

PRESS KIT

Feng Shui and Charlotte Nightingale by Pam Ferderbar

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Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte Nightingale was plain like oatmeal is plain. Not crunchy and wearing Birkenstocks like granola, nor as delicate as a good piece of whitefish.

Joseph Lozzi, who at his insistence went as “Frank,” might have (with a bit of class and two nickels to rub together) passed for a young Sinatra. However, on most days, his thrift shop suits smelled of mothballs and the pockets were empty.

The dull thud of an empty bottle hitting the carpet seemed to trigger Charlotte’s clock radio. Stuck between stations, it blasted a cacophony of L.A.’s top Latino talk radio and an infomercial concerning toenail fungus. Charlotte opened her eyes in the hope that something might have changed, but her life, her man, and her room were just as they were left the night before. The bedside table remained dusted with cigarette ashes Joey never seemed to quite deposit in the ashtray. Cigarette butts floated in an ice bucket that Joey insisted accompany his bottle of Jack Daniel’s and a chipped crystal tumbler he kept with him at all times.

The thin veneer of Charlotte’s dresser remained curled and peeling where the years and inferior glue had left their mark. Shreds of nylon hose hung like cobwebs over drawers that overflowed with odd socks, bra straps, and scraps of paper. The surface of her dresser was a jumble of books, handbags with broken straps, mate-less earrings, magazines, matchbooks, sewing projects that she never quite got to, an empty tape dispenser, and a dusty bouquet she caught at a cousin’s wedding.

The bandleader had asked all the single women to line up for the big toss and although she loathed such corny displays, Charlotte capitulated after her ribs were nearly cracked by Mom’s aggressive elbow. Charlotte leapt up, straight out of her seat, upsetting her chair with a loud crash. The bouquet hit her square in the face, producing a black eye and an allergic reaction to calla lilies that caused her lips to swell like a grouper.

A protrusion in the bed beside Charlotte stirred. “Be a good dame for chrissakes and turn off that noise,” spoke the lump that was Joey. Charlotte reached over and banged the clock radio into submission, then sat up, startled, as she was every morning, by her own reflection in the dresser mirror facing the bed.

She pulled Joey's wrinkled white dress shirt closely around her and got up. Navigating the floor, which was strewn with odd shoes, heaps of clothing, books, and the empty liquor bottle, Charlotte stubbed her big toe on the leg of a chair. She hopped on one foot and attempted to tug loose a bra from the tangled mess in the drawer.

"Frank needs some sugar," Joey said, puckering up. He lit a cigarette and smiled rakishly. "Is that my shirt?" He squinted at Charlotte. "Hey, I have to wear that today!"

She looked back for a moment, and then gave the bra another tug, whereupon the strap broke loose and the undergarment was jettisoned deep into the drawer. She extricated a jog bra, its elastic long since its prime, and a pair of stretched-out knee socks, and turned to him.

"Do you have an interview today, Joey?" Charlotte was as hopeful as possible, given the response of which she was resignedly certain.

"How many times I gotta tell ya, Baby?" He flicked cigarette ashes onto the nightstand some distance from the ashtray. "Now get over here and give *Frank* a smooch."

"Frank," she said flatly, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "You promised you were going to look for a job today."

He dropped his cigarette butt into the murky ice bucket. "I think it's gonna rain," he growled playfully, tugging her shirt.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled the garment tightly around her, lifted the hat off his toe, and plopped it on his head. "You said you were going to look for a job."

Charlotte got up, missed the treacherous chair leg, and disappeared into the closet while Joey adjusted his hat and lit another cigarette.

"You know I work at night, Baby," he said, and then blew a smoke ring.

From within the bowels of the closet, she countered unenthusiastically, "You don't actually work at all, *Frank*."

He swung his legs out of bed. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

She emerged from the closet with a terrific assortment of mismatched skirts, pants, sweaters, and shirts that she scattered across the bed. "What should I wear?"

He picked up a plaid skirt with the hem falling down. "What goes with what?"

