

CHAPTER

22

BING

Age 20

SAN FRANCISCO, 1949

BING MOVED BRISKLY THROUGH THE COOL SUMMER AIR ALONG busy Columbus Avenue in San Francisco. With a tight grip on five-year-old Peter's hand, she was headed to the sidewalk greengrocers of Chinatown to get some inexpensive food to tide them over until Elder Sister could find a solution to their latest predicament.

A few days earlier, Kristian and ten-year-old Ole had boarded a train to New York, where they would transfer to a Denmark-bound ship. The family was nearing the end of its cash, and Kristian needed to tap into his pension and bank account in Denmark. Once he arrived in Copenhagen, he would wire the money for the others to join him. Before he left, Kristian had reached into his thin leather wallet and handed Elder Sister fifty dollars.

"What is this?" Elder Sister had asked, incredulous. "How long do you think this will last us?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but that's all I can spare," he answered calmly. "Ole and I have to get all the way to New York, then Denmark, with barely enough for the tickets. If anyone can make a go of it, you can. At least the room is paid up to the end of the month."

Elder Sister made no further protest. Kristian was right—she had supported seven family members through the wartime occupation

with only her Shanghai charm and savvy. Bing wasn't worried either—her supremely confident elder sister could do anything.

On her way back to the rooming house, Bing took a route along Stockton Street into the Italian area of North Beach. She noticed that there were few Chinese beyond Columbus Avenue. People glared at her with long hard looks that made her uncomfortable. It was different from the admiring stares she got in Chinatown, where men rushed to the doors and windows of every restaurant and shop to gawk as she walked by. She ignored them all, tossing her permed hair back and keeping her head high, as any Shanghai miss would.

Bing was equally curious about these inhabitants of Chinatown. If it weren't for their faces, the calligraphy on shop signs, and a few fake-looking pagodas, Bing wouldn't have recognized anything Chinese about the place. Moreover, the majority of residents were from the Taishan region of Guangdong Province, far to the south of Shanghai. Bing couldn't make sense of their Toisan dialect. To communicate, Bing was forced to use the bits of English she had picked up from Kristian and Elder Sister. At first, Bing felt self-conscious about it, but soon she realized that she knew enough to get by.

Elder Sister hadn't been idle either. With only a few days' rent left at the rooming house, "Betty Woo" had gone to work in search of eligible bachelors for Bing—at the better restaurants and business establishments, family association halls and social clubs, even some fancy nightclubs. It wasn't hard to find them. The draconian Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which had barred most Chinese from entering the United States, had been repealed in 1943 to keep China in the Allied fold. But a quota was immediately imposed that limited immigration to 105 Chinese each year—from any country in the world. But the decades of restrictive laws had forced Chinatown to be a bachelor society by excluding almost all Chinese women, and barring Chinese men already in the United States from becoming citizens or marrying American women. Still, Elder Sister didn't want just any bachelor for Bing. He had to have a future, U.S. citizenship, or a green card—and enough money to repay Elder Sister for Bing's passage to America. On her very first foray, Elder Sister

found a prospect and invited the young man to the rooming house to meet Bing.

AT THE APPOINTED TIME, Bing waited nervously in the front hall of their building. Because she had entered the United States on a visitor visa, she knew that she would have to find a man to marry within six months if she wanted to stay in the country. She wasn't as picky as Elder Sister, but she had standards too. She made a hasty appraisal of the young Chinese fellow who approached the door: He was tall and slender with his hair slicked back, neatly dressed in a buttoned cardigan sweater over his shirt and slacks. He looks pleasant enough, Bing thought. And very American.

"You must be Bing," he said with an easy smile. "I'm Raymond. Your sister said to come by and meet you."

Bing nodded. "I'm very pleased to meet you." She spoke slowly and carefully in her best English.

He looked relieved. "Good, you speak English. Can you speak Toisan?" he asked.

"No. I speak Shanghai dialect. And some Mandarin. Do you?"

When he shook his head, she added, "That's okay. I understand your English. You sound just like an American."

"Well, I'd better talk like an American," he laughed. "I was younger than that little guy when I got here." He nodded toward Peter. "Say, would you like to go for a walk and some lunch?"

