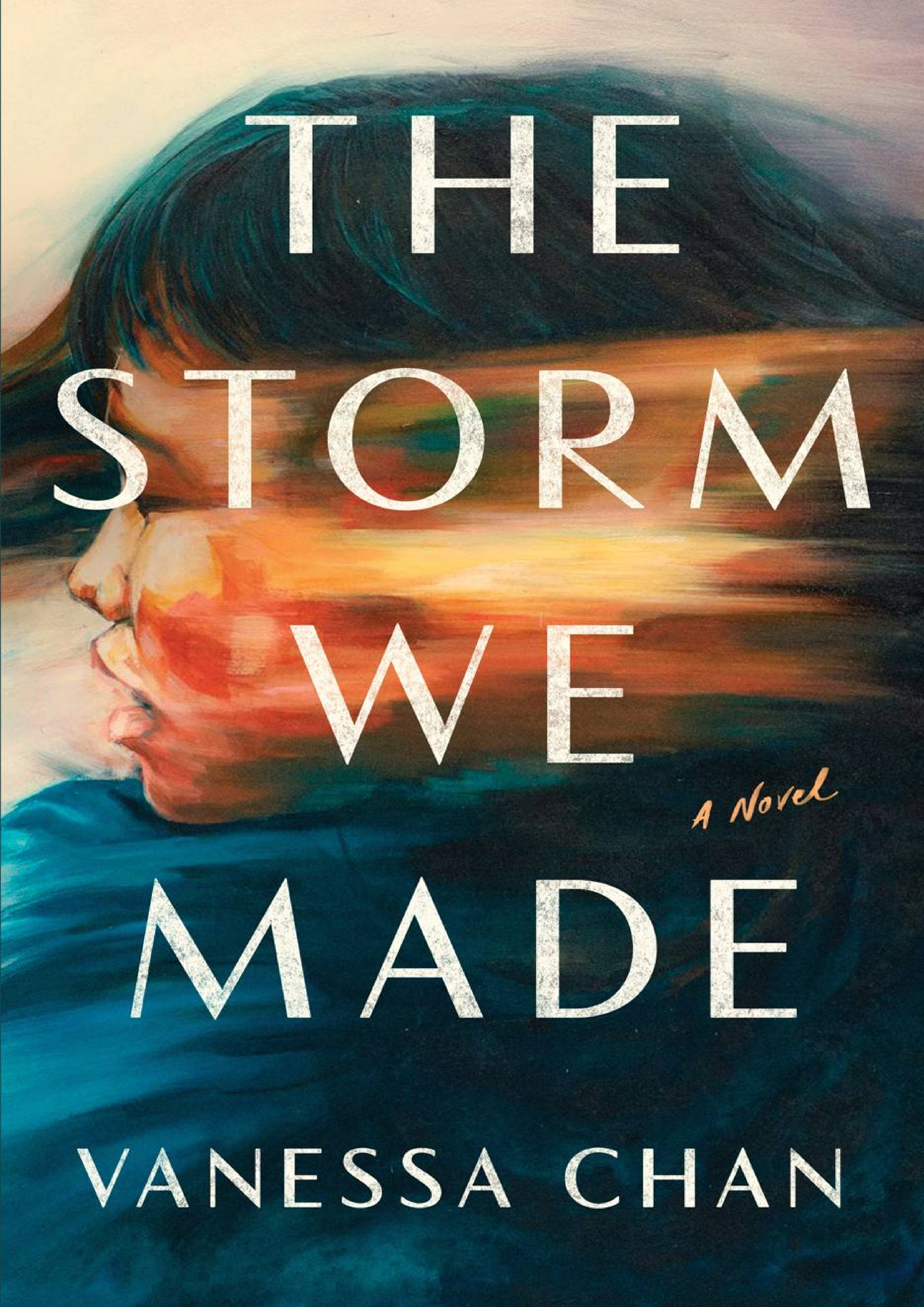
THE
STORM
WE
MADE
A Novel
VANESSA CHAN

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THE STORM WE MADE

A novel

VANESSA CHAN

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For my mother and my grandmother, who always chose life

Dear kind reader,

In Malaysia, our grandparents love us by not speaking. More specifically, they do not speak about their lives from 1941–1945, the period when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Malaya (what Malaysia was called before independence), tossed the British colonizers out, and turned a quiet nation into one that was at war with itself.

