow from the previous evening drifted across my mind and made me shiver.

'Our little princess will freeze waiting for her prince,' smiled Song Shuru.

We stopped at lunchtime and headed for the canteen, where the decorations were still hanging, but the food had reverted to normal.

On our way back to the dormitory to ready ourselves for our afternoon performance, a sullen-faced girl called

Zheng Yi grabbed my arm and spat in my ear, 'Keep away from my boyfriend, kid, or I'll make you very sorry.'

She pushed her way past me and into the dormitory before I could say a word. I couldn't have said anything anyway. I was too dumbfounded. What boyfriend? She could only have meant my tormentor from the karaoke bar, but I had done nothing to encourage him. She must have seen him approach me last night, but I hadn't encouraged that either. I hesitated outside, no longer wanting to go in, until Li Mei came to find me to begin my transformation into a princess.

I sat on my bed while Shen Enqing applied my make-up. I kept my eyes averted from the corner of the room where Zheng Yi had her bed, but I felt her watching me, hating me. When I stood to change my clothes, I caught sight of her whispering to her friends, pointing to me. Suddenly the dormitory was no longer a safe haven.

I wished now I didn't have to perform at the talent show, but I went along so as not to disappoint my friends. The tables had been removed from the canteen and a makeshift platform erected at one end of the room. Our supervisor was in charge of the running

order and told us we would be the fifth to go on. We sat near the back to watch the other acts – a dance with ribbons, a singing duet, a man on a flute, a plate spinner (not very successful). Everyone cheered enthusiastically as each act ended.

Then it was our turn. We made our way to the platform and, as I turned to face the audience, I saw him. Right in the front row, staring at me. Next to him was Zheng Yi, who was watching his every move. I wanted to run away there and then, and when it came to the part in our play where the princess cries at having to leave her prince for another whole year, I cried for real and wished I could throw myself into the River of Stars and disappear for ever.

As soon as we had finished, I leapt from the platform and ran to the door. I wasn't quick enough. Zheng Yi followed and caught up with me outside. She grabbed me by the hair and pulled me round the back of the canteen.

'I told you to keep away from him,' she screamed. 'I saw you looking him up and down. I saw you giving him the come-on with those crocodile tears. I ought to kill you.'

'Please, let go, Zheng Yi,' I pleaded. 'You're wrong. I haven't done anything. I promise.'

'You must think I'm stupid,' she snarled, tugging my hair again so that my head lurched backwards. 'What are you doing here, anyway? Spilled water, are you? Mummy didn't want you? Pity she didn't flush you clean away.'

She pushed me to the ground and stood above me.

'You might think life is difficult enough here already, but I can make it even more difficult. Believe me. This is just the start.'

Chapter Twenty-four

Ready to Run

She was right. Two weeks later, on my birthday, I was removed from my job.

I woke in the morning to find a cluster of little gifts by my bedside: a hairslide from Dong Ying, a book from Li Mei, a silk bag from Shen Enqing and an exquisite hand-made card from Song Shuru. Apart from the card, the presents were all personal possessions which my friends had chosen to give to me. I was greatly touched by their kindness, and hugged them one by one.

'Twelve years old, eh?' said Dong Ying. 'You'll soon be a grown-up.'

I aimed a playful punch at her, and as I did, I caught sight of Zheng Yi standing in the corner of the room looking at me smugly.

'A very happy birthday, Lu Si-yan,' she mouthed,

before turning to her friends to begin a whispering session.

'What's going on between you and Zheng Yi?' asked Li Mei, who had picked up on the unease I felt in her presence.

'I don't think she likes me very much, that's all,' I replied. I had no wish to escalate the problem by involving my friends.

'Probably because you're prettier than her,' said Dong Ying. 'She's always been a sourpuss that one, anyway. Come on then, girls, let's go and stuff those bears.'

We skipped across the yard arm in arm, laughing at our own silliness, and tumbled through the factory door.

'Eyes, here we come,' said Li Mei and marched off to her bench.

