

*The
Leftover
Woman*

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Part One

PROLOGUE

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My beloved, I understand that forgiveness may not be possible. Some deeds cannot be undone. I took someone essential from you that last tragic evening—the blood, so much blood. My hands will never be clean again no matter how hard I scrub. What I was capable of then was only limited by my desire, and my desire could consume the world.

Yet now, so many years later, I write to you because we are both ink and paper to each other. I have marked you as you have marked me, and you are written into the language of my soul. When you think of me, you must only remember glimpses, snapshots taken from a speeding train that you then try to piece into a cohesive narrative. Please, let me construct my truth for you, flawed though it must be. My only hope is your understanding, not in the sense of compassion but simple comprehension.

There is a question that I'm sure you've asked yourself again and again, lying alone in your bed, thinking of me. This is my answer. And after you have heard it, I hope that, perhaps, you will come to me.

I confess I have a daydream of you.

One day, there is a knock on my door. It is raining. My head snaps up, my heart flutters. I close my eyes, afraid of the hope that rushes

through my body like wine. I make myself take a careful step to the door, and then another. I am dizzy but I must not fall.

Through the glass, I make out a dark figure outside, carrying an umbrella, because in your thoughtful way, you are always prepared. A halo of light illuminates the rain cascading over you. Your jaw is clenched as you peer through the windowpane. You too are apprehensive. You don't know if you should have come.

I hurry to unlock the door before you can flee. My hands fumble with the knob and finally, I cast it open. We stare at one another a long moment. Despite all our sorrows, despite the days that have passed, we recognize each other. I think you're the most wondrous thing I've ever seen. I restrain myself, though. I must not frighten you more than I already have. A few hot tears escape. I dash them away.

Your breath catches. A smile touches your eyes; a miracle.

You step across my threshold.

Jasmine

Fifteen years earlier

I stood outside the Manhattan Chinatown teahouse and laid my palm against the windowpane. It was littered with advertisements. I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered in between a colorful flyer for a self-defense class and a Help Wanted ad. I ignored my reflection. I had always longed to be invisible. The Chinese believe our fortunes are written in the physiology of our faces, that the breadth of a forehead, the droop of a lip can seal our fates. For me, this was true. My visage had determined my path in life. Ever since I was a small girl in our village in China, I'd hated my face.

The customers inside were warm and laughing, pouring steaming oolong tea into small porcelain cups, scooping up fish balls with their chopsticks. Waiters and waitresses pushed loaded dim sum carts between the round tables as patrons picked out their favorite delicacies. There, a young father bounced his daughter on his knee as he blew on a wonton to cool it down for her. When the mother smoothed back

the child's wispy hair with a gentle hand, I was homesick for a past I'd never experienced.

A man pushed past me to enter the restaurant. I hurried in behind him before the door shut. A burst of warmth greeted me, along with the luscious smells of soy sauce chicken, orange-scented beef, and scallion pancakes. The chatter was all in Chinese and for a moment, I could pretend I was back home.

My jacket was too thin, and I realized how cold I was, even though it was already the beginning of March. I only had five more months before I'd have to repay the snakeheads who'd arranged my passage to New York. I pressed a hand to my icy ear. My plastic-framed glasses fogged so badly I had to remove them. The moment I wiped them clean, they clouded up again. I dropped them into my large, weather-beaten canvas bag next to my sketchbook. I'd clipped my thick hair into a bun. Messy strands had escaped. I could feel them plastered to my face and neck.

"Can I help you?" There was an edge of impatience to the plump, middle-aged hostess's voice. This might have been the second time she'd addressed me. She'd spoken Chinese instead of trying English first like she should have with someone my age. It must have been clear that I was fresh off the boat. She ran her eyes over my threadbare coat, and I could sense her inaudible sigh.

I spoke over the pulse tripping in my throat. "Can I please see the manager?"

"What?" she said, impatiently. "Speak up."

"I'm looking for a job."

She gestured for me to follow her to the back, where the kitchen was located. This restaurant must have been four times the size of the one back home. Would I ever get used to the extravagance and wastefulness here? Plates shoved to the side, filled with discarded leftovers: partly bitten pieces of lotus root, cilantro and radish garnishes, a salt-baked chicken leg, much of the meat still on the bone.

Weaving through carts and customers, I saw friends and relatives using their chopsticks to drop delicacies like spicy tripe into each other's rice bowls. We stopped next to a table with two beautiful women around my age. What were they—twenty-four, twenty-five?