With Peter as her chaperone, Bing walked with Raymond to Portsmouth Square, a pleasant little park at the edge of Chinatown. They strolled to the Ferry Building, where Raymond pointed out the graceful Bay Bridge. "I stood right there along the Embarcadero when the bridge opened in 1936," he said proudly.

Back in Chinatown, Raymond took Bing and Peter to a luncheonette on Waverly Place that was busy with local Chinese. Raymond ordered a "combo" lunch—a new word for Bing—with thick pieces of tenderized beef in heavy brown gravy, fried rice, an egg roll, and wonton soup. Bing noted that she'd never seen such food in China. Amused, Raymond explained that in America, Chinese had to make

do with the local ingredients to prepare food that non-Chinese would eat. "*Bok wai* are afraid to try food that is too different," he said, using the Toisanese word for "white devil." Bing liked his forthright manner, how he told her about America without showing off, the way some Shanghai boys might. "If the *bok wai* didn't eat Chinese food, we would starve to death. Even educated Chinese can't find work in America except in laundries and restaurants." Raymond himself worked as a waiter in Chinatown, on the evening shift that didn't end until late at night, after other Chinatown workers finished their workdays and grabbed some supper at the local restaurants.

*With her arrival in
San Francisco, on
May 28, 1949,
Bing hoped that her
life would be better
in America—or
Denmark—than it
had been in China.*



Raymond walked Bing back to the rooming house. After Bing thanked him and took Peter to their room for his nap, Elder Sister asked Raymond to chat.

"My sister is a wonderful girl, don't you think?" Betty purred in honey-laced tones.

When Raymond agreed, Betty pressed on. "A lot of young men will be interested in marrying her, but I want to make sure she finds a good man with a future in America. Do you have a job? A green card?" After he nodded yes to both, Elder Sister smiled and told him how pleased she was. She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "We have a problem. Because of the Communists, we left China in such a hurry that we have very little money to live on. Any man who is seri-

ous about my sister must first pay me back one thousand dollars for her boat ticket and the bond."

Raymond gave a long low whistle. "You might as well ask for the moon! Not many guys in Chinatown have that kind of money."

To keep from losing Bing's potential suitor, Elder Sister changed her tone to cushion the blow. "Don't worry about it now; maybe you have some friends who can help you out if you really like her. But don't wait too long. We could be deported if I don't get some financial help soon." Looking up at Raymond through her eyelashes, she had an idea. "Maybe young guys like you don't have much money, but do you know of any older men? I'm going to divorce my old man. Maybe there's someone you can introduce me to?"

At first Raymond said nothing and sucked on his teeth. Then he offered, "I know a fellow who's Cantonese, but I've heard him say he'd like to meet a Shanghai lady. His name's Lee Chou. He's kind of flashy, but you might like that." He took a good, long look at Betty, assessing her carefully. "I'll find out if he'd like to meet you. Maybe he can help you out."

Raymond decided not to pursue Bing, but he kept to his word about Lee. Within days, a mustachioed Chinese man in a zoot suit, looking to be in his forties, came to visit Elder Sister. She was ready for him, dressed in her most alluring red *qipao*, complete with padded bra, girdle, handbag, and matching red high heels.

"Elder Sister, you look like a movie star," Bing said admiringly before going to answer the door. She knew that she'd never come close to achieving her sister's special appeal.

Betty touched up her lipstick. "Thanks, Bing. Wish me luck," she said with a wink.

If Lee was looking for a Shanghai bombshell, Betty was TNT. He took her to the Forbidden City, Chinatown's swanky nightclub, for dinner and a show. Before the evening was over, he asked Betty to marry him. Betty was ready with her pitch: She liked him plenty but couldn't marry him until she divorced her husband in Denmark, which she intended to do after he sent for her. In the meantime, she could be deported because in a week they'd run out of cash and had nowhere to go.

Without hesitation, Lee offered to find a place for her, Bing, and Peter if Betty would marry him after her divorce. She agreed.

The next day, Lee rented a three-room cottage on Broadway, a few blocks beyond the north edge of Chinatown. He outfitted the place with furniture, dishes, and cookware, whatever they needed. Bing, Elder Sister, and Peter took two rooms, while Lee slept in a small room off the kitchen. He even gave Elder Sister cash for groceries.

