



THE
Scavenger's
Daughters

BOOK ONE IN THE
Tales of the Scavenger's Daughters

KAY BRATT



THE
Scavenger's
Daughters

Also by Kay Bratt

Silent Tears: A Journey of Hope in a Chinese Orphanage

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Daughters

A Novel

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Dedicated to the many compassionate people in China who have opened their homes and their hearts to homeless children.

Your efforts and kindness are an inspiration to the world.



Contents

[Prologue](#)
[“If we could...”](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty One](#)
[Chapter Twenty Two](#)
[Sneak Peek: *Tangled Vines*](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Author’s Note](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)

Prologue



China, 1967

Benfu listened to the chorus of crickets and was relieved that evening was finally upon him. Carefully he paced the three feet of space with his hands tied behind his back, squinting in the dimness but knowing there was nothing new to see. Through his swollen eyes he saw the same murk shapes he'd seen since they'd dragged him there days before. He tried to take a deep breath but felt the crackling in his chest. The ragged breaths he was forced to take told him his ribs were bruised if not a few broken. He wished he could wipe the sheen of sweat from his brow, for it burned as it ran into the cuts on his face. It was a bit better since the sun had stopped beaming down on the tin shed but it still felt like he was being baked. He reminded himself to remain calm as he tried to focus on the thought that the cooler night temperatures were coming, a welcome reprieve that gave him the energy to move again and try to make sense of his sudden captivity.

By now he knew every step and each impression in the muck. He also knew from experience where the deep holes were that dropped to the pits of waste. He'd fallen into one that first night and had to be fished out of it like a flailing whale. He still reeked and his stomach rolled with nausea each time he thought of the squishy, putrid substance he had been covered in.

He was like a caged tiger, and though he was weak from lack of food or water, if someone else came through the door to beat him again, he'd fight just as hard as he had the last four days. He would not let them see him broken and he'd never give up and renounce his parents like they wanted him to do. Mao might be in control of most of China but Benfu would not let him take possession of his mind the way he had so many others. His parents were teachers, not revolutionaries! They'd done nothing but spend their lives molding intelligent minds and strong characters; he would not let someone tell him they were criminals.

At only seventeen, Benfu still knew right from wrong and had not joined in the obsessive following of Mao the rest of his generation seemed to have fallen into. Couldn't they see that they were only now starting to recover from Mao's failed Great Leap Forward? Benfu's own father had described to him how Mao's obsession for China to beat Europe's output of iron and steel had overcome his common sense, making him oblivious to leading them into the worst famine in the country's history. What did he think would happen when he pulled everyone from working the crops and instead had them running factory—and even backyard—furnaces to melt anything and everything in sight to make steel? Steel made from anything they could find from grain bins down to the smallest kitchen pots and utensils—done so haphazardly that most of it couldn't even be used!

Then without time to even recover completely, the government leaders had gone immediately from the failed Great Leap Forward to this new so-called Cultural Revolution. Even Benfu knew the

latest plan of clearing out the superstitions and crushing Chinese traditions and artifacts to make way for modernization was not the answer. People needed to keep sight of their history to see how they were growing! When would enough be enough and the people figure out that Mao was not the leader they thought he was? Benfu could see it, but were he and his father the only ones in millions?

He shook his head and tried to shake the stench from his nostrils. Outside he could hear the work groups coming in from the fields, some trying valiantly to lead the others in a weak rendition of “The East Is Red,” a song to exalt their glorious leader, the only semblance of music allowed.

When those in the work group had left that morning, their voices were stronger—ready to take on the challenge of meeting their ever-rising quota of gathering more vegetables, planting more rows, watering more crops. Now with the way all farmers were brought together to work toward one goal, many of them failed to see the irony that they were doing more work for less personal gain. Land that had been in families for generations was now owned and controlled by the government, and the people were poorer than ever! With the failure of the Great Leap Forward, the commune system was being reorganized, but not fast enough.

Benfu had kept quiet about it as long as he could but when he’d finally exploded with frustration, his sarcastic remarks had gotten him in trouble. He’d been called in to speak to the elders and he’d thought he’d settled them down enough. What he hadn’t known at the time was his outburst had caused an investigation into his background, and they’d discovered he wasn’t who he’d said he was. He’d immediately been accused of hiding the truth about his family line. It had only gotten worse from there because he’d refused to give up his parents’ names.

After he had spent a few days locked in a small room off the commune kitchen, they’d moved him to the outhouse to try to break him. He had to admit they’d come close when the sun was at its highest and the temperature in the metal privy had soared. As his head pounded and he sweat out the remaining moisture in his body, the flies and mosquitos never let up from their relentless attack. With his hands tied, Benfu was helpless to fend against them or the stench of human excrement that filled his nostrils and mouth. To keep his sanity, he recited his favorite poem over and over, allowing his mind to focus on the words of long-gone poets rather than on the squalor around him.

“ ‘The dragon sighs, the fine rains fall....’ ” He paced as the whisper of his words punctured the silence of the small enclosure. The dragon was the heat, and he sincerely wished that fine rains would come and the roof would open so he could lift his face to the sky and take in mouthfuls of sweet water.

Twice already earlier in the day, before and after beatings, the commune leader had come to the shed to ask Benfu if he was ready to cooperate. Simple, he’d said, just tell him his parents’ names and address and Benfu could go back to work with the others. Benfu knew if he did, his mother and father would be persecuted. They’d sent him to what they thought was a safe place to hide from the Red Guards who were so vehemently against those with undesirable family backgrounds—black families, as they called them. Teachers, landowners, business owners—in this tumultuous time, if a person didn’t have ties to officials who could protect him, any sort of success or title gained in life could be their downfall, branding them as a counter-revolutionary. Benfu wouldn’t put his parents in danger by revealing their identity.

