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Opening extract from

The Ghost Bride

Written by

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Chapter One

One evening, my father asked me whether I would like to become a ghost bride. 'Asked' is perhaps not the right word. We were in his study. I was leafing through a newspaper, my father lying on his rattan daybed. It was very hot and still. The oil lamp was lit and moths fluttered through the humid air in lazy swirls.

'What did you say?'

My father was smoking opium. It was his first pipe of the evening, so I presumed he was relatively lucid. My father, with his sad eyes and skin pitted like an apricot kernel, was a scholar of sorts. Our family used to be quite well off, but in recent years we had slipped until we were just hanging onto middle-class respectability.

'A ghost bride, Li Lan.'

I held my breath as I turned a page. It was hard to tell when my father was joking. Sometimes I wasn't sure even he was entirely certain. He made light of serious matters, such as our dwindling income, claiming that he didn't mind wearing a threadbare shirt in this heat. But at other times, when the opium enveloped him in its hazy embrace, he was silent and distracted.

'It was put to me today,' he said quickly. 'I thought you might like to know.'

'Who asked?'

'The Lim family.'

The Lim family was amongst the wealthiest households

in our town of Malacca. Malacca was a port, one of the oldest trading settlements in the East. In the past few hundred years, it had passed through Portuguese, Dutch, and finally British rule. A long, low cluster of red-tiled houses, it straggled along the bay, flanked by groves of coconut trees and backed inland by the dense jungle that covered Malaya like a rolling green ocean. The town of Malacca was very still, dreaming under the tropical sun of its past glories when it was the pearl of port cities along the Straits. With the advent of steamships, however, it had fallen into graceful decline.

Yet compared to the villages in the jungle, Malacca remained the epitome of civilization. Despite the destruction of the Portuguese fort, we had a post office, the Stadthuys city hall, two markets, and a hospital. We were in fact the seat of British administration for the state. Still, when I compared it to what I had read of the great cities of Shanghai, Calcutta, or London, I was sure it was quite insignificant. London, as the District Officer once told our cook's sister, was the center of the world. The heart of a great and glittering empire that stretched so far from east to west that the sun never set on it. From that far-off island (very damp and cold, I heard), we in Malaya were ruled.

But though many races – Malay, Chinese, and Indian, with a sprinkling of Arab and Jewish traders – had settled here for generations, we kept our own practices and dress. And though my father could speak Malay and some English, he still looked to China for his books and papers. Never mind that it was my grandfather who left his native soil to make his fortune trading here. It was too bad that the money had dwindled under my father's hands. Otherwise I don't think he would even have considered the Lim family's offer.

'They had a son who died a few months ago. A young man named Lim Tian Ching – do you remember him?'

Lim Tian Ching was someone I had seen perhaps once or twice at some festival. Apart from the name of his wealthy clan, he had left no impression at all. 'Surely he was very young?'

'Not much older than you, I believe.'

'What did he die of?'

'A fever, they say. In any case, he is the bridegroom.' My father spoke carefully, as though he was already regretting his words.

'And they want me to marry him?'

Distracted, I knocked over the inkstone on his desk, its contents spilling onto the newspaper in an ominous black stain. This practice of arranging the marriage of a dead person was uncommon, usually held in order to placate a spirit. A deceased concubine who had produced a son might be officially married to elevate her status to a wife. Or two lovers who died tragically might be united after death. That much I knew. But to marry the living to the dead was a rare, and indeed dreadful occurrence.

My father rubbed his face. He was once, so I was told, a very handsome man until he contracted smallpox. Within two weeks his skin became as thick as a crocodile's hide and scarred with a thousand craters. Once gregarious, he retired from the world, let the family business be run by outsiders, and immersed himself in books and poems. Perhaps things might have been better had my mother not died during the same outbreak, leaving me behind at the tender age of four. The smallpox passed me by with only one scar behind my left ear. At the time, a fortune-teller predicted that I would be lucky but perhaps he was simply being optimistic.

'Yes, it is you that they want.'

'Why me?'

'All I know is that they asked if I had a daughter named Li Lan and if you were married yet.'

'Well, I don't think it would suit me at all.' I scrubbed fiercely at the ink on the table, as though I could wipe away the topic of conversation. And how had they known my name?

I was about to ask when my father said, 'What, you don't want to be a widow at almost eighteen? Spend your life in the Lim mansion wearing silk? But you probably wouldn't be allowed any bright colors.' He broke into his melancholy smile. 'Of course I didn't accept. How would I dare? Though if you didn't care for love or children, it might not be so bad. You would be housed and clothed all the days of your life.'

'Are we so poor now?' I asked. Poverty had been looming over our household for years, like a wave that threatened to break.

'Well, as of today we can no longer buy ice.'

You could buy a block of ice from the British store, packed tightly in sawdust and wrapped in brown paper. It was a cargo remnant, having come by steamer all the way from halfway round the world, where clean ice was stowed in the hold to preserve fresh food. Afterwards, the blocks were sold off to anyone who wanted a piece of the frozen West. My amah told me how in earlier days, my father had bought a few exotic fruits for my mother. A handful of apples and pears grown under temperate skies. I had no recollection of such events, although I loved to chip at our occasional purchases of ice, imagining that I too, had journeyed to the frigid wastes.

