

Chapter One

Canton, 1826

Screams of excruciating pain rang out through Lord Lee Shao Lin's home, the largest private estate in Canton. Shao Lin's daughter, Su-Mei, at four years old, had shocked her parents by refusing to have her feet bound, as all noble little girls did at that age. He couldn't believe she would dare disobey him—it was unheard of! If she didn't start her foot binding now, to attain the “gold” standard of feet no longer than three inches when she was fully grown, her feet would grow to normal size, and she would be the laughingstock of the noble class. So, he had had her tied up and the binding forced upon her. She bellowed in protest.

In a room nearby, Su-Mei's mother and Shao Lin's Number One Wife, Mei Li, was in labor with her second child and also crying out in pain. She had secretly taken the herbalist's potion to induce labor so she would give birth before Number One Concubine Yu Bing. Both were racing to earn the honor of delivering Shao Lin's Number One Son. Both women prayed earnestly for a son, but the goddess Kuan Yin would answer the prayers of only one.

Lee Su-Mei screamed as loud as she could, out of frustration as much as from pain. The sound bounced off the silk hangings on the walls and seemed to drop to the floor. No one heard, no one came to her rescue. Her ankles had been tied with long ribbons to the legs of a low stool, and her wrists were crossed behind her back and tied together, then tied to the back legs of the stool. Master Fu had tantalized her with the silk ribbons, so long and pretty! He had said they would give her the most beautiful tiny feet, just like her Honorable Mother, and all the pain would be worth it when she was a proper lady with a wealthy husband from a noble family. He had bent over her toes and wrapped them tightly to the soles of her feet in an attempt to break

them, and the bones throbbed. She couldn't move, couldn't tear off the ribbons that were causing such agony.

Lord Lee Shao Lin felt that he'd already suffered enough inconvenience for one morning. Number One Wife had started her labor about the same time the foot herbalist had come for Su-Mei's binding, and the house was in disarray, every servant rushing here and there to boil water and heat blankets or fetch the midwife and the astrologer. There had been nothing but tea and cold noodles for his breakfast, and now the best foot herbalist in the city was failing to control a small child.

"Tie her up!" he had ordered. "If she will not obey, she must be made to obey." The firstborn daughter of Lord Lee Shao Lin, one of the wealthiest men in Canton, would marry into the family of a high-ranking guan, and to do that, she would have to have small feet. How his daughter's feet reached that size was none of his concern.

Lee Shao Lin couldn't have explained why Chinese men were so attracted to women with feet so small that young girls were forced to have their toes broken and feet reshaped into dainty little hooves. The feet, trussed in silk bandages, were of no use; they made it impossible for women to walk without pain even in adulthood. When little girls' toes rotted away from lack of circulation, the stench was overpowering, and the servants had to use the most expensive perfumes to disguise it. There were ratings for bound feet: The smallest, at three inches in length, were "gold"; four-inch feet were "silver"; and anything over four inches was dismissed as "iron." Women with gold feet could command a husband from the wealthiest and most respectable families, but to win such a prize, a girl had to suffer excruciating pain from the beginning of the binding process until adulthood. Countless women who had achieved the gold standard

subsequently lost their lives in fires or other disasters because they couldn't run away to safety on their tiny, useless feet.

Foot binding dated back to the tenth century, when the emperor's most-favored concubine was a dancer with tiny feet. She had bound them to reshape them into little hooves. Other concubines who sought the emperor's attention began binding their feet, and the practice spread among noblewomen. Habit and erotic fancy among the idle rich had kept the practice alive, and Lee Shao Lin would keep it going in his house. The tantrums of a child could not be allowed to hinder her bright future.

Master Fu, with the help of a household servant, had managed to tie Su-Mei, kicking and screaming, to the stool. Then he had packed his ribbons and strong-smelling ointments and left. He would return the next day to tighten the binding.

Alone now, Su-Mei struggled, trying with all her strength to break or stretch the ribbons. As she wriggled on the stool, warm liquid flooded her pants and tunic. Her cheeks burned with shame. She was a big girl, nearly five years old, and she hadn't wet herself in years! She hated Master Fu, and she hated her father. Ragged sobs tore at her chest, and huge tears dripped down her face. Furious, she tried to wipe them on her shoulders, but she couldn't reach.

“My lady?”

Su-Mei's head snapped up. “Bao?”

A round face appeared in the doorframe. It was the maid of First Concubine, who Su-Mei knew as Second Mother. The maid's name wasn't really Bao, but everyone called her that because she was so short and fat, like a dumpling.

