CHAPTER 1

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

"What did you say?"

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

"A ghost bride, Li Lan."

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

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

"Who asked?"

"The Lim family."

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

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

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

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

Lim Tian Ching was someone I had seen perhaps once or twice at some

festival. Apart from the name of his wealthy clan, he had left no impression at all. "Surely he was very young?"

"Not much older than you, I believe."

"What did he die of?"

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

"And they want me to marry him?"

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

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

"Yes, it is you that they want."

"Why me?"

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

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

I was about to ask when my father said, "What, you don't want to be a widow at almost eighteen? Spend your life in the Lim mansion wearing silk? But you probably wouldn't be allowed any bright colors." He broke into his

melancholy smile. "Of course I didn't accept. How would I dare? Though if you didn't care for love or children, it might not be so bad. You would be housed and clothed all the days of your life."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing," I said.

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

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

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

"But this wasn't a real marriage."

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

"It was not to be a concubine."

"Then who was it from?"

"The Lim family."

Her eyes widened until she resembled one of those saucer-eyed jungle lemurs. "The Lim family! Oh! Little Miss, it was not for nothing that you were born as beautiful as a butterfly," and so on and so forth. I listened with some amusement and irritation as she continued to list many good qualities that she had never bothered to mention to me before, until she came to an abrupt halt. "Didn't the son of the Lim family die? There is a nephew, though. He will inherit, I suppose."

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

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

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

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

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

Despite my attempts to reassure Amah, I felt uneasy as I went to bed, shielding my lamp against the flickering shadows. Our house was large and old, and since our financial decline had not had one-tenth of the servants needed to fully staff it. In my grandfather's day it was filled with people. He had a wife, two concubines, and several daughters. The only surviving son,

however, was my father. Now the wives were dead and gone. My aunts were married off long ago, and my cousins, whom I had played with as children, had moved to Penang when that side of the family relocated. As our fortunes dwindled, more and more rooms were shuttered up. I seemed to recall the bustle of guests and servants, but that must have been before my father withdrew from the world and allowed himself to be cheated by his business partners. Amah occasionally talked about those times, but she always ended up cursing my father's folly, his wicked friends, and ultimately the god of smallpox who allowed all this to happen.

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

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