



BONNIE DEE
Captive Bride





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By Bonnie Dee

San Francisco, 1870

Huiann arrives in America expecting to be wed to a wealthy businessman. She no sooner disembarks from the ship than she realizes Xie is not looking for a bride: Huiann is worth more to him as a high-end prostitute. Though her fate is better than that of other Chinese women forced into the sex trade, she has no intention of waiting for Xie to sell her virginity to the highest bidder. At the first opportunity, she escapes and disappears into the city.

When a beautiful woman takes refuge in his store, Alan's life changes forever. He's spent the last five years trying to forget the horrors of war, and had almost given up hope of finding love. He hires Huiann as his housekeeper, and though they can only communicate through signs and sketches, they quickly form a bond that transcends the need for words.

But Xie is determined to recover his property, and love may not be enough to protect Huiann from his vengeance.

Dear Reader,

A new year always brings with it a sense of expectation and promise (and maybe a vague sense of guilt). Expectation because we don't know what the year will bring exactly, but promise because we always hope it will be good things. The guilt is due to all of the New Year's resolutions we make with such good intentions.

This year, Carina Press is making a New Year's resolution we know we won't have any reason to feel guilty about: we're going to bring our readers a year of fantastic editorial and diverse genre content. So far, our plans for 2011 include staff and author appearances at reader-focused conferences such as the RT Booklovers Convention in April, where we'll be offering up goodies, appearing on panels, giving workshops and hosting a few fun activities for readers. We're also cooking up several genre-specific release weeks, during which we'll highlight individual genres. So far we have plans for steampunk week and unusual fantasy week. Readers will have access to free reads, discounts, contests and more as part of our week-long promotions!

But even when we're not doing special promotions, we're still offering something special to our readers in the form of the stories authors are delivering to Carina Press that we're passing on to you. From sweet romance to sexy, and military science fiction to fairy-tale fantasy, from mysteries to romantic suspense, we're proud to be offering a wide variety of genres and

tales of escapism to our customers in this new year. Every week is a new adventure, and we want to bring our readers along on the journey. Be daring, be brave and try something new with Carina Press in 2011!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!
~Angela James

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Dedication

For all women who have suffered or continue to
endure injustice.

Chapter One

1870, off the California coast

Clouds were painted on the flat blue-gray sky, not even a gull disturbing the barren heavens. From great black stacks, ribbons of white billowed behind the rapidly moving ship. Although the steamer cut steadily through the waves, it seemed it wasn't moving at all—as though Huiann would spend the rest of her life standing on this deck, waiting for her new life to begin.

When she imagined meeting her husband for the first time, she wavered between nervous anticipation and wrenching fear. Was he handsome, ugly, old, young? Would he treat her gently and listen to her thoughts or expect her to keep silent about her ideas as she tended his house? She hadn't been allowed to ask such questions when her parents announced she was to be a bride.

Huiann's parents had found their three daughters husbands one by one, but by the time it was her turn, the family's prosperity was depleted. So when prosperous American businessman Xie Fuhua sent his agent Lui Dai to secure a bride from the home country and the man spotted Huiann walking in the park, it was considered a miraculous blessing.

"The gods have favored my employer, Xie Fuhua, with riches to match his name," Lui Dai explained to Huiann's father. "Any family would be lucky to make

such an alliance. With your daughter's favorable face and family name, she'll be the perfect bride for him."

"Our ancestors smile on us today! Such a husband will give you a secure future," her mother assured her, and in less time than it took to steep tea, the contract was signed and sealed, along with Huiann's fate. She was to be married to the illustrious Xie Fuhua upon her arrival in San Francisco.

Although Huiann had always dreamed of traveling to foreign lands, faced with the reality her heart ached for Suzhou, her beautiful town on the Yangtze, which she might never see again. Her parents would rest with their ancestors by Lake Taihu while she would be buried far from home.

What would her new home be like? Would her in-laws accept her into their family with warm embraces or be disappointed in the bride their son had acquired from the home country? A mother-in-law could make her new daughter's life heaven or hell on earth. And with Huiann's impatient nature, she was quite likely to do something to earn chastisement and bring shame upon her family name. It was as inevitable as the west wind blowing.

Curling her hand around the wet iron railing, she gazed once more at the turbulent gray-green waves before turning to go below deck to check on her chaperone in their stateroom. Madam Teng, another of Xie's servants sent to escort his bride to America, was miserable with seasickness and lay moaning in her berth day after day.

As Huiann descended from the bright world above to the suffocating dimness of the saloon deck, the thrum of great turbines rattled her very bones. The ship

was a fire-breathing dragon devouring the miles between two continents. On the lowest level, men shoveled coal into the beast's belly to keep her moving. It was like the story of Ping Liu, forced to serve the dragon king for a dozen years to free a princess then tricked into eighty more years of slavery. Huiann felt sorry for the toiling men and curious about the mysterious world below her feet.

She passed her cabin, continuing along the corridor to the stairway leading down to the boiler room. She opened the door. Instantly the throb of the engine grew even louder. How deafening it must be for the men working right next to the great engine. She placed her slipper on the top step then the next. What was the worst that could happen? Someone would tell her to go back where she belonged. It wouldn't be the first time in her life curiosity had gotten her scolded. Despite her name, which meant *kind peace*, Huiann was anything but peaceful. Her mother had bemoaned her restless nature for her entire life, and it had led her into many places in Suzhou where a young lady had no business being.

Now it prodded her down the stairs. The heat increased with each step she took and the thud of the pistons deafened her. At the foot of the stairs, flickering red light from the boiler room flared in the window of the door facing her. She rose up on her toes to peer through the grimy window.

Inside the long low-ceilinged room, coal was piled across from flaming furnaces. A dozen half-naked men, their bodies shining with sweat, shoveled fuel into the burning chambers. They were as black as coal themselves from the dust that coated their skin. Their

muscles bulged and flexed with the effort of the never-ending task, and Huiann felt an odd tightening in her lower belly at the sight of their gleaming muscles. She looked away, embarrassed by the uncomfortable warmth that flooded her.

Deep inside she knew she'd soon see more than a little naked male flesh. What would her new husband look like without clothes on? What would he want her to do? Her mother had been frustratingly vague in her explanation of what to expect on her wedding night. "You must lay with your husband in quiet submission, and the gods will reward you with children."

Huiann knew about the act of copulation but couldn't imagine how it must feel. Just the idea of making her private parts accessible to her new husband made her flush with embarrassment. The actual union of their bodies was something she didn't want to dwell on. She could only imagine it would be painful and something to be gotten over with as quickly as possible.

Huiann watched the fascinating scene in the boiler room for several more moments before stepping away from the soot-smeared window. The door above opened and rapid footsteps pounded down the stairs. Huiann's gaze darted back and forth, searching for a place to hide. At her back lay the boiler room. In front of her was another door. She darted across the passage and through the door into the area of the ship just above the keel.

It was dark, stuffy and without so much as a porthole to cast light on its contents. One small lantern burned on the wall, illuminating bins, boxes, crates and kegs. Huiann squatted beside a crate, waiting for

the man on the stairs to go about his business so she could return to her room. The sound of hushed voices, whimpering, murmuring, crying and singing, floated from the dark behind her. Ghosts! The ship was haunted. Superstitious dread filled her for a moment before she realized the sounds she heard were very real and human.

Huiann rose from her crouch and wove between the storage crates to explore the area beyond. It was so dark in the hold she could barely make out a row of tall pens made of wooden slats lining one wall. Women's voices came from inside them. She caught her breath as the smell of bodily waste hit her, and she registered movement inside the nearest cage. Someone was imprisoned inside.

Human cargo. A slave ship. Her stomach lurched as if overcome with seasickness again.

The women spoke Chinese in dialects she didn't understand. Huiann spoke Wu, the regional dialect of Suzhou, and Mandarin, but couldn't decipher this rough peasant speech, perhaps Xiang or Gan.

For several moments she remained poised on the brink of flying back upstairs to the world where she belonged, to the comforts of her clean berth and the nuisance of Madam Teng. The foul odors and desolate weeping coming from the caged women were horrifying, but she couldn't ignore them, just as she'd never been able to pass a beggar on the streets of Suzhou without bestowing a coin or a dumpling from the kitchen.

She approached the nearest enclosure in which several women crouched. The one nearest the bars had long black hair lying in greasy hanks on either side of

her broad pockmarked face. The woman's fingers poked through the space between the slats, gripping the rough wood.

