

# THE BLOODY OLD PLUM, VOL. 1

## 老梅謠卷一：血色童謠

*A magician and part-time cold-case investigator joins up with a spirit medium to investigate the origins of a creepy nursery rhyme and ghastly legend told by the residents of a picturesque coastal village. What they find is more appalling and dangerous than either could have imagined.*

The sleepy north coast village of Old Plum, famed for its windswept, wave-worn sandstone topography, is internet author Flo's inspirational muse behind this wide-ranging four-volume fantasy horror story in *The Bloody Old Plum*. The book opens with a tale of a deceptively innocent nursery rhyme with a sinister backstory.

Wu Chang, a magician by trade, has a passion for investigating unsolved murder mysteries in his off-hours. After discovering a deeper, curiously dark meaning in the lyrics of an obscure lullaby, Wu teams up with local tour guide and medium Wang I-Chieh to visit Old Plum Village, the source of the children's song. There, however, they quickly find the veil of mystery to be thicker even than the fog that regularly blankets the village. Threatened by mysterious shadows stalking them in the fog, they beat a hasty, albeit temporary, retreat.

Far from discouraged, their odd encounters in Old Plum only pique Wu's curiosity further. He invests in state-of-the-art special equipment and brushes up on local historical knowledge to prepare for a second visit. Comparing his findings with clues woven into the nursery rhyme, Wu learns that the long-abandoned mansion standing where the fog was always thickest is the former home of the local Chen clan – and the site of their brutal massacre.

While preparing their return to Old Plum, a local policeman implores them to end their investigation, saying a survivor had told that on the night the fog appeared, all it touched had perished. Moreover, he tells



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them the unnatural fog that blankets the property even by day is an otherworldly warning to the curious...and that those foolish enough to enter the decrepit mansion are never seen again.

Flo injects distinctively Eastern fantasy elements into a horror story rooted in the pain of unrequited injustice. The staccato tempo of the narrative and the story's sudden twists and turns underpin this work's novel treatment of Taiwan's infamous White Terror Era.

## Flo 芙蘿

Mystery Writers of Taiwan member Flo is a popular internet author with a passion for major criminal cases, the forensic sciences, and forensic medicine. She is adept at weaving her extensive knowledge and technical acumen into her creative works that currently span paranormal thriller, mystery and suspense, and fantasy adventure genres. The four-volume *The Bloody Old Plum* ranks as one of Flo's most critically acclaimed works to date.

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By Flo

Translated by Sahana Narayan

## Chapter One: The Macabre Chant

*Old plum, old plum, how many sprouts? No branches, no leaves, nine flowers about. When mama moon hides, don't go out; bolt the windows shut.*

*Green leaf, green leaf, how long green? Turns to spring with cool jade sheen. When storms come, don't swim about; tides rise on green reef and life goes out.*

*Waterwheel, waterwheel, when will you stop? Bamboo can't lead when water runs out. As dawn brings fire, stone turns gold; cries without shadows in the night.*

*Gold mountain, gold mountain how much gold? Only the Chen clan really knows. On New Year's Eve, don't come near; the faceless ghost of the house will kill you mercilessly.*

Old Plum Village was located on Chi Ching Island, along the coast north of Hsün Hsiang City.

Originally a sleepy town, it'd gained popularity in recent years for a gorgeous formation of sea-eroded rock known as "Old Plum Reef". Photographers and tourists now flock to the spot, posting their pictures on social media.

But for Wang I-Chieh, a local guide, Old Plum was more than just a beautiful place. The creepy chant and its accompanying legend shrouded the peaceful village in a veil of mystery.

The long-term residents of the village know the chant. They teach it to their kids, as a warning. The kids say it when they're bored. When they play hide-and-seek, the seeker recites it before setting out.

I-Chieh wondered if the song was really appropriate for kids. Sure, it served to keep them in line, but the lyrics were dark, hinting at a horrible tale. Wouldn't they have nightmares? She, along with the other local guides, called it "the legend of Old Plum" – but the locals called it "the faceless ghost".

According to the legend, one stormy night, someone was murdered, their face disfigured. The murderer was never caught. Ever since, on rainy nights a faceless ghost appears, roaming the village, murdering people and destroying their faces. The legend has evolved over the years to include another dreadful twist: A murderer who disfigures their victim's body and abandons it at the reef shall never be brought to account for their crime.

