



# LION BOY

AND

A NOVEL

# DRUMMER GIRL



PAULINE LOH

“With deft pen strokes, Pauline has made lion dance as enticing and trendy as K-pop. The novel is a page-turner packed with all the right elements: the handsome lion dance boys with their screaming hordes of teenage fans, the budding romance of a lion boy and a drummer girl, and the pulsating action of lion dances and old feuds. I cannot wait to see all the eye candy in the movie version!”

— EMILY LIM,  
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR AND MEDIACORP’S  
SINGAPORE WOMAN AWARD HONOREE 2013

“*Lion Boy and Drummer Girl* truly captures the essence of being young and in love. With the backdrop of the rich culture of Singapore and fascinating history of lion dance, the author spins a compelling story of two teens in the glitzy world of the idol industry. The book is will have readers hooked from the first sentence to the last.”

— EVANGELIQUE POH, 20,  
AVID READER AND FICTION LOVER

“Pauline and I are critique partners, and we had heady days giggling over ‘bare torsos’ and ‘taut muscles’ as we appraised each other’s stories. *Lion Boy and Drummer Girl* is almost like my own book! I am totally rooting for Ricky and Ying Ying.”

— CATHERINE CARVELL, AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR  
OF THE DARCY MOON SERIES AND FORMER REGIONAL  
COORDINATOR FOR THE SOCIETY OF CHILDREN’S BOOK  
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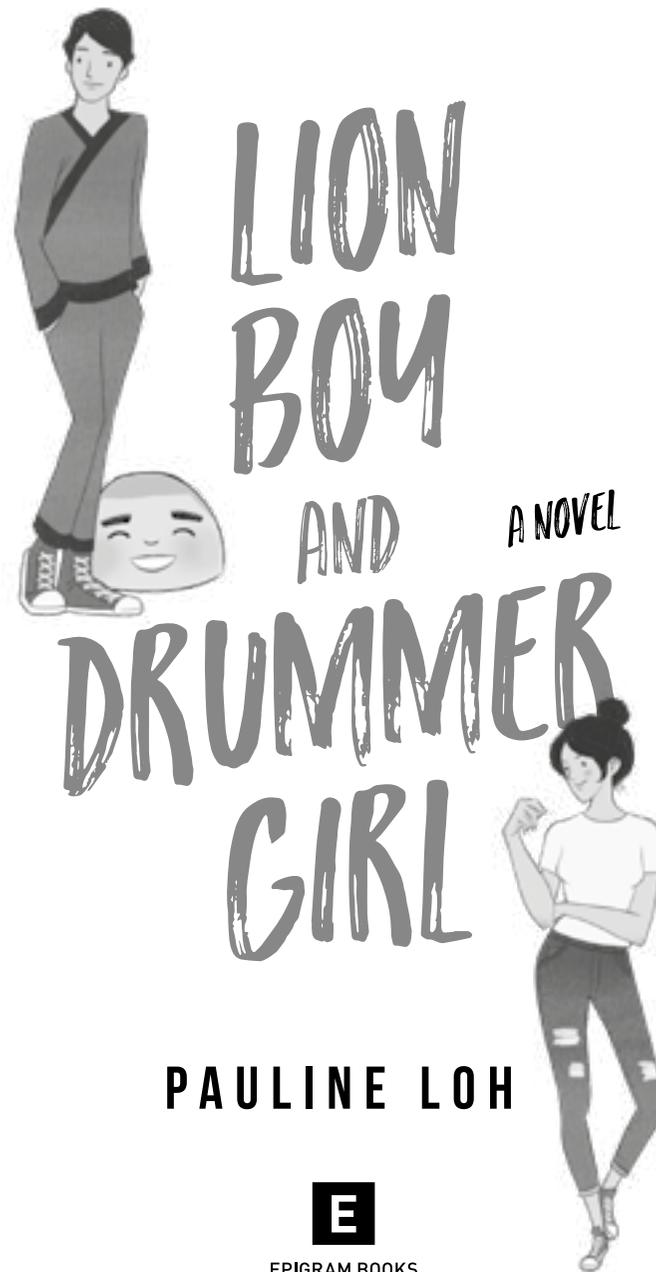
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**PAULINE LOH**



**EPIGRAM BOOKS**  
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To Shinhwa, whose brotherhood  
and loyalty inspired this story;  
To Eddie, the Best Husband in Town;  
To Alexis and Maxine, the pickiest  
readers for any YA author

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# CHAPTER I

## LION DANCE TAKES ASIA BY STORM

The two Southern Lions pranced and leapt, and the teenage girls, who made up most of the audience, danced along in synchrony. They wore bright orange outfits—the colour of the Lion Legends.

