

PROLOGUE

THE YOUNG POET

Tong's arduous journey through life prepared him to help others. He discovered that kindness outlasts suffering, and finding skillful ways through challenges mattered more than any indignity.

Before he left China, Tong was the village accountant for the local farmers and shopkeepers. He worked from his modest home in a combination office and library. The austere pieces of furniture within his private workspace consisted of a desk, sturdy comfortable chair, and a bench with seat cushions; two lamps lit the room when he worked late. Pens, brushes, and ink blocks sat neatly organized atop his desk; a hand-woven rug covered the floor. The desk was positioned at a diagonal opposite the doorway to keep the *feng shui*, harmonious energy, flowing freely at all times.

Two office walls were covered with shelves reaching from floor to ceiling; one stacked with Tong's accounting books, the other with precious scrolls and volumes of Chinese philosophy, poetry, art, and history. In the middle of the third wall hung a watercolor landscape that resembled the park

where Tong and Mei-li first met. Tong's bench was placed so he could sit and gaze at the painting, remembering the sunshine and Mei-li feeding the birds.

The room felt warm and inviting from the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows overlooking Mei-li's flower and vegetable garden. When it rained, bamboo screens were lowered; sunny days they were rolled up and tied with a cord. Mei-li's caged birds hung from tree branches; their melodious songs both soothed and entertained Tong while he worked.

The villagers viewed Tong as a well-educated man, tutored by his grandfather, a respected scholar in his own right, having earned the reputation of being a gifted poet. Grandfather passed on his talent with words to his ten-year-old grandson, teaching him to see using more than his eyes.

"You're a fine student, Tong. You have learned history and mathematics, but now I think you're ready to discover there is more to knowledge than just the basic fundamentals," Grandfather announced one wet afternoon.

"What else is there to learn, Grandfather?"

"How to write poetry."

"Poetry? Why is that important?" Tong tilted his head and frowned.

"Anyone can memorize facts and theories, but writing poetry is an art that teaches you lessons with the words you write."

"I don't understand."

"An artist expresses himself with brush strokes on paper and the colors he mixes. It's the same with a poet who chooses what words to use to paint a verbal picture."

"Do you think I can learn to do that, Grandfather? Will you teach me how?"

Grandfather nodded and patted Tong's shoulder. "Of course. Let's go for a walk in the rain and I will help you."

Tong and Grandfather put on their rain coats and boots and made their way through puddles and mud as they walked down the village road. The moist air smelled of damp

earth and growing plants, chimney smoke, rotting garbage, and cooking food. When they came upon the village inn, Tong saw a dog out back rummaging through a pile of discarded table scraps in search of a bone. The rain stopped falling and bright sunlight streamed down upon the earth; steam rose from the tall grass. A huge arched rainbow stretched across the countryside and disappeared beyond a range of craggy mountains.

"What do you see, Tong? Look around and tell me," Grandfather said.

"I see muddy footprints, a hungry dog, and a rainbow."

"Good. Now close your eyes and tell me what you see."

"That's silly, Grandfather. How can I see with my eyes closed?"

"Just do as I say."

Tong sighed. "All right."

With his eyes squeezed tight he heard the sound of splashing mud as townspeople walked down the lane, and he almost imagined he could see their sloshing feet leave impressions in the wet ground. The dog found his bone, and Tong heard him chewing it as well as the low growl emitting from his throat when someone came too close. In his mind he could see the dog clearly. The scent of the warm, moist earth filled his nostrils and made him feel happy, so happy that he saw the rainbow.

"I can see, Grandfather. My eyes are closed, but I see the dog and the rainbow and the mud. I see everything."

"That's good, very good." Grandfather nodded and was pleased with his clever grandson. "Before you open your eyes, memorize what you see so you can write about it."

Back home, Grandfather handed Tong a sheet of rice paper. "I want you to compose a short poem about our walk today and your observations. Two lines only."

This assignment presented a challenge. Tong had to think long and hard about what to write. Two sentences didn't give him much to work with. Although this sounded like a simple assignment, in reality it was quite difficult. He

took his time and when he was ready, he picked up his brush, moistened it, and ran the bristles across the ink block. The Chinese symbols he wrote were in Kaiti simplified form:

Grandfather, you taught me to see with closed eyes.
I saw a rainbow and tall grass reaching for the sun.

Grandfather praised him. "Splendid, Tong. Well done."

As his reputation as a writer of verse grew, the villagers sought Tong's talents to compose clever and insightful poems to commemorate such important events as the birth of a son, to announce an engagement, or to celebrate the coming of the New Year.

"Tong's poems are as brilliant as the sunrise," declared one proud villager, a new grandfather who had been given a poem from his son-in-law to commemorate the birth of his first grandson.

"He can capture your soul on paper," added another who had just married a plain woman with an impressive dowry.

"I've heard it said he can foretell the future with his proverbs," proclaimed yet another who had recently opened an herb shop.

Over the years, Mei-li received from her adoring husband many beautiful love poems she kept preserved inside a skillfully-crafted teakwood box, and cherished them as priceless gems. One day while planting flower bulbs in her garden, she confided to her mother, who was known on occasion to have a tongue as sharp as a kitchen knife and at one time or another had been critical of everyone: "Tong is an easy husband to please. He has a peaceful and modest soul."

For once her mother didn't criticize but nodded her head in agreement. "You are most fortunate to have married such a kind and gentle man. To do so is highly unusual. You are lucky we changed our minds and broke your engagement to that ole dumb mule!"

Mei-li knew it was best to pretend her parents had been the ones to alter the decision about her original betrothal.

"Yes, thank you, Mother, for finding a better husband for me. I appreciate my good fortune." She added, "Tong and I enjoy walking together in our garden and often read to each other from his poetry books."

"Humph! Your father is nothing like him. All he reads is the price of the bottles of rice wine he keeps stowed away in the corner of the cellar, which he thinks I don't know about. Too often he goes to town to drink and gamble with his friends and squanders what little money we have, then he moans and complains he has such bad luck." Mei-li's mother scowled and lowered her voice so that jealous spirits wouldn't hear when she whispered, "You are blessed to have a husband who takes no pleasure in such foolish things."

Mei-li's fingers smoothed the soil around an amaryllis bulb and she replied with inward satisfaction, "Indeed."

1

OCTOBER 3, 1994

Michael Hamilton swiveled around in his plush black leather executive chair. "What? Come on, Eddie, cut the crap. That's not funny."

