A River of Stars

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

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**SCARLETT** rode the elevator to the third floor, the corridor lined with signs for insurance agencies, accountants, and notaries. Green and red lights flashed on a fake Christmas tree at the end of the hallway. The immigration lawyer’s laminated wood door was unmarked but for a faded gold banner inscribed with old Spring Festival fortunes: MAY MONEY BE PLENTIFUL and BRINGING WEALTH AND PROSPERITY.

It was said Lawyer Loo could find every loophole through which an immigrant might squeeze and turn black to white before a judge. She fingered the two hundred dollars in her pocket, grimy fives, tens, and ones—the sum total of their savings. She suspected the lawyer’s fees would be steep but doubted that his clients—the waitresses, dishwashers, nannies, and busboys of Chinatown—had much, either. Maybe she could leave a deposit today and pay in installments. Or she’d have to borrow money from someone at even steeper terms.

She’d timed her walk to coincide with Liberty’s midday nap, bundling her coat around them against the winter wind. She held the lapels together, since the jacket could no longer fit over the sling and Liberty’s growing body. Back at Evergreen Gardens, her roommate, Daisy, watched over the pork roasting in the oven while her son jiggled and cooed in a bouncer, another gift scavenged by Old Wu.

Inside the office she discovered two men sitting knee to knee on both sides of a desk. The room reeked of stale tea, greasy takeout, and musty old files piled high, of clients who must be pleading, howling for help. Scarlett nearly backed away.

“Fatty Pan, get her a chair!” the older man barked. He must be Lawyer Loo.

The reedy young man cleared a stack of newspapers, dumping it onto the floor beside another teetering pile, and Scarlett perched at the edge of the chair. Liberty shifted in the sling, gurgling, which startled both men.

“There’s a baby in there!” Fatty Pan pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “You’re . . .” He trailed off, embarrassed he’d stated the obvious.

“Born here?” Lawyer Loo asked.

She nodded. She liked that he already was assembling her case. Having a US citizen as a child could be a mark in her favor. She explained that she’d arrived on a tourist visa that was expiring next month but didn’t mention her lover, Boss Yeung, the Perfume Bay maternity hotel, or its proprietor, Mama Fang—the less said, the better. She’d arrived legally, not like those Chinese who paid snakeheads, or smugglers, to bring them into America. The most desperate hiked through the deserts in Mexico, or hid in coffins or under the floorboards of boats, shipped in like any other made-in-China cargo.

“Can you get me a green card?” Scarlett asked.

“No,” Lawyer Loo said without hesitation.

She sagged in her seat. He was supposed to work miracles, and yet he’d given up within five minutes.

“Not at first. We can change your status.” He snapped his fingers, and Fatty Pan fetched a thick black binder. Scarlett recoiled from the photos of Chinese badly beaten, black eyes, bruised lips, their mouths and noses crusty with blood.

“What happened?” Scarlett said.

“These are all victims of the Chinese government,” he said. “Asylum seekers.”

“I don’t have pictures like this.”

“You don’t need to.” Fatty Pan pulled up photos on his laptop. The same photos that were in the album but different somehow.

Scarlett blinked, her eyes watering. The faces had been changed, different people artfully transformed. Fatty Pan might be dim-witted, but he had his talents. Her nostrils twitched. She smelled his lunch on his breath—all over him—as if he’d been dipped into duck grease and hung in a shop window.

Lawyer Loo laughed. “He gets chased by dogs in the street.” He explained that his assistant lived above Tommy To’s, the most famed barbecue shop in Chinatown, and the scent of smoky grease had pervaded every part of him. Fatty Pan hunched his shoulders in misery.

“You Christian?” the lawyer asked.

Scarlett shook her head.

“Doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

“Won’t the government want proof?” she asked.

Lawyer Loo dug through his drawer and showed her a receipt. For his services? No—proof of attendance at a local church. “In return for a modest monthly donation, we have a blank book.”

He seemed to enjoy explaining the process, but it also served as his sales pitch. She, like the other supplicants in this dingy office, didn’t care about the details so long as he guaranteed legal residence. But showing the lengths to which he worked on behalf of his clients would justify the high price of his services.

“Everyone’s a Christian? Won’t the government get suspicious?” Scarlett asked.

He nodded at Fatty Pan, who rested his hands in his lap, thumb to forefinger, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. Perhaps her question wasn’t unusual, perhaps it prompted the next part of the presentation. “The Celestial Goddess,” Lawyer Loo said. Beijing had banned the group.

“I’ll get pictures of you in Portsmouth Square,” Fatty Pan said.

“No pictures.”

“Not to worry!” Lawyer Loo said. “Some clients, they can’t remember what they ate yesterday. The photos help them remember the sequence. But you—you seem like someone who can tell a story.”

He recited the details she’d have to memorize if she claimed Christianity as her cause: late-night prayer meetings, the knock at the door, the government thugs tearing apart the Bible and slamming her to the floor. “That’s not too hard to remember,” he assured her.

When Scarlett had arrived in America, the bored immigration official at the airport had flipped through her passport, but an asylum application would undergo far more scrutiny.

“Americans think the Communists are barbaric,” Lawyer Loo said. “If your story confirms that, they believe anything you say.”