She took the skirt from him and dug into the pile, where she pulled loose a floral blouse and a cardigan without a single color in common with the other two garments. "There. This goes together," she said, questioning her own judgment.

He looked at the bizarre ensemble, raised his eyebrow, and smiled. "You look good in anything, Baby."

Not entirely convinced, but running out of time, she dashed out of the room. "Staple the hem for me, would you? I'm late."

He sat down on the bed, puffed his cigarette and glanced around the room. "Stapler," he mused, exhaling.

Charlotte closed the bathroom door behind her and pulled a string that turned on a flickering light over a stained porcelain sink. She frowned at her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. She felt that her eyes were set a little too closely, her nose curved slightly to one side, and her mouth lacked character. It wasn't the look of a fashion model, or even a woman in an erectile dysfunction commercial. Those women leaned more toward the glamorous. Charlotte's looks were perfectly suited to a librarian—her dream job. Looking down the barrel of another day at her current crappy job, she moaned quietly as she pulled off the shirt and opened the bathroom door. Joey was sitting on the bed, smoking. She hung the shirt on the outside doorknob.

“Stapler, Frank. Stapler.”

She closed the bathroom door and reached into the tub to turn on the hot water. Waiting for it to heat, Charlotte slid the medicine cabinet mirror over and took out her toothbrush and the Mentadent, which felt heart-sinkingly light in her hands. Expectantly holding her toothbrush under the nozzle of the plastic dispenser, she pushed on the head to no avail.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte braced the contraption against her thigh and pushed on it until the oval-shaped bottom was embedded in her flesh, then slapped the toothpaste gadget on the chipped edge of the sink and heaved on it with the heel of her hand. The Mentadent dispenser was unyielding, but the sink was not. It jerked a few inches from the wall, revealing the black abyss between apartments. She grabbed a dingy towel and stuffed it into the hole before sucking the last molecules of minty dreck out of the Mentadent nozzle. She stepped into the tub, flung the mildewed shower curtain closed and pulled the lever for the shower.

Snatching the Herbal Essence from a rusted wire shower caddy, only to discover it was empty, Charlotte nonetheless was determined to wash her hair. She unscrewed the cap and held it under the showerhead adding enough water to dilute the coagulated gunk stuck to the bottle's innards. The milky suds that eventually plopped onto her scalp did little more than coat her hair in a thin film—and provide an enormous annoyance—when the shower cut off mid-stream. She stepped out of the tub, put on a shabby chenille bathrobe, opened the bathroom door, and groped for the outside knob. The knob was bare. Joey's shirt was gone.

A narrow hallway ran the length of Charlotte's apartment, leading to a cramped living room, traversed overhead by heavy beams that the previous tenants—Druids, Charlotte supposed—had painted black. A small closet, built without permits by said Druids, jutted into the room at a bizarre angle. The combination of architectural abomination and the mismatched furniture shoved against the walls, gave the space the appearance of a waiting room at a free clinic in Uzbekistan. What the apartment lacked in visual appeal, however, was overcompensated for by a sheer volume of books—amassed along the walls, wedged

between chairs, towering from every surface and arranged in strict accordance with the Dewey Decimal System.

Charlotte marched to a tall stack of classics under the room's singular window. Carefully setting aside the top three books, she reached for the fourth and flipped it open. "*To my darling Jemma,*" the inscription read. "*Happy Wednesday. With all my love, Brian.*" Jaw clenched, Charlotte's hand quickly scoured the pages. In desperation, she shook the book upside down—empty. She resented Jemma and Brian and their damned happy days of the week, but mostly it irked her that people would mar a perfectly good book with such banal sentiment. *They should invent a library prison for people like that,* she posited. Then she thought about what had been taken from the book and her stomach seized with anxiety.

"Joey, you asshole," she muttered to herself, plopping onto the sofa, one leg of which had been replaced by three *Plumbing for Dummies* editions, thick as phone books.