With their rental at the rooming house coming to an end, Lee's timing was perfect. Bing was astonished that he was so generous with them—and that he had accepted Elder Sister's terms. He demanded nothing and was never at the cottage except to sleep—in his own room. He didn't seem to have a job, yet he always had money. Bing wondered if he was a gangster. She kept her speculations to herself, though, not wanting to be disrespectful to Elder Sister.

With their living arrangements secure, Betty forged ahead to snare Bing a husband. "If your visa runs out before we find you a man with a green card to marry, you'll have to come with me to Denmark. There, you'll have to get married too—and in Denmark, there are only white men to choose from." Bing agreed that she'd be better off with a Chinese husband in America. She would accept whatever fate had in store, as she had always done. "Don't worry," Elder Sister said. "You're young and pretty. Men are like dogs; they'll come sniffing. I'll find you a nice one."

Raymond continued to stop by on occasion, just as a friend. Sometimes he'd take Bing and Peter out for a matinee at the Great Star Theater in Chinatown or for lunch at Clinton's Cafeteria, a popular place for *lofan*—meaning non-Chinese or "foreigners" in Cantonese. Bing enjoyed his insights on America. It was well known in Chinatown, he told her, that many Chinese were "paper sons" or "paper daughters" with questionable immigration documents. In the big San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906, all the city birth records had been destroyed—creating an opportunity for a few generations of Chinese, mostly from Guangdong Province, to claim an American-born Chinese father whose wife had been forced to stay in China because of the exclusion laws. This allowed the reputed offspring to be admitted into the United States as citizens—if they could convince

immigration inspectors. It was a difficult route into the United States, involving lengthy imprisonment with many months of grueling interrogations at Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay. But it was worth it for those who passed the questioning and were allowed to enter the country. According to Raymond, many of the people in Chinatown had this kind of paper trail.

No one Bing met would ever admit to being a paper son, not when the INS was eager to deport almost every Chinese. But several suitors cautioned her to be wary as she went about her quest for a citizen or permanent resident to marry before her visa expired. Some of the stories they told her sent chills down her spine—about Chinese who had been targeted and lynched by mobs of angry white devils in California and elsewhere; about harsh, selective enforcement by immigration agents against Chinese and other Asians, often leading to imprisonment and deportation. She had to be alert, some warned, because INS snitches were everywhere, ready to pounce on any Chinese with false papers. Bing began to wonder if she'd be better off in Denmark.

Raymond admonished her to stay away from Chinatown slicks who ran illegal gambling parlors. These gangsters kidnapped girls to work as prostitutes, he said, and they had guns. "You're a sweet kid, and people may take your kindness for weakness. Your sister knows how the game is played. Stick close to her. If you get in trouble, don't bother with the *lofan* police. They won't help a Chinese," he added. Raymond offered to help Bing get a job harvesting flowers at farms in San Jose. "They're always looking for field workers. The pay is seventy-five cents an hour. Off the books," he told Bing, lowering his voice.

Bing listened politely to Raymond's ideas, but she couldn't risk getting caught by the INS. Besides, a proper Shanghai girl wouldn't work as a field hand, to become as stoop-backed and brown-skinned as farmers in China. Hearing the difficulties of other Chinese in America made her both anxious and grateful that her own dubious papers hadn't been detected on the ship. Bing had her paper secrets too. Elder Sister warned her never to utter a word about her forged passport to anyone.

Elder Sister also reminded Bing to keep her adoption a secret. But

Bing already knew too well the stigma of being abandoned and adopted. She had been the empty bottle, not worth keeping. Who would want to marry a girl who didn't know her parents' names or her birth date? Bing was immeasurably grateful to Elder Sister for treating her like a real sister and presenting her to the world as her own flesh and blood. Of course Bing would never reveal this secret.

Some of the suitors caught her attention. Bing especially liked one handsome fellow who took her and Peter to lunch at Woolworth's, in fancy Union Square, just beyond Chinatown. Almost all of the people in that busy square were *lofan*. Bing was charmed by the young man's kind disposition. He worked at a restaurant and seemed to like her. After "the talk" with Elder Sister, Bing was surprised that he still wanted to see her. Could it mean something more?

On their next date, he took her and her ever-present young chaperone to an ice-skating show in downtown San Francisco. Bing had a fun afternoon with him, and on the way back to the cottage on Broadway, they stopped and sat in a park while Peter chased pigeons.

