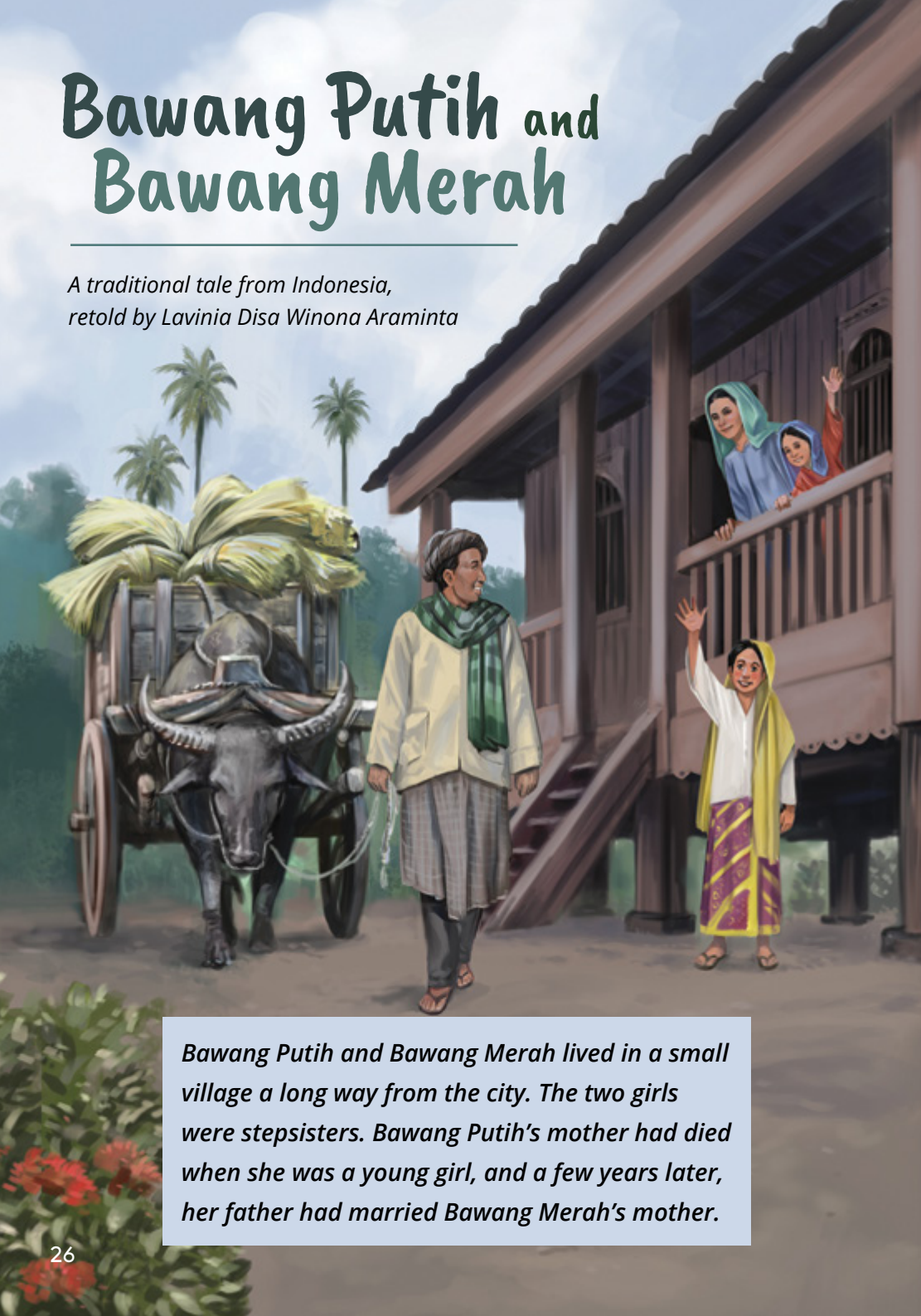


Bawang Putih and Bawang Merah

*A traditional tale from Indonesia,
retold by Lavinia Disa Winona Araminta*



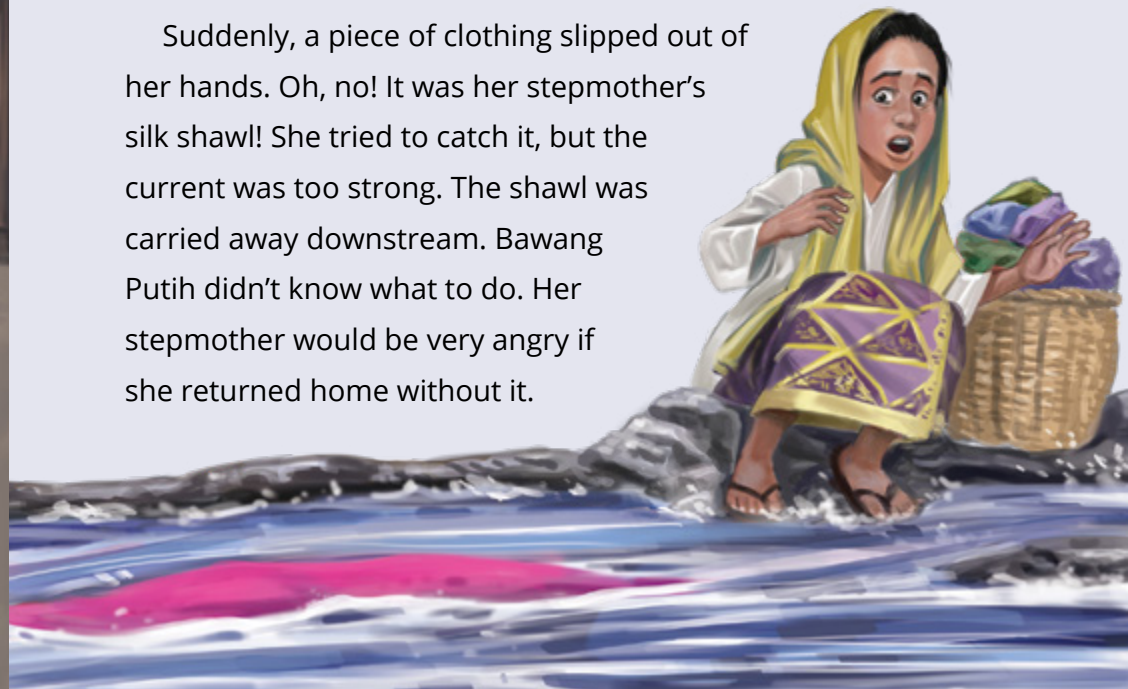
Bawang Putih and Bawang Merah lived in a small village a long way from the city. The two girls were stepsisters. Bawang Putih's mother had died when she was a young girl, and a few years later, her father had married Bawang Merah's mother.

