



THE FOURTH DAUGHTER

A NOVEL

LYN LIAO
BUTLER

PRAISE FOR LYN LIAO BUTLER

“The Fourth Daughter is one of the best novels I’ve read in a long time. Effortlessly melding family, food, and history into a multigenerational saga that kept me turning the pages well into the night, Lyn Liao Butler swept me away. I’ll be thinking about this story for years to come.”

—Camille Pagán, bestselling author of *Good for You*

“Lyn Liao Butler has woven a stunning tale of love, loss, and the unbreakable ties of family. The Fourth Daughter is a novel that doesn’t flinch from the complexities of truth or the pain of what has been lost—but it also celebrates the resilience of love and the hope that binds generations together. With vivid storytelling and deep emotional resonance, Butler takes us from modern-day New York to the Taiwan of the past, exploring identity, sacrifice, and the power of finding our way home. A rich, wise, and unforgettable novel.”

—Patti Callahan Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*

“A beautiful multigenerational story that asks if we can ever truly regain the things we have loved and lost, The Fourth Daughter is a wonderfully transportive novel of family, identity, acceptance, and healing—and a sensory delight for foodies and would-be travelers. Lyn Liao Butler has found the perfect recipe for a satisfying read.”

—Jessica Strawser, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Last Caretaker*

“Up-and-coming chef Liv Kuo must overcome a recent trauma to help her Taiwanese grandmother find the daughter she thought she had lost forever. A heartwarming blend of romance and family drama with roots in martial law-era Taiwan, The Fourth Daughter will have you turning pages filled with delicious food, tragic secrets, and the healing power of love.”

—Julie Wu, author of *The Third Son*

“Taiwan is a small country, but its history and culture stretch across the entire world. Butler beautifully details the hopes of its people, who are sometimes powerless in the face of unrelenting authority and misfortune, but never defeated.”

—Ed Lin, author of *Ghost Month*

“Lyn Liao Butler’s *The Fourth Daughter* is a richly woven tapestry of heritage, healing, and the unbreakable bonds of family. Steeped in the vibrant culture of Taiwan, from its tantalizing cuisine to its deep-rooted traditions, this poignant and moving novel explores resilience, love, and the courage to uncover buried truths.”

—Jean Kwok, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Leftover Woman*

**THE
FOURTH
DAUGHTER**

ALSO BY LYN LIAO BUTLER

The Tiger Mom's Tale

Red Thread of Fate

Someone Else's Life

Crazy Bao You

What is Mine

**THE
FOURTH
DAUGHTER**

A NOVEL

**LYN LIAO
BUTLER**

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Past Me, who thought I'd never sell another book. You did it.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

YI-PING

1959, Taichung

The year my fourth daughter was born, our home near the Taichung train station, which housed five families in the Wang household, collapsed during dinnertime. Just as I was putting the *dua mee gee* noodle soup I'd made on the table, a neighbor ran into our building shouting for us to get out because our home was about to fall.

My mother-in-law yelled for the wives to take our coal stoves so that the building wouldn't burn down (but did that really matter if our home was about to be destroyed anyway?). Like the dutiful daughter-in-law I was, I grabbed mine with two dish towels so I wouldn't burn myself as my husband scooped up our two youngest daughters in his arms. I ran for the door, our oldest daughter clinging to my leg and our faithful dog by my side. We rushed outside and stood on the street in shock as our three-story building began to crumble. As a thunderous rumble filled the air and thick plumes of dust rose around us, our home with all our belongings collapsed in front of our eyes.

The month my fourth daughter was born, my father-in-law was in an automobile accident that left him blind and unable to work. My mother-in-law's wails would have woken all the ghosts who haunted the island of Taiwan for the entire seventh lunar month.

The week my fourth daughter was born, my husband's oldest brother's son died of pneumonia in his mother's arms. How the entire family mourned, the oldest son of an oldest son, gone too soon and before he could take his rightful place in the family.

