

*The
Leftover
Woman*

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JEAN KWOK



VIPER

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For Stefan and Milan

Part One

PROLOGUE

May 6, 2022

My beloved, I understand that forgiveness may not be possible. Some deeds cannot be undone. I took someone essential from you that last tragic evening—the blood, so much blood. My hands will never be clean again no matter how hard I scrub. What I was capable of then was only limited by my desire, and my desire could consume the world.

Yet now, so many years later, I write to you because we are both ink and paper to each other. I have marked you as you have marked me, and you are written into the language of my soul. When you think of me, you must only remember glimpses, snapshots taken from a speeding train that you then try to piece into a cohesive narrative. Please, let me construct my truth for you, flawed though it must be. My only hope is your understanding, not in the sense of compassion but simple comprehension.

There is a question that I'm sure you've asked yourself again and again, lying alone in your bed, thinking of me. This is my answer. And after you have heard it, I hope that, perhaps, you will come to me.

I confess I have a daydream of you.

One day, there is a knock on my door. It is raining. My head snaps up, my heart flutters. I close my eyes, afraid of the hope that rushes

through my body like wine. I make myself take a careful step to the door, and then another. I am dizzy but I must not fall.

Through the glass, I make out a dark figure outside, carrying an umbrella, because in your thoughtful way, you are always prepared. A halo of light illuminates the rain cascading over you. Your jaw is clenched as you peer through the windowpane. You too are apprehensive. You don't know if you should have come.

I hurry to unlock the door before you can flee. My hands fumble with the knob and finally, I cast it open. We stare at one another a long moment. Despite all our sorrows, despite the days that have passed, we recognize each other. I think you're the most wondrous thing I've ever seen. I restrain myself, though. I must not frighten you more than I already have. A few hot tears escape. I dash them away.

Your breath catches. A smile touches your eyes; a miracle.

You step across my threshold.

ONE

Jasmine

Fifteen years earlier

I stood outside the Manhattan Chinatown teahouse and laid my palm against the windowpane. It was littered with advertisements. I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered in between a colorful flyer for a self-defense class and a Help Wanted ad. I ignored my reflection. I had always longed to be invisible. The Chinese believe our fortunes are written in the physiology of our faces, that the breadth of a forehead, the droop of a lip can seal our fates. For me, this was true. My visage had determined my path in life. Ever since I was a small girl in our village in China, I'd hated my face.

The customers inside were warm and laughing, pouring steaming oolong tea into small porcelain cups, scooping up fish balls with their chopsticks. Waiters and waitresses pushed loaded dim sum carts between the round tables as patrons picked out their favorite delicacies. There, a young father bounced his daughter on his knee as he blew on a wonton to cool it down for her. When the mother smoothed back

the child's wispy hair with a gentle hand, I was homesick for a past I'd never experienced.

A man pushed past me to enter the restaurant. I hurried in behind him before the door shut. A burst of warmth greeted me, along with the luscious smells of soy sauce chicken, orange-scented beef, and scallion pancakes. The chatter was all in Chinese and for a moment, I could pretend I was back home.

My jacket was too thin, and I realized how cold I was, even though it was already the beginning of March. I only had five more months before I'd have to repay the snakeheads who'd arranged my passage to New York. I pressed a hand to my icy ear. My plastic-framed glasses fogged so badly I had to remove them. The moment I wiped them clean, they clouded up again. I dropped them into my large, weather-beaten canvas bag next to my sketchbook. I'd clipped my thick hair into a bun. Messy strands had escaped. I could feel them plastered to my face and neck.

"Can I help you?" There was an edge of impatience to the plump, middle-aged hostess's voice. This might have been the second time she'd addressed me. She'd spoken Chinese instead of trying English first like she should have with someone my age. It must have been clear that I was fresh off the boat. She ran her eyes over my threadbare coat, and I could sense her inaudible sigh.

I spoke over the pulse tripping in my throat. "Can I please see the manager?"

"What?" she said, impatiently. "Speak up."

"I'm looking for a job."

She gestured for me to follow her to the back, where the kitchen was located. This restaurant must have been four times the size of the one back home. Would I ever get used to the extravagance and wastefulness here? Plates shoved to the side, filled with discarded leftovers: partly bitten pieces of lotus root, cilantro and radish garnishes, a salt-baked chicken leg, much of the meat still on the bone.

Weaving through carts and customers, I saw friends and relatives using their chopsticks to drop delicacies like spicy tripe into each other's rice bowls. We stopped next to a table with two beautiful women around my age. What were they—twenty-four, twenty-five?

They were impossible to miss in this room filled with families. It was like there was a spotlight focused on them and they knew it, preening and giggling over their tall red bean ices.

I took in the way they held their shoulders back to accentuate their graceful necks, the slender fingers that posed and enticed. They were both wearing too much makeup but instead of diminishing them, the colors seemed a signifier of power, like the way poisonous creatures clad themselves in bright hues instead of camouflage. I was envious. Not of their pulchritude but of their fearlessness, the way they'd seized their genetic peculiarities—because that's what beauty really is, when you think about it—and decided to wield them.

A small man wearing a wrinkled gray suit much too big for him exited the kitchen and approached me. He looked as tired as his faded eyes. "You're looking for work? What's your name?"

