

You Will Hear





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Estralia Russelle

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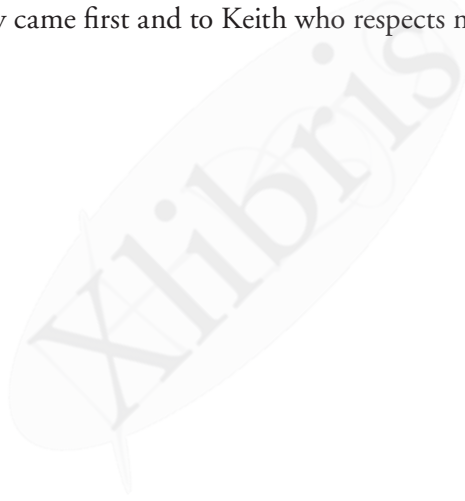
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## Dedication

To the memory of Sidney, who was and still is, in spirit, a great source of inspiration; and to my parrots who constantly reminded me that they came first and to Keith who respects my weirdness.







# CHAPTER 1

The interior design department at Bay Construction and Design had been in a state of wild for weeks, ever since the day Constance McKenna won the \$10 million contract for the feng shui office design at Global Manufacturing. Today was no different except that the furor had emerged with whispered gossip and barely audible conversation throughout the engineering design group. When Constance entered the department, all conversations either shifted or came to a sudden halt. Some ritualistic small talk popped up here and there among the group:

“Did you have a good weekend?”

“Did you see the football game?”

As conversation turned trite, Constance knew she had interrupted something not meant for her ears. Her expression pained, as though she'd been wounded. She drew her lips into a tight smile. She felt awkward walking through the office, knowing they were all avoiding eye contact despite being keenly aware of her presence. One person glanced at the morning paper, another hurriedly picked up the phone, and others gazed at their computer screens.

Feeling paranoid, Constance rushed toward her office. She hadn't slept much recently and the previous night had been anything but restful; she had tossed and turned all night. *Maybe I'm just tired*, she thought. She was preoccupied with her thoughts when she heard her name:

“Constance! Constance!” a voice called.

Slowly she turned around, a confusing rush of anticipation and dread whirling inside of her.

“Oh, hi John,” she said to her boss. “I didn't hear you call.” She spoke in a low voice reserved for dreaded things.

“I need to see you in my office when you get a minute,” John Shaw replied, avoiding her eyes.

The sun caught his glasses, sending flares of light across his face. He normally spoke in a neutral manner, without inflections, yet today his disciplined voice appeared to be an attempt to camouflage his feelings. John Shaw always respected Constance’s ability—she was one of the best feng shui designers in the nation—yet lately Constance had the feeling he had reservations about the logic and acceptability of her work among the shrewd boys’ club in mainstream America. Although she had won the contract with Global Manufacturing, she wondered if John wasn’t sure she would be able to pull it off. Her intuition was usually on target, but today she found herself out of touch; she knew something was amiss. Fear shot through her like the quick, hot touch of the devil.

“Of course, John, I’ll be with you in about fifteen minutes,” she replied.

Although Constance was anxious to find out what was going on and what it had to do with her, she needed time to calm her mind and body, to get back to her usual centered and balanced self. It was as though she were consulting with a voice inside her head before she took any action. Constance walked into her office slowly and placed her briefcase on the orderly solid-oak desk. The office layout was based on the feng shui principles of harmony and balance. The mirrored walls gave depth and spaciousness to the room. The twenty-ninth-floor office was almost spidery in its delicacy. Subtle but expensive accessories, the kind that never call attention to its expense, decorated the room. The bay windows overlooked Golden Gate Park and continued around to capture dramatic glimpses of the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. It was one of the most scenic offices in the prestigious Golden Gate Building.

The blinding dazzle of the sun’s reflection on the quiet ocean had made its way to Constance’s computer screen. She had earned the right to occupy this desirable, spacious office three years prior when she won the \$2 million contract, against all odds, to design the Cartoon World public contact management office using the controversial “reverse logic” design. Constance took a deep breath, removed her ivory-and-taupe trench coat and her tailor-made, ivory, linen suit jacket, and threw them both over the huge black and red leather chair in the corner. Throwing anything around randomly was out of character for Constance; everything usually had its proper place to enhance feng shui.

Constance was having short bouts of disconnected thoughts, which she wanted to sort out and arrange, imposing order in her head. The art of

kundalini yoga was a form of meditation she relied on in times of intense stress and confused thoughts. She loosened her red-striped, silk, crepe blouse; kicked off her black, sensible, leather pumps; lifted her hands up toward the ceiling as though reaching for the sky; and then suddenly remembered her door was open. She rushed over and closed and locked the door to her soundproof office so no one could see or hear what she was about to do. With the engineers' rigidity, control, and ordered mentality, they would think she was possessed by a demon if they saw her. They used the term "weirdo" to describe Constance. Bob Morand, who may have been considered a good friend by most corporate standards, once told Constance her office designs and the philosophy behind them made many of the engineers uncomfortable.

She stood straight, taking rapid, rhythmic breaths through her nose, putting equal emphasis on inhaling and exhaling; her shallow breaths caused her navel and diaphragm to move slightly. She looked as though she were sniffing something through her nose.

Constance thought back to her yoga training, when she had spent a year in India with Singh Bahava training to overcome resistance of the mind. She had memorized the purposes as though she were preparing for a recital: Your spine must be flexed; your nervous system must be de-stressed and strengthened; your glands must be recalibrated; your magnetic field must be charged; your circulatory system must be stimulated; your lymphatic system must be flushed; your sciatic nerve must be stretched; your navel point must be centered and activated; the energy centers along the spine must be stimulated; and you must connect with your spirit.

She began to feel a harmonic resonance among all of her body systems and organs. The internal rhythms had put her in sync with her environment. The feeling of regeneration was surging throughout her body, and she wanted to take this feeling to the next level. She began to feel the endorphins released in her body.

She pressed her hands together at her sternum, slowly knelt to the floor, and sat on the soft, pale gray, plush carpet with legs crossed. She closed her eyes and started to chant softly: "Ong namo guru dev namo." Her body instantly became completely still as she continued to chant, and she fell into a blissful state of mediation with little conscious awareness.

Constance was not immediately aware of the tap on her office door, nor the loud knock that followed, nor the voice calling her name. Her meditation had taken her into a state of oblivion. The voice at the door got louder, causing

her to break her meditative state. She was, however, not fully conscious and couldn't respond or identify the voice in her deep state of bliss.

She finally counted herself up from her deep state; the voice and the knock had faded away. She slowly opened her eyes and gazed around her office searching the wall for the classy octagon clock; it now appeared multicolored. The reflection from the sunlight beaming through the bay windows at first blinded her sight. She refocused her eyes.

"Oh my God," she whispered, allowing her consciousness to emerge. "It's ten o'clock." She now realized an hour had elapsed since her boss had asked her to meet with him.

She stood up yawned and stretched like a cat when it first awakens in the morning. A feeling of glorious happiness sprang up in her heart; she felt blissfully joyous, fully alive. Suddenly she remembered she had not responded to the knock on her door, nor to the voice she vaguely recalled hearing. *Could it have been John?* she thought. *I'm sure the meeting was important, but did it have a sense of urgency?*

She knew in her gut that the meeting had something to do with her position at Bay Construction and Design. Worse yet, she knew it had everything to do with her career. Despite these convictions, her anxiety had vanished, at least for now. She smiled and said, "I'm now armed and dangerous." She wasn't sure there would be a war, but she was certain a battle was brewing, and she was ready to handle it.

Constance had high cheekbones that accentuated her big brown eyes. Her oval face was dark and rather delicate; her nose was slender, the nostrils thin, so it was hard to immediately assign her to any ethnic group. She had often described herself as universal. Even her refined voice and speech could belong to anyone.

Constance McKenna's reaction to life's many situations changed as often as the situations did. There was one area of her life, however, that was predictable: her ability to create superior designs that won acceptance from her customers. She was able to not only design office space but also sell it. Of the few females in the company, she was the only female designer, and nobody could argue with her track record. Although there were many attributes and characteristics one could ascribe to Constance McKenna, one could sense many more that lay dormant. This gave her an aura of mystery. Most liked what they saw, yet there was an elusive, indefinable quality about her.

Constance picked up her phone and called her voice mail, listening attentively for John's voice as she forwarded through the endless messages.

Much to her surprise there was no message from John Shaw. Little lightning bolts of worry darted into her eyes. The easiest solution, she thought, would be to go down to his office now and apologize for the delay.

She slowly walked toward John's office with visible signs of her deep meditative state still lingering. She was hardly aware of anyone sitting in the office pool, but she was keenly aware of the competitive talk and excitement. Grace Mahoney, John's secretary, was not at her desk, so Constance walked into John's office; the door was wide open. His jacket was not there, but she decided to stick around for a few minutes to see if he would return soon.

Her eyes wandered around the office for clues of what might have been going on, tempted to take a peek at the papers that were surely off-limits. For the first time, she was aware of how clearly masculine his office was, yet it had an uncompromising quality—pure and simple. Maybe it was to disguise the paradoxical nature of the inhabitant, she thought.

"Hi Constance," Grace Mahoney said, her voice soft and warm. "John is not here. He is meeting with Thomas Morley and won't be back until four o'clock this afternoon."

Thomas Morley was the division president, who spent a lot of his time in China. *Is it a coincidence that he is here today, a few weeks after winning the feng shui design contract?* she wondered.

"I came down to get you this morning for the meeting, but you weren't there," Grace said, looking like an anxious child who had stumbled upon something she didn't understand.

Grace was beautiful; she had the bounteous magnificence of an earth mother. She seemed to have an aura of untouchable glory and grace about her. It was no wonder her name was Grace. Her large gray eyes were vivid and questioning as she watched Constance. She had that wise, family-friend look. Constance refused to take advantage of her compassion by asking her for information that she might not be at liberty to share.

"Thank you Grace," Constance said. "I will be back at four this afternoon, and I apologize for missing the meeting."

Constance was headed back to her office when George Bailey, her counterpart in the office chair design department, approached her.

"Constance, do you have a few minutes to take a look at my drawings?" he asked.

"Sure, George," she answered.

"This is a drawing of an office chair for the executives at Henderson Company," George informed her. He moved his ruler to show the various

features of his ergonomic executive chair design: “adjustable seat height, back high enough to support the spine, almost to the shoulders. It has a firm and flexible backrest,” he went on, with only a pause to catch a breath. “This is the open front and sides with armrests recessed from the front. Of course this will allow the users to move close to the work surface.” He was confident this was the beginning of a new identity for him.

Her thoughts were like gliding clouds, fading in and out of the heavens as he talked. She wasn’t sure she heard much of anything he said.

“So what do you think?” he asked, not the least bit aware that she barely heard a word he had said. George had a way of smiling without changing his mouth.

*Is George really seeking approval for his designs or does he have a hidden agenda?* Constance was plagued by the questions in her mind. She had not done a chair design since joining the company. George was by far the best and the most knowledgeable in the business, so why the question, she thought. She paused for a moment, as if reluctant to answer a question she wasn’t sure needed to be answered.

“George, this is great. It’s an evolution into creative daring with comfort and productivity as the primary motive,” she responded as she moved over to sit across from his desk.

“I like that description, Constance. Maybe I will use that text as part of the product marketing after I have finished.” His demeanor suddenly changed to that of a very capable detective. “So, what’s happening?”

“Not much,” Constance replied. “I missed my meeting with John this morning, so I’m somewhat in the dark.”

“Ah, so you haven’t heard the latest,” he said, acting as though he had a PhD in one-upmanship. “I wasn’t aware you weren’t there.”

Somehow Constance knew George had some scoop on what she felt was about to happen to her, even though she didn’t know if anything *was* going to happen to her. She sensed he wanted to tell her about it. She was determined that if and when she heard anything, she would hear it from her boss.

“You do know Bob LaCross resigned yesterday and took the current designs he was working on with him,” George said, pushing his bottom lip forward as if in deep thought. “I suppose he ran against the current of academic tradition one time too many with his designs. Bob made a lot of money for the company, but I suppose he flaunted too many company traditions. There’s nothing worse than a hero out of work.”

George rambled on, and Constance was silent. Her complete silence seemed to make him uncomfortable.

“You must integrate your part into the total system,” he said. “The day you believe in your own publicity it’s all over.”

Fear of the unknown caused her stomach to knot and churn. She looked at George with fragility in her eyes and quickly glanced at her watch. “Oh, no,” she said. “I have two minutes to get to my meeting. I didn’t realize it was that late. I will give you a call later.” She ran out of the room grateful that time had saved her for the moment.

She barely had time to take the elevator to the first-floor lobby when Jack Brand, president of Global Manufacturing, walked through the door. With him were several other distinguished-looking businessmen carrying briefcases; it was obvious that they had international profiles within the company. *They can’t be with Jack*, she thought, for it was supposed to be a meeting with just the two of them. Constance questioned herself as to whether or not she was prepared to handle anything other than what she had planned: going over some last-minute details about the feng shui design and the project scheduling—just a review.

She had dealt with Jack Brand for several years now, so she had a good sense of what to expect from their meetings. But what about the others? Why were they there? Were they from his international plants? Were they the group that had put up some resistance to the designs for the last five years? She had gotten much resistance from the traditional establishment, especially during the early stages, but as recently as a few weeks prior there were some expressed concerns. “Traditional,” she remembered, that was the word George had used in his speech about Matthew LaCross’s resignation. Her mind drifted into a fuzzy haze. *Could these guys be a part of the ‘traditional establishment’?* Constance wondered.

Jack firmly shook her hand. He had one of the warmest smiles she’d ever seen in a business executive, even under pressure. Jack’s body language projected confidence as usual, but there was something about the energy Constance felt when she shook hands with the other men that foretold a challenge on the agenda for the next few hours.

“Do you have time to answer some probing questions about the feng shui designs?” Jack asked as they walked down the hall to the conference room. He moved with a quiet economy of effort, unusual in a man so tall and muscular.

Constance was worried and wasn’t sure why. She felt confident even though she did not want to have to defend her designs. She had often been



challenged and criticized for some of her unconventional work and her creative thinking in her design engineering. She rarely went to great lengths to defend her position; defending one's creativity, she thought, took away the power of the creation. As they approached the boardroom, however, she felt that her core belief might be challenged and that she might find herself defending her design if it meant losing the contract with Global. So much of her soul had gone into selling and designing that project; she had eaten and slept with that design for the last five years. *I can't lose it now*, she thought.

The western sun bathed the conference room with dazzling light streaming through the open blinds. The plush floral carpet and the overstuffed chairs with handmade pillows and swivel buttons and casters gave the room a homey yet businesslike appearance. The room conveyed a clear message of comfort and professionalism.

The gentlemen seated themselves around the table in a disguised pecking order of importance. Jack Brand was at the head, seated next to Constance, but it was clear that he was there only because he had the most history with her. Constance got the message immediately that she would have to use every resource and all the statistics she had to conduct this meeting.

"For those of you who don't know me, I am Constance McKenna, vice president of office designs," she announced. She straightened the designer glasses that gave her an intellectual and rather interesting look. "Thanks for coming today. I suppose we can start with opening the meeting up to any questions or concerns you might have about the feng shui designs."

"Are you the only person in your organization involved in this design?" It was the gentleman sitting to the left; his voice was low, but the words whipped like steel between them.

"Well, no, the whole corporation is supporting this project," she answered, although she had some doubt about the truth of her statement.

"I mean is your upper and middle management involved?" he insisted, his face showing a battlefield of wrinkles. "I refuse to give my blessings to this project without . . . well, without some assurance from your upper-level management guaranteeing us that this office design will give us the desired result."

"Desired result?" Constance replied, with a look of surprise. "Maybe we should discuss what you mean, Mr.—"

"Harvey Walberg," he answered, staring with a combination of defiance and stupidity. He was from the Midwest, and he owned Global Manufacturing. "Are there any other representatives from your company here today? We have



not seen any stats that the floor plan and design configuration that you are proposing is of any value at all.” His mouth lifted in a menacing, sarcastic smile. “Furthermore,” he continued with no cohesiveness to his questions, “feng shui might be for other people, but we are different. We are Americans, and our people respond to a different kind of workplace.”

He stopped suddenly as if he had just finished an emotional speech. Her whole body tightened as she took a deep breath. *Did Jack Brand leave me to fight this battle alone? Did he sincerely believe in the concept of my design? Or, better yet, did he understand it enough to convey it?* She knew that everything hinged on her answer to this man’s concerns. She concluded that it must therefore be persuasive and have a male perspective to it. *I must not show that I know he is uncomfortable in not seeing a male presence or suspecting that this design is my idea with very little, if any, logic to back it up,* she said to herself.

Once again, Constance took a deep breath and asked for inner guidance, which she would follow without questioning because at this point she didn’t know what else to draw on.

“Mr. Walberg, I understand your concerns, so let me try to address them in the order you expressed them.” Her eyes left his face for a fluttering moment to look around the table, taking in the four other men. “Let’s talk about the desired results. It is my understanding that your plants are in dire need of remodeling and that plans have been on the drawing board for the last five years. It is also my understanding that the efficiency plan has been completed and the budget has been approved for implementing it this year. Is that accurate?” She felt passionate and intense and was clear about what she wanted to say, and at that moment she was sure that what she said was coming from her center.

“Doing the design, and remodeling in feng shui will not take away from the practicality of optimizing your plant floor productivity, an expectation you would have for any design,” Constance continued. “You will get the space saving, the ease in product movement, and all the other benefits you would get from your conventional design. In addition, there are other tangible benefits you will get from feng shui that can be measured over time. Productivity is expected to increase, absenteeism will decrease, and balance, harmony, and cooperation among employees will improve.”

She stood, and for the first time her eyes met Mr. Walberg’s, as she moved toward the drawing board.

“Of course, these will be subtle benefits,” she said, drawing her design on the blackboard, “but we will be able to measure them over time.” She felt

her confidence rise--or was it arrogance? She wasn't sure. All eyes began to watch with renewed interest as she wrote on the blackboard and continued to speak forcefully.

"All humans have feelings, including the animal kingdom, and these feelings are universal in nature. They transcend time, space, and cultural differences, feeling in harmony and balance, or feeling out of harmony and balance. It is not unique to any culture. Being in harmony and balance with one's surrounding will serve to create positive energy, and positive energy flow increases productivity." Constance moved away from the board and sat down at the table with a disarming friendliness about her.

"It has been claimed by some of the companies that have had feng shui design installed, that productivity, sales, and a more harmonious workplace did result," she continued, as if giving a lecture and had captured the attention of the entire class. "You will not be disappointed. Tangible results will have to be measured later when the design is installed, but I can assure you that if you are looking for measurable results from the design, we can certainly track it within your plant if you'd like."

Constance realized that she was going out on a limb with this statement. She did not know if her company would back her up, but she felt in her gut that she needed to say it. "We will track and measure the results," she said confidently.

*This is the kind of statement any good salesperson would make, she thought. But Constance believed she was relating to a voice inside of her that truly knew the benefits of feng shui. Maybe it's coming from an old wise Chinese spirit.*

Her confidence swelled. It appeared that Constance had the undivided attention of her audience because no one asked any additional questions; they simply allowed her to continue. Constance was smiling in the calm strength of her knowledge. Her fine, silky eyebrows arose a trifle; her face had a look of compassion, but troubled and still.

"As far as Americans being different, I'm not sure I understand what you mean by that statement," she said. "If you mean our culture is different from that of China you are right; however, we are not using the Chinese culture as a model for the feng shui. We are only using the expertise of Chinese who have used the design in this country—in American businesses—and achieved their desired results. The people who have brought the results to the businesses have been bonafide American customers. They have increased their buying

and or use of the services because something subtle caused them to react in a positive way toward the business.

“Energy among the human species,” she continued, gracefully tossing her head so that her brown eyes looked into Mr. Walberg’s, “is universal. We all feel; we all react to our feelings; we know when we feel good; we know when we feel bad. Now we may not know *why* we have these feeling, but we do know we have them.” She paused only to take a breath. “Feng shui taps into our subtle energy field where those feelings are. It has a positive effect on it so that we are operating at our full potential.” She was truly absorbed in her vision. “You see,” she said, as if concluding closing arguments, “energy does not identify itself in the form of culture.”

“The profitability of the whole project has been forecast and measured, has it not, Jack?” Mr. Walberg said. Suddenly there was friendliness in his voice. He couldn’t help respect her commitment and integrity. Jack now projected a controlled smile.

“Actually, Harvey,” Jack finally said, “we have spoken to several other companies who have this design, and they have had a lot of favorable comments to make about it.”

*Why did Jack wait until I poured my soul out to save this project before saying anything supportive?* Constance thought. *Maybe he wasn’t convinced until now.* She wondered if perhaps he, like the others, had reservations because she was a female and about the ability of the designing to bring the results they were seeking in their manufacturing plants.

“Let me draw you an example of the design and show you how it will create harmony and balance, cause cooperative energy to flow through, and create cohesiveness and reduce conflicts,” said Constance, once again approaching the blackboard. “Worker number one will be in sync with worker number two because she will sense the positive energy flow created by the design itself, and enhanced by the reflection of the mirror situated in the appropriate space of the octagon.” She paused and looked around the room.

“The laws of attraction will answer the question of the magnetic energy flow of the mirror,” she continued, feeling somewhat awkward. She didn’t want to give a scientific explanation—simply because she didn’t want to get into it. Her background was not in science, and she was hoping they would find it too technical to listen to. “Now, if you want the technical details we can get them.”

Again Constance had gone out on a limb hoping she would not fall off. She was even more aware of her uneasiness, having to defend the logic of her design; her heartbeat increased a bit.

“I think we got the picture, Constance,” Mr. Walberg said with a startled-fawn expression on his face as he leaned across the table. “How long will it take your company to complete all our plants? If it can do all that you say it can, we needed it yesterday.”

“The last time I consulted with the senior design engineers, we estimated that it would take approximately twelve to fifteen months to complete the project,” Constance said, careful to use the word “we” to imply that there were many others involved and the word “engineers” to connote a male involvement.

“We are meeting with my boss and upper management later this afternoon to solidify the designs,” she said rather persuasively, knowing that she didn’t have the endorsement for the project. Her mind drifted as the executives spoke among themselves. *What if I were taken off the project? Would the standard layout with another design be used instead? Would I be allowed to implement the feng shui design and follow through tracking the results?* Constance’s thoughts had begun to consume her when Mr. Walberg stood.

“I think I have my concerns addressed and satisfied for now,” he said as he reached for his briefcase.

“Since it’s getting late, Constance, why don’t we reschedule our meeting for next week,” Jack Brand suggested, a sigh of relief in his voice.

A small but satisfying victory had been won in Constance’s mind, if not in actuality, and she too sighed a breath of relief. She realized that she, like Jack, had been uptight—but concealed it very well.

Constance suddenly remembered she had a four o’clock meeting with her boss, John Shaw, which was in fifteen minutes. All of the issues she had buried for the last several hours were now resurfacing, so she put her head down for a few minutes of meditation. Feng shui designing had become a part of her life’s work. It consumed most of her life; maybe it was her life. The thought of giving up feng shui designing as a career path was something she couldn’t bear to think about. *It is my center*, she said to herself. *It is worth fighting for.* It was in that moment that she was convinced that she would fight for her designing career no matter what it would take.

It was four o’clock sharp when she arrived at John Shaw’s office. The atmosphere was different from earlier; it was about as relaxed as an audition in which you know you won’t get the part, even after working incredibly hard

to perfect your skill. John Shaw was seated behind his desk, looking intensely at what appeared to be a detailed design layout. Constance couldn't identify it as that of Global Manufacturing, but she sensed that it was.

"Oh, hi Constance," said John, looked somewhat surprised to see her, as she had entered without knocking. "I didn't hear you come in." He gestured to her to sit in the chair next to his desk, strategically placed there to reduce conflict, Constance thought. There was something terribly unsettling about the way he looked. He seemed weighted with unutterable burdens.

"How did your meeting go with Global today?" he asked.

"It went very well," she answered, hoping he would get to the point.

"Did Harvey Walberg attend?" he asked eagerly.

Constance wondered how John knew that Harvey Walberg was going to attend the meeting. She was completely baffled; she suddenly felt a declaration of war between them. Where once she thought they were on the same team, now she questioned if John was going to hang her out to dry. Maybe something happened at the last minute and he didn't have time to tell her. The questions in her mind were becoming overwhelming.

"Yes, Mr. Walberg did attend," she answered matter-of-factly. She was determined at this point not to give any more information than he asked for.

"Well, do we still have the contract?" John asked with an unusual seriousness showing in his face. Constance felt threatened by the strange atmosphere, so she answered immediately.

"Mr. Walberg wants to know how soon we can start with the design."

"Constance, I want you to know that you've done a good job on that account." His eyes moved away as he spoke. "You might have heard by now that we have hired a new guy to manage the Global Manufacturing project. Let me assure you that this has nothing to do with you." He made fleeting glances at her face as if he were holding something back, as if he didn't really believe in what he had to say but had to say it anyway. "His name is Wyman Fortuna from Midwest Construction Company in Backward City. He is a senior designer with very good qualifications."

Constance shifted uneasily, not sure what to say. *He doesn't even carry a comparable title to mine, but he is taking over*, she thought.

"I think you will like working for him," John went on. Constance couldn't contain herself any longer. She adjusted her body in the chair; her face fell in disappointment.

"I will like working for him?" she asked, her voice hollow. "Are you saying I am no longer working for you?"

“No, that’s not what I’m saying at all. What I’m saying is that Wyman will take over the project. You’ll report to me, but he’ll lead the project and you’ll follow his directions on any concerns about Global.” He had a quiet air of authority yet with rare warmth. “All of your other responsibilities will remain the same. You will continue to preside over junior interiors.”

“Does he have a background in feng shui designing?” she asked, showing her disapproval.

“Well, not exactly, but he has been to China.”

*Been to China?* she thought. *What has that got to do with anything?*

“Which brings me to my next point,” John continued. “We would like you to help bring him onboard with the Global project and accompany him to the feng shui seminar in Beijing next week.”

Going to China could have been the opportunity of a lifetime under other circumstances. The glass looked half empty instead of half full, which was not the way Constance usually looked at things.

“We’ll need to bring Wyman up-to-date as soon as possible,” John continued with authority. “We’re counting on you to assist him and provide him with as much information on feng shui as you can.”

Constance had a lump in her throat as she turned away, trying to swallow her pride. She knew she must stay centered for her own sake because her anger was slowly creeping upon her. If she continued to question John about his decision, the volume would turn up and maybe explode. She took a deep breath to reduce her tension a few percentage points as she sat in complete silence.

“Think about it, Constance. It has nothing to do with you. This is not a plot against you. It is in your best interest.” John spoke softly. “It really has very little to do with your performance. The feng shui design needs more backing from within and we are trying to make that happen. We would like to have your support one hundred percent.” His face had the withered look of an empty balloon.

*John will take over the project that I worked for the last five years, giving up so much of my personal time to make it happen,* she thought as she walked over to close her office for the evening. She was preoccupied with how she would fight for her dignity and respect as a feng shui designer and keep the project she so rightfully deserved.

## CHAPTER 2

A creeping uneasiness at the bottom of her heart kept Constance going back and forth to the window to see if her cab had arrived. She had been ready for the last three hours even though the cab wasn't due to arrive for several hours.

She had checked her bags for the fifth time when her alarm clock went off, which made her realize that she had gotten up and dressed three hours before she needed to. This was unusual, for Constance was never late or early for a flight. She had always looked forward to sleeping until the alarm went off because she knew she would be in balance and harmony and arrive on time. Today she felt anything but balance and harmony, and the thought of meditating was not appealing. Her thoughts were scattered.

It had rained all night in a continuous downpour, and this morning was no different, except that the wind had picked up and the temperature had plummeted. The cabdriver honked his horn as he waited, peeping through the windshield wiper blades trying to see the house number. Constance took the six bags, one by one, and placed them on her front porch. Her nerves were at full stretch when she started down the steep steps that led to the sidewalk. Her two-story home sat atop a mountainous hill overlooking the narrow streets. She had picked up her last piece, the heaviest, when her foot slipped on the wet steps and threw her body out of balance. She threw her luggage ahead, and it greeted her like a cushion as she tumbled to the pavement. Unable to break her fall, she landed on her back with the contents of her purse scattered around her.

She lay there feeling as though the rain and wind were assaulting her body. It was as if she were fastened to the pavement. Yet she was very much aware of her thoughts.

She loved that two-story Victorian house in Knob Hill so much so that her parents had sold it to her five years ago and took back the mortgage



themselves. She had grown up in that house and knew it inside and out. She had never had an accident coming down those steps, even as a child, although she was always reminded of their danger if she were not careful. She could now hear the voice of her dad: “Stay in harmony and balance and you will not attract any kind of accident.” It was etched in her memory.

“Lady? Lady? Are you okay?” the cabdriver asked as he shook her gently. His hands were damply flaccid and thick fingered. “Should I take you to the emergency room?” His face collapsed into a complex set of wrinkles.

“I think I’m okay, just wet,” Constance managed to whisper, wiping the red and pink streaks of makeup off her face. “I need to go to United Airlines.”

With the help of the cabdriver, she managed to stand up and collect herself as the cold rain and wind invaded her body and caused her to shake. She couldn’t have been out long enough to be shaking from exposure, she thought. As she rode the ten miles to San Francisco Airport, her entire body shook, and she sat in complete silence trying to find a way to put mind over matter. She looked desperately out of her window at the pouring rain and the blowing winds as if she could replace her tension by their intensity. Her chill and dampness gave way to the wonderment of nature. She couldn’t help but tune in to the sound of the rain beating on the windowpane and the gusting of the wind as it picked up the raindrops and blew them at precisely the right moment.

As she watched the metropolis of parks and skyscrapers against a backdrop of tree-covered peaks, she was reminded of her commitment to live in balance and harmony with nature and her environment; she had been missing the mark at every turn for the last year. Right now she couldn’t think about what had happened; she had to prepare herself for a trip to a foreign land.

Constance’s nervousness and anxiety reappeared as soon as she arrived at the airport; international flights always made her a bit uncomfortable. She was also agonizing over a sense of failure about her career and lack of appreciation from John Shaw; her confidence was at an all-time low. She was due to meet Wyman Fortuna at the check-in, and she had little to no information about him, nor did she know what he looked like.

*Not an ideal way to meet one’s replacement,* she thought with resentment. *How can I greet him with dignity and respect when I feel like I have been robbed of my own—and that he had as much to do with it as the others?* The ill feeling was slowly germinating within her. She determined that she would bury herself in her books and reports and show no interest in Wyman Fortuna whatsoever. *But what if he has the seat next to me?* she thought. *No, Grace wouldn’t have*



*done that to me. She, of all the people I work with in the company, has sensitivity and compassion for the human spirit and ego as well.*

Constance arrived at the check-in for flight 237 to Tokyo two hours before the flight was scheduled to leave. Looking around the airport, a wave of grayness passed over her, a kind of dark premonition of what she might be facing. She couldn't quite understand why so many unwanted thoughts kept creeping into her mind. She kept looking around and checking all the men that walked through the terminal to see if she could spot Wyman Fortuna. She tried to visualize how Wyman Fortuna might look—*short medium built with a full face? Maybe he's lost, being a boy from the cow country of the Midwest*, she thought. However there was no one she had seen so far with an out-of-place look, wearing cowboy boots. She imagined he would probably have a milk-fed awkward look with a potbelly from drinking beer while playing softball and hanging out at happy hour. Certainly there would be nothing classy or sophisticated about him, she thought. Now Constance had never been judgmental or prejudiced, nor did she stereotype people. So what was going on? Why all of these “less-than-positive”—she refused to call them negative—thoughts?

Constance sat facing the continuous flow of weather-beaten people passing through the terminal. Suddenly she saw a man walking toward her nervously rubbing his fingernail against his thumb, a look of apprehension and confusion in his face. She knew it had to be Wyman Fortuna. She winced slightly as if her flesh had been nipped, still feeling the effects of her earlier rain invasion.

“Hi, my name is Constance McKenna from Bay Construction and Design, and I am supposed to meet you here for our flight to China,” she blurted suddenly, never bothering to ask who he was.

“You are who?” he asked, his voice totally devoid of any recognition of the name.

“Constance McKenna,” she repeated, pinching her lower lip with her teeth as it occurred to her that she hadn't asked him his name. “Are you Wyman Fortuna?”

“No, I am not,” the man answered, his voice as cold as his eyes. “Now would you excuse me?”

He pushed past her, and Constance looked around to see if anyone had noticed the rejection—and gave a sigh of relief that the man wasn't Wyman Fortuna. *Maybe my attitude brought me just what I expected*, she said to

herself. *Someone cold and callous*. She wondered if perhaps she wanted Wyman Fortuna to be that way simply so she could justify her feelings toward him.

Constance was deeply involved in reading a mystery novel. The information coming through the intercom system, as well as all other background noise, had faded when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Are you Constance McKenna from Bay Construction and Design?” a rich, timbre voice asked.

“Yes, I am,” she said, appearing startled as she looked up into the face of a tall, distinguished-looking man in his late thirties. His urban, classy look took her by complete surprise. “You must be Wyman Fortuna. . . . It’s nice to meet you.” She shook his hand, hoping he wouldn’t notice the surprised look on her face, and stared into his deep, winter-blue eyes that expressed more curiosity than challenge.

“We still have some time before takeoff. Would you like to get a cup of coffee?” he asked, acting eager to talk.

The coffee shop was rather crowded; the air felt as if it had been breathed too many times. The room smelled of rain and mildew—not exactly the best impression for a first-time introduction to San Francisco, but it was an airport. They sat across from each other at a table as big as a diaper.

“I’m extremely excited about this opportunity to work on the feng shui design,” Wyman said, his voice racing with intensity. “I’m looking forward to you teaching me all you know about the design and the philosophy behind it.” He sipped black coffee with enough sugar to turn it into white coffee.

*I teach him and he will replace me in the company*, Constance thought, her fear overpowering her. *If he’s my superior and I’m supposed to report to him, then why should I have to teach him? Shouldn’t he know it already?*

“Have you studied anything at all about feng shui?” she asked, feeling her own resentment and knowing what the answer would be.

“No, nothing at all,” he answered. “I just heard about it as a variable concept for office design a few months ago. None of the companies in the Midwest have much, if any, interest or even knowledge of the feng shui interior design. . . . You know, I have had this book about feng shui on my list of books to buy and read, but I’ve never gotten around to doing it.” He smiled; it was a good smile, intended to warm her heart. “However, I have always had an interest in creating harmony and balance in designs, and if feng shui can help me improve on that I am all for it.”

He framed his coffee cup with both hands. It was obvious he was accustomed to gesturing with his hands in conversation, maybe even touching, but he was cautious not to be too assuming and instead followed her lead. Constance had finished her orange juice; coffee was a beverage she wouldn't consume under any circumstances. She sat with her hands resting on the table like empty gloves. She wanted to be certain her comment would not be flippant, and she didn't want to sound bitter.

"I didn't realize you weren't familiar with feng shui designing—since you are going to take over the project," she said matter-of-factly, not showing much emotion. Her smile was fixed and meaningless. Constance realized she had made the mistake she had promised herself she wouldn't. Wrathful, maybe even pitiful, feelings lurked deep inside of her. Why Wyman Fortuna, with no feng shui experience, was hired was one nagging question, but why did he have to direct the project while she had to report to him? It was beyond her comprehension.

"In feng shui designing, intuition is the driving force behind the design," Constance continued before she knew what she was saying, "and if that is not something you believe in, then you might find yourself at odds with the design." Did she imply that he didn't have intuition? she thought afterward.

