

CHAPTER EXCERPTS

ONE

The River Yu was born out of the eternal wholeness that gently resides at the core of creation. There, amongst the fires of eternity, the winds of change, the rocks, the rains, and the snows, she took her form and her shape. Then, in the purity of the freshly fallen snow that cloaks the Mountains of the Sky, she awoke, became conscious of herself, and started her life as a simple, unassuming bead of water escaping from a melting snowbank, slipping down a sun-warmed slab of granite.

Freshly born, free as the blue skies soaring above, and with the world at her feet, Yu quickly percolated into a tiny rhythm of water and began to nimbly dance her way down the mountainside, rejoicing in life's sweet song of freedom. Growing in size and strength with each passing minute, Yu ran innocent and clear, weaving her way through sand and boulder, humming her own soft, sweet song and knowing no other thought or question but the constant flow of her current and the ever-present, distant call of the sea.

A hundred feet down the mountainside, Yu slipped into a small, shaded gully where she was joined by other parts of herself that had taken shape and form on other parts of the mountain. Together, they merged and mingled as one, separated, and then joined together again in happy reunion, twisting and leaping down the mountainside. Minutes later, sand, boulder, and coarse granite gave way to simple pasture, flower-dotted lawns, and then the first, stunted Cedars and Spruces, which gave evidence to the deep forest that lay waiting silently below.

Full of youth, vitality, and vigor, young Yu raced along through the pristine, flower-lined meadows, turning left and then right, coursing free and uninhibited in the bright, early morning sun. And then suddenly, bright green meadows and early morning sun all but died as Yu left the highest slopes of the mountain behind and entered into a darkening world of towering Firs, thick Cedars, and giant Rhododendrons.

Still high on the mountainside, but now deep within the first whisperings of high mountain forest, Yu noted the difference between the bright, sunlit mountain slopes above in which she had been born and the deep, darkening world of the surrounding forest which she was now coursing

through. Feeling her current slow down a bit for the first time, Yu gently eased back into herself and then mingled through and around the surrounding forest as it passed.

Deeper and deeper, Yu flowed into the supreme silence of the forest. And in doing so, she became an intimate part of that same thick, deep stillness that now surrounded her. Flowing gently along now, Yu found herself joyfully greeted by each and every tree, shrub, flowering Rhododendron, and nimble fern, and she couldn't help but bask elegantly in the renewal of this ancient friendship. "Buttercup, oh Buttercup, Fir, fern and Cedar, Mountain Ash, Thimbleberry and purple petaled Aster," she hummed as she flowed slowly, happily by them all.

Entering still deeper into the wood, Yu slowly but surely began to feel an unfolding, or rather unveiling of the wood's more subtle qualities; the brisk hammering of a woodpecker searching for his, or her noonday meal; a small grey squirrel, perched high above on the limb of a tree looking down upon her current; and then something else too. Something more difficult to pinpoint and put into exact words. Yet, there it was on the edge of every leaf, on the petal of every flower, on the needle of every tree and in the song of every bird.

Yu sensed it all about her: in the air, in the trees, and in the very ground itself. It was a near-silent, yet barely detectable humming or ringing vibrating through and coursing through everything in the wood. It reminded her of the source that she had just most recently been born from and was rushing to once again. It was wholeness, oneness, and reverence in its highest form. It surrounded her, it engulfed her, and it lured her deeper and deeper into the wood.

And then suddenly the trees parted, the forest ended, and Yu once again flowed forward into the bright sunlight as her current picked up its pace and ran over smooth granite rock once again. A bit surprised by this abrupt change and acceleration of her current, Yu reluctantly bid farewell to the supreme silence of the deep forest and then happily continued on her journey ever onward and ever down the mountainside.

But then a few minutes later, Yu became a little bit concerned as her small current suddenly became a mad, rushing, free-for-all down a short, steep embankment. Landing in a small pool with a splash, Yu had but seconds to

catch her breath before she was thrown over and then down another steep embankment and then another, each time landing into another small pool. Faster and faster Yu now raced, one moment giddy with excitement at the wild pace, and the next scared and concerned at her lack of control and the constant acceleration of her flow and wild falls down the mountain.

And then suddenly there was nothing, absolutely nothing! Nothing to support Yu's ever rushing flow. No flower-lined banks to contain and guide her. No more rocks or shrubs to help her on her way. Not even the ground below her or the blue sky above! There was only a vast, bottomless space of nothingness and a wide-open, terrifying freefall from the earth.