The thing is, our grandparents are chatty about everything else. They tell us about their childhood—the neighbors and friends they used to play with, the teachers they loved and hated, the ghosts they were afraid of. They tell us about their adulthood—the blush of first love, the terror of parenthood, the first time they touched our faces, their grandchildren. But of those four years of World War II they rarely speak, only to tell us that the times were bad, and they survived. Then they tell us to buzz off and not be nosy.

Before writing *The Storm We Made,* I could count on one hand what facts I knew about the Japanese Occupation. I knew that the Japanese ingeniously invaded from the north via Thailand riding bicycles, while the British cannons were pointing south at the sea. That the Japanese were brutal and killed without mercy. That they dropped red propaganda flyers about an "Asia for Asians" as they invaded, both a warning and a call to arms.

As the first grandchild on my father's side, I spent an inordinate amount of time with my paternal grandparents, asking them many questions, to which they dotingly replied. From these childhood interrogations I gleaned just a few more facts from my grandmother: How to avoid getting hit by an air strike ("Stay flat on the ground, and don't get up till the plane is completely gone because they drop their bombs when they are diagonally ahead, not when overhead"). How to become your mother's favorite ("Be a handsome boy like my brother, get kidnapped by the Japanese during the war, come back and say nothing happened"). How to make your husband jealous ("Receive a calendar in the mail every year for twenty-five years from a rare, kind Japanese man who used to work with me at the railways during the war").

As I grew older, excavating truths from my grandmother about her teens in occupied Kuala Lumpur was like playing an oral scavenger hunt. When I

would ask her what life was like during the Occupation, she would always reply, "Normal! Same as anyone."

But eventually, over the years, in an even voice that delivered only facts, I learned more—that people struggled to feed their families, schools were shut, and members of the violent Japanese secret police, the Kenpeitai, imprisoned British administrators in Singapore and quashed the Chinese rebellions in the jungles.

I put these facts away for years. I had other things to do and other places to be, I thought. I had jobs to keep, money to make, my own stories to tell. Until, in 2019, in a homecoming of sorts, I started writing the stories of Malaysia.

During a writing workshop in late 2019, I wrote what I thought was a throwaway homework assignment—about a teenage girl struggling to get home before curfew, before Japanese soldiers storm the streets. I remember the handwritten comments from the instructor: "Keep this precious thing close," she wrote, "and keep writing it."

So I did. I wrote through a global pandemic in my small apartment, through the premature death of my mother, through the deep loneliness of being unable to go home to Malaysia. I wrote about inherited pain, womanhood, mothers, daughters, and sisters, and how the choices we make reverberate through the generations of our families and communities in ways we often can't predict. I wrote about carrying the legacy of colonization in your body, about being drawn to a toxic man, about complicated friendships, about living a life in fragments, about the ambiguity of right and wrong when survival is at stake. That throwaway homework assignment is now the fourth chapter of my novel.

I hope you enjoy *The Storm We Made* and how Cecily, Jujube, Abel, and Jasmin make their way in their world. I hope that you will feel love, wonder, sorrow, and joy as you read. And mostly, I hope you will remember their stories.

Thank you for reading.

Yours,
Vanessa

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

—

1820s • The British begin a more than one-hundred-year rule of Malaya, succeeding two prior Western colonizing powers, the Portuguese and the Dutch.

1936 (November) • Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan enter a treaty of friendship.

1937 (August) • The Battle of Shanghai begins. Japan invades China at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, precipitating the Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanjing.

1941 (December) • The Malayan campaign begins. The Imperial Japanese Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita, invades Malaya from the north, via Thailand. As the country falls, the Occupation of Malaya begins, alongside the Second World War in Asia.

1945 (August) • The US detonates two atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands and leaving detrimental long-term impacts.

1945 (September) • The Imperial Japanese Army surrenders and the British return to Malaya. The Second World War ends.

1957 (August) • Malaya receives independence from Britain.

1963 (September) • The modern federation of Malaysia is formed.

CHAPTER ONE

CECILY

Bintang, Kuala Lumpur
February 1945
Japanese-occupied Malaya

Teenage boys had begun to disappear.