'Ears, here we come,' I copied.

But as soon as I reached my bench the supervisor called me over to speak to me. She said that she had received several complaints that I was too slow, that I was holding up the production line. She said that she herself had always felt that I wasn't up to the job. I was to work instead as a 'runner' in the factory next door. It had been decided. Mr Wang was aware of the situation.

I was to have no say in the matter. I was to start straight-away that morning. Li Mei and my friends tried to argue on my behalf, but with no success.

I was numb with shock when the supervisor led me out into the cold February air, across the concrete yard and through the doors into my new workplace. The blast of sweat, heat and noxious fumes that greeted me as we entered made me feel sick on the spot. The noise from the rows of machines was pulverising.

I looked anxiously across the room. Most of the workers in this factory were men. Some of them eyed me up and down with disdain, others with curiosity, one or two flirtatiously. I lowered my eyes, horrified, and waited to be told what to do.

The supervisor in this factory, a small man with a wizened face and rat-like eyes, showed me round.

'Your job,' he said, 'is to make sure there are no hold-ups in production. As each worker on the line completes a particular task, you must race, race, race whatever part of the toy they have been working on to the next person in the line. You must watch, watch, watch, so that you're ready to run.'

He showed me the order in which the production line

operated, and a sample of the toy currently being made – a large multicoloured plastic dumper truck. Li-hu would have adored it.

'Things are fairly quiet here at the moment,' the supervisor continued, 'but in a month or so's time we'll be at full stretch. Are you ready to race, girl, are you ready to run?'

I suddenly felt a strong desire to laugh out loud as I pictured this funny little man turning into a rat and scuttling into a hole. I took a deep breath and nodded.

'Good girl, good. Off you go then, and remember to watch, watch, watch.'

There were thirteen machines in operation at that moment, though there were double that number in the building. I started circling round them, trying to fathom out the best way to see as many operators as possible at a time. Some of the processes took longer than others, so the order of completion of tasks was totally random. It was a case of reacting as soon as a worker put his part of the truck down, grabbing it and taking it to the next machine.

The speed at which the tasks were achieved was breathtaking. I had thought I would be able to sit down

regularly, but no sooner had I picked up and run from one worker to the next than another one was ready and waiting. The supervisor, much quicker to spot a completed task or a worker twiddling his thumbs than I was, was equally quick to shout at me to keep up. In the rank, airless atmosphere, I found it difficult to breathe, could feel myself wilting, but I dared not stop. I had no doubt that if I failed again to make the grade, I would be dismissed on the spot. I had survived for seven weeks. Mr Wang owed me nearly four weeks' more money. I had made a start on saving to go home. I remembered dear Mrs Hong's words: 'Your resilience will see you through'. I wasn't going to fail now, not if I could help it.

I was comforted to rediscover my friends in the canteen at lunchtime. They bombarded me with questions about my new job. When I told them about Mr Ratty Eyes and his 'watch, watch, watch, run, run, run', they hooted with derision. 'Are you ready to race, girl, are you ready to run?' became our catchphrase, and was greeted with howls of laughter every time we used it. My friends were shocked to learn that I hadn't been allowed to sit down all morning, and that one of the men put his hand on mine every time I went near him.

'Smack him on the head with his toy part, that's what I would do,' raged Dong Ying.

'Drive a dumper truck over his fingers,' offered Song Shuru. 'You poor thing. What a way to spend your twelfth birthday.'

I nodded glumly. 'It's awful, truly awful. The only good thing is that we finish at half past ten, at the moment at least.'

'Now that *is* good,' smiled Li Mei. 'You'll have had an hour and a half's sleep before we come stampeding in to wake you up again.'

'I'd rather be with you and the bears for an extra hour and a half than with Ratty Eyes and Groper,' I grimaced.

I really didn't know how I managed to stay on my feet for the rest of that day. Even standing up after dinner was difficult enough, and I still had another three and a half hours to go. The relief I felt when at last I returned to the dormitory that evening, and the pleasure I felt at having it all to myself, were indescribable. I threw myself on to my bed, stared mindlessly at the ceiling for a few minutes, then fell asleep.

