

The Jade Rabbit, Chapter One

by Mark Matthews

Chapter One

"Hello, Moonlight Crisis Shelter, Janice speaking, how may I help you?"

"I know she's there, God damn it, ran off again, I know it. What is she saying, what is she telling you? That she has it so bad here? That I'm bad, I'm a bad dad and she's a poor thing? I'll tell you one thing, you don't want me to come up there, I know you don't want that."

The voice shot out of the receiver and I practically felt his breath against my face, shouting against my lips — and perhaps there was the odor of alcohol, or at least cigarettes with a hint of bacon grease.

"Who's calling please?"

I knew exactly who was calling. It was Mr. Canticle. His daughter Hailey was at Moonlight Crisis and Runaway Shelter for youths for the second time this month.

"This is Douglas Canticle, and I know my daughter is there again. You know she lies, don't you? Lies all the time just to cause trouble and you let her get away with it. I'm not going to just sit here and do nothing while that happens. I've had enough."

There was fire in the dragon's breath.

"Yes, your daughter is here," I said, with nothing to hide, "and she is safe. And we know that everyone is capable of lying, all right. We know Hailey. For the next forty-eight hours she will be under the care of Social Services, and everyone should just use that time to step back and sort things out until we figure what's next."

I hoped this might calm him, might douse the flames. He needed to know that I wasn't part of a conspiracy to put him back in jail.

I heard him inhale and get ready to fire.

"I guess her loser friends won't even help her no more. Her friends are ten years older than her and a waste of flesh. All night she's out with these punks, and the one she calls her boyfriend is the biggest punk of them all. She's just sixteen years old and they should all be in prison for messing with her. When I was her age, I wouldn't get away with any of this; I was different..."

Then he sighed, much louder than I think he wanted. I heard a self-reflecting sadness, a hurt for all the broken dreams he had, right there in the sigh. Memories could be heard coming back to him of being raised with maybe a rigid father and a fragile mother, perhaps a transient family looking for work in each new state. Whatever it was, there was sadness — at least I hoped he was capable of sadness — so I said nothing.

The air stayed silent for just seconds, but then the shrieks returned.

"Late, she's late, that's what she's running from. I guess that's my fault, too. I bet you're going to send out those idiot state workers to get me arrested. That's what she wants, to get me arrested. Did you know her boyfriend's got a spike through his tongue, and one through his nipple? Last week she got sent home from school for

smoking cigarettes. What am I gonna do? Are they coming out here?"

"Like I said, we are not the police, remember that. We're just a safe place to go, and if Hailey chose to leave, it's good she came here, for both of you, especially if her friends are like you say they are. It's not about blame. We just need to do all that we can to find some answers."

I was telling him that yes, someone is coming out, and hopefully he would start working with us once he felt the squeeze. If that doesn't happen, I might privately wish that he be mandated to have only one child, like they do in my birth country of China for population control. Somewhere in his heart he must love that child, so change could still happen — but if not, a one-child policy was merciful to the unconceived and unborn.

"Well, ma'am," he got sarcastically polite. "we're not going through the same old crap again. You can keep her. Just keep her there and see what happens. Let her try to blame this one on me, the little floozy. Her mother's child, all right, that's all she is. I tried. I tried, and now it's your turn. Her mother doesn't want her."

"It's frustrating for everybody," I repeated. "You're tired of it. Just want it to end and want a way out because anything's better than how it's going. Same as she feels, Mr. Canticle. We got to put all our fears and angers aside because if she doesn't get things together real soon it could cause irreparable damage. We are not the enemy; we want everyone to be safe. I think you know that."

I thought that sounded good, but there was a muffled sound as I spoke, like he had cupped the receiver in his hand and turned it from his mouth, so I wondered if he'd even heard it. What was he doing? My imagination brought up a tattooed, skinny figure next to

him with cash in his hands ready to purchase cocaine.

"Damn straight," his voice returned, and his mood had turned jovial. "Hey, are you that Oriental lady? Hailey told me about you, said you were real crazy. Maybe you do all that chanting oriental stuff, on those rugs too. Hey, those are nice, must be worth a fortune. Maybe that's what she liked. You know, Hailey even likes me sometimes, too. You tell her I'm here like I always am. Tell her good luck."

