THE JADE MIRROR

A LADY LI SOLO MYSTERY

THE QING DYNASTY MYSTERIES

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CHAPTER ONE

Lady Li sat alone in her study, though she was rarely ever truly alone. A pair of maids lingered quietly in the hall, Concubine Swan slept fitfully in the adjoining room, and the rhythmic clatter of her daughters' game stones echoed from the courtyard beyond. Still, a profound stillness filled the chamber—the sort that settles only when one has nowhere pressing to be and nothing particularly urgent to do.

She dipped her brush into the inkstone, but the calligraphy character she began—寂 (loneliness)—broke halfway through. It was a fitting word, but one that refused to cooperate. A smear of black pooled on the rice paper.

It had been just over a year since Lord Yun's death. A year since she had stepped from the role of wife into that of widow. Since then, she had not left her home except for temple rites and funeral obligations. The mourning veil had been lifted, but the veil of isolation still hung.

In their early days of marriage, her husband often told her she had a rare talent—not just for poetry and music, as befitted her station, but for noticing what others missed.

"You read people the way others read texts," he once said, tapping the tip of her nose with a smile. "One day, your mind will be the sharpest weapon in the room—sharper than any blade I could carry."

He hadn't lived long enough to see her prove him right. She had laughed when he said it—embarrassed, proud—but he'd meant every word. She frowned and pushed the ruined page away to dry before setting it aside for burning.

Outside, a breeze swept petals from the magnolia tree across the paving stones like pale ghosts. One landed on her writing desk. She was just brushing it aside when her steward, Eunuch Bai, entered, bowing deeply.

"A letter has arrived, my lady," he said, holding out a folded parchment to her. "From the household of General Nala."

Lady Li raised an eyebrow. "Lady Nala?" she asked, surprised. "We haven't corresponded since the mourning period began."

The letter was sealed in white wax—modest but elegant. Lady Li broke it carefully and read:

Dearest Sister Lian,

I pray this letter finds you in good health. I would not disturb your household during such solemn months unless I had great need. I write to you not merely as a friend, but as one in desperate need of confidence.

My daughter's wedding is set to take place in ten days. The groom is from a prominent family, and the match has been hard-won through careful negotiation and auspicious signs.

But three nights ago, one of her dowry items—a jade mirror once gifted to my husband's grandmother by the Qianlong Emperor himself—vanished from the ancestral hall.

It is irreplaceable. And worse, if word spreads, the wedding could be canceled and our family's reputation destroyed.

I dare not call the magistrate. But I remember... I remember

how clever you always were. I know this is beneath you, but if you would come—quietly—and help us find the mirror, I would be forever in your debt.

With deep affection, Nala Yuling

Lady Li folded the letter slowly, her thumb lingering on the paper's crease.

"Send word that I will visit Lady Nala tomorrow," she said quietly to Eunuch Bai. "We may be there for a few days."

"Shall I prepare mourning robes?" he asked delicately. "To maintain appearances?"

Lady Li shook her head. "No. I think it's time the world remembers I was not buried with my husband."

Eunuch Bai bowed and left, leaving her alone again—though this time, with the first flicker of purpose she hadn't felt in many months.

In the hallway, Concubine Swan shuffled past, her silk slippers whispering against the floor. Her face was pale, and the faint scent of opium clung to her like faded perfume.

"Where are you off to?" she asked, her voice slow and honey-thick with sleep.

"To visit an old friend," Lady Li replied.

Swan's gaze drifted to the basket near the door, where a dozen crumpled pages lay folded and blackened with ink. She nodded toward them with a languid tilt of her chin, blinking as if waking from a dream.

"I hope your friend is more inspiring than that brush of yours. You've been writing the same character for days."

Lady Li looked down at the desk, where the latest attempt still lingered—寂, half-formed and smudged.

She smiled, not bitterly, but with something quieter. Resolved. "Perhaps it's time to write something else." This time, she would not stop halfway through.

CHAPTER TWO

The Nala estate was grander than Lady Li remembered. Though it lacked the restraint and harmony of the imperial mansions nestled within the Forbidden City, it had the boldness of a family eager to show its rise. Lacquered gates gleamed in the sunlight, their red paint touched up just recently. The carved eaves bore phoenixes with gilded feathers, and thick jasmine hedges spilled over the walkways, sweet-scented and slightly overgrown.

Overcompensation, perhaps, Lady Li thought. *Or nervous pride.*

Her sedan chair was received without delay. As she stepped down, Eunuch Bai holding her hand protectively, her robe caught the light: bamboo and plum blossoms embroidered in silver thread, quiet symbols of resilience and winter grace. She had chosen them carefully—a quiet signal: the widow was not withered, only tempered.

At the entrance, a servant bowed low and murmured, "Lady Nala is awaiting you in the east reception hall, madam."

Lady Li inclined her head. As she followed him through the paved courtyards, she noted every detail—the cracked stone near the fountain, the hurried whisper exchanged between two maids, the footman glancing over his shoulder just a breath too long.

The estate was well-kept, but not at ease. There was something brittle in the air. A tension held too tightly. A silence that listened back.

When she entered the hall, Lady Nala rose quickly—too quickly for someone of her rank. Her sleeves trembled as she clasped Lady Li's hands.

"You are too kind to come," she said in a rush. "I didn't know whom else to trust."

Lady Li smiled. "It's been some time, but I remember your kindness from the court. I'm sorry we meet again under such a shadow."

They sat. Tea was poured—oolong, strong, a touch over-steeped. Nervous hands had brewed it. Lady Li took a careful sip and set her cup down.

"Let me be clear," she said gently. "You don't need an old friend. You need someone to send charcoal through the snow. I understand. But why me?"

Lady Nala's hands tightened slightly on her lap. Then she exhaled. "I remember when the Empress Dowager's cousin was nearly ruined by that blackmailer. The man who claimed he had her letters to a bannerman's son."

Lady Li said nothing, but her eyes narrowed slightly.

"You found the maid who smuggled them," Lady Nala continued. "You retrieved the letters before anyone saw them. Quietly. Without anyone losing face."

Lady Li gave a small shrug. "A little truth traded for silence. Hardly heroism."

"It was more than enough," Lady Nala said. "And you never asked for credit. Just a promise it would never happen

again." She looked up, eyes sharp now with something more than desperation. "You were the only one she trusted then. And the only one I trust now." She glanced down, then up again, voice quieter now. "The mirror is gone. It disappeared three nights ago. You remember it?"

Lady Li did. The gift from Qianlong's court—a large round mirror framed in carved dragons, its inlay of imperial green. It was more than an heirloom. It was a claim to legacy.

"It was last seen in our ancestral hall," Lady Nala said, "after the solstice rite. I had it placed in the dowry chest myself."

"Any sign of forced entry?" Lady Li asked.

"None. No broken seals. No misplaced items. Everything else was accounted for. Only the mirror was gone."

Lady Li nodded and rose slowly. "I'll need to see the dowry chest," she said. She only hoped she'd know what to look for.

No protest came. A moment later, she was led into a side chamber thick with incense and stillness. The dowry chest stood at its center like a sleeping beast—massive, polished rosewood bound in brass, its surface gleaming dully in the filtered light. Two maids flanked it, their heads bowed low.

Lady Li approached and gestured for them to lift the lid.

Silks, jewels, combs, and embroidered slippers lined its compartments. The absence was quiet but unmistakable. Near the center, a large recess lay empty, an indentation shaped for a disc. The fabric lining had crinkled slightly, as though something heavy had been hastily removed. A length of brocade cloth was shoved to one side, not nicely folded like the other textiles.

She leaned in and sniffed.

Not the faint scent of camphor she expected, but a trace of something acidic—lacquer, perhaps?

"The mirror was here?" she asked.

"Yes, madam," one of the maids whispered. "I remember folding the red brocade around it myself."

She frowned at the brocade—crumpled, but left behind. Odd. "Why abandon the wrapping if you feared damaging the mirror?"

Lady Li had not been asking anyone in particular, but the maid looked panicked. "I—I do not know. The chest was still closed when I checked it the next morning."

"Then who noticed the mirror was missing?"

"I did," Lady Nala said. "I was placing more items inside the chest and noticed the absence."

"And who else has had access?"

Lady Nala hesitated. "The steward, the head maid, perhaps Miss Wen's cousin—Xiu. She's been helping with the dowry preparations."

Lady Li nodded, her expression unreadable. "Then I'd like to speak with them. All of them."

Rather than summon them indoors, Lady Li requested they gather in the covered garden courtyard, where the light was generous and expressions had fewer shadows to hide behind. There, with jasmine drifting on the breeze and the koi pond murmuring nearby, she waited—calm, composed, and already watching.

First came the bride, Lady Nala's daughter, Miss Wen, demure and pale, her eyes rimmed with quiet anxiety. She bowed deeply, her hands clasped so tightly that her knuckles blanched.

"I'm grateful you've come to help," she said softly, offering a modest curtsy. Her voice barely carried past the ripple of wind across the koi pond.

There was no guile in her. If anything, Lady Li thought, there might be too much obedience—too much willingness to let others decide her fate.

Beside her stood Miss Xiu, the cousin. Slightly younger,

but far more composed. Her posture was flawless, her poise intentional. She wore a simple lilac robe, but her gaze was anything but modest—it flicked from Lady Li's embroidered slippers to the jade ring on her finger, then to the plum-blossom stitching on her sleeve. Calculating. Assessing.

"I've heard you're assisting with the wedding preparations," Lady Li said, letting her gaze settle on Xiu's hands—neatly manicured, but a faint ink stain marked the edge of her third finger. A scholar's mark, not a servant's.

"Yes," Xiu said with a pleasant smile. "I help the servants when they need another pair of eyes."

"Or hands," Lady Li murmured.

There was a pause. The faintest tightening at the corners of Xiu's eyes—there and gone.

Next came Steward Lin, a stooped man with a receding hairline and the air of someone who had outlived his usefulness but not his pride. He bowed deeply and kept his gaze fixed on the gravel.

"These are auspicious days, my lady," he intoned. "But troubling ones. The ancestors are watchful. Perhaps they have reclaimed the mirror themselves."