The day my fourth daughter was born, our dog stood just inside the front door of my husband's sister's house, where we'd taken refuge after we'd

lost the family building, and howled for over an hour. My husband knew then that the son he'd hoped for was merely a dream, and that a hungry girl child had gobbled him up to take his place. Sure enough, our fourth daughter came into the world bellowing at the top of her lungs, as healthy as could be. I saw the bitter disappointment in my husband's eyes as his mouth twisted in disgust, and my stomach twisted in dismay. After having three daughters, he had prayed and prayed for a son to carry on his legacy. His frustration was a palpable storm cloud, threatening to let loose over us. He stalked out of the room, not even sparing us a glance. But my heart filled with joy at the sight of this perfect baby, and I loved her from the moment I laid eyes on her.

In Taiwan, the number four is considered unlucky, because the word for "four" sounds so similar to the word for "death." Taiwanese people are a superstitious lot. They avoid the number four at all costs. Few Taiwanese buildings have a fourth floor, and not many license plates end in the number four. When my mother packed me snacks when I was young, she never packed four of anything, for fear of dooming me to bad luck. My husband refused to have the number four in his office phone number and threw a fit if I brought home four bags of rice, instead of three or five. I should have known that he would not allow a fourth daughter to taint his life.

But I was young: only sixteen when I married him, and only twenty-one when my fourth daughter was born. I'd been taught to obey my husband, that I was nothing without him. I had no idea that on the day of her birth, he was already thinking how he could get rid of her. For he thought of her as a curse, her very existence the reason for all the bad luck in his family that year. I should have been more vigilant and protected her, shielded her from my husband's wrath. But I hadn't, and my fourth daughter became nothing more than a wisp of incense smoke disappearing into the sky.

PART 1

Present day, Manhattan

“I saw my fourth daughter yesterday,” my grandmother, Yi-ping Wang, said when I picked up her FaceTime call.

“Ah-Ma?” My body jolted in alarm as I called her by the Taiwanese words for “grandmother.” I sat up fast from the cocoon of blankets I’d buried myself in on my couch, dropping my cell phone in the process. As I fumbled on the floor to retrieve it, my mind spun as I mentally went back over every video call I’d had with her recently, wondering when my active eighty-six-year-old grandmother’s mind had started to slip. Why hadn’t I seen the signs? Had I been too wrapped up in my own trauma to pay attention to anyone else?

“Liv-ah?” I heard my grandmother’s voice from my fallen phone just as my fingers closed around it. “You there?”

My hands shook as I brought the phone back up so I could see my grandmother’s face. My eyes skimmed over her familiar features, wondering if dementia was something you could see physically, like a wart on the back of a hand. Ah-Ma had only three daughters—my mother, Felicia, being the youngest one—and a son, my uncle Winston; there was no fourth daughter. How far gone was she to have conjured up another daughter? My heart wouldn’t be able to take it if my beloved grandmother was declining just when I needed her most.

“Are you okay?” My voice came out in a tremulous whisper. I’d been holed up inside my studio apartment for the past two months like a spirit stuck in this world, unable to move on, ever since Ah-Ma had gone back to

Taiwan and my best friend, Amy Phan, had left on a worldwide solo trip. I was afraid to go outside and face all the danger that was New York City. My brain knew I couldn't live like this forever, but my body refused to cooperate. And when you lived in a city like New York, you never had to step foot outside if you didn't want to. Everything could be delivered, and no one had to know that you'd developed a phobia of the city you'd once loved so much. The only fresh air I'd gotten lately was when I went out onto my little balcony, shivering in the mid-April chill as I watched the traffic go by seven floors below.

"I'm fine." Ah-Ma's voice was impatient, and she waved a hand in the air. "I need you come to Taiwan. Help find her. My husband, he stole her years ago."

"What?" I blinked at her in confusion, my mind trying to make sense of what she was saying. "What are you talking about? You don't have a fourth daughter."

Should I call my mother? Or the companion who'd gone every day to help my grandmother ever since she'd moved back to Taiwan? Did anyone else know about Ah-Ma's declining grasp on reality?

She heaved a sigh and stared at me for a few moments in silence. "Felicia never told you about Yili?"

"Yi who?" I sat up fully, shrugging the blankets off me, my entire attention on my grandmother. I searched her face for signs of disorientation, agitation, or anything else that would give me a clue as to whether my grandmother was losing her mind. But the face I'd always known gazed back at me.

