



BRIDGET
GRAY

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No Strings Attached

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Bridget Gray

She saved his life, but she wants more from him than gratitude...

Mei Jing is feeling conflicted about not telling Rod that she is his rescuer. And as their relationship grows, her conflict is heightened after each date... She knows Rod is seeking the woman who saved his life, but Mei Jing struggles to find the right time to tell him the truth. Will she be able to trust that what she feels is his love for her or Rod's gratitude for his rescuer?

To Rob, Ally and Matthew with all my love.

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Excerpt from Short Soup

Excerpt from Summer Fling

Excerpt from New Year's Kisses

Chapter 1

Chinese Proverb: Kissing is like drinking salted water: You drink and your thirst increases.

“We’ve met before.” Mei Jing eyed him with a half smile while his mates around the bar table grinned. She’d been introduced to them by her friend, Mick, only a moment ago, and she’d homed in on the cute blond one with glasses.

She’d recognised him immediately. The circumstances were dramatically different, but it was definitely him. Last time she’d seen him he’d been half dead, but ... he was here in Brisbane, *hanging out with her friend*. She stopped breathing. *Be brave. Be cool. Breathe.*

He half smiled back, looking nervous. “Really?”

Mei Jing nodded. “It doesn’t do my ego much good that you don’t remember. You’re Rod Keller, right? An architect?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Where did we meet?” Rod squinted. Mei Jing understood. Squinting always helped her remember better.

“Well, I *could* just tell you ... or ... I could flirt outrageously with you and not tell you.” Mei Jing considered her options while the guys at the table started to snigger. “No. Not going to tell,” she said firmly. “I’ll give you a hint though. How many Chinese Australian girls have you met?”

The blond architect looked bemused. “A few.”

“Hmm ...” Mei Jing smiled as she pretended to ponder. “OK. Let’s narrow it down. How many Chinese Australian girls have you *kissed*?”

He scrunched his forehead. “None that I can remember.”

Mei Jing feigned distress. “This is seriously damaging my self-esteem.”

He smiled properly this time, and asked hopefully, “Did we sleep together?”

Ouch! Mei Jing’s face froze. That was a bit rude! The sniggering stopped. The awkwardness began. Some guys just took it too far. She knew she’d think of something clever to say later, but for now, she gave a disappointed raise of her eyebrows, turned and walked back towards the bar. It was Friday night and the Platform Bar at Central Station was crowded and getting noisier.

“You OK?” asked Tina. Her friend since college, it didn’t take much of a blip in Mei Jing’s mood for Tina to notice.

“Great,” lied Mei Jing.

“OK, spit it out. Who got your goat up? Do you need me to take them out?”

Tina stretched herself tall and puffed out her chest. She clenched her fists by her side and did her best to look fearsome. Tina was a tiny size eight, with pale skin and a cute pageboy haircut. At twenty-five years old, she was often asked for ID. Mei Jing didn’t think Tina did ‘fearsome’ very well.

“That guy over there,” Mei Jing indicated with a tilt of her head, “I’ve seen him before but I doesn’t remember. Not that he should, but ...” Mei Jing’s voice trailed off.

Tina glanced over at the group. Mick was still chatting to them and gave her a wave. “Which one?” she asked.

Mei Jing remained silent, sure that Tina would get it in a minute.

“Which one?” she asked again. “Ooooooh ... Isn’t that ...? That looks a lot like ... Ooooooh ...” Tina grabbed Mei Jing’s arm and pulled her further away from Mick and his friends. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

it?" She was now staring openly at Rod, the architect.

"Yep," said Mei Jing, focussed in the opposite direction.

Tina gaped at Mei Jing. "And he had no idea who you are?"

"Nope."

"Oh! ... My! ... God!"

"Yep."

"Are you going to tell him?"

Mei Jing frowned and shrugged. "Why?"

"Girls! What's going on? M.J., what's with the bolt from the boys?" Mick manoeuvred his gear frame between the girls, slinging a muscled arm round each of them.

"Tina and I were just discussing whether the Cherry Ripe is better in the plain or dark chocolate." Mei Jing answered.

"Ah." Mick nodded in understanding. "Life's big questions."

Tina wiggled out from under Mick's arm and looked up at him. "Who's your friend with the glasses?"

Mick turned back to the group of boys who were pretending they weren't watching. "You mean Rod. He's Stewey's housemate. We played indoor cricket together last year. Why? Has M.J. got the hots for him? She definitely seemed keen there." He waggled his eyebrows at Mei Jing.

Mei Jing willed Tina to keep her mouth shut. Mick and Tina had been best friends since they were kids, and secrets between them were rare. And this was a good one.

Tina leaned into Mick. "That's the guy from Phuket," Tina stage-whispered

"What guy?" asked Mick.

Mei Jing rolled her eyes. It always took Mick a minute to catch up.

"What guy?" he repeated. Mei Jing and Tina watched as the cogs in his male memory turned and clicked into place.

"*That* guy?"

"Yep." Tina nodded earnestly.

Mick spun round to stare at Rod. Men were useless at subtlety. "Does he know who you are?" He turned back to Mei Jing.

"Nope." Mei Jing avoided eye contact and moved to a bar table to fetch the cocktail menu.

"Are you going to tell him?" Mick persisted.

"And say what?" Mei Jing studied the drinks on offer. The cocktail of the month, the 'Thai Salad Sensation', had caught her eye.

"Well, you might get a free beer at least."

Mei Jing shook her head. Mick knew how to simplify a situation.

"Mick. Don't tell him." Mei Jing used her school teacher tone to dismiss him. "I'm going to get a drink," she said and moved to the bar with the cocktail menu in hand.

