



A Girl Named
Faithful
Plum

*A True Story of a
Dancer from China
and
How She Achieved
Her Dream*

Richard Bernstein

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Alfred A. Knopf  New York

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This is a work of nonfiction, though some names have been changed—specifically those of Teacher Zhu, Comrade Tsang, and a few minor characters—and conversations have been imagined. Also, events that actually took place over a two-year period have been compressed into the single year covered by this book. But everything else, starting with Zhongmei’s departure from her hometown on that fateful day in 1978, is described as it actually happened.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bernstein, Richard.

A girl named Faithful Plum : the true story of a dancer from China and how she achieved her dream
/ by Richard Bernstein.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-375-98434-1

1. Li, Zhongmei, 1966— 2. Dancers—China—Biography. 3. Dancers—United States—
Biography. I. Title.

GV1785.L485B47 2011

792.802’8092—dc22

[B]

2010048722

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v3.1

*To Elias,
a.k.a. Tiandao, a.k.a. Dao Dao*

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Glossary of Chinese Places, Terms, and Names

Note: When Chinese is transcribed into English, the letter *x* is pronounced as though it were *sh*, so *xiao-jie*, which means “younger sister,” is pronounced *she-ow-jee-eh*. The letters *zh* are pronounced like *j*, and *q* sounds like *ch*. So Zhongmei is pronounced *joong-may* and Zhongqin, her older sister, is *joong-chin*.

Baoquanling (pronounced *bow-chyuan-ling*) / Precious Water from the Mountain Peaks—Zhongmei’s hometown.

Beijing—China’s capital city.

Beijing Dance Academy—China’s premier dance-training institute.

bing-gwer—an icicle.

***bu-tsuo* (pronounced *boo-tswaw*)**—not bad, pretty good.

Chairman Mao / Mao Zedong—the leader of China’s Communist revolution and the all-powerful head of the government from 1949 until his death in 1976.

Communist Party—the organization led by Chairman Mao that took power in China in 1949 after a long and bloody civil war.

Cultural Revolution—a social movement that led to ten years of turmoil in China, from 1966 to 1976, when the leaders fought among themselves and many schools, including high schools and colleges, were closed.

***da-ge* (pronounced *dah-guh*)**—older brother.

da-jie—older sister.

ding zi bu—basic (first) position in ballet.

er-jie—second sister.

er zi bu—second position in ballet.

fēn, yuán—terms for Chinese money. One yuan is worth about fifteen American cents; there are 100 fen per yuan, so seven fen is worth about one American penny.

flying apsara—a Buddhist celestial maiden.

Gang of Four—a group of officials led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who wielded great power during the Cultural Revolution but were arrested and imprisoned after Mao's death.

guanxi (pronounced gwan-she)—connections with powerful or influential people.

Hegang (pronounced huh-gong)—a town near Baoquanling and the first stop on Zhongmei's journey to Beijing.

Heilongjiang / Black Dragon River—Zhongmei's home province in North China.

Heilong River—the broad, turbulent river that divides Heilongjiang from Russia, which was part of the Soviet Union in 1978 and 1979; also known as the Amur River.

Jiang Qing (pronounced jee-ang ching)—Chairman Mao's wife, imprisoned after his death and now deceased.

kang (pronounced kong)—a heated brick sleeping platform used in houses in North China.

pi-gu (pronounced pee-goo)—slang for one's behind, rear end.

The Red Detachment of Women and The White-Haired Girl—ballets favored by Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and widely performed in China in the 1960s and '70s.

Red Guards—bands of students who roamed China during the Cultural Revolution and attacked people they accused of opposing Chairman Mao and his policies.

wu zi bu—fifth position in ballet.

xiao-di (pronounced she-ow-dee)—younger brother.

xiao-jie (pronounced she-ow-jee-eh)—younger sister.

xiao-mei (pronounced she-ow-may)—little miss.

The Li Family

A Note on Chinese Names

In China, last names come first. That's why the main character of this book is referred to as Li Zhongmei. Li is her family, or "last," name; Zhongmei is her given, or "first," name. Chinese last names almost always consist of a single Chinese character and a single syllable—some of the most common being Li, Chen, Wong, and Liu. Other last names in this book are Jia, Tsang, Zhou, Peng, and Zhu. Given names are typically two characters and two syllables, as in Zhongmei, but they can also be single characters. Zhongmei's younger brother, Li Feng, is a case of the single-syllable given name.

