

The Eunuch of Shanghai

by

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Author's Note

The facts for *The China Contract*, an earlier narrative, were drawn from the files of Det. Insp. Nigel Hawkins, N.Z. Police, and verified from outside sources and the public record. These methods were also employed for this book, including input from Special Agent D. Benelli of the FBI, Dept. of Justice, USG.

Chapter One

Death and Deception

Across the narrow valley, the crack and clatter from a hundred fireworks grew to the thunder of thousands, then faded through the smoke, and died. A swaying line of mourners snaked up the rise to Li Chenqing's grave, a site overlooking the village of his birth. In the hinterland of Shaanxi Province, this place was a lifetime away from modern Shanghai, the crucible in which Old Li's empire had been forged.

Three decades before, on advice from his oracles, Li had relocated House of Five Pearls, his fledgling business venture, from Shaanxi's once-backward capital of Xi'an to the vast swarm of humanity called Shanghai. For two centuries that city, as a huffing, pulsing machine of trade, had controlled the levers of Asian business, but then fallen to the tides of politics and war. Then, in the 1980s, Li Chenqing applied a new grip to those levers, bringing the ancient port back as China's center of gravity. There, where the mouth of the great Yangtze River swings and pushes like a tireless ox into the China Sea, Li and today's Shanghai began their rebirth together. In tribute to this economic triumph, Shanghainese in great numbers had traveled to Shaanxi to mourn Li's passing.

Funerals in China are multi-layered affairs. A throng of mourners is a measure of community esteem. A tasteful show of riches by the family reflects both their fealty and Fate's good graces on the departed, while high demand for seats at the banquet determines the deceased's prestige and face. At a man's burial, the number of mistresses is a statement of his virility.

In Old Li's case, these symbols of recognition were on abundant display, making his life's celebration in Shaanxi the most honored in decades. Born in the Year of the Dragon, with his death in the Year of the Dog, Li had achieved heights of success and wealth outstripping all expectations, even his own. Now, after a short, dismal period of pain, the end had come, and his three children were paying him the grand tribute he deserved, conducted by his daughter Jun Ying, in the valued tradition of their tribe, alongside Li's two sons, Tian Wu and Hua Qiang.

Thousands were present to offer gracious farewells, and relatives, friends, and associates were gossiping throughout the funeral over the life of Li Chenqing. Yet, as the grieving crowd and the ceremonies engulfed his children, a hidden conflict between two of them told a story all its own.

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Three years before, Jun Ying had returned from America with her *guīzi* husband Anthony and their two daughters, and dedicated herself to her duties at House of Five Pearls, her father's industrial empire. Yet for Elder Brother Tian Wu her dedication was too vigorous, treading on his territory. Then, a year into Jun Ying's return, Old Li held a war-council meeting at Shanghai's Yu Garden teahouse where he laid out his covert agenda for a currency war over the American dollar's dominance in world trade. Jun Ying had balked at the idea, even protested, arguing for an open dialogue with America. Tian Wu objected, supporting his father's plan for a hidden attack, and this split stoked a period of friction between the two siblings.

Still, Jun Ying kept up her diligence at work and, in time, showed a vast if humble competence. Then, when Old Li was struck with persistent pneumonia, followed by a lung infection and a battle for his life, she had spent all her spare hours caring for him. Tian Wu, watching this father-daughter harmony, had felt his resentment toward his half-sister fade, and he softened to her presence and her role in House of Five Pearls.

Now, though, Old Li was dead, and Tian Wu was about to uncover a Faustian bargain made by his father decades before. This vile and long-protected secret would kill Tian Wu's empathy for his sister, and lead to his own vengeful compact with Fate, one that would ransom both China and the world to a future of discord and greed.

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Old Li's greatest ambition in life, more than his appetites for business or pleasure, had been for power. Over his eighty-nine years, it was his most reliable ally, his lodestar, and the single temptation that never lost its appeal, regardless of the risk. All things flowed from power: control, wealth, sex, possessions, loyalties. Power over others could masquerade as the key to empire, but for Li Chenqing that key was inside himself. This had been the lesson of his life—if a man can control his own actions, emotions, and desires, the world is his for the taking.

