

KILL HER TWICE

STACEY LEE



putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Stacey Lee

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices,
promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized
edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning,
or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers
and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.
Visit us online at [PenguinRandomHouse.com](https://www.PenguinRandomHouse.com).

CIP data TK

ISBN 9780593532041

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

[Vendor Code TK]

Design by [tk in mechs]

Text set in [tk in mechs]

This is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events,
and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are
the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance
to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.
The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any
responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.



TO AVALON,
FROM YOUR NUMBER ONE FAN

1 GEMMA



IN 1932, LOS ANGELES WAS A CITY OF REINVENTION. IT was a place where mountains could be moved and rivers reshaped, where even stars could fall from the sky and walk around on earth. The blood of an Angeleno coursed through the veins like gasoline, primed for the explosion that would drive progress.

“Stop looking like we’re about to rob a bank.” I tied my straw hat tighter.

My older sister, May, with her long arms gripping the steering wheel of our father’s flower delivery truck, did not look poised for progress. In fact, she looked like she was waiting for the truck to drive her.

Around us, customers hunted bustling City Market for deals on the last of summer’s bounty—corn, stone fruit, zucchini—though it was already October. “Pretend you’re the lead in one of those Hollywood flickers. We’re stylish women in the latest robin’s-egg-blue Cadillac about to go for a drive.”

The Mule, what we called our old Ford Runabout pickup, was definitely not robin’s-egg blue. More like turtle-egg brown.

May frowned at me, a tiny Y crease forming between her tea-steeped eyes. Even when she was annoyed, she had the kind of beauty that drew eyes and tripped feet. “Are you wearing lipstick?”

I pressed my lips together. “As a matter of fact, yes. Lulu Wong’s Noir Red.” The silver screen starlet and our hometown celebrity had the dark red shade made vegetarian for her. “Here, you wear some too. Put it on quick.” I plucked the tube from my clutch.

“They’ll think we’re hussies!” Her serious eyes blinked double time.

“They already think that.” If I’d had enough money, I would’ve gotten the kohl pencil for drawing on Lulu Wong’s tiger-charming beauty mark, a mole round and perfect enough to stop a tiger in its tracks. “Oh, forget it. Work the gears. Let’s get this bucking mule on the road.” I swept my hands toward the exit of City Market, where Ba had carved a niche selling flowers among all the produce vendors. But few bought blooms during a depression. Save for a few big orders placed during the Summer Olympics, it felt as if flowers came to our stall to die. We’d only sold a third of our inventory this morning, mostly the cheaper lilies. But this time, we weren’t going to simply donate them around town like we always did. Ba wouldn’t approve, but he was sixty miles away and might not return for many months.

“You and your big-thinking head,” she muttered, using a Chinese expression for someone with grand ideas. “I have a bad feeling this will get us married off for good.” With grudging movements of her hands on the gears, May eased us forward.

I snorted, though my leg began to jitter with annoyance. With fewer eligible maidens in Chinatown than bachelors, Ba had always told us that his three fierce clouds—Mei Wun, or “beautiful cloud,” for May; Gam Wun, or “fresh cloud,” for me; and Pan Wun, or “wishful cloud,” for our youngest sister, Peony—would blow favorable winds to our family. But with the city’s plans to bulldoze the heart of our community for a train

station, May and I worried the winds would scatter us to new households sooner than we were ready to go.

"They won't like us selling at Westlake Park," May grumbled, crawling us along. The Mule bucked, tossing us like rice in the wok and clattering the buckets in our truck bed. One of the City Market sweepers shook his broom at us. May gave him an apologetic wave. She had always been the nicer one. Reaching San Pedro Street, she gunned us out of the lot, her face growing dark again. "Remember how Guitar Man tried to visit the park?"

"Of course I remember," I grumbled. Our friendly Chinatown bum, who always carried a guitar case, had been so distressed at being ordered to leave the park, he'd gotten on the wrong street-car and ended up near Pasadena. The city preferred the Chinese keep to Chinatown, except when we were selling here at City Market, located two miles south. Los Angeles relied on our produce. Of course, if they swept us out of Chinatown, their dinner plates would suffer, but by the time they figured that out, it would be too late for us. "Guitar Man spits a lot and scares people. We are not going to scare people. We are a delightful vision. Aren't you always telling me people judge with their eyes first?"

May shifted gears and the Mule bucked again. "I was talking about show business."

A truck rumbled by, sweeping dust through the Mule's doorless entries.

"Well, this is a kind of show. Our feminine wiles will go a long way." I eyed her pale-green dress, wishing it was more eye-catching. May sewed our dresses from castoffs like old curtains and tablecloths. Though her creations were clever—she had split a doily to make the collar on my own dress—they always had a washed look to them.

Her tongue clicked in annoyance. “*Feminine wiles?* Sorry, Gemma, I left mine at home next to my girdle.”

“And along with your sense of adventure,” I said breezily.

“Along with my *sense*, you mean. How much did that lipstick cost?”

I made kissy lips at her, and she groaned. If we were going to sell our flowers to the beau monde, which was French for “the upper crust,” we had to look as presentable as possible. Lipstick was a minor investment for a bigger payoff.

Traffic wasn’t heavy on a Saturday afternoon. The white tower of the new city hall saluted us several blocks northeast, toward Chinatown. Buildings passed in streaks of concrete and brick, each day bringing more EVERYTHING MUST GO! signs and longer soup kitchen lines. I imagined all the business we’d find in Westlake Park: couples strolling the lake, families walking their dogs. Westlake residents could still afford luxuries, unlike those in most neighborhoods, who could barely buy the necessities.

“I bet we could make twenty dollars today,” I said. That would more than cover our flower costs for the month.

“How do you figure we’ll do that, short of clubbing people over the head and taking their wallets?” Her nose started to twitch, as it always did when something bothered her.

“It’s very simple, May. We quadruple our prices.”

Her posture slouched as the wind blew out of her. “That’s it. I’m turning around. It’s clear your noodles have gone mushy.”

“Keep your hair on. Westlake people are used to paying certain prices for things. If we didn’t quadruple the prices, they might worry over the quality.”

“I see. So we’re doing them a favor.”

“Absolutely.” A little risk-taking was what was needed to keep our heads above water a little longer. Despite my airy demeanor,

my stomach clenched like the grinding of the clutch. We wouldn't have had to take such risks if we weren't being kicked out of our houses in the middle of an economy that had belly flopped. It was bad enough that Ba had gotten sick. Now it was up to us to save ourselves.

She cut her gaze to me. "I suppose you also have a cage to sell to a lion."

The wealthier neighborhoods of Westlake folded around us, with its elegant mansions moderne, fussy Victorians, and Spanish haciendas, fronted by spacious lawns. The stately brick buildings of a fancy girls' school stretched half a block, where girls played basketball on a court so pristine it would make Peony weep.

Soon, the tropical oasis of Westlake Park spread before us with its glamorous palm trees and meandering footpaths. An assortment of canoes and paddleboats floated on a man-made lake. Pumping the brakes, May eased us up the driveway leading to the boathouse, which oversaw the park. Diners gathered under the shade umbrellas of a picturesque café glanced our direction.

I prayed that the Mule wouldn't buck. "Make a left."

May rolled by the crowds, then turned into the driving lane that encircled the lake. Azalea bushes screened lovers' alcoves. Weeping willows swayed gently in the breeze.

Before reaching the band concourse anchoring the other end of the lake, I pointed to a palm tree. "Park under there."

If someone wanted to lodge a complaint about us at the boathouse, they'd have a good quarter mile to walk.

Pedestrians cast us curious gazes, their eyes skimming the words painted on the side of the truck: CHOW'S FLOWERS. We flipped over crates to build an attractive display on the truck bed, topped by a showstopping potted orchid with its cascade

of miniature purple slippers. Though I doubted the plant—our most expensive item—would sell, orchids gave off good energy. I scribbled prices on a chalkboard, then slashed those prices as if we were having a sale. The orchid I marked at seven dollars slashed to five dollars. Last, I gathered broken petals and blooms into a basket and looped it on my arm.

“Afternoon, folks,” I chirped, rolling a bright-pink bloom between my fingers. “Get your flowers for your lady loves. Won’t you come look? We’ve got roses, freesia, daisies, zinnias, and mixed bouquets in astonishing and dizzy-fying combinations.”

May raised an eyebrow at me. People began to drift closer.

“Oh, Harold, these are just like the ones we got married with.” A woman with a violet hat pointed at a bouquet of white roses, which I had tied with baby’s breath.

“The white ones are the most fragrant.” I beamed a smile at them that Ba referred to as one of my eye-catching “Gemma facets.”

“We’ll take them,” said the violet hat’s husband, not even blinking at the price.

“Wonderful. You can pay my sister, and I’ll wrap these for you.” We usually used newspaper, but today I had brought the waxed tissue paper that we reserved for the extra-fancy bouquets. I threw May a wink, which she did not return. More customers approached. More flowers changed hands.