Every week, their father went to the city to sell the vegetables he grew. When he was at home, Bawang Merah and her mother pretended to be kind and loving towards Bawang Putih. But once his ox and cart were out of sight, their gentle manner would change. Bawang Putih's stepmother would become angry and cruel, and Bawang Merah would taunt and bully Bawang Putih. They made Bawang Putih do all the housework while they sat around and did nothing.

One day, as usual, Bawang Putih's stepmother ordered her to do the washing. "Be careful with that silk shawl," she growled. "It's a precious gift from your father."

Bawang Putih carried the bag of dirty clothes to the river. She sat on a small rock and rinsed them in the running water. While she worked, her mind wandered. She thought of the happy days when her real mother was alive. Tears trickled down her face.

Suddenly, a piece of clothing slipped out of her hands. Oh, no! It was her stepmother's silk shawl! She tried to catch it, but the current was too strong. The shawl was carried away downstream. Bawang Putih didn't know what to do. Her stepmother would be very angry if she returned home without it.





She ran along the riverbank, searching desperately for the shawl. She looked for hours, but there was no sign of it. Night began to fall. Bawang Putih was far from home. Her muscles ached, and her feet were sore. She felt too tired to go home.

In the distance, she saw a light. It came from a tiny shack. "Perhaps I can stay there for the night," she thought. She mustered all her courage and knocked on the door. It swung open, and an old woman welcomed her warmly.

Bawang Putih told the old woman what had happened and said how tired she was. She also talked about her stepmother and stepsister and the way they treated her.

"You are very tough," the old woman said. "Remember, hardships make us stronger. They are not meant to break us."

In the morning, the old woman told Bawang Putih that she had gone for a walk by the river and had found the missing shawl. She said Bawang Putih could have it back if she stayed for a week and did some work for her. The old woman was kind and friendly, so Bawang Putih agreed. She was worried about what her stepmother would say when she got home, but she knew it would be even worse if she returned without the shawl.

For seven days, Bawang Putih helped the old woman with her household chores, just as she did at home. When the week was over, the old woman gave her the silk shawl.

"You have been such a help to me," she said. "Take one of these pumpkins as a reward." She pointed to two pumpkins on the table. One was big, and one was small. "Choose whichever one you like."

Bawang Putih was not greedy. "I'd prefer a small one," she said. "Thank you," she added politely.



When she arrived home, Bawang Putih's stepmother asked her where she had been, and when Bawang Putih told her, she flew into a rage. She told Bawang Putih to go to the kitchen and cook the pumpkin for their lunch.

Bawang Putih took a knife to cut the pumpkin open. When she did, a pile of sparkling jewels poured all over the floor.



Her stepmother grabbed the jewels and gave an evil laugh. "That old woman must be very rich. You said she had a big pumpkin too. Trust you to take the small one, Bawang Putih. You are so stupid. Where does the old woman live?"

Bawang Putih told her. Together, her stepmother and Bawang Merah thought of a plan to get the bigger pumpkin. Bawang Merah washed a shawl and left it on the riverbank near the old woman's shack. Then she went up to the door and knocked.

"I've lost my mother's shawl in the river," she said, pretending to cry. "It's such a long way home. Could I stay the night, please?"

The kind old woman let Bawang Merah stay. The next morning, the old woman went for a walk and found the shawl. Then she asked Bawang Merah if she would stay and help her for a week.

Bawang Merah agreed, but unlike her stepsister, Bawang Merah was lazy. She was not used to doing chores. She stayed for a week but did nothing to help. On her last day, the old woman gave Bawang Merah the missing shawl and pointed to two pumpkins. "Take whichever one you would like," she said.

"I'll have the biggest one, of course," said the greedy Bawang Merah.

As soon as she got home, Bawang Merah and her mother cut open the big pumpkin. But instead of jewels, a mass of snakes, scorpions, and centipedes came crawling out. Bawang Merah and her mother shrieked in fear.



Bawang Putih's father had just arrived home from the city. When he heard the screams, he came running inside. He grabbed a broom and swept all the creatures out through the door.

Bawang Putih's stepmother and Bawang Merah cried and sobbed for a long time. They knew there must be a reason for what had happened, and this made them think about the way they treated Bawang Putih.

"We are sorry, Bawang Putih," said her stepmother. "We have treated you very badly."

"Yes," added Bawang Merah. "We will change. We promise."

Hearing their sincere apologies, Bawang Putih forgave them. From that day on, the family were kind to each other and lived together in harmony.

