Chapter One

‘Mei! Mei, it’s time for dinner!’

Ma’s shrill voice travelled from the house, reaching out towards the far corners of our farm. My snow-white hen cocked her head to the side and looked up at me with curious eyes.

‘You heard her, Little,’ I said. ‘It’s time for dinner.’

My chicken did a small two-step dance and bobbed her head in response. I sprinkled around the rest of the feed and watched Little
and our other chickens peck at the grains. Lo, my rooster, had already had his fill. He was busy preening himself in the corner of the chook pen.

A short while after Pa had died, I found Little and Lo lost in a field when they were just fluffy baby chickens. I’d spent most of last year raising them in secret with my brother, Guo, because Ma didn’t like having animals on the farm. But Ma found out and sold my chooks to the one-eyed butcher at the market. Luckily, I managed to get them back. In the end, Ma decided to let the chooks stay and we got some other animals too. Now we had chickens, sheep and ducks as well.

‘Mei!’ Ma called again.

It was time to go. I gathered my bucket and headed back to the house. The summer had been extra hot and humid this year, so I was sweaty and sticky when I got to the top of the hill where our little farmhouse looked out over the fields. It glowed brightly inside
and I could hear the sound of Ma laughing. She was not alone.

‘Oh Mei, there you are,’ she said as I came in. Sure enough, Ma was seated at our dining room table with a big burly man, his pockmarked face glistening with sweat. There was a pot of tea between them. Ever since he had given back my chickens, the one-eyed butcher had started visiting our farmhouse, having tea with Ma and bringing over bits of meat from his shop. Now Jin and Ma were friends. I had to do my best to be nice when he was around to keep Ma happy.

Ma came over to kiss my scowling face. ‘Look what Jin brought us for dinner.’

She went into the kitchen and came back with a large pig’s head laid out on a platter. The oversized ears lay flat against the back of the head, its fat cheeks all puffed out, squeezing the eyes shut.

I made a face.
‘Oh Mei, don’t be so childish,’ Ma said. ‘Good meat like this is hard to come by. It will make a lovely soup for our dinner. We must thank Jin for his generosity.’

‘Come on now, Mrs Lin, you’re embarrassing me,’ said Jin, smiling and showing off his yellow teeth. He gave me a wink with his good eye. Instead of the gaping hole of his eye socket, Jin now had a glass eye. It didn’t really line up with his good eye so it seemed like he was always looking at something behind you. It was hard not to stare.

‘Where’s Bao?’ I asked, helping myself to one of the sweet egg rolls Ma had put out for tea. Bao was the butcher’s son and a couple of years younger than me.

‘He’s visiting his aunt and uncle in the city this week,’ Jin said.

That was too bad. I liked it when Bao came over. We would play with the chickens or he would help me care for the sheep. I
shrugged and bit into the flaky, eggy biscuit, letting it slowly dissolve in my mouth.

The door swung open and there was my brother, Guo, scraping his heavy work boots on the mat out front. He called out as he took the clunky shoes off and dumped them by the door. I rushed over and wrapped my arms around his waist. He had become a lot skinnier from all the hours he spent working in the fields and his lean cheeks were hollow. I could tell from his eyes that he was tired.

Guo ruffled my hair and gave me a smile. Ma had cut my hair short a while ago saying I was too grown up for pigtails. Now when Guo messed it up, it stuck out at wild angles. This always made me laugh.

‘Hey, son.’ Jin stood up, holding out his hand. Guo shook it firmly. My brother had grown a lot in just a year; he was as tall as the butcher now. And he looked a lot like Pa.
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ma watching them with a funny look on her face. Jin offered Guo a seat and then poured him a cup of tea. Frowning, I took another biscuit off the plate.

Jin turned to me. ‘Mei, why don’t you help your mother put out dinner?’

I scowled. I hated it when he bossed me around.

‘Don’t glare. Where are your manners, Mei?’ Ma scolded. ‘Come help me with the soup.’

After dinner, Guo and I went into the kitchen to do the dishes. I could hear Ma and Jin talking in whispers outside and strained my ears to listen.

‘What are you doing? You shouldn’t eavesdrop on the adults,’ Guo said.

I shushed my brother. ‘I’m trying to hear what they’re saying.’
Guo laughed, flicking some soap suds at me. ‘I like that Ma’s happy now. Jin makes her laugh. It’s good that she has a friend.’

I snorted. ‘Jin’s not a friend. He just brings pigs and ducks.’

‘He’s a good man and a hard, smart worker. He was telling me about a great university in the city, near where his sister lives.’

