BAMBOO PEOPLE

a novel

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PART ONE

CHIKO

1

Teachers wanted. Applicants must take examination in person. Salaries start at—

"Chiko, come inside!" Mother calls through the screen door, her voice low and urgent.

On the road behind our house, horns toot, sirens blare, and bicycle rickshaws crowd the streets. A high cement wall and a barrier of bamboo muffle the noise, making our garden seem as private as a monastery. But it isn't. I could be spotted from the houses nearby, and spies are everywhere. They would betray even an old neighbor for extra ration cards.

I scan the rest of the announcement quickly, my heart racing.

“Chiko! *Now!*” Mother startles the flock of green parakeets perched on the birdbath, and they fly away.

I fold the newspaper around *A Tale of Two Cities* and head for the house. I want to tell Mother about the call for teachers in the paper, but it seems like she’s getting more anxious by the day. So am I, even though I wish I didn’t have to admit that. I’m tired of hiding, of worrying, and worst of all, of remembering again and again the day the soldiers came for Father. Remembering how I’ve failed him.

“You shouldn’t be reading out there,” Mother tells me, peering out through the screen after latching the door behind me.

I take a deep breath and push my glasses back. It’s now or never. “No harm in reading the government newspaper. There’s a notice—”

But she’s not listening. “We’ll talk about that later, Chiko. How could you take one of your father’s books outside? Do you want to end up in prison, too?”

She’s right—I shouldn’t have brought the book out there. The government gets suspicious when a Burmese boy reads English books. But I don’t answer her questions. What can I say? That it already feels like I’m in prison? I take the novel out of the newspaper. The worn cloth cover is still warm from the sunshine. “Read widely,

Chiko," Father used to say. "Great doctors must understand human nature in order to heal."

"Hide it right now, Chiko," Mother says sharply. "Wait. Let me draw the blinds."

The dim room grows even darker. I reach behind the large painting of a white elephant, and we hear the familiar click. The painting swings open silently, like a well-oiled door. Hidden behind it is the cabinet Father built to conceal his battered black medical bag, books, and papers.

The books are in the same order as he left them, and I slip *A Tale of Two Cities* into place. There are a dozen medical and college textbooks, but we also own the complete works of Shakespeare, a book about Buddha's teachings, the Christian Holy Bible, a few slim volumes of British poetry, an illustrated Oxford dictionary, some Burmese books (like the Jakata tales and verses by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and Tin Moe), novels by Indian and Russian writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Arabian Nights*, and a set of books by Charles Dickens. These are our family treasures—faded, tattered, and well read.

I'm one of the few boys in town who can read and write in Burmese and English. It's only because of Father. Schools around here close down so often it's hard to learn, but I studied at home.

Father's favorite books explain the secrets and

mysteries of the human body, from bones to blood to cells to nerves. I always loved stories the best—books about heroes and quests and adventures, books where everything turns out fine in the end. I tried to pretend to be interested in science, but Father wasn't fooled; he used the novels as prizes after we studied science.

It's no use remembering the good times we had. I think I miss the sound of him the most. His voice—reading, talking, or laughing—steadied the house like a heartbeat. These days I only hear the conversation of Mother and her friends. If this keeps up, my own voice might reverse itself and start sounding high and sweet again.

I remember the last time I heard Father speak—almost four months ago. "Take care of your mother, Chiko!" he shouted as six or seven army officers shoved him into a van.

"I will, Father!" I answered, hoping he heard.

But have I kept that promise? No! All I've done is hide, and that's not good enough with our money running out. And it's terrible to go without news of him. The same thought keeps both Mother and me awake at night, even though we never say it to each other. *Is he alive?*

2

"We can talk after you eat lunch, Chiko," Mother urges, pushing a chair to the table. "It's getting late. Daw Widow and Lei will be coming for tea. Daw Widow says she has some something important to tell us."

Daw Widow is our next-door neighbor. She's offered a reward for any information about Father's arrest. It's impossible to get real news, but rumors float through the streets. Bicycle rickshaw passengers whisper to one another, forgetting that drivers with sharp ears pedal the cycles.

That's how Daw Widow discovered why Father was arrested. Someone had spotted him when he crept out from our house at night to treat a patient—an "enemy of the state," a leader of the freedom and democracy movement. They'd charged Father as a traitor to the government for providing money and information along with medical care. Even though we don't know where he's imprisoned, or even if he's still alive, we have to send money to the government every month to pay for his food.