But he wasn’t the only one in the commune who came from a black background. There were landowners’ family members as well as other people who’d come from some sort of undesirable lineage. The difference was that they had not tried to hide it and they gladly attended reeducation classes and renounced their family members, declaring to forever ban them from their lives—a last resort to find their way back in the good graces of Mao and his followers, and avoid persecution.

Benfu backed up gingerly and sat on the makeshift shelf over one of the deep holes. It was ironic that he was in misery from holding his bowels but was imprisoned in an outhouse. Only twice that day had someone come to unfasten his belt and allow him to relieve himself, ignoring his shame.

as they stood over him and watched as his dehydrated body expelled nothing but black waste. Once he had they sent a frightened young woman in with a cup of warm water to ease his swollen throat and cracked lips. He'd begged her to help him, to give him more water or bring him a ball of rice, but the girl had scampered away like a scared rabbit, too afraid to jeopardize her own freedom. He couldn't blame her; she was just a small peasant girl and would have never been able to withstand the punishment it would have earned her if caught.

The voices faded into the night and Benfu knew they were all now in the communal kitchen for dinner, competing in line with their coupons to get their rations before the food disappeared. Gone were the days of family meals and the joy of gathering around the table to connect. In its place Mao had convinced the people that communal kitchens were bonding the people together as a nation, but Benfu knew he wanted to eliminate the people's independence to function or fend for themselves. Total dependence would mean total commitment to his reign. Why couldn't the people see this instead of allowing themselves to be herded like blind sheep? Benfu couldn't understand it. Was the world going crazy around him? He once again wished for the calm assurance of his father and mother. But he'd never give up their names or tell the leaders where they were. He'd do all he could to keep them safe. Judging from the way the last few evenings had gone, Benfu knew he had about two hours before his next beating. It was usually after dinner and right before lights-out that they sent someone to carry out the deed.

He looked up in the dark as he heard the metal chain outside the door being rattled. It was too early! He wasn't ready! Yet he stood, proudly lifting his chin in defiance as the chain slid from the handles and the door cracked open. Quickly a young man darted in and shut the door behind him, the flash of light from the receding sun too fast for Benfu to make out who it was.

"Benfu?" the boy called out.

Benfu stayed silent. He wouldn't make it easy for whomever they'd sent. Even though usually they left the door open, Benfu suspected there were probably two or more others waiting outside to assist in dragging him out for his evening beating.

"I'm here to help you," the boy whispered in the dark.

Benfu straightened up. Help? He couldn't believe it. He hoped whoever it was had brought food and water. Anything—he'd eat anything at all. Even the tree bark he'd heard was the newest delicacy in the poorer circles that'd refused the life of communes. If he could only get to a tree, he'd strip it clean.

"What help? Who are you?" Benfu asked, trying to keep the pleading tone from entering his voice.

"It's me. Pei. I work on the other work team. You've seen me. I'm always at the end of the line."

Benfu struggled to remember who Pei was and suddenly his voice sounded familiar. If it was who he thought it was, the boy was several years younger than he and they rarely crossed paths due to the work teams' being segregated by age and ability. Here, everyone was assigned to a team, some inside the commune for the cooking, cleaning, or minding the children, and the stronger ones were sent to the fields to plant, collect, or water. It was a strict enforcement, and though in some communes around China, families were still allowed to live together, in this one, all males and females had separate sleeping quarters with each cabin assigned by age. Still, he'd seen Pei around a few times.

"Pei? What do you want? Are there more of your cadres out there?" Benfu didn't trust anyone at this point.

"No, just me. Come closer. I'm going to unbind you."

Benfu felt the young man's hands touch his shoulder. Then a sliver of light entered the shadows again as the boy cracked the door enough to see him better.

He examined Benfu from head to toe and inhaled deeply. “*Aiya*, it’s much worse than I thought. You’re covered in welts and bruises. Is anything broken?”

“Why are you untying me?” Benfu asked, his swollen eyes frantically trying to see through the slit in the door to what lay waiting outside. He could handle a beating from one, but he didn’t know he could take on three or more tyrants. His body hurt so much and though he’d try, he didn’t know how long he could remain strong.

But surprisingly, the boy was gentle and had brought a small kitchen knife. He moved around Benfu and cut cleanly through the rope around his wrists. With the sudden release, Benfu’s shoulders throbbed and he rubbed his hands together, trying to restart the blood flow.

“I asked you why you are untying me?” Benfu stared in the dark, trying to see the boy’s face.

“Let’s just say I found my good sense again.” The boy began rustling in his pockets. He brought out four balls of rice and a chunk of bread. With his overflowing hands, he reached out to Benfu. “This is my share of rations from the last two days. I’ve been saving it for you.”

Benfu took the food and his mouth watered right along with his eyes. Food. He’d been dreaming of it all day. But why? He swallowed past the sudden lump of gratitude that rose in his throat and he fought the urge to stuff it all in his mouth at once. He knew if he started, he’d look like a ravished animal and his pride couldn’t take any more shame.

Then the boy unlatched the canteen hooked to his belt. He reached over and snapped it off Benfu’s waistband. “And here’s my water. I’ll tell them I lost it in the fields.”

Benfu looked at the canteen and shook his head in confusion. “You can’t leave that here. They’ll find it when they come back and your initials are carved on it.”

“It won’t be here when they return. Because *you* won’t be here. I’m here to let you go but you have to hurry before they are done with dinner.”

The boy spoke in such a low voice that Benfu had to strain to make out his words. But Benfu could have sworn he said he was going to let him go. Now he knew he was finally losing it—there was no way he would have said that.

“Did you say let me go?” he asked, his voice just as low but shaking now with hope.