"I'm serious, this is no joke," Eddie said, as he dropped an envelope on Michael's desk and then casually walked to the window. He took a deliberate stance, feet planted firmly and back turned. His hands deep in his pockets, he stared up at the sky. "It looks like rain." The words sounded hollow. He jangled the loose change with his fingers, maintaining his stiff posture to avoid making eye contact. "Well, I guess there's not much else to say . . . ah . . . except that I'm sorry it came to this."

"Sorry are you?" Michael bolted out of his chair and shouted. "All you can say is you're sorry you're firing me? Just like that? What the hell?" His heart raced and his hands trembled. He felt the sweat trickle beneath his shirt. "Why . . . you can't do that, Eddie. I . . . I've made you rich!" He

couldn't find the right words to express himself and knew he sounded desperate.

Eddie assumed a haughty air and turned around to face him. No need to avoid eye contact now. He looked Michael straight in the eye with no effort to conceal his indignation. "You've made a lot of money, too. Don't forget that."

Eddie was right and Michael knew it, but that's not what mattered. His thoughts churned while he thought about what to say next. He took a moment to regain his composure and with all the self control he could muster, spread his fingers on top of his desk, took a deep breath, then another.

"Okay, look, let's start over. Tell me what's going on. We've always been honest with each other so give it to me straight."

"Sure, I can do that." Eddie moved closer and stopped directly in front of him with the desk a barrier between them. "Haven't you been following the news? California is in a recession. The firm has been losing money and I've got to cut costs to survive. I'm downsizing, that's it."

For a brief instant their eyes locked but Michael was in too much shock to assert himself. He was barely able to say, "That's *it*? What about the past twelve years of my life? Doesn't that mean anything to you?" But even as he spoke, he knew Eddie's mind was made up.

"It's nothing personal. Look, Michael, business is business. You know how it is. There's a little something inside this to tide you over." He tapped the envelope he'd put on the desk.

That did it.

The envelope made it final.

Michael lost it.

"Get out you *schmuck*! Now!"

"Leave your Rolodex," was Eddie's dispassionate final remark as he walked out. As if on cue, the door slammed behind him.

Michael trembled, short of breath. His head throbbed and his mouth felt parched. He grabbed an open bottle of

spring water but he couldn't swallow and choked. Water sprayed all over the papers on his desk, ruining designs for new ad campaigns and budget forecasts that were meaningless now.

"Shit!"

He threw the papers aside, loosened his tie and paced the length of his office. *What the hell am I going to do? This can't be happening.* In a matter of seconds his whole life had turned upside down. He felt the rising panic taking over.

"Leave my Rolodex?"

He cursed, grabbed the crystal paperweight Eddie gave him last Christmas and threw it at the door.

2

CHINATOWN

Rain clouds gathered offshore in a sky of gray silk; a hint of salt seasoned the moist, coastal air. Sea gulls circled in wide arcs; their lonely cries pierced the air with sorrow. From his park bench in Ghirardelli Square, Michael had a magnificent view of the Golden Gate Bridge shrouded in white mist, but he was too distracted to appreciate the beautiful landscape and, like a blind man, he stared at nothing. Ten feet away on the wet grass a homeless man rolled up in dirty wool blankets snored. A pair of laughing lovers holding hands strolled by unnoticed, soon followed by three chatty women in warm workout gear pushing baby strollers. At the sound of a crying baby Michael snapped out of it.

Despite the cold weather, street vendors set up booths beneath large colorful umbrellas. He watched them arrange their wares of jewelry, candles, clothes and souvenirs. Up and down the street people enjoyed the brisk fall morning, shopping, milling about, and making conversation while drinking steaming cups of coffee. Life was humming all around him, but Michael felt detached from everything. Even the lively music from nearby street musicians playing steel drums and

guitars couldn't lift his gloomy spirit. Feeling empty and lost, he sighed and stood, left the security of the park bench and began walking with no direction in mind. All he knew for certain was he wanted to be anywhere but there.

In spite of his bad mood Michael's stride was swift and easy, his body athletic and tall. Two days' growth of beard shadowed his strong masculine chin, and his thick disheveled brown hair gave him an uncharacteristically unkempt appearance.

The cold dampness of October moved through his limbs as he shivered and waited on the street corner for the traffic light to turn green. The red light shining through the gray San Francisco fog was a harsh reminder of the abrupt halt his life had suffered just three weeks ago when Eddie fired him. In retrospect, he realized nothing he had done for the advertising agency where he had dedicated his life for the past twelve years mattered.

How naïve I was to think all my loyalty and hard work were appreciated. It counted for nothing; it amounted to a big fat zero. I wasted my time and talent; I'm twelve years older, forty-one and out of a job. My life sucks. But who ever said life had to be fair?

The light turned green and Michael stepped off the curb with the other pedestrians and crossed the street. Everyone seemed to walk with a sense of purpose and knew where they were headed, but he felt no purpose other than putting one foot in front of the other. He shivered and blew on his cold hands, rubbing them together in a futile attempt to warm them. He wished he had worn leather gloves and made a mental note to put them inside his coat when he got home. With his collar turned up and his shoulders hunched slightly forward, he shoved his fists deep inside his pockets and absently walked a mile, then two.

At the intersection of Grant Avenue and Bush Street he strode beneath the elaborate green tiled roof and carved stone pillars of Chinatown's entrance. The sidewalks were jammed with tourists intent on searching for the best bargains. For a brief moment he hesitated and stood there like a rock sur-

rounded by a noisy river of humanity. Oblivious of him, the current of people rushed past through the crowded narrow streets lined with novelty shops hawking cameras, radios, sunglasses, and all kinds of souvenir junk. Dozens of T-shirts strung in front of windows like drying laundry snapped in the cold autumn breeze. At the unexpected sounds, startled pigeons flew upward with a soft whirring of wings. The noise and activity made Michael anxious and claustrophobic. He pushed his way through the throng and hurried two blocks up the hill to get away from the clamor.

There, the streets were quieter and less populated with tourists. The air was thick with the tantalizing aroma of Chinese food mixed with the exotic scent of spices, flowers, and freshly baked goods. His shoulders relaxed and he inhaled the pleasing smells. He watched Chinatown's residents go about their daily business. Like scurrying ants, they dashed into herb shops and bakeries, grocery and Ginseng stores, tailors and jewelers. Their animated voices conversed in varying dialects as they haggled over prices, spread new gossip and laughed at funny stories.

The distraction of watching a culture so different from his own was intriguing and freed him from the burden of his heavy personal thoughts long enough for him to realize he was hungry. He searched the street for restaurant signs and then a movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention; he turned toward it and his eyes settled on the entrance of Good Fortune restaurant across the street. The gold letters of the red banner flapping in the breeze beckoned him: *Come here, over here, eat here.*

Michael obeyed.