I couldn’t help noticing a handsome couple leaning against a stone divider several paces away. The woman tilted her Max Factor face toward the man as she twisted the heel of her white pump with its little bow in the dirt. Her powdered nose was fleshy, the kind of “money nose” that the Chinese believed attracted wealth. Plus, only someone with money would wear white pumps to a park. The young man carried himself with

the cultured air of a violin and seemed to be listening to her with only half an ear, his brown eyes studying us with his haughty eyebrows tweaked. A fedora created shadows over his smooth face.

Max Factor left her boyfriend's side and sifted through the bouquets, touching everything as if it already belonged to her. Her young man watched her with the half-annoyed look of someone waiting for a late train to arrive. With a squeal, Max Factor held up a bouquet of bloodred roses, which cost a dollar. He nodded, his smile not reaching his eyes. As May took it for wrapping, the young man lifted himself off the wall and swaggered his pin-striped suit to where I was standing. "Dollar, huh?" he said in a low voice.

"That's right, and worth every penny. You can see how happy they make her."

We both looked at Max Factor, who had buried her fleshy nose in the bouquet.

He snorted. "I could buy a whole chuck roast for that."

"You could. But I doubt it would look as nice on her dresser."

"Freddie, pay the lady," Max Factor called, waving.

He pulled out his wallet, and his long index finger riffled all his bills, more than our entire savings. "You people have a good racket going."

The Gemma facet grew an edge. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

"You can get these at City Market for a quarter." His gaze corralled mine, and my stomach clenched at being called out. "I think you just came here to fleece us."

"Freddie, what's taking so long?" Max Factor's Cupid's-bow lips pouted. "My mother's waiting for us, remember?"

May narrowed her eyes at me. "Gemma?"

My gut warred with the loftier part of my brain that cared about things like image and pride. “Good news, May,” I said loudly. I didn’t take my eyes from the man, even though he stood a good head and shoulders above me. “This nice gentleman would like to buy our showstopper. Could you fetch it? It’s for the lady’s mother.”

Freddie’s straight nose flared. He glanced at the price—five dollars—and his eyebrows became hooks.

“Oh, Freddie!” Max Factor gushed. “Mother will love it. You are so dear.”

I swore Freddie’s bills screamed as he ripped them from his wallet.

The air swept out of my lungs, and I tried to project serenity. “Orchids prefer indirect light, and they’re sensitive to hot tempers. But if you give them lots of love, they will reward you with many years of good fortune.” I stepped aside in case he was tempted to pick me up and plant me in the nearest pot.

May brought the orchid to him, cutting me a glance that said she knew I had done something bad, something that might affect our family honor. May’s expressions were always specific.

Freddie and Max Factor strolled away down the footpath, passing a pair of policemen coming from the other direction. The pair made a beeline for us, kicking my pulse up a notch. Had the bad deed caught up with us so fast?

“Say, what do we have here?” said the shorter one, a high-energy Chihuahua sort with a twitchy mustache.

“Good afternoon, Officers.” I flashed them one of the Gemma facets.

“You got a permit?” barked the Chihuahua.

Conversation died around us.

“Absolutely.” The word fell smoothly from my forked tongue.

I'd figured we would need a permit but had hoped no one would actually check. May sidled up. Two bright spots of color had appeared on her porcelain cheeks. Despite her discomfort, she was as fair to behold as a waterfall pouring off a slender cliff, even without lipstick. The men couldn't help staring at her. I beamed a smile in her direction. "Sister, give it to them."

She withered me with a look. With all the ice she was generating, we could use her to store meat. "Why, sister, I thought *you* brought it."

"Me? Oh, dear. I'm afraid my sister would forget her pretty head if it were not already screwed on."

She fixed her lips into a tight smile. "If this pretty head didn't have to do the lion's share of the work, I suppose I might've remembered that permit."

"*Lion's share.*" I guffawed. "More like lying-about share."

"Officer." May bent a frown at the larger officer. He was more a Rottweiler type with his dark scruff and muscular build. "Isn't there a law against abusing one's sister?"

The Rottweiler shifted from foot to foot, glanced uneasily at the Chihuahua.

The Chihuahua sneered. "Look here. You're not supposed to be—"

I swished my skirts becomingly. "Officers, we don't wish to pull you into our unseemly family squabbles. If you don't mind overlooking my sister's embarrassing and, frankly, not surprising oversight"—with a *hmph*, May stuck up her nose—"we promise to remember our permit for next time. Please, a rose for your troubles." I handed each a golden bloom from my basket, along with a palmed dollar, enough for a pack of bootlegged beer.

A little sugar in the teapot was how business got done here in Los Angeles. Someone once tried to convene a grand jury to try

to root out the corruption, until someone sweetened the jurors' tea as well.

Both pocketed their dollars. "Don't let me catch you without your permit again," said the Chihuahua, twirling the rose against his squarish nose.

At last, the pair wandered back to the footpath. New pedestrians replaced the ones who'd shied away, and business picked up again.

"You were born for the screen," I dropped into May's ear. "Lulu Wong better watch herself."

"It wasn't all acting," she grumbled, hooding her eyes and lifting her chin. Her look said I would have to pay for this bad deed in the next life. Or maybe even this one.



OUR MA STOOD AT THE WINDOW, RUBBING HER SWOLLEN belly as she considered the darkening sky. I'd always loved studying people's faces, and hers was my favorite. But tonight, her face had a folded look about it, like a handkerchief carried too long in the pocket. "Fourteen dollars today," she said in Cantonese, the language we spoke at home. "We can stay in business for another month. But November and December are dead months. How will we get through?"

Few blooms grew in the cold months, and Ba usually supplemented our income with odd jobs, like repairing leaking roofs or roughnecking in the oil fields. But no one would hire a couple girls for that, especially these days, when folks would work a full day just for a bowl of soup.

"I can look for sewing work." It was the one skill I had, even though my hand cramped thinking about the additional work.

Ma's face folded tighter. "You can barely keep up with ours."

Gemma, sitting across from me at our round table, glanced up from her bowl of fried rice. She had wiped off her lipstick and subdued her chin-length hair with a pin. Yet hers was a face that was rarely quiet, even when she was saying nothing. "Don't worry, Ma," she said. "We'll manage. I have some ideas."

I gritted my teeth, having had my fill of Gemma's ideas for

the day. Beside me, Peony began to fidget. Even though she was already twelve, she still had the energy of a cricket and wasn't trusted yet to make the tea. She was small-boned like Ma, her face always open, with eyes the color of the golden lotus paste used for special desserts.

"I do have some good news," said Ma, still looking out the window toward the Los Angeles Plaza, the old city center, as if listening for the watery tinkling of the circular fountain.

"Yes, Ma?" I asked.

"The Moys have asked about you. Their oldest son, Wallace, just graduated from the UCLA"—she pronounced the English initials in a Chinese meter—"and is ready for a wife."

Gemma's eyes turned mirthful. She wiggled the fingers of one hand as if mimicking a scuttling beetle and mouthed "Bug Boy." When we were kids, the knock-kneed Wallace was always chasing us around with insects—grasshoppers, spiders, earthworms. I could not imagine a more dismal husband. I swallowed wrong, provoking a spasm of coughs. Peony slapped me on the back, and I dodged out of her way. Despite her petite frame, Peony's limbs packed a heavy wallop.

"Girls," Ma chastised, not missing anything. The window screeched when she opened it, and a breeze shot through the room.

After composing myself, I asked, "Er, what did Wallace study?"

Ma began making a circuit through the living room half of our large room, using her foot to push a bucket of leftover yellow paint closer to the wall. "Nature. He's an"—she switched to English—"ex-something."

Gemma, who'd been hiding her mirth in her teacup, set it down with a loud *ha!* "*Ex-terminator*, possibly?"

I shot her a dirty look. A black mushroom in my bowl suddenly looked like a squashed cockroach.

"Why do you have to go to college to learn how to kill bugs?" asked Peony. Now we were all speaking in English. Only Ma preferred speaking in Cantonese, even though she'd been born in San Francisco. But once we got going in English, it was hard to turn the horses around.

"Not exterminator. Starts with e." Ma abruptly stopped in front of our chintz sofa, clutching her stomach. Breathing through whatever pained her, she stared thoughtfully up at Ba's crisp paintings of bamboo reeds, intermingled with the pictures of happy babies we'd torn from magazines so that the new baby would be good-natured. A train rumbled from nearby Alameda Street, and Ma returned to the window. We'd grown up hearing it, but recently I'd found myself noticing the sound more often. Maybe Ma had too. "The train station may be coming soon. Plans must be made."

Before Ba was sent to the sanatorium, Ma never paid much attention to matters outside the home, like politics or lawsuits. But like all of us, she was doing her best to fill in the spaces his absence had left, including making decisions for the family. Gemma and I had dropped out of school and taken over the daily work of the business, even though we hadn't known how to sell flowers. The cobbler assured us that when cataracts took his vision, his other senses amplified, enabling him to carry on with his work, but we had barely broken even these past six months.

