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Trail of Blood

Written by S. J. Rozan

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S.J. ROZAN

TRAIL OF BLOOD



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1

"I'm back."

I dropped my suitcase, slipped off my shoes, and listened to familiar Chinatown sounds spill in the windows. Horns honked, delivery vans rumbled. Mr. Hu's songbird trilled from the roof next door. I heard a child squeal with laughter and her grandmother scold in Cantonese: *Hold my hand, you bad girl, or that fish truck will squash you flat.*

And speaking of scolding in Cantonese, here came my mother.

"Who are you?" She shuffled from the kitchen and peered at me. "You look like my daughter, Ling Wan-ju, but I haven't seen her in a long time. She went to California. She said she'd be back soon, but she stayed. I'm happy she's having fun."

My mother's sarcasm could cut diamonds.

"Two extra weeks, Ma. And they're *your* cousins." I kissed her papery cheek, which she grudgingly allowed. "Have a good time while I was gone?"

"Your brother's children are very noisy." I have four brothers, but my mother rarely uses their names when she talks to me; I'm supposed to know which one she means. This time I did: Ted, the oldest. She'd stayed at his place in Queens while I was away.

"But you had the downstairs apartment to yourself, right?"

"I was fortunate it was empty. It's so dark, no wonder no one will rent it."

"I think Ted and Ling-an did a nice job on it."

"Too many rooms for one person. With such a big kitchen! Hard to find all the pots and pans."

"Did you cook?"

"Your brother and his wife both work so hard, come home late. They order from restaurants. So expensive! I made *har gow,* and long-life noodles."

"I'll bet the kids liked that."

"And so much lawn, so many useless flowers! I planted melons."

"You did?"

"Your nephew helped."

I could see that scene: my mother in a straw hat, plants dangling from each hand while ten-year-old Barry dug and mulched. Luckily, both Ted's kids adore her. They know her frowning and finger-wagging are scams to hoodwink malicious spirits into thinking her useless, disobedient grandchildren aren't worth stealing.

"Flushing. Pah!" my mother finished. "Too far away."

I sighed. She'd seen right through us. That apartment, far from being "fortunately" empty, had been built for her. My brothers and I think this fourth-floor walk-up we grew up in is getting hard for her to manage. But her refusal to leave Chinatown begins with a refusal to acknowledge she has anywhere to go.

Jet-lagged, I didn't have energy for this argument. "I'm

going to unpack, Ma. Then I'll tell you all about the wedding."

"You could have gotten married yourself, you were there so long. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"I made congee. There may be enough for two."

Detouring into the kitchen, I waved at old Chow Lun, leaning over the street from his usual windowsill. I lifted the lid from a steaming pot and found enough congee for an army. The table held bowls of chopped spring onions, pickles, and dried fish.

My mother's never liked fish in her congee. But I love it.

While I unpacked, I called my office phone. No messages. Not that I'd expected any. Work was slow, and anyway I'd been checking in daily from California. Now, that might sound like I was waiting for a particular call, but of course I wasn't. I especially wasn't waiting for a call from Bill Smith, my former associate, then partner; former close friend, then almost-I-don't-know-what, who'd done a vanishing act months ago after our last case together. The case, involving Bill's nephew Gary, had ended badly. As his partner and close friend, I felt terrible for him and understood why he wanted no part of anyone for a while. But as his partner and close friend, it made me furious to be one of the people he wanted no part of.

To the tune of my mother bullhorning Chinatown gossip across the apartment, I excavated my suitcase. I was down to the T-shirts when my cell phone rang. I grabbed it; the number was unfamiliar. Squashing down a pang of

disappointment, I gave my name in both English and Chinese. Then I yanked the phone from my ear as an off-key tenor bellowed:

"The stars that hang high
Over Shanghai
Bring back the memory
Of a thrill!
I've been looking hiiiiigh, and I've been looking looooow,
Looking for you, Shanghai Lil!"

"*Stop!* Pilarsky, your singing has *not* improved."

"Hey, it wasn't 'Lydia the Tattooed Lady.' I thought you'd be happy. How are you, Chinsky?"

"Oh, I'm fine." I sighed. "How are you? What can I do for you? And what was that?"

"*Footlight Parade*. Busby Berkeley, Cagney, Keeler. One of the greats. And me, I could be worse. I'm still in business. Are you? If yes, it's not what you can do for me, it's I have a job for you."

"Doing what?"

"Do I know? A client wants someone who can, quote, operate discreetly in the Chinese community."

"So why did he call you?"

"Apparently, because I speak Yiddish. And he's a she."