While she waited to be served, she tried to concentrate on the decision ahead of her. What to do. The Thai Salad Sensation did sound amazing; it was described as 'an adventure for the tastebuds', but she'd always been a Caprioska girl. She didn't do adventurous as a rule. But seeing Rod here tonight ... her uncharacteristic flirting ... No. Flirting had failed; best stick to the tried and tested. Caprioska it was.

Decision made, she looked up from the cocktail menu, but without an important beverage choice to focus on, she found herself thinking about Rod. An adventure that still caused her confusion. She often wondered what it would be like to see him again. He looked exactly the same. Except, of course,

today he was conscious.

~~She looked down at the floor, wondering if she should tell him. Wondering if he'd want to know or would that just make things awkward. Mei Jing didn't do awkward. So ... No, won't tell him. Phe~~
—another decision made. She looked back at the cocktail menu.

“What’s the decision?” a voice beside her asked. Mei Jing turned to see Rod.

“No, not going to tell you,” Mei Jing replied quickly.

“You’re not going to tell me what cocktail you’re having?” Rod asked, his eyes shining with amusement.

“Ah ... that ... Ummm, yes ... I’m having a Thai Salad Sensation.”

Hang on ... that wasn’t it. Why was she talking to him anyway. He’d been rude. “I’ll get it,” said Rod. “A peace offering for being an arse before.” He looked contrite. And cute. His eyes crinkled behind his glasses. And he really didn’t seem like an arse. She hoped he wasn’t an arse.

“You know ...” said Mei Jing, “if we’d slept together you *would* have remembered.”

There she went again. Oh God. She was such a farce. Mei Jing couldn’t remember the last time she’d been suggestive. Surely he could see right through her. She was not a good flirter.

Rod laughed. “It doesn’t matter how I reply to that—I’m in trouble aren’t I?”

Mei Jing smiled. “Pretty much.”

They’d reached the bar and Rod ordered a Thai Salad Sensation and a Caprioska.

“You drink Caprioskas?” Mei Jing asked, surprised. She looked at the cocktail menu. It wasn’t even one of their standards.

“Yeah,” said Rod. “You’ll have to try it. I got hooked on them when I was on a scuba diving trip to the Polynesian Islands. They make them good there. They use a thick sugary syrup made with cane sugar and vodka, add more vodka, then pour it over crushed ice and add lime. I’m trying to find a bar in Brisbane that does them the same, but a lot of bar tenders don’t even know what it is.”

“I know!” said Mei Jing. “It’s a travesty. I don’t understand why Caprioskas aren’t part of Business Training 101.”

“You drink Caprioskas too?” he asked.

“Almost always.”

He tipped his head to one side to look at her. “What’s with the Thai Salad Sensation then?”

“Just trying something a little adventurous.”

Their drinks arrived and they carried them to the side of the bar. Mei Jing took a sip and allowed the flavours to settle in her mouth.

“Wow—that’s good,” she said, taking another sip. “I could convert.”

“What?” Rod looked shocked. “And turn your back on the Caprioska? You are a fickle woman. I was about to ask you to join me on my Best-In-Brisbane-Caprioska mission but you can forget it now. Go back to your Thai Salad Sensation.”

Mei Jing offered him her drink and Rod took a sip.

“Ahhhhh,” he breathed out loudly as the chilli hit him. “Whoa! That is rocket fuel. Thai Salad flavoured rocket fuel. Can I have some more?” He took another sip. “That’s amazing. You can really differentiate the flavours. Basil, ginger, chilli, mint, and there’s something else ...”

“Coriander,” Mei Jing offered.

“Yeah, of course.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Tastes and smells can transport you, can’t they? Like when I taste Caprioska ...” he took a sip to helpfully demonstrate his point, “I can immediately see the bar in Tahiti where I’d hang out, and the big black islander bartender, Jimmy, who used to make them.” He took another sip of the Caprioska.

“What about the Thai Salad Sensation?” Mei Jing asked. She held her breath while he again tasted her drink.

“Ah, memories aren’t so vivid there.” He looked thoughtful, pausing while the chilli hit his palate. “That is so hot! Don’t you find it hot?”

“My parents are from the Szechuan province. We put chilli in cupcakes.”

“Ah.” He nodded with respect. “Hardcore. So, back to the conflict at hand,” Rod became business like, “you promised to flirt outrageously with me and I don’t see you flirting. So you’re going to have to tell me where we met.”

Mei Jing, sensing that the question was coming, had turned to seek out Tina. Luckily, Tina and Mick had been trying to eavesdrop, and so before Rod had finished his sentence, they were standing beside her, ready for their conversation rescue mission.

“Hey Rod, have you met Tina?” asked Mick.

“Hey Rod,” Tina sung out. “I’m stealing M.J. to dance. I love this song.”

The boys leant back on the bar and watched the girls find their way to the dance floor. It was too early for dancing and Mei Jing and Tina had the space to themselves.

“You playing indoor cricket this season?” Mick asked Rod as he watched Tina wiggle to the music. She really was a terrible dancer. She lacked any kind of rhythm and her moves were all over the place. Mick grinned as Tina attempted a Beyoncé-style bottom manoeuvre. If Tina had a bum she may have been able to pull it off, but with missing buttocks—she just looked like a wiggling stick.

“Yeah, the season starts next week,” Rod replied. “You should come along. Stewey’s playing again, and Brad. We’re having a team barbie on Sunday at our place. Come along, bring the girls.”

“Sounds good,” Mick replied, his eyes not leaving the dance floor.

“So is that the missus?” Rod nodded in the direction of Tina, who was now working on an interpretive dance to *It’s Raining Men*, ensuring that the lyrics had corresponding actions.

“Nah. We’re neighbours. Or at least our parents are, and we lived next door to each other from the time I was five.”

“Not childhood sweethearts though?”

“No. Just friends.” Mick hadn’t taken his eyes off Tina. He grinned as security had a quiet word with her. Security didn’t get Tina’s creativity when it came to her dance moves. Just because she was doing a terrible impression of the moonwalk did not mean she was drunk. He could tell this wouldn’t end well.

