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SAFELY HOME

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It cost him everything he had... but he gained everything that mattered.

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THREE MEN watched intently as peculiar events occurred, one right after the other, on opposite sides of the globe.

"What's happening?" asked the first, tall and dark skinned.

"I don't know," replied the man with long black hair. "But wheels are turning, aren't they?"

"Things appear synchronized," said the third man, compact and broad shouldered. "A pattern is emerging. Something great seems poised to happen. Something else lurks in the shadows. It seeks to devour the greatness before it is born."

"Two destinies are converging. But neither suspects it."

The tall one pointed toward a great palace in the distance. "He searches to find the right man for the right hour. Is this the hour? Is this the man?"

"And if so, *which* man? Or both? We see far more clearly than they do. But still our minds are too small to figure it all out."

"The soil was tilled and the seeds planted twenty years ago," the broad-shouldered man said. "No. A hundred years, at least. Now we will see what fruit the vine produces, or whether it will wither and die."

"Hanging in the balance are not just two men," said the longhaired man, "but two families, perhaps two nations."

"Indeed, two worlds."

"The loss could be immense. Or the gain immeasurable." His voice trembled.

"We must watch closely as the tapestry is woven . . . or as it unravels."

"We must do more than watch." The tall man reached out one hand to the other two, who grasped it firmly, the muscles of their forearms taut. They now looked like warriors.

"The stakes are high."

"Higher than they can possibly imagine. Higher than we ever dreamed when we walked that world."

"Somebody's got to make the tough calls," Ben Fielding muttered. "And I don't see anyone else volunteering."

He picked up the phone from his oversized mahogany desk at the far side of his window office on the thirty-ninth floor of the U.S. Bancorp Tower. It was a bright September morning, and Oregon was the best place in the world to live in the fall, but he had more important things to do than admire the view.

"Doug? We need to talk."

"Sure," said Doug Roberts from his desk in the sales department. "What's up?"

"I have a management team meeting right now. Might take an hour. I'll call you in when it's over. Be sure you're available. I've got a conference call before lunch, and I won't have much time."

"Okay, Ben. But what do you want to talk about?"

"I'll call you when I'm ready." Ben still gripped the phone tightly three seconds after he'd finished talking. Finally he put it down.

Doug was his cousin, his mom's sister's son. They'd grown up on the East Coast, a few hundred miles apart. They'd spent most holidays together, wrestling in the snow or exploring the beach or playing Parcheesi in front of the fire. Those were the days . . . when life was simple, and loyalties easily maintained.

Now they both worked in Portland, Oregon, on the opposite seaboard, for Getz International, a leading-edge multinational corporation. As a department head fifteen years ago, Ben had offered Doug a sales job, and he'd jumped at it. They were both young and hungry back then.

Doug had so much potential. Why had he forced his hand? Once he'd been an asset to Ben. Now he'd become a liability.

That Doug was family made it messy. Ben would probably have to skip the holiday gatherings this year. Doug had backed him into a corner. He had to send a clear message to all the employees – Ben Fielding doesn't tolerate insubordination, and he doesn't play favorites.

"Martin's in the boardroom." His secretary's voice over the intercom yanked Ben back to the moment. "They're ready for you."

"On my way."

Ben stopped in front of the mirror on the back side of his office door, ran a comb through his hair, then straightened his Shanghai silk tie. He went to the door of the conference room, took a deep breath, and calculated his entrance. He walked in briskly but not too hurried. He stood tall and smiled pleasantly without grinning, a smile he'd practiced in the mirror. Dressed in a black Armani with a boxy Italian fit, Ben Fielding was a self-made picture of style, poise, and competence. There were eight men in the room, and every eye was on him.

"Hey, Ben," Martin said, "we're talking about that dream you spelled out for us ten years ago – selling one of everything to a country of 1.2 billion people!" Suddenly Martin's broad smile evaporated. "Travis here and a couple of the team have voiced some concerns."

Ben raised his eyebrows and stared at Travis.

"The situation's not stable," Travis said, looking at his Palm Pilot instead of Ben. "I don't trust that government."

"China won't be bullied by anyone," Ben said. "That's what Hong Kong was all about. And Macao. They won't let 'foreign devils' control their destiny. What's theirs is theirs."

"And what isn't theirs eventually will be," Travis said.

Ben shrugged. "I'll say it again. If one nation dictates everybody's future, it won't be America. It'll be China. The sooner everybody comes to terms with that, the better we can position ourselves."

"One thing's for sure," Martin said; "there's not another semiconductor or microchip company with our access to Beijing and Shanghai. Between Ben and Jeffrey, we've established one major beachhead."

Martin Getz, showing straight white teeth in a smile so big it drew in everyone, was CEO of Getz International. His father had started the company in 1979, just before the computer revolution changed the world.

"Okay, okay, guys. What's the report on the Shanghai factory?"

"All indicators are positive," Jeffrey said. "Production's still going up. With socialism loosening its grip and workers getting more for their labor, there's a new Chinese work ethic. Without all those paranoid safety and antipollution regulations, they get done in a week what takes us a month – and their Q.A. tallies are better."

