Chapter One

‘Mei! Cap! Bao! It’s time for dinner!’

Ma called from the house for us to finish our chores.

‘Come on, we don’t want to be late,’ I said. This wasn’t an ordinary supper but a special dinner, my most anticipated meal of the year: the New Year’s Eve feast.

Our family of chickens pecked furiously as the three of us worked quickly to spread the feed about. We had quite a few chickens now, but my favourites were still Little and
Lo, the two chicks I had found and kept as pets, what now seemed like a long time ago. Little was a beautiful snow-white hen and she was definitely the queen of the pack. Meanwhile, Lo, my rooster, was really bossy and hot-tempered.

‘No need to be so greedy,’ I said, watching Lo muscle his way past the flock into the middle so he could pick at the best grains. ‘I’ll have a special treat for you and Little later.’

A lot had changed in a year. Our little farmhouse wasn’t so little anymore. I used to have to share a room with my stepbrother, Bao, who snored really loudly but then my stepfather, Jin, built an extension. Ma cried out in horror when Jin knocked a big hole in the back of the house. But when he had finished the job, Bao and I each had our own room. There was even an extra room for my older brother, Guo, when he came back from the city for the school holidays. Cap
was staying with us too and was sharing a room with Bao.

We closed the pen and raced each other up the hill. Cap and I were the first to get to the top. Bao lagged way behind, huffing and puffing while he pumped his short legs. I laughed and ran back, picking him up under his armpits, even though he was getting quite heavy.

‘Put me down!’ Bao shrieked. Cap grinned and scampered off. I set Bao on the ground and followed Cap inside.

I met Cap when I ran away to the city last year and he showed me the way. He had lost his parents in a car accident and then got into trouble with a man he called Uncle, even though they weren’t related. Now, Cap went to school in the city and lived with us during the holidays so we were kind of like brother and sister. But more importantly, we had lots of fun together!

The three of us bounded into the kitchen,
nearly knocking over my stepfather carrying two heaped plates of food. I used to call him the one-eyed butcher because I thought he was mean and scary, but that was before he married Ma. Now he was just Jin and, even though it took me a while to admit it, he was actually okay.

‘Hey, watch out. This isn’t the zoo you know?’ Jin said with a wink of his good eye. I giggled, remembering the last time we had gone to the city and Jin had taken us all to the zoo. I started hopping madly about, my hands clasped together in front of my chest like paws.

‘Look, I’m a kangaroo!’ I bounced around the room and Cap and Bao followed me. Soon we were all leaping around the tiny kitchen.

We heard the door open and Guo came inside. Our trio of kangaroos sprang on him, jumping up and down. He laughed but I saw the exhaustion in his eyes, weary from spending all day in the fields. He’d been extra
quiet since coming home for the holidays, and hadn’t really talked to me or anyone else in the family. I missed him and was looking forward to our big family dinner.

‘Okay, you animals.’ Ma came in and clapped her hands together to get our attention. ‘Go wash up. Guo, could you please help set the table?’

Soon we were all cleaned up and sitting at the table for our special New Year’s Eve feast. My eyes widened with delight looking at all of the dishes that Ma and Jin had put out. I could hear Cap’s tummy grumbling. It was an important meal, Jin explained, because eating the right foods would bring us good fortune and success in the new year.

I was really happy to see my favourite dish of fried long noodles. These were supposed to bring good luck and a long life. There was also a steamed whole fish. Cap had even taken the time to show Ma how to make dumplings from scratch, something he had learnt
from his friends at school. It all looked and smelled delicious and I eagerly held up my bowl as Jin spooned out generous helpings.

‘It’s been a long and difficult year, but we are very fortunate to enjoy a wonderful New Year’s Eve meal together.’ Jin’s good eye was shining and he gazed at Ma. ‘To health, happiness and good fortune.’ He raised his teacup and threw it back in a single motion. Guo and Cap did the same. It was too hot for Bao and me so we just took tiny sips.

My mouth was watering. I raised my chopsticks, ready to stab at a plump pork dumpling when there was a loud knock at the door.

