

Blazing China

A Christian Novel

by

R. F. Whong

Dedication

I dedicate this book, first and foremost, to my Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, I dedicate this book to my brothers and sisters in Christ who have supported us in our ministry over the years.

Last but not least, I dedicate this book to numerous Christians in China who remain steadfast under tremendous pressure and suffering even today. As the writer of Hebrews 11 states, “They were... destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy.”

They are the heroes and heroines in this book and in real life.

Why I Wrote This Book

While my husband and I served together at three churches from 1987 to 2020, many students and visiting scholars from Mainland China attended the Chinese congregation of our church. A majority of them initially identified themselves as atheists, and they came to church out of curiosity. The work of the Holy Spirit was beyond my comprehension. One by one, hundreds of them accepted Christ as their personal Savior. From them, I heard numerous stories about the Cultural Revolution, the most trying period in modern Chinese history. The Lord put an idea in my mind: Someone must write those incidents down. I compiled some of them into a draft and self-published the booklet, “Ninety Degrees of Separation,” about twenty years ago.

In 2020, I received another inspiration from the Lord and began to revise my draft into a full-length book. This time, instead of depicting the horror and hopelessness of people at that time, I focused on showing how Christians prevailed under intense suffering and persecution. Many scenes depicted in the book took place in real life.

To connect with me, please go to www.ruthforchrist.com.

Chapter One

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

Robert Frost (1874–1963), “The Road Not Taken”

Chungking (Chongqing), China
September 1945

Underneath a painting of Christ’s crucifixion on the wall, Wang Leesan sat with her parents next to the radio, her chest swelling. The news reporter’s loud voice echoed in their living room. “Japan surrendered after eight years of war. Let’s all celebrate...”

Mama stood up, her long flowery dress draping around her slim frame. “Finally, we can return to Nanjing. I can’t wait to see our old house again.”

“Praise the Lord.” Moisture glistened in Papa’s eyes, his shiny black hair bobbing over his forehead. He moved over to draw them into a three-way hug.

After Papa loosened his hold of them, Leesan crossed her arms over her stomach. *Will the Lees move back to Peking? I must see my beloved Rong!*

Was she thirteen when she met him? Smiling over when he moved in next door five years ago, she excused herself and strolled toward their neighbor’s house.

Beyond the gate, a tall woman, in the traditional Chinese *qipao* dress with her glossy ebony hair combed into a neat bun, stood under an arbor full of purple blooms.

Leesan quickened her steps. “Mrs. Lee, have you heard about the big news?”

Mrs. Lee’s lips curled up. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?” A slight Peking accent laced her soft-spoken Mandarin. “Rong is waiting for you inside.”

Leesan waved and entered the living room. Her heartbeat skittered at Rong’s tall profile. Laughter burst from her chest. “How come you’re not reading in your study today?”

Both arms extended, he strode forward. “I’ve been waiting to see you.”

“Yes? You must have heard the news.” She grinned and sprinted across the tiles to meet him.

“Of course. I foresee this year will be earmarked as one of the most memorable moments in our

history.” Grasping her hands, he drew her to sit on the sofa. “I’ve got something to ask you. We’re moving back to Peking. I’ll transfer to Peking University, starting my junior year soon. How about you?”

She leaned against him, a tide of tender feelings flooding her. “Peking University has accepted me. I’ll go to the same university as you.”

“Wonderful.” His eyes sparkled. “I can’t wait to show you our place in Peking. My family has lived there since my great-grandparents. Have you seen a Chinese courtyard house before?”

Safe against his side, she shook her head. “I’ve read about it, a house with a square courtyard in the center surrounded by many rooms on all sides. The main gate always faces south.”

He patted her arm. “I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Her mouth curved up. Oh, she could barely wait to start college life with him and then become Mrs. Lee Rong. She scooted away and pushed to her feet. “I’d better go now.”

Grinning, he tapped her nose. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Enveloped in a dreamy excitement, she headed home for dinner. The air smelled different. The world felt different. Her steps light, she nearly skipped into the dining room to join Papa and Mama by the mahogany dining table. After sinking into her seat and waiting for Papa to give the blessing, she grabbed her chopsticks to pick up a piece of pork and breathed in the tangy garlic scent. Could a day be more perfect?

Her mother gave her a meaningful glance. “We’ll move back home soon. National Central University is also relocating back to Nanjing. Didn’t you receive an acceptance letter from them?”

I can’t hide it anymore. Leesan pushed back her shoulders. “I’m dating Rong. I want to be with him in Peking.”

Her parents lapsed into silence.

