

The Nine Fold Heaven

Mingmei Yip

Prologue

Three months ago I was singing to loud applause in a Shanghai nightclub; a few days later I became unexpectedly wealthy. But immediately I fled Shanghai in a fusillade of bullets to hide out in a run-down apartment in Hong Kong.

In the British Crown Colony, my days were calm but my nights were troubled -- not by bullets but by dreams. When I slept my baby kept disturbing me - either running on his chubby little feet or babbling to himself. But I had never met him in this life, my little treasure whom I had named Jinjin, meaning Handsome Handsome. In my mind he looked just like his father Jinying, Handsome Hero, whom I had left behind in Shanghai and whose face rose up before me - bleeding, scared, abandoned.

As I looked back over my life, though I had known only twenty Springs and Autumns, it seemed to stretch out endlessly behind me, filled with treachery and loss.

I'd led a double life, but not by my choosing. I was the singer Camilla, known to Shanghai's beautiful people as the Heavenly Songbird. But while admired by my fans for my freshness and innocence, I was secretly a spy assigned to send the gangster boss Master Lung to the Yellow Springs. For my real boss was Big Brother Wang, head of Shanghai's Red Demon gang, who had "rescued" me from the Compassionate Grace Orphanage - but only to prepare me for this fatal mission.

Abandoned when I was four years old, the word "love" had been torn out from the dictionary of my life. From my first days with Big Brother Wang, I was trained to charm others but to have no emotions myself, as befits a cold-blooded

murderess, assigned to eliminate Wang's arch enemy, Master Lung of the Flying Dragon gang.

But despite all the effort put into my training, love had somehow tiptoed into my life. Whether this was heaven's gift or punishment, I could not tell.

It happened because of Jinying, the son of the man I was to assassinate and the father of our little Jinjin. Now they had both vanished from my life. Was this heaven's plan - to give me a taste of the sweetness of life, only to snatch it back? Or was it karma for something I'd done in a forgotten past life?

In the months since I'd escaped from Shanghai, I'd had no news about my lover Jinying and our son little Jinjin - except in my tormented dreams. Jinjin would talk to me, sometimes with affection, at other times with bitterness. But he'd never let me touch him, let alone shower his small body with hugs and kisses to express a mother's longing. He seemed to be saying that since we'd never really met, it'd be better for us to keep a distance. Sometimes his father would appear also, but he never said a word to me, just looked at me with mournful eyes.

Now that I was safe in Hong Kong, at least for the moment, I needed to figure out my next move. My heart was begging me to go back soon to find Jinjin and his father Jinying, but I knew that Big Brother Wang and Master Lung would have all their men on high alert looking for me. I had no choice but to stay here and lie low -- but for how long?

I had plenty of money, which I had helped myself to from Master Lung's safe hidden in his secret villa. This was just in the nick of time, as moments later shooting broke out between the Flying Dragons and the Red Demons.

Though I was pretty certain that no one knew that I was in Hong Kong, a free-spending woman traveling by herself might attract attention. The tentacles of the Flying Dragon and Red Demon gangs extended everywhere Chinese was spoken.

In Shanghai, I was a multifaceted diamond glittering before my enthusiastic audiences, but now I felt like a street rat chased by people wielding sticks and knives.... I feared that I had stepped onto a path of no return.

I'd made not just one enemy, but two, and they were no ordinary enemies, but the two most notoriously relentless gangsters in lawless Shanghai.

But making unexpected, risky moves in a seemingly hopeless situation was part of my training as a spy. So I could not help but think about the riskiest possible move – my potentially suicidal return to Shanghai. Of course not right now. Not until I'd had a chance to find out what was left of the two rival gangs after the shootout. Was the Flying Dragon's Master Lung really dead at last -- or just nursing his wound somewhere awaiting his comeback? Had my boss the Red Demon's Big Brother Wang finally been able to take over Lung's place to be Shanghai's number one gangster head?