"I don't want to hear this," Johnny said, his suit lapels flaring as he leaned back, playfully covering his ears. "There are certain things lawyers shouldn't know."

"We can't impose American standards on them," Ben said. It was a mantra he'd repeated at many team meetings. "And even if we could, we don't have the right. But we can demand the highest product standards. And we're getting great results. These people are bright, smart, eager to work. They don't know about unions; they're just grateful to make a living and be able to buy a refrigerator, a TV, maybe even a computer."

Ben's confident voice commanded attention. There was a presence about him. Martin was the boss, but Ben was the brains and energy. Everyone knew it.

"China's still our fastest growing market?" Martin asked.

"In another few years they'll be our biggest customer – period," Ben said. "China has a skyrocketing economy with hundreds of millions of residences that'll add computers and a dozen other electronic devices in the next ten years. Dayton's assembling the network cards in Mexico. They'll ship direct from there to our joint-venture partnerships in-country and bypass China's trade restrictions. It brings the end product cost down and gets it into more hands. Getz benefits inside China; then we score again when it's shipped back here at a fraction of the cost, and we sell it through traditional distribution channels. Our competitors' heads will be spinning. In the next few years they'll be eating our dust."

"They'll never catch up," Martin said, all teeth again.

"I wish I shared your confidence," Travis said. "Seems to me we're walking on a minefield. It's a shaky economy. Human rights issues, overbuilding in Shanghai . . . not to mention Beijing's ability to pull the plug on anyone for any reason."

"It's capitalists and communists scratching each other's backs," Ben said. "Sure, they've got problems. They know the state-owned enterprises are inefficient, banks are folding, and pollution's terrible. There's still a lot of trial and error, but they're learning fast. I've been saying it since my first trip to Beijing – China's our future, guys. It offers us the most cost-effective partnerships on the planet. And it's a dream market come true."

"Just make sure they keep needing us, Ben," Martin said. "You too, Jeffrey. We don't want them to get any ideas of doing it on their own."

"Oh, they've got the ideas, alright," Ben said. "They're swimming in U.S. and Japanese technology, and they can imitate it like nobody else. Give them a decade, and they'll be improving it. Eventually, they'll be our strongest competitors. We'll be racing to keep up. But meanwhile, we've got the edge. Russia couldn't handle free enterprise, but these people can. Their work ethic gets stronger every day, while ours gets weaker. Another six to eight years, and they'll be putting America to shame."

Martin looked at Ben with undisguised admiration. "Ten years ago when you told us you could bring in millions of dollars if you studied Mandarin on company time, I thought you'd gone crazy. But it worked. Boy, did it work! They trust us – you and Jeffrey, especially. You speak their language, know their culture. That's our edge." Martin stood up. "And I want to shore up that edge. I've been chewing on an idea since that Fortune 500 CEO think tank I attended in Chicago a couple of months ago."

Martin looked around the room the way he always did before announcing an idea he was particularly proud of. Several of the men, including Ben, braced themselves. Nobody ever quite knew what Martin would come up with next.

"I'd like to send Ben or Jeffrey to spend maybe six weeks living among and talking with typical Chinese citizens, the type that might work in our factories and eventually buy our products. Ben, what about that old roommate of yours from college? He lives in China, right? A teacher, isn't he?"

Ben nodded. Li Quan's youthful face invaded his mind and infused it with bittersweet memories. It was just like Martin to spring this on him with everybody watching. As it began to register, it didn't seem a good idea at all. It had been twenty years since he . . .

"Getting inside the mind of the typical consumer would help our sales strategy and deepen our reservoir for those Chinese advertising campaigns that marketing's been talking about. And it would be great PR on both sides of the ocean. We'd be the company that sent a Mandarin-speaking VP to live with Chinese nationals to see what they're like, to learn what they need. It's the 'we care about the common man' angle. It would impress the Chinese, our board, stockholders – everybody. A big image-booster for Getz. The advertising potential is enormous. Ben or Jeffrey could end up in a prime-time commercial sitting next to some Chinese guy grinning at his computer!"

The other members of the management team looked at each other to see which way the wind would blow. Then they all stared at Ben. He hesitated. But when Martin felt this strongly about an idea, it nearly always happened. You might as well go with him and look brilliant and loyal. Everyone nodded.

"Anyway, more on that later," Martin said. "Let's hit the agenda. Our third-quarter profits are going to blow them away. When this hits Wall Street, things are going to fly. Hold on to your hats, boys. Your profit shares could increase ten percent overnight."

An hour later Ben walked out of the conference room, glad-handing his associates and feeling the warm rush of competitive adrenaline. As he came out the door, he saw Doug Roberts standing by a photocopy machine. His stomach churned. He looked at his watch.

Conference call in six minutes. "Doug," he called, "meeting'll have to wait until Monday morning. My office, 7:30."

"Sure. But what are we going to—"

"7:30 Monday. My office. I've got a conference call."

Ben strode past his secretary, Jen, and into his office. He shut the door behind him and flopped down on the plush visitors' couch.

Until their lives took different turns, Doug had been not only family, but a close friend. Ben knew he couldn't afford to think of him that way anymore. And if Doug still considered Ben a friend, well . . . he wouldn't much longer.