

LOVE'S ENDURING CIRCLE

by

SUSAN C. GROOME

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Chapter 1

The line back to the beginning

Chang'an, Central China, Han Dynasty, 200 BC

The night Li Huo Shen was born, the women of the court wept. Eerie, hollow cries echoed throughout the halls of Changle Palace and wrenched the servants from their sleep.

"Why is it taking so long?" Xiang asked. He paced up and down the bedchamber and watched the midwife's shadowy movements behind the silk screen that separated them.

"The baby will come when it's good and ready," said Xiang's mother, who sat unconcerned nearby. "Not even you can make it come any quicker."

Prime Minister Xiang had wandered the gloomy corridors for two whole days and prayed for the son that had eluded him for so long. Their master's silent presence had stifled the servants' usual busy flow of activity. None of them had been brave enough to speak up, so they tried to squeeze past him unnoticed. They didn't realize that they too were absorbing the growing tension.

The sickly smell of incense and impatience clung to the stagnant air. Only the chime of the master's black wooden clogs in the marble hallway outside his wife's room offered any relief from the heavy silence. He had rebuffed his mother's suggestions to eat and sleep and was determined to be present when his wife bore their precious first child.

Xiang's wife screamed out in pain. He approached the screen.

"Can you see the head yet?"

"The baby's head is crowning, sir! But mistress isn't doing so well," the midwife said. "Please don't come past the screen, I'm much too busy now."

At that moment a baby's cry was heard and then a woman, her head bowed down, came from behind the screen carrying the child and put it into the master's arms.

"You finally have the son you wanted," the midwife said.

Xiang's face broke into an uncharacteristic broad smile. He looked at the boy with anticipation, mentally planning the milestones of the child's first five years on the spot.

"You've done well," he replied. "I'll make sure you get double your normal fee."

Just then, the young girl who served as the midwife's assistant came from behind the screen, sobbing.

Xiang's mother shot to her feet and moved closer.

"What is it?" she said, her face growing paler by the second.

The girl choked on her words. "The mistress... she's dead!"

The look in Xiang's eyes as he gazed upon his son changed from anticipation to accusation. Xiang thrust the child into his mother's arms and stormed out of the room.

Xiang's mother listened to her son's angry steps and heard him curse at a servant who got in his way. Could her daughter-in-law really be dead? For twelve years the poor woman had suffered one miscarriage after the other, with Xiang insisting that it was her duty to provide him with children.

The baby felt as heavy as a bag of stones. The old woman's legs started to give way beneath her as she sank onto a stool. She wondered whether Xiang would ever accept his son now. It already appeared that he blamed the baby for his wife's death, even though they had both known the dangers of having a child in the year of the Firehorse.

The sign of the horse occurred once every twelve years and that of the ominous Firehorse only once every sixty years. Parents did everything in their power to avoid giving birth to a child during this time. A Firehorse brought either fantastic or miserable luck and most people didn't want to tempt fate. If the village shaman's powerful mix of herbs didn't succeed in ending a pregnancy, many women would beg their families to beat them or push them down stairs so that the child would not live. If Li hadn't been a much wanted son, Prime Minister Xiang would have had the baby killed on that still June night.

The old woman looked up when she heard her son crashing about in his chambers. She remembered that there was a painting of Emperor Liu Bang on the wall opposite the room's entrance which would only serve to fuel his anger even further. Liu's wife and his many

concubines had produced nine children for him. She knew that in the eyes of the court the Emperor was a wealthy man. Now Xiang's wife had added to her son's humiliation by dying.

Xiang, the Emperor and the Empress Lu had been friends since childhood. Xiang's mother had often given a young Liu a clip around the ear for distracting her son from his studies. As a youngster Liu always seemed to be in the thick of trouble, be it stealing from the bakers or poaching from the local landowners. By the time Liu was a teenager, he had gained quite a reputation for causing trouble. His parents knew they had to put an end to this way of life, so Liu Bang was forced to join the army. Xiang, meanwhile worked his way up to become a county magistrate, and together with his wife and mother, had led a comfortable, but predictable life.

