

MINGMEI YIP

Author of Peach Blossom Pavilion

SKELETON WOMEN

*The heart decides
our destiny...*

Song of the Silk Road

Petals from the Sky

Peach Blossom Pavilion

Skeleton Women

Mingmei Yip



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To Geoffrey, who makes the whole world beautiful

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*Never give up working to defeat your enemy.
Master his fate. Exploit his unpreparedness
and attack him when he is unaware.*

—*Art of War*, Sunzi (ca. 544–496 BC)

Stir the water to catch the fish—benefit by creating chaos

—*Thirty-Six Stratagems*, collection of popular ancient Chinese proverbs on outwitting your enemies
First mentioned in Southern Qi dynasties (479–502 AD)

So long as my body is still here, so will be my love for you.

—Li Shangyin (ca 813–858 AD), Tang dynasty poet

PART ONE

Prologue

It all happened because I was considered perfect material to be a spy—beautiful, smart, and, most important, an orphan.

I am well aware of what people call me behind my back: *Skeleton Woman!*

Actually, this does not bother me a bit. Let others feel spite, jealousy, hatred for me. At times I feel a secretive, ticklish glee.

I am a woman who can turn men into skeletons under my touch, though it is as light as a petal and as tender as silk.

My name is Camilla. At nineteen, I'd already become the lead singer at Shanghai's most popular and elegant Bright Moon Nightclub. It was through powerful connections that I got this position at my young age, with the bonus of being the object of desire of many men and the jealousy and hatred of countless women. And then there were Shadow and Rainbow Chang.

They were the *other* skeleton women.

But unlike me, Rainbow and Shadow were not nightclub singers. Rainbow, Shanghai's most popular gossip columnist, made her fortune by digging up secrets and dirt for the *Leisure News*. Though she had a woman's name, she exuded the charm of both sexes as she rode the waves of in-between. Short haircut, silk tie, and outrageously expensive and impeccably tailored suits contrasted with white powdered face, rouged cheeks, pink lips, silvery-pink eye shadow, and long, lush, artificial lashes. Rainbow neither dressed like a woman nor looked like a man. Exposing everyone else's secrets in her column, for herself she chose camouflage, in sex as well as in life. But why? It was yet to be found out.

If Rainbow Chang presented herself as mysterious, then Shadow was absolutely unfathomable. Everything about her was staged like a magician's stunning feats—jumping into thin air; escaping from locked chains under water; cutting a volunteer into multiple pieces, then restoring her in seconds. Carried out in a skimpy dress, enhanced by snake-slick movements, with an expressionless, stunningly beautiful face. Who was she? I was dying to find out.

We used artists' names; no one knew our real ones. With our own agendas, we were the three most pungent ingredients in this boiling cauldron called Shanghai. Men went crazy for a taste of us, while women sought our elusive recipe.

People admired or hated me as the ultimate femme fatale. But I myself had no idea who I was. I was a nobody, literally. An orphan, I was adopted by a man and his gang for their own purposes. Later I learned that the man was Big Brother Wang, his gang, the Red Demons. Under their constant watching and fussing over me and their strict discipline, by fourteen I'd grown up to be a watermelon-seed-faced, full-bosomed, slim-waisted, long-legged beauty, possessing everything desired by men and envied by women.

Of course I had not been raised and disciplined just to be a refined, well-mannered lady to be married off to the son of a rich family. Instead I was groomed to lure Master Lung, head of the Flying Dragons gang, to his doom. I had quickly figured out that I'd been given a roof over my head, fancy clothes to wear, and gourmet food to consume for a reason.

I was raised and trained to be a spy.

I was to be the Red Demons' secret weapon in a meticulous plan to topple its bitterest rival, the Flying Dragons. For nineteen-thirties Shanghai was the battleground for relentless wars among the triads, wars in which I was to be merely a pawn.

And what a life that was.

~~Having schemed for most of my nineteen years in this dusty world, I'd already turned a few men and women into skeletons dangling in hell—literally or otherwise. I didn't feel any guilt. This was the only job, the only life, I knew.~~

This was how they had trained me—to have no attachment, no feelings, no conscience. I was the woman who would, when needed, reduce any man or woman to a skeleton at the blink of my mascaraed eye.

Until the day I met Master Lung's son, Jinying, and Lung's bodyguard, Gao. But that was not part of the Red Demons' plan for me... .

The Naked Girl Jumping Toward Eternity

Against the sapphire-blue night sky, a young woman was pacing along a ledge atop the Shanghai Customs House tower like a circus girl treading a tightrope.

Except she was stark naked.

The Shanghainese say that nothing will surprise them, that they've seen it all. But now they were surprised. No one watching had ever seen anything like this.

Not even my new lover, Master Lung, head of the most powerful black society in Shanghai, the Flying Dragons, nor his slew of bodyguards scattered among the crowd, alert for danger and shoving anyone who seemed about to get too close to their boss.