"Hey, you're a smart broad. You don't need to use that kind of language, Baby." Joey sauntered out of the kitchen, swirling Jack Daniel's over the melting ice in his crystal tumbler. He tossed back half the drink and grinned cockeyed at Charlotte.

She stood to face him and her knees went weak. He was a louse all right, but he was a sexy louse. "The rent money's gone. I thought you left." The words poofed into thin air and lost their gravity even as they came out of her mouth.

"What happened to your hair?" He stared at the hard crust forming atop her head and took a sip of his cocktail before setting it on a volume of Keats. "I wouldn't just take your dough and blow. You really know how to hit a guy where it hurts." He tripped over a wilted potted plant in the foyer and opened the front door. "I'll pay you back tomorrow."

He was gone.

"It's the rent money. I gotta have it," she pleaded to no one, wiping a ring of condensation from the cover of the poetry book with the sleeve of her bathrobe. Shoulders slumping, scratching an itchy scalp, Charlotte shuffled into the kitchen with Joey's glass.

The avocado green stove, harvest gold fridge, and flecked yellow linoleum floor had, in the decades since they were first installed, taken on a grimy patina. Charlotte walked through the dreary room and out the sliding aluminum doors to the balcony, which overlooked Spanky's, a hugely popular fetish and sex toyshop across the street. Ever since S&M had gone mainstream the shop did booming business at all hours of the day and night.

She pulled a quilted blue moving blanket off a group of five-gallon water jugs, and in spite of a seemingly apparent lack of muscles, she effortlessly picked up one of the heavy bottles and hoisted it onto the seat of an old canvas director's chair with the words "Hair & Make-Up" stitched across its back. In one synchronized movement she dropped to her knees, ripped the red rubber seal off the bottle, ducked beneath the torrent of cold water and rinsed her hair.

It would have appeared that she had managed rather gracefully to pull off this peculiar bathing ritual had it not been for her neglect in bringing a towel to the party. When nothing was left in the bottle Charlotte blindly groped for the towel, knowing she had forgotten it. As icy water soaked her bathrobe and pooled around her kneeling figure, she squeezed as much liquid as possible from her dripping hair.

風
水

Life at the Emperor's Kitchen restaurant in L.A.'s Chinatown began the same way every morning. Old Man Kwan hosed down the sidewalk in front of the establishment and cursed the people who had deposited chewing gum and cigarette butts on his property. Years of practice taught him exactly how to position the hose at his hip, crooked thumb pressed over the mouth just so, giving him maximum water pressure and trajectory.

"Yeeeeha!" he screeched as he made a direct hit on a boy with a purple Mohawk whizzing by on a \$500 Tony Hawk skateboard. "Yeeeehoooy!" he squawked while dousing another boy, drenching the kid's Laker jersey.

A battered white Toyota pulled up at the curb, and the old man made a grand gesture of looking at his bare wrist as though it displayed a watch. "You are late," he said flatly as his son stepped out from behind the wheel.

Known simply as Kwan, the young man looked nothing like his father. Standing erect, dressed casually in faded jeans and white T-shirt, and sporting a long silky black ponytail, Kwan was tall, lean and muscular. With high, well-defined cheekbones, deep brown eyes and a full, expressive mouth, Kwan was simply beautiful.

He had slept well the night before, but as he did every single workday, he felt exhausted the instant he got to the restaurant. Sighing, he picked up a cigarette butt his dad had missed.

"I get here the same time every day," Kwan said, placing the cigarette in a Folgers coffee can on the sidewalk.

"Watch your tone," the old man admonished, narrowing his eyes. He toyed with the idea of turning the hose on his son, then thought better of it as a gang of schoolchildren came his way, lugging Sponge Bob backpacks and Spiderman lunch boxes. His thumb twitched over the nozzle of the hose.

"Dad! Don't you dare!"

The old man's shoulders slumped with disappointment as he trudged to the spigot, turned off the water, and coiled the hose. "They could walk on the other side of the street," he griped.

