

R. F. Whong

The Way We Forgive

A Christian Novel

by

R. F. Whong

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R. F. Whong

Dedication

I dedicate this book, first and foremost, to my Savior,
the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, I dedicate this book to my brothers and sisters in
Christ
who have supported us in our ministry over the years.

Last but not least, I dedicate this book to my deceased mother,
the true heroine in this book and throughout my life.

R. F. Whong

Why I Wrote This Book

This book is a paraquel to *Love at the Garden Tomb*, which I published in August 2022.

What is a paraquel? A paraquel is a story that takes place simultaneously with a certain other story.

As I noted in *Love at the Garden Tomb*, some scenes depicted in that book took place in real life. The divergence hinged on the visa to Hong Kong. While Lily didn't get it, I did and went to Hong Kong to marry my husband.

I planned to write *The Way We Forgive* as my memoir. My personal stories were so extraordinary that friends suggested I turned it into a novel. Thus, this book is written as fiction loosely based on real-life events.

To connect with me, please go to www.ruthforchrist.com.

R. F. Whong

Blurbs from Readers

Whong's fictionalized memoir is a great read. While it reads like fiction, there is no doubt that you are reading this woman's life story. Against the backdrop of her everyday dual work roles—a trained biochemist and a side-by-side laborer for Christ with her pastor husband—we see a faithful woman with a busy, productive life. She treats us to vignettes of her childhood in southern Taiwan, plus snippets of her journey from university in Taiwan to receiving her PhD in biochemistry from Ohio State University, to marrying her husband. We learn about Chinese customs and history. We meet her lovely mother. It's a compelling story. Yet the essence of the story is in that which can't be seen or measured. As the seeds of a painful betrayal when she was still a child matured into a crop of bitterness and anger, she turned hard. Come experience the rest of the story as she shares the transforming love of Jesus that created a new life of love and forgiveness.

(Carol J. Nelson writes Christian women's fiction. The first two books of her Chandler's Grove Series are: *Audra, Dying For Life* and *Audra, Life Transformed*.)

This novel does an amazing job of portraying flawed yet lovable characters. Naomi, especially, is a pure delight as a funny, stubborn, generous, and loving mother. Ken, Ruth's husband, is warm and supportive. Jonny, their son, is sweet and lovable. Ruth herself is super relatable. She is flawed but loves her mother and tries to care for her family in every way possible—sometimes to her own detriment. The plot and pacing are good, carrying the story forward to an emotional conclusion.

I highly recommend this book to any Christian woman. I found it to be an easy and enjoyable read. It was heartwarming with wonderful characters and conflicts.

(Regina Rodgers writes Christian women's fiction. Her debut book is: *The Gamble on Love*.)

Chapter One

*Chicago's North Suburbs
January 2010*

I leaned against the white quartz countertop and breathed in the pleasant aroma swirling around the kitchen. Nice. The chicken should be ready soon.

“Wow, what’s that awesome smell?” Ken hugged me from behind and gave my ear a light peck.

I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him on the lips. “My dear hubby, are you talking about me?”

He chuckled. “You and whatever is in the oven.”

I touched his clergy tab collar. “Are you ready to leave?”

“I need to unlock the church’s main entrance before others show up.”

As he walked out of the door, I pulled the rack out of the oven, wrapped the golden-brown bird with a piece of aluminum foil, then placed the package into a plastic bag.

Wendy, a woman in her late thirties, contracted the flu last week. She graduated from my seekers’ class about three years ago. With some vegetables and potatoes added, the bird should free her from the burden of cooking for one or two days.

The clock struck eight. Was Jonny up yet?

I hurried to his room and eased the door open to a slit to peek. He

sat in bed and held his cell phone horizontally, a headphone plugged into one ear.

Engrossed in a video game? “What’re you doing?”

He dropped the phone, horror scrunching up his mouth.

I pointed a finger at him. “Didn’t you promise me you wouldn’t play video games before Sunday worship?”

“I—I—”

I stomped into the room and clutched my hands together to suppress the urge to wave them in the air. “No excuses. A promise is a promise. Why can’t you keep your word? Can I trust you? You’re almost ten, not a little boy anymore.”

“But—”

“You’re still arguing?” I towered over him.

As Jonny covered his face and sobbed, I winced.

Lord, help me. Why can’t I control my temper?