Lung's and my eyes had stopped staring licentiously into each other's and were directed skyward—to the clock tower of the Customs House with its fake European style, far above the Bund and the Huangpu River.

The crowd held its collective breath. Their probing, lascivious eyes were glued to the muscular, round-bosomed, naked body above, expecting at any moment that she would jump to her death. I imagined the onlookers' agitated thoughts:

Is she really going to jump?

Why doesn't she want to live?

Jump! I want splashing blood, crashing flesh, crackling bones!

What a pity, a beautiful girl soon to turn into a puddle of vomit.

Tonight the air was balmy, but the naked girl playing the tug-of-war with death hundreds of feet above chilled us all, both those appalled by someone about to plunge to her death and those perverts who secretly thirsted for the morbid sights of splattered blood and scattered human pieces. I bit my lip, my hand tightly clutching Master Lung's arm while my heart pounded like a tribal drum trying to scare away demons.

Not that a smashed face and broken limbs would have bothered me much. For I had been trained since my teens to wipe away all human emotions. I had been molded for one purpose and one purpose only: to be a spy. Though, ironically, I earned my living singing sentimental songs in a nightclub.

As I continued to watch, the two hands of the clock merged into a single one pointing north, setting off the imitation Westminster Chimes to suddenly flood us with an eerily cheerful melody. But then, in the midst of the clear sky, thunder cracked, and lightning flashed... .

And the naked figure jumped!

The onlookers gasped collectively, their expressions ranging from horror, to sorrow, to unabashed thrill... .

All heads dropped down to gape, some of the women through cracks between their many-ringed red-nailed fingers. A pause, then another shock. There was no body. Only a pair of red high heels in the middle of a pool of blood!

"What happened?! Where is she?!" A collective question burst into the night air.

A group of policemen arrived to inspect the scene, accompanied by a few reporters snapping pictures and asking dazed onlookers questions no one could answer.

Nothing was happening now, except for an excited buzz from the crowd. Master Lung gave my elbow a tug. "Let's go, Camilla."

“You don’t want to find out where she’s gone?”

“She’s probably dead.”

“Then where’s the body?”

“Maybe you’ll find out in tomorrow’s *Leisure News*. Their gossip columnist, Rainbow Chan knows everything.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I’ve seen it all.”

Of course. Master Lung had seen it all. He headed *the* most powerful black society in Shanghai. Not only had he seen it all, he’d also performed it all: shooting, stabbing, strangling, poisoning, decapitating, and other acts I’d rather not imagine. And that was only ways to kill. Before the final moment there were often tortures: beating, electric shocks, finger-crushing, eye-gouging, flesh slicing, tiger-feeding, stuffing inside a snake-filled cage, nailing inside a coffin in a ghost-infested cemetery... .

As the onlookers began to disperse, a young couple ogled us, probably recognizing me as the famous singer and Lung as the famous gangster head. Immediately one of Lung’s bodyguards approached them and lifted his jacket to show his gun. The two ran off as if they’d been accosted by the ghost of the naked girl who’d just jumped. Just then Master Lung’s driver pulled up. We climbed into the huge black car and went back to his mansion on Junfu Lane.

Soon I was sipping his wine next to him on the sofa, the question still swirling in my mind: Who was this beautiful but mysterious jump-and-disappear girl? My spy’s training to dig out secrets just wouldn’t leave me alone.

Lung cast me a stern look. “Camilla, what’s going on inside your head now?”

I stared at the scar that divided his right eyebrow into two lizardlike halves. “Master Lung, the girl who jumped—what happened?”

“You’re still thinking of her?” He smirked. “Why are you so curious?” Lung stuck his fat cigarette inside his thin mouth and puffed, making a heavy, asthmatic sound.

“Master Lung, you’re not?”

He studied me with his protruding eyes set into his monkey face. “I have much more serious matters on my mind, not trivialities like that.”

Those “serious matters” were what I, the spy from his rival gang, the Red Demons, was trying to find out.

But I asked, “A girl jumping off a tower is trivial to you?”

“Yes!” He took a big gulp of his expensive whiskey, then slammed the glass down with an intimidating thud. “Unless that girl is you, my little pretty. So, will you stop your silly thinking and come to bed now?”

Early the next morning, I left Master Lung’s house and snatched up a copy of *Leisure News* from a street urchin. Standing on the sidewalk, I impatiently flipped through the pages until I saw the bold headline:

Naked Girl Jumping to Her Disappearance

Last night at the Customs House on the Bund, the crowd was startled to see a young naked woman pace on the ledge of the clock tower and then jump. But, strangely, no body was found, only splattered blood and a pair of red high heels. The police are investigating this mysterious, inexplicable incident.

Some say this was an attempted kidnapping but that the young woman escaped. No one can explain where she went. Others say she killed herself—but no body.

But now more and more are saying that the girl was, in fact, a ghost. They say that before the Customs House was built, that same spot was a cemetery where the bodies of women raped and murdered were dumped by black-society members.

The police claim they are working hard to solve this case to appease people's fear of ghost's vengeance.