Born into poverty after the reign of P'u Yi and the rise of Sun Yat-sen, Li was forecast by a family seer for lordly success. After Sun's death, the Li family suffered as millions did in the 1920s and '30s under Chiang Kai-shek's regime. Yet by Fate and youth's rebellion, Li grew to idolize Chiang's enemy, Mao Tse Tung, for his tenacity during The Long March. He believed Mao's power would unite China and restore the nation's natural superiority in world affairs. Li's devotion to this dream would later open the doors to his own power.

In the wake of World War II, Mao did indeed lead his people to triumph over Chiang and the reviled Nationalists. Then, as cultural legend had it, with Heaven above and the rest of miserable creation below, the Middle Kingdom needed only to "ride the tortoise's back" on the journey to Eternity. Or so it seemed.

Instead, the flush of victory over Chiang faded into twenty-five years of decimation—famine, suppression, and depravity. One couldn't count the dead and remain sane. Yet, by the 1970s, Mao's Marxist fires gradually cooled and China would find the Middle Way, a path toward stability and survival. Through these years Li Chenqing kept his own counsel, and, happily, his head. Not all were so lucky. Executions for dissent against the State were commonplace, but Li negotiated the darkness and, when his opportunity for notice came, he seized it. This meant three years in Kashgar, in China's western desert, but Li expelled any doubts his superiors may have had about his loyalty and skills. When he returned to the ancient city of Xi'an, it was as a hero to—and for—the Party bosses.

Now the life of these many triumphs was ending with Li's his funeral in old Shaanxi, but his lust for power at all costs did not die with him. Moving House of Five Pearls from Xi'an to Shanghai thirty years before had made Shanghai the playing field—and then the battlefield—for Tian Wu, his first-born. With Old Li's passing, that boy, now a man, felt ready to assume his role as one of China's masters.

So only one secret, one stain, blemished Old Li's life, and that had been buried in Kashgar on the western frontier—so he believed. But near the end of the funeral ceremonies, as the son Tian Wu, who some called Young Li, mused on a charmed future, a stranger about Old Li's age wearing a white mourning tunic appeared between two village huts. As Young Li and a clutch of cousins and aunties passed, something about the stranger's bearing made

Young Li maneuver away from the procession and approach him. The old man showed the required respect to the first son, but a warm familiarity, as well.

"You have the clear eye and strong body of your father," said the dignitary—for he was dignified. "The funeral you have given has honored his memory. Fire and water, growth and death—these create the paradox of life." He nodded, almost to himself. "Fate holds power over us all, Young Li." He pronounced this unbidden, in the habit of old men, then told how he and Li Chenqing had worked together as young men and become friends.

"We met first at the Ministry of Economics, in Beijing, both eager to please but shy from our inexperience. Your father was a friendly genius, marked for greatness. As we advanced, I moved sideways in the Ministry of Information, and he was eventually sent west to Kashgar, in the wilderness of Xinjiang, where he did great things. Though mature in age, he had his first children there." These things were not news to Tian Wu. "But he had been devoted to Mao, the Party, and his career before meeting your mother, then a young woman, also from Shaanxi. After the trouble, as you know, he returned to Xi'an with you, left the People's service, and began his business."

Tian Wu sensed there was a story here, and nodded for the old man to continue.

"We kept each other informed about our separate worlds—capitalism and government." Li had advised him on private investments to secure wealth and position, and he helped Old Li avoid unwanted—perhaps calamitous—bureaucratic interference. "Who had what freedoms? How much power was too much? How far could one go before being stepped over—or on?" The alliance had lasted for decades. "I wish you to know how much I honored your father as a friend and protector."

"Your respect for my father reflects equal respect on you," said Tian Wu, with a deliberate pause and a bow to the stranger.

"We were all troubled," the old man said, "when your father lost your mother and sister in Kashgar. These tales are like heavy stones thrown into a pond, with deep ripples that eventually fade."

With no joy Tian Wu said, "Father remarried. Much success followed."

"Oh, so true, Young Li. And those rewards were part of his fate, as were his tears for the death and the disappeared."

