

fortune cat's visit



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The golden bell door chime of the Harvest Moon Trading Company heralded the arrival of a customer.

Duty called. Lynn put down the white porcelain fortune cat she'd been cleaning in preparation for Chinese New Year. Maybe she should have closed early. The clock was fast approaching eight o'clock in the evening and the whole store was a dust magnet. At this rate, sweeping away last year's bad luck would proceed about as quickly as a traffic jam on the Bay Bridge. She was never going to make it in time. *Sorry, Mom.*

"*Ni hao,*" she called out. "Hello. Can I help you?"

On her way to the front of the store, she carefully navigated aisles stuffed with precariously stacked toys and bins overflowing with brocade slippers. She wondered if this person would even be worth the trouble of assisting. Harvest Moon Trading Company was tucked in a cave-like space in the bowels of Jackson Street. Few tourists

left the Grant Street main drag to visit her little-known store on such a cold winter night. But she went through the motions anyway.

"Hello," came the customer's soothing, harmonious voice.

The voice belonged to a man. He stood just inside the threshold.

Lynn stopped to absorb the sight of him. His black overcoat, sleek gloves, and stylish boots indicated a business occupation of some kind. Yet he had the smartly cut, raven-black hair and sculptured face of a model. Who was he? She'd never seen him in the neighborhood before.

Of course, that didn't mean much. Chinatown had a lot of visitors. But Lynn had a feeling she would have remembered this striking man no matter what. His debonair appearance made her stomach perform a flip-flop.

She wiped her grimy hands on her red blouse as inconspicuously as possible and smiled. "Looking for anything in particular? We have many unique souvenirs."

The stranger flashed a grin in turn. "Just browsing. For now."

His smooth, self-assured manner set Lynn's heart pounding. But of course, he was just a customer. Nothing more. Unfortunately. And she had work to do. Could life be any more disappointing? "I'll be at the cash register if you need anything."

"Thanks."

He disappeared behind a rack of colorful, floral-themed shirts. Reluctantly, Lynn sat on her stool and resumed her cleaning. The task was more busy work than anything. She'd rather be chatting up her handsome visitor.

Her thoughts drifted into a stream of melancholy. With her parents gone, having been stolen away from her eight months earlier in a car accident, there was no one around to nag her about cleaning, unpacking inventory, or hand-selling to customers.

Still, Lynn wasn't sure it was a freedom she wanted. She sorely missed their cheerful presence. No one could ever replace her parents, but she didn't want to spend the rest of her life alone, either. Dusty incense boxes made lousy company.

The stranger wandered down a nearby aisle. Lynn stole glances at him as he passed by a display of cloisonné vases. This was more excitement in one evening than she'd had all year. Customers usually meant families with hyperactive children or elderly tourists from out-of-state. Those relationships were as fleeting as a breeze. She was ready for something far more substantial.

How long had it been since her last date? Lynn racked her brain, but only came up with memories of working in the store. So long she couldn't remember, apparently.

But what would be the best way to strike up a conversation? Coming on to a customer was hardly professional. She pursed her lips at the sight of her wrinkled, dust-streaked shirt. Her shoulders sagged. *Doesn't matter, anyway. He's way out of your league.*

"Excuse me, what is this item here?"

The stranger's voice yanked her back to reality. He had stopped before one of the glass cases near the wall. Lynn hustled over to his side. "Yes?"

He pointed to the largest item. The grayish-green hunk of alien metal gleamed in the warm light of the display case. One side of the mechanism featured a panel with ornate, otherworldly symbols. They marked each of the array's twenty keys. The

singular machine, nearly three feet high, was in sharp contrast to the store's other, more mundane products.

The stranger leaned forward for a closer examination. "Interesting piece. Do you know what it is?"

He was standing so close Lynn could smell his spicy cologne. She indulged herself one deep breath while composing her response. The piece that had caught his attention was indeed very interesting. A few months before they died, her parents had brought it to the store. They'd refused to disclose how and where they'd obtained it. But ever the entrepreneurs, they had promptly placed it on display.

She cleared her throat. "As far as I know, it belonged to the Sojourners. Some of their tech made its way into the bla—into the market after they left Earth. My parents used to own this place, and bought it right before they passed away. They were told it was some kind of time machine."

He arched a brow. "Time machine?"

"Or a portal to another dimension. Something like that. I can't remember."

"Does it work?"

Lynn shrugged. "Maybe you could buy it and find out."

The stranger laughed. "Maybe I could at that!" Then he abruptly sobered. "I'm sorry to hear about your parents."

