

Spring Moon

BETTE BAO LORD



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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

THE HOUSE OF CHANG, IN SOOCHOW:

Bold Talent, son of Old Venerable and his first wife, the Matriarch

Sterling Talent, son of Old Venerable and his second wife

Noble Talent, son of Old Venerable and his third wife, Silken Dawn

Fragrant Snow, wife of Sterling Talent

Spring Moon, daughter of Sterling Talent

Golden Virtue, wife of Bold Talent

August Winds, distant relative

Resolute Spirit, son of Tenant Farmer Lee

Fatso, faithful servant

THE HOUSE OF WOO, IN PEKING:

Fierce Rectitude, Hanlin Scholar

Lotus Delight, his wife

Glad Promise, their son

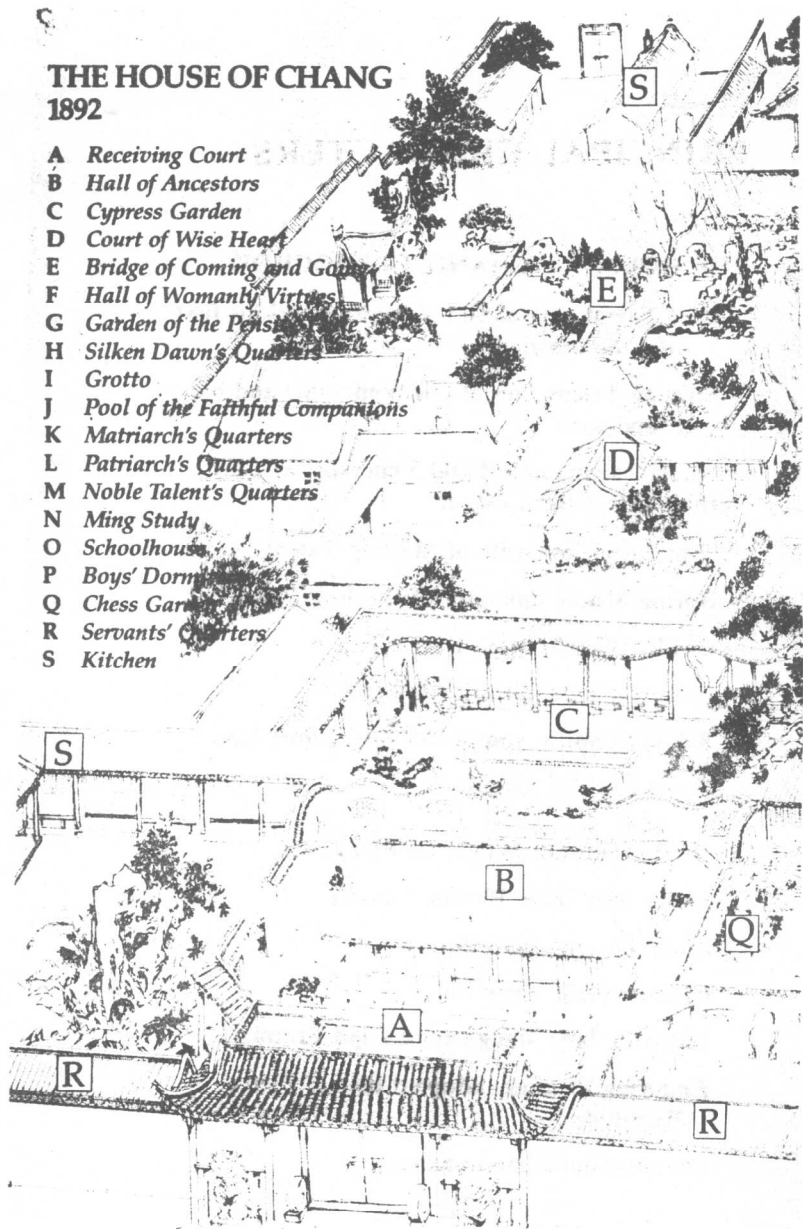
Lustrous Jade, daughter of Glad Promise