Wouldn’t they say something? She put down the chopsticks and wrung her fingers. “I understand he isn’t a Christian yet. Didn’t his mother receive her baptism recently? He’ll become a Christian soon. I’m sure of it.”

Mama let out a long breath. “It’s good that the socioeconomic status of our families is similar, and Su-Ann has become my close friend. But you’re so young. You’ve never dated before. Do you understand what love is? Maybe you’re just infatuated with Rong?”

As tears dampened Leesan’s cheeks, Papa pulled her into his arms. “You’re our only child. We’ll never prevent you from pursuing your dreams. If you wish to go to Peking University, we won’t say no. I urge you to consider your decision carefully. You’re barely eighteen. Pray and choose wisely.”

She stood up from Papa’s embrace and placed a hand over her heart, a heaviness in her chest. “I must be with Rong. I won’t be happy without him.”

Mama dabbed her forehead with a handkerchief. “I’m afraid we’ve spoiled you.”

Leesan surged forward and sank to her knees at Mama’s feet. “I’ll be fine. Rong is a decent man.”

“It’s too bad our small church doesn’t have young men suitable for you.” Mama cupped Leesan’s chin, peered down at her, then smoothed back the hair from her temples. “After you go to Peking, remember to share the gospel with Rong.”

Over the next week, although busy packing, Rong came by every morning and often stayed for lunch. And Papa made an effort to talk to him.

Rong also brought along Liang Duan, a tall young man whose long, thick brows and soulful midnight-black eyes added to his habitual melancholy expression. Rong introduced him as his best friend since their elementary school days in Peking. “He came here to help us move. Like me, he’ll

be a junior at Peking University.”

With the same ideology, the two friends often engaged in earnest discussions. Yet, in her father’s presence, Duan became less talkative.

Unable to suppress her curiosity, Leesan drew Rong into a corner. “Is Duan afraid of Papa? Why is he so quiet around him?”

Rong made a funny face with crossed eyes. “He doesn’t care too much for wealthy folks, especially rich, high-ranking government officials.”

She pouted. “Don’t joke around. How about me? What does he think about me?”

“Hmm.” Rong hesitated with an uneasy laugh. “He learned I’m dating an official’s daughter and wanted to check you out. I guess he likes you now. He told me you’re a good-looking girl.”

She grinned. The more she became acquainted with Duan, the better she liked him. He cared about her feelings more than Rong did and enjoyed reading poems with her.

The clock struck ten.

Excitement pulsed through her veins as she waited for Rong and his friend. But they didn’t show up as expected.

Something must have gone wrong. By lunchtime, she trod to the kitchen. “Mama, please send someone to the Lees.”

Her mother set aside the plate in her hands. “Maybe Rong is busy and forgot to send you a message.”

Bracing against the countertop stacked with china and supplies ready to be packed, Leesan furrowed her brows.

Mama touched the gold-rimmed edge of a bowl and huffed. “You’re really in love, aren’t you?”

She dispatched Ah Shan, their servant boy. He didn’t return until late in the afternoon.

When he entered the living room, Leesan rushed to him. “Is everything all right?”

“Many men in uniform are in their yard. Mrs. Lee is in custody. Nobody has seen young Master Lee since yesterday. The soldiers are searching for him because he’s a member of the Communist party.”

Leesan opened her mouth but couldn’t utter a word. Beads of sweat slicked her forehead. Then she whispered, “Surely, Rong didn’t join the Communist party? He’s never mentioned it.”

She stayed up late with her parents, awaiting additional news.

Duan came at midnight. Ah Shan led him into their living room. “Rong will leave for America soon. He... might not come back.” He stood by the sofa where Leesan sat. His soulful eyes seemed even darker tonight, his voice tight. “He asked me to tell you. Don’t wait for him.”

Her jaw dropped, a hard knot forming in her stomach. Did Rong expect to end their relationship with one simple sentence?

“Where is he?” Rising from her seat, she pressed a fist against the tightening pain. “How do I get in touch with him? Can I leave with him?”

Incredulity flashed across the faces in front of her.

“You can’t.” Mama held up a hand. “You two aren’t even engaged.”

Tears welled up in Leesan’s eyes. “He’ll marry me if I go with him now.”

“You—” Mama’s words seemed stuck in her throat.

Papa kneaded his eyebrows. “Doesn’t he need to apply to go abroad?”

“Our organization has connections and is in the process of completing his application. Please keep the information confidential. Otherwise, Rong’s safety may be jeopardized.” Duan’s forehead drooped further, and his mouth curved downward before he nodded at Leesan. “I’ll contact Rong. I shall be back.”

