



BATTLE of the JADE HORSE

Alison Lloyd started learning Chinese in school because it was a challenge, then later went to live in China for two years. Alison loves history – both the big sweep of events and the little details of how people lived. Her favourite stories are about people's deep feelings – hope and despair, loyalty and betrayal, love and loss. That's why she wrote *Year of the Tiger*, her first novel. She has since written four Letty books in the Our Australian Girl series and the CBCA-shortlisted *Wicked Warriors and Evil Emperors*, illustrated by Terry Denton.

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FOR
THE LORD OF ALL HISTORY
AND MY FAMILY

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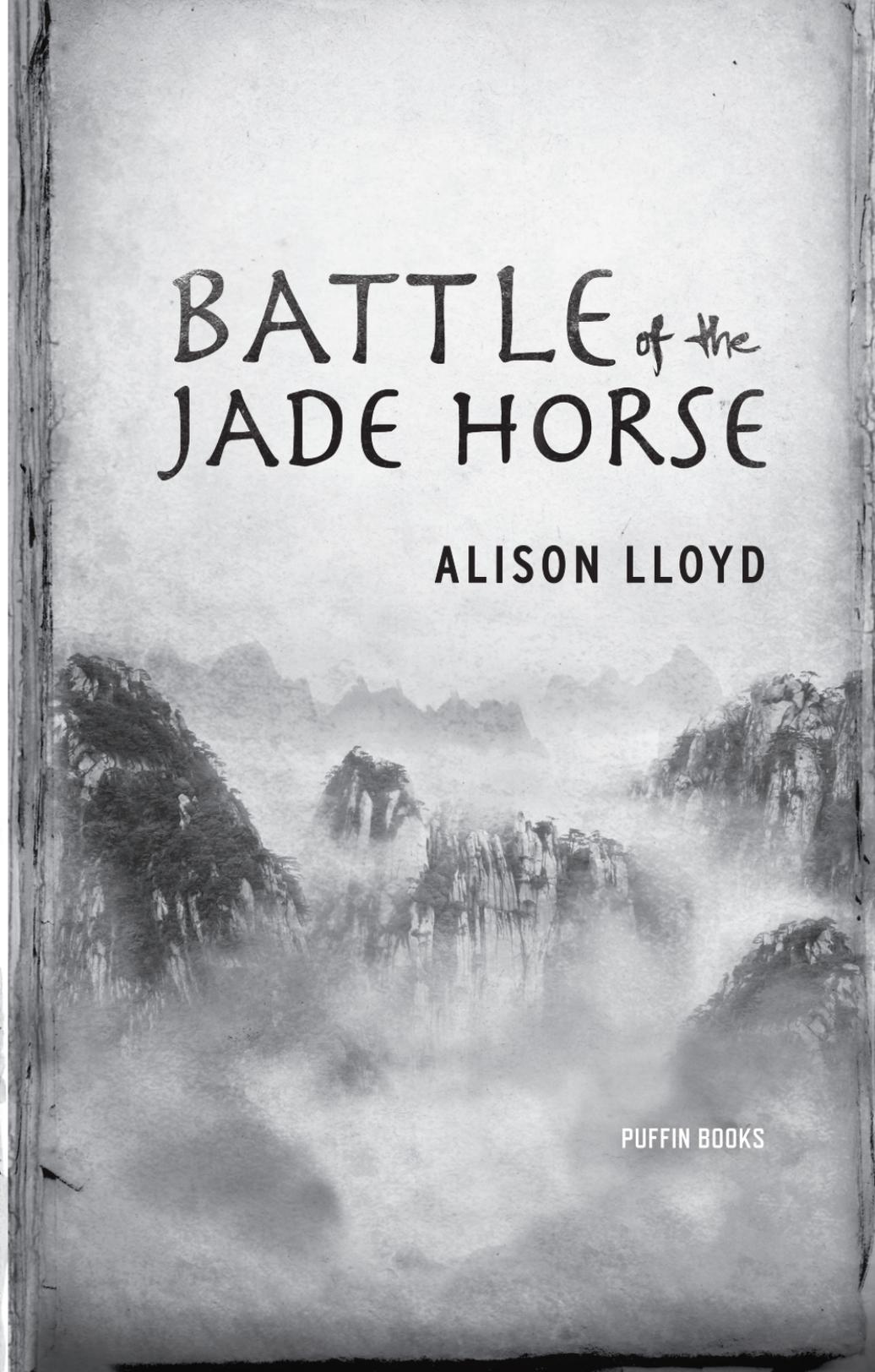
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The background of the cover is a traditional Chinese ink wash painting. It depicts a misty mountain landscape with several peaks, some covered in pine trees. A waterfall is visible in the center, cascading down a rocky cliff. The overall style is soft and atmospheric, with varying shades of grey and black ink on a light background.