"I don't—"

"I don't either. Come to the Waldorf at four and we'll both find out."

"Today?"

"Of course today."

"Well . . ." Chasing to a meeting with Joel Pilarsky when I'd just fought my way in from JFK wouldn't have been my first choice; but work is work. "Okay."

"Good girl. I'll be lurking behind a potted palm."

I bristled at the "girl," but Joel was on the far side of sixty, and I was in fact younger than two of his three daughters.

As I clicked off, my mother's face floated around the doorjamb. She must have been in the hall, responding to a sudden need to rearrange the linen closet or straighten the family photos. "Who was that? You were talking about work. Was that the white baboon?"

"Bill? No. I haven't heard from him in a while." I busied myself with my suitcase. "That was Joel Pilarsky. You've met him. I helped him last year when he was looking for that Jewish lady who ran off with the Chinese restaurant owner."

"In Flushing, I remember! Nobody in Flushing is busy enough, so they make trouble for themselves."

Well, mentioning that was obviously a mistake. "Anyway, Joel has a job for me. I'm meeting him later."

"Today? He's sloppy. He gives you orders. And he sings. You get a headache when you work with him."

"Only when he sings." She makes a point of not listening when I talk about work, so how does she know this stuff? "And it's good to have work. Keeps me busy."

"Pah. Keep busy so you won't think about who isn't calling you."

"Ma! You don't even like Bill. And I haven't called him lately either."

"If you never call him again, your mother and your brothers will be happy. But for him not to call you? He values himself too highly. Make you go all the way to California."

"I went to California for Jeannie Chu's wedding."

"A month for a wedding?" Her pursed lips told me what she thought of that. Then she waved away the annoying gnat of Bill. "When do you have to go to your job today?"

"Two hours. Plenty of time to shower and change. But first, let's have some congee."

Probably taken in by the charcoal silk pantsuit that was my mother's handiwork, the Waldorf doorman actually smiled at me. In the carpeted, chandeliered lobby, three men conferred over PDAs, no doubt scheduling a very important meeting. A graceful woman rolled a suitcase toward the door. Even the two little boys waiting while their parents checked in wore button-down shirts and were behaving themselves.

In a club chair to my right I spotted Joel, not behind a potted palm but beside one. Silver pots and porcelain cups clustered on the coffee table between him and a neat, plump woman. Joel looked a little chubbier, a little balder than last time I'd seen him, but, with both his yarmulke and his tie askew, his hurried, preoccupied air was the same.

The woman, smiling and saying something, looked slightly younger than he. Allowing for facials, makeup, and the general care we women take of ourselves, that probably meant she was a few years older. She'd smoothed her graying hair into a neat bun. My mother would have

approved of the twill cloth and conservative cut of her dark green suit.

Joel popped up, banging his shin as he came around the table. "Great to see you, Lydia. Lydia Chin, Alice Fairchild."

Alice Fairchild stood and shook my hand. She wasn't much taller than I: five-four, maybe, or five-five. "I'm delighted you're available, Ms. Chin. Joel tells me you're just the woman I need."

"I hope so. And please, it's Lydia."

Joel manhandled a chair over. "Sit. Have some coffee."

"Is there tea?"

"Oh, good!" Alice Fairchild reached for a pot. "I always feel so lonely among coffee drinkers. Lydia, how do you take it?"

"Milk, no sugar, please."

"I have to thank you both for making yourselves available on such short notice." She placed a tiny spoon on the saucer and handed me my tea. "As I was just telling Joel, he was recommended by a contact in Zurich. And of course you, Lydia, were recommended by him."

"Alice is an attorney," Joel said. "From Switzerland."

"Semiretired. I only take cases of particular interest now. My bread and butter was estate planning for fellow American expats. A little boring." She smiled. "But I have a rarefied specialty: recovery of assets for families of Holocaust victims. My office is in Switzerland for that reason: As Willie Sutton said about robbing banks, that's where the money is. Most of it. But from time to time, something turns up somewhere else." From a slim briefcase, she handed us each a set of papers. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to look at these."

On top was a Xerox of an old photograph. A teenage girl, in the knee-length skirt and round-toed pumps of thirties movies, stood with a boy a few years younger. One hand held down a hat threatening to take off in a wind that slanted his tie and stirred her curly hair; the other seemed to hold down the boy himself, who radiated affable impatience. Their conspiratorial smiles as they indulged the photographer reminded me of my brothers and me.

The next page was another Xerox, of a handwritten letter. A typed notation at the top margin said, "Jewish Museum, Holocaust archives. Rosalie Gilder to her mother, Elke Gilder, April 14, 1938."

