



*An old broom has its value.
~ Chinese Proverb*

After fourteen hours of solid rest and some much-needed nourishment in my system, I decide to get my own ducks in a row. I unpack and organize all my clothes, set up my workspace, and place my mom's Bible on the bedroom dresser next to a picture of my dad. A few simple touches to make the suite Ms. O'Connor had arranged for me seem more like a true home away from home. Once I've finished all my housekeeping tasks, I call my mom.

"Nicki," she says, answering after the first ring. "Everything okay?"

I plop onto the living room couch. "I'm fine. I just finished putting my things away and getting settled in my room. Why? Are you worried?"

"Somewhat. I know you're an adult and can take care of yourself, but a mother never stops worrying about her child. You'll understand that one day when you're a parent."

"Mom." I shake my head. "You and I both know that's a long time off. Don't get your hopes up."

“Never underestimate God’s plans for you, Nicki. You didn’t think you’d end up in China again, but there you are.” She chuckles. “Speaking of which, what are you up to today? Any excursions or activities on your agenda? You really should take advantage while you’re there to absorb as much of the culture as you can.”

“Yeah, I should.” My eyes fall on Ms. O’Connor’s list of directives lying on the coffee table. Unfortunately, my time in China isn’t a personal vacation. I’m here to do a job and do it well. Nothing can fall between the cracks. For the sake of the orphanage, those kids, and my boss, I have to get it right.

“But I don’t have anything lined up at the moment,” I continue, “So I think I’ll just take it easy and go over Ms. O’Connor’s notes again to be ready to start working as soon as the holiday finishes.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound like much fun. You should be taking in the sights, meeting people—”

“Mom,” I growl. “I didn’t come halfway around the world to meet a guy and get married, I came here to ensure the future and well-being of New Hope.”

“Fine,” she huffs. “You can’t blame me for trying.” She pauses. “So, what’s your plan of attack for New Hope? There’s no doubt in my mind you have one.”

“I do.”

Warmth floods my heart at my mom’s belief in me and what I’m doing, but then again, don’t most parents think their child hung the moon? Knowing she’ll want all the details, I spend the next thirty minutes outlining my ideas for when I return to the orphanage on Monday.

“You can do most of that organizing blindfolded, Nic. I can’t imagine it will take that long, then maybe you could connect with some other expats—”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, but it’s not as easy as it sounds.” I push down the fear that’s been festering in my stomach since I took off from LaGuardia.

“Why do I sense you’re not telling me something?” she asks with the intuition only a mother could have.

I bite my lip and take a deep breath before confessing my concern. “For the most part, organizing the rooms and storage closets will be a breeze ... but the other parts—the policy and procedures, as well as the sorting, organizing, and scanning the paperwork—will prove to be more difficult.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Especially since I haven’t heard from Julia about helping me translate it all. Ms. O’Connor had addressed her concerns about this before I left, but I assured her I had it all under control. Obviously, I don’t.”

“Is it strange you haven’t heard from her yet?”

“It is, which worries me for several reasons.” I push the negative thoughts that have been swirling through my head since I first reached out to her a few weeks ago back to the recesses of my mind. She’s fine, just busy. That’s all.

“I’m sure you’ll hear from her soon.” My mother yawns. A subtle reminder of the twelve-hour time difference between us.

“It’s late, Mom. You should go to bed. We can talk later.”

“Okay, dear, but don’t forget what I said about meeting people. You never know what might come of it.”

Shaking my head, I hang up the phone. My mother will be sorely disappointed when I come home in a few months with nothing to report.

I set my phone on the coffee table and traipse over to the large window offering an amazing view of the street below. Even though the sun is barely poking through the thick gray smog shrouding the city, the sidewalks are crammed with people milling around, and the roads are crowded with cars, bicycles, and buses.

Not what I’d expected during their holiday season. I’d assumed it would be more like the States, where a long break often offered empty streets as everyone kept their celebrations closer to home.

The familiar ding of an incoming text draws me away from my lookout. Julia? Excited at the possibility my fears might be erased soon, I race back to the living room and open my phone. Surprisingly, it's not a message from my young friend but from Zhou Longchen, the liaison from my first trip to Beijing with Ms. O'Connor. I had emailed him about my return to his motherland this week and hoped I'd be able to see him at some point over the next few months.