I started to push my glasses up my nose, then realized I'd taken them off. I felt exposed without them, especially with the two women watching us. How many times had I already had this conversation? Could I trust him not to report me? I stared at his shoes. "Umm, I'm . . . I'm a very hard worker—"

He barked out a laugh. "Let me guess, you don't have the right paperwork and you want me to give you a job even though you're too scared to even tell me your real name. Forget it." He waved a dismissive hand and turned to leave.

"I can clean tables, waitress, serve dim sum. I'm dexterous and have a good memory." My heart was racing. I was talking too quickly. I couldn't return to China and my disastrous life there. I closed my eyes. I had passed the menu board on the way in—what had it said? "Your specials today are braised pork in gravy, shrimp with vermicelli and garlic, and vegetarian crystal dumplings."

He paused. "Can you come in full-time?"

"A few nights a week."

He shrugged. "I have people lining up to work twenty-four hours a day, especially if they're in your situation."

In my peripheral vision, I noticed both women perk up as a young man stepped past us on his way to the kitchen. He was hunched over, his head averted, as if trying to make himself less conspicuous. He

wore a navy jacket with an elaborate emblem on the sleeve. A worn guitar case was slung over his back, an incongruous sight for a person heading into the depths of a restaurant where there were vats of boiling oil and flustered cooks, not to mention live lobsters.

The manager spotted him and erupted like a bulldog confronting a Doberman in the street. "What do you think this is, a storage area?"

The beleaguered man took a deep breath but didn't stop. "I'm so sorry, I'll stash the guitar. You won't notice—"

There was something familiar about his warm tenor that called to me. I didn't recognize the voice, rather the inflection of his Chinese, the rhythm of his words. I tended to avoid young men, with their grabby hands and clinging eyes, but I was riveted to this one. His hair was dark and silky, the gleam of amber highlights visible even in the fluorescent lighting.

"Come here." The manager actually stomped his foot.

The man slowly turned toward us and when he caught sight of me, he froze.

My heart lurched. I stared into a face that I both knew and didn't know at all. Two thick slashes of eyebrows, dusky skin, a square, masculine face with eyes like melted chocolate. Anthony. He was etched into my soul and yet entirely new to me. I remembered gangly shoulders, a broad open grin, his thin fingers plucking on guitar strings while perched on the steps of his house, one of the largest in our village. Then his family moved away and it stood empty, with me staring into the blank windows day after day. How many times had we shared a package of uncooked ramen noodles before he left, sprinkling the seasoning on top so we could munch them like chips? My eyes rested upon the man, but my soul recognized a boy I hadn't seen in ten years, my best friend when I was fourteen years old.

He was gaping at me. Then he whispered, "It's you."

A smile started on my face. To see him again so unexpectedly in this strange country made me feel like the sun had burst forth from my skin and I could barely contain it.

For a moment, wild emotion gathered in his eyes, joy and something else. In two steps, he crossed over to me. He reached out his hands. Before he could make contact, though, I flinched. Images of another

man's fingers, the pain of his grip, arose between us. My mind whispered, *I need to stay hidden*. Sensing my fear, he froze. As I watched, his face shifted. The happiness drained from his eyes, leaving them as cold as the bitter air outside.

The manager was scolding him in one endless stream as we stared at each other. "Now they are taking musical instruments to work. We are not a karaoke club. What will be next? Why don't you bring your cats and dogs too?"

The women, who had already stood up to leave, fiddled with their bags. They were observing us intently, loath to leave our little soap opera. Really, they were watching Anthony. Now that he'd appeared, I was incidental.

He set down his guitar case and seemed to be straining away from me, as far as possible without moving his feet.

I wanted to embrace him and to flee but most of all, I didn't want him to leave. To cover my confusion, I said, "You have nothing to say to an old friend?"

His lip curled. "I didn't realize we were still friends."

The manager's monologue petered out. He fell silent and watched us along with the two women.

Anthony continued to regard me with his challenging gaze. My heart was full. I hadn't allowed myself to think about how much I'd missed him during the many long, unhappy years since he'd moved away. But the last thing I needed right now was to be discovered by anyone from my past. That thought was almost immediately drowned out by my emotions—clearly, I was the dumbest melon in the history of dumb melons. This was Anthony, once the person I trusted most in the world. And my affection-starved heart couldn't let him leave, not now when he was standing right here before me, not even with the anger darkening his face.

"I'm sorry—" I stammered. "I had no choice. I know I hurt you." Even as I said this, I understood it was the worst possible thing I could have uttered.

His entire body stiffened for a second before he laughed, and that laugh struck me like a hammer. "Jasmine, right? It's a wonder I remember your name."

I curled my hands into fists as indignation and hurt burned through me. Others had treated me like this, but never Anthony. “We were inseparable. And now you’re pretending you can’t even recall my name? How old are you, two?”

The manager said, “Okay, let’s forget the whole thing. Get to work.”

Anthony ignored him. “We were children.” He enunciated each word to make sure I understood. “I’ve done many things since I last saw you and you pretended not to see me.” He caught himself, flushed a bit. “Not that I cared. You never had the ability to hurt me. You were only a silly little girl who followed me around.”

How dare he? He was only a year older than me. I deposited as much disdain into my eyes as I could. “Fine. I forgot you were always too good for the rest of us because your family had the foreign road open to you. You must be happy with your American name now that you can finally use it.” I was so heated I needed to unzip my coat, which I did with an angry flourish.

