

Chapter 1

May 16, 1966

As soon as she saw the painting, Mei knew Jian Wu would be leaving Beijing soon. He had chosen to work in miniature, on a canvas small enough to pack into a duffle, and the colors—oh the colors! Those tones of black and blacker punctuated by violent crimson streaks, with a single dash of yellow, her color, fading off the left edge.

His back was to her, his right hand gripping the brush like a spear, stabbing at the canvas, adding more ebony, black on black.

“So, you’ve decided,” she said.

He didn’t turn around. They’d discussed leaving Beijing the previous week after a card was delivered to him, one line of black print. “Report to Reeducation Camp in Guizhou Province by 20/05/1966,” it said. *Two thousand kilometers away. Four days until departure.*

“I have no intention of going to Guizhou,” he’d told her. “I won’t leave you, and they won’t brainwash me.” She kept a soldier’s face, but the earth reeled beneath her feet. *He planned to ignore a directive of the Communist Party! The danger!*

Now she approached him, put one hand on each of his shoulders and kissed the top of his head, surveying their studio. Her easel sat empty, as it had for two months. She hadn’t been able to paint anything since the Red Guards ransacked her home. Still, relics of her old productivity littered the table in a haphazard heap, sketches in one pile, used tubes of paint in another, brushes everywhere.

His side, in contrast, was factory neat. She marveled at his ability to still produce several paintings a week.

A door slammed down the hall. His shoulder muscles tensed under her hands. The art building had been deserted for ages. Who would dare to slam a door now? Another door. He catapulted off his chair, grabbed her arm, and pulled her across the room into the darkened storage closet, shutting them into blackness.

They heard shouts in the hallway, then yelling. She leaned into him, the smell of acrylic and turpentine overpowering her senses. Of course, they would be found. He had left paint tubes open on his easel; the paint was still wet on the canvas.

“Don’t be afraid, Mei,” he said. She buried her face against his chest, conscious of his fingertips digging into her back, listening to the footsteps growing closer. There were voices—his name was mentioned, then hers. An odd sense of calm overtook her. It was a gift she had, an ability to detach from her body and relax in moments of danger, a gift that had allowed her to excel at Kung Fu before the government outlawed martial arts. She counted her breaths—two, three, four—relaxing the muscles in her face and shoulders, reviewing their crimes. His were legend. And she—she’d dared to tell her student, Rong Peng, that it wasn’t right for students to be running the university and beating up teachers, no matter that Chairman Mao himself mandated it.

She inhaled, this time counting to ten, hoping her slowed breathing would help Jian, but her poise dissipated fast when something crashed to the floor nearby. She put her hands on either side of her head, dizzy. *The paint fumes. I’ll throw up if I don’t get some air.* How she regretted

that thought a moment later, when the closet door opened and they were dragged out, her first, then him.

There were a dozen or so uniformed Red Guards, some no older than fourteen, armed with clubs and belts. Several were her former students. She noticed how straight they stood, with their legs apart in military position, their jaws set tight. *They're only children. How much harm can they do?* And yet she trembled as the oldest, a boy about nineteen, washed his eyes over her body, and trembled even more as his gaze became distant and hard.

“Counter-revolutionary devils,” he said, spitting the words through his teeth. “Rightest Pigs!” He seemed to be the leader, and within seconds, the others joined in, yelling insults. She tried to move to Jian, but a Guard blocked her with his club.

“Coward!” he yelled to Jian.

Jian’s jaw tightened. *No Jian. Don’t fight back*, she thought, too late. Jian kicked the Guard in the crotch, and then the clubs were on him.

“Leave him alone!” Her martial arts training kicked in—her focus narrowed. She could take at least two of them with a spinning kick, but while she fought, the other Guards would beat Jian, maybe kill him. And the punishment for practicing martial arts now was death, her own beloved Grandmaster three months in the grave. Chairman Mao had declared all old traditions and ideas illegal, including Kung Fu, the way of the dragon. Now she was the carrier of that way, entrusted to fulfill her Grandmaster’s dying wish. To fulfill her oath, she needed to keep her skills hidden. She exhaled, blowing the air out, trying to release the urge to strike.

“Stop,” she screamed. “Don’t touch him.”

