

Excerpt:

In time past, I was a beautiful woman.  
I knew whenever I smiled,  
I would, like a flower in Spring, capture any man's soul.

Echo (Chinese writer, 1943-1991)

## Chapter One The Million Dollar Journey

A Chinese saying goes: "In good fortune is always some misfortune, and in misfortune some good fortune."

Maybe they're right. After losing both my parents, I was at twenty-nine, abandoned into this treacherous, Ten Thousand Miles Red Dust.

Or so I had thought.

Then a month later I received a letter from a law firm in Manhattan, Mills and Mann, informing me that I was to be given a sum of money. In fact, a very large sum of money.

*Three Million Dollars.*

But from whom? And why? Since I had to max out my credit cards just to lay my parents in thin coffins and watch them – with my hard-earned money -- turn into ashes.

I had to use all my will power to stifle my about-to-shoot-out, uncontrollable, deliriously happy laughter to be able to continue to read.

My benefactress was someone by the name of Mindy Madison, supposedly my aunt from my mother's side.

Neither of my parents had ever mentioned any aunt, in this world -- or the next one.

So where could this Mindy Madison come from?

Besides, Madison was not my mother's last name, which was Chen, nor mine, which was Lin.

Then a light went on in my head. Wasn't this *too* good to be true? Fishy? Like a clichéd plot in a cheap novel?

Without further thought, but much reluctance, I stuffed the letter under my novel-in-progress manuscript on the desk and tried to push the whole thing out of my mind.

But, as the Chinese also say, “When wealth comes, its force will push you against the wall.”

Two days later, after arriving home from waitressing at Our Place Shanghai Tea Garden, an over-priced Chinese Restaurant in mid-town Manhattan, the blinking red light in my dark apartment caught my attention. I pressed the phone’s button and the room was immediately filled with a pleasant male voice: “Hello, I’m David Mann from Mills and Mann Associates. This is for Ms Lily Lin concerning a large sum from her aunt, Mindy Madison. Please contact us as soon as possible so we can process this matter promptly. Our phone number is 212 883 7609. We look forward to meeting with Ms Lin. Thanks.”

The next day, restless with nervous energy, I was sitting across from two impeccably dressed attorneys in a posh law firm located in one of the most expensive districts in Manhattan, listening to a most amazing, stranger-than-fantasy-fiction speech.

“Yes, the whole thing is real, Ms Lin. You’re not dreaming, but about to be granted three million dollars.” David Mann, a thirtyish lanky man with chestnut hair, assured me with his slick lawyer’s voice. In this office filled with rows of brick-like books and angular, deep brown furniture, his gleaming eyes were the only two bright spots.

“But, there is more. Don’t think it’s just going to drop into your hands,” admonished his partner, the fiftyish, Margaret Thatcher look-alike Margaret Mills. “Your aunt -- apparently she’s quite an adventurer -- specified that you have to take on quite a long journey in China, along the Silk Road. This is very specific -- you *must* re-trace exactly the same routes that she took, do exactly the same things that she did. Until you complete this, the three million dollars stays in the bank.” She paused to frown at some document lying like a corpse on the desk. Then she added, in a tone of disapproval, “However, you do get fifty thousand dollars in advance for the preparation of your trip.”

Still in shock, I asked numbly, “How long is the trip?”

Mann’s voice piped up from the honey jar, “It specifies in the document that it will take somewhere from six to eight months.”

I did a quick calculation in my head: would the fifty thousand dollars last six or eight months in China? Of course, most Chinese couldn’t even make this in their whole life!

I watched as the two yin-yang creatures – one heavy and stuffy, the other slim and slick, went on to explain details: The Mills and Mann firm was acting as intermediary, the matter was being taken care of by another law firm in Beijing. Therefore, if I agreed to go ahead with this improbable business, I also needed to meet with a Mr. Lo in Beijing. More details followed but did not make much sense to me. Finally, when their long-winded harangue, delivered in a lawyerly monotone was finished, I sat dumbfounded.

David Mann flashed a row of neat, whitened teeth, his blue eyes sparkling like two sapphires: “So Miss Lin, are you willing to accept your aunt’s terms and take on this journey of a thousand miles?”

Should I accept such an offer? For a moment, I had no answer. But, putting aside the weird, perverse stipulations from a total stranger, supposedly my aunt, could anyone resist a seven-figure fortune? Certainly not a yet-to-be published writer and on-the-side waitress. So I put on a smile especially aimed at the impossible fortune.

I would certainly take the fifty thousand up front and then.... maybe I could even cheat my way out later, who knows?

My mind was racing; I had no idea what I would be getting myself into. But I also did not want to take any chances on this dropped-from-the-sky bonanza. So I nodded emphatically. “Absolutely, I have always wanted to travel on the Silk Road. And I certainly cannot afford to turn down three million dollars.”