Meanwhile, girls from my Pink Skeleton Empire and I have our own sources.

More to follow...

Rainbow Chang

After I finished the article, I almost burst out laughing. It was certainly strange. But a ghost?

The naked girl was definitely not a spirit but a spirited human.

That was worse than if she'd been a ghost, because now there was a woman who could outdo me getting headlines from Rainbow Chang. I was used to being the center of attention as the most celebrated singer in Shanghai's most famous Bright Moon Nightclub. Yet none of my patrons or customers knew anything about me besides my singing, my body, and my name, Camilla, which was fake, anyway. For since my early teens, I'd been trained to be in the public eye but to keep my real intentions secret.

Now my place in society was under challenge. Someone had stepped into my well-guarded territory. For I didn't buy that Naked Girl was dead. She was somewhere, and I had to find out where and how she'd pulled off her stunt. Even though I had no idea who this girl was, I knew she was my enemy.

Thus thinking in the chilly air, I knew it was time to hurry back to Lung's house to warm his bed.

Bright Moon Nightclub

Four times a week at six in the evening, a limo would take me to the Bright Moon Nightclub. This was Shanghai's most fashionable—and expensive—entertainment establishment. It was located in the International Concession between Yuyuan Road—the Fool's Garden—and Fanhuangdu Road—the Emperor's Crossing. These roads were fittingly named, because, although there were no more emperors, there were still plenty of fools.

The nightclub had a gaudily lit circular façade topped with a torchlike, cylindrical tower. If you were allowed in, you would see a huge hall with many tables surrounding a polished dance floor. Above was a mezzanine from which the VIPs could watch those equally rich but less important. On the all-glass dance floor, powerful men became addicted to pirouetting with their seductive, hired partners in rhythm to waltzes, fox-trots, rumbas, sambas, tangos, even marches played by the impeccable Filipino band. Under the chandeliers, diamonds and pearls glittered as young bodies swayed beside their tuxedoed partners, fueling the clients' urge to splurge yet more on an evening's decadence.

But Bright Moon was not always a paradise; in seconds it could descend into hell. Shots were often heard, and stabbings might spray blood onto an expensive gown. Even the private rooms and restrooms were not safe havens from scores being settled. Targets of assassination could be almost anyone, from celebrities to politicians, black-society members, even suspected *hanjian*, traitors who had spied for the Japanese.

The most talked-about assassination was of a gangster head a few years back. Late one evening he was gleefully swirling, lifting, and dipping his girl on the dance floor, four men approached. Sensing trouble, he shoved his girl hard against them and tried to run. Their long knives were quickly stained with the freshly minced flesh of the poor girl as they flung her back at him.

But he was a gangster head, after all, not a sniveling coward. So he pulled out his gun, shot down two of his assailants, then collapsed only after both of his arms had been chopped off. Under the astonished scrutiny of the other customers, he bled quickly and heroically to death. His lifeless body had found its final rest on his favorite glass floor, this time flooded not with his rivals' but with his own precious blood.

People saw only the glamour in my job, but few thought of how the money I made had been recycled in blood. Anyway, only the rich and powerful in Shanghai could afford to come to Bright Moon to be entertained—or murdered.

I was proud to say that, together with seeing and being seen, I was the nightclub's biggest attraction, but that had not happened overnight. Though only nineteen, I'd already come a long way.

I lost my parents at four and had been sent to the Compassionate Grace Orphanage. Unfortunately, I didn't have much memory of my parents except for a few blurry images of their faces. Worse, I had no siblings, relatives, or friends I could ask about them.

At the orphanage, outside volunteers would come to teach the children to sing and dance so they could perform on holidays like the Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Races, and Chinese New Year. Even before I became the most popular songstress in Shanghai, I'd already had to learn to charm audiences.

However, these free lessons were not given out of compassion but to discover beauty and talent so that the gifted children could be sold to work as cheap labor at nightclubs, dance halls, and, of course,

prostitution houses. While hard work—most of the time forced—was abundant inside the orphanage, talent was unusual and beauty, rare. Since visitors seemed to find me attractive, I always wondered why had I not been adopted much earlier. I'd heard from the girls who came back to visit that it was a better life than inside the orphanage. Many times I would watch with bitterness as other girls—less pretty and talented than I—were led away to waiting rickshaws and cars.

Then Mr. Ho, owner of the Bright Moon Nightclub, began his visits to the orphanage, bringing the children toys, candies, food, and clothes. When I was fourteen, Ho decided to rescue me from the institution notorious for cruelty and neglect. He immediately put me to work with the other singing and dancing girls at the nightclub. Though living and training together, we were not allowed to have friends, nor even talk to one another too much. If we did so, we'd be sent to a closet to reflect on our misbehavior on an empty stomach.

The other girls were either orphans like me or had parents so poor that they were forced to sell their daughters to the nightclub, so that they would have a roof over their heads and soup to warm their stomachs.

