

RIGHTEOUS FIRE

By John Ling

When the favoured son of the Chang family dies, it is up to his outcast sister to unravel the truth.

Benjamin Chang died suddenly, violently.

It happened when his tire blew out and went flat on the way home. He stopped at the side of the road and got down, braving the growl of passing vehicles, blinking away the grogginess in his eyes.

"Benjy?" His wife Emma lowered her window, yawning as she did. "It's not safe, dear. Come back inside. We'll call for a tow truck."

He knelt and fumbled with the tire. "No, it's alright. I think I can handle —"

And that's when he got sideswiped by a drifting SUV. In the predawn darkness, Emma never saw its number plate or its model. All she saw was poor Benjy being flung by the bone cracking impact, his arms and legs twisting. Emma screamed and screamed .

Benjy looked peaceful in his coffin —his face finely powdered, his hair slicked back, the faintest trace of a smile on his lips —when they closed and sealed the lid for the last time. Dried autumn leaves fell in shades of brown and yellow.

The pastor recited the closing verses, "In my Father's house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."

Myra Chang breathed in the smell of freshly dug soil, the crisp morning breeze chilling her tear-stained cheeks. Digging her nails into her palms, she watched her big brother being lowered into the grave by creaking ropes and pulleys.

Mom sobbed quietly. Dad remained stoic, his face grey. Benjy had been an overachiever, a businessman, a treasured first born son. For them, it was as if they had died along with him.

There was a soft crunch.

The coffin touched bottom.

"Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Emma clutched her face, breaking into a long tormented wail. Myra reached out and caught her just before she collapsed.

"Jesus answered, I am *the way* and *the truth* and *the life*. No one goes to the Father except through me."

Everyone shuffled forward to drop roses, blood red roses, into the grave. It was a bitter farewell.

Mom was still snivelling when they pulled away from the cemetery with Dad at the wheel. In the backseat, Myra stared out at the hilly landscape with tombstones flying by.

"You shouldn't have caught her." Mom blew her nose into a tissue, the golden bracelet on her arm jiggling. "It was embarrassing."

"What?" Myra emerged from her stupor.

"I'm talking about Emma. You shouldn't have caught her."

"But she was falling —"

"You are being silly . She had her brothers to take care of her."

"But I was closest to Emma."

"Didn't we already talk about throwing in the roses together? The three of us together? As a family? But look what happened. You left your Dad and me to do it by ourselves."

"Look, Emma was so distraught and I had to —"

"Damn it!" Mom slammed her hand on the dashboard, cracking one of her pink fingernails. Her mascara was smudged. Despite her recent facelift, she suddenly looked twenty years older. "You have *no respect* for your brother and *no respect* for your parents."

"Respect? *Respect?*" Myra seethed, her throat burning, her jaw clenching. "You are obsessed about saving face. That's all you care about, isn't it?" Myra stopped herself when she noticed Dad's eyes glaring at her through the rear view mirror.

"Myra, that's quite enough." His tone was flat and matter-of-fact. "You need to shut up."

It was an aching memory.

She was ten at the time.

Benjy was sixteen.

And it happened to be report card day.

Myra trembled as Mom scanned her grades. They were mostly B's. The only A she received was for English.

Mom squeezed the edges of the report card until they crumpled. "We work day and night to put you in a private school. And you think you are being fair to us by giving us *this*?"

Mom pitched the report card into her face and slapped her. She fell. Her ears buzzed. Blood trickled down her lips. Terrified, she scooted backwards, the carpet searing her buttocks through her skirt.

"I'm sorry, Mommy, I'm sorry."

Mom grabbed a snakeskin belt from the wardrobe and closed in on her. Myra bumped against the wall, cowering. Her throat contracted. Her heart felt like it would burst. If only she had been smarter, if only -

"Mommy!"

"You're *useless*."

The belt snapped again and again. Myra howled in agony, her arms turning black and blue, so swollen and numb she couldn't feel anything anymore. She curled up into a ball, her eyes growing foggy, her head almost splitting. Oh God, when would this end?

She became faintly aware of Benjy coming into the room, yelling, his voice clashing with Mom's. The blows stopped. They sounded garbled, hollow, distant, like a dream. Everything was a kaleidoscope of blurs.

Myra hated herself. Hated herself so much. She deserved this, didn't she? She needed to get away. Needed to be safe. She crawled, struggled to stand, and lurched towards her room. She barely made it, crashing into her bed, reaching for her favourite plush toy—a cat named Fluffy. She clasped it against her chest before passing out with silent sobs.

"Hey. Wake up. *Hey*."