Most of all, I was anxious to know the situation and whereabouts of my lover Jinying and our son Jinjin -- if he was still in this life or already departed for the next. And too, there was Lung's bodyguard and my other lover Gao – he had taken a bullet for me and, after the shoot out, brought me to the ship that had carried me to safety in Hong Kong. Had he survived – or had he lost everything because of me?

All these events in Shanghai were as in a past life. My twenty-year life now seemed unreal to me, like a movie. Was I about to leave the theater forever?

Chapter One My Fate on a Piece of Paper

After I decided to go back to Shanghai where I'd run away from, I planned to do something that I'd never done before. Go to a Buddhist temple to pray for my safe trip to Shanghai and an equally safe one back. Although I was not a superstitious person, I needed to rest my mind and pacify my heart. After all, I was a fugitive from two gangs and a criminal in the eyes of the law.

However, I knew well these matters would not be decided by my praying, no matter how sincere or urgent, but my dark karma - which so far was as bad as a rotten apple.

The Pure Light Temple was remotely situated in Diamond Hill on the Kowloon peninsula. I chose this small temple so as to minimize my chance of being recognized. I doubted any monks or nuns read gossip news - assuming there would be any Shanghai gossip in Hong Kong newspapers.

The tanned and wrinkled rickshaw puller abruptly stopped at a small gate, inside of which was a muddy path. "Miss, you have to walk fifteen minutes to go to the temple."

"Why can't you just take me there?"

He pointed a knotty finger to the scorching sun above. "Miss, the path is filled with holes. You want me to have a heat stroke, set my rickshaw on fire, and ruin my business so my family will starve?"

There was no way to argue with this. "All right," I said, paid him generously to sooth my guilt, then got off.

Of course I could have paid him a lot more to carry me. But I feared him thinking I was rich. Though I had enough money, I wasn't sure I had enough good karma. That's why I had come to the temple to generate more.

So I began a tortuous walk with the hot sun beating down on my head to keep me company. I passed stores selling all sorts of necessities such as dried

plums, bags of sugar, salt, tinned biscuits, bottles of sauces: chili, black bean, XO, and more. Also on display were household utensils, such as thermos bottles, electric fans, and blankets. Interspersed were a clothing store, a shoe repair store, a barber shop, and a couple of street stalls selling such delicacies as pig's ears and cow's intestines in bubbling dark sauce, filling the air with pungent, yet appetizing, aromas. On benches, a few women were napping as small children dutifully fanned their mothers,' or grandmothers,' semi-exposed, protuberant bellies.

Feeling wilted by the sun, I stepped into a small food store and paid a few cents for a soda. When I was handed the drink, the bottle was as warm as the overbearing sun.

I protested to the vendor, a fortyish, droop-shouldered man. "It's not cold."

"But you only paid three cents."

"So?"

"One more cent," he pointed to a refrigerator, "cold soda in here."

"All right," I smiled, and paid him the extra cent.

Downing my cold drink and feeling much relieved from the physical and mental heat, I asked, adopting a casual tone. "You know the Pure Light Temple?"

He cast me a curious glance. "Why would a young girl like you want to go there? It's nothing but superstition."

"Aren't all us Chinese superstitious?" I pointed to the jade pendent hanging from his scrawny neck.

He chuckled. "You're right Miss. This'll protect me from being scared."

"What are you scared of?"

"A lot of things: rich people, poor people, gangsters, ghosts, pretty women."

This time it was I who chuckled. "Why pretty women? I think all men love them."

“Because they are always making trouble. Haven’t you heard about skeleton women?”

My heart skipped a beat. That was what people called me in Shanghai, behind my back, of course, but also in the gossip columns. And it was not something pretty. Because women like me, considered beautiful, talented, and extremely scheming, could turn men – as well as women – into skeletons under our touch, though it was as light as a petal and as tender as silk.

I didn’t want to talk about this so I gulped my soda, then pointed to his jade. “Does it work?”

“Of course. Now I have no fear, even talking to a pretty woman like you.” He paused and looked curiously at me. “Where are you from? Why visit our run-down temple?”