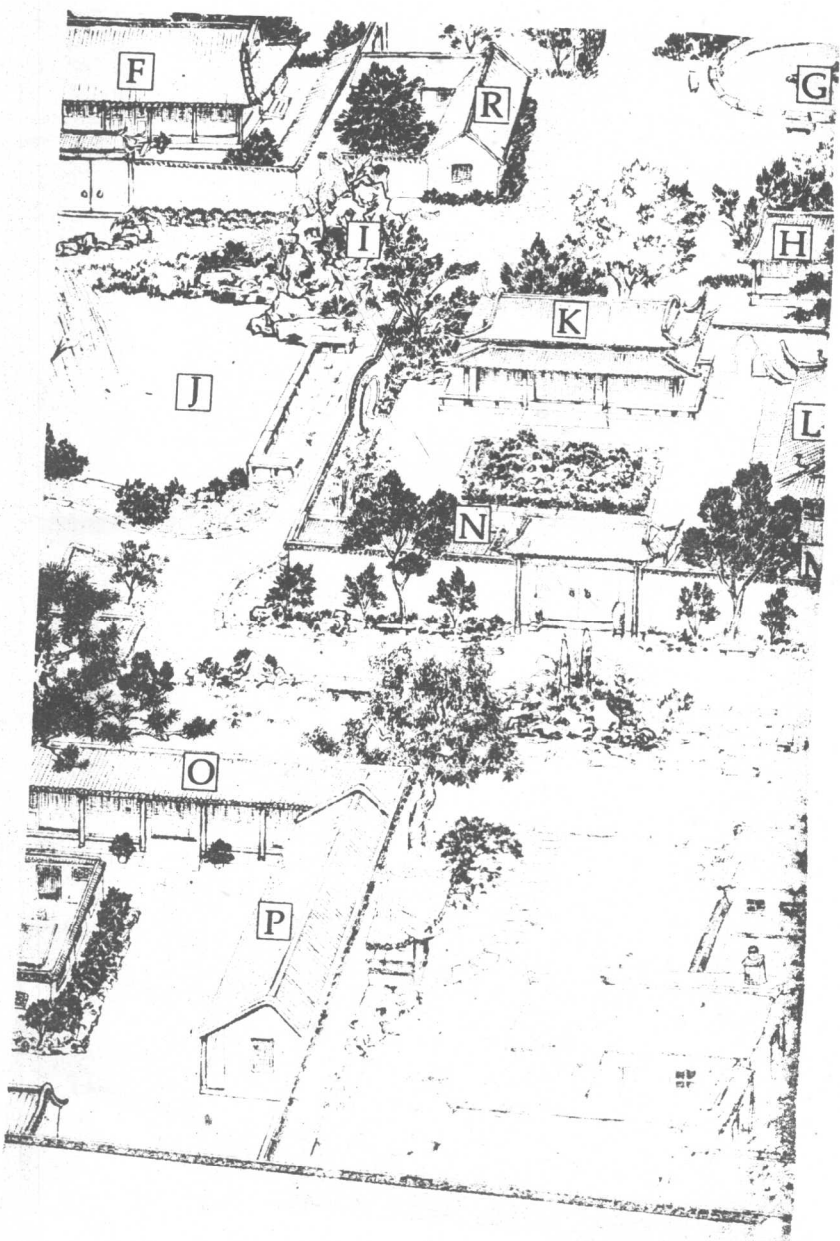
Enduring Promise, adopted heir of Fierce Rectitude

Dummy, mute handmaiden

THE HOUSE OF CHANG 1892

- A Receiving Court
- B Hall of Ancestors
- C Cypress Garden
- D Court of Wise Heart
- E Bridge of Coming and Going
- F Hall of Womanly Virtues
- G Garden of the Peasants
- H Silken Dawn's Quarters
- I Grotto
- J Pool of the Faithful Companions
- K Matriarch's Quarters
- L Patriarch's Quarters
- M Noble Talent's Quarters
- N Ming Study
- O Schoolhouse
- P Boys' Dormitory
- Q Chess Garden
- R Servants' Quarters
- S Kitchen





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Prologue

Before the beginning there was chaos. All sounds but none heard; all shapes but none seen. Darkness pursuing darkness for an endless age.