"Then I hope they return it before the wedding," Lady Li replied lightly. "Ceremony waits for no spirit."

He blinked once, then nodded solemnly—as if that were a reasonable expectation to make of the dead.

Finally came Head Maid Bao, trim and severe, her hair pulled so tightly that it seemed to sharpen her features. She spoke with clipped formality and avoided Lady Li's gaze.

"Many visitors have come and gone in recent weeks," Bao said. "Everyone wishes to honor the family's elevation through this marriage. We received merchants, musicians, even a monk from Longshan Temple."

Lady Li nodded. "A busy household invites many blessings."

"And some dust," Bao added.

Lady Li tilted her head. "Then I trust your staff has swept thoroughly."

Bao dipped her head. But Lady Li noticed how her eyes frequently flicked to Miss Xiu, not Lady Nala. Not the bride. As though seeking silent approval.

That told Lady Li more than words ever could.

She let the silence stretch a beat longer before giving a small nod, and the gathered figures bowed and withdrew, leaving only the whisper of koi fins in the pond and the soft rustle of garden leaves.

Lady Li stood by the pond, tapping her fingers on her crossed arms as she thought.

The surface of this house was polished, but something beneath it was splintering.

The bride was frightened, but not hiding anything. The steward was superstitious but not a fool. The head maid guarded secrets like heirlooms. Miss Xiu was too watchful for someone with nothing to hide.

There was no broken lock. No confession. No clear path forward. Just the telltale quiet of people trying too hard not to be seen.

But Lady Li had seen enough courts and courtiers to know that the truth was rarely shouted. It lived in glances, gestures, a too-casual cough at the wrong moment. It clung to silk and settled in silence.

And the silence, here, was suffocating.

When the others had gone, Lady Li returned to the dowry chamber alone. She needed a second look—this time, without witnesses. The recessed lining where the mirror once lay still bore the curve of loss. She reached down and traced the imprint with one finger.

There, near the edge, caught in the grain of the wood, was something small—a thread.

It was red silk, frayed slightly. But the thread didn't match the brocade lining. This one shimmered faintly with gold embroidery, the kind worn only on outer robes—not meant for wrapping mirrors.

Lady Li smiled, very slightly.

"You were in a hurry," she whispered to no one.

She straightened her sleeves and stepped into the corridor.

Lady Li returned to her guest chambers as the sun began to dip behind the roofline, casting long lattice shadows across the floor. The hush of the household pressed in again—composed, perfumed, and brittle. For a household on the cusp of a great celebration, the quiet was painful.

She removed her outer robe and laid it carefully over the screen. The thread she'd found was no longer than a fingernail, but she unwrapped it from her sleeve and studied it once more under the soft lamplight. It glinted faintly—red, but royal, and gold-edged.

Not temple cloth. Not dowry silk. A personal hem. A robe meant to be seen.

She placed it inside a folded silk pouch and tucked it into her traveling case just as Eunuch Bai appeared at the door, silent until she gestured for him to speak.

"You found something," he said quietly.

She poured herself a cup of tea before answering. "A mistake," she said, and sipped. "Someone in this household made one."

Bai's brow lifted. "How rare."

"More common than you'd think," she murmured. "But rarely in silk."

He moved toward the window and pulled the shutter halfway closed. "Do you suspect the bride?"

"No. She's a child afraid of her own shadow. No one that scared would gamble this much."

"The cousin, then?"

Lady Li didn't answer at first. She placed the teacup down with deliberate care. "If I tell you what I think now, Bai, you'll stop watching. You'll only confirm. That's not useful to me yet."

He bowed his head in concession. "Very well, my lady."

A pause.

"The household is too clean," she said at last. "Too quiet. Like a stage waiting for actors to misstep."

Eunuch Bai allowed himself a smile. "Then let the play begin."

"It has," she said, her tone more thoughtful than certain. "I only hope I'm reading the script correctly."

CHAPTER THREE

Lady Li rose early the next morning, before the household had fully shaken off its dreams. She dressed in soft lavender silk—elegant, but unassuming—and pinned her hair in a simple twist, modest for a widow yet dignified enough to invite conversation.

She walked the garden paths slowly, a fan folded neatly in her hand, her expression composed. Her stated purpose was harmless: she was composing a poem in honor of the bride and wished to observe the rhythm of the household, the quiet routines of a family on the cusp of transformation. No one refused her.

That was the brilliance of poetry—it gave her license to linger. A poem could be written in a day. But truth required patience.

She began with small, harmless questions.

To the cook: "Does Miss Wen prefer lotus seed buns or candied walnut cakes?"

To the laundry girls: "Did Miss Xiu's pockets carry osmanthus last week? I noticed the scent when she passed me at tea."

Each inquiry wrapped in silk and suggestion, every answer filed away.

She complimented a maid's embroidery, noted the stitch patterns on pillowcases, observed which locks were oiled and which drawers stuck.

Meanwhile, Eunuch Bai lingered near the men's quarters, where the servants gathered to wash rice and sharpen blades. When he returned, he waited until no one else was within earshot before speaking.

"The manservants are gossiping," he murmured. "They say the groom's family already knows about the missing mirror. One claims he heard the groom's uncle call the dowry 'incomplete.'"

Lady Li paused mid-step. That was impossible.

Lady Nala had gone to great lengths to contain the matter. Only the steward, the head maid, and perhaps one or two others even knew the mirror had gone missing.

If the groom's family had already heard, this wasn't mere gossip.

This was sabotage.

Someone had deliberately seeded the rumor. Someone who stood to benefit if the wedding faltered.

And now the question was no longer just what had happened to the mirror. It was why.

And more importantly—who stood to benefit from its absence?

Lady Li arranged to speak with Head Maid Bao in the west hall, where sunlight filtered through carved screens and dust motes drifted like slow secrets. She had chosen the setting deliberately—private, but not too secluded. Comfortable, but not cozy.

She ran her fingers lightly across a bolt of sky-blue silk

laid out on the table—one of the finer pieces meant for Miss Wen's dowry—as if idly inspecting it.

"Such a lovely color," she said. "Like spring skies after a rain. Did you help choose it?"

Bao straightened in her seat. "Yes, madam," she said quickly. Her voice carried the bright snap of rehearsed truth. Her hands remained tightly folded in her lap, knuckles pale.

"And you oversaw the solstice blessing?"

Bao nodded. "The ancestral hall was arranged with candles, incense, and heirlooms. The mirror was placed at the center, on the lacquered stand. I personally ensured it was wrapped and returned to the chest."

"And when did you last see it?"

"After the ceremony," Bao replied, too quickly again. "Late that night. I sent two maids to carry it back. It was sealed into the chest that evening. The next morning…" She faltered, eyes wetting. She raised a hand to her mouth, stifling the tremble in her voice.

"The next morning, my lady discovered it was gone."

Lady Li's expression remained serene, but her gaze sharpened. "Were you accused?"

Bao shook her head and dabbed at her eyes with a soft silk handkerchief—too fine for a maid's purse. Lady Li noted the frayed edge, the faded lotus embroidery. An old gift, no doubt—a cast-off from Lady Nala. A trifle to the wife of a general. A treasure to a servant.

"I have served my lady since we were both girls," Bao said quietly. "She knows I would never betray her."

Lady Li nodded once. The woman's distress was convincing. But grief and guilt often wore the same mask.

Even the most loyal servant had a price. And the mirror was priceless.

. . .

That evening, as the household settled into its ritual hush, Lady Li stood near the corridor's shadowed edge and waited.

She did not have to wait long.

Bao slipped through the side gate, shawl wrapped tight and a straw hat pulled low. She carried a small pouch—deliberate, purposeful.

"Bai," Lady Li murmured without turning her head, "follow her. Quietly."

Eunuch Bai melted into the dusk like a shadow trained to vanish.

He returned nearly two hours later, dust clinging to his shoes and the edge of his robe.

"She met a man in scholar's robes at the teahouse on Bridge Lane," he reported. "Handed him silver. They spoke in whispers. Then she left alone."

Lady Li was silent for a moment. "Did you recognize him?"

"No. But he bowed like someone used to being bowed to."

She looked up at the moonlight stretching over the courtyard tiles. Not a blackmailer, she thought. But not a pauper either.

Lady Li invited Miss Xiu for tea beneath the veranda, a shaded corner of the garden framed by climbing wisteria and the steady hum of cicadas. The excuse was harmless enough: a request for help selecting verses for the bridal chamber.

"Do you write?" Lady Li asked gently, as a maid poured chrysanthemum tea into thin porcelain cups.

"Only for leisure," Xiu replied, her tone modest. "I prefer to copy the masters. It keeps the hand elegant—and the mind from wandering."

"And you are close with Miss Wen?"

"Very," Xiu said. "I am her cousin through my late mother; we were raised like sisters."

Lady Li nodded, her fan resting lightly on her lap. "A great comfort for her, I'm sure. Especially in these busy days."

Xiu tilted her head, gaze briefly faraway. "Of course. We all do our part. Wen has her embroidery, I have…the rest."

"You're not yet married yourself?"

Xiu's smile tightened. "No. The match that had been discussed years ago fell through. My uncle thought it best I stay on to assist with the household. A companion to the bride is a respectable place. And quieter."

Quieter. But not forgotten.

Lady Li let the subject drift away, steering instead toward poetry.

"I've been rereading Su Shi," she said. "Do you have a favorite of his?"

"I do," Xiu said. "There's a line: 'reflections dancing in jade glass beside ancestral flame.' It always struck me. It reminded me of the solstice rites."

Lady Li's fan paused mid-flutter.

"That's not from Su Shi," she said mildly. "That line was engraved on the mirror itself."

A pause. Then Xiu gave a soft laugh. "Was it? It certainly sounds poetic. I must have remembered it wrong."

Lady Li smiled faintly. Or remembered it too well, she thought.

LATER THAT EVENING, Lady Li summoned Head Maid Bao to her guest chamber. The lamps had been dimmed, and the scent of sandalwood lingered in the corners. She did not offer tea.