Was she giving Wyman Fortuna a chance? Did she really care whether she gave him a chance? Was her anger misdirected? After all, she had just met him. She wanted to ask him how he got the job. Did she really give a damn what had happened to her business savvy?

"Unfortunately, for me," Wyman said, "I don't, at this point, know feng shui, but I am very accomplished in creative designing using conventional methods. I have a track record that I'm very proud of." His face showed a delicate dimension of sensitivity. "I have several awards for my practicality and functionality in designing. Now, I haven't done feng shui, but I'm confident I can." It was as if he were trying to gain acceptance from Constance, and yet he displayed a lot of control and competence in the way he handled himself.

"I'm open to new ideas and new challenges," he continued. "Understanding energy, harmony, and balance are part of those challenges." Creases angled in toward the corner of his eyes. "But I need to know and understand enough to put logic behind it so that it gets accepted by mainstream America."

*He has political talent, a natural charm, and the gift of persuasion,* Constance thought. She didn't want to be antagonistic, but now all she felt was confusion, wanting to act like her old self on one hand but her feeling of resentment was too strong.

"I'm happy about this opportunity, but I certainly don't expect to get caught in a crossfire," said Wyman. His words had bite. He moved his head slightly to establish perspective. "Is there something going on that I should be aware of? Have I misinterpreted something?"

"Something you should know about concerning what?" Constance was not aware of the irritation in her voice.

"Basically, I was hired to do structural engineering and conventional designing," he said, looking confused. "I wasn't hired to specifically do feng shui designs. I understand you are the expert in that area. Since your company is known for its expertise in doing them, I wanted to become involved and get an understanding of the designing concept." His winter-blue eyes radiated concern and a need for understanding. "I was told I needed to work and consult with you because you have the most expertise."

Trying to recapture the precise details of her conversation with John Shaw, Constance held her hand to her forehead, her chin almost resting on her chest.

"It is my understanding that I'm to report to you and take my directions from you," she said, wondering if she had misunderstood what John Shaw had said to her.

"Those were not the instructions nor the conditions upon which I was hired," Wyman said. His full lips blended into a strong chin; he had classically handsome features. "I specifically asked to work with you as my mentor since I'd heard good things about your work and your professionalism." His eyes showed a willingness to be a follower.

"I was told you blaze your own trail, and I am impressed by that," he continued, adjusting his cream-colored sandpiper sweater. "I'm not aware that I'm supposed to direct anything or anybody. I don't have a hidden agenda, and I hope nobody else does."

He had refreshing ingenious warmth, but Constance wondered if she could trust what he said. *Why is his interpretation so different from mine?* she thought. Constance knew, however, that she had to get past these thoughts if she were to have any degree of success in China. She knew she had to compromise; after all, she had never been to China before and the only knowledge she had about the country came from reading a book—a book mainly on the philosophy of the country and not much in the way of how to survive a three-week business trip there. Taking a chance on alienating herself from Wyman would not be a smart move, she thought, determining to be reasonable and professional.

“I have a very detailed book on feng shui designs and concepts in my briefcase, if you are interested in reading about it on the plane,” she said with a renewed enthusiasm. Constance had a built-in sense of social grace. She felt at this point that they were not enemies, but she was too cautious to be friends.

“I would be delighted,” he said with a wide, warming smile, disarming himself.

Constance knew that the book would substitute for conversation with him on the plane trip, even though her seat was five aisles away from his. She had checked that out with Grace Mahoney. If she were lucky, she would be seated next to someone who knew a lot about the way to conduct one’s self in China —she had been successful in the past in drawing the right people to her, using the law of attraction.

They lined themselves up with the large crowd of passengers headed toward gate 15 as the voice on the intercom said, “Flight 237 now boarding to Beijing, China, with a brief stopover in Tokyo.”

## CHAPTER 3

Constance remembered very little about her flight to Tokyo. She did, however, remember finishing her mystery novel before falling asleep.

“Thank you for flying United Airlines. Please be sure to check your overhead compartment and under your seat for all your belongings. Have a wonderful stay in Tokyo. For those of you who are making other connections, check with the information desk for your connecting flight.”

Constance was sound asleep when the attendant announced their arrival.

“Madam, you must depart the plane. We are in Tokyo,” the attendant said, shaking her. Constance felt like she had been drugged and had temporary amnesia.

“I can’t believe I slept that sound,” she said, looking around the empty plane. “Where are we?” Constance stood up, feeling a sense of disbelief as she gathered her carry-on luggage and stuffed her books and magazine in her bag. *What happened to Wyman?* she wondered. *Why didn’t he awaken me so we could depart together?* They had a three-hour stopover in Tokyo; she assumed Wyman would be at the departure gate. She couldn’t have been asleep more than a few minutes after the plane landed. Surely he would wait for her at the gate.

The flight had been at capacity, so she probably did herself a favor by remaining asleep until everyone got off the plane; she avoided being sandwiched in the massive crowd. Rubbing her eyes and yawning, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar surroundings, Constance walked down the narrow corridor leading from the plane to the terminal. She wondered where all the people from her flight were and how they had cleared out so quickly. It was not until she reached the end of the corridor that she actually realized where she was. It was as though she were dreaming when she looked at the mass of humanity and recognized no one. Her eyes filled with fear as they

searched the huge crowd for her traveling companion. She wormed her way through the crush of people as she fumbled for her ticket. She had to find her departure gate, anxiously hoping that Wyman would be waiting for her there.

“What time did flight 237 arrive from San Francisco?” she asked at the information desk, trying to establish a time factor in order to understand her present moment. She couldn’t fathom how Wyman could have moved so far ahead of her so quickly. Why didn’t he wait to accompany her to their connecting flight? They had plenty of time before the next flight.

Her compartmentalized purse was stuffed with everything she had thought she might need: cotton balls, toilet tissue, gum headache remedies, pens, paper, lotion, etc. She suddenly remembered that she hadn’t checked for her passport since falling down her steps back home.

She spread the contents of her purse on the small space in front of her as she searched frantically to find her passport. She had always been careful about those kinds of things, putting them in a safe or secret place like the hidden compartment of her purse. She could feel the pounding of her blood in her ears as she removed every single item and placed them on her wool overcoat that she had spread on the floor. She felt a familiar, nervous fluttering that always crept into her chest when things were dreadfully wrong. She ran her hands through all of her coat pockets, turning them inside out. Her anxiety continued to grow as she checked and double-checked her slacks and every piece of clothing she was wearing.

She sighed with relief when she remembered her carry-on luggage. *Maybe I stuffed my passport in there since my purse was so packed.* She took a deep breath and tried to center herself, but wasn’t very successful. Thousands of miles from her homeland with no passport or identification, she was too frightened to think of being centered. Anxiety continued to mount as she took the contents out of her small carry-on bag piece by piece, unfolding and shaking each one.

Her mind raced as she tried to figure out what could possibly have happened. She remembered her fall when the contents of her purse had been sprawled on the street in front of her house. Her mind was now floating in sepia haze. She would never get into China without her passport. It was a nightmare, she thought, frantically shoveling her belongings back into her luggage, to be in this part of the world with no identification. She had heard horror stories about people traveling in foreign countries and losing a passport.

Looking at the multitudes, Constance couldn't recall having ever seen so many people packed in such a small space. She moved toward the information desk, trying to avoid stepping on mothers and children lying on the floor.

"Excuse me," she kept repeating as she pushed her way through.

It was a struggle carrying her purse on one shoulder and her luggage on the other. Besides, she was wearing her heavy clothing including a heavy, double-lined, wool topcoat with each of its many pockets stuffed full of personal items. Her two-pound leather boots, which topped two pairs of hiking socks, constrained her movement as she maneuvered her way through the huge crowd looking for the departure gate. She wanted to find Wyman Fortuna now more than ever.

"Excuse me, which direction do I go to reach gate 42 for flight 720 to Beijing?" she asked, slamming her luggage to the floor.

"Make right, go to left, make sharp turn to right, take left to gate 42," the attendant answered. She repeated the directions back to him, making sure she'd heard them correctly.

She hoped for the best, as she threw herself into the moving throng in the direction she believed to be a right turn. She looked up at the signs with Japanese characters directing the flow of traffic, but she wasn't sure what they meant. She had brought a Chinese pocket guide but not a Japanese one. She didn't expect that she would need one because she wasn't spending any time in Japan.

Constance couldn't get beyond her obsessive sense of everything going wrong. The same feeling of foreboding that had been with her a few days ago crept into her consciousness as she hurriedly, almost running now, started down the walkway she thought would lead to her departure gate. The gate numbers were continuing to get smaller, the crowd getting thicker, while she wove her way from one terminal to the next.

"Oh my God," she said, standing in the middle of the traffic flow, her eyes and brain connecting to recognized the decreasing gate numbers. "Have I passed my gate? I must have taken a right when I should have taken a left."

The long, thick shoelaces on her hiking boots had become untied, adding to her annoyance. A heavy piece of Samsonite luggage struck her back as she stooped to retie them, plunging her three feet into the oncoming crowd. A whisper of terror ran through her brain as she landed with her face smashed into her shoulder bag, her carry-on luggage now a makeshift, uncomfortable headrest. She felt as though she was trapped inside a percussion instrument that was being played out of tune.



*Will anybody recognize that I'm not a part of the walkway?* she thought while lying sprawled amidst the moving mass of people. It seemed like hours as she laid there, the footsteps barely missing vital parts of her anatomy. She felt like her body, her luggage, and the floor were all one—and hoped this was not what was meant by “being one with your surroundings.” The layers of heavy clothing had protected her tall, thin frame. Her tendency to feel chilled and the anticipation of China’s cold weather had inspired her to dress this way.

An old gentleman in a white wool robe with a matching turbine, covering what appeared to be his baldhead, stopped to help her. At the same time, a six-foot-four Black man with muscular arms wedged into a full-body-length, off-white cashmere coat, lifted Constance out of the oncoming traffic and held her in his arms to wait for the airport emergency crew to arrive.

“I medicine man,” he said as he instructed the Black man to put her down on a blanket he had spread on the floor. The Black Man carefully placed her on the blanket and quickly walked away. The old man reached into his little, black bag and brought out an ice bag, which he placed on her bruised grape-pulp lip. “Where you from You Asian? You Americana? You got passport?”

The questions were asked gently by the old man, but there was no response. Constance was in a twilight state, only partially alert. She had been seriously traumatized. It wasn’t until the “medicine man” passed a concoction of herbs over her nose twice that she opened her eyes. Even though she wasn’t certain where she was, she did know who she was.

“Can you move your arm?” he asked checking her body for broken bones. “No broken bones. . . . Eyes very good . . . You be okay. Must stay in balance. Flow with life. No out of balance. Rush makes no difference. Center must center.” He lamented these incomplete sentences to Constance who intuitively knew exactly what he meant. “No important,” he said quietly and walked away.

Constance stood up; she felt no pain in her body.

“Thank you so very—” Her words fell on deaf ears. The old man was nowhere in sight. A significant but strange feeling was swelling inside of her, which had nothing to do with her injury. Because of her injury, Constance checked herself in the restroom mirror to see how badly her lip was swollen and to examine her entire body for bruises. After all, she had taken quite a beating from the pedestrian traffic before she passed out. She couldn’t believe that she wasn’t feeling any pain. There was no trace of bruising anywhere; her face and lips were devoid of any signs of injury. Her face was glowing; her lips

were like a thread of scarlet. Her hands had no trace of injury even though she knew they had been stepped on several times while lying on the airport floor.

In her preoccupation with her amazing recovery, Constance had forgotten about her passport and her search for Wyman Fortuna. For some strange reason she had lost her panic about both. She focused her attention on centering and getting to gate 42 for her flight to Beijing. She sensed that she was in touch with something that would guide her to her passport—or a resolution to getting another. She had very little awareness of the huge crowd or the discomfort of her luggage and heavy clothing when she looked up and saw “Gate 42” in big black numbers on a white background. Maybe the numbers weren’t any larger than the others, but in her eyes they were as vivid and striking as neon signs.

She immediately checked in and received her boarding pass. She hadn’t noticed Wyman Fortuna, seated with his back to her, talking intensely to an arrogantly handsome woman of indeterminate age, until she was about to be seated. She had reservations about interrupting him; they seemed so involved with themselves. *Who was the woman?* she thought. He couldn’t possibly have just met her; they seemed too familiar.

Gazing intently at the pair, Constance noticed that Wyman was showing the woman drawings from the feng shui design book she had loaned him. The woman had a pad and pen and was writing something down not from the book itself, but from Constance’s personal compilation notebook she had included with the book.

Before she knew it, suspicion and resentment had crept their way into the forefront of her thoughts. The plane was scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes. She thought he might be looking around to see if she were okay, but the scene in front of her made her question Wyman’s character. The cynical voice in her head brought question after question as she quizzed herself silently. Did he not give a damn whether she made it to Beijing for the seminar? But why not? She wondered if her feng shui design book with her notes had replaced her, and he now considered her obsolete.

She had to say something, she thought. She must let him know about her passport. Maybe he could tell her what to do, she told herself.

“Wyman,” she said, acting excited to see him as if she had just noticed he was there. “I need to talk to you about something important.”

“I wondered what had happened to you,” he said politely and tactfully incurious. Arching his brows into triangles he said, nonchalantly, “What do

you need to talk about? Our flight will be leaving shortly and I don't think we'll be seated near each other."

"Now boarding flight 720 to Beijing," the voice over the intercom said, just as he completed his sentence.

Wyman immediately jumped to his feet and grabbed his bags.

"Maybe you can tell me when we get to China. We have to board now," he said.

As he boarded the plane, his smile was more like a wrinkle with teeth in it. Just as predicted, they were seated several rows away from each other and on opposite sides of the plane. However, she thought that wouldn't preclude him from coming back to hear what she needed to talk to him about if he were interested. Because of the indifference he had shown, she didn't feel comfortable seeking him out and approaching him again.

Feeling humiliated, she took her seat. Many questions lingered between them, unasked, unanswered. Constance wondered if she strained the relationship before it had begun. The thought of being in China alone for the first time in her life without a passport was horrifying. The only hope she felt she had was to try to tap into an all-knowing intelligence. *I must find my center*, she thought, visibly shaken.

She couldn't stop her mind from racing as the plane took off. She questioned Wyman's insensitivity. She had given him her career's work on the secrets of feng shui designs. It had taken her several years and great sacrifice to compile those facts, figures, and designs and to measure their effectiveness. That work meant everything to her; it was her whole life. *Why did I give it to this man without reservations?* Exhausted from the ordeal of the day, she fell into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER 4

The last hills lilted out of Inner Mongolia southeastward. Entering the huge alluvial bowl of the Yellow River below, Constance awaked from a less-than-restful sleep. She sat looking out at the divide between plateau and plain with a feeling that she had gotten a message about her passport while asleep. She gazed from east to west: the west brown, the east green.

Within half an hour they would be landing in Beijing. Anticipating her arrival and remembering her dream, she suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to get her feng shui book and notes from Wyman Fortuna. She felt a whisper of impulse to act at that precise moment. Taking a deep breath she unlocked her seat belt and stood up, looking around the plane to spot Wyman's seat. She hadn't heard the attendant say, "Fasten your seat belts for landing"; her hearing was impaired by her preoccupation with getting to Wyman's seat six aisles away.

"Madam, you must take your seat," the attendant said, blocking her in the aisle and leading her back to her seat. Constance returned to her seat, but she was determined to get to Wyman as soon as, if not before, the plane landed. She sat on the edge of her seat with all of her carry-on luggage within easy reach. Her adrenaline had kicked in and she was positioned to plunge forward as soon as the plane hit the runway. She had spotted Wyman, so she could aim for his seat.

Fear was at peak intensity, forcing her to action. She heard absolutely nothing that was said about the landing; she just knew the plane had landed. She grabbed her bags and lunged to her feet and virtually leaped to Wyman's seat before he could think of getting up.

"My book! Please give me my feng shui book," she cried.

Wyman looked at her, troubled and still, and then reached into his briefcase and reluctantly handed her the book without saying a word. She

snatched it and kept moving with the departing passengers. She had to find a safe spot to sit and search the book to make sure none of her feng shui secrets had been taken. Safety had to be a main concern, she thought remembering her incident at the Tokyo airport. The crowds here were just as large.

She negotiated her way through the masses and found a corner away from the traffic. Her heart thumped against her rib cage as she rummaged through the feng shui book. The pocket of the notebook felt thin-too thin to have all the feng shui documents. She quickly flipped thorough the pages. A thick proposal document was stuffed in the pocket. *What had she done with her feng shui paper? she had always kept them in that pocket.* It was not until she had turned the notebook inside out and searched each section that she remembered she had not put the papers in the notebook. She had stuffed them in an eight-and-a-half-inch canvass pocket inside her luggage. She immediately noticed another small pocket in the notebook. Carefully, she slid her hand into the pocket to pull out its contents. As she felt what her senses told her was something laminated, smooth, and soft beneath her fingers, she knew it was her passport.

“My passport! It really is my passport,” she said, as if she were sharing the moment with a dear friend.

A feeling of glorious happiness sprang up in her heart. Constance wondered how she knew to look in the notebook pocket; it was not a place she would ever consider putting her passport, because she had designated it as a lock box for her feng shui designs only. Constance gathered her scattered papers and put them back into the pocket of her notebook. She scanned the room and spotted Wyman Fortuna making his way toward her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, standing with an indolent torn cat grace. “Come, we can get a jump on getting through customs if we hurry. I have phoned Capital Taxi—they speak English.” He was acting very friendly. “It will take us thirty minutes to get to Great Walls Hotel.” He turned and smiled, gesturing her to follow him.

Having little to no practical knowledge of China and its customs, it was a relief to Constance to have some guidance from someone, even if she wasn't sure she could trust him.

The temperature in Beijing was -20 °C, and the northern winds cut like a knife through bean curd. The winter sun was subdued. The cold dry air made for good visibility. A strange, cold excitement filled Constance. Something impersonal and unfinished pervaded the whole metropolis of Beijing. It wasn't like being in a city at all; it was more like a construction site.

Disoriented and trying to find her core, Constance just wanted to get to her hotel room, drink a cup of tea, and find her center. The Soviet-style institutions, expressionless and featureless, displayed along tarmac, flat desert roads with pale, lifeless, silver poplar and sycamore trees planted nearby. Wyman was able to converse with the cabdriver, making friendly conversation while Constance sat in silence. Her thoughts were about her life, which had nothing at all to do with China, or did it?

The rain had started; veils of drops fell from heavy, impenetrable skies as the taxi headed toward downtown. From the appearance of the sky, it looked as if there were no hope of clearing. Constance wondered whether her clothing would be adequate and if she could avoid getting pneumonia. Wyman and Constance barely said two words to each other on the drive to the Great Walls Hotel. Constance sat with her eyes gazing out at the unfamiliar land. The city seemed to be under an assault by an old adversary: the weather. Through the grit, the rain, and the Siberian winds, she watched poker-faced commuters pedaling through the streets. How would she cope being here alone, she thought. She and Wyman seemed to be worlds apart, and it was yet to be seen whether being foreigners in China would make a difference. Neither seemed to have a clue as to what the other was all about. The willingness to find out was nowhere in sight.

Could she have said no to coming to China and still kept her job, she wondered. It was difficult to believe at this juncture that any new information for feng shui designing would be gained from this trip. So far it had only created stress and tension—anything but balance and harmony. There had been no consistency in her feelings or behavior for some time now. For someone seeking freedom from a crass civilization, China would never be a society of choice for Constance.

Though it didn't appear so in the shambles Constance saw upon arrival, Beijing was a city of very orderly design; it was laid out according to intricate geomancy by the medieval Chinese, who invented the magnetic compass. Constance had read that the entire city was inscribed with a sacred magnetic force field that reaches from one end to the other.

The Great Walls Hotel was rather crowded, mostly well-dressed businessmen. Constance hurriedly made her way through the lobby, her attention focused on getting to her room to get warm. The cab had had everything but heat. Temperatures under seventy-five degrees seemed to cause her body to chill. A cool breeze in August was questionable; her body had a tropical thermostat.

Tea was the order of the moment, she learned as she pushed her cold, damp, and tired body through the narrow corridor to her room, which was as drab and ordinary as its patrons. The curtains were frilly with a homemade look; the room smelled of mold, mildew, and old love. Nevertheless, the tea was waiting to be served. It almost smelled to bad to drink but it did warm her cold insides.

Experiencing loneliness was a challenge that Constance had dealt with and conquered most of her adult life. But now, sitting in her hotel room in what she considered a remote and inhospitable land, caused a wave of grayness to pass over her, a kind of dark premonition. She had to make connections with Wyman Fortuna, she thought, because he was all she had there. She resolved to get a strategy together that would work for her on this trip. She could always discard it later when she didn't feel she needed it anymore. She had been assaulted with a terrible sense of humiliation. Had she been afraid of sharing her precious life, she wondered. Her mind started to drift back to the "medicine man": *What had he meant? Why was he there? Why did he disappear so quickly?* Her consciousness drifted into a hazy, drug-softened sleep.

## CHAPTER 5

Meeting Wyman for dinner—which meant vacating her warm, cozy room now that she had pushed the thermostat to its maximum—had less of an appeal than it did earlier when she made the commitment to meet him. She sat comfortably, feet curled beneath her, in the small, black lacquer chair with a fluffy embroidered cushion. She remained layered in her woven twill sweater, thick wool slacks, and double-knit hiking socks as though she were protecting herself from an anticipated winter storm that would hit the room.

The lobby of the hotel was buzzing with people. Foreigners as well as natives, stayed at the Great Walls Hotel since it was more reliable than some of the other structures that appeared to be falling apart even though they were relatively new building. Also the Great Walls Hotel was located on the avenue near Tiananmen Square—and not buried down a narrow alley, as most of the other hotels—it was an easy place to find. When she arrived in the lobby, Constance noticed Wyman Fortuna engaged in what looked like a serious conversation, gesturing with his hands and looking from one of the four people to the other. The men stood like posts, arms hanging rigidly, all listening attentively. And there again was the woman from the airport, standing somewhat back from the men, an odd mingling of wariness and amusement in her eyes. She stood there as if she were part of the group but not really interested in the conversation. She did, however, appear to have the social graces to involve herself.

Social situations, unless she was presenting an idea or product, often made Constance a bit uncomfortable. Protocol, meaningless chatter, and small talk about the weather or things no one can do anything about were not areas of strength for her; she preferred to remain a silent observer. Situations like these made her want to become a hermit, to take refuge in her own private world. If there were a flaw in her character, it was probably her inability to engage in



meaningless dialogue. Much insight was found in the silence, she thought. She often wondered why people spent so much time on meaningless dialogue with so many trivial points of view.

“Hi, my name is Constance McKenna,” she said, handing out her business card to solidify her existence with a title and a company name. Not sure what to do next or what they would deem appropriate to do, she said, “Are we ready for dinner?”

All eyes descended upon her as if she were too crass. She wanted to become a fly on the wall when they seemed to ignore her words and turned back to Wyman and his monologue as if they had rehearsed their demeanor. “Senior Interior Design, Midwest Corporation” the woman’s card read. *So that’s where Wyman knew her from, his former employer in the Midwest.* She had that reserved, or some might say conservative, marking of someone from that part of the United States. If you didn’t grow up and attend school in the Midwest, Constance had often heard, you were considered an outsider. People from the same neighborhood stayed in touch forever—some rarely left the neighborhood. *A small world,* Constance thought, *yet miles apart from our native country.* Two of the men were from Wyman’s former company, and the other two were from a similar company—both located in the Midwest and seemingly carbon copies of each other. She felt like the left heel in the group-story of her life.

The Friendship Restaurant was the place they all agreed to go. It was the meeting place for most foreigners, particularly Americans living in or doing business in China. There they could cling to each other. Constance thumbed through all the names, faces, and titles she had heard, making an effort to remember each one. She wondered how she would cope the entire evening with this distant group whose conversations seemed to have all the passion of a list of engineering specifications. She had too often been caught in situations like this. She wondered if she would have to walk in her proud humility, living within herself this entire trip.

The Friendship Restaurant was sparsely occupied. They had arrived early enough to beat the evening crowd, and seating for the seven of them was easily accommodated. Holding back, Constance allowed each of the others to sit where they wanted to; she would take the spot that was left. This group, with their clannish mentality, would not want a stranger to interfere with their togetherness, she thought. However, she did manage to be seated next to Nicole Bresneshaus, and Constance thought that maybe they had something in common, if nothing more than womanhood.

Trying to regain some of her shattered confidence, Constance asked, “Are you here for the feng shui seminar?”

“Yes, for whatever its worth,” Nicole answered, and her smug look revealing an air of superiority. “I’m not convinced there is a lot I can learn from the Chinese about interior designing. Well, anything that makes any logical sense.”

She seemed quite happy to offer this opinion to Constance, who shifted uneasily, unsure of how to reply.

“Oh, really?” was all she managed to say.

“There’s nothing sacred about this country or its ideas,” Nicole said broodingly. “If they have the answers to the cosmos, why is it that five out of six Chinese are peasants? I don’t get it.”

Constance remembered the decision she made back home in John Shaw’s office that she would defend her belief in feng shui. But she didn’t mean under frivolous circumstances such as this. Nicole was hardly anyone she needed to defend her belief to, she thought, for it was clear that she was a woman with very little exposure to anything but the academic approach to life. The Western societal training on how to be an acceptable woman who appeals to the male agenda seemed to be ingrained in her along with her handsomely good looks. If there were any depth or insight it remained hidden, and Constance determined that she would not dignify Nicole’s position with an argument since it wasn’t a direct attack on her.

She heard the words of her deceased dad as though he were whispering in her ears: “The worst thing you can do when under attack is to doubt the Self. The Self never needs defending. Stay focused and tuned into the center of your Being and the Self will take over.” He often took over her psyche when conflict arose in her life. He was wise beyond his time. She often wondered if his spirit lurked in the background of her subconscious. “Give them enough rope, and they will hang themselves” was his favorite expression. *Yes, that’s it*, she thought, *I’ll give her all the rope she needs to hang herself.*

Constance didn’t believe that her intellectual brilliance alone could win the battle, because that was not wisdom. It would only give her temporary satisfaction.

“Nicole, your point is very well taken,” she said as she smiled, showing a perfect keyboard of teeth. “I’m not sure what this seminar is going to accomplish for me. If anything, maybe just the trip to China will be of some value.”

“Well, I’m glad you believe that the country itself has some value,” Nicole said. Her eyes were hard and cruel and pitiless. “I suppose if we were looking for the theory, or the how-to, of human production we could certainly look here for the answers. Other than that, I’m at a loss to find much else here.” It was as if she were trying to incite a controversial argument.

Maintaining her composure, Constance said, “Human production, balance, harmony, and inner peace might be all-inclusive. I just don’t have a clue about it.”

She felt cautiously aggressive and alive; it was the kind of social situation she could handle, allowing her to tap into her higher self-wisdom as well as use her learned intellect. Constance had a way of locking her emotional self into a closed-off compartment when she wanted to, but the challenge of keeping her feelings locked away was one she fought constantly. To Constance, emotions and feelings were two distinctly different species, operating on different frequencies. What Webster had to say on the subject had very little merit for her.

“I understand you are a feng shui expert,” said the obese, balding, short, middle-aged man seated at the end of the table.

“No, I’m hardly an expert,” Constance said, remembering how hard she had worked and studied to gain knowledge and respectability. “I have been fortunate enough to have done some extensive study and work in the area.”

“I notice your company has had great success in pushing the design,” he continued. He had a masculine force about him, a great presence born of certainty. “Well, I suppose being in a place like San Francisco, where people will try anything weird, doesn’t hurt. We in the Midwest are not yet convinced that it’s anything more than superstition. You know, we are from the show-me part of the world!” His belly laugh was appropriate.

“So tell us, Ms. McKenna,” he continued, his lips smiling with cruel confidence. “Does feng shui have any merit, or is it brainwashing you to get sales?” He laughed, trying to turn his question into a joke.

“Most of the studies that have been done haven’t been conducted with a critical eye,” Nicole interrupted, avoiding eye contact with Constance. Her eyes expressed challenge mixed with resentment; her look was conceited, marring an otherwise attractive face. “The research and studies have only been done by a few West Coast firms that use it in-house. There’s no public data on scientifically controlled studies by unbiased parties.”

It sounded more like a political speech or a dissertation on why they should not accept feng shui design. One might have wondered why Nicole

had come to the seminar since she had already reached her own conclusion about its lack of worth.

Constance couldn't believe what her ears were hearing; her mind was flipping through mental, ancient, historical data that had been around long before America was discovered. They were discussing this subject as if America were the first civilization on Earth, she thought. The atmosphere was beginning to feel tense, so she took a deep breath to tune in to her center of gravity for balance and focus.

"Perhaps you will hear something this week that will shed some light on your understanding of feng shui," Constance said, maintaining composure and grace. "Since I have not been asked to come here to speak on the subject, I will let the real experts handle it." Her voice was quiet, tranquil, and confident.

"We shall hear all about it tomorrow," Wyman Fortuna said. "I bet we will be amazed at what we hear if our minds are open." He went on with killing casualness, "We might need to make some adjustment in our way of thinking in order to incorporate the idea. At any rate, if it sells and increases the bottom line, that's all we care about. Who gives a damn whether the logic is valid or invalid." His face glowed with anticipation of the possibility.

For a moment, Constance thought she saw some redeeming human qualities in Wyman's character; that was, until his last remark. She had begun to believe that maybe he had genuine interest in feng shui for reasons other than money.

"Everybody knows these people have a shitload of weird ideas based on nothing more than superstition," said Dan Webster, the well-dressed but homely looking man seated next to Wyman in the center. He was also a director of sales for a Midwest firm. "I couldn't care less about the philosophy behind the design as long as it helps me to reach my quota." He spoke with expressway speed and didn't seem to put much thought behind his words.

"The fact that the benefits can't be measured tangibly," Dan continued, looking around and lowering his voice as if he were trying to be discrete, "is even more appealing. Just tell them it's esoteric. If they buy it, who can argue with that?" He leaned across the table, looking at Constance for a sign of approval. "After this seminar I will go back and tell my colleagues and prospective buyers I'm an expert." His homely face rearranged itself into a grin. "It doesn't matter whether I believe in the concept or not."

Sensitivity was not a character trait that any of the businessmen or women had displayed. They were cold and distant with very little compassion and

no centers. This deeply troubled Constance, who hoped they would all speak and confirm her beliefs. She wanted to know where each of them stood on the issue of feng shui designing and the Chinese culture, as this would give her a sense of how to deal with them for the duration of the trip. The entire evening had an emotional resonance that lingered. Lack of respect for the country and its people was one thing, but lack of respect for her as one of their peers left her with a bitter taste in her mouth. She was glad when the evening was over.



## CHAPTER 6

Strange and haunting, like leaves blown through a forest at evening, the morning was silent. Maybe it was the strangeness of being in a foreign country that made everything around Constance appear differently, including nature. The giant weeping willows swayed in the cold breeze, trailing their branches over the frozen lake in Beihai Park. Early morning jogging was a ritual that she had honored all her adult life no matter how unpleasant the weather conditions or how threatening the terrain.

Constance's early morning run took her through the major cultural relic, the garden, and the tile-roofed temple and pavilion, with winds slashing and shoving against the monument of clothing protecting her thin body. She wondered what it would be like to live there all the time. The challenge would probably stimulate her to new insights, she thought.

She had been preoccupied with the scenery and her thoughts when she realized she had moved up from casually jogging to sprinting, and it seemed so effortless. It was as though her body had been energized with a shot of B12. She felt like she was moving through a vast natural aquarium where forests swayed to a natural rhythm. The scenery had changed dramatically. The park setting had given way to narrow streets with pagodas, and in the distance loomed the great red walls of the secret city. Beyond the walls lay hall after hall, gate after gate, and orange-brown roofs with curling corners. She stopped to take a peek at her map. These were no familiar sites; she had wandered too far from her hotel and the familiar surroundings of Tiananmen Square and Forbidden City. Mechanically she went over and over the scene trying to trace her path back.

People in the city seemed friendly enough, but Constance was reluctant to ask strangers for help. Even if it were only for directions, she would rather find her way on her own or at least exhaust her own efforts before asking.

She hadn't yet realized that this wasn't a healthy attitude to have in a foreign country where everyone you meet is a stranger.

The marble ramps carved with dragons, clouds, and cranes leading up to the Hall of Prayer For Good Harvest in Tiantan Park caught her eyes. Feeling fatigued from what seemed to have been hours of nonstop running, her face red from the fierce blowing wind, and tears running down her cheeks, she pushed her body against the wind and up the steep path to the temple. She thought that perhaps she could take respite from the cold until she regained her orientation.

She knocked on the temple door, which was covered with a galaxy of colors and patterns. She waited anxiously like a child not knowing what to expect. An old man came to the door, dressed in a long, red silk robe with a white satin shawl thrown over his shoulders. His features were more Tibetan than Chinese, with high cheekbones and wide, dark eyes. She immediately handed the man her business card, wiping tears from her face as the clouds from her frozen breath mixing with warm air blinded her vision. She must have run eight or ten miles away from the square. The impact of the gusty winds and cold, dry air combined with utter exhaustion from running over the hilly terrain had dulled her senses. The sheer beauty of nature in its antagonizing form had captivated her.

"Sir, can you help me? I think I'm lost," Constance said, trying to catch her breath. He stretched his arm and gestured to her.

"Come sit down. Calm yourself. We talk," he said, moving slowly and looking into the distance as if he were listening to another voice—his *modus operandi*.

"Can I get you a cup of tea?" he asked, handing her a cup of hot tea with a lusty odor of earth and cattle before she could reply. "Good. Relax. Calm nervous system. Open pores to feel warm."

The tea had a stimulating effect on Constance's body. She took small sips, trying to fool her sense of taste and smell to believe it was a zesty lemon flavor. Feeling her anxiety build, she wanted to know how to get back to the hotel so she could have breakfast and make the seminar on time. If she had to walk back, it would take longer than the time she had. *Perhaps I can rent a bike*, she thought. *But where?* Her mind was rushing through her options when she noticed that the old man had turned and was looking into her face, but it seemed as though he were looking into her heart. He smiled, the magnitude of which pervaded her.

"My dear," he said, still smiling, "what is this unhappiness about?"

*Unhappiness?* she thought. *I'm anything but unhappy.* She was concerned about getting back to the hotel on time, but she thought that would hardly qualify he as being unhappy.

"Ah, your life successful, but much unhappiness," he said, looking directly into her deep, brown eyes.

*How can you be successful and unhappy at the same time?* she thought.

"It's here in your eyes. Your life out of balance," he continued with a serious tone. "You must find balance for your soul's happiness. You know theory, but no peace for the Self."

There was a knowing about the way he expressed himself. His words reached deep into her heart; she wanted to understand.

"What do you mean, sir?" she asked, feeling her face thaw from the hot, smelly tea.

"Apply feng shui," he said. "Not just theory to sell. Don't use knowledge to judge the path of others. . . . Use to monitor Self." His eyes had much care and compassion. He paused for a moment as if hesitant about speaking his next thought. "You never lost if in balance." Then he handed her a guide with instructions in English on how to get back to her hotel. "Go seek balance from within or remain lost forever."

She was disturbed and perplexed by the frightening thought of her life being out of balance and attracting unwanted situations. Fear kept her at the peak of intense feelings as she walked back to her hotel at a brisk pace following the exact path on the map. Nothing seemed to register in her consciousness from the scenery; she simply registered the street names in her head and followed along.

"Colors have direct impact on our existence: some make us happy; some make us gloomy; some distract; some energize us. We must understand the relationship between our human ch'i and colors." The speaker at the podium was discussing the theory of color in feng shui.