I shut my eyes to calm my emotions. Yet an image of my mother and me leaving our small village in southern Taiwan popped up, and my stomach twisted at the betrayal.

Auntie Su-Hua, whom I’d loved and trusted since childhood, shouted again in my mind. “You two killed my brother. Get out. Now!”

I shook my head hard to brush aside the painful memories.

No, don’t overreact. Jonny broke one of our house rules. That’s all.

“Mommy, are you all right?” Jonny hugged me. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have broken my promise.”

I dropped onto his bedspread, rumpling up the skateboarder motif. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

He scrambled onto his knees and wrapped his thin arms around me. “I love you.”

Warmth crept into my heart. I ran my fingers through his short hair. “Now, tell me. What happens when you break a house rule?”

“I have to pay a penalty.” He groaned and surrendered the phone. “I’ll give up my right to play games this afternoon.”

“Good.” I tucked the phone into my robe pocket, then tugged at his pajama shirt. “You’d better get up. We’re leaving for worship soon.”

A half hour later, we strolled through the arched doorways

decorated with a stained glass cross and stepped into the church's foyer. Jonny waved at me. "See you after my Sunday school class."

"Okay. Love you." After blowing my son a kiss, I approached Wendy's husband and gave him the food box. "Something for your family. Is Wendy resting at home?"

"That she is." Frank hooked the plastic bag's handle on his arm. "She mentioned you baked a chicken for us. This must be it. You're always so thoughtful."

I grinned. "Hope you'll like it. Please put it in the church fridge downstairs, for now, to keep it from going bad."

Linda, a young woman who recently came to our worship, stood nearby. Once Frank left, she wiped her hands on her black slacks as a flush swept across her face. "Mrs. Huang, do you have a moment to talk to me?"

Was she embarrassed? Why? "Sure. Should we go to Pastor Ken's office?"

With a nod, she clutched her purse to her chest, her shoulders curling forward.

I led her down the hallway, brown carpet softening the clack of her kitten heels, then gestured to the two wooden chairs before Ken's desk. Somehow, my mind conjured up what my new office would look like if I ever dared quit my job for the biotech start-up company I daydreamed about creating. Most biotech start-ups struggled for survival. Maybe I wouldn't even have simple chairs like these.

Why was I thinking of that now when someone needed me?

I refocused on the young woman. As we seated ourselves with the door shut, she ducked her head and let her slippery hair shield her face. I broke the silence. "Linda, is there something you want to tell me?"

"I—I—" She sucked in a deep breath. "I met my husband a year ago at a friend's house in San Francisco."

Her head still tucked down, she dug the toe of her dainty brown shoe into Ken's thin carpet. Then she huffed and swept the hair away from her face, braving eye contact. "The easy manner he had around others impressed me. My friend said he grew up in a good family. His parents were teachers. I fell in love with him that week. After he left, he called me every day. Last fall, he proposed, and we got

married. That's why I came to Chicago."

The dark eyes searching mine shimmered. Then a tear slipped free, so I passed her a box of facial tissues, my stomach tightening.

"Thank you." Linda wiped her face and tucked her hair behind her ears. "In the beginning, everything went well. I thought myself a lucky woman to have married such a wonderful man." Then, covering her face with her hands, she sobbed so hard that she hiccupped.

I retrieved a water bottle from the mini fridge under Ken's desk. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." She took a sip and calmed a bit. "I found he's into pornography. So disgusting and degrading. When I refuse to have sex with him, he either forces himself on me or walks out, saying, 'Who do you think you are? You're nothing. I have so many girls dying to have me. You should be glad I still want you.'"

A chill ran up my back.

"Lately, he became..." Her cheeks flared crimson. "Well, um, he wanted to take nude photos of me and videotape our lovemaking. He said if he has them, then he doesn't need to go to the online porn sites anymore."

I raised my eyebrows. "Did you give in to his request?"

"I'm not that stupid." She coughed. "He threatened to divorce me. I don't know what to do. I'm new here and only made friends with a few people at church, but I can't talk to them about this. I'm so ashamed."

Lord, how can I help her? I rubbed my neck. An inspiration came to me. "Linda, are you a Christian?"

Her hair slipped forward as she shook her head.

"Why do you come to church?"

She lifted her chin. "I passed by this building one day and saw the sign, Agape Chinese Christian Church. I was lonely and thought I could meet other Chinese people here."

"Has anyone shared our Christian faith with you?"

"No." She scooted to the edge of her seat.