The first boy Cecily heard of was one of the Chin brothers, the middle of five hulking boys with narrow foreheads and broad shoulders—they were Boon Hock, Boon Lam, Boon Khong, Boon Hee, and Boon Wai, but their mother called them all Ah Boon, and it was up to the boys to know which one she was calling for. Throughout British rule, the Chin boys were known for being rich and cruel. It was common to see them crowding in a circle behind the Chins' gaudy brown-and-gold house. They'd be standing over a servant, one of the boys with a switch in his hand and all the boys with glints of excitement in their eyes as the switch made contact with the servant's skin. When the Japanese arrived before Christmas 1941, the boys were defiant: they glared at the patrolling Kenpeitai soldiers, spat at the ones who chose to approach. It was the middle boy, Boon Khong, who disappeared, just vanished one day as though he had never existed. Just like that, the five Chin brothers were four.

Cecily's neighbors wondered what had happened to the boy. Mrs. Tan speculated that he had just run away. Puan Azreen, always a cloud of gloom, worried that the boy had gotten into a fight and was lying in a drain somewhere, which made the neighbors peek fearfully into drains as they went about their errands, unsure what they would find. Other mothers shook their head; that's what happens to bullies, they said, maybe someone had simply had enough. Cecily watched the Chin boys' mother, curious to see if Mrs. Chin was stationed by the door waiting for news, or if she performed the hysterics of

the terrified mother, but Mrs. Chin and the rest of the Chin family kept to themselves. On the rare occasion they left their house, the four boys surrounded their gray-faced parents in an enormous wall of sinew and muscle, keeping them out of sight.

Only once did Cecily encounter Mrs. Chin, very early in the morning at the sundry shop. Mrs. Chin was staring at a bag of squid snacks, face glistening with tears. Cecily marveled at the quietness of it all, no sobs, no shaking, just bright, damp cheeks and wet eyes.

"She's been like that for five minutes now," said Aunty Mui, the shop owner's wife, delighting in being able to share her discovery with someone else.

After a few weeks, because there were no further public displays of anguish, no other gossip to be gleaned, people stopped wondering about the Chin boys. Soon the neighbors even forgot which Chin brother was missing.

The next few disappearances came in quick succession. The thin boy who worked as a sweeper at the graveyard, who Cecily was convinced stole the flowers that families left on gravestones and sold them at the market. The plump boy behind the sundry shop who smudged his face with dirt and pretended to be lame by tying up the bottom of his pants leg, to beg passersby for coins. The ghoul-eyed boy who had been caught trying to peep into the toilets at the girls' school. Bad boys, Cecily and her neighbors murmured. Maybe they got what they deserved.

But by the middle of the year, sons of people whom Cecily knew also began to disappear. The nephew of the couple who lived in the house next to Cecily, a boy with an enviable baritone who won all the oratory contests at school. The son of the town's doctor, a quiet boy who carried a small chessboard with him everywhere and would set it up to play with anyone who asked. The laundry lady's boy, a diligent teenager who laundered all the Japanese soldiers' uniforms, and whose mother was now forced to take over because the Japanese did not have the time for bereavements.

With only one major road bisecting the town, one chemist, one sundry shop, one school for boys and one for girls, Bintang was a town small enough for worry to mutate. The whispers began again, pointed glances at the families of the missing boys, lowered voices wondering about their fate. In fact, the boys' disappearances were discreet, as though they had sneaked away, afraid to offend. This bothered Cecily because teenage boys made the most noise when

they moved—they bumped into things, they stomped when they walked, they shifted uncomfortably even when standing still, unable to control the new power in their physique, the new length in their limbs.

"Is it not enough that they starve us and beat us and take away our schools and our lives? Must they come for our children too?" hissed old Uncle Chong, who owned Chong Sin Kee's sundry shop, the local store in the middle of Bintang where everyone bought supplies, from spices and herbs to rice to raw soap. His wife, Aunty Mui, slapped his mouth. Those were treasonous words, and the Chongs had a son too.

It had not always been this way. When the Japanese first arrived three-ish years before, Cecily, her husband, and their three children had been one of the families to line up outside their house and wave at the military convoy, a welcome party. Cecily remembered the blossoming in her chest as she pointed out the bald, squat Japanese general, Shigeru Fujiwara, at the front of the parade. "That's the Tiger of Malaya!" she told her children.