My arms squeezed tightly against my sides, like one of those women who lay in boxes for magicians to saw in half. I resented that train station for pushing us in directions we were not ready to go. Though I was nineteen, of suitable marrying age, who would take care of this family if I were to leave? Gemma and her

big-thinking head couldn't be bothered with the little things that needed doing, like painting the truck so people didn't think we ran a shoddy business.

Gemma examined a cube of tofu between her chopsticks. "Maybe those railroad tycoons will win this time and we can all stay."

The three major railroads had mounted a last effort against the city's order to build a union station on Chinatown, an order backed by the Supreme Court itself. The matter had made strange bedfellows of the Chinese and the railroad magnates. They didn't want to empty their pockets to pay for a terminus uniting all three networks, and we didn't want to lose our homes, our community. The thought of being forced to leave made my head clang with questions. Where would we go? How would we manage to set up house before Ma gave birth? Where would Peony go to school? Unlike the railroad magnates, we didn't get a say. Any day now, the city would pass its final judgment.

Ma grunted. "As long as officials can be bought, we will never be secure. Otis Fox has a dragon's hoard of money."

Gemma made the kind of face reserved for bad smells. Millionaire Otis Fox of Fox Cosmetics had spearheaded the "Take Back L.A." committee leading the charge for the building of Union Station. He considered Chinatown a nest of vipers that needed stamping out. And if his son, Philippe, won a city council seat next month, he wouldn't even need that dragon's hoard to get his way.

Ma's eyes floated to me, stirring at my rice. "Your ba thinks it will be a good match."

Gemma stopped eating. Peony picked at a callus on her palm. I glanced at our father's chair, remembering how family dinner was his favorite part of the day. Many fathers frowned

upon children speaking at the table, but not him, and we all missed him, especially Ma. When he'd begun coughing up mouthfuls of blood, the doctors at the French Hospital had recommended total rest at a health resort located in the desert of San Bernardino to dry out his tuberculosis-ridden lungs. As he was a spry man not yet forty, used to hauling heavy loads as a bricklayer before starting our flower business, they estimated he'd be out in three months. In a cruel nod to the day he'd left—April Fools' Day—he'd been at the sanatorium already twice that. How much longer would it be? And what did it say about the state of his condition that he had approved of a suitor from afar?

"Why is it a good match?" asked Peony, casting me sympathetic glances. She knew I wasn't ready to be married.

"The Moys live in Pa-sa-de-na"—Ma pronounced each syllable as if laying down a winning hand—"on their own ranch." They owned a successful canning company by the Los Angeles River, and though most Chinese couldn't be citizens and therefore couldn't own land, money was like water. The stronger the stream, the more easily it wound its way around even the staunchest rocks.

Peony blinked at the nonanswer.

Ma lowered herself onto the sofa, her face flushed, panting lightly as she studied the teakwood ancestral altar we kept stocked with flowers and incense. Gray hairs were ambushing the black ones on her head. She deserved an easier life. If we all married well, she could have that eventually.

"So when's the piggy going to market?" asked Gemma, mirth returning to her face. I kicked her under the table.

"They will be coming for dinner Friday. Your father insisted you should meet first and 'get to know each other,' the American

way.” Ma lifted her feet onto a low table, grimacing. “In my day, all we needed was a matchmaker to ensure both families were reputable, and a fortune teller to read the stars. There was no need for all this Hollywood drama.” She wiggled deeper into the couch. “But good wives will defer to their husbands.” She raised an expectant eyebrow.

I rolled a loose thread between my fingers. I was the oldest, and duty called. The Moys were respected, even if their son was odd as the number one. I should count myself lucky that it wouldn’t be a blind match. That might have worked for our parents, but this was a new age. “I will meet him, Ma.”

Maybe I had been born to the stage, because the dents that seemed to be a permanent part of Ma’s expression these days smoothed at last. A missing bottom tooth gave her soft smile character. “You can wear my marigold dress, but you’ll need to take in the waist.”

AFTER DINNER, I TOOK MA’S DRESS AND MY NOTIONS BASKET TO the abandoned apartment three doors down that I used as a sewing room. With the threat of Union Station looming for the past few years, the three other families who used to live on our floor had moved to mixed neighborhoods like East Adams as the landlord had failed to make necessary improvements. Why fix the roof of a condemned house? Ba didn’t want us to move—whether because of stubbornness or optimism, I wasn’t sure. When he left for the sanatorium, Ma elected that we should stay put so we could welcome him back to a familiar home.

“Evening, Stuff,” I greeted the dress form that Peony and her basketball crew had found in the old Mercantile lot. “You ever feel like you’re stuck in one place with no mind of your own?”

I fingered the tiny iridescent feather I'd recently pinned to the headless torso. "Sorry, of course you do."

Pushing aside the calico curtains I'd constructed from old bedsheets, I cracked the window that looked south toward Apablaza Street. Bing Crosby crooned from the boardinghouse of bachelors next door. Music was one reason I loved coming to this room. The other was to people watch, though most were already tucked away in their nooks.

I pulled a chair to the window and began ripping out a seam in Ma's marigold dress. In either direction a motley collection of old brick and yellow stucco buildings—and even a few wood structures—soaked up the last of the dusk. Still visible were the red pails Ba had installed on each doorstep. We filled the "cheer buckets" with our unsold flowers—Ba's idea for sprucing up our embattled strip of the world.

Bing's last note died out, and the sultry hit "Midnight Murderess," made famous by Lulu Wong's hit movie of the same name, began its rocking melody. My gaze floated to the iridescent feather, which had inexplicably shown up in our mailbox last week, along with a card that read, "Your turn for luck. Lulu."

Lulu had been two years ahead of me in school, but a school play had brought us together when I was nearly twelve, and she, fourteen. I played a fence, and she, a willow tree, which meant we did a lot of standing. After the play was over, she invited me to the two-room apartment where she lived with her ma and her younger sister. "Since I know you can make wood interesting, would you like to recite some plays with me?"

Two years later, we learned of an upcoming role for a Chinese girl in a movie. The "oriental" look had grown popular in the movie industry. Agents in big Cadillacs even trolled our streets for extras.

“Let’s audition,” she begged me, the signature tiger-charming mole on her cheek as bright as an evening star. “What do we have to lose?”

I looked at her in surprise. Though I’d loved the thrill of transforming into someone else on the makeshift stage of the Wongs’ small flat, the idea of doing so publicly put squirrely feelings in my stomach. Lots of folks considered girls in show business to be loose in morals, even hussies. Perhaps she didn’t care. She’d survived scandal before, after her no-account father took his delivery truck and lit out for Nevada when Lulu was twelve and her younger sister just learning her ABCs. But I could never bring shame to my family.

Before her audition, I gave her a tiny iridescent feather, which I’d found by the river, for luck.

Lulu’s rise to fame had been described as “meteoric.” By the time she was eighteen, she’d moved her ma and younger sister out of Chinatown, and now they all lived together in Beverly Hills with the other movie stars.

Maybe if I’d been so bold, we’d have more than rice and vegetables in our bowls and I wouldn’t have to worry about marrying Bug Boy.

“It must be very dull being a millionaire,” I told Stuffy.

Stuffy had no head, but I couldn’t help thinking she was laughing at me.

3

GEMMA



I STEPPED OUT OF OUR SHABBY STUCCO AND INHALED the Chinatown air, which smelled of fried dough, old cigarettes, incense, garbage, and mind-bustingly, the ocean, seventeen miles away. Ba said I had the nose of a bloodhound like him, useful in the flower trade. I sniffed again. There was something else. A thick layer of clouds seemed to pin down the sun, casting everything in gray. Maybe gray had a smell too.

Or maybe it was simply the scent of irritation lifting off May, who was managing to inspect me from head to toe without tripping, a frown marring her delicate face.

“For heaven sakes, at least let some day go by before getting fretty,” I griped.

“Tie it like this.” May showed me the knot on her blue neckerchief, a twin to mine.

As if that weren’t matchy enough, she had made us both jumpsuits of medium-blue oxford cloth, styled with rolled-up sleeves and cuffed pants and our short straw hats. She thought these new uniforms gave us a more professional look, and since I was working out how to pitch her my new idea, I didn’t complain.

At the Esteemed Friend planter, a three-foot-high strip filled with gardenias, we rubbed our hands across the brick Ba had inscribed with our Chinese names. Touching the brick was our

way of honoring our family. If a family is harmonious, all will be well.

We trekked toward the abandoned horse lot where May had made us paint the Mule last night. Apablaza Street hadn't yet woken up. But soon, the tofu seller would hang his FRESH TODAY! sign, the cobbler's hammer would start knocking, and the herbalist would pull out his wooden tub of longevity turtles, warning, "Watch your fingers!"

The weeds had grown long in the abandoned horse lot and looked like spirits rising from the grave. My ears perked up. At the far end of the lot, past hitching posts still swinging with rope, a strange buzzing seemed to be coming from the stables. Maybe it was the ghosts of vegetable sellers past. The area used to pulse with horses and people on their way to City Market.