A pimped red Honda with an Indy-sized spoiler screeched to a stop a fraction of an inch behind Kwan's Toyota, vibrating with the BOOM BOOM BOOM of West Coast gangsta rap. The old man lunged for the spigot. Kwan blocked him.

"I'll finish up here. Go on inside, Dad."

"No-good-nik," the old man hissed, glaring at the Honda.

"Is that Russian? Kwan asked.

"I picked it up playing chess at the park with Vladimir Efimov," Kwan's father explained, then added, "...when I'm not busy working to support my family and bring a better way of life for my children than I had in Yangtze Province where we didn't have shoes or..."

Kwan cut him off. "Yes, yes, I know. It was uphill to the people's re-education center. It was uphill back home to the commune. It was all uphill."

Kwan Senior grumbled and shuffled his way into the restaurant. The Honda's driver watched the old man disappear before getting out of the car.

"Dog," the young man exclaimed with a South Central inflection although he was Chinese, and originally from the O.C.

"Shit, Dragon Breath is off the chain." Harold Yee, Kwan's best friend since first grade, was a squat young man wearing baggy jeans slung well below his butt and a Sean John polo shirt big enough to house the entire Ming Dynasty. He ran his hands over his shaved head. "Let's hit the beach."

Kwan glanced at the door to the restaurant. "Yeah, right."

Traffic on the street had backed up due to a rusty Jetta stalled at the light. A piece of plaid fabric fluttered from the bottom of the driver's door. The car lurched forward and stalled a second time, forcing a trailing Mercedes to jam to a screeching halt. Horns blared and fists shook. Charlotte Nightingale could only slump behind her Jetta's wheel.

"Yo," Harold said, looking at Charlotte. "Check it out."

"She's a customer." Kwan took a step off the curb in Charlotte's direction. "Maybe I can help..."

Harold grabbed him by the sleeve. "No!"

Kwan pulled his arm away. "What?"

Wiping an invisible smudge from the passenger door of the Honda with the tail of his shirt, Harold shook his head.

"*Shar chi*," he said solemnly. "She's got the poison arrows on her ass, man."

Kwan rolled his eyes. "Not that again."

Harold was a skimmer. He could flip through a book on nuclear fission, or Feng Shui, and pick up enough catch phrases to sound knowledgeable as long as the person with whom he was speaking had no actual knowledge of the subject. In the event the person knew a little something about the topic, Harold looked like a boob, which was a constant source of

irritation to Kwan. Nonetheless, they had been friends since childhood and Harold just wouldn't go away. Kwan had always worked in the family's restaurant and Harold prevailed upon Kwan to get him a job there as well—a constant source of aggravation to Old Man Kwan, who viewed Harold as a parasite rather than an employee.

Charlotte bent forward and banged her head on the Jetta's steering wheel.

“Straight up. She probably has to crawl into that hoopty through the window. She's a hot mess,” Harold said. “Look, her dress is hanging out the door. Come on, open your eyes. You're the Feng Shui master, and she's a disaster!” Harold beamed. “Who says Chinese don't flow?”

“I am a student, not a master,” Kwan said, and for good measure windmill-kicked Harold who then fell to the ground with a thud. That was the other reason they remained friends; both were ardent martial arts enthusiasts, although like everything else Harold had only a perfunctory command of the various martial arts disciplines and absolutely no skill. He picked himself up and attempted to throw a right hook that Kwan ducked, nearly causing Harold a dislocated shoulder.

The Jetta whined pathetically when Charlotte tried to restart it. Just as the engine caught and the car jerked forward, an elderly woman pulling a cart laden with grocery bags entered the opposite crosswalk. To avoid running the woman over Charlotte hit the brakes and once again the Jetta died—this time in the intersection. The old woman shook her fist at Charlotte as total gridlock ensued.

Harold pushed Kwan toward the restaurant. “Come on, let's get goin' before your old man passes a stone.” He chuckled. “And I am flowin'!”

Hoping to perform a disappearing act, Charlotte sank ever deeper into her seat.