‘But Guo, I thought you didn’t want to study. You want to be a farmer like Pa.’ I looked down at the teacup I was drying and frowned. Ma had used the good tea set she and Pa had been given as a wedding present.

Guo sighed. ‘I know; I do. But we didn’t have a good crop this year because of the heat. I think if I took some classes I could be better at running the farm. Maybe learn about how to set prices or maybe about new crops and tools.’ He grew quiet, watching the bubbles popping in the water.

His silence made my stomach queasy. ‘Guo, what are you saying?’
Just then, Ma burst into the kitchen. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks were rosy red. ‘Guo, Mei, I have the most exciting news!’ Jin stood behind her, a big grin on his pockmarked face. His glass eye gazed at us.

Guo put down his dishrag and went over to Ma’s side, but my feet felt nailed to the floor.

‘What is it, Ma?’ Guo asked. The pit forming in my stomach was getting bigger and prickles were shooting up my spine.

‘Things have been so hard on the farm, but I think fortune is finally smiling on us.’ Ma took a deep breath and beamed. ‘Jin and I, we’re getting married.’
The next few weeks were a blur. Because this was the second wedding for both Ma and Jin, they decided against having a traditional banquet and large wedding celebrations. Still, the villagers came to our little farmhouse to give their well wishes to the happy couple. Ma and Jin graciously accepted their gifts and red envelopes stuffed with money to bring good fortune. I kept away from the festivities and danced with Little and Lo in the fields instead. My chickens were
still excellent dancers, even though I found that Lo didn’t pay as much attention to the dancing as he used to.

On the day of the wedding, Ma asked me to pick a bunch of wildflowers from the fields. She tied them together into a bouquet with a red ribbon and then pinned a flower onto my best cotton dress. My stomach had squeezed itself into a tight ball, but I did my best to smile. I wanted to try and be happy for Ma, but I also missed Pa. My heart sagged when I saw Guo step out in a collared shirt and a pair of Pa’s old dress trousers that hung loosely from his narrow frame.

But Ma . . . Ma was stunning in a pretty red dress with a sparkling marigold pattern. I forgot all about my sadness when I saw her.

‘How do I look?’ she asked us. She seemed nervous and her face was a little flushed. She seemed so young, like she did in photos from when she and Pa had married. Guo took her arm and I could see tears in their eyes.
I ran to them and they wrapped me up in a fierce hug.

Finally, Ma, Guo and I made our way to the village office where Ma and Jin would sign their papers.

The butcher and his son were already there waiting for us. They were wearing matching white linen suits, although Bao’s looked about three sizes too big for him. Ma smiled shyly, holding tightly onto Guo’s arm. Jin broke into a wide grin, his good eye bugging out of its socket.

I felt the queasiness in my stomach again. Ma was looking at Jin in the way I had only ever seen her gaze at Pa. A lump was forming in my throat but I shook my head. I really wanted Ma to be happy.

I glanced over at Bao who caught my eye and flapped his long sleeves like a bird. That made me laugh.

The village official shot us a warning look and we grew quiet. But when I looked at
Bao again, he made a gagging face. We both giggled softly.

The signing was over in a matter of minutes and we all went home to have an early dinner. Jin made a huge fuss over pouring Guo cups of tea. ‘It’s the tradition,’ Jin said, pushing Guo’s hand out of the way. ‘When you marry, you must pour tea to honour the man of her home.’

Guo nodded and accepted his drink as Ma stood by the kitchen.

‘It’s going to be so good having you and Bao living here,’ she said to her new husband. ‘It’ll be a fresh start, a good change.’

‘Here, here,’ said Jin, holding up his glass. He and Guo clinked cups and smiled.

I wrinkled my nose and pouted. I didn’t want anything to change.

Not long after the wedding, Jin and Bao moved into the farmhouse. Bao and I shared the room that Ma and I used to sleep in, while
Ma and Jin took the only other bedroom. Guo sectioned off part of the living room for his bed.

The house felt very, very small.

It was strange having a little brother, but I didn’t mind Bao being around. He was good with the animals. He was funny too. Sometimes, when we were feeding the chooks, Bao would tuck in his thin arms and puff out his cheeks, scratching at the ground like Little and Lo did.

But there was one big problem.

Bao snored. Very loudly.

One night, I lay in my narrow bed with the pillow clamped over my ears. Bao’s snoring sounded like Lo’s crowing, only under water. I spent hours tossing and turning, trying to drown it out.

Eventually, I snuck into the living room and climbed under the warm blankets on Guo’s bed. My brother opened his eyes in surprise. ‘Mei, what are you doing here?’
‘Bao is snoring! He sounds like a drowning chook.’