I stamped my cold feet and coughed at my skittishness, hating the slipperiness of being afraid. One fear led to another, and soon you were skidding down a mountain. Life gave us plenty of opportunities to be afraid, and an equal number of chances to punch those fears in the nose.

An orange blur streaked by. I yelped, scaring a scream out of May.

The herbalist's tabby peered back at me, all head and little body. The man shaved the animal to keep down the fleas but allowed her to retain the hair on her head, "for dignity," though I thought it made her look like an overgrown dandelion. With a scowl in my direction, May pulled out her driving gloves.

The Mule still stunk of her new coat of emperor yellow. As May warmed the engine, her gaze rested on the basketball net Peony had nailed to the closest hitching post. "Poor Peony hasn't seen her basketball mates in a while."

None of us had time for leisure since Ba's illness. "You should

worry about your new mate, Bug Boy.” I’d been ribbing her ever since Ma brought him up. “At least you’ll have someone to kill the cockroaches . . . unless Wallace would rather chase you with them.”

May didn’t take the bait. “Maybe he won’t be as bad as we remember.”

“That is a very poor standard for a husband.”

Casting me a black look, she chugged us toward the farms on Valley Road. The uneven pavement jostled my bones, still sore from yesterday’s painting.

I groaned. “Please, May, drive as fast as possible so I can really feel those bumps.”

“Anytime you’d like to drive, I’m happy to trade places.”

I slid down into the bench seat. She knew I would rather paint a dozen trucks by myself than work all those gears and pedals. Ba had taught May but had fallen sick before teaching me. Had it not been for a quarter “tip” to the evaluator, I would’ve failed the road test. But maybe I would learn just so I didn’t have to hear May lord it over me.

The San Gabriel Mountains north of us were beginning to turn from purple to yellow, like someone had punched them. We motored by the county hospital and soon after arrived at the farm of one of our suppliers. Straight rows of blooms surrounded the adobe house in both directions, peppered with colorful geraniums, which was said to keep beetles off the other flowers.

Angel Barajas, a young farmer with a broad nose and a wide smile, moved piles of flowers from a wheelbarrow to our buckets. May and I slipped on work gloves and pitched in.

I plucked up a yellow mum, eyeballing the rows of its older brethren dying on the stalk. “Crisantemos?”

Angel’s smile pulled wider. “Sí, señorita.”

"You ever sell dead flowers?"

May grabbed two bunches of daisies, one under each arm. "Where are you going with this?" she asked me in Cantonese.

I polished up a smile. "Chinese people love drinking chrysanthemum tea."

"We're not in the tea business, sister," May sang through her clenched teeth, back to English. She was predisposed to not liking my ideas, especially ones involving new business ventures.

"But we could be," I sang back.

"Actually, we will have many dead flowers soon, and you're welcome to them. We're switching to all vegetables in the spring. I was just writing a letter to your papa."

"We'll be sorry to lose you," said May, surveying the man's neat fields.

Angel aired his hat. "Me as well. The problem with flowers is you can't eat them if no one buys."

"Of course." May gave him an encouraging smile, though I knew she was worried. Half of our suppliers had gone out of business in the last year alone. But we'd manage, somehow.

After securing the last of the flowers, we returned to our seats, and May gunned off before I had even grabbed the seat handles. Back to the abandoned horse lot we rumbled. We'd prep the stems there before taking them to City Market. Its closeness to home meant easy use of the facilities should we need them before heading out for the day's work.

My sister drove with her gaze tightly focused on the road, as if someone was pulling us along by a string connected to her nose. I knew she was worried about replacing Angel, but I also suspected I was getting dished a serving of silent pudding for my tea idea. At least I had ideas and didn't spend all my time fretting. I started whistling "Pop Goes the Weasel," the song with no end.

When she didn't respond, I did my other whistles—wolf, parrot, train, come-hither, I did them all.

"Stop that racket." The Mule bucked as if agreeing with May. "I wish you would take our situation more seriously. We just lost a grower, I have to marry Bug Boy, and you want to jump a train with an unknown destination. Dead chrysanthemums, indeed."

"Don't be a martyr for us. If you remember, I advised against Bug Boy. Wait until something better comes along. A rodent man, at least."

May took a swipe at me, but I dodged out of the way.

"If you want to block the marriage hand, you have to think bigger." I undid the knot in my kerchief and wiped the sweat off my brow. "Selling chrysanthemum tea might help get us through the winter."

"Who's going to buy it?" May blew the hair off her face. "The same poor Chinese who are already watering their porridge? Plus, we'd be stealing away Dai-Sang's business." She was so fired up, one bump in the road could rocket her into space. Pulling into the horse lot, she killed the engine. "You're always bossing me around without thinking through the consequences," she huffed, then stomped toward the cargo bed.

I met her on the other side. "You know what your problem is, May? You lack vision. White people drink tea too."

She guffawed. "Would you buy tea made by someone you think carries disease?"

"Did you not learn anything from Westlake Park?"

"Yes. That if you ever ask me to go there again, I'm running in the opposite direction." She began untying a bundle of old newspapers that we used to wrap bouquets.

"We sold all our flowers because we were as pretty as a picture, and you know it. Chinatown has an image problem. But I don't see

that anything can be done about it, as long as the press insists on giving people like Otis Fox their attention, and never us.”

I picked up the top newspaper, where a picture of the weasel holding up his fist accompanied the headline “Fox, on Behalf of Take Back L.A., Says ‘Chinatown Must Go!’”

I read aloud:

In a passionate speech to members of the city council, Fox claimed, “The Chinese are, by nature, drunken and slovenly, even their women. As a species, these messy goblins reek of mysterious odors and prefer their dark, labyrinthine alleyways so as to make their crimes and many hideous perversions harder to discover.”

“Well, how do you like that?” I asked.

“What?”

“*Hideous perversions.*” I showed her the paper, pointing at the words. “He must have seen the herbalist’s tabby.”

May shook her head and smiled. But then a fly buzzed near her face, and she took off her hat and swatted at it. Another swooped in, then sped toward the stables, where even more flies were buzzing. My gut whispered a warning. Peeling red paint and a wide, doorless entry gave the stables the look of a rotting carcass.

“They’re coming from there,” I said. The gray had lifted, but the place was still raising the hairs on my arms.

With a frown, May rehatred her head. “Let’s finish this and get moving.” Grabbing her clippers, she began trimming excess leaves into an empty bucket.

Children came here to play. If something foul had moved

in, we should find out. “Something’s wrong. I’m going to investigate.”

“An animal probably crawled in there to die. Don’t go in. We have work to do! Wait!”

I crossed the dirt lot toward the stables, weeds grabbing at my ankles. The wood building was long enough to house ten stalls on each side. We’d discovered a cat with kittens living in one of the stalls a few years ago, but Ma wouldn’t let us keep them, saying she had enough mouths to feed. Occasionally, vagrants would find their way into the building. But besides the flies, the place seemed spookily quiet.

I could feel May come up behind me. Dirt and gravel crunched underfoot as we crossed the threshold.

“I can’t believe you’re dragging me in here just to see a dead animal,” she muttered.

“I hope that’s all it is.” The reek of manure along with traces of sawdust and rotting wood made me sneeze four times in a row. *Four* in Cantonese sounded too much like the word for “death” and was very unlucky. There was something else too. That gray smell again.

May tugged at my sleeve. “Maybe we should just go.”

The flies were zipping around the stall farthest from the door to the left. I switched my gardening shears to a more defensive grip, just in case.

As I drew closer, I couldn’t help noticing footprints on the floor, which was covered by a fine layer of dirt. The prints were as large as Ba’s. A chill snaked up my arms, and I hugged myself.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, let’s just get this over with.” May, who had been trailing me, pulled me to the end stall. “See, it’s just—”

A scream exploded from her lips.



A WOMAN LAY SPRAWLED IN ONE CORNER OF THE STALL, her legs ending with oxford pumps. Pencil-thin black stripes ran the length of her cream suit. I forced my eyes to follow the lines, dreading who I would see. A tendril of hair down her left cheek pointed at a unique birthmark. A tiger-charming mole.

All the bones in my spine seemed to shake loose. It was . . . Lulu. I shrieked, a hair-raising noise I'd never made before, but I couldn't stop it.

Gemma grabbed me. "Shh, May, be calm."

"Oh, ancestors," I babbled, tears coming. "She's, she's—"

"Yes, dead," Gemma said in a tight voice as we clutched at each other.

I couldn't look away, caught by Lulu's eyes, wide open in shock. They suggested she had not died naturally. I whipped around, as if the killer might still be here, watching us. But there was no one, only a dry and empty nothingness. Even my shrill screams had been sucked away.

On-screen, Lulu had always appeared sophisticated. Mature. But now, save for her faded lipstick, her delicate face with its high cheekbones was bare and almost childlike, framed by her short, waved hairstyle. Her mouth was pursed, as if blowing out a kiss.