The music slowed. A hush, pulsated by muted drumbeats, descended as one lion froze with a tasselled foot raised. Its heavily decorated head swung slowly and suggestively in an arc; its half-lidded eyes surveyed the crowd while its painted mouth seemed to smile flirtatiously. It took its time to single out one audience member. The girls stood with fists pressed to their mouths or bosoms. Some girls screamed, “Pick me! PICK ME!”

The ornate beast appeared to have made its choice. It sidled up to one excitable female and began to wiggle its hips. The girl hid her flaming cheeks in her hands. Her friends squashed against her, trying to share her

limelight. Despite the audience having been forewarned not to do so, the girl scrambled onto the stage and flung her arms around the lion's neck. Burly security guys immediately moved in to pry her away. The lion capered off, unconcerned about the hyperventilating girl it had left behind.

As the street performance drew to a close, the accompanying bass drum quickened its beat, signalling the start of the event the fans had been eagerly anticipating. The cheers from the crowd grew deafening. The two lions waited until they had everybody's full attention. Then, with a smooth, graceful motion, they disrobed.

The costumes fell off to reveal four teenage boys—or rather, four demigods—dressed in orange satin pants and white tees that hugged their sweat-soaked bodies. Their chests were still heaving from the effort of their earlier dynamic performance; well-defined abdominal muscles stood out through their thin apparel.

The boys lapped up the applause. Their faces were impossibly perfect. Their complexions were flawless, their hair was immaculately coiffed, their eyes could melt granite, and their lips parted to reveal even rows of teeth that shone against their golden tans. Their bodies were works of art that had been crafted in the gym.

The huge LED screen above the lions blazed with the dancers' statistics. The first boy took a step forward and bowed gracefully. The screen showed:

### **Zeus, king of the gods**

Real Name: Lim Jung Hyuk  
 Birthday: 16 February  
 Age: 18  
 Height: 180 cm  
 Weight: 69 kg  
 Education: Six Distinctions at 'A' Levels  
 Talents: Dance, martial arts and studying  
 Debut: April 2012  
 Position: First lion head

"Zeussie!" a group of girls screamed.

The second boy stepped forward and waved. He was shorter than the rest, which he was very touchy about, but his attractive smiling eyes more than made up for it.

### **Prometheus, who defied the gods and brought fire to man**

Real Name: Lau Dong Wan  
 Birthday: 21 November  
 Age: 18  
 Height: 174 cm  
 Weight: 66 kg  
 Education: Six Distinctions at 'A' Levels  
 Talents: Bodybuilding, martial arts and accepting challenges  
 Debut: April 2012  
 Position: Second lion head

“Prome, Mercury!” a gaggle of girls sang.

Mercury and Prome were often mentioned together because they partnered as one lion. Mercury smiled and stepped forward. He was as tall as Zeus was, but much more powerfully built, and had a mischievous face.

### **Mercury, god of speed and flight**

Real Name: Tan Chung Jae  
 Birthday: 19 August  
 Age: 17  
 Height: 181 cm  
 Weight: 72 kg  
 Education: Four Points for ‘O’ Levels  
 Talents: Dancing, martial arts and clowning around  
 Debut: April 2012  
 Position: Second lion body

The last teenage boy was obviously the youngest of the quartet. His cheeks still showed hints of baby fat and his limbs had the gangly awkwardness of a growing youth. His face bore some resemblance to Zeus’, as he was Zeus’ younger brother. He waved shyly at the screaming crowd.