A burden for her soul fell on me. *Lord, I need wisdom from You.* I swallowed hard. "May I share my belief with you?"

At her nod, my shoulders loosened up. "God created us because of His love. He wants to connect with each of us, but our sin prevents

us from knowing Him. He's holy and has to deal with sin. In His salvation plan, Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place to pay for our sins. If we repent and accept Jesus Christ into our hearts, we can connect with God and receive the Holy Spirit."

She remained silent.

I gave her arm a gentle pat. "Do you want me to pray for you?"

"Will prayers help me solve my problem?" She stared into my eyes. "All these are new to me. I need to think about it."

Lord, what to do next?

I peeked at my watch. Worship was about to start. "Pornography is a tough issue to deal with and often requires you and your husband to seek counseling. Do you mind if I discuss your problem with Pastor Ken? He has professional training and may be able to help more than me."

"I don't think my husband will agree to it." She twisted her fingers together. "Please don't tell anyone about our conversation today."

I pushed back my chair, went to Ken's bookcase, and pulled out a new Bible. "Here is a gift for you. Promise me one thing. When you have time, read the four Gospels, beginning with the Gospel of John."

I flipped to the New Testament and showed her the page number.

"You're very kind." She slid the Bible into her purse. "Sorry to have taken up so much of your time. I saw you check your watch. Worship is starting now. Let's go."

Chapter Two

Two Fridays Later

As I placed the milk carton back on the fridge's bottom shelf, our landline pierced the early morning silence, followed by my husband's baritone. "Hello? Joseph."

I drank my milk and waited for him to end the phone call. Linda's image popped into my mind. Odd. I hadn't seen her for two weeks. Perhaps she'd be in church this Sunday, though I doubted it.

It happened before. After people shared their secrets with me, they could become embarrassed to come to church, even though I promised confidentiality.

"Ruth." Ken leaned against the kitchen doorframe. He scratched his chin, a habit of his when something bothered him.

I grabbed the edge of the countertop. "What's the matter?"

His brows furrowed. "Joseph's wife had a massive stroke last night. She's in the ICU. I'll go see them soon. Is Jonny up? Can you take him to school before work?"

A knot formed in my stomach and made its way up to my throat.

Why did I dread bad news about health issues?

Unsure of my emotions, I took a step forward. "Sure. I'm off today, anyway. I have a doctor's appointment. Dr. Stone wants to go over my recent blood test results with me."

“Ah, I forgot.” Ken pulled me into his arms.

“Last year, I still had normal cholesterol levels. How did it get so high in such a short time?” I snuggled against his chest, yet the sense of helplessness refused to lift.

The answer laid bare in front of me—genetic predisposition. All my relatives on my father’s side suffered from high cholesterol.

“I understand. You love food and enjoy cooking.” He patted my back. “I still remember the day you met with the dietitian. You came home with such a desolate look as if it were the end of the world.”

I scrunched my nose and repeated the dietitian’s words, using a high-pitched scolding tone she hadn’t used. “Ruth, you must consider your meals more carefully. Ruth, you must try to lose weight. Ruth, when you cook at home, avoid meat and seafood high in cholesterol such as shrimp and squid. Oh, and one more thing.” I punctuated her final admonishing with an upraised finger. “Ruth, don’t indulge in sweets since you’re prediabetic.”

As Ken’s chuckle shook his chest, I played with the button on his shirt, secure in his embrace. “You often joke I start to think about what to eat for dinner right after I finish lunch.”

When I tipped my head back to see him, his mouth had curved up into an almost grin. “You didn’t appreciate the enormous binder the dietitian gave you, did you?”

“How dare you laugh at me!” I swatted at his shirt. “After I complained I should stop eating altogether, you pointed at the pictures of lettuce and snow pea pods in the binder and told me they didn’t have cholesterol.”

Why did I sometimes behave like a little girl in front of Ken? Maybe because he liked me that way and gave me positive reinforcement?

“Did I say that? How heartless. I’m sorry.” He pressed his lips together tightly, his expression serious again. “At least you’re well disciplined. You went to the supermarket to load up on veggies and have been on a strict diet ever since.”

My heart swelled. During the past two months, I’d lost more than ten pounds and brought my body mass index into the standard range. “I hope my hard work helps.”

Yet from my doctoral training as a biochemist and my research experience studying kidney disease in a pharmaceutical company, I

knew only 20 percent of the cholesterol in my bloodstream came from food. My body made the rest.