Yu tried to contain herself in her fright; tried to direct or control her flow. Maybe clutch a piece of earth or at least a passing outcropping of rock as she fell. But it was no use. There was nothing to hold on to! Nothing to grab on to! As only air, space, the great unknown, and falling, falling, falling helplessly and hopelessly into absolute emptiness surrounded her.

Bam, splash, crash, whoosh, and splash again! Large drops of water, buckets of water, falling, splashing, and spraying everywhere! It was a moment of supreme confusion, fear, and excitement for young Yu. For one minute, she had been safely and securely gliding along in her little watery world of stream life, and then suddenly, she had been propelled and thrown off the mountainside. And then moments later, she had plummeted into..... herself?

Yes, it was hard for young Yu to understand. But after the incredibly frightening fall from so far above and the wild, uncontrolled flight into nothingness, she had landed right back into herself in a tiny pool of water nestled in a small cup of the earth at the end of her fall. Wild peals of laughter now coursed through her current and the pool itself as Yu realized the folly of her fear and embraced herself anew in a wild glory of recognition. Taking a moment to catch her breath, Yu joyfully looked around the small pool for a moment, and then she silently slipped out of it and flowed out into a small lawn of grass waiting below.

Looking around, Yu could see that she had fallen from the heights above and landed into a small pool of water at the uppermost part of a very large box canyon. Behind and above her stood an immense granite cliff: a tall canyon wall towering up into the sky. To her left and her right, two more

soaring rock parapets enclosed the upper part of the canyon. And laying in front of and below her, seemingly unending bright, green meadows with occasional groupings of small Firs and Cedars spread out in the early morning sun.

“Whew!” Yu thought to herself as her current began to meander through the uppermost lawns of short grass and flowers in the canyon. “That was quite a fall! Totally unexpected, to say the least! But now this place, these alpine meadows neatly nestled within the walls of this deep box canyon. This is a place to slow down for a bit, take stock, and enjoy the serenity of pure being.”

And so, Yu slowed her pace down to the slowest it had been all day and reveled in the beauty and grandeur that surrounded her. “Simplicity,” she thought. “This canyon contains so much simple beauty. And what a beautiful simplicity it is! No hurries, no worries, no giant, unexpected falls. Just silence, flower-lined meadows, trees, grandeur, sunshine, and the occasional song of bird.”

As Yu slowly meandered through the uppermost meadows of the canyon, she delighted in the reflection of the noonday sun playing upon the surface of her being, twinkling, shimmering, sparks of light, dancing, glittering, bouncing on the gentle waves of her current. “Oh! To be alive! To be free! To be flowing ever onward through the beauty of this canyon into the ever onward!” she thought. “What a day! What a life! What a divine purpose!” For Yu at that moment, nothing else mattered, or even came to mind, except the gentle movement of herself and the soft sun shining on her being in the uppermost meadows of that sweet, silent, high mountain box canyon.

It was then that Yu felt the gentle hands of a young girl upon her current. Startled by her first contact with a human being, fear quickly turned into wonder as Yu looked up from the depths of her small current into the face of the young girl dipping her cupped hands into her waters.

Soame was the young girl’s name. And she had come to Yu to quench her thirst that had been brought on by the warm, noonday sun. Soame was a young shepherd who worked the high mountain grasslands with her flock of sheep. Slowly traveling day-by-day looking for good pasture for her small

flock, Soame now called these high mountains and valleys, this very canyon, her home, her hearth, and her life.

Soame had been born in one of the small towns six days below the box canyon, but now she had been living in the canyon for almost four years. Barely seventeen years of age, Soame had been raised as an orphan in the small village of Ruell down below. Her mother had been a young servant girl who had become pregnant by a boy in the market. Phyla was the servant girl's name. And at the time of Soames arrival into this world, she was but seventeen years old herself: a small, scared, thin and frail auburn-haired young girl.

Terrified and embarrassed by her pregnancy, Phyla had kept it a secret as best as she could for fear of being dismissed from her job. Then two weeks before Soames birth, she had pleaded sick at her job and had stolen away up into the mountains above town. And it was there, on a moonless night that she had given birth to Soame, all alone in a sheltered corner of a high mountain meadow.

Amazed, and yet horrified by the beautiful, fair-haired child that had come from her womb, Phyla cuddled and nurtured the child there in that meadow all the next day. Then, the next evening, she had silently and secretly stolen back into town as she carried Soame wrapped in her shawl, close to her breast. Walking down to the river, where the village's small orphanage was, she watched and waited. But everything was quiet. So, careful not to make a sound, Phyla pinned a small note on the shawl around Soame, giving the child's name and a pitiful plea that she be taken care of. Then, with a final kiss and a whispered word, Phyla left Soame on the orphanage's front doorstep and vanished into the night, never to be seen or heard of again.