Glad to have you back in China. Up for an afternoon adventure? I can pick you up at 3.

Today? I should go over my game plan again but heeding my mother's advice to take advantage of my temporary downtime and socialize might be a better idea. I can always work later. Plus, opportunity only knocks once, right?

Determined to relax and enjoy myself a bit, I type out an affirmative reply. The last time I was here, Longchen introduced me to authentic Chinese cuisine, ignited my interest in Asian culture, and connected me to Julia. I can't wait to see what he has in store for me today.

I head to the lobby a few hours later, checking my phone messages as the elevator whisks me down. Still no word from Julia. While I desperately want to reach out and make sure she's okay, I know that she'll contact me when she's able. I just hope for both our sakes it's sooner rather than later.

When the doors open, Longchen stands guard in front of them, waiting to greet me.

"*Huānyíng huí dào zhōngguó*, Nicki!" He opens his arms wide, his face beaming.

I hug him. "Oh, Longchen, it's so good to see you, but I have no clue what you just said."

Pulling out of our friendly embrace, he holds me at arm's length. "It's good to see you, too, but we'll have to work on your Mandarin while you're here."

We both chuckle at the implausibility of me becoming fluent in such a short amount of time.

“I was simply welcoming you back to China.” He turns and offers his arm to escort me out to the car waiting outside. “Are you ready to go?”

“Lead the way.” I slip my arm into his.

During the thirty-minute journey, I badger Longchen with questions about this mysterious outing, but he kindly diverts the conversation to other topics, including Ms. O’Connor, New Hope, and what I’ll be doing while I’m here. I’m flustered by his refusal to offer me any insights but catching up with him is a joy.

“Ah, we’re here,” he says as the Buick stops in front of a tall building, clustered among others with the same height and facade.

I exit the car and study my surroundings. It’s definitely not a tourist attraction. “Where are we?” I wrap my coat around me and join Longchen on the sidewalk.

“Welcome to my home, Nicki.”

“You live here?” I point to the shiny skyscraper in front of us, my eyes bulging at the sheer size of it.

“Well, my family and I occupy one of the apartments here.” He winks at me. “Not the whole thing.”

I laugh at my gaffe. “That’s what I meant, sorry.” I gaze up at the complex once more. “I just thought you were taking me to a famous site, not your home.”

Longchen leads me inside through a revolving door. “I thought you might enjoy partaking in the Chinese New Year celebration with my family. You seemed so fascinated by it when we discussed it the last time you visited.”

Touched by his recollection, I put my hands over my heart. “You remembered?”

“I did.” His eyes sparkle as he leads me up the stairs.

The minute I step into the hallway of his floor, my senses go into overdrive. The smells of food, incense, and lingering cigarette smoke bombard my nose. My ears pick up the

cacophony of voices and music blaring from each apartment. And, like everywhere else I'd seen since arriving back in China, red and gold decorations occupy every flat surface of the hall while lanterns sway from the ceilings like tiny piñatas.

He stops at a wooden door with a poster of a chunky golden cat holding up one arm in the air. "Here we are." When Longchen opens the door, an entirely new set of people, aromas, and noises explode on the scene, this time much more up close and personal.

"*Gōngxǐ fācái!*" A stream of voices greets me as we enter the apartment.

"*Nǐ hǎo.*" I wave at the mix of old and young alike before shooting a glance toward Longchen for translation.

"They are wishing you well for the new year." Longchen guides me inside his cramped home. "Come this way, Nicki."

I scan the apartment, which is sparsely furnished but overflowing with people and happiness.

Longchen whistles, and the room grows still as he introduces me to everyone in Mandarin. Thirty sets of eyes fall on me. Like a lab specimen under a microscope, I fidget under their stares and somehow eke out a tiny grin. But the joy on their faces replaces any fears or discomfort I might have. I am welcome here.

"Let me have your coat, and then I'll show you around." Longchen takes my jacket as I walk into the living room, where most of the action has resumed.

Petite, white-haired ladies lounge in chairs. Men of varying ages huddle around a card table in the corner. Younger children race around the room in jumpers while the older children carry red envelopes around, flashing crisp Chinese yuan at one another.