When I woke again, I was still alone. I went for a shower and stayed under for an eternity, almost as

though I could wash away the horrors of the day. Afterwards, I sprawled on the bed, luxuriating in my cleanliness, and picked up the book Li Mei had given me. I couldn't concentrate, though. The words danced up and down in front of my eyes and made no sense, for part of me was listening for the sounds of the other girls returning.

I had fallen into a doze when the door clattered open. Zheng Yi and her cronies came in first – deliberately, I suspected. She quickly approached my bed and said, smugly, 'I hope you've had a nice birthday, Lu Si-yan.'

I turned away from her. She grabbed my hair and pulled me back.

'Don't turn your back on me when I'm talking to you, Lu Si-yan. Where are your manners? No wonder your mother got rid of you.'

That was enough. I kicked out at her as hard as I could, caught her in the stomach, and sent her flailing on to the floor between the beds. She scrambled to her feet, urged on by her cronies, and was about to aim a punch at my face, when Li Mei and my other friends came through the door and yelled at her to stop.

'You keep your snotty noses out of this,' snarled

Zheng Yi. 'She started it and I'm going to finish it.'

'Leave her alone, Zheng Yi,' ordered Li Mei. 'She's done nothing to harm you.'

'And what would you know, Miss Let's-keep-it-all-sweet-and-nice?' Zheng Yi retorted.

'She's just a kid,' stepped in Dong Ying. 'Why don't you pick on someone your own size?'

'Who asked for your input, big mouth? She tried to steal my boyfriend. She deserves what she gets.'

I couldn't take any more. I leapt to my feet and yelled, 'I didn't do anything and you know it. You're making it all up. Why can't you just leave me alone? Haven't you caused me enough trouble?'

I flew across the room, out through the door and across the yard. It was freezing cold and I was in my nightwear, but I didn't care. I slumped down behind one of the other dormitories and prayed that no one would find me. I decided in that moment that I would have to leave. I just couldn't bear it any longer. I would wait until the end of the week, take my wages from Mr Wang, then go. I wouldn't be able to go home, I knew that, because even if I had enough to pay my fare, I certainly wouldn't have money left to give to my

mother. But anything was better than the nightmare I was living now.

My teeth began to chatter as the cold nipped at my skin and bit through my clothes. I wished I had thought to grab a blanket on my way out. I could hear voices coming from the dormitory, men's voices, then other voices, girls' voices, drawing closer, moving away, then drawing closer again. I pressed myself flat against the wall, but Li Mei and Dong Ying came round the corner of the building and spotted me.

'You'll catch your death of cold out here,' said Li Mei gently.

'I don't care,' I replied. 'I'm not going back in.'

'It's all right now,' said Dong Ying. 'She won't give you any more trouble. She won't dare.'

'She doesn't need to. She's already made it impossible for me to stay here.'

'If you don't stay, then you must go home,' said Li Mei.

'You know I can't go home,' I replied.

'And you can't go and live on the streets either,' countered Dong Ying. 'You'd be prey to worse than the likes of Mr Wang.'

'There are other factories,' I tried to argue, though I knew I was losing.

'What makes you think they'll be any better?' Dong Ying persisted. 'Besides, no factory owner who obeys the law will employ a twelve-year-old.'

'You have friends here,' said Li Mei, putting her arm round my shoulder. 'Good friends who care about you. However hard everything else may seem, at least you have that. We'll do everything we can to help you, so that one day you will be able to go home.'

I knew, of course, that she was right and that I had no choice. They helped me to my feet and back to the dormitory. I went straight to my bed, pulled the blanket over me and lay there shivering, but I had noticed, as I crossed the room, that Zheng Yi was sitting on her bed in the corner with a split lip and a reddened face.

