

The
Walled
City

RYAN GRAUDIN



Indigo

First published in Great Britain in 2014
by Indigo
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Ryan Graudin 2014

The right of Ryan Graudin to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Orion Publishing Group.

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78062 199 9

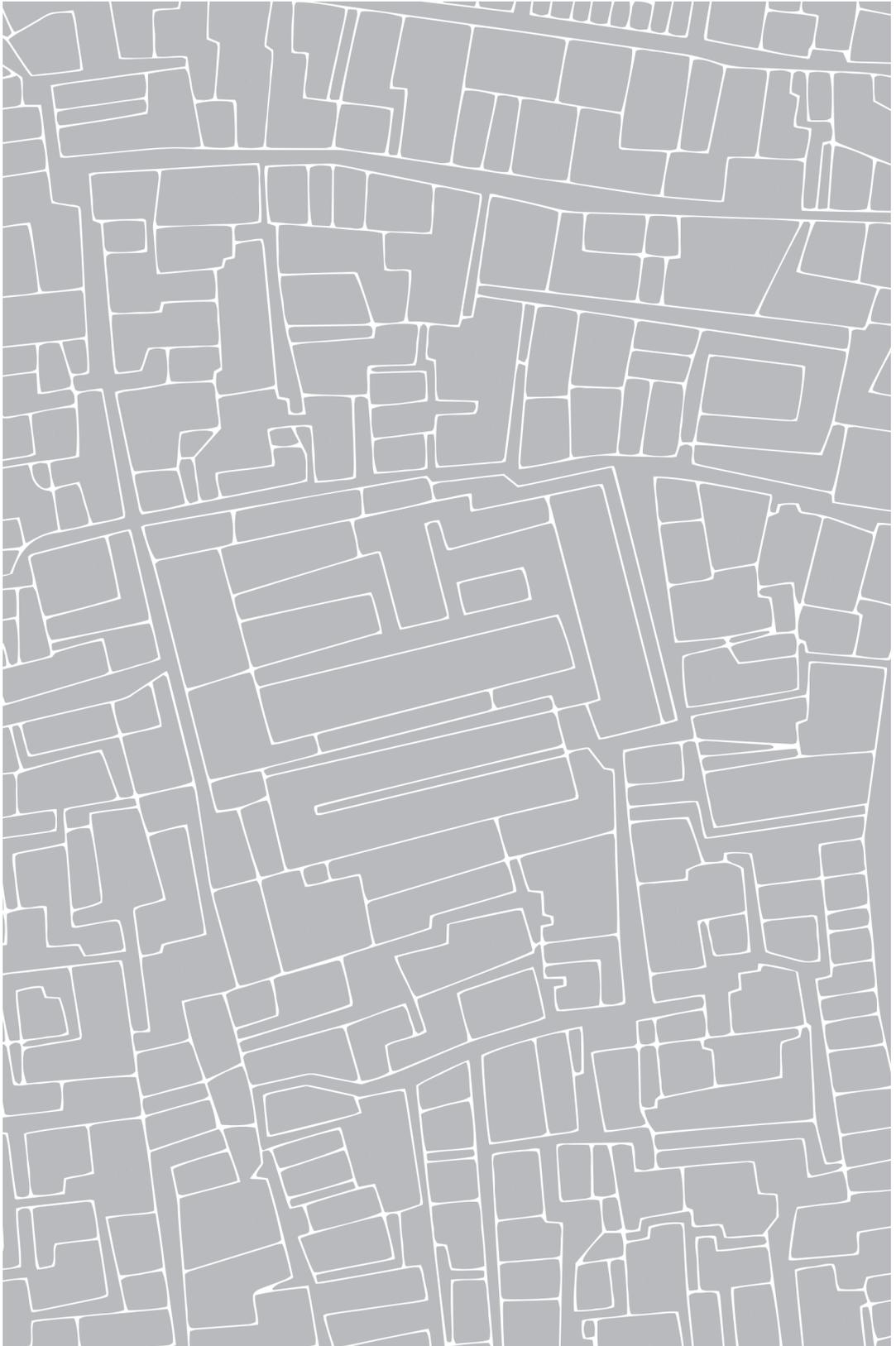
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon CRO 4YY

www.orionbooks.co.uk

TO THE CHILDREN OF BODING,
WHO TAUGHT ME TO SEE THE INVISIBLE

DARKNESS SETTLES ON ROOFS AND WALLS,
BUT THE SEA, THE SEA IN THE DARKNESS CALLS.

— HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW



18 DAYS

JIN LING

There are three rules of survival in the Walled City: Run fast. Trust no one. Always carry your knife.

Right now, my life depends completely on the first.

Run, run, run.