Guo shifted over and let me settle in beside him. I snuggled up and listened to the sound of his steady breathing.

‘Why can’t things just go back to normal? The way they were before?’ I whispered in the dark.

Guo said nothing and stroked my cheek. It made me yawn and I felt my eyelids grow heavy.

‘You can’t sleep in the living room forever,’ Guo whispered.

‘Neither can you,’ I said, just before I drifted off to sleep, dreaming of swimming chickens.

Guo didn’t sleep in the living room for much longer at all. When the seasons changed and the year’s meagre crop had been harvested and sold at the market, Guo made a decision. He was going to university.
Ma cried silently as she helped him pack a large suitcase full of books and clothes. She tucked a few packets of dried pork floss and beef jerky in with his socks.

‘Ma, they have snacks in the city,’ Guo said.
‘These are made by hand. The junk in the city, it’s all made in a factory.’ Her eyes shone with tears as she looked into my brother’s eyes. ‘I am very proud of you, son.’ She hugged him close.

Guo opened his arms to me. ‘Come on, Mei. Give me a hug.’

But I just crossed my arms and glared at him.

Guo came over to ruffle my hair, but I jerked my head away and refused to look him in the eye.

He gave up and went over to Jin. The butcher shook his hand. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll look after them, I promise.’

Guo nodded, picking up his suitcase. Bao rushed over to help. ‘I’ll carry it!’ They all
laughed as Bao struggled with the heavy bag.

‘Let me take you to the train station,’ Jin said, taking the bag from his son. ‘Come on, Bao, you can sit in the bike basket.’

Guo hugged and kissed Ma again and looked over at me. I felt a sob coming but I choked back my tears and shook my head.

With a sigh, my brother stepped out of the house and shut the door behind him.

**BAWK! BAWK! BA-KAW!**

‘Stop it!’ I cried but it was no use. The birds scratched at the ground, eyes narrowed into slits, their neck feathers prickled to full size. Lo let out a loud crow and charged the other rooster.

‘Itchy! He’s going to hurt Itchy!’ Bao dived for the chickens, but they managed to scurry away from him and he landed with a thud.
in the dirt. He sat up and shook his head, feathers and poo clinging to his hair.

I leapt over the fence and scrambled after the chooks.

It wasn’t just the farmhouse that was getting overcrowded. Jin and Bao had also moved in their collection of animals. Surprisingly, Jin kept a beloved prized miniature pig called Tofu. I thought that was a silly name for a pig but Jin said it was beautiful and soft, just like tofu. Jin had built a pigpen for it alongside the house and kept Tofu well fed with beautiful apples and vegies from the farm. The butcher cooed at the pig like it was a baby, picking it up and cuddling it, even planting kisses on its snout when it snorted.

Meanwhile, Bao had brought his rooster, Itchy. Itchy was really just a chick, only a month or two old, so he was much smaller than all the other chooks. But the young chick thought he was the boss and spent most of
his days chasing after the hens or challenging Lo to fight.

Pa had taught me you could never have two roosters on the same farm, but Bao had refused to listen when I told him to give Itchy up.

‘They’re going to get into fights,’ I’d pleaded with Ma. ‘Lo could get hurt or worse.’

‘Oh Mei, they’re just animals,’ she said. ‘They’ll learn to get along.’

Jin agreed with her and that had been the end of that.

Itchy was trying to climb on top of Lo now, squawking loudly and beating his wings. Lo was getting angry, puffing up his chest.

Bao finally reached them and yanked Itchy off, but it was too late. Lo pecked wildly and caught Bao on the arm.

‘Ow! Your stupid bird attacked me!’ He was howling in pain. ‘I’m going to tell your ma.’ He ran off, wailing.
I groaned. Ma was going to be angry with me.

‘Serves him right,’ I grumbled as I knelt down to pick up my chook. Lo was still excited, but I managed to calm him by stroking the back of his neck. He settled into my arms and dozed off. Itchy jerked his head up and started clucking.

‘No,’ I said firmly, standing up. I had to separate them or else there would be real trouble.

I went over to the chook house where the hens were roosting peacefully. Little was sitting in the middle of the group, preening her snow-white feathers, while the others flocked around her. She reminded me of those pictures I’d seen of the royal empresses and queens from the olden days.

I shooed away the other birds and scooped Little up into my arms. It was hard to open the pen door holding two chooks but somehow I managed to undo the latch and shut
the gate behind me. I carried Little and Lo across the grounds towards the storage shed at the bottom of the hill.

The shed was now crammed full with barrels and crates of tools, bins and blocks of knives, all the stuff that Jin had brought when he moved in. I picked my way to the back of the shed, squeezing past a large chopping block.