Chapter Twenty-five

All Too Much

I tried to persuade Mr Wang to let me go back to the bear factory, pleading that the work as a runner was too tiring for me, but that I was sure I would be good at stitching bears' noses, or sewing the pads on their paws.

'I'm afraid that there are no vacancies in noses and paws, my dear,' he said, without even stopping to consider my request, when I went for my wages two days after starting in my new position. 'Noses and paws are very popular, so I couldn't possibly give them to a newcomer. It would cause discontent amongst my staff, do you see, and I wouldn't want that, would I? A fit little thing like you should have no problem keeping up as a runner. In fact, I'd say the job is tailor-made for you, tailor-made. And since there has been no training involved – anyone could do it – I can pay you the full

amount for the job straightaway, lucky you. Of course, there are some small deductions to help pay for the New Year celebrations, and there's still some to come off for the fare –'

'Please, Mr Wang, please let me go back with my friends,' I begged.

'As I was saying, I think you'll find I've been remarkably generous as usual. Now, off you go, dear, back to work. You can do it. I have complete faith in my choice of workers.'

The receipt of a month's wages all in one go, even though they had been severely trimmed, cheered me a little, for it seemed such an enormous amount of money. I counted the notes several times, struggling to take in the fact that they belonged to me. I wrapped them carefully inside my old blouse and pushed it to the back of my locker. I couldn't wait to add to them, for suddenly the dream of going home one day became more of a reality.

My work as a runner, though, was punishing, and was about to worsen. Two and a half weeks after I had moved jobs, a huge order came in for a range of toy farm vehicles. Suddenly, all twenty-six machines were in

operation, a new group of workers was brought in, including a second runner to help me, and our hours were extended. The delicious time of solitude and relaxation I had looked forward to every evening since beginning work as a runner was snatched away from me. Our overtime was extended to midnight.

If I had thought the pace of work was breathtaking before, now it was overwhelming. It was almost impossible to keep up with the rate at which tasks were being completed, and the supervisor shouted at us constantly. The noise from the machines was mind-numbing, the heat debilitating. There was no air-conditioning in the factory, the windows were tiny, and the temperature outside was rising steadily. The air inside was stale and cloudy with fumes, which stung my eyes and made it difficult to breathe. My legs ached and my feet, already pinched raw by my too-small sensible shoes, swelled and protested at every step I took. The runner who was recruited to help me lasted for two weeks, then disappeared and didn't return. A young man was hired in her place. He had only been there a day when he complained to the supervisor that four people should be doing our job, not two. Nothing changed, and he left to

be replaced by a man who seemed to delight in making me look slow. I asked again to be moved, but Mr Wang refused and told me I had better hand in my notice if I wasn't happy. He didn't want me poisoning the rest of the staff.

I didn't leave, but soon afterwards I developed a wheezy cough. It kept me awake at night, and during the day I felt as though I would pass out if I couldn't take more oxygen into my lungs. Li Mei said it must be the fibres and chemicals in the air. She went to see Mr Wang on my behalf, but he turned nasty and said that if she interfered again he would dismiss both of us on the spot and we would not be paid.

March turned to April and the outside temperature soared. Inside the factory, it was like a furnace. More orders came in. Our early finish on Sundays was taken away from us, and twice a week we had to work through until two o'clock in the morning. The atmosphere of discontent that reigned was almost as suffocating as the heat. Those workers who had some choice in the matter soon departed. Those who, like myself, had little choice, had to put up with whatever Mr Wang dictated.

My cough grew worse. I spent my days feeling

nauseous and faint. It didn't matter how much the supervisor shouted at me now, I couldn't have responded. I grew ever more fearful that I would be thrown out. My friends became increasingly concerned about my health.

One day, I was simply unable to get up in the morning.

'You must stay in bed today,' Li Mei insisted. 'They will have to manage without you.'

I hadn't the strength to argue. I slept all day long, right the way through till the next morning, waking only to eat a bowl of rice Li Mei had brought for me. I felt better for the rest, but my recovery was short-lived. A few days later I began to cough up blood. I was too terrified of what might happen to me to tell anyone. I worked on for another week, until, one afternoon, I collapsed on to the factory floor.