“Let me know what she says.” Ken released me and scooped the keys from the pottery dish Jonny made in first-grade crafts. “I’d better go. See you later.”

I glanced at my watch. It was not even eight. So early. Ken took his pastoral responsibilities seriously.

After Ken left, I dropped Jonny off at school and drove to my appointment. My teeth clenched tight like my grip on the steering wheel while I fought off the frightful scenarios racing through my head.

Uncle Tao, Dad’s younger brother, used to lead an enjoyable, productive life. One day, he noticed his left hand looked gray, but he ignored it for a few weeks. By the time he went to the emergency room, clots in a vessel had cut off blood flow to his extremities. He underwent the amputation of three fingers.

I wiggled my hand to check for any sign of discoloration. No, nothing yet. Yeah, what a silent killer. I felt perfectly fine, even though my total cholesterol went above three hundred and my LDL, triglycerides, and HDL were all out of the normal range.

As I stepped into the medical building, shook the snow from my boots, and shed my winter coat, a lump still lodged in my heart.

Hugging my coat to my chest, I chewed the inside of my cheek and sat in the doctor’s office.

Why did diseases and death scare me so much? Every time I entered a healthcare facility, my mind conjured up an image of Dad’s funeral and Mom clinging to a handkerchief to dab at her tear-stained face.

“Ruth.” Dr. Stone’s voice interrupted my musing. She wheeled her chair from before her computer screen and leaned across the desk toward me. “It’s good you’ve lost weight. Although all four parameters have improved, they’re still not in the normal range. Do you want to start statins or try dieting for two more months? Do you exercise regularly? A combination of exercise and diet will help.”

Obviously, I opted for no medication.

When I trudged into our living room, my face must have looked as gloomy as the snowstorm that hit our area yesterday.

Ken sprang from his favorite seat on the sofa below the window and drew me to sit in the winter sunlight beside him, his expression no happier than mine. “Bad news?”

“Not good, but at least I don’t have to take statins for now.” The leather cushions were still cold beneath my slacks. I tugged his arm over my shoulders and leaned into him to warm up as I told him the details.

He gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “What exercise do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know yet. Don’t worry.” I forced a smile, attempting to brush aside my own emotions. “How is Nancy?”

He scratched his chin. “Still in a coma.”

“What’s the cause? Ischemic or hemorrhagic? Does she have high cholesterol like me?” I brought a palm to my chest, another useless endeavor to subdue my trepidation.

After sixteen years of marriage, Ken got used to the medical jargon I tossed around from time to time. He sucked in a deep breath. “Hemorrhagic stroke. Got some pretty serious bleeding. She has diabetes.”

“Diabetes is another silent killer. Mom has it too. I haven’t talked to her for a few days. I wonder how she’s doing.” I should call. I kneaded my eyebrows and peeked at my watch. Eleven thirty.

Fourteen-hour difference between Tokyo and Chicago. Mom got up around six. I had to wait until at least four.

Ken touched his glasses. “We’re having dinner with my aunt’s family tonight. I told her you don’t have to work this afternoon. She wants us to arrive before four to make dumplings together.”

I massaged my temples. I’d have to call Mom tomorrow.

Four hours later, I entered Auntie’s house and loosened my hold on Jonny’s hand. “For tonight’s sleepover with Doug, remember to have good manners.”

“Yes, Mommy.” Jonny saluted me, then ran to the basement with his cousin.

After hanging up our coats, Ken and I strolled into the kitchen. I picked up the chives from the counter. “So green. Did you get these from Chinatown?” I asked in Cantonese.

“Yes.” Emily, Auntie’s daughter-in-law, placed the chives on the chopping board and ran a knife through them. “Every time I hear

you speak Cantonese, I'm amazed. Didn't you live in Hong Kong for only three or four years? How did you learn to speak Cantonese so well?"

"Lots of practice, plus an excellent teacher." I winked at my husband.

The chives' pungent smell filled the kitchen.

Cousin Albert elbowed Ken with a smile tucked at the corners of his mouth. "Shame on you. After being married to Ruth for so long, you still can't speak Taiwanese. How do you communicate with your mother-in-law?"

"Ruth translates for me." Ken gave a sheepish grin. "Taiwanese is a difficult dialect to learn. Very distinct from Cantonese or Mandarin."