Chinese children customarily have the same last names as their fathers. When women get married, they rarely change their own last name to match that of their husband. This can be seen in the names of Zhongmei's parents. Her father is Li Zhengping, her mother Gao Xiuying.

Li Zhongmei (pronounced *lee joong-may*)—Zhongmei means "Faithful Plum."

Li Zhengping—Zhongmei's father.

Gao Xiuying (pronounced *gow she-oh-ying*)—Zhongmei's mother.

Li Zhongqin (pronounced *lee joong-chin*) / *Da-jie*—Zhongmei's older sister.

Li Zhongling / *Er-jie*—Zhongmei's second sister.

Li Guoqiang (pronounced *lee gwaw-chee-ong*) / *Da-ge*—Zhongmei's older brother.

Li Feng / *Xiao-di*—Zhongmei's younger brother.

Lao Lao—Zhongmei's grandmother.

Lao Ye—Zhongmei's grandfather, who died before the events in the book took place.

Other Characters

Chen Aiyi (pronounced *chen I-ye*)—Huping's mother, who takes Zhongmei in when she first arrives in Beijing.

Da-ma—Policeman Li's wife.

Huping—the young man who accompanies Zhongmei on her first train trip to Beijing.

Jia Zuoguang (pronounced *jee-ah dzwaw-gong*)—vice director of the Beijing Dance Academy.

Jinhua—a fellow student who torments Zhongmei.

Li Guang—the son of Da-ma and Policeman Li, works in a photography studio.

Li Zhongshan / Policeman Li—Da-ma’s husband and the friend of Zhongmei’s father, whose home becomes her home in Beijing.

Liu Lingzhang—a dance instructor.

Old Zhou (pronounced *joe*)—the night watchman at the Beijing Dance Academy.

Peng Guimin / Teacher Peng—second-year teacher who mentors Zhongmei.

Tsang Tungzhi / Comrade Tsang / Old Maid Tsang (pronounced *dzong*)—administrator of the Beijing Dance Academy.

Wang Tianyuan—the girl Zhongmei meets on line outside the Dance Academy during the auditions.

Xiaolan (pronounced *she-ow-lon*)—Zhongmei’s best friend. Xiaolan means “Little Orchid.”

Zhu Huaimin (pronounced *joo hwai-min*) / **Teacher Zhu**—the teacher of the fundamentals of ballet.



A Note to the Reader

Sometimes the best stories are the ones that are right in front of your nose. For most of my career as a newspaper reporter and writer of books, I've had to travel far, sometimes literally halfway around the world, to find my material. But I didn't have to go anyplace to learn the amazing story of Li Zhongmei. It came to me, and it stayed right in front of my nose, even though for a long time I didn't do anything with it.

I met Zhongmei almost twenty years ago, before many of the readers of this book were born. She was then, and she still is, a sweet and gentle person. But over the years I've known her, she's told me her not so sweet and gentle story, of an ardent girl from a very faraway place whose dream of becoming a dancer turned into the kind of nightmare that, had she not been very brave, would have destroyed her.

I always thought it was a remarkable tale full of amazing incidents and, in the end, a sweet and happy one too. Still, for years I was busy with my job, writing articles for the *New York Times*, where I was a foreign correspondent, and, from time to time, writing books aimed at adult readers. Until, finally, my sister, Judy, told me one day, "I think young readers, kids around Zhongmei's age when she first went to the Beijing Dance Academy, would find her story fascinating. Why don't you do a book on her?"

And so I did. The result is in your hands. I hope you like it. Also, I hope it will inspire you never to give up in the face of adversity and unfairness, but to look deep within yourself, as Zhongmei did, and find the strength, the discipline, and the determination to overcome.



Prologue

Dear Big Sister, wrote Li Zhongmei from Beijing, China's capital.