He stepped off the curb and carefully maneuvered his way between oncoming cars. Before he entered, he paused a moment beneath the red and gold banner. With his eyes closed he prayed for some much needed luck to change his life. Then he opened the door and crossed the threshold.

3

BEST FRIENDS

The savory aroma of fresh garlic and ginger cooking with sizzling meat and vegetables made his stomach rumble. Michael approached the host.

“Excuse me; if you have one available I’d like a small table for one.”

“Good afternoon, sir; my name is Wu. Do you have a reservation?”

“No, I don’t. Is that a problem?”

“One moment please, while I check.” Wu lowered his eyes and quickly scanned his seating chart. “Please follow me, sir. Today you are most fortunate. I can seat you right away.” He grabbed a menu.

Michael followed Wu toward the expansive open dining room filled with customers. The room was set apart from the waiting area by an entry between two freestanding walls—a matched pair of elaborately carved, thick rosewood panels topped off by lattice-work reaching the ceiling. As he passed through the entrance, he observed the farthest wall in back was constructed of an identical third rosewood panel, paralleling a hallway leading to the kitchen and office area.

Red dominated the dining room. He recalled that in Chinese culture, red means good luck. Chinese lanterns with red and gold tassels hung from the ceiling complementing tables dressed with red cloths and matching napkins. Oval-backed chairs upholstered in red fabric sat on carpet of red and gold. Silk orchid plants separated the curved booths hugging the red-lacquered walls mounted with large, hand-painted fans adorned with birds and flowers. From a distance, they resembled giant butterflies suspended in mid-air.

A large fat smiling Buddha seated inside a lit alcove with burning candles on either side watched over the diners as they ate lunch and drank tea. Red silk banners with good luck symbols painted in gold letters draped the doorways. Wind chimes blowing outside in the cold October breeze made a musical sound each time the front door opened.

Wu led Michael to the back of the restaurant and seated him at a small table. With a smile, he handed him the menu.

"Your waiter will be with you soon. If you need anything else, please let me know."

"I'm fine. Thank you." Michael reached for the menu.

A brief bow, and Wu left.

Michael stared at the printed words, but found it difficult to concentrate. He ran his fingers through his unkempt hair and admonished himself for not shaving the two days' growth of stubble from his face before he left his condo. He feared he not only felt like a bum but he was beginning to look like one.

His self-recrimination was interrupted by the greeting of a slim, handsome, trendy young waiter wearing an impeccably starched white long-sleeved shirt, black slacks, and his hair pulled back into a sleek black ponytail. Both pierced ears had a jade stud earring. He placed a bowl of crunchy noodles on the table and greeted him.

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Wang, and I will be your waiter today. Have you decided on your order?"

"Yes. I'll have a large bowl of *wor wonton* soup and . . . that's all, I guess."

Michael hastily folded the menu and handed it back to Wang.

"Are you sure there isn't anything else I can bring you?"

"Well, now that I think of it, how about bringing me your luckiest fortune cookie? Can you do that?"

Wang couldn't tell if he was joking or not. You could never tell with a new customer. "Perhaps you would like some tea while you wait for your soup and lucky fortune cookie?"

"Sure, why not? Tea leaves are lucky too, right? I need all the luck I can get." Instantly, Michael regretted being so revealing about himself with a total stranger, and a kid at that. *Damn, stop sounding so desperate. Pull yourself together, man. You're losing it.*

"Thank you for your order, sir," Wang responded, concealing a smirk as he walked away and headed toward the kitchen.

On the other side of the lattice-topped wall, Tong sat behind his desk totaling figures and writing inside his ledgers. The distinguished old bookkeeper was accustomed to the loud noise of the restaurant and worked without distraction, but this day proved to be different. Something about Michael's voice as it drifted through the latticework interrupted his concentration and caused him to stop writing. He put down his pen and listened. Tong sensed that the American stranger sitting only a few feet away from him, but hidden from view by the thick carved wood panel, was in the throes of a personal crisis. The anguish and uncertainty he detected in his voice hinted he had suffered an intense loss of some kind that was causing him a great deal of emotional distress.

Tong empathized with the stranger whose troubled voice touched him and reminded him of his own unresolved deep inner sorrow. "Mei-li," he whispered so no one else could hear. "Why? Why did you leave me?" In silent agony, Tong bent over and clutched his miserable head covered with thinning gray hair, and wept for the loss of his beloved Mei-li gone from him so many years. He remained in that posture

until a loud banging noise from the kitchen gave him a start, and he quickly sat up and recomposed himself before he was discovered. No one had ever seen him like that and he vowed they never would. A moment later, as if nothing had happened, the movable counters of his abacus resumed their soft rhythmic clicking. But Tong still listened for the voice of the troubled man who was wholly unaware of his presence.

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Wang carried the *wor wonton* soup to Michael's table in a white tureen bordered with handsome red dragons. With practiced movements akin to an ancient ceremony, he ladled the soup into a bowl and served him. A cloud of warm steam enveloped Michael's face as he inhaled the aroma of chicken broth teeming with slices of barbecued pork and chicken, plump wontons, shrimp, mushrooms, bok choy, green onions and bamboo shoots. He added a dash of soy sauce, picked up his spoon and commenced eating with gusto. After he consumed half a dozen spoonfuls, he paused and looked around.

Most of the nearby tables were occupied by Asian families feasting on unusual foods he had never seen. The other patrons were locals and tourists who ordered their lunches by menu number. The Asian diners used their chopsticks with practiced skill as did many of the others, but one nearby young couple obviously hadn't mastered the unfamiliar utensils. Despite their best efforts, food kept dropping off before it reached their mouths. Michael was engrossed watching their antics while he consumed spoonfuls of hot soup. Without realizing he was staring, he nearly jumped out of his seat when an unexpected familiar voice interrupted him.

"Well, well, if it isn't the elusive Mr. Hamilton."

Michael looked up and saw his best friend, Eric Brewer, staring at him with annoyance.

Eric and Michael were eighteen when they met in college. They quickly became best friends and over the years that

friendship remained steadfast and strong. Eric was slightly shorter and leaner than Michael. Benjamin Franklin glasses framed his laughing, deep blue eyes. His light curly brown hair was casual and well styled, cut slightly longer in back. Eric was dressed in jeans and work boots, a blue denim shirt, casual tie and sports jacket. He carried a hard hat.

"Eric! What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. I saw you through the window when you passed the bank, but I was on the job so I couldn't leave right away. I thought I might find you here. Mind if I sit?"