Bao entered with a lowered gaze and tight hands.

"I know about the man on Bridge Lane," Lady Li said without preamble.

Bao froze. Her breath caught audibly. Then, slowly, she lifted her eyes. "It's not what you think," she said quickly. "My brother—he's young. Foolish. He stole from a wine merchant in town. A few coins, nothing more. But the merchant went to the constable."

She swallowed hard. "If charges are made, my family will be disgraced. My mother will be turned out of her stitching shop. I'll lose my position! I've been paying a clerk to…make it disappear."

"So you've been hiding things," Lady Li said, her voice even and quiet as snowfall. "And you are in need of funds."

Bao's eyes welled with sudden fear.

"I did not take the mirror," she whispered. "I swear it. I never even touched the chest. Only the steward and my lady had the key."

Lady Li rose slowly from her seat and crossed the room. She stopped just short of Bao's bowed form. "But you knew it was missing," she said. "And said nothing."

Bao's voice cracked. "I was afraid. I thought…if I kept my head down, it would resolve itself."

"You serve a house that is already trembling, and you hope silence will steady it?" Lady Li asked.

"No, madam. I just… I didn't want to give anyone a reason to question my loyalty."

Lady Li studied her a long moment. The fear in her eyes was real. And useful. Not just because it made Bao pliable—but because fear made people speak.

She waited a breath longer, then asked gently, "If you didn't take the mirror, who do you think might have?"

Bao hesitated, then lowered her voice even more. "Forgive me, madam," Bao said, eyes downcast. "I shouldn't speak

against my betters, but...if I had to guess…" She swallowed. "Miss Wen doesn't wish to marry the groom."

Lady Li's brow remained smooth, but her breath caught ever so slightly. "The bride?"

"She doesn't want this marriage," Bao went on. "She tries to act pleased, but she's quieter than usual. Distant. She was happier before her father's promotion, before this match was arranged so quickly."

"Was there someone else?"

Bao nodded, barely. "A merchant's son. I don't know his name, only that they spoke often. Discreetly. It ended as soon as her mother found out."

"And you believe she sabotaged the wedding?"

"Maybe she thought," Bao said, lowering her voice, "if the dowry were incomplete, it would fall apart on its own. Without a scene. Without a scandal."

Lady Li considered that. It was plausible. More plausible than a servant stealing an imperial heirloom and staying in the house to be caught. Miss Wen also could have been the one to seed rumors among the groom's family. If she had stolen it, she would have hidden the theft, not bragged about it.

"Interesting," she murmured. "But if that's true, how would Miss Wen have accessed it? She didn't have the key."

"She's quiet, madam," Bao said. "But she's clever. I'm sure she could have managed it."

Lady Li gave no indication of whether she believed the maid or not, but she nodded slowly. "Then let this be your only lie," she said at last, her voice cool but not unkind. "Loyalty is a fine virtue. But concealment stains even clean hands."

Bao bowed deeply, her frame shaking. "Thank you, my lady."

"Go. And next time you see a fire, do not wait to smell the smoke."

Bao fled without another word.

Alone again, Lady Li remained by the window. The lamplight behind her painted her reflection faintly into the glass—sharp, half-finished.

Miss Wen? Timid, trembling Miss Wen? She thought of the pale girl with downcast eyes, the knuckles clenched too tightly, the voice so soft it barely raised above the garden breeze.

Lady Li's fingers tapped softly against the sill.

Could someone so delicate really risk everything to escape a match? Or was fear the one thing Miss Wen and Bao had in common?

She watched the lanternlight shimmer in the garden pond below, the wind stirring the surface just enough to blur its reflection.

Her own marriage had been arranged too. There had been no poetry in it at first, only protocol—two families aligning their fortunes with ceremony and silk.

She had done as she was told. And in doing so, had been rewarded.

Her husband had been kind. Brilliant. Gentle in his own way. He saw her mind and sharpened it. Loved her not as ornament, but as equal. She had flourished beside him—not because the system had served her, but because he had.

But not every girl was so lucky.

She had seen it herself—at court, at temple, even among the servants. Girls promised to bitter men. Daughters-in-law crushed by mothers-in-law who ruled like generals. Young wives who whispered their pain only behind closed screens.

Not every bride grows in marriage. Some wither. Some disappear entirely.

The quietest girls often knew how to cry without making a sound.

The truth was coalescing.

A mirror, a lie, and a girl trying to change her fate.

Outside, the moon hung full and pale above the garden, casting its reflection across the tiled floor.

And in the windowpane, Lady Li's own image shimmered faintly back at her—still, silent, watching.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next whisper came from Eunuch Bai, and Lady Li did not ask how he had come to hear it.

"My lady," he murmured, "there is a shop in the south alley of Wanshou Lane. The kind that pretends to sell scrolls but trades in regrets."

"And what sort of regret is for sale this week?"

"A mirror," he said. "Green jade. Old. Carved with dragons. They say a maid brought it in—said her mistress would never miss it."

Lady Li folded her fan and nodded once. "She was wrong."

By late afternoon, she was cloaked in dove-gray silk and a wide straw hat, her face shaded but composed. She no longer looked like a widow of means—more like a merchant's daughter come to settle accounts.

Bai followed at a respectful distance, his pace casual, his eyes sharp.

Wanshou Lane was narrow and crooked, its buildings leaning in like gossiping old servants. The air reeked of vine-

gar-brined vegetables, donkey dung, and cheap incense. The shop had no sign—only a single crimson tassel hanging limp over a beaded curtain.

Lady Li entered without hesitation.

The shop was dim, lit only by slats of late sunlight through the lattice. Shelves sagged under dust-covered scrolls, chipped inkstones, tarnished trinkets, and the weight of forgotten things.

From behind a folding screen, a man emerged. His fingers were stained with ink and something darker. He smiled the way men smile when they think they know who is in control.

"A rare honor, madam," he said, bowing low. "Not many fine ladies venture to my humble lane."

Lady Li offered no name, no smile. "The mirror," she said. "I'd like to see it."

The man's eyes gleamed. From beneath the counter, he drew out a black-lacquered case. When he opened it, the air seemed to change.

Inside lay a jade mirror—a circle of imperial green carved with twin dragons chasing a pearl. The surface still shimmered with faint polish, and though a single chip marred the frame's edge, it was unmistakably the Nala family heirloom.

"A fine piece," the shopkeeper said. "Came from a grieving maid, she said. Needed coin. Such loyalty—selling her lady's treasures to avoid shame."

Lady Li reached out, one finger tracing the lacquered edge. "And what price," she asked softly, "would protect her from shame now?"

He named a figure that would empty a merchant's vault.

She unwrapped a velvet pouch and set down two taels of silver, glinting faintly in the lamplight. Not the full price—but enough to make the man's breath catch.

"No name. No record," she said. "And if you speak of it

again—" She let the air grow cold as he imagined the consequences.

"It never passed through my hands," the man said, bowing even lower.

She took the mirror, slid it safely into a pocket of her sleeve, and left.

Outside, the alley had grown louder. Chickens squawked. A cart groaned past. A boy ran after a goat, splashing muck onto the hem of her gown. But Lady Li did not stop to scold him.

Bai caught up as she reached the corner.

"Will you return it now, madam?"

Lady Li folded her sleeves tightly around her hands, the weight of the mirror pressing cool and solid against her side. It was a small comfort—but not enough. She wouldn't be able to breathe fully until it was no longer in her possession. Not until it was home—back in its rightful place, unseen, untouched. For now, it felt like she was carrying a secret carved from stone.

"Not yet," she said. "Someone in that household believes secrets vanish with silk and shadows. I intend to show them otherwise."

BACK AT THE NALA ESTATE, Lady Li said nothing of her errand. She placed the mirror in her trunk, locked it with a clasp, and then asked for Miss Wen to join her for a quiet walk through the garden. No maids or servants followed.

They walked in silence for a time, the hem of Miss Wen's robe brushing the petals from a faded camellia bloom. Finally, Lady Li spoke.

"I've heard whispers," she said gently, "that this marriage was arranged quickly. And not by your choosing."

Miss Wen's hands trembled around the silk fan she did not open. "I am the eldest daughter of the household," she said quietly. "It is not my place to choose."

Lady Li didn't press. She let the silence breathe. "And yet," she said, after a moment, "you once had hopes. Someone else, perhaps?"

Miss Wen closed her eyes. "That was before. It's finished."

"And your cousin? Miss Xiu—she was once promised to your intended groom."

Miss Wen's voice fell to a whisper.

"She was. Their betrothal was arranged when they were still young—back when their families stood as equals. She was fortunate. He wasn't a stranger, or an old man. She looked forward to the match."

She hesitated, then added softly:

"She was happy."

Lady Li said nothing, only waited. The silence invited the truth.

"But then her mother died. Her father—my uncle—never recovered. His work faltered, and soon after, he was demoted. The groom's family saw the change and deemed the match beneath them."

A beat of bitterness crept into her otherwise measured tone.

"That's when my father stepped in. Our family had just risen in rank. He offered me instead—said it would preserve the alliance."

She looked down at her hands.

"To save face, he brought Xiu into our household. Called her my companion. But everyone knew why she was here."

She turned toward the lotus pond. The moon had just begun to gather on its surface.

"She didn't cry. Not once. But I saw the change—how she

walked slower, how her laughter dried up. She's my cousin, my friend. Closer than my own sisters. And she lost everything. Her mother. Her match. Her title. Her future."

Lady Li watched her closely. "So you tried to stop the wedding."

Miss Wen didn't deny it. "I didn't steal the mirror," she said. "But I knew it was missing. I heard Mother and Bao talking. I thought...if the dowry were incomplete, the marriage might fall apart on its own."

She finally looked up. "I didn't want to hurt anyone. I just didn't want to become the kind of girl who steps over her sister to reach the altar."

Lady Li's expression was unreadable.

"And what did you become instead?"

Miss Wen swallowed. "Someone who knows her silence is a kind of betrayal."

They stood together beneath the shadow of the old plum tree.

"One of my maids is being courted by a servant of the groom's family. I told her about the missing mirror, and I knew the rumor would spread from there."