He stared down his nose at me and said with finality, “Goodbye, Jasmine.”

He bent to grab the strap of his guitar case again but as he stretched out his arm, the sleeve of his jacket pulled up slightly and I caught a glimpse of a faded red string bracelet.

My mouth fell open. It couldn’t be. The bracelet appeared to be made of Chinese knotting cord, woven thickly in an intricate braid. He saw me staring and clasped his other hand over it. When he straightened, it was hidden underneath his sleeve again. He slung the guitar over his back as my gaze snagged on the logo on his jacket. It seemed familiar. He then ignored all of us, including the manager, who had fallen into a stunned silence, and stalked off toward the kitchen.

At the doorway, he turned back for a moment to stare at me. Was that regret in his eyes? Before I could react, he was gone.

I turned to the manager, my thoughts whirring. “I’m so sorry. But about that job, I can cook too and—”

He snorted. I’d lost him. “Our cooks are all men. And you’re too much trouble.” He flicked me a quick look, then hurried after Anthony.

I closed my eyes in disbelief. There went another work opportunity. Had I really seen Anthony again? How could he have said those things

to me? He couldn't have made it any clearer how much he disliked me. But that bracelet . . . and then I remembered where I'd seen the emblem on his jacket.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I turned to leave before they could shame me further. My hair was falling out of my big barrette, and I yanked it free, the long mass unraveling down my back. I stumbled into something furry and perfumed and realized it was one of the young women who had been watching our entire pathetic exchange.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

To my surprise, she didn't move even though her petite companion was already at the door, tapping her glittery shoes. She peered intently into my face. As I focused on the woman up close, I saw that she was a few years older than I'd thought, possibly in her late twenties. In any case, she was lovely enough to sink the fish and make geese fall from the sky, with an expressive mouth and silky hair. She was all cream and pink and curves, a delicious surface masking the cool intelligence gazing out of those dark, luminous eyes.

She pursed her lips and seemed to make a decision. "I overheard you. You're looking for a job, right?"

When I nodded, she searched her large gold tote, burrowing through skeins of yarn and knitting needles—the last things I'd expect to find in her purse—while muttering, "Let me give you a name. Do you have something to write on?"

I wasn't sure I could trust her, but I desperately needed a job. I pulled my sketchbook out of my handbag right as she found her pen. "Here."

"Ooh," she said, and started to flip open my book. "You draw?"

I reached out and held it closed. "P-please stop that. Just put it on the back."

She pouted, then jotted down a name and address on the back cover. "Come to Opium. They're always looking for new cocktail waitresses. Ask for Aunt Glory and tell her Dawn sent you." She stopped, looked at me from underneath her lashes. "No papers necessary."

"Really?"

Dawn nodded, ran her eyes over me one more time, then leaned in to whisper, "But remember, appearances are everything."

Jasmine

I told myself I was only here out of curiosity. I was standing in front of the martial arts studio door with the same insignia as Anthony's jacket: a black circle edged in yellow with red hands in the center. I'd recognized it from the flyer stuck to the door of his restaurant. He'd probably hung it there himself. FREE WALK-IN SELF-DEFENSE CLASSES FOR WOMEN. After our scene yesterday, I'd taken one of the little tags with the address as I left, even though I swore I never wanted to see him again.

I certainly wasn't here because I wanted to be close to him. *You were only a silly little girl who followed me around.* I cringed at the memory, my cheeks stung from the embarrassment. It wasn't even the insult, though that also throbbed like a bruise, more that he knew better than anyone how the other kids had excluded me and used this knowledge to hurt me. Kind, thoughtful Anthony who had once spent hours trying to return a baby rosefinch to its nest.

I wanted to forget this present-day version, his hard, closed face and averted eyes, but I couldn't stop thinking about that red bracelet on

his wrist. Even though many Chinese wound up in Chinatown, seeing him again still felt like some sort of cosmic coincidence, like fate allowed us to meet from a thousand miles away.

I'd made him a bracelet like that for his fourteenth birthday. I had no money, and I was too shy to give him one of my drawings. Perhaps I'd already sensed that change was coming. My parents were entertaining visitors in our home, men who laughed too loudly and looked at me out of the corners of their eyes as they drank their rice liquor. Pa's friends had never done that before.

Anthony and I had been sent to the stream to catch crabs for his birthday celebration that evening. I was giddy to be released from my chores and swung my legs as I balanced on the luggage rack of his rickety bicycle, twirling my woven basket with one hand.

"Stop that," he called, pedaling hard on the dusty, narrow road that ran through the fields. His bony back was warm against the tanned skin of my arm. "You're going to make us crash. We're almost there."

"You're such an old man," I retorted.

The moment we arrived, I leapt off the bike and took off. "Race you!"

I heard his footsteps pounding behind me. I'd always been faster. He'd recently grown a couple of inches, though, and shot past me. We were both laughing and panting by the time we reached the base of the waterfall. Smooth sheets of iridescent stone glimmered in the sunlight. I loved the rushing music of the falling stream, the smell of mud and grass, the spray cool and damp against my cheeks. The water had eroded the plunge pool. On the periphery, where the waves were calm and sediment collected, we rolled up our simple cotton pants and waded. The sand tickled my toes.

"There's one!" I cried, pointing to a flash of motion I'd seen beneath the surface.