Constance had arrived late. She looked around the room at the colors of the attendees' clothing, wondering how it related to what she sensed they were feeling based on the various expressions on their faces. Her black, doubled-breasted, wool suit, accessorized with a tailored, maroon cotton blouse, had not been chosen with ch'i in mind—she had simply thought of protecting herself from the cold temperature. The seat she had taken in the seminar had not been chosen with regard to the law of feng shui—she simply wanted to get through the day and escape to her world of solitude. Constance felt



too confused by the incidents of this trip, and she wondered if they were coincidental or if they were warnings.

Constance deliberately let her mind run backward as she sat in the seminar listening to information she had heard many times before. She questioned whether her hesitancy to defend the concept of feng shui had anything to do with her own internal conflict. Talking the talk, she thought, is one thing but walking the walk seemed to be something different. She wondered why the Buddhist priest spoke to her as he did. *He was, after all, a Buddhist priest,* she reasoned to herself. *Who else would be dressed in a robe and so clearly in touch with spiritual power?* She felt a feeling of hopelessness, that spirituality seemed to be related to isolation from the rest of the world; she didn't want to think about it. Total isolation as the only road to spirituality was a concept she wasn't ready for.

"We will take a break and be back in half an hour," the lecturer said as he walked away from his flip charts.

Constance looked around the lobby for familiar faces, even for the people she had met the night before—but more to avoid them than anything else. When she turned to look for the ladies' room, she saw Nicole Bresneshaus staring at her from deep within herself, like an animal looking out from the brush. She was wearing a tomato-colored, wool, jersey sweater suit that made it difficult to pretend to not see her.

"Well, what does black represent?" she asked, eyeing Constance up and down and staring with a look of combined defiance and stupidity.

*What is it about this low-life mistake for a human being that irks me so much?* Constance asked herself. She was determined not to answer the annoying question. *Besides, the woman doesn't deserve a response.*

"How's the seminar working for you?" Constance asked casually.

"About as well as anything else is working around here," she answered, looking around at the huge crowd in the hotel lobby with a look of disbelief, rage, and frustration. "Disgustingly crowded, illogical, and senseless."

For a moment, Constance wanted to hear and see the real issues behind Nicole's words; however, she didn't think the woman deserved her interest.

"Hang in there," Constance said walking away. "I must get to the restroom before the session starts up again. I wouldn't want to miss anything."

*Other people are mirrors that reflect back to us the attire we wear—or something like that.* It was a comment Constance remembered hearing from her yoga teacher some years earlier. Feeling disconnected from her surroundings and alienated from the people, she sat only half-listening to anything or

anyone other than the inner voice inside of her. She thought she understood the philosophy and concept behind feng shui. Better yet, she believed it was an integral part of her life, if not a part of her soul. Her intellect was one place; her emotions were another. The difference was as pervasive as loving and being loved.

Her antenna picked up the subtle increase of tension in the room. The feng shui concept was probably too abstract to make any measurable difference to the attendees, she thought.

A tug-of-war was waging in her mind, and she began to wonder if feng shui had become just another selling tool for her. Doubts about her sincerity began to dominate her thoughts. She could not remember ever feeling that confused about her convictions. It would be easy to forget the vow she made to fight for feng shui principles now that she was forced to defend her own. She had the intellectual ability and self-confidence not to feel out of place, while making everyone around her wonder if they were. This was a trait so inherent in Constance's personality that she was not aware of it; consequently, she was unaware of its impact on others—good or bad.

"Interiors with good feng shui support feed the ch'i of the people who live there; they encounter less hostile situations," continued the lecturer, addressing the interior architecture of feng shui. "On the other hand, interiors with ill-defined feng shui cause stress, irritability, confusion, and conflict, resulting in an unhappy life. If the interior feng shui is ill designed, the outside can be great but it won't have an overall powerful effect. The interior will counteract the effects."

Attendees had begun to take notes; the interest had risen several percentage points.

"If people live and work in environments that inhibit their own flow of ch'i, success will not be forthcoming," the lecturer said. "With imbalance anywhere, internal or external, you and your surroundings will degenerate." He had captured the undivided attention of the audience now that the implication had taken on a personal nature. The people were getting restless to ask questions; hands were going up one after another.

"Are you familiar with your internal ch'i and its necessity for balance?" the man seated next to Constance asked her, looking at her with amazement. "I have only been concerned with selling the design," he said. He seemed dutiful, as if programmed to follow a prescribed course.

Constance avoided answering his question. She was becoming an expert at avoiding direct questions.

“Interesting statement,” she said with a smile, hoping he wasn’t seriously expecting an answer.

“Well, what about you? Do you sell the design by using your own ch’i as a guide?” he persisted.

Feeling a bit unsure of what she was doing, facing him but not looking directly at him, she said, “I’m not sure. I thought I had it together until I got here.” She spoke as if she were searching her soul. She didn’t feel intimidated, as she sensed his honesty and sincerity. His face was infused with hope. “I must review my personal portfolio on selling the design.” Afraid of sharing too many of her precious secrets of selling feng shui designs, Constance was cautious.

“Aren’t you the woman from San Francisco who has the record in sales for feng shui in the U.S.A.?” he asked, looking at her nametag. “You’ve been in *Who’s Who in Interior Designs*,” he said, his smile transforming his face into pure sunlight. She had to answer his question with the same sincerity.

“Yes, I have held that record for the last five years, but I’m not sure what that means,” she said, remembering what George Bailey had said to her: “The day you believe in your own publicity, it’s all over.”

“My name is Lang DeBjon,” he said, extending his hand while handing her his business card. “I’m the marketing manager for Franco Architecture in Paris.” It seemed to Constance that in this part of the world you were nobody without a business card; people were what their card stated.

“Could we meet for dinner this evening after the seminar?” Lang asked eagerly.

*Is it my company he wants, just a ploy to get more information on my secret to selling feng shui designs?* she thought. Many of the group, particular those who had read the latest edition of “Whose Who,” the designing journal, who featured Constance, seemed to be convinced there was a secret that only she knew about feng shui designing.

“There’s this French restaurant within the precincts of the Chongwenmen Hotel that has great food,” Lang said. There was a clean purity in his profile, which didn’t spell “Frenchman” to her. He was heavy boned and rakishly good looking. Saying no wasn’t an option Constance wanted to exercise when she saw only friendliness and sincerity in his smile.

“If we get out early enough,” Constance replied, thinking it would be a great opportunity to dine over pleasant conversation. “I have to make a reservation to take a side trip to Lhasa this weekend.”

It would also give her an excuse to decline dinner with the “groupies”—the name she had given Wyman Fortuna’s group from Chicago. The thought of spending another evening in the presence of Nicole Bresneshaus gave her a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. Similarly, Constance decided that hiding out in her room might prove to be a bit stifling after sitting in the hotel seminar all day. She wanted to do something.

“I will call you as soon as I make reservations and change my clothing,” she said to Lang. She turned and moved through the large crowd, excusing herself while avoiding eye contact with anyone who might recognize her.

The speaker at the seminar had introduced her earlier as one of the most successful feng shui designers in the world. Now people had started to recognize and gravitate to her. Her anonymity was disappearing. To become too well known, she thought, would be like a death sentence. She had no desire for fame.



## CHAPTER 7

Getting reservations to Tibet proved to be nearly impossible, which Constance hadn't anticipated. Getting a ticket to Lhasa by way of Chengdu seemed simple enough, until she arrived at the reservation desk.

"Oh, yes, Ms. McKenna, we got your tickets," the desk clerk said, handing Constance a one-way ticket to Chengdu.

"This ticket doesn't say Lhasa," Constance said, not sure she was reading the ticket correctly.

"No no, to Lhasa," the plain, dim-witted young girl said, seemingly more interested in watching TV than doing business. "You go. It good ticket."

"Show me," Constance said, pointing to the ticket. "Where does it say 'Lhasa' on the ticket? Where is 'Lhasa' on this ticket?"

"You get a lift to Lhasa from Chengdu," the clerk said, shaking her head to put off more questions. But Constance stood bewildered, looking at her. It took awhile, but the clerk finally understood that Constance was waiting for a reply.

"No flight on that day to Lhasa. Flight to Chengdu only. Take bus from Chengdu," the clerk said as she walked over to help someone else standing in line.

Constance was beginning to have an odd, volatile feeling about the whole country. She slammed the ticket down on the counter, raised her voice, and almost screaming said, "I insist on speaking to someone who speaks English! I want to speak to someone who will answer my questions now!" Constance walked behind the desk. "I've paid my money to fly to Lhasa, and I insist on an answer!"

A slightly blurry-faced man—the kind you can't remember—came out of nowhere and said, "Show me ticket please."

“Ah,” he said, looking at the ticket, “Perhaps you trek to Lhasa from Chengdu, take bus, or rent four-wheel drive. No flight on Saturday. No flight on weekend.”

“Am I booked to take the bus from Chengdu?” she asked with a look of defiance in her eyes.

“Bus no run this weekend,” he replied, grabbing a wrinkled sheet of paper from a desk drawer. “Bus run three times month: second, twelfth, and twenty-second—maybe.”

“You say ‘maybe.’ Are you sure?” Constance asked, her voice furious. Saturday would be the twenty-third, she thought, so that would mean she would not be able to leave Chengdu for almost two weeks. She could not comprehend this kind of thinking. Nothing made any sense to her. There was absolutely no logic to this system, she thought. She had heard of the hazardous road conditions driving to Tibet, the erratic driving, the slipping of gravel along the hills, and the decoys who would sometimes run bikers off the road.

“What time does this flight leave?” Constance asked.

“Flight on time. Leave at dawn. Pick up in lobby,” the man said lackadaisically. “You be okay. You come here. We take you airport.” He gestured to her to move on and turned to the TV set.

Annoyed, angry, and frustrated, Constance walked away. *Where can I find someone to discuss the situation with—someone with a better understanding of the way things work here?* she thought. *Better yet, where can I find someone who would want to make the trip with me?*

Slowly she walked backed to her room, lost in her concerns. She had a fundamental appreciation for reality, and the reality of her situation was that she had a lack of communication and comprehension with a people she had thought she connected with. *If I have to discuss communication,* she thought, *I’d never have it.*

“Why make little problems when you can create a holocaust?” It was the voice of the English woman she vaguely remembered seeing the first day she arrived. She was smiling with a calm strength. She introduced herself as Monica Winston, from Whales.

Feeling embarrassed that the woman had seen her out burst, Constance stood sagging against the door, appalled at herself.

“My first trip here, I was out of balance most of the time,” Monica said, trying to reassure her. “Sometimes you have to change your perspective on many things—and people as well.” She had a genuine uptake in sensibility. Remembering her first visit as if she were rearranging it for a new perspective,

she continued, “Sometimes people aren’t given choices of what they do here; therefore, the interest and dedication from the heart and soul is lacking.”

Constance was still standing silently as if she were glued to the hotel room door. She felt the humbleness of a child, unsure how to react to Monica’s intrusion. She wasn’t sure she could trust that Monica had her best interest at heart. Or that she knew any more about the Chinese culture than she did.

Culture shock—Constance wondered if it could possibly be happening to someone who deemed herself to have an understanding of the world’s cultures. *Having a philosophical understanding is one thing, she thought, practical experience is another.* How does one transcend the knowledge to a state of knowing? That was the question that she couldn’t answer. Her confusion about her practical experiences, her inner wisdom versus her intellectual knowledge—those thoughts had begun to mount in her mind.

“Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?” she finally offered Monica while unlocking the door to her room. Although she wanted to brush her off, she didn’t feel Monica was an enemy, but at the same time she felt too cautious for them to be friends. It was Constance’s experience on the trip so far that most people either wanted her to share information on feng shui or divulge what they believed to be the secret of feng shui. Monica walked through the door behind Constance and, gazing around the hotel room, she said,

“My, you brought enough clothes to last a lifetime.” She was staring at Constance’s pile upon pile of winter clothing lying stacked on her luggage, the chair and half of the bed. “Will you be staying all winter?”

“No, not all winter,” Constance replied. “But I did hope to travel to Tibet where I assume it is much colder than here. Besides, my body is not acclimated to extremely cold temperatures like they have here.”

Constance spoke as though apologizing for her cold nature. She felt a tug of resentment for having to explain her reasons for bringing her clothing. *Doesn’t everybody in China wear several layers of clothing in the winter?* she wondered. *If this woman is so knowledgeable about the culture, then why is she asking such trivial questions?*

“That’s true, but why so many of the same garment?” Monica asked, her gold-green eyes wide with astonishment. “Carrying too many clothes will inhibit your freedom of movement. . . . Your clothes are like any other excesses: They can create imbalances if you have too many.” Monica’s voice trailed off as she moved to the small window overlooking the garden that lay dormant in the cold of winter.

*This is exactly what irks me about letting people into my life. They immediately start to judge the value of it,* Constance thought.

“I will be going to Lhasa this Saturday,” Monica said, turning to face Constance. She smiled with her mouth and her eyes. “You are welcome to come with me. I have reserved a four-wheel drive to go from Chengdu to Lhasa. I would be delighted to have you ride down with me.” She seemed to be aware of Constance’s reservations.

Constance had been interested in Tibet since she was a child. Her dad had told her stories of the Dalai Lama. He had often talked about the beauty of the country, the magical mountains, and the spirit of its people. Constance thought that this might be her only opportunity to visit the place and fulfill a lifetime dream—and that she was too close to realizing it to give up now—the thought of going to Tibet alone was more frightening than it had been back home in San Francisco. The person she was then and the person she had become seemed worlds apart. Needing or wanting anyone to accompany her anywhere in the world wouldn’t have been a remote possibility for her then; she had a fondness for her aloneness—maybe even a sense of pride in it.

There was bitter pride in her voice as Constance said, “I’ll need time to think about it. I mean think about whether or not I’m going to take the trip.”

“I could give you a thousand and one reasons why you might want to go, but I won’t,” Monica said, holding up her hand. “You can let me know if you are inspired to do so. . . . There is no pressure. I’m sure I’ll meet someone in Chengdu who will want a ride to Lhasa.”

Monica seemed so self-assured; she projected a free spirit—a spirit that wasn’t afraid to extend itself to total strangers. It was as though she had a sixth sense for talking to people who needed to hear what she had to say and, in many cases, people who were interested in what she had to say even when they didn’t know it. Constance handed her a cup of her celestial lemon zinger herbal tea that she had brought from the States. The two women sat sipping the steaming hot tea in complete silence. It was a moment they both seemed to appreciate. The silence seemed to be intriguing to their sense of solitude, spelling character and confidence, which Constance admired.

Placing her empty cup on the table, Monica walked toward the door. Her deep eyes showed sensitivity of a scholar. It was as though she knew there was an internal struggle going on inside of Constance.

“A multiplicity of relationships can be an avenue of growth,” she said to Constance on her way out the door. “See you later. Oh, by the way, thanks for the tea.”



Constance sat gazing at all of her clothing and personal belongings sprawled around the room. Every inch of the floor had something resting on it. A confusing rush of anticipation mixed with fear and dread ran through her. Why had she brought all of these clothes? Did she really need so many changes of outfits? She had never considered her clothes to be a hindrance to her freedom, but now she thought that perhaps they'd become a handicap for her while trekking around Tibet. Clothes had become a by-product of Constance's status; trendy, classic, tailored-made, casual, or business attire, they were top of the line.

It was hard for Constance to determine how long the phone had been ringing before she finally answered it.

"Oh my! I completely forgot. I must have fallen asleep," she said, looking at the clock to establish the time. Her body hadn't yet adjusted to the new time zone. "I'll meet you in the lobby at six o'clock American time."

She felt fully alive while waiting outside the hotel lobby for her cab. She felt a warm kernel of blissful happiness at the center of her being; the cold chilling winds had lessened their impact. A blush of pleasure rose to her cheeks as she thought of spending the evening with a Frenchman at a French restaurant. A romantic feeling toward the opposite sex was an emotion that Constance had almost forgotten. It was a feeling she welcomed.

So far, dinners had been anything but romantic, or even pleasant, on this trip. Having dinner with the group from the Midwest again—especially Nicole Bresneshaus, who was born ignorant and had been losing ground ever since—would have caused her to lose her appetite, she thought.

It was a few minutes after six, just in time to make a grand entrance, as Lang DeBjon sat waiting for her to appear. It was a pleasure for Constance to walk through the lobby without being shoved, pushed, or shouldered by someone.

"My, you look beautiful," Lang said smiling and eyeing her up and down.

Her natural, red silk sweater enhanced her rosy high cheekbones, complementing her long, flaring, taupe cashmere skirt and her tapered, black, knee-high leather boots. She was sharply dressed—a classy look.

"I reserved a table next to the courtyard," he said as he reached over to remove her black and moss-green tweed coat, "although we won't be able to see much outside. However, it is away from the noisy crowd."

Opulent examples of Chinese art covered the rectangular walls; the main door had a fan over it like a halo. A few pieces of French provincial furniture were scattered here and there, but for the most part, the decor was completely Chinese: mirrored walls; private dividers painted with peacocks, ducks, and birds; a gilded bronze lion; a lacquered and brass-trimmed trunk. The walls and ceiling were covered with paintings and fifty-foot statues at the entrance and exit to the garden. It looked more like a museum than a restaurant.

“This place is designed with the feng shui concept in mind,” Lang said, looking at the wide rectangular doorway that led to the courtyard. “It does allow the ch’i to permeate. . . . Feel that.” He stretched his hands out to feel the ch’i. “The challenge of the modern feng shui designer is to create or restore harmony and integrity within a twentieth-century framework.” His eyes were buzzing with excitement. “I can’t remember the last time I felt this much ch’i. Perhaps it’s the influence of the young lady seated across the table.”

His eyes were probing her very soul. He had the confidence of a healthy young man who had never been hurt. His rich French accent, his handsomely good looks, and his eyes glinting with pure masculine interest created an awareness in her soul that hadn’t been there for years. It was a sensuous and glowingly warm feeling. Responding to a stimulus other than one that engaged the intellect was as foreign to Constance as China. She thought that trusting and allowing her heart to indulge in such nonessentials might in some way destroy the successes she had made in the architect-designing world, a world dominated by males. Emotional responses to situations that hadn’t been examined with the mind were too dangerous for the heart. For a woman of status and maturity, having her emotions under control at all times was her safest bet.

“So, where do you think feng shui, in contemporary society, is headed?” she asked, pulling back her shoulders and lifting her granite chin. She was back in her strength.

“It’s here to stay if it continues to attract such beauties as yourself,” he said, his voice playful with a serious undertone. “I mean if we can get the conventional public interested enough and we can measure the benefits in terms of dollars and cents, there will be a surge of interest.” His tone had now turned serious as he assessed her question. “To be honest with you, I didn’t put too much stock in feng shui until I read about your success in selling it. Of course this seminar has been enlightening, but I never would’ve come here if I didn’t have a financial interest in it. Frankly I don’t see how it could change my personal life. However, if I can capitalize on the philosophy behind the art,

then that's what I'll do—I don't have to believe it. It's like asking the Pope if he believes in Catholicism. He doesn't have to in order for it to serve his purpose."

His demeanor had become that of a shallow and somber businessman. Fixing his penetrating gaze on her delicate face, he stared at her until she blushed.

"Well, Ms. McKenna, don't I get a comeback from you?" he asked as though he wanted her disapproval.

"There's no substitute for believing in your product," she said. She had gone back into her head into central control and reset the relays. "If I weren't convinced that my designs accomplish what I say they will, I wouldn't sell them."

She was haunted by a suspicion of her own words; she wasn't totally convinced of her claims about feng shui. She glanced at the large, open, rectangular doorway and the mirrored wall that created a depth of spaciousness to the restaurant. She did feel moved by the flow of ch'i energy in the room; there was harmony and balance even with the crowded, close seating arrangement. The intimate setting of the restaurant had to have been inspired by the French, she thought, because the Chinese were too stoic for such imagination.

"Constance," Lang said, reaching across the table, placing his hands on her arm as if he were aware that she was lost in her thoughts. "I'm not saying I don't believe in the claims made about what the design accomplishes. I'm just saying I don't know it to be true. So I don't feel comfortable making claims until I know a bit more about it. Believe me, I'm open because I know something makes some places feel different than others." His seriousness turned to a wide-eyed smile as he said. "My dad is a hard-ass German, you know. I hope you don't hold that against me. It's a little hard for us to believe in the supernatural and make a decent living too."

His smile made her forget what he had said even though it was a smart-ass remark. A rare, intimate smile, beautiful with brightness, graced her face. She had almost forgotten her role as Ms. Executive Feng Shui Designer when she said, "It's good to be here. Thanks for inviting me. . . . The food is great."

"Maybe you could come to my country, and I could show you what French food really tastes like without the Chinese influence," he said, smiling his wide smile as he nudged her foot under the table.

The evening had taken a turn for the better, and the conversation had turned to a less controversial topic when the waiter politely said, "Excuse me, sir. Are you expecting a Ms. Breshall to join you for dinner tonight?"

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot,” Lang said as he looked at his watch. “Send her in.”

He looked at Constance and said, “She still has time to order, doesn’t she? You’ll like her. She’s an American girl from Chicago. She was supposed to meet us at six, but I guess she was delayed.”

*Did the waiter mispronounce her name?* Constance wondered. *He didn’t mean to say “Nicole Bresneshaus” did he?* Constance hoped it wasn’t the case, but she couldn’t remember hearing the name. *Maybe he was referring to the other American woman at the seminar: Mercia Brenshowell, the woman from upstate New York.* The last names were very similar. Constance noticed a woman far in the distance walking toward them. She was shorter than Nicole with a bit more muscle. It was hard to discern just who she was from the distance. The heavy, cinnamon, wool trench coat and velvet cocoon hat bordered in fur covered most of her face. She became certain it was not Nicole when the woman got closer, and continued walking past their table.

“Hi, sorry I’m late. I went to the wrong place.” It was Nicole standing at Constance’s back. She had come in through the side door.

“No problem. Here,” Lang said, standing and pulling her chair out. He was as gracious a gentleman as anyone could ask for. “We are halfway through dinner, but we will be happy to stay until you are finished.” He looked at Constance as if he already had her approval and knew she didn’t mind.

“What are you having?” Nicole said, examining Lang’s plate. “This Chinese junk, so far, has turned my stomach upside down.” Her face was smirking, her trademark as far as Constance was concerned.

“Entrecote de boeuf is very good if you eat red meat,” he said, pointing to the menu.

*Of course she eats red meat,* Constance thought to herself. *What better way to maintain that incurable attitude she carries around?*

“By the way, Constance,” Nicole said, acting as though she just discovered her seated at the table, “you must have felt good about the lecture today. The speaker endorsed your ideas about feng shui.” Her mouth lifted in a menacing, sarcastic smile. “Of course that has to be nothing more than folklore. No one has any accurate account of history that dates back that far.”

Nicole had a way of asking questions but not allowing time for the answers before either asking another one, making some comment, or continuing on with her speech. The desirable food that Constance had been feasting on had lost its appeal. She sat picking at her coq au vin with her fork as if trying to find an edible portion.

“Nicole, I don’t believe I ever mentioned anything about my ideas on feng shui. Did I?” she said, her voice brimming with distaste.

“Well, excuse me. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Nicole said, seemingly surprised that Constance responded in anger. “I guess I based my conclusion on what I read from your comments on the subject.”

“Amiable but intimidating,” Constance said. “Where did you read anything I wrote on the subject? I haven’t written an article, nor have I published a term paper.”

“Wyman Fortuna let me read the notebook you keep on the subject,” she said. “I assumed it was your work and ideas.” She spoke as though apologizing for having read it.

Dramatically turning her body sixty degrees away from Constance, hunching her shoulders, Nicole said to Lang, “Do the people in your country believe in this feng shui designing crap? So far I haven’t seen any evidence to prove anything that has been said about it.”

There was a stalking, purposeful intent in her voice. Lang’s kindness, consideration, and just plain politeness seemed to overshadow his desire to ignore the question.

“Crap? We hardly believe it to be such,” he said, moving over to whisper in her ear. “Call France. We’ve just recently been introduced to the concept. In our country we’ve designed exterior and interior building using a pathetically conformist view point.” His eyes were following Constance.

“Doesn’t sound like your company endorses this nonsense,” Nicole said, turning around in her chair, reaching for the teapot.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what the company thinks,” said Lang with excitement in his eyes. “If I’m convinced it has value, I’m gonna go for it. It might be easier to win a dog-sled race with a team of Chihuahuas than to convince my boss.” His eyes squinted with amusement. His sense of humor decreased the obvious tension at the table.

Nicole did a long, slow slide with her eyes, taking in the decor and layout of the restaurant, and then said, “This place has expensive taste in decor. However, it’s out of place for this restaurant. Don’t you think?” She looked at Constance.

*Why does she ask what I think when she knows damn well she doesn’t care what I think?* Constance said to herself. *How can I allow my evening to be spoiled by Nicole?* It wasn’t so much what she said as it was her sheer presence. There was something unpleasant about the energy she projected; at times it felt like having a mirror held up in her face.

"I know," Constance said, as if she had just discovered a secret. "These artifacts belong in a museum." Her eyes were clear and intense. "It would be enlightening to have them back home in the Chicago Museum of Ancient Art. It might spark some interest in the place."

Staring at Nicole with deadly concentration, Constance saw a dichotomy in the woman's personality she hadn't seen before. She began to wonder if there was a karmic link between them.

"The food was pretty good," Lang said, beckoning to the waiter to remove his plate. "However, I must say the service has declined somewhat since the natives took over." He was whispering, not wanting to offend the patrons who might not share his opinion.

"What'd you mean by that?" Nicole asked. It was part of her ritual when she wanted to give her opinion.

"A guy from France made an agreement with the Chinese to run this restaurant for ten years and then turn it back over to them. The ten years were up about two years ago and . . . well, it has gone down since." His face was embellished with compassion. "It's understandable that the pride to keep the place up in quality wasn't there—given this system."

After ingesting that bit of information, Nicole's face took on a look of disgust; one might have suspected that if she had that information beforehand, she wouldn't have had dinner there.

"The seminar starts early tomorrow, so, if you like, I can save you a seat up-front," Nicole said looking at Constance. Her smile was disarmingly generous. "I know you run in the morning and may not get there as early as I will."

Constance shifted uneasily, not sure how to answer or whether to answer at all. *Is this a shrewd political strategy?* Constance questioned.

"You'll have to save one for me too," Lang said, seemingly trying to spare Constance the pain. "I'm magnetized by her energy field, so we are inseparable." His wit saved the evening.

His simple words were wonderfully romantic, Constance thought. His positive energy helped to negate Nicole's negativity. The prospect of spending five or six hours sitting next to her, smoldering in her energy field, was a challenge she didn't need.

"Thanks, Nicole." She was careful not to commit herself. *Just a thank-you will suffice*, Constance thought. Ending the evening was an easy decision for Constance to make. "I must get going. I have so much to do before I retire."

## CHAPTER 8

Drab, dreary landscape; endless blocks of dingy, featureless, apartments trailing off into the polluted haze and divided by plots of barren earth—Constance saw no character to this city. Her external environment matched her internal environment. A harrowing headache pounded her forehead. A crown of gloom marred her face as she jogged around Forbidden City. A feeling of separation of the mind, body and spirit was growing when she dropped her exhausted body on the park bench.

Constance hadn't noticed the electronically controlled wrought-iron gates. The pounding headache had impaired her vision. She needed a place to rest and soothe her aching head long enough to brace herself for the long walk back to the hotel. *At least my mind is functioning enough to find my way back*, she thought. Sitting slumped on an old, damp park bench, holding her forehead in the palms of her hands, she said affirmations that her body, mind, and soul connect. To experience this kind of separation and disconnection was, for Constance, something just short of feeling insane. Identifying the cause or causes was one thing, but knowing when she felt the disconnection was an art she had mastered over the years. At least she thought she had.

"What'a you doing here, miss? Don't you feel well? Something wrong?" said a thick, dotty, deep-accented voice of an old Chinese woman dressed in a dirt-colored cloth coat, fastened in front with wooden toggles. Nothing fit. Her shoes were soft, worn, kangaroo plastic with high-laced cuffs that came up over her ankles. She stood, quiet and humble, her face red from the wind.

"You don't go here," she said shyly, looking away. "I help you out. You want."

Constance looked at the old woman, feeling annoyed and not fully understanding her broken English.



"I'm okay. Please leave me alone. Go 'way please," Constance said, gesturing to the woman to go.

It was not a day for small talk. She didn't feel up to answering questions about being an American or being hassled by someone who wanted to exchange RMB for FEC, or having someone assume she was wealthy because she was American. It had become a ritual and she didn't want to engage in it today.

Having no interest whatsoever in the old Chinese peasant, Constance buried her face in her hands once again. Remembering an acupuncture healing technique she had learned from a friend in San Francisco, she placed her fingers on certain points on her forehead and applied great pressure for a few seconds; her headache subsided; the release couldn't have surprised her more. Walking back against the cold northern winds would be a hassle, but the absence of the throbbing headache made it possible, she thought as she stood up, stretched, and started on her way back.

"What are you doing in this area? No foreigners allowed. You American? Passport." The questions were coming in rapid succession from a stoic-faced armed guard standing at the locked gate. "Why are you here?" He examined her passport while speaking to someone on his two-way radio in his native tongue.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I wasn't allow in here," Constance said, her voice cracking as she remembered the old lady back at the bench. *She offered me help*, Constance thought, *and I turned her away*. "I'm lost. I need help to find my hotel room—oh, my business card. Here."

She searched her jacket pocket, her jogging pants, and her tube socks where she finally found her business cards. He looked at it and pointed to the wall where the paint had weathered out; all that remained was the fading letters of a sign written in Chinese: "No Foreigners Allowed Unless With Chinese Friend."

"You get locked up no Chinese friend here," the poker-faced guard said, grabbing hold of her arm.

He led her back toward something that resembled a compound. It was a graceless, mausoleum-like building—drab and cold looking, standing off in the distance. With a quick intake of breath, like someone about to plunge into icy water, she followed the guard. A hard fist of fear grew in her stomach; every nerve leaped and shuddered. The terror was running through her mind so rapidly her thoughts were cloudy.

In a city so heavily populated with people everywhere, Constance wondered where the people were. There was no movement anywhere—not



even the whisper of a sound as she was led up flights of steps through darkened doorways, passing shuttered shops; there was hushed silence throughout the building as they entered.

The thought of the old woman made her throat ache with regret. *How could I have been so blind?* she thought. *If there is a guardian angel, God, please send her to me now!* It felt like a nightmare beyond anything she had ever encountered. She was millions of miles from home and had no one to turn to. Who would get her out of this hell? Or worse yet, who would know she was there? She was overwhelmed with questions and fear but had no answers. *If there were ever a time I needed to find my center, it is now,* Constance thought.

She focused and pulled in energy from someplace that even she wasn't aware of, brought it to the center of her body's gravity, and breathed deeply while asking for immediate guidance and help. The impact of the energy flow had caused her to momentarily forget her plight.

"She my friend. That's why she here." It was a voice that sounded familiar, but she couldn't remember from where. "You can let her go. She here witha me."

It was the old peasant woman she had seen at the bench earlier.

"You know this woman?" the guard asked, avoiding any eye contact.

"Yes, sir, I do," Constance blurted out without thinking, a feeling of thankfulness shivering through her senses. "She's my Chinese friend."

The guard handed Constance back her passport and business card and said, "Go. Don't come on private property. Read signs."

Constance was happy to be alive. She ran out of the building hoping to find her new friend, but the woman had disappeared.

## CHAPTER 9

Congregated around the lobby, squeezed into every inch of space that would hold both feet and an upright body, the seminar attendees assembled in individual groups, chatting and expressing themselves one to another. The noise, the tension, and the manifestation of the different energy patterns lingering in the atmosphere created an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia in Constance as she stood waiting for Lang to return with her cup of tea.

Lang's desire to be seated next to Constance was so great it inspired him to wait for her at the entrance door. He knew if he didn't, he probably wouldn't see her for the rest of the day.

"Your favorite tea was missing, so I got you apple cinnamon—with its delicacy I didn't think I could go wrong." He smiled and said something romantic in French.

She saw only friendliness in his smile, yet her thoughts were on the old lady in the park that morning: *Why did I snub her? If she hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here now. Instead I would be locked away in some unknown place being tortured.* She shuddered, thinking of what might have happened. She wondered if Lang would understand if she told him about the incident.

"Thank you, Lang. This is my other favorite flavor," she said, gently pulling him out of the path of the falling cup of hot coffee the man behind him had dropped. He gave a short laugh and appeared embarrassed.

"Thanks, this is my only business suit. You saved my suit and me. That coffee was piping hot," he said, looking back at the man, seemingly a bit annoyed. "Space is a premium in this place. I'll have to remember that. Let's get into the workshop before there is nothing left of me."

He smiled and touched her waist, guiding her into the seminar. It was a protective gesture, but no matter how innocent, it warmed her heart. There was warmth in the feel of his hand on her waist. The energy he projected made

her heart feel light. She had to keep reminding herself that she had just met this man two days ago; it felt more like a lifetime. It wasn't anything he said; it was an energy she felt when he was present that warmed her inside and out.

Nicole Bresneshaus? Constance had completely forgotten her invitation to sit with her at the session. She determined it was okay, besides she would've had to search for her, fighting through the congested crowd. However, there seemed to be some overpowering need for Constance to appease Nicole, even though she didn't really want to. The seminar seemed more crowded, stifling and airtight. There were no vacant seats anywhere. The atmosphere was more formal than in the lobby—a grim, gray, distant sort of feeling. The group on the podium consisted of new speakers, people from other areas of China, who were not scheduled to speak. They sat looking numb, as though paralyzed or fastened to their chairs, their faces expressionless. One might have wondered if they were actually alive. They set the tone and the mood; one could feel the lack of enthusiasm from the audience.

“Feng shui expertise continues to be used in Hong Kong for building apartments and houses,” the speaker began. “Every building, whether old or new, needs to be consecrated. A feng shui priest should perform a ceremony before the tenants move in, something like a Dragon Dance.” A bald man except for a monkish fringe of white hair, he was dressed in a long, white cotton robe, and was about as animated as a robot in a sulk. “The challenge of feng shui design is to restore what modern architecture has taken away. We must recapture the ancient style, harmony and integrity, using modern-day technology.”

It had only been ten minutes and the group was bored and restless. There wasn't much movement in any of his body parts. He spoke in a neutral manner, without inflections, occasionally clearing his throat of rumbling phlegm.

There was something different about the physical makeup of the room, Constance thought, as she looked around. The shape of the room, the width of the doorway, the room was a boot shaped. It was not the same room they had been in the day before; they had been moved. Constance had an overwhelming sense of impending disaster. The boot-shaped room was not the only problem, but the platform rested in the toe that projected outside the main door. This created a problem for the audience listening to the lecture. It was apparent to Constance that the people teaching the concept of feng shui were not using it and didn't have a practical knowledge or understanding of its principles.

"This lecture is going downhill for me today," Lang whispered to Constance. "Maybe my ch'i is off, but I can hardly listen anymore."

His face had fallen with disappointment. Fighting to quiet her ego and contain her desire to tell the speaker immediately what was wrong, Constance searched to connect with her own center to balance her own ch'i. Having studied energy fields since she was a child, she could see, sense, and feel the different energy pattern from the audience, as well as the energy the speaker was projecting. It wasn't what the speaker was saying that was causing the distraction that was permeating the room; it was something entirely different.

"He has lost his audience," she said, turning to Lang as though she had a vested interest in the chaos.

"But why?" Lang asked curiously.

