

## BETRAYAL

Belinda Chang

**W**aiting in the airport lounge, President Hu took out his cell and made two calls. The first was to Mrs. Hu in Taipei. "Hi, it's me . . . I've made it to Macau . . . ah, alright." He kept it to the point. The second call was also brief. "Hey there, what's up? I'm in Macau. Take a shower and wait up for me."

Hu returned the cell to his briefcase. He was a man in his fifties, a man who used pomade on his thinning hair, a man with a comb over. He had a square face; with the exception of several deep wrinkles between the eyebrows, it had no distinguishing features at all. It was the face of a middle-aged man, a weary, suspicious, dissatisfied face. Several times while he was waiting, complete strangers gave him a warm greeting and offered to shake his hand. He just shook his head: no, I'm not Manager Qiu. I'm not Chairman Chen. And I sure ain't Jim, Mark, or Jonathan. China-based Taiwanese businessmen and their employees all had English names, even if their jobs required no English at all.

Hu was wearing a pair of gray slacks. He was on the last hole of the belt, the result of years of convivial banquets with the mainlanders. His polished calfskin loafers matched with gray socks had been prepared for him by Xiuying. He'd had to go back to Taipei for a whole week for his mother's eightieth birthday celebrations. Xiuying and the children had made a huge fuss about everything. In bed the night before he left, Xiuying was clinging to him and nagging for all she was worth. How much longer would she have to put up with this?

"I trust you won't abandon this family. You might not want your old lady, but you'll always want your kids, right?"

Jacob did well in school, always in the top three in his class. Jasmine was Hu's little princess. How he used to look forward to coming home at the end of the day and doting on his daughter! Seven years before, he had ventured west into mainland China, all for his family's sake. After getting knocked down a lot at first, he was finally able to get his footing, stand firm and taste the fruits of success; yet for seven years he'd lost the joy of spending time with his darling daughter. Sixteen years old now, Jasmine wore thick glasses and had her mother's serious expression.

"Three years, just bear with me for three more years and I'll be ready to shut down the operation."

He had a factory in Shanghai's Songjiang Industrial Zone making high-quality plastic containers for an endless stream of customers. In the past two years he had even secured orders from world-class manufacturers and improved packaging production considerably. All he needed was a chance to sell the plant and he would have enough for the rest of his life.

"The good things only come to those who wait . . ." a familiar pop song echoed in his ears, but as soon as he opened his mouth to sing along he'd lost the tune. He gave a big yawn. Nobody understood him. His mother, wife and the kids just demanded things from him, none of them offering him the slightest bit of comfort.

There were only a couple of duty-free shops in the airport lounge. He bought a bottle of Estée Lauder's newest lotion and a tube of lipstick, a purchase which would have cost the average mainland worker a month's salary. He felt like a coffee. Walking past a fashion accessories store, he saw some of those gorgeous silk scarves. He went in and picked out an emerald chiffon kerchief embroidered with a luscious red peony.

When Hu came out of the Pudong Airport in Shanghai, his driver, Zhao, was already waiting by the door. Zhao was scrawny, with a washboard chest. Hu's complete opposite, Zhao always had a smile on his face and an apology on the tip of his tongue. He ingratiatingly took Hu's luggage and led the way to the lower lot where he had parked the black BMW.

The sedan raced through the metropolis. An autumn drizzle, illuminated by the lamplights of the buildings and the billboards on the Bund, veiled the city that never slept in an alluring haze, like the plum blossom in the rain—like the ill-fated imperial concubine in the ancient song. Hu squinted out the window at the endless flow of traffic. Could you tell Taipei and Shanghai apart anymore? He didn't know. This, too, was a land of luxury, a realm of voluptuous pleasures, but one that was bigger, deeper, more affecting, or simply unfathomable.

"How's everything, Zhao?"

"Everything's fine. Miss Tangyan attended a ballroom dancing class and went to Xintendi. Her country cousin was here, too, but he didn't come to the house. She took him to Nanjing East Road and Pearl City to do some shopping, and he left the same day."

