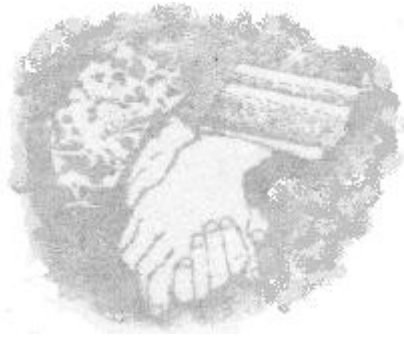


# Cotton and Silk

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## Prologue    Blinded Love

June 10, 1916. Seoul, Japanese-occupied Korea

**L**ieutenant Hiroshi Watanabe sat at his black lacquered desk. Overhead, a slow-turning ceiling fan moved damp air through his basement office in the Japanese Resident General's palace. As he reviewed a stack of court orders and judgments, he stroked his mustache, its bushy unruliness his badge of individuality. Though he found only insignificant technical errors, he chose to view his work as important. It was good for the Korean people to see official matters conducted assiduously. The Japanese way. That's how they would learn. How they would improve.

Just before noon, there was a knock on the door. Kitamura, Watanabe's military secretary, entered and bowed. "Excuse me, sir. Miss Lee Lin-hwa is here to see you." His arched eyebrows added reproach to what was otherwise a bland statement of fact.

Watanabe frowned—it wasn't an aide's to know, much less judge, a superior's private life—and was glad to think the look masked his soaring joy at the visit. "You may show Miss Lee in."

In early 1914 Watanabe had arrived at this assignment under General Masatake, the military ruler of the Korean province. His wife Sumire had joined him when suitable family quarters became available in late 1915. In her absence, he had taken Lin-hwa, a pretty Korean teenager, as his mistress. He'd continued to see her even after his wife arrived, until February when Sumire discovered the infidelity and confronted him.

Though he'd come to treasure the girl he called Nightingale, he had no option but to send her away forever. Duty before self.

As Lin-hwa stepped through the doorway, Watanabe was struck, touched, by her smallness—he'd forgotten how childlike she looked. Then the implication of the bundle she carried pushed everything else aside. Watanabe felt at once elation and terror. He rushed to the door and thrust it closed in Kitamura's face.

"Don't be angry," Lin-hwa said. "I had to show you our daughter."

Our daughter! Watanabe kept silent, but his eyes sparkled at the thought. He swept the infant into his arms, and she began to cry. It took just an instant for her contorted little face to steal his heart. Soon the fan blades' movement captured the infant's attention, and she quieted.

Lin-hwa looked down. "I discovered my pregnancy soon after we parted. My parents sent me to the countryside to have this baby. They've promised her to the local grain merchant and his childless wife. I had to show her to you. Just once." Her gaze met Watanabe's. "Forgive me."

Watanabe nodded. He guessed she'd also come to let him glimpse the life they could've shared. To show him that a lowly Korean girl could outdo his Japanese wife. His barren Japanese wife. He gazed at Lin-hwa—mysterious, enchanting—and wondered how her tiny body could contain a spirit so imposing, so fiery. Drawn like a moth to her spiritual flame, he'd let her brand his heart. Even cherished her indelible mark on him, despite the danger it posed for them both.

They'd been talking for ten minutes when the office door burst open. There stood Sumire, gasping, enraged. Tears tracking through the white powder on her cheeks, she pulled Watanabe's ceremonial revolver from the folds of her robe and pointed the heavy pistol unsteadily at him.

"Sumire," Watanabe boomed. He thrust the infant toward Lin-hwa, but without taking her, the girl stepped in front of him.

"That's it—hide behind your whore," Sumire shrieked. "But someday have the courage to tell that bastard how you betrayed your true wife." She raised the revolver to her temple.

"My wife, stop." Watanabe's tone made it more plea than order.

Kitamura was standing behind Sumire the whole time. The smile he'd shown initially had become a look of white terror. He leapt clumsily at Sumire, and she stumbled forward into the room, the gun barrel arcing ahead of her.

Watanabe's eyes were locked on the pistol's muzzle when it flashed. He felt the blast reverberate through the office and saw the blurry image of Lin-hwa crumple before him. Shards of light shot through his brain and a bolt of pain exploded in his left eye. With a sensation of wetness and warmth coursing down his face, he rolled to the floor, protecting the infant daughter cradled in his arms.

Watanabe came to an hour later, still in his office. He raised a hand to his throbbing left eye and felt the damp dressing covering it. With his right eye he could see Sumire embracing the bundled infant, rocking her in her arms. He was astonished at her calm. She was listening intently as Colonel Nishimura, his superior, spoke to her, pounding the heel of his fist into his palm for emphasis. Watanabe turned to the staff physician kneeling next to him, adjusting the bandage on his eye. He pulled the doctor's sleeve to bring him close and whispered, "The girl, Lin-hwa?"

Except for a scowl, the doctor made no reply. He went on trimming the edge of the gauze dressing. After studying it from several angles he nodded sharply. Finally, he peered into Watanabe's face and sniffed, "The body is already removed."

The room around Watanabe began to spin, ever faster, wilder. He let consciousness slip away.

In his infirmary room that evening, with the left side of his face wrapped in gauze, Watanabe watched the white blades of a ceiling fan whirl above him. Listening to the rhythmic hum of the motor, he realized he'd never noticed the sound of the fan in his office. Tears filled his eye—he'd missed so much. His thoughts turned to Sumire, to the strength she'd shown in the wake of the...incident.

His wife entered the room holding the infant like she'd been doing it forever. She bent down and kissed his cheek. "Your eye, the surgeon won't be able to save it. The bullet fragments were too many. But your life is spared. That's what is important."

She pulled a chair close to her husband's bed and sat. "Nishimura-sama has taken charge of things. This is what will be: The Administration will arrange for a payment to the girl's family. Records will be created around the birth of our daughter." She nestled the infant to her cheek.

Watanabe turned his face to the window.

Sumire touched his arm. “It was so strange. I rushed to you this morning so full of rage. I hated her. Hated you...Hated life. When the pistol fired, I don’t know...I was dazed. The sound of the shot echoed in my head and my mind went gray. The next thing I knew, I was holding the infant. And I felt tranquil. My brain was clear. Holding her put the world right.” She stroked his shoulder. “Husband, all I ever wanted was a family. You know that. When I learned I was barren, half my life seemed over. With your unfaithfulness, the rest withered. Now fate has intervened. It has given me a new life. Given *us* new life. We have each other. A daughter to unite us. And no one to divide us. Watanabe-san, turning away is not an option for *Nihon-go*.” She paused, waiting for her husband to speak, but he kept silent. When the baby fussed, Sumire said, “I’ll take our daughter to the wet nurse. Tomorrow when I return we’ll select her name.” She stood to leave.

A feeling of resolution washed over Watanabe. What was so for Sumire could be true for him, too. The Authority would take care of external matters. Lin-hwa’s fire was gone, but so was the danger it posed. His career, his marriage, his honor—all were suddenly secure. “The world put right,” he murmured and turned back to his wife. “What happened must remain our secret.”

“I pledge it will,” said Sumire.

“Never to be disclosed?” He glanced at the infant in his wife’s arms.

“Never to be disclosed....To anyone.”

After a silent moment, Watanabe took Sumire’s hand and squeezed it. “Our daughter’s name shall be Eri.”

Sumire searched his face. She smiled and nodded. Then she turned and left the room.