"But even if the groom's family ends your betrothal, there is no guarantee they would accept Miss Xiu. Her status is still too low. They would seek a girl of equal status. You both could lose out on an enviable match."

Miss Wen said nothing. But her chin lifted just slightly—perhaps the first breath of a spine forming. "I'd rather dim my lantern than let it outshine hers."

Lady Li looked at her a long moment. There were girls who bent, and girls who broke. This one—she was learning how to stand.

She touched Miss Wen's elbow, then turned back toward the house.

As she crossed the courtyard, twilight settling across the stone, her mind returned not to the girl she had just left—but to the one who hadn't cried at all.

Miss Xiu.

Graceful, contained, always watching. She hadn't complained. Hadn't protested. Not once. But neither had she faded.

Some women mourn their losses. Others repurpose them.

Lady Li remembered the ink stain on Xiu's finger. The polished answers. The faint tension behind her smiles.

If Wen carried guilt, Xiu carried silence. One was heavy. The other was sharp.

Lady Li had just returned to her room when an urgent knock stirred the quiet. It was Lady Nala, her face lit with cautious relief.

"Good news," she said, barely waiting to be invited in. In her hands was a bundle wrapped in red silk. She laid it on the table and folded the fabric back to reveal a jade mirror.

At first, Lady Li's breath hitched. Had she been deceived? If her husband were still alive, he would have been appalled —at the loss of silver, and her error in judgment.

"The mirror has been found," Lady Nala said. "The chest was opened again this morning, and there it was—just as we hoped."

Lady Li stepped forward, lifting the mirror with both hands.

The weight told her everything. Too light. The wood was pine, stained to mimic depth. The dragons—clumsy. The jade —no more than resin. She gently handed it back.

"It must have been misplaced after the solstice rites," Lady Nala went on, admiring her reflection in the mirror. "Perhaps one of the girls panicked and tucked it away. But no harm done."

Lady Li handed her friend the fake mirror and went to

her trunk. "There is harm," she said quietly, "as what you found is not the real mirror."

Nala blinked. "What do you mean?"

Lady Li lifted the true mirror gently from its wrappings and placed it between them on the table.

Nala's breath caught. Even she could see the difference. "Then what—what is this?"

"A forgery," Lady Li said. "An imitation. Resin for jade. The dragons are wrong, the weight is wrong, the craftsmanship rushed."

She paused, then added gently, "Someone tried to pass off a copy. To hide the theft. Perhaps they meant to return the real one after the wedding, once the dowry was no longer under scrutiny. Or perhaps they hoped it would never be noticed."

Nala sank onto the chair beside her. "Who would do such a thing?"

Lady Li didn't answer at first. Instead, she gently folded the silk back over the true mirror and returned it to her trunk.

"Let them think it has not been found yet," she said. "Say nothing of this copy. Let it remain in the dowry chest for now."

Lady Nala looked startled. "But—why?"

"Because someone believes they succeeded. If we reveal the truth too soon, they will vanish into silence. But if they think the theft is still buried, they may grow bold—or careless."

Lady Nala was quiet for a moment. Then she nodded slowly. "You have a talent for seeing through shadows, my lady."

"No," Lady Li said softly. "Only for watching which ones move." She paused, her fingers brushing the lacquered lid of

her trunk. “If the truth won’t show itself, perhaps we should offer it tea.”

Lady Nala tilted her head. “A tea ceremony?”

Lady Li turned back, her eyes calm but sharp. “Yes. A quiet gathering. For the bride. All the ladies in attendance—friends, family, loyal staff. Let us toast to virtue—and see who flinches first.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Lady Li had hosted many tea gatherings in her life—birth celebrations, condolence visits, literary salons where poems were judged more cruelly than criminals. But never one quite like this.

This was a performance. A play with whispered lines and no applause, staged beneath silk lanterns and behind painted fans. The truth would not be spoken aloud—but if served correctly, it might steep into every cup.

The garden pavilion had been cleared and prepared with quiet precision. Cicadas rasped in the heat beyond the stone wall, but here the air was thick with osmanthus incense and the faint mineral scent of polished silver.

A square table had been arranged beside the koi pond, its surface draped in red damask and embroidered with silver cranes mid-flight. The water nearby shimmered softly, disturbed only by the flick of a golden fin.

At each place sat five porcelain cups, their delicate rims brushed with gold. Each had been inked with a single calligraphed character: 孝 (filial piety), 信 (honesty), 忠 (loyalty), 礼 (restraint), 义 (justice).

Lady Nala arrived first, flanked by her steward and Head Maid Bao. Her sleeves were crisp, her posture formal—but her eyes held the weariness of too many nights without answers.

Miss Wen followed, demure, her eyes downcast as always, her robe pale green, her steps nearly silent. A moment later came Miss Xiu in lavender silk so faint it bordered on silver, a pink chrysanthemum pin tucked into her chignon—demure, but deliberate.

One by one, other noblewomen trickled in—friends, family, and neighbors of equal rank, wrapped in muted silks and guarded expressions. They spoke softly, offered obligatory compliments, and fanned themselves with the kind of lazy elegance that masked deep curiosity. Lady Li noted the subtle flickers of interest. How far, she wondered, had word of the missing mirror truly traveled?

Then came Lady Nala's senior dowager aunt, her cane tapping softly over the flagstones, her maid trailing behind like a weary echo. Her hair was oiled and sculpted high, her face powdered pale, and her expression the well-trained sneer of someone who had survived three husbands and enjoyed none of them.

Lady Li stepped forward with a low, respectful bow. "We're honored by your presence, madam."

The dowager chuckled as she lowered herself onto the cushion, her knees cracking audibly.

"I've been summoned to so many pre-wedding gatherings this season, I'm starting to wonder whether this bride intends to marry or ascend the throne. Still—" she waved a hand toward the garden's opulence—"one can't fault the family's enthusiasm. Though it does tend to attract the wrong kind of attention."

The silence that followed was long enough to sting.

Lady Li only smiled, serene as steam rising from a pond

in summer. "Enthusiasm can be a virtue…so long as it isn't mistaken for pride."

The elderly woman nodded her approval of Lady Li's reply.

Lady Li then gestured to the table. The women found their seats with the careful grace of practiced perfection. Fresh camellias floated in shallow bowls. Plates of candied lotus, mung bean pastries, and dried plums had been arranged in precise geometric patterns. Nearby, the incense burned in a bronze crane, its thin smoke curling like a question no one dared to ask.

"Today's ceremony," Lady Li began, "is a simplified form of the old scholar's tea—the Five Virtues of Harmony. It was once used to instruct brides in matters of character and reflection. May our gathering today steep us all in clarity."

There were soft murmurs of approval. Tea, after all, was always safe.

Until it wasn't.

Lady Li waved her hand, and five maids entered silently, each carrying a small brass tray bearing a teapot warmed by a flickering candle beneath. Each tea had been steeped to precision—different leaves, different timings, all ready to be poured in perfect synchrony.

Lady Li lifted the first pot, the porcelain warm in her hands. As she tilted it, the tea flowed in a pale amber ribbon, curling into the porcelain cup with a soft hiss of heat meeting cool glaze.

"This tea," she said, "was once steeped by daughters tending their elders and represents the virtue of filial piety. Goji berries brighten tired eyes. Chrysanthemum soothes the restless heart."

The steam rose delicately, scented with floral bitterness and something faintly honeyed.

Lady Li's voice, calm but resonant, carried across the

table. "There's an old tale," she said, "of a girl who carried her mother on her back for three days in search of healing herbs. In the end, she found what she needed growing in her own garden—uncut, unnoticed."

She placed the teapot gently down the table, her gaze lingering not unkindly on Miss Xiu. "Sometimes, the greatest act of care isn't how far we go, but how well we look at what's already under our roof."

Miss Wen, seated beside Lady Nala, reached over and gently laid her hand atop her mother's. Her smile was soft, touched with guilt and grace.

Miss Xiu gave a small smile as well—but her fingers curled lightly around her teacup, and her eyes did not rise. Lady Li noted the stillness in her shoulders, the way one thumb traced the lip of her cup.

Across the table, the dowager aunt sniffed as she sipped. "A fine sentiment," she said, "though I've always found daughters are best at brewing complaints—and only slightly less bitter than the tea."

Polite laughter fluttered like fans.

Lady Li reached for the second teapot—a squat vessel glazed in cracked celadon. She poured slowly, allowing the dark liquid to fall in rich ribbons into each cup. The aroma that rose was unmistakable: deep, earthy pu'erh, with a top note of sun-aged tangerine peel. It was a scent that clung to the air like an old memory.

"This tea," she said, "represents the virtue of honesty. It cannot hide what it is—aged, pressed, and preserved over time. Its bitterness sharpens with every year, just as truth does when it's buried too long." She set the pot down with quiet precision.

"Long ago," she went on, "there was a merchant who coated lead cups in gold paint to sell to trusting buyers. But

when he served tea to a scholar, the bitterness gave him away. The cup was lovely, yes—but it ruined the brew."

Her tone did not rise, but her gaze settled softly on Miss Xiu. "A lie," she said, "is like bitterness in tea. It lingers long after the cup is drained."

Xiu smiled too quickly, then coughed—a delicate, hollow sound. She didn't meet anyone's gaze as she lifted the cup to her lips. But she did not drink. Her fingers toyed with her sleeve again, brushing the seam like one might touch a scar.

Across the table, Miss Wen's eyes flicked toward her cousin, a trace of concern—maybe doubt—tightening her jaw.

The dowager aunt, meanwhile, hummed in pleasure as she took a long sip. "A good steep," she admitted. "Though, like lies, if it is brewed too long it irritates the bowels."

Lady Nala nearly choked on her tea and held a napkin to her chin before the dark liquid could dribble onto her fine qipao. "Auntie!" she exclaimed.

The ladies all chuckled, some with humor, some in embarrassment. The old woman waved her niece's admonition away like an annoying fly.