Margaret Mills immediately pushed the document across the desk for me to sign. With my slightly trembling hand, I scribbled my name Lily, which meant Beautiful in Chinese, also a homonym with Fortune, then my family name Lin, which means forest or abundance.

Mills took the document back, and the duo reached out to vigorously shake my hand,

“Congratulations, Ms Lin!”

Now suddenly the tomb-like office looked almost like a sunny garden. Even the middle-aged Margaret Thatcher look-alike Margaret Mills could now pass as handsome. I studied her officious expression while remembering the Spanish Foreign Minister’s speech to the other Margaret: “Madame, I was prepared for your intelligence, but not for your beauty!”

With the images of the two Margarets, one in Britain and the other right before my eyes, I tried very hard to suppress a chuckle.

The Manhattan Margaret spoke again, “Miss Chen, these things take time to process. Come back next week and we’ll have the fifty thousand dollar check waiting for you.”

David Mann added, “You will be a rich woman. We will be happy to help you with your future legal affairs.”

At four-thirty, I stood on the street outside the law firm, dizzy and disoriented by my sudden change of fortune. The sun was bright and warm, while the sparkling air matched my rising mood. Though the world outside looked unchanged with people hurrying and cars inching forward, the world inside me was like an hour glass suddenly turned upside down. I felt ambushed from all sides, even though no one paid me any mind. I kept thinking of the strange demands by this strange supposed aunt, who had never even existed for me in my entire twenty-nine years. Not to mention the unbearable lightness of a small piece of paper with “\$50,000” written on it, soon to be sitting arrogantly yet happily in my purse!

During the following week, I ate and slept and waitressed at Our Place as usual, but my mind had already flown to the Silk Road where my body was enjoying a sauna under the hot sun, my bare toes and soles baked by the fiery golden sand, my eyes steamy and dreamy from the intoxicating heat. The days crept by until I finally dragged my numbed feet back to Mills’ and Mann’s office and settled the surreal affair in a banal, legalistic manner. I was briefed about the terms one more time and was given the fifty thousand dollar check.

Margaret Mills said, handing me a big manila envelope, “Miss Chen, here are the

preliminary itinerary and the tasks you are required to carry out on the Silk Road. Details of your aunt's document and her journey will be in Beijing for you to pick up from Mr. Lo there."

When I stood up to leave, the envelope pressed tightly against my chest, I caught a smirk on David Mann's face. "Good luck with your aunt's requests!"

After leaving the lawyers' office on this note of high suspense, I went straight to the Chase Bank in Union Square near where I lived and deposited the check. Then I strolled around aimlessly, trying to clear my mind. Near the subway station, three teenagers were showing off their impossible skating skill by flipping, flying, and somersaulting in all directions, their skateboards scraping hard on the ground, making a threatening "Zeeet!" Zeeet! Zeeet!" sound.

"Watch out!" I yelled to the kids and quickly stepped aside to avoid a possible hit and run – reminding myself that I was now a three-million-dollar heiress.

"Queeeeiit!" A skating board squealed to a halt directly in front of me. It was the youngest of the kids.

He saluted me, splitting a big, heart-melting smile, then shouted, "Yes ma'am!" His rhinestone stud sparkling like morning dew on his impossibly smooth face.

I flashed him back a soon-to-be-millionaire smile, then continued to walk. Could anyone tell that this white-shirted and blue-jeaned Chinese woman was soon to be wearing nothing but designer clothes, flawless three-carat diamonds, a three hundred dollar hairdo, and dining only in high-end, fashionable restaurants? Hmm...actually one person did. The young male bank manager. Although he had not made any comment, his smile had betrayed his approving mood. I couldn't wait to see what his smile would look like (stretching all the way outside his face?) in six months – assuming I would come back from China alive and in one piece.

Back home, I immediately plunged into reading Mindy Madison's documents. I flipped through the thick stack, reading a section here and skipping another one there. At first

glance, I was quite relieved to find that the routes to take, cities to visit, people to meet, and things to do didn't seem all that daunting. However, as I read further, the requests started to become a little weird, one even perverse.

At the edge of a desert called the Taklamakan, I needed to retrieve something (it was not specified what) buried in a small oasis town and return it to a certain temple.

I had to meet with a blind fortune-teller in a certain city and tell him nothing but lies about everything.

And the perverse one:

I had to seduce a certain monk in a certain temple and have sex with him in the "upside down hanging lotus" position, something, though I considered myself pretty open about sex, had never heard of. Would I get a brain hemorrhage? I couldn't help but chuckle. Not that I found this funny, but just hoping the chuckle would somehow dissipate the uneasy feelings which began to emerge inside me.

After I finished reading, I let out a sigh. The whole thing struck me as peculiar. Very peculiar. And scary. If my "aunt," Mindy Madison, had already done these things, then why pay me to repeat them? There must be something not quite proper -- or downright crooked -- going on behind all this, but what I had no idea.

Like a bad cold, the uneasy feeling refused to go away.