

### 3. THE CREATIVE WORK

#### Call Me Bathsheba

Chapter1: *Feng Huang*—The Phoenix

Hong Kong (1990-2008)

I didn't know my name. My Papa brought me home from a redlight district at the heart of Macau thirty-one years ago, to the surprise of my stepmother Candee and his other family members. He had given me a name of course. Two words. That he hoped could define me, help me in finding my identity, and make me feel comfortable in my own skin. Ridiculous. Now, don't get me wrong. I know he really just wanted the best for me, he just didn't understand. Nobody ever did know how it feels to be me.

Ruby Chow. It was the name that he gave me. The name that is written in my passport and engraved behind the band of the golden ring Papa gave me when I turned sixteen. All of my stepsisters were also given a golden ring when they turned sixteen, but mine was different. All of their rings were decorated with a tiny, milky green jade on top. While mine had a gigantic sparkling ruby. Flaming red like wildfire. He said it was because my name is Ruby, but for me, it was because I was different. I had always been different and I have always been fully aware of it no matter how hard Papa tried to make things normal for me. And the ruby ring was just the cherry on top, to highlight it even more.

I grew up being called by many names. Ruby was one of them, of course, since the teachers and Papa always called me by that name. But, there were other names too. Hurtful names that have been a part of my identity. Daughter of a slut, a whore, a harlot. Anything.

I still clearly remember when I was six years old, I accidentally broke a blue porcelain bowl. Candee, my stepmother, put it on top of a table for decoration. Candee eyes' were lit up with pure hatred at that moment. Her pupils turned dark, her gaze made my whole body tremble.

"You, daughter of a slut! How dare you break my precious China? Don't you know that it was a present for my first wedding anniversary from your father? It is my keepsake of those glorious days, the days when your father still loved me. The days before *your mother*, that

harlot, laid her dirty fingers on him! She ruined my marriage into pieces, and now you break the only remembrance of it into pieces! Her harlot blood must be running through your veins too!"

She gripped my collar tightly, I could hardly breathe.

"I still let you eat the same food with *my children*. The food I cook with my own hands! And what do I get in return? A broken china! What an ungrateful little bitch you are, look at yourself!"

Tears were streaming down my cheeks. It was the very start of my search for my real mother. I might be still so young at that time, but I was not stupid. Candee's words were crystal clear when she yelled about *my harlot mother* ruining her marriage. I didn't understand what a harlot meant yet at that time, but I clearly knew she was saying that she was not my mother. I had stopped calling her 'Mama' since I was in middle school. I called her Candee instead, her first name. It might sound so disrespectful, but I cannot help myself and she also never complained anyway. Also, to be compared to the names she gave me; daughter of a slut, a whore, a harlot, Candee definitely sounded more respectable. During that time, I felt like she treated me with extreme injustice. My identity to her seemed to be affected so much by *my real mother's* identity even though I had never met her even once in my life. I didn't even know her name. I didn't understand why she blamed everything I didn't do on me and my *harlot* mother. Not until years later when Papa finally told me everything that he had been hiding from me.

My Papa is Alan Chow, the owner of Chow Electronics Hong Kong. Chow Electronics was the biggest electronics supplier in Hong Kong and Papa was one of the richest men in our country. I grew up with privilege. I went to the best private school in Hong Kong and lived in a huge, luxurious mansion with him, Candee, three stepsisters, and one stepbrother. Things were lovely when Papa was home. He loved me and wouldn't let anyone be cruel to me, even Candee did not dare to do anything to me if Papa was around, but when he was not home (which happened often due to his endless business trips), my life was a nightmare.

When I was fourteen, my step-brother Tommy raped me. No one believed me, not even Papa. I was coming out of the shower at that time. Tommy was already inside my room, I don't know how long he had been there. He snatched my towel and pushed me towards the

wall. It happened just like that. My body froze, I couldn't do anything. My body was there, but I was not. I numbed myself until he was done. I felt ashamed and broken after he left. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I cried but it didn't make me feel any better. He didn't even threaten me not to tell anyone. No one would believe me and he knew that too well. Papa loved me, but he didn't believe his son would do such a thing like that. He accused Candee of being mean to me while he was not home until my mental health was shaken, and Candee blamed me for causing this. My whole life, I have learned to endure and to survive. Even until today. Some people are destined to take this place in life.