When the moment was true, out of chaos emerged the sleeping giant Pan Koo. Upon awakening, he was angered by the void and shattered it with a blow. That which yields floated upward while the unyielding sank, forming the Heavens and the Earth.

The breath of Pan Koo became the winds and clouds, his voice the rolling thunder, his left eye the sun, his right the moon, the hairs of his head and beard the stars, and the sweat of his brow the rain and dew. The fleas on his body became men and women. Thus the world began.

Three Divine Rulers appeared to help mankind. They taught the black-haired people to build a fire; to fish, hunt, and tame the animals; to cultivate the land. Each reigned for thousands of years. Then chaos returned, for their successors were princes of inferiority. And without order, men knew no peace and were no better than beasts.

At last, the Yellow Emperor ascended the throne, restoring civility. From him the people of the Huang Ho learned to mine and to mint, to heal the sick and to record the wisdom of men and the passage of time. His Empress shared the secret of silk making.

Thereafter, for more than four thousand years, empires waxed and waned, dynasties rose and fell, clans flowered and faded, season after season, year after year. And always more feared than tigers or floods or spirits were the times of chaos, luan, when kings were not kings, nor subjects

subjects; fathers were not fathers, nor sons sons; husbands were not husbands, nor wives wives; brothers were not brothers; friends were not friends.

In the days of the great sage Confucius, the Prince of Wu, seeking glory, spoke thus to his Prime Minister: 'Build me a new capital for my kingdom, one that will mirror the Heavens and the Earth, where virtuous men of letters and beautiful women will dwell, and in time of danger subjects and goods will be safe from the enemy.'

And so, on a site between lush hills and fertile plains, where flowers bloomed ten months in every year, the walled city of Soochow was built and encircled by a moat. Like heaven, it had eight water gates; like earth, eight foot gates. On the hillocks a crown of pagodas, and in the vale fretted with canals, gardens of infinite perspective.

Two thousand years passed like the seasons. Then, during the reign of Wan Li, a poor scholar and his aged mother stopped in Soochow on the way to Peking, where he hoped to succeed in the Imperial Examinations. But the woman fell ill. Before she died, she commanded her son to bury her in the first convenient spot and thence journey on to meet his destiny. He did as she asked. The site was near a pool, the home of a pair of ever-faithful mandarin ducks; the grave was marked with a sprig of cypress.

In the capital, the scholar won all honours, but not once in twenty-seven months did a smile touch his face. Grieved by his servant's sorrow, the Emperor inquired. The Senior Wrangler explained. All who heard were moved.

The Emperor sent him to serve in Soochow, where he could be near his beloved mother. On his arrival, he saw that her resting place had not been disturbed and the sprig had become a sapling.

South of the tree he ordered the gates of his home to be built, and around it the garden walls.

- Clan story

As the sun blazed in the western skies, Spring Moon slept. Her room was cool, shaded by the green-tiled roof that arched

gracefully away from the ancient walls, and she curled contentedly in the far recesses of her bed, enveloped by its pink silk curtains and the scent of camphor. Her breathing was imperceptible.

Suddenly a ray of sunlight, slipping under the eaves and through an open shutter, found a crack in the curtains and splashed across the bed. At its touch, Spring Moon stirred, pulling the coverlet over her head. She could still just see the red box and willed herself to dream again. But it was no use.

'Plum Blossom,' she called, throwing off the covers and sitting up. 'Why did you leave the curtains open? I was having the most wonderful dream, and now it is spoiled.'