Lady Li only smiled as she lifted the next pot, its clay darkened with long use. As she poured, the air filled with the scent of pine smoke—woodsy, bitter, and almost medicinal. The tea swirled into the cups, leaving faint wisps of steam like incense from a battlefield shrine.

"This is lapsang souchong, dried over burning pine, and represents the virtue of loyalty. It was first brewed during wartime, when the leaves had to be salvaged quickly and smoked for preservation."

She let the aroma settle around them—smoke and silence. "There is a story," she said, "of a general under siege who brewed this tea for his emperor. He served his lord first, always. Only when the emperor had drunk would he touch

the cup himself. He said that loyalty meant following his master in all things."

No one spoke.

"True loyalty," Lady Li continued, "isn't loud. It's what remains when no one is watching. It holds steady when reward is unlikely—and notice, even less so."

From the periphery, Head Maid Bao stood beside the other maids, a respectful distance from the table, her hands folded neatly at her waist. Her face was still, but Lady Li noticed her shoulders—just slightly drawn.

One lady murmured something about the groom's new military appointment—how fine it was for a family to be tied to such ambition. Another asked lightly if the bride had yet embroidered his campaign banner.

Miss Wen answered gently, with her eyes lowered. "The main parts, yes, but my cousin will complete the details as she has the finer hand."

Someone gasped. The dowager aunt raised an eyebrow, then sipped from her cup with an exaggerated slurp. "The best housecat works for her place at the hearth. She does not send a rat to catch mice."

No one laughed. Miss Xiu bowed her head, her fingers tight around her teacup. Bao looked up, briefly, then dropped her gaze again.

A bird called once from the eaves. Someone adjusted her silk sleeves. One of the younger ladies pretended to admire the embroidery on her napkin.

Lady Li waited, still as porcelain. She could feel the air tightening around the table—not loud, not panicked, but stretched thin like silk drawn too taut.

She reached for the fourth pot. The teapot was pale clay, smooth as river rocks. As Lady Li lifted the lid, the faint aroma of white peony unfurled—soft, green, faintly sweet, like a breeze caught between silk panels.

She poured with care. The tea was nearly colorless—just a kiss of gold at the bottom of each cup.

"White Peony," she said softly, "is restrained. It must be steeped for just the right amount of time. If you rush it, it lacks flavor. If you oversteep, it turns bitter." She let the sentence trail off as the steam rose.

"Once upon a time," she continued, "there was a concubine in the emperor's court. She never raised her voice. Never fought for favor. She sat quietly through every banquet and every long, lonely night. In time, the emperor loved no one more—because where others demanded, she endured."

Her voice never changed, but her gaze lifted—lightly, pointedly—to Miss Xiu. "There is great wisdom in knowing when not to act. When to wait. When to hold one's peace… even when one aches to speak."

Miss Xiu looked up. Her face was composed, but pale. She met Lady Li's eyes for just a moment—long enough for something to flicker behind them. Not guilt. Not fear. Something else.

Across the courtyard, Head Maid Bao stood motionless, her hands still folded—but her eyes had shifted. Watching Xiu. Watching Lady Li. Even the dowager aunt said nothing this time.

Only the steam dared to move.

Lady Li reached for the final pot. This one was carved with a phoenix in low relief, its wings faded from use. As she poured, the oolong swirled rich and golden into each cup. The osmanthus floated to the surface like tiny suns.

"This tea is oolong," she said softly. "Not green. Not black. It walks the edge between two worlds. Its depth represents justice, but it is tempered with sweet and delicate osmanthus for grace."

She lifted her gaze, looking at each lady in turn before

continuing. "When I was a lady-in-waiting in the Forbidden City," Lady Li began, "an elderly concubine told me the story of a jade mirror kept in the inner palace of an empress known for her beauty—and her temper. But this mirror did not show one's reflection. It showed one's actions."

She let the steam rise between them, slow and curling.

"One day, a servant stole a brooch from her chamber. It was small, rarely worn, but precious all the same. When the empress discovered it missing, she flew into a rage and accused a different maid—the one who cleaned her dressing table. The girl pleaded innocence, but the empress would not hear it."

"She had her beaten. The girl did not survive the night."

Lady Li paused then, letting the silence steep.

"Later, the thief—the true thief—came across the mirror, still resting on its jade stand. And when she looked into it, she did not see her face. She saw blood on her hands. The blood she hadn't spilled herself…but had caused all the same."

"She fled the palace that night. She was never seen again."

The story ended. Lady Li's gaze lingered on the cups, untouched.

"The truth," she said, "always finds the mouth that released the lie."

Then—

A clatter.

One of the younger maids had stumbled. A lacquer tray crashed to the stone floor. The sound rang out like a gong. Porcelain rattled. A gasp slipped from someone's throat.

Miss Xiu jerked in her seat. Lady Li's hand shot out—gently but firmly—catching Miss Xiu's wrist. The two women locked eyes.

"Xiu, dear, would you be so kind as to help me, since you

are so skilled with a needle and thread? I seem to have snagged my sleeve."

Caught off-guard, Miss Xiu nodded. "Of course. My basket is in my room."

"Excuse us, ladies," Lady Li said, rising with deliberate grace. Miss Xiu followed. Around them, fans fluttered and chairs shifted, compliments were murmured, the clinking of cups resumed. But the air had shifted.

In the corridor's quiet shadow, the two women stood facing each other. There was no need for accusation. They both knew Lady Li's sleeve had not torn.

"How did you know?" Miss Xiu asked, her voice low.

Lady Li withdrew a small object from her robe—a weight that had settled like a truth waiting to be named. She held it out.

"I thought it was ink that stained your finger the day we met," she said. "But it wasn't. It was tung oil." She handed over the mirror.

Miss Xiu took it carefully, as if it might shatter beneath her touch. Her reflection shimmered faintly in the cheap resin surface.

She ran a finger along the rim—slowly, as though she could still pretend it was real.

"Do you know what I see when I look in this mirror?"

Lady Li said nothing.

"I used to see a girl of promise. A future carved in jade." She paused. "Now, I see nothing."

She lowered the mirror, but didn't let go.

Lady Li's gaze softened—not with pity, but with understanding.

"Then stop looking," she said gently. "And start speaking."

CHAPTER SIX

Miss Xiu moved to a chair and sat, her silk sleeves folded in her lap. They trembled, despite her effort to still them. She was still clutching decorum—but only barely. A sliver of carved jade lay on the low table between them, dull in the lamplight, quiet and damning.

Lady Li sat across from her and studied her for a long moment before speaking. "You are clever," she said, her voice smooth as still water. "Too clever to believe this would go unnoticed forever. Tell me why."

Miss Xiu stared at the floor. Her jaw was tight, her throat moving as if trying to swallow the words before they emerged. When she finally spoke, her composure cracked—just slightly. Like lacquer beneath a careless thumb.

"Many years ago," she said quietly, "I was promised to him. His family courted mine. Our horoscopes matched. My embroidery won favor at his mother's salons. Everything was very formal…"

The words faded, like steam from a forgotten cup.

"Then my mother died. And my father… he was not the

same. Their marriage had been arranged, like all others. But they had learned to love. He never even took a concubine. When she died, he stopped eating. Stopped caring. His work suffered, and he was demoted.

"My uncle rose in his place. And suddenly, Wen was the better match. Her dowry heavier. Her father's rank higher. No one fought for me—not even my own father."

Lady Li remained silent, her hands resting gently in her lap.

"A broken engagement would have been a stain on the whole family, so my uncle brought me into his household. A 'companion' to the bride. A shadow. Every morning I help her choose hairpins for the wedding I once dreamed was mine."

Her voice cracked then, not from volume but from the quiet pressure of grief unspoken.

"The mirror was never meant to disappear forever. I only wanted to delay the wedding. Long enough that the groom's family might reconsider. Maybe I'd be called upon. Maybe I would matter again."

Lady Li reached for her teacup but didn't drink. The porcelain was still warm in her hands.

"This could have destroyed more than a wedding," she said. "A false dowry shames a family for generations. One whisper in the wrong ear, and Wen would never marry. Not him. Not anyone of worth."

Xiu's eyes closed. "I was foolish. And I am sorry. I never meant to harm her. I only… didn't want to vanish completely."

"Now that the mirror is returned," she added softly, "I won't interfere again."

Lady Li leaned back slightly.

"Do you think that is enough?"

The question hung in the air like steam above bitter leaves.

Miss Xiu didn't answer.

After a long silence, Lady Li spoke again—low, but firm.

"You will not be exposed. Not publicly. But you cannot remain here."

Miss Xiu's head jerked up.

"You'll go to Shanyin Temple. They accept noblewomen in... complicated circumstances. You will say you've chosen to reflect before marriage. No one will question it."

Miss Xiu's lips parted, then closed again. Her eyes shimmered—but no tears fell. Slowly, she slipped from her chair and lowered herself into a full kowtow.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I deserve worse."

Lady Li touched Miss Xiu's elbow and bade her rise. "Your aunt will never know the truth," she said. "But you will. And so will I."

Miss Xiu kept her eyes downcast. "Will you forgive me?" she asked, not lifting her head.

Lady Li paused. "Perhaps," she said. "When the mirror reflects a woman you are proud to see again."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, the household awoke to a quiet miracle.

Lady Nala announced that the missing jade mirror had been found, once again nestled in its brocade wrap at the heart of the dowry chest—as though it had never left. No one claimed to have seen it returned. No locks were broken. No guards alerted. It simply...was.

Polished to a flawless gleam, it caught the morning light like truth re-entering a room. The forgery was gone—vanished without a word, like a secret returned to silence.

No questions were asked. No answers demanded. The household understood the language of things left unspoken.

Within two days, preparations resumed at full pace. Guests re-confirmed. Red silk banners were pressed and hung from the outer gate. The cooks' fires were stoked. The tailors adjusted sleeves. In the courtyard, a boy rehearsed the rhythm of wedding drums with clumsy joy.

Only Miss Xiu was absent.

The official word was that she had taken a vow—retreating to Shanyin Temple for a season to reflect on her

path and study sutras. A minor illness, perhaps. A touch of spiritual unease.

No one questioned it.