Tian Wu thought, *The old man has confused my family's story with another.* Death, yes, of his baby sister, and his mother driven to suicide from grief in Kashgar, but no one had disappeared. Yet he held back as the old man spoke again.

"That is Fate's road, Young Li, but another path would have been easier for your parents, certainly for your mother, Qin Yu Shu. Her final act brought such sadness." The old man spoke as old men do, mouthing details of a time long past. "When her broken body was found on the street, your father was nearly broken, too. Such a loss of face. So it was a happy day when he escaped from Kashgar back to Xi'an and a new life for you, and later for Jun Ying and Hua Qiang."

Tian Wu gazed at the old man. His limbs were stiff, fingers bent like winter twigs, teeth like ivory tiles, white hair shivering in the wind, but he was not confused. He knew details of the family story he told. Tian Wu asked, "When did my father last have the honor of your company?"

"We met at a social affair in Shanghai after Jun Ying returned from America. It was at the US Consulate on Huai Hai Road, a reception for the American Vice-President, hosted by an old ally." His eyes were clear, as was his memory. "And now, Young Li, your father is

dead. If the faults of his past cannot be undone, they must be buried with his body, and prayers said for your ancestors and the sad fate of your lost sister."

Lost sister, thought Tian Wu, *not dead sister*. A mystery, a hidden allusion seemed to lurk in the old man's words, like the thread of an untold story. "You are indeed a valuable friend to my father's family," Tian Wu said. "Please help me write a funeral prayer for him, and tell me all you know of my mother and sister." Waving others away, Tian Wu walked with his father's comrade among the leafless trees, and the old man revealed a tale from memories long past, of desperate choices and a lunge for power. While Old Li's funeral had marked one death, many more would follow from the truths told by his aged friend.

In the following months, any residual friction between Tian Wu and Jun Ying appeared to cool—*appeared* to. As joint leaders of their late father's empire, they worked in separate spheres of House of Five Pearls, Jun Ying fluidly, and Tian Wu with his trademark vehemence. However, mesmerized by the old comrade's story, but also incensed, Tian Wu soon traveled north—to Beijing, and then Inner Mongolia. He returned to Shanghai with another stranger, a woman. In the weeks to come, day by day in secret, he and she would debate how to undo Li Chenqing's sins in Kashgar and beyond.

Chapter Two The Sa Pa Murders

A year later—Northwest Highlands, Vietnam

As Li Jun Ying lay on the bedroom mat in the elegant, if sterile, holiday villa, her body had absorbed the skill of the masseuse even as her mind drifted away. For an hour, with soothing music and the incense's smoky perfume, this "mistress of the house" had felt fully alone.

More than three years had passed since "Gloria Li-Kennedy", as her American partners knew her, returned with her family to China. She had come back with her memories of university in Vancouver, Stanford's business school, and four years on Wall Street, where she was an unqualified success in preparation for the role she was now playing in Asia.

She was living in Shanghai with her Irish-American husband, a renowned physician and researcher, and their two Chinese-American daughters. She excelled in her role as managing director and one heir to modern China's most powerful industrial conglomerate, House of Five Pearls, built from nothing by her late father, Li Chenqing. Earlier in the week, though, Jun Ying had checked her young family into The Pavilion of Heavenly Joy, near the historic hill-country town of Sa Pa, in the Lào Cai Province of Vietnam, south of the Chinese border.

For weeks—months really—she'd been under intense pressure but mounting excitement. Now, in a few days, all the planning and preparation and hard work were about to pay off. On her return to Shanghai, Jun Ying, her brothers, and her husband would host the opening of the New Century Medical School, her late and much-loved father's legacy to China. In the year since his death, the demands on her, Tian Wu, and Hua Qiang to complete China's—indeed the world's—most advanced hospital had been exhausting, and this posh family holiday was to be a great relief. It was a request she had put to Old Li on two occasions, first at the end of a business meeting, when he was still robust, and again as she cared for him before his death.

"Yes, but silly woman," he had said the second time, "why *Vietnam*? With all of China and America at your feet, why would you go to such a place?" Besides, what was becoming of his children, that they needed a vacation from hard work?

"For the quiet, Father. For the escape." This had mollified Old Li, but he had not been enthusiastic. Now he was dead.