Myra struggled to crank open her eyes. Her mouth felt parched, terribly parched. It seemed like only a split-second had passed, when it had really been hours. Her skin prickled as if covered by pins and needles. She felt a straw being pressed past her shivering lips. She sucked long and hard, tasting orange juice, taking big swallows.

A face came into focus.

Benjy's smiling face.

Sleek and rugged in all the right places, he reminded her of Cary Grant.

"You're getting too heavy."

"Wha -?" her voice rasped.

"I had to carry you to the bathroom, clean and bandage you, change the bed sheets, and then carry you all the way back. *Poor me*." Benjy

scrunched up his face and faked a pained expression. "You gotta go on a diet, sis. Lose some weight for my sake. *Please?*"

Despite her soreness, she laughed, spilling drops of juice. "I'm not fat."

He winked. "Sure."

"Why...why did you stand up to Mommy?"

"Because you're my sis, that's why."

"But I'm useless."

"No, you're not. I *know* you're not."

She started to cry, feeling almost sorry that he had to protect her. "You're the best big brother." She hugged him. "Best big brother, ever."

Myra stroked Fluffy slowly, thoughtfully.

Outside her window, nearly-bare tree branches shifted and crackled, like bony fingers silhouetted against the dimming sunlight. The skies turned steel-grey. Thunder growled. She leaned her forehead against the glass, her breath hazing it.

Benjy was a straight-A student, an outgoing guy, Mom and Dad's favourite, the one they always introduced to strangers first.

Why can't you be more like your brother? Just look at how many hours of study he puts in. What about you? You're wasting your time with your silly stories and poems and sports. You think they are going to get you anywhere in life? Your father's an engineer. I'm a lawyer. And your brother's going to be an economist. What about you? You're just content to continue dreaming. I'm ashamed to have you as a daughter. If I could, I would disown you. That's right. Disown you.

Myra groaned. Maybe it might have been better if she had died instead of Benjy. Then Mom and Dad wouldn't be so miserable. After all, she was expendable, wasn't she? Benjy wasn't.

Behind her, the door opened, and the voices of family and friends drifted in from downstairs. She turned away from the window.

"I thought I'd find you in here." Emma strained to smile, shutting the door behind her. "It's all pretty overwhelming, huh?"

"Yeah." Myra shrugged, setting Fluffy down on the bed. "Overwhelming is the word."

"Thank you for helping me just now, back during the funeral."

"Don't mention it." Myra gave a thumb up. "It's what every wholesome sister-in-law does, right?"

They stood in lingering silence. Emma reached for the bedpost to support herself. Even in grief, she looked so beautiful—almond eyes, wavy hair, and radiant skin. A striking young widow.

"I'm pregnant," Emma said simply.

Myra's world tilted. "Excuse me?"

"I'm going to have a baby."

"Jesus."

"I was going to tell Benjy. But, you know, I thought —" She bit her lip. "I thought of waiting until his birthday. It was supposed to be yesterday. That's when I was going to tell him." She sank slowly down on the bed, shaking her head. "No one else knows, Myra. This whole thing is my fault. I shouldn't have let him drive back so early in the morning. We had already checked into a motel. But he got some call on his cell and suddenly he said we had to go home right away. *That's when it happened.*"

Myra hurried downstairs.

At the bottom, Dad froze in mid-conversation, his hand flexing around his iced lemon tea. "Where have you been? You're supposed to be down here entertaining the guests."

Myra smirked and glided past. Around her, people stole glances, murmuring in hushed tones. She snatched her coat off the rack and was already out the front door when Dad caught her by the shoulder.

"Myra, don't you turn your back on me. I'm talking to you. Where are you are going?"

"It's about Benjy."

"What about Benjy?"

"You know how we thought he was coming back late from that business trip because he couldn't get a motel room? Well, turns out he did get a room."

"Myra —"

"But there was this phone call."

"Myra —"

"He drove back because of it."

"Myra." Dad's grip tightened. "I don't want you running off right now. Don't you realise how much you've upset your mother?"

Myra gently loosened his hand and pushed it away. "Emma is pregnant."

"Excuse me?"

"You're going to be grandparents. That's right. *Grandparents.*" She unlocked her car and got in, her fingers drumming the steering wheel. Lightning reflected off the hood. She hesitated. "Daddy, tell me something. Would it have made you happy if I had died instead of Benjy?"

He half-chuckled and turned away, sauntering back into the house. The wind grew stronger. Droplets of rain drizzled. And in that moment of moments, Myra felt her heart break. She had her answer. Slamming her door shut, she keyed the ignition, reversing out the driveway.