# I



Ivy Lin was a thief but you would never know it to look at her. Maybe that was the problem. No one ever suspected—and that made her reckless. Her features were so average and nondescript that the brain only needed a split second to develop a complete understanding of her: skinny Asian girl, quiet, overly docile around adults in uniforms. She had a way of walking, shoulders forward, chin tucked under, arms barely swinging, that rendered her invisible in the way of pigeons and janitors.

Ivy would have traded her face a thousand times over for a blue-eyed, blond-haired version like the Satterfield twins, or even a red-headed, freckly version like Liza Johnson, instead of her own Chinese one with its too-thin lips, embarrassingly high forehead, two fleshy cheeks like ripe apples before the autumn pickings. Because of those cheeks, at fourteen years old, she was often mistaken for an elementary school student—an unfortunate hindrance in everything except thieving, in which her childlike looks were a useful camouflage.

Ivy's only source of vanity was her eyes. They were pleasingly round, symmetrically situated, cocoa brown in color, with crescent corners dipped in like the ends of a stuffed dumpling. Her grandmother had trimmed her lashes when she was a baby to "stimulate growth," and it seemed to have worked, for now she was blessed with a flurry of thick, black lashes that other girls could only achieve with copious layers of mascara, and not even then. By any standard, she had

nice eyes—but especially for a Chinese girl—and they saved her from an otherwise plain face.

So how exactly had this unassuming, big-eyed girl come to thieving? In the same way water trickles into even the tiniest cracks between boulders, her personality had formed into crooked shapes around the hard structure of her Chinese upbringing.

When Ivy was two years old, her parents immigrated to the United States and left her in the care of her maternal grandmother, Meifeng, in their hometown of Chongqing. Of her next three years in China, she remembered very little except one vivid memory of pressing her face into the scratchy fibers of her grandmother's coat, shouting, "You tricked me! You tricked me!" after she realized Meifeng had abandoned her to the care of a neighbor to take an extra clerical shift. Even then, Ivy had none of the undiscerning friendliness of other children; her love was passionate but singular, complete devotion or none at all.

When Ivy turned five, Nan and Shen Lin had finally saved enough money to send for their daughter. "You'll go and live in a wonderful state in America," Meifeng told her, "called *Ma-sa-zhu-sai*." She'd seen the photographs her parents mailed home, pastoral scenes of ponds, square lawns, blue skies, trees that only bloomed vibrant pink and fuchsia flowers, which her pale-cheeked mother, whom she could no longer remember, was always holding by thin branches that resembled the sticks of sugared plums Ivy ate on New Year's. All this caused much excitement for the journey—she adored taking trips with her grandmother—but at the last minute, after handing Ivy off to a smartly dressed flight attendant with fascinating gold buttons on her vest, Meifeng disappeared into the airport crowd.

Ivy threw up on the airplane and cried nearly the entire flight. Upon landing at Logan Airport, she howled as the flight attendant pushed her toward two Asian strangers waiting at the gate with a screaming baby no larger than the daikon radishes she used to help Meifeng pull out of their soil, crusty smears all over his clenched white fists. Ivy dragged her feet, tripped over a shoelace, and landed on her knees.

"Stand up now," said the man, offering his hand. The woman continued to rock the baby. She addressed her husband in a weary tone. "Where are her suitcases?"

Ivy wiped her face and took the man's hand. She had already intuited that tears would have no place with these brick-faced people, so different from the gregarious aunties in China who'd coax her with a fresh box of chalk or White Rabbit taffies should she display the slightest sign of displeasure.

This became Ivy's earliest memory of her family: Shen Lin's hard, calloused fingers over her own, his particular scent of tobacco and minty toothpaste; the clear winter light flitting in through the floor-to-ceiling windows beyond which airplanes were taking off and landing; her brother, Austin, no more than a little sack in smelly diapers in Nan's arms. Walking among them but not one of them, Ivy felt a queer, dissociative sensation, not unlike being submerged in a bathtub, where everything felt both expansive and compressed. In years to come, whenever she felt like crying, she would invoke this feeling of being submerged, and the tears would dissipate across her eyes in a thin glistening film, disappearing into the bathwater.