Mother sets a covered plate before me. "Daw Widow has been scolding me about how skinny you're getting," she says. "Before I know it, she'll be checking my pantry and giving me cooking lessons again."

The familiar dimple in Mother's left cheek deepens. Father used to say that he tumbled into it when he first saw her and never climbed out. But lately a pattern of creases and wrinkles is starting to hide it. "She must like your cooking, Mother," I say. "She always eats seconds when she's here, and sometimes thirds, if there's enough."

Still smiling, Mother hurries to the kitchen to slice me a lime. I lift the cover off the plate and see *ngapi*, the dried and fermented shrimp paste we eat with every meal; rice; and a few chunks of chicken floating in a pale, weak curry. I've been trying to get Mother to eat more by having her eat first. She's even thinner than I am, but she hides it under the loose folds of her sarong. I hunt and count pieces of chicken—she hasn't taken any meat at all. I'm going

to have to change my strategy and eat before she does so I can leave her most of the meat.

Mother returns with three juicy, green wedges, so I squeeze lime over my food and start eating. I want to finish before our guests arrive because I've started feeling uncomfortable eating in front of Lei. With those dark eyes watching me, I feel like a tiger, tearing and chewing away at my dinner—a big cat predator in square-rimmed glasses.

After I'm done, Mother clears the table and brings out her mending. The look on her face tells me she's hoping I won't bring up the newspaper announcement. Father's voice in my mind reminds me to study, so I sigh, open the cabinet again, and take out a calculus book.

It's impossible to concentrate today. After pretending for a while, I glance at Mother's face. Time's running out—the interview for teachers is at four o'clock. I'll have to leave soon if I want to make it. Besides, Daw Widow will be here shortly, and she'll probably put up an even bigger fight than Mother to stop me.

Now or never, Chiko, I tell myself, taking off my glasses and rubbing my eyes. "Mother."

The needle keeps going, but she's frowning.

"Mother." I try again.

She looks up. "All right, Chiko. What was in the paper?"

"The government wants to hire teachers. They're giving an exam this afternoon. I want to take it."

"And you believe them?"

"It *might* be true. And if I pass the test, they'll hire me. The salary's small, but—"

Mother flings aside her sewing and stands up. "You are *not* leaving this home, Chiko. Young men are disappearing every day. Just last week We-Min's son was at the market when soldiers dragged him away to join the army. And *his* father's still at home."

She's right. It could be dangerous for me out there. And the notice in the paper could be a lie. But I can't live like this any longer, cowering inside this house while Mother gets thinner and our money runs out. I made a promise; I have to try to keep it.

"Times are changing," I tell her. "Daw Widow told us about the rumors that some of the prisoners might be set free. This job—if it's real—might pay enough for us to keep taking care of Father until he's released."

Mother has already sold her jewelry and our extra clothes. The toaster, the fan, the radio, and even most of the pots and pans are gone. Last month she even sold some of Father's medical equipment, knowing that he'd want us to eat. All we have left are our family treasures, hidden in that cabinet behind the white elephant.

"We're going to have to sell the books," I say, even though I know what Mother's reaction will be.

"No! Your father brought those back from England before we were married. Selling them is like . . ."

It's my turn to stand up. "Like what, Mother? Like admitting that Father might not come back? Well, what if he doesn't? Our money's gone!"

"Your father *will* come back, young man!" She steadies her voice. "He's alive; I can feel his heart beating inside mine."

I press my lips together to keep more disrespectful words from pouring out. Superstitions and old wives' tales won't help Father survive; we've heard stories about how they treat "enemies of the state."

"I know it's hard for you to hide like this, my son," Mother continues. "Won't you change your mind and join the temple?"

The suggestion is tempting, and she knows it. Soldiers don't harass monks, and boys my age often serve the temple for a year or two. But I can't become a monk, not with Father's last words to take care of Mother ringing in my ears, mind, and heart. Not with the memory of me doing nothing while they dragged him away.

"No, Mother. The temple won't pay me a salary."

"I can find sewing work here and there," says Mother. "And you'd be safe, Chiko."

That word triggers something inside me. "Safe!" I shoot it at her like a bullet, and she flinches. "Maybe I'm not supposed to be safe. We're behind in the rent and running out of food. And what am I doing about it?"