She swallowed a cry as a club whacked her back. It caused a dull throb—it was the sense of violation, the fear of worse things to come, that left her dizzy and gasping for breath. She lowered her head and put her arms on top of it to protect her skull—*please stop, please*—an instinctive reaction, but no additional blows came. Instead, she heard Jian struggling and then a ripping sound, and she bolted up, eyes wide.

Jian’s shirt had torn and one of his buttons was scuttling across the floor. She stared at the copper sphere, at the frayed threads hanging off it—she’d sewn that button on for him.

“Jian,” she said. She needed to see his face, but he was surrounded by Guards, sprawled on the floor.

She pulled herself up to her full height and conjured her inner dragon, instinct trumping fear. She’d surprise these aggressors with a Bajiquan attack, and keep them away from Jian until she figured out her next move. Her legs bent into horse stance, she readied to pounce, and then she heard Jian’s voice, weak, but firm.

“No, Mei! Stop,” he said. “Stop for the baby.”

A few younger Red Guards ran at her from the front with their clubs raised to strike. The leader stepped in front. “Wait!” he said.

She wondered if she should announce she was pregnant to sway the Guards toward mercy—perhaps they hadn’t heard Jian—but one look at the leader’s tight-lipped glare convinced her against it. He’d take it as evidence of her cowardice and make an example of her, sacrifice the fetus to the cause.

“Strip!” he said to Mei, tugging at her shirt. “Take it off.” She hesitated, unable to comprehend, stupid from fear. He ripped at the shirt until it tore. “I said strip!”

She remained frozen, though the urge to resist surged through her veins, the desire to crouch into Xu Bu. This was the moment she'd trained for, and she could take him, even with his club. But Jian had said no, the baby.

She closed her eyes—a cornered rabbit. The Guard went for her pants, his cold fingers pushing against her waist. Without thinking, she kicked, she would take his head off. He danced a few steps back, unharmed. He knew Kung Fu, too.

“Do you want to die?” he said. “You dare to use the fighting tricks of the ancestors? I will shoot you on the spot.” She didn't know if he really had a gun, but she couldn't risk it. Red Guards had no restraint.

He lunged for her again. She couldn't help kicking and flailing, but it was no use. Two of the Guards restrained her as the tall one yanked off the remains of her pants, leaving only her underwear.

She was afraid they would rape her, and in front of Jian, and he would try to stop them and they would kill him. Her fear was as much for Jian as for herself, and for the baby.

But they didn't move in on her. Instead, one asked, “Where are your paintings?”

“Destroyed,” she lied. Within seconds, a tall boy found her stash in the supply closet. One by one he punched through her canvases using the blue scissors at her workstation, then he shredded them, letting the pieces fall to the ground. She felt the insult in her body as if he was tearing skin from her bones. Several gathered around her and prodded her with the ends of their clubs as he did his work, pushing her against the wall as they turned their attention to Jian and stripped him. She winced when she saw the bruised areas of his body, the dried blood on the very shoulder she had just been caressing.

His face! There was a ragged cut under his left eye, and the eye itself was bruised and already blackened. Three spots of blood under the eye. She let out a muffled cry. It was the blood on his face she'd remember, the crimson pooled on his beautiful skin. They locked glances for a brief moment, and he nodded—*yes I see you, I see you, my love*. A mad desire to scream filled her gut. But she would not throw a match onto their fire, and so she ate the scream as they grabbed armfuls of his canvasses, years of sweat and hope, and using thick brushes wrote “COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY DOG” right on top of the largest work. She caught his eye again, seeking strength, but seeing instead his vulnerability—her Jian, cowed, his eyes cloudy. If they touched him again, she'd . . . She moved her balled fist to her chest.

They strung Jian's largest painting with wire and hung it around his neck, then wrote “CAPITALIST ROADER” on her only remaining intact painting, two feet by three feet and heavy with paint, and hung it on her. The wire cut into her neck, but she was grateful that the canvas covered her underwear and shielded her baby.

A moment later, she and Jian were forced to march down the hallway wearing the placards. A Red Guard marched behind her, pressing down her head while he led her across campus, into the cafeteria. They were pushed onto a low platform at the front of the room. Dozens of students sprawled on the floor in front of the platform, and hundreds more packed the room to the walls, cramming around tables, sitting on chairs and standing with arms crossed. *Were these the same students who'd beaten Poor Professor Tian, with her skinny-as-an-egret body, just last week?*

“Down with Wu!” the crowd was chanting. Insults resounded throughout the hall. “Bourgeois Devils!” someone yelled. “Revisionist Traitors.”

