

Prologue



For a pair of small bound feet, shed a vat of tears.

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Autumn, 1942

Laohutan, Manchuria

“**IT’S** a boy!” an excited voice announced from a room at the east wing of the courtyard house. Servants had gathered in front of the closed double doors, chatting among themselves with delight and some shedding tears of joy.

An elderly female servant opened the door from inside. Immediately, everyone outside started asking questions. The elderly servant asked the crowd to step aside and clear a path for her. She walked past them towards the lady of the house Mrs. Chen Yafong, who was waiting in the courtyard.

Yafong was the wife of Dr. Chen, who was a medical doctor specializing in western medicine and known for his benevolence and integrity. He owned one of the largest private western medical hospitals in Dalian.

In the center of the courtyard stood an elaborate square pavilion overlooking a large koi pond, which was surrounded by large moss-covered rocks. Elegant water lilies floated on the water while koi swam between the long flexible stems. The pavilion had four large wooden columns supporting its distinctive hip roof covered with olive green glazed tiles. Two exquisitely handcrafted wooden benches connecting the columns served as an airy and relaxing seating area. Yafong enjoyed being there, especially when her two girls played in the courtyard.

Secure in her nanny's arms, eighteen-month-old Yilin dipped her little hand in the pond and tried to touch the red-eared slider turtles. She giggled when she saw the turtles poking their heads out of the water.

Nine-year-old Shinyu was sitting on one of the rocks, frowning. She was worried and scared. Her mother told her that her nanny Pinpin was having a baby, but the screams she heard frightened her. She looked in the direction of the room where the disturbance had occurred, but the golden ginkgo foliage blocked her view.

Shinyu turned towards her mother and met her caring gaze. No words were spoken and Shinyu immediately felt better as her mother had always been a great comfort to her. She thought her mother was the most beautiful person she had ever seen. She had never seen her mother in any garment other than qipaos, and her long black hair was silky and always neatly plaited, wrapped into a bun, and pinned on the back of her head. Shinyu returned her mother a relieved smile, but her smile faltered when her mother's faded.

"My lady, it's a boy," the elderly servant said softly when she arrived at the pavilion and stood by her lady.

Yafong nodded gently, and her eyes expressed sadness. She raised her right hand, and the maid standing by the pavilion entrance quickly stepped up and grasped her hand and elbow to help her stand up. Slowly taking graceful little steps, Yafong turned herself towards the path to the east wing. With one arm supported by the maid, she gently swung her other arm to keep herself balanced.

Shinyu lowered her eyes and looked at her mother's small feet, which were wrapped with a pair of red embroidered silk shoes matching her qipao. She watched her mother slowly moving her feet, the smile reappearing on her face. She wished she could go with her mother as she had always loved holding her

hand and strolling around with her since she was a little girl. However, she was told she had to stay in the yard today. Letting out a small sigh of disappointment, she turned around to watch Yilin, who was still leaning her little body against her nanny, looking into the pond.

Yafong carefully walked down the pavilion stairs to the veranda that led to the east wing. She sighed when stepping on the veranda platform as its length seemed endless to her, but she immediately put on a smile to uplift herself. Her pace was in a graceful rhythm, but her heart was racing as she was eager to attend to Pinshin—her handmaid, her best friend, and the sister she never had.

Yafong's childhood nanny once said to her and Pinshin, "Miss Yafong, you are blessed to be born in a nice family when others suffer from the war. Pinshin, you are fortunate to come to this family and have a chance for a better life when others are still struggling. You two have to cherish each other." But little did they know that fate had brought them together and that their futures would be inextricably intertwined and marked by unexpected obstacles.

Suddenly, Yafong felt a burning sensation in her eyes. She slowed her pace and blinked her eyes, hoping to ease the tears. "It's joyful," she whispered to herself. "He will be happy." Increasing her pace again, she could not wait to see Pinshin and tell her everything would be all right now.

Most of the servants were still gathered in front of the double doors, which were closed again. The noise of the crowd muted when their lady arrived. One servant knocked on the door and announced her arrival. The double doors immediately opened.

Yafong stopped momentarily in front of the open doors to compose herself. Taking a deep breath and putting on a broader smile, she stepped into the room with her maid's assistance.

It was a large room furnished with western style furniture.

The first thing one noticed when entering the room was a beautiful sitting area complete with a set of golden yellow sofas, a large redwood tea table, and side tables.

“My lady,” the servants and midwife greeted Yafong in unison.

A middle-aged servant was cradling a purplish-pink baby wrapped in a white cotton cloth. She walked towards Yafong with the baby, assuming the newborn was what she wanted to see first. But Yafong walked past the servant without looking at the boy and went directly to Pinshin, who was lying on the bed in a lethargic state. The servants and midwife stepped aside while Yafong sat on the edge of the bed.

With her handkerchief, Yafong wiped perspiration off Pinshin’s forehead and brushed aside the hairs from Pinshin’s face with her slender fingers.

“Thank you,” Yafong whispered to Pinshin.

Later in the evening...

“Mama, when can I see the baby? Can I go now?” Shinyu asked eagerly.

Yafong was removing her pearl earrings. She paused and smiled at her daughter, who was sitting by the vanity looking at her with her impatient big eyes. “How about tomorrow morning after breakfast? Daddy should be here by then,” Yafong said.

Shinyu nodded but could not hide her disappointment.

Yafong removed the earrings and carefully placed them in a red velvet jewelry box. She then turned to gaze at Shinyu and reached out to caress her cheek. “Off to bed now,” she said softly.

“Yes, Mama,” Shinyu replied even though she wished to stay longer. “Good night, Mama.” She gave her mother a hug and a kiss on her cheek before walking out of the room. Her nanny was waiting by the door for her.

One of Yafong’s two personal maids closed the door after

Shinyu and walked back to Yafong to help her change. The other maid walked out of the bathroom carrying a washbasin with warm water and put it on the floor by the vanity. She knelt down by Yafong's feet and gently removed her silk shoes and socks.

If only I had been born five or ten years later, Yafong thought when she saw her feet after the socks were removed.

She was carrying on a tradition of Chinese history. Or... perhaps she was bound by it.