I was carried back to the dormitory by two of the men. Li Mei was assigned to keep an eye on me, with strict instructions to return to work as soon as I revived. She sat stroking my hand and wiping my forehead with a damp towel. I remembered my mother when she had been ill, lying so still that it was as if she were dead.

Mother had recovered, but her life had failed her. If that was the fate that awaited me, if I was doomed forever to a future as bleak as the past ten months, then I had no wish to recover. I couldn't go on. I had tried, but my best had never been good enough, and the struggle was just too great. 'You are like a fragile reed,' Mrs Chen had said. 'One puff of wind and you will break in two.' I was broken now.

I was racked by a sudden fit of coughing. As soon as Li Mei saw the blood on my pillow she ran for help. She returned with Mrs Wang, who immediately fussed around like a solicitous mother hen, while Li Mei watched her in disbelief.

'The poor girl,' she clucked. 'I always sensed that she was a sickly child, all that fainting for no reason, but she was so desperate for a job that I ignored my better instincts.' She stopped to pat my hand, but continued addressing Li Mei as though I were not there. 'How cruel of her parents to send her off to work when she's such a weak little thing. So small for her age, too. I always wondered whether she was really fifteen like she said.' She looked at me accusingly at that point, then continued, 'She must go to hospital, of course, and

being good employers we'll pay, but I fear she won't be able to return here when she's better. It'll all be too much for her again. All too much.'

She ran to call an ambulance, muttering 'Poor thing, poor thing' as she left the room. Li Mei held my hand once more. Despite feeling wretched, I began to giggle. Li Mei joined in.

'That's put the cat among the pigeons,' she said. 'The last thing the Wangs want is someone asking questions about their working practices and how you came to be in this state.'

'I've always been a sickly child, didn't you realise that?' I said.

Exhaustion took over again then, and I fell into a deep sleep. I scarcely stirred as they lifted me from my bed and into the ambulance, nor during the long journey to hospital. When I arrived, I was aware of a lot of activity around me: nurses taking my temperature and putting needles into my arms, doctors examining me, disturbing me, asking questions, making notes. I didn't want to be disturbed, didn't want to wake up. I was happy handing the burden of my life to someone else.

Chapter Twenty-six

A Voice So Strange and Quiet

I drifted in and out of sleep for what seemed like days after that. Shadowy figures hovered on the fringes of my consciousness each time I came to, only to disappear again before I could identify them. I feared that one of them was Mrs Chen, another Yimou, another Zheng Yi. I seemed to have lost my ability to decipher what was real and what was imaginary. When Uncle appeared fleetingly from nowhere, I screamed until my cough took my breath, then I flailed my arms around to keep him away. Behind him, my mother clawed the air as though trying to pull me towards her. Even when Uncle seemed to have gone, Mother stayed there reaching out

to me, but I couldn't run to her, couldn't run to her. Uncle's tight grip around my wrist was holding me back. I screamed at him to let go, kicked out at his invisible presence, and when at last he did let go, I fell back into a bottomless sleep.

I woke at last, late one morning, to dazzling sunlight spilling across my bed from a window opposite. Through the window I could see that the sun was high in a pale blue sky feathered with clouds. I blinked in confusion, trying to remember where I was, who I was.

Little by little, my shadow world fell away as other beds came into focus and uniformed figures bustled to and fro between them. I had no idea how long I had been there, and I was too weak to move, but I felt somehow safe and would have been happy just to lie there for ever and watch.

A small movement to my left made me turn my head. A man was sitting by the side of the bed, head bowed, hands clasped, as though lost in contemplation. He became aware of my gaze and looked up. The minute he did, I turned away. It was Uncle Ba. I wasn't safe. The nightmare wasn't over.

How long had he been there? How had he found me?

What did he want?