Michael gestured for him to join him. "Since when do you have to ask?"

Eric squeezed into the other chair, and Michael waited for him to get settled. "So, how's the remodeling project at the bank coming?"

"It's almost done. Stop by and take a look after you finish lunch." Eric picked up a pair of chopsticks, tore off the wrapper and started drumming the table. His voice expressed his frustration. "Why haven't you returned my calls? Where have you been?"

"I've been sulking, okay? I was going to call you tomorrow."

"Right. Jeez. Why the tight squeeze back here? Couldn't you have asked for a larger table?"

"What's your problem?" Michael shot back. Lately it didn't take much to set him off.

Eric knew his friend was going through a hard time and decided to cut him some slack. Instead of a usual snappy comeback, he kept quiet and moved his chair around in an attempt to get more comfortable.

"Sorry." Michael apologized. "I'm touchy these days."

"Forget it."

"Want some soup? There's plenty. I'll have the waiter bring another bowl."

"No thanks, I already ate." More table drumming. "So, how's it going? Any leads or interviews?"

Michael's fingers clenched into a fist.

"I swear I could punch a wall. I'm getting so desperate I even asked the waiter to bring me a lucky fortune cookie. Can you believe I said such a dumb thing?"

"Why should that surprise me? You've been dumb your whole life."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"You know, you're lucky to have a good job." Again, he ran fingers through his hair. "Going on job interviews at my age sucks. Twenty applicants show up for one lousy opening. Most of them are kids compared to me. Hell, I'm twice their age. I feel old and . . . well . . . useless. Like my time has come and gone and there's no future for me anymore."

"Bullshit. You've got experience, those kids have got acne."

Michael placed his spoon on the table and stared at it for a few seconds, and then his eyes met Eric's. "Well, a lot of good a clear complexion does me. I haven't had a single response to the resumes I've submitted."

"That's tough, but don't give up. It's only been a few weeks. Give it some time. Odds are in your favor you'll find something soon."

"Right."

"Are you sure you want to stay in advertising? I know you weren't happy at your job the last few years. Frankly, I've never understood how you stuck it out for so long."

Embarrassed, Michael confessed. "It was an easy way for me to make a lot of money, that's all. I was doing well, I got used to spending the bonuses Eddie gave me and fell into a privileged lifestyle. I didn't think about changing jobs or career moves and the years just went by. But it's no secret I've always envied you for liking what you do."

Eric fiddled with his hard hat. "Being an architect has its moments, but most of the time I feel pressured by budgets and deadlines. It's not until a project is finished that I can step back and appreciate what I've done." He checked his watch. "Speaking of deadlines, I've gotta go. Listen, why not come

over tomorrow night and hang out with us? You haven't been over since . . . you know."

"Since I got canned."

"Susan would love to see you. She even admitted she misses having you underfoot all the time. We'll rent movies and order pizza. Nothing fancy, the usual."

"Sounds great. What time?"

"Seven. And don't worry, I promise it'll just be the three of us. I wouldn't want any of Susan's single friends to meet you looking like a used toilet brush."

"Yeah," Michael said, rubbing his hand across the stubble on his chin. "With all my important meetings and things I have going, I didn't have time to shave."

4

TONG AND MEI-LI

Their journey began in the summer of 1968. Hours before dawn on the morning of their departure, Mei-li lay awake beneath the quilted covers of her bed too excited to sleep. How many days, months and years had she waited and prayed for this morning of change to arrive? Unaware of her fervor, Tong lay beside her, breathing evenly in silent repose. In the dim early morning light, Mei-li was barely able to discern the covers shifting about Tong ever so slightly and she found herself wondering how he was able to sleep so peacefully when she could not.

Viewing the handsome and dignified visage of her husband of the past fourteen years, as always, Mei-li admired Tong's thick head of shiny black hair crowning his compassionate face, his finely shaped eyebrows and small unobtrusive ears.

She was moved by his gentle expression that remained unchanged even as he slumbered. She leaned toward him and tenderly kissed his smooth forehead, then settled back in bed and let her thoughts carefully review the events of the other day.

"Mei-li, you can't take everything with you," Tong chided as he watched her attempting to squeeze all her best clothes into one small bundle.

"But our future is so uncertain. I can't bear the thought of leaving behind even one of these beautiful robes Mother and Grandmother sewed for my dowry."

To reassure her, Tong reached for Mei-li and embraced her so tightly he felt her heart beating against his chest like the flutter of hummingbird wings. "Once we get settled and save enough money, I promise to send for what you don't take with you."

"Very well, but these I won't leave behind," Mei-li declared stubbornly as she held up the jade earrings and matching necklace Tong gave her as a wedding present.

"And I'll take my fine set of writing brushes and ink blocks that you gifted me on our wedding day."

So saying, they carefully stowed their most precious belongings inside a special pack before sifting through the rest of their personal possessions. Tong's office furnishings and other important items were being shipped separately. Later that night after the packing was done, exhausted and happy, they cuddled in bed and Mei-li listened as Tong speculated about their forthcoming journey to the United States, and what he hoped would be the answer to all their prayers.

"When you agreed to marry me I never imagined we would be leaving our homeland and traveling far across the sea." Tong nuzzled the softness of Mei-li's smooth, warm shoulder rich with the scent of freshly cut flowers.

Mei-li turned to face him and smiled, causing the dimple beneath her right eye to wink. "I thank good fortune that our son will be growing up free and far away from this troubled land. I pray that once we are settled into our new home, I'll make him an older brother many times."

In the darkness a shadow passed across Tong's face when he heard this. "Nonsense," he insisted in a gruff voice. "I'm satisfied with one son to carry on my name. One is enough."

Mei-li returned from her reverie and sighed because more sons would surely have added to their happiness. Perhaps Tong would change his mind about having more children once he saw her emaciated body begin to grow strong and fill out, hiding the sharp hollows and shadows caused by the hunger that had robbed her of sensuous womanly curves. Mei-li was convinced when she no longer had to ration their food, and when her new life in America was less physically demanding, the nagging headache of the last few weeks would go away and her strength would return. Then surely she would conceive another son for Tong, and then perhaps another.

Unable to linger in bed another minute, Mei-li slipped quietly out of the covers and tip-toed across the floor to awaken her son, Wu, who had recently turned the tender age of five. Wu was her treasure, her blessing, her sweet miracle. For years, in spite of passionate nights with her husband, Mei-li had remained childless. Tong, a highly respected personage in their village, ought to have had the honor and prestige of fathering many sons. A less devoted husband would have felt shamed, believed she was worthless and cast her aside like a pair of unwanted shoes, as Mei-li had seen other wives treated by their husbands whom they no longer pleased. Under such circumstances, no one in the village would have thought any less of Tong for taking to himself a concubine as others had done.