“Bao! Where is everyone? Can you let me go? Please, please! I won't tell anyone.”

“Hush, my little lady—stop your crying.” Bao wiped the girl’s face with her sleeve and bent to untie her arms and legs. “Don’t you know? Everyone is busy with your Honorable Mother. She is about to give you a baby brother or sister!”

Su-Mei sniffed. She didn’t think she wanted a baby brother or sister. “Where’s Nanny?”

“Nanny is helping her grandmother with the birth preparations.” The last knot came loose. “There! That’s better, isn’t it?”

Su-Mei tore frantically at the bindings on her feet. When she’d ripped them free, her toes went from white to deep red, and pain streaked up her legs. It would take minutes for the agony to abate; nevertheless, she was flooded with relief. “Oh, thank you, Bao!” She pointed at her dressing table. “Master Fu left me some sweets—that is all I can offer you for helping me.”

The packet of sesame candy wrapped in rice paper disappeared into Bao’s pocket. “My lady, please remember—not a word to your Honorable Father about this. If you tell anyone I was here, I’ll be whipped, and I won’t ever help you again.”

“I promise, Bao. I’ll say I did it all myself.”

“And everyone will believe you, my lady.” Bao gave Su-Mei a crooked smile. “I’ve never met such a defiant child in my whole life, refusing to follow her Honorable Father’s rules and traditions.”

Su-Mei kicked at the stool and the scattered ribbons. “I hate rules and traditions!”

“Not all rules and traditions are bad, my lady. You may find them helpful one day.” She glanced up the hallway before leaving. “And now I must fetch your Second Mother some almond cakes and tea. With all the fuss, no one brought her any breakfast this morning.”

“Did you do it?” Yu Bing set down the novel she had been pretending to read.

“Yes, my lady,” panted Bao, hurrying into the room with a tray. “It was just as you said—the poor little girl was screaming in pain. I thought at first it was Lady Mei Li in her labor, it was so loud.”

Yu Bing winced, recalling her own first bind. “And you must keep doing it. Help her to take her bindings off every time, and soon it will be too late, and she’ll never have gold feet.” A wicked smile lit up her face. “And Sister Mei Li will feel the shame of having an unmarriageable daughter with big, ugly feet.”

Bao nodded. “And a rebellious one too! Remember how Lord Shao Lin used to dote on her? She was so bright and talkative, but now she dares to revolt instead of obeying her parents’ every command, and at such a young age!”

Yu Bing laughed. “Don’t worry too much about little Su-Mei. She is still the daughter of a very wealthy lord, and granddaughter of the highest-ranking guan in Peking. She’ll do fine.”

Lee Shao Lin’s father, the Honorable Lee Man Ho, was a senior Imperial Court magistrate at the ministerial level. After passing the provincial exam at age eighteen, he was ranked number one among the candidates who sat for the imperial palace exam. He began his government service as a level five guan, even though most candidates started down at level nine. After twenty-five years of providing sound advice and wise ministrations to the emperor, he was promoted to level one guan at the age of forty-three, the youngest ever to reach this status. It was quite common for high-level guans to leverage their power for tremendous personal wealth by granting favors, and Lee Man Ho was not immune to the temptation. He wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and increase the already impressive family fortune, but Shao Lin was not the studying kind.

Shao Lin was a clever man—just not a studious one—and he learned quickly how to benefit from his father’s connections and wealth, which opened doors for him that were not accessible to very many citizens in Canton. Customs officers were the most corrupt of government officials, and they let opium from British smugglers through. Those who wanted to be promoted invited young Lee Shao Lin to partake in lavish entertainments in the hopes that he would put in a good word for them with his father in Peking. At an early age, Lee Shao Lin was exposed to the opium trade in Canton and realized the tremendous gains to be made—the opium trade showered everyone involved in profits beyond their wildest dreams. British smugglers, including William Jardine, the most prolific of them all, brought millions of pounds of opium into Imperial China, and most of it passed through the port of Canton as a result of an ill-conceived and ineffective imperial edict. Canton proved fertile ground for corrupt officers at every level.

More than half a century earlier, in 1757, the Imperial Court had decreed that foreign cargo could be unloaded legally only in one port, Canton. The emperor meant to limit the influence of foreign cultures on his people. This didn’t stop British smugglers from traveling up the coast to sell opium in other provinces, however; they were breaking the law no matter where they unloaded this cargo. In a few years, the underground economy created by the illegal opium trade had generated more income than the real economy, and the opportunities of illicit wealth it presented for magistrates and guans were often too lucrative to pass up.