I left him to the rest of his opium pipe. As a child, I spent hours standing in his study, memorizing poetry or grinding ink for him to practice his calligraphy, but my embroidery skills were poor and I had little idea of how to run a household, all things that would make me a better wife. My amah did what she could, but there were limits

to her knowledge. I often used to fantasize about what life would have been like had my mother lived.

As I left the room, Amah pounced on me. She had been waiting outside and gave me quite a fright. 'What was it your father wanted to ask you?'

My amah was very tiny and old. She was so small that she was almost like a child: a very opinionated and despotic one who nonetheless loved me with all her heart. She was my mother's nurse before mine and by rights should have retired long ago, but still she puttered around the house in her black trousers and white blouse, like a clockwork toy.

'Nothing,' I said.

'Was it a marriage offer?' For someone who claimed to be old and deaf she had surprisingly sharp hearing. A cockroach couldn't skitter across a dark room without her stamping it out.

'Not really.' As she looked unconvinced, I said, 'It was more like a joke.'

'A joke? Since when has your marriage been a joke? Marriage is very important to a woman. It determines her whole future, her life, her children . . .'

'But this wasn't a real marriage.'

'A concubine? Someone wants you to be his concubine?' She shook her head. 'No, no, Little Miss. You must be a wife. Number one wife if possible.'

'It was not to be a concubine.'

'Then who was it from?'

'The Lim family.'

Her eyes widened until she resembled one of those saucer-eyed jungle lemurs. 'The Lim family! Oh! Little Miss, it was not for nothing that you were born as beautiful as a butterfly,' and so on and so forth. I listened with some amusement and irritation as she continued to list many good qualities that she had never bothered to mention to

me before, until she came to an abrupt halt. 'Didn't the son of the Lim family die? There is a nephew though. He will inherit, I suppose.'

'No, it was a proposal for the son,' I said with some reluctance, feeling as though I was betraying my father by admitting he had even entertained such an outrageous thought. Her reaction was just as expected. What could my father be thinking of? How dare the Lims insult our family?

'Don't worry, Amah. He's not going to accept.'

'You don't understand! This is very unlucky. Don't you know what it means?' Her small frame quivered. 'Your father should never have mentioned this to you, even as a joke.'

'I'm not upset.' I crossed my arms.

'*Aiya*, if only your mother were here! Your father has gone too far this time.'

Despite my attempts to reassure Amah, I felt uneasy as I went to bed, shielding my lamp against the flickering shadows. Our house was large and old, and since our financial decline had not had one tenth of the servants needed to staff it fully. In my grandfather's day it was filled with people. He had a wife, two concubines, and several daughters. The only surviving son, however, was my father. Now the wives were dead and gone. My aunts were married off long ago, and my cousins, whom I had played with as children, had moved to Penang when that side of the family relocated. As our fortunes dwindled, more and more rooms were shut up. I seemed to recall the bustle of guests and servants, but that must have been before my father withdrew from the world and allowed himself to be cheated by his business partners. Amah occasionally talked about those times, but she always ended up cursing my father's folly, his wicked friends, and ultimately the god of smallpox who allowed all this to happen.

I was not sure that I believed in a god of smallpox. It didn't seem right to me that a god should stoop himself to go around blowing smallpox in through windows and doors at people. The foreign doctors at the hospital talked about disease and quarantining outbreaks, an explanation that seemed far more reasonable to me. Sometimes I thought I would become a Christian, like the English ladies who went to the Anglican church every Sunday. I had never been but it looked so peaceful from the outside. And their graveyard, with its neat green sward and tidy gravestones under the *frangi pani* trees, seemed a far more comfortable place than the wild Chinese cemeteries perched on hillsides.

We went to the cemetery on Qing Ming, the festival of the dead, to sweep the graves, honor our ancestors, and offer food and incense. The graves were made like small houses or very large armchairs, with wings on either side to accommodate a central tablet and small altar. The paths up the hills were overgrown with weeds and *lalang*, the sharp elephant grass that cut you if you ran your finger along it. All around were abandoned graves that people had forgotten or which had no more descendants to care for them. The thought of having to pay my respects as the widow to a stranger made me shudder. And what exactly did marrying a ghost entail? My father had treated it as a joke. Amah had not wanted to say; she was so superstitious that naming something was as good as making it come true. As for myself, I could only hope that I would never need to know.

Chapter Two

I tried my best to put the Lims' disturbing overture out of my mind. After all, it wasn't really what one would hope for in a first proposal. I knew I ought to be married some day – a day that was drawing ever closer – but life was not yet too restrictive. Compared to how things are done in China, we were fairly casual in Malaya. Locally born Chinese women didn't bind their feet. Indeed, the other races looked upon foot-binding as strange and ugly, crippling a woman and making her useless for work in the home. When the Portuguese first landed in Malacca more than three hundred years ago there were already Chinese here, though the earliest Chinese who came to seek their fortunes brought no women. Some took Malay wives and the resulting mix of cultures was known as *peranakan*. Later settlers sent for women from home who were often older, divorced, or widowed, for who else would undertake such a long and perilous voyage? So we were less rigid here and even an unmarried girl of good family might walk in the streets, accompanied, of course, by a chaperone. In any case, despite my father's eternal interest in all things cultural from China, the reality was that the British were the ruling class here. They set the laws and precedents, established government offices, and opened English schools for natives. Our bright young men aspired to be government clerks under them.

