



If one is in harmony with his family, he has found the secret of success.

~ *Chinese Proverb*

I spend the majority of our three-hour flight filling in Ben on the details of my mother's illness. How it began after my father's death, the rift it caused in our relationship, and the extreme measures it took for her to finally accept the help she needed.

Of course, Ben was nothing but completely understanding and compassionate as I poured out ten years of sorrow, pain, and frustration on him. By the time our plane touched down in Connecticut, I was certain my life and the events of the past two days would qualify us for our own reality TV show. Or a full-blown theatrical production. Especially once we bring my mother up to speed on our upcoming nuptials. There's no telling which side of the pendulum she'll swing to.

"Here we are." I slowly pull our rental car into my mom's overly cluttered driveway.

Under a gray and cloudy sky, Ben surveys the scene in front

of him. He rakes his hand through his hair and lets out a slow whistle. “Wow, you weren’t kidding, were you?”

“No,” I say, unnerved not only by his reaction but also by the condition of my mom’s yard. Not much has changed since I was here for Ms. O’Connor’s funeral in February. There are still several dishwashers, garden gnomes, and tattered lawn chairs spread out across the patchy lawn, the welcoming committee to the chaos.

“She’s supposed to be cleaning things up to satisfy the city and county orders, but from the looks of it, she hasn’t made much progress out here.”

“It probably looks better on the inside. Maybe it’s been too cold to work outside right now. I’m sure March in Connecticut isn’t as warm as Texas.” He removes his seat belt. “Should we go in and find out?”

I hope he’s right. They had to have made improvements inside. Otherwise, my mother will be homeless soon.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?” I wince. “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to see everything. You could go to the hotel tonight, and we could meet you for breakfast in the morning.”

Ben shifts his body and faces me. “Nicki, I’ve never been married, but I’ve been to enough weddings to know that whoever is officiating will say for better or for worse during the ceremony. When he does, I will say I do because I mean it. For better or worse, okay?” His eyes flick toward the mess. “And if we need to help her in any way, we will.”

“Thanks, that means more than you realize.” I gaze back at my mother’s front yard and sigh. “If we’re going to do this, there’s no point in delaying it any longer, right?”

We exit the car and slither through the hodgepodge of items scattered between the driveway and the backdoor. I don’t even have my hand on the doorknob when it suddenly swings open.

“Nicki!” My mother squeals in delight. “You’re here!”

Before I can say a word, she hugs me tight. The smell of her

watered-down rose perfume attacks my nostrils, and I inhale the familiar scent. I'm home.

"Mom." I gasp for air. "It's only been a few weeks."

She reluctantly releases me and holds me at arm's length. "It feels like ages ago."

Her eyes fall on Ben. "And you are?"

"I'm Ben." He holds out his hand to her. "It's so nice to—"

Instantly my mother wraps her arms around his chest.

"Meet you," Ben manages to finish, his face red as he reciprocates her gesture.

My mom releases Ben from her tight grip and beams. "Nicki said she was bringing someone home with her when she called, but I thought she was talking about her friend Julia or her boss Heather. I had no idea she was bringing a suitor to visit."

I step in between them and do my best to save Ben from her smothering. "A suitor, Mom, really? This is not the Victorian era. Ben is just a friend." Who also happens to be my fiancé. "Now, can we please go inside? Even though it's spring, it still feels like winter, and I'm freezing."

The three of us scoot inside the toasty house. Despite connecting my mom with a hoarding specialist, it doesn't look like much about the house has changed. Old newspapers and phone books line the main hallway, and piles of overflowing plastic bags from the local dollar store have yet to relinquish their duty as a barrier to the front entrance.

"Why is all this stuff still here?" I ask through gritted teeth.

My mom blinks rapidly. "What do you mean?"

"This." I wave my arms frantically around the space. "You were supposed to be clearing all of this out."

"Nicki," Ben's eyes convey a subtle warning. "Maybe now isn't the time."

I pivot back towards him. "She doesn't have time, Ben. The local officials are going to evict her soon, and this place looks the same as when I left." I look at my mom. "Is Ann still helping you?"

“She is, but when she brought her entire team in here, it was too much for me to handle. We decided to just work one-on-one instead and only a few hours twice a week.” My mother rocks from side to side. “It’s taken longer that way, but we’ve managed to make some progress in my bedroom, the bathroom, and part of the living room.” She counts off each space on her fingers. “You don’t need to worry about it. I’ve got everything under control.”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

The joy that had radiated from my mother’s face when I first arrived evaporates, and she lowers her chin to her chest.

Immediately shame engulfs me. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I whisper. “I’m just worried about you and what will happen if you don’t meet the city or county’s deadline.”

“It’s hard to let go, Nicki,” my mother mutters.

“I know.” I take her hands in mine. “We’ll figure something out.”

“We will,” Ben says, stepping closer to me. “But for now, why don’t we move on to other topics?”

My mother slowly lifts her head. “That sounds lovely. We can visit in the kitchen over some tea.”

When we settle around the wobbly Formica table, my anger has simmered some. I’m not really upset with my mom. I’m mad at myself for not being here when she needed me most. Maybe if I’d stayed and had overseen the work she and Ann were doing, things would have improved at a faster rate. I would have made sure of it.