It didn’t take long for Shao Lin to be completely seduced by the wealth he saw around him. Through his connections at the Customs Office, which wholeheartedly supported him, he became an opium dealer important enough to deal directly with William Jardine himself. The only problem was that Shao Lin didn’t speak English, and he didn’t trust any of the low-level

traders who did. Jardine solved their problem by introducing Shao Lin to a Jesuit priest who spoke fluent English, Chinese, and Portuguese, one Father Afonso of the Sao Lourenco Church in nearby Macau. British smugglers more commonly used Protestant missionaries as translators, but most of them communicated with Chinese merchants in pidgin. Few Chinese spoke English fluently, and even their pidgin, mixed up with Hindustani and Portuguese, was difficult for the missionaries to understand. Jardine wanted someone who spoke proper English and Chinese when dealing with Lee Shao Lin, who, as the son of a high-level guan, had never been exposed to pidgin.

Shao Lin was untouchable as a result of his family's social and political status, and he worked hard to project the image of a righteous nobleman. Those who were aware of his involvement in the opium trade knew better than to speak such shameful allegations against the son of a level one senior guan in Peking.

Within a few years, Shao Lin had become wealthier than he ever imagined. All along, he was discreet to give his father no cause for suspicion. He set up a legitimate business front distributing tea and silk, and because aristocrats looked down on merchants, Shao Lin, like most successful merchants, bought himself a low-level guan title that came with no specific duties, thus earning the respect of the Cantonese community. It was a simple matter of donating a significant amount of silver to the Imperial Court, and then everyone had to address him as "Lord Guan" or "Mandarin" and marvel at his bodyguards and entourage—all without studying for a single exam.

Lord Lee Man Ho, a legitimate level one guan with critical court duties in Peking, was too busy to spend two weeks traveling each way to and from Canton just to check on his family affairs. He was disappointed when his son wrote that he had not passed the provincial

examination and had decided instead to enter the business of trading tea and silk. To maintain the family stature, Man Ho succumbed and used his influence to help his son purchase a low-level title so he could retain his own social position.

With his new wealth and title, Shao Lin built himself an enormous estate: over twenty acres with a man-made lake, gardens, courtyards, and pagodas where his servants brought him tea. The estate required a staff of forty workers, not including personal servants. It was the envy of all Canton and a target of jealousy for those who knew the true source of Shao Lin's wealth. To complete his ascent in status, his next acquisition then had to be a wife. His mother, employing the services of a professional matchmaker, selected a noblewoman for him, and Shao Lin was married with great fanfare. His father returned to Canton for the wedding and was shocked by the stupendous success his son seemed to be enjoying in the tea and silk business. Man Ho wondered briefly whether Shao Lin was really involved in the opium trade but chose not to question it further. *Better not to know*, he thought.

On their wedding night, the first time he met his wife, Shao Lin was powerfully aroused when he saw Mei Li's dainty feet. He thanked the heavens that his Number One Wife was so beautiful. Soon, however, his voracity turned to disappointment when it became evident that she did not possess much interest or skill in pleasing his Jade Stalk. It was some consolation that he would now have good reason to spend his considerable wealth on concubines who would minister to his every need.

Mei Li's prayers were answered, and she bore a son after an entire day of labor. In the excitement following the birth of Lord Lee Shao Lin's Number One Son, no one seemed to notice Su-Mei or recall that she shouldn't have been able to walk around freely. By the time

Shao Lin noticed his daughter's unbound feet, he was so enthralled with his heir that he decided not to force the issue until his newborn son, Da Ping, had survived his first month.

The next few weeks were filled with celebrations: the boy's first bath, his Red Egg Day marking the date he had been alive for one lunar cycle, the fireworks that were set off on the estate grounds to announce that Lord Lee Shao Lin had a son and heir. The family fortune-teller noted a birthmark on the infant's temple, the likeness of a small copper coin, and proclaimed that young Lord Lee Da Ping would enjoy tremendous wealth in his lifetime and blaze a path of glory across the sky.

Su-Mei continued to refuse her binding no matter what Shao Lin did, and he finally gave up, disappointed and resentful that his daughter was so rebellious and disobedient. Yu Bing bore another girl and quickly lost his affection as well, and he shifted all his attention to his Number One Son. Even when, two years later, Shao Lin acquired Concubine Number Two, and she quickly bore him a son and a daughter, bringing the household total to three wives and six children, he still placed all his faith in his firstborn son.