I set my chooks down and prised open the cellar door, peering in. This had been my secret hiding place when Ma had tried to make me sell my chickens not so long ago. I carefully lowered myself down the rickety ladder into the pitch blackness until my feet hit the concrete floor.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. And then, I screamed.

Row after row of dead pigs hung from giant hooks on the ceiling. Their stomachs had been sliced open and their insides turned out. They gazed upwards so that all I could
see were the whites of their eyes. Their tongues were flopped out to the side.

I stumbled backwards, knocking something off its hook. I tried to get up, but my feet slipped on something wet and slimy. There was a cold, damp stickiness all around me. Pushing and panting with all my strength, I finally managed to get up and take a closer look.

It was a dead cow, all skinned and gutted. Its eyes stared blankly and its mouth lay open so I could see its blunt teeth.

I shot up the ladder and grabbed my chooks. I kept running and running, out of the shed and up the hill, hollering as loudly as I could, ‘Ma! Ma! MAAAAAAAAA!’

‘Mei, what’s wrong?’ she said, bursting outside. She eyed the chooks suspiciously as I ran up to her. ‘Mei, you know you can’t bring the chickens up to the house.’

But I didn’t care. I flew into her arms with tears streaming down my face. ‘Ma, the cellar!
There are monsters in the cellar!’ I was trembling as she wrapped her arms around me.

‘What’s all this about?’ Jin’s voice thundered as he came outside. ‘You know your mother doesn’t like you bringing your chickens to the house.’

‘Demons! They looked like dead animals with no eyes and no skins and they were flying through the air.’ I shuddered, remembering the pink, glistening carcasses swinging from their hooks. ‘They were going to possess me.’

‘Oh, Mei, don’t be silly. There’s no such thing as demons,’ said Ma, stroking my hair.

‘There is!’ I sniffled loudly. ‘I can never go back to the cellar again.’

‘Oh, Mei.’ Jin laughed and put his hand against Ma’s back. ‘I’ve just been storing some of my smoked carcasses there. It’s cool and dry, so it’s perfect for storage. They’ll fetch a great price at the market.’

I watched him exchange a knowing look with Ma. My breathing had finally slowed
but I felt heat rising to my cheeks in anger. ‘But Pa built that cellar for us to hide in if a typhoon ever came,’ I protested.

‘I’m sure it’s okay if Jin borrows it for a little while,’ Ma said.

I pouted and shook my head.

‘Come on now,’ Jin said. ‘You can’t be squeamish about a few animal carcasses.’ He draped a burly arm around my mother and looked down at me. ‘You’re a butcher’s daughter now,’ he said as he ruffled my hair.

Ma laughed at his remark, but I was furious and batted his hand away. ‘He can’t go around changing everything. It’s our farm!’

Ma held me at arm’s length and looked at me sternly. ‘I’m sorry, Mei,’ she said. ‘But you’re going to have to get used to the fact that things are changing around here, especially since Guo’s gone to university. And I, for one, think Jin is doing an excellent job of taking over the farm.’ She gazed up at her husband fondly and Jin smiled.
I frowned and said nothing. Little and Lo clucked softly in my arms.

That night, with Bao’s snoring to hide the noise, I snuck around the room, stuffing clothes and underwear into an old backpack. Little and Lo were sleeping in the corner of the room. Ma hadn’t noticed me sneaking them in.

Thankfully, Bao hadn’t told on me, even though I could tell he was still mad. He kept rubbing his arm and had spent most of the night avoiding me. It was better that way. I had already made a plan.

I took out a purse that Ma had given to me as a present. I liked it because it made me feel more grown up. Inside was 42 yuan, which I had earned doing small jobs at the market. It was all the money I had. I put that into my backpack as well.

I was all packed except for one thing. I found an old wooden box with a lid that
had been used to store vegetables and took it to my room. There was no time to dress it with straw or even a blanket. I picked up my chickens and put them inside.

It was time to go.

With my box and my backpack, I stepped outside and gently shut the door behind me. There was a chill in the air and I shivered as I zipped my thin jacket all the way to the top.

Leaning against the side of the house was the shiny new bicycle Jin had bought. I undid the chain and carefully set my chook box in the basket up the front. Little and Lo wiggled around inside.

I wheeled the bicycle down the hill until I reached the small dirt path that led to the main road that would take me to the village. Then I hopped on to the seat, my feet just reaching the pedals. I pedalled hard, pushing with all my might. Just before I turned off the path, I stole a quick peek over my shoulder.
The house looked small and lonely standing on the hill, with only the stars to keep it company. I swallowed hard but refused to cry; I said goodbye to the home I had always known.