Huiann fixed her gaze on the raggedly chewed fingernails as she spoke to the woman in Mandarin. "Who did this to you? How can I help?"

The pie-faced woman's black eyes fixed on Huiann and she began to jabber quickly, her voice high and excited.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand you. Do you speak Wu? Mandarin?"

The woman only spoke faster and louder in her native dialect.

Huiann shook her head in frustration. "I don't understand. Can I get you something? Water?"

The word was echoed back to her from someone farther down the line. "Water!"

"Hello?" Huiann headed toward the sound, the acrid stench of ammonia forcing her to cover her nose with her sleeve. "Water?"

"Water," the voice responded. There was a flurry of movement inside one of the pens as the speaker pushed the other prisoners aside and moved toward Huiann. "Food. Water." The Mandarin words were interspersed with more regional dialect.

"I don't have anything." She held her hands wide open. "But I will try to bring something if you can wait." She was struck by the foolishness of her words. Of course they would wait. They had no choice. But how could she help them? Surely their captors must feed them. They'd be no good as slaves without receiving sufficient nourishment during the journey.

What kind of work were they bound for—working on farms and in factories or maybe as servants in wealthy homes? Huiann realized how little she knew about life in the foreign land that was soon to become her home.

She studied the pale face and single black eye staring at her from between the slats. This girl looked very young, surely no older than Huiann's little cousin Min. The lump in her throat nearly choked her and tears welled in her eyes. She touched the slender fingers that reached out for her.

"When we land, somehow I'll find a way to free you. My new husband is a great man in America, a rich man. When I tell him, he will fix this." She squeezed the girl's fingers then stood as the clamor of voices begging for help rose in a cacophony. "I'm sorry. I have to go now. I don't belong down here."

Huiann felt guilty at her relief in leaving the shrill clamor and the horrid smells behind as she retraced her steps along the dark passage, past the noisy engine room and up the stairs to the middeck. There she drew a deep breath. Sweat rolled down her face and her stomach felt as if she'd eaten a bad piece of fish. She went to the rail and leaned over as far as she dared. She retched up the contents of her stomach, which swirled away in the gray waves far below.

How could she take water down to the women, let alone food? And if someone caught her interfering what would they do to her? A feeling of hopelessness swelled through her, but she fought it off. Since when had she allowed circumstances to stop her once she had a goal in mind? Her mother had often bemoaned

her stubbornness and likened her to a thistle among peonies in comparison with her older sisters.

Huiann pushed away from the railing and went to her cabin, where Madam Teng lay on her berth, whimpering. Huiann offered her a dipper full of water from the small metal cistern allotted to their room. After Madam stopped grumbling and subsided into a doze, Huiann heaved the half-empty cask in her arms. She was barely able to clasp her arms around the slippery cylinder. It was awkward to carry and she feared discovery at any moment on this busy ship, but she made her way back down to the hold and the prisoners.

The cacophony of whispering, whining voices truly did sound like ghosts, and even though Huiann now knew they were flesh-and-blood women, a shiver still ran up her spine. She dipped water from the cistern and offered the tin cup to the grasping hands reaching through the bars. The cup was jerked from her and passed from one thirsty woman to another.

"Slowly or you'll spill it," she warned.

She refilled the cup several times before pulling out the tin of crackers she'd placed in the inner pocket of her loose-fitting *qípáo* gown. "I wish had more to offer. Maybe I can get food for you tomorrow." Already her mind was busily at work like a mouse worrying a piece of cheese from a trap as she tried to figure out a way to secure extra food from the galley.

She scraped the last of the water from the cistern and offered it to the woman who spoke a little Mandarin. The girl returned the empty cup to Huiann and then clasped her hand, her skin as cool as river

water. "Thank you. Thank you," she repeated her gratitude over and over, mixed with foreign words.

Huiann bobbed her head. "You're most welcome," she answered formally. "May the gods bestow only good fortune on you and your family."

"Great blessings come from heaven but small blessings come from man. Thank *you*, kind sister." The woman's accent was atrocious but the old proverb was clear enough. The gods could only be counted on for so much help. The rest was up to one's fellow man.

Huiann squeezed the cold hand then let go. "I must leave now. Tomorrow," she promised.

Once more she scurried upstairs, heart pounding as she passed the noisy boiler room, and returned the cask to her cabin where Madam Teng still slept. Huiann couldn't bear the thought of staying in the stuffy room for the rest of the night. She returned to the deck and her spot at the railing, which had become her true home on the ship.

The scent of brine replaced the ghastly odors from below, and the fresh air cooled Huiann's heated cheeks. She stared at the horizon where for weeks there'd been nothing to see but the union of ocean and sky. But as the sun emerged from clouds just long enough to set behind the fast-moving ship, its golden shafts illuminated a thin dark line bisecting ocean and sky in the east.

Land! By tomorrow they might reach it. She imagined meeting her husband for the first time and how he'd listen with concern when she told him about the miserable women imprisoned on the ship, even as he scolded her for going where she wasn't allowed. She fantasized about a handsome, bold man,

confronting the ship's captain, freeing the women and finding them jobs in one of his factories where they could earn money for passage home. What happened after that, she couldn't quite picture. Her wedding night was a mystery and the life she would live as the wife of an important American businessman would not come into focus.

She remained on deck until the sky turned gray and the first stars twinkled above. Only when the wind grew cold enough to steal her breath did she retreat below to her cabin where Madam Teng berated her for being gone so long.

When Huiann woke in the morning, the ship was steaming into the harbor. Her new life in America was about to begin.

Hands reached out for Alan, bony fingers waving like seaweed, grasping at him, entreating him to help. But he could do nothing for them. He was a skeleton himself, barely able to stand upright, only a burning core of stubbornness keeping him alive from one second to the next. The feeling of helplessness was worse than the ravenous hunger that had become a part of him, so he hardly noticed it any more than he would his hand or foot. He stared vacantly at a hawk circling far overhead—or maybe it was a vulture—and dreamed of his mother's drawing room filled with ladies in rustling silk dresses.

And then he was there in the overheated room filled with the smell of too many warm bodies covered by too much perfume. Stifling. He was choking from the heat and the cloying odor of decay, drowning with

lungs full of mud while hands grabbed hold of him and dragged him down.

Alan jerked awake, gasping and drenched in sweat, the blankets twisted around his body like coils of rope tying him to the bed. Another dream of the prison camp. He'd spent more nights in Andersonville in his mind than he had in reality. Was he condemned to suffer the rest of his life in that hell?

He rose and splashed his face with water from the basin. Drawing back the curtain, he looked through the warped, wavy glass at the street below bustling with traffic. Fog shrouded the carts and horses, carriages and pedestrians, stray dogs and homeless beggars that jostled for space. Another San Francisco morning had begun, the war was five years past and he was a shopkeeper not a soldier. He must concentrate on making the rest of his life productive and put the horrors to rest at last.

He stripped off his nightshirt, washed and dressed in a shirt, vest and jacket and woolen trousers probably too warm for the day ahead but fine for the early-morning chill. Then he went downstairs and entered the store below his rooms.

"Morning, Taylor. I'm going to the docks. I'll leave you to open."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sommers." Jeremy Taylor was as eager to please as a puppy that piddled on the floor every time a visitor patted its head. The young man's eyes were magnified by round spectacles and his slicked-back hair only emphasized his moon face. But he was a loyal employee, compulsive about tidying the stock and extremely punctual. Alan couldn't ask for a better clerk.

The weak sun burned through the fog as Alan walked down Sansome Street to the wharf. The bay smelled of brine and rotting fish mingled with the pall of coal smoke and the ripe scent of horse dung. From ocean liners to tugs, steamships to sailing vessels, the harbor was alive with motion. Alan felt energized by the activity and the sense that a man could board a ship and sail away across the vast ocean. If he hadn't already bought a store, maybe he would've become a sailor and traveled to foreign lands. But then he was already the breadth of a continent away from where he'd been born and maybe that was far enough. No matter how far he went, a man couldn't outrun bad dreams.

The pier was packed with people scurrying about their business like rats crawling over a garbage heap. There were tradesmen like Alan, buyers and sellers of the goods that came into port. Taverns lined the street and prostitutes lingered in front of them, luring sailors on shore leave. Most men were dressed in suits like Alan's, but some wore clothes from their native countries—Slavic boots and embroidered vests, Oriental robes or loose-fitting smocks and trousers. Foreign languages and regional English dialects spiced the flow of exchange. Hand signs were often the only way to haggle with importers from the Russian or Chinese ships.

