

## *The Restaurant*

I knew I'd stayed at the restaurant too long as I held a chubby, pink hand in each of mine and half sprinted across the car park. Susan's little legs couldn't keep pace, so she dangled above the pavement every second step. The sensation of eyes on my back sent a hot prickle up my neck to the top of my scalp, but I didn't look at the second story window as I strapped Beth into her child seat.

The Green Jade restaurant was a favourite of mine. The girls and I ate Chinese there every Friday night. Well, *I* ate Chinese. Beth enjoyed dipping spring rolls in tomato sauce and Susan took great care to pick every single piece of meat and vegetable out of the fried rice and scatter them in a semi-circle around her high-chair. The Green Jade had been our ritual ever since Brett had... I blew out a quick breath as my chest constricted.

It's just us girls now.

Tonight we'd sat at our usual table by the second story window, so I that could watch the evening traffic below. Dinner conversation was limited with the girls. We ate early, so there weren't many other diners and I didn't pay much attention to them anyway. I preferred people-watching from behind the darkly tinted glass.

A cold hand on my shoulder made me drop my fork, sending a miniature bowl of soy sauce spinning across the pristine white table cloth.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," the stranger said, sitting turned in his seat behind me.

I shrugged out from under his hand and smiled politely. He didn't look like one of the usual crowd in his crisp white suit with the point of a pink, silk handkerchief protruding from the breast pocket. His black hair was thinning and meticulously greased into a comb-over that made my jaw clench. I wondered why he was still smiling at me. Was he waiting for something?

"Can I help you?"

"Good evening," he spoke with precise English articulation "what beautiful daughters you have."

"Thank you," I replied, stabbing a piece of chicken with my fork and dipping it into the yellow syrup.

"I'm Ben," he offered his hand.

I pretended I didn't see it as I tore a piece off the chicken.

He wasn't deterred. "What is *your* name darling?" He had turned further around in his chair to speak to Beth, stroking his greasy hair to ensure it wasn't out of place.

"Bef," she smiled from under a mop of russet curls.

"Well, aren't you a pretty little girl. Do you like magic tricks?"

Beth nodded. I watched as he rolled a twenty cent piece over and under his fingers, moving it along his hand. The yellow tint to his olive skin was highlighted by the fluorescent lighting and the corners of his eyes turned down. He looked like he could be related to the owners of the restaurant, although I'd never seen him here before.

"Now I'm going to tuck it in here," he made a show of dropping the coin into his breast pocket and patting it.

A queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach solidified into a rigid ball as I watched his manicured hand stroke the side of Beth's face and linger behind her ear. He pulled his hand away to reveal the twenty cent piece. Beth laughed as he placed it in her chubby hand and wrapped his around it.

"Keep that safe, darling," Ben said.

I thought he was leaving when he stood, but he turned his chair all the way around to face our table and sat back down. My eyes narrowed. I resented this interruption to the precious time with my family.

"Eat up Beth, we're leaving soon." I hoped the finality would deter our unwelcome guest.

"I have something else you might like, Beth darling," Ben beamed. He pulled a stiff black wallet from his hip pocket and ostentatiously laid it on the table, revealing a thick wad of fifty dollar notes. He extracted a piece of coloured paper and carefully unfolded it, smoothing out the centre wrinkle to reveal the face of Yusof bin Ishak—the first president of Singapore.

"This is a two dollar note from Singapore. Have you ever been to another country?"

Beth shook her head, affecting a mask of curls across her peachy face. Ben laughed lightly and reached forward to push the curls aside and reveal her smiling eyes.

"I spend my time equally between Singapore and Darwin," Ben explained to me. As he lunged into an account of his successful business enterprise and various properties that he owned, I noticed that his eyes only briefly met mine as he spoke, returning to Beth repeatedly. The solid ball in my stomach started to ache.

He returned his full attention to Beth. "You can keep this if you promise to be a good girl and always do what your mother tells you to do," his eyes were alight as he held her hand and

placed the currency into it. “You know, I have a friend who has a beautiful little puppy to give away. Perhaps I could bring it your home on the weekend?” He barely took his eyes from Beth as he smiled hopefully in my direction.

A puppy to a complete stranger? A ringing started in my ears and it wasn't tinnitus. It was alarm bells.

The large piece of lemon chicken rolling around my mouth had difficulty finding its way down my throat. I nodded my head up and down like a bird trying to dislodge a hot chip that was stuck half way down.

I didn't like the number of times Ben had leant across to touch my Beth in the last ten minutes. I didn't like the way he directed most of his attention at a three year old. But I especially didn't like the way his eyes narrowed after he smiled at Beth, changing his eyes from intense to predatorial.

I didn't ask for a plastic container for the leftovers, or wait for the bill. Susan was in one arm, the nappy bag dangling from the crook of my elbow and Beth being towed unhappily behind as I threw cash by the register and headed for the stairs.

“I wanna puppy,” Beth whined.

Whether it was the feeling of eyes on my back or the need to ensure that my back was safe, I instantly regretted the defensive glance behind me. Ben's too white teeth gleamed in my direction. No confusion on his face at our hurried exit.

His face was serene. Patient.