In his deathbed, a day before he passed away, Papa told me about my mother. He said he didn't build Chow Electronics from zero. He got it from my grandpa when he was about my age. Not long after he ran the company, his parents arranged a marriage for him with Candee. Candee's family had long known Papa's family. He had known Candee for quite a long time, but never really been in love with her. Time passed and his marriage went well even though it was kinda boring for him. His business colleagues often asked him to join them partying at Hong Kong's most high-end nightclubs and bars after work, and he did join them because he thought his life was boring. He looked for some fun. It was in one of those nights when he met my mother, my real, biological mother. She was an escort girl working for a famous brothel downtown Macau. She and a bunch of other girls often had to go to casinos and bars to look for men who wanted to pay for their sex. She was, according to Papa, mesmerizing. I got my pointed nose and eye color from her, another thing that made me different from my other siblings. My physical appearance is extraordinary as being compared to my step-sisters. People always say I am beautiful. My eyes are sharp and slanted just like Papa, but my iris color is hazel brown instead of raven black like everyone else in my family. This made people talk about me. My friends at school, my distant relatives who hardly visited Hong Kong, and even the media. I often read gossip magazines speculating about my father having an affair with a mysterious mistress. My sisters hated me, they said my mother had made Candee suffer deeply and was almost being divorced by Papa. They said all of them almost became homeless if Papa decided to marry my mother, which was not true of course. Kayla, my biggest step-sister told me luckily, my mother fled, running away to live with another richer man. I didn't know whether or not to believe her since she always said cruel things to me and Papa never answered my questions until his last days.

Long story short, Papa paid for my mother's service that night, and then came back to her the other night, and the following nights. This had gone for almost one year when Papa finally realized that he was in love with her. Things got even more complicated when several months later, my mother got pregnant. The situation was extremely difficult and he didn't know what to do.

"I felt sorry for Candee. She was really mad and devastated the day I brought you home," he said.

"No wonder," I murmured.

"It was not her fault that we had to get married anyway. Also, I already had three children, your siblings, at that time so I couldn't just divorce her to marry your mother. Not mentioning that I have to redeem her first from the brothel. She was considered to be the property of the brothel, there was a tattoo on her left breast as a symbol of ownership of the brothel. Just like yours, I have to redeem you from that fat pimp. You were born in that brothel and therefore considered to be his property. Goddammit."

"What?"

"Yes, the tattoo behind your neck is supposed to mean something. A name. They give all of the workers' names to be used when they service the client. It's almost the same as a stage name I guess."

"A name? What does mine mean?"

Papa shook his head, "I don't know. It's written with ancient Chinese symbols or something, I have tried to ask people to translate it, Ruby, but no one knows. I am sorry." He looked troubled.

I sighed. It's true, I have a tattoo, inked deeply in the nape of my neck. It is black and looks like complicated, meaningless curves. Kayla said it was a mark that I was born to be a prostitute. She turned out to be right though.

"Not even the brothel?"

"That fat man, the pimp, told me that the name that *his* brothel gave to you was none of my business. He told me your tattoo was just a mark. A symbol system that his brothel created. He was a dickhead. Treating all the women there like they couldn't hear and feel, like properties." He gritted his teeth. "I didn't even remember that man's name. Thank the gods I could still get you out of his grip. You were a precious asset to him. Your mother was one of the best girls he ever had. He must have squeezed tons of gold out of her, he must have." Papa sounded like he was mumbling to himself.

"What was the brothel name? And what happened to her?"

"Crystal Dragon. When I redeemed you, your mother had already left Macau. The pimp had tried to hide her from me since he knew she was pregnant. He was afraid that she would leave the brothel to live with me. I would pay a lot for redeeming her of course. But, I believe no matter how much I could pay him, it would never exceed the amount of money he could get from her if she continued on working for him. She was his goose that laid golden eggs."

He paused for a while, blinking tears from his eyes.

"Did you ever try to look for her?" I demanded.

"Of course, I did! I couldn't find her there, I believe they had changed her name and everyone there was hiding her from me." He looked so tired. The wrinkles in his eyes were so deep. "And what breaks my heart the most is, she never tried to contact me back. She had my office landlines, my fax, and even my address! A part of me wants to believe she actually wants to, but the situation is hard for her so that is not possible. A part of me still wants to believe that she was, and still is, in love with me. Just like how I was, and still am, madly in love with her."

I took a deep breath, then finally asked, "What did you call her? What was her name?" My heart went wild. That was the first time I would finally know my mother's name. The name of the woman whose identity had been attached to me my whole life.

"Bathsheba. I know her as Bathsheba, she never wanted to talk about her real name. She loved Rubies a lot. She wore that stone as lockets, bracelets, rings, earrings, anything. It suits her though. She is just like rubies; beautiful, bold, and rare."