Alan stopped in front of a docked steamer. Workers were unloading crates, kegs, burlap bags and boxes from the hold and piling them on the wharf. Local wholesaler Dong Li had already begun selling bolts of fabric, and a cluster of storeowners gathered around him, claiming them for exorbitant prices. Alan ordered

several dozen bolts of fabrics in a rainbow of colors and prints. Since more women were arriving in San Francisco from back east, the mercantile's supply of material and sewing notions vanished almost as soon as Alan restocked it. He made arrangements to have the fabric delivered to the store then stayed to talk to Dong Li.

"Who's your contact for imports? I'm interested in learning more about how the shipping business works." Even if he could only afford a small share in a steamship, it would be the beginning of cutting out the middleman, as goods coming into the harbor were growing more expensive every day.

Dong Li gazed at him with hawk eyes. "You want to invest?" He snorted. "You might as well dive into a pit of rattlesnakes."

"That bad, eh?" Alan refrained from saying more, knowing Li would rattle on for a while. Forget the aphorism about the Chinese being close-lipped. Dong Li was a gossipy old woman.

"So you don't like my new prices? Trust me, my margin grows smaller every day. Palms have to be greased and the port authority is only a part of it. Lately the tongs require an extra slathering of bacon fat and I still have to make a living."

"I know you do," Alan soothed him.

"Even if you own an entire ship, you still have to handle the snakes. See that ship over there?" Li pointed to another vessel being unloaded. "Xie Fuhua, head of the most powerful of the tongs, has a large share in it, but even he must pay off the right people or have his goods seized or the right to offload them at this port refused."

A slow burn of righteous anger churned in Alan's gut. San Francisco politics was a hotbed of corruption. Everyone knew it. The newspapers trumpeted it. But no one seemed able to do anything about it. Hell, maybe it was time to stop complaining and consider running for local office. He'd licked his wounds after the war for long enough. It was time to join the living.

"Thank you for the advice. I'll consider it." He trusted Dong Li, who'd been a native of this city all his life and knew how things worked. The man was worth listening to. And Dong Li seemed to enjoy the respect Alan showed him, which was in short supply from the other storekeepers, who treated Li like a glorified laundry boy.

With his business completed, Alan purchased a cup of coffee and fried flatbread from a vendor, leaned against a wood post and watched the bustling waterfront. The crew of the tong boss's steamer unloaded cargo from the hold and passengers disembarked.

Alan stopped chewing and stared as a Chinese woman swathed in a robe of gold walked down the gangplank. Although the fabric concealed her body from neck to toes, it only served to emphasize how petite she was and made a man want to see her hidden shape all the more. Her black hair was so glossy it caught the sunlight and gleamed like satin. Pulled away from her face, it was fastened by glittering jeweled pins. The high-piled style made her neck appear long and slender like a stalk supporting a beautiful flower. Her features were as delicate as a porcelain doll's. She looked like royalty, and he wondered what lucky man was expecting a lovely

bride from back home. Accompanying her was a sour-faced older woman in black who gripped the young woman's arm and talked nonstop.

The bride's lips were tight and Alan guessed she was biting her tongue at whatever the other woman was saying. She frowned and her dark eyes looked troubled. Was she nervous about meeting her husband? Sad to be so far from home? He'd like to smooth that wrinkle from between her brows with his thumb.

Her beauty stole his breath, and her wide expressive eyes seemed as changeable as the sky, cloudy one second and clear the next. He swore he could see hope, despair, curiosity, excitement and fear flash one by one across their dark surface even from this distance. He pushed off from the post as if he would walk toward her, his body reacting without conscious direction from his mind. Of course he couldn't really go over and introduce himself to her, but he stayed poised with his gaze riveted on the vision of a golden lotus flower in the swamp of the waterfront.

The woman in black spoke to a man on the dock. The Asian wearing a Western-style suit directed the women toward a waiting carriage. He helped the bride into the conveyance and closed the door behind her.

The carriage disappeared into the throng of vehicles and Alan's stomach clenched. A sorrowful feeling of loss rushed through him as if he'd spotted a precious treasure on the beach but waves had washed it away before he had a chance to claim it. How could he have such a strong reaction to a woman he hadn't spoken to, would never speak to, a woman who hadn't even noticed his curious glance?

Alan wiped the grease from his hands and returned the coffee mug to the vendor. He headed back to the store, but his mind lingered on the pier. The woman with shining black hair and luminous dark eyes continued to haunt him long after he'd left the noisy wharf behind.

Chapter Two

Huiann clenched her hands together in her lap and stared out the small window at the bits of San Francisco flashing past the carriage. The architecture of Suzhou was much more beautiful, but the Westerners' buildings were tall—some of them towering four stories high. Just as on the wharf, there were many foreigners wearing strange clothing, and unfamiliar smells, sights and sounds all around her. A wave of homesickness hit her like a squall at sea, rising unexpectedly and knocking her off balance.

She had hoped her new husband and his family would meet her at the dock to welcome her, but he'd again sent his agent, Liu Dai, the man who'd arranged their marriage. She mustn't allow herself to feel disappointed. Her mother had reminded her Xie was an important businessman who would have many demands on his time. Mother said a common mistake new brides made was expecting too much attention from their husbands, who were busy attending to numerous things a woman could never comprehend.

With tears in her eyes, Mother had given Huiann one last kiss. "Make a comfortable nest of your home, and your husband will always fly back to it."

But it was hard to be brave and put on a good face when she was in knots. She wrapped her arms around her body, willing her stomach to settle, and hoped her husband's absence wasn't an omen signaling how their future would be. He might always be too busy to find

time for her. She would likely find his mother and any sisters he might have would be her closest companions in her new life. Huiann prayed to the gods that she would like them and they would approve of her.

Huiann distracted herself from her nervousness by considering the poor women in the hold of the ship. By now they'd been sent on to whatever destiny awaited them, and she'd never had a chance to help them. She would talk to Xie Fuhua at the first opportunity, but what would he think of her exploring the ship rather than staying in her quarters? Men didn't like adventurous women. Her mother had told her many times to curb her curiosity and act like a proper young lady—modest, respectful, quiet and demure.

The view outside the window changed. Signs in Chinese marked the storefronts. The people milling along the sides of the street now looked familiar. Many wore the smocks and pants of laborers while others dressed in silk robes. Still others wore Western suits with round-crowned black hats. Above the earthy smell of horse dung floated the odors of fried food and roast chicken.

Huiann's stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten since yesterday noon. The crew had been too busy bringing the ship into harbor to provide a meal last night. Guilt flashed through her as she thought of those other women, who were probably much hungrier than she.

The carriage stopped with a jerk and her heart lurched too. Was there a traffic jam or had she reached her destination? Her body vibrated as tensely as a string with a bobbing kite on the other end. She was about to meet the man who would make her happy—or

miserable—for the rest of her life. And his family, whose approval of her would mean everything to her husband.

The door of the carriage opened. Liu Dai with his slicked-back hair and pointed goatee let down the step and helped Madam Teng from the carriage. Huiann didn't want to take his hand. She didn't like the man, who often looked at her with a gaze like a cat observing a wounded bird, allowing its prey the illusion of escape before pouncing and snapping its neck.

Liu Dai held her hand in his moist grip longer than was necessary after she'd set foot on the street. "Chua Huiann, may you have much contentment in your new home. Remember to be obedient and you will find your life filled with luxuries beyond your dreams."

Huiann pulled her hand away as quickly as she could without being rude and fought the urge to wipe it off on her gown. She bowed her head. "Thank you, Liu Dai."

The door of the building they were about to enter was painted deep red for luck and the writing above it proclaimed great pleasure to all who entered—a positive sign. However, she was not impressed by the rest of the building, which looked like every other one in the row, weathered gray wood with no adornment to show it was a rich man's house. She was rather surprised Xie Fuhua's mother didn't have the place painted. Usually a woman's pride was in her home—or her son's home. That was certainly the case with Huiann's mother. But perhaps things were done differently here in America.

Once she was his wife, Huiann would suggest changes that would make the plain building look more attractive. Although of course it was the people living inside who truly turned a dwelling into a home. She thought of her family and her many cousins, aunts and uncles in Suzhou and wished all of them could be here to witness her wedding ceremony. Would she ever see any of them again?