“I want to do things the legal way,” she said.

“You came here to make a better life for yourself. For your baby,” he said. “You worked so hard to get here, you should be able to stay.”

Lawyer Loo couldn’t have been more wrong about the circumstances that brought her to America: getting accidentally pregnant and caving in to her lover’s demands. Still, she’d worked hard to remain here, and in the attorney’s eyes—if not the law’s—that must count too.

“You have to petition within a year of arriving,” he said. If approved, she could start working, and after a year she could apply for permanent residency.

“Are there other stories?” Scarlett asked. A story she could believe, a story that could stir her emotions during the green-card interview.

“For a woman your age, usually forced abortion or a forced sterilization after your first child,” Fatty Pan piped up. “Usually.” He eyed Liberty. As Scarlett caressed her baby’s head, she remembered the other mother, the one who’d fled.

On a spring night, Scarlett had woken up alone in the bed. She might have been eight or nine years old. She’d heard low voices outside, Ma and the headman and others she didn’t recognize. Scarlett had followed the group of five, crossing a swollen river to a nearby village where they stopped in front of a house whose straw thatch had the look of mangy fur. They burst in without knocking. The men shouted and cursed—whomever they wanted to surprise must have escaped.

Scarlett heard panting up ahead, and she’d spotted a pregnant woman waddling around the corner, wincing with each step. All winter, she must have been hiding her pregnancy under layers of heavy clothes. Scarlett’s shout curdled in her mouth. She’d been proud of Ma, proud of the work that served the country and kept her out of the fields, unlike the other mothers. Yet maybe she should lead Ma astray. Or she could run alongside the woman, put an arm around her waist to ease her load. She had wanted the woman to escape. But if Ma found out—Scarlett never should have followed her here. She should go back home and hide under the covers.

The woman backed into a chicken coop by accident, setting off squawking hens. The group ran out of the house, chasing down the noise, and caught sight of her. Running as well as she could, the woman reached the river and waded in up to her waist. Her feet slipped on the rocks, her arms outstretched for balance, as the current battered her body. Two men ran over the bridge to the other side, blocking her escape.

She’d wept, begging, pleading that her mother-in-law would beat her until she had a son. “I know it’s a son, a son.” She howled, a sound that tore the world apart, a sound that Scarlett couldn’t escape, even with her hands pressed over her ears, a sound she knew she would never forget. Until that day, she’d thought the women deserved their punishments, but maybe Ma and her job were at fault?

Then Scarlett saw her mother’s face, lit with grief and regret, and realized Ma might agree. Couldn’t she let the woman run away and lose the paperwork? Ma had locked eyes with Scarlett, silently telling her it was too late and she had to finish what had been set in motion. No one moved until Ma squared her shoulders, waded in, and dragged the woman away.

How broken the woman had been afterward, shambling, her hair matted, with no son and no hope of ever having one, at the mercy of the stone-hearted doctors who would abort her baby and then sterilize her.

Woozy, Scarlett gripped the arms of the office chair. She felt herself dissolving, blurring, fading. Soon she’d have to nurse, her breasts full with milk. Milk that the other mother must have had to squeeze out. Scarlett steadied herself, and everything rushed forth as she told the men the story: Ma’s work at the clinic and what happened to the woman. She’d killed herself by swallowing a bottle of pesticide. Her body convulsed so hard she’d bitten off her tongue, it was said. She’d never gotten over the loss of her son, no matter how much she might have loved her first child, her daughter who would leave her, someday marry, and belong to another family.

Scarlett had been at school when she heard. She stabbed her pencil into the palm of her hand, driving the tip deep into her flesh, to keep from screaming. That day she’d vowed she would never become like Ma.

The men’s eyes widened. For all the stories they’d concocted, the real one electrified them. She’d never told anyone. Not Boss Yeung. Not Daisy. Despicable—she and Ma both. Scarlett should have warned the woman and led her to safety. Her skin started to itch, and her hair felt unbearably greasy. She longed to stand under a hot shower, rinse it, rinse herself down the drain.

There was a backlog, Lawyer Loo said, but he could move up her case if she paid her deposit today. He acted as if he’d won the lottery. Taking her on must have seemed easy money. “Ten thousand dollars, with a one-thousand-dollar deposit.”

A thousand dollars! Even if she started doubling, tripling her batches of hanbaobao, she would have to work for months to save up. But she possessed something far more valuable: the truth. Detail after detail that had the power to shock, unlike the lawyer’s rote, repeated tales. If he waived the deposit, she’d spill more stories of the villagers that Ma had punished and tell him every detail the government wanted lost.

“You can get those stories from the Internet,” Fatty Pan said.

“You think the government isn’t taking them down? No one else has the ones I can tell you.”

“If I give you a discount, everyone will ask for one,” Lawyer Loo said.

“No one else will know. And no one else has stories, not like mine. It’s not a discount. It’s a trade.” She’d bartered her rent money, and now she’d barter her way into his services.

“Talk doesn’t cook rice,” Lawyer Loo said.

“Lawyer Tam will want to meet with me,” she said. A competitor.

The Party had trained its people well. To survive, you had to lie, cheat, and steal.

“No one could save her,” Scarlett said. The woman who ran into the river. “But her story could save someone else.