BATTLE *of the*
JADE HORSE

ALISON LLOYD

PUFFIN BOOKS

CHINESE NAMES IN BATTLE of the JADE HORSE

<i>Ab-po</i>	(Pronounced 'Ab-poor')	Grandma, mother's mother
<i>Beicheng</i>	(Pronounced 'Bay-cherng')	Imaginary place in north-west China, meaning 'North Town'
<i>Dong</i>	(Pronounced 'Doong', with the 'oo' sound as in 'book')	Surname of the Grand Inspector
<i>Han</i>	(Pronounced 'habn')	Name for a dynasty, or series of Emperors, who ruled China from 207 BC–220 AD; Chinese people today still use this name for themselves and their language
<i>Hu</i>	(Pronounced like 'who')	Meaning 'tiger'
<i>kang</i>	(Pronounced 'kabng')	Hollow brick platform used as a bed and a stove; heated in winter
<i>Li</i>	(Pronounced 'Lee')	Hu's surname
<i>Li San</i>	(Pronounced 'Lee Sabn')	Hu's father; meaning 'Li Three', the third son of his family
<i>Lien</i>	(Pronounced 'Lee-en')	Ren's sister; meaning 'compassion'
<i>Luoyang</i>	(Pronounced 'Law-young')	Capital of China in the Eastern Han dynasty 25–190 AD
<i>Ma</i>	(Pronounced 'Mab')	Mum
<i>Mei</i>	(Pronounced 'May')	Hu's sister; meaning 'plum blossom'
<i>Ren</i>	(Pronounced 'Rern')	Meaning 'benevolence, kindness'
<i>Sbandan</i>	(Pronounced 'Shabn-dabn')	A big garrison on the Silk Road
<i>Yen</i>		Hu's uncle. Means 'swallow' or 'swift', a little bird that migrates long distances
<i>Zheng</i>	(Pronounced 'jerng')	Ren's surname

In Chinese, people put their surnames in front of their first names. So the main characters of this book are Li Hu and Zheng Ren. It is friendly and polite to call people by their titles, such as 'Second Deputy' (or 'Number Two' for those who know him well).

PROLOGUE

*From His Imperial Majesty,
Son of Heaven,
Ruler of the Han Kingdom,*

*To the Commanders of the north-west,
along the Great Wall and the Heavenly Mountains.*

*For the security of the Emperor
and his people,
the evil and rebellious Yellow Bandits
are hereby outlawed.*

*Any persons belonging to, helping or protecting the bandits
shall be put to death.*

*By Imperial Order,
eleventh year of the reign.*

北城

BEICHENG
THE NORTHERN TOWN

虎

HU

A man lay on the road above the River, as if the long shadows of sunset had washed him up there. A shiver of unease went down Hu's spine. His bad leg tingled. It was time to go back into town, he thought, as he limped along beside the pony – before the guards closed the big wooden gate and locked them outside the walls.

The sunset shone on the polished wood of Ren's bow. Hu and his friend had been out hunting. They could've set rabbit traps, like Hu used to in the old days, when he had two good legs and an empty stomach. But hunting with a bow was more fun.

Since Ren had come to Beicheng over a year ago, a lot had changed for Hu. The Li family now had food, money and a house, and Hu was being educated with Ren, which was something a country kid like him had never dreamed of. Hu loved the mystery of Chinese characters. Writing their shapes made him forget what people said about him and his bung leg – because Hu's friendship with Ren had also cost him. If he had never met Ren, he'd still be an acrobat, not a cripple.

Ren's pony tossed her head. Her nostrils flared as she

eyed the figure on the road.

‘Someone in your father’s battalion has had too much to drink,’ Hu said, looking at the man in their path.

Ren shrugged. ‘Leave him there.’

‘It’ll be cold enough to freeze pee when the sun goes down,’ Hu said. ‘And he’ll be easy pickings for the wolves. Let’s wake him up.’ Hu didn’t wish a night outside on anyone. He knew from experience how harsh that was.

‘You do it,’ said Ren, reining in his horse.