I wondered what had happened to the unfortunate Lim

Tian Ching and if he had hoped to rise to such a clerkship, or whether such things were beneath him as the son of a rich man. His father was well known as the owner of tin-mining concessions, as well as coffee and rubber plantations. I also wondered why the family had approached my father, for it wasn't as though I had any kind of personal history with their son.

Over the next few days I tried to badger my father into revealing more of their conversation but he refused to answer, retreating to his study and, I am sure, smoking more opium than he ought. He had a vaguely sheepish air as though he was sorry he had ever mentioned it. Amah also got on his nerves. Not daring to berate him openly, she wandered around with a feather duster, addressing various inanimate objects with a stream of muttered complaints. Unable to escape her onslaught, my father eventually placed the newspaper over his face and pretended to be asleep.

In this way, I thought the matter settled. However, a few days later a message came from the Lim family. It was an invitation from Madam Lim herself to play mahjong.

'Oh, I don't play,' I said, before I could stop myself.

The servant who had been sent merely smiled and said it didn't matter; I should still come and watch. Indeed, I was very curious to see the interior of the Lim mansion, and despite pulling a sour face, Amah could not help fussing over my clothes and hair. Meddling was always her second nature and since I was much raised by her, I feared that it was also one of my own qualities.

'Well, if you must go, at least they will see that you are nothing to be ashamed of!' she said as she laid out my second-best dress. I had two good dresses: one of thin lilac silk with morning glories embroidered on the collar and sleeves, and another of pale green with butterflies. Both had

belonged to my mother, as I hadn't had new silk clothing for a while. Most of the time I wore loose cotton *cheong sam*, which is a long gown, or *sam foo*, the blouse and trousers used by working girls. As it was, when one of these dresses wore out we would probably unpick the embroidered collar and cuffs to reuse on another garment.

'What shall we do with your hair?' asked Amah, forgetting that she had disapproved of this visit only moments ago. My hair was usually kept in two neat plaits, though for special occasions it was skewered up with long hairpins. These gave me a headache, particularly when wielded by Amah, who was determined that not one strand should stray. Stepping back, she surveyed her handiwork and stuck in a couple of gold pins with jade butterflies. The hairpins were also my mother's. After that, she clasped no less than five necklaces around my neck: two of gold; one of garnets; another of small freshwater pearls; and the last with a heavy jade disk. I felt quite burdened by this largesse, but it was nothing compared to what wealthier people wore. Women had little security other than jewelry, so even the poorest among us sported gold chains, earrings, and rings as their insurance. As for the rich – well, I would soon see how Madam Lim was attired.

The Lim mansion was further out of town, away from the close quarters of Jonker and Heeren Streets, where wealthy Chinese merchants had taken over old Dutch shophouses. I heard that the Lims too, had such property, but they had moved their main residence to where the rich were building new estates in Klebang. It wasn't too far from our house, though I had heard it was nothing like the European quarter's villas and bungalows. Those were very grand indeed, with many servants, stables, and great expanses of green lawn. The Lim mansion was in the Chinese style and said to be quite imposing in its own right. Amah had called

for a rickshaw to take us there, although I thought it wasteful when we could have walked. She pointed out, however, that it was still a fair distance and it would do no good to appear covered in sweat and dust.

The afternoon sun had begun to abate when we set off. Waves of heat rose from the road along with clouds of fine white dust. Our rickshaw puller moved at a steady trot, rivulets of sweat streaking his back. I felt sorry for those coolies who hired themselves out in this manner. It was a hard way to make a living, although better than working in the tin mines, where I had heard the mortality rate was almost one in two. The rickshaw pullers were very thin, with concave ribcages, leathery skin, and bare feet so calloused that they resembled hooves. Still, the scrutiny of these strange men made me uneasy. Of course, I was not supposed to go out unaccompanied and when I did, must shade my face with an oiled paper parasol. Before I could muse much further, however, we had drawn up to the Lim mansion. While Amah gave the rickshaw puller stern instructions to wait for us outside, I gazed at the heavy ironwood doors, which swung open noiselessly to reveal an equally silent servant.

We passed through a courtyard lined with large porcelain pots planted with bougainvillea. The pots alone were worth a small fortune and had been shipped from China, nestled in chests of tealeaves to protect against breakage. The blue and white glaze had the limpid quality that I had seen on the few small pieces that my father still possessed. If such costly ceramics were left out in the sun and rain, then I was certainly impressed. Perhaps that was the point. We waited in a grand foyer while the servant went ahead to announce us. The floor was a black and white checkerboard and the sweeping teak staircase had carved balustrades. And all around there were clocks.