Anthony bent down at once. He expertly pushed with his thumb on the crab's back and flipped it into the basket I held. The river crab scabbled futilely to clamber up the smooth bamboo sides. Soon we had the basket mostly filled and climbed the outcropping that hung over the swirling plunge pool. We settled into the small, dry indentation in the rock where we always sat, warm from the sun.

We were trying to count the crabs we'd caught, all scrambling and swarming, when he said, as I'd known he would, "I think some of these are too small. They won't be good eating."

I let him drop about a third of them back into the water before I laid my hand on his arm, right above the mole in the crook of his elbow. "You're too softhearted, Anthony. We can't free them all."

He hunched his shoulders and stared at the ledge. "My folks won't mind."

I stared into the distance. The words were thick and stuck in my throat. "Ma will be angry with me. She'll say our family lost face by not contributing enough."

His eyes flew to my profile, his gaze stricken. I would be beaten if we didn't bring enough. My parents weren't like his, who could afford to buy any meat or fish they wanted. "Let's go catch some more then."

I shook my head and smiled at him. His eyebrows were furrowed, the moon-shaped scar on his forehead from when he'd fallen on a protruding nail as a toddler lighter than the rest of his skin. "We still have enough. Hey, I made something for you." I pulled my gift from my pocket and held it out to him.

"Two people connected by the red thread will always be tied together," I said, as he stared at it. Ma never told me stories, but I always listened when she put my twin brother, Hong, to bed. I would turn to the wall, so I didn't have to see her pet his cheek or tussle his hair. "The magical cord might stretch or tangle, but it'll never break, no matter how far away they might be from each other."

Anthony's cheekbones turned bright pink. "This is for . . ."

"What?"

"Boyfriend girlfriend."

I gasped and snatched my hand away, still clutching the bracelet. "No!" Had I not heard the whole tale? I started babbling, the waterfall roaring in my ears. "That's not what it is for us. It only means we're best friends and always will be. This was a stupid idea. I can give you something else."

His coloring settled back into its usual tawny hues. He reached out and loosened my fist to uncover the bracelet. "I like it. Will you put it on me?"

Still embarrassed, I avoided his eyes as I tied it around his skinny wrist. “I wanted to decorate it with beads, but I didn’t have any.”

He looked at the colorful knots of string—green, yellow, turquoise, and orange—neatly set off from the rest of the bracelet by a dark gold thread I’d taken from my mother’s sewing basket. “These bracelets are supposed to be a pair. You should have a matching one.”

I shook my head. I had wanted to make myself one, but I was afraid of being discovered, though technically I was allowed to use the sewing basket materials for mending. “I don’t need one.”

“I’ll make it for you,” he promised.

For months after that I caught him with little ragged bits of red thread in his pocket, all knotted and twisted. He never succeeded in making anything that didn’t look like something the cat had thrown up, though. We didn’t know it then, but we were already speeding through our final months together. My friendship with Anthony had formed the safe boundaries of my childhood, a buttress against the cold disdain of my mother and Hong’s infuriating teasing. I’d found shelter within those walls without knowing it. Soon they started to crumble and there was nothing I could do to stop it, nothing at all. A year and a half later, Anthony was gone.

I hadn’t expected him to resent me so much. This adult Anthony didn’t want me in his life, and I respected that; I had never wanted him to be unhappy. If only I could see if those knotted beads were on his bracelet, then I’d know it was the same one I’d given him. I wouldn’t pursue him beyond that. I couldn’t have someone connected to my village in my life anyway. If he hadn’t moved away years ago, I wouldn’t even have considered following him here. This was pure curiosity. I’d leave as soon as I checked out the bracelet and we would never need to see each other again. It wasn’t like I was lonely for a friend. A pang ran through me, and I ignored it—except for Grandma, who had passed on, I couldn’t trust anyone, not even the people I loved most.

If I saw him here, I’d act surprised. No one could blame a woman living in New York City for taking a self-defense class. I steeled myself, then hauled open the heavy metal door. It took me a few tries. This must have been some kind of test, where only people strong enough to open the door were allowed to take their class.

A sturdy-looking young woman with a blunt-cut pyramid of hair sat behind a rickety table with the sign-up sheet in front of her. When she spoke, her voice was low and assured. To my relief, she addressed me in Chinese. "Hi, you must be new. I'm Yan. Please fill in your name with your phone number."

I hunched my shoulders. "I'm not sure I'll be staying."

Yan's voice was pragmatic and calm. "That's no problem. But for our records, everyone coming through must sign in. Otherwise, you can't enter."

I scribbled my name and contact information on the sheet.

"Go down the hallway. Changing room's to your right, studio's to the left."

I hesitated. "I don't have anything to change into." Why hadn't this occurred to me? Probably because I didn't have much other clothing aside from my usual plain pants and shirts.

She looked me up and down. There was no judgment in her gaze. "What you have on is fine and you can do the class barefoot. So you're all set."

As I took a step toward the dressing room, I felt light-headed, like I'd been spinning around at high speed. This was a terrible idea. No one from our village could know I was in the Beautiful Country.

I was turning to leave when I heard Anthony's voice behind me. "What are you doing here?"

I wrapped an arm around my stomach and tried to calm my racing pulse. My voice wavered. "I-I could ask you the same thing. You're the man at a women's self-defense class."