But sometimes fate was in a good mood, and a girl would become famous and, like a hurricane, lift her whole family out of poverty. The rest of us, who were not famous, lived together in one big room and were not paid.

My sense of freedom from escaping the orphanage hadn't lasted long. One day Ho took me aside and informed me that my real boss was not he but Big Brother Wang, head of the Red Demons Gang. He introduced me to Wang, who told me he was an old friend of my parents. They had been killed in a car accident, and he and his underling Ho had been trying to find me for years. Smiling, he told me that in rescuing me from the orphanage he had fulfilled his duty to his deceased best friend. But next his smile gone, he told me that finding me had been expensive and how I had to repay him. I was to continue being a singer, but now it was a cover for my real job—to spy on Master Lung of the Flying Dragons.

Before I even had time to think or protest, my training with Big Brother Wang had begun. I realized once again that beggars cannot be choosers, and that to continue to keep a roof over my head, rice in my stomach, and, most important, my head on my shoulders, I had to do what I was told.

Much of my training was concerned with perfecting my ability to charm men. I was taught ballroom dancing, which was now all the rage in Shanghai. Dancing with a patron, I would put my arms around his neck and exhale my fragranced breath onto his face. And I would press my equally fragranced body against him and feel the heat shooting out from his groin. He might wrap his arms around my much-coveted twenty-one-inch waist, move his hand between my neck and bottom like an elevator, lift me up toward heaven, then dip me back toward hell. I learned early on that I should cling only to the important ones, such as Master Lung, and steer clear of the insignificant losers. Did I enjoy doing this? I can only say that it kept me alive while I watched other people's lives.

I knew well that I was but a shadow of someone else's existence.

I took singing lessons from a fiftyish Russian woman, Madame Lewinsky. Mr. Ho picked her because she was a famous teacher who'd turned a few nobodies into somebodies. And she was too busy to be nosy. Also, as a foreigner, she was safe because too ignorant to perceive the complexities of Chinese society, especially the black ones.

Madame Lewinsky put a lot of effort and time into teaching me. But I heeded Big Brother Wang's warnings and so told her nothing about myself. She probably assumed that I came from a rich family or had a wealthy patron, since I could afford her exorbitant fees.

Lewinsky had come from Russia with her husband to escape the revolution. But he'd died in a free construction accident before they had a chance to have children. So now she was all by herself in this dusty world. Perhaps because of her loneliness, she often tried to act like she was my mother, which

of course, she was not.

Her face was distinctively Russian, with high cheekbones and a strong jaw, but her figure was voluptuous, like that of a Greek goddess. When she opened her mouth to sing, it was like a large bird spreading its wings to soar above the clouds.

Was I fond of her? No. But I did appreciate the way she taught.

She also taught me how to feel—something absolutely forbidden in my training to be a spy.

However, all the songs Lewinsky chose for me had sad overtones. She told me that my voice—high pitched, tender, innocent—was perfect for this bittersweet sentiment. And, contrary to my training, sometimes I just couldn't help but feel the music tugging at my heart. Whether my emotions were genuine or pretended, the audience at Bright Moon was crazy about the "feelings" in my voice.

It was not exactly right to say that I had no feelings, although it had been my training to stifle them. However, as I was not supposed to have feelings for people, I'd secretly developed feelings for Madame Lewinsky while singing. I wondered if my boss, Big Brother Wang, understood the irony that, if I was trained not to feel, how could I become a great singer? Maybe he didn't think that far, or maybe he thought this was just life's inevitable dilemma. Or maybe my vigorous training had enabled me to perform anything like a magician, from putting great feelings into my singing to hurting people without a twinge of guilt.

For four years I worked as a singer at Bright Moon Nightclub while secretly being trained to be a spy. Then, the summer when I turned eighteen, I won the coveted title of Heavenly Songbird from the Recording Songstress Contest organized by the *Big Evening News*, a newspaper secretly sponsored by the Red Demons gang. Madame Lewinsky had thrown me a big celebration party and flooded me with gifts—candies, cake, clothes, small jewelry, sweet little somethings.

Privileges soon followed. I was assigned to sing solo and given my own apartment. I had more good luck in that Lung, though an extremely mistrustful person, never suspected my real standing. My background as an orphan was just too plain to arouse any doubt.

Then one night I was sitting inside my private dressing room, scrutinizing my illusory self in the big gilded mirror. Standing beside me was Old Aunt, whose job was to do my makeup and hair.

Old Aunt was now putting her finishing touches on my melon-seed-shaped face. "Miss Camilla, you were not a performer, you would not need makeup. You must have heard the saying, 'I lamer using makeup that only mars my natural beauty.'"

"I never thought about it one way or the other. I only do what I'm supposed to."

She nodded at me knowingly, then pinned a flower above my right ear to complete my Heavenly Songbird look. "Miss Camilla, you look perfect. Now go out to charm Shanghai."

"Thank you, Old Aunt."