A servant inside the house opened the door. Madam Teng gripped Huiann's arm hard and steered her through it. The foyer of the house made up in ostentation for what the exterior lacked. Gilt frames surrounded mirrors and paintings. A plush carpet with intricate patterns covered the floor. The walls were adorned with scarlet wallpaper—bright enough to hurt the eyes. The garish entryway would be first on her list for redecorating. Then she registered the paintings displayed in the frames and her cheeks grew as red as the walls. She dropped her gaze to the floor, away from the canvases of nude women frolicking with men who grasped their private parts.

There was no time to ponder her husband's poor taste as Madam pulled her up a staircase to the second floor. "I will show you to your room. You will clean yourself, change into a garment I will provide and then meet the master."

Huiann preferred Teng when she was moaning and seasick. This abrupt harshness bordering on disrespect was intolerable. Another of her first acts would be to replace Teng with a more agreeable servant.

The bedroom where Madam led her was as sumptuous as the front hall and equally gaudy, but the large four-poster bed looked very comfortable. Huiann

studied the furnishings until her gaze was drawn to the window. Bright sunlight streamed in through the glass—between iron bars.

She frowned as she went to the window to look out on the teeming street below. When she wrapped her fingers around the bars, the blue bead ring her sister Mei had given her clicked against the metal. She thought of the girl in the hold of the ship reaching between the slats of her cage to squeeze Huiann's hand, but dismissed the image of imprisonment. San Francisco was a large city. Probably all rich men's homes had barred windows to protect them from robbers.

Huiann went to the washstand, took off her gown and washed her face, neck and arms using the cake of sweet soap beside the porcelain basin. Glancing at her hair in the mirror, she considered taking out the pins, brushing and rearranging it, but before she could begin Madam Teng entered the room—without knocking.

"You are to wear this robe and nothing else. Do you understand? Remove your undergarments."

"Pardon me?" Huiann raised her brows, certain she'd misheard.

"Xie Fuhua wishes you to be naked beneath the robe." Teng's mouth was a severe line and her eyes were like two bits of slate. She placed an embroidered silk robe on the bed and stepped back, arms folded.

Huiann stared at her.

"Undress now. Hurry. The master has little time to waste on you."

Her skin burned and her heart beat fast as she removed her camisole. It would be easier if Madam Teng would avert her eyes, but the woman watched

her undress with those rock-hard eyes. Huiann's blush deepened as her breasts were bared to the older woman's inspection. She slipped on the robe and tied it around her waist.

"Your pants too. Everything."

Every fiber of her being clamored that this was humiliating and wrong, but Huiann had never been married. Maybe this was part of the ritual. Perhaps a husband expected to examine his bride before finalizing the vows, maybe even with his mother in attendance to make certain his choice was acceptable. She knew that sometimes part of the marriage agreement involved testing the bride for virginity. She blanched at the thought that they might require that of her too.

Huiann swallowed the knot in her throat, reached beneath the long robe and pulled her drawers down her legs. She folded and laid them on the bed with her gown and camisole. Her skin burned as if she had a fever. Her breasts were tender and her nipples poked hard against the slippery fabric of the wrapper. She cinched the tie around her waist tighter.

"Come." Madam led the way from the room.

Huiann padded after her on bare feet. The wooden floor was chilly beneath them but that was not why she shivered. There were several closed doors along the corridor and she wondered why there were so many bedrooms. Did Fuhua have many overnight guests or was he planning for a house full of children?

Thoughts of children led to considering the act of procreation. Her mother had given her a brief explanation of what to expect and Huiann had inferred the rest from seeing stray dogs coupling in the street.

Copulation was a very intimate act and one she feared, but her more immediate fear was that Fuhua would require her to remove this robe. Would he truly demand to see her nude body before agreeing to wed her? And if he didn't like what he saw, would he send her home to China or cast her out on the street? An agreement had been made. Surely he would not do such a thing.

They descended a flight of stairs at the rear of the house to another hallway where Liu Dai waited for them in front of an ornately carved wooden door. He knocked on the door, waiting for a reply she couldn't hear before opening it and ushering them inside.

Elegant paintings decorated the walls of the room and a deep green carpet like lush grass beneath her feet. It was a Western-style office with a large desk dominating the room, and behind the desk sat her prospective bridegroom. Huiann's mouth was dry and her cheeks burned. She kept her hands clenched inside the long sleeves of the robe and her eyes turned submissively down so that she heard the voice of her husband-to-be before she saw him. He spoke to Liu Dai in English and his agent replied in the same strange, flat language.

Huiann studied the green carpet and the bottom of a desk. A flurry of movement told her he'd risen from his chair behind the desk and a moment later Xie Fuhua's black shoes came into view.

He grasped her chin and lifted her face. Her breath caught at the sight of dark, intense eyes under heavy eyebrows. He had a moustache and wore his hair cut short with no queue. His clothes were Western style too, a white shirt and black tie, a vest, coat and

trousers. As he examined her face, his breath smelled of alcohol. Not the rice wine her father drank, but something smoky and dark. He wasn't handsome but he was a presentable man and she breathed a small sigh of relief that his appearance wasn't repugnant.

"Chua Huiann, I'm pleased to see you," he said in Mandarin. "I entrusted Liu Dai with the task of securing a princess and he has served me well. You are indeed exquisite."

It wasn't possible for her to blush any redder, nor could she bow her head at the compliment since he held her chin firmly in his grasp. She offered a small smile. "I am honored to meet you, sir."

"You are so beautiful I'm quite tempted to keep you for myself."

Her confusion must have registered in her eyes, but Fuhua merely returned her smile and stepped away. He leaned against his desk, arms folded. "I'm going to require something of you now that might make you uncomfortable. Please remove your robe so I might see your body."

Her stomach turned over and over like a cartwheel. Blood throbbed in her temples and she glanced at Madam Teng, hoping she might intercede. But the woman's face could've been carved from jade for all the emotion she showed. Huiann glanced at the other occupant of the office, Liu Dai, and then back at her fiancé.

"It's all right. You must get used to disrobing before strangers so you might as well begin now."

Her mounting anxiety exploded at his words. Something was very wrong here. She might be naive about the relations between men and women, but she

knew no husband would treat his wife this way, forcing her to strip naked in front of another man. Nor was the mother-in-law she had so dreaded in attendance to at least give a pretense of respectability to this bizarre request.

As she continued to hesitate, Xie Fuhua sighed. "There's no need for you to be afraid. You will be well-fed and cared for and live in a beautiful room with many lovely gowns and jewels to wear. But Liu Dai has deceived you. You have not come to America to be my wife."

The breath was sucked from her body. She couldn't even form the obvious question: *Why?* But he answered without her asking.

"You will entertain the cream of society. Only the richest, most important men in San Francisco will come to you, and they will pay well for the pleasure. Do you understand?" His voice was soft, almost gentle, and as smooth as glass.

Like a piece of glass it cut her. She felt the sharpness in her chest as she understood all in a moment exactly what her situation was. Still she prayed she was wrong, that he wasn't suggesting she would become a courtesan.

"Honorable Xie Fuhua, forgive my ignorance, but I do not understand your meaning," she demurred.

He heaved another sigh. "I own many properties and businesses in this city, including houses of pleasure. You are not so innocent that you don't know what those are?"

She nodded.

"My various establishments offer many levels of entertainment depending on what a man can afford.

You, my princess, will not be subjected to the filth of the cribs or a cheap brothel. I will bill you as royalty and charge highly for your favors.”

“Sir.” She bowed deeply, doing her utmost to remain calm. “I cannot comply with your wishes. I regret your expense in bringing me here and apologize for the misunderstanding, but I wish to return home. I’m sure my parents will repay you.”

He straightened from his casual lounge against the desk.

“No. That is not what’s going to happen.” His smooth voice was no longer gentle. The glass grew sharper and slashed her into ribbons. “You’ve been paid for. You belong to me, and there’s no one in this city who will deny my rights. I’m the most powerful man in Chinatown. No one dares cross me. So don’t even think of attempting to try to escape this house. There’s no place for you to run to and no one who will help you.”

Huiann’s head spun. There seemed to be no air left in the room and the edges of her vision grew black. She feared she would pass out. She forced herself to draw a deep breath and steady her nerves.

“Now, I order you again to remove your robe.” The glass turned to cold steel.