It had been the best kind of dream, magical and shivery. Bearers had come from far away, bringing a red lacquer chest. On its lid were strange gold characters not even Eldest Uncle could read. 'It is a present for Spring Moon,' the bearers said. They warned that she must wait three days and nights, until at the exact hour of her birth, the box would pop open like a roasted chestnut.

And she had waited. But when at last the hour of the monkey approached, the sun had wakened her. Now she would never know what was inside.

Spring Moon sighed. It must have been something most marvellous. An enchanted peachstone to sing to her, perhaps, or a potion for turning peppers into sweets. Plum Blossom should not have left the curtains open, even a little.

'Plum Blossom?'

Still there was no reply. Spring Moon raised her voice.

'Plum Blossom, I am through napping. You must not sleep when I am awake. Answer me.'

She parted the curtains. There was no one in the room.

'Plum Blossom? Are we playing hide and seek?' Spring Moon scrambled out of the bed and peeked underneath. Only a thimble was there, and the gourd placed beneath the spot where her head lay, to ward off ghosts.

Spring Moon straightened and paused for a moment, her brow furrowed. Then, quickly pushing her cloth-bound feet into a pair of pink embroidered shoes and pulling on her *ta chin p'ao*, she stepped out onto the gallery that bordered the

garden of the Court of Wise Heart. The garden was a small one and contained no hiding place, so she walked from door to door, looking into each room of the three wings of her family's quarters. Plum Blossom was not in any of them. No one was.

Where could the girl be? A sudden fear quickened Spring Moon's heart. Only a two-headed snake could have sent Plum Blossom away. Unless . . . what if Fragrant Snow had needed her? Had not Fatso complained that morning of a headache? Perhaps Plum Blossom had been called to wait on Mother in Fatso's place.

Quickly the child slipped through the Fan Gate, past the Court of Silent Bamboos, which belonged to the family of Great-Uncle Number Three, past the several courts of the Venerable's nephews, to the Bridge of Coming and Going and the Court of Womanly Virtues. As she neared the tall red columns that marked the entrance of the Hall, she could hear the hum of gossip and the clatter of gaming tiles within. For a moment she hesitated. What if Mother was losing again to Great-Aunt Number Three? But she could also be winning, and in good spirits. Resolutely Spring Moon walked the few steps across the gallery to the open door.

At the threshold, she paused once more, trying to locate Plum Blossom or Fragrant Snow among the grandmothers, mothers, widows, wives, concubines, daughters, slave girls, and servants who lived together in the thirty courts beneath the ancestral roofs. Her gaze passed quickly over the three betrothed and over Auntie from Tientsin, who was painting flowers on a silk fan. Auntie did not see her sister-in-law mimic her pursed look of concentration behind her back for the benefit of the Matriarch. Not did that wizened woman give any sign that she noticed, although everyone knew she missed nothing. She sat, flanked by two slave girls whose delicate features and fine clothes were proof of the wealth and standing of the household, in the precise centre of the room.

To Spring Moon's relief, Fragrant Snow was not among the mah jong players with Great-Aunt Number Three, who, from the sound of triumph in her voice, was surely winning. But there was no sign of the slave girl either, and as Spring Moon's eyes darted from one group to the next, the fear

stirred once more. Finally she spotted the plum silk that, years ago, Fragrant Snow had decided was her best colour and now wore exclusively. She was embroidering by the west window where she could catch the last of the afternoon light. Spring Moon slipped through the crowd.

'Mother!' She tugged at Fragrant Snow's sleeve. 'Mother!' Fragrant Snow slapped the offending hand. 'What are you doing, naughty girl? Rushing in like a gust of wind, interrupting your elders without so much as a greeting! Everyone will think that I have neglected my duties. You will heap shame upon our ancestors!'

Spring Moon bowed her head. 'A thousand pardons, my mother.' She turned away and walked slowly towards the Matriarch.

The old woman's full attention was now given to Grandniece Number Five, who stared at the hem of her tunic while being instructed on the conduct proper during expectant happiness.

'... and remember, no hashed foods lest the baby have a careless disposition ...'

Spring Moon waited to be acknowledged.