My lungs burn, bite for air. Water stings my eyes. Crumpled wrappers, half-finished cigarettes. A dead animal—too far gone to tell what it used to be. Carpets of glass, bottles smashed by drunk men. All of these fly by in fragments.

These streets are a maze. They twist into themselves—narrow, filled with glowing signs and graffitied walls. Men leer from doorways; their cigarettes glow like monsters' eyes in the dark.

Kuen and his followers chase me like a pack: frantic, fast, together. If they'd broken apart and tried to close me in, maybe they'd have a chance. But I'm faster than all of them because

I'm smaller. I can slip into cracks most of them don't even see. It's because I'm a girl. But they don't know this. No one here does. To be a girl in this city—without a roof or family—is a sentence. An automatic ticket to one of the many brothels that line the streets.

The boys behind me don't yell. We all know better than that. Yelling attracts attention. Attention means the Brotherhood. The only sounds of our chase are gritted footsteps and hard breaths.

I know every corner I dash past. This is my territory, the west section of the Walled City. I know exactly which alleyway I need to disappear into. It's coming soon, just a few strides away. I tear by Mrs. Pak's restaurant, with its warm, homey scents of chicken, garlic, and noodles. Then there's Mr. Wong's chair, where people go to get their teeth pulled. Next is Mr. Lam's secondhand trader's shop, its entrance guarded with thick metal bars. Mr. Lam himself squats on the steps. Feet flat. His throat grumbles as I run past. He adds another loogie to his tin can collection.

A sharp-eyed boy slouches on the opposite stoop, picking at a Styrofoam bowl of seafood noodles. My stomach growls, and I think about how easy it would be to snatch it. Keep running.

I can't afford to stop. Not even for food.

I'm so distracted by the noodles that I nearly miss the alleyway. The turn is so sharp my ankles almost snap. But I'm still running, body turned sideways in the narrow gap between these two monstrous buildings. Cinder block walls

press against my chest and scrape my back. If I breathe too fast, I won't be able to wedge through.

I push farther in, ignoring how the rough, damp wall claws skin off my elbows. Roaches and rats scurry in and out of the empty spaces by my body—long past the fear of getting crushed by my feet. Dark, heavy footsteps echo off the walls, throb through my ears. Kuen and his pack of street boys have passed me by. For now.

I look down at the boots in my hand. Sturdy leather, tough soles. They were a good find. Worth the panicked minutes I just spent running for them. Not even Mr. Chow—the cobbler on the city's west edge, always bent over his bench of nails and leather—makes such sturdy footwear. I wonder where Kuen got them. These boots have to be from City Beyond. Most nice things are.

Angry shouts edge into my hiding place, piling together in a mess of curses. I flinch and the trash beneath my feet shudders. Maybe Kuen's boys have found me after all.

A girl trips and falls, spills into the foot of my alleyway. She's breathing hard. Blood streaks down her arms, her legs, summoned by the glass and gravel in her skin. All her ribs stick out from the slippery silk of her dress. It's blue and shiny and thin. Not the kind of thing you wear in this city.

All breath leaves my body.

Is it her?

She looks up and I see a face covered in makeup. Only her eyes are raw, real. They're full of fire, as if she's ready to fight.

Whoever this girl is, she isn't Mei Yee. She isn't the sister I've been searching for all this time.

I shrink farther into the gloom. But it's too late. The doll-girl sees me. Her lips pull back, as if she wants to talk. Or bite me. I can't tell which.

I never find out.

The men are on her. They swoop down like vultures, clawing at her dress as they try to pull her up. The flames behind the girl's eyes grow wild. She twists around, fingers hooked so her nails catch her nearest attacker's face.

The man flinches back. Four bright streaks rake down his cheek. He howls unspeakable things. Grabs at the nest of falling braids in her hair.

She doesn't scream. Her body keeps twisting, hitting, thrashing—desperate movements. There are four men with their hands on her, but the fight isn't an easy one. They're so busy trying to hold her down that none of them notice me, deep in the alley's dark. Watching.

Each of them grabs a limb, holds her tight. She bucks, her back arching as she spits at their faces. One of the men strikes her over the head and she falls into an eerie, not-right stillness.

When she's not moving, it's easier to look at her captors. The Brotherhood's mark is on all four of them. Black shirts. Guns. Dragon jewelry and tattoos. One even has the red beast inked on the side of his face. It crawls all the way up his jaw, into his hairline.

"Stupid whore!" the man with the nail marks growls at her battered, unconscious form.

“Let’s get her back,” the one with the face tattoo says.
“Longwai’s waiting.”

It’s only after they take her away, black hair sweeping the ground under her limp body, that I realize I’d been holding my breath. My hands tremble, still wrapped around the boots.

That girl. The fire in her eyes. She could’ve been me. My sister. Any one of us.