When Liu led a rebel military coup back in his home county, he sought out Xiang and relied on his old friend for tactical advice. Before long, their ambition catapulted them onto the stage of the Royal Court. Xiang had a fine legal brain and Liu Bang was clever enough to keep his close friend as his personal advisor. Xiang manipulated the Emperor, more because he enjoyed the cerebral challenge of outfoxing him than for the result itself. Despite this, he remained loyal to the Emperor. But he would always be in competition with him until he could produce a large family of his own.

Xiang's mother's thoughts were once again disturbed by the shouts of her son. She was overcome by the airless room and decided to escape outside. She gathered the baby up holding him close to her bony chest as she walked into the empty gardens. Only the luminous

full moon lit the old woman's path. The breeze through the trees and bushes threw up scents of pine and cypress, together with the heady perfume of cherry blossoms.

She was unable to see very well through the darkness and the infant in her arms impeded any chance of monitoring her footing, so the old woman relied on her instincts to find her way across the gardens. She shuffled her feet over the tiled garden path so that she didn't trip. Not once did she take her eyes off the small bundle of life, whispering to him while she walked. When she came to her favorite rest spot she sat down.

Silent tears streamed down the new grandmother's face and she rocked the baby as a way of comforting them both. How many times had she consoled his mother the same way? The old woman wondered at the gods for allowing her daughter-in-law's senseless death. She hadn't even had the opportunity to see her own son.

Once again the old woman overheard her son's screams ringing through the air and shattering the silence. But still, the baby remained quiet, his gaze cast upward as though studying the cloud-flecked sky.

Grandmother, as she would now be known to all, held firm to her conviction that the child was a blessing. She pulled him closer to her face and held his peachy skin as close to her cheek as the swaddling would allow. She closed her eyes to savor his scent and kissed his tight little mouth.

"Welcome, little Firehorse. I will love you for both your parents." In his eyes, she recognized an old soul who had staked his rightful claim on life. This was his time.

Chapter 2

Afraid of what Xiang would do to the child, Grandmother decided to take Li Huo away from the palace until her son had calmed down. She walked over to the stables and was relieved to find a servant awake, grooming a horse. He dropped down on one knee and cast his eyes to the ground when he saw her enter.

"Get a cart harnessed up to your best horse," she ordered. "We're going to Luojiashai Village."

"As you wish, Mistress, but now?" the servant replied. "It's still dark."

"It'll be dawn soon; don't tell me you're scared. Besides, it's only a short ride to the village. Come on man, I need to get this baby to a wet nurse before he starts making noise and we're noticed."

The servant untied a horse and pointed at the bundle she was carrying. "Is that the Prime Minister's new baby?"

"Yes," she said and then tutted when she saw the look of apprehension on his face. "He's my grandchild, and at the moment my son is in no fit state to take responsibility for him."

The servant hitched the horse to the cart and led it out of the stable, opening the cart door for the Mistress.

"We're going to take him to my friend, Mistress Hu, the wine merchant's wife. I'll tell you where to go when we reach the village."

Mistress Hu already had seven children, but she had lost a baby in the first quarter of the moon. The little girl had been born weak and deformed and died within minutes. Her husband had tried to comfort her by saying that the gods had spared them all any further suffering. However, Grandmother knew from bitter experience how heavy her friend's heart would be after losing a child. Mistress Hu's own mother had been a good friend to Grandmother back in Pei County when her own first child had been stillborn.

At the hour stolen between darkness and light, the rickety cart rumbled across the forecourt cobblestones and out through the palace gates. Nobody noticed Grandmother leave since all the servants were hiding from Xiang. From the relative safety of the courtyard, she could hear her son shattering vases and plates while he screamed with rage over his wife's death.

A mixture of pagoda, elm and pine trees lined the eight main streets which connected the gateways to the outer city walls. Like all the main roads in the city, the architects had divided Anmen Street into three by running water drains down either side of the lanes. Grandmother's cart joined the street where it ran next to the palace gates and passed the imperial gardens. The road would take the old woman and her grandson through Luojiashai Village before it carried on into the northern districts.