My knees nearly gave out at the oddness of her expression,

and a sour taste coated my mouth. *No, no, no. Not you, my old friend. Oh, Lulu, what are you doing here?*

A memory of her playing dead on the pine stage of our school-house superimposed itself over the vision in front of me. She'd relaxed all her muscles, even her tongue, so that she really did look tragically corpse-like, save for a youthful bloom over her cheeks.

She'd popped up from the floor so suddenly that I'd jumped back, nearly falling. "Okay, now you play dead."

This time, there was no acting. She wouldn't be getting up ever again.

A fly landed on her lip, and a shudder ran through me. Gemma caught me before I fell, pulling me back to the stable door. "Come on, we've got to call for help. Mr. Yam has the closest phone."

I stumbled to the exit on legs as unfeeling as two sticks of white radish. The morning sun hurt my eyes, the earlier haze having burned away. "How long do you think she's been there?" I gasped, feeling my stomach bucking.

Gemma shook her head. "I don't know. But when I think back, I remember the buzzing from earlier. I didn't know it was the flies then. I wasn't even sure it was a real sound."

My flat Mary Janes sounded too heavy on the pavement. The iridescent feather floated into my mind, sent only a week ago. *Your turn for luck*, she had written. I hadn't yet replied. Guilt flooded me. If I had gotten in touch with her, would things have been different? Who had brought her so low?

A rising panic was closing my throat, and I forced myself to breathe. "Poor Lulu. How could this happen? Her poor mother."

"And Bettina," Gemma muttered, referring to Lulu's little sister, one of Peony's classmates. She hadn't "fit in" well at her local

school, so she'd returned to our school in Chinatown. "Buck up, sis. I know you were friends, but we can't fall apart yet." She handed me a hankie, and I dabbed my wet eyes, for once glad for her take-charge manner. With a glance back at the stables, she pulled me along over gravel that crunched like bones. "Should we call the police?"

"Of course we should call the police."

"Like *they* ever help," Gemma griped.

I grimaced, remembering how the police were supposed to investigate the vandalism of several Chinese businesses last year but dropped the case when the businesses couldn't cough up enough funds to keep them interested. "Even if they don't like us, they'll have to do something. She's famous. If we don't report it, they might think we had something to do with it."

Gemma scowled. "It's just, this is going to rain hell down on us. I just know it."

"What do you mean?"

"Chinatown already has one foot in the grave. The Foxes of the world are going to use this to push us all the way in."

All the gloomy possibilities began to take shape in front of me. People already believed Chinatown to be mysterious and sinister. Proponents of Union Station certainly played up that angle. Whatever last efforts were being pitched by the railroads—not to preserve our homes, but to save their pocketbooks—would be ripped away.

I focused on putting one foot in front of the other as we hurried to One Dragon Grocery, a hundred paces from the horse lot. The store's faded bricks all seemed to be leaning to one side. Had they always been that way? Even the flowers we'd put in Mr. Yam's cheer bucket all appeared to be crooked in one direction. For a moment, I almost believed Lulu's murder had caused the

ground here to shift. But even if the earth was sound, a howling wind had blown through Chinatown, wreaking damage that would be felt for a long time. Maybe forever.

The scent of red flower liniment drifted from the entrance, where a knee-high statue of a stone dragon stood guard. Mr. Yam, the grocer, was always up early. Inside, his spindly form arranged sacks of rice, a lick of black hair all that remained on his even scalp.

"Mr. Yam!" panted Gemma. "It's an emergency. We need your phone."

He unbent himself, his joints popping and creaking. His eyes were the gray of old spoons. "Come in, come in." He gestured to the telephone on his counter.

Gemma picked the receiver off its candlestick base and dialed. "Operator, please connect me to the Central Police Department." She fingered a basket full of haw flake candies; the small red cylinder packages looked like tiny firecrackers. "Hello? . . . Yes, someone has died. We think she was murdered." Her voice trembled and she cleared her throat. Mr. Yam fumbled the pot of tea he was pouring, spilling it onto the counter. "Yes, *murdered*." Gemma glared at the plank floors. "Please come quick. We're at Apablaza Street by the horse lot . . . My name? It's Gemma Chow."

Mr. Yam pushed two cups toward us, then clutched his arms around him.

We nodded our thanks, though my hands shook so badly, I dared not lift mine.

"Was it anyone we knew?" Mr. Yam licked his thin lips.

"Lulu Wong," I whispered.

"Oh. It couldn't be." His breath fell out of him, and he looked on the verge of falling.

If I hadn't seen her with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it either. She had been so full of life, of promise. No one ever expected she would go into show business, the soft-spoken girl whose dresses always fit too large on her boyish frame. But I knew.

"What was Lulu Wong doing here?" Mr. Yam leaned back against the pile of rice sacks, his thin face heavy with dismay.

"Maybe visiting someone?" Gemma blew distractedly at her tea.

I frowned, rubbing my clammy palms against my pants. Lulu ran with a different crowd nowadays. I had been the closest to her, and even I hadn't kept in touch. "Maybe she came to shop for her mother?"

Mr. Yam frowned. "If so, she would've stopped here. Wong Tai put in an order for more red flower liniment and hasn't picked it up yet."

A police siren wailed from the direction of Alameda to the west, sounding annoyed, as if the hand cranking it were doing so reluctantly.

"Excuse me, girls, I must wake up Mrs. Yam." The grocer stepped around a wooden barricade that marked a crumbling spot on the ceiling, then disappeared up the stairs to his living quarters. Mr. Yam and his wife were like the sun and the moon, one early to rise, the other, late.

Gemma and I set off back toward the horse lot, me dragging my feet again, but not due to numbness. I didn't want to see Lulu like that again, dehumanized. A victim. It was bad enough that someone had killed her. I pinched my neck, thoughts of her suffering threatening to shatter me. A second death would come in the form of scandal, her twisted body held up for viewing like some circus sideshow, her fame recast as a cautionary tale. They would kill her twice.

People had begun to appear on balconies or from the doors of the lodging houses lining the street. A black cruiser with a boxy top pulled up. Its window rolled down, and the crackling noise of a police dispatcher filtered through. A man peered at us from the stingy shade of his porkpie hat. His face had the unenthusiastic droop of one not easily amused. He draped an elbow over the window, his peanut-shaped nose flaring. "You the one who called?"

"Yes," said Gemma. "Officer . . ."

"*Detective Mallady.*"

"Detective Mallady. I'm Gemma Chow, and this is my sister May."

I nodded at the man. Beyond him, a young officer in uniform sat at the wheel, his gaze darting around him.

"The victim is Lulu Wong," Gemma stated simply in her no-nonsense business voice. Thank goodness for her levelheadedness. My own head felt as jumbled as a tangle of blooms. "We found her right up here in the stables."

The young officer parked behind the Mule. As Detective Mallady exited the car, his seat cushion groaned, and the door uttered the kind of unpleasant noise not made in polite company. Even his car didn't want to be here. He nodded to our truck. "That yours?"

The Mule looked cheerfully out of place in the drab setting. "Yes," said Gemma.

Mallady pulled his trousers higher over his thick middle. His broad shoulders caused his rust-colored suit to bunch, though better posture and a good ironing could help. "Chow's Flowers. What are you doing here at this time of day? Shouldn't you be out selling those?"

"We always stop here before City Market to prep the flowers," Gemma said easily.

Mallady frowned at me. I showed him the clippers I had stored in my pocket. The door slammed, and his partner emerged from the car, a wide-eyed man in his early twenties. He assessed us with the nervousness of a pigeon on the lookout for cats, his shiny new badge throwing around glints of sunlight. "So who's Lulu Wong?"

Gemma rolled her eyes. "She's a movie star."

The young officer scratched at his cheeks, which had the red, bumpy look of a recent shave.

Mallady snorted. "Come on, Officer Kidd. Let's see what we've got. You two, stay here."

Kidd withdrew a baton from his belt and followed Mallady across the dirt yard.

"Let's go," said Gemma, setting off after them.

I planted my feet. "But they said to stay here."

"But we're the ones who found her. And I don't trust them to do a good job. Mallady looks like he'd rather be anywhere else, and that Officer Kidd looks newly minted."

I didn't move, as if I could stop this horror from continuing by standing still. "Who would want to kill her?" I finally voiced. "Who would do such a thing?" Lulu might've had her share of on-screen enemies—she was always cast as the villain—but off camera, she had been caring and warm. Sometimes, instead of reciting plays, we'd read the dailies posted on the news wall on Alameda to the elderly and the illiterate.

"I'm just as upset as you. But we owe it to Lulu to keep an eye on matters. We need to make sure justice is served, don't you see? She might've been a somebody when she was alive, but now, who knows?" Gemma gazed up at me, her face as earnest as a daisy.