"I'm teaching with my uncle Nick." Of course, I remembered the uncle who lived in America and would bring him here one day. Anthony had changed into a black kung fu uniform that stretched over his muscular shoulders, belted at his narrow waist. Even barefoot, he was taller than I recalled. I stared at the long sleeves that covered his wrists and heaved a sigh.

He glanced at Yan, who was still behind the desk. She was watching us with avid curiosity and a hint of wariness. A slight flush crept up his jaw. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

As I followed his stiff back down the hallway, I had a sudden urge to jump him from behind and wrap my arms and legs around him like a monkey. When we were younger, I would sneak up on him like that while he was practicing shooting marbles in the dirt outside his house. I used to cackle like a maniac when he jumped out of his skin. Anthony had always possessed an inherent faith in the goodness of everything. Maybe I could convince him not to be so upset with me anymore.

He led me into a small office. There were framed photos of students in kung fu uniforms winning prizes and a girl who seemed to have nothing to do with martial arts. There were countless shots of her from childhood on. Anthony's cousin, perhaps? His uncle obviously loved his daughter very much, I thought wistfully. The office was crammed with trophies that overflowed all the available shelf space, spilled onto the desk and floor. Anthony had always taken kung fu lessons back home but no matter how many times I'd asked, I'd never been allowed to join him. Ma thought it was a waste of money for a girl.

His guitar case and an animal carrier were stashed in a corner. A three-colored cat was prowling around and rubbed itself against my knee, purring outrageously. I leaned down to pet its thick, soft fur. I would have loved to sketch its white paws and stripy tail, the blaze of orange behind one ear, the gray pattern that descended over one eye like a pirate's patch.

When the cat ambled away, I looked up to find Anthony facing me with his arms crossed, his lips set in a determined line. "I'd like you to leave."

The words sliced into me. I flinched before I could hide my expression, and from the guilt that edged into his face, I knew he'd seen it. I ducked my head and took a step toward the door. "Fine. Goodbye, Anthony."

His voice behind me. "Why on earth do you want to take a self-defense course anyway?"

I shrugged but didn't turn around.

Before I could touch the doorknob, he said hurriedly, as if loath to see me go, "Do you really expect me to believe this was a coincidence?"

Now I'd had enough. All my tension condensed into fury and heat rushed to my face as I turned to him. "What should you think then?"

That I followed you to this foreign country and I'm just hoping you'll fall to your knees and beg me for forgiveness for your rudeness, even though against all odds, after all these years, we've found each other again?"

The lines on his face hardened. "You don't need to make fun—"

"Don't I?" I said, walking toward him. "I apologized to you, Anthony. You didn't need to lash out at me."

"I—"

"No, you listen now. This is your studio but it's my turn to talk and if you feel the need to run away, be my guest." I waved at the door.

He clenched his jaw but didn't move. His eyes were bright with indignation underneath the crescent-shaped scar, faded now. He looked as stubborn as he ever did as a boy, and at the corner of his left eye were the same three little freckles that formed a triangle.

At these reminders of the Anthony I had loved, I sighed, the anger leaking out of me. "I shut you out of my life with no warning. It must have seemed like—"

He broke in, his voice harsh and furious. Suddenly he was looming over me with his fists clenched. "Like you were too good for the rest of us? With your new life and big house and *him*?"

I cowered but managed to squeeze out, low and urgent, "I had no choice."

He scoffed. "Of course you didn't. No choice but to treat me like trash on your shoe. Ignoring me even though I ran after you like an idiot, hoping at least to be your friend. Time and time again, I thought you hadn't seen me, that you were busy. The excuses I made for you in my head."

"I couldn't—"

"What?! Couldn't treat me with any type of decency?" He raised his voice, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Couldn't what, Jasmine?! Couldn't have picked me instead? You were *my* girlfriend!"

At this, we both froze. We were breathing hard. I stared at him incredulously. "What? I was never your girlfriend."

He deflated and looked down, unable to meet my eyes. He stammered, "I-It was a secret."

I said, enunciating slowly, "So secret that even *I* didn't know about it?"

A hot flush crept up his chest and neck, and he nodded.

Now it was my turn to avoid his gaze. I stared at the floor as I said in a tiny voice, "I tried. Your parents refused."

"What?!" It was an explosion of air and disbelief.

I risked a glance upward and he was flabbergasted, his eyes wide, mouth gaping open. His lips moved though he seemed unable to speak. At his obvious surprise, something inside me loosened. He hadn't known. I'd spent years wondering.

I gave a short laugh. "They always had their eyes on the Beautiful Country for you, Anthony. Or did you never grasp the reason they gave you an American name from the day you were born? They understood that your uncle would bring you here and that your future would be abroad, not in our little village. I knew we weren't involved but I would rather have been with you than . . . I told my parents I would accept an arranged marriage if they asked your family first. Believe me, I had to fight to make my folks agree."

"Why didn't you ask me directly?" His voice caught, straining to contain some emotion I struggled to decipher. Frustration? Anger?

I was still staring at his uniform. "I was embarrassed. We'd never . . . I never saw you that way. I was sure they'd talk to you, and you'd find out. To be honest, when you tried to approach me after the wedding, I was still resentful and wounded. I thought you felt guilty for rejecting me when the matchmaker approached your family. Anyway, whether it was up to you or your parents, I wasn't good enough."

There was utter silence, then he took me by the chin and tilted my head up to meet his eyes. His expression was unreadable. I wrenched my face away as a hot tear overflowed. I dashed it away, angry at myself for displaying vulnerability while he remained so stoic.