But Tong adored his tiny sparrow of a wife with her quick gentle hands, generous heart, quiet demeanor and lovely laughter that filled their house like the tinkling of wind chimes. Each day while she prepared him delicious meals out of simple ingredients mostly grown in their small garden, Mei-li amused Tong with her delightful stories about the most ordinary occurrences. One evening after she had arranged flowers in a vase and was chopping vegetables for their dinner, she said, "Today, I made friends with a lady praying mantis. While I was planting seeds in the garden, she hopped on my arm and we spent the afternoon together like a couple

of old friends. For lunch I had a bowl of soup, and she ate the fly buzzing around it."

Tong laughed at the charming story and inwardly rejoiced at his good fortune for having such a beautiful and entertaining wife. He fondly recalled the morning he first encountered Mei-li in the park where each day he went to read his books, gaze at the reflection of the sky mirrored in the lily pond, and meditate. A creature of habit and discipline, Tong always sat on the same bench beneath the shade of a stately willow tree where he enjoyed his solitude and the quiet beauty and serenity of his surroundings.

One day began exactly the same as so many others. As he approached his favorite spot, he was surprised to see Mei-li seated on the bench feeding the birds gathered at her feet. Enchanted, he watched her from a distance and heard her whistling to them their own song while she tossed handfuls of seeds on the ground from a cloth bag. Her graceful motions and sweet voice coaxing the birds to come closer, instantly captivated Tong. After observing her for several moments, he managed to overcome his initial shyness. He quietly approached her, bowed slightly and introduced himself. Mei-li stood and returned the bow, and when she smiled demurely back at him he saw her dimple wink. She told him her name and after their mutual introduction, Mei-li gestured for him to join her on the bench. Tong took his seat but kept a respectful distance between them.

"I see you have a special way with birds," he remarked.

"That is because birds have always been my friends."

"Oh? How so?"

Mei-li laughed and began to explain. "My father raises parakeets, canaries and doves for the wealthy house of Ling. The honorable lord entertains his guests in the library where the men sit for hours discussing literature, playing chess, eating *dim sum* and sweetmeats, and drinking tea. Father arranges his caged birds around the room so their delightful songs can be enjoyed by everyone."

"What is your relationship with these esteemed birds?"

Mei-li reached inside the bag and tossed more seeds. The birds scattered and pecked. "When I was a young girl I helped Father care for them. I cleaned their cages and gave them fresh water and seed. I memorized their songs and gained their trust. In return for my devotion they allowed me to clip their nails and wings. Over the years I received the gift of many loose feathers that I sewed into a special pillow for my bed."

"That was a lovely story," Tong said with delight, and felt himself irresistibly drawn to Mei-li, igniting unfamiliar feelings.

Reading philosophy and classical literature preoccupied most of his thoughts when he was away from work. But books could not compare with the allure of Mei-li's beauty, her wit, sweet laughter and charm. Captivated, Tong could not take his eyes away from her. His inward spirit, that intimate part of the soul that controls the emotions of the heart, felt as though it had awakened from a long emotionless sleep. The rest of the morning passed with the two of them exchanging stories and feeding the sparrows until it was time for Mei-li to go.

Tong watched her rise from the bench and inquired in hope: "Will you be here tomorrow at the same time?"

Her lips curved into a friendly smile and Mei-li replied in a voice that was as much an invitation as a question. "Yes. I hope to have the honor of seeing you again."

Tong's elated smile was her answer. They bowed formally to each other and Mei-li left.

Their meeting the next day was to be the first of many. As fate would have it, their growing love soon led to an unforeseen crisis. Mei-li, who had always been an obedient daughter, shocked her parents when she returned from passing a wonderful morning with Tong and announced she refused to marry the man they had chosen for her. She had never anticipated falling in love with Tong, but it happened. Certain of her heart, she informed them of her decision to wed Chow Lee Tong and no other, and a bitter argument followed.

Mei-li refused to spend her life in a loveless marriage and she could not be dissuaded from her resolution. After weeks of futile quarrels, with reluctance her parents acknowledged her mind was made up and they conceded that Tong would make a more prestigious husband.

However, their problems were far from over. When they broke the news to the slighted suitor's family the engagement was off, her parents found themselves embroiled in a heated dispute that resulted in a series of cunning maneuvers both sides played out like a game of chess.

In the end, the boy's parents agreed to tell prying villagers: "The engagement of our son is cancelled. The fortune teller advised us against the unlucky match." Thus, they were able to save face.

Since no formal marriage contracts had been written or signed, the engagement was publicly abandoned. In private, however, Mei-li's parents paid considerable compensation to the slighted suitor's family, but only after they elicited the promise from them: "We will not put a curse on Mei-li."

Throughout all this turmoil, the impetuous young lovers seemed oblivious to anything but each other. They continued their daily courtship and longed to formally announce their engagement. When both sets of parents agreed, Mei-li and Tong consulted a fortune teller. They gave their birth dates, chose an even-numbered month for their wedding, and heeded the fortune teller's warning: "Steer clear of the seventh lunar month, the time of the Hungry Ghost Festival."

When an auspicious wedding date for their union was chosen, the engagement was made formal with an exchange of rings. The number of tables to seat wedding guests was decided, and Mei-li's dowry assembled. Marriage contracts were drawn up and signed, and gifts exchanged between the two new families being joined together.

Soon, wearing a red bridal dress embroidered with gold and silver thread, Mei-li wed Tong in a lavish ceremony suitable to honor the most obedient daughter.

5

NEW ARRIVALS

The year of their marriage was 1955, twenty-four years before China's one child law was established by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. On their wedding night, Mei-li desired giving birth to many fine boisterous sons to be Tong's legacy. Yet eight years later there were still no noisy children blessing their quiet household. Mei-li burned with hot inward shame, and her two closest friends who knew of her humiliation attempted to assuage her guilt and help her save face by making blatant innuendoes about her husband's virility when they were alone with her.

"Sometimes a firecracker makes a loud noise but fizzles out too soon," one of them joked as Mei-li gazed with envy at her friend's infant son nursing at her breast. The other friend, much younger and still a virgin, blushed and modestly covered her mouth as she giggled with embarrassment. "Perhaps there isn't enough gun powder to hit the target."

