



Her beauty
hides a deadly
purpose.

A Novel

A
SONG
TO
DROWN
RIVERS

ANN LIANG

New York Times Bestselling Author

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TO
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RIVERS

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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TO KATHLEEN RUSHALL, FOR ALL YOUR
FAITH AND GUIDANCE

CHAPTER ONE

They say that when I was born, all the wild geese flew down from the sky, and the fish sank beneath the waves, having forgotten how to swim. Even the lotus flowers in our gardens quivered and turned their heads away, so ashamed they were of their own diminished allure in my presence. I have always found such stories to be laughably exaggerated, but they prove the same thing: that my beauty was something unnatural, transcending nature itself. And that beauty is not so different from destruction.

This was why my mother insisted I cover my face before leaving the house.

“Do not draw unwanted attention to yourself, Xishi,” she cautioned, holding up the veil. It rippled and gleamed in the midday light, the edges glowing white. “It is dangerous, for a girl like you.”

A girl like me.

There were a thousand meanings tucked in those words, and I tried not to dwell on them, even as the old memories boiled up in response. The clucking, red-cheeked village aunties, who once came over to visit and marveled at the sight of me. *She is so pretty*, one of them had murmured. *Someone of such exquisite loveliness—she has the power to topple kingdoms and overturn cities.* She had meant it as a compliment. Another had sought to introduce me to her son, who

was thrice my age, worked as a woodcutter like my father, and had a face that reminded me of a bitter gourd.

“Come here,” Mother said.

I stepped forward and let her wrap the veil around my head, feeling her thin, calloused fingers—worn from scrubbing raw silk in the day and scrubbing rusted woks in the evening—fiddle with the strings. The fabric fell gently over my nose, my lips, my chin, cool against the sticky summer heat. I supposed I ought to be thankful for her desire to shield me from outside eyes. Zhengdan’s mother all but dragged her out onto the streets and paraded her good looks for everyone to see. And it worked. Already, seven of the men in our village had shown up on their doorstep, bearing lavish gifts and begging for her hand in marriage. It was Zhengdan who told me this late at night, her mouth puckered in disgust, her hand clenched into a fist beneath mine.

“I’ll return before it’s dark,” I promised Mother, who I knew would start worrying long before that, even though the river was not far from our western corner of the village, and I had walked the same route countless times.

But girls like me sometimes went missing. Though *missing* was too soft a word for it. The truth was uglier: stolen, slaughtered, sold. Traded between men like rare porcelains. It was especially true these days, with the wounds of war still running fresh in our kingdom, the Wu breathing down our people’s necks, and our remaining soldiers too jaded and thinly spread to be bothered by trivial matters like dead girls.

“Return as soon as you can,” Mother urged, and pressed a rough-woven bamboo basket into my arms, bolts of silk piled inside it.

I walked through the village alone, alert. The long veil tickled my cheek and soon clung to me, damp with sweat, but it helped subdue the less-pleasant smells of goatskin and dirt and uncooked fish. Around me, most of the houses still lay in ruins, with gaping holes in the walls like puncture wounds, or cracked stones strewn across the

yard like skulls. There were black marks in the earth from when the Wu soldiers had come, fires blazing, swords swinging, our people's blood dripping from their hands. The scene was fresh as ever in my mind, less a memory than a haunting. Sometimes at night, I thought I could see ghosts hovering over the yellow dust paths. All the villagers who hadn't survived.

A door creaked to my right, yanking me back to the present. Voices spilled out through the cracks. A man hacked up thick phlegm. I moved faster, the basket drawn close to my chest.

As always, I heard the river before I saw it. The steady, songlike trickle of water, joined by the calling of geese from beyond the trees, its blue-sweet scent a relief. Then the elms parted, offering a clear, stunning view of the riverbank, with the grass rising and swaying in the breeze and the smooth pebbles strewn along the edges, patterned with white and gray specks like quail eggs. The place was empty, save for me—and I was glad of it. I had always enjoyed the sound of my solitude, the quiet of my own breathing. Often, when I was around other people and felt their gazes on me, I had the strange, encroaching sense that my face and body did not belong to me. As if I had been designed purely for the pleasure of their viewing.