At this early hour, the air felt fresh and invigorating and Grandmother settled back into her seat as best she could with a baby to hold.

"Looks like we got away with it so far," she said to the servant.

He looked over his shoulder and frowned. "It's the soldiers we need to look out for. Those guards up in the towers and city gates will hear us long before we can see them."

"You worry too much," she insisted. "Even if they do notice us, why would they bother the Prime Minister's mother going for a ride?"

"With respect, Mistress," the servant whispered, "we're the only people out at such an early hour. It's bound to look suspicious. The soldiers can see everything from up there and there are lots of them posted all around the city walls."

"Pah," said the old woman. "Let's just hope they're doing their job properly and looking out for any invading Mongols heading our way across the desert."

Despite her bravado, Grandmother couldn't help looking up every time a silhouetted soldier walked in and out of the shadows along the high walls. She prayed to the gods that they weren't noticed.

By day the city was an immense, noisy conglomeration of roads, markets, houses, temples and workshops. With more than two-hundred and forty-thousand people inside the city walls, Grandmother and her clattering wooden cart would have blended into the general pandemonium during a normal working day. At such an early hour in the morning, however, their presence on the main road would look conspicuous. When she

noticed the bloated dawn sun rising from behind the distant cloud capped Mount Huashan, Grandmother smiled to herself. Its pale yellow rays would nudge the city into life and draw attention away from her.

The cart hurried along Anmen Street and past the villagers' farms. Men took to the fields with their oxen and scythes and settled into their backbreaking routines in order to harvest the wheat. Peasants dressed in black, baggy hemp pants and loose cotton shirts joined Grandmother in their carts on the road. They nodded their greetings to the old woman and the royal servant and Grandmother waved back.

The city started to spring to life as people left their homes and went about their daily chores. Grandmother hoped that all the noise and activity would continue to keep her secret safe from any prying eyes.

She was singing to the baby when the cart's wheels veered in toward the water drains and caused the cart to shudder.

"The road is too rough," Grandmother called out over the clatter of hooves and the rattle of the wheels. "Use the Emperor's lane."

The servant looked back over his shoulder, afraid to defy her, but more afraid of his punishment if they were caught. Grandmother understood his hesitation.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll explain who I am to the officials if we're questioned."

She looked up at the walls and tried to see if any of the guards had stopped to watch them. The servant said nothing and pulled into the broad middle lane. He urged the horse to go faster and he mouthed a silent prayer to the gods.

All of a sudden, with a loud cracking sound and a severe listing to one side, the cart stopped. The jolt woke up the sleeping baby and he began to cry.

"One of the wheels has come off, Mistress," said the servant.

"I can see that," Grandmother asked while rocking the baby, trying to stop him from crying. "Can you put it back on?"

"I don't know. Are you both alright?" he asked as he stepped down from the cart.

"Yes, yes, don't fuss! Go and fetch the wheel and see if you can fix it," Grandmother instructed as she continued to sooth her agitated grandson.

Grandmother got out of the cart and started to walk up and down the street in an attempt to settle the newborn. As she continued her fruitless attempt at quieting the baby, an unexpected call from up high along the wall caught her attention.

"Wait there!" A lone man's voice ordered.

The servant had picked up the broken wheel and was walking back to the cart. The rising sun blurred their vision as they peered up to see who was calling. Shortly, two soldiers holding drawn swords emerged from the ground-level door of the guardhouse.

"What are you doing in the Emperor's lane?" said the taller of the soldiers.

Grandmother wasn't one to be easily intimidated.

"Do you know who I am?" she said with a steely glare. The soldiers looked the old woman up and down and then noticed the red dragon on the side of the cart.

"Mistress!" they both said together and bowed.

"Quite so! The Prime Minister will be less than pleased when he hears about this," she said, pointing to the swords they were only just putting away.

"Please allow us to mend your cart," the shorter soldier pleaded. "Xi! Run to the stores and fetch another wheel."

Within minutes the three men had attached the new wheel and Grandmother was settled back in her seat.