"This looks like German," I said. "I don't—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Alice Fairchild. "The last page is the translation."

I flipped the pages. From neat typing, I read:

14 April 1938

Dearest Mama,

I write from the deck of the *Conte Biancamano* as we are putting out to sea. A salt wind is blowing and the sun shines with a power I've never seen. Oh, how I miss you, Mama! From this moment I shall write often and tell you everything, exactly as you requested. Paul teases me that my inability to keep silent and my love of setting pen to paper would assure that you'd be flooded with letters, whether you'd requested them or not! And he's right, of course. Though this letter,

and its fellows to come, could remain unwritten, could go to blazes for all I care, if only you were with us!

I couldn't write from the train, Mama. No one aboard could think of anything but how each passing meter brought us closer to the border. What weak conversation there was stopped completely each time the train did. Everyone was terrified that the Gestapo—who came aboard twice—would find something wrong in our papers, and remove us. Such downcast eyes and timid voices! Even mine, Mama, even mine. Choking on my fury—yes, and my fear—I sat, the soul of meekness, showing Paul's papers and mine as commanded, otherwise silent. But all the passengers were the same; even the youngest children sat frozen, clutching their parents' hands.

Until the border! As the whistle blew and the train chugged from the Italian customs station, such cheers erupted! Strangers hugged and champagne bottles appeared by magic. One gentleman jumped from his seat and burst into Italian song. I allowed Paul champagne because I imagined you would have, and took a small glass myself. Briefly we celebrated; then the tumult died down, as all of us, exhausted by worry and weakened by relief, turned to quiet conversations or private thoughts.

Are you well, Mama? I must tell you, as the train pulled out of the Hauptbahnhof I very nearly leapt from it and refused to leave Salzburg without you! But I forced myself to remain. You've made me responsible for Paul's safety and I intend to carry out my charge so you will be proud of me when you arrive. And I hope and pray that will be sooner than we expect. Three months is not fast enough! Please do whatever you must—sell everything, badger the steamship lines, cause a nuisance at travel offices—until you book an earlier passage! Please, Mama, I won't rest until I hear that you and Uncle Horst have cleared the border.

Now, as to Paul and myself, you mustn't worry. People show great kindness when they learn we're traveling alone. The situation on this ship, in any case, is quite extraordinary. Everything is teak, glowing brass, and thick carpets. As we boarded this morning, streamers flew and in the Grand Saloon the ship's orchestra played merry tunes—quite well, I'm sure, but unnervingly discordant in the circumstances. Our stateroom is small but well appointed. Our suitcases, though battered, are intact and holding up nicely. The passengers are looked after by stewards who treat us as guests traveling for business or pleasure, though fully two-thirds are fellow Jews

in our situation—refugees, let us use the word.

The emotions among us are so mixed, Mama, so hard to describe! Relief. Sorrow. Anger. Fear for the future. Horror and disgust, as we hear whispered stories of brutalities perpetrated in Germany. Can it be that Austria, now that we have lost our independence, could stoop as low? None believe it, but Mama, guard your tickets! If you and Uncle Horst cannot find an earlier ship, then train it must be, and please take great care until you depart. Urge Uncle Horst to rein in his temper and live in a way so as not to be noticed—oh, Mama, I'm serious but I laugh to see what I've written! The very words you spoke to me! And here I repeat them to you for Uncle Horst, as though you need them.

I can't wait for the day when we're together again! In Shanghai Paul and I will ready a home, and when you arrive we'll rush to meet you. Perhaps, in years to come, bedtime tales of the Chinese adventures of the Gilder family will be told to wide-eyed children, who will then dream wonderful dreams.

Paul sends his love, and promises to write though I think he will not. But no matter; I will faithfully correspond for us both. Please, please, Mama, come soon!!!

With all my heart,

Your Rosalie

In the silence I became aware of comings and goings in the Waldorf lobby. A bellhop pushed a luggage cart across the carpet. Well-dressed men and women read newspapers and sipped coffee. If you ignored the taxis beyond the doors, this could be the saloon of a great ocean liner itself.

I looked at Alice Fairchild. "I don't understand. These were Jews escaping the Nazis? But—they were going to *Shanghai*?"

"It was their only choice."

"What do you mean? I thought they went to other countries in Europe, or came here."

"Survivors did, after the war. But as the Nazis rose in the thirties, countries all over the world closed their doors. Everyone knew what was happening, but no government was willing to deal with a flood of desperate refugees."

"Even the U.S.?"

"The U.S. had small quotas by country and looked at the Jews as Germans, Austrians, Poles, wherever they were from. All the normal paperwork was required."