Lynn nodded in acknowledgment even as a lump formed in her throat. Despite belonging to a clan of aunts, uncles, and cousins, her relatives were scattered far and wide across the Bay Area. She'd been pretty much alone in her grief ever since the funeral. "These things happen."

The stranger removed his gloves and extended his right hand. "I'm Jian Yuen, by the way."

He studied her face intently as they shook hands. *Weird*. It was as if he expected her to react to his name in some specific way. She searched her memory, but it came up empty. Mr. Yuen was indeed a stranger to her. But she didn't fear him. In fact, she felt quite the opposite of fear. He sure was a friendly customer, one whose hand felt warm and comforting. "Lynn Chong. Nice to meet you."

"So," he said, gesturing to the alien machine. "How much do you want for it?"

Lynn's heart raced. She fought to keep her expression neutral. What should she say? Her parents had insisted on keeping the Sojourner artifact price-tag free. They'd said the price would reveal itself when the right buyer came along. And at that point, their lives would change forever.

Now a buyer was in her store. A very handsome one, in fact. He was clearly interested in buying the artifact. So why was she feeling reluctant to sell it?

It wasn't because the object had once belonged to a group of aliens. The Sojourners, as the people of Earth came to call them, had made first contact in 2079, only a decade past. Initially, their presence came as a great shock. There was widespread panic. Many feared an invasion was at hand. Underground shelters were built at record speeds. But despite the massive, copper colored ship, the Sojourners didn't attack. As best the scientists could tell, they had only landed for a pit stop.

While on Earth, the humanoid beings freely shared their technology. Their sophisticated translators overcame language barriers. Many cultural exchanges occurred. Earth scientists formed vast partnerships in order to develop commercial

applications using the new technology. NASA was rejuvenated with a five percent federal budget increase.

After a six-month visit, the Sojourners departed as mysteriously as they had come. They made no promises to return.

After some soul searching, Lynn discovered that the true reason she felt reluctant to sell the artifact was because it had belonged to her parents, however dubious the actual ownership might be. They had been planning on selling it to the highest bidder and retiring in style. The accident had stolen away that dream. Now, she didn't think she could sever that link to them.

Lynn averted her eyes. "So sorry, but I don't think you can afford it."

Jian's dark, mesmerizing eyes glinted with intrigue. "Try me."

Oh, what have I done? She moistened her lips in preparation for the most outrageous stunt in her entire life. "Okay. Five million dollars." *Surely* that price would dissuade him, and she could retain an important link to her parents. Even so, Lynn couldn't help but feel an ache in her heart at the thought that he'd soon be gone from her life.

Jian nodded. "Excellent. You've got a deal. I've been searching weeks for just the right showcase piece for my new office. This will do perfectly." He raised his left hand and showed her the pale silver circle on his palm. Lynn recognized the embedded chip. Thanks to the Sojourners, the device was all the rage these days for those who could afford the procedure. It streamlined all kinds of payment and business transactions.

"Where can I pay?"

Lynn gaped. How much money did this guy have? She immediately regretted her impulsive statement. She should just tell him the truth. "I, ah, I appreciate your offer, but—"

Jian shook his head. "Ms. Chong," he began.

"Please, call me Lynn."

He smiled nervously. "Lynn, yes, thank you. Listen, I still want the artifact and intend to negotiate further, but that's not the real reason I'm here."

Lynn slanted her brows. "I don't understand."

"I know. This must seem strange." Jian raised a hand to his mouth and politely covered it while he cleared his throat. "Do you remember what happened here on the eve of Chinese New Year about twelve years ago? It was '77, to be exact."

Lynn thought back to that time. She'd just turned twenty. It was shortly before the Sojourners had arrived, and a time of global economic struggle. Like many vendors in Chinatown, her parents had come perilously close to going out of business. All she recalled was anxiety and frequent nights of plain rice and soy sauce.

She shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, but nothing stands out. Why do you ask?"

"There was a man. He was down on his luck in unimaginable ways. He came here, looking for a handout. Your parents forced him to leave."

Lynn raised a hand to her cheek as memory came flooding back. "Yes, I remember now. He looked really awful."

Actually, 'awful' was an understatement. The man in question had been dressed in filthy, tattered clothing. He'd entered the store with bare feet. Long, lank hair had

obscured his dirt-streaked face. His breath had smelled like a sewer, and was rivaled only by his sour body odor. It had taken hours to air out the shop.

Jian looked at her intently. "You ran out after him despite the cold. You gave him shoes and a bowl of hot rice."