Just before dawn, a carriage pulled away from the courtyard, its wheels muffled on the old stones. The mist had not yet lifted.

From a high lattice window, Lady Li watched without comment. She did not wave. She did not weep.

She simply watched as one secret departed, and another took its place.

THE WEDDING ITSELF WAS FLAWLESS.

The groom, resplendent in crimson robes, bowed with grave reverence before the ancestral altar. Miss Wen, radiant beneath her phoenix-crowned headdress, walked the length of the hall with a stillness that was not fear, but quiet resolve.

The drums pounded. The firecrackers cracked and snapped like bones of old superstitions being broken into blessings.

Lady Li did not enter the main hall. She stood in the second courtyard, just beyond the garden corridor, a place where no one would think to look—but where the sound carried, soft and ceremonial. The vows reached her as echo more than words. A breeze stirred the camellia branches. A petal fell at her feet, pale and perfect.

When the final bow had been made and the feasting began, she turned and slipped away. No one noticed her absence—because they had never noticed her presence.

Eunuch Bai met her at the outer gate, holding her cloak with both hands, already tied with care.

"Will they ever know what you did?" he asked quietly, his gaze downcast.

Lady Li paused, one hand resting on the ironwood gate.

Behind her, the music of celebration rose again—bright and reverberating.

"That's not the sort of truth that needs confessing," she said.

She pulled the cloak around her shoulders, and for a brief moment, the wind caught the silk like wings. She stepped into her carriage, already half shadow, half memory.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Back in her own home, Lady Li returned to her study. The room smelled of old ink, magnolia wood, and the faint spice of tea left steeping too long.

She unrolled the calligraphy scroll she had abandoned weeks earlier. The poem remained unfinished, its final lines waiting like an unsent letter.

She dipped her brush and added three new lines:

A broken thing replaced in silence, a lie folded in silk, a truth unspoken—but endured.

She set the brush down and folded her hands.

Outside, laughter echoed through the courtyard. Her daughters chased each other around the plum trees, their nursemaid hurrying after them with mock sternness. From the music room came the discordant plucking of the pipa—Concubine Swan, attempting practice between naps and sighs. The notes were wrong, but welcome.

Inside, all was still.

Lady Li looked to the lattice window, where sunlight dappled the floor in a patchwork of shadow. The patterns shifted as the breeze moved the leaves. It reminded her of the

tea ceremony—the way silence had exposed more than shouting ever could.

She thought of Xiu. Of her silence. Her desperation to be seen.

She thought of herself.

Since Lord Yun's death, she had become ornamental: a respected widow, still useful when summoned, still praised for poise—but no longer necessary. No longer seen.

Her eyes turned east, toward the Forbidden City, its rooftops rising like dragon scales through the yellow dust of Peking.

There must be someone out there, she thought, *someone who seeks the truth as I do. Someone who might see I still have so much to offer this world...*

A breeze stirred the room. One sheet of paper lifted from her desk and fell to the floor with a soft sigh.

She didn't pick it up. Instead, she looked out the window once more. The light had shifted. A shadow moved. Or perhaps it only seemed to.

She picked up her brush and returned to her calligraphy. Back to her scroll. Back to her silence. Back to a life that was unlikely to change…

EPILOGUE

THE NEXT MORNING...

Lady Li's carriage rolled through the narrow streets toward the temple district, where she would make an offering for the successful resolution of the Nala family's troubles. The morning mist still clung to the rooftops, and vendors were just beginning to arrange their wares along the cobblestones.

At the intersection of Jade Street and Scholar's Lane, her carriage paused to allow a sedan chair to pass. Through the latticed window, she glimpsed a man walking alongside—tall, purposeful, with the bearing of someone accustomed to authority. He carried a leather satchel and moved with the careful observation of one who noticed details others missed.

For a moment, their eyes met through the carved wood screens. His gaze was sharp, intelligent, searching—the look of someone who read people the way she read poetry.

Then the moment passed. The sedan chair moved on, her carriage continued toward the temple, and the stranger disappeared into the morning crowd.

She sat back in her seat, unaware that somewhere in the

maze of Peking's ancient streets, she was destined to see that man again.

THE TEA TABLE OF LADY LI

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEA IN IMPERIAL CHINA

Tea has steeped its way into every corner of Chinese civilization—from the smoky hearths of village courtyards to the gold-lacquered chambers of the Forbidden City. It has accompanied farmers through seasons of hardship and scholars through nights of solitude. It has been poured at weddings, funerals, peace offerings, and parting farewells.

Though its forms have shifted across dynasties—from powdered froth to loose leaf, from coarse earthen pots to delicately painted porcelain—its essence has remained unchanged: warmth, reflection, and quiet power.

To drink tea in China is to enter a conversation older than empire. Each cup speaks of patience, of ritual, of restraint. It asks the drinker to pause. To notice the scent before the taste. The texture before the temperature. The silence between the words.

In the Qing dynasty, tea was more than a beverage—it was a code. Poured carefully in the women's quarters, it became a subtle instrument of courtship, consolation, and

command. A bitter infusion might hint at disappointment. A sweet one could carry apology. A well-steeped oolong, served with grace and silence, might signal a truce between rival concubines.

In Lady Li's world, tea was never just refreshment. It was performance, diplomacy, and—when needed—investigation.

Origins and the Myth of Shen Nong

Every leaf has a beginning, and every beginning requires a little magic.

According to legend, tea was discovered by Shen Nong (神農), the Divine Farmer and father of Chinese medicine. Shen Nong was said to have a body made of crystal—translucent as river glass—so that he could observe the effects of each root, leaf, and blossom he consumed. In his quest to catalog the healing properties of all plants, he is said to have tested hundreds in a single day, curing illness and inviting poison into himself in equal measure.

One afternoon, weary from his work, he paused to boil water beneath a wild camellia tree. As the flames crackled and the steam curled from his clay pot, a breeze stirred the branches above. A few curled leaves drifted down and landed in the water. The infusion bloomed amber and fragrant. Curious, Shen Nong drank—and felt clarity course through his limbs, lifting the haze from his mind and restoring vitality to his breath.

Thus tea was born: not as medicine, but as miracle. Not bitter, but bold.

The tale is myth, yes. But its endurance tells us something true: that tea, from the beginning, has been both remedy and ritual—discovered not by conquest, but by accident and attention.

Even today, many Chinese tea trees are said to descend

from the wild groves Shen Nong once walked. And every first cup of spring's harvest still carries the echo of that breeze through his branches.

Tang and Song Dynasties: Powdered Tea and Poetic Rivalry

If Shen Nong gave tea its soul, the Tang dynasty gave it its stature.

During the Tang (618–907), tea transcended its role as humble medicine and entered the realm of the cultured elite. No longer simply boiled in leaves, tea was now ground into fine powder and whisked into frothy bowls—much like the practice later formalized in Japan. These early powdered teas were steamed and pressed into bricks for storage and trade, then shaved and dissolved into hot water during preparation.

It was during this period that tea earned imperial patronage. The great poet Lu Yu, known as the Sage of Tea, penned the *Classic of Tea* (茶經, *Cha Jing*)—the first treatise to elevate tea from beverage to philosophy. His elegant prescriptions on water, utensils, preparation, and mood transformed drinking tea into an aesthetic and moral exercise. To brew tea correctly was to understand harmony. To drink it mindfully was to nourish the soul.

The Song dynasty (960–1279) carried this refinement further, turning tea into spectacle.

Court officials and literati hosted dou cha—tea competitions where whisked powdered teas were judged on the clarity of foam, the steadiness of bubbles, and the evenness of color in porcelain cups. These gatherings were part art, part duel. Men who failed to produce the perfect froth might lose not only face, but reputation.

Scholars composed poems mid-sip. Courtiers tested one another's restraint not in battle, but in the swirl of a teabowl.

A well-made cup could win favor at court. A poorly steeped one could signal decline.

And for the women of the inner chambers—whose talents were often unseen and whose voices unrecorded—tea became a way to perform elegance without speaking. A perfect pour was a kind of poetry.

It was said that in the Song capital of Bianjing (modern-day Kaifeng), one could judge a household's refinement by the luster of their teabowls and the confidence of their silence.

Ming Dynasty: The Birth of Loose Leaf and Porcelain Grace

If the Tang and Song dynasties gave tea its poetry, the Ming (1368–1644) gave it its clarity.

With the rise of the Ming court came sweeping cultural reforms—among them, a shift away from powdered tea. Emperor Hongwu, in a declaration both aesthetic and practical, abolished the tribute of compressed tea bricks and mandated instead the use of whole, loose tea leaves. What had once been powdered and whisked now became unbound—steeped and savored in water clear enough to reveal every swirling leaf.

This revolution was more than cosmetic. It changed how tea was prepared, served, and understood. The act of brewing became more intimate, less performative. Loose leaves demanded patience and attention. The elegance lay in stillness, not froth.

The utensils changed, too. Dark, thick-glazed teabowls gave way to jingdezhen porcelain—thin, white, luminous. Tea sets became smaller, more personal. Cups fit in the hand like a secret. Pottery was no longer merely functional; it

became a stage upon which aroma, clarity, and restraint were performed.

In elite households, gongfu cha—the "artful" or "disciplined" tea—began to flourish, particularly in the southern provinces. Multiple infusions, precise timing, and the careful choreography of cups and kettles turned tea into a dance. Even the water mattered: mountain spring was preferred. Rainwater collected from lotus leaves was considered especially auspicious.

Women of the Ming inner court, many of whom were poets, painters, and calligraphers in their own right, embraced this new mode of tea. A single perfect pour was said to reflect one's understanding of harmony, proportion, and moral calm.

Porcelain teapots were now often inscribed with aphorisms:

"In stillness, clarity."

"A quiet leaf floats farther than a loud wind."

These were not merely decorative—they were reminders that a woman's grace, like tea, revealed its strength in silence.

By the close of the Ming, tea had become not only a daily ritual but a philosophical lens: a way of seeing the world—and one's place within it—with elegance and intention.

Qing Dynasty: Tea as Diplomacy Behind the Curtain

In the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the art of tea passed through a veil—out of the scholar's study and into the silken folds of the inner court.