I heard him stand up and clear his throat. I waited for the usual words of criticism, words of scorn, knowing that after what I had been through they would have no power to touch me.

'How are you feeling, Si-yan?' Uncle said at last, in a voice so strange and quiet that I almost thought it had come from someone else. The question hung tantalisingly in the air. How did he expect me to feel? I lay there motionless, the fraught silence begging me to have my say, but no words found their way out. I sensed Uncle shifting uneasily. Let him suffer.

'I have come to take you home, Si-yan.'

My heart skipped. More silence.

'I have been trying to find you these last four months. There was a letter from Mrs Chen's mother-in-law to your mother saying that you were on your way home. But you never arrived. And then, when I tried to retrace your steps, it was as though you had disappeared.'

I might as well have done, Uncle Ba, for all you cared.

'I have travelled a thousand miles to find you, Si-yan. I had all but given up when the hospital made contact.'

Why so much effort, Uncle Ba? I turned towards him.

He looked shrunken somehow, and haggard. He avoided my gaze and sat back down in the chair. Then he leant forward and tried to take my hand. I pulled it away sharply. How dared he?

'Si-yan,' he said. 'There is something I have to tell you.' His voice quavered in its reluctance to speak. 'Si-yan -' he said, and paused again.

I stared at him and despised his sudden weakness.

'It's your mother, Si-yan.'

The air grew taut.

'What about my mother?' My own voice frightened me. 'Where is my mother?' I tried to sit up, wanting to challenge the man I hated to say anything against her.

'Your mother is dead.'

The words struck me like daggers, though they were spoken in the smallest whisper. I screamed then, over and over again, ripping the air into shreds. Uncle tried to calm me, but I hit him with all my might.

'She's not dead, she's not dead! How can she be? Why are you saying such things? I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!' I screamed.

Nurses came running, I heard Li Mei's voice. Nothing could stop me, though. My pain was devouring

every ounce of my body and threatening everyone else around me. I fought against the comforting words and restraining hands, fought against the efforts to make things better. They couldn't be made better. It was Mother's job to make things better, and she had gone.

I screamed until my cough robbed me of my breath and I succumbed to a drug-induced sleep.

Li Mei was sitting by my bed when I woke again. The news of my mother assaulted me afresh and I began to sob.

'Tell me it's not true, please tell me it's not true.'

Li Mei held me tight, quietly stroked my hair, and her silence told me again what I didn't want to believe.

'Where's Uncle?' I asked at last.

'He's asleep on a bench outside.'

'It's his fault, Li Mei, I know it's his fault.'

'He says it was pneumonia, that your mother was too weak to fight it,' Li Mei said gently.

'Too weak because of him,' I countered.

'He blames himself terribly, Si-yan.'

'Am I supposed to feel sorry for him?' I howled. 'He sold me, Li Mei, sold me like a bucket of pakchoi, just because we owed him money. All he ever thinks about is

money. And now he's killed my mother because of his meanness.'

Li Mei held my hand. 'He wants to make amends, Lu Si-yan. The way he treated you can never be excused, but there are things he has told me that you may not know.'

I looked at her angrily. 'What sort of things? He's just trying to get you on his side, Li Mei. You don't know him like I do. He's always been mean, always selfish, always finding fault when we were doing our best. Father loved him, but all Uncle could do was criticise him. And he's always hated me. Always, always, always.'

She told me, then, what she had learned from Uncle while I was asleep. I knew already that Uncle had helped to bring up my father after the death of their parents. I didn't know quite how bitter that had made him at the loss of his own childhood. I didn't know that even when Uncle was a simple farmer, he had helped Father to establish his own farm. I didn't know, and neither did my mother, that when I was born, by which time Uncle was working in a factory, he had made payments to my father whenever times were hard. When Li-hu was born, Uncle had at last seen a time in the future when

he would no longer have any responsibility for us. Li-hu and Father would share that responsibility. Then Father had died, and suddenly he was more responsible than ever.