Mei-li laughed at their suggestive remarks because she couldn't get angry or take offense at such humorous attempts to console her. She was convinced her inability to conceive was her fault, not Tong's. Then quite unexpectedly, after eight

barren years of marriage, Mei-li stunned her husband with some surprising news. One night while preparing for bed, she put a comb in her hair and donned one of her prettiest robes. She came toward him with a radiant smile and announced, "I have happiness in me. I saw the doctor today and he confirmed I am with child."

Without Tong's knowledge, for months Mei-li drank tea brewed of *yin yang huo* and *tang quai* mixed with other roots, pieces of bark and flowers, using a recipe she secretly obtained from one of her grandmother's old cronies. Reacting to her unexpected announcement, at first Tong was stunned into silence and stared at his wife with disbelief. Then, as the truth sank in, he roared with laughter and reached out and embraced her. While she watched, he pranced boldly around the bedroom like a proud rooster shouting, "A son! A son! I am going to have a son!"

Eight months later Wu was born. A robust healthy boy, his size surprised everyone since Mei-li was as slight as a slender willow branch. Though she survived the long and difficult labor, she never quite fully regained her strength nor did she conceive again. Now, five years after giving birth, as she gazed at Wu sleeping, it was impossible for Mei-li to believe her life could have ever been complete without him. As though reading her thoughts, Wu stretched and yawned, rubbed the sleep from his dark round eyes and smiled at her.

"You must help Mama," she said in a soft voice, smoothing Wu's shiny black hair to one side and kissing him tenderly on top of his youthful head. "Papa is sleeping and there is still much to do before we are ready to leave. Be quiet so you don't wake him."

"Are we really going on the big airplane today?" Wu asked with his eyes now fully awake and his voice full of childish excitement.

"Yes, my darling. And Uncle Cho and Auntie Ying are going with us."

"Hooray!" Wu cheered with youthful jubilation, instantly forgetting his mother's instruction to be quiet.

"Shhhh, be still," Mei-li admonished, but she couldn't stop herself from smiling as he scrambled out of his cot.

Wu dressed in haste, ate his rice, and then helped his mother prepare for their journey by packing all his favorite toys and stuffing fistfuls of sweetmeats inside his pack.

That was how the morning began the day Chow Lee Tong left China to immigrate to San Francisco with his cherished wife Mei-li, their son Wu, Tong's younger brother Cho, and his newly expectant wife Ying, along with other members of the large Chow family clan. After fifty years of prejudicial quotas and discrimination imposed on the Chinese people by the United States government, the newly passed immigration laws finally allowed entire Chinese families to come to America instead of only allowing the men to enter. Like hundreds of other hopefuls that day, prompted by the desperate political and economic conditions in China, the Chows joined the stream of other emigrants fleeing their homeland in search of a better life, and boarded a plane carrying only their most valued belongings.

In the jet's close quarters, the hopes and dreams of so many anxious people crammed together for hours in a confined space helped them overlook the pain of cramped legs and hours of boredom. The wail of crying babies expressed everyone's discomfort. Soon after the plane took off, Mei-li's head began throbbing and her headache got worse from the air pressure inside the cabin. At first she tried to hide her discomfort from Tong, but as her condition deteriorated, she was forced to confess, "I have an awful headache today. This one is so bad I can barely stand the pain."

"No wonder, it's too crowded and noisy in here. Try to rest and get some sleep. We have a long flight ahead of us."

"I don't think I can. I'm sorry for being such a burden today, of all days," Mei-li apologized. "Please, forgive me."

Tong patted her hand and reassured her. "Forgive you? My darling, there is nothing to forgive. I could tell you were not feeling well but I thought you were only suffering from the sorrow of leaving your relatives and our homeland."

Gazing into Mei-li's eyes and seeing the pain there, Tong was suddenly consumed with guilt. He regretted spending so much time the past couple of weeks with his brother, Cho, discussing their future plans that he failed to notice how often Mei-li was getting headaches. She had mentioned it only once before to him, and he had not taken proper notice of it since. If only Mei-li had complained again, but that was not her way.

Tong fussed over her as if she were a child. He covered her shoulders with her shawl and tried to soothe her. "As soon as I can get her attention, I'll ask the attendant to bring a pot of hot water and I'll brew you some strong tea for your headache from our bag of dried herbs. Where is it? I don't see your shoulder bag."

After a long moment of silence, in a low voice Mei-li informed her husband, "I had hoped not to tell you this. Our bag of herbs was stolen."

Tong was momentarily shocked into silence. "When did this happen?"

"At the airport when we were standing in line, I felt someone bump into me and grab me for just a second and then they were gone. It happened so fast and it was so crowded I never saw who did it. Then I noticed my shoulder bag missing. They probably thought our money was inside."

Tong became outraged when he heard this and his usual calm voice rose in anger. "Who would do such a thing? No one from our village would have committed such a crime against us. It must have been a dishonorable person from another region!"

Despite her discomfort, Mei-li attempted to quiet her irate husband because he was embarrassing her in front of the other passengers, some of whom were now staring at them. She placed her hand on his arm and at her gentle touch, he became still. "It is impossible to prevent such things from happening; there are always thieves. Perhaps it was a mother with a sick child who acted out of desperation. Had she but asked me I would have gladly given her what she needed."

Then, overcome with exhaustion, Mei-li yawned and snuggled up against her husband and went to sleep. Full of remorse, Tong watched her and brooded in silence. For the first time since she gave birth he worried about her health. He kept his fears to himself but vowed that from now on he would take better care of his wife.

At the end of their arduous flight, the excited new arrivals were met at the airport by a noisy congregation of Chow family members of all ages who had assembled to meet them. Many were descendants of those earlier Chows who, generations ago, had comprised a segment of the ten thousand Chinese laborers hired to construct the trans-continental railroad of the 1800s. Although most were meeting Tong and Cho for the first time, family members rallied with excitement around their relations. They bowed and exchanged formalities, introduced themselves, and inquired anxiously about their distant relatives back home and any news of their village.

Mei-li stood back from the crowd and clutched Wu's hand to keep him still. Ying stood with them, while Cho and Tong did their best to answer questions. The whole time Tong's eyes scanned the throng, hoping to see a familiar face emerge from the hundreds of strangers milling about the airport.

Finally, a man came forth from the crowd, bowed low to show deep respect and announced in his native tongue: "Most honorable cousin, I am Chow Boo Chung, nephew of the village butcher."

Tong bowed. "Yes, yes, I recognize you. You have your uncle's face. Allow me to introduce my brother Cho and his wife Ying, my wife Mei-li, and our son Wu."

Chow Boo Chung bowed to each of them, and they returned the bow. "Welcome to America; your new life awaits you. How was your journey?"