While emperors and officials governed from marble thrones and vermilion halls, women of influence wielded quieter tools: embroidery, poetry… and tea. Within the labyrinthine palaces of Peking, a well-brewed pot could settle rivalries, signal intentions, or win an empress's regard.

Tea gatherings among women—especially those of noble or bannerman households—were no longer casual entertainments. They became acts of social choreography, carefully orchestrated displays of grace and moral cultivation. What was poured, how it was served, what poem accompanied which infusion—all carried meaning.

A Cup, A Message

To offer bitter tea without apology was to express mourning—or perhaps rebuke. To serve sweet chrysanthemum to a guest was to flatter her purity. To choose not to serve a guest at all was a message even the dullest courtier would hear.

Lady Li, like many women of her standing, learned early that tea was diplomacy in a cup.

Marriage and Matchmaking

In Qing elite families, tea played a central role in matchmaking. Before a marriage proposal was formally accepted, tea was exchanged between families. The bride's tea, brewed and poured in front of the prospective groom's envoys, was watched carefully: Did her hand tremble? Did she pause before pouring? Did she speak poetry, or merely smile?

A daughter's future could be decided not by her dowry alone, but by the flavor of her tea.

Season and Setting

In spring, new green teas symbolized youth and beginnings. In summer, floral infusions like jasmine and lotus cooled the body and tempered tempers. Autumn demanded roasted oolong and darker brews with longan or red dates. In winter, aged pu'erh warmed the marrow and quieted gossip—unless that was the intended flavor.

Even the location mattered. Garden pavilions were for

conversation. Ancestral halls required solemnity. To serve tea in one's private study—particularly to another woman—was an invitation to speak freely… and sometimes dangerously.

Lady Li's Circle

In Lady Li's household, tea became not only a symbol of refinement but a method of discernment. Her ability to read character through conversation over cups became a legend in her district. She claimed she could judge a person's honesty by their first sip.

"Watch how they lift the cup," she once told her steward. "It's not the hand, but the hesitation, that gives them away."

And it was during one such gathering, beneath a blooming osmanthus tree, that Lady Li first uncovered the truth behind a forged mirror—and stepped quietly into the life of a detective.

SYMBOLISM IN THE CUP: THE LANGUAGE OF TEA IN QING SOCIETY

In Qing dynasty China, tea was more than a beverage—it was a silent language of virtue, emotion, and social nuance. The type of tea served, its presentation, and the occasion all conveyed messages understood by discerning guests. For women in particular, tea ceremonies offered a refined means to express sentiments and uphold cultural values within the constraints of their societal roles.

Jasmine Tea (茉莉花茶, mòlìhuā chá)

Jasmine tea, with its delicate aroma, symbolized purity and grace. Introduced to China during the Han dynasty and gaining popularity in the Song dynasty, jasmine-scented tea became a staple in social gatherings. Its

fragrance was believed to purify the mind and elevate emotions, making it a favored choice for welcoming guests and during matrimonial ceremonies. Serving jasmine tea was a gesture of respect and goodwill, reflecting the hostess's refinement and the harmonious intentions of the occasion.

Chrysanthemum Tea (菊花茶, júhuā chá)

Chrysanthemum tea, made from dried chrysanthemum flowers, held deep cultural significance. As one of the "Four Gentlemen" in Chinese art, the chrysanthemum symbolized nobility, longevity, and resilience. Its association with autumn and the Double Ninth Festival underscored themes of reflection and the transience of life. In traditional Chinese medicine, chrysanthemum tea was valued for its cooling properties and believed to aid in detoxification and eye health.

Osmanthus Tea (桂花茶, guìhuā chá)

Osmanthus tea, infused with the sweet-scented osmanthus blossoms, was emblematic of love, romance, and auspiciousness. Blooming in late summer and early autumn, osmanthus was associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival and the legend of Wu Gang, symbolizing perseverance and the pursuit of excellence. The tea's golden hue and fragrant aroma made it a popular choice during celebratory occasions, conveying wishes for happiness and prosperity.

Bitter Teas in Mourning Rituals

In the context of mourning and ancestral rites, bitter teas were customary offerings. The bitterness symbolized the pain of loss and the solemnity of the occasion. Serving such teas during funerals or memorials was a gesture of respect and a means to honor the deceased, reflecting the deep-

seated belief in tea's role as a bridge between the living and the spiritual realm.

Through these nuanced practices, tea in Qing society transcended its role as a mere drink, becoming a medium through which individuals, especially women, could express complex emotions and uphold cultural values within the intricate tapestry of social rituals.

Seasonal Brews and Court Favorites

In the Qing court, tea was not simply served—it was attuned to the calendar. Each season guided not only the body's humors but also the mood of the court. Tea reflected that rhythm: warming or cooling, invigorating or grounding, bitter or sweet. Carefully chosen blends marked the shifting seasons like brushstrokes on a landscape scroll.

Spring: Tender Greens and Orchid Petals

With the return of plum blossoms and the soft green of budding leaves, court ladies favored early-harvest green teas —picked before the Qingming Festival. These delicate brews were often infused with orchid or apricot blossoms, yielding a light, floral cup that signified renewal and emotional clarity.

Said to awaken the liver and dispel the sluggishness of winter, spring teas refreshed both body and spirit. They were often served during garden poetry salons and betrothal discussions, their freshness a metaphor for new beginnings.

"A tea best taken in morning light," wrote one courtier, "when the heart is open and ambitions still polite."

Summer: Chrysanthemum and Cooling Relief

In the thick heat of Peking's summer, when stone corridors radiated warmth and tempers frayed, cooling teas

became essential. Chrysanthemum tea—delicate, floral, and known to reduce internal heat—was a seasonal favorite, sometimes paired with goji berries or honeysuckle to brighten the brew and ease eye strain.

Mingled with mung bean water or lotus leaf, these tisanes were believed to relieve heatstroke, soothe the nerves, and promote clear skin. Such blends were common during garden visits, embroidery circles, or post-bathing rituals among the inner court women.

Autumn: Roasted Oolongs and Memory

As leaves turned and the air dried, oolong teas with roasted rice, osmanthus, or longan fruit came into favor. Richer than spring greens, these teas warmed the belly and steadied the mood—perfect for evenings spent in quiet reflection.

Autumn was the season of memory and sentiment, and osmanthus, which bloomed during the Mid-Autumn Festival, was especially prized for its symbolic connection to love and reunion. Steeped into oolong, it produced a golden brew sweet as nostalgia.

"A tea for long gazes and longer silences," Lady Li might say, "when summer's chatter has faded and winter's hush approaches."

Winter: Pu'erh and Tangerine Peel

In the brittle chill of Peking winters, when courtyards stood silent beneath snow and silk slippers padded over heated brick floors, nothing comforted like a strong aged pu'erh.

Dark, fermented, and often infused with dried tangerine peel, pu'erh was prized for its earthy strength and digestive benefits. Its richness made it ideal for sipping after the heavy banquets and festival feasts of the New Year season.

These teas were often accompanied by preserved fruits or walnut cakes and poured in the study—where gossip turned to legacy, and hands trembled less from cold than from what had been left unsaid.

TEA AS CEREMONY IN THE QING COURT

In the outer court, men bartered favors with scrolls and swords. In the inner court, women brewed alliances one cup at a time.

In the Qing dynasty, tea was more than refreshment—it was theater, language, and power wrapped in porcelain and steam. For elite women confined to the inner quarters, tea became a critical tool of influence. Unlike letters or spoken appeals—which could be intercepted, distorted, or considered impertinent—a tea ceremony communicated in the only currency truly valued in court life: elegance, restraint, and implication.

To invite a guest to tea was to open a door. To choose the right blend, setting, and sequence was to shape the conversation before a single word was spoken. With every pour and pause, women negotiated dowries, settled rivalries, consoled the grieving, or hinted at proposals not yet spoken aloud.

Tea reflected the woman who served it. Was it bitter or sweet? Delicate or bold? Clear or clouded? Just as a poorly steeped infusion could betray haste or carelessness, a perfectly timed cup could elevate the host in the eyes of her guests—or her mother-in-law.

Within the Forbidden City and noble compounds across the empire, these private rituals of tea became acts of moral performance. Infused with Confucian ideals and poetic grace, they offered women a realm of agency—quiet, but no less potent than the court scrolls unfurled by men beyond the curtain.

As the saying went, "A woman may pour in silence, but the steam will rise where it's meant to be seen."

Matchmaking and Marriage Rites

In Qing dynasty households, especially among the elite, tea was more than hospitality—it was a gesture of consent, a test of virtue, and a covenant between families.

When marriage negotiations began, the exchange of tea was among the earliest and most symbolic steps. A tray bearing two cups—often accompanied by auspicious tokens like red dates, lotus seeds, or bridal cakes—was sent from the groom's family to the bride's. If the tea was accepted and returned in kind, the message was clear: the proposal was welcome. This simple exchange, more binding than a written contract, marked the beginning of a carefully choreographed alliance.

At the wedding itself, tea took center stage once more. After the bridal procession and formal bowing ceremonies, the bride was expected to serve tea—kneeling—to her husband's parents, grandparents, and senior relatives. This act was called jing cha (敬茶), meaning "to respectfully offer tea." It was not only a sign of humility, but of filial devotion and the bride's symbolic entry into her new lineage.

The tea itself mattered: too bitter, and it could be read as ominous. Too sweet, and it might be seen as pandering. Ideally, the tea was balanced—often oolong or a lightly floral blend—chosen by the bride's family as a final signal of refinement and emotional readiness.

In wealthier households, the bride might recite a poem or couplet as she poured, her voice calm, her wrists steady. Elders, in turn, would offer red envelopes or jewelry as blessings—tokens of approval and welcome.

"A daughter pours to please her mother," it was said. "But a bride pours to prove herself to the world."

For women whose voices were seldom heard in formal matters, this tea ceremony was both their introduction and their trial. Within those cups swirled not just leaves, but expectation, tradition, and the hope of harmony between two ancestral lines.