The boy went to the door and peeked out, then gestured his hand toward Benfu. “Yes, the coast is clear. Just run through the cornfield until you reach the other side. You’re about ten miles from Wuxi—follow the lights. From there, you’ll have to find a place to hide for a few days. Then you need to keep moving far, far away from here.”

Benfu knew where they were—he’d watched carefully when they’d been bused in from the city. But he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was the boy really offering him his freedom? He tried to clear the tornado of thoughts in his head—he wouldn’t let his confusion stand in his way of possible freedom. He stuffed one rice ball into his mouth and the others into his pocket. He’d eat them on the way. The bread he first held under his nose and inhaled the sweet aroma. Then he put it in the other pocket.

“They’ll start looking for you soon. So you can’t stop. Don’t even turn around until you hit Wuxi. I’m going out there to trample down the field leading in the other direction. Then I’ll double back. They’ll think it was you and that might buy you some time, but be careful to not leave a trail.”

Benfu’s head was spinning. He still didn’t understand why this boy whom he barely knew had come to help him. And suddenly he realized what would happen if the boy was caught. He sighed and his shoulders dropped. He spoke the hardest words he’d ever said.

“I can’t go. I appreciate what you are trying to do for me but if they find out it was you, there will be nothing that can save you. Thank you, but I can’t have that on my conscience. You’re just a boy!”

Pei began stubbornly pushing him toward the door, ignoring his whispered protests.

“You *will* go and don’t worry about me. I’m older than I look and I’m fast and smart—they never know who it was. I need to do this for you, Benfu. I’ve heard them beating you and stood in the shadows like a coward. You’ve already repaid me in ways I cannot say. Just go. Please, I beg you to just go!” With that he pushed Benfu harder than expected for such a small fellow and Benfu stumbled out of the shed. He looked around and, seeing no one, bent over and ran toward the first cornfield. At the edge he turned to see the boy one last time but he was already gone. Benfu wished he had thanked him for such a selfless act but now it was too late. He turned and ran.



Benfu watched from the safety of the cornstalks for a moment, then made a dash around the old shed and behind the kitchen building to the old well. The thing was dry and no one attempted to draw from it any longer, making it a great hiding place for the one thing in his possession that would have been confiscated if found. Yes, he’d taken a chance by carrying something that had been forbidden throughout China but he’d safeguarded it well. And he’d been lucky when he’d arrived; there weren’t enough commune workers on hand to keep everyone together as they’d struggled to check them in, allowing Benfu to sneak away and find the well before returning to the line of new residents. It’d been almost a year since that first day and the well had remained the best place to keep his treasures.

Looking around to be sure he was alone, he leaned over the rounded bricks and began pulling on the frayed rope. He felt the weight on the end of it but didn’t release his sigh of relief until his bag came into view. He quickly untied it and held it to his chest, then ran back to the field.

Pausing for a moment, he ate only a nibble from one more rice ball, scared he’d need to ration it for a while. He listened intently for voices, for he was sure there was probably a chase going on. But he didn’t hear anything and once again he thanked the gods that perhaps Pei had successfully diverted them.

With one arm holding his ribs and the other clutching his bag, Benfu ran through the field until he thought his lungs would explode. As he ran, the stalks slapped his face and he could feel his cut reopening, but he didn’t let the sting deter him from his rush to freedom. Finally he stopped for only a few seconds to get his breath and take a sip from the most amazing water he’d ever tasted. He turned the canteen over and, sure enough, there were the initials of the boy, reminding Benfu he’d have to be very careful where he discarded it eventually. He sure didn’t want the boy to face any repercussions.

He ran more until he reached the end of the row of cornstalks. There he stopped to rest and spread mud over the welts on his arms and neck. The mosquitos were still landing on him even in his sprint to safety, and the welts from the last few days burned like fire. Benfu quickly finished and took off again, by this time limping with each stride. He was halfway to town. He could do this, he told himself. *Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop.* The words became a mantra that kept him putting one foot in front of the other.

Finally he could run no more, so he staggered on toward the lights of town. He had plenty of time to think and marveled at how or why he had been given a reprieve. He took the time to bargain with the gods that if he could just make it through the night, he’d spend his life finding ways to be just as selfless as Pei had been with him. As he walked he stayed close to the ditches, ready to jump at any moment. He knew he looked a sight—beaten and staggering like a drunken man. He hoped the late hour would keep anyone from seeing him. He unscrewed the lid from the canteen and drank the rest of the water, unable to stop himself.

At least three hours later, much longer than it should have taken him, Benfu found himself on the outskirts of town. He took a break and dropped to his knees, using his hands to skim just a tiny bit of water from the top of the mud in a pothole. It tasted oily and salty, but it was gloriously wet. With that small reward he felt he could keep moving a bit farther. As he stood, the rumbling and lights of a large truck came around the corner and Benfu stumbled to the high grass and hid as it went by. He figured it was the delivery truck coming from his commune, taking most of their day's crop intake on to Shanghai. No one cared there wasn't enough left behind to feed the people; their only directive was to bring it on to Mao's troops.

Still shaking from the close call, he stayed away from the main roads, choosing to skirt down the country roads until he came to one of the *hutongs*, the residential lanes that ran parallel to the major roads. He thought maybe he could find an old shed or barn to hide in while he rested. If he could get just a few hours of sleep, then he would set off again.

As he staggered down one quiet lane, he saw a small home with the gate open. The house beckoned to him and since his gut instinct had not failed him yet, Benfu quietly slipped through the gate. He looked at the front window and saw only a very faint light, and he hoped the homeowners were asleep as they should be at this time of night. First listening for noise from the inside and hearing nothing, he crept around the house toward the small utility shed. He wished it had windows as he could hardly make himself go back into such tight, airless quarters, but alas, he had no choice if he wanted to remain hidden. He hoped he could find space in it to stretch out for a few hours.