"It was tiring, but we are overjoyed to be here. We have never flown before. Can you tell us where to collect the rest of our belongings?"

"Follow me to the baggage claim area." Chung motioned for them to go with him and led the way.

While they walked, Cho and Tong were so focused on conversing with Chung they didn't notice what was happening behind them. Wu was overly excited and wanted to run off to look at everything. He squirmed and complained until his mother told him, "No! You must stay with me." He was acting so wild it took both Ying and Mei-li to control him. They each gripped a small hand and sternly told him to behave, but he couldn't be restrained and he squirmed and whined all the way to the baggage claim.

As they waited for their belongings to come down the chute, Tong turned to Chung. "I bring you news of your family."

"Ah yes, I've been most anxious about my father's health. How is he?"

"Your father has a strong spirit, but his vision is failing and he walks with a cane. I paid him a visit shortly before we departed, and he dictated a letter to me that I have for you." Tong reached inside his shoulder bag and pulled out a folded packet of paper that he handed to Chung.

Chung thanked him and took the letter. Without looking at it he stashed it inside his pocket. "How does my mother fare? Is her arthritis worse?"

"Your mother's hands are gnarled and painful, but she doesn't overly complain because your obedient youngest sister helps her in the garden and with the cooking and mending."

"She is a good girl. I am glad to hear that. Did the extra money I sent after the flood reach my parents?"

"Yes, and it was most welcome. They used it to buy food and firewood last winter, and some chickens and a rooster to ensure the laying of many fertile eggs. You have helped them a great deal."

"Then I will continue to send more."

Cho recognized some of their bags on the revolving conveyor and the three men rushed to grab them. He waited

for the rest to come barreling down the chute while Tong continued his conversation with Chung.

"How do the people fare in the other villages?" Chung asked.

"It's a bad time. Food is scarce, and many are close to starvation. As I'm sure you know, that is why they are fleeing our country in such great numbers."

Chow Boo Chung expressed how sad he was to hear of the dire conditions back home and assured Tong that the quality of life in America was abundantly better, though not without its own problems.

"Our people struggle here as well. Many hate us and think we are sly and not to be trusted. They blame us for being the cause of the current low wage; they call us bad names and don't show us respect."

"That is indeed a great disappointment, but I have come this far and will not be diverted from my purpose," Tong vowed, recalling his promise to Mei-li to make a better life for them in America.

"I wish you every success," Chung replied.

They retrieved the last of their luggage and left the terminal. Chung led them through the parking structure where another group of relatives waited by their cars. Hasty introductions and bows were exchanged before the men stowed the bags in the trunks of several vehicles. Tong sat in front with Chung, Wu sat in back with his mother, and Ying and Cho climbed into another car.

When everyone was settled, Chung turned around and announced to Mei-li, "Now we are taking you to the housing the Association has prepared for you. I hope you will find it adequate and pleasing."

"Thank you, I'm sure I will."

The small caravan of cars pulled out and drove through the crowded streets toward downtown San Francisco. From the back seat, Wu stared with amazement, pointing and exclaiming at all the unusual sights. "Look Mama look!" Everything was new and strange and wonderful, and he was so ex-

cited he never noticed his mother shielding the light from her eyes.

Inside the car following directly behind them, Ying shared Wu's excitement as she lovingly caressed her stomach and gave silent thanks. *I am grateful my son will be born in such a rich and modern country.*

6

UNENDING SORROW

As simple as the housing was, the newly arrived Chow family stood in awe of their beautiful surroundings. Mei-li was thrilled with the modern kitchen, gleaming new appliances, spacious bedrooms, even the bathroom was a wonder to behold. Ying was equally impressed with her apartment next door, and tears of joy and relief flowed when she told Cho how happy she was. After the two families had enough time to unpack, rest, and settle into their new living quarters, with the prearranged financial backing and careful planning of the powerful Chow Family Association, Tong and Cho found themselves working in the restaurant business. Both were assigned to the kitchen of the newly opened Good Fortune restaurant. Their former lives as accountant and merchant were a thing of the past. Neither had regrets; they were in America and this was the beginning of a new and better life.

No one could have predicted that Mei-li wouldn't live to see the birth of her nephew. The cancer that caused her headaches took her life quickly. Five months after her arrival she succumbed to the illness. In her final days she slipped in and

out of consciousness, and then died peacefully surrounded by those she loved. Thankfully, before the sickness claimed her, she saw her dream realized. She knew her son would grow up in a free society, her hope for his future fulfilled. This knowledge gave her a sense of inward peace and allowed her to face death with quiet dignity and courage.

When she first showed the signs of failing health, Tong couldn't bear the thought of living without her and was devastated. His lips trembled as he sat beside her hospital bed and watched her slipping away, so pale and beautiful, a lotus blossom fading into premature death. In desperation, Tong clasped Mei-li's hands and bowed his head in prayer.

"Most honorable ancestors, I am unworthy of your charity, but I humbly beg you to spare Mei-li's life. She is a tender soul, pure of heart. Wu is but an innocent child who still needs his mother. Please don't take her away from one so young."

As if she heard her distressed husband's plea, Mei-li opened her eyes and managed a smile for him. "Promise me you will take care of Wu," she whispered.

"Of course my dear, I promise." Tong leaned close and tenderly caressed her cheek. He kissed her forehead. "Don't worry about anything. Please rest now."

"I love you," Mei-li murmured, and closed her eyes again.

Over the ensuing days while Mei-li's body grew weaker with each passing hour, Tong, Wu, Cho, and Ying sat vigil and prayed by her bedside. They helplessly watched her breath diminish as it became increasingly shallow and slow. The aching of Tong's heart consumed him with grief until he cried out, "Please don't leave me!"

Mei-li didn't hear him; she was deep inside a dream. Once again, she was a young girl laughing and running through a field of wildflowers with outstretched arms and her loose hair flying. As she slumbered, her pale lips curved into the blissful smile of youthful innocence. When her dimple winked, Tong caught his breath. Ying heard him gasp and her

eyes filled with tears. "I'm afraid there is nothing more we can do for her," she said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "I am so sorry, Tong. I love her, too."

A few hours later Mei-li awoke briefly for the last time. In silence, she gazed with love at her husband and son; a single tear rolled down her cheek where Tong had caressed her. Her fluttering lids grew heavy and closed. A soft sigh announced she had found eternal rest. Ying stood up and grabbed Wu's hand. She rushed him out of the room to give his father privacy.

Frozen in shock, Tong watched the doctor and nurses attend to his wife's lifeless body. After what felt like an eternity he reached out and cradled his beloved in his arms. Moaning softly, he rocked her back and forth like a sleeping child, sobbing through his tears that he would love her forever.