After Duan left, Papa stood and gripped her elbows. “Are you certain you want to enter marriage at such a young age?”

Dabbing her cheek with a handkerchief, she returned his gaze. “I’m one hundred percent sure. I can’t live without him.”

“If you’re so determined, I have nothing else to say.” His heavy breath ruffled her hair. “I’ve felt his political views are to the radical side, but I never suspected he’d join the Communist party.”

“Oh, Papa.” Tears trickled down once more. “I care about him. I choose to go. If I stay behind, I’ll die of a broken heart.”

“I’m concerned you two don’t share the same values,” Papa murmured more to himself than to her. “With the approaching civil war, I do worry about your safety here. This may be God’s answer to my prayers. Leaving the country for a year or two doesn’t seem bad. I pray you’ll come home safely once the political situation stabilizes.”

When Leesan was having afternoon tea with Papa and Mama the next day, the doorbell rang, and Ah Shan ushered Duan into the parlor. He stopped in front of them. “Rong has arrived in Shanghai. He’s expecting Leesan to join him. They’ll get married right away. Their paperwork can be processed together.”

Papa stroked his chin, his face suddenly looking much older. “Can you tell us more information?”

Duan ducked his head without replying.

“Why is secrecy so important?” Papa’s nervous fingers moved to massage his temples. “At least tell us where in America they’re going.”

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, Duan rocked back on his heels and met Papa’s gaze. “They’ll go to Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.”

“Ohio State University?” Papa’s eyes brightened. “Dr. John Sung’s alma mater?”

At Duan’s puzzled glance, Leesan couldn’t help chiming in, “Dr. John Sung was a famous Chinese evangelist. My papa and mama became Christians at one of his evangelistic meetings. Dr. Sung received his PhD in chemistry from OSU but dumped his diploma into the Pacific Ocean during his trip back to China.”

“Oh yes.” Papa’s lips curled up. “Believe it or not, a coffin sat right in front of us during the meeting. Dr. Sung shouted, ‘Get rich, get rich, get the coffin!’ Subsequently, he laid himself in the coffin.”

Her mother nodded. “Dr. Sung was an evangelist full of the Holy Spirit and also an expert in using Chinese words that sound similar but have distinct meanings to convey his messages.”

“The words *get rich* and *coffin* sound similar.” Papa dipped his head. “Who would have combined such words in the same sentence to demonstrate pursuing money won’t lead to eternal life?”

Mama touched her eyes. “His powerful sermon moved us to tears. We answered his altar call and accepted Christ as our Savior right on the spot.”

“Doesn’t Rong major in chemistry? So, he’ll attend the same Department of Chemistry as Dr. Sung. How extraordinary!” Papa’s voice dropped. “Too bad Dr. Sung passed away last year.” He then took a sip of his tea. “How about you? Have you decided what you want to study?”

“I’ll try the Department of Education. I hope they’ll accept me.”

Papa put down his teacup and forced a smile. “With your good grades, I’m confident you’ll have no problem.”

That night, during their evening prayer, Leesan prayed for the Lee family and also pleaded for the Lord’s protection over her parents as they faced political turmoil.

Afterward, Mama placed a red silk pouch in front of her. “I got these from your grandma. Originally, I planned to give them to you when you became engaged. Since you’re leaving tomorrow, I…” She dabbed her eyes. “It’s awful. We can’t even see you get married. Your papa has dreamed about taking you by the hand to lead you into the wedding ceremony. It seems an impossible wish now.”

“Oh, Mama,” was all Leesun managed to say.

She opened the bag to pull out several platinum chains, jade pendants, pearl bracelets, and diamond rings. Her fingers brushed over a large transparent green jade carved in the shape of a peach. “Grandma used to wear this.”

“Yes, one of her favorite pieces.” Mama picked up the pendant. “Give it to your daughter one day.”

Her father gave her a Chinese Bible, moisture shimmering in his eyes. “Remember to read your Bible.”

Chapter Two

“Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn’t.”

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

Shanghai, China
September 1945

The train pulled into Shanghai Station. Sighting Rong’s tall frame on the platform, Leesun rushed off and fell into his arms. “I was so worried about you. Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he replied in his usual calm tone, then placed a kiss on her forehead.

Her stomach churned, and she leaned against him, tears wetting her cheeks. “How did you get into this trouble? I knew you were involved in some campus activities at your university, but I didn’t think it would be so serious.”

“No use talking about it now.” He frowned. “Let’s go to my uncle’s place. His friend Pastor Ling will officiate our wedding.”