TWO

And so Soame had grown up in the orphanage. Raised by the nuns that lived there, prayed there, and took care of the small collection of orphans that lived with them. Quick and bright, if somewhat silent and reserved, Soame grew up to be a good student and worker. She always placed first in all her classes and excelled in her work in the kitchen, the granary, the small farm, and whatever else needed to be done there in the orphanage.

But it was the work in the garden that Soame liked best. For it was there that she could be all alone with the plants, the silence, and the open-air with nature all around her. For to young Soame, it just seemed normal to be quiet and gentle of nature. For in being so, she felt a gentle quietness and ease within herself.

Of course, she studied and played with the other girls and boys there in the orphanage. And she enjoyed their company, as well as that of the nuns in charge. But being alone in nature was what young Soame really lived for. For it was there that she felt most alive.

And so, as the years went by, Soame folded more and more into herself. Content with a solitary life of studying alone, working alone in the garden down by the River Yu, and praying in the orphanage chapel with one or two of the sisters. Most evenings, she usually spent roaming the hills alone just outside of Ruell watching the birds or the sunset or collecting herbs and wildflowers.

At first, the nuns were quite concerned at the queer ways of this very young and serious girl, so different from all the other girls and boys in their charge. But Soame was a good worker and an excellent student who knew the scriptures well. And she was admired and respected by all in the orphanage as well as the town of Ruell. And so, as the years passed, the nuns accepted Soame's silent and strange ways in the hope that in doing so, one day she would work through whatever it was that seemed to be distracting, or rather, driving her.

As the years went by, though, Soame didn't work through what was distracting her. She couldn't detail exactly what it was, but she couldn't escape the feeling deep within herself either that something was amiss.

Like maybe something very important was missing, overlooked, or forgotten. She enjoyed her life there in the orphanage with the nuns, as well as her work, her studies, and the other children. But she just couldn't get over the feeling that something very important in life had been mislaid or misplaced.

At first, Soame had tried to find answers and solace in the chapel, praying and studying with the nuns. And that had helped for a bit, for a while. But in the end, all the studying and praying had only left her confused. And so, as the years passed, Soame lost faith in the teachings in the chapel and of the nuns. And instead, she retreated more and more into herself and the hills just outside of Ruell.

And then one-night in her thirteenth year, Soame had a dream. A beautiful dream! The very first of her entire life. She was all alone in a lovely little canyon, surrounded by trees and flowers and birds, and there was a charming little brook running right beside her. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and deep, deep silence reigned all around. Curious and intrigued at first, but far from scared. Next, Soame had heard a distant voice, whispering to her in the dream. It came from the trees, or maybe from the brook, or maybe even from the sky above. Or maybe, it was all about her. Soame wasn't quite sure.

At first, Soame had been unable to make out the actual words of what was said, what she heard in the dream. So, she had sunk down to the ground in the dream and closed her eyes, straining to understand. Then slowly, words, soft words that she could barely make out, began to take form and shape: something about reverence, respect, resolution, and a path leading to a special place, a hidden heart, deep within the soul of the mountains. But the rest, the words in-between, Soame couldn't make out. Sitting there in the dream, Soame listened as hard as she could for a long time to get the rest of the message until finally, the dream passed as she fell back into a deep sleep.

Waking up the next morning, Soame felt a lightness, a peace, and a happiness she had never known before. But, had it been real? Or had it just been a dream? She wasn't sure. But she decided to keep the dream and the voice a secret from everyone else, even her best friend Sister Laurel, for fear of being teased and taunted. But she could not deny that

she had had the dream, the first and only of her entire life. Or that she had heard the voice and what it had said to her. For it had spoken to her soul that dream, that voice, calling to her, trying to communicate something very special.

All that day, and then that night as she lay in her bed before falling to sleep, Soame kept remembering the dream, trying to understand what she had heard: reverence, respect, resolution, and a path to some kind of special place. What did it all mean? Thinking and wondering until she could think and wonder no more, Soame fell asleep that night on her small pallet of straw and hay in the orphanage with the beginnings of a bright, warm glow inside of her. The first she had known in a long, long time.

Soame didn't dream that night or the next. But three nights later, it came again. The same dream! Once again, she was all alone in a beautiful little canyon, surrounded by tall cliffs, tall trees, birds, and a little murmuring brook. And there, in the canyon, she heard the same voice again; so gentle, so soft, and yet, so definite and so clear. And again, it whispered its sweet, soft message of reverence, respect, resolution, and a path leading to a special place: a hidden heart deep within the soul of the mountains.