"So, what do you think?" Longchen asks as he passes me a warm drink.

I take the cup and sip the green tea within. "Delightful!" I

look out at the crowd in front of me. “Are all these people related to you?”

“Most of them are. There’s my mother on the chair next to the TV.” He points at her and waves. “And I believe my son is somewhere over by the mahjong table.” He cranes his neck in the direction of the men clustered together in the corner.

Even from across the room, I can see the similar features between the father and son.

“My wife is in the kitchen cooking,” Longchen continues, pulling my attention back to him. “I’d take you to meet her, but no wise or right-minded person would dare go in there at the moment. Those women take their task seriously and don’t like to be interrupted for anything.” He chuckles. “Then there are a few neighbors, co-workers, and friends who couldn’t be with their families at this time, so we have them join us. Our New Year’s celebration should never be spent alone.”

His words offer me the perfect opportunity to inquire about my unresponsive friend. “Speaking of friends and coworkers, did you invite Julia today too? I’m anxious to talk with her.”

“I did. And Ben Carrington as well.”

“Ben?” My cheeks burn at the mention of his name.

“Yes, the nice young man I introduced you to at the coffee house the last time you were here.”

“I remember him.”

How could I forget? Green eyes. Blond hair. Texas drawl. Oh, and a good listener too. I’d kept the email he sent me after I returned to the States on the off chance our paths might cross again during my stay here. I’d just never thought I’d be seeing him again so soon.

“I think you’ll enjoy visiting with him today. Sadly, most of my family doesn’t speak English, so at least you’ll have someone to talk to other than me.”

“And Julia,” I add. “She and I have a lot of catching up to do. Between the two of them, I should be good.”

“I’m afraid Julia won’t be joining us today, Nicki.” Longchen

grimaces. “Her sister has been sick for some time and was taken to the hospital earlier this week.”

Visions of Julia’s twin sister, Mingyu, who has Down Syndrome, pepper my mind. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“The director of their orphanage didn’t give me much information. We can only hope she’ll be okay. Otherwise, Julia will be devastated.”

My heart aches. Not only for Julia and her sister but for my situation as well. How could I possibly ask Julia to translate for me while she’s dealing with this type of family emergency?

I couldn’t possibly request her help now. Which means I’m in serious trouble.

How will I get the work done without a translator?

My scrunched-up forehead must signal to Longchen that something’s wrong.

“I’m sorry, Nicki, I didn’t mean to upset you. This is supposed to be a joyous occasion.”

“Oh, no, Longchen, I’m okay.” I plaster on the best smile I can. “I was thinking about something I needed to discuss with Julia, but it can wait.” Just not long.

“Okay, good.” Relief washes over his face. “I want to show you the heart of our celebration then.”

We amble over to a large table where a feast fit for a king has been spread.

“Wow,” I gasp. “I can’t remember seeing so much food in one setting.”

“Behind spending time with friends and family, Chinese New Year is all about the food.” He hands me a plate and a pair of chopsticks. “Please, help yourself.”

Rice, noodles, dumplings, buns, vegetables, meats, soups, and fruit cover every flat surface of the table. I set down my tea and peruse all the options. Where do I even start?

As if sensing my hesitancy, Longchen points to a platter of fluffy round balls. “Here, try this.” He scoops up one and drops it onto my plate.

“What is it?” I poke at it with a chopstick.

“It’s called *Tang yuan*. In English it would be translated as sticky rice ball.” He pops one in his mouth. “There are all kinds of rice balls, but these are my favorites because they have a filling on the inside—either peanut butter, sesame, or red beans. Try one.”

I carefully raise the ball to my mouth and take a small bite. Peanut butter flavors explode on my tongue. Not at all what I was expecting but definitely a sweet treat I could eat more of. “I like it,” I tell him after swallowing it. I hungrily load six on my plate, then, realizing my mother would take just as many or more, I return three of them to the platter.

Once I’ve decided on a suitable amount of food to sample, I settle into a cozy spot on the couch. Various people sidle up next to me, but as Longchen predicted, the language barriers keep our chats short. I’m disappointed I can’t converse with them as I’d like, but I am grateful to have been included in their festivities.

