

## Chapter One The Turquoise Pavilion

To be a prostitute was my fate.

After all, no murderer's daughter would be accepted into a decent household to be a wife whose children would be smeared with crime even before they were born. The only other choice was my mother's -- to take refuge as a nun, for the only other society which would accept a criminal's relatives lay within the empty gate.

I had just turned thirteen when I exchanged the quiet life of a family for the tumult of a prostitution house. But not like the others, whose parents had been too poor to feed them, or who had been kidnapped and sold by bandits.

It all happened because my father was convicted of a crime -- one he'd never committed.

"That was the mistake your father should never have made," my mother told me over and over, "trying to be righteous, and," she added bitterly, "meddling in rich men's business."

True. For that "business" cost him his own life, and fatefully changed the life of his wife and daughter.

Baba had been a Peking opera performer and a musician. Trained as a martial arts actor, he played acrobats and warriors. During one performance, while fighting with four pennants strapped to his thirty-pound suit of armor, he jumped down from four stacked chairs in his high-soled boots and broke his leg. Unable to perform on stage anymore, he played the two-stringed fiddle in the troupe's orchestra. After several years, he became even more famous for his fiddle playing, and an amateur Peking opera group led by the wife of a Shanghai warlord hired him as its accompanist. Every month the wife would hold a big party in the house's lavish garden. It was an incident in that garden that completely changed our family's destiny.

One moonlit evening amidst the cheerful tunes of the fiddle and the falsetto voices of the silk-clad and heavily jeweled *tai tai* -- society ladies -- the drunken warlord raped his teenage daughter.

The girl grabbed her father's gun and fled to the garden where the guests were gathered. The warlord ran behind her, puffing and pants falling. Suddenly his daughter stopped and turned to him. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she slowly pointed the gun to her head. "Beast! If you dare come an inch closer, I'll shoot myself!"

Baba threw down his precious fiddle and ran to the source of the tumult. He pushed away the gaping guests, leaped forward, and tried to seize the gun. But it went off. The hapless girl fell dead to the ground in a pool of blood surrounded by the stunned guests and servants.

The warlord turned to grab Baba's throat till his tongue protruded. Eyes blurred and face as red as her daughter's splattered blood, he spat on Baba. "Animal! You raped my daughter and killed her!"

Although all the members in the household knew it was a false accusation, nobody was willing to right the wrong. The servants were scared and powerless. The rich guests couldn't have cared less.

One general meditatively stroked his beard, sneering, "Big deal, it's just a fiddle player." And that ended the whole event.

Indeed, it was a big deal for us. For Baba was executed. Mother took refuge as a Buddhist nun in a temple in Peking. I was taken away to a prostitution house.

This all happened in 1918.

Thereafter, during the tender years of my youth, while my mother was strenuously cultivating desirelessness in the Pure Lotus Nunnery in Peking, I was busy stirring up desire within the Peach Blossom Pavilion.

*That was the mistake he should never have made -- trying to be righteous and meddling in rich men's business.*

Mother's saying kept knocking around in my head until one day I swore, kneeling before Guan Yin -- the Goddess of Mercy -- that I would never be merciful in this life. But not meddle in rich men's business? It was precisely the rich and powerful at whom I aimed my arts of pleasing. Like Guan Yin with a thousand arms holding a thousand amulets to charm, I was determined to cultivate myself to be a woman with a thousand scheming hearts to lure a thousand men into my arms.

But of course this kind of cultivation started later, when I had become aware of the realm of the wind and moon. When I'd first entered the prostitution house, I was but a little girl with a heart split into two: one half light with innocence, the other heavy with sorrow.

In the prostitution house, I was given the name Precious Orchid. It was only my professional name; my real name was Xiang Xiang, given for two reasons. I was born with a natural *xiang* -- body fragrance (a mingling of fresh milk, honey and jasmine), something which rarely happens except in legends where the protagonist lives on nothing but flowers and herbs. Second, I was named after the Xiang River of Hunan province. My parents, who had given me this name, had cherished the hope that my life would be as nurturing as the waterway of my ancestors, while never expecting that it was my overflowing tears which would nurture the river as it flows its never-ending course. They had also hoped that my life would sing with happiness like the cheerful river, never imagining that what flowed in my voice was nothing but the bittersweet melodies of karma.