Slowly, I unrolled the first bolt of silk from the basket and plunged it into the cool river water. Once, twice, again. Then I wrung it dry, the water running in rivulets down my wrists. The task looked simple but was harder than most people knew. Unwashed, the silk was rough against my skin, leaving pink blisters in its wake; washed, it was so heavy it weighed on my arms like sheepskin. I paused for short breaks between, to catch my breath and unclench my muscles. To massage the tender skin over my heart with one hand. The stranger stories claim that my mother had been washing silk on this very river when she was struck by a pearl, and soon after became pregnant with me. In these stories, I am reduced to someone barely even human, a creature of myth, but at least they would explain my ill health from when I was a child, the ache in my chest that occasionally subsided

but never fully went away. At times, I imagined there was a fissure running through my heart, one I could not stitch up no matter what I tried.

Now the pain grew sharper. I winced, my brows knitting as I set the silk down with a splash. Tried to exhale. There was no fighting the pain when it came; all I could hope for was to let it pass. I was still clutching at my chest when I heard a distant yell.

It sounded like a child.

Susu was my first thought, but that was foolish.

I straightened and squinted, my heart pounding from both pain and fear. Two figures were drawing closer down the riverbank—a stick-thin, disheveled girl at the front, pursued by a much larger man. My blood ran cold at the sight of him. His black hair was cut short in the traditional Wu style.

Monster.

An enemy in the flesh. Right here in Zhuji, in our village. On our riverbank.

“Please, help,” the girl cried, her wide eyes landing on me. She could not have been alive for more than one full zodiac cycle—around *Susu*’s age, if *Susu* had been given the chance to grow up. When she lifted her scrawny arms, I saw the violet bruises marring her sunburned skin. They looked fresh.

The girl and her pursuer were only a few yards away now. Less.

Do something. The words pressed against my mind, but they felt detached, as if another person had thought of them. My hands were still wet from the river, the cold silt stuck beneath my nails. My teeth chattered. I scanned the area for something—someone—but there was only the yellow sunlight glancing off the water and the geese soaring over the horizon and the silk crumpled within the basket.

The girl stumbled. Fell forward, knees knocking against the pebbles. The sound jolted through my own bones, and I felt a secondary pain that wasn’t mine. A cry escaped her lips, but in my

ears, it morphed into another child's cry. A familiar one, shrill with panic and confusion. Someone who needed me more than anything.

Susu. No, don't go there, we must keep hiding.

Listen to me.

Come back.

For one moment, time seemed to divide, and I saw my baby sister, her round eyes, her soft face, made from everything good in the world. I saw the sword pierce her side. I saw her fall—

“Help!”

The girl was scrambling to rise again, but the man towered over her, as giant as Pangu from the early myths, his shadow spreading beneath the sun. He closed in, one boot stamping down hard on the corner of her threadbare tunic. She was pinned to the ground, a bird with an arrow pierced through its wing.

“Little thief,” he spat, the Wu accent obvious in his words, in the way he crushed the syllables between his teeth. “Did you really think you could take the pear from right under my nose and get away with it?”

The girl's face was white and stark as bone, but her eyes, when she turned them to her attacker, seemed to burn from within. “It was just *one* pear.”

“It's mine. Everything here,” the man said, gesturing to our village and beyond, to the sloping blue mountains, the capital city, all of the Yue Kingdom, “belongs to us now. Don't forget.”

The girl responded with a series of expletives so foul I could only wonder where she had learned them from—

“Enough,” the man barked, and drew his sword.

The sharp, metallic hiss cut through all noise. I had heard the Wu were masters of metallurgy, just like we were; that their swords were so fine they could slice into rock and would remain sharp even after centuries. With great despair, I saw firsthand that it was true. The blade glinted in midair, the sun split open on its lethal tip. One swift strike, and it would sever bone.