With that we said our goodbyes.

I hung up and waited for the quiet of my office to blot out the screeching noise of the phone call. These calls happened often. There was no way out of them, just a way through them.

I imagined Mr. Canticle getting busy today, buying groceries and cleaning house. This and a fake smile was all it usually took to avoid a Child Neglect charge.

I leaned back and looked at the picture of my mother and father that sat on my desk. They were both dressed up, dad in a striped suit with a purple tie and Mom in a red dress. Their bodies were turned into each other, their arms were embraced, but their heads were swiveled at the last second to the shooting camera flash. Unprepared, unposed, and it had captured all their kaleidoscope background.

Dad could never get 'Mr. Canticle' mad. He never even learned how. If mother ever got mad, you could only tell because she was on the internet, donating to an organization that would fight the cause. Twenty-five to fifty bucks later, she logged off and felt her revenge.

Beside the picture stood my nameplate; *Director, Janice Z. Woodward, MSW*. Janice, my professional name, was usually turned to Jan for my friends. Z stands for Zhu, a name given to me by the

orphanage that raised me for six months in China, and Woodward is the family where my new identity took roots after the adoption. The Masters of Social Work is still being paid for with a two hundred dollar electronic withdrawal each month, and here I am spreading the fruits to over three hundred children a year as crisis shelter director.

But dragons continue to breathe fire and char any green that may grow.

Hailey had just recently moved in with her father. Her mom raised her, but after mom said she was interfering with the latest live-in boyfriend, she was kicked out and came to stay at Moonlight. Dad was contacted, came to the shelter for one meeting, and agreed to take her home as long as the paperwork was done to stop the child-support payments. Hailey moved into his basement, but came back to Moonlight yesterday after hearing the constant footsteps of neighborhood leeches making crack cocaine deals in the living room above her. These were the allegations he must have been referring to as lies.

But I've learned to never give up hope. Hailey can have her parents back someday; her father or mother can get it together — people do change. I tell myself this always when the dark side comes in and blocks out everything. Mr. Canticle just has old built-in fears and evil residue from his own parents getting in the way. It's nothing that the staff of Moonlight can't fix from this yellow-bricked, sad looking shelter that years ago housed nuns in every room. The old nunnery turned shelter for runaway youth and respite for families in crisis could perform miracles.

The moon. Even when the sun is gone and things get dark, usually the moon comes to reflect some light of hope until a new dawn can emerge

.

I held my cheeks in my hands, ready to be done for the day. It was near 9 p.m., and out the window the June night was finally getting dark, but not before orange sunshine smeared around the horizon. I looked at the picture of my husband. His smile of contentment said, 'I understand that you work late. Work as long as you need to; they need you now, and even go for a run after work if it helps.'

My desk needs a picture of both of us with my parents, I thought; his black skin, my brown, and their pale white would really make a kaleidoscope. My white parents with their Asian daughter and black son-in-law.

"Hey, Sue," I intercommed the direct care supervisor. "I'm leaving. Please check in on Hailey tonight. Her dad called and is pretty upset. I think he'll calm down, but while the neglect charges are being investigated, he cannot see her." Sue knew what to do, of course — but if she needed to reach me, I was on call for twenty-four hours, a cell phone perched on my nightstand.

I grabbed my gym bag out of my office closet and changed out of my plaid dress into my running gear, making sure to slip on my identification bracelet (in a world full of cars, runners need this like a soldier needs a dogtag). I hung up my dress, flattened out the wrinkles with the sides of my fists, and then bounced downstairs. Just changing clothes made my spirit change course, and as soon as I stepped out the door and took a few running steps across the parking lot, the day already began to fall away, like drops of water shaken off a wet dog. I checked my watch and mentally charted a familiar eight-mile loop, hoping to knock it off in under an hour and be home by 10:30 for some husband time before sleep.

The shelter was in a Detroit suburb, a place where low rent houses bought by state-aided, one income families were mixed in with retired couples who had lived there for fifty-five years, hung flags out front, and put metal bars on their windows. I never felt like part

of this world while running through these neighborhoods, flying by strip malls, and waiting for stoplights while stretching my calves against a telephone pole. I always ran north of the shelter since 2 miles south was an area known as 'little Saigon' for the frequent gun shots in the night.