Despite our abject poverty after Baba's death, it was never my mother's intent to sell me into Peach Blossom Pavilion. This bit of chicanery was the work of one of her distant relatives, a woman by the name of Fang Rong – Beautiful Countenance. Mother had met her only once, during a Chinese new year's gathering at a distant uncle's house. Not long after Baba had been executed, Fang Rong appeared one day out of nowhere and told my mother that she could take good care of me. When I first laid eyes on her, I was surprised that she didn't look at all like what her name implied. Instead, she had the body of a stuffed rice bag, the face of a basin, and the eyes of a rat, above which a big mole moved menacingly.

Fang Rong claimed that she worked as a housekeeper for a rich family. The master, a merchant of foreign trade, was looking for a young girl with a quick mind and swift hands to help in the household. The matter was decided without hesitation. Mother, completely forgetting her vow never to be involved in rich men's business, was relieved that I'd have a roof over my head. So, with her departure for Peking looming, she agreed to let Fang Rong take me away.

Both Mother and Fang Rong looked happy chatting under the sparkling sun. Toward the end of their conversation, after Fang Rong had given Mother the address of the "rich businessman," she shoved me into a waiting rickshaw. "Quick! Don't make the master wait!"

When the vehicle was about to take off, Mother put her face close to me and whispered, "From now on listen to Aunty Fang and your new master and behave. Will you promise me that?"

I nodded, noticing the tears welling in her eyes. She gently laid the cloth sack containing my meager possessions (a small amount of cash and a few rice balls sprinkled with bits of salted fish) on my lap, then put her hand on my head. "Xiang Xiang, I'll be leaving in a month. If I can, I'll visit you. But if I don't, I'll write as soon as I've arrived in Peking." She paused, a faint smile broke on her withered face. "You're lucky..."

I touched her hand. "Ma. . ."

Just as I was struggling to say something, Fang Rong's voice jolted us apart. "All right, let's go, better not be late." With that, the rickshaw puller lifted the poles and we started to move.

I turned back and waved to Mother until she became a small dot and finally vanished like the last morning dew.

Fang Rong rode beside me in silence. Houses floated by as the rickshaw puller grunted along. After twists and turns through endless avenues and back alleys, the rickshaw entered a tree-lined boulevard.

Fang Rong turned to me and smiled. "Xiang Xiang, we'll soon be there."

Though the air was nippy, the coolie was sweating profusely. We bumped along a crowded street past a tailor, an embroidery shop, a hair salon, and a shoe store before the coolie finally grunted to a stop.

Fang Rong paid and we got out in front of the most beautiful mansion I'd ever seen. With walls painted a pale pink, the building rose tall and imposing, with a tightly closed red iron gate fiercely guarded by two stone lions. At the entrance, a solitary red lantern swayed gently in the breeze. An ornate wooden sign above the lintel glinted in the

afternoon sun. I shaded my eyes and saw a shiny signboard, black with three large gold characters: Peach Blossom Pavilion. On either side, vertical boards flanking the gate read:

Guests flocking to the pavilion like birds,  
 Beauties blooming in the garden like flowers.

"Aunty Fang," I pointed to the sign, "what is this Peach---"

"Come on," Fang Rong cast me an annoyed look, "don't let your father wait," and pulled me along.

My father? Didn't she know that he was already dead? Just as I was wondering what this was all about, the gate creaked open, revealing a man of about forty; underneath shiny hair parted in the middle shone a smooth, handsome face. An embroidered silk jacket was draped elegantly over a lean, sinewy body.

He scrutinized me for long moments, then his face broke into a pleasant grin. "Ah, so the rumor is true. What a lovely girl!" His slender fingers with their long, immaculate nails reached to pat my head. I felt an instant liking for this man my father's age. I also wondered, how could the ugly-to-death Fang Rong catch such a nice-looking man?

"Wu Qiang," Fang Rong drew away his hand, "haven't you ever seen a pretty girl in your life?" Then she turned to me. "This is my husband Wu Qiang and your father."

"But Aunty---"

Now Fang Rong put on an ear-reaching grin. "Xiang Xiang, your father is dead, so from now on Wu Qiang is your father. Call him De."

Despite my liking for this man, in my heart no one could take the place of my father. "But he's not my De!"

Fang Rong shot me a smile with the skin, but not the flesh. "I've told you that now he is, and I'm your mother, so call me Mama."