I jerked free from my horrified daze. There came the thought again, louder: *Do something. Save her.*

Don't fail again.

My fingers groped the ground wildly and closed around a loose stone. No bigger than an egg, but solid in its weight, with a jagged edge. The man wasn't watching me; his gaze was only on the cowering girl. In the split second before the sword swung down, I threw the stone at him. What I hoped to achieve then, I do not know. I like to think that murder was not at the forefront of my mind, that I only wished to distract, rather than to hurt. But when the stone struck the man's nose with a loud *crunch*, and he staggered backward, yelling, hands flying to his face—

I will admit to feeling a small, sharp curl of satisfaction.

Yet fear rapidly surged up to take its place. The man had turned his full attention to me, and even if murder had not been *my* intention, I could tell it was his. His chin was smeared with thick blood, and as he stepped toward me, more blood trickled from his nose into his mouth. He turned and spat. Wiped at his face with his left sleeve. In his right hand, his sword gleamed, pointed directly at me.

“In the Wu Kingdom,” he said, “we have a saying about people who can't mind their own business: They often die unpleasant deaths.”

My throat tightened.

I knew then, with a certainty that sang through my very bones, that I was going to die right there on the riverbank, where the water met the sky, and where my mother waited less than a mile away for me to come home. The man's footsteps crunched over the pebbles, closer. In my panic, my mind skipped to absurd places, pulled up flimsy, half-formed protests. That I was too young, that surely I had done nothing so bad as to deserve this, even if I did not always finish my rice or fold my sheets; that I had yet to fall in love, to see the sea, to set foot on land beyond my village.

Yet all my protests went unheard by the vast universe. I flung another stone at the man, desperate, but he was prepared now. He dodged it easily, and the next one, his lips pulling back to reveal blackened teeth. Again, he raised his sword. I felt the coolness of the metal as if it had already collected my soul, kissed my flesh.

No, I thought nonsensically. *Not yet, not yet, not yet—*

A bright flash across my vision.

The clang of metal against metal. I blinked. An unnatural wind fanned my veil, and it took me a moment to understand what had happened. Another sword had shot out and knocked the man's weapon off its trajectory before it could reach me. But where had the other sword come from?

I twisted around, searching, and the answer soon revealed itself to me. A tall, lean figure strode forward across the banks with all the eerie grace of a lynx, the sun blazing behind him, his features blurred by light. I wondered faintly if this was someone sent by the heavens, a warrior from the legends—or if perhaps I were already dead, and had dreamed the scene up.

But no, this was real. Nothing had felt more real in my life. I could taste the rich salt of the river, mingling with the blood from where I'd bitten down too hard on my own tongue. Then the figure turned a few degrees, and the light changed, illuminating the planes of his face. I was surprised to find that it was the face of a young man, and a beautifully refined one at that. All the angles were clean, sharp, harmonious, the natural curve of his lips almost arrogant; together, they were too intimidating to study for long.

"Who are *you*?" the Wu man cried, though his question came out a rough gurgle, thickened with blood. "Where do you people keep coming from?"

"You have no right to speak to me," the stranger replied calmly. His voice was like his appearance: cold and quiet, but only in the way a blunt sheath conceals a deadly blade.

The Wu man's face twisted. He lunged for his sword where it had been knocked astray into the grass, then made a violent stabbing motion at the stranger.

"Look out!" I cried.

I need not have spoken. The stranger crossed his hands behind his back and swerved easily out of the sword's path. His expression didn't even change. He wore that same cold look, his eyes dark and intelligent, the corner of his mouth lifted contemptuously, as if this were all an annoying inconvenience.