"But fine, Anthony. I understand. I don't see any trace of the boy I was friends with anymore. That boy may have been hurt—and yes, you've made it very clear that you're anything but hurt by me—but he would have heard me out. He was kind to every living thing, thought the best of everyone. I'm sorry I intruded on your life here. I don't know why I came to see you again. I won't bother you anymore."

He was speechless as I backed away from him. I strode out of the office and toward the exit as quickly as I could. I could hear him coming

after me. I wanted nothing more to do with him. Yan stared at me as I grabbed the handle, pushed the main metal door—and bounced off of it. What was that thing made of, lead?

I felt his hand on my arm. “Jasmine.”

I stopped but I didn’t turn around. We both stood there, silent. He squeezed me gently and said quietly, “I was—”

It was too much for me. I couldn’t stand to be on the cusp of friendship. I couldn’t bear the memories. There were so many emotions raging through me that I didn’t know what I was feeling. I wrenched my arm from his grasp and rammed my whole weight against the door, running out of the studio and out of his life.

THREE

Jasmine

After I fled the studio, I was determined to forget about Anthony. I needed to get my own affairs in order. I shivered, remembered when my future was only a dark box, a room painted black with no window or door in sight. I had carved my own exit, walked through it, and now I had to pay the price. I shouldn't have let him derail me. I, of all people, knew how quickly kindness could turn to cruelty.

If I didn't find a job fast, I'd be at the mercy of the snakeheads. Back in China, getting in touch with the gangs who smuggled people into the United States had been easy enough. Everyone in my village knew who they were.

When I was told the astronomical sum I would owe them, I had swallowed hard. "What happens if I can't earn the money in time?" I'd heard stories about the sort of punishments inflicted on those who tried to escape their debts.

The snakehead licked his lips. "A young woman like you? You'd work for us, for as long as it took. There are a lot of men who'd appreciate your services."

I understood the type of employment he meant. I didn't know then that most of the legitimate restaurants and stores in Chinatown would reject me because I didn't have the right documentation. After Grandma passed on, I had to get away no matter the cost. When I first landed in New York last August, I went to sleep every night with the jade hairpin she gave me clutched in my hand, pretending I wasn't adrift in this vast ocean called the Beautiful Country. I prayed no one would ever find me here.

The alley loomed dark and threatening, dismal corners filled with shade. I passed a homeless man who sat propped against a building, forgotten by all who had ever loved him. I turned away and walked down the street to the pawnshop, clutching the red jewelry pouch in my pocket. I wasn't going to sell anything. Not really. I was only getting an appraisal. If the hairpin was worth anything like what I suspected, I'd have a significant part of the money I needed to repay my debt.

"When you're old enough to marry, you'll stop wearing braids," Grandma, her round face tender, had said when I was a little girl. "And we will coil your hair into a bun and fasten it with this."

The hairpin was my history, the accumulation of generations of women in my family who had starved and died rather than let it out of their hands. They cherished it as a powerful talisman, an amulet of love, healing, and protection. I could never sell it. Maybe I could put it up for collateral, though, and when I managed to earn enough, come back for it. I had already liquidated everything else Grandma had given me. I wouldn't let go of the hairpin. My chest was heaving as if I might break out in sobs. I told myself it was due to the chill in the air.

A bell chimed as I stepped inside the little pawnshop. It was empty except for the heavy, bearded man behind the register. I didn't like massive men. Why couldn't he have been a woman instead? I kept my gaze fixed to the glass counter, where a goldfish swam in circles inside its bowl. I took the silk pouch from my pocket and slid it over to him. My voice quavered. "How much is this worth?"

I watched as his thick fingers unzipped the material and pulled out the hairpin. The large piece of emerald-green Imperial jade had been meticulously carved to form translucent pomegranate seeds borne on intertwining branches of pure gold. A vivid long-tailed bird engraved

expertly into the outer part of the stone seemed about to take flight. The striking colors reflected light like water. Smaller precious stones shimmered, bright leaves that sparkled against the ripe fruit. Even now, the sight of it took my breath away.

The man grunted in surprise. I looked around the store while he examined it. All these cabinets filled with other people's desperation. How many stories like mine could these objects tell?

He peered at the hairpin through his jeweler's loupe and inhaled sharply. "This is very old."

I nodded and forced myself to meet his eyes. "From the Qing dynasty."

He raised a scraggly eyebrow as he took a swallow from a large glass of water. "That's what they all say. You looking to sell?"

"No, I only want to know the value today in case I want to pawn it."

His heavy-lidded gaze turned crafty. "I can lend you seven hundred dollars for it. That's a very good offer, young lady."

I ran a sweaty hand down my pant leg. I had done my research. My throat felt tight as I said, "It's worth at least thirty thousand, probably more."

His eyes lingered on it. "Even if it was, and I'm not saying it is, I wouldn't give you more than seven hundred."

I shook my head and held out my trembling palm, relieved when he dropped the hairpin in it. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

The late afternoon sun almost blinded me when I stepped outside. The masses of people mountain, people sea streamed around me, threading through the fissures defined by the skyscrapers in crowded New York City, utterly uncaring. All that concrete and brilliant glass, the loud roar of traffic, the stench of gasoline and asphalt made me clutch my stomach as I staggered down the street. What was I going to do now? Grandma had passed away and the last little bit I had left of her seemed unable to protect me.