Huiann weighed her options. She could attempt to run from the room, and Liu Dai would grab her and rip the robe from her body. She could scream or weep or faint on the floor at Xie Fuhua’s feet, but no matter what she did, there was no doubt in her mind he would have his way. He would see her naked, conscious or unconscious, struggling or submissive. She’d rather be in control of the moment, hold her head high and not

allow him to see her horror and shame. Let him believe she was completely cowed and, the moment she had a chance, she *would* run away even if she had no place to run to.

With shaking fingers she loosened the tie and slowly opened the robe. In the quiet of the book-lined office, she heard Liu Dai's quick intake of breath as the fabric slid over her shoulders and pooled on the floor around her feet. Huiann longed to cover her breasts and her sex, but forced her hands to remain clenched at her sides. She held her chin up, no longer gazing politely at the floor. She stared past Xie Fuhua's shoulder at the wood mantel over the fireplace that dominated one wall of the room.

Her nipples grew taut, although the room wasn't cold. The lips of her sex also became tight and stiff. Fire burned in her belly and tears stung her eyes. She stared even harder at the fireplace, willing her eyes dry.

"Exquisite. Very lovely, Liu Dai. Are you positive she's a virgin?"

"Yes, sir." His voice cracked. "An untouched lotus. She should fetch a great price."

Xie nodded. "Good. You've done well. Madam Teng, teach her what she needs to know." He paused then added, "You may get dressed now, girl."

Huiann continued to bite the insides of her cheeks, stopping her lips from quivering. She blinked the moisture from her eyes and stooped to pick up her robe from the floor.

After she'd tied the robe around her trembling body, Xie Fuhua stepped close and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, gripping it tight. "You're a very brave girl, Huiann. No tantrums, no tears. That pleases

me, but it worries me too. Such a strong, brave girl might think she has the power to escape her fate." He pinched her neck and a bolt of pain shot through her.

"Let me say again. Even should you escape this house, there is no place for you to run, no one who will give you shelter. I hold this city in the palm of my hand. Do you understand?"

Huiann nodded in compliance, but already she was making plans.

"The veal is excellent, Mrs. Dodge. Thank you so much for inviting me tonight."

"You're welcome, Mr. Sommers. But you're too kind about the meal. It's only passable. Back home we had a cook who served delectable dinners. It's so hard to find good servants here." Mrs. Abigail Dodge, the banker's wife, patted her lips before returning her napkin to her lap. The elaborate beading on her dress clattered like twigs and Alan wondered how many pounds all those beads weighed.

He turned his attention to the Dodges' daughter, Cynthia. Her pale blue eyes were so wide they gave her a vacant appearance, but perhaps there was more depth to her than one would guess on first glance.

"Miss Dodge, how do you like San Francisco?"

"Honestly, I find it rather dismal. There's far more fog and rain than I expected." The young woman glanced at her mother's disapproving frown then back at Alan. "But the bay is beautiful when the sun does make an appearance."

"Yes." He should ask her questions about the finishing school she'd attended or discuss the weather, but he was really only interested in the meal. Despite

Mrs. Dodge's protest, the food was delicious. But since he was invited as an eligible bachelor deemed suitable for the Dodges' daughter, his payment for a meal demanded he make some effort.

"You must miss New England and all your school friends."

"I do. Very much." The vehemence of Cynthia's words earned another frown from her mother. The young woman bit her lower lip as though remembering she was meant to charm their dinner guest, not show disfavor to the city he called home. "I understand you're originally from New Hampshire, Mr. Sommers."

"Yes." He pictured his parents' house and the quaint town in a tree-shrouded hamlet a world away from the bustling commotion of San Francisco.

"What brought you to California?"

Alan sipped his wine while he tried to decide how honest to be. "After the war I returned home but couldn't seem to settle there, so I took a train headed west and kept going until I reached the ocean." A truthful yet surface answer. His sense of disassociation from his old life, the melancholy and hopelessness that drove him to wander, were hardly suitable dinner topics.

Cynthia put a hand to her chest, drawing his attention to her décolletage. She seemed to be practicing flirtatious wiles someone had recommended and didn't appear comfortable in the role. "My goodness, a war hero in our midst."

"Not a hero, just a veteran," Alan said.

“Whether you earned a medal or not, I’m sure your service was heroic.” Mrs. Dodge signaled for the servant to bring the next course.

“What outfit did you serve with?” Mr. Dodge leaned forward and gave Alan his full attention. “I was in the Third Cavalry.”

“Ninth Infantry. Enlisted, much to my father’s chagrin. I was rebellious and left college to enlist. At the time it seemed cowardly to continue going to class while everyone I knew was fighting for the Union.” Alan gave a small bitter smile. “I might as well have stayed put for all the good I did. I was felled by the concussion of an artillery shell in my first battle and spent the rest of the war in a Confederate prison.”

Alan forked a few peas and occupied himself with chewing. That was enough. He’d already shared more than he wanted to with the Dodge family.

“It was a terrible time for our nation. Terrible.” Mrs. Dodge sighed then quickly changed the subject. “Mr. Sommers, you might be interested to know that a group of women is planning a fundraiser to erect an opera house for our community. The advent of culture is exactly what this city needs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed, happy to let Mrs. Dodge prattle on about the blossoming cultural scene. The woman clearly wanted to scale the walls of Nob Hill.

When Mrs. Dodge finally drew breath, Alan seized the opportunity to pursue his own agenda with Mr. Dodge, picking his brain about city government and Alan’s chances of scaling *those* walls.

“You thinking of tossing your hat in the ring?” Mr. Dodge finally surmised the reason for Alan’s questions. “Well, good for you. We need a man who will fight for

justice for the merchants. I know a number of men who would back you if ran for a spot on the Board of Supervisors. The city taxes have become outlandish, and a businessman can't get a thing accomplished without bribing some do-nothing civil servant."

"Gentlemen, please," Mrs. Dodge interrupted. "Heated discussions of politics go best with after-dinner cigars. Perhaps you might postpone your conversation until then."

The talk turned to weather—rainy and foggy—and then back to society issues—balls and fundraisers—until Alan was ready to yell from boredom. It didn't help that Mrs. Dodge seemed even more interested in him as a matrimonial candidate for her daughter now that she envisioned him becoming a prominent local politician. She listed every accomplishment Cynthia possessed and managed to work in how useful such accomplishments would be for the wife of a community leader.

In the end there was very little time for his talk with Mr. Dodge.

"I'm not even certain I'm the right candidate for this office, but I do have the beginning of a platform and it won't to be to everyone's liking." Alan sat across from Dodge in front of a dead hearth, holding a cigar he didn't plan to smoke. "Stamp out corruption. No more bribes or kickbacks or paycheck padding. Honesty and a fair deal for everyone."

"A good campaign slogan." Dodge puffed on his cigar. "Ambitious. But a difficult promise to keep. You'll have to negotiate shark-infested waters and sometimes it's necessary to feed the sharks a little in order to achieve your goal."

Snakes and sharks. It seemed everyone had a favorite representation of those in power.

“But I like you, and I’ll see what I can do to rally support for you at my club.” Dodge chuckled. “A fresh breeze sweeping away the San Francisco fog. That’s what you’ll be.”

Alan was already regretting his rash impulse to get involved as he walked home later that evening with his coat collar upturned against a light drizzle. His hands were full with the store. Besides, was he really ready for a fight and for all the odious backslapping a politician had to do?

But someone had to make a change in this city—this county—and it might as well be him. He could make up for his wasted years of inertia, interred in a prison camp, by doing some good at last.

His path home took Alan through the edge of Chinatown, a foreign world no white man should walk at night. He pulled his hat low over his face to hide his features and gripped the derringer in his coat pocket. From taverns, gambling dens and restaurants floated singsong voices and the odors of alien foods. The mysterious Chinese symbols on the signs intrigued him. A small ornate temple in the midst of wooden shacks made a stark contrast between elegant beauty and ugly poverty. Stick-thin beggars wandered the streets along with wealthy businessmen out for an evening’s entertainment in gambling and opium dens and brothels.

Was sex with Chinese women really as different as some men claimed? What would it be like to stroke silken black hair, feel a petite body beneath his and smell the spicy scent of her foreign breath? He passed

a squalid row of cribs where a man beckoned patrons to buy the girls in the small barred cells. Alan's stomach turned at the grunting sounds of sex coming from inside. Treated like animals, these lowest of all prostitutes merely existed until they were worn out and died of some disease. But were these wretched creatures so very different from their well-dressed, perfumed counterparts in the better brothels—a few of which he'd visited from time to time?