Such clocks! The walls were covered with dozens of clocks in every style imaginable. Large ones stood on the floor and smaller examples nestled on side tables. There were cuckoo clocks, porcelain clocks, delicate ormolu clocks, and a tiny clock no larger than a quail's egg. Their glass faces shone and the brass ornaments winked. All about us rose the hum of their works. Time, it seemed, could scarcely go unmarked in this house.

While I was admiring this sight, the servant reappeared and we were ushered through a further sequence of rooms. The house, like many Chinese mansions, was built in a series of courtyards and connecting corridors. We passed through stone gardens arranged like miniature landscapes and parlors stiff with antique furniture, until I heard the raised chatter of women's voices and the sharp clack of mahjong tiles. Five tables had been set up and I had an impression of well-dressed ladies who put my own attire to shame. But my eyes were fixed on the head table, where the servant muttered something to a woman who could only have been Madam Lim.

At first glance I was disappointed. I had penetrated so far into this domain that I was expecting, perhaps naively, nothing less than the Queen of Heaven. Instead, she was a middle-aged woman with a figure that had thickened at the waist. She was dressed beautifully but severely in an inky-hued *baju panjang* to signify mourning. Her son had died nine months ago but she would mourn him for at least a year. She was almost overshadowed by the woman who sat next to her. She too wore blue and white mourning colors, but her stylish *kebaya* had a waspish cut, and her jeweled hairpins gave her an insect-like glitter. I would have thought that she was the lady of the house except for the fact that she, like the other women at the table, couldn't help but glance at Madam Lim as though to take

their cue from her. I learned later that she was the Third Wife.

'I'm glad you could come,' said Madam Lim. She had a soft voice, strangely youthful and much like the purring of a dove. I had to strain to hear her over the surrounding chatter.

'Thank you, Auntie,' I replied, for that was how we addressed older women as a mark of respect. I wasn't sure whether to bob my head or bow. How I wished I had paid more attention to such niceties!

'I knew your mother before she was married, when we were children,' she said. 'She never mentioned it?' Seeing my surprise, Madam Lim showed her teeth briefly in a smile. 'Your mother and I are distantly related.' This I had never heard of either. 'I should have asked after you earlier,' said Madam Lim. 'It was very remiss of me.' Around her the mahjong game started up again with a brisk clatter. She gestured to a servant, who pulled up a marble-topped stool beside her. 'Come, Li Lan. I hear that you don't play, but perhaps you'd like to watch.'

So I sat next to her, looking at her tiles while she made bids, and nibbling sweetmeats that issued in a never-ending stream from the kitchens. They had all my favorite kinds of *kuih* – the soft steamed *nyonya* cakes made of glutinous rice flour stuffed with palm sugar or shredded coconut. There were delicate rolled biscuits called love letters and pineapple tarts pressed out of rich pastry. Bowls of toasted watermelon seeds were passed around, along with fanned slices of mango and papaya. It had been a long time since we had had such an assortment of treats at home, and I couldn't help indulging myself like a child. From the corner of my eye I saw Amah shake her head, but here she was powerless to stop me. At length Amah disappeared to the kitchen to help out, and without her disapproving eye, I continued eating.

From time to time, Madam Lim murmured something to me. Her voice was so soft however that I scarcely understood her. I smiled and nodded, all the while gazing around with undisguised curiosity. I rarely had the chance to go out in society. Had my mother lived, I might have sat beside her just like this, peering over her shoulder at the ivory tiles and soaking up gossip. These women peppered their conversation with sly references to important people and places. With nonchalance, they mentioned what seemed to me astounding gambling debts.

Madam Lim must have thought me simple or at the very least unsophisticated. I caught her sharp pigeon eyes studying me from time to time. Strangely enough, this seemed to relieve her. Only much later did I understand why she was so pleased with my gauche performance. Around us, the ladies chattered and made bets, jade bangles ringing as the tiles clattered. The Third Wife had moved to another table, which was a pity since I would have liked to study her a little more. She was certainly handsome, though she had a reputation for being difficult, as Amah had earlier found out through servants' chatter. I saw no sign of a Second Wife, although I was told that Lim himself, as was a rich man's prerogative, kept other minor concubines whom he had not bothered to marry. There were four daughters from the different wives but no surviving sons. Aside from Lim Tian Ching, there were two sons who had died in infancy. The only heir left was Lim's nephew.

'Actually he is the rightful heir,' Amah had said on our way there.

'What do you mean?'

'He's Lim's older brother's son. Lim himself is the second son. He took over the estate when his older brother died, but promised to bring up his nephew as his heir. As time went on however, people said that maybe he didn't want

to overlook his own children. But what's there to talk about anyway? Lim has no more sons of his own now.'

As I considered this web of relationships, I couldn't help feeling a frisson of excitement. It was a world of wealth and intrigue, much like the crudely printed romances that my father was so dismissive of. Of course Amah disapproved. I knew, however, that she too was secretly enthralled. It was so different from our own penurious household. How depressing it was to think of how we scraped along year by year, always trying to stretch things and never buying anything pretty or new! The worst was that my father never did anything. He no longer went out to make contracts or run his business. He had given all that up and was walled up in his study, endlessly copying his favorite poems and writing obscure treatises. Lately, I felt that we were all penned up with him too.