Spotting an old rusty water pump on the side of the house, he stood there, uncertain for a moment. He could take a chance and try to clean himself up a bit and get some fresh drinking water to refill his canteen, or he could wait. He shifted from foot to foot. He didn't want to get caught but he was so thirsty that his tongue felt swollen and rough like fabric in his mouth. If he didn't get water, he felt he would just die. He was dizzy and weak, and so thirsty that if he succumbed to his pain from hunger and ate one of his last remaining rice balls, he might even choke on it. What a cruel fate to finally have food in his pocket but know his throat was too parched to get it down.

With precious moments wasting before daylight came upon him, Benfu made a choice. He had to drink. He only prayed the old pump would not moan and carry on, waking the family inside. With his ribs now in such intense pain he could barely walk, Benfu struggled over to the pump. He slowly and carefully lifted the handle and flinched when the old pipes began to rumble. Carefully he dropped to his knees. He'd be quick, just one drink. Turning his head to the side to catch the stream in his mouth, he heard someone behind him.

The quick movement to see who had caught him made his head spin and a wave of dizziness completely overtook him. As everything went black around him, he focused on the face of a girl about his own age. His last thoughts before he hit the ground were of how pretty and clean she looked as she stood there with her hands on her hips, a scolding frown making its way across her heart-shaped mouth.

Then all was dark and Benfu welcomed the curtain that fell across his vision and smothered the smell of his fear.

“If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole lives would change.”

—Buddha



Chapter One



Beitang City, Wuxi, China, 2010

On a cloudy day in early January, Benfu stood outside his house and held the red pail under the spigot, waiting for it to fill. Today was a good day; when he pumped the handle, the old pipe didn't moan and rattle too much before deciding to cooperate. But he didn't mind it so much either way—like him, the piece of iron was ancient but stubbornly kept going. And anyway, they had history together, and if a man could feel affection for a thing, then Benfu absolutely did. A silly fondness, but there all the same, for it was the very same temperamental water spigot that had been the matchmaker that brought him and his precious Calli together so many years before.

When the water reached the top, he pushed the pump handle down and carried the pail across the street to the old widow's house. Quickly he filled the tins for her chickens and used the last of the water on her pot of herbs hanging in her window box. He looked at the chicken droppings and considered cleaning them up, but that was a task Widow Zu usually took on and he didn't want to deprive her of that joy. And anyway, nothing was worse than the smell of chicken dung on a man's hands.

Chuckling, he returned to his yard across the street, got on his bike, and headed out for the day. Twenty minutes later, he pushed his rusted three-wheeled bicycle slowly up the steep hill and turned the corner. Around him the streets were coming alive. Morning vendors were opening their stalls and stacking displays of fruits and vegetables, sweepers cleaned the sidewalks, and early commuters hustled to work. As he strained to push the bike, the cars, electric scooters, and other bicycles rushed past him. Most paid him no attention, for he was just one of many laborers out at the crack of dawn trying to get an early start to the day. With his weathered brown face and deep wrinkles, he blended in, but unlike some of the men his age he passed who were doing their morning *Qigong* exercises sitting at makeshift tables while playing cards, Benfu still had a job to do. Even though he had lived on earth for over six decades, he could not retire.

He struggled the last few feet, listening to his water canteen bumping against the metal bar that was tied to and thought about how much the city had changed over the years. At least his side of Beitang City—Old Town Wuxi as some called it—still kept some of the old charm, while new Wuxi had grown with businesses and even many foreigners coming in to make their mark. Benfu was a transplant—he'd been sent to Wuxi as a teenager by his parents to escape the danger of Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. It was for his protection, they'd told him as they cried and bid him good-bye. What they had thought would be a better life for him was an unforgettable time of trauma and hardship. And though he'd never intended to stay for so long, fate had intervened and Wuxi had become his home. But that was long ago and he'd survived many more hard times since then—tim

that were better left unspoken of, times that made a day like today feel like child's play.

—At the top of the hill, Benfu mounted the bike again and with shoulders bent over the handlebars to add more weight, he pedaled slowly. He was already tired and that irritated him. He always been known to be bigger and stronger than most, but for the last year he just couldn't shake the cough and heavy feeling that had enveloped him. Passing the line of street breakfast stands, he winced at the sudden squeaking from the rusty back wheel of his bicycle. As it began to bump and turn haphazardly, he hoped it would last the day, at least until he could ask his daughter to take a look to see if she could repair it. If she could, that would save him some valuable coins that he could avoid paying the local repairman. He was lucky to have the transportation, and the three-wheeled bike was fitted with a makeshift cart on the back, allowing him a way to haul things home without carrying them in a basket on his back as he'd done for years before.

Benfu passed the cigarette store and for a moment he fought the sudden craving that overtook his thoughts. His wife had finally got her way when he'd stopped smoking a few years before, but there were days he could almost taste the sweet tobacco, he wanted it so badly. It was a welcome distraction to hear his friend call his name from where she perched on the next front stoop, peeling peanuts. His mouth watered at the sight of the treats in her bowl. He would have liked to be able to bring some peanuts home to add to their own simple dinner. Occasionally the woman saved a small bag behind her to hand over to him, but not today. He had many friends in the neighborhood and one had even complimented him long ago by telling him he was a big man with an even bigger presence. He didn't quite know how he had a big presence but it had sounded nice. Always known as soft-spoken and wise with his words, he found that when he had something to say, others usually listened.

"Zao, Benfu. Cold day, eh?"

Benfu raised his hand to the woman and smiled. "Good morning to you, too, Lao Gu. Yes, very cold. But don't worry, spring is coming soon!"