I miss you. I miss everybody. I even miss Teacher Wong, who was kind of mean sometimes in fourth grade. Sometimes I wish I had never come to Beijing. I feel so far away from home. I don't know why Teacher Zhu hates me so much. What did I ever do to her? She still won't even let me take ballet class, and if I don't take ballet class, how can anyone expect me to pass the exams at the end of the year? The other girls all keep teasing me for being a country bumpkin. And it's true. I am a country bumpkin. When I got here, I didn't even know what getting on television meant. Remember how that made Teacher Zhu mad as a hornet? Well, I told you about that already, didn't I? But there's one thing I didn't tell you.

There's a person here that we call Old Maid Tsang. She would kill me if she knew I called her that. She did something really terrible, so bad I'm afraid I'll start crying if I tell you in this letter. It's not that I'm ashamed of crying. I cry all the time here, after lights are out and all the other girls are asleep. But I'm afraid of getting the paper all wet. Anyway, I'll tell you about that on my next trip home.

Don't tell Ma and Ba that I'm having a hard time here. I don't want them to worry. Don't tell Lao Lao either. It would make her sad. But don't worry. Do you remember the plan we made when we saw each other for New Year's? I'm sure you do. Well, it's going pretty well. Old Zhou pulls on the string outside my window every morning at four o'clock, the one that's tied to my wrist, so I always wake up on time. It makes me pretty tired. The other girls get two hours more sleep than I do. But I'm strong, and I have to do it. I'll do anything not to get thrown out of here.

I'll see you at home this summer. I'll have a lot more to tell you, especially about Old Maid (I mean Comrade) Tsang. Please make my favorite noodles in chicken soup, if there's any chicken. If not, I'll be happy to have just plain noodles in soup without chicken, but I'm hoping for chicken too. Greedy me.

Your little sister



1

Leaving Home

One sunny morning in the spring of 1978 in the remote, very northernmost part of China, a slight eleven-year-old girl named Li Zhongmei got on a bus for the first leg of a journey to Beijing, China's capital. Zhongmei had gotten up that morning as she always did, to the sound of roosters crowing and hens clucking in nearby yards. She was so excited, hopeful, and nervous that she could barely eat the breakfast of rice porridge and corn fritters that her older sister Zhongqin made for her, because this was indeed a very big event in the life of a young girl who had never been more than a few hours from her hometown. It was even a noteworthy event for the town itself, a place called Baoquanling, most of whose residents had never been to Beijing and never expected to go.

When Zhongmei got to the bus station, just a patch of open ground alongside the town's main street, she found that most of the people she knew were there to see her off—her classmates from the fourth grade in elementary school, her neighbors, and a few of her teachers. Her two older sisters, her older brother, and her younger one had accompanied her to the bus station as well, though her mother and father couldn't be there because, like all the adults in this region of China, they had to put in a full day of work, whether their daughters were heading off to Beijing or not. In all, the trip would take three days and two nights on two buses and two trains. But Zhongmei wouldn't be alone. On the first part of the journey to Jiamusi, which was two buses and four hours away, she was going to be accompanied by Zhongqin, who was not only the older of her sisters but was also her best friend.

"We're going to miss you," one of her classmates called out as Zhongmei and Zhongqin turned to get on the bus.

"I'll miss you too," Zhongmei replied.

"Do your best," one of her teachers said, raising a clenched fist in the air, looking a bit like a figure in one of the posters that were up all over China in those days, urging people to fight for the revolution. "Try hard. Be strong."

"I will," said Zhongmei.

Zhongmei shook hands all around, gave her younger brother a pat on the head, hugged her second sister, and smiled at her older brother, who gave her

a cheerful thumbs-up. Standing on the first step of the bus entrance, she took one last look around the place where she had spent her whole life. Baoquanling was about as remote as remote gets in China, pressed against the border with Russian Siberia in China's Heilongjiang Province, blazing hot in summer, freezing in winter, battered by strong winds in the spring and fall. The air on this early morning was cool and fresh. The sky was a pale blue stained with yellow dust and streaked with high, thin clouds. A Chinese flag, five white stars on a field of red, hung limply from a nearby flagpole. Through a gap in the buildings that lined Baoquanling's main street, Zhongmei could see a row of men and women, pitchforks and rakes slung over their shoulders like rifles, marching out to the wheat and vegetable fields of the Baoquanling State Farm.