My first few steps away from the building and my mind began to free. I listened to the sweet sound of plastic on pavement. I needed the rush quicker today so my strides started much more brisk, a near sprint over the first half mile. Drops of sweat flowed around my temples, and the liquid of life oozed out of my pores. The small ache in my calf from yesterday's run was fading, and I felt my blood rushing more free through my body. Toxic chemicals that had built in my brain were being flushed out. Brain cells of memory and mental energy were being rearranged. My thighs started to get stronger with each stride, begging to be let go and glide through the dusky streets.

About two miles in and recent memories of Mr. Canticle gathered inside me like a grey billowing cloud, and I ran right into its haze. It was the cloud of his hurt, and for a brief moment I became the Canticle dragon. Pain, fear, and chronic desperation surrounded me. I understood and felt what he feels, just a small predator animal, maybe a wolverine, stuck in a steel trap and chewing off my own leg. Blood filled my mouth, bone crunched in my teeth, but I just gnawed harder because nobody's ever gonna keep me trapped, and I'll be happy to kill myself trying to get away.

The specter of Mr. Canticle flushed from me quickly, and I felt my legs get stronger at mile four, almost thirty minutes in. My lungs breathed in the last bit of sunlit air as car headlights illuminated the running lady silhouetted on the sidewalk. At mile six, more chemicals flowed through me, and I ran into the past of Hailey's mother, becoming her just as I had Mr. Canticle. I heard Hailey's voice, my precocious, psychological-warfare-waging

daughter, telling me all these terrible things my new boyfriend had done. For so long I had been haunted, followed by chronic sadness, all my possible futures wiped out when I gave birth to Hailey at just seventeen — and now I had one last shot. One last chance for happiness. I felt the conviction in my own voice when I said Hailey ‘was lying just to make me miserable so it's time she moves out with her dad until she gets some mental help.’

Mile seven: one more and then done, and I picked up the pace and left this behind. My calf might never hurt me again, the nagging injury might be gone because I was flying, ripping away each mile and gaining strength with each stride and each breath and my round trip nighttime run was near complete.

Then I saw the figure of Hailey sitting in the distance back at the shelter on the side of the road. She was dressed in her red shirt, with her body slumped over and her arms hugging her legs. Outside when she's not supposed to be, acting out again, and just begging for attention, and I could feel the anger of her dad resurface. ‘The floozy,’ her dad had called her. That's all she had left since she was betrayed by those who were supposed to raise her, and protect her, but who abandoned her as much as a baby placed in a dumpster. All that could get her love and attention now was her young body from a nipple-pierced ‘punk’.

“She's late, she's late. Just like her mother.” The words finally hit me.

How did I miss that? She's pregnant. Hailey's pregnant. It's always hidden somewhere in a client's speech, what they really want, and I let the fire in the dragon's breath stop me. If Mr. Canticle had any right to be angry, it should be at me for not hearing him.

Hailey was with child. If this was true, we needed to talk about it.

I sprinted in the last quarter mile with a kick that would usually feel like bliss, and trotted right next to a surprised, cigarette smoking, blond-haired sixteen-year-old Hailey who was sitting on a parking block, gently rocking with her elbows between her knees.

"Hailey." I placed my hand on her shoulder. "you know you can't smoke here." My chest heaved. "And you're not supposed to be outside." I got this all out in one breath and placed my hands behind my neck to free up my airways.

"Go inside before you are put on restriction."

Hailey put out the cigarette, got up on her feet, and tried to brush the dust and guilt off her jeans. She was moving in circles, with no clear direction, as if she forgot where the front door was. I folded my hands behind my head to get enough air to belt out one last thought. "Hailey, I know, I know. I know there are some things you need to tell me."

She stood looking at me. Tired, slitty blue eyes that were unfocussed. Her hair was mopped over her head like she had been living on the street for weeks. I could feel her examining my thoughts, wondering if I was a threat. If we could have stayed there forever we could have eventually connected without saying a word.

This was when a pair of headlights shined behind me.

(Download a Sample or the complete novel on Amazon)