### **Apollo, the sun god**

Name: Lim An Dee  
 Birthday: 21 January  
 Age: 15  
 Height: 177 cm  
 Weight: 71 kg  
 Education: International Baccalaureate studies  
 Debut: April 2013  
 Talents: Basketball, football and dancing  
 Position: First lion body

“Apple!” the girls squealed. An Dee blushed and squirmed adorably. He had debuted as a young boy when his cheeks were so chubby and rosy that one reporter described him as being “apple-cheeked”. Although he had shot up in the past year and was struggling with a breaking voice, the nickname stuck.

The bass drum sounded a two-beat signal and the boys donned their costumes in unison. The street performance, which lasted an hour, had ended. But the girls were not disappointed. They were already booking Uber rides to take them to the location of the lion dancers’ next performance, where they would patiently wait for several hours before the boys made their appearance there.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE GIRL ON THE OUTSIDE

Ong Ying Ying stood to the side of the stage and eyed the audience cynically. She was only 18—a teenager, like many of the girls in the crowd. But, unlike them, her heart did not go pitter-patter in the presence of the lion dancers. This was because she always remembered the boys as preteens with scrawny chests, gangly limbs and crooked teeth when they had auditioned for her father, the owner of Lion Legends.

Zeus was older than she was by a few months. While most perceived him to be a bossy and charismatic leader, at Legends Hall he called Ying Ying “Jie”—elder sister. She was the daughter of his *shifu*—his lion dance master—and more experienced than he in all the ways of the Legends.

Prome was younger than she was. He had been so nervous during his audition that he had thrown up and Ying Ying had had to calm him down.

Mercury towered over her. His temper was notorious, but she could subdue him with a simple glare.

As a young boy, Apple had often hidden behind Ying Ying when Shifu threatened to punish him. He did not have an older sister and Zeus liked to terrorise him, so Ying Ying became his favourite person in the Legends.

After the boys had been accepted into Lion Legends, they had grown up alongside Ying Ying and she had had a hand in grooming them into the demigods they were today.

Ying Ying was pretty and slim. Her heart-shaped face and luminous complexion were passed down from her mother, a TV presenter and former actress. Her natural athletic grace was inherited from her father, a martial arts exponent and lion dance instructor.

Her best feature was her waterfall of straight black hair. At the moment, it was bunched carelessly into a ponytail. She wore jeans and a plain tee-shirt emblazoned with the Legends crest, which was her working uniform. She was an ‘A’-level student but worked in her father’s troupe during the weekends and school holidays—scheduling and managing performances, and balancing the accounts. She was her father’s right-hand person.

Her father, Ong Lung San, had already gone ahead to the second location to prepare the stage for the next performance. Ying Ying wondered if she should call to

check on him. She did not doubt her father’s abilities—he was the best in the business—but he had become as much of a star as his disciples, and fans often clustered around him and interfered with his work. Lung San was too warm and generous to rebuff them, so he sometimes got distracted, although he never compromised on his boys’ safety.

The LED screen was now showing a pre-recorded segment from *Leopop News*, a lifestyle news programme that had been launched in the last year in response to Asia’s lion dance craze. Leopop was a mashup of the words “Leo”, for lion, and “popular”, and the buzzword topped Internet searches every day.

## CHAPTER 3 THE IDOL MAKER

The guests on this particular episode of *Leopop News*, “Pioneers of Leopop”, were men from the Lion Dance Council. Seated right in the middle of them was Ying Ying’s dad, Lung San.

Lung San was 55 years old but looked 20 years younger because of his lithe and toned body. Ying Ying could not help but admire how handsome her dad was in his satin Chinese jacket with frog buttons and his figure-hugging ripped jeans, a single drop earring tangled in his tousled, longish hair. His colleagues, in contrast, were grumpy conservative men with potbellies. Yet they deferred to and respected him because of his consummate martial arts skills and, more important, his dedication to the art of lion dance.

The *Leopop News* anchorwoman, Jessica Yeo, was a pretty lady in her twenties. She gushed, “Lung Shifu, everyone says you made lion dance what it is today. Lion

dance programmes and news are featured during every television prime time, and lion dancers have become pop icons. In fact, your nickname is ‘Idol maker’. Can you tell me how you created this regional sensation?”

Lung San drawled softly, “The lion is a guardian creature. Time and again in China’s history, when the Chinese were under spiritual or physical attack from neighbouring countries, the lion gave them strength and hope.”