"Well the ch'i of the speaker needs correcting, so does the ch'i in the design of the room," she said, looking puzzled. *Was this a setup for us Westerners?* she thought. *How could they possibly have been so negligent?*

"Do you know what needs to be done?" Lang asked, visibly annoyed by the distractions and disturbances going on among the attendees. "Listen to this circus; nobody is paying any attention to what's being said. This is a disaster."

Although the room was filled with conversations sounding like instruments out of tune and people singing off-key, the speaker didn't miss a beat. His ch'i was emanating from his mouth but missing his brain. It was almost like a recording. One by one the attendees left and the speaker's voice echoed through the hollow spaces in the half-empty room. Harmonious conversations and sounds of gaiety were coming from some place other than the seminar room. The adjacent lobby had virtually stolen all the attendees, and the festive mood in the lobby was alluring.

The seminar sponsor appeared in the doorway, his eyes gazing around as though assessing something about the room. Standing in the doorway, he opened a red box and took out two red bells that he immediately hung over the doorway. At the same time another man in the center of the room hung two flutes in a ba-gua arrangement on the beam. A third man appeared and placed a full-length mirror along both walls. Another man hung wind chimes in the cross point over the stage; the podium was moved out of the toe.

The speaker was politely interrupted when an old Chinese man walked on stage and offered him a green, plum-trimmed robe in exchange for his white one. After which he placed two large, green potted plants, one to his left and the other to his right.

“For God’s sake, what are they doing?” Lang asked, his voice irritated. “What in the world is all of this nonsense? It seems to me the seminar is over. The only reason I’m still sitting here is because of you.”

Overcome by her own amazement, Constance watched the energy in the room come alive with excitement and harmony as the attendees marched back in without any verbal invitation.

“The circuits of the listeners were blown by the speaker’s ch’i, which was compulsive and stationary in his mouth,” Constance finally said, trying to find the right words to express what she was seeing and feeling so Lang would understand it.

After a second reassuring glance around the room, surprised and somewhat thrilled by her own behavior, she turned to Lang and said, “This was an example of destructive feng shui. It affects you whether you are aware of it or not.”

“So why was I able to stay despite the bad flow of ch’i?” he asked, hating to have excitement described to him instead of sharing it.

“Possibly it was the strength of the center I built around us,” she said, wanting to make the idea logical and convincing but wasn’t sure how. “I meditated from my center of gravity and pushed the energy equally through all my connecting points and projected it out to yours.” Her face was shrouded with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Constance, I don’t understand. We’ll have to discuss this over dinner tonight,” he said, with curious but refreshing warmth. “I was aware of something unusual happening. My head was throbbing but I felt no pain.”

Constance wondered if he was being sincere with his internal observation or if he was merely boosting her ego. He had a way of knowing which buttons to push.

“You mentioned that a dragon dance should be done before moving into a new facility,” said Wyman Fortuna from the audience to the speaker. “Is that why the dragon is such a prominent figure in China?” His voice was ripe with laughter—so much so that he couldn’t keep a straight face. The entire audience burst into laughter and transcended to the speaker. The magnitude of the speaker’s laughter pervaded the room; it was hearty, humorous, and contagious.

“It’s no accident the dragon figure is a legend in Chinese history—he had rhythm,” the speaker said, the grin still lurking at the corners of his mouth now turning to a chuckle. He was surprised he had made a joke that was appreciated by the audience.

"I've heard that it's bad luck to build a house on the tail of the dragon," Wyman said. He was making an effort to be polite and serious, but his face gave him away. "Why is that considered bad luck?"

"Certain land topography forms the dragon, such as the mountains that form on the nerves of the dragon," the speaker said. "You must have a feng shui expert to identify the tail of the dragon. You don't build on the tail of the dragon because it might move its tail. Living on the dragon's brain is good."

The energy in the room was at its peak. Excitement and interest were high. It was obvious the speaker really believed the myth.

"Never build near the beast's mouth," he continued. "Too much ch'i. You could be swallowed up."

Even the air in the room seemed to be holding its breath. The attendees exploded with anticipation as the lecturer continued with anecdotes, drawing designs, and warnings about designing bad feng shui.

"What did you think about today's presentation?" Wyman Fortuna asked Constance. It was apparent he had made an effort, squeezing through the crowd, to get to her.

"It was interesting enough," she said, wondering why she hadn't seen him for the last few days.

"I hope you take good notes," he said, scanning the room. "Maybe I could borrow your notes on our way back to the states."

"I suppose so," Constance said looking puzzled, wondering why he couldn't rely on his own, and she wasn't sure she would be returning with him.

"Today was my first day in the workshop," Wyman said with a secretive smile on his face.

"Oh, I see," Constance said curiously but reserved.

"Well, if you must know, I've been in Hong Kong with a friend," he said, as if confiding a secret in her. "I've missed most of the lectures."

"That's unfortunate. They were actually pretty good presentations," she said, her wise eyes bright and bemused. *What is he really up to?* she wondered.

"Well, my friend's status has been elevated to the top of the heap," he said. His eyes were filled with excitement that accentuated his good looks.

"Will you be here for the remaining lectures?" she asked.

"I don't know yet. I have to phone her tonight and we'll decide what to do."

"I'll call you later. Maybe we can have a cup of tea or something after dinner," Constance said smiling.

It was her anticipation of dinner with Lang that evoked the smile; it took priority over Wyman's need to talk. Wyman's ch'i patterns in his energy field spelled "help." Clamoring to rescue the men in her life, curbing her own needs, was a long-standing pattern of hers. She was tempted to accommodate Wyman by foregoing her dinner with Lang, but she believed that dinner with Lang would have something more to offer her than being used as a sounding board or a political support system. She had too many reminders from her past, reminders that still lingered in her memory.



## CHAPTER 10

The looming prospect of the bright and flowery bathhouses, a blissful retreat down the street from the hotel, had an allure as more than just a place to soak away the dust and annoyance of the day. It had a deeper appeal to Constance. She wondered if it could be a place to get in touch with some ancient consciousness that might be hidden in the bowels of the tubes. The desire to visit one was coming from a place other than Constance's need for soaking her body. Her mind and soul had some longing of their own.

Bathhouses had been a part of Chinese culture since ancient times, and they were a necessity for Peking homes; half of the homes had running water, but few had bathtubs. Bathhouses functioned as bathtubs for the working people. Curiosity, as well as a strong desire to restore her spirits, made Constance ask her new Chinese friend Prana Raji, whom she had met on her first day in the seminar, to accompany her to the bathhouse. Constance had been drawn to introduce herself to Prana-her energy seemed to have a drawing quality, she found impossible to resist. They shared several personal stories about their feng shui experiences, so Constance felt comfortable asking her to attend the bathhouse with her. She had thought of asking Lang, but her self-consciousness caused her to dismiss the idea. She left him a message instead, stating that she was going to the bathhouse with Prana and would meet him for dinner at six o'clock.

Prana Raji's uniqueness was alluring. She had driven across country for several days from Nepal, because she had a strong sense of urgency to attend the feng shui seminar she had told Constance. Her long neck curved like a bird taking wing; her smooth yellow-brownish, glowing skin was toned and supple. She had narrow slanted black eyes and an oval shaped face that looked more Indian than Chinese. Although she was a combination of the two, there were no prominent physical characteristics that immediately revealed either.



However, the rich cultural influence did manifest itself in her great store of knowledge and wisdom. There was an aura of magic about her. Her beauty was so unearthly it was frightening. Constance wondered if she could be a descendent of the Dali Lama.

The hard wind was whipping down over her world, blowing debris and pedestrians. It reminded Constance how much her body could use a soak in a spa and a massage.

Braving the cold wind and the blowing debris, Constance made her way to the bathhouse. Not knowing what to expect, she stood at the lobby window waiting for an invitation.

“Twenty-six fen,” the lobby window clerk finally said.

Constance handed her twenty-six fens, which was about fifteen cents, through the window. Her eyes large and appearing somewhat timid, she waited for instructions that didn't come.

“Come this way. Follow me,” Prana said, taking her by the hand.

They walked down a long, curved hallway, through swinging double doors, turning into a tiled corridor that led to the ladies' locker room. Collapsible beds with thin plastic mattresses covered the floor, and people were sprawled on them taking post-bath naps. Aware of all the eyes gazing directly at her, Constance wanted to jump into the tub with her clothes on. She looked around the room, taking her lead from her friend, and shyly undressed, wishing she had a swimsuit to wear. It was more embarrassing than she thought it would be. Her unclothed body revealed how different her body looked from all the others. *How can I relax with all the eyes of China on me?* she thought.

“Come on, Constance. This is most invigorating tub. It has ancient powers. Do many things for you,” Prana said, making splashing, mellifluous sounds in the tub.

The words “ancient powers” were ones Constance had often associated with something more sacred than a bathtub, but she had to try it. Maybe something special was in the tub. Looking around at the other bathers, no one seemed to be in a hurry. Even those who had finished bathing sat around in their robes, lounging on their cots, sipping tea, and chatting quietly.

“The three giant tubs give not same benefits. Distinct benefits for body, mind, and spirit,” Prana tried to convince her.

According to her, the lukewarm tub would draw the mind into shallow places of the past and introduce one to a small piece of the past that possibly

influences the present. It would not hold someone there very long, however, not even long enough to retain the memory.

“It’s quick go like flash,” Prana said. “Here read de benefits in yo language”, Prana continued. She handed Constance an old dogged eared pamphlet written in English which read: *Hot steaming tub with rising waves stir the mind, body, and spirit and take you deep into past as well as the future, imprinting details that are discernible. Then there is the tub with extremely cold water. When the body is enmeshed for a period of meditation, enlightenment is certain to come. The water pattern arranges itself into the shape of the dragon, which superimposes itself on the spirit of the individual inhabiting the tub. It could create the optimum in feng shui balanced energy if you quiet the mind and accept the energy.*”

Prana’s face appeared old and wise while making outlandish promises about the tubs. Her energy field had expanded throughout the room making sparkling glimpses on the walls. There had to be some truth to her claims, Constance thought. The colorful deep layers of her aura were thicker than any that Constance had ever witnessed.

“Unusual seeing” was a term used by many to describe Constance’s ability to see the human energy field. It had been referred to as a condition of the retina, causing her great anxiety, intoxicating her mind with confusion. She didn’t know what it was or what it meant, and most of the time didn’t care, but she didn’t believe it was a defect in her retina.

The lukewarm water was seeping into her tight pores releasing dirt and debris. Constance sat questioning the esoteric benefit of the tub. Her mind was engaged in the physical understanding of what she was experiencing. She wasn’t aware of much else—except for the big brown cake of soap making small ringlets of suds that withered as quickly as they formed, leaving the water gritty and flat. Her logical mind was at its best analyzing her physical surroundings.

Out of respect for her friend, Constance switched to the steaming hot tub where Prana sat in an altered meditative state with her eyes closed. *How can she tolerate this hot temperature with waves of steam bombarding her face?* Constance said to herself. The blissful, tranquil peace encompassing her body made it seem irresistible; she had to try it.

Nearly overcome by the intensity of the heat, Constance forced her attention to the center of her being, expanding her lower-level energy field. Her body slowly relaxed, muscle by muscle, organ by organ, until her nervous system adjusted to the heat.

“Constance it’s time to get out. We’re not allowed to stay any longer. Must leave, give space to others,” Prana said, gently shaking Constance’s shoulders. “You did get there, I know you did.”

Dizzy, her mind slightly altered, Constance slowly lifted her body out of the tub, walked like a sleepwalking zombie, and dropped her nude body on a cot. Aware that all the eyes in the locker room were staring at Constance, Prana grabbed a robe and wrapped it around her. Constance was sprawled on the cot looking as though in a trance.

“Massage—we must get a massage,” Prana said, gently pushing Constance to the center of the cot where she remained comfortably still. “You get stimulated massage. Bring you back.”

“Stimulated massage for her and me,” she said to the two anxious women waiting with tiger balm oil. “Do feet first. Restore energy.”

The fire of the tiger balm and the powerful friction launched by the woman’s delicate but powerful hands were just the stimulation Constance needed. With the faint beginning of a smile, her eyes opened. It was an oblique, quick, half-shy look; she was a hundred percent back, feeling strange but alive. Something of great importance had happened to her. It showed in her face: the amber flame in her eyes, the dazzling smile. Feeling quiet and calm with heightened awareness, she knew she was somehow different in a profound way. She wondered if Prana could have been right about the tubs. Logically it made no sense. Perhaps the water was too hot and she passed out.

Walking back to the hotel, the evening air was as astringent as alcohol, and it signaled a promise of a cold, windy night. The splendor of bold mountains imposing from north to south and east to west seemed to lessen the effect of the winds. There was a roar of absolute silence, yet the endless wail of a distant train touched her ears. It was as though she were in two dramatically different experiences. Constance and Prana walked along the narrow path in complete silence. There was a feeling of another’s presence gliding along just outside of Constance’s physical body, almost to the point of touching her. She hoped she hadn’t unwittingly brought someone back from the bathhouse. That was just too illogical to ponder. She dismissed the idea, replacing it with the thought of having dinner with Lang upon her return. Prana seemed to be preoccupied with her own thoughts, which made it easy for Constance not to ask probing questions about what had happened to her in the bathhouse. They walked briskly, hurrying to escape the cold. The sound of the wind and the rhythmic tapping of their footsteps were the only sounds she heard.

Lang arrived in the lobby late for dinner. His face was firmly set in deep thought, yet he attempted his usual excursion into humor.

"I fell asleep on the dragon's mouth," he said. His smile was different—not the wide-eyed version he usually had. Constance sensed he was troubled.

"Where to tonight?" she asked, not acknowledging his uneasiness

"Maybe we should have dinner here in the hotel restaurant tonight," he replied, as though making any other decision would tax his brain.

"I'm not fond of the menu nor the atmosphere," she said, disappointed at his lack of vision.

Feng shui questions and comments resulting from the seminar lectures would be the topic of conversations at the dinner table. Attendees would sit at the table with the guest speakers, probing for additional feng shui information. That was hardly the atmosphere she was anticipating for the evening. Although Lang hadn't said anything specific to indicate that he had a romantic interest in her, yet she could sense a connection with him that transcended words. Even if her belief did not necessarily coincide with reality, the chemistry and the force she felt were overwhelming at times. She wondered if his outward charm and openness masked a man not yet revealed: a different, private man.

"I didn't know if you wanted to challenge the outside elements again," Lang said, as though the thought hadn't occurred to him until now.

"Well, I don't mind the elements anymore. I have been embracing them with renewed enthusiasm considering I don't have much choice," she said trying to appear detached and light-hearted about an evening she had been eagerly anticipating.

Being alone with Lang, unhurried and uninterrupted by a third person, would give her the opportunity to discover where he was really coming from. She thought that probing his soul would reveal if there were a romantic, divine, karmic, or any kind of connection between them.

"We could go to the West Influence restaurant on the square," Constance suggested.

"Frankly I don't give a damn where we go. My appetite is waning," Lang said with a hint of irritation in his face.

Was this a new side to his personality that he hadn't shown before, or had something happened? Constance asked herself. It might've been simple just to ask him what was wrong, but she was afraid that what was bothering him had something to do with her.

“We can cancel dinner if you’d like,” she said, pushing her concerns to the pit of her gut. Her smile was squeezed. Her dark brown eyes moved into his and saw stark fear. “What’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this. . . . well, without hurting you. Let’s walk to the West Influence. We need to talk.”

There was a strange nervousness about him. He shifted uneasily as though not sure if his words came out right. Haunted by the suspicion that he had no romantic interest in her, she wanted to call it off, go to her room, and find comfort in her solitude. After all, they weren’t lovers. They’d made eyes over a few dinners, enjoyed conversation, and seemingly liked each other’s physical presence. So what was there to lose? Her mind kept rationalizing the insignificance of the relationship. Mixed emotions—confusion, anxiety, curiosity—led Constance to continue with dinner plans, putting herself in a vulnerable position.

“Well, Constance, are we going to take our chances and brave the cold for West Influence?” he said, extending his hand and flashing a somewhat friendly smile, knowing he had to gain her confidence again. “I do want us to have dinner together. I can explain everything.”

Lang had turned into a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. His behavior was questionable.

Clouds socked-in, no light shown from the night sky, as Constance and Lang walked the mile down to the Chongwenmen district to the West Influence restaurant. The fierce, blowing winds had slowly calmed, giving way to a cushioning silence of fog; the temperature had increased, making it almost pleasant except for the perpetual yellow scud dancing around in the atmosphere.

Maybe it was the coolness of the air or the silence of the night that tamed the conversation and kept them at bay. The moments of silence left Constance to her inner thoughts. A wave of grayness passed over her, a kind of dark premonition, leaving her to wonder what had happened to Lang’s charming personality. He seemed distant but polite. A night of gnawing unrest and discontentment was not worth her precious time. She determined that if the payoff would not be any better than what she had seen so far, she would walk away from the dinner. Walking in complete silence with a male counterpart opened the door to a lot of memories she had tried to bury.

Other than her two dogs—Bongus, a dachshund, and Picadilly, a French toy poodle—Constance had forsaken personal relationships. Feng

shui designing gave her intellectual stimulation and sparked her intuition, of which she had plenty. Bongus and Picadilly served as surrogate friends, and many times the means by which she escaped the need for personal human contact. Since the death of her mom and dad in a car accident, she had poured her love, attention, and all her personal emotions on her profession and her animals. She had kept to herself, offering unconditional love and receiving it back from Bongus and Picadilly. She loved her profession, but it didn't always give her the satisfaction she sought because of the lack of human intervention. The fear of conditional relationships had kept her from intimate involvement with people. She made a pact with herself after losing her parents that she would go it alone unless she experienced unconditional love in a relationship with someone.

There had been constant gossip throughout her career at Bay Construction and Design, gossip among peers who considered her weird, unusual, or eccentric, and someone who didn't belong in mainstream American business. These were descriptions that had been used so often they had lost much of their meaning for her, if they ever really had any. She often wondered if those who spoke them really knew what they meant.

The West Influence restaurant was clean, modern, and pseudo elegant. The name was fitting, as the Western influence was immediately visible. There was a beamed cathedral ceiling and tile throughout. It revealed an unerring sense of architectural composition, the furnishings elegant but understated. Feng shui had been an afterthought, corrected mostly by mirrors, colors, and artifacts. Small doors had mirrors placed on top to give height and width. The too-large door had a wind chime to disperse harmful ch'i.

Lang's body language spoke louder than his words. Both arms tightly folded, pressing against his chest, he sat leaning backward with excessive observation above and beyond the top of Constance's head. His eyes seemed to be fixed on a distant scene.

"Maybe they are wrong. I'm not sure I believe it any way, but I need to hear your side," he said, his eyes slightly moved from the focused distant.

"Maybe they're wrong about what?" Constance asked, her voice quiet, tranquil, and stubborn. "What don't you want to believe?"

She could almost guess he had heard a rumor about her. It seemed that the designing industry couldn't get enough of making inferences aimed at discrediting her feng shui designs or assassinating her character. She adjusted her body in the chair, looked at Lang directly, magnetizing her eyes to his so he couldn't move them away.

“Lang, what have you heard about me? Give it to me straight. I think I can take it.”

She sat staring into his eyes waiting for the words to come forth. They’d never been more than careful strangers to each other, so she wondered why she cared what he was thinking about her. She was more concerned that what he had heard would affect his respect for the art of feng shui designing.

“I walked in on a group who were discussing you, and some of the things I heard were less than flattering,” he said, moving out of her locked eyes.

“And?” she said, encouraging him to go on.

“They were from San Francisco, so I assumed they knew you and your work firsthand.” He hesitated.

“Lang, please, just tell me what was said, unless of course you really don’t want to. . . . At least I’ll know if it’s worth defending myself against,”

“They said that you are strange, weird, and live an unconventional lifestyle with animals—and that your designing had no logic to it, and your success, if you call it that, had been a fluke. They said you do weird stuff—stuff that doesn’t make any sense—and the reason you sell your designs is that people think you are mainstream. They said you hide behind classy expensive clothing, presenting yourself as if you are intelligent.”

His face turned red with embarrassment as though he had stooped to a level that made him uncomfortable. Stunned, but not surprised by Lang’s revelations, Constance wasn’t sure if she should defend herself with explicit details or simply say it wasn’t true. Decorum was one thing, but she had to consider her deeper feelings. *Should I dignify the gossip with more gossip?* she thought. If Lang knew her, she wouldn’t have to say anything, but he didn’t. She sat pondering her inner thoughts, with memories fleeting through her mind like wind on water. The words had an emotional resonance that lingered. Uncomfortable with her silence, Lang resumed the conversation with still more gossip.

“They said your company wants to replace you because of your off-beat, illogical style, but they hadn’t found anyone yet to generate the revenue stream you do.”

“Oh, I see,” was all she could say. Nothing else came to her, nothing at all. She hid a thick swallow in her throat and turned away. The niggling guilt of her inadequacy to defend herself assumed the role of self-doubt.

“Hunan chicken,” the waiter said, pushing a dish that looked like anything but chicken in front of Constance.



Just one whiff of the dish, and she lost her appetite. The thought of ingesting some domesticated animal into her already-tense stomach dulled her sense of adventure for the delicacy. She pushed the dish toward Lang and poured herself a cup of tea, camouflaging it with lemon juice.

“Are you aware that Wyman Fortuna is looking for an assistant?” Lang asked.

It hadn’t seemed to matter that Constance hadn’t defended any of the allegations or gossip. His face had gone from a troubled, still look to that of compassion. Without his knowing, Lang was giving her answers to troubling questions she had pushed to the back of her mind thinking she was being cynical and paranoid. She believed Wyman Fortuna had deliberately tried to throw her off track.

“How do you know Wyman Fortuna is looking for an assistant?” she asked, her face in deep thought, remembering certain conversations with him.

“He said that’s the reason why he’s here: to find a qualified feng shui designer that meets specific criteria.”

Constance’s mind wouldn’t stop trying to piece the puzzle together. She knew she needed to offer some explanation to Lang to reassure him she was not a villain, yet she didn’t want to reveal too much until she had time to think it through. She wanted to defend herself just enough to suspend his suspicion.

“It’s true, Lang, that there are people who are uncomfortable with my approach. Maybe it has to do with my belief system or something that they find indefinable,” she said, aware of her own pain and depth of feelings. “I haven’t done anything unethical, illegal, or immoral. There are just people who are afraid of what I don’t reveal about myself or my designs.”

“Why would the company want to get rid of you if you make money for them?” he asked with a look of sensitivity and desire to understand her side of the story.

“Maybe the company thinks it’s the technical knowledge they lack, and nothing else. If they have a mainstream person with the knowledge, they will continue the revenue and have the appropriate person as well. Maybe a mainstream thinker will fit in the company’s culture better.” Constance couldn’t help remembering her refusal to attend company functions, optional meetings, or anything of a social nature.

“So what’ll you do if they replace you?” he asked, his feelings for her obviously deepened.

“I don’t know yet,” she said, pouring more tea into the empty cup. She’d been like an animal in a cage that, even if the door opened, wouldn’t dare



move. She remembered being told by a former boss that she was desirable because she was so unreachable and unpredictable and constantly got desired results. “I suppose I’ll allow them to pull the plug if that’s what they want to do.” She tried to look steady and well controlled, but her face was remorseful.

“Your talent is in demand,” Lang said with a lovely, wide, warming smile. “You don’t need to worry. I feel nothing but good vibes each time I am with you. I suspect your customers feel the same way. Maybe it’s their perspective that’s skewed. You could become a consultant and work for yourself.” His eyes squinted with excitement for her. “It’s not like your views are from alien beings.”

The thought of making a living without a well-established corporate name behind her was intimidating to Constance. She hadn’t had a master plan for her life or career; she had moved from day to day, moment to moment, trusting that the direction would come.

“Constance,” Lang said, touching her hands across the table, “I am sorry for the way I reacted to the gossip about you. I trust you more than I trust the source of the gossip.” He looked up, now fully gazing into her eyes. “I want us to be good friends forever.”

“Good friends forever” resonated deep within her soul while they walked down Tiananmen Square back to the hotel. The wind had picked up again, positioning itself for the night. Her ears were tuned to catch the whispers of the wind, but she heard only those of Lang’s sincere voice and felt his compassion for her as a person.

## CHAPTER 11

Constance stood leaning against the hotel information desk waiting for the clerk to return with her messages.

I'll meet you tomorrow morning for jogging. Call me and let me know what time you're running.

It was from Nicole Bresneshaus. Constance flipped the piece of paper to find yet another message.

I won't be able to have that tea break with you tonight. However, if you would compile your new notes from the workshop and any of your old notes, I would like to borrow them to take on my trip back to Hong Kong on Friday. Don't worry, I will take good care of them and return them to you on Wednesday when we get back in the office. Thanks a lot. I'll see you Friday before the seminar ends. Sincerely,  
Wyman Fortuna.

Mechanically she went over and over the words on the notes. It wasn't so much what was said as how she felt about what she read. There were demanding implications in both notes. Her subconscious mind blocked her conscious. She sensed they were trying to control her, and it was frightening.

Although they degraded her work behind her back, Constance knew that they thought she had some secrets about selling feng shui designs that only she knew, and they were determined to find out about them. It appeared that Wyman Fortuna believed the secrets were in her collection of notes and drafts she had obtained during her career. Selling feng shui designs as

a viable option in the West had proven to be difficult, yet most designers sought after it. It had proven to be a big money maker if one could master the secret to selling it.

If she had been naive before, the conversation with Lang had opened her eyes. The question was how she would avoid letting Wyman Fortuna borrow her precious notes without revealing her suspicion about him. She threw the notes on her dresser in her hotel room and threw herself on the bed. She wanted to cover her head and make it all go away, but her eyes still rested on the image that the messages had conjured in her mind. Not only did she have to deal with Wyman Fortuna, but also Nicole Bresneshaus had become what felt like a thorn in her side. She too couldn't be trusted. *She hasn't been jogging, running, or walking during the entire trip, so why the sudden interest?* wondered Constance. There was something about what she didn't say that made Constance uncomfortable.

Obedying her inner thoughts that said, "When in doubt do nothing," Constance calmed her troubled mind and drifted off into the twilight of sleep. The loud ringing of the phone jarred her back to awareness.

"Hello?" she said half awake and half asleep.

"Did you get my message?" the voice on the other end said.

"Who is this?"

"Nicole," she said annoyed that Constance didn't recognize her voice. "I left you a message about jogging tomorrow morning, but I know how lax the front desk is about giving messages, so I decided to call you. What time are you going?"

Constance hesitated, searching for a way to discourage her.

"I go very early. The cold winds are fierce, and it's difficult to jog at that time. I run against the north wind you know." Constance hoped she would reconsider.

"Where shall I meet you?" Nicole insisted. It was obvious she had been trained as a pushy salesperson. "I can meet you in the lobby at six."

"Well, okay, if you insist," Constance said, thinking she would leave earlier and miss her.

"I'll meet you in the lobby at six a.m. sharp tomorrow morning," Nicole said and dropped the phone. She sounded like a drill sergeant; saying "good-bye" would've been too polite.

Constance stood staring at the phone as though bound by its field of electronic force. Unanswered questions would hound her sleep all night, she thought. She had to force herself to dress for bed. A cynical inner voice

brought another question to mind: Maybe Nicole and Wyman were working together. Could Nicole be in line for her replacement at Bay Construction and Design? Why? She quizzed herself silently until sleep came nudging in among her thoughts.

The roar of absolute silence, a breeze skimmed past down the open deck while Constance stood looking over the hotel garden. It was five-thirty in the morning. She couldn't sleep any longer. It was a postcard-perfect morning: The skies were cloudless from one horizon to the other; a clear view of the tall cliffs and Yellow Mountains seemed so perfect in their stillness; and the light from the full moon was still visible.

Dismayed at the prospect of spoiling her whole day by starting it off in the company of Nicole, Constance wanted to retreat through the back entrance, avoiding the lobby where she would be waiting. She knew Nicole wouldn't take off on her own. Uneasiness spiced with irritation was not the ingredient for a pleasant morning jog, Constance thought.

Her early morning meditation and running were the means Constance used to prepare herself for the challenges of the day. With so much disruption in her personal and professional life, she needed this time alone more than ever. *I can't win a popularity contest anyway, she thought, so why not go ahead without connecting with Nicole and face the consequences later?* She needed the solitude, the strength, and the insight that running alone would provide.

Constance had decided to leave through the back door and wind her way through the garden maze, when she heard a soft knock on her door. It was quarter to six and not uncommon to have the morning newspaper dropped off; it was a service the hotel management performed for foreign guests, especially Americans. Constance opened the door slightly, reaching down for her paper, only to find a red pair of tennis shoes attached to Nicole instead; she was eager to go, dressed in yellow sweat pants with a white elasticized waist, a zip-up bluish-green jacket with a drawstring hood and a tan wool cap. It was as if she had followed the element theory of color scheme. The colors were symbolic for an important meeting, negotiation, or other occasion to reinforce ch'i for luck and determination.

Constance's heart thumped against her rib cage. All of her inner warning systems went off at once. Her face jelled into an expression of shock. Nicole's presence had become an emotional roller coaster for her since the day they met. Caught in the moment of Nicole's clever strategy to accompany her, Constance decided to make the best of a difficult situation. She would take

the path of the greatest resistant so they would have to use most of their energy for running, and have very little left for conversation.

The usual influence of the cold, dry northwesterly winds blowing from the interior of Asia was absent this morning. It was almost pleasant, something Constance hadn't experienced since jogging in Beijing. She took it to mean that perhaps spring was around the corner.

Side by side they took off up Biechang Jie running toward Jingshun Park, a straight uphill path, traveling along the walls of Forbidden City. The northern winds picked up ever so slightly as they ran farther north toward Shisha Lakes. Footsteps hitting the pavement, breath like frosty smoke polluting the atmosphere, they moved in unison. No words were uttered. Nicole was proving to be a better athlete than Constance had thought. After several miles of intense running they had gone far past Jingshun Park, which was farther than Constance had meant to go. She knew these would be long trying miles to retrace if she got out too far and became fatigued.

Contacting on the ball of the foot, rocking back on the heel, then coming off the ball of the foot again, running about a six-minute mile or faster, Constance and Nicole raced through the streets of Beijing. Constance kept her distance far enough ahead to prevent conversation. After an hour of running, it was obvious to Constance that Nicole was anything but an amateur runner. She had the stride of a marathon runner. Her athletic ability, natural and trained, was clear. Constance's mind began to thumb through the sketchy information she had about Nicole—it was sketchy indeed. She knew nothing about her past. Most of what she knew had been taken from her observation of Nicole's behavior. She knew nothing about the woman's abilities or experiences; she had only formed an opinion about her.

Determined to have her solitude and experience, the so-called runner's high, an increased sense of consciousness, that certain state of euphoria that comes when all body systems are working in synchronization, she refused to give way to conversation.

"That wasn't what I had in mind when I ask to run with you. I didn't know you were so competitive," Nicole said, catching her breath between words as they approached the hotel.

They had jogged ten miles without interruption. It was almost two hours later. The streets and the lobby were now bustling with the morning crowds: pedestrians running to the subway, bikers trekking along the packed streets,

masses of humanity coming and going in every direction. Beijing was now awake in its entire splendor.

"I'm impressed," Constance said, looking Nicole in the face for the first time. Constance noticed a pair of icy-blue watery eyes that radiated something different than anything she had seen before: There was compassion, maybe admiration. She was surprised. She had expected Nicole to be angry and belittling since she didn't get her way. "Do you run often?"

"Yes, I run eight to ten miles a day," Nicole said matter-of-factly as they stretched their hamstrings. "I'd hope we could have time to talk. I didn't know you were a real runner like me." She touched Constance on her shoulder to make sure she had her attention. "It is very important that we talk alone." Her voice was almost begging to be heard.

"Maybe another time," Constance said apologetically, "because it's getting late and I have to make some phone calls back to the States. You know how difficult that can be."

Constance thought that if she could stall meeting with Nicole long enough, the workshop would be over, and she wouldn't have to see or talk to her again. She was convinced that Nicole wanted something from her, and she was dead-set against giving her the opportunity to ask for it. Constance had drawn her own conclusion about Nicole based on circumstances:

She and Wyman Fortuna had worked at the same company in the Midwest. Wyman wanted to bring her with him to the West Coast as his assistant. If Bay Construction and Design got the right mix, a couple of persons qualified and interested in feng shui, they would find a clever, legal way to terminate her. Or they would give her an insignificant back-office job.

This was the scenario Constance ran through her head while walking back to her room. She was sure Nicole Bresneshaus was part of the conspiracy to replace her. Constance's ego wanted nothing more than to call her boss back in San Francisco and resign, rather than play strategic games to hold her job. But the \$10 million contract with Global Manufacturing and the pending deal with Universal would be the most significant projects she had ever done with feng shui designs; it would be a permanent showcase, sure to bring fame and fortune.

There was a driving force that propelled Constance, but it had little to do with the obvious. It was an unexplainable force that made her want to stay on, a force that made her willing to fight, a force that she didn't understand. It wasn't pride, control, ego, power, or money, but rather as though an energy incapacitated her when she thought of walking away; all the logical reasons she

used to justify leaving, such as making it on her own as a private consultant, were overshadowed. Her logical mind, intellect, emotions—none of these had any conscious influence in her decision to stay. It didn't seem like the decision was coming from her at all, knowing what she knew about herself. She hated battles and would walk away in a second to maintain her peace of mind. She felt gripped by some other kind of force that ignored her personality. It was a power that she didn't think belonged to her.



## CHAPTER 12

“Try your call again later,” the long-distance operator said for the third time.

Constance stood gripping the phone. She had been trying for hours to call her boss back in San Francisco to get an update on her accounts. Vicious competitors were always waiting to edge their way into her accounts, so Constance wanted to touch base with her customers. This trip had brought out insecurities and worries in Constance she hadn't felt before. The competition had always been there, but she hadn't dwelled on it. She had taken it in stride.

Deciding to bypass her boss and call her accounts directly, Constance got through to Global Manufacturing immediately.

“Hi, Jack, this is Constance McKenna. How are things going? . . . Yeah, I'm still in China. . . . Yeah, uh huh, is that right? He did what? What was the meeting for? . . . Yeah . . . When did this happen? . . . Really? What did Mr. Walberg have to say about that? . . . Well, that's encouraging. So, John requested the meeting with Mr. Walberg. . . . Yeah. So he was satisfied with my proposal. That's good to hear. . . . Yeah, I'll be back on Thursday. . . . Sure, we can meet on Friday morning. . . . Okay, bye.”

Fear of the unknown knotted and writhed in her stomach. She thought she had mastered the terrifying prospect of being replaced until now. Although Constance had heard rumors of her company's plans to replace her, she wasn't prepared for what Jack Brand had told her: John Shaw had requested a meeting with Harvey Walberg, the owner of Global Manufacturing, to discuss possibly taking Constance off the account. He wanted to find out if it would be detrimental to keeping the account. He had inquired about her rapport. As subtle as it was, he nevertheless had asked the question.

Constance was stunned, humiliated, and downright angry. *How could John Shaw stoop so low?* she thought. *What caused him to turn on me?* She felt a rock fall through her heart. The person she trusted the most had betrayed her.



Constance and John Shaw had differences in ideology but few arguments about her work or ability. He had been the wind beneath her wings, she thought, instrumental in her getting promotions and raises. He was, however, a “company man,” some might have called him a “yes man.” He did seem to have an underlying fear of losing his job if he disagreed with his superiors. Power and status, whether real or perceived, raveled his equilibrium.

