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## ∞ The Promise ∞

She had one leg out the window when she felt a hand grip her shoulder. She could tell, both by the fierce intensity and the steady hold, it could only belong to her mother.

“Child, I am done with your foolishness.” Her mother’s voice was stone—cold and unyielding. “You’ll do as you’re told. There will be no more discussion.”

Xingjuan pulled her leg back and smoothed her exquisite silk *qi páo*. She turned to face the exceptionally tall woman with severe cheekbones and features held in such tight control that only a clairvoyant might read her true feelings. The girl lowered her head, knowing her mother interpreted this as supplication and surrender—an acknowledgement of her fate and an acceptance that trying to avoid it would be futile. But this was not the reason.

Xingjuan was devastated. Even this last attempt at avoiding her parents’ wishes had failed. Tears welled up in her eyes, quickly dropping onto the floor.

“Come now,” her mother chastised. “This is no time for histrionics. Crying doesn’t become you. You are not

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beautiful and even you must know how much worse you will look in the morning with swollen eyes.”

“But Mother—”

“Silence!” the woman interrupted violently, grabbing her daughter’s shoulders and forcing her to sit on the stool next to the vanity. It tipped back with the motion and caused the delicately painted perfume bottles to clink softly.

“I have never known such a selfish child! Thinking only of her fancies. You are not a baby anymore, *nóng bāo*,” she spat.

Xingjuan looked up into her mother’s eyes where the flecks of fury were quickly being replaced with the hard gaze of a woman she knew had never loved her.

“Your father and I have already indulged you too much.” The cool indifference had returned to her voice. “Giving an ungrateful child a say in her future was a mistake. We thought you had been raised better than that, better than some common girl with no regard for her family’s honor.”

The woman turned and sliced her way through her daughter’s sitting room, pausing at the threshold. “I won’t tell your fiancé about this. If he is fool enough to marry you, let him discover what a worthless prize he has won.” She hurled a look of scorn at her daughter. “And fix your face before you return to the party. You are revolting.”

The girl waited for the door to close. When she heard the metal click into place she lifted her eyes and looked out the window. Beyond the meticulously groomed grounds, beyond the high stone wall and the Li River, the karsts surrounding her family’s summer home were like a legion of stone temples staring right back at her. Kweilin, the garden of China, had always been a happy place for her—an escape from the sweltering heat and expectations of Shanghai. But not anymore. Now each passing day felt more and more as if she were picnicking on her own gravesite.

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Xingjuan sighed. "At least my father loves me."

She remembered the day in his study, when she pleaded with him for the last time. The memory forced her to qualify the sentiment. "A little, anyway."

She had complained that Mr. Chen was too old, nearly twenty years her senior.

"That means he is settled, Daughter. He is established. A young husband would only be a worry to you. Mr. Chen has done well for himself. You will want for nothing."

"But what about my happiness? Don't you want me to be happy?"

Her father smiled indulgently. "*Xiǎo guāi*, a woman finds joy in service to her husband and children. This will be enough for you and you will be happy." He reached out to pat her head. "I promise."

That had been the end of it. The engagement moved forward and tonight everyone who had any power or money in the province had gathered to celebrate the union. And now that escaping out of her bedroom window had been removed as an option, she was left no choice. Xingjuan reached for her comb and began putting stray hairs back in place.

"You have no power," she said to her reflection. "You are a commodity—something to be traded—a thing to be exchanged." She felt the impulse to cry but suppressed it, hardening her face and asking bitterly, "Does the farmer care for the wishes of his water buffalo?" Again she felt the rush of tears and steeled herself against them. It was as if a battle was raging within her. The impulsive, anguished child beating her fists against the woman who knew this was simply how the world worked.

When Xingjuan descended the grand staircase she submerged herself into the gaiety of the crowd. Plastering a smile on her face—pleased but not giddy—she made her way to the great room where she knew Mr. Chen would be, standing regally next to the marble

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fireplace, holding court with the other rich businessmen. She strode slowly, being sure to nod and smile as she threaded her way among the guests. When she neared him, she noticed his glass of champagne was almost empty. Catching the eye of a servant, she beckoned him over.

“Pay better attention,” she growled under her breath, without breaking her expression of sheer contentment. She took a glass from his tray and cast her eyes at Mr. Chen.