"This is a surprise?" Joel asked me. "There were Chinese quotas, too, you know."

"I know that. But I thought—"

"It was just you? Wrong."

I sipped tea to hide my annoyance that Joel had caught me out being ignorant, and in front of the client, too. "Well, but Shanghai? It seems so . . . unlikely."

"I'm sure it did to them, too," Alice said. "But visas were relatively easy to get, and often passengers off ships weren't asked for papers in any case. Anyone who could get there could stay. It was the only place."

"How many refugees went?"

"Twenty thousand."

"Twenty *thousand*?" Where had I been during world history class?

"The story's not well known." Alice read my mind. "It's been eclipsed by the war, the concentration camps. They began arriving in numbers in 1937. By 1942, fighting in Europe and the Pacific had closed the routes."

"But 1937—that's when Japan invaded China." I hadn't slept through world history completely, after all. "The Japanese let them in?"

"Shanghai's open port was what made it wealthy. That early, Japan wasn't planning on war with the West and saw no reason to change anything."

Alice looked at Joel, then at me. "Rosalie Gilder was eighteen, her brother Paul fourteen, when they fled Salzburg by train for Trieste, to board the *Conte Biancamano.* Their mother, Elke, a widow, and her brother, Horst Peretz, had tickets to Shanghai three months later by the overland route—Trans-Siberian Railway to a ship at Dairen."

I asked, "Why didn't they all go together?"

"Germany had annexed Austria a month before. Extermination wasn't yet the Nazis' plan for the Jews; they meant to force them out. They'd arrest Jewish men, and only let them go once their families produced travel documents. That happened to Horst. Elke was able to get train tickets, so he was released, but three months was a frighteningly long time to wait. She moved heaven and earth to get berths on a ship leaving sooner, and managed two. She sent her children. She hoped she and Horst could follow on another ship."

"Did they?"

"No."

"So they went by train?"

"They never got out."

My gaze fell to the photo again, sister and brother smiling on a windy day. I looked at Joel. His face was carefully blank. It occurred to me he must have grown up hearing countless tragic variations on this same story.

"In the letter you see a reference to their suitcases," Alice resumed briskly. "Jews who left weren't allowed to take much money, or anything valuable. Paul and Rosalie packed only clothing and a few household items—a pair of pewter candlesticks, for example."

"What happened to things people left behind?"

"The Nazis seized them. Most can't be traced. My work involves trying to recover the ones that can—paintings, antiques. In this case, though, that's not what I'm after. As Rosalie predicted, Paul turned out to be not much of a correspondent. But he was good with his hands. He'd built hidden compartments into the suitcases, where they concealed their mother's jewelry."

Joel raised his eyebrows. "That's why she says the suitcases are intact."

"Yes. She was telling her mother they'd held on to the jewelry. Earning a living in Shanghai was hard for the refugees, and these were teenagers. The jewelry was their safety net."

"What happened to them? Rosalie and Paul?"

"That's actually unclear. After the end of the war they can't be traced. You can imagine what chaos those times

were. Record-keeping wasn't anyone's priority. Now, as I'm sure you know, Shanghai's in the middle of a building boom."

I nodded. That was something I did know.

"A month ago, excavation for a tower in what had been the International Settlement, in a place called Jiangming Street, unearthed a carved box containing five pieces of jewelry. I was able to identify it as Rosalie Gilder's." Reaching into her briefcase again, she handed us photographs of a necklace, two rings, and two bracelets. "I represent the grandchildren of Horst Peretz, Rosalie and Paul's uncle. He'd sent his daughter to live in Switzerland in 1935. She survived the war. My clients are her sons.

"The Chinese government considers anything found on their soil Chinese cultural patrimony, not to be removed from the country without permission. In this case, because the jewelry is so clearly European in origin, I was able to persuade them to negotiate. I went to Shanghai, and things were going smoothly until a few days ago, when the jewelry, and a midlevel official from the Shanghai Ministry of Culture, disappeared."

"The official ran off with the jewelry?"

"Oh, well, I don't know that, do I?" Her eyes sparkled. "But I have reason to think that he—Wong Pan is his name; this is his picture—arrived in New York two days ago." She handed us photos of a round-faced man.

"Is the jewelry very valuable?" I asked.

"By jewelry standards, no. Each piece is probably worth between twenty and forty thousand dollars. But for a

Chinese bureaucrat, you can see the temptation. To my clients, of course, it's priceless.

"So now you can see why I need you both. Under most circumstances, if I were trying to sell antique jewelry in New York, I'd head to the Diamond District." She nodded at Joel. New York's Diamond District on Forty-seventh Street is almost exclusively the province of Orthodox Jews.