I stood up and cast a last glance at the mirror. Tonight I was dressed in a turquoise body-hugging *cheongsam* with high slits up the sides. On the front were embroidered pale golden camellias enhanced by matching elbow-length gloves and dangling gold earrings. During my training, I was constantly told, "People respect your clothes before they respect you." And, "Women need beautiful clothes like the Buddha needs golden robes." The message is obvious: If you want to be accepted in the high society, dress like a high-society lady. If you want respect, dress elegantly. If you want to lure a huge following, dress in gold.

But the main reason I dressed my best was to lure Master Lung to keep visiting my bed so I could fulfill my mission: learning all his secrets, then eliminating him.

I took a deep breath, smoothed my facial muscles, thrust out my chest, and pranced onto the stage on my shredded-golden-lotus steps. The sensuous silk rubbed against my thighs as the cool air caressed my alternately hidden and exposed legs.

As soon as the audience spotted me, thunderous cheers flooded the packed hall. I took my place center stage, under a banner emblazoned with big gold characters against a crimson background: *Bright Moon Celebrates Heavenly Songbird Camilla's Performance*.

My eyes scanned the audience until they landed on a scrawny man in front with a crew-cut head and a monkey face—Master Lung. For the last few weeks, Lung had been coming here regularly to watch my performances, always accompanied by his underlings and a slew of bodyguards. Because of his famously infamous reputation, he and his entourage were constantly fussed over by nervous waiters and the fawning manager.

Lung alternated between chugging down his expensive wine and twiddling his fat cigar in his bored fingers as he stuck it between his thin lips. While his fingers and lips were engaged in these suicidal activities, his eyes molested me unrelentingly. To my satisfaction, I saw him rhythmically strike his fist against his thigh, showing how excited he was by me.

But something was different tonight, and at first I could not place what it was.

I decided to make this audience wait while I took time to study them. The usual crew: successful businessmen, influential politicians, high government officials, black-society members. Also poets, artists, writers, a few professors, all no doubt the indulged sons of rich families. And the women with them: older ones who were obviously wives, younger ones who were just as obviously concubines, mistresses, courtesans, or just prostitutes hired for the evening. But not everyone was what he or she seemed. A bomb-carrying revolutionary or two might be concealed in the crowd of revelers.

High-end nightclubs were miniatures of the greater Shanghai. I knew well that the expensive attire, polite speech, and elegant manners were but tools to hide the itch for blood and money. As if oblivious of the tension in the air, white-shirted and black-suited waiters busied themselves topping off wineglasses, warming teapots, proffering hot towels, extending trays laden with cigarettes, and depositing a variety of respect dishes—complimentary snacks.

Every evening I began with “Nighttime Shanghai,” a syrupy tune favored by the rich and decadent. The small orchestra—consisting of a pianist, violinist, drummer, and trumpet, trombone and double bass players—watched me, ready to strike the first note.

I always held a prop—an embroidered handkerchief, a painted fan, or simply my long, red-nailed fingers imitating an orchid swaying in a gentle breeze. Tonight the prop was a golden fan adorned by a red camellia, a gift from Master Lung. Holding the fan to hide my lips, I meditated a bit more, then I dropped the fan to breathe out my first note, trying to make it as tender as a baby's breath.

Nighttime Shanghai, nighttime Shanghai,

A city of sleepless nights,

Lights dazzling, cars hustling,

Crooning songs and flirtatious dances filling up the night... .

I half closed my eyes to let the tune, the dreamy air, and the audience's hushed attention wrap me like a silk cocoon. I didn't know what I was thinking, if anything. But I did feel, maybe a little nostalgic, even melancholy. About what, I had no notion.

I continued to croon as I swayed my waist in synchronicity with my fan, on which the painted flower seemed to be shyly nodding in approval.

They only see my smiling face

But will never guess my heart's pain.

Singing for my living,

Intoxicated not by wine but by this lush nightlife.

My years are spent in dissipation.
When someday I finally awaken,
I will still love Shanghai at night.

I could identify with the sentiments of the song. But had I been spending my life in debauchery? Did I still love Shanghai at night? Thinking, I let the last note end its decadent incarnation in the air.

The audience, as if awakened from a dormant past life, burst into thunderous applause.

“Wonderful!”

“What a heavenly voice!”

“Wah, melts my ear wax!”

Again, my eyes made my obligatory rounds, right, left, middle, back. But then they stopped at a new face among a group of richly attired, refined-looking young men. He looked shy, seemingly ill at ease, as if he had been raised in a different environment and was thrust into a nightclub for the first time. Since the people with whom I had grown up all lived by cunning and cruelty, innocence always surprised me.

I threw this youth a nonchalant glance, bowed deeply, then threw the fan in his direction before he sashayed backstage in my golden stiletto heels.

Ten minutes later, after the crowd had quieted down, I left my dressing room and headed straight to Lung’s table under the audience’s intense scrutiny. Because of my popularity, I was usually expected to make my rounds, stopping at different tables and pleasing the patrons by making sexy small talk. But for the past few weeks, I could sit only with Lung. Once the other men realized I was Lung’s favorite and might be his concubine someday, they quietly backed away. Because Lung or his thugs would not hesitate to strangle anyone—not only men but even a crippled oldster, a pregnant woman, or a newborn baby.