Despite all the attention her little brother received simply for being born, Su-Mei did not resent him one bit. She sat with the baby for hours, singing and chattering, and as soon as he could toddle and play, they were inseparable. Neither sibling particularly enjoyed the company of the other noble children who came to visit; they mocked the whiny little lords who were afraid to climb trees or chase ducks and the simpering little ladies who could scarcely hobble on their bound feet, let alone run and play.

“Why are they like that?” Da Ping once asked his sister. “Why are you different?”

Su-Mei shrugged. She didn't know, but after months of threats and tears and the ashamed resignations of five foot herbalists, her parents had given up on their dream of a daughter with gold feet. Dong-Mei, Second Mother's daughter, had dainty feet and a biddable disposition, but Shao Lin took little interest in the girl, and neither did his other children.

Su-Mei believed life would go on like this forever in her father's palatial estate: surrounded by servants, racing Little Brother around the lake and over the charming bridges that crossed it, eating multicourse dinners of delicious pork, fish, and vegetables with her Honorable Father and Mother, Second Mother—and in time, Third Mother—and her sisters and brothers, and attending festivals in downtown Canton or at the local temple. There was nothing else in the world, as far as she could tell.

But when she turned sixteen, three important things happened. First, the servant who had always dressed her hair in neat buns on top of her head, wrapping them in silk ribbons, changed Su-Mei's style to that of a woman: her hair was clipped up at the top of her head with delicate ornaments and allowed to flow freely down her back like a smooth black waterfall. Second, her mother began meeting with matchmakers, who examined her closely and shook their heads over her big feet. And third, her beloved brother had less and less time for her.

With Da Ping approaching the age of thirteen, one day his father sat him down in the private study for the first of many father-to-son lectures about the responsibilities and privileges of being Number One Son. Shao Lin did his best to sound regal, authoritative, and paternal to convince his own son to follow the path he hadn't been able to stomach in his own youth.

“You are to be tutored by the best scholars in the region,” Lee Shao Lin said, “and you will memorize the classics and the teachings of Master Sage Kong Fu-tzu—”¹

“Will Big Sister study with me?” Da Ping interrupted.

“Da Ping, *you* are Number One Son. *You* are the future head of this household, *you* will be a leader in your community, and *you* do not need your sister to help you in any way. She is a woman—a woman with unbound feet, so no respectable noble family will ever marry their son to her, and she will end her life as an ugly spinster. You must think for yourself and forget that rebellious girl. She has no respect for her father and mother.

“Listen carefully, Da Ping,” Shao Lin continued. “Your sister flouts the teachings of our Master Sage Kong Fu-tzu and the wishes of her parents. I would have her thrown into a well if it would not upset your mother. I’ve let her live this long only because she is my firstborn and because I’ve seen how much she has meant to you since you were born.” Shao Lin almost convinced himself that this was true.

“But it’s time for you to be a man now and forget that you have such an ungrateful and disrespectful sister. She will never marry well, and I will have to bribe some low-level noble family to take her for their son just so we don’t lose face. Do you know what a burden that is, Da Ping? Our ancestors are scolding me from beyond the grave for this travesty. Forget your sister—you are your own man now, do you hear me?”

Da Ping saw the fury in his father’s eyes, and he knew better than to defend his beloved sister. *What am I going to do without Big Sister?* he wondered, but he nodded and bowed to his father like a good and respectful Number One Son.

¹ Western scholars know this sage as Confucius.

The next morning, Su-Mei knew something was wrong. Da Ping was not sitting outside her bedchamber waiting for her to come out to play. She found him in his room crying.

“What’s wrong, Little Brother?”

“I’m supposed to be all grown up and not play with you anymore, Big Sister, but I don’t want to grow up! I only want to play with you, but Honorable Father said you have big, ugly feet and no respect for your parents.” Da Ping sniffled, unable to look at her. “I like your feet, Big Sister!”

“Don’t you worry, Little Brother,” Su-Mei said. “Big Sister will still play with you! We’ll go climb the big tree today, the one you’re still a little afraid of—what do you say?”

“I can’t. Honorable Father said I have to play with other boys now, but I don’t want to!” He started to sob.

Su-Mei had always known her father would train her little brother, Number One Son, to take over the responsibilities of the family, but she never suspected that he also intended to separate them. This realization only made her resent her father more, which caused her crushing guilt. These feelings were deeply unfilial and against the teachings of Master Sage Kong Fu-tzu.

“Little Brother,” she said softly, wiping away his tears, “even if Honorable Father keeps us apart, even if he marries me off to some hideous dolt in the country, I will always be watching out for you, and when you need me, I will find you.”