



One

Mei Ling Pang was born at an inauspicious time on an inauspicious day in an inauspicious month, so bad luck liked to follow her around. Strange things did too. Like the ghastly-looking figures with their white faces and waist-long tongues, hanging out in front of her parents' restaurant, staring at the display of roast ducks and licking the glass.

In the corner of her eyes, Mei could always see shadows and movement. But it got particularly bad when the gate to Ghostland opened.

Mei hated Hungry Ghost Month.

'It's the one time of the year when all those in the spirit world are let out to do as they wish. They



may want to visit living relatives ... or just have a bit of fun,' Ma explained each August as they knelt together and stuck joss sticks into the brass pot and arranged the offerings of oranges and red tortoise cakes by the front door.

'If they have one thing in common, it's that they are all ravenous! If we make sure they are well fed, then hopefully it brings us good luck.'

And boy, did they need some good luck right now! Mei stared sadly at The Augusta Moon. The restaurant used to shine in red and gold glory, but the gold had tarnished and the red had faded to a dull pinkish-orange. She squeezed her eyes shut and wished fervently for a truckload of customers!

Opening one eye and then another, Mei was met not with customers, but with ghosts of all shapes and sizes ogling the food and tasting the curling smoke from the incense. She groaned and rubbed her eyes. Nope! They were still there and *very* real.

Mei didn't know why she was able to see things that other people couldn't. All she knew for sure was that she always had.

Her earliest memory was being pushed on a swing by a little girl with long blue-black hair, a red cherry blossom dress and holes in her face where her eyes should be.

She had told Second Aunty about her new 'friend'.

'Look! She's still pushing the swing! What a funny little girl.'

Second Aunty stared long and hard at the swing swaying back and forth by itself despite the lack of breeze and clutched tightly at her jade beads.

'Don't tell anyone about this, please,' Ma Pang had begged her sister when confronted with the fact that Mei might be 'cursed'. 'Mei is just a ... special girl. Don't do anything to make her life hard for her or make her think she's different.'

But Second Aunty was the sort of person who if she knew one secret, would go around telling two.

The quiet, unassuming suburb of Honeywood,

Perth, Australia, was a place where everyone knew each other by name, the golf course was always green and nothing out of the ordinary ever happened. Everyone was normal; strange Chinese monsters didn't exist. In fact, nobody even believed in monsters. Which is precisely why Ma and Ba Pang had moved there from Hong Kong, hoping for a fresh start and to get away from the various Ghostbusting Grandmasters that Second Aunty kept trying to suggest as a cure.

Which was great, until Ma realised that all the strange things they had tried to leave behind had simply followed them.

Before long, everyone in Honeywood knew that something was wrong with Mei. She was the girl who shouted at the thin air, flapped her arms madly at nothing and acted like a weirdo. The one who made shivers run down their spine (although Mei knew it was actually little demons tickling their backbone).

Mei tore her eyes away from the long-tongued monsters which were still licking hungrily at the

window and hurried back into The Augusta Moon. Relieved that no ghouls could enter because of the bagua symbol nailed above the doorframe, Mei sat silently behind the till. The restaurant sat silently with her.

The copper chain of temple bells suddenly jangled and the door creaked open. Mei inhaled sharply, sat up straight and prepared to smile brightly.

‘Is this Doctor Heckyll’s premises?’ asked an old man, adjusting his thick spectacles and peering at the writing on the glass.

Mei frowned deeply. ‘No!’ she fumed.

It was only the fluffiness she felt figure-eight around her ankles and purr loudly that managed to calm her down. Mei picked up the little black cat and took her behind the front counter. The cat had showed up one day on the front step and had made herself perfectly welcome. Now she was a regular visitor.

Unsure about how her parents and health inspectors would feel about something non-human

in the restaurant, Mei had kept her new friend a secret.

‘No one is coming in for dinner, are they kitty?’ she asked the black cat.

The black cat looked at her sympathetically with green eyes, as if she understood.

Mei stared at the faded Chinese New Year decorations. The cheap paper lanterns pinned on the ceiling for a splash of colour unfortunately had a habit of making a splash into customers’ hot and sour soups.

That’s when there *were* customers.

More mosquito-swatting than cooking took place these days at The Augusta Moon. The simple fact being that not many people wanted to go to a restaurant next to a graveyard.



TWO

The dark shadow of Dr Heckyll's Mega Morgue & Funeral Home loomed over The Augusta Moon. The front entrance, the height of three upright coffins painted the deepest black, was a constant grim reminder that time for the Pang family's ailing restaurant was almost up.