福

With all her close relatives still in China, Mei-li's funeral was as small and modest as she was in life. Tong kept the old customs and traditions during her wake by hanging a white cloth over the front doorway with a gong placed to the right of the entrance to signify the death of a woman. Mei-li's body was cleaned and powdered and she was dressed in her finest garments; all her other clothes were burned. A yellow cloth covered her face; a light blue fabric draped her torso. An offering of food sat on a plate in front of her casket, an altar with burning incense and a lit white candle was placed at the foot.

Mei-li's comb was broken in two. One half remained with her, the other half with Tong.

Joss paper and prayer money to provide her with sufficient income in the afterlife burned continuously; all the mirrors in their apartment were removed. In a final act of devotion, Tong saw to it that Mei-li had a white funeral banner with a lucky wish written especially for her heavenly journey.

Since it is believed blessings from the deceased are bestowed upon the pallbearer, willing volunteers carried Mei-li to her final resting place. The small funeral procession walked to the cemetery high on a hill above the city, and at the gravesite each mourner tossed a handful of dirt on her coffin. At the moment Mei-li's casket was lowered into the ground, Tong was so overcome with grief he turned away because he couldn't stand to watch his beloved swallowed by darkness. Wu hid his face in Auntie Ying's skirt and sobbed for his mother.

When the funeral was over and all the guests had departed, Tong sat in his room and grieved alone. Not even Ying or Cho could comfort him, though they tried. The only woman he ever loved was gone from his life; a light in his heart extinguished forever.

Weeks passed, and then months.

In an attempt to protect his young son from his terrible sorrow, Tong carefully shielded his grief from little Wu, mistakenly thinking Wu needed his father to be strong. He never let his son see him cry.

7

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

"Listen for your inner voice to guide you. Trust your instinct." As if it were yesterday, Tong remembered Grandfather's voice instructing him when he was ten. "It may be no more than a whisper, but if your intent is pure, you will hear the voice clearly. Follow where it leads you."

"I've tried, Grandfather, but I hear nothing," Tong insisted with frustration. "What am I doing wrong?"

"If you try too hard, the noise from your thoughts will obliterate all other sounds, thus making it impossible for you to hear your heart speak."

福

While Michael and Eric sat at the small table in back of the restaurant dining room making plans for pizza and movies at Eric's the next night, it never occurred to Tong not to act upon the instant compassion he felt for the troubled American stranger he could hear but couldn't see. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing to clear his mind of all thought;

his body relaxed and felt weightless. Effortlessly, he drifted into a light meditative trance from which Grandfather's voice emerged and spoke to him. *"The American stranger is in need of your guidance. Remember your promise. You must help him find his way."*

"Yes, Grandfather, I remember," Tong silently answered. His responsibility was clear; he knew what he must do. A moment passed and he opened his eyes. He took a small pair of scissors and carefully trimmed a piece of note paper to the correct size. Then he reached for the indelible ink pen he used for writing. Despite advanced age, his hand was steady as he wrote a fortune. When he heard Wang whistling on his way to the kitchen, Tong rose from his chair and rushed to cut him off.

"Wang, come here quickly." Tong gestured his bony hands for Wang to obey.

"I don't have time to talk. Can't you see I'm working?" Wang intended to ignore the old man. He was almost finished with his shift and anxious to leave to be with his girlfriend.

"I'm working, too. Come to me *now*." Tong's commanding voice demanded obedience. "And never let me catch you whistling at work again. Such disrespectful behavior insults the chef and entire kitchen staff. Your younger generation needs to learn more respect."

Wang obeyed, but his tone didn't try to conceal his annoyance. "Yes, sir. Anything else?"

Tong lowered his voice so Wang had to lean close to hear him say, "Take this fortune, put it inside a cookie and give it to the man sitting at the table outside my office. Don't tell anyone what you're doing."

Wang stepped back from the aged gentleman and stared at him with wide-eyed disbelief, but he didn't budge. At such insolence, Tong lost his patience. "Go now. Go!" He seethed, and made a shooing motion.

Wang was curious as he took the small slip of paper from Tong and read it. "You really know how to write fortunes? I've heard rumors but I didn't believe them."

Without trying to conceal his outrage, Tong's voice stormed. "In my life I have learned many important things. One of them is not to answer foolish questions from a disrespectful younger cousin twice removed."

Such blatant hostility deflated Wang's confidence. He retreated down the hallway and headed toward the kitchen muttering with anger. "Old fool. Why should I listen to him?" Yet deep down, he knew he had better do as instructed or he'd be sorry.

With the swiftness and cunning of a jewel thief, Wang tossed a fortune cookie into the microwave for twenty seconds to soften and open. He scanned the room nervously and when he was sure no one was watching, he removed the fortune and replaced it with the new one. Deftly twisting the cookie back to its original shape, he put it on a plate to cool.

福

After Eric's departure, Michael found himself looking forward to the next night even though he feared Eric's wife, Susan, would ask him her usual string of probing questions. He knew she always meant well but she was a close friend, not his therapist. The latter relationship was reserved only for her private clients and he didn't want her to treat him like one. Besides, when he told her and Eric he'd been laid off, he didn't agree with her preachy advice: "When you're ready to accept a positive change, an opportunity will present itself. Open yourself up to receiving it and at the right time, it will come." Sure, that was easy for her to say. She and Eric were both secure in their careers. How would she react if she were in his shoes? He sincerely hoped she never had to find out.

Wang interrupted Michael's thoughts as he approached the table with a fresh pot of tea and the fortune cookie. Without noticing the odd look on Wang's face, Michael thanked him and said he wanted to let it steep a while longer. Taking the hint, Wang left, grateful for the opportunity to distance

himself. Michael watched him leave. Then he poured a cup of the steaming liquid and waited.

The steam rose in thin, transparent clouds as he silently prayed. *Please bring me good luck, I really need it.* He held his breath, snapped open the cookie and removed the fortune. His anxious eyes scanned the paper.

YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS WHEN YOU ACCEPT THE CHANGE OF DIRECTION.

What does this mean? What direction? What journey? How is this supposed to help me?

The words were different from what he had prayed for but even so, he read the fortune a second time hoping perhaps he had missed something. It still made no sense. Oh well, what had he been thinking? That a lucky fortune would somehow turn things around for him? He would miraculously inherit a fortune and his troubles would be over? He admonished himself for being such an idiot.

In disappointed silence he drained his cup and paid the bill. As an afterthought, he stuffed the fortune in his pocket and walked out the door into the chill October air.