*John Shaw’s boss could be behind the strategy*, she thought. John’s boss had made innuendoes about having a male head of the feng shui design department. Yet he often praised her work and appeared pleased with her performance. Still, there did seem to be that unanswered question lurking in the minds of upper management about whether the company would double its profits if a male was involved on the front line of feng shui designing. They thought a mainstream, conventional, male figure would add credibility. These were conditions Constance had been vaguely aware of but not enough to be concerned about. She had distanced herself from “the boys’ club.”

A war had started and Constance thought that she was too far from the battleground to fight effectively. She wanted to forego the remainder of the seminar and fly home to protect her turf. Talking to John Shaw long-distance had lost its appeal. She wanted to make a personal appearance so she decided not to call him. She felt as if the whole of her being was in jeopardy. She pondered over what Jack had said while she dressed for the workshop.

Reflecting on the five-element ba-gua color wheel, a map of one’s life condition, she carefully chose her wardrobe so it would help her to manipulate her destiny. She endorsed the Chinese belief that you can tip fate’s hand by adjusting the ba-gua. Her mind went through the translation of the colors as she coordinated her wardrobe: red and white flowered scarf with red blazer jacket, symbolizing fire, followed by a white blouse (fire melts metal), a blue skirt (metal chops down wood), and brown shoes and tan hose (wood uproots earth). She carefully dressed to raise her ch’i.

The lobby was virtually empty when she arrived for the day’s seminar. All the attendees had gone into the seminar room. This was exactly what she had hoped for. The fountain in the center of the lobby splashed with mellifluous sounds, drowning the intense level of noise coming from the seminar room. She stood as if in a trance near the fountain to let the water wash her troubles away.

Hearing anything at all about feng shui was the least desirable thing she wanted.

Just outside the seminar room at the entrance was the sign-in roster for the attendees. Constance flipped through the pages arranged in alphabetical order to see if Wyman was attending—and there he was. He had signed in about five minutes before, so he would be seated in back of the room, she thought. She jarred the door slightly, enough to peek inside. He was seated in the back row where the only other empty seat was awaiting if she went in.

This was Wyman Fortuna's last day at the workshop, and she knew he would persuade her to give him her notes to take back with him. He was the kind of man who wouldn't accept "no" for an answer; she had already seen that side of him. He would beat her down for the notes and she knew that. He was sure of himself and his influence over women.

Sobered instantly by the frightening possibility that she would give up her feng shui secrets and sabotage her career, she closed the door and headed back toward her room. Then she saw Lang standing at the front desk in the hotel lobby.

"Hi, Lang," she said walking up to the desk. "Are you checking out?"

"I've rented a jeep to take an excursion to Shanghai after the workshop," he said.

"Are you going today?" she asked with a look of apprehension. She felt as though she was walking the knife-edge of danger as long as she stayed around, taking a chance that Wyman would somehow find her.

"I'd planned to leave tomorrow afternoon," he said, looking around the lobby, a direct response to her display of nervousness.

"Can you come to my room when you finish? I've gotta get out of this lobby," she said moving quickly toward the corridor.

Constance knew absolutely nothing about driving the unpredictable roads in China. Otherwise she would have taken off on her own, she thought. She hadn't called Monica Winston yet about going with her to Tibet on Saturday. Her strong desire to return home to save her career seemed to overpower her desire to explore China, an opportunity of a lifetime, she had thought earlier. Her most immediate thought was to find someplace to hide for the next twenty-four hours. If Lang were to leave now she would go with him.

Lang came to Constance's room immediately. The door was open but he knocked, waiting for her to greet him at the door. She hurriedly pulled Lang into the room and closed the door.

"I've a problem," she said. "I can't attend the workshop today because Wyman Fortuna will try to pressure me into giving him my feng shui notebook." Her whole body tightened, and she took a breath.

“You don’t have to give it to him, do you?” he asked. “Just say ‘no.’”

“Lang, please take me seriously,” she said, her face marred with tension. “I’ve got to figure out a way not to see him at all today. His flight leaves tonight, so if I can avoid him today I won’t have to deal with him.”

“But what about when you return?” he asked. “You’ll have to deal with him sooner or later.” His voice echoed with sadness for her predicament. It appeared that he wanted to help any way he could.

“I can handle the situation on my home turf,” she said. “But it’s difficult here.”

“So what do you suggest we do? Shall we stay locked in your room for the next twenty-four hours? I can handle that if you can.” His sense of humor was always present even though he saw the seriousness of the situation.

“We could take an excursion to the Western Hills. It could take us well into the evening, even if we left now,” she said, her face mixed with tension and excitement.

“Do you know how to get there?” Lang asked.

“No, but I have a detailed map, and I’m good at navigating.”

“But I’ll miss today’s lecture. I was told he would reveal the secret to selling feng shui.” Lang wanted to get as much as possible from the workshop. He had been more serious than ever about marketing and selling the design since meeting Constance.

“I have copies of today’s lecture, and it doesn’t give you any secrets,” she said, moving to the window looking out into the garden as though in deep thought. She wasn’t sure there were any recorded secrets to feng shui. “Trust me. I have a video presentation on the art of marketing and selling feng shui, and it might give you more practical information than you will hear in any lecture.”

She hoped that she could trust Lang with the information. Very few people knew she had a video; it was one of her most prized possessions, done by the great masters in the art.

“You have a video? Wow!” He was charged up like a filament in a light bulb. “If you’re gonna share that kind of information with me, I’ll say to hell with today’s lecture. Do you really mean that? That’s the most exciting news I’ve heard since I’ve been here.”

He strode over to the door, raring to go. The feng shui video had been made with the help of her dad, who had traveled all over the world researching feng shui and its ancient mysticism. He had been advisor to the head of corporations worldwide, but very few people knew that. In fact, the company

she worked for wasn't aware, nor her customers or peers. Her dad had been master of the art himself and had taught Constance much of the subtleties of selling the design, including how to use intuition in order to achieve the best results. It wasn't published information; only she knew it.

Since Constance had dressed to obtain optimum ch'i power that morning, she decided to keep on those clothes. She advised Lang on how to optimize his ch'i power by making some major changes and rearrangements to his dress. She wanted the best for both of them.

"I think we should take a backpack with extra clothing. There's a fifty-fifty chance we won't get back," he said.

Lang had a working knowledge of eastern China; he had backpacked across the terrain on horseback and bike a few years after graduating from college.

"Why? We aren't going too far out of Beijing," Constance said, concerned that he might be planning to go farther into the countryside.

"This country is just too unpredictable to be unprepared for the unexpected," Lang said convincingly. "Maybe we should check out now. Perhaps we could tour the countryside together for a few days before you leave."

He stepped back into the room, sat at the small, red-and-black-lacquered desk, pulled out a pad, and started writing their itinerary.

"We need to revamp and plan this trip," he said taking himself seriously. "We have time to plan our route, pack, and check out before the first break. No one has to know what happened to us."

His cheek muscles stood out as he clenched his jaw while he wrote; he was in deep thought. Constance stood looking over his shoulder. There was a part of her that wanted to explore China with Lang, yet she was haunted by the problems she anticipated back home with her job. She trusted Lang and felt some sense of connection with him, but she couldn't bring her mind to relax with the idea of traveling alone with a man she hardly knew. Being in his presence forced her to an unknown place inside herself, a place she wasn't comfortable going.

The morning had a chopped, chaotic tempo mixed with excitement and adventure with undertones of love and romance; the atmosphere felt teeming with possibilities. She sensed spirituality in the moment, something she hadn't felt since she left San Francisco. She usually experienced this kind of high running through the Golden Gate Park with Bongus and Picadilly. Everything felt right with the world in those moments.

“We can travel the Great Wall from Beijing to Shanhaiguan, if we can make it that far,” Lang said, marking up the trail map.

Constance’s thoughts regressed. In spite of her resolve, her mind inexorably returned to the possibility of losing her job.

“But, Lang, if I stay here longer I’m sure to lose my job,” she said. “I guess I’m afraid of what might happen if I’m not there. I’ll have no control over what happens.”

She couldn’t believe she had admitted she was afraid. It was a feeling she rarely shared with anyone; admitting it to herself was unusual. The faint beginning of a smile appeared on Lang’s face.

“You might lose your job, but you won’t lose your career. That situation is not yours to control. Lighten up, Constance. The universe will take care of it, unless of course you’re on the mouth of the dragon.” He couldn’t contain his smile any longer; he laughed. “You’ve done your part. The universe will support you.”

Constance hadn’t heard that kind of talk since the long walks in the park with her dad. Whenever she got worried or distressed, her dad would take her, hand in hand, for a long walk in the Golden Gate Park along the south bay and talk about the power of the universe and the mind. He seemed to walk with an internal force that he claimed connected him to the universal mind that had the answers to every concern. She had trusted that completely—until the accident that claimed his life.

Lang had triggered pleasant memories of her dad. He had to be an old soul with that kind of wisdom, she thought to herself. She wasn’t surprised to hear him encourage her, but she was surprised at his choice of words.

“Okay,” he said standing. “I’ll pack and meet you back here to help you carry your luggage.”

Constance had packed her clothing two days ago, prepared to leave on short notice for some unknown reason. This was a practice unlike her; she usually kept her clothes open so she could pick and choose her wardrobe based on her immediate need for ch’i enhancement. She had felt a need to do things differently since she had been in China.

Remembering that Monica Winston had asked Constance to travel with her to Chengdu, Constance called her to let her know she had made other plans.

“Hi, Monica. I’m glad you are there,” she said. “This is Constance McKenna. Remember me? I told you I’d let you know if I were going with you to Chengdu. Well, I’m checking out today. . . . Yeah. . . . No, we are

driving the Great Wall starting today. . . . Yeah, you could do that. Oh, yeah. We would be delighted to have you come along. . . . Yeah, you got time. . . . Great! We'll meet you in the lobby. Hey, Monica, meet us on the west wing." Constance didn't want to take a chance on running into anyone from the seminar. "Okay. See you then. Bye now."

Since she didn't know if Lang would agree to have Monica come along on the trip, she immediately called to tell him what she considered good news. Monica was more familiar with the China topology than Lang.

Four large pieces of Samsonite luggage, a giant backpack, an oversized briefcase, and a heavy-duty wool overcoat—*Much too much luggage for a two-week trip*, she thought. Most of the items in her luggage hadn't been worn once, yet she deemed them important enough to trek across China. Wearing any outfit twice within a two-week period was unheard of. She needed variety in her clothing. Her oversized briefcase must've been packed with every business document she had, including all of her feng shui designs, presentations, drawings, and statistics on its benefits. One might think she didn't believe in using filing cabinets.

They had loaded the luggage and were ready to head for the Great Wall, when Constance discovered she had left her briefcase in the hotel. Her adrenaline level began to rise because her feng shui notebook was in her briefcase. Constance had turned her room keys in at the front desk, so negotiating with them to get the keys again would be next to impossible. The seminar break was within ten minutes, and Constance thought nothing would be resolved within ten minutes at the front desk no matter how simple it was.

She rushed through the door of the front lobby when she saw Wyman Fortuna standing with his back to the front lobby door. *Maybe he's out of the workshop looking for me now*, she thought. *I'll have to try another path; his X-ray vision will surely spot me if I go through the lobby.*

"Constance! Constance!" She heard someone call her name. She refused to look back. She ran through a side door that was slightly ajar; it looked like a fire escape. She pulled the door shut and stood quietly with her head against the door listening for footsteps. The knob on the door slowly turned; her heartbeat raced. The knob turned again, but the door was locked.

"Hello? Anybody there?" It was definitely Wyman Fortuna's voice.

Constance's heart was beating out of control. She stood glued against the door. She heard the footsteps slowly move away. He was gone. Grasping the doorknob, thrusting her entire body weight against the door, she tried to

open it. The door had locked from the inside and outside. She felt a sudden chill and wondered if she should scream a guttural cry of terror. The smell of rancid grease hung in the air like a wet sheet.

She saw a splintered, dilapidated wooden stairway covered with cobwebs and dust. Holding on to the railing, testing each step before she put her body weight on it, she climbed the stairs. Upon reaching the fifth floor, she saw a door; it was also locked. Constance knocked, kicked, and screamed at the top of her voice until a housekeeper who happened to be nearby heard her. She opened the door, looked at Constance, and slammed it shut again.

“Jiuming! Jinming! Wo shoushangle,” Constance screamed and yelled to the housekeeper, pleading for her help, announcing in Chinese that she was injured.

The woman came back to the door, bringing another housekeeper with her. Each took turns peeping through the keyhole, as though Constance were on display. She continued to plead for their help using the few Chinese words and phrases she had learned.

“Waihuijuan. Nimen waihuijuan,” the housekeepers said. Constance was able to translate that they wanted to bargain for her relief.

“Duoshaoqian?” Constance asked. She really didn’t care how much. She wanted to get out. “Ten yuan. I will give you ten yuan.”

The housekeepers giggled as they opened the door; they were thrilled. Relieved and thankful, Constance gave them the two U.S. dollars, never questioning the ethics of what they had done. In addition she had to bargain with the housekeepers to give her the key to get back in the room. They required additional money to give her the key to the room. She quickly handed them another U.S. dollar for the key. She then rushed down the hall to the room from which she had just checked out. She had almost forgotten why she had gotten herself into the predicament.

The notebook was there on the dresser, right where she had left it. Constance quickly grabbed the notebook and took off through the back exit. The thirty minutes seemed like an eternity. She was sure Lang and Monica would be wondering what had happened to her. She rushed weaving and winding through the nooks and crannies of the hotel. Monica and Lang were waiting patiently, relaxed and chatting about the trip. It was as though they had no concerns about her return. She didn’t tell them what had happened. She felt too embarrassed and out of balance.



## CHAPTER 13

A smudge of sun dappled through the clouds, revealing a clear view of tall cliffs etched with specs of snow. The clouds reached out and over into the land. Constance hummed the tune from the Chinese opera played on the jeep's radio. She was glad to be away from the hotel the workshop, Wyman Fortuna, and Nicole Bresneshaus. She knew she would have to deal with Wyman sooner or later. She would make it later. The sound coming from the speakers was of such good quality that the tune seemed to have mesmerized Lang, and Monica into complete silence while they rode along the Great Wall. It was as though they thought they would disturb the quiet beauty of the mountainous region and valley if they spoke.

For twenty miles they followed a lonely gravel road among steep hills, gaining elevation as they traveled. Looking back, the Wall spread out upon the highest range of peaks. It seemed to run along the roof of the earth, watchtowers along the wall stretching from horizon to horizon. For the first hundred miles or so, the Great Wall meandered through steep mountains following the ridges. Constance began to understand why the Chinese saw the Wall as a dragon lying across China with its head drinking from the sea.

Evidence of agricultural China appeared as they approached fields and villages. Rural China seemed to be a place of endless labor, most of it performed by animals and Chinese peasants. Spring was emerging, as evidenced by an old man patiently scooping cow waste from the road and stuffing it in a straw basket; it would be used for fertilizer in planting.

Intrigued by the splendor of the countryside and its breathtaking Yellow Mountains, Constance realized they had passed the last stop for the city buses. They had even bypassed the path to scramble up the slopes to the top of Incense Burner Peak. She had heard that the view was incredible and embracing up there.



Passing through familiar crowded landscapes of gray-tiled rooftops and featureless walls, Constance's mind slipped back to her situation. The endless array of rocks—rock walls, rock houses, rock terraces—were such a drab scene, her mind slipped back into worry about her job security. She had tried to convince herself that she could stay here for a few days and enjoy what she once considered an opportunity of a lifetime, but her troubles kept resurfacing. Lang and Monica meant well, she thought, but they couldn't possibly know how anxious and scared she was of losing her job if she didn't get back right away. She wanted to take a flight out of China that night. She didn't remember if Wyman Fortuna was flying back to San Francisco or Hong Kong, but she did know he was leaving that night as well; she was willing to take a chance on running into him. The desire to leave had become an obsession. Going ahead to Chengdu would delay her arrival back home by three days and anything could happen by then, she thought.

A sense of rage was building inside of her. Constance felt helpless being so far from home, as though she were losing control of her reasoning powers.

"Why in the hell did you talk me into coming on this trip?" she said to Lang. Her face was distorted with anger. "I need to get back to San Francisco. I don't want to stay here any longer. What in the world am I doing here with all the stuff going on at home?"

It was obvious she had been stifling her anxiety for the last two weeks. Lang seemed shocked and surprised at Constance's outburst. He didn't know how to respond. He glanced at her, too uncomfortable to look into her eyes longer than that.

"I thought you wanted to do this," he said.

"I thought I did too," she said quickly, looking away. "But right now I'm miserable and if this is the way I'm gonna feel, I want to go back now."

Constance's face had taken on the look of a child in pain. Lang hadn't seen this irrational, emotional side of Constance. He had seen her only as solid and sure of herself.

Solitude had always been her solace, but now it was causing her to have serious doubts—doubts that seemed to be overwhelming her. She felt a pain deep inside of her so great she wanted to scream. She felt as though she was suffocating from lack of air.

Constance believed that there was no point in being with people or sharing your troubled thoughts with them if they would not take the time to listen deeply and try to understand what you were feeling. She had doubts that Lang or Monica would understand or care what she was feeling at the core of

her being. She didn't feel solitude, instead she felt alienated already, being on this trip with Lang and Monica. She believed they, just like others she met, weren't interested in her real feelings. She simply didn't want to have superficial talk about the beauty of China. Constance longed for someone to care about what she was feeling. Otherwise she preferred to be alone physically.

She had agreed to go with Lang because she felt that they had a connection that would lead her to a better understanding of herself. She thought that maybe they could even share a closeness she hadn't had for a long time. She had hoped that this would be that opportunity, the chance to touch her soul with the soul of someone else and risk sharing her feelings. But instead she felt alone and afraid.

If she had been home, however, she could meditate and connect with her higher self, *which would be a source of comfort*, she thought. It had long been her means of getting through difficult times. It seemed to escape Constance that the universal mind was everywhere.

"There's nothing you can do about anything this weekend, is there?" Lang asked. "I'll have you back at Beijing's airport by tomorrow afternoon. I'd take you now but we'll never make it. It's too late. I'll make sure you're on the first flight out tomorrow. . . . Frankly, these outbursts might get to be too much."

"You don't give a damn about me or my problem," she said, her usually strong, womanly voice broken into a girlish outburst. "You're just another 'user' like all the others. Once this trip is over, you can just fly on off to France as though you never met me."

"What'd you want me to do, go with you to San Francisco? Because if you want me to, I will." It was hard to tell if Lang was serious, his face was devoid of any sign that could be read.

"All of you are nothing but selfish bastards looking for someone vulnerable to take advantage of." Her words were sudden, raw, and very angry. "Every person I met here in this workshop has wanted something from me. Why?" Her eyes began to tear; her voice cracked. She turned on him with a sudden flash of defensive spirit. "I've never done anything to hurt anyone. My character has been assassinated, my career threatened." She wiped the mascara running down her face. "I'll be damned if I am going to allow anyone to manipulate me into submission."

Lang said nothing to defend himself. He drove along silently with a compassionate look on his face, wondering if it had been his intention to use Constance in some way. Fixing his penetrating gaze on the Wall, pinning it

with a long silent scrutiny, Lang looked for a place to exit but had no luck. There wasn't an exit for another twenty miles.

Monica hadn't said a word since the beginning of the trip. She originally seemed enthralled with the landscape and the topology of China—or maybe she was deep in thought and using the scenery as a backdrop. It had appeared that Monica thought she would enjoy the comradeship of a woman from another country, sharing different ideas and perspectives as well as having a companion to travel the lonely roads with. However, Monica was now painfully aware of the silence and the tension building in the jeep. She wanted to find a way of breaking the tension without being trite.

“Do y'all know the moral tale of the Wall?”

Constance waited for Lang to respond; she was not interested in making small talk.

“I've heard several stories told,” Lang said with a smile seaming the corners of his mouth. “Everybody tells a different one.” His smile turned to a laugh. “The Wall is a dragon lying across the country with its mouth drinking from the sea, and right now I think we must be driving over its volatile part.” He avoided looking at Constance.

“Constance,” Monica said, obviously trying to draw her into the conversation, “I bet you've heard many stories about the Wall, given your background in feng shui designing.”

Constance sat slumped dejectedly into her seat, her feet under her body. She didn't want to hurt Monica's feelings by ignoring her, which is what she wanted to do, so she responded as a sulking child.

“Yes, I've heard many stories about the Wall—so many that I don't want to hear any more.” Her voice was uneasy, spiked with irritation. Her self-pity would not allow her to enjoy any kind of “trivial” conversation.

“Well, I guess it does become monotonous and boring after hearing it for awhile,” Monica said, aware of Constance's irritation. “I've kind of gotten tired of it myself. You know the Chinese love to tell you their history whether you are interested or not.”

Her sincerity, honed by years of training, was striking. She did respect Constance's desire not to talk about it, yet she also appeared annoyed by her anger. Constance tilted her body so that her back was to Lang, adjusted herself in the seat, and stared out the window. The Wall draped itself up one hill across the crest and down the other side; then it looped back to the front.

At the top, it melted into the partly clouded skies. She tried to escape her thoughts by focusing on the wonder of the moment.

"It doesn't look like there's another exit before we get to Chengdu," Lang said, looking straight ahead.

"I haven't seen any signs posted on distance since we left Beijing," Monica said, peering through the window. "I remember reading somewhere that it was 'bout a three-hour drive from Beijing."

"Then that would mean we have at least another hour," Lang said, looking at his watch and slightly glancing at Constance's back. "My stomach is beginning to feel empty. . . . What about you Constance? Are you hungry?"

Pretending to be asleep, she didn't respond to Lang's touch on her shoulder. Lang leaned forward so he could see her face.

"Constance? Constance?" He wanted to be certain she was asleep, not believing she wouldn't respond out of meanness.

"Oh, yes, I think she is asleep," whispered Monica. "Poor soul. She must be stressed out. How long have you known her?"

"I met her here at the feng shui seminar," he said, seemingly concerned by the question. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no particular reason. I was wondering why she isolates herself from the world at large." She seemed to be looking more for scoop than understanding.

"I don't know enough about her to speculate. I was drawn to her energy by a force I don't understand. I only knew it felt different." He loosened his grip on the steering wheel. His face turned into a relax smile as though he were reliving their first meeting.

"It's interesting that you were drawn to her because that's the same feeling I got. I felt a 'force' when I met her," Monica said, turning to look back at the Great Wall. "My, that's an incredible view."

Incredibly steep ridges followed along the Wall's crests forming natural barriers: huge boulders and sheer cliffs, used where a wall was unnecessary. The walls guarding the southern foothills of the mountains began to show marked changes in the landscape. Northward, the road climbed steeply up a series of hairpin bends, the walls crenellated on both sides. Impressive and largely intact, they curved along the terrain, up the hill and along the ridges, to the east and the west.

Constance lay curled up in the car seat still pretending to be asleep. She was waiting to hear what else Monica and Lang would say about her. She was

remorseful about her outburst and hoped Lang wasn't too disappointed. He hadn't done anything to merit her rage, she thought.

"Why doesn't she share her design secrets?" Monica asked Lang, lowering her voice. "You think she is threatened by the thought of someone becoming better at doing them than she is?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Do you think there is any way I can get a copy of her notes to take back with me?"

"I can't answer that because I don't know," he said, surprised by her question.

"You know there is so little information written on how to sell feng shui to the mainstream," Monica said, peeking over to see if Constance was still asleep. "I would love to get a hold of her selling information on the topic." She lowered her voice again. "Isn't she considered the nation's greatest expert at selling the designs? Well, that's what I've heard."

"Yes, she is very good with the art," Lang said, as though he took a special pride in complimenting her.

"Do you know if she has her feng shui secrets with her?"

"No, I don't."

The jeep hit a bump in the road, swinging off to the left, slightly missing an embankment. Lang had relaxed his grip too much for the rugged terrain.

"I think I'd better concentrate on the road," he said, hoping he had awakened Constance. He was uncomfortable with Monica's questioning.

Constance straightened in her seat, stretching and yawning as though awakening from a deep sleep. After hearing Monica's questions, she knew she was in more danger.

Constance had a stabbing feeling, a message across the darkness, tormenting her mind with fear. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and asked for a light of protection to come down over her. If she had any faith in anything, she thought this was the time to test it.

Lang looked over to Constance and put his hand on her arm that was resting on the armrest and said, "I promise you'll be on the flight out tomorrow night." The look on his face was one of understanding. Constance appeared quiet and calm on the outside—a transformation from earlier. Part of her did trust Lang. There was something unique about him.

"What'll we do tonight?" she asked. "Will we drive back to Beijing?" She forced her voice not to show the anxiety that was eating away inside of her.

“We could spend the rest of the day at Chengdu, visit the temples, and then drive to Shanhaiguan and spend the night,” suggested Lang with an already-prepared itinerary. “We could leave at dawn for the Beijing airport.”

“But what about you? Aren’t you going to stay longer?” Constance asked, concerned that she might have spoiled things for him. She wondered why he hadn’t defended himself against the accusations she made if they weren’t true. *Maybe they are true and he doesn’t want to lie about it*, she thought. She would have felt better had he denied them.

Constance’s thoughts had always been a challenge for her. Her mind seemed to work overtime, which was why she had become so involved in transcendental meditation. She needed to find a way to quiet her mind, ease the additional electricity running through her brain. She often thought of it as a blessing as well as a curse, however, because she usually could figure out a situation long before anyone else had a clue.

“I think I’m leaving tomorrow night, too,” he said. “I need to get back home to take care of some pending business. Besides, I think I’ve about had enough of the dragon.” The Chinese usage of the dragon was a source of humor for Lang.

“What about you, Monica?” Constance asked, turning to look over her shoulder into the backseat. “Are you still going to Sichuan and Tibet?” Constance felt somewhat uncomfortable asking the questions because of her suspicions about the woman.

“No, I think I’m gonna go back to Chicago in a few days,” Monica responded. “I will refund my tickets tomorrow and fly down to Shanghai for a couple of days. From there I’ll fly to Hong Kong—I have a friend there I want to visit with. After that, I’m off to the States.” She seemed delighted to tell Constance about her new plans.

“Going back to Chicago?” Constance asked. “I didn’t know you lived in Chicago.” Constance was too surprised to pretend otherwise.

“I’m English, but I live in Chicago now,” Monica said. “I’ve lived there for over twenty years.”

Wales? Monica had said she was from Wales when she first met Constance. Constance wondered if she deliberately tried to mislead her. She had a very strong English accent. Constance’s mind began to work overtime, searching for clues as to why Monica was there. She hadn’t seen her in the seminar, and she knew for a fact her name wasn’t on the roster. Having a photographic memory, she would have remembered. *From Chicago? Could she be connected to Wyman and Nicole?* Constance wondered.

“You do know there was a feng shui workshop in Beijing two weeks before ours started,” Lang said, aware that Constance was bothered by Monica’s comment and therefore trying to put her at ease.

“Oh, yeah, that ’s the one I attended,” Monica answered matter-of-factly. “I’ve been here for almost a month. I took some vacation time so I could visit the country.”

Monica hadn’t mentioned to Constance when she met her earlier that she had been there for a feng shui workshop. Maybe there wasn’t any reason, Constance thought, but why hadn’t she mentioned it? She wondered if Monica had deliberately tried to mislead her.

Constance closed her eyes again and visualized a golden white circle of light around her. She felt threatened by the strangeness of circumstances. Conversation ceased; the pleasant “fool-the-mind music” played on the radio. Constance sat in a stunned slump, her feng shui briefcase under her feet.

“There’s our exit,” Lang said, slowing the jeep to a near halt. The exit was a sharp, deep curve. “We are finally here.”

They turned down a narrow street that led up steep hills.

“This is the main entrance to Bishashanzhuang,” he said excitedly. “We are in Chengdu.”

## CHAPTER 14

The main entrance to the summer residence of the emperors of the Dynasty stood before them, thirty-five feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains, forest, and lakes.

“The Kangxi Emperor discovered this area while on an inspection tour and immediately ordered a summer residence to be built,” Monica said, reading from a pamphlet that described the history of the area.

“Are you going to be our tour guide?” Lang said, laughing over his shoulder.

“Wait! This might be an interesting place to explore,” Monica continued, her eyes wider than usual. “Listen to this: The Qialong Emperor had expanded this complex and added buildings in styles of various nationalities. He was trying to express his desire to consolidate this country of many peoples and to strengthen the ties between the Manchurian ruling house and the foreign ethnic groups.”

“I didn’t know China had an ethnic group,” Lang said. “The crowds I’ve seen each time I’ve been here have been made up of round faces, long faces, sad eyes, laughing mouths, smooth cheeks, and faces withered with age, but they all were Chinese.”

“Are we going in here?” Constance asked. Nothing she had heard about the place so far had caught her interest. Knowledge for its own sake didn’t interest her much if it didn’t serve any practical purpose.

“Oh, yes, I think we should,” Monica said flipping through the temple history booklet. “This entire complex is larger than the Imperial Palace and the summer palace in Beijing combined.”

“So what?” Lang said.

“So what? Well, listen to what happened,” she said, holding the back of the seat and moving closer. “In the summer of 1820, the Jiaqing Emperor



was struck by lightning and killed close to the palace. The Imperial Court considered this a bad omen and left the residence hurriedly, never to return again.”

Constance stepped out of the jeep seemingly irritated at the want-to-be history buff. All Lang could evoke was a courteous smile and a friendly nod.

The palace grounds were surrounded by six miles of red walls that snaked up and down the hills. The architecture and decoration were an exotic mixture of Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian. Monica informed them that it had been built originally as an imperial palace but later turned into a temple of visiting monks from Mongolia and Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism had spread into Mongolia, and various Tibetan-style temples were built mainly to please the Mongolians.

Lang walked slowly over to Constance.

“What temples interest you most? I believe there are seven or eight up here. How about the Temple of Universal Love?” he asked. He smiled with warm spontaneity, the sort of smile that forced her to smile back.

“Get serious, Lang,” Constance said, thinking he was joking. “Where are we going to visit?”

“I’m not kidding. There are four temples up here that I thought you might enjoy visiting. You’ll know why when we get there,” he said, grinning as if he had a surprise for her.

Monica stayed behind in the jeep reading the history of the temples while Lang and Constance walked toward the Temple of Universal Love. They had gotten some distance from the jeep when Constance noticed Monica was not following them. Constance immediately got suspicious when the jeep was out of their view. She remembered what Monica had said while she was pretending to be asleep. She wanted to go back to secure the contents in her briefcase.

“Will you wait for me Lang? I need to go back to the jeep for a minute.”

A suspicious sideways squint in her eyes, she took off running at full speed back to the jeep. Monica was kneeling on the floor, pushing and pulling at the snaps of Constance’s briefcase on top of the backseat. Constance tapped on the opposite door of the jeep. She wanted to give Monica a chance to save face. Monica jumped up and sat on the seat, covering the briefcase with her body. Startled but well controlled, she showed a steadiness that concealed her uneasiness. She moved over to unlock the front door.

Constance crawled into the front seat pretending to be looking for something other than her briefcase.

"I moved your briefcase to the backseat so I could sit up front and let the seat back and stretch out, you know?" Monica said nervously.

Her words hung in the heat between them. Constance faced backward, got on her knees in the front seat, reached back and grabbed her briefcase out of the backseat.

"Wouldn't it have been easier for you to stretch out in the backseat?" Constance said, her voice brimming with a mixture of dignity and distaste. "Besides, it is too cold to take a nap out here. It's the first day of spring, but it's light-years away from summer."

"I suppose that was a stupid idea, huh," she said with an audacious smile. "Maybe I'll come with you and Lang now, okay?"

Monica got out of the jeep. Constance sat silently, immobilized in the front seat of the jeep, her briefcase on her lap. Monica finally walked away when it became apparent from the ignoring of her taps on the window that Constance wasn't getting out of the jeep. She headed toward the temples where Lang was waiting at the entrance gate.

When Constance sensed Monica was out of her sight, she checked her briefcase. To her surprise, it was locked. She had forgotten about the combination lock she had put on it. She looked around for a space to hide the briefcase in the jeep; even though it was locked, she didn't know whom she could trust or what to expect anymore. The garment bags were packed as tight as sardines in a can; she wasn't certain they wouldn't close again if she opened them.

Constance stood at the back of the jeep, having decided to take her papers from the briefcase and stuff them in between her clothing in the luggage, she took some of her clothing out of the luggage to create space for her papers. Lang and Monica came back. They stood staring at her. She slammed the back door when she saw them, leaving her briefcase on top her luggage. Her face was red hot in spite of the thirty-two degree temperature, and she looked at them with unmistakable anger.

"What happened? Did you find it? Did you find what you were looking for?" Lang asked but got no answer.

He could tell by the look on Constance's face that she wasn't going to answer his question. In the short time he had known her, he seemed to have a deeper understanding of her than most people who had known her for years.

Monica immediately filled the void with her historical information about the temples as they walked through the courtyard.

“These temples are Tibetan style,” she said with the voice of a tour guide, obviously impressed by her own knowledge. “You can tell that when they built these temples they were aware of the importance of supporting the Dalai Lama.”

As much as Constance wanted to see the temples of Chengdu, her anxiety about leaving Beijing was creeping back. She felt uncomfortable with Monica. It was obvious to her that Monica wasn't going to give her the opportunity to talk to Lang alone. She was a brilliant strategist. Constance had begun to believe Monica was capable of misdeeds; however, she wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Entering the Temple of Universal Love, Constance could feel the heaviness inside and outside of her physical body. She felt weighted down with gloom and doom. She had begun to feel physical pain, and the stressful feeling had mounted in her chest. She felt physical ill and lethargic. *This trip has become a labyrinth*, she thought.

Constance entered the temple and sat in the bench closest to the entrance. She wanted to go to the altar, but her physical condition prevented her from going further. She bowed her head as if in prayer but was actually to calm the dizziness. *My, God*, she said to herself. *I haven't felt this sick since I was a child with the flu.*

She remembered it as if it had happened yesterday. She had been scheduled to do a recital at her eighth-grade graduation. She had tried to conceal her illness, insisting that she was feeling okay. She didn't want to disappoint her dad, who had told her the audience would go wild over her recital. It was the best performance he had ever seen, he told her. She collapsed onstage, and when she woke up she was in a vaporizer in the hospital, struggling for each breath. It was during that time her dad told her nothing was important enough to become sick over, and she could always get another opportunity but not another life.

Constance wondered if her fears and worries had made her sick. She was sure they would have been considered inconsequential by her dad. In spite of her remembrance of her dad, that overpowering voice inside her head and encouraged her to go to the altar. She felt that it would be a great risk to stand on her feet. She slowly raised her head and opened her eyes. Some of the dizziness had subsided, but her stomach was still churning. It felt like all the blood had rushed there and was trying to get to other parts of her body. She was afraid she would pass out if she stood up, left to die. She didn't think

Lang and Monica had followed her into the temple. She was sure Lang wanted to give her space to cool her anger.

*Could this be the wrath of God?* she wondered. Constance had often heard that expression but had never given it much thought. At a time when calling on divine intervention would have made sense, being in the Temple of Universal Love, she had little faith to do so. Her mind was searching for practical, physical things to do. She didn't feel her meditation ritual to bring in and surround her body with light was of practical use now. She had begun to question everything she had ever believed about divinity and spirituality. Even her ability to see energy was absent. She felt hopeless and confused. The pain in her stomach continued to mount.

Prayer had never been an essential part of Constance's life. She had never understood the purpose of asking for the help of someone she didn't even know. She did, however, believe in a higher intelligence behind the universe; she just didn't believe you accessed it through prayer. She believed that the energy surrounding her every day was God, but that it had to be strong enough at any given moment to be accessed.