General Fujiwara had brought the British forces to their knees in under seven weeks, orchestrating a brilliant and unexpected land invasion, cycling in on bicycles from the north where Malaya bordered Thailand, across rough, hot jungle terrain, while the British Navy, anticipating a sea attack, pointed their guns and cannons south and east toward Singapore and the South China Sea. To Cecily, it had felt like a dawn of a new age. But her hope for a better colonizer was short-lived. Within months of the Japanese arrival, schools began to shut down and soldiers made their presence felt on the streets. The Japanese occupiers killed more people in three years than the British colonizers had in fifty. The brutality shocked the quiet population of Malaya, accustomed by then to the stiff upper lip and bored disinterest of the British, who mostly stayed away from the locals as long as the tin-mining and rubber-tapping quotas were reached.

Fearful of what was to come, Cecily started doing a roll call every evening to make sure each of her three children had made it home. "Jujube," she would call over the din of dinner preparations. "Jasmin! Abel!"

And every evening they answered—Jujube irritably, face twisted in the seriousness of an eldest child, Jasmin cheerily, small feet skittering across the ground like a puppy's. And her middle boy, Abel, who worried her the most,

who would shout, "Ma, of course I'm here!" careening toward her with a big, loping hug.

For a while the system seemed to work. Evening after evening as the sun set and the mosquitoes began their nightly chorus, she called for her children, and they replied. The family would gather at the scratched dining table and tell each other about their day, and for a few minutes, listening to Jasmin snort-laughing at one of Abel's theatrical jokes, watching as Jujube pulled at her short curls that looked so like Cecily's own, Cecily could forget the severity of their circumstances, the terror of the war, the barrenness of their lives.

But then, on his fifteenth birthday, on the fifteenth of February, Abel—who had light brown hair so unlike the rest of the siblings, Abel who was ravenous all the time because of the food rationing, Abel who had grown six inches the previous year and was now taller than everyone in the family—had not answered her call, had not made it home from the store. And as the waxy birthday candle melted into Abel's dry birthday cake, Cecily knew. Bad things happened to bad people; and she was exactly that—a bad person.

The truth was, for the last couple of years, Cecily found she could not hide the distinct fear that controlled her existence; the knowledge that all the things she had done would come for her, that retribution was always a day away. This fear manifested in her anxious, twisting fingers, in the way her eyes darted over her children, in the distrust with which she greeted anyone unfamiliar. Now that the catastrophe had come to pass, she felt every piece of taut energy in her body simply give way. Jujube told her later that she had released one long howl, low and anguished, then sunk into the rattan chair without further sound, her expression calm, her body motionless.

Around her, the family was a hive of activity. Her husband, Gordon, paced, shouting to himself or perhaps to her, at the top of his lungs: "Maybe he went to the shop; maybe he got stuck at a police checkpoint; maybe, maybe, maybe." Jasmin held on to her older sister's thumb, her face too stoic for seven years old. Jujube, ever practical, had sprung into action. She extricated herself from Jasmin and ran to the back of the house, called over the fence to the neighbors on both sides: "Have you seen my brother? Can you help me find my brother?" But it was past the eight o'clock curfew, and none of the neighbors dared respond, even if their heart broke at the sound of Jujube's cries.

Cecily said nothing. For a few minutes before the guilt took hold of her, it was a relief to see her terror realized. It had finally come to pass, and this was all her fault.

She had caused this, all of it.

The morning after Abel's disappearance, Cecily's neighbors swung into action. The Alcantaras were a respectable family, and respectable families did not deserve tragedies this monumental. The men organized daytime search parties, carrying signs and roaming around hollering Abel's name. They looked in storerooms behind houses, they looked in the corners of Abel's favorite shops, they looked in playgrounds and in abandoned factories. They looked but didn't enter the old school that had been turned into a Japanese interrogation center. The men stayed in small groups, bent their heads low when the Kenpeitai soldiers in muddy-green uniforms looked their way, but felt a secret smugness because there was safety in numbers, and this search for the boy felt like their own tiny revolution, a small uprising against the Japanese. The women treated the incident like a birth or a death, bringing over an endless supply of food and consolations to the Alcantara house. They assured Cecily that all would be well—that Abel was just a careless boy and had probably fallen asleep somewhere and would find his way home soon, that Abel had lost track of time and was staying with one of his friends, that boys like Abel—so handsome, so charming, and with so much promise—didn't just disappear.