“You’ve never even kissed?” Rod asked. Mick shook his head. “That sucks man,” Rod empathised. “She’s hot.”

Mick nodded. “Anyway,” he said, “suppose that’s my cue to leave.” Security were escorting Tina to the door while Mei Jing tagged along behind, finishing her Thai Salad Sensation. “You gonna say goodbye to the girls?” Mick asked Rod.

Rod and Mick caught up with the girls outside the door to the bar, where security were doing the best impressions of Greek pillars.

“Where are you guys going now?” Rod asked the trio.

Mei Jing looked at Tina and Mick, but they were leaving this up to her. She hesitated. Where did she want this to go? It’s not like she hadn’t imagined meeting Rod again. Natural curiosity. But in all her daydreams, he knew exactly who she was. In none of her imaginings was she in the least bit

attracted to him. Eeek! Confusing! What to do in the absence of a daydream to direct you?

“Have you tried the Caprioskas at the Green Buddha?” she asked.

“Hang on.” Rod pulled a creased napkin from his wallet. “Let’s see ... Green Buddha ... Green Buddha ...” He ran his finger down a list. “Yes. Yes I have. No, they were crap. Didn’t even bother to crush the ice.”

“You’re kidding!” Mei Jing said, outraged. Her heart was beating faster. He wrote lists and carried them around. “OK, how about the Jubilee?”

“Not a chance. They brought me a cappuccino.”

Mei Jing closed her eyes and shook her head in shared disgust. “How about *Andy’s House*? It’s a new reggae place in New Farm?”

“Yes! Let’s go there,” Tina butted in, no longer leaving it up to Mei Jing. This could take all night besides, she had some mean reggae dance moves. “You coming, Rod?”

“Sure,” said Rod. “I do have an interrogation to finish after all.” He smiled at Mei Jing.

When Rod went inside to say good-bye to his mates, Tina gave Mei Jing her ‘talking to’.

“He’s nice, good looking and at first glance does not appear to have homicidal tendencies. You’ve got to tell him. You like him—tell him.”

“But if I tell him,” said Mei Jing, “the dynamics will change. He’ll like me for what I did for him not for who I am. It’s too much pressure. Let’s just see how tonight goes.”

“We’re going to his house for a barbie on Sunday,” said Mick. “You can always tell him then.”

“We are?” asked Tina. She pulled out her phone to check her calendar. “We’re supposed to be at home on Sunday morning for Mum’s birthday brunch.”

“I know,” said Mick. “But I can go to your Mum’s, then we can pick M.J up on the way to Stewey’s. I picked up your Mum’s present, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Tina distractedly as she typed the new appointment into her calendar. “How much do I owe you?”

Mick smiled, shaking his head. “I’ll add it to your tab.”

Andy’s House was actually a house. An old Queenslander, complete with verandahs around three sides, set amongst a small but lush rainforest garden. Inside, the restaurant had polished wooden floors and small candle-lit tables. The restaurant was half-full, mostly with couples soaking up the relaxed atmosphere. On one of the side verandahs the reggae band was set up with a dance floor in front. Stepped down into the garden, which had a scattering of outdoor furniture arranged in beer garden style. The whole house was decorated in bright prints, bright table-cloths and flowering pot plants.

Although it was only eight o’clock, it was already buzzing.

“I have a good feeling about this place,” said Rod. “I’ll get the first round.”

Mick hunted down a table while the girls found the bathroom. Mei Jing checked her appearance. Normally she didn’t fuss. Her long, straight black hair rarely did anything but be long, straight black hair. Her eyeliner was intact and she touched up her lip gloss. Done.

Mei Jing watched while her friend did the fussing. Tina added powder, enhancing her naturally fair complexion, added another layer of eyeliner, touched up her eye shadow, brightened her blush, re-did her lipliner and finished with three coats of lipstick. Tina was cute in an under-age kind of way, which was a bit of a drawback when they headed out on the town for a sophisticated night out. Tina often looked like she was playing dress ups.

“Do you think you can get plastic surgery to *add* wrinkles?” Tina asked.

Mei Jing shook her head at her friend. When she’d first met Tina at the Queensland U

orientation, they were both just out of school, still underage and both scared witless. Tina sat next to Mei Jing in the lecture theatre and after standard small talk introductions, they'd spent the rest of the presentation playing hangman.

Luckily for both of them, Mick, who was a year older and therefore so very much more experienced, took it upon himself to show the girls the ropes. He got them false ID's, taught them how to skull a beer, and introduced them to Sunday sessions at the Regatta Hotel. He protected them from sleazebags, carried them home when they fell over drunk and expected nothing more than to be introduced to their gorgeous girlfriends—most of whom he slept with and then moved on.

Eight years later they still watched out for each other. Tina had only lasted a semester at Uni before deferring, promising to come back. She never did and was now a barista at a funky coffee shop in New Farm.

“You don't need to add wrinkles,” said Mei Jing. “You just need to dress like an old woman. You know, floral prints and big vinyl handbags.”

Tina pretended to gag. She was wearing black satin shorts and a black halter top with dangling gold ear-rings and, of course, ridiculously high heels. Mei Jing was certain Tina would choose unnecessary surgery over floral prints.

“Come on. Let's go,” said Tina. “I'm thinking tonight could be my lucky night. Mr. Right might be out there now, just waiting for me to walk by.”

Mick had secured a table in the garden near the dance floor. Rod still hadn't returned with their drinks so Mei Jing went to check on him.

She found him at the bar, an enraptured expression on his face. “Check this out!” he said excitedly. “They actually heated the sugar till it melted, then added vodka, then they've crushed the lime with mortar and pestle. Look at the effort going into this.”