Clinching her hands against the back of the bench for support, she pulled herself up only to fall back down. Her legs were too weak to hold her up. She wrapped her arms around her abdomen like a child holding a favorite doll and screamed a silent scream. Her body was motionless like the still branch of a tree. She tried to sense the blood moving through her veins—she felt nothing. She wondered if she could be physically dead and simply experiencing herself through her spirit consciousness. If she could hold on to her consciousness, she believed she wouldn't die.

Her senses reached out into the stillness of the temple. Her mind tormented for answers about what to do, she fought to still her thoughts and listen. Her eyesight became blurred; her hands automatically loosened from her body. *I'm losing control of my faculties*, she thought. She clung to her thoughts; they assured her that she was still alive. It was only her ability to think that made her believe she wasn't dead.

She reasoned that if there were energy or spirits in the temple, they probably weren't in the very back of the temple, so help was probably waiting for her at the altar. She positioned her head so that the occipital ridge was pressing against the top of the bench, remembering having been advised to do this when she wanted to calm her nervous system and make contact with a higher power. Within minutes she felt her head get hot; it felt as though someone had put it in an oven. She broke into a sweat. She felt as though

her temperature had risen over one hundred degrees. Constance knew that this could burn the infection out before it damaged her. She had been taught that this was the best thing that could happen to an infected body. She could feel the perspiration pouring out of her sweat glands, but instead of feeling weakness from the sweat she was feeling strength.

She slowly stood up, supporting her body against the bench. Her head was spinning, but her legs were steady. She continued to blink her eyes to get a clear view of the altar before she attempted to walk to it. Her mind said yes, but she wasn't sure her legs agreed. She dropped back down on the bench.

Constance knew with pulse-pounding certainty she needed to make it to the altar. It was a stab of a feeling, a message across the darkness, overtaking her entire body. Suddenly, in a breathless instant, she was on her feet free of support from the bench. Something came across her body like a wave of motion, moving her body forward toward the altar in the temple. She felt a warm glow running from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. The wave of energy propelled her forward. It was as though she had no choice. She felt she had lost all control over her body and its movement.

When she got halfway to the altar, she saw something standing in the center of her path. It appeared to be a silhouette of her body, but not her shadow—for it didn't move when she did. As she moved closer and closer, it stood in its precise spot emitting light from itself.

Unable to avoid this mass, she walked into it. The force was so powerful it caused her body to vibrate at a rapid speed. It was so strong that she fell to the floor, but then she got up so quickly she hardly knew she had fallen. She took four steps and fell on her knees at the altar. Her body was vibrating so high she felt like a featherweight.

She kneeled with her forehead on the floor of the altar, afraid to look up. She had no control over her actions; she felt glued to the floor. Sounds of chanting came spiraling down from the thirty-foot ceiling, stretching like a tight wire throughout the temple. She felt her body become one with the sound of the music.

Constance gazed in front of her, and there she saw the God of Trust When You Can't Understand Why. Appearing next to her in a sky-blue robe was the God of Sharing Your Life With Someone. Looking a short distance away, she saw the God of Letting Go and the God of the Path Unwinding. They were linked together.

Suddenly she became frightened and buried her face in the floor. She felt her face tighten as a voice whispered in her ear. She could feel air in her ear; it felt like someone's breath.

"There's no need to be afraid. We will heal you if you will listen, trust, and acknowledge."

The voice sounded like the desecration of a temple, and it dulled her frightened edge, so she slowly raised her head and came face to face with the God of Fighting Your Battles Facing Forward. Just as she had begun to understand the god before her, another appeared. It was the God of Knowing When To Stay and When To Go, and it lingered longer, staring deeply into her eyes. The stare almost took her breath away. Not able to handle the light any longer, Constance looked off into the distance. There were two other figures standing there, beckoning to her.

She stood and slowly moved over to an L-shaped wall richly decorated with carvings. She immediately became spellbound by the three figures dressed in flowing robes that encompassed all the colors of the spectrum. The God of Harmony and Balance stood before her, and right behind it were the God of Staying Centered and the God of Conquering the Mouth of the Dragon. Submerged in such overpowering energy, Constance lost consciousness.

"You must go back to your homeland now," said the voice of the person who was shaking her.

Constance slowly opened her eyes, looking around and trying to make sense of where she was. A hand descended on her shoulder from behind and she heard the voice say again, "You must go back to your homeland now." It was the same Buddhist priest she had seen at the Tokyo airport dressed in a long white robe who had helped her when she fell at the Tokyo airport. He reached out, clasped both of her hands, and pulled her up from the floor. He braced her body against his until she was strong enough to stand on her own. He then quietly walked away as quickly as he had appeared.

Constance slowly walked out of the Temple of Universal Love and everything around her looked different. She felt renewed. Her mind, spirit, and emotions felt as though they didn't belong to her. Her face was warm and glowing; her heart rate was slow and methodic. She could feel every organ in her body vibrate and could sense the functioning of each. Her awareness of the things around her was magnified. She felt one with all of nature and its

inhabitants. This oneness feeling was something she had longed for but never quite reached. She was convinced she had experienced a miracle.

She recalled how sure she was that she had contacted the flu or some dreadful disease and that she had been sick enough to die if she didn't get emergency medical care. Given the unsanitary conditions she had been exposed to for the last two weeks, she determined that she could have picked up almost anything. Many times she regurgitated the meals she ate. Avoiding the unpleasant adventure, she sometimes made do with a candy bar for dinner. She continued to gaze at her body not sure whether she had been transformed into someone else.

Walking around the courtyard a bit disoriented, the reality of her situation started to surface. Neither Lang nor Monica was anywhere in sight. They hadn't said where they would meet; they hadn't said anything at all. Constance had taken off on her own to get away from them. She had heard Lang and Monica talking about the Little Potala Palace. *Maybe they're there*, she thought.

Potala Palace was the largest temple in the complex. In front of the temple stood a beautiful memorial arch; in back, a high terrace rose above it. The two big stone tablets told the history of the Turgent tribes in Manchu. The temple had been erected in honor of the representatives of the nobility of Northern Chinese minorities. Constance had no interest in the temple or its history.

Although she had a sense of urgency to find Lang—Monica didn't matter—Constance didn't feel panicky. She wasn't feeling like herself anyway; something had happened to take her out of touch with her fear. The roof of the main hall, covered with gilded copper tiles and decorated with nine gilded copper dragons, was the only attraction Constance noticed. She trekked from room to room looking from face to face, but none was recognizable.

It was getting late, so she walked to the jeep thinking that perhaps they would be waiting for her there. She remembered that Lang had given her one of the keys to the jeep earlier, so if they weren't there, she could wait inside for them. The maze of the huge garden meandering around trees and tall buildings didn't intimidate Constance, even though she wasn't sure of the way back to the jeep; she had a sense of being guided.

Constance thought she heard Lang and Monica's voices on her way to the jeep, so she picked up her speed hoping she would catch up with them. But when she got in view of the jeep she didn't see or hear anyone. The landmarks looked different. The jeep was no longer parked next to the entrance gate with



the glazed pagoda on one side and sutra column on the other; it was now parked to the far right of an entrance gate, a tiered pagoda on one side and a tomb pagoda on the other. Something was awry. She looked at the detailed map of the grounds and discovered that she was on the opposite side of the building. They had parked on the front side of building number one, and she was now acres away on the far backside of building twenty-five. She had accidentally wandered onto the wrong lot. *It has to be a coincidence that this is an identical-looking jeep*, she thought.

She spread the detailed map on the pavement to take a closer look, and it indicated she was in the north lot instead of the south lot where they had parked. She compared the license plate of the jeep with the number on the key chain and found them to be the same the same. She climbed on the fender and looked into the back of the jeep. She immediately recognized her luggage, and it was obvious to her that someone had tampered with it. She put her key in the lock of the back door; it flew up exposing her rifled luggage. She quickly searched for her briefcase, finding it intact but obviously tampered with as well.

Feeling that her privacy had been violated, knowing that she couldn't trust Monica, and unsure if she could trust Lang, Constance knew she had to leave Chengdu for the safety of her designs. If her life wasn't in danger, she thought, her feng shui designs certainly were, and that was almost as important. Fumbling through her luggage, trying to make sense of what was happening, the incident in the temple came rushing back like a hidden current. The words of the Buddhist priest played continually in her head: "You must go back to your homeland."

It would take about four hours on foot—if she could walk that far—back to catch the last train to Beijing. Constance had been in excellent physical condition, running six to eight miles every day; however, remembering her last serious episode of illness, she didn't know whether she could handle the challenging terrain of the Great Wall on foot, but she decided that she had to try. She had seen other travelers be offered rides and thought that perhaps she'd be offered the same.

Looking around, to make certain there was no one watching, she hurriedly switched the contents of her briefcase into her backpack and put on another layer of clothing; the temperature was sure to drop after nightfall. She strapped her backpack, which she had stuffed with essentials before she left



Beijing, to her waist and shoulders and put her passport in her pant pocket. She was as prepared as a Boy Scout.

Constance didn't stop to ponder leaving her expensive, top-of-the-line clothing. Her tailored business suits designed by top Paris designers were of little concern at the moment. Pierre Cardin shoes, Calvin Kline sportswear, silk blouses, tweed sweaters, designer underwear—clothes women would die for—were left thrown across the floor and the backseat of the jeep. She threw her jewelry box under the seat without examining its contents for precious pieces she had once cherished.

Constance had prided herself on being one of the best-dressed women in San Francisco. She had been mentioned in the designing circle magazine as an example of how to “dress for success.” She was considered to have superb taste in clothing, dressing as though an heiress. Her wardrobe was impressive by anyone's standards. Traditional, trendy, fashionable, eccentric, contemporary—she dressed to express many different moods. She particularly dressed to enhance her ch'i. Her clothing had been a source of comfort for her. She wanted to look good and feel good in whatever she put on her body.

The backseat was filled with Constance's personal possessions, now viewed as excess baggage that would impede her movement. She glanced over her collection of clothing then slammed the door, realizing she had to cut the cord. She took a few steps forward, looked back, and then walked back to the jeep to retrieve her diamond tennis bracelet. The bracelet had dropped out of the jewelry box and was wedged under the back of the seat, a sure sign to Constance that she was to take it with her.

The bracelet had become a symbol of her worth. Constance had won it in a competitive professional tennis match where she had been flagged the underdog. She believed in earning her worth, that rights weren't simply handed out; she had to compete for everything she got, and she competed well. The bracelet reminded her of it.

Constance took off down the winding hill from the palace in Chengdu. She had studied the map earlier, so she had a sense of the path she would take. She would follow the road along the Great Wall. Noticing the cars and buses parked on the parking lot, Constance was apprehensive: *They're bound to leave for Beijing sooner or later. Someone will surely give me a lift.*

Running with a ten-pound backpack strapped to her back was a challenge she hadn't tried before, but she felt strong enough to try it. The wind was at her back, propelling her down the steep hills, forcing her to run faster than her feet would carry her. Concerned about preserving her energy, she wanted

to slow down, yet her legs kept following her body and her body followed her legs. She didn't seem to have much control over her pace.

The scale of the landscape was enormous. The mountains and the cliffs towered into the sky; the valleys were wider; and the brown river was flowing. The scattered trees were breaking into a fresh green. Winter was slowly drifting away; the grass was showing specks of green and the fields appeared to be thawing. There were houses tucked in among the folds of the mountains. Constance's speed continued to increase moment by moment as though she had a motorized body. She was pleased with her ease of movement in spite of the backpack. Glimpses of sunlight were still glimmering over the steep-sided valleys and falling down the towering mountains; Constance hoped she could make it to the main road before dusk. She wondered why she hadn't seen any vehicles traveling along the road. Surely all of the people who had driven up to Chengdu weren't staying overnight. She increased her speed even more. It didn't seem humanly possible to run as fast as she was running.

It seemed as though nature had taken over all of her senses as she ran along the rough terrain of the Great Wall. Again she couldn't separate herself from anything around her. She was one with it all. The rocks and the soil varied in color: reddish-orange, yellow, white-gray; beautiful in some places, drab in others. She passed a river, its water churning white foam against the wide, pebbly shore. Suddenly she was out of the mountains and in the vast plain of rice fields stretching far into the distance. She had no idea how far she had traveled or what direction she had taken.

Constance stopped to check the time and her map. She couldn't believe she had been running for two hours. But, much to her surprise, she had been running in the opposite direction from Beijing. She had noticed that the scenery was different than when they drove up, but she thought it was because she had a different physical perspective. She rechecked her map to reorient herself. She was going toward Liaoning Province. *Shenyang is the capital of Liaoning and that's where we were headed to spend the night*, she thought. A nervous fluttering started prickling her chest. She hadn't thought of Lang or Monica since she left but began to wonder what she would do if their car were the first car to come along the road. *I'd have to hide*, she thought. The thought of them caused her concern.

The blood slid through her veins like hot needles; a confusing rush of anticipation flashed through her mind. She had gone too far away from her destination; she couldn't go back; she had to continue. Whenever she stopped running, all of her human characteristics as she knew them came back. She

became Constance McKenna, wracked with fear and apprehension over how she would get back to Beijing.

The air was brisk, invigorating, and intoxicating, the endless wail of the trains in the distance. She could still hear the birds sing as the sun was going behind the horizon. She was closer to civilization than she realized. In the far distance were steep hills surrounded by boulders; massive black rocks roared up from the water's edge. *It would take a superhuman power to get to the other side of this terrain*, she thought.

The night had cast its dark shadows on her path and the moon had not yet showed its face. Sobered instantly by the frightening possibility that she might become too tired to carry on, she cried, "Oh spirit help me." This was out of character for Constance; independence was her watchword. Sheer faith, perseverance, determination, and strength got her through adversities.

*Maybe I'm not on the same page as my spirit guides*, she said to herself. She had begun to feel like she was pushing Jell-O up a mountain. The path kept winding around the mountains snaking up and down hills, loose rocks hidden underneath the leaves. Constance thought about building an overnight nest in the woods, surrounded by the yellow dust that seemed omnipresent throughout China. *But if I freeze to death, it will be summer before anyone finds me*, she thought. She wondered how she had gotten herself into such a predicament.

The glimmer of lights shining in the far distance caused her heart to skip a beat. It was a vehicle. She rushed toward the road, fearful of whom it might be yet desperate for help. She put on her nightwear over her topcoat for high visibility and safety. This was the first vehicle she had seen in three hours and feared not seeing another one. Gesturing, waving, and calling for help, she ran down the hill at breakneck speed, unable to stop at the edge of the road. The vehicle was traveling at about sixty-five miles an hour—much too fast for the particular stretch of road—and had just made a sharp turn around the deep curve in between two mountains. Blinded by its bright lights, she stood paralyzed in its path. The sound of the loud horn blaring, the squealing of wheels—at that moment Constance knew she had met her demise.

"Oh, God Spirit, have mercy and save me now!"

The jeep started to spin out of control and ran off the road. Constance's body was pinned facedown on its hood. A boulder from the side of the mountain rolled down and slammed into the back of the jeep sending it colliding into the embankment. The impact sent Constance's body onto the top of the jeep's cab, landing flat on her back.

Constance made no sound, nor did her body move. She lay stretched across the top of the jeep, eyes closed and not moving. Even she wasn't sure whether or not she was dead. Her head was hanging slightly off the side panel. *Oh, Guides, help me*, she screamed inside. The driver of the jeep lay slumped over the steering column, blood running down both sides of her face, her foot jammed on the break as if stuck. The body appeared to be intact, but there was no movement. Rocks had shattered the windshield; broken glass was scattered about the front seat. Either the driver was dead or she had lost consciousness.

"You can move. You're okay," a voice whispered in Constance's ears.

*I'm dead. How can I hear a voice?*

"You can move. You're okay. You weren't thrown up here. You were lifted up here," the voice whispered again. "You asked for help just in time. Your pride didn't hold you back." The voice was louder and clearer. "Go ahead, trust you can get up." The voice trailed off.

*If I'm dead, I can't think or move*, Constance told herself. *I've never died before, so I don't know if I would still have consciousness*. Her mind drifted through situations, events, and times that eventually brought her back to the present. It was as though she were having a multitude of dreams.

Thinking her neck was surely broken from hanging over the jeep, she tried to lift her head. To her surprise, she could move it. She raised her torso and took a deep breath; her lungs felt clear and open, her ribs intact. She raised both her legs to her chest; there was no pain or inhibition. Trembling from her own thoughts, she slowly lifted her hands to her face, touching her mouth, her nose, and her eyes. Her eyes were open.

Convinced that she was alive, she moved to the edge of the jeep's cab, hung her legs over the side, and jumped down to the ground. It was not until then that she realized she had been hit by a jeep.

She was startled and frightened by the appearance of the body she saw slumped over the front seat, her face covered with blood, yet, driven by her instinct, she pulled a shirt from her backpack and made it into a bandage to stop the bleeding coming from both sides of the woman's head. She checked her air passage to see if it was clear and immediately started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. After several attempts the woman's breathing was restored; the last meal was regurgitated, spilling over the car seat and splashing traces in Constance's face. The woman was alive, but barely.

She wrapped the injured body in a thermal blanket found in the backseat and jumped behind the wheel to try to start the jeep; the engine made a

clicking noise and stopped. She pressed and pumped on the accelerator, held it for a moment, and turned the key again; the engine was dead. Constance got out of the jeep and raised the hood. She had no idea what she was looking for, but she hoped that there would be debris obstructing something obvious. She glanced over the mechanical parts in the jeep, not even sure what the engine looked like, but she didn't see anything that stood out.

Frightened out of her mind that imminent death would be on her hands if she didn't do something, her body felt numb again, as though she were paralyzed. She looked at the broken windshield and realized that the cold mountain air was blowing in on the injured woman. She pulled off her overcoat and stuffed it in the hole in the window. The temperature had dropped below the freezing point, but being nestled between two mountains gave them some protection from the wind swirling off the top of the hill.

Constance tied her orange and yellow safety jacket on the antenna of the jeep to alert a passing car, even though she hadn't seen one go by in either direction since they had been there. She thought that she'd even be happy to see Monica and Lang come by, that they could have whatever they wanted from her. She was desperate. Constance felt the pulse of the injured woman, and she noticed that it seemed to increase when she touched it. She felt strange sensations of heat spiking through her own body. In spite of what was going on, for some reason, Constance hadn't felt hopeless. There was a strong energy building around her hands and head.

Lifting the injured woman's body from the front seat, she gently stretched her out in the backseat. Feeling her own life force pulsating, Constance thought that perhaps she could transfer some of it to this unknown woman's body to help keep her alive. Was it possible for her to be the life-support system for this body? she wondered. It didn't seem logical, but she was going to try.

Constance knelt on the floor in front of the injured woman and allowed her mind to revisit the incident that she had experienced in the temple, thinking that perhaps that was where she had been endowed with the powerful energy force. She put both of her hands over the woman's heart and took a deep breath.

"Ask for help. Bring in the light. Bring in the light." It was the same voice she had heard earlier, and it whispered over and over.

Constance didn't understand what the voice was saying to her.

“Oh, God, Force, Spirit, whatever and whoever you are, just use me because I don’t know what to do!” Constance cried out to the bombardment of the echoing voice and threw her upper body over the injured woman.

Constance visualized pulling in light through her hands and her head and sending the light out through her hands, her head, and all of her energy vortexes into the injured woman’s body that lay beneath her. Within minutes, the injured woman’s body was burning as though on fire. Constance could feel the energy being transferred, like dense streams of light pouring from all of her major chakras into the injured body. Her fingertips were blazing with heat and light, entering the woman’s heart at the point where Constance’s hands were placed. She couldn’t stop the fire if she wanted to. She knew that the injured body was as much alive as hers. They had become one with the life force. They both drifted into a deep state of unconsciousness—the kind that a deep sleep brings.



## CHAPTER 15

Constance opened her eyes to a blood-red sun just above the horizon. Dawn filled hills with purple mist. She awakened from a seated position on the floor of the jeep, her hands still affixed to the body lying on the seat beside her. It was hard for her to believe she had slept so soundly in such an awkward position. She looked around trying to piece together what had happened. Her memory was a fog. She stared at the slightly blurred face of the woman in front of her. *Who is she? How did she get here? How did I get here? Whose jeep is this?* The unanswered questions hounded her.

Not wanting to disturb the woman who was obviously in a state of deep sleep, Constance quietly withdrew her hands and climbed over to the front seat and took off for a walk, thinking that the brisk air of the early spring morning would jog her memory.

Rubbing her face, taking deep breaths, and stretching her sore aching joints-her neck and muscles were very painful. She rubbed herself down with Tiger Balm. She struggled to fit the pieces together. *This is China*, she thought, recognizing the yellow dust whipping against the bold mountains that she had come to identify the country by. *Part of its decor*, she thought. Traces of what had happened began to slowly creep into her mind. Constance knew who she was, but she had no idea who the injured person was. She remembered that all she had been aware of the night before was that she had to save her life. It had appeared to her as simply a life force slowly slipping away.

Constance heard a yawn as she returned to the jeep. The injured woman was waking up.

“How do you feel?” Constance asked, looking over her shoulder from the front seat.

“I’m okay, I think. But where am I?” the woman asked. Her voice sounded familiar, but Constance couldn’t identify it.

“Do you remember having been in an accident?” Constance asked, modulating her voice to make it soft and compassionate as though talking to a child.

“Yes, vaguely.”

“Can you move your body?”

“Yes, I think so.” The woman exerted some effort to move.

“No, don’t. I’ll help you,” Constance said, moving back to help her. There were no obvious signs of injuries, which Constance thought incredible considering what had happened. “Here, let me see your arm. . . . Does that hurt?”

“No.”

“Does this hurt? Do you feel pain anywhere in your head?”

“No, not at all. . . . I feel a slight headache, but other than that, I’m okay.”

Constance was amazed that there were only slight traces of the cuts the woman had sustained, remembering how profusely she had been bleeding on both sides of her head. Palpating her head for contusions and abrasions, she felt a sense of knowing this woman.

“Who are you? I mean, what’s your name?” Constance asked with a kind and gentle voice.

“Check my purse,” the woman replied. “It was in back of the jeep. I’m not sure who I am.”

Constance rummaged through the luggage in back of the jeep but didn’t find a purse nor was a nametag on the luggage. Constance wondered why the woman seemed so familiar, but she couldn’t identify her face. There was some swelling and distortion from the accident that obscured her features.

“Is there some other place you think you could have put your purse?” Constance probed under the backseat.

“Look in the front seat. Maybe I had it there,” the woman suggested.

Constance knew the purse wasn’t in the front seat; she would have seen it. She was satisfied that the woman had no visible physical damage, but thought that she could have suffered brain damage or amnesia from hitting her head on the steering wheel. It stood in front of the morning, that thought, killing all joy of going ahead with her plans to catch a train to Beijing.

She had heard the sounds of trains from the moment she awakened. The volume was ear splitting like city noise. She could hear what sounded like a crowded tunnel, so she knew the station wasn’t far away. Perhaps she could continue with her journey, get help for the woman, and still board her train to the Beijing airport. She hadn’t changed her departure date, so she



still had a seat on the flight out that evening. The warning to go back to her homeland haunted her. Fear and apprehension had become her watchwords. Visibly shaken by her own thoughts, Constance continued looking for the woman's purse.

"What color is it?" she inquired with her head under the front seat.

"It's a red, Liz Claiborne shoulder purse trimmed in black."

"Liz Claiborne," Constance muttered to herself. "If she remembers a designer's name for a purse, her brains can't be damaged too much."

The woman was now in an upright position in the backseat. She had combed her hair and tied it back. Her long neck appeared to have slight bruises.

"There's no purse anywhere in this jeep. I've searched it from front to back," Constance concluded, getting up from the floor.

The dazzling white blur of the sun coming through the window revealed a glimpse of the woman's pronounced cheekbones and sharp, chiseled chin. Constance was surreptitiously eyeing her through one of the remaining pieces of the rearview mirror. *Nicole Bresneshaus?* she asked herself. *That's whom she looks like.* She quickly looked away, uncomfortable with the familiarity of the face.

"I'll look around outside for your purse," Constance said.

She searched the area around the jeep, walking in ditches and behind rocks, examining every inch of the ground. She had given up finding the purse, when she saw a large rock on the other side of the road. *It can't possibly be over there,* she reasoned.

"Go look," a voice inside her head said. Too afraid not to listen to the voice, she walked over to the rock.

A red strap jutted out from behind it. It belonged to a purse, but there was no purse. *Perhaps it was thrown to the street and a passerby stopped to pick it up,* Constance reasoned in her head. Frustrated, she turned and trudged back to the jeep. She had decided to leave—to journey on into the city to catch a train to Beijing.

"Look farther." It was that same voice. "You give up on people too easily."

"Help me find it! Please!" Constance screamed.

She walked six feet to the rear of the rock, and there was the purse. Anxious and curious to find the woman's identity, she opened it. The passport was, indeed that of Nicole Bresneshaus. Constance's antenna picked up a subtle increase in tension in her body. Her adrenaline level began to rise.

Now that Constance knew who the woman was, she decided that she wouldn't show her the passport for fear her memory would come back before she could get away.

"Did you find the purse?" Nicole asked eagerly when Constance returned.

"I found a red strap," Constance responded. "Perhaps the purse was in the road and someone grabbed it." Constance's face was stoic as she stood with the purse tucked underneath her sweater.

"Oh, no! What am I gonna do?" Nicole cried, choked with tears. "How am I gonna get out of this country without identification?"

*Well, at least she knows this is not her country,* Constance told herself. She wondered if Nicole was leading her on, pretending to not know her identity. She now mistrusted everyone she had met in the feng shui seminar—not even Lang. She was concerned that they all wanted something from her. She just wanted to get out of China and leave the memory behind.

Constance's mind thumbed through all the names and faces she had met since she left San Francisco. Memories opened before her as if a curtain had been ripped aside. She wanted to hang on to the empowering energy she had experienced at the temple because it took her to places she hadn't experienced before. It allowed her to tap into sources that she had only been aware of intellectually. Yet she sensed a heavy obligation and responsibility to be with people against her will.

Torn between staying with Nicole, going for help, or taking the train to Beijing airport, Constance sat paging through her domestic commuter flight schedule. There were several frequent commuter flights from Beijing to Hong Kong. If she missed her direct flight from Beijing to Tokyo, which would happen if she didn't leave soon, she could fly directly from Hong Kong to San Francisco. She planned alternate routes out of China. She had to find a way to get to the train station with or without her companion.

Her mind was busy analyzing her situation and trying to come up with a workable solution, when she remembered her running experience with Nicole in Beijing. They had run eight or nine miles through Tiananmen Square—*Nicole is an excellent runner,* she thought. *Maybe she's strong enough to make it to the train station.* In any case, Constance knew that Nicole would have to either make an effort or accept her plight and wait for help. Constance was determined to do something that made sense to her; she didn't want to appear insensitive to Nicole's condition by asking her to take such a challenge, for the terrain was harsh with steep inclines, certainly not for the weak or injured.

Since Constance wasn't supposed to know anything about the woman, she couldn't reveal her knowledge of Nicole's running ability.

"Would you like an apple?" Constance asked, pulling two wrinkly red apples that looked more like prunes from her backpack.

"Thanks. I'm famished," Nicole answered, eagerly reaching for the apple. She hadn't had any food for almost twenty-four hours.

"I have several protein candy bars and a variety of nuts. Here, take some," Constance offered, handing her the large canvas bag filled with food.

She had brought the well-wrapped treats from the States two weeks ago; the freshness had been retained. Concerned whether Nicole was strong enough to venture outside of the jeep, Constance encouraged her to eat as much as she wanted.

"It's not a full-course meal, but it will give you all of the nutrients your body needs," Constance said.

"Bless and empower the food." There it was again, that voice in Constance's ear. It felt like a strong ocean wave had hit her eardrum and left a whisper of words. Constance started to wonder if she were sharing her body with someone or something else. She tried to ignore the voice, thinking it would go away or that she was just talking to herself.

"Bless and empower the food," the voice repeated. It was louder.

*I've given her the food already,* she told herself. *How can I bless it?* She was irritated at the strange lunacy of it all. She continued to ignore the voice and eat her apple.

"Thank you so much. That was just what I needed," Nicole said, smiling for the first time.

She handed the near-empty bag back to Constance. An electrical shock went up Constance's arm as she reached for it. A whisper of terror ran through her. The magnitude of the shock shook her upper body. It was hard for her to comprehend what was happening or where it was coming from. She stared at the woman she thought was Nicole. *She certainly has all Nicole's features as I remember them,* she thought. *It has to be Nicole—the passport said so.*

"Send light. . . . Send light. . . . Send light." The words left echoes in her ears. Agreeing reluctantly, she made a grudging sound and lifted her hands toward the woman. They were on fire, like bolts of lightning going through her fingertips.

"Direct the energy," the voice said.

Constance silently asked the energy to go and strengthen the woman. She felt too embarrassed and foolish to say anything out loud. Constance thought

she was losing her mind. She asked herself questions to see if she got logical, sane answers. Although Constance had seen Nicole's passport, she wasn't sure it was Nicole. It appeared her normal thinking was distorted. She needed to know if she was who she thought she was.

*I'm Constance McKenna. I live in San Francisco, California. I'm in Beijing, China. I have two dogs back home. Their names are Picadilly and Bongus. I'm an architect.* Over and over she made these statement in her head to confirm to herself that she was not insane.

"How's your strength?" Constance asked. She noticed the woman's face was revealing more character than before. Her cheeks had a bit of glow to them; her shoulders were raised; vibrancy had started to show throughout her body. "Do you think you can walk—I mean take a long walk?"

The woman was proud and arrogant, something Constance thought would justify leaving her behind.

"I feel strong," she said. "I think I can walk, maybe even run."

She sat there staring at the mountains as if enjoying the bright specks of sunshine hitting the window, as if glued to the backseat. Constance stood outside of the jeep—something about the woman frightened her—and then walked about thirty feet up the path, assessing the hilly terrain, the cliffs, and the land in general. It didn't appear insurmountable even for the amateur walker or runner. She glanced back at the jeep thinking that the woman would get out and follow her. But she did not. She remained in the jeep watching Constance.

"Damn," Constance muttered to herself. "This is not going to work. She is acting too damn passive and fearful."

Thoughts of what to do whirled through her mind. The morning was slowly drifting away; no one had stopped to help. Two vehicles had passed by, going in the opposite direction: One was an old dilapidated truck carrying manure, the other a cab carrying men dressed in business suits; neither seemed to notice their jeep.

Constance was beginning to be suspicious and disgusted that the woman wouldn't get out of the jeep. Did she not want to walk? Her behavior seemed deliberate, almost calculated. It was the kind of behavior Nicole was capable of.

"It's getting late and if I don't leave I'm gonna be stuck here until who knows when," Constance said upon returning to the jeep, fastening her backpack around her waist. "If you aren't gonna try, I'll have to." She looked directly into the woman's eyes with the impatience of a challenger. "This jeep won't start and no one is driving by. We might be sitting here for another

night. I can't and I won't take that chance. You can come with me or you can stay here and wait for help." Her voice was furious and she flinched as she spoke.

"What if I can't make the trip?" the woman questioned. "I'll be stranded with no shelter. I can't take that chance." Her eyes were clouded with hazy sadness as tears welled up in them.

"Why don't you get out and take a short walk to test your strength," Constance suggested. "How're you gonna know unless you try?" Her angry voice lifted to a shout that stopped everything dead. "For God sake, you haven't made any effort—nothing at all. I don't owe you a damn thing. You ran over me!"

Constance buttoned her topcoat, wrapped her wool scarf around her neck, jumped out of the jeep, slammed the door, and took off walking. She tried to erase the painful sobbing sound and the look in the woman's eyes when she left. It made her too vulnerable to think about it.

"A person who has complete power over others becomes wicked," she mused, thinking she would have given her power away to the woman if she had stayed.

It was a pleasant fast-paced walk along the countryside. The air was fresh and sounds of early morning were still in the background. Constance was pleased with her stride. It was good, although not propelled by the same force she had felt the day before. She could feel no effects of the accident physically; she was feeling great. However, she had doubts about running. Perhaps the drawback was in her head. She couldn't stop questioning whether she'd been fair to the woman she left behind.

Constance had often been encouraged by Brother Charles, who ran the Better Living Healing Ministries, to become a spiritual healer. "Your talents will be wasted in the corporate world," he often said. Constance volunteered at the ministries for four years, during her summer breaks from college. Her dream at the time was to work for a service organization whose mission was to save humanity. Yet now she wasn't sure humanity needed to be saved, and if it did, she hadn't determined what it needed to be saved from. Itself perhaps, she often thought. She admired and respected Brother Charles; he appeared to be joyful and happy all of the time. Constance had looked forward to spending her summers working with him.

"You have a purpose to fulfill here on this earth. You can deviate if you like, but you must come back," he had said to her on the day she told him she was taking a job with Bay Construction and Design. "You don't belong

out there. You'll get swallowed by the sharks. Your soul will be lost forever. You are a healer."

Constance had very little awareness for her ability to be a healer, so she wasn't sure what Brother Charles had meant. She had gone to work for the ministries because she had grown up around them. She had wanted God to see her as good and as deserving as Brother Charles. College graduation was within two weeks and Christmas was right around the corner when she made her last visit to the Children's Hospital with Brother Charles. Christmas cheer, decoration, and celebrations were going on throughout the hospital. The goodwill seemed to be felt by everyone. The songs were contagious; everybody was singing. It was the sadness of the little boy lying in bed with neck, arm, and leg braces staring into the distance that caught Constance's attention. His joints were too weak to hold him up without braces. The boy sensed Constance's attention; his cold black eyes locked with hers. It was as though he was begging for attention in some way, so she sat next to his bed and held his hands.

The boy had squeezed her hands as though holding on for life. She was unable to move for what seemed like an eternity. The boy's eyes brightened; his cheeks turned rosy; his whole face lighted up; and he smiled a wide and prevailing smile. He then loosened his grip on Constance, got out of his bed, and walked over and joined the other children singing Christmas carols.

Constance had been deeply moved by the experience. She was exhausted, weak, and confused afterward. She felt that she had exchanged her good feelings for the boy's bad feelings. She spent the next few days feeling sick lethargic and at times angry. She questioned whether it was the kind of work she wanted to do for the rest of her career. Perhaps it was right for some people but not for her, she reasoned. She questioned why she should deplete her life force to save someone else, if she owed her life and vitality to humanity. She decided then that it would not be the path for her. A few days later, she resigned, but not without warning from Brother Charles. "One day you will be shown the error of your ways," he said. That was the last time she had seen or talked to him, and she hadn't thought of him much since.

Constance had been walking continuously for three hours with no human life force in sight, and there was no indication of a city, town, or community anywhere nearby. She hadn't looked at her map, so she had no idea where she was headed. The force that she had felt around her body, empowering and

pushing her the day before, wasn't with her. Concerned about her stamina and lack of food, she stopped to take a break and check her map for directions.

The huge boulder stationed in the center of four giant ginkgo trees, nestled at the foothill of the Garden of Virtuous Harmony Mountain was an ideal place to rest, she thought. Constance sat on the rock, and the immense ginkgo trees seemed to ward off the chill of the wind yet allow sparkles of sunlight to drift through their branches. It was a welcome shelter, and it appeared to have been used for shelter by other travelers. There were offerings buried next to the root of the trees, messages inscribed in hieroglyphics, symbols that were more foreign than familiar. Not having much training in deciphering hieroglyphics, she could only discern one or two of the pictures. The symbols for faith and trust jumped out at her immediately.

Surprised and a bit disturbed that she understood the ancient symbols that she had never seen before, she wondered if her mind was deceiving her. She moved closer to the tree; the symbols appeared larger. She traced their outlines with her fingertips, feeling as though the tree's power had taken over her.