The quick movement threw his attacker off-balance. The man's arms flailed wildly as his body weight teetered, following his empty swing. Panting, he steadied himself and tried again, this time aiming straight for the stranger's exposed neck. But no sooner than he'd shifted position, the stranger did too; a most subtle change, one you might miss if you blinked. And so it continued, back and forth. The Wu man striking, pouncing, charging like an enraged bull until he was bright red in the face, and the stranger gracefully sidestepping, dodging, ducking without so much as lifting a hand.

"Who are you?" the Wu man repeated, but there was a note of real fear in his tone.

The stranger did not reply. Instead, he lifted his leg a fraction just as the Wu man came charging once more. With a noisy crash, he went sprawling on all fours, his sword flying free from his grip. Before he could try to retrieve it, the stranger paced over, picked up the sword between two slender fingers, and tossed it ever so casually into the river's depths. The water rippled outward.

In the silence, only the defeated man's harsh, frustrated grunts could be heard.

"Leave," the stranger said coolly, turning away with a swish of his robes. "Or it will be your body that is thrown into the water next."

The man blanched, then—cursing under his breath the entire time, his crooked nose still dripping red—staggered to his feet and fled, disappearing behind the copse of elms without a glance back. Once

his footsteps had faded into the distance, the stranger finally faced me. Up close, he was even more striking than I'd realized, his beauty so sharp as to be unsettling, his gaze of such a clear, black-eyed intensity I could not look away.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. His voice was gentler than it had been when he spoke to the Wu man, but no warmer.

I drew myself up to full height—though even then, my head only came up to his shoulders—and scanned my body for any signs of pain. There were none, other than the faint stinging in my palms from where I'd gripped the stone. Even the ache in my chest was gone, as if it had never been there at all.

"No," I replied slowly, smoothing out my veil. Then I remembered his sword. It had planted itself into the dirt, but much of the blade was still a shiny, polished silver, with a diamond pattern repeating down the front and back and little jade fragments embedded in the hilt. There were words engraved into the blade too. I read them as I tugged the sword free: *The mind destroys; the heart devours*. They stirred something inside me, like the slow pluck of a guqin string, but I could not name why.

"Thank you for—everything," I said, passing the sword to him rather awkwardly on two outstretched hands. I did not know if this was the right way to do it. He was clearly from some sort of noble background, with robes that alone were worth more than a dozen of our best water buffalo.

He sheathed his sword in one silver, fluid motion. "It was nothing." He did not sound like he was being polite, but rather stating the truth.

"I should repay you," I insisted, standing straighter. "I owe you a life debt."

His lips quirked, as if wondering what I could possibly give that he did not already have. "That won't be necessary," he said. "It is satisfying enough to humble a man from Wu." He paused, tilting his head. "Were you the one who broke his nose?"

I briefly considered lying, to act the part of the wide-eyed, innocent maiden, as most people expected from me. But something compelled me to nod.

Now his lips curved higher into some semblance of a smile. “Impressive.” Then his gaze slid over to the little girl, who was still lying where she’d fallen, her mouth hanging agape in shock. “Is she a relative?”

I felt an ache inside me. How I wished she was. How I wished I could still point to someone and call them *sibling*.

“I don’t know who she is,” I admitted, walking over to her, the stranger following behind me. “She just looked like she needed help.”

“Yet you saved her,” he said with a touch of surprise. Something told me he was rarely surprised, and a strange pride bloomed beneath my breastbone, knowing I had done the unexpected.

“You saved me,” I pointed out. “And we don’t know each other.”

“Yes, but I was certain I would be in no danger. Protecting your interests could not have harmed mine.” He glanced at me sidelong, though I pretended not to see it. “It is quite a different thing to help someone when it puts yourself at risk.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but the little girl spoke up first.

“Is—is the bad man really gone?”

“He is. But don’t get up just yet,” I added hastily, seeing her struggle to rise onto her elbows. I crouched and inspected her wounds. The bruises were a terrible purple-blue shade, like an overripe plum, and she had grazed her skin open in multiple places when she’d stumbled. It was difficult to tell how many of the dark splotches in her tunic were blood or mud. Then I drew my attention down to her small hands and recoiled. All her nails had been torn clean off, leaving only little semicircles of raw, uneven flesh. These injuries were older. And they did not look like accidents. “What ... happened to you?” I breathed, swallowing the bile in my mouth. “Where are your parents?”