Nan and Shen's child-rearing discipline was heavy on the corporal punishment but light on the chores. This meant that while Ivy never had to make a bed, she did develop a high tolerance for pain. As with many immigrant parents, the only real wish Nan and Shen had for their daughter was that she become a doctor. All Ivy had to do was claim "I want to be a doctor!" to see her parents' faces light up with approval, which was akin to love, and just as scarce to come by.

Meifeng had been an affectionate if brusque caretaker, but Nan was not this way. The only times Ivy felt the warmth of her mother's arms were when company came over. Usually, it was Nan's younger sister, Ping, and her husband, or one of Shen's Chinese coworkers at the small IT company he worked for. During those festive Saturday

afternoons, munching on sunflower seeds and lychees, Nan's down-turned mouth would right itself like a sail catching wind, and she would transform into a kinder, more relaxed mother, one without the little pinch between her brows. Ivy would wait all afternoon for this moment to scoot close to her mother on the sofa . . . closer . . . closer . . . and then, with the barest of movements, she'd slide into Nan's lap.

Sometimes, Nan would put her hands around Ivy's waist. Other times, she'd pet her head in an absent, fitful way, as if she wasn't aware of doing it. Ivy would try to stay as still as possible. It was a frightful, stolen pleasure, but how she craved the touch of a bosom, a fleshy lap to rest on. She'd always thought she was being exceedingly clever, that her mother hadn't a clue what was going on. But when she was six years old, she did the same maneuver, only this time, Nan's body stiffened. "Aren't you a little old for this now?"

Ivy froze. The adults around her chuckled. "Look how *ni-ah* your daughter is," they exclaimed. *Ni-ah* was Sichuan dialect for *clingy*. Ivy forced her eyes open as wide as they would go. It was no use. She could taste the salt on her lips.

"Look at you," Nan chastised. "They're just teasing! I can't believe how thin-skinned you are. You're an older sister now, you should be braver. Now be good and *ting hua*. Go wipe your nose."

To her dying day, Ivy would remember this feeling: shame, confusion, hurt, defiance, and a terrible loneliness that turned her permanently inward, so that when Meifeng later told her she had been a trusting and affectionate baby, she thought her grandmother was confusing her with Austin.



Ivy became a secretive child, sharing her inner life with no one, except on occasion, Austin, whose approval, unlike everyone else's in the family, came unconditionally. Suffice it to say, neither of Ivy's parents provided any resources for her fanciful imagination—what kind of life

would she have, what kind of love and excitement awaited her in her future? These finer details Ivy filled in with books.

She learned English easily—indeed, she could not remember a time she had *not* understood English—and became a precocious reader. The tiny, unkempt West Maplebury Library, staffed by a half-deaf librarian, was Nan's version of free babysitting. It was Ivy's favorite place in the whole world. She was drawn to books with bleak circumstances: orphans, star-crossed lovers, captives of lecherous uncles and evil stepmothers, the anorexic cheerleader, the lonely misfit. In every story, she saw herself. All these heroines had one thing in common, which was that they were beautiful. It seemed to Ivy that outward beauty was the fountain from which all other desirable traits sprung: intelligence, courage, willpower, purity of heart.

She cruised through elementary school, neither at the top of her class nor the bottom, neither popular nor unpopular, but it wasn't until she transferred to Grove Preparatory Day School in sixth grade—her father was hired as the computer technician there, which meant her tuition was free—that she found the central object of her aspirational life: a certain type of clean-cut, all-American boy, hitherto unknown to her; the type of boy who attended Sunday school and plucked daisies for his mother on Mother's Day. His name was Gideon Speyer.