Cecily, the other women thought, was surprisingly ungrateful. She did not say thank you when they delivered the food, she did not make them tea when they waited at the door to be invited in, she did not cry or confide or collapse in the way that would be understandable. All she did was look so terribly alert, eyes darting everywhere, as though ready to pounce. On what? They didn't know. Of course, they felt for her, they whispered to one another, but Cecily really took things too far sometimes. Remember the terrible stories she used to tell her children?

"The one about the man who was forced to drink soapy water till his stomach hung out from his body, then the Japanese soldiers balanced a wooden beam on him and jumped on either side of the beam like a seesaw till he burst? That one?" said Mrs. Chua.

"Aiya, do you really need to repeat that awful story? Yes, that one!" said Mrs. Tan. "It gave my children nightmares for weeks!"

Sometimes, they thought, Cecily really didn't know how to act right. They were all mothers; they knew how mothers should act. And when a mother loses a son, she should cry, she should collapse, she should seek comfort in other mothers. She should not just hold her pain as a shield, act so prickly that everyone was afraid to come near.

Still, they reminded themselves, they needed to be good neighbors. Mrs. Tan continued to send steaming bowls of soupy noodles to the Alcantara house and tried not to be offended when she saw the bowls standing in the exact place outside the gate when she passed by the next day. Mrs. Chua offered to watch Jujube and Jasmin so Cecily could get a break. Puan Azreen, who loved the dramatic, told stories about everyone she'd ever heard, who'd gone missing, but she couldn't resist adding a sheen of horror to her tales—people coming home absent limbs or with disfigured faces.

To the neighbors, at least Gordon, Cecily's husband, seemed grateful enough. He tramped through town with the other men, called for his son, slapped the backs of other husbands, thanked everyone for their time. He has become so much nicer now, the neighbors told one another. Of course you don't want such a thing to happen to anyone, of course not, they tsk-tsked, but they preferred this iteration of Gordon Alcantara, taken down a peg, without the pompousness they had disliked about him in the before times, when the British were in charge and Gordon was an administrator who fancied himself better than all of them.

The days of Abel's absence stretched into weeks. Daily searches by the men became sporadic, and the house visits from the women began to dwindle. As more and more boys began to disappear, the neighbors stayed home, hid their own sons away from the barbed glares of the Kenpeitai soldiers. The brief joy of revolt died down, and the neighbors remembered once again that during a war, the only priority was one's own family. They could not waste their time on the missing children of others.

A week before he disappeared, Abel had come home with an armful of ugly, weedy-looking flowers that he'd clearly plucked off the side of the road. But he

had been so proud, that Cecily had put them in a vase and pretended they were the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen. In the weeks after he disappeared, the weeds became dry and brittle, but still, Cecily couldn't bring herself to throw them out. Then, one afternoon, she forgot to close her bedroom window during a thunderstorm, one of the noisy, wall-rattling tropical storms that Malaya was known for. The room became misty with rain, and the wind knocked everything over, shattering the vase of Abel's dried weeds. That evening after the storm subsided, Gordon found Cecily bleeding from her fingers as she tried to glue the pieces of the vase back together, tried to arrange the broken weeds to stand as tall as a boy. But, as with the pieces she had set in motion ten years before, there was no fixing to be done. There was no coming back from this.

CHAPTER TWO

CECILY

Bintang, Kuala Lumpur
1935
Ten years earlier, British-occupied Malaya

Cecily's family was Eurasian, descended from Portuguese men, the first in a series of white colonizers who had come to Malaya's shores in the 1500s, armed with guns and ships and an ambition to control the region's spice-trading routes and immense natural resources. Cecily's mother relished the speckle of white in their names and their blood, would sweep her eyes, dark with judgment, over others around them. Her mother's refrain: "We did not come here as laborers like the Chinese and Indians to work the land and the mines, and we were not conquered like the Malays. We were made by white men, we are Christian, we worship their same gods, and they gave us their names, Rozario, and Oliveiro, and Sequiera."

As a child, Cecily was confused because their Eurasian friends and family came in all colors, brown, black, yellow, but she couldn't think of a single person with the same white and pink blotchy skin she saw in the British.