The wind's noise had suddenly abated; the cracking sounds of the sharp, brittle, and weathered wood ceased; the silence stretched like a tightrope through her ears as she stood leaning against the barren tree. She was almost sedate; the trees had an anesthetic effect. The sun was casting a peaceful burst of light across her face and she wanted to take a quick nap to energize her body.

She had drifted off when a noise inside her head suddenly awakened her. It sounded like a crowded tunnel and wrapped around her like water around a rock. It was the same myriad of sounds she had heard before: voices, murmurs, whispers. Enormous pressure was building in her head, extending into her face, chest, and hands. Thinking the trees were affecting her, she moved another five feet away from them, but the noise got unbelievably loud, its frequencies plucking the nerves in her head.

"Damn it! Leave me alone!" she screamed, throwing both of her hands over her ears.

The noise got louder as she ran back to her running path, trying to escape what she considered torture. Adrenaline rose; her body tightened; the tension had reached a flash point; and she felt a tug of terror at her throat. She took a deep breath, threw her head back, and screamed a guttural cry of horror. She ran at full speed, as if she thought she could run away from the voices in her head.



“Ask for help. Ask for help,” whispered a gentle voice to Constance as she ran on automatic pilot.

She remembered the pictures carved into the trees: “faith” and “trust.”

“Ask who for help?” Constance reluctantly said out loud. “If you’re God, then you know I need help. So why do I need to ask?”

Nothing happened immediately as a result of her angry charge. *I knew it was my imagination*, she said to herself. A force that felt like wind swept across her face, almost knocking her to the ground. She tripped, stumbled, and twisted her body, but managed to keep running. She began to sense and feel energy around her body that she hadn’t felt before.

There hadn’t been a passing vehicle yet, and she was now four hours into her journey and now running. She wasn’t aware when she had switched from walking to running.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know who I am. I don’t know where I am. I am lost.”

“Ask for help,” the soft voice whispered again.

Constance ignored it; she didn’t trust it. *It’s my imagination*, she thought. *This is just an illusion. I’m nobody special, so why can I get help just by asking?* She picked up her speed but knew in her heart that no matter how fast she ran she would never make it to a city to catch the train before nightfall. Looking across her shoulder to see where the sun was positioned, she hit a large rock, sending her feet out from under her. She tumbled about three feet forward. She didn’t fall to the ground, but she sprained her ankle trying to keep from falling.

“Please, spirit guides, God of the universe, please, please help me now!” she shouted as she humbly fell on the wet grass. “I can’t do this by myself. I really want your help now! Whatever is for my highest good, please grant it now!”

She was prepared to lie there on the mountainside and let nature take its course, even if it meant death and decay.

“Build an energy ball, energize it, and send it to the woman you left behind,” the voice stated.

This time it only spoke through her left ear. Once more she became irritated. *How in the hell is this going to help me?* she brooded.

“Send the light, Constance. You know how,” the voice continued. “You’ve read about it all your life. Now you must test it out for yourself.”



*This is I, talking to myself*, Constance reasoned, trying to dismiss the voice.

She limped to a heart-shaped red rock and sat down. She lifted her hands, closed her eyes, and drew energy into her body through the occipital region of her head and forehead, pulling it down to the base of her spine and back up again. She brought the energy to the top of her head, swirled it around inside, and then sent it through her arms and out through her fingertips. She built a ball of light between her hands and sent it back to the woman she had left behind at the jeep. She repeated this exercise until she passed out.

Tired and exhausted, she struggled to get her body down near the road in case someone came along. If no one came by, she believed, she would die of exposure. *Maybe death isn't such a bad thing since you don't have to contend with the physical limitations of the body*, she speculated, feeling less afraid.

"Madam, you okay?" an old man asked, standing a short distant from her. She was lying, wrapped in her sleeping bag, by the side of the road where she had fallen asleep, leaving her fate in the hands of the elements.

"I don't know, sir," she stammered. "I don't know anything anymore. I don't even know who I am." Her big brown eyes were as humble as a lamb.

It was the same man she had seen at the Tokyo airport and in the universal temple in Chengdu.

"Do you need help?" he probed.

"Yes, sir. More than you'll ever know," she begged, her voice almost inaudible.

"Where are you going?" he inquired a mystical look in his eyes.

"I'm trying to get to Beijing to go back to my country—the U.S.A.," she said, hardly getting the words out.

"Ah, A-merican girl, huh," he responded.

"Yes! Yes!" she cried, her voice stronger. "Please, sir, will you help me?" she begged, but her face grew a look of disappointment as she saw that he didn't have a vehicle. "I . . . I need transportation to the airport."

"Now! Now!" he chided. "Calm down, madam." His voice trailed off as though he were in deep thought. "You in temple in Chengdu yesterday."

"Yes, I was there."

"You get help at temple?"

"Yes."

"You have experience that opened ya up. . . . You must leave China now." She tried to meet his eyes, but he looked away.

"Please, sir, can you help me to leave? I need to get to the Beijing airport," she pleaded.

"Beijing no. Wrong way," he answered. "Many kilometers back. Need train. No train here."

Constance could feel the tension rise in her face. She wondered if he understood what she was asking of him. She could feel her heart pounding fast as she waited for his words of wisdom.

"Can't you do something to help me, sir? Please," she implored. "I will offer you anything I have. I don't care what. Please help me to get to the airport."

"How you get there not this way," he said. "Long way away. Go tomorrow." He looked at the sky and smiled. "Tomorrow better day for you, huh."

Frustrated at his broken English and her lack of understanding, Constance threw up her hands.

"Patience. Patience," he chided.

She turned her back to him in an effort to calm her fragile nerves, feeling threatened by the strangeness of it all.

"Find center," he continued. "Go there. Find peace. Send for ride."

He continued to look off into the sky as he spoke, as if searching for something. Not knowing what else to do, Constance took a deep breath, folded her sleeping bag, and sat down upon it.

"Calm your 'Being' and follow me," he directed. "We send for help . . . no help come . . . too upset . . . off center . . . no trust . . . be still."

Constance sat watching his every move, wanting desperately to do what he ordered.

"Hold my hand," he said. "We will build strong thought wave and send out for help. Take deep breath. Bring energy from universe. Build it in spine. Put it in your hands. Tell it what you want it to do for you. Send it out to bring your request."

He sat with his eyes closed and face turned up toward the heavens. Constance followed his instructions precisely. She was amazed at how quickly her body calmed down.

"We do for twenty minutes," he said.

*Twenty minutes?* she thought. *I can't do this for that long.* She had let her negative thoughts drift back in. "I need to be on my way," she muttered to herself.

"Yes, twenty minutes," he repeated as if he were reading her thoughts.

It was exactly twenty minutes later when the old man tapped her on the shoulder. She didn't remember much about what had happened except she had asked for someone to come along and give her a lift to Beijing airport—someone who would not be an adversary. The old man had directed her to be very specific in her request. He had told her to create a sense of urgency and made it clear that asking for what she wanted was okay, but to never forget to ask for things that would be for her highest good, because she wouldn't always know what was best for her.

After packing her sleeping bag and readjusting her backpack, Constance turned to ask the old man what to do next, but he had disappeared. She frantically searched the roadside, the hills, and the mountainside, hoping she would see him. He was nowhere in sight. *How could he have disappeared that fast?* she wondered. *He didn't have wings.* She felt lost again, unsure what she was supposed to do next. He hadn't helped her, she concluded, for she was in the same predicament she had been in earlier. Determined that she would find her way somehow, she headed back in the opposite direction. She remembered the old man had told her she was headed in the wrong direction.

She logically retraced her steps from the day before. *What was I thinking about yesterday?* she admonished, reacting not thinking. *I could have taken the train from Chengdu to Beijing.* Knowing what to do and how to do it hadn't been clear to Constance for months now. Most of the time she appeared to be acting impulsively or as though driven by some unseen force. Concerned about becoming too exhausted from running at a fast pace and not feeling likely to make it much further, she slowed down to conserve her reserves. She only had about a cup of water and very few nuts left.

Constance was preoccupied with thoughts of what the old man had said to her, wondering if what he had told her had any practical application. She wanted to dispel all doubt, yet she was afraid to simply let go and trust. She didn't see the logic behind it. Thoughts of being rescued were comforting, like a rune, something to hold on to; however, nothing was manifesting in reality. She reasoned that if she had enough stamina to run all day and all night, she would know something had intervened, but she was growing increasingly weary with each mile.

Once again, she ran near the road, hoping someone would notice her and offer her a ride. Just as she reached the side of the road, a tourist bus loaded with passengers came toward her, going in the opposite direction. She waved her colorful red scarf frantically, trying to get the driver's attention, willing to go wherever they were going for a lift. He slowed the bus down. She ran to

the other side of the road hoping it would stop for her. The bus stopped. But as she reached the door, the bus took off again. Perhaps the driver didn't see her coming to accept the ride, or maybe it was against the rules to pick up a stranger, she reasoned in her head.

She drank her last sip of water and ate the last of her nuts while she watched the bus travel over the hill out of her sight. She tried to keep the problem at a safe distance using her energy to run instead of worry, but that resolve was slowly fading. A thunderbolt of worry jagged through her stomach. A hard fist of fear gripped her throat.

Running parallel to the roadside had brought her nothing, she concluded, changing her course of direction. It made absolutely no geographical sense in terms of getting to Beijing. She had no logical reason for taking this direction, but she took it anyway. Trekking up the steep hill leading away from the road, she was running off the gravitational pull of the earth, sparing her reserves. She ran down the hill with little effort, all the way not thinking that at the bottom of the hill was a valley and she would have to come up the other side to get out. Standing in the middle of the valley surrounded by the steep Yellow Mountains, Constance saw what appeared to be a remote community on the other side. Weighed down by her heavy winter coat, triple-compartment backpack, four-pound hiking boots, and lowest-ebbed energy level, she stared at the side of the mountain. Her legs felt weak; her head was pounding from the chilly wind blowing in her face; the sun was slowly sinking; and a terrible, keening moan sprang from her lips.

She wanted the voice in her head to tell her what to do, but it didn't come. She closely analyzed the sloping sides of the mountains looking for a path of least resistance. She had some experience in climbing mountains back in San Francisco, but there she had the proper gear. She thought she was ill equipped physically, mentally, and emotionally to tackle these mountains. No one side of the mountain looked less challenging than the other. She didn't think that anyone in China would be searching for her, so she couldn't take a chance on staying in the valley, hoping to be rescued. The fear of dying a slow, painful death from hypothermia or starvation drove her to consider challenging the mountain. If she fell from the side of the mountain, she would at least have an instant death, she reasoned.

She walked farther back from the mountain to get a better view of how steep it was and assess the challenge; it was then that she heard a buzzing in her ear. It sounded like bees swarming around her head, but she knew it was too cold for bees. She stood frozen in her tracks, quietly listening for the voice

she thought might follow. She heard nothing. *Maybe I'm too tense*, she told herself, taking a breath from deep within her solar plexus.

After taking several more breaths, she became calm and could sense a presence of energy other than her own. The buzzing had left her ears, but she felt heat inside, and her hearing became sharp and clear. Yet she didn't hear a voice. As she stood wondering what to do next, she remembered the advice she had received earlier: "Ask for help."

"Spirit guides, God Force," she prayed, "help me please. Direct me out of this dilemma."

She heard no voice as she stood silently and listened, but a strong force pushed her toward the left of the side of mountain. It was as though someone had shoved her forward. She tumbled over her foot but continued to move in the direction the force was pushing her. When she got to the side of the mountain, there was an outlet between upland hills that led to a narrow bridge. She had seen only solid mountains all around her, but it had been an illusion.

Crossing the narrow bridge, she could see the awesome power of the Yellow River, a force that had brought destruction and floods to China for years. The river swirled along, its flat circulating eddies full of sediment, pushing against the piles of the bridge. On one side of the river were several mosques, some modern and some old. Immediately over the bridge, lined along the street in both directions, were Muslim markets and restaurants. There were covered stalls brimming with mounds of fruits—apples, apricots, dried prunes, pears, oranges; vegetables—asparagus, beets, carrots, cucumbers, leeks, ginger, and broccoli; and baskets of nuts—pecans, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, chestnuts, and Brazil nuts. Enticing aromas led Constance to rows of restaurants: Muslim barbecued lamb and shish kebabs; assorted Mongolian meats and vegetables cooking in hotpots; Beijing Duck with pancakes and plum sauce; beggar's chicken wrapped in lotus leaves; Shandong bird's nest soup; and sweet-and-sour Yellow River carp—the fish still alive and served while breathing.

Tucked between restaurants were bargain-priced booths offering down jackets, silk scarves, prints, T-shirts, handicrafts, embroidered purses, paper cuts, and wooden and bronze Buddha statues. The distinct mingling of different cultures was refreshing to Constance. An elaborate pagoda spread up the steep hillside surrounded by the clustering houses of the drab, old, musty Muslim quarter.

Constance sighed with relief, thinking that perhaps she would find help there. She climbed the steep steps that led to the entrance gate of the white pagoda.

## CHAPTER 16

The air was as astringent as alcohol, a sign that evening was drawing near. Smudges of sunlight still dappled the ground between buildings as crowds of people, mostly Chinese, poured out the gate to the temples, which were soon to close for the day. Constance stood in a pose of weary dignity watching the people leaving. Her salvation, she thought, was to get to a city where she could take the train back to Beijing. Somewhat confused about her next step, her mind drifted into a fuzzy haze. Her sense of direction, minimum at best, was lost. She wondered if she had left China and entered Mongolia. Her passport had been issued for Beijing and would expire in three days. She hadn't gotten an extension, nor had she gotten permits to go to any other cities. She had wanted to go on to Tibet but had changed her mind, and therefore had not changed her original visa that was issued for business purposes only. Her airline ticket was scheduled to leave at midnight. The reality of her situation caused her weariness to grow.

Great religious sculptures were all around, damaged by time and the bleakness of their environment. The pollution of the city stained the sky; the sour smell in the air choked her breath. The huge figures had tremendous presence, both dramatic and spiritual.

Intrigued by the pagoda, but too weary to indulge herself, Constance followed the crowd, hoping they would lead her to the train station. She merged with the crowds and with a nudge here and an occasional light shove there, she made it to the train station.

"Ticket to Beijing Airport," she said to the agent behind the window.

"Passport please. See yo passport, madam." His face had no expression. It was as if he were reading a script. She handed him her passport immediately, grateful that she had it so readily available. "Uh, huh," he muttered, looking

through her passport. "Permit? Where yo permit to Tongda? No permit, illegal to buy ticket no permit."

He showed no mercy or compassion. "Next," he called to the next person in line.

The crowd immediately shoved and shouldered her until she was at the back of the line. The massive crowd stood holding their tickets and staring at her as if she were a foreign object.

Humiliated, dejected, and unable to ask questions of anyone around her, she slowly walked out of the terminal, tears falling down her cheeks.

*I must clear my head*, she thought. She took a deep breath, her trademark for centering her mind; it was a self-protective habit. Realizing that it might have been days before she had an opportunity to buy anything worth eating, she headed to the Muslim food stands she had seen at the bottom of the hill when she arrived. She bought bags of hard red apples, withered oranges, dried apricots, almonds, chestnuts, ginger roots, beets, and carrots—foods that she could eat raw, eating as she stuffed the bags in her backpack. She was starving. Each morsel of food strengthened her resolve to get back to Beijing.

Attempts at asking questions fell on deaf ears. The natives didn't speak enough English to get past "Hi" and "Good-bye," but Constance still hoped she'd encounter an American somewhere in the crowd. She could still see people leaving the pagoda, so she climbed back up the steep hills to the gate. The food had given her more, almost magical, energy; her head felt clearer, her body lighter, making the long flight of steep stairs that led to the temple a breeze.

"My, God," she uttered, remembering that the old man at the food stand had handpicked her vegetables, fruits, and nuts, holding them momentarily as if he were blessing or anointing them. It was the same man she had met in Chengdu, the same man she had met on the roadside.

The darkness of night was slowly creeping in; the moon had replaced the sun in the night sky. The Siberian wind was stirring the yellow dust, and the temperature was slowly dropping. Although it was the second day of spring, the temperature was still likely to drop below freezing overnight. The last of the tourists had already left the temple when Constance reached the gate, which the guard had just locked for the night.

"Sir? Sir? Can you help me?" she called to the guard. He stopped from inside the gate, looked around, but appeared to not see her.



“Hello! Hello!” Her voice created a wistful charm of country echoes; one might wonder why, under the circumstances, her voice sounded charming, but it did.

Fear resurfaced as she walked the deserted streets of Tongda, realizing that the struggle could be just beginning, that it might continue even if she did get out of China. Most small towns in China, including Beijing, went to sleep early—at least people were off the streets; however, Tongda was even a smaller industrial coal-mining town that seemed even more isolated, with few streetlights. Constance went off down the cold, windswept streets looking for a hotel to spend the night, although she hadn’t seen anything remotely resembling one. A mess of churned earth and rubble spreading to a derelict factory building with broken windows and a crumbling chimney was all she saw around her.

The light from the full moon accompanied the dim streetlights in revealing the bleakness of the town with smoke from the factory chimneys smudging the sky. The town was mostly raw and featureless, but just outside were some of the most famous Buddhist cave temples in China, which drew many tourists to town.

Constance had been walking around in circles, beginning and ending at the same place. She had covered every major, minor, and in-between street searching for a place to spend the night. Desperate, Constance thumbed through the guidebook she had tucked away in her backpack. Most of the information in it was about Beijing, but a picture of the Huayuan Monastery caught her eyes; it was to be just east of Tongda’s Crossing, which was where she was standing. At a distance, far east of the crossing, she could see the roofs of the monastery, but she couldn’t tell where the entrance was. She reasoned that if she could get there, the monks would amicably allow her to spend the night. She knew that the gates would be closed, but hoped that if she knocked loud enough and maybe even screamed, someone was likely to hear her.

She walked for what seemed like hours, up one street and down the other, before she found the entrance to the monastery, which was divided into an upper and lower temple. Everything around it was dilapidated; however, conservation was in progress. Surprisingly, the elderly monks were in residence; she could see them shuffling between the buildings carrying firewood in their blue robes and narrow pointed slippers. Most of them looked bad-tempered, long-faced with slanted eyes that appeared almost shut. *Who*



wouldn't look so sour and withdrawn having to live in such abject poverty? she reasoned.

The decayed atmosphere was somehow appealing. It had a sad but touching quality. The gate stood ajar—*probably an oversight of the monks or the guards*, thought Constance—so she walked through the gate to the inner hall. Steep stone steps led up through a gateway to the inner court of the main hall. In the center of the court was a bronze pagoda; Buddha and bodhisattva statues made of wood and clay were everywhere. There was no one nearby, so she wandered down the long hallway surrounded by sculptures and murals of Ming and Qing. Constance had an eerie feeling walking through the hall, knowing that she wasn't supposed to be there. Wandering from hall to hall, climbing steep steps, she was in awe of the rich decor. Buddha statues rested on gilt lotus flowers, tall ethereal bodhisattvas, alluring and mysterious with an inner mystery of faith. They were strange, worn, and ancient, yet somehow their original inspiration was still alive and deeply moving.

Time seemed to have stood still; Constance had become fixated by the mere presence of the statues. Her body was still as she knelt on the floor in front of them. Although she'd had no intention to worship them, she felt that she had been forced to her knees with no resistance; it was that powerful.

The strange, full feeling in her ears was back, a burning sensation coupled with internal pressure. She had learned from the past experience not to resist it, so she tried to accept the situation and flow with it. The form of a figure appeared before her like a bright shadow without the darkness: a full, round figure that went from degrees of darkness to degrees of lightness. The light separated out from the dark making itself distinguishable; then it would flow back, blending the light and darkness together. Constance was overcome with fear, but somehow she felt she had to stay and have the experience, so she tried to calm her body by breathing deeply.

"You can't stay here tonight," a strong and authoritative voice said. "Rules too rigid; not make exceptions. Consequences too much."

"What am I doing wrong?" she asked. "Why have I been forsaken? I'm lost and don't have any place to spend the night."

She felt as though the voice had compassion for her plight. It reminded her of her dad. She suddenly wasn't afraid but felt like a child talking to a parent.

"You're too involved in the ego, its logic. Must overcome." The voice was clear. It wasn't directly in her ear, but appeared to be coming from across the room.

"I can't stay here. Where will I go? I'm lost," she pleaded.

"Go back to the hotel," she heard. "Someone waits for you there." The voice was getting weaker.

"There is no hotel here," she said.

"Oh, yes there is. You see it but not look like what you think. You dismiss it."

"Where did I see it?" she begged.

"Go you find it," the voice went on. "Can't stay here."

"Please, I don't know!" she screamed like a spoiled child throwing a temper tantrum.

"Ask for help." The voice was barely audible.

Her ears cleared with a popping sound; the pressure was gone now. There was no sound, no voice, complete silence.

The sound of her scream was heard by the monks sleeping in the residence hall just a few feet away. They all came out at once from both sides of the hall, in unison. They stood in silence as if at army command, their eyes fixed on Constance kneeling near the statues. They turned in unison, walked back into their rooms, and closed their doors.

A guard instantly appeared and escorted Constance out of the building, asking no questions, something she concluded as a telepathic summoning by the monks.

"No foreigner allowed here," the guard said. "Restricted to visitor at all times."

Constance found herself wandering around the streets again, wishing the guard had jailed her—at least that way, she concluded, she would have been off the streets for the night. She stood outside the entrance to the monastery, shifting uneasily, unsure of which direction to take. She felt disoriented with a tight place of anxiety in her heart. She walked down the steep steps by the light of the full moon.

Back at Tongda's Crossing, she retraced in her mind the places she had passed. She tried to sort out what the voice had said to her, but her memory was in a fog. *I haven't made little problems for myself; I've created a holocaust*, she thought. Walking due south, silent movies playing in her head, her senses reaching out into the night, she hoped to get a sense of which direction to take, but no insight came.

## CHAPTER 17

A general market stood on the corner, along the narrow dirt path leading off the main street. A white husky dog with black eyes and a bushy tail stood in a trance, its eyes glued to Constance as she approached it. Wagging its tail, it ran toward her. She had been told to beware of wild dogs on the run from the slaughterhouse, but this dog appeared friendly—too friendly to be wild, she thought.

It wasn't the typical wild dog found in China: the raccoon dog, named so because it resembled a small raccoon. China was infested with dogs, many barely alive, dragging themselves along, trailing half-chewed-off legs. It was not uncommon to see them roaming monasteries and urban streets in vicious packs.

Judging from the shape of its head, placement of its ears, and the color, gait, and texture of its coat, Constance inferred that he could have been a pedigree, perhaps even registered with a kennel club. His coat was thick, bright, and shiny; his nature was gentle and affectionate.

Constance had a strange, unexplainable feeling about the dog as though it had a message for her. She slowly rubbed its coat and petted its head as he made friendly noises, wagging its tail and smiling as loving dogs do with their masters.

"I'm your friend," she went on. "I want you to be my friend."

The dog turned over on its back while Constance rubbed its belly, moaning and groaning in pleasure. Constance had always connected with animals, ever since she was a child. She looked at the dog with mist in her eyes and felt love and compassion for the beautiful animal.

"Can you help me?" she asked sincerely, kneeling down and holding the dog's face in her hands. "Which way do you think I should go for help?"

The dog looked into her eyes, licked her face, and wagged its tail. He acted if he understood and would accommodate her. Constance followed the gentle dog down the street to a narrow dirt path off the main street. She had noticed before but discounted it because it wasn't a paved street. The dog ran slightly ahead of her, stopping every few minutes to look back at Constance, whose movement had gotten slower. She wondered if the dog was taking her to its hideout. She had found a new friend, she thought, and had momentarily forgotten her troubles.

For about ten minutes, the eighty-pound dog led her along the dirt road up and down hills. The road wound around the back of buildings, finally ending at the foothill of a mountain. Suddenly the dog stopped, looked at Constance, and barked.

They had come upon what looked like an abandoned hotel, ready to disintegrate any minute. Examining it closer, Constance noticed a dim light inside, but the doorway was dark. Tarpaper roofing flapped forlornly, and a sprained screen door hung open—but the wooden door behind it was locked. The solidity of the building was disguised by its red stucco finish.

There was no way to tell whether someone was in the lobby because the light was so dim and the peephole was only functional from the inside. The fading letters on a sign above the door read "Yes," but she wasn't certain what that meant.

Barking and nudging, the dog led Constance to a soapstone rock underneath a small window, which Constance used to climb on and peep through the window through sprays of dust. The homemade frilly curtain stood open, and she could see the face of a young man and images of a TV from a cluttered, mirrored wall. She tapped on the dusty window. She continued tapping, louder and louder, while the dog stood watching, but she got no response. The dog barked as if telling her to come down and then led her to the locked door, barking and scratching at it while looking back at Constance.

After several of Constance's knocks, someone spoke through the peephole.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I need a place to spend the night," she responded. "Is this a hotel?"

"No hotel. No room," he said, cracking the door to take a closer look. He was a young Chinese boy, smoking a cigarette. "Not tonight."

Constance inched her way through the doorway.

“Could I sleep here in the lobby just for tonight?” she begged, thinking it would be a welcome respite from the cold. “I’ll pay you with FECs. . . . I’ll be gone before your guests get up.”

The lobby was choked in smoke. The windows were closed tightly to seal out the chill. Her eyes burned and she coughed nonstop. The fumes were overpowering. The water garden in the center of the lobby was coated with crazed green crust of drying slime; the ceiling was blotted with water. The place was flecked with cobwebs; the smell of dust and mildew was everywhere. Dried wallpaper curled from the yellow plaster. The carpet was stained and dirt was everywhere. She was in no position to be discriminating, but she could hardly stomach the filth.

The boy took another puff on his cigarette and smiled as though he had been trained to do so when foreigners were around.

“Get in trouble boss come tonight,” he said, looking at the front door.

It was obvious he wanted to make the FEC, “tourist money”, that was worth more than the regular currency used by the Chinese, RMB, commonly called “people money,” but was afraid his boss would come and find her sleeping in the lobby. He stood hesitating about what to do when the night supervisor walked in. He didn’t ask any questions; he simply commanded her to leave.

“No room tonight,” he asserted with a stern, poker-faced expression. “Serve breakfast tomorrow. You come.”

Constance was relieved to see the dog standing right outside the door as she was escorted out, as if he sensed she wouldn’t be able to stay for the night. He barked, wagging his tail and looking up at Constance as if to say “Follow me.” She followed closely behind him, somehow believing he was her only hope and that no matter where he led her, she would be okay. She followed, climbing steep hills, dodging rocks and mud holes, guided by the light of the full moon and a flashlight. The dog’s coat was illuminating light to the dark terrain.

The steep climb up the side of the Yellow Mountains proved to be more of a challenge than Constance was prepared for. The dog climbed up grooves along the side of the mountain stopping at intervals waiting for Constance, who had planted a foot on a rock that had weakened and given way, causing her to slip downward a few feet. She grabbed hold of the edge of the cliff, gripping it for life while her body swung in midair. It was too dark to see exactly what was underneath her, but it looked as if it were a million miles down to a solid surface. Although she had climbed mountains before, she had

nothing in her grab bag to help her. She believed there was a platform below, but she didn't know how far or how solid it was, so she was horrified at the thought of jumping down.

Terror mounted inside of her as she swung from the edge of the cliff. Overcome with fear, her rational mind was inoperable. Roaring blood running through her veins, adrenaline pumping at its peak, she took deep breaths to center and calm her innermost being. She realized that if she panicked, she would lose complete control and possibly fall to her death. Breathing deeply, she adjusted her hands to get a better grip, while slowly moving her body against the belly of the mountain, bracing her back in what felt like a deep groove that gave her some support. She thought she had mastered the terrifying prospect of dying alone, but not on the side of a mountain thousands of miles from home.

The dog suddenly appeared beneath her, looking up with its compassionate eyes, yet calm as if he saw no danger. He walked around, seemingly analyzing the situation, from one end of the platform to the other; then he walked the width of it. Each time he got to the end he would look up at her hanging from the cliff, calmly wag his tail, and bark. He seemed to be trying to show Constance the rock was safe to jump down on, but she was too fearful of losing her balance and falling.

Failing in his attempts to convince her to jump, the dog climbed the side of the mountain, stopping just beneath her feet, and barked profusely. He looked at her and looked down; he shuffled his body around on the side of the mountain and jumped down on the rock, making Constance realize it wasn't too far down for her to jump.

She closed her eyes and heard a voice inside of her say, "Surround yourself with white light and jump." It was the same voice she had heard for days now. She opened her eyes, and then closed them again. She took a deep breath and visualized light inside and all around her until she felt that the energy was strong enough. Then she jumped, landing on her feet next to the dog. It was a happy reunion. Overcome with gratitude she hugged the dog.

They only had to travel another thirty feet before they came upon a cave in the side of the mountain. The dog went inside and came back out barking and wagging his tail, reassuring her it was safe to enter.

Hidden inside was a temple, designed in the shape of a large rectangle, in a north-south direction. The entrance to the temple was a simple gateway in which celestial guardians stood leading to the outer courtyard of the

temple complex. Following the entrance gate to the north was a second gateway, which led to the inner courtyard, the limits of which were defined by walls that encircled its hall-like walkways. Bell and drum towers rose to the left and the right. It contained the holy objects of the monastery, the pagoda containing sealed-up relics and the Buddha hall. The outer temple gate interrupted the temple's surrounding walls in the south.

Constance trailed along just slightly behind her new canine friend, gazing in awe and disbelief at what she saw. There was no one around; dim candles were lit throughout the temples. The manner in which the dog led Constance through the temples let her know it had been there many times before. She felt a sense of security being with the dog. The presence of energy she felt from the temple was powerful; her consciousness was in the moment. The fear, worry, and anxiety of getting out of China were suspended in time.

Above the middle entrance hung an inscription with the name of the temple and many of its famous masters, written in Chinese which appeared to have been inscribed in calligraphy. She did recognize the name of some of the masters because she had studied their philosophy. The path led through the main gate where two temple guardians stood, on the left and right, watching over the entrance to the main lobby. The mighty statue of Erwang, the King she had often read about, stood in the corner of the lobby and two other Kings she had never heard of stood nearby. They were frightening figures with threatening faces and strong, muscular bodies. One stared resentfully at the visitors entering; the other appeared to be calling out a message to those departing.

The temple guardians were armed with diamond clubs: one ready to destroy evil, sin, and the enemy, the other to protect the good. According to Buddhist tradition, the two were one and the same, just having many manifestations. Erwang was also called "King of Knowledge" and supposedly knew the way to salvation. He was symbolic of the highest, absolute, and infinite wisdom.

The dog suddenly stopped, looked at the statues, barked, yawned, and rubbed up against Constance's leg. He spread himself against four, square-shaped pillows in the hall away from the traffic area. Without questioning the safety of where they were, Constance opened her sleeping bag and snuggled up beside the dog.

Ironically, where the dog had encouraged Constance to rest for the night was the first of the holy halls and was the hall in which the statues of the four Celestial Kings—the guardians of the world—provided protection for all points of the compass. They carried arms and weapons that they used

to destroy evil and demons, guard Buddhist truth, and serve the welfare of all. The four celestial guardians watched over earthly happenings; nothing escaped them. They punished injustice, violence, and vice, and rewarded virtue and morality.





## CHAPTER 18

The warm, moist lick of the dog, its soft growl, and gentle nudge against the sleeping bag awakened Constance, making her aware that it was time to get out of the temple before the guards came to check it for the day. It was nearly dawn, nothing was stirring; silence permeated the halls. It was Constance's experience that China usually awakened very slowly, and the temples even slower.

Stretching and yawning as she folded her sleeping bag, a smile curved her lips as she admired her new friend who sat waiting patiently, watching the hallways. As soon as she was ready, the dog led the way out of the cave. It was apparent to her that their time was limited for getting out of the cave safely. The dog's slow pace turned into a trot. She sensed it had good reason for its increasing speed, so she picked up her pace, leaving no time to admire the statues or artifacts.

Trotting along briskly, Constance close behind, the dog took what appeared to be an unexpected detour and went to the left of the hall. Suddenly it stopped, looked at Constance, and quickly moved behind twelve sculptures that stood around the sleeping Buddha: one resting on its body, the other supporting his head. She stood next to the dog; it pushed her farther behind the statues. They both rested against the statues in complete silence. She could feel her life force pulsating against the force of the dog, and felt more at one with him than she had felt with any living thing since she had been in China.

The guard passed through the corridor, looking around in all directions, a procedure that had obviously become routine for him. He was so mechanical that he never looked beyond the nose on his face in any one direction. His eyes never went past mid-length of any of the statues. The dog's tail was sticking out past the width of the statue, but the guard didn't see it.

As soon as the guard was out of sight, the dog beckoned to Constance. It looked from one end of the hall to the other, as though it was about to cross a busy intersection of streets. They hurriedly passed through the Temple of Universal Spiritual Awakening, only stopping momentarily as Constance tried to take in as much as she could with a few quick glances. She knew she would get just a quick exposure to these wonders, but felt their power even in the brief moments.

The dog led Constance down a different path out of the temple than the one they had used the night before, at least it appear so. All the Buddha statues had an entourage of bodhisattvas, kings, priests, and followers she hadn't noticed before. The bodhisattvas were richly bejeweled with costly crowns; diamonds, rubies, sapphires, jade, jasper, lapis lazuli, calcite, sodalite, and pearls covered their breasts and hung around their necks and arms. They were graceful and looked upon the visitor with mild expressions, their hands often raised soothingly. Many of the things Constance's dad had shared with her about the Buddha, the Kings and the Temples had resurfaced; Bodhisattvas were holy ones who had achieved maturity and were ready to reach Nirvana.

Constance found that the path down from the mountainside appeared less challenging than the night before. She followed happily behind the dog, which she had named Spirit Guide. The rocks that led down to the vale were artistically sculptured, but not the same as when they came up the night before. *Maybe we were on the backside of the mountain*, Constance thought, but she had no way of knowing. It had been so dark the night before when they went up the mountains the mountains had felt like they were closing in from both sides.

The distant foothills, cloaked in yellow dust, drifted from under the budding ginseng trees. The wind flew, whimpering across the fields and the sky like the city was a dense slab of lead. Trains chugged out clouds of smoke and steam. Constance and Spirit Guide walked side by side along the dirt road leading back to the city limits of Tongda. Constance now noticed landmarks she remembered seeing before. They were going back to the dilapidated hotel they had been in the night before.

Thinking that Spirit Guide might be hungry and tired, she stopped and offered him food just before they reached the hotel; he welcomed the vegetables, fruits, and nuts, eating eagerly yet carefully as though he were making sure there was enough left for Constance. When he was through, he took the lead again, turning onto the unpaved alley that led up to the old hotel. He barked and looked at Constance.

Trying to get inside of the dog's head, Constance squatted so she would be at eye level with him. *For what reason, she wondered, could he possibly be bringing me back to this undesirable, disgusting, rundown place?* She looked into his deep-set, jet-black eyes, hoping for a message she could understand. The dog's eyes met hers, and then looked at the old beat-up door to the hotel, piercing it as if he were seeing something inside. Constance's large brown eyes wide and questioning, she approached the door. Spirit Guide wagged approvingly.

The door to the hotel lobby was unlocked, so Constance entered freely. Behind the reception desk, a young girl stood drinking tea and singing an American pop song. It made Constance's heart glad, thinking that perhaps she'd be of assistance in her quest to get back to Beijing. The girl looked at her and smiled in a way that reached clear to Constance's heart. In spite of the overbearing odor seeping through the woodwork, she was glad to be there.

"Hi, how can I help you?" the young girl inquired in perfect English. "You're American, right? I love your music."