Mother holds up one hand, palm facing me. "Stop!"

she says, and her voice is stern. “They’ve taken my husband. I don’t intend to hand over my son.”

Somebody raps on the door, and we both jump.

“Who is it?” Mother calls, her voice trembling.

The day the soldiers arrested Father, the three of us were arguing about my going away. Father wanted me to apply to colleges in England. He still has friends there, friends who could help get me into university. Mother, of course, didn’t want me to go, but she hates that her last words to Father were angry ones.

I take her hand. If the army *is* here to take me, I don’t want our final moments to bring any more crying in the night. “Speak up!” I call, even though my stomach is clenched like a fist. “Who’s there?”

The hinges of the front door creak, and a rusty voice calls out, “Wei-Lin! I heard that boy of yours shouting from my kitchen. *And* I saw him reading a book. *Outside*.”

It’s only Daw Widow. Mother lets go of my hand. Quickly I tuck my shirt into my trousers and push up my glasses. Lei enters the house behind her mother, looking like an orchid in her slim green sarong. Her purple silk blouse seems to carry the sunlight into our house.

Daw Widow stays in front of her, blocking my

view, hands on her hips. "What's the fight about this time?"

Mother manages a smile. "The boy wants to leave, Ah-Ma." My mother is always proper, never forgetting to address Daw Widow as her older sister. "He wants to prove something, I think. That he can be as brave as Joon was—is, I mean."

We're quiet, pretending not to notice her slip of the tongue. Then Daw Widow advances, one finger jabbing the air in front of my face. "So you want to go to college, do you? Let me tell you something—you don't learn to be a doctor from books," she says. She pokes the calculus book I'm using as a shield. "Your father didn't, either. I never thought much of his fancy foreign education, anyway. The knowledge they stuffed into his head from these books didn't make him the finest doctor in Burma. He was a healer even before he went away. The heavens gave him a special gift."

I always feel like groaning when Mother or Daw Widow brings up this old village belief. Father's medical skills a gift from heaven? Hah! I've seen his detailed, neat lecture notes; reviewed his stellar examination records; watched him do research for hours. Hard work and a clever mind—those are the keys to the medical profession, not some magical healing touch. Besides, why does everyone assume I want to be a doctor, anyway? I don't

want to deal with blood and broken bones. Lei might be the only one who knows my distaste for medicine, and only because I confessed it to her once when we were alone.

"No use getting that know-it-all look on your face," Daw Widow scolds, her sharp eyes studying my expression. "Your father had a gift, I tell you. There was something in his face that made people feel better *before* he gave them any of those Western medicines. A glow, or a light in his eyes. When he left, he took a patient's worries and fears away in that black bag of his."

"I know just what you mean," Mother chimes in. "Joon's old medical professor came for tea last week. When he smiled and told me Joon would be well, I believed him. He left such a feeling of peace behind."

I shrug, remembering how the old man's lined features seemed to brighten as he looked at Mother. It was nighttime when he visited, and the flickering kerosene lamp cast a strange pattern of light onto our faces. But I'm tired of old wives' tales and fears. It's time for some truth telling. "I don't want to become a doctor," I announce. "I want to be a teacher."

"Teach?" Daw Widow asks. "Your father wanted you to be a doctor, young man."

"I know. But he'd be glad if I chose to be a teacher."

Daw Widow snorts. "Anyway, you're too young."

"That's what I've been trying to tell him," Mother says. Shaking her head, she heads into the kitchen to get the tea.

"No snacks for us today, Wei-Lin, dear," Daw Widow calls in the direction of the kitchen. "Lei and I had a big lunch."

Unlike Mother, Daw Widow has a steady source of income. Her husband was a postal officer before he died, and a small government pension still comes every month.

I pull out two chairs. After her mother is seated, Lei gathers the folds of her sarong and sits down. I smell the faint, clean scent of soap on her skin and fight the urge to touch the shining curtain of hair that swings across her shoulders.

She looks up. "Do you have time to teach *me* today? It's been a while since you came over, and I'm not learning as fast on my own."

Lei and I grew up together, playing in each other's gardens. She's always been like a sister, so it was natural when Daw Widow asked me to teach her to read and write. Spending time with Lei was like being with myself—easy, relaxed, and peaceful. Then, in one instant, everything changed. She was reading a poem by Tin Moe called "Desert Years."