If I had, my mother would have a clean, livable house by now, and the threat of eviction wouldn’t be an issue. However, had I done that, our bond would have been battered and bruised beyond repair once more, which is why I’d asked a third party to step in. Despite feeling as if I’d just been awarded the “World’s Worst Daughter” title, I’m certain returning to China had been the right thing to do. For our relationship, for New Hope, and especially for Lei Ming.

I only worry what the future holds for my mother now.

“So, what brings the two of you back to the States? How long will you be staying?” She sets three chipped tea mugs, each filled with water and a seeping tea bag, and a bag of partially eaten, generic sugar cookies in the center of the table. “Nicki was rather vague on the phone.”

“Actually, Mrs. Mayfield ...” Ben clears his throat.

“Stop right there.” My mother wags her index finger before sitting down across from him. “There will be no formality here with me. Please, call me Ginny.”

“O-kay, Ginny.” Ben nods. “Well, Nicki and I ...”

“We’re getting married!” I blurt.

My mother’s eyes grow as wide as tea saucers. “M—married?” Her eyes dart back and forth between Ben and me as if trying to determine which one of us was going to yell out ‘gotcha’ first.

“We are.” Ben gives me a side-eye. “We wanted to tell you in person.”

“Really?” Mom clutches her chest, and for a moment, I worry she might have a heart attack. “The two of you are getting ... married?”

“Yes. In one week. In Texas.”

“So soon? When did all this happen? And why so fast?” Her voice is a mix of joy and confusion. “I mean, I’m delighted by the news, but I don’t understand.”

I lean over and cover her hands with mine. “I’m sorry to drop this bombshell on you, but we have a good reason.”

“I’m sure you do, dear.” She shakes her head. “I’m just hoping one of you can start at the beginning and tell me how this all came about.”

“Yes,” Ben and I say together.

We spend the next hour tag team sharing all the details of the last few weeks – Assistant Director Chang’s schemes to embezzle money from New Hope, Lei Ming’s health issues, and the obstacles standing in my way to adopt her. When we finally reach the part about our decision to get married and

the problems we encountered in Texas, we're both out of breath.

"I don't know what to say." My mother takes a long sip of her tea.

My mouth drops open. "Seriously? You've been dying for me to get married and supply you with grandchildren. Now that it's finally happening, you're speechless?" Fear shoots through me. "Unless you're not okay with our decision?"

"Oh, I am. I'm just shocked, that's all." She fans herself with her hand, and I'm not sure if she's trying to calm down or keep herself from crying. "But I am happy!"

I jump from my chair and squat down next to her. "I know it must sound like we've lost our minds." I flick my eyes at Ben. "Who knows, maybe we have, but as strange as it seems, it does feel right."

"It sounds pretty strange," my mom chuckles. "But it also sounds like love."

My breath hitches, and I almost topple over onto the floor. "Love?"

"Yes, dear. Love."

Obviously, we didn't explain the situation well enough to my mom. Ben and I are just friends. I mean, he's a great guy and has gone above and beyond, but that was all there was to it. Right? Otherwise, why were my mother's words throwing me so off balance?

"What the two of you are doing for that little girl," she continues, "is nothing short of love. God's love. And I couldn't be prouder." She cups my face in her hand. "It's not the way I always dreamed it would be, but who am I to stand in God's way? And if the two of you have prayed and feel strongly that this is what you're supposed to do, then I can't say no to that."

My legs tremble, and for a second, my spirits dip. The love she was referring to wasn't about Ben and me, after all. If all she sees in us is a strong friendship, maybe that's truly all there is.

"We have your blessing then?" Ben asks. "Even though Nicki

and I both agree that we need to do this, I still want to respect your wishes.” He beams. “Mrs. Mayfield—I mean, Ginny—do I have your permission to marry your daughter?”

My mom looks down at me, her eyes glistening. “Your father would have been thrilled to have Ben ask him for your hand.”

I gulp. “I know. I wish he could be here.”

“Me too.” She plants a soft kiss on my cheek before turning toward Ben. “Yes, you have my permission.”

Springing to my feet, I give my mom a hug.

“Now I have so many questions I want to ask you about the wedding.” She pulls back from me. “But first, I want to see the ring.”

I freeze and stare at Ben with a “now what” expression.

“Oh, we’re going ring shopping tomorrow,” he says smoothly. “We wanted to wait and make sure it was okay with you before we put a ring on it.”

My insides jiggle at his reference to one of Beyonce’s most popular songs and that he was able to skirt around the fact it was a topic we hadn’t really discussed.

“That makes sense,” she says. “Then I guess all we need to do now is talk wedding details. I have a stack of bridal magazines around here somewhere, and I’m sure I can find my wedding gown for you. I set it aside many years ago in the hopes I could pass it on to my daughter. And that day has finally arrived!” She snaps her fingers. “It can count as both something old and something borrowed.”

I rub my forehead. It’s bad enough my mother even has a bridal magazine collection or that she held on to her dress all this time, but she’s going to be disappointed when she learns that someone else is handling all the details of the big day.