Ying Ying chuckled when she saw the anchorwoman’s eyes glazing over with boredom. Jessica scrambled to divert Lung San from his history lesson. This was not what viewers watched *Leopop News* for. “Yes, yes, but Lung Shifu, back to Zeus and the boys. I’m such a fan! I understand you hold stiff auditions that don’t just test the candidates’ athletic abilities but also take into account their looks and star potential. How did you know that idols were what it would take to revive lion dance?”

Lung San explained, “Around a decade ago, lion dance had become shrouded in superstition and underworld connections—associations were doing dismally, and recruitment had dropped to an all-time low. I thought, perhaps we need attractive role models who will resonate with the youth. Lion dance is a visual art, but the solution was not in buying more elaborate or expensive lion costumes. What was under the costumes also needed to look good.”

“Yes, I heard that your number-one criterion for those who audition is ‘no pimples’,” Jessica said. Lung San leant forward and scrutinised her face. The camera zoomed in on her peerless complexion. Ying Ying was amused to see the lady getting flustered by Dad’s proximity to her.

“Hmm, I believe Mercury’s complexion is better than yours,” he teased disarmingly. The audience erupted in laughter while Jessica looked alarmed and checked herself surreptitiously in the nearest reflective surface.

Lung San continued, “Jung Hyuk met all my standards. But my daughter Ying Ying said that his name was too difficult to remember, so we decided to rename him after a Greek god.”

Jessica put a manicured finger to her bright red lips. “Zeus? Zeus’ birth name is Jung Hyuk?”

Lung San scratched his head ruefully, looking absurdly youthful as he did so. “Oh dear, Ying Ying keeps telling me to refer to the boys by their stage names, but I always forget. Wait a minute—she prefers to be called Camellia.”

Ying Ying squeaked with frustration. How many times had she reminded him to refer to her by her English name in public?

He went on, “I told my boys, ‘When you are in costume, you must feel, think and move like the guardian of the spirit portal and protector of the people. Out of costume, be your natural selves—soft,

vulnerable and happy. Bring joy to your fans and help them to forget their troubles.’ I don’t know how it happened, but these young men became the dream boyfriends of every teenage girl.”

Jessica turned to one of the senior council members. “Low Shifu,” she greeted prettily.

“Call me Low Ge,” he invited in a voice that had been made hoarse from a lifetime of smoking.

“Yes...” Jessica smiled fakely. The paunchy senior did not have the same agreeable effect on her as the handsome Lung San did. “Low Ge, did you agree with Lung San’s methods?”

“At first,” he said, “it all seemed quite heretical. We were worried about how much tradition he was going to break. But we were all struggling with the same issues of bad public opinion. Lung has always been a trustworthy brother of the council; we knew how this brother had devoted his life to lion dance. Then Lung’s boys became famous and soon those who could not make it past Lung’s auditions were begging for entry into our troupes. Lung set the standard that we felt we had to match up to.”

The camera panned back to Lung San. He said, “All the kids are into social media. I don’t understand it, but my boys do. Practice is 90 per cent, but the remaining effort must be spent on getting to know our audience. Lion dance never had fans before; our audience used to just be passers-by. The first few fans began talking

about lion dance on social media, and the craze soon went viral.”

He continued, “Before Apollo was old enough to audition, he had been spending all his time practising in front of the mirror. But I soon realised that recruits should not neglect their studies while doing well in lion dance. So I made it a requirement that candidates for my troupe had to be straight-A students. Parents started investing in expensive tuition so that their sons could get good enough grades in school to qualify to audition. It was madness. Lion Legends has groomed a batch of well-rounded trainees. Many of them have gone on to accept handsome contracts with other local and even overseas troupes. Some have even received scholarships to study at top tertiary institutions.”

He added, “I couldn’t have done it without my daughter—she was the one who saw the pretty factor in the boys. I guess it takes a teenage girl to recognise a heartthrob.”

Jessica cut in with a diamond-bright smile, “Yes, she sounds so interesting but unfortunately, we are running out of time. Do you have any last words for our viewers? Tell us about your latest star recruit, perhaps?”