"But I am only a young girl," Soame wanted to protest back in the dream. "I don't know the mountains or how to survive there. Surely, I will be eaten by a bear, killed by bandits or starve to death." But as much as she protested in the dream, the canyon walls, the trees, the birds, the small brook, and the very sky itself only smiled back at her and demanded that she come.

The next day after school, lunch and her afternoon work, Soame walked down to the wood beside the River Yu that ran in front of the orphanage. "What's going on?" she thought to herself. "Why do I keep having this same dream? And what does it mean when it talks about reverence, respect, resolution, and a path leading to a special place and a hidden heart deep within the soul of the mountains?"

It all felt so incredibly wonderful, yet so big, so mysterious and so daunting to Soame. Like maybe she had been asleep her entire life, and now it was time to wake up from the "dream of life" that she had been living. "But was it really real, the dream? And all of this the real dream?" Soame ruminated as she sat by the river. "Or was it only a dream, and all of this reality?"

Looking into the current of the River Yu as it passed, Soame sat in wonder and confusion as she tried to make sense of it all.

But then, there, in the murmuring current of the River Yu, Soame felt it again! Not a voice like in the dream, but something more like an energy or a spirit reaching out to her. Immediately shaken out of her reverie, Soame curiously looked deeper into the current of the passing river, searching intensely for the source of what she was feeling. And then suddenly, inexplicably, she felt the river pulling her, actually tugging at her soul, directing her upriver into the mountains and to its source!

Startled, and now more confused than ever, Soame could not help but feel a great fear welling up inside of her as she sat there beside the River Yu. But she could not deny what she was feeling there beside the river. It was so clear, so obvious, so undeniable. Nor could she deny what she had been hearing in her dreams at night. And so, surprised and amazed and scared all at the same time, yet intrigued and enchanted, and yet still, confused and disorientated by it all, Soame stayed there beside the River Yu for a long, long time, looking deeply into its current, and beyond.

The next day in the orphanage, Soame found herself stumbling about as if she were in a daydream. She felt lethargic, confused, and completely incapable of understanding and assimilating what was happening in her life with life there in the orphanage. At lunchtime, sister Laurel had even commented on Soame's apparent lack of enthusiasm and her bewildered appearance. But Soame, unable to explain her strange behavior, had only smiled back weakly at sister Laurel and mumbled something about being tired.

And then one evening, two days later, twilight it was, as Soame sat on a hill just outside of Ruell watching the last rays of the sun fading into the plains to the west, she felt it again! Suddenly it was all around her! In the hills, the valleys, the far horizon, and the sky above: a feeling, a spirit, an almost distinct voice beseeching her, calling her up the river and into the mountains. "Reverence, respect, resolution, and a hidden heart somewhere deep within the soul of the mountains," it seemed to whisper to her ever so softly, faintly.

Once again, Soame was shocked and surprised by what she was feeling, what she felt she was hearing. And although she was not entirely sure of

where the words were coming from, there was no denying that she could hear them. Or at least feel them, coming to her from all of nature that surrounded her. So Soame sat there for a long time, listening deeply in total awe as the sensation surrounded her, nurturing her young soul until it faded and disappeared with the final rays of the setting sun and the coming of night.

Returning to the orphanage in complete darkness, Soame took her dinner from a pot on the kitchen stove and carried it with a chunk of black bread back up to her room on the second floor of the orphanage. Lightheaded now with delight and curiosity, she sat by the window of her small room eating her supper as she gazed out and up into the multitude of stars above.

“What is going on?” Soame asked herself again as she tried to contain the mysterious feeling of excitement that was now brewing, laughing, dancing, and bubbling over inside of her. “And what is this feeling of indescribable lightness and exhilaration that begins in the very depths of my heart and soul and bubbles up and out into my arms, my feet, and my head? I feel as if I need only stand on the tips of my toes and stretch out the window to touch the very stars themselves!” she thought as she sat there gazing up into the stars.

But, unable to answer the questions she was asking herself, or make sense of what was going on, Soame quietly finished her meal, changed into her sleeping gown, said her prayers and went to bed. But try as she might, Soame could not sleep that night. Every time she closed her eyes, she heard the voice, or at least the memory of the voice, beseeching her, whispering to her about the hidden heart somewhere in the depths of the mountains!

After three hours of wakefulness and confused excitement, Soame could bear it no more. It simply would not let her be! So, getting up and shedding her sleeping gown and dressing for the cool evening air, she quickly packed her small leather bag with her few belongings. Then, silently, she slipped down the stairs, grabbed a loaf of black bread, a wedge of cheese, and some nuts from the kitchen, and stole out the front door of the orphanage, back into the hills just outside of Ruell, up along the River Yu.