CHAPTER ONE

THE ORANGES



Penang, 1860

It was the fifteenth night of the new year, in the fifteenth year of Swee Bee's life, and the whole of the esplanade smelled of citrus and firecrackers.

Fifteen days of celebration ended tonight, and the street had been giving itself over to noise and gunpowder since the new moon, the smoke still hung low and blue over the five-foot ways behind them, drifting out toward the water in slow, unraveling ribbons. Under it, sharper, closer, the whole pier smelled of oranges: peel bruised underfoot, juice on a hundred pairs of hands, the sweet rot of the ones that had already missed the water and split open on the stones. Somewhere behind her, a hawker's cart hissed and spat where oil met batter, and the crowd's noise came in layers, gongs further up the street, girls' voices pitched high and performing, the low murmur of mothers who had opinions and intended everyone to hear them. Red and gold paper lanterns hung in long strings from post to post, close enough together that their light pooled and overlapped on the wet stones, and doubled again, broken and shivering, in the black water below.

This was the night the moon came full and the unmarried girls of the town were finally let out of their houses, and this year, for the first time, Swee Bee was not merely brought along to mind shawls. She was permitted to hold an orange of her own.

She had not written a name on it, and did not intend to. She sat on the stone bollard nearest the godown wall, its surface still faintly warm from a day of sun, the wood-and-tar smell of the warehouse wall behind her a familiar counterweight to the sweetness of the crowd, close enough to see, far enough not to be seen, an old habit she saw no reason to break simply because she was fifteen now and technically eligible, and turned the blank fruit over and over in her palm while she watched her sisters become strangers to her. Let the others throw theirs into the dark and wait to see whose hands would catch them. She would rather know first.

It happened every year, and every year she was startled afresh. In the house they were only her sisters: Swee Lian who hummed while she dressed, Swee Hoon who stole salted plums from the kitchen jar and blamed the cat, Swee Choo who cried at everything and laughed at everything else. But down here, under the lanterns strung along the quay, with the whole town's unmarried daughters gathered in their best kebaya, sheer voile bright even in lantern-light, sarongs patterned in wave and vine, gold kerongsang pinned at the throat, and their mothers' borrowed jade cool and heavy at their wrists, they became something else. Something to be admired, and acquired, though no one used that word, and everyone understood it.

Swee Bee had a talent for seeing things before they were meant to be seen, it was the family joke, that the youngest noticed everything and said nothing, that she'd make somebody a terrifying wife one day because she never forgot a single thing anyone did. She was not forgetting tonight, and she suspected she would still have every detail of it when she was an old woman.

Their eldest sister, Swee Neo, first daughter, first orange, first everything, stood a little apart from the others with the fruit in her palm, and did not look like a girl waiting to be looked at. She looked like a girl doing sums. On the orange's skin, in the same deep indigo ink she kept for her father's English correspondence, never the household's ordinary black, she had brushed her own name: small, precise, and only once.

"You've written it too small," said Swee Lian, peering over her shoulder at the character brushed onto the orange's skin. "No one will read it from a boat."

"I don't want it read from a boat," Swee Neo said. "I want it read by one person, and he has eyes."

"That's not how it works. You throw, whoever paddles fastest gets it. It could be anyone. It could be old Ang Kongsi's grandson with the wandering eye."

"Then Father will have found me a husband who already knows how to look elsewhere for what he wants," Swee Neo said, "which will spare us both a great deal of pretense." She did not smile when she said it, which was somehow funnier than if she had.

Swee Bee watched her eldest sister's hands. They did not shake. Swee Neo's hands never shook, Swee Bee had watched them steady over the godown tallies on nights their father worked late in his office above the quay, checking the weight of pepper against the manifest, cross-referencing the tin shipments against what the towkays owed on credit, drafting in careful English the letters that went to the trading houses on Beach Street. Swee Bee did not fully understand what her sister did in that office. She understood only that their father, who trusted no clerk with the household's credit book and no compradore with a letter meant for an Englishman's eyes, trusted his eldest daughter with both.

She had asked, once, to be shown. Not to help, she was eleven then, and knew better than to ask for that, only to be told what the English words in her father's letters meant, the ones that arrived crossed and re-crossed in a hand nothing like her tutor's careful copybook script. Her father had laughed, not unkindly, and said that was what Swee Neo's head was for, and had she finished her sums. She had finished her sums. She had also, without telling anyone, begun keeping a small book of words she did not know, its cover a scrap of unbleached cream cloth begged off the tailor because it had been going spare and no one thought to ask what a girl of eleven wanted with it, copied from the spines of her father's ledgers and the mastheads of the newspapers left folded on his desk, in the hope that someday someone would tell her what they meant instead of whose head they were for.

Swee Hoon was already laughing at something, already leaning dangerously far over the water with her orange raised like a trophy she meant to give away rather than a fortune she meant to test. Swee Choo had decided not to write her name at all. In their grandmother's day, the girls had written nothing on their oranges; they had simply thrown them, with a wish, and left the rest to the tide, and Swee Choo meant to do the same. She chewed the end of the writing brush she did not intend to use, ruined the sleeve of her borrowed blouse, and did not care.