It was impressive. The bar tender, pleased that his endeavours were being appreciated, was working with flair. He added umbrellas, and with flourish, presented the drinks to Rod.

Rod paid and they headed outside just as Mick and Tina got up to dance.

“OK—let's do this together,” he said. “1 ... 2 ... 3.” They both sipped at their drink and then waited for the others' judgement.

“Best in Brisbane?” asked Mei Jing finally.

Rod took another sip. “I've ... I mean ... We've found it,” he said reverently. “The best Caprioshk in Brisbane. I've been searching for months and here it is. And it's all because of you.” He looked gratefully at Mei Jing. “I have so much to thank you for, Mei Jing. Where would I be without you?”

Mei Jing smiled. *There's a story.*

Chapter 2

Boxing Day 2004 about 9:45am – Hotel on Patong Beach, Phuket

They'd been sitting by the pool at the time. Having arrived in Phuket on Christmas Day, they'd both had a little too much Christmas cheer the night before, and were nursing hangovers when they heard the commotion down by the beach.

Mei Jing wearily looked towards the sound of people shouting. There was a constant roar, like someone using a high pressure hose. The commotion got louder, and Mei Jing rose from her banquette lounge to look over the hedge surrounding the pool to the street beyond. The beach was usually just across the road, but swarming towards them rushed a wall of water the height of palm trees. It pushed everything out of its way and carried with it chairs, tables, trees, and, to Mei Jing's horror ... people.

Mei Jing's heart raced, her breath catching in her throat, her hands reaching out in front of her as if to push the nightmare away.

"Oh God! Tina, get up!" Mei Jing cried.

"What ...?" Tina sat up annoyed, but she was too short to see over the hedge.

"Get out!" Mei Jing grabbed her arm hurling her tiny frame forwards

"What's going on?" Tina demanded. "What's that noise?"

"Run!" screamed Mei Jing.

"Really?" said Tina. "Why?"

"This way. Go!" As they bolted across the courtyard, the water broke through the hedge and started to wash into the pool.

Tina took only a second to realise what was happening. Mei Jing heard her scream as they ran. Racing down the street, beside the hotel, away from the water, the girls made it about fifty metres when the wave hit them, carrying them with enormous force. All control gone. Helpless. Mei Jing struggled to keep her head above the torrent.

She grabbed her tiny friend's hand as the water lifted them off their feet and they flowed past shops, restaurants and night clubs. The power of the water was unbelievable. Debris slammed into their weary bodies, the brown foam nearly suffocating them. But they managed to stay on top of it. The wave slowed as it reached its turning point, and Mei Jing managed to cling to a sign post advertising 'Quality Adult Entertainment'. She desperately pulled Tina towards her.

Hanging on with their depleted strength they clung to the pole for what felt like hours, but was only a few minutes before the water began to recede. The wave retreated much slower than it had come in, its energy spent.

Mei Jing and Tina watched as the water moved back down the street to its rightful place in the ocean. In shock, they stood silently, holding hands, observing, as if from afar, the destruction in every direction. There was noise and activity all around them but, as if in their own bubble of survival, the girls simply stood in the middle of it all. Unable to move, unable to speak, unable to think.

Mei Jing felt, more than heard or observed, the noise and activity around them change. People ran past them—looking behind as if being chased by something. It finally clicked, snapping Mei Jing from her inertia and renewing her terror. They ran from the second brown raging wave. Their bodies reacting on instinct. Exhausted. Shocked. Reacting without thought. The fear overwhelming every cell.

in their bodies. In the years that followed, Mei Jing and Tina had only spoken a few times about the terrible day, usually only after a few drinks and then only to each other. The effects for each of them had been profound. Tina still hadn't gone swimming in the ocean—although she never made a big deal of it to anyone. She just avoided the beach altogether. Mei Jing had been brought up to not talk about the important stuff, so her memories stayed inside her—only to come out on rare alcohol-induced deep and meaningful discussions with her best friend. For both of them, the memories of the second and third waves, the people around them, the exact chain of events was sketchy, and Mei Jing was happy to leave it that way.

At one point towards the end of the third wave, they were separated, and as the water moved back down the street, leaving a trail of mangled buildings, bodies and brown mud, Mei Jing frantically looked for Tina.

Oh my God, where was she? Tears streamed down Mei Jing's face as she called for her over and over. Without thinking, she stumbled along the street, manoeuvring through the rubble back to the hotel. Back to home base.

The pool, which a short time ago had been a beautiful blue oasis, was now filled with murky water, tree branches, banana lounges, loads of froth and ... hang on—what's that? Oh, and a car.

She heard someone crying behind her and saw Tina, in just her bikini bottoms, staggering towards her.

“Thank God you're all right!” Mei Jing hugged her close. Despite the tropical temperature, the both shivered uncontrollably.

“I lost my top. The water tore it off me.”

“I know, you trollop.” Mei Jing cried, shocked and relieved. She took off her sensible rashee and gave it to Tina. The rashee looked like a long lycra dress on Tina.

“There's a car in the pool,” Tina said. “Is that someone in there?” The car tilted bonnet first in the pool, the back of it raised on the pool steps.

“Oh shit, I didn't even think of that. I was too worried about you.” Unable to see clearly into the car through the murky water, Mei Jing made her way carefully down the pool steps, pushing aside deck chair and palm tree branches. It was a tinny little two-door that you saw everywhere in Phuket with the driver's door completely submerged in chest-deep water. Visibility was terrible, but Mei Jing could make out a figure slumped over the steering wheel.

Fear gripped her heart. Fear, exhaustion, self-doubt. She couldn't do this. What if he was dead? What if he wasn't?

“There's someone here! Come help me!” she yelled at Tina

She pulled at the door but it wouldn't budge. The window was open and the driver, typical of Thailand, had no seat belt on. The figure looked solid but not huge, and the lack of breasts indicated it was a he. She reached in and grabbed him by his t-shirt and hauled. No luck. She tried again but the shirt just moved over his head and he barely budged.