Alan's momentary burst of lust died away. He walked quickly past the cribs, not wanting to see the fingers poking between the bars as if beseeching help that would never come. They reminded him of other skeletal hands clutching at him when he could give no aid or comfort.

If he were elected to office, maybe he *could* do something, begin to make changes, one of which would be to ensure such slavery was eradicated. Chinatown had been left to operate by its own laws. Tong bosses ruled, and city police avoided the area unless the crime involved a white man. His platform of fairness and justice for all could include making certain the laws really did apply to everyone.

As he left Chinatown behind, Alan thought of the woman he'd seen on the wharf the other day, the golden splendor of her gown, her glossy hair and the turbulent emotion in her eyes. He wondered what she was doing right now and if she'd found happiness in her new home.

Chapter Three

Huiann carefully broke the hunk of bread in half and wrapped the extra piece in one of her handkerchiefs before adding it to the little bundle of food hidden beneath a pile of clothes in her closet. She chewed and swallowed every bite of the rest of the bread even though she wasn't hungry. She must keep up her strength so she'd be ready to run when her moment came. She'd spent four days in the home of Xie Fuhua, locked in her bedroom—the fine furnishings not concealing the fact that it was merely a cage. In that time Madam Teng had given her lessons on what was expected from a courtesan.

“You must give the appearance of innocence ripe for the plucking yet exhibit accomplishment at sex. Make the man feel that he is a king on this earth and he will come back again and again. He may even bring you gifts,” Madam had informed her yesterday while brushing Huiann's hair. She looped a coil around each ear, fastening them with golden butterflies.

Her hands rested on Huiann's shoulders for a moment as she met her eyes in the looking glass. “While the payment for your services goes to your master, the gifts you may keep. One day, when your beauty has faded and your body is no longer tight and pleasing, you will have the money from selling those jewels. If you've been an obedient servant, your master might let you live out your days quietly, rather than be banished to the row. There are worse places

than here where you have a soft bed, good food and pretty clothing.”

Madam Teng had already explained to her about the unfortunate girls who were penned like animals to serve men’s appetites. It was very likely the fate of most of the women Huiann had seen on the ship. So, if she was a devoted courtesan and followed Fuhua’s dictates, she might end up years later like Madam Teng, a stone-hearted, soulless woman who schooled younger women about the life of a prostitute. *That* was something to aspire to.

The rest of her lessons were about the sex act itself. Madam taught her what men liked in bed, how to fellate them, how to pose herself to please them, how to masturbate herself for their amusement, and which of her orifices she could expect them to enter with their cocks. Her explanations at first made Huiann blush furiously, but after a while her embarrassment at hearing such things faded. There was no longer any room in her for girlish innocence. She must be smart and sly and use whatever skills she could to get free of this place. If she couldn’t find a way to escape before her virginity was sold then she might have to pretend to settle into this life for a time. Maybe one of the men she met could be prevailed on to help her.

Huiann finished the meal on the tray Madam had brought to her. The food here wasn’t like home, but it was filling and that was all that mattered. She’d only saved the bits she thought would hold up for a few days without going bad, rice mostly and the chewy bread. She didn’t know what would happen if she did escape Xie Fuhua’s prison. The little food she’d saved wouldn’t last long and, as he’d pointed out, she had no

relatives or friends in this foreign place. Strangers would be afraid to take her in. She couldn't speak English and had no idea how the city was laid out or where she might go for aid. But none of that mattered. She would still run away the moment she got a chance.

For now, she waited and learned about her body and men's bodies from Teng. Madam had explained that a bidding war was going on for Huiann's virginity. The master was entertaining proposals from several interested men and seemed pleased with the way Huiann's price was rising. Madam had heard him say she was a good investment, and she reminded Huiann that she must live up to the expectations of whichever man won her.

"Every man is different. They enjoy different reactions from women, but all are the same in one regard. They want the illusion they are the best lover you've ever had. That is what they pay for and that's what you will give them. And remember that in America you're no longer the daughter of a merchant. You're related to royalty. These men want to believe they're fucking a princess so you will always exhibit elegant manners and demure behavior."

Putting her tray aside, Huiann walked to her window as she did dozens of times each day and tested the strength of the bars while staring down at the street. She'd memorized the buildings she could see from the window and planned to run to the pawn shop if she escaped. There she might be able to trade her expensive gown for a peasant smock and hide more easily among the people.

She'd only been out of this room when she was taken for interviews in Xie's office. She wondered

about the other rooms, the other courtesans who worked for him. Sometimes she heard faint voices, laughter or cries through the wall. Maybe she wasn't the only one who wanted to escape from here. After she finally met the other women, maybe they could work together to be free.

Just then the shrill song of a cricket started up as if to approve her thought. A good omen. Huiann searched the room for the little harbinger of luck but couldn't find it, and then the door opened behind her, making her stomach drop. She was in a state of constant anxiety now. Waiting for what would happen next seemed almost worse than the sex Teng described. If a horrible stranger poked his stalk into her lotus at least it would be over with and she wouldn't have to fear the unknown any longer.

"Prepare yourself. Another potential client has come to call."

For the fourth time in as many days, Madam had come to take her down to Xie's private office to be shown like a thoroughbred horse. Each time Huiann stood dressed in a scarlet bridal gown before Master Xie and his guest. They would stare at her while her flesh burned from humiliation. The man might tell her to raise her face so he could see it, or he might come close and lift her chin with a finger while her flesh crawled at the touch. When the client was finished assessing her merits, Madam Teng led her back to her room for more training and hours of speculation about her possibilities for escape.

Today Madam presented Huiann with a white gown to wear. "This man is a Westerner. To them white

symbolizes a woman's purity. This is what their brides wear."

Dressed in the lacy white gown, Huiann followed Madam down the corridor and back staircase to Xie Fuhua's den. She noted every door or window they passed, trying to get a sense of the layout of the house. It would be too ironic if she had a chance to run and got lost in the labyrinth of rooms, never making it outdoors.

Standing on the moss-green carpet, Huiann stole surreptitious glances at the Yankee who'd come to bid on her. It was her first chance to see an American up close. At the wharf she'd been too distracted to study the foreign faces before being hustled into the waiting carriage.

She held her lips steady, stopping them from twisting into a disgusted grimace. The man was ugly. His face was round and his features overly large. Bushy eyebrows jutted over strange gray-green eyes, and a thick moustache covered his upper lip. Long sideburns furred his cheeks but his hairline receded, revealing a bright pink scalp. He was tall and wide across, stretching his waistcoat with a belly like a pregnant woman's. The thought of this man touching her was utterly repugnant.

Xie Fuhua spoke with the man in English. The cadence of the foreign tongue sounded slow and drawling to her ears. She listened to each sound as though she might be able to make sense of the words if she listened hard enough.

After the men talked for a few minutes, the Yankee approached her. She smelled his cologne, his sweat and cooking odors clinging to his clothes, as well as

the sharp odor of burned tobacco. He reached out a hand and it took all her strength not to cringe from it. He touched her hair, toyed with the tiny white shells on a string that adorned it, and tipped her face up with one fat finger under her chin. He traced the same finger along the bridge of her nose then over her red-painted lips.

Huiann stared at his ear rather than his eyes, focusing hard and willing him to stop touching her before she screamed. At last he turned away and spoke to Xie again as he walked back to his seat and lowered his bulk into the chair.

She was dismissed and returned to her room.

In her too-soft bed that night, Huiann dreamed she was home. Her sisters and mother were pestering her about something, perhaps about the forthright way she spoke or how she neglected her household duties. There was always something. But then a great storm came. The river flooded and carried her family away. She waded through waist-high water, fighting the current, desperate to find and save them, but knew by the ache in her heart that they were gone forever. She woke with her cheeks wet with tears and the ache in her chest still there because the nightmare was true. She would never, ever see her family again.

Late that morning, Madam Teng entered her door without knocking. The expression on her face was as close to excitement as it ever got.

“Why are you still in bed, lazy girl? An agreement has been made and a client chosen for you. He wants you to be brought to his house to fulfill a particular fantasy. You won’t be the first ‘bride’ he has acquired

from Master Xie.” She clapped her hands. “Get up! You must be made ready for him.”

Several maids hurried into the room, setting up a copper tub and filling it with urns of hot water. Like a doll, Huiann was stripped and guided into the bath. Strangers’ hands scrubbed her body and washed her hair, dried her and perfumed her. They dressed her hair in an elaborate coiffure and clothed her in the same white gown.

Huiann’s stomach dropped. The choice of garment could only mean the Westerner was her buyer.