She didn’t wait for a response, gliding elegantly toward her future. When she reached him he had just finished telling a joke. She laughed on cue—not so bold as to steal attention but not so weak as to reflect poorly on her soon-to-be husband. After all, someone as esteemed and accomplished as he should be flawless in every respect. She traded his glass for hers and linked her arm in his. He paid no notice to either gesture and yet she knew he was pleased. She was playing her part, which was all that was expected. As the evening progressed she continued in her role of dutiful daughter and soon-to-be wife, each dissemblance adding another layer of rock over the child within her—that stupid, whimsical girl who thought joy was simply there for the taking, as if there were enough for everyone.

Then, as the evening drew to a close, Xingjuan noticed her mother at the other end of the room. Next to her was the smirking face of a girl whom she had recently thought of as one of her dearest friends and who now she suspected was the one who had ratted her out. Li Qiao had a satisfied look on her face. *What has she gained from this?* Xingjuan wondered. *Except my misery.* Her mother’s expression was one Xingjuan could not recall seeing before. Then with a resounding chill the last layer of rock fell into place and the coffin of her childhood was sealed: The look, she realized, was one of pride.



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Party blended into party, event into event, year after year. Xingjuan stood there—to Mr. Chen's left, arm linked in his and watching the glass empty. At home, her life was her own and yet not her own. Her husband would leave early and return late. He would go on business trips—first for a few days, then weeks at a time. While he was gone she found things to occupy herself. Instructing servants, lunching with other businessmen's wives, blessing a charity with her attention and her husband's money.

Five years into the marriage she bore a child. For months she had prayed to her ancestors. *Let it be a girl. Please let it be a girl.* A girl could be hers—someone to mold and guide. But of course, as with every other thing in her life, her desires were denied her. Mr. Chen and his lackeys rejoiced in the heir, but babies held no appeal for them and soon Xingjuan was left alone as usual.

She poured her heart into her child, agonizing over every minute decision in his rearing. Which were the best schools to attend, the best families to befriend, the best avocations to pursue?

In the end, she had some small victory. Chen Liwei did not follow in his father's footsteps and expectations. He chose politics and, with his mother's tireless efforts, quickly rose through the ranks, becoming the youngest ambassador China had ever sent to the United Nations. But even this accomplishment felt empty to her, for by that time Mr. Chen had been dead many years. And since her heart had been closed to him, the only difference Xingjuan noticed was that there wasn't a glass to watch at parties anymore.

With her son living in New York, Xingjuan didn't feel lonely, merely unoccupied. She resumed her former activities, and when he visited a few years later he brought another disappointment—a fiancée of his own. *Probably, it's my fault,* Xingjuan thought. *I should have been spending my time finding a suitable wife from a suitable family;*

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*paying him the favor I myself was paid.* But she had neglected her duties and filled her days instead by taking three times as long for every task. She walked more slowly, ate more deliberately and took even more care in her already meticulous handwriting. She made it perfect and it became her secret vanity.

The woman her son presented was an American—blonde and bold. Unfortunately she was also exceedingly polite and spoke perfect Mandarin. Still this only delayed Xingjuan's ability to find fault with her for a short time. Once she had, though, she mentioned her misgivings to her son. Contrary to accepting her disapproval and setting the young woman aside, her son lashed out at his mother and returned to America to be wed.

And then at last a grandchild came. Again Xingjuan prayed to her ancestors. *Let it be a girl.* And it was. A tiny, wailing little thing, ready to be shaped and controlled. But even from a young age it was clear that the child would not be ruled. In the end, Xingjuan was plagued with a granddaughter just as obstinate and headstrong as she herself had been. She could almost hear her mother laughing from heaven, so amused at the way things had circled back. But she would not be dissuaded. The girl, Qingyue (Xingjuan refused to use her American name), would come to heed. Even the fiercest child could be forced to comply. Xingjuan's whole life was proof of that.

With the demands of his work, it didn't take long before her son deposited his wife and daughter on her doorstep. Unfortunately the wife's sister and her own American brat were also in tow. The two children—different in appearance as night and day—were raised side by side, despite all of Xingjuan's objections. They were insufferably inseparable.

In the end, Xingjuan's father had broken his promise. She was not happy. She was nearing sixty and could say without hesitation that she had not smiled or laughed unintentionally in over four decades. But she

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was no longer powerless. Her money, her reputation, even the influence of her opinion held sway over the city's elite. No longer was she the young girl from provincial Kweilin. Now she was a matriarch and lorded over a dominion.

But power is a poor substitute for happiness and at night, when none of this mattered, she sometimes found herself thinking of that day in her father's study. "You promised me, Daddy," she'd whisper into the darkness. "You promised me happiness." Then the tears would begin. "And you were wrong."