'When your father died,' Li Mei continued, 'your uncle supported your mother more and more, but he became increasingly embittered. You bore the brunt of his bitterness because, like many men of his generation, he considered you good for marriage and little else.'

'But I tried so hard,' I protested.

'It wouldn't have mattered how hard you tried. It wouldn't have made any difference once he had made up his mind to reduce his burden by settling your future elsewhere.'

'By selling me, you mean.'

'He says he chose your future in-laws very carefully.'

'Not carefully enough,' I snapped. 'I'm sure he just sold me to the highest bidder. Nothing matters to Uncle except money.'

'He is paying a terrible price now for his actions. He has seen what harm it caused to your mother and to you. He has to live with the knowledge that he allowed his own bitterness to split his family apart.'

'Let him pay the price then, why should I care?' I sobbed. 'He took my mother from me, and I'll never forgive him.'

'He needs you, Si-yan, and so does your brother.'

'I am just a girl-child,' I said bitterly. 'How can he possibly need me, except to cook his meals and run errands for him? Don't you see, Li Mei? We're more of a burden than ever now.'

'You and your brother are all the family your uncle has left. Go home and give him a chance, Si-yan.'

The emptiness I felt inside was worse than the pain I had endured before. I had nothing to look forward to any more. My survival over the past few months had been built upon the belief that, one day, I would go home and be with my mother. What was there now? I wandered back through the paths of my childhood, tried to grasp hold of the happy times and not let them go. There was Father singing in his rickshaw, bumping his way to market; Mother sitting on the river bank laughing with the other village women; Li-hu chasing hens and yelling with delight every time he found an egg. Little Li-hu, my apple-cheeked baby brother. Nearly a year had gone by since I had left him behind in my

mother's arms. He would have grown. I might not even recognise him. Would he know me? How was he coping without Mother?

Suddenly, more than anything in the world, I wanted to be with him, wanted to hold him, wanted to make things better for him, wanted to take away his pain, wanted to tell him that I loved him. 'When he is old enough, my handsome tiger will protect and treasure my beautiful silk swallow,' my father had said. But he wasn't old enough. He was only six. 'Perhaps your silk swallow will protect and treasure your handsome tiger,' I had laughingly replied. Well, I would protect him. I would be mother and father and sister to him. And I wouldn't resent it. Not for one moment.

'I want to be with my brother,' I said.

Li Mei squeezed my hand and left the room. She returned with Uncle, who hovered by the door, all his self-assurance gone. I noticed the dark circles under his eyes before I turned my head away, unable to cope with his uneasiness on top of my grief. He stepped forward and spoke.

'I am not asking you to forgive me, Si-yan, just for a chance to repair some of the damage I have done. My

selfishness has nearly destroyed this family, I see that now. I want to give you and your brother a home. I don't want you to be a mother to Li-hu, it is too much to ask of any child. I want you to go back to school, Si-yan, to make something of yourself. Li-hu too.'

I looked at him. Did he really mean it? Had he changed so much? I had changed, I knew that.

'I am not the child you sent away ten months ago, Uncle. I will come home with you for the sake of my brother, and for the sake of my mother and father. But I cannot forgive you, and I will not be your servant.'

Uncle nodded. 'You have come a long way,' he said, 'and so have I.'

Chapter Twenty-seven

Let it Be Somewhere Better

It was another week before I was strong enough to leave hospital. Uncle came to see me every day. We were so awkward together at first that I almost dreaded his visits. He tried hard to make things right between us. They couldn't be, though, not just like that, not for a very long time.

Uncle talked frankly about Mother and how, when she had fallen ill, she had begged him to find me and bring me home. A letter had come from Mrs Hong saying that I was on my way, but when I hadn't arrived Mother's condition had worsened. Uncle had set out to look for me, but had been called back as my mother's life failed her.

He talked about Li-hu, how he had grown, and how much he looked like our father. I could see that Uncle adored my brother, that my brother had unlocked his heart. I doubted Uncle would ever feel like that about me, and feared that it would only ever be guilt that made him accept me back.