The boundaries of the Mega Morgue crept closer each day, having eaten up the quaint stores and cafes that used to be there. It seemed to Mei like an unstoppable monster that left behind only nothingness and flattened earth, ready to be made into new dirt beds for the dearly departed. Death was a booming industry. After all, it is almost certain

that a person will die at least once in their life.

Mei couldn't help but feel that the demise of the restaurant was her fault somehow. She was unlucky. Born under the wrong stars. Made of misfortune. Slowly, the guilt inside her built and built until ...

'Is everything like this because of me?' she blurted out to Ma.

Mei's mother had been looking a little pale of late and right now she looked as white as the Moon Maiden etched on the window of their restaurant. Ma sighed as she emptied out the pot of old rice into the scrap bin for the chickens. 'No,' she replied.

Mei wasn't so sure. She had heard Ma pick up the phone this morning and talk to Second Aunty – who always spoke like she was bargaining at the downtown fish markets – and it went like this:

'The girl was always going to be born cursed after that black cat jumped over your pregnant stomach. You should get her bound with an invisible red string to stop her spreading bad luck!'

'There is nothing wrong with Mei,' Ma scolded. 'You're just being superstitious! And how does

anyone know the string is red if it's *invisible*?'

'Listen, I heard that there is a great Tao Master ...'

'I'll never entertain such a thing! I don't want to talk about this again!'

Ma Pang hung up on Second Aunt and went to the stove where she proceeded to bang a wok around loudly. Being active took a toll on her. Sweat burst over Ma's forehead and she slid down onto the sticky floor. She was sicker than anyone knew. Ma remembered the incident with the black cat, who was herself pregnant with a bellyful of kittens. It did seem to coincide with the time strange things started to happen, but ...

Mei slipped into the cool room out the back to find Ba, who was stacking seasonal greens, and asked him the same question she'd asked Ma.

'Come closer, child.'

Mei approached her father and he felt for the top of her head and kissed her. Ba Pang's eyes were turning milky in the same way that Ma Pang's beautiful black hair was turning white.

Dr Kuthbutheen said that Ba needed to have

a critical operation before he became completely blind. Mei had seen her mother plough through endless envelopes stamped with a red 'Final Notice'. She watched Ma punch numbers into the calculator and then tearfully shake her head.

Ba said he didn't mind his fate. 'If the universe says this is how it is meant to be, then we must accept that.' He had developed a deep appreciation and thankfulness for all his other senses. The world sounded more beautiful than ever and his cooking was tastier. Even if the three of them were the only living souls dining at The Augusta Moon, Ba Pang still lovingly prepared delicious meals every night. Why not make the most of everything?

'Don't worry so much about the future, child.'

It was the only thing Mei *could* worry about.

'I'll make sweet and sour spare ribs for supper, extra saucy; how about that to cheer you up?'

Mei tried her best to make lively conversation at the table, but it was hard when there was a van parked outside their window with the words *Chipper Colin's*

Caskets – Cheerful Carpentry for Crestfallen Times printed on the side. It was probably a good thing Ba couldn't see that there was a man (presumably Colin) unloading grim rectangular objects from the back of it.

'I'm going to start my homework,' she said, as she hurried off upstairs, hoping it just sounded like she was trying to be studious.

Mei had a plan. She wasn't going to sit around and let Fate take its course if she could help it! Mei quietly slid open a drawer and reached deep behind the greying pyjamas that Ma had promised she would replace almost a year ago now. In a little cinnabar box carved with a peony and a fox, Mei had been secretly storing the coins that Ba had in turn been secretly giving her to buy milk at school.

These coins would soon be slotted into the photocopier at the local newsagency. Reaching under her bed for the map of Honeywood hidden there, Mei unrolled it and started plotting a delivery route.

Half an hour later, Mei was flying through town

on her bike, with her Hello Kitty backpack filled with photocopies of The August Moon menu. She pedalled fast past the glowing homes, determined to do her rounds and make it back before she was discovered gone and had to face a punishment like scrubbing the restaurant toilet, or even *worse* – before the really scary ghosts came out.

Mayor Dom Asplin and the gold Chain of Office he wore around his neck all the time was sitting in his pyjamas eating ice-cream as Mei stopped by his letterbox. As Mei rode past the police station, Senior Sergeant O'Hagan was watching his favourite cop show, eating donuts and wishing he had a street of tough crime to patrol.

Honeywood's Mother-of-the-Year, Taylor Sweet, was busy preparing Dinner of the Year and Dessert of the Year, which she was busy photographing to be put on the internet before she fed her children, Jimmy and Daria. Mei slid a menu in their letterbox. The wheels on her bike had barely stopped spinning before she was off again.