"I like you a lot, Bing," he said, "but what your sister is asking for is impossible. This is our last time out. I thought I'd show you a good time because I won't be coming back."

Bing looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry," she said. "You've treated me very well. Thank you for everything."

Before he left, he offered a parting thought. "You know, a lot of guys say to watch out for Shanghai girls; they're out to hustle you. You're not like that at all. But your sister is something else."

Bing didn't mind saying goodbye to him—or any of them. She had learned years before not to get too close to anyone. Still, she was beginning to worry that the price Elder Sister was asking of her suitors was too high. Or could her bad luck be following her from Shanghai?

Elder Sister, however, wasn't waiting for luck to find them. "You make your own luck," she insisted. Instead of resting on the largesse of Lee, her unwitting benefactor, she'd been conducting her own reconnaissance to follow the money in Chinatown. Early in Chinatown's history, having been largely ignored and disenfranchised by the city's politicians, the Chinese had developed their own network of governance, with powerful associations organized by occupation, an-

cestral hometowns, and family clans. Betty sashayed her way through the various headquarters, which were almost entirely male.

One of the most influential organizations in Chinatown was the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, which handled the community's relations with San Francisco's mainstream society. It was staunchly loyal to the Nationalists, whose defeat in China only intensified the organization's anti-Communist fervor. Chiang Kai-shek's portrait hung inside its main hall, along with a prominent display of the Nationalist flag. Signs of the civil war and ideological divisions were ever present in Chinatowns everywhere. The blood feuds, internecine accusations, political surveillance, and gang thuggery reminded Betty of occupied Shanghai. She was on familiar ground.

Mustering all the appeal of a sophisticated Shanghai lady, Betty charmed and teased the prominent elders of Chinatown. One, a lawyer with the surname Yee, belonged to the large Yee Family Association. Betty wasted no time in telling him about her beautiful, innocent, and marriageable sister—and the quandary of her visa. "She has big eyes, full lips, and a nice shape—and she can cook! She'll be a great catch for some lucky guy," Betty assured him. The lawyer happened to know of a fellow clansman, John Yee of New York City, who was visiting relatives in neighboring Oakland, across the bay. According to the lawyer, John Yee was a fortyish widower who worked for a bank and was looking for a wife.

Betty arranged for John to meet Bing at the cottage. When the portly, balding man approached, Bing felt a moment of panic. He looked old enough to be her father. If he was truly forty, he was twice her age. As Elder Sister went to the door, she reminded Bing that Kristian was thirty years older than she. Bing calmed herself and looked more closely. The man had a genial smile. He was wearing a suit, something none of the other men she had dated owned, and he brought her flowers. Since he spoke Chinese in the Toisan dialect, they conversed in English.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Bing," he said, bowing slightly. "Would you care to join me for lunch?"

Bing suppressed a giggle. He was so formal. "I'm happy to join you for lunch. Would you mind if my nephew Peter joins us?"

"Of course," he replied with a cheerful smile.

They went to Sam Wo, an inexpensive eatery where Bing had gone with other suitors. But John Yee seemed different. Unlike many of the other men, he didn't just talk about himself—he wanted to know about her. Bing painted a bright but vague picture, careful not to hint at her difficulties. She learned that John Yee's wife had died years before and they'd had no children. He had lived in New York's Chinatown for many years, working as a teller with the Bank of China. He was taking a month's vacation to visit his sister and brother who lived and worked in Oakland. He told her stories about New York and asked her about her life in Shanghai.

When lunch was over, he asked Bing if she'd like to see him again. She paused. She liked his gentle personality. He seemed kind and cheerful, with a ready smile. His employer was one of the biggest banks under the Nationalist government. That seemed more promising than a restaurant or laundry. Bing answered that she'd be glad to see him again.

They met the next day for lunch. Bing felt safe and secure in his presence. Since he was staying with his sister in Oakland, he had to take a ferry or a bus all the way to San Francisco to meet her. That impressed Bing as well. Timing was a problem, though, as his vacation would end soon, and he'd have to return to New York.

At the end of the second date, Elder Sister pulled him aside: If he wanted to marry Bing, he would have to pay two thousand dollars for the travel costs plus the immigration bond. Listening in the next room, Bing stifled a gasp. That was double what Elder Sister had told the other men!