Jin set his bowl down and got up. Ma crinkled her brow. ‘Who could that be?’ she mused. ‘It’s New Year’s Eve.’

‘Happy New Year,’ Jin said to the stranger at the door. ‘How may I help you?’

I craned my neck and glimpsed a tall man standing on the other side. He was wearing a Western-style suit and a bright red tie, which
was much dressier than the clothes people wore in the village. He frowned, clutching a stack of crisp, white paper in his hand.

‘Happy New Year,’ the man said, but he didn’t sound particularly happy at all. ‘Are you Mr Lin?’ His words came out short and clipped, like he was barking.

‘Wang actually. Lin is my wife’s late husband,’ Jin explained.

‘Mr Wang, I am Deputy Director Yu and I have copies of order papers sent from the Regional Ministry of Urban–Rural Development. Your house and land are due for resale by tomorrow.’

I squirmed in my chair, stealing a glance at Ma and Guo. This didn’t sound good.

The man frowned at the gold watch on his wrist. ‘The deadline is just five hours away.’ I shrank in my seat as his voice rose to a feverish pitch. ‘Why have you ignored these papers?’ He waved the paper in front of my stepfather’s face.
Jin looked back calmly. ‘I’m sorry, sir, that you went through such trouble and came all this way. But we sent our response a few weeks ago. We cannot accept the offer,’ he said.

The stranger narrowed his eyes and peered around, like he was about to come into the house. But my stepfather stood tall, his massive shoulders blocking the way.

The man pursed his lips when he spotted the five of us huddled around the table, the steam from our dinner rising. My mouth was still watering and I swallowed nervously.

He caught my eye and sneered. ‘Well, Mr Wang, we’ll just have to see then.’ He flashed a toothy smile but his voice remained cold. ‘Please, enjoy your dinner. And have a Happy New Year.’ And with a nod, the man spun on his heels and was gone.

Jin closed the door and Ma breathed a sigh of relief but I could see her hands were shaking.

‘Who was that?’ I asked. They ignored my question and Jin clapped his hands together.
'Well, who's ready for dinner? I'm starving!' His booming voice shook the thin walls of the house and made me wince.

‘Yummy!’ cried Bao. He and Cap plunged chopsticks into their bowls, sending grains of rice flying. Jin returned to his seat and began to eat. I frowned and looked down at my food.

‘Jin, was that the city official again?’ Guo asked quietly. ‘I thought that was done.’

‘Doesn’t matter. It’s all taken care of,’ Jin said, dismissing the question with a wave of his chopsticks. Guo looked doubtful but said nothing more.

‘I’ll tell you what, though,’ Jin continued, ‘we are incredibly lucky to be together enjoying delicious food for New Year’s. Your ma has done a fantastic job preparing such a feast.’ Ma blushed and pushed vegetables around her bowl. There was a faint smile on her lips but her eyes were full of worry. I frowned again.
'Ma, what did he mean?’ I asked. ‘Do we have to sell the house?’

‘Hush, Mei,’ she said, piling another piece of meat on my still untouched meal. ‘Eat your food before it gets cold.’

‘That’s right. We don’t want this beautiful food to go to waste,’ Jin said, grinning so that little bones stuck out between his teeth like fangs. Normally, that would have made me laugh but the corners of my mouth would only curl down.

With a sigh, Guo speared a dumpling with his chopsticks and bit into it. The meaty juices dribbled down his chin. He started eating with fervour and soon he was making loud slurping noises like the other boys. I scrunched up my forehead, still confused, but the delicious smells tempting my nostrils were too hard to resist.

Finally, I began to eat.
Chapter Two

That night after midnight, I snuck down to the chook pens with table scraps I had collected. The second I set them down, Little and Lo dived into the pile of cold noodles and leftover dumplings, like they were picking out real worms.

As I watched them eat, I thought back to the man at the door. Even though Jin said everything was okay, something about their talk made me feel queasy.