World's Best Kung Pow Chicken! Come and try it

tomorrow night! Mei had scribbled on the back of each one even though she knew it was a big claim as she a) hadn't tried every Kung Pow chicken in the world and b) the best one was probably in Kung Pow. But if only people would come to the restaurant! Then they would know how delicious Pa's cooking was and they wouldn't care it was beside a creepy graveyard.

Mei pedalled hard, determined to finish her round. Out of breath, she turned around to discover why the ride home felt twice as difficult. There was a little old woman sitting on the back.

'Can I offer you some words of advice?' the old woman beamed.

Mei certainly didn't want advice from a stranger, but she pursed her lips.

'I can tell you are a child of misfortune, but your curse will be lifted if you can in your lifetime, make but one friend.' The little old woman smiled so broadly her eyes disappeared in the folds of her wrinkled face. 'Consider that my gift to you during Hungry Ghost Month.'

A friend? Fat chance of that! The world would more likely end first! thought Mei.

'If you don't mind, I better be on my way,' Mei huffed furiously. 'You should have asked first if you needed a ride!'

'Sorry, young Miss. I thought a fit thing like you wouldn't mind letting an old lady rest her feet for a while.'

Problem was, she didn't have any feet.

'Thank you!' the little old woman cackled before she slowly faded away.

The spirits were particularly bold and cheeky this time of the year. There was a good reason why Ma and Pa didn't want Mei going out at night during Hungry Ghost Month.

Mei frowned and darted into the house just as the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed eight times.

Back in her bedroom, doing her homework so that she hadn't really told a lie, Mei was pleased with her efforts. She had dropped off fifty menus and if everything went according to plan, the restaurant

would be perfectly filled tomorrow night. She hadn't told Ba, but that was only a minor problem – she was sure he'd be able to make extra Kung Pow chicken. Everyone was going to be so happy!

Mei yawned and before she knew it she had drifted off to sleep, where all her demons left her alone so she could dream about nice things like unicorns, busy restaurants, friends and being normal.

She didn't notice the evil things afoot in the big black building next door.



Three

The huge front door of the Mega Morgue creaked open an inch to let the black cat in. A large bloodshot eye looked out furtively before the door was shut again to keep the rest of the living out. Dr Dennis Heckyll, with his bald head and hunched stature, was so frightful to look upon that kids would dare each other to knock every Halloween. Not surprisingly, no one ever took up the challenge.

Dr Heckyll was not always like this. He possessed a perfectly normal spine, but many years of being an evil mastermind meant that he had started to draw deeper and deeper into himself.

Now, he walked peering in the direction of his cold black heart.

Although, if you believed the rumours, it was said that Dr Heckyll didn't even *have* a heart – just a cold black space where a heart used to be. His heart was apparently stolen a long time ago.

Unlike a normal person, Dr Heckyll wasn't scared to deal with corpses, or feel sad that he had to face distraught family members. Being heartless was actually quite useful for his job.

Lying on the mortuary slab right now was a gentleman, very advanced in age, with a face that showed evidence of a life well lived, covered in many deep wrinkles. That didn't bother Dr Heckyll, but what made his skinny legs tremble in his skinny black pants was the fact that this man had the biggest and bumpiest nose he had ever seen. It looked like a lump of hardened porridge.

Dr Heckyll unrolled his long cloth pouch of sharp and pointy instruments and selected something long and silver with a large eye on the end like a needle. He pressed the end onto the

nose and a gross wax-like substance oozed out of a pore. Dr Heckyll shivered with both disgust and satisfaction.

By the time Dr Heckyll was finished, there was a beautiful sight to behold. The old gentleman looked almost alive again, glowing with an inner health and beauty. Most importantly he had the smoothest, most perfect nose you'd ever see. If Dr Heckyll could feel any emotions at all, he would have felt a deep sense of satisfaction. He wheeled the corpse back into the cool room.

Now that his work was done, Dr Heckyll snuck into his Secret Room. What was going on inside the Secret Room was a secret of course, but Dr Heckyll was up to something dreadful.

Dr Heckyll hadn't thought much when he purchased a musty volume from a garage sale called *Big Bao's Book of The Dead* (English Edition). It was only \$4.50 after all, and he got a bonus black cat that followed him home.

Among the pages were some interesting embalming recipes ('Insta-balm') that promised

to make the dead look more alive than when they were alive and Dr Heckyll had eagerly bookmarked them, but it was the recipe for reanimating corpses that had really intrigued him.