John was taken aback. Two thousand dollars was a huge sum. He was a frugal man who had worked hard to save his money as a bank teller, not a Bank of China magnate like T. V. Soong or H. H. Kung. He told Betty that he wasn't sure and would consider her terms on his way back to New York. When he said goodbye to Bing, he spoke gently but didn't mince words. "I like you a lot, but I have to think about it. Is your sister marrying you off or selling you?"

ELDER SISTER HAD A sixth sense about people—and she could smell money. She had instantly sized up John Yee: He was older than the others who were interested in Bing; he had worked for years at a bank, which had to pay more than a Chinese restaurant; and he was a Cantonese, as notorious for their thrift as Shanghainese were for their extravagance: He had surely saved plenty.

There was another reason why Betty had doubled her price. She hadn't received a single letter from her husband or son to confirm that they had arrived safely in Denmark. Kristian was supposed to wire her money to pay for her travel to Denmark—and they might need a ticket for Bing as well if they hadn't found a suitable husband by then. Betty couldn't string Lee along forever. It was only a matter of time before he tired of waiting—and supporting them. She needed a fall-back strategy, just in case.

A month went by, and there was no word from John Yee. Bing figured that Elder Sister had asked for too much. She hadn't told Elder Sister what he had said about her, but she hadn't forgotten either. To dispel any doubts, Elder Sister insisted, "He'll come around. You'll see."

In the meantime, other suitors continued to call on Bing. Word was out that she was still available. But Bing wasn't interested. She didn't want to start seeing someone new without knowing if she should wait for John. She liked his easy and pleasant manner. That he was older no longer concerned her. Rather, his age brought more security and stability, something she'd never known.

Bing didn't know what she'd do if John Yee declined. She had learned of another young Chinese woman in her neighborhood who was struggling with her visa situation. Margaret Soong, a flight attendant with CNAC, the Chinese airline, had landed in the United States just after the Communist victory in Shanghai. Several CNAC pilots had defected to mainland China with the airline's planes, but Margaret faced deportation as a stranded crew member. Luckily for her, another guest at her hotel was a well-known Catholic priest, Reverend John T. S. Mao, who tirelessly worked to find scholarships for Chinese

Christian students to attend American colleges. He was helping Margaret to stay, but college wasn't an option for Bing, whose formal education had ended in third grade.

ONE DAY IN MID-SEPTEMBER, a telegram arrived at long last. It was from Denmark—but sent by Kristian's brother. Elder Sister's husband had fallen ill on the transatlantic ship to Denmark. He'd been hospitalized as soon as the ship reached Copenhagen. Poor Ole, not knowing a word of Danish, had been living with his uncle's family for more than two months.

The telegram ended with: COME TO DENMARK. DO NOT DELAY.

Elder Sister had to act quickly. She didn't have enough money to get to Denmark. But her best prospect was John Yee in New York. She went to a pay phone and called his sister in Oakland. "Hello, Florence? This is Betty—you remember me, Betty Woo from Shanghai? Your brother John was interested in marrying my sister? We have to leave for Denmark soon. Can you let your brother know? If he wants to marry Bing, he better not waste any time, or she'll be gone."

John Yee got the message. Bing seemed like a sweet girl. She was more beautiful and had a nicer disposition than he'd hoped for. She didn't mind if he took her to cafeterias and other cheap places and didn't seem like the pampered wives of rich Chinatown merchants who played mah-jongg all day and flaunted their wealth. But two thousand dollars was an incredible sum. It couldn't possibly have cost that much to bring her to the United States. That was almost his entire life savings in America, squeezed from decades of work in the menial jobs relegated to Chinese. He'd gone to night school to learn basic bookkeeping and to improve his English. Only after that had he been able to work his way into a teller's job.

On the other hand, he had been widowed for so long, and there were few potential Chinese brides in the United States. He liked the way she treated her nephew—she'd be a good mother if he was lucky enough to have children. But she was so young. Would she really want to be with a man more than twice her age? He had lied when he'd told the elder sister that he was only forty.

John turned to his boss and closest friend—Berne Lee, the manager of his bank branch—for advice. Berne had given him the chance to work there when it had first opened in New York many years earlier. Back then, Chinese hadn't trusted banks and had been especially hesitant about one headquartered in China. Chinese-language newspapers, even in faraway America, ran stories about China's bank failures, currency collapses, and rampant corruption. To win over customers, John and Berne had gone door to door, tenement by tenement, educating restaurant workers, laundrymen, sailors, and merchants in Chinatown about banks and how their money would be safer in one—and earn interest. The two men succeeded in getting enough deposits to sustain the Chinatown branch of the Bank of China on the Bowery. Moreover, Berne was one of the few married men in Chinatown. He would know what to do.