Worry trapped my breath in my chest. Lulu's wealth and fame

would give the investigation a push. But for how long and how far? In the end, she was just a dead Chinese woman, without even a father to speak for her. Would she matter enough? I said a prayer and nodded. Lulu was gone, and I could not afford to stay in this moment. She needed us. Plus, though Gemma might be bolder, she was also more foolish, and it was my duty to keep folly's hand off her.

The scent of incense drifted by from one of the bachelor buildings, and my mind floated back to when I had seen Lulu six months ago at the White Horse joss house. After she'd nabbed her first role at age sixteen, I hadn't seen her much, and then not at all when she'd moved to Beverly Hills. I'd just refilled the gold bowls in the main temple with fresh camellia—something Ba made us do every week. In the adjacent ancestral hall, a figure in a dark jacket and a silk head scarf bowed at the altar. Leaving her to her privacy, I exited to the courtyard, which featured a fountain centered by a horse.

"May?" The woman had followed me. She pushed back her scarf.

"Lulu? How are you?" I set down my bucket, reaching out to embrace her, then pulling back. Now that she was a big star, perhaps it was inappropriate.

To my surprise, she pulled me close, placing a kiss on my cheek. "I'm well." Her smooth brow with its straight hairline furrowed. "You are a hard person to reach." Her voice, huskier than most girls, seemed to have ripened into a fine rice wine, sweet and rich with honey notes.

I murmured an apology, remembering a call I hadn't returned and a letter I'd written but never mailed. Somehow, I'd convinced myself that her new life didn't leave room for her old one.

"I think about you often, May. I miss our times together. Ma asks why you never come around."

My expression fell, hating that I'd disappointed a woman who'd always welcomed me. "I am sorry," I mumbled. "Time just got away from me. Hollywood must be exciting." I bit my tongue, realizing how foolish that sounded. "I mean, all the people you must be meeting."

"I didn't love it at first." She wended her scarf around her arm. "I was being treated like a circus pony, trotted out, petted, and fawned over. But I got tired of other people holding the reins. So I took them back. Act like you have power, and you just might get it."

"Okay," I replied, though I wasn't sure what she was talking about.

"I'll call you next week. We'll get French dips." She pretended to clamp a cigar at the side of her mouth and waggled her eyebrows.

I laughed. "Of course." We had dreamed of ordering French dip sandwiches at a diner near Chinatown, though I couldn't imagine the gossip that would be provoked by the sight of us eating together, the famous Lulu with the ordinary May. People might think she felt sorry for me or, worse, that I was trying to elevate my own status.

Those thoughts seemed so petty now.

I forced my limbs to follow Gemma toward the stables. Creeping inside, we stopped behind the first stall. At the last stall, Kidd was writing on a notepad.

Mallady stood beside him, his hands on his hips. "Definitely rigor mortis." His voice echoed off the walls. "Look at her neck, fingers, limbs. That puts the time of death in the last six to twelve hours. If it was a murder, whoever did it would be long gone." He

swatted a meaty hand at the flies, then bent down. "There's a cut on the side of her head."

The word *murder* slithered around my head like a water eel among the lotuses.

"You think that's what did her in?" Kidd's pencil paused.

"Who knows," Mallady grumbled. "I don't see any other marks. Could be poison."

"Like Dixie Doors."

Gemma glanced at me, her eyes large. Dixie Doors was a local beauty pageant winner from Glendale who the police had found murdered in a local park last year. The police never did catch the killer.

"Dixie Doors was strychnine," said Mallady. "This doesn't look like strychnine. Ah well, let the medical examiner figure it out."

Kidd was back to scratching his cheeks. "But what's a dame like that doing here? I wouldn't bring my horse to this dump if I owned one."

"Maybe meeting a lover, a tryst like."

Gemma's eyes flicked to the ceiling, and she shook her head. When I'd known her, Lulu had been a dutiful and virtuous daughter. I couldn't imagine her skulking around in old stables meeting lovers.

"Yeah, look at her lips." Kidd's voice had gone high, and he started shaking out his legs as if he were preparing to make a run for it. "It's like she was waiting for a kiss."

Gemma clicked her tongue in annoyance. Mallady glanced over at us, his aluminum-colored eyes crimping. "I thought I told you to wait outside."

"We just want to help solve her murder." Gemma strode right up to the last stall, with me at her heels. The sight of Lulu's

frozen face with her kissing lips sucked the air from me. The cut Mallady had mentioned was visible, a spot of dried blood above her left ear that I wouldn't have noticed without his having pushed her hair aside. Something red—blood?—smudged her right sleeve near the wrist of her cream pantsuit. Had she attempted to wipe the blood from the cut with her right sleeve? She was right-handed, but that was a long way to stretch. Surely she would've just used her left sleeve. My gaze fretted about on her silk pantsuit with its stylish wide trousers. Who had she been going to see?

Mallady crossed his arms, reminding me off a grumpy sandstone pillar. "If it is murder. She could've just wandered in here drunk, fell over, and hit her head."

Gemma snorted loudly. "If you knew her, you would know that Lulu wandering in here drunk is as likely as her flying in with wings. She was Buddhist and didn't drink."

"I'm a Catholic, but that doesn't stop me from sinning," said Mallady.

"Besides, we were here painting our truck last night until sundown," Gemma added with impatience. "We didn't see a soul."

"Write that down," ordered Mallady, and Kidd scribbled in his notebook. "She a friend of yours?" Mallady's mouth twitched to one side.

"Yes, we knew her," I answered.

"Yeah? How?"

"Lulu was two years above me in school," I said, willing my voice not to quaver. Kidd's pencil scratched the silence. "She left school to be an actress. She is well known for her role in *Midnight Murderess*."

Kidd looked up from his notebook. "I saw *Midnight Murderess*. That was her? She was evil, the way she painted her face and

scared all those men to death.” He shuddered, glanced back at Lulu, and shuddered again. “Girl like her must have had a string of boyfriends.”

Gemma scoffed. “Movies are not real life.”

The detective steered his grouchy face to me. “You know anyone who had it out for her?”

“No,” I replied stiffly. It felt wrong to be talking about her while she was stretched out in the corner, attended to only by flies. “We were all happy for her success.”

Mallady pulled off his hat, whose indentation had marked his face with a second frown. “I suppose it could’ve been a robbery. Love and greed are the biggest troublemakers in my business. She had money, didn’t she? I don’t see a purse anywhere.”

“I certainly hope you won’t let that stop you from finding the killer.” Gemma’s jaw clenched, and her arms spooled tight around her. “He should be hanged and quartered.”

Mallady raised an eyebrow, and for the first time, his face took on a glint of interest. “We’ll find the *truth*, don’t worry.”

The word *truth* batted around in front of us like a moth.

Gemma’s mouth buckled, as if trying to cage all the doubts piling up behind it.

“May? Gemma?” Mr. Yam poked his head into the stables along with the Filipino cigar maker and the herbalist.

I lifted a hand in greeting. “We’re here, Mr. Yam.”

“Good Lord, the townspeople have arrived,” Mallady muttered. He raised his voice. “Folks, this is a crime scene. Girls, let’s go. Kidd, call an ambulance. Then rope off this area. There goes my morning.”

“Yes, sir.” Kidd hurried after his boss, who was already halfway to the exit. I got the impression that the junior officer was only too happy to move on to more mundane matters.

Gemma began to follow them, but Lulu's anguished face beckoned to me. Swallowing my revulsion, I drew closer, lowering myself. Through the small hole made by her lips, I could see that some of her dark red lipstick had rubbed off onto her front teeth. "I wish you could tell us what happened," I whispered.

"Let's go, May." Gemma held out a hand. I was about to take it. But then a ray of sunlight from the broken roof crept over Lulu's head, and something glinted beneath her black waves. My finger trembled as I pushed aside her hair. She was wearing gold earrings.

"Look." I showed Gemma. "If the motive was greed, wouldn't they have taken these?"

Gemma's eyes went as big as moons, and she bent closer. "They're cranes. See the long legs?"

I slowly nodded. In Chinese culture, the birds represented longevity. But they also signified long-lasting love and fidelity. Cranes stayed with one partner for life. "So who did Lulu love?"

5

GEMMA



AN AMBULANCE CARTED LULU AWAY TO THE *TSK TSK* OF cameras. While reporters for the *Observer First*, *L.A. Daily*, and *Chinatown News* collected stories, I did my best to assure our shocked neighbors, despite my own sawed-off nerves. Their conversations pelted me from all directions.

“Bad luck will follow,” said someone.

“Who could’ve done such a thing?”

“Chinese haters. They are coming for us all.”

“Hush. Disaster follows from careless talk.”

That last bit was spoken by our stately herbalist Dai-Sang, one of Chinatown’s respected leaders, whose tall face always harbored a deep thought.

May floated around like she was a Goodyear Blimp, only air holding her up. The shock had been especially great for her, as she had known Lulu the best. I remembered one wretched winter when our whole family except May had come down with influenza. With us all half-delirious, May snuck out to sell some of Ba’s inventory in her handbasket. Lulu, then fifteen, offered to help. The two took the streetcar to the newly opened Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, where they sold the blooms to tourists.