“We'll have to pull him out through the window,” she told Tina. “You grab under his arm on your side and I'll swim round the other side and try and push from there.”

The other side of the car was more deeply submerged and, taking a deep breath, Mei Jing swam through the window on the passenger's side. Grabbing a hold of his arm she used all her strength to lift and push through the other window. Tina pulled in the opposite direction and finally his body achieved some buoyancy and between the two of them, they managed to manoeuvre him past the steering wheel and out the window. She felt the panic sweeping her body from her belly up. What now?

Mei Jing and Tina dragged him out by the pool steps and laid him on the ground. Mei Jing's mandatory CPR training kicked in and she checked for signs of life. There were none—not a single one—no movement, no breathing, no perving at her breasts (even as she thought it she marvelled at the inappropriate things that pop into a person's head). Tipping his head back, she gave him two quick breaths and began compressions. After a very long minute of alternating breaths and compressions, the man vomited water and Mei Jing turned him on his side. He coughed, more water flowing from his mouth and nostrils.

She checked his breathing and was desperately relieved to see that his chest was moving. Securing him in the recovery position, Mei Jing looked down at her patient, who remained unconscious but was now breathing for himself. His t-shirt was still down in the car. He was muscular but slight, a surfer's build. He had blond curly hair and a good tan. Well, right at this moment his face wasn't looking as tanned—there was a tinge of blue around his lips but the rest of him was tanned. He was wearing Billabong board shorts and no shoes. Mei Jing noticed a small tattoo of the Australian flag on his right shoulder. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Is he OK?” Tina was beside her, holding tightly onto her arm.

“He's breathing,” cried Mei Jing as she turned into Tina's shoulder. “He wasn't breathing but now he is. I breathed for him. He's breathing.”

“You saved him,” said Tina. The emotion overcame both of them and they clung to each other, shaking, while the tears streamed down their faces.

“You saved a totally hot guy.”

Chapter 3

Chinese Proverb: Feel like old friends at the first meeting

He still appeared to be doing quite a good job of breathing on his own, Mei Jing observed. There had been nothing romantic about saving Rod's life at the time. He was a stranger. Breathing for him had been training kicking in—nothing more. She'd been proud of herself at the time but right now she was damn pleased he was still alive. And he liked Caprioskas.

"So, you're still not going to tell me where we met?"

"Sorry," said Mei Jing. "You're going to have to work it out for yourself."

"Cool, a mystery! Right, let's see what we've got in common. You're a friend of Stewey's. Did we meet through him?"

"No. Mick's a friend of Stewey's. I've never met him."

"So what do you do?"

"I'm a teacher in the Special Ed unit of Springwood Primary School."

"Right."

Mei Jing could see it coming. Mention you're a teacher and loads of questions followed. Everyone's had a teacher after all. Mention you work in Special Ed and there was the conversation stopper.

"What sort of disabilities do your kids have?"

Surprised but pleased at the follow-up question, she sipped at her amazing drink. "Well, some kids aren't great at verbal communication, some kids have challenging behaviour, a couple have very poor attention spans."

"Sounds like any workplace," Rod observed. "I could name people in my office with similar behaviours."

Hmmm. Good response. The usual responses included everything from morbid fascination in what her kids did, to over-the-top sympathy.

"Where's your office?" Mei Jing asked.

"My business partner and I have an office in Bardon. There's a new eco-friendly residential development going in at the bottom of Mt Cootha and we're working with the developers on the designs. I'm an architect specialising in environmentally sustainable projects ... but you already know I'm an architect. I definitely feel disadvantaged here. What else do you know about me?"

"You have an Australian flag tattooed on your right shoulder."

Rod looked suitably shocked. "So you've seen me at least semi-naked. Well, that narrows it down." He thought for a second. "I tell you what. Can we put a time limit on this? You're coming to our barbie on Sunday, right?"

Mei Jing nodded.

"Give me the weekend to try and work it out, and if I haven't worked it out by Sunday afternoon you have to tell me, OK?"

Mei Jing wasn't keen to commit. The spark between them felt good, but what if he found out that the only reason he was now breathing was because of her. Mei Jing hated feeling indebted to people. Weaving a complex web of favours, gratitude and obligation was an Asian thing that Mei Jing loathed.

and she wouldn't wish anyone to feel they owed her anything.

"We'll see," seemed like a safe answer for the moment.

Mick and Tina came down from the dance floor arguing about something.

"All I'm saying," said Mick, "is that sometimes a guy isn't perfect but he's still a good guy. You should give people a chance."

"What's going on?" Rod asked.

"This loser asked me to dance and I told him politely 'No thanks'," said Tina.

"You don't know he was a loser. How do you know he was a loser? He might be perfectly nice but you won't know now because all he wanted was one dance and you think you're too good for him."

Mick took a long swig of his beer, clearly frustrated.

"He was wearing shorts and sandals," Tina insisted.

"You're wearing shorts and sandals," Mick shot back, exasperated.

Tina scowled. "So," she said turning to Mei Jing and Rod, "what's the verdict on the Caprioskas?"

"Best in Brisbane," they both said together.

Mei Jing watched the look pass between Mick and Tina. She knew she'd be teased later about the cute couple who said the same thing at the same time.

"Hey Mick." A gorgeous blonde woman appeared next to Mick and put her arm round his waist.

"Linda. Hey, great to see you." Mick kissed the blonde on her cheek, lingering a little longer than a peck.

"LynDALL," the blonde corrected. "Want to dance?"

"Sure." Mick downed half his beer, gave Tina another exasperated look and took LynDALL by the hand to the dance floor.

With a loud sigh, Tina turned back to Rod and Mei Jing.