“Ahh...” Lung San smiled. “My American import. You’ll have to wait, just like everyone else, to meet him personally when he arrives in Singapore and makes his debut next month.”

## CHAPTER 4 BEAUTIFUL BOYS

With a start, Ying Ying realised that she had lingered too long and needed to hurry to the next location. When she arrived, she was amused to see Dad in his offended-artist mood. He was lecturing Prome and Mercury, who stood at attention in front of him, looking ashamed. The performance was about to start, but Dad did not look like he was finished with his tirade.

Ying Ying started a soothing, soft one-beat rhythm on the big bass drum. Its tone was so low that it was merely a throb on the outskirts of the hearing of those nearby. Dad began to calm down visibly. He checked his watch and snapped back into his *shifu* role.

“Costumes on!” he ordered.

Today’s performance was based on Governor Tan He’s military strategy against General Fan Yan, set during the North and South Dynasties circa AD 450. Legend has it that Fan Yan’s army rode into battles

on elephants. Tan He was worried about the mighty elephants’ impact on his troops’ morale. His cavalry, mounted on horses, was no match for the beasts. Then he hit on a brilliant strategy. He ordered his soldiers to dress up as lions to confuse and frighten the elephants.

The troupe was well versed in the rich history that formed the backdrop of this story, but the crowd of young girls and media hounds could not have cared less about that. All they saw were Zeus, Prome, Mercury and Apple. The boys were masked, but the girls recognised them immediately. A richly brocaded elephant (Zeus and Apple) stomped into the arena. It tossed its fearsome head and waved its mirrored tusks menacingly. Then, the jaunty lion (Prome and Mercury) strutted onstage. It took time from the upcoming battle to bat its eyelashes at some schoolgirls who were straining against the cordon and screaming in delight.

The lion and the elephant posed dramatically and circled each other warily. The beats from the accompanying drums and cymbals worked the crowd into a frenzy. A storm of flashbulbs went off. Then the two beasts engaged in a long and furious battle in a show of kicks, balancing and rolls.

Finally, with a thrust of its head in one direction and a karate kick in another, the lion sent the elephant cartwheeling to the floor. The elephant lay on its back, sadly and comically kicking its legs. The audience thought the performance was impeccable,

and responded with thunderous applause and deafening screams.

Well, they actually thought that Zeus, Prome, Mercury and Apple were flawless; the rest of the play could have been a disaster and they would still have cheered wholeheartedly. At one point, the lion had tripped over the elephant's hind leg, but the audience thought it was a choreographed move and laughed. However, Ying Ying saw Dad tense up. A fumble like this could easily have resulted in an injury. She knew he would be furious at the upcoming Lions Advance.

## CHAPTER 5 THE LION FAMILY

After the performance, the costumes and musical instruments were carefully loaded into the truck and transported back to Lion Legends' training hall. Away from the spotlight, Ying Ying noticed that Prome was limping.

Lung San came into the hall and his crew of dancers and musicians snapped to attention. Lung San barked, "As you know, we will have the all-important christening ceremony for the Green Lion in a few days' time—the lion we have scrimped and saved for. But at the rate you are going, I think I will have to sell it away! We've put in all this hard work, but you lack one critical thing. Tell me what it is!"

Visibly quaking, Apple came forward. "I knocked into Prome Ge during the show. I'm sorry."

The lead drummer, Ares, was 20 years old and slightly more mature than the rest. "No, it was my

fault. My drumming was too fast and it confused the elephant. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't in my proper position either," Prome admitted. "We need to be more coordinated."

Lung San snorted. "Coordination is all very well for fighter pilots and brain surgeons. But in lion dance, that's not enough! When a lion lifts his front foot, the whole troupe must shift their weight. When a lion gets an itch, everyone must scratch! You don't need coordination—you need to mind meld. And we are going to go away and learn how."

"Lions Advance!" the boys yelled in unison. They whooped.

Lions Advance was an intensive three-day training camp that was usually held at the training hall of a lion dance troupe in Johor. Although the programme would be filled with backbreaking practice, the boys loved it because they would get to compete, show off, play games and stay up late.

Lung San motioned for his disciples to calm down. "Yes, yes. Immediately after I collect our newest member, we will drive to Layang Layang and you'd better be prepared for lots of hard work, cuts and bruises!"