Rong took her to a Western-style house in the city’s trendiest district. They were married in a simple ceremony on the same day. Only the pastor, Uncle Su-Nong, his wife, and their twin boys were present. Different feelings—joy, sorrow, love, and a trace of regret—assailed her. After the wedding, they heeded Liang Duan’s directions to hide in a bungalow until further notice.

On their first night as husband and wife, she nestled beside Rong in their dark bedroom. Heat flushed her face. “Do you know what to do?”

“I suppose.” His voice sounded thick.

Her fingers brushed over the soft bedsheet. Unease tingled at the back of her neck. Was he anxious like her? “Do we need to take off our clothes?”

“No.” He cleared his throat. “Just remove the underwear.”

She heard his movement and complied.

In the darkness, his mouth fell on hers, and she kissed him back, the alluring scenes in the romance novels she’d read flashing across her mind. Anticipation swamped her heart, but he didn’t give her tender caresses as she’d expected.

“No—” she uttered a gasp of shock.

Rong ignored her protest and continued his rhythm. Tears streamed down her cheeks when he collapsed against her. Why was it so different from the depictions in novels?

He didn't touch her in the next few days. What a relief!

One week later, they boarded the ocean liner. As the ship pushed away from shore, they stood on the deck to watch the land disappear.

“Bye, my beloved China, my home, my fatherland. I sincerely want to give myself to you. I don't know if I'll ever see you again,” he murmured, his eyes glistening.

She touched his shoulder, then clutched both arms to her chest, unable to lift a heavy dread. When would she see Papa and Mama again?

Soon, the coast vanished from sight. While craning her neck and seeing nothing except water, she grasped his hand, and they walked back to their cabin.

Once inside, he pulled her to the bed to kiss her. She went still, a hard knot forming in her stomach. “Aren't you in a foul mood?”

He nuzzled her neck, his breath hot against her skin. “All the more reason why I need my wife's love.”

She turned her head sideways, an ache rising to her throat. “This inside cabin is so dark. Shall we have the light on?”

“No.” His arms tightened around her.

Like last time, she lay beneath him in silence, enduring his full weight on her. Frustration coursed through her veins, and her mind wandered. Was sex between a couple mainly for the purpose of producing children? Mama taught her to be submissive to her husband, no matter what.

Her thoughts returned to the present at the end of his movement. He got up and went to flick on the switch. “I received a letter from Duan before we boarded the ship. He said my mother is still in custody. I don't know what'll happen to her.”

She sat up and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. How could he mention this now? When had he become so insensitive? “Do you want to pray with me for her safety?”

As he shook his head, she plopped back onto the pillows. Was he always so stubborn?

Columbus, Ohio

Fall 1945

When they arrived at Ohio State University, two letters awaited them, one bearing the name Lee Du Su-Ann and the other Wang Jia-Ting and Wang May.

Praise the Lord! Leesan clasped the letters to her chest, savoring the news from both Rong's mother and her parents. Su-Ann had been freed and was leaving for Peking.

Peking... What would it be like to be going there now?

She tucked the letters in a dresser drawer and followed her husband to go outside. At least, the fabulous display of autumn colors eased her homesickness as they strolled around Mirror Lake, the jewel of their university, and stopped to admire a mixture of yellow, orange, and red leaves.

“The setting isn't much different from home.” Still, pain and longing contorted Rong's face.

“Oh, Rong.” She pulled him closer, tears blurring her vision as she pondered her parents' whereabouts.

Back in their rented room, he grabbed her to sit together on the saggy sofa. “We can't eat out anymore.”

“I’ve never cooked anything in my entire life.” She placed her hands on her waist, her every muscle taut.

“Eating out is too expensive. We can’t afford it.”

While he glared at her, she pressed her lips together and kept quiet.

He huffed out a breath. “Okay, I’ll do it. Let me go get some groceries.”

An hour later, he returned and hurried into the kitchen to prepare their first home meal—spaghetti disguised as Chinese noodles topped with a meat sauce.

She cleaned her plate and leaned back in her chair with a grin. “I didn’t know you were such a superb cook.”

Rong shrugged. “Cooking isn’t much different from carrying out a chemical reaction.” Leaning back in his chair, he folded his arms across his chest. “By the way, I’ve been washing our clothes since we left Shanghai. You can’t expect me to do everything. My study is even busier than yours.”

Her smile disappeared, and the displeasure came rushing back. “But—”

“No more but.” He waved at her. “Cook, or do the laundry. Pick one.”