“Enjoying yourself?” Longchen joins me on the sofa after fulfilling his duty as host.

“Yes, thank you so much for inviting me.” I survey the crowded space. “It’s just my mom and me when there’s a holiday, so it’s nice to see your family having fun all together.”

Longchen scans the room full of his loved ones. “I’m a blessed man, Nicki.”

“You are.” Pangs of jealousy stab my chest. I’m too ashamed to tell him the true reason why we don’t hold fun gatherings like this at my mother’s house.

Before I can elaborate, his phone dings. “Excuse me a moment.” He flips open his phone and squints at the small screen. “Ben has arrived.” He stands. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.” I immediately primp my hair and check my breath. Since there were a lot of onions and garlic in the dishes I just ate, I dig for a breath mint and chomp on it as fast as I can.

“*Gōngxǐ fācái!*” The room erupts in prosperous greeting once more.

I look back toward the entrance, and there, towering over Longchen, is Ben. I try not to swoon over his handsome physique. He looks as good as he did a few weeks ago when I'd first laid eyes on him. Except now he's dressed in an amethyst sweater, a perfect complement to his emerald eyes, and black slacks. Not quite the boy-next-door look from the coffee house, but swoon-worthy.

If a girl were looking for a guy to swoon over, which I'm not.

I rise from my spot on the sofa and walk toward him and Longchen. "Hi, Ben. It's good to see you again."

"Hey, Nicki." He flashes a row of pearly whites at me. "I'm glad you made it back."

Goosebumps grow on my arms at the sound of his Texas drawl. I'm a sucker for a guy with an accent. "Yeah, I just arrived."

"Well, your timing's perfect. Experiencing Chinese New Year should be on everyone's bucket list. Right, Longchen?"

"I couldn't agree more." Longchen pats Ben on the back. "That's one reason why I invited her here today."

"Oh, I thought it was to see me." Ben laughs. "Regardless of the reason, I'm glad you did." His eyes fall back on me.

Taken aback by the tenderness of his stare, I shift my gaze away.

"Why don't the two of you catch up, and I'll check in with you later." Longchen bolts off, leaving us alone.

"Let me grab some food, then we can talk."

Carefully balancing his plate, Ben sits down next to me a few minutes later. "So, Nicki, as I recall, you were on an expedition last time you were in China. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Expedition?" I furrow my eyebrows.

"Yeah, you said you were searching for something. Did you find it?" He digs into the food.

My mind drifts back to our short conversation at the coffee house when I was desperate to discover something that would

keep Ms. O'Connor from shutting down the orphanage. "I guess you could say that."

He takes a bite of dumpling and swallows. "So then, what's on the agenda this visit?"

"I'm here on a new mission."

"New mission, uh? Now you've caught my interest." He taps his chopsticks together. "Please, do tell."

While Ben wolfs down the rest of his food, I share with him what Ms. O'Connor and I discovered at the orphanage and my reasons for returning.

"That's awesome." He drags a napkin across his mouth, then sets it on his lap. "Your boss and the kids at New Hope are lucky to have you."

"We'll see, but enough about me. What's going on with you?"

"I just got in myself." He sets his wiped-clean plate onto the coffee table. "I was looking for a place to live when I return home for good this summer. Can't live with my parents, you know?"

Boy, do I ever.

"You're leaving China then?"

"My teaching contract here expires in July when classes end, so it's time for me to stop running and go home."

I'm puzzled by his comment, but since I don't know him all that well, I don't pursue it. "That's right," I say instead, "you teach English at the school where Longchen volunteers."

"Yep, for the past five years."

"Five years?" My jaw drops open. "No wonder you're so good at Mandarin."

"I wouldn't go that far, but I get by." He takes a sip of water. "I can converse with my students without any problems, but I wouldn't say I'm an expert. Reading and writing have been a challenge for me."

"You're probably way better than you give yourself credit for."

His long blond bangs shake from side to side over his

forehead. “Not really, but I can get myself out of trouble if I need to.”

“That’s only because he’s always finding ways to get into it.” Longchen rejoins us and sits on the armrest. “Ben is drawn to mischief like a nail to a magnet.”

“I’m completely innocent.” Ben throws both his hands up in the air.