Zhongmei and Zhongqin pushed their way into the bus, Zhongmei carrying the small cloth suitcase that Zhongqin had bought for the occasion at the local department store—none of the Li children had really been anywhere before, so they didn't have any travel accessories. There was a good deal of pushing and shoving as passengers scrambled to find seats, or risk having to stand in the aisle all the way to Hegang. Zhongqin was lucky to get a spot in the very first row just behind the driver. She relieved Zhongmei of the suitcase and put it on her lap. Zhongmei, a bit less lucky, sat on the cushioned engine cover that occupied the front part of the aisle, which warmed up from the heat of the engine and vibrated the whole way to Hegang.

Zhongmei watched as the bus driver revved up the engine and put it noisily into gear. She turned to wave to her friends and family, but the bus kicked up such a thick cloud of dust and smoke as it roared into motion that nobody was visible. Zhongmei felt a wave of disappointment at that, but then she figured it didn't really matter. For weeks everybody had been telling her that she was bound to fail in Beijing and would be back in Baoquanling pretty soon, after which everything else would go back to the way it had been before—except that her hard-pressed family would have to pay back the money they borrowed for one expensive train ticket. This was not what Zhongmei hoped for, and she was determined not to fail. And yet so many people seemed to think that she was making this big trip for nothing that she had begun to wonder if, maybe, they were right.

The flat, straight road leading out of Baoquanling was lined with gray birch trees whose trunks were painted white so they could be easily seen at night. It teemed with bicycles, oxcarts, and three-wheeled farm trucks filled with trussed pigs, slatted chicken crates, bricks, cinder blocks, mounds of cabbages or turnips or eggplants or straw, or mesh bags filled with scallions or spring pea shoots or bulging with garlic heads. Blackbirds perched on the electricity wires strung across the endless rank of telephone poles parallel to the road.

The bus rumbled and bounced on the rutted track. Trucks, crowded with farm workers whose legs dangled over the edges of their flat wooden beds, passed from the other direction. They were being taken to Baoquanling's more distant fields, and Zhongmei strained to see if her mother was among them,

since she was a fieldworker herself who often traveled that way, but she caught no glimpse of her. Her bones beat to the vibration of the engine. Her bottom was warm.

In the distance on the left side of the bus was a range of purple hills where, in the spring and summer, members of Zhongmei's family searched for medicinal herbs and mushrooms. These were the peaks in the name of Zhongmei's hometown, whose three Chinese characters, *Bao Quan Ling*, mean "Precious Water from the Mountain Peaks," and Zhongmei remembered her excursions there with her two sisters. As the youngest, Zhongmei was only allowed to go to the crest of the first hill, where the sisters gathered pine nuts and mushrooms. Wolves lived beyond that spot and over the next hills, and often at night the Li family could hear their distant howling. Sometimes one of Zhongmei's older cousins went deep into the mountains to hunt for wild turkey and pheasant, and when he was successful, there was meat for dinner, a rare event for the people of Baoquanling.

Once Zhongmei's younger brother, Li Feng, got sick, and her second sister, Zhongling, took it upon herself to go into the mountains to gather a special grass that could be brewed into a medicinal tea. Zhongling climbed through the woods and over the first hill, where the sisters usually stopped for their mushrooms and nuts. She walked over the second hill and into a valley where, as she gathered the grass, she noticed two puppies in a nest of leaves and twigs under a big tree. Or at least she thought they were puppies. They were cute and playful. Happily Zhongling put them into her sack and brought them home, shepherding them under a table in the kitchen and feeding them some scraps.

That night, the howling of the wolves wasn't as far away as it usually was. It was alarmingly close. There was a scraping noise just outside the house, canine nails sliding down the brick walls. Suddenly the gray head of a wolf, its fangs showing, appeared in a window, just like Zhongmei imagined in the story of the three pigs, which she'd read at school. It seemed to be looking inside the house, trying to find what everybody now knew were wolf pups, not dog pups. Zhongmei remembered not sleeping much that night as she huddled against her big sisters, listening to the wolves as they prowled outside, sniffing at the window, scratching the walls, howling at the moon just outside the gate.

"Don't be scared," Zhongqin said to Zhongmei and to Li Feng, who was equally terrified. "It's a strong brick house."