‘What do you think he wanted?’ I whispered.
Lo looked up, a trail of noodle dangling from his beak. He narrowed his eyes and then spat on the ground, raking the dirt with his talons like a caged bull. I giggled and felt a bit better.

I tucked the chooks in for the night and went back to the house. For the new year, we were allowed to stay up late, but it really was time to go to bed.

As I crept past Ma and Jin’s room, I heard low voices. I couldn’t help pressing my ear to their door. My heart wrenched as I listened.

‘Jin, what are we going to do? You know they won’t take no for an answer.’ Ma kept her voice to a whisper, but there was no mistaking the panic behind her words.

‘Shh, it will be okay,’ Jin murmured softly. I could picture his big hand rubbing soothing circles across Ma’s back. ‘It’s not just us, remember. They can’t very well uproot the whole village!’
'Oh Jin.’ Ma’s words were muffled and I gathered that she had buried her face in Jin’s shoulder while she cried. ‘This farm is our whole life. Guo and Mei, and their father—’ The rest of her sentence was lost in sobs. I bit my bottom lip to fight back my own tears.

‘Don’t worry, dear. We’ll find a solution. It’s the new year after all and I’m certain our luck will change.’

I stepped away from the door. Despite Jin’s reassuring words, I was worried and the knot in my stomach got tighter as I hurried to my room.

_Could we really end up losing the farm?_ Pa’s father had built our farm with his own two hands, well before Pa was even born. When Ma and Pa were married, Ma gave up her life in the city to help in the fields. And now Guo was completing his studies at university to learn how to be a better farmer.

There was a soft knock at the door. I didn’t want Ma or Jin to know I was eavesdropping,
so I did my best to sound sleepy. ‘Come in,’ I said in as steady a voice as I could muster.

The knob turned but it was only Cap and Bao. They came inside, Bao with a ratty old blanket trailing behind him. I was surprised because Bao hadn’t carried the blanket around since starting school this year. But tonight, I guessed he needed a little extra comfort.

‘Hey,’ I said and let Bao cuddle up beside me as Cap took a seat on my bed. ‘What’s up?’

‘Ma’s crying,’ Bao said. Ma’s room was right next to the one Cap and Bao shared so they must have heard her crying too.

‘That man at the door made her a little upset, that’s all,’ I answered truthfully. I didn’t want to worry him with what was really going through my head – that we could lose the farm.

Cap furrowed his brow. ‘What do you think it was about? Do you think what he said was true?’
I pressed my lips together. ‘I don’t know, but Jin said not to worry, so I’m sure he has it under control.’ At least, I hoped so.

‘If my dad were here, he would talk to the regional minister himself,’ Cap mused. ‘He knew a lot of government types because he was a general in the army.’

I didn’t say a word. It used to annoy me a little that Cap was always showing off about his father, but now I realised it was probably because he missed him.

We sat in silence for a while. Suddenly Bao sat up, a bright smile on his face. ‘I know how we can cheer Ma up! We should get her the New Year’s lollies from the market tomorrow,’ he said.

I had to smile. ‘You’re right, Bao. They’re her favourite.’

Satisfied, Bao curled up beside me again, his head resting in my lap. I stroked his hair and ruffled it along the sides.

My stepbrother was starting to fall asleep
so Cap helped me bring him back to their room. As we tucked Bao into bed, he murmured softly, ‘We have to make Ma happy. It’s the new year.’

*Bong bong! Clang clang! Bong clang!*

I woke with a start. The noisy gongs and clashing cymbals could only mean one thing. I threw off the blankets and rushed to the window.

Sure enough, I could just glimpse the colourful New Year’s lion dancers making their way down the road, headed for the market.

I shrieked with joy, sprinted into the hallway and smacked right into Bao and Cap as they thundered out of their room, wearing matching expressions of glee.

‘Hurry or we’ll miss the festival. The lion dancers are performing,’ I cried.

‘Not so fast,’ Ma demanded. ‘Look at the three of you! Still in your pyjamas. You’re not
going anywhere until you’re cleaned up and have put on your new clothes,’ she scolded. ‘What would the villagers think?’