The lanterns strung along the quay lit the girls, every face, every kebaya, every orange held up to catch the light before it was thrown. The water past the jetty's edge was another matter entirely. Out there the lantern light gave out fast, and the boats waited in a soft, deliberate dark, close enough to shore that Swee Bee could count them, too far into shadow to make out more than shapes: men standing at the oars, men crouched at the gunwales, all of them waiting with the stillness of people pretending not to be waiting for anything at all.

Swee Bee found him before her sister did. She had a talent for that too, it was, she suspected, why no one ever told her anything important until it was already half over.

He stood apart from the boats entirely, at the very edge of the jetty where the lantern light gave its last and the dark water began, one shoe on the stone and one already in shallow water, close enough to the last lantern post that Swee Bee could make him out where the others were only shapes. His coat was black and gave itself to the night; the lantern found only the white of his collar, a thin gold line of watch chain, and his face, turned toward her sister. Hands loose at his sides, he was watching Swee Neo with a playful curiosity, like a problem he intended to enjoy solving. English, or English enough. Dark-haired, hat in hand out of some private courtesy nobody had asked of him, his hair thick and swept back from his brow, one lock already slipping loose in the damp night air. Swee Bee did not know his name yet.

"Who is that," she said, to no one, and Swee Hoon, who heard everything she wasn't meant to, followed her gaze and made a small delighted sound.

"That," said Swee Hoon, "is Robert Ashworth-Lee. The one who does the shipping accounts for Boustead's. Out from Bristol these nine years,

and Chinese enough by now to know what Chap Goh Mei is for, which is more than I can say for most of them."

"Does he know what it's for?"

"He's standing at the water at midnight during the one night unmarried girls are let out of their houses. He knows exactly what it's for."

Swee Neo had not turned to look at him. This, Swee Bee understood even at fifteen, was itself a kind of look, the stillness of someone working very hard not to.

The gongs began somewhere up the quay, the signal, and all along the water the girls surged forward in a soft rush of silk and bare feet on stone, oranges lifted, names called out to the dark in half-laughing, half-serious voices, the whole ridiculous beautiful machinery of the night grinding into motion. The air filled with them, dozens of small orange suns arcing out over the black water at once, catching the lantern light for one bright instant at the top of their flight before dropping into shadow, and the water itself came alive with small splashes, ripples crossing and breaking against each other, oars knocking against gunwales as boats lunged for their prizes. Swee Lian threw hers wide and wild and shrieked with laughter when it vanished into the black water unclaimed. Swee Hoon's was fielded almost instantly by a boy who'd clearly been told exactly where to stand.

Swee Neo did not rush.

She turned the orange once in her hand, as if weighing a decision that had, Swee Bee suspected, already been made some time before tonight, made in the office above the quay, perhaps, over the credit book and the shipping tallies, in whatever silent arithmetic her sister did that nobody else in the family was permitted to see. Then she drew back her arm and threw, not wide, not wild, but a clean, deliberate arc, out past the boats where the current ran, toward the one man who was not pretending to fish for fortune with the others.

He did not scramble for it the way the other boys scrambled from their boats. He simply shifted his weight onto the foot already in the water, ruining, Swee Bee noted with interest, a very good pair of English shoes, and caught it before it touched the surface. For one strange moment the whole clamoring pier seemed to Swee Bee to go quiet around that single point of contact, orange against palm, held breath in a quiet room.

For a moment nobody on the quay moved. Then the mothers began to talk very quickly to one another, and Swee Lian said "oh," in a small flat voice, and Swee Hoon grinned like she'd been personally responsible for the whole arrangement.

Swee Bee watched her eldest sister's face. It gave away almost nothing, Swee Neo had spent a lifetime training it to give away almost nothing, in a house full of clerks and uncles and men who did business with their father and needed to believe a girl in the room was only a girl in the room. But Swee Bee had fifteen years of practice reading what her sister did not say, and what she read now was not triumph.

It was closer to fear. The exact fear of someone who has just gotten exactly what she wanted, and understood, in the same breath, everything it was going to cost her.

Down at the water, Robert turned the orange over in his palm, found the character painted there, and looked up the quay, past the other girls, past the boats, past Swee Bee on her bollard with her own orange still blank in her lap, exactly where she meant to keep it, directly at Swee Neo.

He smiled, a reserved smile.

Swee Bee, unmoved by any of it, pressed her thumbnail into the soft dip where the stem had been, and the loose skin of the mandarin came away in three easy pieces, misting her fingers with a sharp, bright oil. She picked off the white threads, split the fruit in two, and ate it where she sat, segment by segment, in quiet, methodical bites, the way a youngest child does most things nobody dares think to forbid her.

A cane tapped her shoulder before she'd finished the first section, light, precise, its jade tip cool even through her blouse. Auntie Kim, who had matched half the marriages on this stretch of the quay and took credit for the other half besides, looked down at her with the delight of a woman who has just caught a child doing something foolish enough to repeat at every dinner table in George Town for a year.

"Aiyah, that's not for your stomach, girl." She laughed, a short, satisfied bark of a laugh. "That's for your heart."

"My stomach asked first," Swee Bee said, and did not stop eating.

Auntie Kim laughed, touching Swee Bee gently on the shoulder once more before moving off toward the mothers, already talking.

Swee Bee, fifteen years old on the fifteenth night, and already keeping better accounts of her family than anyone knew, thought: an orange thrown hard enough carries a great deal of intention.

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KAPITAN'S DAUGHTERS

I



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INTEREST AND PRINCIPLE
Kapitan's Daughters I

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