These days he was so used to being cold that he no longer thought much about it. At least there hadn't been any snow this season—saving him the trouble of carrying his load when he couldn't get the cart through. Sure his cough was worse in the cold, his old joints ached, and his gnarled hands cramped from the hours spent wrapped around the handles, but instead of dwelling on it, he chose to focus on other matters—matters like finding enough discarded items to earn enough for a day's meals for his family and if he was lucky, enough to put some savings toward their monthly rent bill. But first, his self-imposed obligation needed to be fulfilled for the day.

"Zhu ni haoyun, Benfu." She wished him luck and went back to peeling. No small talk was needed because there wasn't anything new to discuss. They'd been passing each other for the last fifteen years and only stopped to catch up every month or so, unless either of them had news worth interrupting their chores. The woman was widowed and Benfu had known her husband back in the hard days. But those were times they didn't talk about.

Benfu continued with his cart and hoped his morning would be uneventful. He didn't wish to find anything out of the ordinary as he turned past the block of buildings. He really didn't. He always wished to find nothing except trash. But sometimes something other than trash found him.

Now in the alley between two buildings, he guided his bike around soiled refuse bags and a line of jumbled bicycles, then heard the first mewl coming from a pile of boxes. He hoped it was nothing but a new kitten, strayed from its mother. That would be the best scenario, for Benfu could help it find the rest of the litter and then go on with his day as usual. But the closer he got to the huge pile of trash, the more that hope faded. He'd heard this same sound before and he scolded himself; he should have known the difference from the start.

Sighing, he stopped the bicycle and climbed down. He walked over to the pile of cardboard boxes. Lifting them carefully and tossing them aside one by one, he dug down until he finally found

the right one. As he paused to look at the labeling on the side of the cardboard, a couple at the end of the alley stopped and pointed at him, then moved along.

Gently he picked up the box and carried it to his cart. He carefully set it on top of the pile of trash he had collected on the way over. Opening the two flaps, he peered into the box and immediately connected with tiny dark eyes.

“*Aiya*,” he muttered softly, so as not to scare her. The baby was very young—maybe only a few hours or possibly a few days old. She lay in the box fully unclothed save for a scrap of a red shirt with frog ties and a few balled-up newspapers scattered around her. Benfu wrinkled his nose as the smell of urine wafted up from the soaked box. He noticed her umbilical cord still hung from her tiny button, already turning dark from the lack of sustenance running through it. From the weak sound of her mewling and the mottled color of her skin, she didn’t have much time left.

Faster than most would think an old man could move, Benfu struggled out of his worn red overcoat and laid it on the ground in front of him. He then lifted the infant and set her on top of it. As he knelt down to wrap the material around her, he ignored the throbbing in his knees and rubbed her tiny feet and hands. He counted under his breath as he quickly massaged each petite toe and finger. While he worked to get the blood running in her body again, his eyes met hers and held.

With the surprise of being suddenly discovered, she had quieted and serenely stared up at Benfu, her dark eyes twinkling at him. She was beautiful, this one was, and he wondered what sort of ailment she might have that would have prompted her parents to relinquish her to a new fate.

“Hello, *nuer*. I’ve come to take you home. Just hold on and we’ll get you all fixed up. And we’ll add one more scavenger’s daughter to the world, yes we will.” He wrapped the coat all around her, making sure to double the sleeves around her icy feet. He gently laid her back in the box and after checking to make sure he had made a sufficient tunnel through the material for her to breathe through, he closed the flaps again. Looking around, he hoped the remaining cardboard would be there when he returned, but for now he needed to hurry.

Turning the bicycle around, he shivered from the sudden gust of wind that blew through his clothing. He climbed aboard and slowly began to pedal, willing the stiffness in his knees away. As he picked up the pace and began his journey home, he sighed and looked over his shoulder again at the box his newest treasure was nested in. He ignored the nervous fluttering in his stomach that reminded him how hard it would be to feed one more hungry mouth, and instead gave thanks to the gods that he had found the baby girl before it was too late.

Chapter Two



Fifty minutes later Benfu pulled his cart onto the sidewalk and around the low concrete wall the lane of small buildings. Their house, like others along the row, opened up onto a small backstreet. The narrow *hutong* was only wide enough for pedestrians and bicycles to get through, creating a quieter sense of community that with the ever-increasing number of trucks and vehicles on the roads was getting harder to find in China these days. The downside was that the small homes were all very close together and most times that meant a lack of privacy.

He pedaled the bike much faster than the neighbors were used to and the sound of the squeaking wheel soon brought the people out. Like statues, they stood silently, watching him go by. They knew by the pace he kept that he carried something more than his usual trash. As he passed, they eyed the box lying on top of the pile in his cart.

“Calli!” he called, struggling to get his breath. “*Guo lai!*”

Within seconds his wife popped out of a doorway ahead. Around her a few more heads of different heights began appearing. Peony was the first to burst out the door to meet Benfu, skipping as fast as she could—so fast her braids took turns dancing in the air.

“Ye Ye! Do we have a new sister?” She rushed to him and ran alongside the cart as he pedaled, trying to peek into the box.

“*Dui le*, Peony. You have another sister. But if we don’t warm her quickly, she won’t survive.”

Calli met him at the low gate to their tiny courtyard. He had caught her in the middle of wrapping up her long, wet hair and she struggled to pin the strands into a bun on the top of her head. She hurried to him. Benfu reached into the box and picked up the baby girl, then breathed a sigh of relief as he handed her over to his wife. He saw a flash of pain cross her face, pain from too many years of bending her body to pick up trash, but Benfu knew that if the baby could be saved, his Calli could do it.

“She’s very cold.” Benfu shook his head and shoved his hands into his pockets to warm them and stop the trembling.