Ivy soon grasped the colossal miracle it would take for a boy like Gideon to notice her. He was friendly toward her, they'd even exchanged phone numbers once, for a project in American Lit, but the other Grove girls who swarmed around Gideon wore brown penny loafers with white cotton knee socks while Ivy was clothed in old-fashioned black stockings and Nan's clunky rubber-soled lace-ups. She tried to emulate her classmates' dress and behaviors as best she could with her limited resources: she pulled her hair back with a headband sewn from an old silk scarf, tossed green pennies onto the ivy-covered statue of St. Mark in the courtyard, ate her low-fat yogurt and Skittles under the poplar trees in the springtime—still she could not fit in.

How could she ever get what she wanted from life when she was shy, poor, and homely?

Her parents' mantra: The harder you work, the luckier you are.

Her teachers' mantra: Treat others the way you want to be treated.

The only person who taught her any practical skills was Meifeng. Ivy's beloved grandmother finally received her US green card when Ivy turned seven. Two years of childhood is a decade of adulthood. Ivy still loved Meifeng, but the love had become the abstract kind, born of nostalgic memories, tear-soaked pillows, and yearning. Ivy found this flesh-and-blood Meifeng intimidating, brisk, and loud, too loud. Having forgotten much of her Chinese vocabulary, Ivy was slow and fumbling when answering her grandmother's incessant questions; when she wasn't at the library, she was curled up on the couch like a snail, reading cross-eyed.

Meifeng saw that she had no time to lose. She felt it her duty to instill in her granddaughter the two qualities necessary for survival: self-reliance and opportunism.

Back in China, this had meant fixing the books at her job as a clerk for a well-to-do merchant who sold leather gloves and shoes. The merchant swindled his customers by upcharging every item, even the fake leather products; his customers made up the difference with counterfeit money and sleight of hand. Even the merchant's wife pilfered money from his cash register to give to her own parents and siblings. And it was Meifeng who jotted down all these numbers, adding four-digit figures in her head as quick as any calculator, a penny or two going into her own paycheck with each transaction.

Once in Massachusetts, unable to find work yet stewing with enterprising restlessness, Meifeng applied the same skills she had previously used as a clerk toward saving money. She began shoplifting, price swapping, and requesting discounts on items for self-inflicted defects. She would hide multiple items in a single package and only pay for one.

The first time Meifeng recruited Ivy for one of these tasks was at the local Goodwill, the cheapest discount store in town. Ivy had

been combing through a wooden chest of costume jewelry and flower brooches when her grandmother called her over using her pet name, Baobao, and handed her a wool sweater that smelled of mothballs. "Help me get this sticker off," said Meifeng. "Don't rip it now." She gave Ivy a look that said, *You'd better do it properly or else.*

Ivy stuck her nail under the corner of the white $2.99 sticker. She pushed the label up with minuscule movements until she had enough of an edge to grab between her thumb and index finger. Then, ever so slowly, she peeled off the sticker, careful not to leave any leftover gunk on the label. After Ivy handed the sticker over, Meifeng stuck it on an ugly yellow T-shirt. Ivy repeated the same process for the $0.25 sticker on the T-shirt label. She placed this new sticker onto the price tag for the sweater, smoothing the corners down flat and clean.

Meifeng was pleased. Ivy knew because her grandmother's face was pulled back in a half grimace, the only smile she ever wore. "I'll buy you a donut on the way home," said Meifeng.

Ivy whooped and began spinning in circles in celebration. In her excitement, she knocked over a stand of scarves. Quick as lightning, Meifeng grabbed one of the scarves and stuffed it up her left sleeve. "Hide one in your jacket—any one. Quickly!"

Ivy snatched up a rose-patterned scarf (the same one she would cut up and sew into a headband years later) and bunched it into a ball inside her pocket. "Is this for me?"

"Keep it out of sight," said Meifeng, towing Ivy by the arm toward the register, a shiny quarter ready, to pay for the woolen sweater. "Let this be your first lesson: give with one hand and take with the other. No one will be watching both."