We scrambled to put on the new outfits that Ma had made for us. They were bright red for good luck. Bao and Cap had matching red shirts and pants while I had a new red dress. The fabric was itchy against my skin, but I hardly noticed in my excitement. A couple of annoying buttons under the arm and I was done. I raced to the door with Cap and Bao right on my heels.

‘Shoes!’ Ma shouted and I found my sandals among the pile by the door.

Outside, Jin and Guo were waiting for us. I skipped across our courtyard and threw my body into my stepfather’s arms, wanting to be spun around.

‘Oof!’ he cried as he set me back on the ground. ‘You’re getting quite big, missy and too old for such childish things.’ I frowned when he scooped up Bao and sat him on his
shoulders. Bao’s spindly legs dangled like wires around Jin’s neck.

Guo took my hand and I smiled at my older brother. Ma followed behind us and we made our way to the village to take part in the New Year’s festivities.

As we walked, the clangs and bongs grew louder and sure enough, the lion troupe was performing when we reached the markets. A drummer kept a steady beat on a big wooden drum and a boy clanged a pair of cymbals beside him. The huge crowd of villagers pressed tightly together but they smiled and made way so we could watch the lions dance too.

I was thrilled to see that there were two lions this year. A sparkly gold lion with white fur and a button-red nose danced alongside a darker lion lined with black satin. The baubles and bells that covered their faces trembled as they flicked their giant heads. Each lion was operated by two boys from the local martial arts school. They stayed hidden under the
lions’ cloth bodies so that all we could see were their legs lashing about. The crowd gasped when the darker lion let out a series of impressive high kicks and low lunges. Its gaping jaws flapped up and down and its eyes blinked, just like a real lion.

The crowd cheered when one of the villagers came towards the lion holding up a long pole with a head of lettuce tied to the end. The drumming picked up and we were jostled forwards.

‘The lion is going to get the lettuce off the stick,’ Jin said.

Bao, who had the best view on Jin’s shoulders, clapped his hands in delight. I had to stand up on tippy-toes and I could see one of the boys had now climbed onto his partner’s shoulders.

I watched mesmerised as the boy on the bottom kept up the high kicks and lunges, even though he was carrying the other boy’s weight. The golden head bobbed up and
down, as if sussing out its prey. The villager with the pole laughed and swung the head of lettuce like a pendulum.

At the last moment, an arm snaked out of the lion’s gaping jaws and snagged the lettuce from the noose. The villagers broke into cheers and the drumming went wild. The lion shook its head about, ‘spitting’ out little bits of shredded lettuce, like it was enjoying a tasty meal. I clapped my hands and squealed.

‘That was so cool,’ Cap exclaimed.

The crowd thinned and the lion troupe marched towards the centre of the market. Cap and I went to follow when I felt a tug at my elbow.

Bao looked up urgently. I stooped down so he could whisper in my ear. I smiled, whispered back and his eyes lit up like a firecracker.

‘Ma, Pa. Can we go play the goldfish game? Can we, can we?’ he asked Ma and Jin, smiling oh-so-sweetly. He was very good at being cute.

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Ma and Jin exchanged a look. ‘Are you sure that’s a good idea, Bao? The queues are so long. Don’t you want to look at the kites or the lanterns instead?’ Ma said.

Of course, the three of us had no intention of actually playing the game. We just needed a reason to sneak away and there was nothing that adults found more boring than waiting in line for the goldfish game.

‘We reeeeeeally want to play,’ Cap chimed in, doing his best to mimic Bao’s pleading voice.

‘Please, Ma,’ I added, not wanting to be left out. ‘I can look after Bao while you, Jin and Guo look at the kites in the markets.’

They exchanged another look and Jin gave Ma a little shrug.

‘Okay, you can go play if you want. We’ll be over by the lanterns.’ I had to hide my triumphant grin. Our plan had worked.