Both mothers had been as mad as boiled owls when they’d found out.

For the thousandth time since Ba had been gone, I wished he was here. People always came to him when they had trouble because he always knew what to say and do. Once, I'd broken May's new scissors trying to cut off a stick of sugarcane. She was mad enough to stab me with them. After making me apologize, Ba showed us both how to repair the scissors with a new pivot screw. What would he do in this situation?

Well, one thing he would *not* do is break into hysterical fits.

After helping Mr. Yam organize a "comfort committee" to check in on Lulu's mother, including collections for a gift basket, May and I finally processed our flowers. I shook my limbs loose. I'd been holding myself as tight as a trussed duck, as if I could keep all the bad energy, like gasoline fumes, from seeping in.

"Let's donate these to the hospital." May tied twine around the last bunch of daisies. "By the time we get to City Market, it'll be close to noon. And this day has wrung me out." She *was* looking as green as a cabbage leaf around the edges.

I held my tongue, not ready to surrender our flowers. Though noon was closing time at the market, whoever had murdered poor Lulu would not take our wages too. Not if I could help it. And selling flowers was better than brooding at home over the cruelty of the world.

"Fine," I said amiably. "I'll deliver them. You go home and keep an eye on Ma." I wiped off my tools and tucked them into an old potholder, trying not to look suspicious. If May knew I was planning to sell again at Westlake Park, she might feel compelled to tell Ma, who didn't need another thing to worry about. Ignorance served all.

May leveled her gaze at me. "But you don't drive. I'll come with you."

"I don't drive because I'd rather *you* do it. Anyway, I do have

my license.” I jutted my chin. Hadn’t I resolved to learn just a few hours ago?

Before she could disagree, I quickly maneuvered into the driver’s seat. Home was only a short walk away, but May slid into the passenger’s side and cast me a thorny gaze, judging me in the way only she could do. “First, let’s see if you can make it the two blocks to home.”

I switched on the key and pressed the starter. The Mule made sounds like she was trying to cough up a hairball.

May pressed a finger to her temple. “You forgot the choke. Start again.”

“Right.” I turned off the starter, this time remembering to release the choke valve and jiggle the timing lever before trying again. I lifted the throttle, and with a *vroom*, the Mule bucked, snapping back both our necks.

Two dents like rabbit ears appeared between May’s eyebrows. “This is a bad idea. The point is to bring the flowers to the hospital, not wind up in the hospital.”

“Stop worrying. I’ll never get better at driving if I don’t just do it, and I don’t need you looking over my shoulder. In fact, I was planning on cruising around afterward, to practice my left turns. I’ll be home before dinner.”

“You’re up to something.”

“Am not.” How did she always know?

May sagged against the seat. “Whatever you say. I’m too tired to argue. Wiggle. You’re wasting gas.”

I parked in front of our dingy building, then followed May up the stairs to our apartment. “Just need some peanuts,” I told her frowning face.

Inside, Ma had started scrubbing the floor, even though we had done it this weekend. Chores were her way of working off

anxious energy. May pulled out one of the kitchen chairs. “Ma, come sit. I’ll finish that.”

Ma relinquished her brush to May. “It could’ve been one of you. What if it had been?”

“It wasn’t,” said May.

I ducked into the room I shared with my sisters and grabbed my tube of lipstick. Returning to the living room, I headed for the door.

“Gemma?” May’s voice was stern.

Somehow, she had seen through my jumpsuit pocket to the lipstick hidden inside. I lifted my chin. “Yes?”

“I thought you wanted peanuts.” Her eyes patted me down for clues.

I coughed. “Yes, I did.” Fetching a handful from the sack on the counter, I hurried back outside, trying not to step on my own tail again.

Soon, I was back on the road. I nudged the Mule to a jogging pace, which was fast enough for me. A horn honked from behind. “Move faster, you road hog!” the driver yelled.

I threw out a hand and gestured for him to pass. “Go around, flower hater!” He couldn’t hear me, but it felt good to yell back.

I bumped the curb on a right turn, and the dark archway of the Second Street Tunnel came into focus. The Mule sputtered and kicked up a fuss, as if trying to dissuade me from the path I was set on. Ignoring her, I drew in a deep breath and held it, letting Bunker Hill swallow me.

When May and I were kids, we’d heard that if you held your breath in a tunnel and made a wish, the wish would come true. We tried it out, wishing for the poundcake being raffled for the school benefit, and won. We’d been holding our breath in tunnels ever since.

As the Second Street Tunnel chugged by, I crammed in as many wishes as I could: for Lulu's killer to be caught, for Ba to come home soon, for Union Station to be stopped, for juicy roast duck. A small man, Ba had always had a big appetite when it came to roast duck, and he'd passed it down to me.

The car in front of me slowed unexpectedly, and my lungs clamored for oxygen. But I refused to let all those wishes go, even though May would say I had wished for "more than my allotment" and they wouldn't count anyway. According to her, we could only make one wish per tunnel pass. We'd always played by different rules.

At last, sunlight poured over me, and I sucked in great gobs of air all the way to the park.

The ornery Mule kicked again, maybe to protest our destination.

"Life is a gamble, you nag. Maybe we'll get lucky again."

Pulling into the driveway by the boathouse, I slowed to a crawl, hoping to creep by the café diners and afternoon strollers as noiselessly as possible. It occurred to me I should've wished for a hassle-free afternoon. If I ran into those two coppers from the last visit, they might not be so forgiving this time. Echo Park lay a couple miles north and drew rich people, just like Westlake. Sure, it was sometimes closed due to its popularity as a movie backdrop, but why not check? No need to take unnecessary risks even when gambling.

I was just passing the spot where we'd set up previously when the Mule backfired, causing nearby pedestrians to startle and back away. A terrier yipped frantically at me. Then, with an ear-splitting bang as if someone had fired the fatal bullet to end her suffering, the Mule let out a whine and died.

"No," I wailed. Wrenching the wheel, which now felt frozen,

to the side, I used the truck's last bit of momentum to pull it off the road, braking when I felt the wheels hit the curb. The Mule came to rest in a spot next to a large garbage can. There was no cool palm tree to rest under, not even a fig leaf of shade. "Come on, girl. I didn't mean to call you a nag." I reset all the gears, then tried to start again from scratch.

Nothing.

On the bright side, at least I wasn't blocking the road. But now I'd be the one having to walk a quarter mile to the boathouse to find a telephone. That didn't seem quite fair, even though it probably was. I imagined May's face when she learned what I had done. Worse, our mother's face, already puffy with water retention. Well, if I had to suffer their looks of dismal disappointment, I wouldn't do it empty-handed.

Applying Noir Red, I set up shop and wrote out prices on our chalkboard. The Monday crowd was thinner than Saturday's, and not as free with their money. Or maybe I was driving them away with my distracted salesmanship, twitching like a pigeon every time I thought I saw the permit police.

After three hours, I'd only made two dollars. It was better than nothing, but not enough to ward off the trouble headed my way if May found out I'd lied to her again. But I was getting tired of standing in the sun. Plus, the heat seemed to be lifting the scent of duck droppings off the pavement and serving them to my nose. There were downsides to having a good sniffer.

I packed up. Time to find a telephone booth. I fished the key out and tried the engine one last time, as if I could surprise the Mule into action. Nothing happened. Sighing heavily, I dropped the key into my purse, though I wondered why I bothered. As far as I was concerned, if anyone could revive this dead horse, they deserved her.

I hiked down the footpath, carrying a basket of the choicest flowers, just in case I encountered customers along the way. Fortune favored the prepared, after all.

My feet had begun to swell, and the narrow toes of my black boots were pinching. The lapping of the water as boaters paddled by—ordinarily a soothing sound—today stirred the contents of my stomach, and my head felt too hot and heavy. I took off my hat and fanned myself. Lulu's grim face appeared in my head. She had been twenty-one. I hoped the newspapers would be kind.

"Fancy seeing you here again." A man's voice lifted my head from his polished shoes to his face, finely crafted like a violin. My feet slowed, recognizing the young man who'd bought the showstopper. A sleek fedora that looked as if it'd been made of steel sheeting topped his head at the perfect jaunty angle. Dark eyes that never needed to glance away rolled over me.

"Fancy that." I moved around him, but he sidestepped in front of me, bringing his chin to my eye level. I would never go out with a man with a pointed chin, which indicated someone who must always have his way. In fact, thanks to our ba, who often treated us as the sons he never had, I could not think of a single thing I needed a man for. Well, except having babies, and I wasn't a baby-raising sort.

The chin jerked behind me toward the Mule. "Business must be slow if you've got to peddle your wares by foot. Course, that makes it harder to sell those obscenely expensive purple monstrosities."

I managed a tight smile. "I'm so glad your mother-in-law liked her orchid. If you don't mind—"

He tugged at his gold cravat, a perfect contrast with his crisp gray suit. It was a pity May was not here to admire it. She'd iron her hat if she could.