"Excuses, excuses." Albert made a face with a cross between a smile and a growl. "How different can it be?"

Ken adjusted his eyeglasses. "Just as Chinese is distinct from English."

"Albert, give Ken a break." Emily laughed. "Isn't it odd that we Chinese don't understand each other's speech? But we can when the words are jotted down."

My dear hubby scratched his forehead. "The fault of our first emperor, Qin Shihuang. He unified the written language. Unfortunately, he couldn't go to each home to force everyone to speak Mandarin."

"True." Auntie reached for the chopped chives and mixed them into the ground pork. "Why does your mom speak Taiwanese and Japanese but not Mandarin?"

I took over kneading the dough. "It has a unique historical background. Taiwan used to be Japan's colony. My mom was born during this colonial period and received a Japanese education."

"But you never learned to speak Japanese?" Auntie leaned over to get chopped bok choy and garlic from Albert and added them to the bowl.

I shook my head. "By the time I was born after the civil war, Kuomintang—the political party of the Nationalist Government—had retreated from Mainland China and ruled Taiwan. At home, my parents spoke to each other in Japanese and talked to me in Taiwanese."

“Must have been confusing.” Emily scooted over to wash the chives from her hands. “Now I understand why your mom immigrated to Japan.” She came back to stand by me. “How is your job? You told me you dream of starting your own company one day. Any progress on that front?”

My fingers slowed down in shaping the soft mass. “I’m still thinking and dreaming. My boss treats me well and counts on me to bring him results. I can’t leave yet.”

Auntie placed the well-blended dumpling filling on the pearl-white countertop. “Ken, are your parents well? The last time I called your mom, she said her arthritis improved after she learned the *Baduanjin* qigong exercise. Does she still practice it every day?”

Ken snagged a mini pineapple cake from the counter and plopped it into his mouth, winking at me when I rolled my eyes. Then he wiped his hands on a towel and swallowed before answering. “Yeah. She also urges us to do it.”

As our chats turned to wellness, I relayed my earlier conversation with Dr. Stone.

“Try the ancient Chinese remedy.” Auntie moved to my side and slipped her arm around me. “It works well for many of my friends.”

She launched into detailed descriptions of her friends’ conditions and the remedy’s beneficial effect. “Very simple. Buy a juicer and drink a cup of juice made from one cucumber, one bitter melon, one green pepper, a bunch of celery, and an apple.”

It sounded easy enough. Plus, the recipe seemed harmless even though the idea of the concoction’s taste made me shudder.

“Excellent suggestion.” Ken gave me a toothy grin. “Hey, your birthday is coming up soon. I’ll buy you a juicer.”

A juicer? Not a diamond ring or a Gucci bag? Well, when did he give me jewelry for my birthday or Christmas? And a Gucci bag? Never.

We were practical people. Flowers for Mother’s Day? No, they wilted easily. Instead, one year Ken bought me a silver-inch plant. What a drought-resistant plant! We came home from a month-long vacation and found it not only alive but also in perfect health to engulf the entire patio.

I bit my lip and punched the dough with one quick strike.

The next afternoon, Nancy came out of her coma. When Ken asked me if I wanted to go with him to visit her, I brought with us a container of a silver-inch that I propagated from a cutting. Nancy was asleep with tubes attached to her body, her face as white as snow.

“Pastor Ken and Mrs. Huang, thank you for coming.” Joseph put the pot on the windowsill. “Such a healthy plant. Thanks a lot.”

Healthy seemed a thoughtless word to use in a place like this, but at least the plant offered some color to the sterile setting. I kept my steps light so my sneakers didn’t squeak as I crossed the room. I grasped Nancy’s icy hand. “Does she need more blankets?”

Joseph hurried to a chair and brought a throw to tuck around her. “The doctor said a stroke can affect her ability to regulate body temperature. The damage is on the right side of her brain. She’ll have problems with movement and sensation on her left side.”

“At least her speech and language skills won’t be affected.” I drew the information from my memory bank.

Joseph grimaced. “But she may never fully recover. They’ll put her into a rehabilitation program soon. They suggested I find a nursing facility to help her after she’s discharged.” He raked his fingers through his thin graying hair, then let the arm fall idle to his side as if he didn’t have the energy to hold it up. “As much as I want to bring her home. I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s a tough decision.” With an understanding nod, Ken patted Joseph’s back. “Let’s ask the Lord for His guidance.”