When we were out of sight, the three of us high-fived and charged into the bustling
market. We headed for the food stalls, passing families bowing and wishing each other Happy New Year on the way. It didn’t take us long to find a lolly stall. I paid for a bag of lollies with my pocket money and Bao clutched the bag in his little hands as we made our way back.

It was the Year of the Horse, so the markets were decorated with majestic stallions leaping in the air, tossing their colourful manes. We hopped around kids dressed in shiny red outfits, twirling festive drums. There were stalls selling all sorts of New Year’s delights: fireworks and bright red banners, costumes and dresses and tasty New Year’s treats. The children crowded around them, clutching little red packets full of lucky money. I broke into a grin when I spotted a familiar stall.

It was the old toymaker that had made my pinwheel so very long ago.

‘Why, hello there, little Mei,’ the toymaker greeted me warmly. I blushed, surprised that
he remembered me. ‘Still playing with your wooden pinwheel?’ he asked.

I shook my head, so that my long braid flopped about. ‘Not anymore, I’m a bit too old for it now.’ I pointed to the boys. ‘This is my stepbrother, Bao, and my friend, Cap.’

‘How do you do? Everyone calls me Old Dan,’ he said, revealing a toothless smile.

Old Dan was hunched over a peculiar box that Cap immediately stepped towards to investigate. It had a crank on one side and beautiful carved decorations on the other sides. Two large panels had matching mythical lion sculptures that looked like they were leaping out from a jungle of leaves. Their eyes were ferocious and hungry and I couldn’t help shuddering, even though I knew they weren’t real.

Nestled between the leaves of the engraved jungle were a number of dials, levers and clunky gears, like the insides of a clock. A metal cylinder sat inside the box. It had
ridges and dots that ran in strange patterns along the surface. The cylinder pressed up against a metal plate, with thin metal strips sticking out like a comb.

‘Wow, what’s that?’ I asked.

The old toymaker smiled. ‘It is my own invention. I’ve been working on it for a while but it still needs some tinkering.’

‘What does it do?’ Bao asked.

‘It’s a music box. I’ve seen something like it before,’ Cap said, always keen to show off just how smart he was. He pointed to the cylinder. ‘When you turn the crank, the spool turns and the ridges and dots hit the teeth on the comb playing the notes.’

The toymaker looked surprised. ‘That’s exactly right. You’re quite clever aren’t you?’ Cap beamed and I rolled my eyes.

‘People have been building music boxes for centuries,’ Old Dan explained. ‘They used to give them as gifts to the emperor back in the Qing dynasty.’ He ran his fingers lovingly
down the side of the frame following the lines of the natural wood grain. I could tell he was very proud of his work.

‘Can you show us how it works?’ I asked.

Old Dan smiled and reached for the crank. The cylinder turned. Just as Cap had described, the strange pattern of dots and ridges caught the metal plate, one by one. A sweet melody began to play that I recognised as a lullaby Ma used to sing to me when I was little.

‘Hey, cool, it lights up,’ Cap exclaimed. And sure enough, the toymaker had put in a string of lights above the metal comb. When the music played, the lights sparkled like jewels set in a golden crown.

‘That’s my own addition,’ the toymaker said. ‘I like a bit of shiny, don’t you?’ He winked. Finally, he brought the music to a stop.

‘What goes here?’ Bao asked, puzzled by the wide gap on one side of the box.
There was another metal comb and the same jewelled lights but where the metal spool should have been to play the notes, there was nothing but an empty spindle.

‘Aiy, yes, that’s the part I haven’t finished yet,’ Old Dan said with a frown. ‘I was going to add another layer to the song, a second spool that would play at the same time. I have plans all drawn up but I haven’t had a chance to build it.’ He scrunched up his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth sagged. ‘I always thought that I would have a chance to finish it. But I guess it’s time to put away such childish things.’ His last words choked up.

I frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Old Dan looked up in surprise. ‘I thought everyone knew. The deputy director has been going around the village. I thought he would have come to your house by now …’

Cap wrinkled his brow and looked at me. ‘Does this have something to do with the man from last night?’