How could he expect her to do so much work? She covered her face to feign crying. Not hearing any movement, she lifted her head. He still sat there, eyeing her with his arms crossed. She wiped her tears away. “Fine. I’ll do the laundry. It’s easier.”

At ten o’clock, he touched her cheek. “Let’s go to bed early tonight.”

She moved a step away to lean against the wall as a chill gripped her heart. Could she muster up her courage to talk to him, this man she’d loved since thirteen, about such a sensitive subject? The mere thought brought a tightness to her throat. “Should we try different things? Can we take off our clothes and turn on the light?”

Shock distorted his smooth features.

She swallowed hard, resisting the urge to cringe. Had she said anything salacious? No. She kept her chin high. “The Bible teaches Adam and Eve were naked together and didn’t feel ashamed.”

A sneer further twisted his face, and the Peking accent in his Mandarin became more noticeable. “Your Bible teaches such indecent ideas?”

Her heartbeat slammed against her ribs as she rubbed her forehead. “It’s not indecent. We’re husband and wife—”

He raised his index finger. “As Chinese growing up under the teachings of Confucius, you should know well we have our code of conduct. Gentlemen and ladies from good families simply don’t spend too much energy on this. Life is full of more important matters.”

Maybe she’d been reading too many romance stories? She chewed her lip and went to turn off the light.

Columbus, Ohio
Early Winter 1949

At her husband’s familiar footsteps, Leesan set down her novel.

Rong entered the living room and shook off the light snow from his boots. “Today, Dr. Boord invited us to have Thanksgiving dinner with his family and other students.”

She moved toward him and clapped, excitement bursting through her. “How wonderful. He’s so kind.”

How she loved their gatherings with friends. Besides school parties, she enjoyed meeting with other Chinese students every week to talk about China’s political situation.

In their first year at OSU, during one of their parties, someone told her that everyone called Rong Mr. Right. His name sounded like *wrong* in English, and a naughty American classmate nicknamed him.

The only absence was church. She hadn't stepped into a church building during the past four years. Why didn't studying the Bible or attending church cross her mind except when she read a letter from her parents asking if she'd found a suitable church? Whisking a tress of hair away from her face, she brushed aside the questions with no answers.

Rong gave her cheek a teasing pat. "Time flies. I'm in debt to Dr. Boord. Without his guidance, I wouldn't have received my master's degree this year. And he also helped me find my first job."

"Your professor has done so much for you. We ought to buy a gift for his family." Perfect timing that the two of them graduated at the same time. With a bachelor's in education, maybe she could find a teaching job in Los Angeles.

Rong waved a piece of paper in the air as he shifted toward the sofa. "I almost forgot to tell you. I received a letter from Mother."

"What does it say?" She smoothed her fingers over her already smooth slacks, her mood plunging. During the past months, every letter from the Far East brought her apprehension. Rong's uncle had moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong to escape the raging civil war. Her parents' last letter described their decision to follow the Nationalist Government to Taiwan.

"Wonderful news." His lips curled up. "Mother mentioned Chairman Mao's speech, announcing the founding of the People's Republic of China." His eyes sparkled. "I wish I were there to celebrate with Duan and my friends. I've been waiting for this. It's finally happened. Now we can go home."

"Home?" She grinned, then hitched a long breath. Had Papa and Mama already moved to Taiwan? She touched Rong's shoulder. "Dear Mr. Right, you'd better stay home to help me fill our boxes. We're moving to California right after Thanksgiving, and we're barely ready."

"I..." He scratched his cheek. "I've been thinking." He placed the letter on the table. "If we don't go to California, if we go back to Peking—"

She sat, her stomach clenching. As he stared at her, she turned her head away. "How about your job? What'll you do in China?"

"I've also received a letter from Duan. He said the new government is recruiting people with my qualifications. It won't be a problem for me to find a suitable position once we go back. The pay will be decent." He chuckled. "We'll have servants like before. We don't need to cook and do laundry ever again. I'll send a telegram to the California job. Dr. Boord will understand."

He clasped her hands, but she drew away and walked to the window. "I don't know what to say. Papa and Mama plan to go to Taiwan. With the political unrest, if we go back to Peking, can we see them again?"

He came over to hug her shoulders. "I won't force you to do anything you don't like. Please consider it. We don't have to decide at this moment."

She tried to smile but couldn't stop her mouth from curving downward. "I must think about it. Please put the remaining books into the boxes. I need to go for a walk."

Her chest heavy, she dragged her feet toward the nearby park. Just an hour ago, their future in California seemed certain. Now everything had changed.