'... and no sad thoughts lest the baby be infected.' The Matriarch nodded. 'You may go now and take tea.' She turned to Spring Moon.

Spring Moon blushed, remembering all at once that she had neglected to wash after her nap. Grandmother would know, of course. She always knew. But you could never tell what she was thinking, for the rice powder hid her expressions as completely as the opera mask hid the face of the doll Eldest Uncle had given her before he went away. With the Matriarch looking at her, Spring Moon always felt as small as a sesame seed.

'Well?'

The child swallowed hard, then bowed deeply. 'Good afternoon, my grandmother. Forgive me for not paying you proper respect when I came in just now.'

The Matriarch smiled, careful not to part her lips and reveal her toothless gums. 'You seem excited, indeed.'

Spring Moon breathed easier.

'What is it, my child?'

Thus invited, the words rushed out. 'Oh, Grandmother, Plum Blossom is lost. I cannot find her anywhere.'

As though a ghost had spoken, the woman stopped their sewing and chatting, eating and playing, to look her way and listen.

'Do not be foolish, child.' The Matriarch no longer smiled. 'She must be somewhere within our homestead. Perhaps she is in your room looking for you.'

Unable to move, Spring Moon watched her grandmother sip her tea, feeling as if she herself had been swallowed.

'Well? Is there anything else?' The Matriarch waited. When no answer came, she spoke more harshly. 'Speak up, child. Speak up!'

In a quivering voice, Spring Moon obeyed. 'But Grandmother, she was not there when I woke up. I thought she might be here, but I do not see her. Something must have happened. I am afraid something . . .'

She faltered. The Matriarch's eyes had narrowed until they were only slits, searching the room for the responsible parent. At once, Fragrant Snow rose to take charge, pulling her impudent daughter by the ear towards the door. All eyes followed the retreat. There was no sound except for the jangle of Fragrant Snow's gold bracelets.

Safely beyond the red columns, the mother scolded. 'You are forever meddling in family affairs, Spring Moon. A good girl never asks such impertinent questions.' She waved the child away.

Spring Moon opened her mouth to protest, but her mother arched an eyebrow, daring her to utter the smallest sound. It was no use. She bowed and walked away. Slowly, she retraced her steps to her family's quarters. Perhaps Grandmother was right, and the slave girl would be in her accustomed place.

But as before, the painted stool was empty. She checked inside the rosewood wardrobe and opened the sandalwood chests, although they were much too small to hide anyone bigger than the monkey that belonged to Cousin Number Six. At last she paused, sitting on the slave girl's bamboo k'ang to rest. Could Plum Blossom have run away like the neighbour's

girl? She shook her head emphatically. No, Plum Blossom would never do that.

Her golden lilies ached, and she tried to massage her calves as Plum Blossom always did, but there was no strength in her fingers. Wearily, she lay back, brushing away a tear before it could fall. She was much too old to cry. Had it not been more than two years since her seventh summer, when the bandages were first used to bind her feet? She had screamed and screamed then, as the four smaller toes were curled underneath the sole, and the sole forced towards the heel until the feet were bent almost in half. 'It is for your own good, child,' her mother had said. 'No matter how beautiful, how rich, how filial, no man will marry feet that flop like yellow pike.'

It was Plum Blossom who had comforted her and bathed her feet in medicinal waters, making certain that no toes were lost to infection. Every day the slave girl had carried her on her back to the Pool of the Faithful Companions, where she could lie on the cool rocks and play with the golden carp . . .

Suddenly Spring Moon smiled and sat up. The grotto! Why had she not thought to look there before? Once, long ago, Plum Blossom had said it was her favourite place to release *chi*. Perhaps she had gone there and forgotten the time.

Sliding quickly from the bed, Spring Moon hurried out.

When she reached the terrace she heard something, and paused to listen. There! Once more she heard it, a sound as faint as the footfall of a ghost. 'Plum Blossom?' she called sharply. 'Plum Blossom, is that you?' There was no answer.

