

 Chapter 1

The airplane touched down on the tarmac, bringing me back to my birthplace: Chengdu, China. I tried to ignore my stomach jitters, caused by feelings still lurking from childhood of wanting nothing to do with this country. Even at thirty-eight I seldom revealed where I was born. Yet here I was in the spring of 1980, accompanying my parents on a tour of the People's Republic of China. They'd been eager to visit Sichuan Province and Chengdu ever since the country reopened to western tourism. This tour was the first they had found that included the western provinces. But my parents weren't tourists. They were doctors, medical missionaries who had lived here for fourteen years. For them, this was a kind of homecoming.

Our plane taxied to a stop in front of a drab concrete terminal. I stood and took a deep breath, gathered my travel bag and camera, and followed my parents up the aisle toward the door. Waiting our turn to descend the stairs, Mom gave me a tight smile, fidgeting with her still naturally blond hair. Dad leaned toward me, gleeful, his blue eyes crinkling.

“Are you ready for this, Jackie?”

“As ready as I'll ever be, I guess.”

At the doorway, I glimpsed flat agricultural fields stretching into a distant haze and stepped down into the steamy subtropical air of a sunny spring day. Reaching the tarmac, I moved briskly to keep up with my eager parents as they strode toward the terminal door.

Four Chinese people waited just inside, all dressed in dark gray Mao-style jackets and pants. Only their heights defined a difference—the two women diminutive, the men both a head taller. All four were scanning the incoming travelers, mostly westerners. I watched their expressions transform from somber concentration to elation when they recognized my parents.

Mom, proceeding apace and not expecting an airport welcome, started to rush by.

“Mom!” I said and put my hand on her shoulder.

Then she recognized them. The women bowed shyly as my mother reached toward them. They clutched hands, all three smiling and crying at the same time. Dad, shorter than the two men, beamed and shook their hands enthusiastically. A lively conversation in Chinese broke out, punctuated by hand gestures and laughs. Dad stopped talking briefly to introduce me in English. The four were Mom’s medical-school classmates and Dad’s former medical students at West China Union University. I shook hands with them, and they resumed their conversations as passengers from our flight continued to trickle by.

I stood outside their circle, transfixed by the women’s tender, poignant reunion. My mother’s constant mask of stress had fallen away, leaving only joy. I could not recall her ever showing love so openly to me and my siblings, or even to Dad. My eyes pooled as I backed away and leaned against the beige wall. Large, side-by-side pictures of Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai gazed at me from across the hall. My chest tightened as if in a vise, and time slowed down. I saw only what was before me: my mother chattering away with her friends, delight emanating from her every look and gesture.

I was stunned to my core. Who was this woman? Certainly not the mother I'd grown up with.

Minutes later we bade a temporary farewell to my parents' friends. We would see them the next day at a gathering of their Chinese medical colleagues when we would leave our tour for the day. Still reeling from what I'd witnessed, I wondered what other revelations awaited me.

Rejoining the tour group, we boarded a bus that took us to our hotel in the city. The only thing on our itinerary that evening was a briefing on Chengdu history and dinner—my first chance to try the famously fiery Sichuan cuisine.

*This trip came at an unsettled time* for me. My marriage had developed fissures, although my relationships with my children, a son twelve and a daughter ten, were close and rewarding. After seventeen years tending to others' needs, I was at long last thinking about what I wanted to do in life.

My decision to accompany my parents had surprised me. Growing up in a small West Virginia town following World War II, I hadn't wanted anyone to know about our connection to China as it drew attention to how different we were from others in town. At the same time, I knew they were concerned about the growing upheaval in China. They scoured newspapers and magazines for updates as the Nationalist and Communist armies battled for control. I heard the worry in their voices as they wondered how their Chinese friends were faring. Dad did not resign his medical missionary appointment until 1948, when there was no hope of returning. The next year, Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China, and the country closed to the world. My parents heard nothing more from their Chinese friends.

Years later as my childhood memories receded, I became curious about my birthplace. When visiting my parents, I