"I will overlook your indiscretion this time," the old woman told the soldiers. Then she turned to her servant. "Now hurry up, we've wasted enough time."

They continued their journey along Anmen Street and were in Luojiashai Village within the hour. Soon they were lost in the growing hive of activity. The market was being set up along the main street which forced the driver to slow down. While parents set up their market stalls on either side of the road, young children squatted in the gutters to play. Three small boys had brought their pet frogs over to one of the drains. They had each tied a thin reed around one of their frog's legs and were giggling as they made the animals race against the flow of water and pulled on the reeds to encourage their frogs to swim harder.

The scraping and banging of wooden boxes on the cobblestones cracked into the morning stillness and drowned out the children's laughter. While the stall holders greeted friends and encouraged prospective customers to buy early, the crowds swelled the pavements. Soon the air was filled with the inviting smell of fried chicken and dumplings and the servant had no choice but to travel at a snail's pace to wind his way through the burgeoning crowd of shoppers.

"Stop!" Grandmother said when they passed a small row of brightly colored huts set back from the main road. "You wait here for me while I visit my friend."

Grandmother knocked on the first door in the row and called through the shutters. "Master Hu, I'm sorry to disturb you so early in the morning. I need to speak to you."

There was a clatter of pots followed by hushed angry tones before the door was opened by a drowsy, potbellied man rubbing his eyes. When he realized who was standing on his front step, he opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"Mistress, I'm most honored to welcome you to our humble dwelling. Please forgive my inappropriate dress," he said and bowed low.

Grandmother burst out laughing. "Master Hu, you're just as pompous first thing in the morning! I've told you before; you're not speaking to one of His Majesty's whores! Come now, let's speak plainly as old friends should. Let me in. As you can see, I've brought someone very special with me today."

He peered at the bundle in her arms. "A baby! But who does it belong to?"

"My son," she said and smiled at her grandson.

"The Prime Minister?" Hu said. "Come in, quickly!"

The children who had been sleeping on mats stood up to see what was happening.

"Please sit down," he said and pulled out a stool for Grandmother. "I'll fetch my wife."

Three of the children gathered around the old woman to look at the baby. She pulled back the blanket

and showed them Li, who was rooting for milk. Mistress Hu hurried into the room.

"Grandmother, how wonderful to see you," she said. "I wasn't expecting you until later in the week. My husband says that you've brought your son's newborn. Whatever has happened?"

"I need you to nurse the boy," Grandmother said. "His poor mother died only minutes after giving birth to him and if I leave him in the palace I think my son will have him killed by way of punishment."

Mistress Hu held out an arm to take Li, undid the front of her tunic and put him to her breast.

"My, he's a strong little bugger!" she said with a grimace. "I only have a little milk left, but I'm sure he'll awaken my motherly instincts."

Grandmother watched Li suckling in contented silence.

"You'll have to keep baby Li here, you know. He won't be safe until his father calms down."

"Surely your son wouldn't kill his only child," exclaimed Mistress Hu.

Grandmother shrugged. "Li's a Firehorse. Forgive me dear friend, but you know how ill-fated these children are."

Mistress Hu looked down at the baby and thought of her own recent loss. Before she had a chance to reply, her husband walked into the room holding two small glasses of green wine.

"Here you are ladies. You've had a terrible shock this evening with the death of your daughter-in-law. Please know that your grandson will be safe with us for as long as you need him to stay."

Grandmother knocked back her wine in one mouthful. "Thank you," she said. "I promise you that I won't forget your kindness today."

Chapter 3

Growing up in the royal city as the Prime Minister's son, Li enjoyed a privileged life. He always had the best food; mutton and fish, fruit imported weekly for the royal palaces from the fertile lands of Dunhuang City and a daily supply of fresh sheep's milk and vegetables from the local farms. He was accompanied everywhere by his own personal band of servants and became more comfortable in the company of adults than children. He grew up pampered and indulged by his grandmother, much to his father's frustration.