Life might be simpler if they went to California. She furrowed her brows, haziness clouding her mind.

The trees had already gone bare. The scenery remained quiet at first. Then a faint tune teased her ears—a familiar melody, light and merry. One of the hymns she used to sing in church, “He Leadeth Me.”

Could she peep into the future to know which route to pick? She opened her mouth but couldn’t utter a word of prayer. As dusk fell, she lifted her gaze toward the lingering blue luster on the western skyline.

I’m tired of cooking and doing the laundry.

Life in China might be more comfortable.

Chapter Three

“I can’t go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.”

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), *Alice in Wonderland*

Beijing, China
Spring 1950

Leesan stood in the center of the yard and sucked in the fragrant aroma swirling around the beautiful garden.

I can’t believe the peonies are already in full bloom.

She walked toward the main gate to pick up the newspaper. As she passed the exquisite marble pillars framing the door, awe crept into her heart as if she were seeing them for the first time.

Her gaze returned to the paper, and she searched for new information on the civil war.

No, nothing important.

With a heavy sigh, she returned to the lush yard surrounded by bushes, trees, and odd-shaped stones.

Had they arrived in Peking, now called Beijing, only two months ago? On that February day, a thin layer of snow helped the magical scenery cast a spell on her. Yet concern about Papa and Mama’s safety had broken her enchantment.

Moisture gathered behind her eyelids. Did they reach Taiwan? Were they safe?

A faint, consistent voice floated into her ears, rousing her from her thoughts.

Mother must be praying in her room.

She walked toward the main hall’s north section and its adjacent houses where Rong’s mother resided. Still, her chest constricted. Had she made the right decision to leave the US? Could she see Papa and Mama again? Sitting by the pond, she stirred up the tranquil waters, the soft lapping soothing. Nice to have such a splendid garden. Besides this property, the affluent Lee family also owned a parcel of land outside Beijing.

At the thought of her mother-in-law, Su-Ann, the tightness in Leesan’s shoulders eased a bit.

Quite a unique character.

“Ms. Leesan, breakfast is ready.” Ah Tian, Su-Ann’s nanny since birth, beckoned from the kitchen door.

Leesan strolled into the dining room and sat by her mother-in-law.

Like always, Su-Ann wore a traditional Chinese qipao dress. Leesan couldn’t remember ever seeing her wear anything else. At forty-nine, her mother-in-law still maintained a well-kept, youthful look, maybe because she had a household of servants working for her.

Yet she appeared changed in a certain way. She used to play mahjong with some aunties late into the night and wouldn’t get up until noon. Nowadays, she rose before dawn every day to read the Bible.

Leesan reached for a bowl of congee. “How early did you wake up today?”

Getting ready for work nearby, Rong chimed in. “I know why Mother gets up so early every morning. She tries to practice—” He paused. “What’s that phrase you told me?”

Su-Ann lifted her face. “No B No B.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “Bye. See you tonight.”

Leesan waved at her husband and grinned. “Rong seems quite satisfied with his government position.”

“It’s great he’s landed this job so fast. Duan’s assistance was invaluable. What a blessing to have your childhood friend as a colleague!” Su-Ann peeled apart an orange and examined the pulp.

“What’s No B No B?” Leesan stood up to take a piece of bread.

“No Bible No Breakfast. I learned it from missionaries at my Chungking church where your mama led me to Christ....”

Mother stopped because of a concern for me.

Moisture clouded Leesan’s vision. After they returned to China, she heard from Su-Ann that her parents were among the first groups of people to go to Taiwan, and that was the last piece of news about them.

Su-Ann handed over a handkerchief. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Leesan dabbed away her tears. “Thank you.”

“Do you know I majored in English? I didn’t have any occasion to speak English for many years. So, I was pleasantly surprised when the missionaries organized an English Bible study class in Chungking. I learned No B No B there.” Su-Ann set aside her orange pieces and cleaned her fingers. “Why don’t you come to worship with me this Sunday?”

Leesan ducked her head and shifted in her chair. She hadn’t been in a church since she’d left home. “I can’t. It’ll cause Rong trouble. And we’ve already promised Duan to go hiking together.”

Her mother-in-law placed the uneaten orange into a bowl. “I see.” She rang a bell for the servants to take away the breakfast. “Rong mentioned gossip spread among his associates that I’m a Christian. I wonder how they found out.”

I have no clue, either. Leesan shrugged and excused herself. An equally uneventful day fizzled away with the setting sun. After dinner, she retreated to their bedroom to enjoy her reading. When familiar footsteps approached, she dropped her romance novel on the sofa. Rong leaned against the doorpost, a somber look dragging down his thin lips.