'You look sad.' Madam Lim's voice broke in on me. Nothing seemed to escape her gaze. Her eyes were light for a Chinese, and the pupils small and round, like the eyes of a bird.

I colored. 'This house is so lively compared to my own home.'

'You like it here?' she asked.

I nodded.

'Tell me,' she said, 'do you have a sweetheart?'

'No.' I stared fixedly at my hands.

'Well,' she said. 'A young girl shouldn't be too worldly.' She gave me one of her abbreviated smiles. 'My dear, I hope you're not offended that I ask you so many questions. You remind me so much of your mother, and also myself when I was younger.'

I refrained from asking her about her own daughters. There were a few young women at the other tables but everyone had been introduced to me in such a cursory

manner that I had a hard time keeping track of who was a cousin, friend, or daughter.

The mahjong game continued but as I wasn't a player, I began to feel restless after a while. When I excused myself to use the washroom, Madam Lim beckoned a servant to escort me. She was in the middle of an exciting hand and I hoped she would stay that way for a while. The servant led me along various passages to a heavy *chengai* wood door. When I was done, I opened it a crack. My guide was still waiting patiently outside. But there was a call down the hallway and casting a quick glance at the door, she left to answer it.

With a thrill, I slipped out. I passed a small sitting room, and then one with a marble table, half laid for a meal. Hearing voices, I turned hastily down yet another passageway into a courtyard with a small pond, where lotus flowers tilted their creamy heads amidst green stalks. A sultry, dream-like stillness settled over everything. I knew I ought to go back before I was missed, but still I lingered.

While I was examining the lotus seedpods, which resembled the nozzles of watering cans, I heard a faint silvery chime. Perhaps I was near the clock room after all. Wandering over, I peered into what looked like a study. One door was thrown open to the courtyard, but the interior was dark and cool. Momentarily blinded by the difference in the light, I stumbled against someone working at a low table. It was a young man, dressed in shabby indigo cotton. Cogs and gears scattered on the table and floor, rolling away into the corners.

'I'm sorry, miss . . .' He glanced up with an apologetic air.

'I heard the chiming,' I said awkwardly, helping him gather the pieces as best I could.

'You like clocks?'

'I don't know much about them.'

'Well, without this gear, and this one, the clock stops completely,' he said, collecting the shining innards of a brass pocket watch. With a pair of tweezers, he picked up two tiny cogs and laid them together.

'Can you fix it?' I really shouldn't have been having this conversation with a young man, even if he was a servant, but he bent over his work which put me at ease.

'I'm not an expert but I can put it back together. My grandfather taught me.'

'It's a useful skill,' I said. 'You should open your own shop.'

At that he looked up quizzically at me, then smiled. When he smiled, his thick eyebrows drew together and his eyes crinkled at the corners. I felt my cheeks grow hot.

'Do you clean all the clocks?'

'Sometimes. I also do a little accounting and I run errands.' He was looking directly at me. 'I saw you beside the pond earlier.'

'Oh.' To hide my discomfort I asked, 'Why are there so many clocks in this house?'

'Some say it was a hobby, perhaps even an obsession with the old master. He was the one who collected all of them. He could never rest until he had acquired a new specimen.'

'Why was he so interested in them?'

'Well, mechanical clocks are far more precise than water clocks that tell time by dripping water, or candles where you burn tallow to mark hours. These Western clocks are so accurate that you can use them to sail with longitude, not just latitude. Do you know what that is?'

I did, as a matter of fact. My father had explained to me once how the sea charts were marked both horizontally and vertically. 'Couldn't we sail with longitude before?'

'No, in the past the great sea routes were all based on latitude. That's because it's the easiest way to plot a course. But imagine you're far out at sea. All you have is a sextant and a compass. You need to know exactly what time it is so you can reckon the relative position of the sun. That's why these clocks are so wonderful. With them, the Portuguese sailed all the way from the other side of the world.'

'Why didn't we do that too?' I asked. 'We should have conquered them before they came to Malaya.'

'Ah, Malaya is just a backwater. But China could have done it. The Ming sea captains sailed as far as Africa using only latitude and pilots who knew the local waters.'

'Yes,' I said eagerly. 'I read that they brought back a giraffe for the Emperor. But he wasn't interested in barbarian lands.'

'And now China is in decline, and Malaya just another European colony.'

His words had a faint tinge of bitterness, which made me curious because his hair was cut short with no shaved pate or long hanging queue, the braided hair that many men still maintained even after leaving China. This was either a sign of extreme low class, or rebellion against traditional practices. But he merely smiled. 'Still, there's a lot to learn from the British.'

There were many other questions I wanted to ask him, but with a start I realized I had been gone too long. And no matter how polite he seemed, it was still improper to talk to a strange young man even if he was only a servant.

'I must go.'

'Wait, miss. Do you know where you're going?'

'I came from the mahjong party.'

'Should I escort you back?' He half rose from the desk and I couldn't help noticing the ease of his clean-limbed movements.

'No, no.' The more I thought about my behavior, the more embarrassed I felt and the more certain I was that I had been missed. I practically ran out of the room. Darting down several passages, I found myself in yet another part of the house. Luck was with me however. While I was standing there undecided, the same servant who had escorted me to the washroom reappeared.