"I guess that's why my name is Ruby?"

"Yes. And your ruby ring was hers. I engraved your name inside it just before your sixteenth birthday."

My eyes widened. I never thought about that possibility.

"She gave it to me the last day we met. She forced me to keep it. As a remembrance of our story, she said. She must have known that she would never see me again, but I didn't know that it was a farewell. Fool of me."

I would like to ask if he thought there was a possibility that to her, he was just another man. That to her, I was just an accident. But, I couldn't bear making him suffer anymore and a part of me also does not want to know the answer. I would rather cling to a tiny hope that my mother was somewhere on this earth, still thinking about us the way we think about her. That day was a new beginning for me. A fresh start where my journey began. A journey in search for my name.

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My Papa died that year. After his death, I was kicked out of the family. I didn't even get any inheritance because I am a girl. The Chow family still firmly believes in the patriarchal Chinese tradition where daughters don't get any inheritance from their parents since they are going to move into their husbands' families later on. A month after the grieving period for my Papa ended, Candee told me to pack my belongings and leave the house. She gave me a meager amount of money to find a motel to live in while I am searching for jobs. I was sixteen, just entering high school back then. Dropping out of school was out of the question. I didn't know what to do with my life. Searching for a job in Hong Kong is hard, especially when you are a girl with no degree. Most of the blue-collar works and menial works are prioritized for men. I don't have the muscles to be a construction worker. I was rejected when I applied as a supermarket worker, skyscrapers' windows cleaner, food manufacturer, and even as a janitor. I am too pretty for the job. The manager suggested me to be a waitress at a place owned by her friend. The place was a little shady. It was dark and closed when I arrived there for the interview. It was in Wan Chai, a notorious area for its crime and poverty in Hong Kong. There was a sign with the word 'Red Swan' written in Cantonese characters at the front door. An around forty-year-old woman, who I later address as Mrs. Lian, answered the door and

scrutinized me from head to toe. Her hair was styled in a funny weird bun like what my step-grandmother usually did.

"So, you're the new bar girl?" she asked.

"I was told that you were looking for a waitress, Ma'am."

She laughed heartily. "Yeah, yeah, almost the same. Waitresses are for restaurants, bar girls are for clubs. Restaurants are old businesses, clubs are modern businesses," she explained.

"This... building... is a bar?" I asked, scanning my surroundings.

"Yes, at night. However, Qin Fei didn't mention that you're *zhen de piao liang*—extremely beautiful. I believe you'd prefer to work at my other bar in Macau."

"Macau?"

"Yes, the money is better there. I believe a girl like you wouldn't want to waste your golden age here in Wan Chai, right? For the goddesses' sake, you actually can even work in Mong Kok or even Kowloon! This must be my lucky day!"

"What will my job be?" I was really curious. What Mong Kok? What Kowloon?

"Basically just serving drinks and stuff to customers. Men customers. They drink a lot, especially on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You'll be very busy on those days." She laughed again.

"Drinks and stuff to men customers?" My suspicion spiked.

"Oh, come on, don't be so naïve. Girls like you know what I mean, don't you?"

I swallowed hard. I didn't expect this at all, I had been called slut and whore my whole life, but it never crossed my mind that one day I would have to actually become one. Also, what did she mean by 'girls like me'? Was there anything exclaiming 'SLUT' being written on my forehead? I didn't know how to respond. The idea of giving sex to earn money obviously doesn't spark joy or thrills me, but neither the idea of having to starve to death. I did really need the money. The money Candee gave to me had long gone. I had to put my ruby ring,

which was my only possession, as collateral to take out a loan at a pawnshop, and the money too was about to run out at that time. I kept on moving from one cheap motel to another, eating only once or two times a day when the seller pitied me and gave me more than what I could buy.

"How much would I get a day?" I finally looked up.

Mrs. Lian smirked with satisfaction, "Follow me, let's talk about this inside."

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I decided to move to Macau. Not just because Mrs. Lian said the money was good, but the chances to meet people I know from my past, especially my family, were also lower if I moved. I also cut my thin, long hair to a short bob to make it more difficult for people to recognize me. The Red Swan bar and nightclub in Macau was in better condition than the one in Wan Chai. The interior was quite modern. There was a small bar right next to the dance floor. During nighttime, the whole area was dimly lit with colorful neon lights, mostly red. I was asked to wear a uniform, a cheap red mini dress. Many of the girls had a stage name, a name they used while working. It was not mandatory, but I understood why most women decided to have a stage name. Other than to avoid meeting someone from our life outside work who might recognize our name, it functions as a barrier to protect our identity, to separate who we are when working and our real self when we are not. This whole thing is becoming more confusing especially when you are like me, when you don't know who you are. My whole life I have always been Ruby the daughter of a slut, but who is Ruby actually? I guess I will never know. Moreover now, I have become Ruby the slut. I am not only my mother's daughter, I have finally become her.