Tangyan had mentioned this cousin of hers before they moved in together. "I won't let you be jealous!" Tangyan said with her arms around his neck. "He's my eldest uncle's son. We grew up together." Every time the cousin came to visit, Tangyan would get him to take things home for her. He was the only one in the family who knew about Hu. Everyone else thought

she was a pink-collar worker in a foreign company. A college grad who was fluent in English and chic, Tangyan looked like a pink collar worker. Better to say she used to *be* a pink-collar worker, until old Hu had “headhunted” her—brought her over to his company.

They’d met at the Christmas party for Taiwanese corporate executives and entrepreneurs last year in the Grand Ballroom at the Paramount. It was an occasion to schmooze and party. An old Taiwanese entrepreneur like Hu, a man who had made it on the mainland, would receive a stack of business cards from those fresh off the boat. With a glass of red wine in one hand, Hu was humoring some, sizing up others. Oh well done! Where’d they find such a beautiful woman? She was dressed princess-style in a white lace dress and a golden bodice that hugged her frame. The flaxen curls of her perm bobbed prettily as she danced. What he found most appealing were those slender legs with sexy, shapely calves, a pair of lovely legs one saw once in a blue moon. Her golden three-inch heels tapped in time with the swing of her hips as she danced the cha cha, cha cha cha—hot damn!

When she finally came off the dance floor for a rest, Hu rushed up to introduce himself. Up close, minus the provocative dance moves, she was a completely different person. Sitting demurely, oval-faced and almond-eyed, she looked studious, like a schoolgirl. When things got hot and heavy, Hu usually went for foxy ladies, preferring girls on the fleshy side, but for some reason this slim schoolgirl made him ache with desire. She met his eager gaze with a sweet smile and introduced herself as a PR rep for a well-known international cosmetics firm.

From then on, Hu took her out every day. They went to the Bund to watch the pleasure boats, and the reflections of the boat lamps on the water were like dancing moons that shook and shattered on the waves. They had coffee in the Jinmao Plaza with a view of the cityscape by night. Hu listened to her reminisce in a faraway voice about her bitterly poor childhood in the countryside. How she would count down the days to New Year, when she was allowed a few feet of cheap patterned cloth for a new dress! In college, she’d worked as a private tutor, scrimping and saving until she eventually had enough to buy herself a fancy fur coat. What she wore underneath did not matter so much. The main thing was to look presentable.

“I just love to look pretty!” she said, puckering her mouth up daintily.

He gave her designer clothes and purses. In return, Tangyan gave him sweet kisses, one after another. He felt as if he was reliving the days when he would pamper Jasmine. He did not want other men to pamper her.

“Stay with me, sweetie, and I’ll treat you right.”

For their love nest, he purchased a two bedroom luxury refurbished apartment on an upscale block. He did his best to gratify Tangyan’s desires,

while she played her part by making him feel like he was on cloud nine. This was actually so much better than the guerrilla warfare approach to finding women, always hit and miss. He needed a safe haven, with a gentle, understanding woman waiting ashore.

To expand his market share, Hu often traveled the length of the country from north to south, from Harbin to Shenzhen, rushing back and forth between the major cities in all the provinces. When he was away, he needed Zhao to keep an eye on his woman. A very clever fellow, Zhao was from Shanghai and had been with him for three years.

Before he could even ring the bell, the door swung open and Tangyan flew into his arms, her body warm and silky.

"Did you bathe?" he asked softly. Tangyan writhed in his arms and said nothing.

"Wear this tonight," he said as he pulled out the green silk kerchief from his briefcase and draped it over her pretty head.

As old Hu was taking a shower, Tangyan pulled out the lingerie drawer of her wardrobe, in which she had sensual undergarments of every color and texture. She combed through her collection like a student looking for references in the library, or perhaps like a Shanghai housewife picking out the finest fruits in the market. She finally uncovered a red silk thong with sewn-on sequins to go with the scarf. Too gaudy. A further search revealed a pair of sultry raspberry-colored low-rise panties. A peony floated tantalizingly over the chiffon crotch. She was satisfied. She opened her shoe cabinet and took out a pair of silver pointed-toe heels. The props were all in place.