We gathered around Nancy and prayed, pleading for God’s protection over her and for Joseph to make the best arrangements for their family. But I couldn’t help opening my eyes and peering at the woman on the bed, her frail image seeming to sear its place in my vision.

Still unable to rid Nancy from my mind on our way back, I brushed the shivers from my shoulders and cranked up the heat in our Toyota Highlander. “Joseph has a tough journey ahead of him. As a caregiver, he’ll be the one to provide the support for Nancy’s recovery and rehabilitation.”

“Yeah. Won’t be easy.” Ken flicked on his turn signal, then merged onto Milwaukee Road, slush slopping beneath the tires. “Are you calling Mom soon?”

I checked my watch. Almost four thirty. “Sure. Once we get home.”

As I stepped down from the entryway into our living room, our landline phone rang.

“Mimi.” Mom spoke without greeting me when I picked up the receiver. Mimi had been my family’s nickname for me for as long as I could remember. “We’ll need to pray for your uncle Pei.”

Uncle Pei, my father’s youngest brother, was in his late sixties. Like my mom, he, his wife, and their daughter, Yuko, immigrated to Japan and lived in a town about twenty miles away from Tokyo.

My stomach tightening, I pressed the phone to my ear. “What’s happened?”

“Yuko called me early this morning. Pei had a heart attack.” Mom’s sigh whooshed through the speaker. “She said it wasn’t serious, but I’ll go see him in the hospital, anyway.”

“Please give them my regards. Hope he’ll recover soon.” I drew my eyebrows tight, then pressed cold fingers to the pinched skin. “How about you? How is your diabetes? Do you watch your diet and exercise daily?”

“I’m fine.” Something like papers rustled during her pause. “I’m leaving for the train station in a few minutes. Let’s talk later.”

I swallowed hard. “When you have a moment, please call me again.”

After she hung up, I slumped onto the sofa and rubbed the back of my neck, a useless attempt to suppress the apprehension inside of me.

Why did I feel on the edge of panic when I heard about a traumatic event?

Ken sat by me. “Are you all right?”

I leaned against his shoulder. “We’ve witnessed Nancy’s ordeal. And now Uncle Pei is in the hospital. Why do we have to get sick and suffer?”

“You know the standard Christian answers.” He gave my arm a gentle squeeze. “To avoid similar incidents, please start exercising

today. I have high hopes that diet, exercise, and herbal remedies will pull down your cholesterol level.”

I expelled a pent-up breath and went to the basement to work out.

Chapter Three

Early March 2010

On the morning of my birthday, I walked into the kitchen. True to my husband's promise, a brand-new juicer sat on the counter next to a bag of mixed vegetables and apples.

Yuck. Not even a cupcake—or a birthday muffin. Twisting my lips to one side, I followed the directions and whipped up some greenish gunk for my birthday breakfast. I'd just poured the contents from the juicer into a glass when my phone buzzed with an incoming text from an unknown number.

“Ruth, my husband has filed for a divorce. I'm going back to San Francisco. Just want to let you know I've been reading the Bible you gave me.”

No signature. Yet it must be from Linda. As my mind skipped ahead to her uncertain future, I typed a reply. “I'll continue to pray for you. Please keep in touch.”

I dropped my phone to face the unfriendly mixture. We stood there in a staring contest, that green stuff and I, before I got the guts to sip the bittersweet liquid. Ugh. I couldn't help but wince.

The landline sounded. Grateful for the distraction, I crossed the hardwood floor to answer, and my shoulders relaxed as Mom's voice sounded. “Mimi, happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I took another healthy swallow of the concoction and shuddered. “What’s up? How are you? How is Uncle Pei?”

“I’m fine. The hospital released Pei on the same day I visited him. He’s better. The doctor warned him to take his cholesterol medication. I’m sure he won’t forget anymore after this scare.” Her sigh came through the line. “And I ran into somebody at the hospital. Guess whom?”

I pushed aside my cup. “Who?”

“Your aunt Su-Hua.”

“Auntie Su-Hua?” I snapped and slammed the glass onto the table so hard it should have chipped. “Isn’t she in Paris? What’s she doing in Japan?”

Mom went quiet.

“Hello?” I dropped into a chair and gripped its armrest with my free hand.

“She married a Japanese guy in Paris.” Her tone sounded thick. “She and her husband moved back to Tokyo earlier this year. We’ll meet for lunch tomorrow.”