Lynn remembered the night vividly now. The man had nodded in thanks as she passed him the bowl, but didn't speak. He'd gazed at her for a long moment, his eyes hollow with some kind of unfathomable sadness. Then he shuffled away, cradling the bowl like a newborn baby. The rice was supposed to have been her dinner. She'd gone without that night, but didn't regret it one bit.

"I would have given him money, but my parents might not have made the rent if I had." She shrugged. "It was the least I could do." She gave Jian a measured stare as insight dawned. "Is he a friend? I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him since."

"You have, actually."

Lynn frowned. "What do you mean?"

Jian took a deep breath. Then he gazed at her steadily. "I was that man."

Lynn's jaw dropped open. "Oh, my goodness." She looked him up and down. "Really? You look wonderful now. I had no idea." She turned away, blushing. "I'm sorry, that was awfully forward of me."

"No, not at all. I appreciate your kind words." He reached out and touched her shoulder lightly. Lynn shyly met his gaze. "Because of your kindness, everything changed for me that night. I'll tell you how I arrived at that terrible place if you like, but what's more important is how I turned my life around since then." He gestured to the

Sojourner machine. "In fact, once I was stable, I made it my goal to pay you back properly someday. I own a business now. Have you heard of Tangerine Enterprises?"

Lynn gasped. Tangerine Enterprises was the global leader in photovoltaic textiles and other renewable energy products. "Yes, of course," she replied.

"That's my company." He suddenly appeared contemplative. "I still have the shoes. They hang on the wall in my office. I never want to forget where I came from."

"I'm very happy for you!" And she was. She hadn't thought about that homeless man until now, but she was glad to hear about his happy ending. "But just because you're wealthy doesn't mean you have to pay me back. That's not why I did it."

"I know. But I still want to thank you." He gazed at her earnestly. "Thank you, Lynn, for helping me when no one else would on that cold, dark night so long ago." He rested a well-manicured hand against the case as a gleam lit his eyes. "Are you sure I can't buy this? Perhaps I underestimated its worth. How about six million?"

Lynn swallowed. "At the risk of sounding rude, I just can't sell it right now. It...it belonged to my parents. Please understand."

Jian smiled. "I do. Well, if you won't take my millions of dollars, may I please take you out to dinner?" Then he paled a little. "That is, as long as you're...maybe I shouldn't have presumed...are you with anyone?"

Lynn shook her head. "No. It's just me here." She waved a hand toward the shelves. "Me and the dusty cats."

Jian's expression brightened. "Great! I mean, not great that you're alone, but..." He began rubbing the back of his head as his skin flushed red.

Lynn giggled into her hand. "I know what you meant."

Jian grinned. "Must be my lucky day."

You and me both! Lynn took a step back, feeling giddy. "I'd love to have dinner with you. Give me a second to lock up."

Jian pulled his gloves back on. "Take your time. I'll be waiting."

Lynn quickly emptied the cash register and placed the money in the safe. She donned her coat, hat, gloves, and scarf. As she shut off the lights in the back room, she whispered, "I'll clean up tomorrow, Mom and Dad. I promise."

When she returned to the front, Jian was standing by the door, waiting as promised. The streetlight shone through the window, creating a soft white halo around him. He looked like an angel. Lynn couldn't believe her incredible luck.

Jian opened the door. A chilly, yet invigorating breeze rushed through the opening. "Ready?"

Lynn's keys jingled as she locked the front door. The night air was cold and crisp, but she reveled in the feeling. Adventure of a new kind awaited her. As she slipped the keys into her purse, Jian placed a guiding hand on her elbow.

"I should warn you," he said, then hesitated. "Oh, that sounded bad, didn't it? Sorry, it's just that I'm very excited to see you again. What I meant was, I wanted to let you know that I don't want to just take you out to dinner. I'd like...to get to know you. No pressure, of course."

"I'd like that very much," Lynn said softly. She linked her arm through his. "By the way, gung hay fat choy."

Jian grinned widely as they walked up the steep slope toward Grant Avenue. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to hear you say that again. Gung hay fat choy, Lynn."

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About the Author

Heather Massey is a lifelong fan of science fiction romance. She searches for sci-fi romance adventures aboard her blog, The Galaxy Express (thegalaxyexpress.net).

She's also an author. Her stories will entertain you with fantastical settings, larger-than-life characters, timeless romance, and rollicking action. So sit back, relax, and pour yourself a cup of space java as the tales unfold. You deserve it.

When Heather's not reading or writing, she's watching cult films and enjoying the company of her husband and daughter.

To learn more about her work, visit heathermassey.com.

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