And the earth
like fruit too shy to emerge

without fruit
in shame and sorrow
glances at me
When will the tears change
and the bells ring sweet?

She looked up, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. Had her dark brown eyes always glowed like smooth, polished stones? When did her lips get as red as the flame tree that flowered between our houses? I got to my feet quickly. "Lesson's over," I mumbled.

But too many times since then, I've reread the poem to myself, picturing Lei's smile and smooth skin. And now something deep inside starts trembling whenever she's near. I've even stopped going over there in the afternoons, afraid that Lei will notice how my feelings have changed. Or even worse—that her mother might.

Even now Daw Widow is studying me closely. "You grow more like a bamboo pole by the day," she says. "Taller and skinnier. *And* you need a haircut."

Mother comes out carrying a tray. Tea's still cheap, and this morning she splurged on a small packet of biscuits from the vendor who comes to the door. The biscuits are arranged in a neat fan on the one porcelain plate we haven't sold.

"I'll give you some recipes, Wei-Lin," Daw Widow continues. "My tamarind shrimp soup will fatten this

boy up in no time. Teach? Hah! He can barely stand on his own two feet!"

Mother's dimple creases her cheek as she catches my eye. "Does my boy look too thin to you, Lei, dear?" she asks, pouring another cup of tea.

Lei smiles shyly. "No, Daw Wei-Lin. Chiko looks just as ha—I mean, just as healthy as ever."

Healthy? I think. What was she about to say? I push my glasses back up my nose. Stupid things, always falling forward at the wrong time.

"Tell us more about your plan, Chiko," Daw Widow says suddenly.

"They're giving a teaching exam this afternoon at city hall," I say, handing her the newspaper. "Ignorance is bad for Burma, the government says. This time they might be telling the truth. I could pass the exam if Mother lets me go."

Daw Widow's eyes narrow as she studies my face. "So! Somebody who can read a book or use a pencil is smarter than somebody who can't?"

Too late I remember that Daw Widow never learned to read or write. "I didn't mean that," I say, taking the newspaper back. "It's just that I want to do something worthwhile. Make a difference, like Father."

"Humph," Daw Widow snorts. She's quiet for a bit, thinking something over. Then, "Let him go, Wei-Lin."

4

I can't believe my ears. Daw Widow is usually just as bad as Mother when it comes to me leaving the house. The only place I go without the two of them stopping me is next door to teach Lei. I feel a twinge of shame as I recognize the truth. Deep inside I was counting on Daw Widow to keep me from going, to convince Mother it's safer for me to stay inside. Then I could tell myself at least I *tried* to keep my promise.

"What, Ah-Ma?" Mother asks. "You want Chiko to leave me here alone?"

"I'll take care of you," Daw Widow tells her grimly, glaring at the door.

I wish for the hundredth time that Daw Widow had been with us when the soldiers came for Father. Even armed officers would have a hard time standing up to her. I've seen a burly chicken seller back away from her door when she accused him of overcharging her. But she and Lei were visiting relatives the week Father was arrested. Sometimes I wonder if the government was informed of their travel plans.

"I'll keep you company every day, Daw Wei-Lin," Lei adds.

I glance at her face, hoping for any hint of sorrow or worry on my behalf. But how could any girl admire a boy like me? Lei deserves a real man, a hero, a warrior who can protect her. Not a boy hiding inside his mother's house.

Daw Widow takes a sip of tea. "He may act like a good-for-nothing, Wei-Lin, but your boy can teach. I've seen my own girl reading and writing like a scholar these days, thanks to him."

"I know he's smart," Mother says. "And teaching is a noble job. As fine as healing. But how do we know they're not lying? It's not safe for him out there."

"It's not safe in this house either, Nyi-Ma," Daw Widow says softly.

The tone of her voice makes us stare. What does she mean, it isn't safe for me in this house? I notice she's used

a special name for Mother: “Nyi-Ma” means “younger sister,” the name used for a close relative. As an older neighbor, Daw Widow usually calls my mother by name, but now she’s added an extra tenderness with the term of endearment.

“Not safe, Ah-Ma?”

Daw Widow looks straight into Mother’s eyes. “He hasn’t registered with the army, like he’s supposed to. It might be best for him to go out and apply for this job, even if it’s a fake. I heard it in the market. They’re coming after your boy. They want him to fight, or they’ll put him in prison, too.”