This was the second man she'd gone with. He'd been good to her, willing to spend: he immediately bought her whatever she wanted without flinching. She kept some of the trophies and sold the rest, saving almost enough to buy a place of her own. Her family had torn down the old house and built a new one a while back. Her parents were happy and her little sister had married well. She'd put her cousins through school. Her uncles would never have been able to afford the tuition on the income from the farm.

She trusted her judgment. She would find a tycoon with a heart of gold, go with him for a few years, and never worry about money again. She was a creature of vanity but kept a clear head, unlike some other girls who blew it all and ended up with nothing. She knew that the capital of youth would soon be spent.

She had a professional attitude and served her man to the best of her ability. He was very affectionate towards her and let her do everything she wanted. The only time she had felt constrained was when Mrs. Hu came to

visit for a month over the summer. Jumping at every sound, old Hu was on edge the entire time. Apparently, his wife, from a well-to-do family in Taiwan, was not to be taken lightly, and if old Hu was caught cheating he could forget about ever seeing his children again.

That was also the month she ran into her college classmate, Songjun, on the subway. She got on at Xujiahui and it was packed. It was always like sardines down there, and people could get quite fierce trying to find a seat. Even if your destination was only two or three stops away, you just had to take an empty seat or you'd feel taken advantage of. A seventh person would squeeze onto a bench seat that could comfortably sit six, every time without fail. Everyone, no matter who, would be squashed together, the well-dressed white-collar worker cheek by jowl with the sweaty laborer, but you were always better off sitting. That day, some big fellow got up for his stop and Tangyan nimbly took his place, hardly filling the vacancy he left behind. There was really only half a seat left, but this woman just had to take it, pressing Tangyan up against the man beside her. Both of them shrank back slightly. She glanced over and saw it was Songjun.

They'd dated for a while during college. He was young, hot-headed and did not know how to woo a girl, so they had broken up. Here they were a few years later in Shanghai and Songjun had grown up. Still tall and strong, he looked debonair in a black Gap tank top and Levi's. He worked in the fashion industry as a sales rep and told her she could model. Really, a couple of years go by and he's such a sweet-talker. She told him she was in the PR department of an international brand-name cosmetics firm. She once was a salesgirl at one of the counters in the company's outlet and often used the name of the company when introducing herself.

She knew what she was doing, investing long term, enjoying it as long as it lasted. She wouldn't be able to do this forever. She would save some money and make other plans. People say that the first "bucket of gold" is always filthy, but after that you can roll in the dough and clean up your act. Yet Mrs. Hu's arrival gave her some new ideas. Her spirits were low that day on the subway, and she went a bit overboard chatting with Songjun and even got off at his stop. You couldn't blame her; it was still early—only five o'clock, a few hours until dark. What else was she going to do?

Songjun still remembered her fondness for pretty things. Seeing that she was dressed head to toe in designer labels, he knew that she wanted nought, that there was nothing he could afford to give her. So he took her to Shaoxing Road. It was a short street, only a few hundred yards long, with art galleries and studios and a few long-established publishing houses, cafes and tea shops. Speckled with white paint, the parasol trees along the way were in full bloom, and the sun was pouring down radiance, the light

shattering into brilliant splinters as it passed through the chinks in the leaves. Their leather shoes clacked lightly against the sidewalk and she felt like a college student again, promenading with her beau. She had been in Shanghai for three years and had been to many high tone places, but she never knew this place existed.

Merrily, the two of them went in to check out several studios. The owners greeted them, assuming they were a couple. They seemed a perfect match. This was so different from her outings with old Hu; her fluid, youthful beauty next to his tired, stagnant age always attracted some strange looks. She went up to an oil painting of autumn leaves and checked the price. Perhaps one day she would buy it. That is the beauty of money—it can buy beautiful things. Songjun lingered in an art publisher's over reprints of old illustrated stories—there was *Madame White Snake*, *The Three Kingdoms*, and *Journey to the West*. He plunked himself down in one of the old chairs and wasn't getting up, so she, too, found a story to read, *The White Bone Demon Attacks Thrice*. They'd been reading a while when the owner asked them if they wanted tea. Songjun said yes and two cups made with tea bags were soon served. They read until it started to get a bit dark out. When they were on the way out the door without buying anything the owner charged them ten yuan for the tea. That cracked them up. It was like being kids again.