“They’re dead.” She said it in a listless way, as if reciting a poem that had long lost its meaning.

“Dead?”

“Killed,” she amended, staring out at the glittering river.

“By who?”

“Who else? The monsters of Wu. I managed to escape while they were distracted by my mother’s screams. I didn’t want to,” she said, almost defensive, as if she thought we might judge her for surviving. “But I wasn’t going to wait around for them to cut my throat too. It was what my mother would have wished for.”

Good, I wanted to tell her, the ache deepening. You should have fled. You should have done whatever you needed to get away from them. Because if your mother had lived and you died, she would spend the rest of her days in unimaginable pain, weeping until her voice went hoarse. She would drag herself around the house like someone had torn half her soul from her body. It is the cruelest fate for the gray-haired to bury the dark-haired.

I would know.

“You did the right thing,” the stranger spoke up. His features had tightened, and I thought I caught a flash of resentment beneath his icelike complexion. “What is your name?”

“Wuyuan,” she whispered.

“Wuyuan. I see.” He did not offer his name in return, nor lower himself to the ground as I did, but he retrieved a skin of water and a clean handkerchief from his robes, then turned to me. “Her injuries will likely grow infected if left unattended. Do you have any experience with cleaning wounds?”

“Some,” I said, taking the supplies from him. The handkerchief had been embroidered with an image of two fish circling each other in a lotus pond, and the silk was of the finest quality, wonderfully soft to the touch. It felt wrong to stain it with blood, but he did not seem to care. “This might sting,” I told Wuyuan as I smoothed out the handkerchief.

She just nodded, her gaze still on the river. It was not the reaction a normal child would have to pain. Then again, perhaps there could be no normal children raised in an age of war. As I dabbed at her bloodied palms, I felt a vicious stab of hatred toward the Wu. There had been no end to the turmoil in our kingdom ever since the Wu armies captured Kuaiji, and now there grew a generation of parentless children who were more familiar with pain than peace.

I expected the stranger to leave, but he merely stood to the side and watched me while I worked. It was a foreign feeling. Few ever paid much attention to me when my face was covered, and fewer still looked at me as if they could see me—not the smooth, pretty surface of things, but the thorns that grew underneath.

“You are not from around here, are you?” I asked without glancing up at him.

“How can you tell?” From his mild tone, it was difficult to judge whether or not he was genuinely asking.

To be safe, I responded anyway. “Your ... air. Your mannerisms. It is not like the men around here.”

“No? And what kind of air do I possess?”

Now I did glance at him, at the sword in its carved sheath and the rich-colored robes wrapped tight around his waist, the elegant topknot his raven-black hair was arranged in, the tassels and jade swinging from his belt. “A dignified one,” I said at last. “The air of somebody important. Perhaps you are a nobleman. Or a traveling scholar. Or a leader in the military—you fight so well.” I wanted him to correct me, to confirm my guesses, but he just smiled slightly and said nothing else.

When Wuyuan’s wounds had been treated to the best of my abilities, he placed a pouch in her hands. I only needed to hear its faint jangle to know it was filled with coins.

Wuyuan stared, wide-eyed, her shock mirroring mine. “What—”

“Buy yourself some food and new clothes,” he said. “But make sure you do not spend all of it. Leave half the coins to purchase unripe

plums at the lowest price you can get—I suggest the market two miles south from here, right down the river. Store them in a safe place, away from the sun. You will find that the prices for plums will rise dramatically three days later. When that time comes, sell the plums again at triple the price. Do you understand?”

Wuyuan nodded, even though she was now openly gaping, as if unsure whether the young man before her was a mortal or god. I was no longer sure myself. “Yes.”

“Good.”