Zhongmei finally fell asleep, and when she woke up at dawn, the wolves had left. A car belonging to the state farm was called. Zhongling put the two adorable wolf pups in her sack, scurried through the yard, ran out the gate, and jumped into the car, looking out for the wolves she feared might still be roaming the alley outside the house. Carrying the sack over her shoulder, she climbed over the first hill and, not daring to go any farther, released the two pups, and then watched as they scampered over the hill toward the deep forest. That night, Zhongmei remembered, now smiling at the thought, the

howling of the wolves was reassuringly far away, though it was still a little scary.

On the right, Zhongmei caught glimpses of the sun glinting on the Heilong River, which formed the border between China and Russia. Between the hills and the river were the vast flat farm fields of the state farm, the cement factory, brick kiln, elementary school, and low-slung residential areas that made up the only world Zhongmei had ever known.

Zhongmei had never been so full of nervous anticipation as she was now, facing both thrilling possibilities and scary unknowns. She had never been on a train before, or, for that matter, even seen one close up, and now here she was, soon to be on one that would take her all the way to China's fabled capital, which, to a country girl like her, seemed unimaginably glamorous. Beijing was where China's most famous people lived. It was the home of the country's greatest palaces and monuments, not to mention gigantic Tiananmen Square, which Zhongmei had seen in countless pictures in the newspaper. Movie stars lived in Beijing and so did China's leaders, including of course Chairman Mao, the founder of the People's Republic of China, whose picture was everywhere, though he had died two years before, and whose most famous pronouncements were memorized by every Chinese schoolchild. It was big and important, but it was also a place where Zhongmei didn't know a single person, which was not comforting for an eleven-year-old girl who had never been alone. But even in her state of excitement, Zhongmei could not have known that everything in her life was going to change from this moment of departure. If she had any idea just how hard these changes were going to be, she might never have gotten on that bus to Hegang in the first place.



2

An Impossible Dream

A few weeks before, Zhongmei had been sitting at home early in the evening copying Chinese characters into her school notebook when Zhongqin, who was nine years older than Zhongmei and the person who most took care of her, casually mentioned seeing an interesting notice in the *People's Daily* newspaper, which she'd read at work.

"It said that the Beijing Dance Academy is going to have open auditions," Zhongqin said. She was standing in front of a large pot in which she was boiling dumplings for dinner.

Zhongmei immediately perked up. She loved to dance. She danced at her elementary school's performances. She went to ballet classes in the Workers and Peasants Cultural Center, given by a woman who had been sent to Baoquanling from one of China's big cities. She danced in the lane outside her house, just for fun, humming to give herself some musical accompaniment.

"Open auditions? What's that?" she asked.

"The school was closed during the Cultural Revolution," Zhongqin said. The Cultural Revolution was ten terrible, violent years in China from 1966 to 1976 when the country's top leaders struggled against each other for power and the whole of society was turned upside down. Bands of eager teenagers called Red Guards roamed the country ganging up on anybody, including their teachers and even their parents, if they felt they didn't give their total, loving support to Chairman Mao. They destroyed old things like antiques, temples, and priceless works of art because they felt that there should be nothing old in the brand-new China being built under Chairman Mao's brilliant supervision. The universities and schools like the Beijing Dance Academy, and even the elementary and high schools, closed for three years.

"Even after it opened again a couple of years ago, the students were chosen directly by the school," Zhongqin said. "But now anybody who wants to go can audition."

Zhongqin began to ladle dumplings into blue earthenware bowls and passed them to her four brothers and sisters. Zhongmei put down her notebook. She plucked a pair of chopsticks out of the clay vase on the counter where they were kept, and picked up a dumpling.

“Anybody can go?” she asked, holding the dumpling in midair and looking at it as though it were a rare specimen of butterfly. She dipped it in some soy sauce spiced with chopped chili peppers and devoured it.

“It’s only for eleven-year-old boys and girls,” Zhongqin informed her.

“Well, I’m eleven years old!” Zhongmei shouted. “I want to go!”

“She wants to go,” Zhongqin said to the other children dismissively.

“Well, why not?” Zhongmei said.

Zhongqin thought for a moment.

“Why not? The paper says that something like sixty thousand girls are going to go to the auditions all over the country, in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Chengdu”—China’s biggest cities. “And out of those sixty thousand girls they’re going to select a grand total of twelve. Twelve! Maybe two or three from each audition. So how good do you think your chances will be?”