"Except maybe if you were Chinese." I began to catch on.

"Exactly. Then I might try Canal Street, even though I understand antiques aren't Canal Street's specialty."

"No, those shops deal mostly in new pieces. Still . . ."

"Yes, exactly. So I'd like you to show these photographs around and see if anything's turned up."

Joel studied the photos. "And if it has?"

"If you find someone who's bought any, let them know I'm in New York and interested in recovering it. Between us, the family's prepared to buy the jewelry back, to save years of headaches. You might stress I'm not the long arm of Chinese law."

"What if we get a lead on the bureaucrat? Wong Pan?"

"If he still has the jewelry, I'll be willing to deal with him. I'm not crazy about someone profiting from a stunt like this, but my charge is the assets. Now"—Alice sat back—"I have to tell you, I have another, more personal reason for my interest in this case. I was born in Shanghai. In those years."

Joel did the gallant thing. "How can that be? Someone as young as you?"

"You're a very sweet liar. My parents were American missionaries. We spent two and a half years in a Japanese internment camp after Pearl Harbor. Of course I was very young—then." She smiled. "Most of my memories are from the camp, not Shanghai itself, and they're not particularly pleasant. Still, when this case came along, it did seem like something I'd want to see through. As if somehow it might, a tiny bit, redeem that experience. I'm not sure that makes any sense."

Joel said, "It does to me."

Personally, I had doubts about experiences being redeemable, but I kept them to myself.

We had more tea and coffee while the conversation turned to fees, expenses, and reports. Alice was Joel's client, so he took the lead, and that was fine with me. I listened, put in my two cents when it was wanted, and tried not to yield to the hypnotic combination of jet lag and the Waldorf.

Finally, retainer checks and receipts having been written and passed around, Alice said, "You'll have to excuse me. That Shanghai flight's a long one, and my poor body's not sure what day it is, let alone what time. And I've scheduled meetings with other clients over the next few days, since I'm in New York. Lydia, you just got back from California, didn't you? You're probably looking forward to the end of this meeting, too." I tried to deny it, but she had my number. "I'll go up to my room and let you two get started. Thank you."

Joel and I stood, shook her hand, and watched her cross the lobby.

"Well, Chinsky," Joel said, "ready to do the bloodhound thing?"

"Sure. Thanks for calling me in."

"Chinsky, as far as Chinese PIs, you're at the top of my list. I mean, it's a short list, but still."

"Gee, thanks." I had taken a few steps when I realized Joel was still staring toward the elevators, chewing his lower lip. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. I feel like something's off."

"Like what?"

"For one thing, she's a shiksa. Her parents were missionaries. It's an odd profession for a shiksa, Holocaust asset recovery."

"Maybe she converted."

He gave me a pitying look. "Trust me on this, bubbaleh."

"Okay. But so? There must be money in it. She probably gets a percentage or something."

"If she finds anything. And she'd be on retainer, in case she doesn't. But it's frustrating. Like she said, most assets can't be traced. When they can, ownership takes years to prove. Half the time, you never do, and you don't get your client's goods back. Everyone I know who does that work thinks of it like a religious calling."

"She does have that air about her."

"Yes. The question is, why?"

"Because her parents were missionaries?"

Joel rolled his eyes. We turned and headed to the door. Casually, Joel asked, "Speaking of work, how's your partner?"

"You're subtle as a ton of bricks, Pilarsky. I haven't seen

him in a while." As though it explained anything, I added, "I've been away."

"Mmm. I heard you guys were having problems."

"Did you? Where?"

"Around. It's true?"

"Why? You want to go into business with one of us?"

"With you, in a minute. We'd be unstoppable. Cute little Chinese chick and a fat Jewish alte kacker, clients would be falling over each other. No, seriously, it's just that you guys work well together. That's not so easy to find."

That showed a surprising sensitivity, coming from Joel, but I didn't want to get into it. "He seems to think I'm better off without him."

"Who asked him?"

"Certainly not me. Listen, is this important? Like, does it have to do with this case?"

Joel smiled and suddenly bellowed,

"You're nothing without me!
Without me you're nothing at all—"

"*No*!" I put my hands to my ears. He stopped, and I asked, "What?"

"*City of Angels*. Coleman and Zippel. Last of the great Broadway musicals, and it's about a private eye, too! You should see it, Chinsky."

"Where's it playing?"

"Nowhere. Closed years ago."

"Then how do I see it?"

"Your problem, kiddo. You need anything before we start?"

"No," I sighed. "I'm good."

"Okay." Joel smiled beatifically. "Go. Have fun."