"Ah, but we are nearly white, like them," Cecily's mother would insist, gazing adoringly over at the nearest British person, usually sweating in the unfamiliar heat: a teacher, an administrator, a priest.

Cecily had never felt entitled to the beautiful and superior. Growing up, she was a nice girl but an unnoticeable one, not pretty enough to attract much attention. It showed in the way her mother appraised Cecily's muddy-brown hair, eyes, and skin with indifference and, on some days, disappointment. Her sister, Catherine, four years older, was the aspiration. Catherine, with her olive skin and green-gray eyes, ended up marrying a British officer called Abbott who took her back to England to claim his lordship. Just like that, Catherine

became Lady Abbott. But plain girls like Cecily, even if she was Eurasian, born into small houses with thatched roofs in stiflingly hot British colonies in the early 1900s, were meant to lead quiet lives that fulfilled all the roles set for them —first as a girl, learning all the skills that would attract a good husband, then as a wife, keeping the household organized, getting along with the neighbors, then as a mother, bearing and raising the appropriate number of children to prove her worth.

And Cecily did all those things with quiet tenacity and, by age thirty, found herself with two children, Jujube and Abel, and a husband—Gordon, once a plump Eurasian boy who lived two roads away and who provided her with decent comforts. They lived in a small house with an orange roof, not at all beautiful but very functional. And yet she was unbearably discontent. Every morning she would stand in the hot kitchen making half-boiled eggs for her husband and children. She would pour black coffee into little tin mugs, a smile on her face, sometimes a song on her lips. But while cooking, singing, and doing all the chores that simulated a quiet, small world of domestic bliss, she would fantasize about cracking the boiling eggs on her husband's head and throwing hot coffee in the children's faces. It made her sick with shame. She did not know when, why, or how the shift occurred inside her; she did not know how to fix herself. Even outside the home sometimes, when she was at the market trying to haggle with stallholders over the price of fish or brinjal, she would feel a sudden urge to scream and tip the tables filled with scaly fish and bleeding pork onto the proprietors.

On the last Tuesday of November in 1935, Cecily watched the sky suspiciously. It was about to rain, gray clouds gathering like a congregation. She was knee-deep in stinking refuse, pressing so hard into her slippers for stability that her toe joints shone white. The air was humid, as late afternoons in tropical Malaya tended to be, even more because the rain clouds lurked, threatening release. She was worried she wouldn't finish her assignment before the rain arrived. She dug through the trash heap, through cabbage leaves, fish bones, and something that looked suspiciously like an animal's testicle. The heat blasted the smell of all the rot straight up her nostrils. She suppressed a gag, cursed the assignment, and prepared to give up before she saw the

document she was looking for, a sheet of notebook paper sitting calmly atop a bag of garbage that she had just torn through. It was stained but smooth, lying there as though waiting to be claimed. She thumbed the paper and flapped it a little, then regretted her action because whatever trash juice was on the paper flicked droplets onto her face. At least the squiggles, diagrams, smudges, and lines on the paper, written in her husband's handwriting, were intact.

"Good work, Cecily."

The brittle voice startled her, caused her feet to slip in her squat. She widened her stance to steady herself from toppling headfirst into the trash heap, which would have been a revolting outcome. She stood and whirled around, holding her hands in front of her so her fingers wouldn't drip on her clothes. "What are you doing here?"

Fujiwara stood three strides behind her. His hands were fair and clean, a stark contrast to Cecily's own, which were brown and damp with garbage juice. His linen suit was creased enough to show signs that he had walked through town. He stepped toward Cecily, one arm outstretched, gesturing for the notebook paper. She frowned at him. This was not their agreed-upon process, and he knew she didn't like it when he acted unpredictably. It destabilized the carefully constructed nature of their relationship, and that, in turn, destabilized her.

Fujiwara pinched an unstained corner of the notebook paper from her hand and flapped it in the air to dry it. This did not work. The humidity dampened the flapping sheet even more.

"Put it away or you'll get us caught," Cecily said. She tried to stanch the jumpiness in her stomach with as much frost as she could muster in her voice. Her words came out high-pitched and reedy. A swell of frustration rose through her throat.