And so, "the faceless ghost" has become a daily sign of terror for the locals. The elders often warn naughty children: "If you keep up like this, the faceless ghost will come for you!"

There was only one man who didn't believe the legend. His name was Wu Chang.

Tall and refined, born to French and Taiwanese parents, Wu Chang was an internationally renowned magician who solved crime in his spare time. On his many world tours, he'd established strong connections with police departments in different countries and had fostered especially tight bonds with the police chiefs on Chi Ching Island. His past was a mystery to everyone, except for Captain Yang Chih-Kang of the Ninth Criminal Investigative Unit.

Sitting across from I-Chieh, Wu Chang flipped a coin between his long, dexterous fingers. He said, "Dead men tell no tales, but songs betray volumes – *as long as you listen for the music beyond the strings.*"

The two, along with Chih-Kang, had become involved recently in a case at the Golden Sands Resort. A client on one of I-Chieh's tours had died under mysterious circumstances. They pieced the case together, unveiling the truth and gradually becoming familiar with one another in the process.

During the case, Wu Chang learned of the creepy chant, and heard *the music beyond the strings*. It was the killer himself, after they'd caught and bound him, who had told Wu Chang the legend of the faceless ghost. Seeing a connection between the rhyme and the legend, he decided to come to Old Plum and investigate the secrets possibly hidden there.

I-Chieh was delicate and petite, with clear skin and big, round eyes. She scrutinized the slip of paper, looking over its lyrics for the millionth time. "I really don't understand what you're looking at. You really think there's something hidden here?"

She tilted her head, her bangs and high ponytail falling to one side, thinking for a second. "Are you and Chih-Kang messing with me? This feels like some sort of weird prank."

"Of course there's something hidden," said Wu Chang. "At the very least, there was a murder. I'm sure of it."

"That's ridiculous! But wait...another murder? Even if there *was* a murder, ages must have passed since. What's the point of investigating when we're not gonna find anything?"

"If we don't try, how will we know? Besides, we have you."

"Honestly, I feel dumb as hell around you guys. Your abilities make me question my self worth," she complained.

"But you can see spirits; I can't."

"Who am I, the legendary Judge Pao?" she shot back. "I'm terrified of ghosts, how am I supposed to help...let alone become some sort of paranormal investigator?"

"If I'm not mistaken, this is an unsolved crime. You have the power to set things right. Don't you want justice for the victims?"

"Ugh, don't guilt trip me! Besides, now that the Golden Sands case is wrapped up, the restrictions on tours will be lifted. I'll go back to being a tour guide and won't have time for you."

"No matter." Wu Chang's eyes were a deep indigo. His body radiated a sense of dangerous mystery. And yet, he seemed calm, at ease. His nimble fingers continued to play with the coin. "After all, in this world, there are so many whose deaths remain unspoken for."

There was a splutter as I-Chieh spat her half-drunk hot tea onto Wu Chang's face.

He froze in place. The coin dropped from his hands, clinking against the marble tile floor and rolling under a coffee table.

“Oh my god, I’m SO sorry!” I-Chieh grabbed a wad of tissue and started to wipe at his face.

“Master Wu, are you alright?” Liao, the butler, popped in from the kitchen, holding a fruit knife.

Wu Chiang brushed the tea off his face. “I’m okay. Get back to work.” He got up in a huff and headed off to the bathroom, pointedly ignoring I-Chieh.

I-Chieh stared awkwardly at Wu Chang’s receding figure, contritely wiping the sofa.

“What should I do? This couch is such a light suede; I’ll never be able to get the stains out.” She looked helplessly at the butler.

“Just buy a new one.” Wu Chang said as he left, slamming the door behind him.

“I-I-I’m...so sorry!” I-Chieh said as she bowed to the butler.

“It’s no problem, I’ll sort it out. Please sit. Have some fruit.” he answered.

I-Chieh picked the coin up from under the coffee table. She started to play with it, mimicking Wu Chang’s movements, emotions swirling about her.

The last couple days had been one problem after another. First, someone in her tour group had died, then she’d encountered a ghost, and then there were the police requests...accompanying them to the crime scene, identifying the body. It was all so much! She didn’t want anything more to do with it, especially with there being corpses and spirits involved.

Yet at the same time, if it weren’t for the guidance of the spirits, would the case have been cracked so quickly? Would the murderer have given himself up so easily?

What if Wu Chang was right? If only there were a safe and easy way to help out.