My phone vibrated. It was a text.

Jasmine, this is Anthony. I don't know what to say.

That was it? He wrote to tell me . . . nothing? I stared at the characters until they blurred before my eyes. How had he found my number

anyway? The sign-up sheet for the class. He must have gotten it off that. What did this mean? My phone remained silent. It was apparent that nothing else was forthcoming, no invitation to see him again.

I thought I understood. This was a message in a bottle cast into the sea. He probably felt guilty for how we'd left things, and this was his attempt at a slightly friendlier closure. Well, I'd done enough chasing after him and the whole mess of emotions he represented. I didn't care if he was wearing the stupid bracelet I'd given him. He wasn't the boy I knew, and the girl he remembered was long gone. Plus, what kind of lame note was this? My life was complicated enough without a guy who couldn't even communicate clearly.

It used to be different with him. As a child, I often had to work on the farm. In addition to feeding and taking care of the animals, I transplanted rice by hand to the paddy fields in June, legs in the water, back aching. I harvested it and helped clear the fields in the fall. November was busy with the planting of wheat and reaping of soybeans, sweet potatoes, cabbages, and icicle radishes. But whenever I could get away, Anthony and I picked wild berries, stained our hands and mouths, sucked nectar out of the stems of honeysuckle, folded small paper boats to float in the stream. We'd understood each other perfectly then. And those picture cards that we had used as currency: brightly colored drawings of ancient gods and demons. We'd shoot rubber bands at each other's and if we hit them, the winner took that card. I'd always been a better shot than him and often won. Sometimes he gave me ones he knew I wanted to paste into my own collages.

I came to the corner and instead of the green mountains of my childhood, a taxi blared. Traffic rushed down the avenue. I sighed. We both needed to move on. He'd made plain his desire to get me out of his life. I put my phone away. I wouldn't write him back. This would be our goodbye. In my limited experience with men, it never ended well for me.

I had entrusted my heart to Wen after we married when I was only fourteen years old. He loved my skin and hair. He loved being seen

with me. I'd been too young and stupid to understand that his adoration was for the things I could do for him, the sons I would bear him, the status I could bring him, and not for me. All he wanted was a wife to give him face.

I let so many injustices go over the years but I could never forgive him for his ultimate betrayal. I discovered the truth one day when I was nineteen years old. That evening, I didn't care if he was watching or not as I stepped into the round wooden bathtub, secured by three bands of metal. He had seen my naked body often. I wouldn't let his presence ruin my bath this time. I'd already become far more protective of that which lay beneath the surface: my mind, my spirit. I slid into the hot water, wrapped myself in warmth that seemed to sink deep into the cold at my core. I sighed as I leaned my head against the rim. The stone weighing down my soul eased a bit. As my eyes fluttered closed, I breathed in the scent of the peony soap.

I flinched as Wen moved closer and began to pour water over my hair from behind. "Jasmine, I was wrong. How can I make you feel better?"

I tried to steady my voice, stared up at the brown rafters supporting our tiled roof. "I want to stop trying to have a baby for a while. I'm still too young. My body isn't ready yet."

He hesitated, his hands resting on my hair. We both knew that plenty of women my age had children, and after several miscarriages, I'd finally carried to term last year, only to be devastated when the midwife told me the baby died right after birth. "Of course," he said after a moment. "I have only ever cared about your well-being. We have enough time, after all."

I felt the lies in his words like a pebble wedged in my shoe but I needed to play along, to pretend I was as charmed by him as I used to be. I allowed a corner of my lips to turn up in a small smile and looked over my shoulder at him. His handsome face was filled with concern. I noted the frustration hidden in the tightness of his mouth.

In the years when I had loved him, I had pored over every minute change in his expression. I had learned to read him like a language I adored. "Truly?"

"Absolutely," he said as he cupped my face in his hands. I bit back a hiss when his cold fingers brushed against the bruise beginning to darken my hairline. He was usually more careful. "I am so sorry for earlier."

I pressed my lips together. "You hurt me."

He leaned in, heedless of the water wetting his fine shirt, and rested his forehead against mine. "I know. My mind was clouded. Of course, the miscarriages aren't your fault, and you can't help the way the country potatoes on the street stare at you. You are as lovely as a crane among chickens. I only acted that way out of worry. And it'd already taken me so long to find you. I wish you wouldn't wander alone in the mountain."

"You said it was no wonder a whore couldn't conceive sons." His words had been the least of my pain. But I couldn't talk about the other things he did to me when he was enraged. I didn't dare.

He winced. "I was not myself." He rolled up his sleeves and lathered my hair. I closed my eyes. "Let me make it up to you. I want to plan a beautiful wedding for us."

My eyelids flew open and I forced myself to remain calm. I glanced at the ring weighing down my finger, diamonds sparkling in the hand-engraved band of yellow gold. "Whatever for? We're already married."

He coughed. "Well, not in the eye of the law. Of course, our wedding banquet was sufficient for everyone in this village, but you'll turn twenty soon and we'll be able to marry legally." His voice deepened. "I want you to be mine in every way, my beautiful Jasmine."

Once, I might have turned to him, flushed with pleasure and anticipation, leaned toward him like a flower to the sun. But now I would die before I allowed myself to be officially bound to this man. He had broken more than my heart. He'd shattered my will, my spirit, and my voice. Worst of all, I had let him. I would never again be led blindly into the darkness. If I had to walk, I would choose my own path with my eyes wide open.