'Oh, miss,' she said. 'I just stepped away and when I came back you were gone.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, smoothing my dress. 'I went astray.'

When we got back to the mahjong room the game was still underway. I slipped into my seat but Madam Lim hardly seemed to notice. From the number of tokens piled in front of her, she had been on a winning streak. After a while, I made my polite goodbyes but to my surprise Madam Lim rose to see me out.

On our way back to the front door, we passed a servant arranging funeral goods to be burned in one of the courtyards. These were miniature effigies of wire and brightly colored paper that were burned for the dead to receive in the underworld. Paper horses for the dead to ride on, grand paper mansions, servants, food, stacks of Hell currency, carriages, and even paper furniture. It was a little unusual to see these goods laid out now, as they were usually only prepared for funerals and Qing Ming, the festival of the dead. The devout could, however, also burn them at any time for the use of their ancestors, for without such offerings, the dead were mere paupers in the afterworld, and without descendants or proper burial, they wandered unceasingly as hungry ghosts and were unable to be reborn. It was only at Qing Ming, when general offerings were burned to ward off evil, that these unfortunates received a little sustenance. I had always thought it a frightening idea

and looked askance at the funeral goods, despite the gay colored paper and beautifully detailed models.

As we walked, I studied Madam Lim covertly. The brightness of the courtyard revealed shadows under her eyes and the loose flesh of her cheeks. She looked unutterably weary, although her posture denied such weakness.

'And how is your father?' she said.

'He is well, thank you.'

'Has he made any plans for you?'

I ducked my head. 'Not that I know of.'

'But you are of marriageable age. A girl like you must already have many offers.'

'No, Auntie. My father lives quite a retired life.' And we're not rich any more, I added to myself.

She sighed. 'I would like to ask you a favor.' My ears pricked up, but it was strangely innocuous. 'Do you think you could spare me that ribbon in your hair? I was thinking of matching it to make a new *baju*.'

'Of course.' I pulled the ribbon loose. It was nothing special. The color was a common pink, but who was I to gainsay her? She grasped it with a hand that trembled.

'Are you well, Auntie?' I dared to ask her.

'I've had trouble sleeping,' she said in her small feathery voice. 'But I think it will soon pass.'

As soon as we were ensconced in the rickshaw, Amah began to scold me. 'How could you behave like that? Eating so much and mooning around – I couldn't tell which was larger, your eyes or your mouth! They must have thought you a goose. Why didn't you charm her, tell her clever stories and flatter her? *Cheh*, you behaved like a *kampung* girl, not the daughter of the Pan family!'

'You never said I was charming before!' I said, stung by her remarks, though I was secretly relieved she had been

helping in the kitchen when I took my extended walk-around.

'Charming? Of course you're charming. You could cut paper butterflies and recite poems before any of the other children on our street. I didn't tell you before because I didn't want you to be spoiled.'

This was typical Amah logic. But she was bursting with gossip from the kitchen and easily distracted, particularly when I told her about Madam Lim's request for my ribbon. 'Well, it's a funny thing to ask. She hasn't had new clothes made for months. Maybe when the period of mourning is over they'll arrange a marriage for the nephew.'

'He's not married yet?'

'Not even betrothed. They said that the master should have arranged an alliance for him earlier but he held back because he wanted to make a better marriage for his own son.'

'How unfair.'

'*Aiya*, that's the way of this world! Now the son is dead, they feel guilty for not doing so. Also, they probably want to get another heir quickly. If the nephew dies there'll be no one left to inherit.'

I was somewhat interested in this story, but my thoughts roamed back over the afternoon. 'Amah, who looks after the clocks in that house?'

'The clocks? One of the servants, I should think. Why do you want to know?'

'I was just curious.'

'You know, the servants say that Madam Lim is very interested in you,' she said. 'She's been asking lots of questions lately about you and our household.'

'Could it be about the ghost marriage?' For some reason, the piles of funeral effigies rose to my mind and I shuddered.

'Nobody knows about that!' Amah was indignant. 'It was a private conversation with your father. Maybe he even misunderstood. All that opium he smokes!'

However much Father smoked, I doubted that it had clouded his understanding that day, but I merely said, 'Madam Lim has been asking me questions too.'

'What sort of questions?'

'Whether I have a sweetheart, whether I'm betrothed yet.'

Amah looked as pleased as a cat that has caught a lizard. 'Well! The Lim family has so much money that perhaps a good upbringing matters more than family fortune.'

I tried to point out to her that it seemed unlikely they would pass up this chance to acquire a rich daughter-in-law in preference to me. It also didn't explain the unease I felt around Madam Lim. But Amah was happily off in her own daydreams.

'We should show you off more. If people know that the Lim family is interested in you, you may get other marriage offers.' Amah was so shrewd in some ways. She would have made an excellent poultry dealer.

'We'll buy some cloth tomorrow to make you new clothes.'

Chapter Three

That night, I went to bed early feeling tired and overexcited. It was hot and I tugged at the wooden shutters. Amah did not like me to open the windows too wide at night. Something about the night air being unwholesome, but when there was no monsoon it could be stifling.

