





SCARLET
BUTTERFLY



A MEMOIR

EMPRESS FEI



Scarlet Butterfly
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First Edition

This one is for little Feifei.

Thank you for dreaming, fighting, and winning.

And, of course, this one is also for M:

my best friend, my soulmate, my everything.

PART ONE: EGG





I

BROKEN DOLL

When I was a kid, I was the sovereign of an empire that consisted of a dozen blonde dolls, a toy refrigerator housing an assortment of condiments, and a palace constructed from multicolored building blocks. Unsurprisingly, my first memory revolved around a toy.

One of my great uncles was visiting for the afternoon. He brought me a gift. The context surrounding this moment had been washed away by the river of time. Even so, I could never forget the magical moment when he reached into a plastic bag and produced a sleek remote-control car. Sunlight entered through a crack between the curtains, kissing the vehicle's

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crimson body. Instead of handing it to me, he set it on the wooden floorboards. What happened next came in bits and pieces: the car's engine rumbling to life, a gasp of cold air scraping my throat, the vehicle speeding past me. I chased after it, the song of my laughter ringing off the cracked walls.

Then the moment cut off.



In 2007, summer seized the city of Chengdu in a chokehold. Furious sunbeams threatened to set everything ablaze, baking the clothes on washing lines and scorching the uneven pavement littered with cigarette stubs, candy wrappers, and the occasional dog manure. The streets teemed with throngs of people in short sleeve shirts. Some snacked on milk popsicles purchased from the nearest Hongqi chain store. Others carried polka-dot umbrellas to fend off the sun.

A green taxi dropped me and my mom off at a bustling boulevard. Teenagers loitered outside internet cafes with flickering neon signs. Elderlies played mahjong inside teahouses.

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At a nearby construction site, workers gulped iced water and wiped sweat with white towels. One of them flashed an odd look in my direction, and I tightened my hold on my mom's hand.

We had just left her workplace where she introduced me to two colleagues. The first was a stern lady who counted numbers in the same office as my mom. She had an angular face and an attitude sharper than a machete. The second was a bubbly woman whose smile proved to be infectious. We waved goodbye to her at the gray staircase near the exit then climbed into the taxi.