Hu walked up to the man sprawled in the yellow dust. He lay on his side, completely still.

‘Hey, you.’ Hu poked him with his crutch. The man didn’t stir. Hu squatted down and rolled the man over.

‘Yuck.’ Hu swallowed down a sick feeling. The man was really just a boy, not much older than Hu and Ren. And one side of his face was a mess. He had a large wound on his forehead, and blood smeared down to his chin. Dirt was stuck to it. Fresh blood was oozing up through his hair. A wet patch darkened the road.

Hu knelt as far away from the blood as he could and reached for the boy’s wrist.

Ren looked over Hu’s shoulder. ‘Ugh,’ he said. ‘Is he – you know . . .’

Hu wasn’t sure. He tried to find the boy’s pulse. He couldn’t. Perhaps it was because he had the shivers himself. He lifted the boy’s sticky hair off his neck, and found a leather cord twisted around his throat. The other end was caught under his armpit. Hu pulled it out. A small

bronze medallion hung on the cord.

‘What’s that?’ said Ren.

‘Good luck charm, I s’pose. Didn’t work for him.’

Ren frowned. ‘His tunic is the same colour as the ones worn by that battalion from Wudi we saw last year.’

‘That’s a long way to come,’ said Hu.

‘No sign of a horse though,’ Ren said thoughtfully. ‘Funny how he doesn’t have a sword or a bow either. Not even a knife on his belt.’

‘Not even a belt,’ said Hu. ‘Someone must have taken the lot.’

Hu felt the artery on the man’s neck. A slight pulse fluttered under his fingers. ‘He’s still alive.’ Down the road the drums began to beat for the closing of Beicheng’s gates. ‘We can’t leave him here,’ Hu said.

‘Why not? We don’t know him. You’re too soft sometimes, Hu.’

Hu tried to lift the boy, but with only one good ankle he couldn’t balance. ‘Come on, give me a hand,’ he said to Ren.

The sun glinted in Ren’s eyes. ‘I don’t want to. He makes me feel sick.’

‘Now who’s soft?’ said Hu. He knew that Ren was not really heartless. But he was the son of the Tiger Battalion’s Commander – he was noble and rich, and he wasn’t used to dirty work.

Between them, Hu and Ren dragged and heaved the unconscious soldier onto Ren’s patient pony. Arrow had

once been a barbarian war horse; Ren claimed she was trained to handle anything. The boys slung the soldier face down across the saddle, arms dangling. His medallion bounced against shaggy clumps of the pony's winter coat.

Ren caught hold of the disc with the hand that wasn't holding the pony's reins. He turned it over, then back. A funny expression went over his face. He sighed.

'What's up?' said Hu. 'You seen a ghost?'

'See this writing?' Ren said. 'That's the character for "imperial post". He's a messenger. Like that one that came last month.'

'There's no message on him now,' Hu pointed out.

'No. But there should've been. My father's expecting one. Now he's got the repairs to the Great Wall completed, he's expecting a recall.'

'What does that mean?' Hu asked.

Ren kicked a stone along the road. 'It means the Emperor will tell the Tiger Battalion to go back to the capital, but I don't want to go.' He kicked the stone angrily into the Yellow River.

Hu did not want him to go either. Ren was his best friend, despite everything. And without Ren, Hu wouldn't be able to learn to read and write. If Ren went back to the capital, that'd be the end of that.

'Bugger the Emperor,' Hu said.

'Shh!' said Ren, even though there was nobody around. Hu knew he shouldn't have said it. It was bad luck to curse the Son of Heaven, whatever orders he gave.

It was dangerous, too, if you said it in front of someone you couldn't trust. But the injured boy gave no sign of having heard anything. He was still slumped across the pony like a bundle, unmoving.

'Well, he's not going to be passing on any message just yet,' said Hu.

'Not yet,' said Ren gloomily. Then he looked hopefully at Hu. 'Hey – what if you could come back to the capital with us? Would you?'

But Hu hoped it wouldn't come to that. 'I don't want to choose between you and my family,' he said. 'I like everyone being together.' The walls of Beicheng held everyone Hu cared about. He wanted it to stay that way. If he could do anything to keep it like that, he would.

Ahead of them, the guards were just starting to swing the town's gates shut. The flaming sunset was fading into grey edges, and the shadow of the gate tower stretched all the way back to the black puddle of blood on the road.

It seemed like a bad omen to Hu.