

Ghost 65

Chapter 65: the daughter returns

The Chen residence, once alive with noble laughter, was now a storm of confusion.

The courtyard lamps were still burning though the night had long passed; servants darted about like frightened sparrows.

Doors opened, slammed, and opened again.

Somewhere in the east wing, a vase shattered.

And at the center of it all, Madam Chen sat pale and trembling, clutching a silk handkerchief, her eyes red from weeping.

Beside her, Lord Chen Guiren, the patriarch of the house, paced the floor with barely controlled fury. His face was carved in thunder, and his hands trembled—not from age, but from the weight of anger he could not unleash.

His son, Chen Hao, stood nearby, fists clenched tight, jaw rigid.

Every one of them was waiting for the same thing.

The missing daughter's return.

The Return

The heavy gate creaked open.

A girl stepped in quietly — robes dusty, hair slightly disheveled, face pale from exhaustion but still as delicate as a painting.

Chen Mei.

The youngest daughter of the Chen house.

The girl who, by the Emperor's new decree, was destined to enter the palace in three months' time.

The last remaining pearl of a tarnished family.

Her steps faltered the moment she saw the sight before her: her mother's tear-streaked face, her father's thunderous glare, her brother's burning eyes.

The silence was suffocating.

"Where," Lord Chen said at last, his voice low but lethal, "were you?"

Chen Mei dropped to her knees instantly, forehead touching the polished floor. Her voice trembled. "Father, please forgive me... I—I went out..."

"Out?" her brother snapped, voice echoing. "Do you have any idea what chaos you've caused? The servants searched every courtyard, your maids nearly fainted from fright! You are to enter the palace soon, yet you vanish into the night like a common girl!"

Madam Chen covered her mouth, stifling a sob. "We thought something terrible happened to you!"

Chen Mei pressed her forehead to the ground again, tears spilling freely now.

"Mother... Father... I didn't mean to worry anyone. I'm sorry—I just wanted to see the city one last time before I enter the palace. I thought... I thought I would never walk freely again once I go there."

Her voice broke on the last words.

The sincerity in her tone softened the edges of the room's fury, but Lord Chen's eyes remained sharp.

"You disobeyed my order," he said coldly. "Do you know what would have happened if someone had recognized you? If the wrong person learned the future palace consort of the Chen family was wandering alone?"

"I wasn't alone," she said quickly, lowering her head even further. "I went with my maid. She was with me the entire time."

Her lie was smooth, practiced — and yet tinged with truth. Her maid had indeed followed her halfway before she'd sent her away. The rest... was between her and the night.

Lord Chen's frown deepened, but before he could speak again, Chen Mei reached for the small bundle tied to her waist.

"I brought things for everyone," she said softly, lifting it with trembling hands. "I didn't go to waste time. I went to buy these."

The Filial Lie

She untied the bundle with careful fingers and began taking out items one by one.

"For Father," she said, holding up a small porcelain jar, "I bought these tonics from the southern apothecary. They strengthen the liver and calm the heart. You've been working too hard, Father. Please... take one each morning with warm water."

Lord Chen's stern expression faltered for a moment. The servants murmured quietly. The label on the jar did indeed bear the seal of a rare and expensive physician's shop.

Then she took out a length of silk — shimmering pale blue, embroidered with cloud motifs. "For Mother," she said with a teary smile. "I found this at the festival. I know you love light colors. The vendor said it came from Suzhou."

Madam Chen pressed her trembling hands to her mouth, eyes filling again — this time not with grief, but with emotion. "Oh, my sweet girl..."

"And for Brother," Chen Mei continued, producing a small box wrapped in red paper, "a miniature sword from the armory stall. It's said to be modeled after the generals' blades. I know Brother practices daily. I wanted him to have a keepsake."

Chen Hao blinked, surprised despite himself, and took the box without a word. The blade inside gleamed faintly — nothing grand, but its craftsmanship was fine.

"And..." she hesitated, then pulled out a final item — a small vial wrapped in silk cloth, the faint fragrance of crushed herbs wafting from within.

"This," she said softly, "is for Sister."

Madam Chen looked confused. "For your sister?"

"Yes." Chen Mei lowered her gaze. "It's a medicine... it's said to strengthen a woman's body and aid in conception. I heard it helps those who have trouble bearing children."

Her voice quivered — the lie half-truth, half-prayer. "Sister has been suffering so much. I thought, if she can bear a child, perhaps the Emperor will love her more. I want her to be happy."

The room fell silent.

Even Lord Chen was taken aback.

He looked at his daughter, then at the vial, and for a moment, his fury gave way to astonishment.

His wife's tears fell anew — but now they were tears of pride. "Oh, Mei'er... my sweet child... you still think of your sister even now."

Chen Mei bowed deeply again. "She is my sister. We may quarrel, but she's still family. If she can have a child, perhaps our house will rise again."

Lord Chen exhaled slowly, the fire in his eyes dimming. "You... foolish but filial girl," he muttered. "You could have sent someone instead of risking yourself."

She smiled weakly. "I wanted to choose everything myself."

A Shift in the Storm

For a long time, no one spoke.

Then, slowly, Lord Chen's shoulders eased. "Enough. Go and rest. You've caused enough worry for one day."

"Yes, Father," she whispered, bowing again before rising unsteadily to her feet.

Her brother, who had been silent, finally sighed and looked away. "Just... don't do something so reckless again. If people found out—"

"They won't," she said quickly. "I promise."

Madam Chen reached out and took her daughter's hands, squeezing them tight. "You frightened me so much," she whispered. "But I'm glad you're safe. You have a good heart, Mei'er. Heaven will bless you."

Chen Mei's smile trembled. "I hope so."

As she turned to leave, her father's voice stopped her once more. "You will enter the palace in three months. Until then, you will not step outside these gates again. Do you understand?"

She bowed her head. "Yes, Father."

"Good." His tone softened, just a fraction. "You've grown up. You think of others, not yourself. Rest well. I'll see that your sister receives your gift."

The Daughter Alone

Back in her room, Chen Mei shut the door and leaned against it, her breath shaking.

The silence pressed in on her.

Her heart ached with the weight of all she'd said — the lies, the half-truths, the look of pride in her father's eyes that she didn't deserve.

She untied the empty pouch at her waist — the one that had once held a token from Lian Ruo.

Inside was nothing now but a folded piece of paper — his handwriting, the faint scent of sandalwood clinging to it.

> "No matter the walls they build, I will find a way to reach you."

Her tears fell silently onto the note.

She pressed it to her chest, whispering, "Then hurry... before I become someone I don't recognize."

Outside, her family spoke of her filial devotion, her good heart, her promise to restore the Chen name.

Inside, she sat beneath the flicker of a lantern, holding the secret that could destroy them all.