The Goodwill closed down a year later, but by then, Meifeng had discovered something even better than Goodwill—an event Americans called a yard sale, which Meifeng came to recognize by the hand-painted cardboard signs attached to the neighborhood trees. Each

weekend, Meifeng scoured the sidewalks for these hand-painted signs, dragging her grandchildren to white-picket-fenced homes with American flags fluttering from the windows and lawns lined with crabapple trees. Meifeng bargained in broken English, holding up arthritic fingers to display numbers, all the while loudly protesting "Cheaper, cheaper," until the owners, too discomfited to argue, nodded their agreement. Then she'd reach into her pants and pull out coins and crumpled bills from a cloth pouch, attached by a cord to her underwear.

Other yard sale items, more valuable than the rest, Meifeng simply handed to Ivy to hide in her pink nylon backpack. Silverware. Belts. A Timex watch that still ticked. No one paid any attention to the children running around the yard, and if after they left the owner discovered that one or two items had gone unaccounted for, he simply attributed it to his worsening memory.

Walking home by the creek after one of these excursions, Meifeng informed Ivy that Americans were all stupid. "They're too lazy to even keep track of their own belongings. They don't *ai shi* their things. Nothing is valuable to them." She placed a hand on Ivy's head. "Remember this, Baobao: when winds of change blow, some build walls. Others build windmills."

Ivy repeated the phrase. *I'm a windmill*, she thought, picturing herself swinging through open skies, a balmy breeze over her gleaming mechanical arms.

Austin nosed his way between the two women. "Can I have some candy?"

"What'd you do with that lollipop your sister gave you?" Meifeng barked. "Dropped it again?"

And Austin, remembering his loss, scrunched up his face and cried.

Ivy knew her brother hated these weekends with their grandmother. At five years old, Austin had none of the astute restraint his sister had had at his age. He would howl at the top of his lungs and bang his

chubby fists on the ground until Meifeng placated him with promises to buy a toy—"a *dollar* toy?"—or a trip to McDonald's, something typically reserved for special occasions. Meifeng would never have tolerated such a display from Ivy, but everyone in the Lin household indulged Austin, the younger child, and a boy at that. Ivy wished she had been born a boy. Never did she wish this more fervently than at twelve years old, the morning she awoke to find her underwear streaked with a matte, rust-like color. Womanhood was every bit as inconvenient as she'd feared. Nan did not own makeup or skincare products. She cut her own hair and washed her face every morning with water and a plain washcloth. One week a month, she wore a cloth pad—reinforced with paper towels on the days her flow was heaviest—which she rinsed each night in the sink and hung out to dry on the balcony. But American women had different needs: disposable pads, tampons, bras, razors, tweezers. It was unthinkable for Ivy to *ask* for these things. The idea of removing one's leg or underarm hair for aesthetic reasons would have instilled in her mother a horror akin to slicing one's skin open. In this respect, Nan and Meifeng were of one mind. Ivy knew she could only rely on herself to obtain these items. That was when she graduated from yard sales to the two big-box stores in town: Kmart and T.J.Maxx.

Her first conquests: tampons, lip gloss, a box of Valentine's Day cards, a bag of disposable razors. Later, when she became bolder: rubber sandals, a sports bra, mascara, an aquamarine mood ring, and her most prized theft yet—a leather-bound diary with a gold clasp lock. These contrabands she hid in the nooks and crannies of her dresser, away from puritan eyes. At night, Ivy would sneak out her diary and copy beautiful phrases from her novels—*For things seen pass away, but the things that are unseen are eternal*—and throughout those last two years of middle school, she wrote love letters to Gideon Speyer: *I had a vivid dream this morning, it was so passionate I woke up with an ache . . . I held your face in my hands and trembled . . . if only I wasn't so scared of getting close to you . . . if only you weren't so perfect in every way . . .*

And so Ivy grew like a wayward branch. Planted to the same root as her family but reaching for something beyond their grasp. Years of reconciling her grandmother's teachings with her American values had somehow culminated in a confused but firm belief that in order to become the "good," *ting hua* girl everyone asked of her, she had to use "smart" methods. But she never admitted how much she enjoyed these methods. She never got too greedy. She never got sloppy. And most important, she never got caught. It comforted her to think that even if she were accused of wrongdoing someday, it would be her accuser's word against hers—and if there was anything she prided herself on other than being a thief, it was being a first-rate liar.