Despite marrying again and having three more children, Xiang had never overcome his feelings of guilt over his first wife's death. The boy's presence only served to remind him of his past failings, so he avoided him. He had his mother rear the child and installed his second wife and growing new family on the opposite side of Changle Palace, where he could almost forget Li even existed. He took to staying away from the palace during the day so that he wouldn't have to see the boy. Even hearing the child's laughter left Xiang feeling sick to the pit of his stomach.

From the age of seven, Li spent most of his mornings under the beady eyes of his tutor, who tried to enlighten him to the wisdom of Confucius and the ancient poets. The boy didn't enjoy having to memorize so many useless rules and lines of poetry for the civil service exams his father expected him to take when he was eighteen.

Li took great pleasure in challenging his tutor's words and often distracted him away from the lesson to debate ideas he didn't really believe. In the afternoons he would practice the niutuiqin, a two stringed fiddle made from cedar, which played a soft almost husky melody when the bow was drawn across its strings. His grandmother liked to sit and listen to him under the trees in the garden or on the palace veranda if it was raining.

From time to time, Li would put his instrument aside and look up at the clouds, watching them twist and turn while they escaped the limits of his horizon. They swept out toward the distant blue headed mountains and he watched the clouds with increasing envy, yearning to know what lay out there, far beyond the city gates.

Grandmother would watch him and smile to herself as she remembered how he had looked up at the moon on the night he was born. She still believed that her little Firehorse was destined for great things.

By the time he was eleven, the chubby faced little boy was self-assured and demanded an attentive audience. Despite the constant presence of his servants, he never seemed satisfied, and was forever trying to push back the boundaries of his confined existence.

"When can I go hunting Grandmother?" he would often ask.

"It is not for me to know or say," the old woman would explain, holding him close so that she could breathe in the musky scent of his soft, downy skin. She could sense the trapped animal within the boy and was beginning to feel uneasy. She should have been able to talk to Xiang about him, but he had busied himself with the Emperor's military campaigns since his first wife's death. He had become an important figure in court, and the Emperor relied on his old friend for more than just political advice. Xiang could only be heard around the palace when Li was asleep or in class. The singular noise of his wooden shoes on the tiled floors was a signal to everyone to stay out of his way until needed.

It was on one such afternoon of questions and frustrations that Grandmother was forced to escape the harsh summer sun and stay in the shade of the veranda. The weather had been humid for several days, with only the occasional whisper of a breeze to break up the monotonous heat. The buzz of flies and the heavy floral scent from the gardens hugged the air creating a sultry atmosphere that gave headaches and bad tempers to almost everyone. Then, without warning the skies opened up and great lashes of rain poured down on the unsuspecting. Without any respect for age or status, the rain doused everyone not sheltered and kept them from performing the necessary tasks of their everyday lives.

The change in the weather was greeted with great relief. Excited yelps of approval were heard above the crashing percussion of the rain as people ran for cover. Some of the servants from the Changle kitchens and stables ran across the courtyard just to get drenched by the warm, pelting precipitation.

Several of the Emperor's concubines, however, were unfortunate enough to get caught out while taking their afternoon stroll in the gardens. Some of them emitted mild shrieks while others screamed bloody murder at their servants to fetch them cover.

Li watched from the safety of his veranda. He put down his niutuiqin and watched the women being urged inside while more servants ran through the mud carrying parasols and silk sheets. The older concubines had all taken shelter in the great hall of the Changle Palace but two of the younger women were still causing a good deal of commotion and were shouting insults at the servants who were trying to retrieve their slippers from the mud.

They were standing under a tree near Li and now that the servants had stopped trying to help them they were frozen to the spot, their arms were linked and they were crying. Their painted faces slid into a garish mess of white, black and red sludge. "Somebody help us please!" they said in between their sobs. Li laughed when he noticed their tiny silk slippers disappear in pools of mud.

"What will we do if the Emperor sees us like this?" the youngest one said, leaning on her friend for support.

"Is he here?" said the older girl. She looked around in a panic. "We look so ugly he's bound to send us away from court."

Convinced that their fate had already been sealed, they became hysterical and started to hop around and scream. Even the sound of the rain clattering down failed to drown out their noise. Two servants rushed out again but the concubines continued to cause a scene and hit the women who were trying to help them.