During all these preparations, Madam continued to remind her of her duties. “You must be aware of the man’s expectations from every tiny signal he gives you. Some men want a virgin to cry out in pain as he enters her. The ravaging of her untouched body is what gives him pleasure. Others might want you to react with joy, as if this is the moment you’ve been waiting for all your life. You must ignore any discomfort you experience and concentrate solely on what he wants you to be.”

As the tirade of advice went on, Huiann’s clean, scented body grew increasingly tense. Her muscles quivered with the fear she held inside. Her mouth was so dry she couldn’t swallow, and her mind felt like a flock of wood pigeons bursting up from the ground to disperse in all directions. She had to center herself and start thinking of a way to use this situation to her advantage. For the first time in almost a week she would be taken outside of the house. If there was ever a time to escape, this would be it.

Huiann prayed for strength and guidance to her departed ancestors, especially her favorite

grandmother, Mei, for whom her sister was named. Grandmother Mei had been a smart woman who ruled her husband and household with a velvet glove over an iron hand. Huiann had the utmost respect for her and knew her grandmother's spirit would help her survive this ordeal whatever the outcome.

Liu Dai accompanied Huiann and Madam Teng to Xie Fuhua's office, where the man sat behind his desk, studying a ledger. He rose and came around the desk to stand before her, then reached out to touch a curled lock of hair resting against her cheek.

"Mr. Johnston will be pleased, although you're a bit older than the girls he usually chooses. Chua Huiann, you've pleased me too. You're a very self-possessed young woman. You've been obedient, haven't tried to kill yourself or given Madam Teng any trouble since you arrived, and now you're about to make me a good sum of money."

Huiann inclined her head slightly, her teeth clenched together and her jaw rigid.

Xie's fingers tightened on the lock of hair and he tugged hard. "Today, however, it's time for you to lose some of that composure. Mr. Johnston is a man who will want tears and protests and struggle. Be sure to give that to him or your punishment when you return here will be severe. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Xie," she murmured, and it was easy to sound weakly submissive. Waves of helplessness swept over her. There was no way out of this. She would never get free. She was about to be raped by a stranger and officially become a whore.

Liu Dai took her arm and escorted her to the front of the house. The shiny black carriage waited outside.

Huiann and Madam Teng sat on one seat and Liu Dai sat across from them. The driver mounted the box and urged the pair of horses forward. Wheels clattered over pavement and the vehicle creaked and swayed.

The doors on either side of the carriage each had a window. Huiann looked through the smeary glass at the buildings and people and fought the hopelessness that seized her. She'd hoped there would be a moment between the house and the carriage when she could run, but Liu Dai had never released her arm from his hard grip. Maybe there would be a chance at the other end of the journey, when she left the carriage to go into the foreigner's house.

Although she sat as still as a statue, her body hummed with energy. Blood rushed through her veins, leaving her hot and shaky. She felt as if she would suddenly burst into flame, leaving ashes behind that would blow away on a breeze. It had never occurred to her to avoid bringing shame on her family name by killing herself until Xie mentioned it. Perhaps she should've thought of that when she was in her room with some opportunities to carry it out.

The scene outside the window changed. The signs no longer had Chinese symbols. They'd entered another part of the city and drove along a busy street lined with shops. She could guess what they sold by the pictures on the signs over the doors or the displays in larger glass windows than she'd ever seen. Shoe repair. Eyeglasses. Hardware. A tailor. She distracted herself from her fear by studying the storefronts until she fell into almost a trance, dreamily gliding along the streets toward her destiny.

The carriage lurched to an abrupt stop. Shouts and horses' whinnies came from the road ahead. Huiann stared blankly out the window at vegetables and fruit in trays under the awning of a shop. Clothing, tools and other goods were displayed in the window.

When opportunity comes, seize the chance. Grandma Mei's voice sounded in her head as clearly as if the old woman was sitting beside her.

Starting from her daze, Huiann glanced at her companions in the carriage. Liu Dai was craning his neck to look out the opposite window. Madam Teng faced the same direction, asking what was holding up traffic.

Huiann grabbed the latch of the door and opened it. She leaped through, her slippered feet landing on hard-paved road. Hiking her skirt up, she ran, with Liu Dai's shouts sounding behind her. She zigzagged through the crowd of pedestrians, dodging around stalled vehicles and making an erratic path as a rabbit would when fleeing a predator. Surprise and speed were all she had in her favor. Liu Dai hadn't expected any resistance. But both he and the driver would be on her heels in seconds and she could hardly blend into this crowd of foreigners, especially wearing a white dress that shone like a beacon.

She darted back across the road between a tall coach and a low wagon filled with barrels. The horse harnessed to the wagon whickered and its warm breath blew against her hair as she scooted beneath its nose. Huiann risked a glance over her shoulder. Neither Liu Dai nor the driver were in sight and Madam Teng would have stayed in the carriage. But Huiann heard her pursuers shouting from somewhere behind her.

The only Chinese in a crowd of Yankees, their voices were easy to detect.

Ahead, the bins of bright fruits and vegetables in front of the grocer's caught her attention. She would be safer indoors. Maybe she could even barter her gown for less conspicuous clothing. But even as she opened the door and slipped inside she realized she could also be trapped here. Why would a foreigner help her? She had no money to offer as a bribe. If Liu Dai pursued her in here, he would tell the owner he was searching for a runaway bride and the man would likely turn her over.

Huiann paused, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the dim interior. The place carried items from food to household goods to tools. The walls were packed with merchandise on shelves or hooks, and more shelving units and bins covered the floor. Huiann smelled leather, pickle brine, starch, tobacco and coffee as she moved toward the back of the room.

A Yankee stood behind a glass-fronted counter in which were displayed small items like candy, pen knives, ribbons and watch fobs. He was tall with big features, a wide mouth and a nose that dominated his face. His strange eyes were bright blue like the sky. She could've sworn his eyes widened in recognition as if he knew her.

She pressed her palms together and bowed her head, fearful of addressing him and knowing he wouldn't understand her. "Please, sir, will you help me? A man is chasing me. I need to hide here for a time until he is gone."

He frowned and came out from behind the counter. Huiann stepped back. He was so big and strong-

looking. What if he grabbed her and...and did what? Could there be a worse fate than what Xie had already planned for her?

She lifted her face, daring to meet the man's eyes. His frown appeared concerned rather than angry. His held out his hand to her slowly, as though she were a bird he was coaxing to land there. Her hand seemed to rise of its own accord, reaching out to him.

At that moment, the door opened with a jangle of the bell that hung above it. Huiann glanced over her shoulder, caught one glimpse of Liu Dai, dove around the tall Westerner and ducked behind the counter, where she couldn't be seen from the front of the store. Her racing heart sped even faster as she squatted on the floor, ready to leap up and run again if he betrayed her.

She listened to Liu Dai speak in English to the man. The shopkeeper answered briefly. Her arms wrapped around her knees and she dug her fingers into her forearms, silently praying to Lord Buddha, all her ancestors and especially Grandmother Mei. *You led me here. I trust your guidance. Continue to protect me.*

Liu Dai said a few more words before his footsteps headed toward the door. The bell rang as he left the store and the door closed behind him. There was a moment of silence before the American's boots tapped across the wide wooden boards, the floor creaking beneath his weight. He came around the edge of the counter.

Huiann looked up, so high up, to meet his gaze. He was a giant, frightening in his sheer size, but a small smile curved his lips as he offered his hand to her for the second time. He spoke in that strange, flat

language but she could tell he asked a question from the lift of his eyebrows.

Huiann took her arms from around her legs and reached up to him. His big hand engulfed hers and she felt the strength in it as he pulled her to her feet. Even standing upright she had to tip her head back to see his face.

She remembered a childhood story of a giant who terrorized a village. The people feared him and offered sacrifices to appease him. But in the end of the story it turned out that the giant wasn't the one who'd been ruining their crops or stealing their cattle and children. In the end, he saved the village from a bandit tribe, sacrificing his life for the people. So a giant could be a hero.

Huiann's hand grew warm in the storekeeper's grip. She curved her lips to match his—her first smile since she'd reached Xie Fuhua's house.

Chapter Four

Alan felt as if he were in a dream. Not one of his recurring nightmares but a skewed, impossible version of a normal day in the store. He couldn't believe this woman standing in front of him was the same beautiful creature he'd seen on the dock, the one who'd made his heart beat faster.