That day, as on all other days, Cecily was supposed to drop off the sheet of paper at the Chongs' sundry shop, where she would slide her fingers between the splintery wall and rickety shelf that housed sanitary napkins, feeling for a tiny nook, and press whatever intel she had picked up that week into the little space. It was an ingenious drop-off point—hidden in plain sight at one of the most trafficked businesses in town—simply because men avoided the aisle and that shelf, afraid to have anything to do with female reproductive parts, and women scurried in and out, not wanting to be noticed there. Fujiwara's trusted

cook would pick up whatever intel was in the nook as part of her shopping and deliver it to him. They'd been doing this for months; there was no reason for Fujiwara to switch up the procedure on her.

"I don't like this," Cecily hissed. "I could get caught talking to you." Her eyes flicked to the main road perpendicular to the alley they were standing in, usually a busy thoroughfare. A motorcar passed, then a rickshaw, then a bicycle, but no one seemed to be paying attention to them.

"Cecily," he murmured. Of the many things that frustrated Cecily about Fujiwara, one of the biggest was that his voice never really rose above a whisper. She wondered if he was aware of his power, that the quiet tenor of his voice was its own aggression, forcing people to stop what they were doing in order to lean in and listen.

She turned away from him and from the chisel of high nose that always made her stomach leap. Fujiwara was not a beautiful man, but there was a cleanness and symmetry to his face that lent him the air of the aristocratic. She focused on reaching for the nearby hose to wash the smell of fish scales off her hands. As cool water gushed over her left palm, a stinging pain shot through her arm, and bubbles of blood flowed pink along the stream of hose water.

"Cecily, you're bleeding."

As he stepped forward to look, the mint scent of his hair cream coated the warm air around them, reminding her that she was always in his capture.

"It's nothing, just a scratch," said Cecily. *Because* you made me dig in the garbage, she thought but did not say. Instead, she arranged her face into a calm smile, almost a smirk, an expression she hoped would belie her desire to grasp his wrist, to communicate the yearning she felt for him. It had been like this for months, her stomach toppling insensibly the few times that they met, making her feel both hungry and drunk.

"I'm sorry, I know you don't like when we make changes," he said.

Cecily ran her hand under the water and flinched as the sting of the cut roiled through her.

"It's just that I have to tell you something. I couldn't wait," he said.

There it was again, that delicious curdle in her stomach. He had never given her a clue that he felt the same way. In fact, he had never given her a clue as to how he felt about anything.

Fujiwara raised his right hand and pressed his fingers against the stained sheet of notebook paper, smoothing it against his thigh. Cecily removed her own finger from the stream of water and wiped it, the cut already beginning to clot, on her floral skirt. The splotch of blood darkened the petals of a flower on the fabric, but the stain could barely be seen, a monster hidden in plain sight.

"What do you have to tell me?" she asked, hating that she sounded like she was begging.

"These numbers will be useful to us," he said, staring at the notebook paper, ignoring her question, furrowing his dark eyebrows.

Cecily studied Fujiwara as he studied the notebook paper. A tiny bead of sweat clung to the top of his eyebrow, unusual, as he always looked fresh, as if he had just bathed. Cecily wanted to stick out her tongue and lick it away, taste the hot saltiness.

"I will have to take this back to be analyzed," he said. Because he had stepped back away from her, she could barely hear him. "But it looks like part of a log your husband made of tides and hourly water depths at the port. He must have written his findings into a larger report and thrown away these notes."

Cecily nodded, half-listening, trying desperately to draw her eye away from the bead of sweat. Her bloody finger stung with shame.

"Well. If you're not going to tell me what's going on, I'm leaving now," she said. "It's dangerous, hanging about like this, and I have to get back to the children." She turned away, her breath catching. She was a woman who could walk away, she told herself.

"Wait, wait." Fujiwara's breath whistled through his teeth. Close by, a mynah bird cackled as though mocking their impasse. "I have heard about a German man, who is both a good man and a bad man, and he will win us the war from the British." Fujiwara's voice vibrated with excitement, making him even harder to hear.

Cecily stepped back and turned to face him. This was unusual. The nature of their relationship was transactional; Fujiwara was her spymaster. She, the informant, gathered intelligence, mostly stolen bits of information from her husband, Gordon, whether from the discarded bits of paper in his trash or from conversations she overheard. Gordon was an unsuspecting middle manager for the British administration in the public works department,