“I’ve told you to take a blanket with you, crazy old man. Now look at you standing there shivering without a coat.” She tsked as she carried the baby into the house. “Peony, stoke the fire and get your Ye Ye his sweater. Ivy, get the can of flour and the milk powder, and plug in the kettle.”

Everyone hurried around the small house as Calli sat down in her chair and opened the bundle. Beside her, their youngest, Jasmine, stood and watched everything happening. At five years old, the

little girl had never uttered a word since they had found her over a year before; she only stared everyone with her big, knowing eyes. The infant stared up at Jasmine and when the cold air hit her skin, she gave a pitifully weak wail. Maggi, another daughter, strained to see the baby from her place on the bench lining the wall.

Benfu nodded his head. "That's a stronger cry than the one that helped me find her. So we've got more of a chance than I thought to save her."

He met his wife's eyes over the bundle of the baby. Her expression told him what she was thinking. It was the same thing he was—about the first little baby girl he had brought home many years earlier. Benfu had found her wrapped in a thin sheet in front of the train station. He'd walked up to find a crowd standing around the white bundle, yet no one was doing anything other than staring. He had broken through them and picked up the baby and brought her home. She was so cold that her tiny body was frozen stiff. They had wrapped her in a burlap sack and warmed her as best as they could and she had responded for a while, even beginning to wiggle in Benfu's oversized hands. A quick check by the doctor and he had released her to their care. She was a gift that had healed a hole in their hearts and they had named her Rose, but tragically she had died a few weeks later. The short time they had her made Benfu realize that they had been depriving themselves of the joy a young one could bring to one's heart.

Since then, Benfu and Calli had made it their life's mission to care for the castaways that fate had brought into their lives. For Benfu, it was a self-imposed penance of a sin only one other knew. For his wife, the girls helped to fill an empty, sad void deep within her soul. In her younger years, she'd been called Mama by the girls she'd taken under her wing, just as he'd been Baba. But a decade or so ago their newer daughters instinctively called him Ye Ye and her Nai Nai—the affectionate nicknames used for grandparents in Chinese families.

Many of the children they had rescued were out in the world thriving now, but Benfu felt a small bit of relief that those who hadn't made it had at least felt a bit of love as they passed through to the next world.

Calli unwrapped the baby and handed the coat to her nearest daughter. She pulled the quilt from the back of her chair and wrapped the infant inside the folds, exclaiming over the creamy hue of the child's brown skin.

"Put your inside jacket on, Benfu. You'll have pneumonia," she scolded her husband. Their home, like others in their neighborhood, was still quite chilly inside, despite their best efforts to keep it warm.

The kettle began to bubble and shake. Benfu rushed over to supervise his daughter as she made the baby's first meal.

"Only one spoon of powder, Ivy." With his thumbs hooked through his suspenders to keep from interfering, he coached the girl as she measured the powder into the bottle. The milk powder was very expensive and he had taught her to ration it carefully. Ivy opened the bag of flour and added a heaping spoonful to the mixture. She poured the steaming water over it and put the nipple on and shook it.

"I already know that, Ye Ye. I made all of Mallow's bottles before she died. And you don't have to tell me how lucky we are to have milk powder, or the story of how when I came home, all you could give me was flour and water." The girl grinned at Benfu and he winked back. Next to his little Jasmine, Ivy was one of his favorites, though he'd never let the others know. It amazed him how all of his daughters remembered those who had left this world and were able to fondly speak of them. He was getting so old he struggled to remember how many had died over the years, but he knew it was at least a half dozen.

"Hand it to me, Ivy." Benfu took the bottle from her and opened it again. He didn't mention that their first found baby wasn't even lucky enough to have flour and water. That came with the

second child but Rose was fed broth right from their supper pot. That was all that they had at the time and it was given with a spoon, a few drops at a time. Since then there had been many more children and they had learned to keep a small amount of milk powder locked away in the cupboard, ready for emergencies.

Benfu reached over and lifted the pitcher of cold water from the counter and added an inch or so to the bottle. He shook it, then hurried over to his wife.

Calli held the baby close to her body, rocking and humming to her. She had pulled her chair as near to the old coal stove as she could. She took the bottle from Benfu and as soon as it touched the baby's cheek, the tiny girl frantically bobbed her head back and forth, instinctively rooting for the nipple. Calli slid it into the open mouth and everyone around breathed a sigh of relief when the baby successfully began to suckle. Calli and Benfu would take the baby to see the neighborhood doctor later in the day but she had learned over the years that the children had the best chance of survival if she worked to stabilize them at home first.

Peony, Ivy, and Jasmine crowded around their Nai Nai, watching the baby suck the lumpy mixture. Lily—Ivy's twin sister—sat at the table, listening intently to what was going on around her. Even Maggi stretched herself as far as she could from her perch on the bench, trying to get a glimpse of the baby's face.

"Nai Nai, do you think she misses her mother?" Peony asked pensively. She was the next youngest in the group and usually the most vocal and probably the sassiest, too, Benfu would say. There was no doubt that Peony was of mixed blood and by the streaks of auburn in her hair and the slight rounding of her golden-colored eyes, Benfu suspected her father was Caucasian. At nine years old, Peony still remembered her own mother and even recalled the day only a few years ago that she was told good-bye and set on a bench outside the train station. Her mother told her to wait and someone would be along to take her to have the peach-sized lump removed from her head. She said they'd be together again when she recovered.

Lucky for her that someone was Benfu and he had begged and borrowed to get the money for her surgeries. To make things harder for the child, postcards had started to arrive for Peony soon after her first treatment. Obviously the woman had been watching to make sure her daughter was found and had followed them home to see where they lived, always staying elusive enough to avoid being discovered.

