

PROLOGUE

WHEN NGA-YEE LEFT her flat at eight that morning, she had no idea her whole life would change that day.

After the nightmare of the last year, she was sure better times were ahead if they just gritted their teeth and clung on. She firmly believed that destiny was fair, and if something bad happened, something good must naturally follow. Unfortunately, the powers that be love playing cruel jokes on us.

A little after six that evening, Nga-Yee dragged her exhausted body homeward. As she walked from the shuttle bus stop, her mind busily calculated whether there was enough food in the fridge to make dinner for two. In just seven or eight years, prices had risen alarmingly while wages stayed the same. Nga-Yee could remember a pound of pork costing twenty-odd dollars, but now that barely got you half a pound.

There was probably a few ounces of pork and some spinach in the fridge, enough for a stir-fry with ginger. A dish of steamed eggs on the side would complete a simple, nutritious dinner. Her sister Siu-Man, who was eight years younger, loved steamed eggs, and Nga-Yee often served this soft, silky dish when the cupboard was almost bare—a fine meal with chopped scallions and a dash of soy sauce. Most important, it was cheap. Back when their finances were even tighter, eggs got them through many a difficult moment.

Although there was enough for that night, Nga-Yee wondered if she should try her luck at the market anyway. She didn't like leaving the fridge completely bare—her upbringing had left her wanting a backup plan at all times. Besides, quite a few vendors dropped their prices just before closing, and she might pick up some bargains for the next day.

Ooo-eee-ooo-eee.

A police car sped past, the siren piercing Nga-Yee's thoughts of discounted groceries. Only now did she notice the crowd at the foot of her building, Wun Wah House.

What on earth could have happened? Nga-Yee continued walking at the same pace. She wasn't the sort of person who liked joining in the excitement, which was why many of her secondary school classmates had labeled her a loner, an introvert, a nerd. Not that this bothered her. Everyone has the right to choose how to live their lives. Trying to fit in with other people's ideas is pure foolishness.

"Nga-Yee! Nga-Yee!" A plump, curly-haired, fiftyish woman waved frantically from among the dozen or so onlookers: Auntie Chan, their neighbor on the twenty-second floor. They knew each other to say hello, but that was about it.

Auntie Chan sprinted the short distance toward Nga-Yee, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her toward the building. Nga-Yee couldn't make out a word she was saying, apart from her own name—sheer terror made her voice sound like a foreign language. Nga-Yee finally began to understand when she picked out the word "sister."

In the light of the setting sun, Nga-Yee walked through the crowd and was finally able to make out the horrifying sight.

People were huddled around a patch of concrete about a dozen yards from the main entrance. A teenage girl in a white school uniform lay there, tangled hair obscuring her face, dark red liquid puddling around her head.

Nga-Yee's first thought was, Isn't that someone from Siu-Man's school?

Two seconds later she realized the still figure on the ground *was* Siu-Man.

Her little sister was sprawled on the cold concrete.

All the family she had in the world.

Instantly, everything around her turned upside down.

Was this a nightmare? If only she were dreaming. Nga-Yee looked at the faces around her. She recognized them as her neighbors, but they felt like strangers.

"Nga-Yee! Nga-Yee!" Auntie Chan clutched at her arm, shaking her violently.

"Siu . . . Siu-Man?" Even saying her name out loud, Nga-Yee couldn't connect the object on the ground with her little sister.

Siu-Man ought to be at home right now, waiting for me to cook dinner.

"Move back, please." A police officer in a neatly pressed uniform pushed through while two paramedics knelt by Siu-Man with a stretcher.

The older paramedic held his hand beneath her nose, pressed a couple of fingers to her left wrist, then lifted an eyelid and shone a penlight at her pupil. This took just a few seconds, but Nga-Yee experienced every one of these actions as a series of freeze-frames.

She could no longer feel the passing of time.

Her subconscious was trying to save her from what would happen next.

The paramedic straightened and shook his head.

"Please step back, clear the way please," said the policeman. The paramedics walked away from Siu-Man, looking somber.

"Siu . . . Siu-Man? Siu-Man! Siu-Man!" Nga-Yee pushed Auntie Chan aside and dashed over.

"Miss!" A tall police officer moved quickly to grab her by the waist.

“Siu-Man!” Nga-Yee struggled futilely, then turned to beseech the officer, “That’s my sister. You have to save her!”

“Miss, please calm down,” said the policeman in a tone that suggested he knew his words would have no effect.

“Please save her! Medics!” Nga-Yee, all color drained from her face, turned to implore the departing ambulance crew. “Why isn’t she on your stretcher? Quick! You have to save her!”

“Miss, are you her sister? Please calm down,” said the policeman, his arm around her waist, trying to sound as sympathetic as possible.

“Siu-Man—” Nga-Yee turned back to look at the broken figure on the ground, but now two other officers were covering her with a dark green tarp. “What are you doing? Stop that! Stop that now!”

“Miss! Miss!”

“Don’t cover her, she needs to breathe! Her heart is still beating!” Nga-Yee leaned forward, her energy suddenly gone. The policeman was no longer holding her back, but propping her up. “Save her! You have to save her! I’m begging you . . . She’s my sister, my only sister . . .”

And so, on this ordinary Tuesday evening, on the empty ground in front of Wun Wah House, Lok Wah Estate, Kwun Tong District, the normally voluble neighbors fell silent. The only sound among these cold apartment buildings was the heartbroken weeping of an older sister, her sobs rushing like the wind into each person’s ears, filling them with a sorrow that could never be wiped away.