"My girlfriend's mother, you mean. Well, yes, she loved it. But I doubt it'll make it to the other side of this week with her black thumb. She even kills dried herbs."

Guilt pinched me in the side. *Shake it off. The showstopper is just a plant, and no longer your concern.* "Tell her to keep it in the shade and mist it frequently. It's tropical."

"The humane thing would have been to leave it in the tropics instead of siccing desert dwellers on it."

"If you're trying to get a refund, I'm sorry, but all sales are final. Now, if you don't mind, I need to find a telephone booth. And your girlfriend must be looking for you."

"She's not here today. Who are you needing to call?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

"Suit yourself." He tipped his hat to me, then stepped aside.

Rolling back my shoulders, I marched on. The boathouse with its colorful umbrella shades lay another fifty paces away.

"By the way, there's no telephone booth at the boathouse."

I stopped and looked back at him smugly watching me. "Where's the nearest one, then?"

He shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest."

I grimaced, my basket creaking under my arm. This was a fine pickle. Well, I would just have to head toward the main boulevards and see if I could find a booth. Or maybe this fellow was playing a trick on me and there actually *was* a telephone at the boathouse.

"Seems to me, if you needed to use a telephone, you would've driven your jalopy to the boathouse, and since you didn't, perhaps you are having some transportation issues. Am I right?" He threw me an unsettling, triumphant grin, like a demon who had tricked me out of my soul.

Was I hallucinating? My knees trembled. I must have a touch

of heatstroke. "That's quite a deduction, Sherlock. How hard it must be for your neck to support such a big head. Goodbye." I had more important things to attend to than arguing with this dandy. I set off again toward the boathouse, just to look like I was going somewhere. But, damnable pinching shoes, my foot missed its step, and I felt myself stumble. I caught myself, but the world seemed to be spinning.

A hand caught me by the elbow. "Easy, miss." The man relieved me of the basket. The smugness had left his face.

"I am fine." I shook off his hand and tried not to sway. "It's just . . . the heat."

"It's not even eighty degrees. When's the last time you drank anything?"

I snorted, though my mouth was parched. "Why? Are you a doctor, in addition to a detective?"

"Correct. Dr. Frederick Winter. I think you are dehydrated."

I squinted at him, but it was hard to focus.

His face drew closer, searching mine like a beggar looking for change. "Come on, Miss—er, what is your name?"

"Just Gemma."

"Gemma. Let's get you something to drink. How about you wait on that bench, and I will fetch a refreshment."

"I am not in the habit of trusting men who have accused me of fleecing them."

He frowned. "I can assure you that, as a doctor, I have taken an oath to do no harm, so you have nothing to fear from me unless you're planning to force me to buy your flowers again."

He helped me to a bench in the shade of a magnolia and set my basket beside me. Then he made his way to the boathouse, somehow covering the distance in less than a minute without looking like he was in a hurry.

With my bottom planted, the world stopped shifting about so much. Maybe it *was* dehydration. I hadn't drunk anything since this morning's tea.

A couple of women walking a poodle cast me snooty looks. Even their poodle bared its teeth at me. I never liked dogs, after a policeman's Doberman pinscher tried to take a bite out of my leg after my sixth birthday.

As the women swept by, one whispered loud enough for me to hear, "Who does she think *she* is?"

I lowered my eyes, shame breathing fire on my neck, and the women passed.

This was what fruit mold felt like. Fruit mold couldn't help where it planted itself. It was just trying to live its life, like everyone else. I loosened my boots. The breeze through my thin socks felt as heavenly as summer rain, and magically, the throbbing in my head lessened.

So Freddie was a *doctor*. I hadn't figured the blueblood for a working man, let alone a healer. No wonder he helped me. It would look bad for his reputation if he didn't.

In short order, the man returned with two glasses of lemonade and slid onto the bench beside me.

"Thank you." I drank thirstily, the icy goodness pouring through me. I hardly noticed when he took my wrist and felt for my pulse. I snatched my hand away.

He took my empty glass and passed me the second one. "This is for you too." He pulled a paper bag from his pocket. "Shortbread?"

"Is this usually part of your service?"

"Only for the patients who need sweetening." Before I could think of a snappy response, he asked, "Have you been dehydrated before?"

I scoffed. "You make it sound like I did it on purpose. I happen to be a fan of water."

"Your sister's not here today. Where is she?"

"She wasn't feeling good. Why does it matter?"

"Is she ill?"

"Not exactly." I fed myself a cookie, reluctant to tell him about Lulu's death. We didn't need his sympathy, even though I seemed to have no problem enjoying his charity. But he *was* a stranger. And strange men who came in his particular shade did not have a good history when it came to women in mine. Then again, he did just go out of his way to help me. And he was a doctor; perhaps he would have some insight into how Lulu had died. I washed my mouthful down with more lemonade and focused on a mallard putting around in the water. "We witnessed something horrible this morning." As briefly as possible, I told him.

The smooth planes of his face turned grim. "Poor Lulu Wong. She didn't deserve that." He gripped his knees and stared hard at the lake.

"You knew her?"

"We ran in similar circles, yes." He blew out a breath. "Well, that explains it."

"What?"

"You're still in a bit of a shock. Your skin's clammy, your pulse is elevated, and you're dizzy enough to fall over, all made worse by not drinking. Good news is, you're on your way to recovery."

A truck rumbled up the driveway with ABE'S AUTO SERVICES painted on the side. Freddie hailed the driver and went to speak with him, then pointed to the Mule, a few hundred paces away. The driver motored toward the Mule, and Freddie returned to me.

"Who was that?"

"I took the liberty of calling one of my patients. He owns an auto shop. He can fix anything, even old jalopies. Feeling okay to walk?" Setting the glasses in my basket, he picked it up, then offered his arm. I ignored it. I did not like the idea of taking any more assistance from him than I needed. "I thought you said there wasn't a telephone at the boathouse."

"No public telephone. They let me use their private line."

My cheeks pinked. He knew they wouldn't have let someone like me use the private line. "Thank you. What is his rate?" I only had five dollars. Usually, we'd get car fanatic Moses in Chinatown to help us with repairs for the reduced rate of Ma's famous scallion pancakes.

"Forget it. He owes me."

"But then I will owe you."

"I can't take money from a damsel in distress. It's against my principles."

"I bet you see plenty of damsels in distress in your work as a physician. How do you stay in business?"

"As long as I can avoid the flower sellers, I do okay."

"Well, it's against my principles to owe a debt." Especially to someone like him. One moment, he was vexing me as if for sport, and the next, hovering like a nurse maid.

"I'm afraid, then, we are at an impasse." He walked as stiff as a telephone pole beside me.

"Say, could I interest you in a truckload of flowers? You only gave your girlfriend a dozen last time, when a true gent would've gotten her a dozen dozens."

A smile tugged at his mouth, and he shook his head as if hoping to dislodge it. "If it makes you feel better, I will take them to my clinic across the street."

"It does."

We reached the Mule, where Abe, a neatly combed young man with his name stitched on his army-green jumpsuit, had already started working under the hood. He nodded at me. "Miss. Looks like you have a bad fuel pump. Take me a second to replace it."

"Thank you, sir."

Freddie gestured to the driver's seat, and I slid in. He took his off his jacket, taking the time to fold it neatly over his arm before wandering to the engine where Abe was tinkering.

Lulu's face appeared in my head again, flies landing on her skin, the bizarre mask that would be her last.

"Gemma? Are you alright?" Freddie was peering in from the passenger side. My knuckles had gone white from gripping the steering wheel.

I released the wood. "Yes. Er, as a doctor, you must have seen many, er, dead people."

All his hard angles seemed to soften. He scooted into the passenger seat and leaned back, causing his hat to tip up. "Yes, I have. I even interned with the coroner's office for a few months."

"She had a small cut on her head above the ear, but not much blood. Is it possible to die from an injury like that?"

He blew out a breath. "Sure, if the blow occurred at the right angle and velocity. Bleeding inside the brain can cause pressure that can be fatal." His eyes were the walnut brown of a good writing desk. "The medical examiner should be able to figure that out. He'll do a thorough examination, including toxicology reports."

"You mean, to find out if she was poisoned."

He nodded.

"Detective Mallady said it probably wasn't strychnine." From Dixie Doors's death, we'd all learned that strychnine was an

excruciating way to die, and the thought that Lulu might have similarly suffered had been worrying me. “How would he know that?”

“Strychnine shuts off motor control. The resulting spasms can contort the body in an unnatural way, perhaps freeze the face in a grimace or a clenched jaw. Eventually the muscles tire so that they can no longer draw breath, and”—his eyes traveled to my face—“well, let’s just say, the detective is probably right. I’d recommend letting the wheels of justice turn. The truth will come out.”

A river of anger coursed through me. Sure, the wheels of justice turned for some, but others they just ran right over. Lulu Wong was wealthy, but she had also been Chinese. Which part mattered in the end?