Before the end of the three freezing treatments and final procedure for Peony, two more postcards arrived. They were brief, only a line or two, and while there was never a return address, the sender claimed to be Peony's mother and said she was watching the girl from afar and wanted her to know that when her circumstances changed, she'd be back for her daughter. He and Calli had agonized over whether to give the girl the postcards or not but in the end, Calli reminded him that they'd always been totally honest with their daughters. They hadn't wanted to start keeping secrets. Since the first postcard, Peony had started acting quite ornery. However, Benfu was gentle on the girl because he knew she was hurting inside.

Benfu didn't know if the woman would ever really come forward and claim her child, but he did know that the postcards were a thread of hope that Peony clung to with all her might. She even slept with them under her pillow, taking them out one by one and gazing at the scenery on the fronts. She probably tried to imagine where her mother was. He only wished he had a way to find the woman and reunite the two, even if it would be painful to lose the girl. It never failed to sadden Benfu when Peony talked about the gentle kiss her mother had given her before walking away.

"*Bushi!* She doesn't miss them. They are cruel for leaving her in the cold with barely any clothes on. If her parents had their way, she'd already be dead," Ivy blurted out, and received a chastising look from her Nai Nai.

Benfu saw Peony visibly wince, then lower her head. “My mother didn’t mean for me to die. She wanted me to get help. She told me so,” she said, picking at the threads in the colorful rug she sat on.

Benfu shook his head. The girls knew he had a strict rule about criticizing parents for leaving their children. He always told them no one knew the entire story or what was truly in the parents’ hearts. He even believed that sometimes it wasn’t the mothers who did or even agreed to the abandoning of their children. He knew that from experience—a hard lesson he’d learned years before.

“Zheng Ivy, we mustn’t make rash judgments. Perhaps her mother was sick herself and someone else took her baby from her. We just do not know the truths of the story. All we know is that it is fate that she is a part of our family now,” Benfu gently chastised her while pushing away the forbidden memory that threatened to invade his thoughts.

Ivy hung her head, her cheeks flaming. Benfu patted her on the back. Ivy and Lily were the only set of twins—identical at that!—and had been with them for nine years. At first he’d got the names constantly confused but he’d finally stopped calling them the wrong names. Now they were fourteen and Ivy’s emotions seemed to be all over the place as she struggled with feelings about her birth parents. She was a loyal one—he’d give her that. She’d always been the eyes for her blind sister and totally devoted to caring for her. Lily had so far been a gentle-mannered girl but lately Benfu could sense some discontent behind her unwavering stare.

He knew she needed to be enrolled in a school for the blind but so far his requests had gone unheeded by the council of affairs. The whole family continued to let her be as independent as possible but the truth was that she needed more assistance to learn the ways of the blind than they could give.

Ivy didn’t lift her face to meet his gaze; she didn’t like to be scolded. And in return he didn’t like to see his girls unhappy and rarely worked up the energy to discipline them. He didn’t see life through rose-colored glasses, though. He’d admitted before that some of the girls who’d passed through their doors had taken months and even years to soften. Many of them had been physically or emotionally abused—sometimes even both—but he and Calli always remembered that all children had some good in them. With the most difficult cases, they’d focused on giving them a stable home, and Lao Tzu was right when he once said, “Kindness in giving creates love.”

Benfu sighed as he thought about how dearly he loved all twenty-four flowers that had bloomed in the fields of his life.

Chapter Three



As the sun set and the nighttime chill invaded their house, the rest of the family arrived and they all gathered around the room, ready to sit down for supper. The concrete floors had been swept clean and mopped, the colorful braided rugs beaten and returned to their places. The fire had been allowed to die down, the usual routine to keep the girls from breathing in too much coal smoke as they slept. Benfu also kept their supply of coal rationed, in case the weather turned bad and he couldn't buy more. Coal used to be inexpensive but nothing was cheap these days. It was inevitable that the cost of living in Beitang would soon catch up to the bigger cities. Every yuan needed to be carefully accounted for.

The modest home could only accommodate a small table that sat three, so all but Jasmine scattered to other perches. Some balanced on overturned crates and some on short stools. Benfu always told the others that he liked to have Jasmine at the table beside him so he could watch and make sure their tiny sister ate her dinner. The other girls didn't mind—they knew his affection for Jasmine and, bundled up in coats and scarves, they sat quietly, their cheeks flushing a healthy pink hue.

Benfu looked around and smiled at his daughters, proud of their attempt to look proper for dinner. Although they couldn't change their clothes for another day or so, until their allotted bath day, they had all washed their faces and combed their hair. He and his wife had raised many children, and most of them were now out living their own lives, but he had always made it a point to teach them to be proud of who they were no matter what their status. The children in the room were meant to be the last ones but the new arrival today had changed that plan—once again.

Linnea, currently the oldest daughter in the house, held the baby. She had arrived home and stopped to repair the loose wheel on the bicycle before taking her turn to get to know the newest member of her family. At seventeen, the girl had an unusual ability to understand mechanics and could fix most anything. Still, like some of her adopted sisters, she had not been allowed to attend school past the fifth grade, as her birth was unregistered. Instead she held a job as an assistant to a street-side bicycle repairman. It earned her only a few yuan a week, but her contribution to the family income was needed and appreciated. Benfu also liked that her job kept her busy; he dreaded the day that she would become interested in boys, as she was already turning into quite the beauty. Luckily, he thought, she hadn't realized it yet.

It was Ivy's turn for kitchen duty, and she scooped the rice from the cooker and distributed

evenly among the bowls as another sister handed out clean chopsticks. When finished, Ivy took the first bowl to her twin. Lily felt Ivy approach and Benfu watched her serene smile slowly appear, her hands out, ready to receive her supper. Then Ivy picked up another bowl and took it to the bench where Maggi stretched out. As she approached, Maggi pushed herself up on her elbows, eager to eat.