‘Insta-Jiang’ promised to have the dearly departed popping back up again. It wasn’t clear whether the recipe bought dead people fully back to life or just turned them into zombies. The latter would be disgusting. Dr Heckyll decided he’d better leave it alone. He didn’t think anyone wanted to see their loved ones sit up in their casket in the middle of a service. It was going too far.

Still, the recipe played on Dr Heckyll’s mind. He thought about it while he squeezed the blocked pores of another dead customer. He thought about it while he personally dug a hole in the graveyard for another coffin to go in. He thought about it while he shampooed the top of his bald scalp in the shower. There was just something about Dr Heckyll that liked anything morbid.

Curiosity finally got the better of Dr Dennis

Heckyll. One night, in the dark, curtained secrecy of his Secret Room, gathering deadly poisons and unknown chemicals that swirled mysteriously in their vials, he set to work as the black cat slept on the shelf.

The resulting mixture was beautiful to look at, as it cooled into a bright blue colour. Too bad it smelt like farts. He distilled it into a small jar, labelled it and under the cover of darkness, ventured into the graveyard.

Most people would be scared to go out into a graveyard in the middle of the night, but since Dr Heckyll lacked a heart, nothing frightened him. And the smell of his potion-making didn’t bother him as Dr Heckyll’s nostrils had long ago gotten used to the stench of Death.

He noted though, that strange things – well, stranger than usual things – had been happening this month in his graveyard. The dead quietness was interrupted by the noise of what sounded like a busy marketplace and hundreds of unseen voices laughing, but when Dr Heckyll shouted, ‘who’s



there?’ and lifted his torch, there was nothing but darkness.

The scene in front of him flickered on and off and he almost caught the sight of an alternative world, but it was too fast for his eyes to register. There was also a strange mist hanging in the air and although Dr Heckyll blamed bad weather, the mist appeared to be made of ghosts and magic. Something pinched him on the nose and laughed loudly. Dr Heckyll screamed and dropped his torch.

While cursing and fumbling around, he accidentally tripped over the gnarled root of an extremely old Chinese elm tree. A tree that he was sure he'd never seen on his property. His head hit stone and there was a huge crack.

He rubbed his forehead while stars spun around his eyes. When people said Dr Heckyll had a ‘thick skull’, they weren’t exaggerating. He was fine. The stone coffin on the other hand, had cracked open.

Exposed to the night was the face of a child that looked just like he was sleeping. He was dressed in Qing dynasty clothing: a colourful changshan

and a rounded black hat. Now if Dr Heckyll had a heart (which he clearly didn't as demonstrated) he wouldn't have thought it was a good idea to use his Insta-Jiang potion on the unfortunate boy. The boy who had been happily asleep in the Afterlife, beside his two parents, for centuries and would have preferred to remain that way until the end of time. But Dr Heckyll didn't have a heart. And the recipe had stated: 'Enough for a child'.

Standing at the top of the fox hole she called her home, under the branches of the peach tree she had decorated with fairy lights, the Peony Princess frowned and crossed her arms as she watched Dr Heckyll administer the potion, then she disappeared with the flick of an orange tail.

The boy in the stone coffin opened his eyes, sat up and looked all around. Surprised at being alive again, he stood up and found that due to being dead for so long, he could only move by putting his arms out for balance and hopping along.

If you had been asleep for that long, you'd find yourself a little stiff too.

Before Dr Heckyll could do anything about it, the boy hopped right out of the coffin and kept on hopping, fast disappearing into the darkness.

'The recipe actually worked!' Dr Heckyll exclaimed to himself, stunned.

This is how Jiang found himself reborn.



FOUR

Mei woke up determined that the day was going to be perfect and nothing was going to spoil it. Even though there were two of those long-tongued monsters stuck onto her bedroom window like aquarium suckerfish.

It was Kung Pow Chicken Night!

She just had to get through the day first.

Every morning Mei walked past the Mega Morgue & Funeral Home, and every morning Dr Heckyll's three Irish wolfhounds dashed up to the gate to bark at her. To be honest though, she couldn't be sure whether they were barking at her or at the headless body following her.

I just want to see normal people! Mei screamed silently.

But standing in the gap between The Augusta Moon and the Mega Morgue was the Peony Princess.

I said normal people, universe! Mei fumed.

Even though the Peony Princess looked just like a girl with a flower in her hair and a beat-up guitar, her case open to catch stray change, Mei had on more than one occasion seen a ghostly passer-by stop, bow deeply and mumble, 'Your Highness.'

'How is the Emperor?' someone had enquired. 'Haven't seen him for decades,' she had replied casually. 'How is the Empress?' someone else asked. 'Haven't been home for centuries,' she said.