When the oil lamp was blown out, the moonlight slowly strengthened until the room was filled with a pale, cold radiance. The Chinese considered the moon to be *yin*, feminine and full of negative energy as opposed to the sun that was *yang* and exemplified masculinity. I liked the moon, with its soft silver beams. It was at once elusive and filled with trickery, so that lost objects that had rolled into the crevices of a room were rarely found, and books read in its light seemed to contain all sorts of fanciful stories that were never there the next morning. Amah said I must not sew by moonlight; it might ruin my eyesight, thus jeopardizing the chance of a good marriage.

If I were married, I wouldn't mind if my husband was like the young man I'd met that day. Endlessly, I replayed our brief conversation, remembering the tones of his voice, the quick confidence of his remarks. I liked how seriously he had spoken to me, without the avuncular condescension of my father's few friends. The thought that he might share my interests, or even understand my concerns, caused a strange flutter in my chest. If I were a man and found a serving girl who pleased me, no one would stop me from

buying her if she was indentured. Men did so every day. It was far more difficult for women. There were stories of unfaithful concubines who had been strangled, or had their ears and noses sliced off and been left to roam the streets as beggars. I didn't know anybody personally to whom these atrocities had happened, but I could not meet this young man or worse still, fall in love with him. Even my father, lax as he was, was unlikely to allow a match with a servant.

I sighed. I barely knew him, it was all hope and conjecture. Though if I did marry, my husband was likely to be a stranger to me as well. It was not necessarily so for all girls of good family. Some families had an early betrothal, others entertained often enough that young people could meet and even fall in love. Not our household however. My father's withdrawal from the world meant that he had sought out no friends with sons and had arranged no match for me. For the first time I began to fully comprehend why Amah was continually angry with him on this subject. The contrast between the realization of his neglect, and the fondness I had for my father, was painful. I had few marriage prospects, and would be doomed to the half-life of spinsterhood. Without a husband, I would sink further into genteel poverty, bereft of even the comfort and respect of being a mother. Faced with these depressing thoughts, I buried my face in my thin cotton pillow and cried myself to sleep.

That night I had a curious dream. I wandered through the Lim mansion though all was still and silent. It was bright, but there was no sun, merely the whiteness that comes from a fog at midday. And like a fog, parts of the house seemed to vanish as I passed, so that the way behind was shrouded in a thin white film. Just as I had that very day, I passed through artfully planted courtyards, dim corridors, and

echoing reception rooms, although this time there was no distant murmur of voices, nor servants moving about. Presently, I became aware that I was not alone. Someone was following me, watching from behind a door or peering through the balustrades of the upper level. I began to hurry, turning down one passage after another as they began to resemble each other with a dreadful sameness.

At last, I came into a courtyard with a lotus pond, very much like the one I had visited that day, although the flowers here had an artificial air, as though they had been stuck into the mud like so many sticks of incense. As I stood wondering what to do, someone sidled up beside me. Turning, I saw a strange young man. He was grandly dressed in old-fashioned, formal robes that came down to his ankles. On his feet, curiously short and broad, he wore black court shoes with pointed toes. His clothing was dyed in lurid hues, but his face was quite undistinguished, being plump with a weak chin and a smattering of acne scars. He gazed at me with a solicitous smile.

'Li Lan!' he said. 'How I've longed to see you again!'

'Who are you?' I asked.

'You don't remember me, do you? It was too long ago. But I remember you. How could I forget?' he said with a flourish. 'Your beautiful eyebrows, like moths. Your lips, like hibiscus petals.'

As he beamed, I was struck by a lurch of nausea. 'I want to go home.'

'Oh no, Li Lan,' he said. 'Please, sit down. You don't know how long I've been waiting for this moment.'

As he gestured, a table appeared laden with all kinds of food. Boiled chickens, melons, candied coconut, cakes of all possible varieties. Like his clothes, they were intensely and unappetizingly pigmented. The oranges looked like daubs of paint, while a platter of *pandan* cakes were the

sickly hue of the sea before a typhoon. Piled up in rigid pyramids, this largesse looked uncomfortably like funeral offerings. He pressed me to have a cup of tea.

'I'm not thirsty,' I said.

'I know you're shy,' said this maddening creature, 'but I'll pour myself a cup. See? Isn't it delicious?' He drank with every evidence of enjoyment.

'Li Lan, my dear, don't you know who I am? I'm Lim Tian Ching!' he said. 'The heir of the Lim family. I've come to court you.'

The queasiness continued to build until I felt lightheaded.

'Aren't you dead?'

As soon I said that, the world contracted as though it had wrinkled. The colors muted, the outline of the chairs blurred. Then, like the snap of a gutta-percha string, everything was back the way it had been. The white light shone and the food on the table positively glowed. Lim Tian Ching closed his eyes as though pained.

'My dear,' he said, 'I know this is a shock to you, but let's not dwell on that.'

I shook my head doggedly.

'I know you're a delicate creature,' he said. 'I don't wish to distress you. We'll try again another time.'