How much money had he paid my parents for my bride price? There had been gasps and whispers, though I'd never seen a cent of it. With so few girls under the one-child policy, we were valuable commodities

to be auctioned off as young as possible. However, even in our little village, it'd been unusual for me to be handed over to the matchmaker at fourteen. Most parents waited until the girls were sixteen at least, but from the moment I started developing curves, I'd attracted too much gossip. Wen was considered a real prize, with his government position and residence permit to live in Beijing, where he spent much of his time. He was also one of the tallest and strongest men in our village. It didn't matter that he was already twenty-six years old when we married, I told myself then. He would love and protect me.

Well, I was no longer that naïve girl. I wanted to slap his arrogant face. I wanted to run out of that house and never return. But I held myself back. If I wanted to be truly free of him, I couldn't be impulsive. I needed to plan. I had to be smart.

"Wouldn't you like that, my darling?" he asked. "I'll buy you the most gorgeous dresses, even a Western white one, if you want. More paints and pencils for your little hobby. Whatever you desire."

I ground my teeth. I needed my "little hobby" the way a fish needed water. Without a pencil in my hand, I wouldn't know how to engage with reality, how to make sense of the confusion of my life. But I had no allies except for Grandma, whose health was failing. I had to become strong so that no one could use me like Wen or my parents ever again. I had to play the game and win this time.

So, I made myself gasp with pleasure. "With lace and a veil?"

He chuckled, reassured. "Nothing is too fine for you. And we'll supplement your bridal jewelry as well. It will go to our son eventually anyway."

I clenched my jaw, knowing he couldn't see. I braced myself. "A wonderful investment in our future." I turned to him, half-rising out of the water so the droplets rolled down my breasts. At his intake of breath, I kept my eyes wide, lips soft. "But won't you give me some time to plan it properly? I want to savor the creation of such a joyous and important occasion."

Eyes roaming over my body, he nodded. "Of course."

I kissed him tenderly, then sank back into the water while he finished rinsing my hair. Who was I becoming? Whomever I needed to be. I knew he loved me in his own twisted way. It wasn't enough, though. In

some ways, everyone I'd ever cared for had been taken from me, even Wen, even though he was right beside me. My own parents essentially sold me to him, Anthony moved away, and now Grandma was ill. I couldn't trust anyone to be there for me. My gaze blurred as I stared at the ceiling and Wen massaged my scalp. The haze of steam surrounding me felt as damp and pervasive as grief.

He went on and on about the glory of our wedding, how often he'd thought about me during the months he was in Beijing, his important work for the government, how wonderful it would be when I finally joined him there, how much his parents would miss having my help in their restaurant. I knew he'd never bring me to Beijing. His mistresses wouldn't be pleased with his young country wife. How it had hurt me when I'd first found out about them, but they were nothing compared to his greatest lie, which I'd just discovered. That was the worst thing he'd ever done to me.

I gasped as he lifted me out of the water like I didn't weigh a thing and set me on my feet on the rug, the water streaming down my body. He dried me tenderly before pulling a thin cotton nightgown over my head. It smelled of the same laundry soap Grandma used. I pressed my lips together to keep a sob from escaping.

My mind was as exhausted as my heart. All I wanted was to be rid of him. "I'd like to go to sleep now."

"Of course." He led me to our canopy bed, ducked under the upper wooden panels inlaid with gold leaf and mother-of-pearl, and held back the translucent curtain while I lay down.

When I slipped under the covers, he followed me despite my rigid spine. My heart sank as I felt his weight settle behind me. I stayed as stiff as a board until he started stroking my arm. "You're the only one I love, Jasmine."

Liar. It might be partly true or merely another manipulation to ensnare me further. It didn't matter. I had to acquiesce until I could make my move. Despite myself, I relaxed in his hold. I'd loved him for years. He was the only man I'd ever known intimately. I didn't want to be in his arms, even if it was all I had desired for so long. A storm of emotion rose within me: anger, sadness, regret. I kept them all inside. I needed to be numb. That way I'd be safe.

But as he kissed my hair, I let the girl inside who had lost the man she loved take this moment with him. I swept those bitter pieces of my broken spirit into that naïve girl who'd been willing to do anything to please her parents, even marry a stranger twelve years her senior. I was in mourning. This was my goodbye, to him and to me. My lashes were wet.

His caresses became more insistent. He turned me over to face him. He didn't notice my tears.

Afterward, he murmured, "I'll never let you go."

FOUR

Jasmine

“I’m afraid your English isn’t good enough,” the architect told me. Her expression was kind. “We have a number of Western clients, and we need to make the right impression. I truly am sorry.”

I trudged down the narrow stairs until I emerged onto the street again. I’d known the receptionist job was a long shot, but I was becoming increasingly desperate. The sky was gray and white, verging on rain. A gust of air whipped through the avenue and an old newspaper rose from the sidewalk, swirled for a moment in the late afternoon shadows, then fluttered downward. How would I ever earn enough at this rate? What would the snakeheads make me do if I failed? Would they force me to stay in one of their houses? I’d heard about the stained mattresses crammed into those places, lined up across the vinyl floors, crawling with roaches.

My telephone buzzed and I jumped, startled. It was a second text from Anthony.