"As I don't feel qualified to comment on the virtues of a good Caprioska, I guess I should go talk to sandal man." Tina too wandered off to the dance floor.

Mei Jing's phone rang and she groaned as she answered it.

"Hi, Mum." She glanced apologetically at Rod. "Yes, Mum, I'm out ..." She paused. "Mum, I told you I wasn't going to make it tonight ... what, *now*?"

Finishing the fruitless conversation in a flurry of heated Chinese, Mei Jing snapped the phone shut and flung it into her bag. "I've got to go," she said in a huff. "My parents need me. I'll tell Tina." She stormed over to Tina, who was chatting comfortably with sandal man, wisely postponing the reggae dance move demonstration. Once Tina was duly informed, she rejoined Rod.

"Everything OK?" he asked.

"Fine—nothing's wrong, I just have to go. Chinese family thing requiring my immediate presence. Sorry." She clenched her teeth and reached for her Caprioska, sloshing some on the table in her frustration. It was insane to have to drink such a good drink in a hurry. It was insane to leave a cute guy when it was only eight o'clock. Chinese families were insane.

"That's OK," said Rod with resignation. "However, if I've only got till Sunday, maybe we can hang out tomorrow. I think I'm going to need every minute to work this mystery out." He smiled at Mei Jing. "Did you have plans during the day?"

She hesitated. His green eyes crinkled in the corners. *Crinkly eyes are very cute*. His eyes had been mostly closed last time they met, and seeing them now was like receiving a bonus prize for saving his life. "I am due at the UN tomorrow to broker a Middle East peace deal," she said.

"Come on—they've been at it for ages—what's another day?" Rod was grinning and it was impossible not to join him.

“OK. What did you want to do?”

~~“I’ll surprise you,” he said. “How about I pick you up at nine and take you for coffee and then we’ll take it from there. But bring swimmers,” he added.~~

Mei Jing pulled out a Post It and pen from her hand bag just as Rod pulled out a pen and slipped a leather bound note pad from his back pocket. Respectfully agreeing on the note book, Mei Jing jotted down her address and phone number.

“See you at nine,” she said.

Rod leaned in to kiss her good-bye on the cheek. Mei Jing, still flustered at how impressed she was that he’d brought a notebook (and leather bound at that), thought he was going for a hug and leaned in too far too quick and Rod ended up kissing her ear—which was just weird.

Oooo. Awkward. Mei Jing flushed and turned to leave but Rod laughed and pulled her back. “Be a little more careful, we give that another go.” Holding her shoulders to prevent further movement, he carefully planted a kiss on her cheek.

Much better. Not perfect. But she was sure practise would make perfect.

Chapter 4

“Ni hao Mei Jing,” Joe, the Maître d’ welcomed Mei Jing.

Walking into the Fortitude Valley restaurant was like walking into her second home. Staff and customers alike greeted her warmly.

She knew where her parents would be. They had the same table every time - the one right by the lobster. It was a good table by Chinese restaurant protocol. Her parents were sitting there with another older couple and a good looking Chinese man.

Her parents greeted her like a long lost relative. After all, it had been over twelve hours. After introducing her to the Tangs, Mei Jing was ushered into a seat beside the Tang’s son, Jeremy.

“Sorry to drag you away,” Jeremy murmured as he stood to pull out her chair. .

Mei Jing took a moment to size him up properly. He was much better looking than the other. Taller and better filled out in the chest. He was wearing a neatly pressed pink business shirt with an open collar. The colour looked great against his skin.

Mei Jing glanced distractedly at Jeremy while her mother fussed at her tardiness. Mei Jing shot her mother a withering look as her father rescued her from further scolding.

Speaking in Chinese, he said, “The Tangs are new to Brisbane. They’re visiting Jeremy while he’s up here on work. They’re friends of the Chens.”

The Chens.

Mei Jing, a glass of water half way to her mouth, lowered the glass and glared at her father.

Her mother glanced around nervously, but her father simply looked back at Mei Jing gently. A Gentleman her father had mastered the gentle calming look long ago.

The Tangs also averted their eyes to the lobsters. Jeremy, however, smiled and changed subject. Speaking directly to Mei Jing in English, “So you were out on the town before you were dragged away. Anywhere good?” he asked.

Mei Jing was wary. The Tangs were friends of the Chens...

“Yes,” she said without smiling. “We were at a new restaurant in New Farm called Andy’s House”

“I read about that,” Jeremy said. “It’s a reggae place right? Was it good?”

“Yes”. Mei Jing left it at the one word answer.

Jeremy looked amused by Mei Jing’s clear dissatisfaction with how the night had turned out.

“Next time you take Jeremy,” her mother said in her heavily accented English. “Jeremy no friend yet in Brisbane. Friends still in Sydney. Next time you take Jeremy.”

Her mother was hopeless. A twenty-nine year old daughter, who was still single despite countless dinners with completely appropriate men in this exact restaurant, drove her mother mad.

Jeremy nodded seriously. “Yes. I am indeed friendless. Unbearably lonely actually.” He took a long unsteady breath and closed his eyes in despair.

Mei Jing wasn’t buying it. She waited for him to open his eyes again. He looked at her hopefully.

“Loser,” she muttered under her breath—loud enough for only him to hear.

He burst out laughing and Mei Jing caught herself smiling.

The food started to appear and her parents and the Tangs chatted away in Chinese. Sitting at the end of the table with Jeremy, Mei Jing picked at her chicken with her chopsticks. Jeremy didn’t break the silence between them. Offering her the plates of food without saying a word, simply waiting for

her to serve herself before passing the plate back up the table.

Mei Jing gave in first.

“So, you’re up here for work?”

“I work for a software development company based in the city. We specialise in software for the banking industry. I’m up here for a few months on an extended project.”

Mei Jing looked down at her food, avoiding eye contact. The IT industry was something she was used to making small talk about but she wasn’t ready to go down that track right now.