Her gaze held his. “What’s the matter?”

“I heard some news.” He shifted forward. “The People’s Liberation Army has taken over most of China. The Nationalist Government has retreated.”

Tears warmed her cheeks. “Are Papa and Mama safe in Taiwan?”

“Oh, Leesan.” He pulled her up into his arms. “I believe they’re well. I’m sure we can see them again soon.”

She snuggled against his broad chest. Listening to his even heartbeat calmed her frayed nerves.

“That’s not the only troublesome news.” He released her and took a step away. “New campaigns are unfolding to combat corruption. Unscrupulous officials have been chipping away at the coffers for so long. It’s about time to crack down on them.” He tugged on an ear. “But I worry the new campaigns will also aim at eliminating the capitalist class, including the landlords in Beijing. Mother is one of them.”

With the dread in his eyes so visible, something heavy pressed down on her shoulders. “Anything we can do?”

His mouth curved downward even more. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

An uncomfortable hush stretched across the room. *Time to change the subject.* She ducked her head and nudged a slipper along the wood floor with gold stripes. “Do you think Mother has changed?”

“Not her appearance—” His fingers ironed out the lines crinkling his forehead. “Her speech and behavior haven’t altered either. She always speaks softly and calmly, giving the impression of confidence and solemnity.”

She placed a palm on her heart. “Her character?”

“No.” As he lowered his hand, he wrinkled his eyebrows. “It’s more than that. She’s always been educated, prudent, and well-mannered, although sometimes she came across as too proper. I should say she used to be too much in control, cold, like a stone wall.”

“How about now?” Her chest swelling, she touched his arm.

He moved aside her novel and motioned for her to sit next to him on the sofa. “Mother is still proper, polite. Yet I sense the barrier has disappeared. She has a new kindness and an unselfish concern for others. Do you know what our driver told me this morning? Old Zhang said his daughter had a baby last year. Mother gave him a fat red envelope. She also visited his daughter and baby in person.”

“Is that why all servants listen to her?” She crooked up a corner of her mouth.

Rong flipped through her novel, using it to fan himself. “If her Christian faith did such wonders for her, I should say being a Christian isn’t too bad.”

Her heartbeat quickened. Dare she hope...? “How come you don’t want me to go to church with her?”

He slammed the book down, then shot to his feet. “Don’t you understand? I’m a Communist. I believe in communism. Religion is the people’s opium. We don’t need it. Communism will soon build a utopia in this world. Everyone will live well, no need to commit crimes, no need for Christian redemption.”

He was so stubborn. She stifled a sigh and focused on the magnificent painting on the wall—a pomegranate tree laden with red flowers and fruit nestled against huge, oddly shaped boulders. Subtle. Mother wanted them to produce as many seeds as the pomegranate. “In one aspect, Mother hasn’t changed a bit.”

He followed her gaze. “Yeah, she always tries to give us hints. No doubt she wants to have many grandsons like the pomegranates.” He gave her a wink. “Mrs. Right, let’s continue our mass-production project tonight.”

“You’re insufferable.” With reluctance, she flicked off the light switch.

A month fled away. Leesun strolled to the main gate to pick up the newspaper. News about the new campaign to redistribute land ownership occupied the front page.

Oh no. It's happening. But what could they do?

Sparrows flitted over the pond as she read in her favorite corner of the yard. Shaking her head, she dropped the paper and mused over a more pleasant idea. Her menstrual period was regular. Now she'd missed her period for two months.

Mama's words whispered in her head. "Your mother-in-law looks forward to having a grandson inherit the vast family fortune. In the past four generations, each generation produced only one son. If possible..." Mama didn't elaborate. Topics about bedroom activities leading to children were always difficult for her parents to broach.

Mother and Rong would welcome the baby's arrival.

Her glee evaporated as images of her parents overshadowed her. Uncontrollable tears welled up. Would she see Papa and Mama again? With a heavy heart, she trudged toward the kitchen and joined the others for breakfast.

In the afternoon, Rong came home at his regular hour, his expression grave. After dinner, they sat together to enjoy tea as usual.

Su-Ann asked the servants to bring out a special set of utensils that had been with the Lees for four generations. The pot and its six matching cups, a gift from the emperor to Rong's great-grandfather, were carved from high-quality green jade.

Rong picked up his cup. "Mother, how much land do we own?"

Su-Ann's head jerked up. "Don't be concerned. All our family properties will be yours one day."