Mostly, I just listened. I grasped at little bits of information that helped me to build pictures of my mother and Li-hu at home without me: Uncle playing with Li-hu; Mother struggling to cope; Mother lying ill; my brother without Mother at home with Uncle. They were uncomfortable pictures, but I needed to see them. I watched for signs that would show the old Uncle was still only just below the surface, ready to re-emerge. I studied him hard, trying to work out whether or not his regret was honest. Part of me wanted to believe it because, apart from Li-hu, Uncle was the only family I had left. The other part of me fought against such belief, because I wasn't ready to take his side.

Li Mei disappeared during that week, saying that she had something to sort out and that she would visit again before I left. She returned one afternoon with a big smile on her face and clutching a brown envelope.

'This is for you,' she said triumphantly.

'What is it?'

'Open it and see.'

I unsealed the envelope and pulled out a wad of notes.

'It's the money the Wangs owed you, and I managed to extract some extra,' she grinned. 'They were worried that your uncle might report them for employing underage children and other illegal working practices. Mr Wang was extremely friendly and very happy to pay you what I demanded.'

I laughed at the thought of the obnoxious Mr Wang humbly doing what Li Mei told him.

'Will you go back?' I wanted to know.

'I don't think they'd have me, somehow,' chuckled Li Mei, 'but with the extra that Mr Wang insisted I too deserved, I'm going home as well, Lu Si-yan, and then I shall find work somewhere else.'

'Somewhere better,' I said. 'Let it be somewhere better.'

Chapter Twenty-eight

Fragments of a Song

As soon as I was well enough to travel, we began the long journey home. Uncle called a taxi early one afternoon and helped me into the back. Li Mei sat alongside me, her own journey home taking her part of the way with us. I soon fell asleep, my head bouncing up and down on her shoulder. I woke when we came to a halt. It was dark outside, but I could hear the eerie sounds of distant engines and horns.

We had come to a river. A huge ferry was moored at the end of a jetty. Men with wicker baskets on their backs were walking down to it, bent double under the weight of oranges and vegetables. Others had long poles slung across their shoulders, at the ends of which were buckets full of fish. Two men were pushing a cart piled high with meat.

'Are we going on that enormous ferry?' I asked.

'For the next two days and five hundred miles,' said Uncle.

Uncle carried me aboard. I was still too weak to walk very far. He took me to the cabin I was to share with Li Mei, settled me on one of the beds, then left us to go and find something to drink. I pulled back the curtains to look at the river, but all I could see was the dappling of reflected light across a blanket of black. I turned to Li Mei.

'While I have been away, I have believed that as long as I could see the river, any river, one day it would take me home. Yet so often it has disappeared from sight or been shrouded in black. Now, at last, the river is taking me home, but still it is hidden from me, and my dream has been smashed.'

I began to weep and Li Mei rushed to my side. There was nothing she could say, but her presence was a comfort and I was so happy to have her with me for a little while longer.

After we had eaten, we both fell asleep. I woke the next morning alone in the cabin. I had no idea what time it was, but from the noise of the engines I could tell

that we were moving. Sunlight was smouldering through the curtains. I opened them on to a pure blue sky. I gazed in fascination as the river bustled by, sparkling and frolicsome. Another ferry drew level with us and its passengers waved. I waved back until I could no longer see them. I made up my mind then to dress and go up on deck.

It took all my willpower to climb the steps and make my way to the front of the ship. Ahead of me, Li Mei was facing forwards, leaning against the railings, the wind streaming through her hair. The wind carried fragments of a song, which knitted together as I drew closer. It was Li Mei's song, her beautiful song about mist and mountains, rivers and waterfalls, a cormorant fisherman sailing quietly along in the golden light of an evening sun. I stood by her side and began to sing with her. Then, as I looked all around me, I saw Uncle on the deck below brushing a tear from his eyes.

'The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet' was one of my father's favourite sayings. Where was I now on my journey? Or was this a new journey about to begin?

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