He tried to smile as he faded away. I was forcing myself awake with all the will I could muster. It was like struggling through a mangrove swamp, but slowly the colors bled away until, gasping, I was aware of the moonlight spilling over my pillow and a numbness in my hands where I had pressed my forehead.

I could hardly sleep the rest of the night. My body was covered in sweat, my heart racing. What I really wanted to do was to go down the hallway and crawl, like a child, into Amah's bed. I used to sleep next to her when I was

small, and the pungent smell of the White Flower Oil she daubed on her temples against headaches comforted me. If I went now, however, Amah would be worried. I would get a scolding and she would force all sorts of nostrums on me. Still, the loneliness and terror I felt almost drove me to disturb her until I remembered that she was an incorrigibly superstitious woman and any mention of Lim Tian Ching would upset her for days. Towards dawn, I finally fell into an uneasy torpor.

I meant to tell Amah about the dream, but my fears seemed less consequential in bright sunlight. It was a result of dwelling on the Lim family, I told myself. Or eating too much rich food. I also didn't want to admit to Amah that I had been thinking about husbands before I went to bed. The whole encounter with the young man who fixed clocks made me feel guilty.

The next evening, I went to bed in trepidation, but there were no dreams and so when a few more uneventful nights passed, I put it behind me. My thoughts were, in any case, more concerned with another. Try as I might, they kept drifting back to my conversation with the clock cleaner. I thought about how knowledgeable he had seemed, and what a pity that such a man should be a servant. I wondered how it would feel to run my hands through his cropped hair. When I had a free moment, I studied the angles of my face in the small lacquer mirror that had been my mother's. Growing up, my father took little notice of my appearance. He was more interested in my opinions on paintings and the liveliness of my brush calligraphy. Occasionally, he mentioned that I resembled my mother, but the observation seemed to give more pain than pleasure and afterwards, he would withdraw. My amah seldom praised and often found fault, yet I knew she would throw herself under an ox cart for me.

'Amah,' I asked her some days later. 'How was my mother related to Madam Lim?'

We were walking home after buying material for a new dress. Somehow Amah had found the money for it. Embarrassed, I couldn't bring myself to ask from what private store she had scrimped this unnecessary luxury. All amahs put aside their wages for their retirement. They were a special class of servant sometimes known as 'black and white' because of the clothes they wore: a white Chinese blouse over black cotton trousers. Some were single women who refused to marry, others childless widows with no other means of support. When they became amahs, they cut their hair into a short bob and joined a special sisterhood. They paid their dues and banked their money there, and in return after a lifetime of working for others, passed their old age in the Association House, where they were fed and clothed until the end of their days. It was one of the few options for a woman with no family and no children to take care of her in her dotage.

I suspected that Amah had been raiding her own savings for me. It was shameful. If our family really ran out of money, then she ought to look for another position. Or she could simply retire. She was old enough to do so. If I married well she might come with me as my personal maid, just as she had come with my mother upon her marriage. Now as I glanced at her tiny form trotting beside me, I felt a surge of affection. Despite her exasperating strictures, which often made me wish to escape her control, she was fiercely loyal.

'Your mother and Madam Lim were second or third cousins, I believe,' she said.

'But Madam Lim talked as though she knew my mother.'

'Perhaps. But I don't think they were close. I would have remembered,' she said. 'Madam Lim was a daughter of the

Ong family. They made their money building roads for the British.'

'She said they played together as children.'

'Did she? Maybe a couple of times, but she wasn't one of your mother's close friends. That's for sure.'

'Why would she say such a thing then?'

'Who knows what a rich *tai tai* thinks?' Amah smiled suddenly, her face wrinkling like a tortoise. 'I'm sure she has her reasons though. The servants say it isn't a bad household. Of course, they're still in mourning for the son. It was a great loss for them when he died last year.'

'What about the other wives? I didn't see the second one.'

'She died four years ago of malaria.' Malaria was a scourge for us in Malaya, a constant fever in people's veins. The Malays burned smoky fires to keep the disease away and the Hindus garlanded their many gods with wreaths of jasmine and marigold to protect them. The British said, however, that it was borne by mosquitoes. Thinking about insects reminded me of the Third Wife and her glittering jeweled pins.

'The Third Wife looks difficult,' I said.

'That woman! She was nobody when the master married her. No one even knows where she came from. Some town far south, maybe Johore or even Singapore.'

'Do the wives get along?'

Only rich men could afford many wives and the custom was becoming infrequent. The British frowned on it. From what I heard, it was the *mems* who were most against it. Naturally they disapproved of their men acquiring mistresses and going native. I couldn't say that I blamed them for it. I too would hate to be a second wife. Or a third, or fourth. If that were the case I would rather run away and pledge my life to the Amah Association.

'As well as you could expect. And then there's all that vying to see who can produce an heir. Fortunately for Madam Lim, she seems to have been the only one.'

'And the son, Lim Tian Ching, what was he like?' I shivered despite the heat of the day, remembering my dream. Amah usually avoided speaking of him but I thought I would see what I could worm out of her today.

'Spoiled, I heard.'

'I think so too,' I blurted this out without thinking, but she didn't notice.

'They said he wasn't as capable as the nephew. *Aiya*, no point discussing him. Better not speak ill of the dead.'