"No, that's not what I meant." He took a sip, choked, and started coughing. When he ceased wheezing, he walked to the window, his steps soft against the wood floor.

Outside, night had fallen. The chirp of crickets rang in the stillness. The room felt tranquil in comparison.

He turned from the window. "A reliable source warned me a large-scale land reform campaign will take effect soon. I worry about our situation."

While Su-Ann remained silent, Leesan fidgeted. Unable to keep still, she excused herself to step out. But she didn't go far and leaned against the wall beyond the door.

Her husband's words drifted out. "This new campaign will target the city landlords. We're one of them."

Su-Ann didn't reply. Insects chirping in the background created the only sound. After the clock struck eight, she spoke in a voice lower than usual. "The tea is cold."

Mother must have just sipped her tea. Leesan lifted her gaze toward the crescent of the new moon, pale in the dusk sky.

Rong heaved an audible sigh. "We need to take action soon."

"What are you trying to say?"

"We have to get rid of our land—quickly."

"What? Get rid of it?" Su-Ann nearly screeched before adjusting her tone. "The land has been in the family for generations. Your great-grandfather gave specific instructions that it should not be divided even if there's more than one son."

"I know it all."

"Our ancestors won't forgive the offspring who squanders the property. Do you want me to be that person?"

Leesan touched her forehead, then massaged her temples. As she prepared to return to the room, Rong's bass voice sounded once more. "Mother, forgive me, please forgive me."

Her husband didn't bring up the topic again that evening. Yet as the week progressed, he talked to his mother about it nonstop. Leesan couldn't help asking, "How come you push her so hard?"

“Because it’s a serious matter.” He paced around their bedroom. “I understand communism. The land reform campaign is bound to happen. Sooner or later, she’ll lose the land. Sooner is better than later, especially if she volunteers to give it up.”

Her gaze followed him. “What can the government do if we refuse?”

His steps halted by the sofa. “The government can do a lot, including prison sentences and capital punishment. The current goal is clear—eliminate the landlord class.”

A shiver ran up her spine. She rubbed the back of her neck. “Do you regret coming back?”

He gave her a stern stare. “Why do you ask such a question?”

“I’m just wondering.” She turned her head sideways. “You don’t look happy.”

“I have no regrets.” He snapped his fingers, making her jump. “The government is doing the right thing for China, including the land reform campaign. I’ll convince Mother, although I do understand her sentiments. She dreads to bring shame to the family.”

After two quick strides, he sat beside her and tucked her hair back from her cheeks. “And you? Do you have regrets? It must be tough for you, especially not knowing how Papa and Mama are.”

“I miss them a great deal. I’m grateful I have you and Mother.” Giving him a forced smile, she patted her belly. “Soon we may have a fresh addition.”

He clutched her shoulders. “What did you say?”

“I think I’m pregnant.”

“Truly?” He pressed a palm against her abdomen, and his lips crinkled up. “How wonderful. I can’t believe it. I’m going to be a father. Let’s go tell Mother.”

His excitement scarcely matched her mother-in-law’s response. Upon hearing the news, she looked into the distance, an enormous grin rounding up her cheeks. “Praise the Lord.”

The relief in her voice brought warmth to Leesán’s heart. The Lee family line would continue.

Although disturbing information about the new campaigns continued to reach her, nothing could diminish the jubilant feelings when the doctor said she was pregnant with two babies.

After one regular checkup, Su-Ann gestured at Leesán’s protruding belly. “It must run in our family. My younger brother also has twins. *Twin boys.*”

“I remember Ming-Ming and Tong-Tong, two active naughty boys. We saw them a few years back. Auntie Shu-Fang always yelled at them.” Leesán chuckled at her recollection of meeting them before her wedding.

“Yes, two fine, healthy boys.” Then Su-Ann’s smiling expression stiffened into seriousness. “Do you know what Pastor Fu taught us on Sunday? He cited Matthew chapter thirteen.”

“The parable about a farmer who went out to sow his seed?” Leesán tilted back her head.

“Yes.” Su-Ann clenched her hands together. “Pastor Fu emphasized the seed that fell among thorns. It’s like a person who hears the truth, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. The Lord is giving me a message. I used to think all the wealth was mine. In reality, everything, including my life, is just entrusted to me temporarily. I’m willing to give it all back to the Lord. Tomorrow, I’ll give the land to the government to set an example for other landlords in the city.”

Strands of white hair shimmered on her mother-in-law’s head. Noticing them for the first time, Leesán couldn’t help rubbing her temples.

With nonstop political campaigns, what would happen next?