Just as Wu Chang emerged from the bathroom, a solution popped into I-Chieh’s head.

“Wu Chang! I know what to do!”

She paused and looked. Wu Chang was wearing a white bathrobe. I-Chieh was a little disappointed; she was hoping he’d be wearing a towel, exposing his rippling abs.

“Yes?” He dried his short, black hair with a towel.

“Let’s figure out if there really was a murder first. If so, *then* we can launch an investigation.”

“As I said, there was a murder. I’m sure of it.”

“That might not be true. Let’s at least think about where to start looking, okay?”

“There’s no need; the lyrics make it very clear,” he said, impatient. He looked at her with supreme disappointment, the way her father looked at their family dog as it failed to do a trick for the umpteenth time.

“Okay, sure...whatever...You’re the super-special once-in-a-lifetime genius blah blah blah...” she grumbled. “So what’s so special about these lines? It doesn’t always rhyme, but sometimes nursery rhymes are just like that. You sing it anyhow. The lyrics make no sense though.”

“No, it’s not the rhyme; it’s the structure.”

“The whole thing?” I-Chieh scrutinized the lyrics again.

Wu Chang went on. "Have you noticed? This chant has four sections. In three, the first sentence of the second line ends in three words: a negative particle followed by a phrasal verb. Only one section ignores this rule: *stone turns gold*."

"So? It might just be an exception. So, what about those 'three ending words'? *As dawn brings fire, stone turns gold*. Doesn't that just mean sunlight makes the stones look golden?"

"You can also read it as, when police arrive at the crime scene with their lanterns, the murderer has already hidden their metal weapon in a place once used for storing stones or perhaps under a rock."

"Isn't that kind of dark for a children's rhyme?" I-Chieh had a bad feeling about this.

"It's pretty dark to start with."

"But, if you're right, the person who came up with both the rhyme and the legend would have known about the murderer and the murder weapon. Why didn't they tell the cops? Why was the murderer never caught? Why is there no trail to follow?"

Wu Chang shrugged and said, "They were probably afraid they'd be silenced." With that said, he turned his attention to the piping hot cup of coffee his butler had just brought him.

"So you're saying that if we stumble upon the truth, we might be...?!" Goosebumps broke out over her skin. For some reason, her sense of foreboding was growing stronger and stronger...

## Chapter Two: The Time Realm

*Worldly writings do the scriptures contain, passed by witnesses through generations. Ink collects and becomes treasure, the mountain's secrets passed down forever.*

*In the final years of the Eastern Chin, a poor man named Liang succumbs to sickness. His wife mourns long; she seeks to die with him. His coffin stays in the hall for several days.*

*On night number seven, Liang's wife is at his side. Her tears, unceasing, take her close to death. Hearing a noise within she stops and runs; she gathers neighbors close to check inside.*

*As the coffin's lid is lifted, Liang sits up, breathing deeply. His wife weeps tears of joy as they embrace. The neighbors doubt, and Liang begins to sketch, his words a blur and pictures more than vague.*

*He regains life but can speak no longer, otherwise the same as before. The villagers declare a miracle, they often come to watch and give support.*

*Days after, Chang, a Taoist priest, pays a call. He says Liang's sketches aren't of this world. They map the boundaries of the chaos realm! To mortal's hands they will bring nought but harm.*

*Chang takes Liang's scrolls away for safekeeping, but his temple drowns in blood soon after, all inhabitants dead within a night, the scriptures taken, lost with nary a trace.*

*Upon this news, Liang, fearing without end, falls to the ground, unable to rise. Ever since, the path of resurrection has been lost.*

The air hung with a thin mist that carried a hint of chill. I-Chieh could see a dimly lit street ahead. Streetlights in front of old apartment buildings flickered to life, as if to welcome her arrival, and yet even their light seemed hazy and cold. Shreds of newspaper on the ground fluttered and drifted in the occasional gusts of wind.

I-Chieh had no idea how she'd ended up here.

As she came to, she realized she was walking with a group of people. She had seen them before – but where? She saw confusion and terror on their faces. She, too, was gripped by fear...a fear stronger than theirs.

What exactly was she afraid of? She couldn't tell. Maybe it was the incense in her hand. Everyone had one. Where did they come from? What were they for? There was a blue light at its burning tip, and fluorescent green filled its center. It emitted a white smoke that was strangely cool. Even as it burned, it did not drop ashes. And its length stayed the same, as if time had come to a standstill. Perhaps the incense wasn't lit by flames.