Moisture blurred my vision. What was Auntie Su-Hua up to? Hadn’t she caused enough trouble for us? “Why did you agree to have lunch with her?”

I twisted the phone cord around my fingers and held my breath, waiting.

“I’ve forgiven her.” Gentle as the morning breeze, her voice shivered over me. “I thought you’d also forgiven her.”

“Of course, I have.” I stood to pace around the kitchen. “But forgiveness doesn’t mean we can trust her or restore our relationship with her. She could do you more harm than good if you befriend her.”

Mom huffed. I could imagine her kneading her brows. “It’ll be okay. Plus, you always want me to share the gospel with others. I intend to share my faith with her.”

Ouch. Worrying the inside of my cheek with my teeth, I lapsed into silence.

“Well, it’s late here. I’d better hang up and get ready for bed.” She yawned. “Oh, before I forget. I’ve booked my flight. I’ll arrive in Chicago on the last day of April.”

“Got it. Good night.” I placed the handset into the receiver and swallowed the remaining liquid.

While the peculiar herbal flavor danced on my taste buds, I shut my eyes to suppress an irrational fear about possible unfortunate events that might jeopardize my or Mom’s life.

An image of my childhood home with five bedrooms leaped into my mind. My toes curled up like my fingers. Yet memories rushed in, fighting against my body’s protest.

Mei-Shan, Plum Blossom Mountain, a small village in South Taiwan, my hometown, a place I left behind so many years ago.

Dad’s body in the coffin, Grandpa’s sneer, the arguments...

“Happy birthday, dear.” My husband’s greeting interrupted my thoughts. “I’m glad you’ve begun to use the juicer.”

“Thank you.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “Thoughtful of you to remember your promise.”

“What’s the matter? Why do you look dispirited?” He smirked. “Was the juice so horrible?”

I moved to rinse the offending glass. “The taste isn’t pleasant, but it doesn’t matter. I’m worried about Mom. She’s just called me.”

He arched a brow. “Is she unwell?”

“She’s well. She said Auntie Su-Hua is in Tokyo, and they’ll have lunch together tomorrow.” I rubbed my temple. The heaviness in my chest brought upon by my recollection of the past refused to lift.

“Oh, Ruthy.” He pulled me into his bosom. “Let bygones be bygones.”

I tried to let myself relax into his warmth. “I’m not hanging on to my grudges. I just can’t trust Su-Hua. Mom may get hurt again.”

“Mom is smart.” He patted my back, his voice soothing against my hair. “In Taiwan, she’s at a disadvantage because she doesn’t speak Mandarin. It’s different now that she’s in Tokyo.”

“You think so?” Listening to his even heartbeat calmed my frayed nerves.

“I’m sure Mom will be all right.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “But I’m concerned that every time you think of Auntie Su-Hua, your emotions plunge into anger and bitterness.”

Heat surged through me, and I pushed away from the haven of his arms. Every muscle going stiff, I jerked my chin up. “What do

you mean? You never went through a similar experience. You won't understand."

Oops. What was that about? I ducked my head, unable to meet his eye. *Lord, please help me control my temper.*

Ken blew out a hasty breath. "Though we've been married for so long, I only know your dad died suddenly when you were sixteen. You never told me the details."

My shoulders stiffened, and a knot tightened in my stomach. "Such a painful time in my life. I never want to revisit it."

"But it still torments you." He stood still, his hands falling to the sides of his pajama pants. "I'm here for you. Tell me what happened."

Great. Now Ken's intense pastoral gaze bore into mine.

I tilted my head away from him and stared at my plants on the windowsill. Memories from long ago flooded me. Scene after scene flew across my mind like a fast-forward movie.

"My father worked as the chief manager in a bank, and my family was well-to-do." I sat in our breakfast nook and flattened my palms on the tablecloth.

He took the seat across from me, the chair legs grating on the hardwood floor.

"Grandma and Auntie Su-Hua, Dad's sister, lived with us. As the oldest son, Dad bore the responsibilities of taking care of other family members." My heart rate kicked up. Needing to do something, I grabbed a tress of hair and twisted it around one finger.

Ken raised his brows. "Why did they live with your parents, but not with your grandpa?"

"I once asked Mom about him, and she whispered to me my grandpa lived with another woman. She also said Su-Hua was a divorcée, a rarity in our village."