“Well, somebody’s going to get it,” Zhongmei said. “My chances are the same as everybody else’s.”

“No, they’re not,” Zhongqin replied. “You’re a little nobody from a nothing little town like Baoquanling. You really think you’re going to be one of those twelve girls?”

“If everybody thought that way, nobody would go,” Zhongmei said.

“Yes, they would,” Zhongqin replied, “because they live in big cities and don’t have to travel for days to get to the audition, and they attend famous ballet schools, where they know the people who can help them get into a place like the Beijing Dance Academy. People like us from so far away don’t know anybody. And anyway, you have school. You’d miss two weeks.”

“Well,” Zhongmei hesitated, not knowing what to say about school, where she had always been a dutiful student. “But I go to ballet school too,” she continued, avoiding the issue by changing the subject. “And I’m the best in my class.”

“The best according to you,” Zhongmei’s older brother, whose name was Guoqiang, put in.

“No, not according to me,” Zhongmei replied, “according to everybody who knows anything, which you don’t.”

“Even if it’s true, which it probably isn’t, being the best in Baoquanling doesn’t make you good enough to go to the best dance school in all of China,” Guoqiang said.

It was true that Zhongmei was the best dancer in her ballet class, and she had other qualifications besides. For a couple of years she’d been a well-known performer in Baoquanling. She had been chosen at her school to be the girl singer at a noontime performance that was held every day to entertain the town’s farmers when they broke for lunch, these farmers working in the far-flung wheat fields, pigpens, and chicken coops that surrounded the town. For a while Zhongmei had gone every day to the microphone in the town hall, a two-story brick-and-mortar edifice adorned by orange stucco pillars and a portrait of Mao. There, in her flutey voice, she sang a song that was carried on

loudspeakers set up in every corner of the district—often, but not always, songs in praise, you guessed it, of Chairman Mao. Zhongmei didn't really think all that much about Chairman Mao, though she certainly heard people speaking of him with reverence as China's great helmsman, the man who had led the country's Communist revolution. His picture hung on the wall behind her teacher's desk in her classroom at school. An identical picture was on a wall at home, and it scared her because the chairman's eyes seemed to follow her wherever she went. She sang the words because they were the words to the song:

*He was our good chairman,
He saved our country and our people,
He's our own red sun.*

After a while, Zhongmei recorded some songs, accompanying herself on the *yang-qin*, which is a kind of Chinese xylophone. Some of her classmates played the *er-hu*, a two-stringed Chinese violin with a horsehair bow and a sound box made of snakeskin, in the background. From then on, the farmers were treated to Zhongmei's recordings, and she didn't have to go to the microphone herself every day. She was famous. She used to be stopped by total strangers on the street wanting to say hello to her. Once her ballet teacher took her to Jiamusi to study for a few days with a song and dance troupe there. It was the only other time in her life that Zhongmei was away from home.

Like good Chinese girls, Zhongmei was properly modest and well behaved, but she was also ambitious. She was convinced that she was meant to do something special in her life, something more thrilling than being a Baoquanling farm girl. Not that there was anything wrong with farm girls. So far that's what she had been, and that's what her two sisters were also. But Zhongmei had always had the idea that she was destined for something else, and the little bit of fame she enjoyed in Baoquanling encouraged her in this thought. The truth is that she was rather special, pretty in her wiry, tomboyish way and naturally graceful. She was tall for her age and very slender, with long, skinny limbs, her hair, tied up in the pigtails that all girls her age wore in those days, swinging behind her shoulders.

At dinner that night she wore her usual blue cotton pants, made by her mother, a simple white schoolgirl's blouse also homemade, and, around her neck, the knotted red scarf of the Young Pioneers, a sort of Chinese Boy and Girl Scouts that all children Zhongmei's age belonged to. She had a delicate oval face, full lips, and a clear complexion, though her skin, darkened by the sun and dried by the stinging winds of her hometown, marked her as a girl from the countryside. She was a sweet girl, polite, well liked by her friends and teachers, but she wasn't meek or shy. She could run faster than most boys her age. Her dark eyes always glinted with something untamed and fiery, but never more so than on that night when Zhongqin told her about the Beijing Dance Academy auditions.