I lean back in my chair, shaken. Fear rises in my throat like a sponge and dries my mouth. Mother buries her face in her hands.

The room is still. Then Daw Widow speaks again: “He’s Joon’s son. And yours. He will endure whatever comes his way. Let him go, Nyi-Ma.”

“Are you sure?” Mother asks, lifting her head. She takes the handkerchief Lei offers, and wipes her eyes.

“I feel it in my spirit,” Daw Widow answers. She turns to me. “What time is this teacher’s exam, Chiko?”

“Four o’clock.” I’m trying to keep my voice steady.

“It’s just past three now,” Daw Widow says. “Get out of that *longyi*. It’s best to wear trousers to an exam.”

I duck into the other room, take off the comfortable cotton cloth knotted around my waist, and change into

a pair of pants. Daw Widow is right—somehow I'll have to survive whatever is in my future. But how? My heart yearns for the old days, when Father was here to keep us safe and I could lose myself in a familiar story, one that ended happily.

Daw Widow smiles when I return. "We have something for you, Chiko. Lei, give the boy his gift, will you? And to Daw Wei-Lin, also."

Lei reaches into her mother's woven bag and takes out two packages. She hands one to me and one to Mother. We open them at the same time and discover matching miniature photographs of Father mounted on cardboard. He looks young in the picture, but his eyes are as keen and kind as the last time I saw them. An ache of missing him takes my breath away. *Stay alive, Father,* I pray. *Please stay alive.* Mother is gazing at her copy of the photo, and a tear curves along her cheek. I reach over and thumb it away.

"It's his graduation photo," Lei says. "One of our relatives from the village works in the college, and he hunted down the negative. We developed them at a shop in town—Mother trusts the man who makes the pictures."

"How can we thank you?" Mother manages to say. "We have no picture of him at all. This is exactly as he looked when we first met."

Suddenly reality hits me. This is Daw Widow's goodbye present. Rumors of the government's interest in me

must have reached her ears some time ago. That's why she ordered two copies instead of one.

"Thank you, Daw," I manage. "Thank you a thousand times."

She takes the photo, tucks it into my pocket, and fastens the button. Knowing my habit of keeping pens, money, and other valuables in the front pockets of my shirts, Mother sews sturdy buttons on them so that nothing can fall out.

"No need for thanks," Daw Widow says, giving the pocket a pat. "You better catch a rickshaw before you miss that exam. Many women would want a son-in-law brave enough to try to be a teacher in these terrible times."

My mouth falls open. Have I heard right? I must have. Daw Widow's raisin eyes are twinkling at me. So I haven't been able to hide my feelings for Lei! But what does Lei think? I push my glasses back up and steal a look. But Lei is leaning over Mother's shoulder, studying Father's picture. The veil of silky hair hides her face.

"What are you waiting for, boy?" Daw Widow asks. "Go! And be careful."

"Hurry back before it gets late, Chiko," Mother says, handing me a jacket. "I'll be waiting. It's dangerous out there for a boy your age, so try not to meet the eyes of strangers."

I slip my feet into my sandals, hardly knowing what I'm doing. I haven't left our home much for four months, and when I do, Mother insists on coming along. Am I really heading out into the city on my own?

Lei looks up, finally, smiling her sweet smile. I straighten my shoulders. If I have to go, I'll leave with my head high. I can at least pretend I'm a hero.

Mother hands me a few kyat notes. I don't want to take them, but she insists. "Just in case," she says, kissing me. "Please, Chiko."

Daw Widow opens the front door. The light dazzles my eyes, making the house seem even more like a cave.

Pausing on the threshold, I lift my hand. "See you tonight!"

"A lesson tomorrow, Ko?" It's Lei. She's called me "older brother" ever since we were little. I don't mind—girls use that word for their sweethearts, too.

"A lesson tomorrow, Lei!" I answer, and close the door behind me.

5

The rickshaw speeds through the tree-lined streets. I huddle into the back of it, remembering Mother's advice to avoid eye contact.

Sidewalk vendors are beginning to set up wares for the afternoon. The rickshaw veers to avoid children playing in the streets. These little ones should be in school, but they don't have a choice. Schools have been closed so many times that nobody can learn much.

Thanks to Father, I can teach kids like these; I know I can. My work with Lei made me sure of it. But I don't have any formal record of classes or