Behind his back Lung was nicknamed “Half-Brow,” because, it was said, years ago his right eyebrow had been slashed into two by a would-be assassin using a sharp razor. The assassin had probably meant to slash his carotid artery, but during the struggle Lung must have dipped his head to protect his neck, so his brow was slashed instead. While a non-Chinese might have borne this as a sign of bravery, for Lung it was a mark of shame, to the point that no one would risk asking him how he had gotten it.

For the Chinese, to “shave off the eyebrow” is to inflict the most extreme insult, even worse than calling his mother a dog-fucked whore or his father a shit-chomping tortoise head. Splitting a person’s eyebrow is believed to cut off his vital energy, life breath, and good fortune.

Like all Chinese gangsters, Lung was terrified of bad luck, so after his eyebrow was split, he had become extremely superstitious. Now he would never take off his amulets, not even when he bathed. From his thick golden neck chain were suspended Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion; General Guan, both loyal protector and relentless killer; the ubiquitous money god; and a new addition—a soaring dragon, his zodiac animal carved from translucent jade. A gift from me for his recent fifty-fifth birthday.

In less than twenty years, Lung had risen from a spat-upon shoe-shine boy to being respected and feared by Shanghai’s most powerful people, even the police chief. The gangster head had begun his ascent shining shoes for celebrities, wealthy businessmen, powerful gangsters, influential politicians. His shoe-shining was rumored to be so painstaking and immaculate that with it he softened the hearts of some of his influential customers. He’d rub harder, longer, and use more cream than the others. He ran errands faster than anyone else and somehow knew whom to ingratiate himself with by n

charging them for his services. If the right situation arose, he would chat briefly with these dignitaries but always remain respectful, never crossing boundaries.

Soon he was invited into the Flying Dragons. Though he was no more than a gofer, rumor had it that once he took a bullet for a powerful gang member. The gangster he saved was an important politician and so Lung was catapulted to fame, fortune, and power. His generosity also greased his way to the top. Unlike many warlords, Lung was free in passing out red envelopes stuffed with lucky money. His beneficiaries were not only his underlings and his favorite women of the moment but also police and politicians. Whether to ease his conscience or simply to ease his way into Shanghai society, he held lavish banquets and donated millions to charities, especially if they were run by influential people. On his way up, he somehow managed to shed most of his shoe-shine boy speech and mannerisms. Though his speech was still not refined, his money and violent reputation more than compensated for that.

Of course, most of what I knew about Lung was based on rumor. He never told me anything about himself, and asking a too-personal question was possible suicide.

Looking at Lung as I approached his table, I was, as usual, reminded of a monkey. Not only his face but also his limbs that seemed always to be moving like those of a monkey leaping between branches. During his shoe-shining days, he could steal almost anything from anyone without them noticing. Usually he sold his booty, but if the victim might benefit him in some way, he would return the item, pretending that he had found it.

All the other gentlemen—or gangsters—stood up to greet me, except Master Lung and his right hand man, Mr. Zhu.

The boss stared at me with his big, protruding eyes, rumored to be the result of a near-strangling by a rival.

“Camilla, you smell really good. Your singing is also getting better. Do you drink special herb soups for your body and your throat?” Lung’s own voice was hoarse from years of smoking, drinking, and screaming.

I smiled, sitting down in a chair automatically pushed under my bottom. Crossing my legs and feeling the squeeze between them, I said in my innocently sexy voice, “Master Lung, what else is so ‘special’ besides you?”

I had been trained to say whatever was beneficial to a situation. As the Chinese saying goes, “When you run into a human, speak the human language; when you run into a ghost, speak a ghost’s.”

He laughed, his belly making waves. “Ha-ha! My Camilla, your tongue is getting more glib, too.”

Of course I never told him, or anyone, how hard I’d been working to improve my voice. I’d rather let them think that they thought it was all natural talent. Nobody wants to hear about the painful years of tedious, bitter practice, only their pleasurable result.

What no one knew was that when my act finished, I would sleep for a while if I was allowed to evade Master Lung’s clammy hands, then walk to the Bund and sing to the sun as it rose, then to the moon in reflection on the Huangpu River. This way my voice would absorb the powerful *yang* energy from the rising sun and the *yin* from the softly flowing river. I hoped to expand my range up to heaven and down to earth, so that when it reached the highest register, instead of cracking it would be as soothing as the morning light. And when it reached the lowest register, it wouldn’t disappear but would be as deep and fathomless as the sea.

I knew the truth of the Chinese sayings: “One minute onstage is worth ten years’ cultivation offstage,” and, “You plant a melon, you harvest a melon; you plant a bean, you harvest a bean.” Success will not arrive at your doorstep if you just mope around the house instead of getting out and taking action.