Jun Ying lay on her back, eyes closed, thorax and limbs relaxed. Beside her on the floor sat Phuong, a masseuse from the Black Tai ethnic group. As Phuong used one heel to unwind her client's corded neck muscles, the other did the same in her armpit. Phuong's hands worked over the woman's outstretched fingers. Despite all these pushes and pulls, Jun Ying's detachment seemed absolute, like a curtain over her mind. Like that quiet curtain, though, the night in this remote valley shrouded things from sight, and a quartet of shadows stole through the darkness.

As the door from the veranda slid open, a cold presence crossed the threshold, causing a tingle to race over Jun Ying's face. She felt the urge to sit up, but, just as her senses stirred, the first assassin into the room, with a single swing of his blade, decapitated Phuong. Jun Ying felt the masseuse's hands and feet go dead, and the hill-tribe woman pitched sideways toward the floor. Jun Ying's eyes snapped open, and glistening jets of blood, black in the shadows, spouted from Phuong's once-elegant neck, splashing hot across Jun Ying's face. Pinned to the floor by her arms, Jun Ying felt a gag being stuffed into her mouth. She saw a

curved sword streaked red hovering above her throat, and her gaze fixed on its still-gleaming edge. Wet fingers of Phuong's blood crept across Jun Ying's scalp, through her hair, and into her ears.

Into those dark seconds, Jun Ying's mind injected a fear-filled New York City memory—being dragged into a redbrick doorway by two liquored-up thugs, a calloused palm smelling of cigarette fumes clasped over her mouth. One mugger pressed a knifepoint to her abdomen.

“Give it up, you chink bitch, or we’ll gut you!”

“Gut you,” said the other. “Slice you into dog meat, bitch!”

The vision of her flesh flayed and filleted, a special revulsion in her culture, had shaken her to her toenails. Yet her agile mind and iron resolve had made a calm and immediate assessment—two thieves with a hit-and-run, smash-and-grab MO, taking chances for a score but not reckless gambles. So she'd surrendered all she had. The thieves had walked, and so had she.

Despite the memory of that escape, Jun Ying knew there was no escape tonight. Her masseuse was dead, without a word, and she was now staring at the blade that took that life. Jun Ying heard a foot scrape, and looked up through the tacky, clotting blood in her eyes.

At right angles to her own face was another face, that of a woman. It floated above the sword in the darkness of the room, disembodied, glowing with an ivory whiteness. Then it began to rotate, as if on a pivot, its schist-like eyes, stone-grey and shimmering, coming into line with Jun Ying's own. Then the face seemed to blink like a giant eye would blink—open, close, open—full with meaning, then empty, and then full again. To Jun Ying, the identity of the face, its contours and nose and arch of the brows, its lips bowing over the curve of teeth, was both astounding and expected, a mystery made more real by its own revelation. From the movement at the door until this recognition of her slayer took only seconds, but it passed across Jun Ying's consciousness like all the years she had lived.

Fear bloomed in her, hot and coarse, forming a murky picture of silent killers with weapons sharp as scalpels. Then she sensed from the noiseless breeze and a jagged tear in her heart that her family—her husband, daughters, and mother—might already be dead, dispatched on the villa's veranda with neither a moan nor a whisper. Indeed, they were—dead and disfigured—but she was undone just by the image and the knowledge that she had been the primary target of the attack. That mattered little now, though. Though she was last to go, her waxing panic was magnified by her love for them.

Then two of her captors wrenched her upright and the face receded, contorting in a sneer. Up rose the glinting steel, its edge poised, and then down it flew, parting the air between the face and Jun Ying, freeing her head from her neck in one arcing slice. Her blood doused the killers as she herself had been doused by Phuong's blood, as she would have been doused by her family's blood if the two who orchestrated those killings had wished it so.

Now the executioner grabbed Jun Ying's head by its gore-glossed hair, shoved it into a black, drawstring bag, and wiped all traces of blood from the sword. She left Jun Ying's spasming trunk where it lay, and led her three henchmen from the room. One grasped at a fetish on his neck to ward off evil, and another, lingering, slid something under the bed as protection from the spirits of the dead. Then the four vanished into the oily night.