“*Xie xie.*” She thanked her as Ivy handed her the bowl and then took the time to pull the coverlet over the girl’s feet. Even though Maggi couldn’t feel anything from the hips down, Ivy didn’t want her toes to be cold. They all took great pains to make sure the girl was always treated with the utmost care. The doctors had said she would never be able to walk because her spina bifida hadn’t been treated soon enough. But other than her sometime grumpiness from pain caused by the lump on her spine, and her embarrassment at her incontinence, Benfu rarely remembered her ever complaining in the three years she’d been with them. She was one of the sweetest eight-year-olds he’d ever known.

“You’re welcome.” Ivy returned to the bowls and took the next ones to Nai Nai and Ye Ye at the small table. She took Linnea’s bowl to her and set it down beside the stool the girl sat on. She quickly finished handing out the rest and sat down with her own bowl in one hand, chopsticks in the other. They all sat still, waiting for Benfu to give the word to begin their dinner.

“Linnea, put the baby down into the cradle,” he reminded her.

She gently laid the baby in the wooden bed and tucked the blanket around her. The child still slept, as she had done almost nonstop since her first bottle hours before. Benfu was worried about her but he knew that they had done all they could and her destiny was now out of their hands.

“Let’s eat,” he said, and the room erupted into a clatter of chopsticks against porcelain. Tonight’s dinner was only steamed rice and eggs with tomatoes, but around the room the girls ate as if tasting one of the greatest recipes on earth.

“Ye Ye, when will we have pork again?” Lily asked, then shoved a bite of rice in her mouth. Lily couldn’t see the expressions everyone held as they looked up to see what Ye Ye’s response would be. However, she was startled at the sudden silence brought on by her question.

As the eldest, Linnea looked up to answer for their Ye Ye. “Lily, we all look forward to the nights that a bit of meat or vegetables will accompany our rice, but you must learn to keep the thought inside your head and not let it pass through your lips,” she said quietly. When she finished, the eating began again and noise filled the room.

Benfu looked up from his bowl just in time to see a sad shadow cross Lily’s face. He held his tongue, knowing that each child must learn the lesson of a humble life and pass it down to the younger ones. He had no doubt that in time Lily would learn it, too.

For Benfu, Lily’s question brought back a lot of memories. During the revolution and the years after, meat was allowed only once a week for most families. And that was only if they had the proper food coupons, which were mostly given to the red families—those without questionable backgrounds or ties to counter-revolutionaries. Of course questionable backgrounds included anyone related to an official, teacher, landowner, or intellectual, so many families were automatically out of the equation. Since all the persecution had ended in the early seventies, he’d had meat more often, but since he was getting older and money was getting scarcer, they had to depend more on rice and noodles for their daily meals.



After dinner his daughters gathered around in a circle. Benfu brought in a large box of scrap from his

morning collection and set it in the middle. The girls reached to grab remnants but Benfu held up his hand. Their nightly sorting of empty plastic bottles, newspapers, tin cans, and other treasures could wait a few minutes.

Benfu went and picked up the infant from her bed. He brought her with him to the rocking chair and sat down, cradling her in his big hands.

“Wait. First, we name the baby. Who has a name they’d like to offer up?”

The girls all made various expressions of concentration. Benfu looked over their heads at his wife and smiled. Calli had taken the baby to the doctor and he had given her a once-over and declared her fit to stay in their home. They still weren’t sure she would live or even if they would be given custody of her after the police reports were made, but instead of waiting the traditional one month they always gave each child a name right away so that if she died, she could enter the spirit world knowing who she was. Some in China might call their initial dubbing only *milk* names, to be changed after they started school or married, but with Benfu’s girls the names would be permanent. After so many daughters, it was getting harder to come up with new names and these last few years he had made the important decision a family affair. His daughters took the naming ceremonies very seriously.

“What about Fang?” Ivy offered. “It means fragrant. Zheng Fang makes a nice name.”

Behind her the infant stirred and let out a small cry. The girls giggled. The baby then began to coo and do her best to give all of them a piece of her mind.

Calli laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a young infant be so vocal. I think she wants a say in if she should be called Fang.”

“I don’t think she likes that name and anyway, it isn’t a flower, Ivy,” Linnea said, rolling her eyes.

“Close enough, because a flower smells good!” Ivy retorted, crossing her arms sullenly.

Benfu chuckled, remembering how *fragrant* the infant had been when he found her. He was glad that his wife had washed the strong smell of urine off her once she had settled. Now she smelled only of the flower water Calli made and distributed each week to the girls.

The girls began chattering among themselves, too quickly for Benfu to keep up with. He looked at his wife and pointed toward the kitchen cove.

Calli stopped her rigorous massaging of Maggi’s legs and went to the cupboard. She took the key from around her neck and unlocked the door, opened it, and removed a pencil and a thick leather-bound book. Sitting down at her stool at the table, she untied the twine and opened the weathered cover. Benfu smiled at the sight of the red book embossed with a golden 家, the character representing *Family*.

Calli picked up the pencil and waited with it poised in the air, ready to record the new name once decided, as well as the baby’s finding spot. Every small detail mattered; where they were found, what they wore, contents of any note left with them. Calli often stated that if any of her children wanted to find her birth family one day, they would have every clue she could give them to start the search. In addition, Calli recorded dates of the child’s milestones and for those who were grown, the most recent addresses. No one but Calli had ever looked in the book, but she made it clear that when they were grown, the daughters would be welcome to their pages. So far none of them had ever asked for the information.

The girls quieted when they saw Calli sit down with the book. Bringing it out always settled them down. They all knew the importance it held. As far as the girls were concerned, the book was the most sacred possession in the house, for it contained all of their histories.

“Other ideas?” Benfu asked. He had given all the girls his own surname, so Zheng was already

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