The Peony Princess always sang about love and today she was strumming out a new tune.

'I once knew a boy with blackest hair of coal,
I loved him deeper than five feet of snow.
But he caused me sorrow, he caused me pain,
So I ate his heart and spat out his brain.'



The problem was that while the Peony Princess looked the part of a folky, acoustic singer-songwriter, her voice was truly terrible and her songs were worse. As usual, Mei wondered if she was the only human who could see the Princess, but to be honest, she wouldn't have been surprised if people ignored her on purpose. Her voice was like all three of Dr Heckyll's Irish wolfhounds howling at the full moon at the same time.

Mei clapped to be polite. The Princess curtsied and twirled so that her pretty fox-print dress fanned out. What was that glimpse of something bright orange underneath her petticoat? It looked suspiciously like a fluffy fox tail.

The Peony Princess always wore a different face each time they met. Mei asked her why this was and she replied:

'Sometimes I feel like this face and sometimes another.'

'Can I please see your real face?'

'No. My real face is *very* ugly.'

A violin screech from a horror movie filled the

air and then stopped. It resumed and then stopped again. It took Mei a while to realise it was a ring tone.

‘Hello?’ The Princess pulled a pink phone out of her fluffy skirt.

‘Can you please speak up? Yes, I understand the reception from Ghostland is not very good, but I cannot hear you at all!’

‘No, sorry! I do *not* need a new phone plan!’

The Peony Princess hung up the phone and tucked it back into her skirt. She started clearing her throat and strumming her guitar and that was when Mei decided to hastily toss a coin into the empty guitar case and move along. The Princess’s song followed her like a nightmare.

Pausing at Dr Heckyll’s gate, Mei wished that *he* would make like a ghost and disappear out of their lives. But then part of her felt guilty that it was she who had bought this curse upon her family. Second Aunty was right. It was her fault the graveyard came to be next door because Mei was born unlucky.

Mei knew that Ma tried hard not to talk

about the happy times as they all seemed to have happened before Mei came along. Did that mean all they had now were bad times?

Mei looked sneakily left and right, saw only the Headless Man and as he had no eyes to witness and no mouth to speak with, she flipped the sign that hung on Dr Heckyll’s gate, changing it from OPEN to CLOSED. Then she hurried off.

When Mei reached the crossing where the Lollypop Lady stood, ready to ferry the children across to the school, the Headless Man waved to Mei and Mei waved back. The Lollypop Lady looked at the nothingness Mei was signalling at and felt a cold chill, even though the weather was warm.

Ms Zenadoo, Mei’s teacher, greeted Mei warmly as she did every morning to each student. She liked to wear rainbow skirts, talk through puppets and always smelt faintly herbal. Her classroom was painted pink as it was the best colour to encourage creative thinking and hung with crystals to promote the opening of eager young minds.

‘Today we’re going to talk about what we did on the weekend, children.’

Jimmy Sweet went first.

‘I went to the Honeywood Community Fete and ate three hotdogs and then went on the Vomitron 2000 and hurled my guts. I looked at the farm animals and they stank. I looked at the cat show and that stank too. Then Dad bought me as many show bags as I could carry and we went home.’

‘That’s ... great,’ said Ms Zenadoo, encouragingly. ‘Now, Mei, your turn.’

Mei felt her face go very red and her throat completely dry as she stared at her classmates and they all stared back.

A lot of well, *interesting things* had happened to her over the past two days. But why did she feel it was safer to make something up? She could just say she went to the beach, or to the Honeywood Community Fete like Jimmy had, but she felt her mouth open and say:

‘My parents took me to an opera in Chinatown on Saturday night. Except it’s not a *normal* Chinese

Opera. It’s held out in the open for Hungry Ghost Festival and the first three rows are left empty. On *purpose*. If you try and take one of these seats you might unintentionally sit on someone because they’re reserved especially for ghosts.’

The class was completely silent.

They also did not have any questions.

‘That’s ... very interesting,’ said Ms Zenadoo and she added very gently. ‘It’s a very *imaginative* scary story.’

Mei sighed. She wished that her parents didn’t encourage her to always be truthful – this is what happened when she was! And she didn’t even mention she could see each and every ghostly being sitting in those three front rows!

The classroom door suddenly flew open and standing there was the strangest looking kid Mei had ever seen. He stood there with his arms straight out in front of him and a fixed smile on his unmoving face.



Five

His clothes were funny, his skin looked funny and he walked in the funniest fashion. If you could call it *walking*. He moved with little hops, his arms in front of him to keep balance.