Still, my lips curled up as my mind turned toward those early days. "I loved Auntie Su-Hua. We spent hours playing card games in the evening, especially when both my parents got busy. Sometimes she went out with friends. With my mom's permission, I would go with her to explore the mountains, the lakes, and the tourist attractions near and far."

Whoosh! Snow fell from the pine tree limbs outside of the French door. The neighbor's dog started barking.

“I never suspected my dad, active and energetic, would get sick.” A lump rose in my throat. My smile vanished, and I swallowed hard. “But during my first year in high school, he complained about persistent stomach discomfort. One night, I heard him and Mom talk at length about something in Japanese. After I queried Dad, he patted my head. ‘Don’t worry. Your mom and I met a superb doctor. I’ll have surgery to fix my stomach problem soon.’”

Ken crossed his legs and laced his fingers in his lap. The wooden chair squeaked under his weight. “What happened next?”

Even after so many years, a chill crept up my spine. “The surgery didn’t go as expected. Dad didn’t eat well. Within weeks, he went from a man in his prime to a skeleton. He was on the brink of death.”

Ken’s large hand covered mine. “Didn’t you say your father accepted Christ before his death?”

“Yes.” I withdrew my hand from him to rub my arms, forcing goosebumps to subside. “As he grew weaker, he had nightmares about ghosts and deceased relatives. Grandma, who attended a local Christian church, asked her pastor to talk to him. He was baptized in bed. One week later, he passed away.”

Ken scooted his chair closer and pulled me into his bosom again. I rested my head on his chest, letting my tears wet his shirt.

“Almost everyone from our village attended the funeral. The next morning, a quarrel broke out in the kitchen. I hurried over and heard Mom demanding to know why the house she and Dad built was not under their name.”

I closed my eyes, hearing Su-Hua’s icicle-fringed words in my head. “You two killed my brother. Get out.”

My grandpa stood there smirking.

I sucked in a deep breath, a vain attempt to compose myself. “Mom packed a suitcase and dragged me out of the door. We moved fifty kilometers away from home to Chia-Yi and left everything behind, including family pictures and personal mementos.” I squeezed my eyelids tight, but I couldn’t push away the intruding images.

“Oh, Ruthy.” Ken gave my back a light tap. “You went through a horrible ordeal with Mom. One day, you were the apple of your parents’ eyes. The next, you became fatherless, kicked out of your home.”

“I’ve loved Auntie Su-Hua since childhood. My mom treated her like a dear sister. And she betrayed us.” I wiped my face with my palm. “Worse, we had no money. Mom found a dingy place for rent through a newspaper ad.”

“Must have been tough to go from a large house to a tiny rental.” Ken kissed my wet cheek. “Didn’t your dad have a pension or some sort of savings?”

“My dad was a dutiful son. Most of his estate went to my grandpa.” I shivered at the memory of the damp cement floor in the room that I shared with my mother for two years. “Mom and I slept in the same bed. Many nights, I sobbed to myself. I told her I planned to quit school and find a job. But she refused to listen, insisting my father wished for me to get a college degree. I had to live up to my dad’s expectations and get into National Taiwan University.”

“Did your uncles help?”

“No.” I flattened my palms on the tablecloth again, pressing hard against the smooth linen as if it could ground me. “They probably knew nothing about our problems. Mom didn’t allow me to bother them. She said we should grit our teeth rather than accept money from relatives.”

Yet I hesitated to share more. For years, I developed an intense fear of losing my mother through disease and death. Whenever I woke up from nightmares, I placed a palm in front of her nose and mouth to feel the soft movement of the air as she breathed in and out.

“God looks after orphans and widows.” Ken gave my arm a gentle squeeze. “You entered the best university in Taiwan.”

“Upon my acceptance into National Taiwan University, Mom reconciled with my grandpa and aunt and moved back with them.” Bile surged up my throat. “Auntie Su-Hua intended for me to go home before I left for college. I refused. She planned to parade me to her friends. I had no interest.”

Ken reached for a Kleenex to dab my face. My shoulders relaxed, and I snuggled closer to him. His simple gesture brought a stirring warmth to my bosom better than any jewelry or Gucci bag.

My heavenly Father loves me, and my husband loves me.

Then Ken released his hold of me. “Have you seen Jonny this morning? Let’s go check on him. School starts soon.”

I sighed and followed him into our son's room. Jonny sat at his desk with his children's Bible.

Lord, thank You.