They were impossible to miss in this room filled with families. It was like there was a spotlight focused on them and they knew it, preening and giggling over their tall red bean ices.

I took in the way they held their shoulders back to accentuate their graceful necks, the slender fingers that posed and enticed. They were both wearing too much makeup but instead of diminishing them, the colors seemed a signifier of power, like the way poisonous creatures clad themselves in bright hues instead of camouflage. I was envious. Not of their pulchritude but of their fearlessness, the way they'd seized their genetic peculiarities—because that's what beauty really is, when you think about it—and decided to wield them.

A small man wearing a wrinkled gray suit much too big for him exited the kitchen and approached me. He looked as tired as his faded eyes. "You're looking for work? What's your name?"

I started to push my glasses up my nose, then realized I'd taken them off. I felt exposed without them, especially with the two women watching us. How many times had I already had this conversation? Could I trust him not to report me? I stared at his shoes. "Umm, I'm . . . I'm a very hard worker—"

He barked out a laugh. "Let me guess, you don't have the right paperwork and you want me to give you a job even though you're too scared to even tell me your real name. Forget it." He waved a dismissive hand and turned to leave.

"I can clean tables, waitress, serve dim sum. I'm dexterous and have a good memory." My heart was racing. I was talking too quickly. I couldn't return to China and my disastrous life there. I closed my eyes. I had passed the menu board on the way in—what had it said? "Your specials today are braised pork in gravy, shrimp with vermicelli and garlic, and vegetarian crystal dumplings."

He paused. "Can you come in full-time?"

"A few nights a week."

He shrugged. "I have people lining up to work twenty-four hours a day, especially if they're in your situation."

In my peripheral vision, I noticed both women perk up as a young man stepped past us on his way to the kitchen. He was hunched over, his head averted, as if trying to make himself less conspicuous. He

wore a navy jacket with an elaborate emblem on the sleeve. A worn guitar case was slung over his back, an incongruous sight for a person heading into the depths of a restaurant where there were vats of boiling oil and flustered cooks, not to mention live lobsters.

The manager spotted him and erupted like a bulldog confronting a Doberman in the street. "What do you think this is, a storage area?"

The beleaguered man took a deep breath but didn't stop. "I'm so sorry, I'll stash the guitar. You won't notice—"

There was something familiar about his warm tenor that called to me. I didn't recognize the voice, rather the inflection of his Chinese, the rhythm of his words. I tended to avoid young men, with their grabby hands and clinging eyes, but I was riveted to this one. His hair was dark and silky, the gleam of amber highlights visible even in the fluorescent lighting.

"Come here." The manager actually stomped his foot.

The man slowly turned toward us and when he caught sight of me, he froze.

My heart lurched. I stared into a face that I both knew and didn't know at all. Two thick slashes of eyebrows, dusky skin, a square, masculine face with eyes like melted chocolate. Anthony. He was etched into my soul and yet entirely new to me. I remembered gangly shoulders, a broad open grin, his thin fingers plucking on guitar strings while perched on the steps of his house, one of the largest in our village. Then his family moved away and it stood empty, with me staring into the blank windows day after day. How many times had we shared a package of uncooked ramen noodles before he left, sprinkling the seasoning on top so we could munch them like chips? My eyes rested upon the man, but my soul recognized a boy I hadn't seen in ten years, my best friend when I was fourteen years old.

He was gaping at me. Then he whispered, "It's you."

A smile started on my face. To see him again so unexpectedly in this strange country made me feel like the sun had burst forth from my skin and I could barely contain it.

For a moment, wild emotion gathered in his eyes, joy and something else. In two steps, he crossed over to me. He reached out his hands. Before he could make contact, though, I flinched. Images of another

man's fingers, the pain of his grip, arose between us. My mind whispered, *I need to stay hidden*. Sensing my fear, he froze. As I watched, his face shifted. The happiness drained from his eyes, leaving them as cold as the bitter air outside.

The manager was scolding him in one endless stream as we stared at each other. "Now they are taking musical instruments to work. We are not a karaoke club. What will be next? Why don't you bring your cats and dogs too?"

The women, who had already stood up to leave, fiddled with their bags. They were observing us intently, loath to leave our little soap opera. Really, they were watching Anthony. Now that he'd appeared, I was incidental.

He set down his guitar case and seemed to be straining away from me, as far as possible without moving his feet.

I wanted to embrace him and to flee but most of all, I didn't want him to leave. To cover my confusion, I said, "You have nothing to say to an old friend?"