A few steps further and an elegant long white wall appeared. What fine family's fenced floral bower was this? They looked in and discovered it was actually a park designed to look like a secluded private garden. It had a little pond at the entrance with a few koi in it. There was also a sign there that read Take Caution Walking by the Lake. The two of them had another good laugh. Winding paths traversed the tranquil garden, leading to a covered corridor at the back. Nobody was there, so they sat down on the bench inside. How did that line go? The breeze blows, a bird cries, each sees the other in smiling eyes. She remembered the first time Songjun kissed her, in a pavilion in a little park. Before she got carried away there was a sudden rustling in the thicket outside, made by a man with his back to them who was undoing his fly. The two hurriedly stood up and left.

She told Songjun that sometimes when she was walking alone somewhere quiet she would get the funny feeling there was someone watching her, but when she turned to look it was just some guy looking for a place to relieve himself. Songjun laughed and said, "Someone must be following you. What man would not want to follow you?"

They were almost at the end of the street when she pulled him into an essential oils shop. They filled up the tiny space inside. Songjun seemed to be everywhere: his ears, his arms, his legs. She smelled roses, tea tree, and

lavender while Songjun looked on smiling. If she wanted, he would buy something for her so she could have something to remind her of this happy encounter and excursion. Citron, jasmine, or bergamot? Which fragrance would embalm this moment in memory? She would need this memento, because she could not see Songjun again. They had not spent much on their walk down the street, but it had brought her such happiness. She was afraid.

They walked out of the store empty-handed and stood at the entrance. Two girls of about ten years old passed by and one of them pulled the other's sleeve and said, "This shop owner is such a snob. Last time, he wouldn't let us in!" The girls soon turned down a narrow alley, where some elderly people in well-worn grey-blue clothes were ambling in the evening cool. There were a few bamboo poles across the alley to dry clothes from. A woman in her pajamas was retrieving her laundry—perhaps the mother of one of those girls. The alley seemed quite a bit darker than the street, and older too. The sun set earlier in there. Tangyan shivered.

Hu left for Beijing first thing the next morning and would be back in three days. Tangyan slept in until nearly noon. She took out her new pearl grey dress and purple angora single-button cape and laid them out on the bed. Then she sat down at the mirror and piled her hair up, leaving a few stray wisps and curls to flutter and dangle. Glossy foundation was in this fall, along with shiny eye shadow and sparkly lipstick. She spread and traced and witnessed an exquisite, glowing face appear in the mirror, a face that gave her a feeling of festive delight.

When Tangyan stepped out of the building in her ankle boots, the car was already waiting at the door. Zhao was whistling under his breath while maintaining a respectful demeanor. He asked, "Where will you be going today, Miss Tangyan?"

"Take me to pick up Miss Jiang."

Obediently turning the car around, Zhao drove towards the Hongqiao District. He asked, "Miss Tangyan, will you luncheon with Miss Jiang?" and observed Tangyan's expression in the mirror. She looked stunning today. Every few days, she would meet up with Miss Jiang for lunch in some quirky little eatery. Miss Jiang was also in a relationship with a Taiwanese entrepreneur, a man who ran a metal processing business and was always traveling abroad. She had recently gotten into ballroom dancing, hiring a retired national-class instructor to take her on a tour of Shanghai's grand ballrooms to refine her skill. She would often drag Tangyan along. The boss didn't like it. Another thing the boss didn't like was when they went clubbing. He'd heard all of this driving them around. Sometimes they'd lower their voices and whisper into each other's ears so he couldn't listen in

on the conversation. They were on guard against him, he felt. The two little vixens. The first time he'd driven the boss to pick Tangyan up, he could already see that the sweet young thing was a seductress. With that body and that strut, she was born to entice men. You only needed to take one look at her to know that only a man of means like the boss had the cash flows to keep her in clothes, let alone victuals and accommodation.