The boys grinned. They were at the age when injuries were medals.

## CHAPTER 6 THE NEW LION

The next morning, Ying Ying headed to the airport to collect their latest recruit. Since she wasn't one of Lion Legends' faces, she could leave the house in a plain tee-shirt and jeans, and without makeup. She scraped her hair back into a messy ponytail and slid in her favourite hairpin. In the taxi, she flipped through the recruit's portfolio.

Name:	Ricky Kang Min Wu
Birthday:	July 28
Age:	18
Height:	174 cm
Weight:	65 kg
Education:	High School Diploma (Distinction)
Father:	Owner and CEO of Golden Fishery Pte Ltd, Hong Kong
Mother:	Homemaker; Chairperson of

- Tsim Sha Tsui Rotary Club  
(Hong Kong); President of Women's  
Circle (YWCA, Los Angeles)
- Talents: B-boy, hip-hop, fashion and  
stand-up comedy
- Self-portrait: Warm, engaging and lucky person  
with a sharp sense of fashion

*So, he comes from a rich family, she thought. Dad must have paid a hefty sum for this recruit.*

Born in Hong Kong, Ricky had studied in the USA. He had training in wushu, *kong shou dao* and other martial arts. But it seemed that his favourite activity was breakdancing, and he had taken part in several street competitions. He started doing lion dance not long ago, performing as a big head doll and lion head while he was in LA. She didn't know why Dad was so interested in him. Dad was not one for foreign talent, and had always believed that local boys would rise to the occasion if you had faith in them.

*Not all the Legends will welcome this newbie, Ying Ying grimaced. For months, Apple had been begging Shifu to promote him to lion head, but now that coveted position would go to an outsider.*

Ricky's arrival was meant to be low-key. It would give Lung San time to orientate him before his official debut the month after the Green Lion christening ceremony. But Ying Ying was astonished when she

saw a crowd of about 50 people at the airport. Jessica and her *Leopop News* camera crew were there. She recognised a magazine writer. The rest were female fans in their teens. *How had they found out about Ricky Kang?*

With the finely honed senses of a manager, she inserted herself into the group and eavesdropped.

"I saw Ricky at last year's Golden Horse performance in Hong Kong Theatre and fell in love with him *straw-a-ightaway*. Do you follow him on Instagram?" a girl with a heavy Cantonese accent asked her friend.

They had to be expatriates from Hong Kong and China, Ying Ying realised. Maybe she would not have to work so hard to make him popular. *I hope he's worth the money Dad paid for him*, she thought sourly.

The girls suddenly started screaming. Ying Ying craned her neck and caught a glimpse of a well-sculpted young god, dressed in a white tee and skinny jeans, strutting out of the baggage claim area. Calvin Klein sunglasses sat atop a Wolf cap that was set jauntily on attractive bangs. A leather designer bag hung casually from one shoulder, and in his other hand was a boxy steel case. He flashed a grin at the crowd and Ying Ying noted his flawless white teeth.

*I'd better watch that Prome and Mercury don't maul this pretty boy*, she thought, acknowledging that the looks of this foreign talent would cast that of her protégés into the shade.

Flashbulbs went off and the newswoman Jessica swung into action. She wiggled her way through the crowd till she was next to Ricky. Her crew followed. Ying Ying saw her eyes widen appreciatively at Ricky's gorgeous looks.

Ricky spotted the camera and smiled toothily at Jessica. He accepted a hug from her. Ying Ying suppressed a flash of annoyance and...something else, but she wasn't sure what.

Jessica burred, "Ricky! I'm Jessica from *Leopop News*. Wow, you're really eye candy—a candy lion! Why have you chosen Singapore as your new home?"

"Hi everybodyyy!" He waved at the camera. "I'm Ricky Kang. Coming to Singapore, the home of the Lion Wave, is a dream come true for me. It's an honour to be recruited by Lung San Shifu! I intend to stay for a long, long time. Friends?" He smiled winningly and flashed a peace sign with a beringed hand.

Ying Ying was impressed by his public relations smarts. In his short greeting, he had managed to promote his name and new troupe, and projected an image of himself as being both humble and enthusiastic.