But I doubted anyone in the audience tonight cared about the long, arduous hours I’d spent

perfect my four minutes of singing “Nighttime Shanghai.” However, that innocent but intelligent-looking youth I’d noticed earlier at the adjacent table, maybe he could understand.

“Thank you, Master Lung.” I smiled, taking a delicate sip of his whiskey as if swallowing all the bitterness that came with my practice. As I felt my tongue pricked by the rough-tasting liquid, in my peripheral vision I spied a pair of eyes fixed on me like a mistress’s on her patron. Just then Lung signaled to the next table, and the shy, fresh-faced young man hurried over. His tall, slim frame was covered in a gray pin-striped suit set off by a silver tie with a pearl stickpin.

I wondered, what did this refined-looking young man have to do with the uncouth Lung?

Gao, Master Lung’s most trusted bodyguard, stood up to pull a seat out next to Lung. “You’re the Master, please.”

Lung smiled till his eyes became two slits. “Camilla, meet my son, Jinying.”

Could he really be Lung’s son? Maybe he was adopted, or a *guoji*, a child given to a childless man by a male relative—a gift to maintain the family tree.

The young man and I shook hands. Wrapped around mine, his palm felt warm and cozy, like a cocoon. If I was a *yin* type of person—remote, cool, calculating, meticulous—then he definitely was a *yang* type—warm, straightforward, impetuous.

Now Lung smiled a proud, open-mouthed smile, revealing a few sparkling gold teeth. It was the first time I had detected anything like tenderness or kindness in the underworld boss. “My son just came back a few days ago from studying in the US.”

I smiled. “That’s very impressive. May I know what subject the boss’s son studies?”

The young man smiled, blushing slightly. “Law—”

Lung interrupted. “At Ha Fuk.”

The son corrected his father. “Father, it’s Harvard University, not Ha Fuk.”

The father laughed, watching his son admiringly, as if now he were his son’s underling. “Yes, Harvard... Fud.”

“Father, you’re embarrassing me!”

“So-ri, so-ri, son,” Lung apologized in pidgin English. The most powerful gangster in Shanghai, who never hesitated to eliminate fools, now looked like a fool himself.

I suppressed a smile. Even this ruthless gangster chief had his soft spot. No one is invincible; it’s just a matter of finding his weakness and waiting for the right time to attack it.

The young master ignored his father and turned to me. “Miss Camilla, you have the most beautiful and intriguing voice I’ve ever heard.”

“Thank you,” I said, not really meaning it. I’d been taught not to fall for flattery, because to be distracted would ruin my mission. I never forgot that even though people might praise me, it was unlikely they cared for me beyond my beauty, celebrity, and talent to entertain.

Oblivious of my bitterness, Lung again cast his son an appreciative look. “I want Jinying to help me in my business, but maybe he won’t do a good job, because he only cares about music.” He paused and pinch the sleeve of his son’s suit. “See? I even have this suit made for him at Gray to suit his Harvard lawyer status.”

Gray was the most expensive tailor in Shanghai, even more outrageous than the famous Paramour. I heard that each suit would cost nearly three times what it would at the expensive Paramount, which meant a tael of gold.

The young man, red-faced, turned away from his father and said to me, “Miss Camilla, my father told me about you and your legendary voice, and it’s such a pleasure and honor to finally have the chance to hear you sing and then meet you tonight.”

I was astonished that the son of the most feared gangster in China would act and talk in such a

elegant and courteous way. But with such a powerful father, no one would imagine that he spoke the way from weakness. However, his father might have taken it that way, because he cast his son a disapproving look.

Abruptly Lung stood up and held out his hand to me. I let him lead me to the glass dance floor amid the scraping of patent leather shoes and stiletto heels. Lung put his arm around my waist, and we began gliding to the dreamy tune of the “Blue Danube” waltz. Some of the men, when they waltzed near us with their partners, bowed their heads respectfully as they said, “Good Evening, Master Lung.” The boss returned these greetings with a simple nod.

As we swirled in circles, my eyes glanced alternately at the orchestra and the audience. I peeked toward the young master Jinying, who was intensely watching us. I found myself tightening my arm around Lung. I’d only just met this young man; I wondered, why should I want to arouse jealousy in him?

Finally, when we had made enough dents on the dance floor, Lung and I returned to our seats. But Jinying’s friends kept calling him back to his own table, so he quickly apologized to us and left. Then Mr. Zhu, Lung’s right-hand man, picked up a newspaper and handed it to me, pointing to an article. It was the latest gossip column by Rainbow Chang.

A Naked Shadow

We can now reveal the identity of the girl who plunged to her disappearance three days ago. This stunning escapade was staged by a magician, Miss Shadow.

The incident was a prelude to promote her show opening on Thursday at the *Ciro* Nightclub, the upcoming rival of the older and more classy *Bright Moon* Nightclub. With this fanfare Miss Shadow has instantly become the talk of the town. So I believe that the *Ciro* Nightclub will steal many customers away from *Bright Moon*.

