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Opening extract from

Spilled Water

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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Chapter One
To Market

I loved my baby brother, until Uncle took me to market and sold me. He was the bright, shiny pebble in the water, the twinkling star in the sky. Until Uncle took me to market and sold me. Then I hated him.

'Lu Si-yan,' Uncle greeted me early one summer morning, 'today is a big day for you. From today, you must learn to find your own way in the muddy whirlpool of life. Your mother and I have given you a good start. Now it is your turn.'

My mother stood in the shadows of our kitchen, but she didn't look at me and she didn't say a word. Uncle took me tightly by the wrist. As he led me from the house, my mother reached out her hand towards me and clawed the air as though trying to pull me back. Then she picked up my little brother and hid behind the door,

but I saw her face wither with pain and, in that moment, fear gripped my heart.

'Where are you taking me, Uncle Ba?' I cried.

'It's for the best,' he replied, his mouth set grimly.

'You're hurting my arm,' I cried.

He pulled me past the scorched patchwork terraces of my family's smallholding, scattering hens and ducks along the way, and out on to the dusty track that led steeply up to the road. There, we walked, Uncle brisk and businesslike, me dragging my feet in protest, until we came to the bus-stop.

'Where are we going, Uncle Ba?' I whimpered this time.

'To market,' he said.

'What are we going to buy?' I asked.