Well, I guess there's no rule against hopping inside the classroom, Mei thought and shrugged, *only running.*

'This is our newest class member, Jiang,' said Ms Zenadoo. 'Please make him feel welcome.'

Oh good, Mei thought, *at least I'm not the only one who can see him. That's a good start.*

Everyone in the class could *definitely* see him, as all sets of eyes looked like they were about to bulge

out of their sockets.

Ms Zenadoo had found the strange boy peering through the window of her classroom this morning, and assumed he was a new student.

'What's your name?' she had asked.

The boy didn't reply, but as he turned to hop away, she noticed something stuck to his back. It was a torn piece of label from Dr Heckyll's jar of reanimation potion, but Ms Zenadoo didn't know that.

'*Jiang*,' she had read. 'Why, welcome to Honeywood Primary school!'

That is how Jiang became Jiang.

'Have a seat at any of the spare desks,' said Ms Zenadoo now.

Jiang hopped over to the empty desk next to Mei and sat down. There was a loud snap that sounded like cracking bones, but Jiang didn't seem to feel it. He turned his head to face Mei and gave her a bloodcurdling smile that made all the hairs on her body – from the long black hair on top of her head to the teeny ones down her back – stand up.



Mei looked at his odd round hat and funny silk robes, the string of beads around his neck and his black cloth shoes.

‘See to it that you get a school uniform, Jiang’ said Ms Zenadoo cheerily, ‘If you don’t mind, Mei, why don’t you partner with him and be his orientation buddy? Show him around at lunchtime?’

Mei shrunk down in her seat. *Oh no, as if the other kids didn’t think she was weird enough already!*

Jiang just kept smiling non-stop at her with his green fangs.

Ms Zenadoo had taught the class about respecting people of all cultures, religions and nationalities, and the class was made up of children from different backgrounds. Most of the kids at Honeywood Primary got along well with each other, but they tended to break up into groups based on common interests and similarities at lunchtime.

Everyone had a group except Mei and Jimmy Sweet.

Jimmy Sweet always sat by himself because none of the kids liked him, not even Mei. Jimmy was a

brag and a bully. She'd rather have no friends than be friends with him! Mei walked toward an empty table, where she planned to sit alone as usual. But not today.

Jiang was advancing, bouncing up and down, his arms outstretched toward her. Mei felt terrified that he was going to hug her. His mouth was open and he had such unusually sharp teeth. Was he going to try and kiss her too? Maybe intimate displays of affection were common where he came from, but Mei wasn't about to find out. She quickly seated herself and opened her tiffin lunchbox.

Jiang stopped immediately, sniffed the air, turned and sat down across her.

Mei always felt self-conscious about the smells of her hot lunch filling up the whole playground, as most of the other kids ate sandwiches, but today there was a smell of a more pressing nature.

There was no hiding the fact that Jiang smelt terrible. Mei couldn't quite describe it, it was something artificial and human at the same time. It smelt like the disgusting chemical wafts that came

from Dr Heckyll's morgue late at night.

Mei picked up her chopsticks and snagged a piece of baby corn, but between the staring and Jiang's putrid smell, she couldn't bring herself to eat. She put down the chopsticks and pushed her lunch across to Jiang.

'Help yourself.'

Jiang stared at the food with a look of delight on his face. He leaned in close with his mouth open.

Even the way he eats is funny, thought Mei.

Eating was one way to describe it. It was more like he *inhaled the food's essence*. When Mei looked down at her lunch, everything was still there – the rice, the stir-fried vegetables and the one dumpling – but everything had turned grey and wilted, as if the life has been sucked clean from it.

'If that means you're done, I'll show you where the toilets and the sick room are,' said Mei standing up. Jiang bounced up as well and gave her a pleased grin. Mei did not return the smile.

Oh, no. Jimmy Sweet was shuffling in their direction. The worst thing about Jimmy was that he

had the tendency to say anything that came to his little mind without thinking about it.

‘Dad says that people like that are not welcome here.’

‘What type of person would that be?’ replied Mei with disdain. ‘Your dad doesn’t know who Jiang is.’

Jiang stared at Jimmy with the same frozen smile on his face. Jimmy gulped, but continued talking.

‘Dad says that this place is already full and we don’t need more people coming here.’

‘Yeah, it’s full. Full of cane toads like you Jimmy, now rack off!’

The usually quiet Mei was getting red in the face and she seemed to grow twice in size. She was sick of Jimmy and his stupid dad being so constantly mean when nobody was ever mean to them.

Jiang was eyeing Jimmy off like he was some delicious morsel to be eaten so Jimmy got the hint and quickly shuffled back to where *he* came from, but not before he yelled:

‘My dad says Honeywood was a nice normal

place before your family came along.’