Rather than answer these questions, I decided, as I finished my soda, that it was time to conclude our conversation.

“Oh, just passing by and curious to take a look. Thanks for the cold soda. Goodbye.”

He called to my back. “Come back soon, Miss. Superstitious or not, pretty girls are always welcome here!”

Fifteen minutes later, I reached the small, red-roofed temple. As I stepped across the threshold, the faint fragrance of incense snaked its way into my nostrils. Then I noticed an altar with a gilded Buddha and a white ceramic Guan Yin statue. In front of the figures had been placed the usual offerings of flowers in vases and fruit in bowls. Incense rose from the openings in a bronze burner, curling into question marks, or so they looked to me. Except me, there was no other people in the temple, at least not that I could see.

At the foot in front of the altar were three cushions for the faithful to kneel and pray. I took an incense stick from the burner, held it in both hands and made wishes to the Buddha and Guan Yin – that my trip back to Shanghai would be safe and that I’d find Jinying and that our son, Jinjin, would somehow be alive. I

prayed for the enlightened ones' generous protection so that I would complete this dangerous trip of mine without losing even one strand of hair. And that Heaven would decide to smile down at me and let me return with my son and his father.

Was it too much to ask? Was I too greedy?

When I finished praying, a gaunt, sunken-faced, fiftyish man in a gray monk's robe emerged from a hidden door.

He didn't look like a monk since he had his full head of tea-and-milk hair, but I nevertheless bowed and said respectfully, "Master, I hope I am not disturbing the tranquility of the temple."

He smiled, revealing some long teeth. "Oh, not at all, Miss. This temple has known many with troubled minds."

Was trouble written on my forehead like a newspaper headline?

Instinctively I faked my most cheerful smile. "But I'm not troubled. I just happened to pass by and decided to come in to pay my respects to the Buddha. I'm sure you've heard the saying 'whenever you arrive in a new country, follow its customs; whenever you enter a temple, make offerings to the gods? "

"The offering to the gods" is of course a donation, with cash, checks, jewelry or even land, to be humbly offered and respectfully accepted.

"Ha ha! Of course I know this saying. Anyway, good for you. I don't mean you particularly, but all us sentient beings swimming in the sea of suffering. We are all troubled. No one can escape this karmic cycle until we attain enlightenment. That's why we all need temples and incense."

And donations. I silently finished his sentence.

He paused to give me a once over. "So, do you want your fortune read?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, you didn't know that our temple also provides this service? Are you ready?"

Was I ready? Not if he would predict something bad - I had troubles enough already. I remembered what the sage Laozi said, "when things reach

their peak, there is no other way to go but down." I believed my life had already hit bottom, so according to the same theory, I hoped it meant that I was about to begin my ascent.

But he seemed to read my mind, saying, "Don't worry Miss, as they say 'if you haven't done any wrong, you needn't fear even knocks on your door in the middle of the night.'"

Damn. But I had done wrong. In fact my whole life in Shanghai was wrong doing. They were not entirely my fault, yet the list of my offenses was long: I'd alerted Big Brother Wang to send his gang members to assassinate Master Lung. Not only did I have sex with Lung, I made love to his son Jinying and also his most trusted bodyguard Gao. I'd caused my magic show partner, Shadow, to lose part of her little finger, just to keep her from stealing the limelight, and Master Lung, from me.

I was very bad. I knew I was referred to as a "skeleton woman," a femme fatale who could bring anyone to ruin with the blink of a mascaraed eye.

The fortune-teller's voice interrupted my reverie.

"Miss, please have a seat."

He signaled me to sit down by a table next to the altar, then sat down across from me.

He picked up a cylindrical bamboo holder and put it in my hand. "Miss, shake it until a stick falls out."

"What about if it's more than one?"

"Believe me, that won't happen."

I did and miraculously, though I shook as hard as I could, only one stick fell out onto the table as if it obeyed the man's bidding.

The man picked it up. "All right, it's number eighteen." Then he shifted through a pile of yellow papers, lifted one out, and began to read silently.