"My fourth daughter, Yili," Ah-Ma said.

I shook my head, confusion clouding my brain. My mom had never once told me she had a younger sister. *No one* in our family had ever said that. I wasn't as close to my mother as I was to Ah-Ma, but we had a good relationship. I called my mom every few days, but there was much we didn't talk about. Apparently, her missing younger sister was one of them.

“*Aiya*.” Ah-Ma shook her head. “It like she never exist.” She switched to Mandarin then, her words coming faster in her native language, which I understood but could barely speak. “I had a fourth daughter. My husband gave her away when she was only eighteen months old, when Winston was born. I searched for her for years, but it was like she’d disappeared.”

“No.” My eyes widened as her words sank in. She’d lived with us for all of my childhood, and she’d never once said anything about a fourth daughter. I’d never met my grandfather, but I couldn’t imagine he’d been that evil. How could anyone give away their own child?

“Yesterday, she was in line in front of me at a food stall. And then she disappeared. Poof.” Ah-Ma flicked open her hands to emphasize her words. “Just gone. Like magic.”

“I . . .” The words got stuck in my throat. My grandmother had always been practical, not one to give in to superstitions or fairy tales. She didn’t believe in magic. I’d just seen her a few months ago, when I’d landed in the hospital after that horrible incident at the restaurant where I worked, and she and my mother had flown here to New York to be with me. After I was finally released, my grandmother had stayed with me in my tiny studio for months taking care of me after my mother went back to California.

“I’m sorry I never told you about her.” Ah-Ma’s tone softened. “It hurt too much to speak the words out loud. I saw her yesterday at Yizhong Shopping Street.” Ah-Ma paused, a faraway look in her eyes as a tiny smile flitted around her lips. “I was craving good old-fashioned street food. There’s a stall there, they sell the best barbecued squid. I was in line when I saw her.”

“How do you know it was her? She must be . . .” I trailed off, trying to do the math, but my brain was still trying to comprehend that my grandmother had had a child stolen from her, and I couldn’t make sense of the numbers.

“She would be sixty-five now.” Ah-Ma’s smile was sad. “The woman I saw was the right age. She looked exactly how I imagined my Yili would have grown up to look like.”

“But Ah-Ma, you said she was taken from you when she was eighteen months old. How could you possibly . . .” I didn’t want to hurt my grandmother’s feelings, but there was no way she could know what her lost daughter looked like all these years later.

“I know it was her.” Ah-Ma’s voice was steely. “She had this birthmark . . .” Ah-Ma gestured to the back of her head. “Right here, behind her left ear. It looked like a heart. The woman in front of me had the same birthmark. She had her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. I wasn’t paying attention, but then the person behind pushed me and I fell against her. And I saw it, Liv.” My grandmother’s eyes burned with intensity. “She has the exact same birthmark in the exact same place. And when she turned around to see if I was okay, I recognized her. It was her.”

I stared at my grandmother, trying to absorb everything she was telling me. If she was right and this woman was actually her missing daughter, it would be a miracle.

“I called her by name. Yili.” Ah-Ma’s chin trembled with emotion. “But she only looked at me in confusion and said I was mistaken. That wasn’t her name. She gave me a sympathetic look and then took off down the street.” Ah-Ma stared into my eyes. “She didn’t even get her snack. I was so shocked I didn’t move for a few moments. Then I took off after her, trying to catch her.” Ah-Ma shook her head, as if in regret. “There were too many people. It was so crowded. I lost her. I kept searching, pushing past people, trying to find her, but she was gone.”

“I’m so sorry.” I brought my hands up to my chest, my heart breaking at the look on her face.

“I know it sounds far-fetched, but I believe in my heart, in my soul, that that was her.” Ah-Ma’s eyes clouded with sorrow, and she stared at a spot somewhere behind me. “I’ve dreamed of the moment when I’d see her again so many times over the years. I’d wake up thinking I could smell the sweet scent of her hair, feel her arms around my neck. I believed with all my heart that she’d be returned to me.” Ah-Ma sighed. “I never imagined that I’d see