“Where are you living?”

“I’m renting a little place just round the corner.”

Mei Jing nodded, her small talk used up. She looked around the restaurant. She had been coming to this restaurant with her parents since she was five years old. Her Dad was a popular GP and her family was well known. In recent years her mother had hosted numerous dinner parties, such as the one tonight, in the hope of Mei Jing finding a suitable mate. Occasionally Mei Jing went out with the prospects to temporarily placate her mother, but since Kevin Chen she was wary; particularly of Chinese men.

“So,” said Jeremy. “You wanna get married?”

Mei Jing nearly choked on a bamboo shoot. “Was that a badly put proposal or an inappropriate personal question about what I want from life?”

Jeremy laughed wickedly. “I figure that if we get the proposal out of the way early enough, we can tell your mother, and mine, that I asked, that you said no, and the pressure would be off everybody.”

Mei Jing thought for a moment. “Well it’s worth a try. Go on then.”

Jeremy cleared his throat and held up his glass in a proposed toast. “Excuse me folks,” he announced then switched to Chinese. “I would like to propose a toast.” Mei Jing held up her glass.

“To marriage.” Mei Jing was watching for her mother’s reaction and at the ‘M’ word she nearly fell off her chair. “My parents,” Jeremy went on, “have been married for thirty years next week. So my toast is ... To marriage.”

“To marriage,” they responded.

Mei Jing’s mother, Aimee, was nearly bursting out of her skin, wiggling on her seat looking from Jeremy, clearly her new favourite, to Mei Jing and back. Mei Jing waited for him to fulfil the dare and tell her mother they weren’t getting married but he’d obviously chickened out. The wimp.

Jeremy turned to Patrick, Mei Jing’s father. “How long have you been married?”

“We’ve been married thirty years next year,” he said smiling and nodding politely at the Tangs. “I worked for my wife, Aimee’s, father every day before and after school running errands, doing the yard work et cetera. She was the youngest of two daughters and no sons—so Aimee’s father offered to pay for me to go to school in Australia. I finished my medical training, went back to China to marry Aimee and we returned to live in Brisbane a week later. I got my tuition paid for and a wife thrown in for free!” Patrick laughed and the Tangs joined in.

Mei Jing had heard the joke her whole life and still didn’t get it. She understood the cultural concept. In her parents’ day, a wealthy family without a son would often unofficially adopt a local lad to carry on the family name. In return when the ‘lad’ became a man he would accept responsibility for aging relatives, provide financial support and marry a daughter. Exactly what her mother got was never clearly articulated. A life in a strange country away from her family with a man she barely knew.

The older generation returned to chatting amongst themselves.

Jeremy turned to Mei Jing. “Kevin said to say ‘Hi’ by the way.”

Mei Jing refused to bite.

“We’re good friends. He told me what happened between you guys.”

Mei Jing silently picked at her chicken. Her heart was beating faster. It took every ounce of pride she had not to ask ‘so what did he say?’ It was insulting that this stranger knew more about the demise of her previous relationship than she did. Her feelings for Kevin were long gone but her curiosity wasn’t. It was also annoying that Jeremy had wrecked a nice moment by talking about Kevin at all. She had actually been warming to him.

“Mei Jing! Mei Jing!” said her father. He spoke quickly in Chinese. “Mr. Tang, Jeremy and I have booked golf tomorrow. You should come and make up the four.”

“No thanks,” replied Mei Jing in English. “I have plans tomorrow.”

“Where you go tomorrow?” her mother asked.

“I don’t know yet,” said Mei Jing. “I’m going out with a friend and he said he was going to surprise me.” She’d normally have given her mother a more vague response but she was annoyed and thought she’d ‘share the joy’.

“You go out with boy tomorrow and you not know where going?” her mother practically shouted. She launched into a Chinese diatribe which ended in English with: “You play golf!”

Mei Jing looked desperately to her father for support.

“No worries.” Her father laughed at his own Aussie idiom. “You have good time tomorrow with your friend. Ring when you get home so we know you’re safe.”

“Thanks Dad.” Mei Jing decided to make a run for it while her mother plotted her next move. “Actually, I’m going to head home now. I’ve an early start tomorrow. It’s been lovely meeting you.” Mei Jing bowed to the Tangs but did not meet Jeremy’s eyes. She gave a slight bow to her mother and her father.

“I’ll walk you to a cab,” said Jeremy rising from his chair

“I’m fine,” Mei Jing said giving him a look she felt sure would leave him cowering. A look that obviously needed more practice

Jeremy took her elbow and guided her out of the restaurant. “Look,” he said when they were outside. “I know you probably hate Kevin but you don’t have to hate me too. And...” he continued “you know Kevin’s not a bad guy.”

“In my little drama he is the bad guy and frankly, by association, so are you.”

Mei Jing turned to search the street for a taxi. Willing one to come quickly to aid in her retreat she busied herself checking her watch, straightening her handbag.

“I’ve never been described as ‘bad’,” said Jeremy. “I’m usually the good guy. The good Chinese boy. Well there was of course that one incident...” Jeremy was talking to himself now, “... handcuffed and naked to the traffic lights outside Circular Quay.”

Mei Jing stared at him, her eyebrows raised. Jeremy met her gaze. “I don’t like to talk about it. But honestly, I’m not bad and I don’t have many friends in Brisbane so it would be great if we could catch up sometime.”

Mei Jing took a deep breath. He was classically good looking. Tall and well built. His hair had a ruffled relaxed look and his smile was cheeky. But she wasn’t attracted to him. She was not sure why it was, but after the hormonal adventure earlier tonight, she was pretty in tune with what pushed her buttons and Jeremy just wasn’t making the grade.

Jeremy sensed her hesitation. “Look at it this way. This guy you’re going out with tomorrow—Chinese or white?”

“He’s white,” answered Mei Jing.