Jessica asked a few more questions and wrapped up the quick interview. Ying Ying had to muscle her way into the human knot that was forming quickly around Ricky. She and Ricky were almost the same height. He was not very tall, but his perfectly proportioned body made him appear so.

"Excuse me, Ricky. I'm Camellia, your escort from Lion Legends. Shall we get you back to the hall so you can rest and freshen up?"

As she was speaking, Ricky's jaw had dropped open slowly. He turned his chocolate brown eyes towards her, and his boyish smirk became a warm smile. Ying Ying suddenly became very conscious of her bare face and simple tee. She could tell that he was admiring her from head to toe.

"Wow, you're *pre-e-tty!*" he said.

Ying Ying's heart skipped a beat. *My goodness, he's a smooth operator.* She gave herself a mental shake—*it's just PR talk! Don't take it seriously.*

## CHAPTER 7

### A DEN OF LIONS

In the taxi, Ying Ying sat in the front passenger seat to make room for Ricky, his luggage and steel case in the back. Ricky leant forward, his arms resting on her chair, and continued to bombard her with his charm and inquisitive questions until the taxi driver had to sternly remind him to put on his seatbelt.

Ying Ying's heart had, by then, calmed down. She reminded herself that she was immune to flower boys after having worked with Zeus and the gang. *Beneath the sizzling attractiveness is just another human being, just as petty, competitive and calculative as everyone else.*

When they arrived at Legends Hall, Ying Ying's first thought was to usher Ricky straight to Dad's office, but she saw him pause to take in the architecture. Ying Ying had grown up in the hall and had never given it a second glance, except perhaps during spring-cleaning days. She was suddenly conscious of how dilapidated it was.

"Legends Hall looks just like my home! So, this is why my dad designed our house like that—to look like his hall in Singapore!" Ricky said with surprise.

Legends Hall had originally been a family villa. Lung San's *shifu* had bought and expanded it over the years according to the troupe's needs. It had become a hodgepodge of old and new structures.

The simple metal gate was flanked by twin stone lion sculptures. Ricky stared at them with admiration. He started reciting in Chinese:

The heads are carved of wood,  
The tails are woven with thread.  
Pupils are flecked with gold  
And teeth capped with silver.  
They wave fur costumes  
And flap their ears  
As if from across the drifting sands  
Ten thousand miles away.\*

Ying Ying looked at him in surprise. Ricky's expression was wistful, as if he longed for the glory days of the 6th century BC, when the first lion dancers had travelled the Silk Road to China to be presented before the emperor.

"You sound... Chinese," Ying Ying said.

"I am Chinese," Ricky responded, puzzled.

"What I meant was, you look so westernised, but you

just recited that in perfect Mandarin.”

“That’s my dad’s influence. My Chinese roots and Western upbringing are the best parts of me...like how this place evolved to become the capital of the lion wave.” Ricky gestured at Legends Hall with real appreciation.

Ying Ying looked at her hall with fresh eyes as she led Ricky through a small porch, beyond the stone lions, that was occupied by the troupe lorry. The lobby was actually the living room of the villa, and a door led from it directly into a quaint open-air indoor courtyard that was the Legends’ main training area.

Farther inside the villa, one bedroom had been converted into an office that Lung San and Ying Ying shared, and another into a reflection room that was guarded by a smaller pair of twin lions. Ricky paused beside them. “This room must be special,” he guessed.

The kitchen and dining area had been combined into a spacious and airy room where the boys had their meals at long wooden tables. Tacked onto the outer walls of the small villa were newer buildings housing gyms, dance studios, sound studios and conference rooms. After Ying Ying had given Ricky the tour, they went into the office.

“Ricky, my boy!” Lung San came forward and hugged Ricky. Ying Ying was surprised. Her father seldom hugged his disciples. “Did you know that your father and I trained under the same *shifu*? How did you get to be so much better-looking than your father?”

“I take after my mum,” Ricky grinned.

Lung San ushered Ricky to the sofa and asked him about his parents and his home in Hong Kong. Then the older man eagerly started telling him about his plans for Ricky’s role in Lion Legends.

