

“An intriguing, historical portrait of Korea and her people on the brink of political and religious upheaval. Written in elegant prose, this story is equal parts mystery, history, family drama and royal court dynamics. The alluring twists and turns keep you turning pages and holding your breath.”

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Cynthia Leitich Smith, *The New York Times* bestselling author of *Blessed*, *Eternal* and *Rain is Not My Indian Name*

Korea, 1895: Court intrigue and foreign powers threaten the centuries-old hermit kingdom. In a prominent manor, Ji-nah, the young, sheltered ward of the master, and Han, the servant she sees as an older brother, are left in the iron grip of Tutor Lim’s power when Master Yi is called away. When Ji-nah and Han uncover the tutor’s broader conspiracy with the Japanese to overthrow Queen Min, they resolve to save the queen, whose fate seems tied to their master. In the last days of their fallen kingdom, they struggle to rebuild their lives and nation, and find hope in a new world order.

Steeped in the forms and rhythms of Korea at the turn of the century, *Last Days of the Morning Calm* is a dramatic coming-of-age tale whose tenor captures the spirit of the times.

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Last Days of the Morning Calm

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*Last Days
of the
Morning
Calm*

Tina Jimin Walton

A decorative graphic consisting of stylized, swirling grey clouds. One cloud is positioned behind the word 'PROLOGUE' in a white box, and another is to its left.

PROLOGUE

1882

Thirteen Years Ago

The quick susurrus of her skirt penetrated the sleepy midnight air as the lady-in-waiting rushed faster toward the inner sanctum of the palace. Clutching a set of tattered robes and a flickering candle, she flew down the maze-like corridors that led to Queen Min's chambers. Sudden shouts echoed outside the palace walls. It was only a matter of time before the royal guards would be overwhelmed by the mob orchestrated by Taewongun, the queen's bitterest enemy, and also her father-in-law.

For years as regent, Taewongun had ruled the kingdom with a tight fist, keeping Korea a hermit kingdom, closed to all foreign influence. He purged French missionaries, using the martyrs' blood on the kingdom's shores to stave off further intruders.

The ruthless regent ruled through Kjong, his weak son, soft as clay in the hands of his father. To cement his control, Taewongun arranged his son's marriage to the orphaned Min girl, whose clan had little or no influence in court. With a weak son and an unknown daughter-in-law, Taewongun thought he had secured his power.

But he had underestimated the young girl who had plans of her own. Queen Min had her husband's ear, and when King Kjong came of age for the throne, it was she who demanded the regent

step down. She amassed enough power by elevating her own clan members and exiled Taewongun from court.

The ex-regent bid his time, determined to access the throne once more. Times were changing, and the kingdom was opening up to foreign pressures under the new reign. Uneasy with change, many Koreans were upset with the court's concessions to modernisation. The old guards complained and Taewongun listened. It was the opportunity he was waiting for and craftily, he fanned the flames of the disgruntled soldiers. Now, waiting like a hungry wolf at the edge of the dark, Taewongun watched the mob finish their job. Soon, it would tear down the gates and storm the palace.

The lady-in-waiting reached the queen's chambers. Without announcing herself, she threw open the paper-screened *hanji* doors.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! They are breaking down the main gate – it's a mutiny!"

The queen woke with a start, but remained strangely calm, as though she had been expecting this moment, and changed quickly into the robes her attendant offered.

From the double pavilion, a bell tolled continuously, sounding an intrusion.

Now disguised in peasant clothing, Queen Min and her small entourage made haste toward the servants' gate. Out through the North Gate, they slipped quietly into the dark foothills. There was only one safe place where she could hide. In a small hamlet, just outside the city, she would go to a modest home that belonged to her well-hidden and little-known younger sister.



Part One



CHAPTER 1

Ji-nah couldn't feel her legs, kneeling as she had for what seemed like an eternity. But the numbness of her deadened legs was nothing compared to that of her mind, frozen with disbelief. The red tassel on the corner of the floor cushion poked through now and then as the hem of the lady's billowing skirt rose in tandem with her animated voice.

"Not even the *day* of your birth?" Lady Cho asked again.

Ji-nah nodded, but bit her tongue, forcing herself to keep her gaze low on the tassel; she must keep decorum.

"Ji-nah was born in the year of the dragon, an auspicious year," Tutor Lim offered with a nervous laugh, ingratiating himself to the lady, who seemed too haughty for a visitor of her station. The Cho family was far beneath the Yi name that belonged to her master. Surely her tutor knew this. Ji-nah cast him a sidelong glance that he couldn't have missed, but he ignored her.

"You recall the story of the manor. Years ago, Master Yi took in the poor infant left at his gate," the tutor continued, blinking strangely at Ji-nah.

"Wasn't it also the same year he lost his wife and child? I hardly call that auspicious," the lady huffed.

"But this child brings her own good fortune," he persisted.

“She would have perished from her lowly birth if it were not for fate’s mercy. Why, she didn’t merely survive, but she’s found favor! Look, she’s a *yangban*’s ward!”

Yangban, the privileged class of noblemen. One was either born into it or in rare instances, men with means were known to take the state examination to test into the title, but never had it been heard of that a girl of ignoble birth be elevated to such status.

Ji-nah had heard it all her life that she was lucky, like a river carp picked to swim amongst the scarlet and golden koi in the royal palace. She was fortunate, but the reminder of her lowly birth still chafed.

“Master Yi hired me to teach her. I can vouchsafe for her deportment. She is diligent with her studies. She reads and writes –”

“Ack! A good wife doesn’t need to know her letters. It puffs her up and fills her head with all sorts of nonsense.”

Nonsense? Ji-nah bit harder, filling her mouth with a salty tang. She stole a glance at the lady whose downturned mouth reminded her of a dried mackerel. *This* was nonsense – this discussion over her marriage suitability without Master Yi.

“Four pillars,” the lady insisted. “The year, month, day, and hour of birth are crucial for divining such unions. My son is eleven –”

“A perfect match! She’s sixteen – a dragon sign.”

Tutor Lim’s sparse whiskers moved comically as he defended Ji-nah’s pedigree. Yet, the tight pull of his topknot above his narrow face gave him an austere and hungry look. The tutor seemed small and crumpled in his ill-fitting robe that hung loosely from his skeletal frame – like a child play-acting the importance of his role.

One at birth and thirteen years later – he certainly knew how

old she was. What was he getting at? Unable to bite down any harder on her tongue, she corrected, “You’re mistaken. I am but fourteen this year. I was born in the year of the horse.”

Lady Cho gasped. “Why, Ga-mun is a rooster. A stubborn horse for my Ga-mun? Inauspicious! It would never work.”

The lady stood abruptly, ending the fruitless meeting. When her back was turned, the tutor pulled a long thin bamboo switch from his sleeve and waved it admonishingly at Ji-nah. It was a small victory for Ji-nah’s pride, but she didn’t know then that she had let a valuable opportunity slip through her hands.