"Hmmm.....it's a strange reading, not the worst, not the best. But it's not neutral either."

"What does that mean?"

“You can read it yourself,” he said, handing me the yellow slip with characters printed in red.

The beauty crosses the sea to the immortal’s realm.
 Golden lights shine at the end of her journey.
 In the wind and clouds, dragon and tigers advance
 To the gathering of heroes and sages at Jasmine Lake.
 Then she leaves like a cicada shedding its shell.
 Heaven’s mystery should be kept to oneself, not revealed.

After the main text, there were two smaller lines below:

Let the wind steer your boat,
 Move forward.
 Have no fear.

After I finished reading, I asked, “But I don’t understand.”

The man replied, “Since it’s heaven’s secret not to be revealed, I’m afraid I can’t interpret this for you.”

I protested. “But that’s your job!”

“Some jobs are better left undone.”

“What a disappointment.” I should have said “What nonsense!”

“There are always disappointment on one’s path, Miss. You better get used to it while you’re still young. Anyway, go home and read it over and you’ll be able to understand your situation. Pay attention to ‘she leaves like a cicada shedding its shell’ and also ‘Golden lights shine at the end of her journey.’ These are all good predictions.

“Have you heard the saying ‘a hidden dragon does not act?’”

I nodded, though I was not completely sure what it meant.

He went on. “When a person is not ready, she should be like the dragon who does not act. Not until the right moment arrives, then she’ll soar to the nine fold heaven, looking down on the ordinary as she enjoys her long-awaited success and glory.”

He studied me. “Miss, you must hide now like the hidden dragon, but one day you will be the dragon that soars to the nine fold heaven.”

“Thank you, Master,” I nodded, savoring his every word.

“Remember Miss, heaven only advises, you must take your fate in your own hands. That’s all I can say about your fortune.”

He scrutinized me for seconds. “But I can give you some personal advice if you like.”

“Please.”

He studied me carefully, then spoke as if reciting a riddle. “You are beautiful. For some that brings good luck, for others, tragedy. When beauty is on your side, even the moon and stars lose their brilliance. But some day it will leave you. Be careful not to end up with a hard heart and an unfeeling body. Because if that happens, even if good fortune approaches you, it will give you no happiness.

“Remember, the greatest fortune is not beauty, but family. That’s where you can always return.” He thought for a while then recited something like a poem:

The ten thousand things arise and return to their origin.
 Returning to the origin is called tranquility.
 Tranquility is recovering your original nature.
 Recovering your original nature is called the unchanging.
 Knowing the unchanging is called enlightenment.
 To not know the unchanging is calamity.

When finished, he added. “Miss, now when you have your beauty, don’t give all your attention to it and neglect other things. Look for the unchanging in your life – find your root and you will find tranquility, even happiness, that’s all I can say.”

An abandoned orphan, I had no root that I could trace. Nor tranquility now that I was on the run from two gangs!

But I said, trying my best to sound calm, “Master, but the *Book of Changes* says that everything changes.”

He cast me a curious glance. "Yes, but we're not talking about this impermanent world, but the one beyond, the true, original one."

"Oh...that makes sense," I responded, although I actually had no idea what he meant.

It was time to leave. Part of my spy training was never to stay in one place for too long, no matter how much I found it appealing.

"Master, how much do I owe you?"

He waved a jade-ringed hand. "Let' not talk about money today. This is a very unusual encounter so the temple won't charge you. Because if money is involved, the magic will be gone."

What sort of magic, I wondered. I hoped not like my magician friend Shadow's staged version.

The master spoke again, "Find your root. Then magic will follow."

"I will." I thanked him again and took my leave.

During my way back on the crude, muddy path, I tried to decipher the enigmatic poem on the slip and what it had to do with the diviner's portentous advice. It had taken all I could summon in myself to become the talented, charming, and mysterious singer, Camilla the Heavenly Songbird. What would be left without my beauty? It was my weapon against men and their power. But I also knew that time does not wait for anyone, and one day my beauty would be completely gone like a gambler's money at the roulette table.