Tea and the Language of Virtue

In the quiet drama of the Qing dynasty's inner court, tea was more than flavor—it was philosophy in a cup. Beneath the painted screens and lacquered beams, elite women used tea not merely to entertain, but to instruct.

Inspired by Confucian teachings, many hostesses structured their tea gatherings as moral tableaux, each pour reinforcing a particular virtue: filial piety (孝, xiào), honesty (信, xìn), loyalty (忠, zhōng), restraint (礼, lǐ), justice (义, yì), and more. These virtues, so often taught in male academies, found their feminine expression not in lecture halls, but in drawing rooms filled with jasmine steam and silken gestures.

The ritual could be exquisitely structured:

- A bitter pu'erh might accompany a tale of sacrifice.
- A light chrysanthemum infusion might precede a story of filial devotion.
- A smoky lapsang souchong could underscore themes of enduring loyalty.

Each guest was expected not just to drink, but to read the symbolism—to understand the host's intent, moral framing, and unspoken commentary. Tea was a mirror: it reflected both the brewer's character and the guest's perception.

To misread a pour, or to interrupt before the story's close, was not merely impolite—it was a sign of shallow understanding. It meant failing the test. For in these intimate salons, tea was not passive. It was didactic.

"In books, one studies virtue," a Qing lady once wrote in a private diary. "In tea, one practices it."

The hosts who mastered this moral choreography were praised not only for their refinement but for their wisdom—women who, though seldom granted titles of power, shaped reputations and reconciliations through the warmth of a porcelain cup.

The Five (or Ten) Virtues Tea

Lady Li's "Five Virtues Tea" is a fictional ceremony—but one drawn from the grains of historical possibility.

Scattered across Qing dynasty etiquette manuals and women's instructional texts are references to multi-course tea rituals intended to reflect a woman's cultivation of moral character. While no fully preserved example survives, fragmentary records speak of tea gatherings aligned with Confucian virtues, each pour reinforcing an ideal: filial piety (孝, xiào), honesty (信, xìn), loyalty (忠, zhōng), restraint (礼, lǐ), and justice (义, yì). In some late Qing and Republican-era notations, ten virtues are mentioned—corresponding to the ten celestial stems (天干) of the traditional Chinese calendar—but in practice, five were more manageable for domestic performance.

Each tea would be carefully chosen for its taste, symbolism, and seasonal appropriateness. Stories or poetic allusions accompanied each pour, creating a layered experience of flavor and reflection. The event was as much performance as refreshment—a chance for a hostess to demonstrate not only her palate, but her moral education, wit, and rhetorical grace.

While Lady Li's tea sequence is fictionalized, it reflects a deeply Qing sensibility: that virtue could be conveyed not through grand declarations, but through the ritualized act of offering tea—each cup a lesson in civility, subtlety, and self-control.

"To serve tea well," an old adage went, "is to speak without offense, to lead without command, and to teach without pride."

Poetry and Presentation

In the refined world of the Qing inner court, a well-brewed cup of tea was never served alone—it arrived accompanied by verse.

Poetry was both currency and armor in elite feminine society. Whether drawn from the Shijing (Classic of Poetry), Tang dynasty couplets, or one's own embroidery of words, a poetic reference was expected to precede or accompany each pour. This literary flourish was not idle ornamentation—it was a layered form of expression, signaling the hostess's education, emotional intelligence, and, above all, her discretion.

To praise a tea's fragrance was to admire purity. To note its bitterness was to mourn endurance. A single line could compliment a guest's patience, hint at a rival's overstep, or remind an elder of shared sorrow—all without breaking the bonds of decorum.

"In spring, one drinks orchid dew and speaks of parting; in autumn, one serves pu'erh and speaks of loyalty."

Even the sequence of metaphors mattered. A chrysanthemum brew might be paired with a line on aging nobly. Osmanthus, long associated with female virtue, often evoked allusions to palace grace or romantic restraint. The more elegantly these threads were woven together, the more admired the hostess became. A clever allusion could elevate a compliment or deliver a veiled rebuke beneath a veil of steam.

These verbal bouquets served as much for the ear as for the heart. In a world where direct speech could be danger-

ous, poetry gave women a language that was both weapon and balm—steeped in civility, sharpened with wit.

In Lady Li's Household

In Lady Li's household, as in many upper-class Manchu homes of the Qing dynasty, tea was not simply refreshment. It was atmosphere, etiquette, and architecture—an invisible framework that shaped the rhythms of the day.

Mornings began with a mild green tea or silver needle white tea, served by a personal maid with silent attentiveness. Midday brought a stronger brew—oolong or aged pu'erh—accompanied by seasonal fruits or candied lotus root, a quiet moment for correspondence or reflection before the household's business resumed. In the evenings, floral teas steeped with chrysanthemum or osmanthus were poured in Lady Li's study, their gentle fragrance settling over scrolls and brushwork like a veil of peace.

After Lord Yun's death, mourning rituals changed everything. The tea table remained, but the gaiety of presentation disappeared. Brocade cloths were swapped for plain linen. Scented teas gave way to subdued brews: dark pu'erh for grounding grief, or old white tea, once reserved for spiritual clarity, now steeped as a daily balm. Guests were rare in those days—but even in solitude, the ritual continued. Tea offered order where there was none. Heat when the bed was cold. Steam when the eyes refused to cry.

By the time the events of the current story unfold, Lady Li's mourning veil has lifted—but the practice remains. In her house, tea has become a language: a way to soothe her daughters, test her servants, or weigh the intentions behind a visitor's smile.

To be offered tea by Lady Li is to be read—and to be invited, gently, to read her in return.

3. LADY LI'S FAVORITE RECIPES

These entries are preserved from a set of scrolls discovered in the bottom drawer of Lady Li's writing desk—written in her own hand, smudged with tea, and annotated in the margins with notes like "Too strong—Bai oversteeped" or "Best when someone else needs comforting."

Imperial Tea Eggs

When properly cracked, the shells resemble a scholar's brushstroke—veined and unpredictable. They are best made the day before a revelation, when something hidden is about to come to light.

Ingredients:

- 6 eggs
- 3 tablespoons loose-leaf black tea (or 2 tea bags)
- ½ cup dark soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon light soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon Chinese five-spice powder
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 2 star anise
- Orange peel, if in season

Instructions:

1. Boil eggs gently for 8 minutes, then remove and let cool just enough to handle.
2. Tap each shell with the back of a spoon to create fine cracks—like the fault lines in a good family.
3. Return the eggs to the pot with 4 cups water, both soy sauces, tea leaves, and spices.

4. Simmer covered for at least 1 hour, longer if secrets need time to marinate.
5. Let steep overnight for best color.

"A humble snack, yes—but the marbling pleases the eye. Like hidden truths rising slowly to the surface."

Chrysanthemum and Goji Berry Tea

A favorite among ladies of the court—not only because it soothes the eyes, but because it gives one something to sip while pretending not to listen.

Best served after an emotional conversation or when the weather turns stubbornly warm.

Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons dried chrysanthemum blossoms (white or yellow)
- 1 tablespoon dried goji berries
- Optional: a few red jujubes (Chinese dates) for added sweetness
- Boiling water

Instructions:

1. Rinse the flowers and berries quickly under cool water—too many hands touch things in the apothecary jars.
2. Place in a clay or porcelain teapot.
3. Pour freshly boiled water over the mixture and cover.

4. Let steep for 5–7 minutes. Do not oversteep—goji berries will become assertive.
5. Serve in clear glass or thin porcelain to admire the float of petals and red fruit.

"Light, floral, a touch sweet—much like the gossip that follows a wedding. Best sipped with secrets not meant to leave the room."

Osmanthus Syrup over Sticky Rice Cakes

Served when the moon is roundest—or when a marriage requires smoothing. Sweet, fragrant, and pleasing to old tongues and young hearts alike.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup glutinous rice flour
- ½ cup warm water
- 3 tablespoons dried osmanthus flowers
- ½ cup rock sugar (or substitute with honey)
- ½ cup water (for syrup)
- Optional: a dash of rosewater or a few wolfberries for garnish

Instructions:

For the cakes:

1. In a bowl, combine glutinous rice flour and warm water. Mix until it forms a soft, pliable dough.
2. Divide into small balls and flatten slightly into coin-like shapes.

3. Steam over high heat for 10–12 minutes until translucent and springy.

For the syrup:

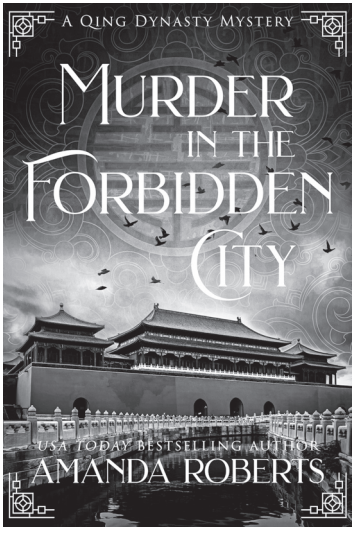
1. In a small pan, simmer rock sugar and ½ cup water until dissolved.
2. Add dried osmanthus and continue simmering for 5 minutes.
3. Let cool slightly to thicken into a delicate syrup.

To serve:

Arrange rice cakes on a small lacquered dish. Drizzle with osmanthus syrup while still warm. Garnish as desired.

"Soft enough to silence a mother-in-law. Sweet enough to cover a cousin's ambition. Best enjoyed under moonlight, with no one asking questions."

MURDER IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY



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Behind the vermillion walls of the Forbidden City, murder knows no boundaries.

When one of the Empress's ladies-in-waiting is found dead in the Inner Court, Inspector Gong faces an impossible task.

As a man, he's forbidden from entering the women's quarters—yet somehow he must solve a murder he cannot investigate. How do you catch a killer when you can't visit the crime scene or question the witnesses?

The widowed Lady Li is devastated to learn her sister-in-law has been murdered while serving the Empress. Determined to find justice, she makes a dangerous decision: she'll go undercover in the Forbidden City and work with the insufferable Inspector Gong, even if his arrogance makes her want to throttle him herself.

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