What evil had turned her sweet-faced students into this angry mob? She understood the need to destroy the dark threat of capitalism, to root out bourgeois ideas so that a new and better society could flourish. She knew her students wanted to create a world free of poverty, intellectual snobbery, and inequality. But ever since Chairman Mao had banned what he called the “Four Olds”—old habits, old ideas, old customs, and old habits of mind—frenzy had ruled. Students burned books to get rid of old ideas, raided homes and smashed antiques, destroyed temples, demolished photographs, and attacked the elderly. Her own student, ChangChang Lin, had led the raid on Mei’s home just five days previous, burning books, breaking porcelain dishes one by one, destroying the only remaining photo of her beloved grandmother. The smoking table passed on to her by her great-grandfather, destroyed. The brush paintings by Qi Baishi, worth a fortune, burned. She should have felt honored to sacrifice her Four Olds to the Revolution—so said Chairman Mao—but instead, she’d felt as shattered as the pottery shards left strewn on the floor.

Must revolution turn people into rabid dogs?

At the front of the platform stood Rong Peng, Mei’s former student. Rong Peng, who gained more power each day, who now headed her own faction. The Red Guards used a megaphone to call for formal accusations from members of the audience. Rong Peng was the first to speak.

“I studied with the imperialist Mei Wu last semester,” Rong yelled, stomping her foot for emphasis. “She used counter-revolutionary Western art objects in class. She stole bourgeois art from the classroom to keep for herself.” Rong produced a plaster reproduction of Michelangelo’s David.

“Found under her bed,” she said. “She teaches capitalist ideas. She hordes capitalist art!”

Mei remembered arguing with Rong about Michelangelo’s David the previous semester. Mei had been standing on her desk, the David hoisted high above her head.

“Perspective!” she’d said. “What do you see with the statue raised high that you didn’t notice before? Ms. Peng? What do you notice?”

“I notice that you’re standing on Party property.”

Mei hopped down from the desk in one movement, landing in a bow stance, statue in arms. “Irrelevant, Ms. Peng.” She smiled at the girl. “You see, class, Michelangelo was a master of perspective. He knew that the David would adorn the roof of the Duomo in Florence. He enlarged the head and the penis for viewing from below. Michelangelo shows us that in art as in life, we need to think from all angles.”

“What about the revolutionary angle?” Rong Peng said. “Michelangelo was a Western capitalist. Why are we studying him?”

“Some things transcend politics, Ms. Peng, like love, and art.”

“Nothing transcends politics, Professor Wu.”

Mei had walked up to the girl and stood inches from her, nose to nose. “You are nineteen years old, Ms. Peng. Old enough to wear a red armband, but not old enough to know your own heart. When you turn thirty, we can resume this conversation. Now, sit.” She gave Rong’s desk a knock with her fist, enough to startle the students in the surrounding desks, but not enough to move Rong Peng.

The girl had stomped out of the room, banging the door behind her.

Now, Rong held the same statue above *her* head and hurled it to the ground. Mei winced at the sound of the plaster shattering. Within seconds, a mob wielding sledgehammers surrounded the sculpture, smashing it until it was demolished altogether. Mei held her breath to keep from crying out—she knew there would be no point in protesting. The Guards would just as soon use the sledgehammers on her head.

More accusations from the audience, some true. “She supports the counter-revolutionary Jian Wu, who has refused to report for reeducation. She secretly practices black martial arts. She maintains bourgeois values in her clothing. Look at her long hair and vain ring.” Mei reflexively touched the dragon ring her Grandmaster had given to her.

Other accusations were outright lies. “She sells her paintings to capitalists in France. She is loyal to the denounced Lu Shaoqui. She has bedded the traitor Peng Zhen and seduced many of her students.”

At this, she met Jian’s eyes and he shook his head, letting her know he didn’t believe the stories. She saw that one of his eyes was swollen shut. *I hope it’s just a superficial bruise. He needs ice. I need to go to him.* Still, she didn’t dare move or protest—and neither did he. After an hour of witness testimonies, they were asked if they admitted guilt. Mei knew she’d be beaten if she denied the accusations but wasn’t sure admitting guilt would spare her. She opened her mouth to speak. No words emerged.

Rong Peng pointed two fingers at Mei’s face. Their eyes locked, and Mei felt the full force of Rong’s hatred wallop her.

