

FOUR

GRANDPA

When Mieko came to, she heard voices. The principal was speaking to Miss Suzuki.

“She just seems to be overexcited, that’s all.”

“What makes it so sad,” Miss Suzuki said, “is that a few children have been teasing her. As if she hasn’t been through enough.”

Mieko sat up and drank some water. All she wanted now was to get out of there.

“Do you think you can walk home alone?” Miss Suzuki’s voice was concerned. “I can send one of the students with you.”

“No, thank you!” Mieko said quickly. “I’m fine now.”

She certainly did not want any help from them. And if Grandma knew about the fainting spell, she would make a fuss and call the doctor.

Mieko left the school. But instead of going straight home, she slowly walked to the field. Grandpa was working up to his hips in rice plants that were turning a golden brown. Mieko stood on the path, kicking up little clouds of dirt until he saw her and came over.

“Phew!” he exclaimed, tipping back his straw hat and wiping his forehead with a small towel. “Autumn is late this year. I’ll be glad when it cools off.”

Mieko noticed how much his tanned face was like Father’s—yet different. It was thinner and more wrinkled, and Grandpa’s hair was gray.

“How was school?” Grandpa asked, tucking the small towel back into his belt.

“Awful!” Mieko mumbled. “I hate everyone there.”

Grandpa gave her a quick glance that seemed to see right into Mieko’s mind.

“That is a heavy load of hate for a little girl to carry around.” He rubbed the bony knuckles of his hands to ease the arthritis. “Of course they are all monsters?”

“Yes!” Mieko replied.

“Have you tried to be friends with anyone?”

Mieko thought of Yoshi. She shrugged and kept her head down so that she wouldn't have to meet his eyes.

Grandpa swept an arm toward the rice field.

"See that? Rice does not grow all by itself. I must plant the seeds, fertilize them, and see that no weeds stop their growth. Then I must separate the seedlings and plant them farther apart. It is not easy." His face was serious. "It is not easy to make friends either, especially when you hate almost everyone."

Then he stretched and started back toward the field.

"Think about it!" he called over his shoulder.

Mieko was too upset to think about his words. She wasn't interested in growing rice, anyway.

At the house a shock was waiting for her. Inside the entrance, neatly placed together on the cement floor—toes out—were two shiny brown shoes.

Mieko tried to slip past the living room, but Grandma heard her.

"There you are!" she said. "We have been waiting for you. Come in and say hello to Miss Suzuki."

Mieko sighed and stepped up into the room. She knelt on the tatami, and bowed her head in greeting. She wondered what Miss Suzuki wanted.

Grandma poured some tea for Mieko into one of her best cups. Mieko noticed the flower design—the same as on Mother's dishes.

"Miss Suzuki thinks that you should stay home for a little while until you have your strength back," Grandma said.

The teacher nodded.

"When you feel better, Mieko, you may come back to us. You are always welcome." She gave Grandma a sideways glance. "There is plenty of time."

Mieko watched them over the rim of her cup.

Grandma frowned, tucking a wisp of gray hair into the bun at the back. "But Mieko must learn to get along with other children. And there is her painting ..."

Miss Suzuki leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“Please don’t worry. Mieko will be back in school soon and she can easily catch up. Of course, there is no reason why she cannot continue her painting at home. ”

Mieko’s face lit up. No more school! No more teasing from Akira and the boys. No more giggles behind her back. Maybe she would never go back to that school. But continue with her painting? How could she do that? Without the fifth treasure it didn’t matter.

Later that day, the mailman brought a letter from Mother.

Dear Mieko,

There are so many patients that your father and I are working long hours in the clinic. We hope that you are happy on the farm and getting strong and healthy. By now you must be in school and making many new friends. Write to us when you can. We miss you.

Love, Mother

“Any news from home?” Grandma asked.

Mieko shook her head. Then she ran upstairs and put the letter away.

That night she was already in bed when Grandpa came home late. His footsteps sounded heavy and tired on the stairs.

“Mieko,” he whispered, “are you still awake?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and pretended to be asleep. Mieko didn’t want to hear any more about growing rice or making friends.

“I understand, ” Grandpa said, as if he knew that she was faking. “When the time is right, you will go back to school.”

The kindness in his voice made Mieko feel worse. She lay very still, scarcely breathing.

At the door Grandpa said softly, “Believe me, Mieko, some lovely sunny day you will look around and find a friend. And in your happiness you will paint beautiful word-pictures again. Just like before.”

Mieko heard the rustle of the door sliding shut.

“He’s wrong,” she thought. “I’ve lost the fifth treasure for good. And I’ll never be happy again.”