How do you know? I wanted to ask him. How could he possibly predict what the prices would be three days from now? And he sounded so certain of it. But he had smoothed his robes and started back down the riverbank, away from us.

Without thinking, I ran after him.

“Wait, before you go—” I scrambled to pick up the best bolt of silk I could find in my basket, the one I had finished washing, and passed it to him. “Please, take this.”

He slowed, and cocked his head. “For what?”

I pointed downward at the hem of his robes. There was a tiny tear from where he must’ve caught it on some rock earlier in his fight with the Wu man. “To patch it up. Or make a new set of robes. And if not,” I said louder, when he looked about to protest, “then take it as a token of my thanks. I know it is not the most equal of trades: a bolt of silk in exchange for a life. But perhaps you can better remember me this way.”

“I do not need the silk to remember you,” he said, so quiet I barely heard him, but accepted my offering with a small dip of his head. “If fate wills it, may we meet again.”

I gazed after his retreating figure, the sun beating down on the knife-straight line of his shoulders, until his silhouette was but a smudge in the distant horizon. Yet as soon as he was out of sight, my chest seized, and I gasped, fingers grabbing uselessly at my robe collar. Just like that, the pain had returned.

★ ★ ★

I made no mention of my close brush with death, nor my strange encounter with the young man, when I returned home. I knew my parents would worry themselves to pieces over the first part, and even more so over the second. Besides, in the old, familiar light of my room, with its rammed-earth walls and low, thatched roof, everything that had transpired now took on a dreamlike air. Would they even believe me if I spoke of a beautiful, mysterious stranger who could win a duel against an armed man without moving a finger, who could predict the rise and fall of the market in the future, who stood and spoke like someone raised in a palace? I barely believed myself, and I had been there. I had seen him.

So I collected the washed silk, cleaned the tables, and prepared dinner. Our supply of beans was low, and our supply of rice lower; when I took the amount needed for one full pot of porridge, my ladle scraped the jar bottom. I ignored the pinch of worry in my belly. Tomorrow, I would clean twice the amount of silk I did today, so we could sell more at the market. That would be enough. It needed to be. And when that ran out—

I snipped the thought before it could grow. I had learned to think of time in days, the stretch between two meals, from sunup to sundown. Sometimes it felt like that was all my life was, all it ever could be: the repetition of tasks necessary for survival until I grew older and my time expired. Yet strange as it was—whenever I tried to imagine myself as an old woman, I couldn't. It was like trying to see the tail end of a river; the image only grew blurry and faded to black.

“Do you need help with that?”

My father's face in the doorway, beaten brown by the sun. He was not an old man, I didn't think, but his hair was already graying, and his frame was stooped from the weight of thick tree trunks and giant axes.

“No, Father,” I said. He always offered to help, and he always said it sincerely enough, yet somehow, he never ended up helping. Perhaps

because it would be worth more trouble teaching him than simply doing the task myself; I doubted he even knew how to boil water on his own. But he was still better than some of the other fathers, who beat their children for not cooking fast enough, or simply to release their own rage on someone who couldn't hit back.

“Very well, then.” I listened to him shuffling across the room, the low heave and exhale as he settled into his chair, and not long after, his soft, rumbling snores. And then there was the boiling water, the green beans floating to the surface, their insides splitting open. I stirred as I had been taught by my mother, and her mother before her.

After dinner, I sat beside the window, knees hugged to my chest, and stared out. Although the huts themselves were not much to look at, little more than an ugly reminder of the violence that had touched our part of the kingdom, all the trees and wildflowers and mountains were painted in saturated shades of blue and green. Lush grass grew over the places corpses had been left to rot, back when there weren't enough villagers remaining to help bury the bodies. Butterflies fluttered from one branch to another, where blood had once stained the leaves.

Nature had healed faster than we had.

A warm breeze drifted in and sighed against my skin. At times like these, the dusky air held a breathless quality, as if it were waiting for darkness to descend. I was waiting too—but for what, I did not know yet.