She and the group were alone. No one knew where to go; no one dared leave each other. In wordless panic, everyone followed closely on each other's heels, searching for a sense of safety, ambling aimlessly down the quiet street.

Suddenly, a gust of wind. A voice rose from inside the group: "M-m-my incense is burning! So fast!"

Everyone turned to look at each other's incense. Some were burning very fast indeed. Some were still long, others dangerously short.

What the hell was going on?

"Mine is almost out!" cried a man in a dress shirt. The last of his incense burned away. As his light vanished, so did he.

Terror bubbled and burst through the group. Some people collapsed; some broke into uncontrollable sobs; others tried to shield their incense from the harsh wind; and still others tried to grab incense from others in the group in hopes of remaining in this strange place as long as possible.

I-Chieh's incense was one of the longer ones, and people started eyeing her. They made moves towards her, and she turned and ran as fast as she could. As she ran, the wind blew harder and harder. The road in front of her blurred, and the people vanished from her sight.

"Tornado! Take cover!" someone cried out ahead.

Everyone scattered, taking cover in the nearby apartment buildings and alleys.

I-Chieh scrambled into the building to her left. The door closed itself with a *bang!*

She looked around. Why did this six-story apartment building have a basement? It was strange, but considering how everything was strange here, it felt almost normal.

The door shook behind her, battered by the wind. Even the screws began to shake loose! It felt as if an unseen force was doing the shaking. I-Chieh started rushing up the stairs, seized by panic. It felt as if the door might suddenly burst open.

The stairway curved from the first to second floor, and at the curve was an open window. I-Chieh looked through and saw the tornado in full force: newspapers and cups swirling around,

incense flying away and people turning to dust, incense breaking into parts and their owners snapping into pieces.

I-Chieh looked at her own incense. It had already burned halfway.

“This is bad. The wind is going to get in,” she thought to herself.

She rushed forward, forcing the window closed. As it snapped shut, the outside dimmed. The world fell into an absolute calm.

It was dark in the apartment building. The only light came from the streetlamps outside, shining through the windows. However, the windows were dark, and so she couldn’t see what was going on outside. She felt completely isolated. A tinge of fear was building again, quickly mounting to full-blown panic.

I-Chieh didn’t want to be alone. “Please someone, help me,” she whimpered.

She went floor by floor, ringing the bell of each apartment, knocking on each door. No one answered.

Only silence.

How much time had passed? How many floors had she climbed, how many doors had she knocked? I-Chieh glanced down again at her incense, seeing that only a third now remained. She anxiously looked out the window, but nothing seemed to be blowing around; the wind seemed to have died down.

She happily made her way down the stairs; she’d rather be chased than linger in this unsettlingly quiet place. She ran down flight after flight, but still hadn’t reached the bottom. “Weird,” she thought. Had she really climbed that high?

She kept going. The end was nowhere in sight.

The incense was down to its final quarter.

“Anyone here? Anyone? Please help, please!” she cried out. She battered a nearby door, tugged at it and with a sudden – *clunk* – it opened!

It was as if the door was never locked.

But as she cracked it open, all she could see was a deeper darkness. The next moment, an unhinged laugh came crackling out, and she reflexively slammed the door shut.

Even more terrified, she flew down the steps again, finding only more stairs.

She started to cry. “I’m trapped,” she thought. “I’m forever trapped on this staircase.” Despite her overwhelming despair, her feet kept going. She could not afford to stop.

Eventually, her numb feet gave in, and she collapsed in the space between two floors. She couldn’t run, not anymore.

Her incense was almost out. She started to cry again. She felt hopeless.

What was this apartment building? She felt more terrified than she thought possible. Even if her incense burned out, and she vanished, she would not let it happen here! She had to escape! But how?

Time passed. Her incense was down to its last tick of life. She froze. Her terror, now long-gone, had been replaced by numbness. As she stared at her legs, she noticed a shadow.

“A shadow?” she thought.

All this time, she'd been looking down the staircase. Now, she shifted her gaze to the window. She retraced the path of the shadow, scanning for the light behind it: a lamp! A streetlamp.

She clung to the wall to pull herself back to her feet. The window was shut tight. She used all her strength to open it – just a crack – before the wind again barreled in, as if trying to force her to close it shut. She couldn't let it close. She strained and pushed the window back in place, stuck her head out and looked down. The streetlamp was just one floor below her.