The words hit Mei’s heart badly. Tears stung her eyes and she pushed them away angrily with her knuckles.

‘Let’s go,’ Mei said, and roughly pulled Jiang’s arm along with her. She could hear Sunny Kim and Arthur De Castro whispering as they trudged past.

‘What a strange boy!’

‘I don’t think he’s a boy at all!’

‘He’s weird, just like Mei!’

Mei couldn’t be more disappointed that these two, who she really liked, were behaving just like Jimmy. She hurried past. Jiang could hardly hop fast enough to keep up.

It is said that time goes quickly when you’re having fun. They don’t talk about how painfully slow it is when you’re having the exact opposite. She sighed with relief when the final bell rang. It was almost Kung Pow Chicken Night! She had to make sure she finished all her chores so she could get ready to start taking orders and ringing up the cash register.

Dr Heckyll's wolfhounds lined themselves at the gate as they usually did, ready to commence their vicious barking. For once Mei was glad to see them, as it meant that she was close to home. Until she heard bouncing feet on loose pavement behind her.

Oh no! He'd followed her.



Six

The wolfhounds took one look at Jiang, let out bone chilling howls and raced back toward their Master's front door, tails between their legs.

Mei stared at Jiang. Jiang, of course, stared back at her.

'Do you expect me to say thanks? I don't need saving you know.'

Jiang said nothing. He hadn't uttered a single word all day.

Mei's stomach let out a huge rumble. She hadn't had lunch after all. She retrieved the snack box from her backpack and took out a glutinous rice ball. As she felt rude not to offer, Mei held one out to Jiang.

She regretted this instantly. Jiang let out a horrible groan and started hopping backwards, his hands covering his face.

‘Oh! I’m sorry! I just thought you might be hungry!’

Ms Zenadoo had taught them that people might get offended about something by accident, but only because it was different to what they’d grown up knowing. Mei didn’t know what to do with the rice balls so she threw them both over Dr Heckyll’s gate.

‘Are you okay?’

Jiang was standing completely still with his hands over his eyes.

Maybe he had had a bad experience with glutinous rice balls when he was younger. Maybe where he was from people were forced to eat rice balls as punishment.

‘I’m sorry!’

Jiang took his hands from his eyes and his now familiar grin came back. He put his arms in front of him and gave a hop forward.

‘I gotta go,’ Mei nervously and backed away. ‘I guess I’ll see you at school tomorrow?’

The huge front door of the Mega Morgue creaked open an inch to let the black cat out.

What is wrong with the younger generation these days? thought Dr Heckyll. They’d scared his dogs half to death and thrown rubbish over his gate, probably as a dare. His bloodshot eyes lit up though when he caught sight of the little missing jiangshi that he had been searching for all over his property.

Then he saw Mei walk briskly pass. The little jiangshi bounced off behind her.

Of course that’s who he’d follow. The girl was a magnet for trouble. Dr Heckyll decided he would bide his time. His plans were already coming along nicely.

One of the pink neon letters had stopped working in the restaurant sign, so it was currently called *The Augusta Moo*. The black cat was sitting on the front window sill as if she was waiting for Mei.

Mei hadn't told Ba what was going to happen tonight at the restaurant — she wanted it to be a surprise. She kept her smile to herself as she wiped the dust off the fake flowers and polished the belly of the Lucky Buddha by the cash register. It was almost Kung Pow Chicken time!

The clock on the wall struck six o'clock and Mei wrung her hands excitedly. The customers eager to have an early dinner would soon be streaming through the door. Any moment now. She was sure of it.

The whole place was quiet. Dead quiet. You could hear a ghost drop.

As the clock inched toward six-thirty, Mei was still hopeful. After all, most people ate their dinner around this time. It was still early. She shuffled the leaflets that showed the delicious specials and made sure they were in a neat pile.

Slowly the clock crept up to seven and then snuck on past. Perhaps everyone was just stuck in traffic jams. They'd be here soon. Hungrier than ever and wanting more than just Kung Pow

Chicken. They'd be shouting out menu items faster than her fingers could write. Noodles! Fried rice! Spicy chicken! Sichuan and Hunan! Fujian or Canton!

At eight o'clock, Mei quietly turned off the neon sign and *The Augusta Moo* flickered into darkness.

Nobody was coming for Kung Pow Chicken. Even if it was the best in the world. It was a stupid plan anyway. Mei put her face down on her arms and wept.