Li leaned back in a chair, folded his arms and laughed to see such comic opera.

"Li don't stare at them. They'll see you," his grandmother said.

Li shrugged and jutted out his chin.

"I don't care," he said. "Don't they realize how silly they look? Whoever puts on their best clothes to go for a walk in the gardens? They need to know that people are laughing at them. The Emperor will think they're stupid!"

Grandmother tutted and settled back in her chair to rest. At last the concubines struggled their way inside and glared at Li as they went past him. With his grandmother taking a nap in her chair and no further entertainment in sight, Li started to pace the length of the veranda and watched the huge puddles of mud and water swell within the gardens and forecourt.

For more than an hour the rain continued its relentless attack. It splattered the whitewashed veranda floor with an ochre paste and forced a great many huge lizards and rats to scuttle under bushes and buildings for safety from drowning. Even this amusing flurry of activity couldn't stave off Li's boredom. He checked that his grandmother was still asleep and slipped off his clogs before padding down the steps. He found a small patch of soil without a puddle to stand in and closed his eyes. Lifting his head upwards, he spread his arms and opened his mouth to welcome the cool relief.

But Grandmother wasn't asleep at all.

"Little Firehorse! Come back here this moment!"

He turned to her and scowled. He didn't like the name his grandmother still called him when she was cross.

"But I like it out here – come and join me!" he said with a playful smile.

Li splashed around in the mud and stuck out his tongue to catch the raindrops. He stared at his grandmother and his eyes twinkled with mischief.

Grandmother pulled herself out of her chair. "I'll do no such thing, now come in; you've had your fun, get dried before you catch something."

She leaned on one of the servants who had come forward to help and edged toward the end of the veranda. Her small tottering frame revealed her frailty and age.

Grasping the veranda's wooden frame she held herself steady and stared back at her grandson with an equal measure of defiance. She drummed the heel of her free hand against her thigh while she spoke, determined to keep her composure.

"Come inside this instant!" she said.

Li paused for a moment and cocked his head to one side. "I can't get sick from rainwater."

"No arguing!" said the old woman. "Now come in, before I send the servants out to fetch you."

Grandmother turned away and walked back to her seat as steadily as she could. Her legs were still aching when she sank into her comfortable chair with a sigh and gave her knees a vigorous rub. She too welcomed the rain, but not for the same reason as most. Her aches and pains would be relieved within the day if the rain continued.

Li's shoulders slumped. He watched his grandmother walk across the veranda with her stiff, straight back and that determined pursed mouth, and knew that she was trying to put on a brave face for him. He

wasn't being very fair to her, and just knowing that hurt him.

As much as he loved his grandmother she was overprotective and stopped him from having as much fun as other boys his age. He always watched with envy when the servant children were allowed to play out in the grounds after supper. They ran with carefree abandon around the meadows, chasing and pulling one another to the ground while they engaged in mock fights. He watched now as some of the younger servants ran into the stables to help settle the horses and wished he could run over and join them.

He remembered how one evening, the previous week, he had slipped away from his grandmother to do just that. He should have been reading Confucius's Analects, but spied the gaggle of noisy children with their red kites heading down toward the fruit meadows.

Without waiting for an invitation to join them, he abandoned his book and followed them from a safe distance. He hid behind a wooden post at the top of the meadows and watched them ditch their kites to jump up at the cherry trees. They crammed the sweet red fruit into their mouths until they had had enough and then began throwing the overripe cherries at each other. They screamed with delight when they got a hit because they knew how cross their mothers would be to find their clothes stained. Li slipped out from behind the safety of the wooden post not quite knowing what he should do to join in. One of the older boys spotted Li and pointed him out to his friends.

"Look! It's the Prime Minister's son!"

They all stopped laughing and gathered together around the tree to stare at the well-fed little boy from the palace.

Li tilted his head to one side and stared back at the sea of curious faces. "Can I play too?"

The boy who had spotted him approached. He was taller than the others. Wiry but confident, he dared to approach the Prime Minister's son and spoke in a loud, sarcastic voice.