“Confess!” Rong yelled. “Tell them you work to decorate walls of feudal landlords, of capitalist enemies.” She was inches from Mei’s face. Mei knew what she was supposed to say:

that she was guilty, she deserved the harshest punishment. Instead, she looked over to Jian, who also was being prodded for a confession. His crimes were recounted again: he had painted commissioned work for Peng Zhen, now an enemy of the Revolution. His work was not “red, bright, and shining” as mandated by Chairman Mao’s wife. He had failed to report for reeducation, proving he opposed socialism, and his brother had moved from China to Taiwan, showing he had capitalist connections.

“Jian Wu tried to bed me,” Rong Peng said. “His organ was larger than a submarine when he touched me.”

Mei looked at Rong’s pancake face and couldn’t suppress a snort. A guard struck her with a belt as soon as the sound escaped her lips. The room spun. Her shoulder throbbed, but she tried to focus instead on her breathing. When she saw the belt poised for a second strike, she bit the inside of her cheek and looked out to the audience, where she caught a glimpse of one of her former students in the front row, a gaunt boy named Qiu Shen. She recalled criticizing him for the lack of subtlety in his work. He now stared at the place where her legs met, transfixed.

“Pig!” It was Jian, his fist raised to the boy, taking a step forward as if to strike.

“Jian,” she said. His eyes shot bullets. He kept moving toward the boy, ripping the placard off of his neck and hurling it into the crowd.

“Jian, no!” He would get them both killed. The crowd surged as five guards surrounded him. *Stop Jian. Please.* He struggled against them, biting and punching as they knocked him to the ground. The sound of her own panting filled her ears.

She remembered the day he had told her to lay still, like a dead cat, if attacked. “Wild animals don’t chase dead prey,” he had said. But now, he was doing everything he had warned her not to do.

“I deny all the accusations,” he yelled at the guards. “We have no fear of you.”

Three guards knocked Jian to the ground, kicked and beat him with belts. “Confess,” they were yelling. “Admit you have opposed the Revolution.” They were still kicking when she started to run to him, but Rong held a sledgehammer in one hand and a belt in another, blocking her path. *The baby. Rong’s hatred.* She closed her eyes. A belt struck her.

“Open your eyes, Mei Wu. See what happens to running dogs of capitalism!” She recognized Rong Peng’s voice, and kept her eyes shut. A belt struck her again; her eyes flew open. Jian was curled in a heap on the ground, blood around his head. *What have they done to him?* Several Guards lifted him to carry him away. *Jian. My Jian.* Her blood thrashed against her veins, a desire to rush the Guards, kill them even—if only she could get to Jian. She couldn’t see if his eyes were open, if he was conscious, if his chest moved up and down.

“Where are you taking him?” she cried. She took a step toward him.

Again, a belt struck her, once, twice. She felt the crack on her bare skin, was sure she bled. She kept her hands over her midsection, praying that she wouldn’t feel fetal blood dripping down her leg. Her head throbbed. Rong Peng and four other guards surrounded her, blocking her path. Rong Peng spit in her direction. Her chest heaved and tears burst forth, the room went blurry. She tried to quell the tears but couldn’t, humiliation and the slap of defeat now mixing with fear and fury.

“Go. Write a confession and prepare to read it to a thousand of your comrades here tomorrow,” Rong Peng said. “Be thorough, Mei Wu. We will be waiting here for you at noon. Leave! We need to dispense with your boyfriend now.”

“He’s my husband,” she said. She remained glued to the place where she stood. *I can’t leave without Jian. Let them beat me.* She again started to walk to where the Guards held Jian, both hands folded over her chest.

The baby kicked, and hard. It was impossible, she was only twelve weeks, maybe fourteen, and yet—Was she imagining it? Another kick—a plea for survival?

A guard grabbed her, struck her with a belt once more, and yelled at her to take her shameful body away so it would no longer pollute the Revolution—to disappear or she would be beaten like Jian. She took another step toward Jian anyway. The baby kicked again. Another guard stepped forward with a club raised over her head and slammed his boot into the podium.

“Go now, dog,” he yelled, “Do you think I care if you die?”

Mei hesitated as the Guard swung the club, remembering Jian saying, “We have no fear of you.” She repeated the words to herself. *We have no fear of you. We have no fear.* And yet, as the seething mob surged forward, clubs raised, chanting, “Go now, Capitalist dog,” her legs obeyed their command.