As Zhao weaved through the city street, an indescribable fragrance filled the car. A beautiful woman in a perfumed sedan—too bad they belonged to someone else. He glanced in the rearview mirror again and saw Tangyan looking out the window, a smile playing on the corners of her mouth. He couldn't help smiling as well. Seemed like the weather today would be particularly fine!

Miss Jiang got in. Petite, she wore a short, red leather miniskirt and a black cardigan with spangles. Combed up, her hair was wrapped with several coils of tinted beads. Like Tangyan she was very stylish, but she did not have the same allure, the power to make a man gratefully kneel at her feet and satisfy her every whim.

They got off at Hengshan Road. Zhao found a parking space and opened a copy of the Shanghai News, but he couldn't concentrate. He was thirty years old already but didn't even have a girlfriend, while a beautiful girl like Tangyan went and became someone's mistress. The boss had told him to keep a close eye on her. The boss wasn't stingy, paying him twice what other drivers got. Zhao was no ingrate, and would hold up his end of the bargain. In truth, the boss didn't have to tell him to keep his eye on Tangyan; he was doing that already. He took careful note of where she went, who she hung out with, what she bought, and even her mood. This one time, he remembered very clearly, one day during the month the boss's wife was visiting, the boss asked him to drive her to that Cloud Mountain Café they frequented. She was ten minutes late coming down, wearing large-frame sunglasses under an overcast sky. She got in the car without a word.

The boss's wife was nobody's fool. The first time he drove her around, she wormed out of him his family background and the boss's daily routine, including where he went after work and who he saw. He began to worry: what if she found out about Tangyan? A momentary lapse of attention and he made a wrong turn. Thank god the boss's wife didn't know the way. He calmed down at the realization that a total outsider wouldn't be able to spot the holes in his explanations. Still, he remained on alert the few times the boss's wife talked to him in private after that. The day before she took the kids back to Taiwan, she had him stop in front of a park. "Zhao, you get out, too, I need to speak to you." In the rearview mirror her eyes flashed daggers.

His cell rang. Tangyan said they were done eating and wanted to go to

Changle Road to buy dance shoes. When they got to the shoe store, Tangyan told him he didn't need to wait for them; they would be taking a stroll in a bit. He started driving in circles and found a space the second time around. He hurried back and stood behind a parasol tree across the street. The storefront was narrow. Five minutes went by and nothing. Just as he thought he had lost them, he spotted them around the corner, standing in front of a food vendor, each with a shoebox in hand. The vendor was selling autumn crabs he'd placed in two bamboo baskets on the ground. Tangyan bent down to look at the crabs as a leaf floated down, brushed her shoulder and, as if finally satisfied, fell down to the ground.

They kept moving ahead, and appeared to be walking along the street—there were many boutiques along the way. He followed from a distance. They walked quite slowly, stopping in the stores that looked interesting. A grown up man, he tended to take big strides, so he had to keep starting and stopping so he wouldn't get too close. He didn't know what he was doing. Even though the boss told him to keep tabs on Tangyan, he did not really have to follow them like this. Talking and laughing, they went into a place selling leather bags. He saw a public washroom nearby and suddenly felt the need to go.

Coming out, he nearly bumped into Tangyan. "Hey!" they both cried. Miss Jiang gasped with surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"I, I had to use the washroom. My stomach wasn't feeling well, so I parked the car and . . ."

"We're going to the washroom as well," said Tangyan. "What a coincidence."

"Well, I guess there's no need for me to stick around."

"Zhao," Tangyan stopped him, "I won't be needing a ride today."

"Alright." He waved and hurried off.

The next afternoon at three, Tangyan came downstairs right on time. She smiled amiably at Zhao, releasing a day and night of tightness in his chest.

"Where to?"

"Wukang Road."

"Wukang Road?"

"Don't you know where Wukang Road is?"

"Yes, yes, I know where it is." Zhao forced himself to start driving.

"I went dancing with Miss Jiang yesterday," volunteered Tangyan. "She dragged me along. I said I was wearing boots, and she insisted I buy a pair of dance shoes—they're made in the USA, really comfortable. We were back before midnight."

"Aye."