What Mei didn't know was that there was one person who would have liked to come for Kung Pow Chicken. Jimmy Sweet had found the menu in his letterbox on the way home from school and thought it might also give him a chance to talk to that girl from school who *actually* talked back to him. But his mean mum said no and tried to make him eat smashed avocado casserole instead.

What would happen to them? thought Mei. Ba needed treatment. There was something wrong with Ma that she was keeping a secret. They would have to sell the restaurant. They might end up homeless.

It felt like not a single person in the world cared ...

Mei turned to the sounds of footsteps.

Jiang hopped through the front door and straight in.

‘Oh! It’s you again!’

Mei looked up at the protective bagua nailed on the doorframe.

Strange. It was there to keep the monsters out, suckerfish ghouls and all. Maybe Jiang wasn’t quite a monster.

‘Did you bring home a friend?’ asked Ba, hobbling in from out the back.

‘I guess,’ replied Mei staring at Jiang, who hopped straight over to the aquarium where the sole lobster resided, more a pet than a main course these days as he was the most expensive item on a menu. Leroy was probably too old and tough to be edible now, anyway.

‘Wait there,’ said Ba Pang with a big kind smile on his face. ‘We must welcome your friend, properly.’

Ba shuffled back to the kitchen and the sound of

the gas cooktop and exhaust fan roared into life.

‘I guess someone is better than no one,’ sniffed Mei and steered Jiang away from the lobster who was starting to look a little worried.

Jiang’s stiff body cracked and buckled as he sat down at one of the tables and tucked his arms under the white tablecloth. Mei plopped herself opposite him, sighed and put her face in her hands.

Delicious smells were starting to come from the kitchen. The sizzling aroma of chicken and sliced vegetables crisping in peanut oil. The comforting scent of fluffy jasmine rice warming in the cooker. Although the sight in Ba Pang’s eyes was worsening every day, his powerful nose was now as strong as a fox and his tastebuds as good as the best chef in the world.

Ba sampled and balanced the flavours, adding a splash of soy sauce and a pinch of five spice powder. A hint of salt and a good slug of Shaoxing wine. Most importantly, the crowning touch was a chunk of Ba’s homemade fermented chili bean paste. Just the perfect amount of kick and spiciness. As the



wise proverb goes, those who cook with love will always prepare a meal that others will love to eat.

Ba came back out into the restaurant and placed the steaming dish in the middle of the table.

‘Ba ... you knew to make Kung Pow Chicken,’ said Mei in bewilderment. Her stomach rumbled.

‘Of course. I know it’s your favourite,’ replied Ba. ‘We must welcome your friend. It’s been a while since we’ve had a customer! Eat up!’

Mei stared at Jiang and Jiang stared back at Mei. She knew she had said she didn’t want him as a friend ... but it was nice to have someone around. Someone other than Ba or Ma when she was feeling as sad as she was right now. They weren’t that dissimilar. They were both weird and misfits that the other kids didn’t like. That made Mei smile.

Before she could even tell him to help himself to the meal, Jiang leaned in and sucked the very soul from the huge plate of Kung Pow Chicken.

It was like Jiang hadn’t eaten for the last hundred years. He grinned at Mei and then gave a huge burp that made all the paper lanterns swing.

She would like him better if he wasn't so disgusting.

Mei tip-toed into the kitchen with the plate of chicken and scraped it into the bin while Ba's back was turned. Seated back at the table, she wasn't sure what to say to Jiang, so she talked about school. Before she knew it, she was telling him all about her fears and worries, hopes and dreams.

Jiang just stared and smiled.

Ba came back out with two fried ice-creams topped with raspberry sauce. Jiang sniffed curiously at his, but did not touch it.

'I'll have yours if you don't want it!' Mei exclaimed.

She shovelled spoonfuls of the cold, coconutty treat into her mouth and talked about all her favourite books and movies and the books that were much better than their movies. It was as if having no one her age to talk to her whole life, it just came pouring out.

Jiang just stared and smiled.

The clock struck nine.

Where did the time go? Maybe time just flies when you're with a friend.

'I think it's time for you to go home!'

Mei dragged him by the back of his silk robes, deposited him out the front door and slammed it shut.

'Goodnight!'

Jiang stared through the restaurant window as Mei slipped out the back and he chuckled to himself. A bolt of lightning cracked through the sky and lit up his green-grey skin. His eyes glowed red.

Mei locked the back door of the restaurant and slipped across the alley to her house, the front of the house flickering from the television while Ma watched her favourite Chinese dramas and Ba listened along. Preoccupied with her thoughts, she almost ran headfirst into two frightful creatures loitering near the bins. One had the head of an ox and the other had the face of a horse, both dressed in armour and bright silks and holding sharp three-pronged weapons.