“Don’t let his charm fool you, Nicki.” Longchen grins. “He’s a prankster, but his heart is in the right place.”

My eyes dart between the two men as they continue their banter, and I can’t help but admire the deep respect they have for one another.

“Nicki,” Longchen says once their jesting ends, “you mentioned that you had something you needed to talk to Julia about. Is anything wrong?”

“Um, well, sort of.”

“Can I be of help?” Longchen’s brown eyes are filled with worry.

“I’d be happy to help too,” Ben chimes in.

I smile at their concern and willingness to bail me out. “I need a translator to help me at New Hope with some of the work I have to do. I can organize easily, but I don’t read Mandarin, so that’s an issue.” I sigh. “I planned on asking Julia if she might be available, but that’s no longer a possibility. Yet it doesn’t change the fact that I need help right away.”

“Oh, that is a problem.” Longchen ponders my words.

“Would either of you happen to be available to help me out?” While I’m not normally so direct, desperate times call for desperate measures. “Please?”

Both men look at each other and then back at me.

Longchen speaks up first. “I’m sorry, Nicki, but I’m busy facilitating tours for the next several weeks.”

“School starts on Monday for me,” Ben adds. “Between my day and night classes, I’m afraid I’m unavailable too.”

“That’s okay.” I twist my mouth. It was a long shot, but at least I’d tried. “I’ll figure something out.”

We remain silent until Longchen’s mother rises from her chair. The room grows still, and everyone turns their eyes in her direction. She spurts out some type of instruction that causes everyone to quickly gather their belongings. Clearly, when she talks, people listen.

Once the commotion dies down, Longchen fills me in on the details. “It’s time for the Lion Dance, and Mother wants everyone to go, including the two of you.” Like everyone else, he hustles to fulfill his mother’s command.

Ben jumps off the couch, ready to bust a move. “Alright, let’s go.” He holds out his hand to me.

“Um, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I sink back in my seat.

“Sure, it is.” He shakes his hips. “It’s easy, and I promise I won’t embarrass you.”

“I see that.” I chuckle at his antics. “But really, it’s not you, it’s me.” He keeps moving, but his efforts to persuade me are useless. I don’t dance. Not. At. All.

“Nice moves, son, but it’s not that kind of entertainment.” Longchen sidesteps Ben and hands me my coat. “We watch the professional performers dance.”

I take my coat from him. “I’m sorry, Longchen I will have to pass on the Lion Dance. I need to get back to the hotel.” A long yawn escapes from my lips. “Jet lag is setting back in.”

Ben stops his frolicking. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“I am,” Longchen confirms, a twinkle in his eye.

“Me too.” I quickly shift my gaze away from Ben to avoid cracking up. “Thank you for today, Longchen. This has been great, but I should get some rest and see what I can do about finding a translator.”

The elderly man does his best to hide his crestfallen look, but I can see his spirits have waned. “I’m the one who should be apologizing, my dear. I should have considered you’d be tired

still." He holds out his arm to escort me. "Let me take you to your car."

"No worries, Longchen." Ben steps forward, cutting him off. "I'll walk the lady out." He takes my arm and leads me toward the door.

When we get downstairs, Ben opens the car door for me like a true gentleman.

I slide inside and peek back at him. "It was nice seeing you again, Ben."

"The pleasure was all mine, Nicki." He leans against the door. "If there's anything other than reading or writing Mandarin that I can help you with, let me know." One corner of his mouth lifts in a smile. "And if you're interested in getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse of China, I'd be happy to show you around before we both head back to the States."

Touched by his kindness, I nod. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure how much free time I'll have. If I can fit it in, I'd definitely take you up on that."

"Great, I'll text you." He shuts the door.

As the car swerves in and out of traffic, I lean back against the headrest and replay the day's events. Despite having to leave early, I'd enjoyed every minute of the festivities. Even spending time with Ben. He's quite the character. Plus, it's nice to have someone from back home close by. Just in case.

My joy evaporates, however, when I reflect on the predicament I now find myself in with Julia being unavailable to assist me. Not only can I not reach out to her, but I failed to recruit any help as well. It seems I'm out of options.

Which means there's only one thing left for me to do.

Please, Lord, send help soon!