“Do you believe me?”

Zhao’s heart almost burst from his chest. “Believe you? I mean, why wouldn’t I believe you?”

“Whatever.” Tangyan didn’t say anything else.

They arrived at Wukang Road. It was an old street; under the deep blue sky, shaded by yellow leaves, the irregularly spaced old Western-style residences on both sides of the street were exotic, but the poles poking out of the buildings were Chinese-style. Somehow the clothes hanging out to dry on the poles seemed more worn than they would if people were wearing them. There were five or six families living in each building—behind each sumptuous façade, a shabby interior, the correspondence between form and content long lost.

During the day, Wukang Road looked like an ordinary residential street, while in the evening the moonlight and the leafy shade would lend an enchanting ambiance to the trendy little shops and cafes tucked in between the homes. Why would she come here in the middle of the day?

“Zhao, you get out, too. There’s something I’d like to speak to you about.” In the rearview mirror, Tangyan’s cold eyes flashed daggers. Zhao really wanted to get out of there, but instead he compliantly found a place to park.

He got out of the car, as if disarmed. Standing in front of her, he was nothing. He was even a little bit shorter than her. Tangyan turned and started walking, with him following submissively. Those toned, irresistible legs, the wondrous coordination of waist and hips, that straight back, those captivating curls: her swaying silhouette was oh so familiar. How many times had he quietly followed her like this, enthralled?

Tangyan stopped in front of one of the houses, glanced at him, and went in. For several nights now, he had watched her walk in. If he told the boss, she would evaporate like a drop of water, disappear into some remote corner of Shanghai with a new name and a new identity. He would never see her again.

He plodded on, stepping from a sun-lit world into an abysmal realm. There was a spiral staircase in there with a decorated banister, the carving nearly worn away, and on the windowpane was a thick coating of grime. Rays of afternoon sun angled in on the motes of dust wafting in the air. Mop handles dangled down from the upper floors. There was one door per floor, probably one floor per family. Over the grey door on the first floor was an equally grey window, through which he could make out a stack of cardboard boxes and a bicycle. Tangyan had already gone up several stairs. The tap, tap, tapping of her leather shoes echoed loudly through the silent, seemingly deserted building, harrying him.

What was there upstairs? A love nest for her and that man. For sure

there would be a bed in there, soft as quicksand. What was he doing here?

The tapping of her footsteps stopped. Now all that echoed through the air was the sound of his heavy breathing. The sound of footsteps started again, this time coming back down. Zhao turned and ran.

“Zhao!”

The urgency in her voice made him stop. He turned round and saw Tangyan leaning against the banister, looking at him beseechingly.

“Zhao . . .”

“Miss Tangyan.”

“I know that old Hu told you to keep an eye on me,” said Tangyan, dewy-eyed. “You are too devoted to him. What did he promise you? Be careful you don’t get left drinking hollow dumpling soup.”

(As long as there is evidence I can hold in my hands, the terms I am promising you will immediately be fulfilled . . . )

“The boss has been always good to you. If he ever found out, it’d break his heart.” Oh what long nights! All those long nights he shadowed her.

“Zhao, listen to me . . .”

“You shouldn’t . . . betray . . .”

A hint of scorn flashed over Tangyan’s glossy face, arced across the abyss of space between them and, like a long, thin needle, pierced his tender heart. Icily, she asked, “Tell me, how much do you want?”

(This amount would be enough to cover a down payment for a house. You could think about getting married . . . )

“I don’t want your money.”

“You don’t want money? What were you tailing me for if not money? Just name your price!”

“I said no,” Zhao’s face turned crimson, but he still seemed to be smiling. “No!”

He rushed out, got in the car, and locked the door. She did not chase after him. What a fool he was, what an idiot! How could he let her see through him like that? Why didn’t he have the guts to go up with her? She’d assumed it would be just that easy to buy him off with her body and her money. For him she had nothing but contempt.

There was only one thing he could do. He had no other choice but to become a betrayer. That evening, Zhao finally dialled that overseas number. It was the first call he’d ever made to Taipei.

“Hello, Mrs. Hu, it’s me, Zhao . . .”