John presented his worries to his good friend: the money, Bing's youth, the domineering sister. The fact that he had already used up all his vacation time on his recent trip. Berne addressed each point. If John needed more money, Berne would help him out. In the special case of an employee's marriage, the bank would give him another month off. As to the sister and Bing's age, Berne asked John: "Do you love her? Could you love her? If you love her, you'll be able to work things out."

His friend's questions gave John pause. Yes, he could love her. In fact, he must have had feelings for her if he was still considering the outrageous demand from her sister, plus the additional cost of going back to California. He was a cautious and thrifty man—for any other girl, he would have walked away without a moment's thought.

The next day, John called his sister with the following message: Tell Bing he would like to marry her. He could get back there in two weeks.

BING WAS THRILLED. It was already October, and her visa would be expiring on November 26. Now she didn't have to go to Denmark. At least in America, she could get by in English. She didn't know John Yee well enough to *love* him, not the way people did in the movies, but

she liked him. She hadn't expected much in this search for a husband, and she could have done worse. Here was somebody who really *wanted* her. Her own father and mother hadn't wanted her. Her first adoptive mother, Mama Hsu, hadn't wanted her. John Yee wanted her enough to pay two thousand dollars. Yes, she could marry him.

Elder Sister seemed more excited than Bing—she grabbed the bride-to-be and danced around singing, "Happy days are here again!" while Peter doubled over in laughter at the sight of them.

Suddenly the cottage on Broadway was abuzz with activity. With the cash she had on hand, Elder Sister began to assemble Bing's modest trousseau: new shoes, nightgowns, lingerie. A coat for the cold New York weather. They found a tailor to sew some new dresses for Bing. A wedding gown to be worn only once would be too extravagant. Instead, they selected a special fabric for a dress that she could wear again.

Travel plans, too, had to be made. Elder Sister reserved a passage to Denmark for herself and Peter. They'd take a train to New York and from there board the ship to Copenhagen. She didn't know what she would discover there, whether Kristian would be too ill to leave Denmark. But war and chaos had taught Elder Sister to prepare for the worst, just in case. She needed an alternate plan.

If things didn't work out in Denmark, Elder Sister decided she would return to America. But she learned that a bank account in the United States with at least two thousand dollars was required for an immigrant visa. John Yee's "dowry" would buy her tickets to Denmark, but it was not enough to gain her reentry into the United States. She would have to sell some of her jewelry. She picked out her most expensive piece: the diamond solitaire that Kristian had given her before they were married. She hated to part with it, but this wasn't a time to be sentimental. Refugees everywhere had to barter and sell whatever they had in order to survive. And she was a survivor.

Elder Sister knew exactly whom to approach about her ring: "Sugar Daddy" Lee. Since he was supporting her on the promise of marriage once she divorced Kristian, he'd be glad that she was getting rid of the wedding ring.

When Lee returned to the cottage that night, Betty was dressed to kill.

"Lee, darling, I have good news," she purred. "My dreadful husband has finally wired me that he's ready for the divorce." She'd be leaving for Denmark soon, she explained, and when she returned, she'd marry him. She also told him about the two-thousand-dollar requirement for the return visa. "Can you help me to get a good price for my wedding ring? I won't need it anymore." The big diamond flashed brightly as she showed off the ring. "We paid five thousand U.S. dollars for it ten years ago," she said, inflating the price with her Shanghai bravado. "Can you get that for me, darling?"

Pleased to hear that her divorce was on the way, Lee examined the ring closely and grunted. "Five thousand dollars? Is it the Hope Diamond? Don't worry; I have some pawnshop pals who know diamonds. Leave it to me."

The next night, Lee returned. "My buddies say that you were snookered if you paid five grand for this ring. The best they can do is twenty-five hundred dollars."