The way she was swaying to the sounds from her Walkman made Constance laugh. The girl had beautiful skin and shiny hair as black as Manchester coal.

"I'm trying to get back to Beijing," Constance said, showing her passport and airline ticket.

"I'll help you," the girl said, her eyes lighting up behind a coy smile. Constance had a feeling it was going to cost her dearly. "How much will you pay? You pay me FEC, I'll tell you how to get to Beijing."

It had been a few days since Constance had exchanged money, so she had very little foreign currency. She had reserved enough to get her to the airport. If she weren't able to take the train to Beijing she would need her RMBs and FECs to get a cab ride back, she reasoned. Her diamond tennis bracelet—was it time to part with it in exchange for her freedom? It was worth over \$5,000. It had meant so much to her at one time, and as she stood in a daze, Constance knew she had to lose the memories that were flooding her mind in order to let go of it—after all, that was why she had brought it with her.

The tap on her shoulder startled her, causing her to jump. She turned around; her face jelled into an expression of shock and disbelief. It was Lang DeBjon. Without saying a word, he grabbed her, the choked laughter and tears streaming down his face. It was as though he was afraid she would get away if he loosened his hold.

“Thank God I’ve found you. Thank God,” he said over and over. “I’ve been worried sick about you. I’ve been searching for the last forty-eight hours.” His face beamed with happiness. “I filed a missing person report to the Chinese government.”

Constance believed, at that moment, that he was not her enemy. There was a pervading feeling inside of her that convinced her she had been wrong about him. Yet she was skeptical because of what had happened back in Chengdu. She could only be in the present moment with her feelings, she thought. There were so many questions that needed to be answered before she could be sure, but for now she felt safe. Wrapped in a warm bunting of her own feelings, she took a breath of utter astonishment. She was speechless; tears of joy filled her eyes.

“God, I’m glad I’ve found you,” Lang said, looking directly into her eyes. His face had the most compassionate look she had ever seen. “I must check out of this dump. . . . Where’re your things? We must get out of here. The jeep is in back.” He was going nonstop. “Stand right here. Don’t move out of my sight.”

The receptionist checked Lang out, somewhat disappointed that her underground moneymaking scheme hadn’t been successful. Caught up in the moment with their reunion, Constance had forgotten about Spirit Guide, who was sitting outside on his hind legs waiting and watching the front door of the hotel. He ran up to Constance as soon as she came out the door and lifted his front paws for a handshake. His work was finished.

Constance’s heart felt heavy; she had mixed emotions about letting the dog go. She wanted to take him with her to claim him as her own. She knew Spirit Guide was trying to say good-bye to her, and it broke her heart. She wanted to at least find a local family to take care of him. Squatting with her arms around the dog, she looked into his loyal and compassionate black eyes and said, “I’ll never forget you. Thank you so much for taking care of me when I didn’t know how to take care of myself.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. The dog rubbed his nose against hers and made a noise of approval.

“Would you like me to find you a home?” she asked the dog. He looked back at her as if he understood what she was asking. “We can take you with us.” She desperately wanted to do so, and she believed he could understand and feel her desire. She wondered if there was a way to take the dog back with her to America.

The dog looked at Constance and looked off into the far distance turning its head from one side to the other as if he were saying no. He barked and looked up the street in the direction of what she believed to be a residential area. Convinced that the dog was trying to tell her he had a home, she said, "You live," she pointed in the direction he was staring, "that way?"

The dog barked several times wagging his tail and moving his head up and down. Constance noticed Lang standing nearby watching her affectionate interaction with the dog. She wondered if she could get the dog to give her a reading on Lang, to let her know if she could trust him. Petting him on his back and pointing to Lang, she asked, "Am I safe with that man?"

Spirit Guide looked at Lang; his eyes widened; his tail wagged; he barked; and he walked over to where he was standing. He rubbed against Lang's leg, looked directly up at him, looked back at Constance, and barked as his head nodded with approval. The dog gave one last look and trotted off in the direction he had been looking.

Constance's heart broke as she watched the dog turn the corner, tears streaming uncontrollably down her face. Something wonderful, beyond her understanding, had happened to her. *Spirit Guide is definitely connected to a higher power, she thought, perhaps the same one I want to be connected with.*

Lang was in awe of their interaction. He didn't know what happened between them, but even he saw the strong bond they had formed. He was puzzled, but too uncomfortable to ask questions.

"Beautiful dog," he said.

"Yes, he is," said Constance. "More than words could ever express. He was my guiding angel." She spoke as if it were just then that she understood why the dog had really been with her. "He took care of me when I didn't know how to take care of myself."

Lang was a bit confused, but he had learned not to probe.

"We better get going," he said, "if we're gonna get you a flight tonight." He remembered she had been anxious to get back to San Francisco.

## CHAPTER 19

Beginning at eight in the morning, Constance and Lang followed the road parallel to the path of the train, getting only glimpses of it when it ventured out of the tunnels. Sunlight gleamed through the windows as they drove along steep-sided valleys, towering mountains, waterfalls, turbulent rivers, sharp rocky gorges, and occasionally a small plateau holding a farming village enclosed by terraced fields. Winter had given way to spring—signs were everywhere.

Looking out at the views of rocky landscapes, bleak and barren red cliffs, until they were swallowed up by a long tunnel, Constance had been searching for meaning in what had happened to her—until she saw a sign that read “Sixty Miles To Chengdu.”

“I thought we were going to Beijing,” she said anxiously. “My ticket is from Beijing Airport.”

“Yes, I know,” Lang said.

“So why Chengdu?” she insisted. He was being a bit too casual for her.

“Because Wyman Fortuna has notified the Beijing authorities to search your briefcase for the feng shui designs and confiscate them,” Lang said. “I understand he paid them a lot of money to do this. . . . He convinced them that the information contained in your briefcase is a threat to their country.”

“But that’s not true!” Constance cried in outrage. “Won’t they know when they see the designs?”

“Well, yes, but that won’t happen until you are on the plane and gone,” he answered. His eyes were filled with sadness about how she had been treated.

“What’ll they do with them?” she asked. “I mean, after they examine them.”

“He paid them to ship them to him in the States,” Lang said looking away.

“Lang,” she questioned, “how do you know so much about what is going on?”

“When I promised to help Wyman Fortuna, he told me the whole story,” Lang explained. “Wyman Fortuna promised to copy Monica Winston and me the designs.” He hesitated.

“Yes, go on please,” she demanded. “Tell me the whole story.”

Fear and anger were mounting inside of her, clouding her rational thought. She wondered if Lang was still working with them. Lang was aware that Constance wasn’t convinced of his innocence, so he knew he had to temper what he said. He was afraid that she wouldn’t hear the whole story if she became too emotional. He moved his head slightly to establish perspective, put both hands on the steering wheel, and wrinkled his mouth.

“Before I go on with what happened, you must know the role I played was to protect you, nothing more. . . . So please reserve your judgment of me.”

“I promise I’ll hear you out,” she said avoiding his eyes.

“Wyman Fortuna sent Monica Winston with us to Chengdu, not to see the Great Wall, but to see if she could get your briefcase with the feng shui documents.” He shifted his body uncomfortably; his eyes stared on the road. “She was to take them during our overnight stay at Shenyang, where she was to share a room with you. She would take the train back to Beijing during the night.” His embarrassment kept him from looking at her.

“But . . . I asked Monica to ride up with us,” she said, puzzled with the chronology of events. “I also asked you to come up.”

“Right,” he said. “But they had plans to do it the next day, so you just made it easier.”

Constance couldn’t believe she had set up her own fate. She had trusted Monica against her better judgment. She had been uncomfortable with the way she had analyzed her wardrobe when she first met her, and thought she should have taken that as a sign.

“So, why did Monica want to take my briefcase?” she asked, turning to make eye contact with Lang. “I mean, why did she try to take it while we were parked?”

“Because Monica didn’t believe I was really gonna go along with the plans.”

Constance’s mind retraced the incident; things weren’t adding up.

“So why was the jeep moved to a different parking lot when I came back from the temple?”

“What do you mean? The jeep was never moved from the parking lot we left it in.”

He pushed his hair back to get a better look at her, but Constance didn't say a word. She was wondering if she could have been mistaken about the jeep having been moved when she came out looking for Lang and Monica. She went to another compartment in her head, one that considered she might have been in an altered state of mind after leaving the temple. She felt confused.

“All I know is that when I came out looking for you, I was on the far back side of the parking lot, and you weren't there,” she said, not sure she had the directions correct.

“That's where we parked the jeep,” Lang said convincingly. “The jeep was parked in the same place until we left. It was never moved.”

“I don't know, Lang. I just don't know.” She had resigned herself to her confusion.

“When I came back to the jeep after the two hours and you weren't there, I left Monica at the jeep and went looking for you,” Lang said. “I looked until they threw me out of the garden. Monica came looking for me because I was gone so long.” He seemed haunted by his own suspicion of what had really happened. “When Monica and I came back to the jeep it had been ransacked.”

*Yes, it had been ransacked,* she said to herself, *but not by me.* Seeing her things in such disarray was what caused her to run away, she remembered. She had promised Lang she would allow him to tell his side of the story, so she didn't interject her thoughts about what had happened, although she didn't promise not to interrupt him but she didn't.

“I was devastated by your note saying you were going back to Beijing,” he said.

“So, what did you do?” She was curious if he had come looking for her.

“When I told Monica I wasn't going to Shenyang, she became irate, took her things, and said she would call a cab to go on to Shenyang without me. . . . You see, she believed you had gone to Shenyang and were trying to mislead us with your note. Since Shenyang was much closer than Beijing, she was suspicious of you.”

*Yeah, that's an understatement,* Constance thought to herself.

“I took off back to Beijing looking for you along the roadside,” Lang continued, loosening his collar as if to get some air. “After driving back to Beijing, I assumed you had taken the train. I couldn't sleep all night, and I wandered the streets desperately looking for you in every hotel I could find.”



Constance sat listening with endless patience yet noticing the majestic scenery passing before them. The scale of the landscape was enormous. The mountains and the cliffs towered into the sky and the valleys were wide. The river was brown and fast flowing; scattered trees were breaking into a fresh green that contrasted softly with the dark rock, the gray soil, and old grass of winter. There were houses here and there tucked among the folds in the mountains. She wanted more than anything to believe Lang's story, so she urged him to continue.

"I wasn't aware until the next day that Monica had stolen most of your clothing," he said apologetically. "When I was sane enough, it dawned on me what had happened."

Constance remembered how Monica had been adamant that she free herself of some of her clothing, referring to them as "excess baggage."

"Hold on tight," said Lang. "We have to negotiate this rough terrain."

He accelerated the jeep up the steep hill, winding around treacherous deep curves in the side of the mountain. There was complete silence for a moment. Constance gripped the seat belts with both hands. They rode along the narrow road and cut through the Yellow Mountains, thick yellow dust flying everywhere, the northern Siberian winds slashing against the front of the jeep.

With every turn around the steep ninety-degree angle curve in the road, Lang's jaw became firmer, his muscles tighter, his heartbeat faster. A fist of fear tightened in his stomach as he gripped the steering wheel, every inch of his strength holding it against the raging winds.

"Hold on, Constance. We're gonna make it," he said, trying to reassure her and himself.

Lang lowered the jeep to first gear. Virtually blinded by the yellow dust oozing out of the mountains, the jeep descended thousands of feet. Pumping the brakes was of little use. The force of the gusty wind pushed against the back of the jeep, and the gravitational pull of the earth left him with little control.

After descending about twelve hundred feet, a blast of wind ripped through the jeep like the thunder of war, causing it to turn the curve on two wheels. The screech of steel-belted radials permeated the inside of the jeep. Lang could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

"Oh my God, save us!" he cried, leaning his entire body into the steering wheel, his foot pressing the brake to the floor.

A gray spit of steam covered the inside of the windows. His vision of the road was gone. Loosening her seat belt, Constance stretched her arm as far as she could, clearing a small spot on the window so Lang could see. The jeep suddenly hit a bump in the road throwing her back into the seat. She had cleared the windshield just enough for Lang to peak through and see a few inches of the road, barely enough to avoid the side of the mountain.

Skirting death's edge, feeling that it might be imminent, Constance was numb with terror. She held one hand up toward the top of the jeep while gripping the seat with the other. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize a white light coming down around them. With a shriek neither of them would ever forget, she called for the help of the light. Remembering what she had been told earlier by the voices, she silently asked her Guides for help.

The scream chilled Lang to the marrow, but help came in what seemed like a split second. The winds slowly calmed; the yellow dust from the mountains became visibly thinner; the jeep seemed to stabilize; and the violently shaking doors were now softly rattling. They both were shocked at the way things had calm down. Although they still had a few miles to travel along the rugged mountain road, they were confident they would make it.

## CHAPTER 20

Grateful to still be alive, Constance didn't have much interest in hearing the rest of the story Lang had been telling her before their dangerous encounter in the mountain. She just wanted to get back home to San Francisco safely. On the other hand, Lang felt more than ever that he needed to tell his story to clear his conscience. The road gave way to smoother terrain; the winds escaped behind the mountaintop; driving was much easier. It made conversation more plausible.

"I don't know what happened back there, but it was frightening," Lang said. "You must've scared the wind off with that scream."

His sense of humor was back. He stared at Constance and saw that she was serious. Although he'd made a joke of it, he was aware something powerful had happened, and he had a sense that it had something to do with Constance.

"Just thank God we're safe," she said.

It was obvious by her tone that she didn't want to discuss, nor did she know, what had happened. When Constance had asked the unseen for help, she did so silently, fearing what Lang would think of her action. She was careful not to let anyone know of her true convictions about a higher power. She saw the connection as very private and personal, but she was beginning to wonder if her connections with the force were becoming more public all the time. Constance knew that Lang had a belief system but suspected it was more rigid and dogmatic than anything she could ever believe. She had a more hands-on, practical approach to her connection with the God Force. She didn't see any need to view it otherwise.

"We'll be arriving at the airport soon," he said, "but I must tell you about what happened to Nicole." He was adamant.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "What about Nicole?"

It was the first time she'd thought about Nicole since she left her on the side of the road. A sense of guilt over the fact that she'd never sent for help began to creep up on her.

"Nicole came up to Chengdu to warn you about Wyman Fortuna and Monica Winston," he said. "On her way back she had an accident and spent the night on the road. She didn't remember much about what happened. She suffered amnesia."

"What happened to her?" Constance interrupted, eager to know.

"She said she was saved by a woman who transferred something into her body that saved her life," he said. "She didn't remember much about what happened or the woman."

"What else did she say?" Lang grinned, something Constance had learned he did when he was happy about something. "Well, do I get to hear the rest?"

"Nicole said she remembered bleeding profusely, so much that she thought she was going to die. She said the woman stopped the bleeding and that she awakened the next day with only sketchy memories of the incident." He paused.

"Lang, please, did she say anything else?"

"She said the woman went for help and didn't come back," he said vaguely, as if still trying to understand what Nicole had told him.

"So, did she get back okay?" Constance asked nonchalantly in an effort to conceal her concern.

"Yes, she drove the jeep back to Beijing," he said. "She was very disappointed that she didn't find the woman who saved her life."

There was so much more that Constance wanted to know, but she didn't want to ask a lot of details that might make Lang suspicious that she knew anything about the accident.

"Nicole really admired you," he went on. "She was a very sincere person."

Fighting her guilt, Constance wanted to change the subject to more pleasant thoughts.

"How long does it take to fly to Hong Kong?"

"But, Constance, there's more you need to know," he said.

"But, Lang," she said as if she were mocking him, "what does it matter if I'm going home?"

"Part of the problem is at home."

"What're you talking about?"

Her heart beat faster. She hadn't thought about the consequences of returning home for some time now, and she was afraid of what she might hear.

"You really don't know, do you?"

"If you mean my job is in jeopardy, of course I know."

She wasn't good at hiding her feelings no matter what they were; her irritation was showing. Frankly, she was tired of hearing warnings about losing her job. Her feng shui portfolio and documentation had more meaning now; she thought her job could wait. Constance hung an invisible "Do Not Disturb" sign as she tried to forecast the events of her return to San Francisco. She sifted through what-ifs, not sure if any of them mattered to her. Something inside of her core had changed, and she was losing her focus on the images of probable realities. Memories of her recent experiences in China—the encounters, the adventures, the enlightenment—came crowding back like an undercurrent, closing in around her, and filled her with a longing to turn back. She wanted time to sort things out, to understand the underlying meaning of the experiences.

Deep into her thoughts, Constance didn't hear Lang ask her if she was thirsty. Realizing she wasn't with him, he turned on the radio to ease his feeling of isolation. The Chinese opera wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but it did take away the silence. Assaulted by the intense, unbelievably loud level of noise, that gave her a slight headache, Constance gazed over at Lang. She caught his warm smile and wondered if she had let an idyllic state slip by without savoring its sweetness.

"I'm back," she said.

"I know how much you love Chinese opera," Lang said, laughing as he turned the volume down. "It's gonna be a beautiful day." A white blur of the sun stood fixed; the winds were gone.

"It's turning out to be one of those postcard-perfect days. I can't believe it considering what we had to drive through," she said, watching the glitter of the sun on the windshield.

"Maybe you can come visit me in San Francisco this summer."

Smiling, that perfect keyboard of teeth. He made it obvious that there was something about Constance that warmed his heart. "I hope you will visit me in France," he said.

"It's a desire I'd love to fulfill," she said, "if we keep in touch."

"I'll make sure that we do," he said laughing, a rare intimate laugh, beautiful with brightness.

“Chengdu airport, ten kilometers,” Constance said, reading the sign. “I can’t believe we’re that close.”

“Oh, yeah, it doesn’t take long once you get out of the mountains,” he said. He seemed sad that their time together was drawing to a close. “I’ll miss you much. . . . This has been a wonderful experience meeting you.” A flicker of a smile lifted the edges of his mouth, and then died out. “I kinda think it might change my life, but we’ll have to see.”

A faint beginning of a smile turned to a sudden questioning look on Constance’s face. A wave of grayness passed over her, another sort of dark premonition. Anxiety knotted inside of her.

“It’ll be okay, Constance—. You’ll have to trust me,” he said.



## CHAPTER 21

Chengdu airport was packed and chaotic with honking cars, curious sounds, and tantalizing smells. Planes growled off the runway like vultures over their kill. The lines were long, people standing shoulder to shoulder everywhere—*The entire population of Chengdu and its surroundings must be buying tickets*, thought Constance. The airport's interior was as drab and ordinary as its patrons. The carpet was embedded with dirt and filth from years of abusive spitting frenzies by the natives. Clouds of smoke danced around; the air felt like it had been breathed too many times.

Lang took the duty of buying the tickets and making the right connections—he had visited China several times, and he spoke fluent Chinese. After passing through endless tunnels, winding through corridors, going up and down flights of stairs, Constance finally found the women's restroom tucked away in a corner. *Surprising that anybody ever finds it*, she thought. *The airport was probably designed for men only.*

On her way back to the reservation desk, she took a wrong turn, confused by the maze, and found herself in the departure terminal. She seemed to lose her sense of direction easily in airports; the part of the brain used for decoding airport layout didn't seem to work very well for Constance. Gate 46: that was the gate Lang had said she would be leaving from. She was to meet Lang back upstairs at the reservation desk.

She put on her glasses so she could see the posted time for departure of her flight before she tried to find her way back to the reservation desk. Scanning the long line, she noticed the back of a woman with shiny brown hair, Medusa-style locks, a narrow waist, small hips, and long legs. She had the profile of Monica Winston, Constance thought, moving closer for a better look. The red, black-trimmed, wool gabardine suit, perfectly tailored with slits on each side of the skirt, caused Constance to do a double take. It

was her own suit, she was sure of it; she'd designed it herself and had never seen a duplicate. *It has to be Monica Winston, wearing the suit she took from my luggage*, she thought.

Constance was furious enough to go after her, but a frightening feeling in her heart froze her. Her whole body tightened; she couldn't separate her fear from her anger. Constance walked out of the terminal, stopping briefly to take another look. She wanted to be one hundred percent sure of her identification. The woman turned as a man approached her, allowing Constance to see her face and confirm her belief that it actually was Monica—and, to Constance's surprise, there was no doubt in her mind that the newest character on the scene was anyone other than Wyman Fortuna.

Almost running, Constance took off through the crowded terminal, bumping into passengers, jumping over people sprawled on the floor. Somehow, her orientation of the airport had improved; she found the counter where Lang was checking her baggage in a microsecond.

"Lang! Lang!" she called to him, nearly out of breath. "Stop my baggage! I can't leave here now. They're down there waiting for me."

"Who's waiting for you?" he asked moving away from the check-in counter. "Calm down. Take a deep breath." He put his arm around her. Every eye in the line was watching them.

"I can't take a chance leaving from here," she said, lowering her voice. "They'll have me stopped."

"I've checked your luggage already," he said apologetically. "Let's think this through." He continued leading her affectionately away from the crowd. Trying to keep his composure, he looked at her compassionately and asked, "Where're your designs? Were they in your luggage? Oh my God, please say no."

Constance hesitated for a moment rubbing her forehead. She knew that anything with her name on it would surely have been searched going through customs.

"Let me think," she said. "So much has happened."

"Take some deep breaths," he said, patting her on the back.

"My backpack . . . It's in my backpack. Where's my backpack?"

"It's on your back," he said, pulling on the straps across her chest, both of them laughing with relief. "Remember my cousin I told you about who's on the assignment for UPI in Beijing? Well, I can get him to ship your designs to San Francisco. . . . I'll have him ship 'em out tomorrow morning before I catch my flight."



Constance hesitated, thinking of the possible consequences of losing her designs forever if she left them with Lang. There were still reservations in her mind about his involvement with Wyman and Monica, questioning if he knowingly brought her to Chengdu airport where they'd be waiting. Bombarded with so many different energies, it was hard for Constance to tune in to her inner voice, retrograde in motion from her head telling her one thing but her heart another.

"I guess that's a good idea," she finally said. "Besides, what choices do I have?"

Constance continued to weigh the pros and cons of losing her designs while Lang made a call to his cousin in Beijing. The buzzing in her ears, the feeling of fullness behind her mastoids, the intense feeling of heat on her face—she wondered if she was getting sick again. *Maybe it's the smoke and the sewer smell of the place*, she reasoned. She wanted nothing more than to go home to San Francisco. Her soul didn't seem to care much about her physical life; she felt weak and unhealthy. *Perhaps the voice is trying to contact me again*, she thought, but even if it were, she was too preoccupied with worries to allow it to come through.

"I let go, leaving it all up to you," she whispered to the voice in her head. "If you guide me, I'll follow and trust whatever you tell me."

"Constance, I got good news," Lang unknowingly interrupted with excitement. "My cousin has to go to San Francisco on Wednesday of next week and could bring your designs with him."

Flipping through her lifetime collection of feng shui drawings and notes, she remorsefully stuffed them in the large brown envelope, not knowing if she would ever see them again. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she trusted they would be returned to her.

Lang locked the envelope in the glove compartment of the jeep, where the designs would be kept until he took them to his cousin in Beijing.

"Lang, what did you mean when you said there was more to the story?" Constance asked while they sat idling in the jeep in the airport parking lot.

"Oh, it was about John Shaw," he said.

"John Shaw? You mean my boss, John Shaw?" "Yes."

"You know him?"

"Well, I don't actually know him, but I know of him."

"You sure you didn't know me before we met here?" she asked jokingly, although she was curious.

“No, other than what I read about your work in the trade journal,” he said. “You know those articles never say anything about your personal life. They’d never shown even a picture of you.”

“So, what do you know about John Shaw other than what you’ve read in the trade journal?”

“John Shaw has developed a business plan to open his own feng shui consulting firm,” he said.

“What? You aren’t serious!”

“Don’t you get it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“John Shaw hired Wyman so he could learn the business from you. After six months, Wyman and John planned to go out on their own.”

“So I was to teach him the business, and he would become my competitor, huh?”

“Right.”

“I’m surprised John would stoop so low.”

“There’s more,” Lang continued. “Listen to this: The president of Bay Construction and Design found out about it and fired John Shaw.”

“John Shaw fired? Come on, Lang. John Shaw is part of the woodwork at Bay. The company believed he could do no wrong.”

“John alerted Wyman that he had been fired, and he told Wyman to be sure to get the feng shui information from you. He suggested that he do it by any means necessary.”

“He really said ‘by any means necessary’?” she asked thinking Lang was teasing.

“Yes, that’s what he said.”

“You mean they would do bodily harm to me?”

“No, I don’t think they had that in mind,” he said, flashing his reassuring smile. “They didn’t think physical force would be necessary.”

“So what about Nicole Bresneshaus and Monica Winston?”

“Wyman Fortuna had plans for Nicole to join them, but after meeting you she decided against it. She even tried to tell you about it the morning she ran with you in Beijing.”

Constance felt remorseful about the way she had treated Nicole. She wondered how many other people she had brushed off, never making an effort to probe deeper than the surface.

“Lang, how did you know to come looking for me in Tongda?” she asked, trying to bury the unpleasant memories. Her eyes were wide with curiosity.

“Prana Raji, the woman you went to the bathhouse with in Beijing,” he said. “She told me.”

“How did she know?” Constance was confused. She hadn’t seen or talked to Prana since the night at the bathhouse.

“She has some kind of psychic ability,” he said smiling, as if remembering Prana fondly. “She went into a trance state and was able to describe the place as that of Tongda. She could see you wandering around in that town. . . . She has incredible ability.”

“Oh, come on, Lang. Tell me a better lie than that.”

“It’s true. You, of all people, should know these things are possible.”

The last passengers were going through the gate, headed to customs, when they arrived. Lang wasn’t allowed to go any farther, so they had to say their good-byes.

“Stay in touch,” he said, embracing her as if he didn’t want to let her go.

“Thank you, Lang,” she said. She felt a rock fall through her heart. “I’ll never forget you.”

Tears were falling down her cheeks as if a dam had broken; she hadn’t cried since her mom and dad had died. She turned and waved as she walked through the gate.

## CHAPTER 22

The slow-moving line at the departure gate was the first of several lines and clearance Constance had to get through before exiting China. The staff acted as though they were on a timeless social visit, seemingly unconcerned about people catching their scheduled flights.

“Passport please,” said a young Chinese government official. He checked through her passport again. “Yo name, this yo name?” he asked, sternly staring at her with the face of a soldier and gesturing her to move out of the line. “Driva license. Yo got driva license?”

Constance pulled her driver’s license from her backpack and handed it to him.

“Aha,” he said, “it’s you. . . . Come with me. Where yo otta baggage?”

“Sir, I don’t have any other baggage,” she said, following behind him.

He led her down a long, dark tunnel to a cluttered office tucked away at the end, behind the black and red partitions where several other men dressed in government official clothing.

“Wait here,” he said.

He walked across the room never leaving her sight and whispered something in Chinese to the others. They all looked at her. He showed them her passport and her driver’s license. The officials handed the backpack to someone in the back room.

A foul odor and irritating fog of smoke lingered in the room. Constance was both crossed and gnawed with anxiety, afraid that she might miss her flight if detained too long. A vision of making a dash for her flight kept flashing into her head. She had her ticket in her coat pocket. *Perhaps they would think I’ve been cleared*, she thought.

“Where’s you otta baggage?” the official said upon his return in a tone one might use to reprimand a dog and with a suspicious sideways squint in his eyes.

“Sir, my luggage was stolen,” she said. “What you have is all I have left of it.”

She surprised herself with that statement. It was impulsive. She didn’t know why she had said it.

“Yo briefcase, where’s it?” he asked stoically without pausing for answers. “Did you check it? Do you have a paper?”

They had checked her backpack, *obviously looking for my designs*, Constance thought. She found herself getting anxious, so she took a few deep breaths from the center of her being. *I have to get through this final stage in one piece*, she thought.

“Sir, all of my things were stolen from the hotel along with my briefcase,” she explained with limpid clarity and endless patience.

“What hotel you stay?” he asked.

“The Dingsta Hotel in Tongda,” she said. *It shouldn’t be hard for him to believe it could have been stolen from that dump*, she thought.

“Dingsta in Tongda, you stay there?” he said surprised.

“Yes, sir.” “Aha,” he said and disappeared around the corner into a back room.

It seemed like an eternity of waiting, watching the door for his return. It was four o’clock; her flight was scheduled to leave at four-thirty. She was horrified at the thought of missing it, but more than that, she worried about being detained for questioning. A black veil painfully closed in at the back of her mind; she wanted her subconscious to surface with its sense of knowing, but her chest that was tight with anxiety kept it at bay.

Her shallow breath gave way to conscious deep breathing. She closed her eyes and created pictures in her head of the government officials, seeing them behind the closed doors. She connected with her center and sent a message through beams of light to each of them:

“Let her go. She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

She floated the message around their heads, in her vision. She held it as long as she could and then let it go, mentally disconnected herself from the men, stood up, and opened her eyes. It was four-twenty and the men hadn’t returned. She walked over to the empty desk and peeked around the partition, but she didn’t see or hear anyone; the silence gave her an uncanny feeling. Her eyes were drawn to the table behind the desk where she saw her passport,

driver's license, and backpack. She jumped over the partition, grabbed her belongings, and took off running over the gate that divided the back offices from the customs area.

There were official at the gate that had been obviously assigned to keep an eye out for Constance. Upon reaching the customs boarding area, she threw herself in front of a tall man weighing about three hundred pounds, who had been cleared to board the plane. The man's stature shielded her from the watchful eye of the officials who appeared to have been assigned specially to watch for her.

"Have a nice flight," the flight attendant who was standing just beyond the guards, said as she handed Constance her ticket stub.

Constance sat watching and listening obsessively as the plane moved away from the terminal. Although her blood pressure felt as though it had lowered, she could still feel a tight place of anxiety in her, which she knew would continue until she heard the pilot announce their entrance into another country.

Flight conditions were optimal, with minimum drag; the lift was at maximum; takeoff was smooth. She hoped they could break the transatlantic airspeed record. Constance took a deep breath and calmed down a few notches more when she heard the pilot say the plane was flying at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet and headed to Tokyo.

*Tokyo, Japan?* she said to herself. *I thought I was going to Hong Kong.* She looked at her ticket; it read: "From Chengdu, China, to Hong Kong, Japan, to San Francisco, United States." She didn't have a ticket to Tokyo. She tried to sort things out in her head. She hadn't entered gate 42, where she saw Wyman Fortuna and Monica Winston, when she ran away from the officials. That flight went to Hong Kong. She had entered gate 47, the flight to Tokyo. She had entered gate 42 going into customs, but when she ran out of the government officials' office, she made a left turn instead of a right. When she went through the gate, the flight attendant didn't catch the error.

Much to her own surprise, her tension eased a bit; she was happy for the chance to get out of China by any means. Her fragile soul couldn't bear the black memories that had scorched it, and she determined to replace them with pleasant ones. Concerned that the airline officials might catch her upon her arrival in Tokyo, she took a quiet moment to build a strong vision of what she wanted to happen. She visualized herself as being invisible passing through the airport and, therefore, not having to show her ticket again.

## CHAPTER 23

As the plane approached the runway, Constance could see that the sun was about an hour above the Twin Peaks. The post-storm cumulus clouds seemed to be thinning out, but there was still a large white mass to the northeast, throwing a dark shadow on the center of the bay. Another cloud mass cast patterns of light and shadow on the rolling Sonoma Mountains.

Applause rose in a great wave as the plane touched down at San Francisco International Airport; her sentiment was shared by other passengers. Grateful to be back on her home soil, she silently gave special thanks to her guides for leading her invisibly through Tokyo Airport.

Constance was up early Wednesday morning anticipating her first day back at Bay Construction and Design, not knowing whether she still had a job. She took her usual early morning run to prepare for the day.

Knob Hill had always expressed itself in many different ways to Constance depending on the weather conditions. The city hadn't awakened; the sun was coming up from behind the Berkeley Hills across the bay, illuminating the top of the highest downtown towers. Light descended upon the city from a pool of shadows as the peninsula rose from the water around it. Constance ran the familiar streets with a greater appreciation for the clattering railroad and ships unloading their cargoes from around the world. Beyond the waterfront were changing colors of the bay, the flowing currents, the encircling shores, and the far mountains.

Constance was home and feeling like she could conquer the world. She felt as though she could have run all morning, enjoying her new appreciation for her San Francisco neighborhood, but she had to face the music at Bay Construction.

The sea breeze continued to blow cold and salty from the northwest, but the sun was higher in the eastern sky, and she welcomed its warmth on her back as she drove down the freeway. Slowly the sun was drying the dampened sage and coyote brush on the eastern slope below. The currents of the bay and the currents of the metropolis were beginning to move on the flood tide. She was remembering Beijing, contrasting its topography to San Francisco, as she took the exit to the artery below the hill, crossing over the park traffic. Traffic was moving in nervous rhythms, jammed temporarily at stoplights, and spilling over onto the secondary streets. Thousands of people were going to work in the city, on the bay, and in the suburbs. Their sounds seemed to rise to the hill like the roar of far-off surf. Along the cliffs and headlands of the Golden Gate, the breakers continued to rise in white geysers of spray.

Constance gave thanks to her higher power for giving her the opportunity to experience living in this city by the bay.





Walking into Bay Construction and Design for the first time in several weeks created some anxiety for Constance. The office was quiet. In fact, no one was around. *Perhaps the staff is attending a Wednesday morning breakfast meeting*, she thought.

The decor of her office looked the same, yet something inside of her wasn't connecting with the space around her; she felt different—somewhat estranged. A package, sent special delivery from San Francisco's airport, stood out from underneath her desk with a letter from the president of Bay Construction and Design attached to its top.

Constance could not remember receiving a letter from him before. She paused for a moment, haunted by the suspicion that she had been fired. The nervous fluttering prickling her chest surprised her; she thought she had conditioned her body, mind, and spirit to be okay whatever the outcome. She decided against opening the letter first and instead opened the package, which contained all of her feng shui designs, drawings, notes, and presentations secured in a bonded envelope. Lang had made good on his promise. She smiled, remembering him.

I hope we can get together this summer when I'm in S.F. interviewing with my uncle, the president of Bay Construction, for a year of internship at the company.

Love, Lang

P.S. Character is formed in the world's torrent. Remember:  
Never sit on the mouth of the dragon.

Constance stared at the unopened envelope on her desk. She had little interest in opening it. Her mind drifted back to her experiences in China. She thought of Brother Charles from the missionary again. Much to her surprise, she wanted to visit with him. She wondered if her experiences in China had anything to do with the warnings he had given her when she left the mission.

*Perhaps it's time to seek another level of service for the sake of my soul— and maybe for mankind in general, she thought. Brother Charles—I will go find him. Perhaps he can help me understand these experiences in relation to my higher purpose in this life.*

Something inside had changed for Constance. She didn't feel the drive, determination, and desire she normally experienced in her office—but rather emptiness. She picked up the envelope, turned it upside down, dropped it on her desk, and walked out into the street. Overwhelmed by her desire to speak to Brother Charles, she headed for the Better Living Healing Ministries, on the Hill.

*Perhaps it's time to see and experience life from a different perspective. Maybe the universe has blessed me with a gift that I've been too frightened to recognize and develop, she thought. Constance was convinced that her guides had proven themselves to her. She now believed she could sit on the mouth of the dragon—or any other part for that matter—and not get eaten.*

Constance stood looking far in the distance down a long winding road with many paths and detours. She walked slowly, hardly aware of her physical surroundings. She didn't bother to ponder any of her rapidly moving thoughts; she simply increased her speed to a slow run.

*Perhaps there are many paths that I can or will walk in this life—many paths indeed—but I must follow my own, she thought and smiled as she passed by the turn for the road that would have led her to the Better Living Healing Ministries.*