His lip curled. "I didn't realize we were still friends."

The manager's monologue petered out. He fell silent and watched us along with the two women.

Anthony continued to regard me with his challenging gaze. My heart was full. I hadn't allowed myself to think about how much I'd missed him during the many long, unhappy years since he'd moved away. But the last thing I needed right now was to be discovered by anyone from my past. That thought was almost immediately drowned out by my emotions—clearly, I was the dumbest melon in the history of dumb melons. This was Anthony, once the person I trusted most in the world. And my affection-starved heart couldn't let him leave, not now when he was standing right here before me, not even with the anger darkening his face.

"I'm sorry—" I stammered. "I had no choice. I know I hurt you." Even as I said this, I understood it was the worst possible thing I could have uttered.

His entire body stiffened for a second before he laughed, and that laugh struck me like a hammer. "Jasmine, right? It's a wonder I remember your name."

I curled my hands into fists as indignation and hurt burned through me. Others had treated me like this, but never Anthony. "We were inseparable. And now you're pretending you can't even recall my name? How old are you, two?"

The manager said, "Okay, let's forget the whole thing. Get to work."

Anthony ignored him. "We were children." He enunciated each word to make sure I understood. "I've done many things since I last saw you and you pretended not to see me." He caught himself, flushed a bit. "Not that I cared. You never had the ability to hurt me. You were only a silly little girl who followed me around."

How dare he? He was only a year older than me. I deposited as much disdain into my eyes as I could. "Fine. I forgot you were always too good for the rest of us because your family had the foreign road open to you. You must be happy with your American name now that you can finally use it." I was so heated I needed to unzip my coat, which I did with an angry flourish.

He stared down his nose at me and said with finality, "Goodbye, Jasmine."

He bent to grab the strap of his guitar case again but as he stretched out his arm, the sleeve of his jacket pulled up slightly and I caught a glimpse of a faded red string bracelet.

My mouth fell open. It couldn't be. The bracelet appeared to be made of Chinese knotting cord, woven thickly in an intricate braid. He saw me staring and clasped his other hand over it. When he straightened, it was hidden underneath his sleeve again. He slung the guitar over his back as my gaze snagged on the logo on his jacket. It seemed familiar. He then ignored all of us, including the manager, who had fallen into a stunned silence, and stalked off toward the kitchen.

At the doorway, he turned back for a moment to stare at me. Was that regret in his eyes? Before I could react, he was gone.

I turned to the manager, my thoughts whirring. "I'm so sorry. But about that job, I can cook too and—"

He snorted. I'd lost him. "Our cooks are all men. And you're too much trouble." He flicked me a quick look, then hurried after Anthony.

I closed my eyes in disbelief. There went another work opportunity. Had I really seen Anthony again? How could he have said those things

to me? He couldn't have made it any clearer how much he disliked me. But that bracelet . . . and then I remembered where I'd seen the emblem on his jacket.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I turned to leave before they could shame me further. My hair was falling out of my big barrette, and I yanked it free, the long mass unraveling down my back. I stumbled into something furry and perfumed and realized it was one of the young women who had been watching our entire pathetic exchange.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

To my surprise, she didn't move even though her petite companion was already at the door, tapping her glittery shoes. She peered intently into my face. As I focused on the woman up close, I saw that she was a few years older than I'd thought, possibly in her late twenties. In any case, she was lovely enough to sink the fish and make geese fall from the sky, with an expressive mouth and silky hair. She was all cream and pink and curves, a delicious surface masking the cool intelligence gazing out of those dark, luminous eyes.

She pursed her lips and seemed to make a decision. "I overheard you. You're looking for a job, right?"

When I nodded, she searched her large gold tote, burrowing through skeins of yarn and knitting needles—the last things I'd expect to find in her purse—while muttering, "Let me give you a name. Do you have something to write on?"

I wasn't sure I could trust her, but I desperately needed a job. I pulled my sketchbook out of my handbag right as she found her pen. "Here."

"Ooh," she said, and started to flip open my book. "You draw?"

I reached out and held it closed. "P-please stop that. Just put it on the back."

She pouted, then jotted down a name and address on the back cover. "Come to Opium. They're always looking for new cocktail waitresses. Ask for Aunt Glory and tell her Dawn sent you." She stopped, looked at me from underneath her lashes. "No papers necessary."

"Really?"

Dawn nodded, ran her eyes over me one more time, then leaned in to whisper, "But remember, appearances are everything."