“I’m glad you arrived before our Lions Advance. You’ll get to bond with the crew before your debut. After you return from the advance, Ying Ying—you must call her Camellia—has some press conferences and photo shoots lined up for you. You will be famous! And then...”

“Why must I call her Camellia?” Ricky cut in.

“Eh?” Lung San said. He was not used to being interrupted by his disciples.

“How come you call her Ying Ying, but I have to call her Camellia?”

“Because I am her father, and your *shifu*, so you will do as I say!”

Ricky nodded respectfully, but Ying Ying noticed that he did not look intimidated.

Lung San continued, “By the time she is done promoting you, you should be all settled in. Then I will begin training you for the role of lion head. I watched the clip your father sent me. You are not fantastic, but you hadn’t met Lung Shifu then.”

Ricky interrupted again. “Thanks for your compliments, Shifu. I am really flattered, but you know I perform best as the big head doll. I feel I have not fully

explored all the potential of the doll.” He lounged on the sofa and smiled as he spoke.

Lung San sputtered. “Big head doll? They are calefare, bit actors inserted into performances to get a few laughs.”

In a hall full of testosterone, Ying Ying was used to playing mediator. “Ricky, you need to speak to your elders with more respect. Please stand at attention when Shifu is teaching.”

Ricky saw Ying Ying’s stern look and stood up straight.

Lung San calmed down. “Zeus, our first lion head, is starting university soon and will be spending less time here. You need to take over his role. You are small and agile, and will partner well with Apple.”

Ying Ying felt a stab of guilt when she thought of her little brother’s disappointment. A fresh wave of resentment against the usurping Ricky rose in her heart.

Her dad was explaining as patiently as he could, “Don’t you know that lion heads are at the top of the hierarchy in a troupe? Skilled lion heads are sought after by all troupes, not just in Singapore, but overseas.”

“But working as a doll is stated in my contract,” Ricky spread his hands and shrugged as if to say, *So there!*

## CHAPTER 8 LIONS ADVANCE

Lung San and Ricky’s discussion had reached a stalemate. Lung San blustered and fumed but Ricky remained polite...and stubborn. But the members of the troupe had started arriving with their bags and gear, and Lung San would have to continue his talk with Ricky later. It was time to set off for the Lions Advance.

The mood became merry as the boys, Lung San and Ying Ying all piled into the bus to travel to Johor. The icebreaker games started in the bus. Members were partnered randomly and each pair had to work together to fulfil missions. Ricky and Apple were paired; Apple was younger than Ricky by three years, but he was so transparently hostile to his partner that Ying Ying felt embarrassed by his childish behaviour. Because Apple refused to cooperate with Ricky, the pair came in last in the game.

They were slapped with a mortifying forfeit—to

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\* From Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road: China and the Karakorum Highway, A Travel Companion* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 148.



## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

**Pauline Loh** is an award-winning writer with 30 years of writing experience. She has published 12 adult non-fiction books, three youth books and seven children's storybooks.

She is a winner of the First Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative 2009 and first runner-up for the Scholastic Asian Book Award 2012. Her books have been shortlisted for the Samsung KidsTime Author's Award 2015 and the Singapore Book Awards 2016.

She is also director of a non-profit organisation called Women Empowered for Work and Mothering (WEWAM), and a Singapore Memory Project (SMP) volunteer. She mentors book authors; conducts assembly talks and author visits in schools and is a Ministry of Education registered trainer.

She graduated from Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Raffles Junior College and the National University of Singapore, and has formerly worked in journalism, magazines and corporate communications. She is currently a full-time author and book editor. Pauline is happily married with three children.



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“With deft pen strokes, Pauline has made lion dance as enticing and trendy as K-pop.

I cannot wait to see all the eye candy  
in the movie version!”

— EMILY LIM,

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR & MEDIACORP'S  
SINGAPORE WOMAN AWARD HONOREE 2013



Lion dancers are the new sensations in Asia, and none are as charming or handsome as US import Ricky Ang. But while the rest of the Leopop boys aspire to be the lion head, Ricky would rather goof around as the big head doll.

Ironically, drummer girl Ong Ying Ying is the biggest cynic of this Leopop wave. “Don’t fall for a lion dancer!” her mother had always warned her. “He will break your heart.”



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