Before I could protest again, she'd already half-pushed me along through a narrow entranceway. Then I forgot to complain because as we passed into the courtyard, my eyes beheld another world. Enclosed within the red fence was a garden where lush flowerbeds gave off a pleasing aroma. On the walls were painted lovely maidens cavorting among exotic flowers. A fountain murmured, spurting in willowy arcs. In a pond, golden carps swished their tails and gurgled trails of bubbles. A stone bridge led

across the pond to a pavilion with gracefully upturned eaves. Patches of soothing shade were cast by artfully placed bamboo groves.

While hurrying after Fang Rong and Wu Qiang, I spotted a small face peeking out at me from behind the bamboo grove. What struck me was not her face but the sad, watery eyes which gazed into mine, as if desperate to tell a tale.

When I was about to ask about her, Fang Rong cast me a tentative glance. "Xiang Xiang, aren't you happy that this is now your new home? Isn't it much better than your old one?"

I nodded emphatically, while feeling stung by those sad eyes.

"I'm sure you'll like it even better when you taste the wonderful food cooked by our chef," Wu Qiang chimed in enthusiastically.

Soon we arrived at a small room decorated with polished furniture and embroidered pink curtains. Against the back wall stood an altar with a statue of a white-browed, red-eyed general mounted on a horse and wielding a sword. Arrayed in front of him were offerings of rice, meat, and wine.

In the center of the room was a table set with chopsticks, bowls, and dishes of snacks. Fang Rong told me to sit between her and Wu Qiang. With no other etiquette, she announced that dinner begin. A middle-aged woman brought out plates of food, then laid them down one by one on the table. After filling the bowls with rice and soup, she left without a word.

During the whole meal, Fang Rong kept piling food into my bowl. "Eat more, soon you'll be a very healthy and charming young lady."

I'd never before tasted food so delicious. I gulped down chunks of fish, shrimp, pork, chicken, and beef, washing them down with cup after cup of fragrant tea.

When dinner was finished, I asked, "Aunty Fang---"

"Didn't you forget that I'm now your Mama?"

Her stare was so fierce that I finally muttered a weak, "Mama." I swallowed hard. "After dinner, are we going to see the master and the mistress of the mansion?"

Barely had I finished my question when she burst into laughter. Then she took a sip of her tea and replied meaningfully. "Ha, silly girl! Don't you know that we *are* your new master and mistress?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's what I mean -- I am the mistress and my husband is the master of this Peach Blossom Pavilion."

"What is Peach Blossom Pavilion?"

"A book chamber."

I looked around but didn't see any books, not even book shelves.

Fang Rong cast me a mysterious look. "A cloud and rain pavilion."

Now Wu Qiang added soothingly, "This is. . .ah.. .a turquoise pavilion."

"What---"

Fang Rong spat, "A whorehouse!"

Wu Qiang looked on with a mysterious smile while his wife burst out in a loud laugh. Then she chided me affectionately. "Why do people always have to have the entrails drawn?"

She was referring to the Chinese saying that when one paints a portrait, he even includes the intestines -- an act redundant and stupid.

Shocked, it took several beats before I could utter, "But didn't you tell us that the master is a merchant of foreign trade?"

Fang Rong laughed, her huge breasts and bulging belly shivering. "Ha! Ha! It's true. From time to time we do entertain British, French, and American soldiers here. Don't you know you've just arrived at the night district of *Si Malu*? This is the most high class *shangren* lane, where all the book chambers are found!"

I felt a queasiness simmering in my stomach. "You mean. . . I was sold into---"

Fang Rong's harsh voice pierced my ears. "No, you were not sold, silly girl! You were given to us as a gift---"

Using his long-nailed pinky to pick some meat from between his teeth while stealing a glance at me, Wu Qiang added, "We didn't even have to pay your mother."

"That's why we never forget to make offerings to the Buddha, Guan Yin the Goddess of Mercy, and," her sausage finger pointing to the sword-wielding, horse-riding general, "the righteous, money-bringing White-Browed God." Fang Rong winked, then pinched my cheek. "So, little pretty, see how they look after us!"

Now, as if he were my real father, Wu Qiang looked down at me tenderly, his voice unctuous. “Xiang Xiang, don’t worry. From now on, you’ll have plenty of good food to eat and pretty clothes to wear. You’ll see we’ll take care of you like you’re our own daughter.”

But they were not my mother and father. That night, alone, helpless, and abandoned, I cried a long time before I fell asleep in the small, bare room to which I’d been led.

My only hope was that my mother would write to me and soon come to visit.