That was why when my very first client bought a black martini at the bar that night, asking by what name he should call me, I didn't make up some weird exotic names or pick any random flower names like the other girls, instead, I simply answered, "Just, call me Bathsheba."

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My first client was a rich Hong Kong man, just a little younger than my Papa. Heck, he probably would recognize my surname if I had it mentioned. I was considered lucky for not



getting an abuser, masochist, or anyone with disturbing kinks on my first. Some of my friends still have nightmares about their first night working. I do have constant nightmares too, not about a particular night, but the cumulation of everything that had ever happened. However, that night was still memorable to me, so it is worth telling.

He was about seventy and his wife had died long ago. He didn't corner me, beat me, or force me physically in any forms, but the moment his fingers touched my skin, I immediately was not there. It was like when I was fourteen and Tommy raped me. My body was there, but I was wandering somewhere else, expecting him to finish whatever he did with my body. Ruby is the soul and brain, Bathsheba was the empty body demanded to respond sexually according to what the clients desired. Everything was fine until he suddenly kissed me. It was like my soul was forced to re-enter my body before its time. I feel horrible. The line that had separated Ruby and Bathsheba was crossed and I was disgusted with myself. I wanna get myself out of my body and never come back. I flinched, trying to avoid him. His body stiffened, I could sense his annoyance.

"I paid you much because I want to have sex with a real woman, not a doll. Be here, be present! I'm so disappointed. Anson says you're a professional." He scoffed. Anson was Mrs. Lian's right-hand man. All of the girls were scared of him. If the client wasn't satisfied, he wouldn't let us have our share of the money, or even beat us or force us to practice with him to 'learn' better.

"Please, I can't do it," I sobbed.

"Just pretend you are my girlfriend! Don't cry! You make me feel I am a monster! I am not here to make you feel better! I paid you for that, for god's sake!" From his voice alone I knew I was going to be in trouble.

"I'll try to be more present, I promise, but please not the kiss, Sir."

He shrugged me off and left the room immediately. I didn't get my payment that night.

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Being a prostitute means being a woman the world hates. Learning how to be one means building layer by layer of shields to protect your heart from hurting, breaking, and

burning. I was not always as lucky as that first night. I met clients who hit my head to the walls, tied, whipped, and choke me. Some have spitted or even peed on me too. I have broken several bones, including my nose bridge. Mrs. Lian brought me to the hospital that time because she said my pointed nose was an important aspect of my beauty, an important asset to the business. She didn't tell the doctor the truth. She told the doctor I was her niece and that I was robbed. She said she was afraid we would not receive any treatment if they know who we are. I stayed because it was the only way for me to keep on going, to keep on living. At the very least, the money was enough. Enough to rent a small room behind the bar, to buy cheap food, and to redeem my precious ruby ring from the pawnshop. Redeeming that ring was my main motivation for trying so hard to please my clients to get bonuses. I learned how to serve clients professionally with blood and tears, literally. I learned to act as if I were there, or even more, I act as if I myself were as excited for the sex as my clients. I pretend to enjoy what I am doing because that's what they expect from me. After doing that so many times, I am trained already to automatically not be there but act out as if I were there at the same time. Yet, although I am already very used to it, it still feels very tiring every time. I feel exhausted not only from the physical activities or to defend myself when the client was getting abusive, but also emotionally for the nature of the activity itself is draining.

I still had to keep Ruby and Bathsheba separate when I was outside work. In this case, it's the other way round. I have to hide Bathsheba. Letting others know about my job would attract more harm than goods in the outside world. The neighborhood mocks and calls me names every time I pass by. One evening during my first week moving here, I entered a cosmetic store to buy some powder. I was still checking the price when suddenly the tiny woman who owned the store screamed, "How could you get in here? Get out!" I was still not aware she was talking to me until she came in front of me and pointed her finger to my face, "You are the new Red Swan girl, right? Leave or I'll call the police!" Every pair of eyes were looking at us, some whispering to each other.

"But, I-I want to buy powder," said I.

"Buy?" She mocked. "Everyone knows girls like you just steal! LEAVE NOW!" she shooed me away.