"I'm guessing your Mum prefers you to date Chinese guys?" Jeremy asked.

Mei Jing nodded. ~~Jeremy nodded.~~ "Mine too. ~~Well she'd certainly prefer it if it wasn't guys at all~~ but if given the choice, I think she'd rather me date a Chinese guy than a white girl. So to keep your mother off your back for a few weeks, tell her you and I are catching up. We can see a movie, grab coffee and I promise no proposals. Just friends."

Maybe Jeremy wasn't 'the one', but the thought of placating her mother for a few weeks was definitely appealing.

"Anyway," he said passing her his business card, "give me a call. No strings."

A cab pulled up and Mei Jing climbed in. No strings, she thought. Wouldn't that be a nice parallel universe?

In the car on her way home, Aimee was at her insistent best. "Jeremy seems like a very nice boy. Nice family, good job, good looking. A very nice boy. It would be appreciated if you didn't try to scare him away." Aimee was feeling quite smug. Jeremy was the first man in months that Mei Jing had been the least bit friendly towards. Oh she was always courteous, after all, that's how she'd been raised, but tonight Aimee had even caught her daughter laughing.

And Jeremy had brought up the topic of marriage. He'd made a toast to it. That was surely a good sign?

"I don't scare them away," said Patrick. "You scare them away. Within five minutes of meeting a single Chinese man of appropriate age, you're interviewing them for the role of your daughter's husband." Patrick's tone was snappy but Aimee caught his smile in the dark.

She didn't try to defend the truth but went back to the argument they'd had many times before. "It's not me. It's you. You scared Kevin off. I may never be a grandmother. Our name won't be continued." Aimee sniffed loudly and then sniffed again.

Patrick replied, in his calm voice, "Mei Jing's better off without Kevin and there are at least twenty-six Jian's in the Brisbane area already, so I'm sure our name won't be missed."

Aimee sniffled. "And why did you have to say that thing?" she demanded.

"What thing?"

"That thing about getting a wife for free. Like I'm an extra set of steak knives from the shopping channel." Aimee shook her head and looked out the car window as they crossed the Storey Bridge. Arranged marriages were commonplace in China thirty years ago and money often changed hands during the negotiations, but most people kept the details discreet. Not Patrick. She may as well have a red and white SOLD sign stuck to her forehead.

"You're right," said Patrick. "You're certainly not free. American Express will attest to that." Aimee was already hatching her next move.

"I'm going to call Jeremy. Give me his business card."

"If you like him that much, you should ask him on a date yourself." Patrick laughed at his own joke. He pulled Jeremy's business card out of his pocket and handed it to Aimee. "What are you going to say?"

"I don't know yet but I'll think of something good. I always do."

"You know Mei Jing will make up her own mind about who she's going to marry," said Patrick gently.

"She'll do as her father says but her father is too soft. I married the man my father chose and we're still married thirty years later. It's a very long time."

"It sure is," agreed Patrick. "A *very* long time. But I think we're going to have to let Mei Jing

choose.”

~~“Don’t be ridiculous,” Aimee snapped. “If I’d been allowed to choose, do you think I would have~~
chosen my father’s errand boy? No. Patrick, you must choose and Jeremy is a good choice.”

The errand boy smiled.

Chapter 5

At 7:30 the next morning Mei Jing was woken by her mobile. Taking the call from Tina, she went to the kitchen of her one bedroom flat to get a juice.

“I can’t believe you disappeared last night,” wailed Tina. “You left me with sandal man. Michael disappeared with LynDALL and your Rod decided he didn’t want to stay without you so he left a well.”

“He’s not *my* Rod. But really? When did he leave?”

“Straight after you,” said Tina. “But we’re not talking about you, we’re talking about me and sandal man.”

“Sorry.” Mei Jing poured her juice and carried it out to her narrow balcony to soak up the morning sun. “Does sandal man have a name?”

“Grant,” said Tina. “And get this... The sandals are like a disguise. He’s actually a solicitor. He just likes to go out at night disguised in sandals so clients don’t recognise him.”

“And he thinks sandals give him invisibility?”

“Absolutely. I mean I seriously jumped to the wrong conclusion about him because of the sandals and I’m sure most people would. They’d take one look at the sandals and think.... No way, I do not want to dance with him.”

“OK but he sucked you in. Are you seeing him again?”

“Well I gave him my number, so we’ll see. I will not be going anywhere though if he insists on sandals. How about you? Are you seeing Thai man again?”

“He’ll be here at nine. We’re going to hang out. He really left straight after me?”

“Yep. Said his goodbyes and said he’d see us at the BBQ on Sunday. So where are you going tonight? Nine o’clock is a bit late to go out isn’t it?”

“Nine this morning.”

“What! You’ve only just woken up. It’ll take you hours to get ready. Go!” Tina hung up without waiting for a response.

Rod rang the buzzer to her flat at 9am on the dot. Knowing that she was more pleased than she should be at his punctuality, Mei Jing buzzed him up. Her flat was on the first floor of an older style three storey walk up with twelve units in all. Beneath the units were the garages.

Opening the front door, she watched Rod come up the stairs. Mei Jing moved from foot to foot fidgeting, unsure what to do with her hands. He was wearing a navy polo shirt, faded denim cargo pants, dark Ray-Bans and brown deck shoes. He looked gorgeous. Spotting her at the top of the stairs Rod grinned.

“Morning Ms. Mystery,” he said in a deep voice, imitating the English constabulary. “Do you have any further information for me?”

“I’m afraid not, detective. Would you like to come in?”

“Love to,” said Rod, reaching the top of the stairs and placing a kiss on her cheek. He moved past her and into her flat.

Mei Jing fought an urge to giggle. Despite being born and bred in Australia she was raised with traditional Chinese parents, and random kisses on the cheek were just not part of her make up. But

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