Betty appeared to mull this over. She objected briefly at the prospect of such a loss. After pausing a beat, she agreed to sell. Bing knew that under her poker face, Elder Sister was pleased. Lee left, promising to sell the ring the next day. Alone with Bing, Elder Sister shared an excited whisper. "He got a good price. Now we're in business!" The next day, Lee came by and plunked down twenty-five hundred dollars in cash. Elder Sister promptly opened a savings account, crossing that big hurdle for a return to America if she wished.

THE GOLDEN MID-OCTOBER SUNLIGHT streamed into their cottage as Bing answered the knock on the door. It was John Yee, standing outside with a suitcase in one hand and a bouquet of daisies in the other. He had just arrived from New York, and his first stop was to see Bing.

Without even a hello, he looked at her intently. "Are you sure you want to marry me and live in New York?" he asked almost shyly.

Bing returned his gaze without flinching. She nodded and replied in a firm voice, "Yes, I'm sure."

John smiled broadly and handed Bing the flowers.

By then, Betty had rushed to the door. John reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a fat envelope, handing it to her. "Here's two thousand dollars. Please count it," he requested. "I don't want to hear that I shortchanged you." When she'd finished counting and was satisfied, he asked, "Do I get a receipt?" His tone was jovial, but Bing sensed he was only half joking.

Elder Sister replied, "She's all yours—after the wedding."

"Then let's not waste time," he said, taking Bing by the hand and leading her to get blood tests, then to city hall for the marriage license. They would go to Reno, Nevada, where they could get married without delay by a justice of the peace. Bing packed a small bag and headed out the door.

Before going to Reno, they stopped in Oakland to see John's sister Florence. In anticipation, Florence had spent days preparing a traditional Taishan herbal concoction to enhance the young bride's health and fertility.

Florence handed Bing a cup filled with dark, thick fluid. "Just drink it fast," Florence instructed. "It will help make things easier for you. Tonight." She gave Bing a knowing smile.

Bing hesitated. She wanted to please her soon-to-be sister-in-law. She had no choice but to raise the foul-smelling liquid to her mouth. She downed it. Almost immediately, Bing became woozy and started gagging. She remembered that she had experienced this once before.

"Is there alcohol in the drink?" Bing gasped in between spasms. "I'm very allergic."

"Only a half bottle of whiskey," Florence replied. "Not much."

Bing's skin broke out in an itchy rash. She felt ill during the entire trip to Reno. She could barely remember how she got there or the marriage ceremony itself. That night at the hotel, Bing felt miserable, her wedding night a bust. The special Chinese concoction had made nothing easier for her, no matter what Florence believed. The next day, Bing and John went back to Oakland to visit his extended family for a

few days. A relative who owned a Chinese restaurant held a big wedding banquet. Two hundred members of the large Yee family came, but Elder Sister couldn't get there from San Francisco. The only people Bing knew were John and Florence. She couldn't talk with her wedding guests because everyone spoke in the Toisan dialect.

Another bride might have pouted, but Bing didn't mind. She was used to being on the margins, and it didn't bother her, not even at her own wedding party. Her every smile and nod was a genuine reflection of her happiness: She'd have her own home, her own place with John Yee. Soon she and John would leave for New York. Bing had spent all her life following the wishes of others. Now she would make her own path.

CHAPTER

23

DOREEN
AND
BENNY*Ages 19 and 22*

GUANGZHOU AND NANJING, 1950

A LARGE SMUDGE OF DRIED TEARS BLURRED THE TRAIN window next to Doreen where she had pressed her damp cheek to catch a final glimpse of Benny and her mother before they disappeared from view. Her mother had chased after the train, not stopping until she reached the very end of the platform, her arms outstretched as if to pull Doreen back.

Doreen had had to fight the desire to run through the train, toward the retreating figure. What kind of daughter was she to spurn her mother's wrenching appeal, especially when her mother had never before asked anything of her? She had managed to calm herself by resting her gaze on Benny as he waved her on. His reassuring smile seemed to telegraph that she was doing the right thing. That she'd be okay.

As the steady chug of the train lulled other passengers to sleep, Doreen imagined the other life she might have had, unblemished by war and treason. Now nineteen, she'd have been heading off to college and, one day, would have had a beautiful wedding. Her smart and charming elder brother would have been a doctor, a statesman, or possibly one of Shanghai's notorious playboys, the spoiled sons of the rich and mighty who had no purpose in life but to revel in the city's decadence. Instead of living that fanciful dream, she was sitting on