"I didn't know you were allowed to play with us."

Li shrugged. "Why not? No one need know."

The boy turned to the others and grinned.

"Tell him no!" called one of the boys near the trees.

"We'll get into trouble," said another.

Even though they were now in neutral territory, away from the usual class system that ruled in the palace, the boys knew that they would be in serious trouble if the Prime Minister or their parents learned of them talking to his son. The tall boy spoke again.

"I don't think we can. Just leave us alone." He wasn't feeling quite so brave now that he thought about the trouble Li could cause for them.

"I can make you!" Li stepped forward and gave the bigger boy a cold, hard stare. His lips pursed together as he thought about what he could do next to make the threat real.

The boys bunched together and the last of them jumped down from the cherry trees to form a protective wall. Li picked up a handful of cherries from the grass and started to throw them at the tall boy. Li laughed when he saw how surprised they all looked.

A couple of the younger boys caught the tails of his enthusiasm and started throwing cherries back and before long all the boys were throwing cherries. Several of them had managed to hit Li and when one of the cherries caught him on the side of the face, he screamed and ran toward his attackers.

"Who did that? Which one of you?" Li demanded.

The younger boys shrieked with laughter and blamed each other. Li picked up a handful of squishy, bleeding cherries and ran roaring toward the group, who had already started to run away.

As they ran helter-skelter around the meadow, a lone, distant bell from the palace kitchens reminded the boys that they were expected back for duties. They picked up their kites and headed back to the palace, continuing to throw cherries at Li while they screamed and shouted.

"Stay, please! My father will tell your parents that you are allowed to play with me for as long as I like," Li hollered after them.

The boys didn't reply and continued to run toward the kitchens. When they had exhausted their ammunition they ran even faster but smiled at Li to let him know that they had enjoyed their game.

Li stopped. "Will you come back tomorrow?" he said, yelling at the top of his lungs.

None of the boys answered. They were close to the palace again where social status defined their boundaries once more.

Li's daydreams were now interrupted by the sound of panicked voices close by. Two of the servants had left the shelter of the veranda to fetch him back inside, when a sudden shower of frogs had taken them by surprise.

Li was still standing barefoot in a deep muddy puddle, and when he realized what was happening he roared with laughter to see the servants hopping and dancing about. The occasional frog would land on their head or shoulders and make the servants shriek with horror. Li's laughter was contagious and Grandmother couldn't remain serious for much longer. She burst out laughing and the servants joined in.

"Come in little Firehorse, before the frogs eat you!" she said.

With great reluctance he followed the servants back onto the veranda, his earlier look of defiance replaced by a childish pout.

"Will you play something for us little one?" said Grandmother as she settled herself back into her chair now that all the excitement was over.

Li shook his head. He walked up the steps and kicked his feet against the wall. A huge pool of water trailed behind him onto the clean wooden floor. The servants cleaned away the dirty water and stripped him off to dry him.

"I want to go and play with the stable boys," he said.

"But they have work to do," Grandmother replied. "And the horses will be frightened if you play amongst them."

Grandmother fixed a cushion behind her head in an attempt to get comfortable. Li gazed out at the stables and then eastward toward a hazy cloud capped Mount Zhongnan and lost himself in his dreams. He didn't put up any struggle when the servants changed his clothes and wondered what adventures lay beyond the blue misty

peaks. He imagined that there were other mountains far beyond Zhongnan that were whispering to him to come and explore.

"Huashan, Yuntai, Yunu..." he mumbled softly to himself, "Wait for me, I'll see you all soon."

Grandmother came over to Li and stroked his hair. "I don't know what to say to you when you're in this mood?"

He looked at her and remained silent.

"Why don't you sing for us Li?"

She waved to her room which lay to the side of the veranda and her maid hurried to fetch the large rosewood box where Grandmother kept her special silk gowns.

Li smelled the sweet scent of the rosewood and a broad smile lit up his even features. He helped the maid to set the deep red box in the middle of the floor. The hinge squeaked as it always did when he opened up the lid to uncover the treasure.