“Um, Mom.” I clear my throat. “Before you start making any plans, I need to talk to you about the wedding.”

“Of course.” She pushes back in her chair. “But a week isn’t a long time to get a wedding coordinated. Can it wait?”

“Actually, there aren’t many details you need to worry about.”

I purse my lips. “Ben’s family has generously offered to make all the arrangements for us in Texas.”

“Every ... thing?” she cries. “You mean I don’t have a part in my own daughter’s wedding? But that’s what the bride’s family is supposed to do.”

Seeing the anguish on her face, guilt ties my stomach in knots. She’s wanted this for so long, and to see her in such pain, it’s as if I just pulled the rug out from under her and robbed her of the entire experience. Not only that, but I don’t have the heart to tell her that Darlene Carrington’s idea for a high society event doesn’t include clearance items from the local thrift shop or hors d’oeuvres from the freezer section of the big box stores.

“Well, it’s just that weddings, even small ones, can be expensive, and you and I don’t have the kind of resources they do. It only seemed logical to let them take care of it. Plus, not worrying about all the details will let us enjoy the moment more.”

“I hadn’t considered that.” She drums her fingers on the table. “But isn’t there anything I can do? I’m the mother of the bride!”

“I’m sure there is,” Ben chimes in. “My mom is hiring an event planner to handle most of the details, but I have no doubt there’ll be something special you can do.”

“Yes,” I grin, grateful for Ben’s ability to think fast on his feet. “I have to present to the O’Connor Foundation in a few days. Then we’ll all fly back to Dallas, and you can find a part of the ceremony to claim as your own. And if there isn’t that much for you to do wedding-wise, I’d love it if you’d help me get things squared away for your granddaughter. I have no clue what a child requires, and you could go shopping with me and tell me what to buy.”

My mother rises from her chair and paces the already worn-out laminate tiles. “I don’t know,” she mutters with each pass. “They aren’t buying you a dress, though, are they?”



“No, now that I know I can borrow yours, that’s one less thing anyone will have to worry about.”

“You mean it, Nic? If I find it, you’ll wear it?” My mother’s eyes light up.

“I will.” I have no clue if it will even fit, but for Mom’s sake, I’ll figure something out.

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” She claps her hands and scoots toward the kitchen door. “I’ll go dig it up right now.”

The cuckoo clock she’s had for as long as I can remember belts out its hourly jangle. “It’s getting late, Mom. Why don’t we wait until tomorrow?”

“You’re right.” She waits for the antique timepiece to finish its tenth chime. “We have a few busy days ahead of us, and we’re all going to need our rest. I’ll set up the air mattress for Ben in the living room.”

I walk over to her and break the bad news. “Ben and I thought it would be better if we didn’t sleep here. We reserved two rooms at a hotel just off I-95.”

“Don’t be silly, Nicki.” She swats her hand at me. “This is your home. You can’t sleep at a hotel.” Her eyes fill with determination. “You’ll just sleep in your room, and we can put Ben on an air mattress in the living room.”

“Mom—” I rub my temples. I could tolerate the house and all its chaos for a night or two, but it wasn’t fair to make Ben endure such torture.

“An air mattress will be fine, Ginny,” Ben says before I can debate the point.

Satisfied by her victory, my mother flashes a huge grin at him. “They’re here somewhere. Just give me a minute to locate them.” She retreats to the deep, dark recesses of her house in search of the bedding. I have no doubt she’ll return with enough inflatable mattresses to supply an entire platoon of soldiers.

Once she’s gone, I reach for my purse. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll take the car key and get out now. I’ll cover for you.”

“It can’t be that bad, Nicki.”

“You have no idea.” I pull the key fob from my bag and toss it to him. “She stores her freakishly scary collectible dolls in my bedroom, so there’s no telling what may keep you company in the living room if you stay.”

Catching the key as only a former baseball player could, Ben lets out a booming laugh. “Don’t worry. If I can sleep on the rock-hard beds in China, I can handle an inflatable one for a night or two.”

I inch closer to him and wrap his fingers around the black plastic. Better than anyone, I’m well aware of the creatures and critters that linger in dank spaces when expired food, trash, and unkempt spots go unchecked. Even if my mom has managed to make a dent in some of it, those who have been living rent-free in her house will retaliate. I’d really hate for Ben to be one of their victims.

Ben’s shoulders bounce up and down as he drops the key on the table. “You may be easily spooked by a few dolls, but I’ll be fine, I promise. You just worry about getting your rest for our big ring hunt tomorrow.”

The mention of jewelry shopping leaves me breathless. “You were serious about that?”

“Of course.” He takes the twisty tie off the cookie bag and begins shaping it into a circle. “We have to have something to slip on your finger unless you want one like this.” He holds it up as if it were a priceless gem.

“I’m not big on fancy trinkets, but I think we can do better than that.” A rush of adrenaline courses through me as I think about all the possibilities for my left hand.

“Agreed.” Ben tucks his rustic creation into his jean pocket. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready for bed.” He swaggers out of the kitchen.

“Okay, but now you’re the one who’s opened Pandora’s Box.” I holler. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”