Gingerly she made her way to the other side of the miniature mountain. There, huddled on her knees, her face raised to her young mistress, was Plum Blossom. She wiped away tears with the back of her hand.

'Plum Blossom?' Spring Moon whispered. She had never seen the slave girl cry, except at funerals, when everybody wailed. Only that morning, Plum Blossom had been unable to stop smiling, for the betrothed cousins had rated her a third-grade beauty, citing only the roundness of her face and the closeness of her eyes as demerits. She reached out to touch the

older girl's cheek, but Plum Blossom pulled away.

'Please let me be, Small Mistress. I will come to you in : while.'

'But what is the matter, Plum Blossom? Are you sick. Mother will call for the doctor.'

'No, I am not sick.'

'Then why are you crying?'

'I am not crying. I just have some thinking to do.'

'About what?'

'It is of no importance.'

'Then come and play.'

Plum Blossom shook her head.

'You must! You are my slave girl. You must do everything I say.'

Plum Blossom bowed her head. 'Yes, it is true. I am only your worthless slave girl.'

She had never spoken in that way before, whatever her mistress said. Quickly Spring Moon took her hand and held it to her heart. 'No, Plum Blossom, you are my sister. I am sorry I was angry. It is just that I have been looking for you everywhere. What is wrong? Tell me, please?'

Plum Blossom only shook her head.

Spring Moon leaned closer and whispered into her ear, 'Did Grandmother say something to make you cry?'

'Shh!' Plum Blossom put her hand to the child's lips.

'So it is Grandmother. . . .'

'We must not speak of her -'

'I do not care. Tell me at once!' Spring Moon's voice rose.

The slave girl hesitated, then shrugged. 'The Matriarch said that I am to go to another house.'

So Plum Blossom's tears had not been real tears, after all, but ritual ones, like those shed at departures. Spring Moon clapped her hands, applauding the performance, too relieved to be angry at the trick. How beautifully the slave girl wept! She had been even more convincing than the female impersonators at the New Year's opera.

'But that is wonderful news, Plum Blossom,' she cried. 'Grandmother has chosen a husband for you! You will soon be married and free, and I -'

She broke off. Her friend shook with silent sobs, burying her face in her hands again. Spring Moon was more puzzled than ever. All slave girls were married before they were twenty, and Plum Blossom was already seventeen.

'Why do you cry, Plum Blossom?' she asked finally. 'We have been expecting this to happen. You can come back for visits. I shall invite you. We shall have tea in the garden, and I ...'

She stopped, for as she spoke, Plum Blossom had grown strangely calm, and when she looked up her eyes no longer glistened with tears but were dull, like those of the blind storyteller.

'You do not understand, Small Mistress. I am not going to be married.'

'But you just told me -'

'I said another house, not a marriage. Your family has promised me as a concubine to Old Yeh.'

But Spring Moon still did not understand. True, Old Yeh's wife was as shrivelled as a cooked shrimp, but it could be worse. Plum Blossom could have been given to Lame Loo or the cross-eyed barber. Old Yeh was a scholar and very rich.

'Do not cry, Plum Blossom, please. Think of the dowry Grandmother will give you. ... And you will never be poor again. You will never have to sell even one of your daughters. Old Yeh is as rich as ... as we are. You will give him a son. And your son will be a scholar, I know he will. He will pass all the Imperial Examinations, be Senior Wrangler, even enter the Hanlin Forest of Pencils. All his honours will also be yours, and someday you will be the Patriarch's mother. Fate will see to it. You may even be more honoured than I. Then you will invite me to tea.'

But the look on Plum Blossom's face never changed, and when Spring Moon paused for breath, she said only, 'Please go.' Her voice was smooth as *koo* melons, and as bitter.

'May I not stay here with you?'

'Please go. I will be along to help you dress for dinner.'

Reluctantly, Spring Moon walked away, stopping every few steps to look back to see if Plum Blossom had changed her mind. The slave girl crouched motionless beside the small