"Who does this belong to?" Li asked as he pulled out a jade necklace. "I've never seen it before. It's beautiful." He held the necklace up to the light so that he could get a better look at the different shades of green in the stone.

The old woman sighed and took a few moments to reply. The boy knew so little about his mother. Xiang had forbidden anyone from talking about her.

"Yes, it's beautiful. Just like the lady who used to own it," she said with a wistful note to her voice.

Li looked up. "Can I have it? Do you think the lady would mind? I'll look after it, I promise."

Before Grandmother had a chance to reply, Li had put the necklace around his neck.

"Yes, you put it on, I'm sure that she would have wanted you to have it."

Grandmother hadn't even finished speaking when the boy had his head back in the box searching for new treasure.

He pulled out an old yellow dress and lost no time dressing himself while one of the maids tied his wet hair into a ponytail on top of his head. Grandmother clapped her hands with a childlike glee at the transformation and beckoned him to her side so that she could daub rouge on his cheeks and remind him of how to hold the fan he had found at the bottom of the box.

"What a wonderful lady you make. Sing for us!"

Reminded of the foolish concubines earlier that afternoon, Li laughed out loud and smeared some more makeup across his eyes.

"Will the Emperor see me now?" Li said in a soft, girly voice as he curtsied.

He lifted his head and batted his eyelids at two of the servants who stood next to his grandmother and hid part of his face with the fan to accentuate his twinkling brown eyes. The servants tried hard to stifle their laughter and settled down on the floor to watch. Sure of a captive audience, he launched into a falsetto voice and began to sing.

*Oh, sweet little flower
My peach blossom shower,
Your silky hair cascades,
As precious as Jade...*

All of a sudden the giggling maids fell quiet. Feeling the shudder of heavy footsteps along the

floorboards they scattered to the corners of the veranda. The Prime Minister's sober presence stifled the lighthearted mood and announced his arrival without him needing to utter a single word. Grandmother hadn't noticed him and when Li fell silent, she urged him to continue.

"Yes, that's good, what comes next?" she said.

Li saw the familiar look of disgust on his father's face and sank to the floor.

"That's enough," he bellowed, stamping his foot.

Grandmother turned to her son and frowned.

"Leave the boy alone, Xiang!"

"I will not have my son parading around in his mother's wedding dress for your entertainment."

Li gasped and stared at the dress.

"Didn't you realize, boy?" Xiang looked at his mother. "You should know it's bad luck."

Grandmother sighed and gave Xiang her impatient look.

"You're too superstitious. He's only having fun. If you spent more time with the boy then he wouldn't be so bored with his life."

"You know very well I'm not superstitious," he countered, with a sneer. "I tolerate lots of things but it's not superstitious to want to encourage my eldest son away from effeminate habits. What are you trying to teach him anyway? That it's alright for him to wear women's clothes and makeup? No mother, it's about time he grew up."

Xiang looked at the boy with such annoyance that, at first, Li couldn't bear it and averted his eyes.

"He even has her features. Probably just as weak as her too."

Despite his fear, Li forced himself to look up and hold his father's gaze. He was determined not to let Xiang intimidate him. After several seconds Xiang finally spoke to his son.

"It's time you learned how to be a man. Are you ready?"

The boy nodded and stood up.

"Very well then, I'll teach you how to hunt. A pair of wild boar has been raiding the village over the past couple of nights, destroying the farmers' crops."

"Now, father?" Li asked eagerly and pulled back his shoulders with pride. "Just us?"

"Yes, we can go now. My work will wait until later. I'll saddle up the horses and get a falcon." He marched across the veranda toward the stables expecting the boy to follow him.

Li tore off the dress and threw it on the floor. Jutting his chin out he shouted, "I won't be singing for you again any time soon Grandmother. I'm going to be doing men's things from now on!"

Without a thought for his dirty rouged face he ran after his father and fell into step behind him, copying his broad, heavy stride over to the stables.

Grandmother watched, her eyes following their every step until a thin smile appeared on her lips.

"At last!" she whispered to herself.