We were also told that the night she jumped, Miss Shadow was not really naked but wearing a flesh-toned tunic. The blood, of course, was fake, probably from a slaughtered chicken or pig or dog.

Like me, many of my readers must wonder what will happen now to Camilla, our beloved Heavenly Songbird. Will she still dominate the Shanghai nightclub scene, or will she soon be pushed into the turbulent sea? Who will be our supreme entertainment queen? Who will be Shanghai’s ultimate skeleton woman?

Well, we will soon find out.

One question to Miss Camilla: How will you feel when you finally meet your worthy rival?

More to follow...

Rainbow Chang

I bit my lip, then quickly regained my focus and conjured up my most flirtatious smile. “Master Lung, have you read this?”

“Do you think I’d waste my time on gossip?”

Good. “Will you be here Thursday night?”

He cast me an amused look. “Depends. Why?”

My heart suddenly turned cold, like the ice floating in my drink. I couldn’t bring myself to ask if I

would go to Ciro to see the naked magician and her show.

Back in my apartment, I couldn't shut my eyes. Sipping wine, I could only think of this new rival, her inconceivable trick and her genius in getting attention. Why did she call herself Shadow; did she not have a real existence? Was she a ghost? The name was fake, of course, just like mine. Not that the Shadow, having already bewitched Shanghai, would need a response from me. Did she want to replace me as the number one nightclub attraction? Or maybe Rainbow Chang had guessed wrong. Maybe Shadow's target was not me but someone else. My heart rose in alarm. Could that someone else be Master Lung?

Of course I was smart enough to realize that this Shadow had not jumped to her death and was not a ghost but a human rival.

So of course I was smart enough to deal with her. I remembered the lines from Sunzi's *Art of War*:

Know when to attack and when to wait.

The essence of warfare is not attack but strategy.

Know yourself, and know your enemy even better.

Yes! That's it. Know yourself, but know your enemy even better. Knowing her would be the next step toward clearing this weed on my path to completing my mission of eliminating Lung.

Thus resolved, I reached to turn on the radio. As if on cue, a recording of my singing "Nighttime in Shanghai" began to flood the room.

They only see my smiling face
But never guess my heart's pain... .

I sighed, then downed the whole glass of wine.

Madame Lewinsky

As a spy, I had to study strategies about scheming. My favorite was the *Art of War* by the most famous military strategist, Sunzi, who lived twenty-five hundred years ago.

Everything I learned from this book can be summarized in one sentence:

Build your presence, and use your cunning.

Sunzi says that on a battlefield, there are only two realities: win or lose. So there is no room for virtue, unless being virtuous or being a gentleman is your strategy. To win, every position has to be thoroughly known, every plan meticulously studied, and every act carefully worked out. As there is no room for virtue, there is no such thing as “a glorious failure.” On the battlefield, “honor” is just an empty comfort for losers.

Losers don't get sympathy; they get killed.

History is written by the victors. So no matter how heartless and dishonest you are, after it's written, if you win, you'll be remembered as a paragon of virtue and honor. The Chinese say, “Those who win become kings, those who fail, thieves.” Steal a nail, you're a thief, steal a nation, a king.

You must show no weakness, no human feeling. Like King Liu Bang, who lived over two thousand years ago.

When they were battling for the kingdom, Xiang Yu kidnapped Liu's father and threatened to cook him alive. Expecting his rival to surrender, Xiang Yu was shocked when Liu Bang exclaimed, “No problem. After you've cooked my father, don't forget to save me a piece for dinner!”

In war, you have to be that ruthless.

Having studied the *Art of War*, the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, and all other major works on strategy, I believed no one, trusted no one. So I'd already guessed that little naked Miss Shadow had not plunged to her death—and was probably not really naked, either. I didn't trust my own shadow, so why would I trust anyone else's?

To decide how to deal with Shadow, I needed to talk to my real boss, Big Brother Wang.

A bodyguard let me into Wang's spacious study filled with antiques, polished redwood furniture, and string-bound books. My boss sat at a massive desk, where smoke curled up from a cone of incense nestled on a celadon disk. He was reading a book cradled in his jade-ringed, long-nailed fingers. Above him on the wall was a calligraphic scroll:

Befriend all scholars under heaven; study all books written by sages.

So I worked for a scholar-gangster. Maybe that was why he had never been able to beat the cunning streetwise Master Lung.

The door closed as quietly as a drop of water in a bucket. Staring at the bald spot on Wang's lowered head, I could see that he would not look up at me until he finished the page. I was curious to know what he was reading but kept my lips tight to prevent questions from popping out of my itchy mouth. Instead I glanced at his many books on the shelves.

Trained to be aware of everything in my surroundings, I wanted to know what these books were about and why, as a gangster, Wang liked to read. In addition to his more active pursuits of cheating, scheming, gambling, threatening, kidnapping, torturing, killing, and, of course, womanizing.

Despite this last proclivity, Big Brother Wang had never tried to seduce me or even force me to

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