Even though she smiled at him, her eyes were worried. He wanted to reassure her that he'd never turn her over to the men who were looking for her. The one who'd come into the store had explained she was a bride on her way to her wedding. The foolish girl had become frightened at the prospect and run away. Her fiancé, the man's boss, would pay handsomely for her return.

"Sorry. No girl came in here. Hope you find her." There was no doubt in his mind that the woman was running from something much worse than a wedding.

After watching through the window until the man entered the next shop, Alan had locked the door and flipped the sign to Closed before going to the woman cowering beneath the counter.

She appeared so small, like a child huddling on the floor, but when she looked up at him, her face was a woman's. How frightened she must be, here in a world where nothing was familiar and those who should've been her protectors had her running for her life. The desire to defend and aid her surged through him with powerful intensity. As a boy, he'd read Knights of the

Round Table stories and played at being a valiant knight. Clearly some part of him hadn't left that childish dream behind.

"Are you all right?" Alan offered her his hand to help her to her feet. The woman's hand was warm and soft in his and he didn't let go right away. One moment then two slipped away. The air between them was charged with energy and Alan felt as if he was poised on the cusp of a crucial moment. His life would be forever different after this. He'd felt something similar when the mortar blast knocked him off his feet at Chickamauga. In the second before he'd blacked out he'd thought, *This is how I die.*

Only now he thought, *This is how my life begins.*

The woman touched her hand to her chest. "Chua Huiann."

"Alan Sommers."

Her hand moved within his and he realized it was past time to let go. As he released her, he glanced toward the front of the store. Her pursuer might come back and, even though the door was locked, it was best he get her out of sight.

"Come with me." He pointed at the door that led to his apartment.

She hesitated and looked toward the street before following him.

Behind the shop on the first floor of the building was his kitchen. Upstairs, a bedroom, sitting room and spare room, which he used for storage. Alan pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. His guest stared at it for a second then smoothed her gown and sat gracefully.

"Do you want something to drink? Some coffee or maybe tea? You people prefer tea, right?" He stirred

up the coals in the stove. The kettle was already on the top, but it would take some time for the water to heat.

He turned toward Shu-Ann and she glanced at him from beneath her brows. Alan had learned a few things about Chinese culture from Dong Li and understood direct eye contact was considered impolite. Shu-Ann had been quite bold in meeting his gaze up until now.

Alan searched his mind for a way to communicate with her then held up his palm, signaling her to remain seated. "Stay. I'll be right back."

She gave a slight inclination of her head which set quivering the strings of tiny white shells that adorned her hair.

Behind the store counter, Alan had a roll of butcher paper for wrapping purchases. He cut a length, grabbed a couple of pencils and returned to the kitchen.

Shu-Ann was looking around at the cupboards and stove and the small window which opened onto the back courtyard. When he entered, her gaze swept to him. Such dark exotic eyes with their fringe of black lashes. Her gaze made him hot and hungry in a way that was inappropriate for a man who'd set himself to be her savior and protector.

Alan laid the paper on the table before her and sketched a rough shape of the United States then marked San Francisco on the map. He drew another blob intended to be China and made some waves to indicate the ocean in between. For good measure, he made a fair approximation of a steamship chugging between the two.

He pointed at the spots on the map. "America. China." He pointed at Shu-Ann. "China."

For a moment, she stared at the paper and he feared his geography lesson was gibberish to her. Then she took the other pencil and began to draw on the map of China. A cluster of houses, a river, some stick people and Chinese symbols. She pointed to the steamship he'd drawn and held up ten fingers and seven more, showing how many days she'd been at sea. She looked at Alan.

He nodded his understanding. "Seventeen days to cross."

Shu-Ann began to talk as she marked the paper. He was intrigued by the rise and fall of her voice as her story unfolded on paper.

In San Francisco, she drew the port and some buildings, then a house and a man with a moustache and a fierce glare. On the upper story of the house she sketched a window with bars and a face behind them. She pointed to the face then to herself. "Chua Huiann." Her voice cracked and she fell silent. Her hand stilled on the paper.

Alan wished he could tell her he understood the helpless feeling of being trapped. He'd been a prisoner too. He pointed to the sketch of the glaring man, a suspicion of his identity rising from the conversation he'd had with Dong Li earlier. "Who? Xie Fuhua?" He did his best to pronounce the name as Li had done.

Her eyes widened in surprise and her head bobbed. "*Shi*, Xie Fuhua!"

The tong boss who owned the steamer she'd arrived on. Alan was sickened as he imagined what the man had likely planned for this innocent woman.

"I'm sorry." He reached out to pat her shoulder, but the kettle on the stove shrieked, breaking the moment of silent solidarity. He went to prepare the tea.

Shu-Ann rose and joined him by the stove. She pointed to the kettle and the tea canister. He stood back and let her take over the task, watching her lovely hands measure the loose tea, lift the steaming kettle and pour water into the teapot. She talked as she worked. Perhaps she told about her family or her voyage to America or the man who'd held her hostage or maybe she was only talking about making tea. Whatever it was, Alan felt he could almost understand her if he listened hard enough, and listening wasn't difficult because he liked the sound of her musical voice.

After it had steeped, she poured the tea into two chipped coffee mugs he provided. She lifted one of the cups and presented it to him with a bow.

Charmed by her manners, Alan took the cup and sipped the awful, watery brew. He hated tea and only kept it on hand for the rare guest who enjoyed it. Not that he actually had any guests, and probably the tea tasted so bad because it was so old.

He dipped his head. "Thank you."

His guest smiled. Not the polite quirk of the lips she'd given earlier, but a wide smile that created deep dimples in her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled. Alan's heart knocked against his breastbone.

At the same time there was an actual knock at the door leading into the store. He jerked and nearly spilled his tea.

Jeremy opened the door and surprise turned his pumpkin face into a shocked jack-o'-lantern. "Mr.

Sommers, I'm sorry to interrupt. I thought... Um, there are people waiting outside and I didn't know why the store was closed." He opened and closed his mouth silently a couple of times like a dying fish. "I, uh, signed for the freight at the train yard and arranged for a driver to transport the merchandise."

"Good." Alan moved in front of Shu-Ann, blocking her from the clerk's view. "Go ahead and open up. Apologize to the customers but, Jeremy, don't chat with anyone about my...new housekeeper, all right?"

"Yes, sir. Of course." The young man's eyes were the size of half dollars. "Discretion. Absolutely."

"You can go now. When the freight arrives, I'll help you unload, but meanwhile I'll be busy showing Miss Ann her duties."

Jeremy blushed such a fiery red Alan feared his face would ignite. "Okay." The clerk bobbed his head and backed out of the room.

Alan turned to Shu-Ann. Her eyes were nearly as wide as Jeremy's.

"It's all right. He's harmless. You're safe and you can stay here until you decide what to do." He pointed to the narrow staircase. "I'll show you the rest of the house."

She frowned and looked from the stairs to him.

"It's all right," he repeated. He pointed to the picture of Shu-Ann behind bars and waved his hand as if erasing it. "You're not a prisoner. You can leave here any time. You're safe with me."

She swallowed, betraying her nervousness, but nodded and placed her mug on the counter beside his.

Alan led the way up the rickety stairs. He was ashamed at how dirty they were, couldn't remember

the last time he'd swept them. He'd never cared enough to make the place look like a proper home. The sitting room was shabby and sparsely furnished. His bed was unmade and clothes lay everywhere in his bedroom so he barely allowed her a glimpse inside. The extra room was packed full of stock for the store.

"I'll move all this out and you can sleep here." He pointed at Shu-Ann then at the few square feet of bare floor in the crowded room. "You, sleep here."

Her gaze darted past him to the open door as though she considered escape.

"No. Nothing bad." He shook his head. "You keep house for me and live here."

He rested his head on folded hands, eyes closed in pretend sleep, but it only confused her more. Alan moved away from the door so she could get past him if she wished to.

He pointed at her. "You. Cook." He made eating motions, then wiped his finger through the dust coating a small table and showed it to her. "Clean."

Understanding dawned in her eyes. "You." She pointed at herself. "Cook." She mimed eating then wiped the dusty wood. "Ceen." Her nose wrinkled as she studied the dirt on her hand and repeated the word quietly to herself. "Ceen."

"I know it's filthy." He smiled and was rewarded with a small smile that showed her adorable dimples.

Shu-Ann nodded emphatically and rattled off a stream of words in Chinese before repeating his English words carefully. "Chua Huiann cook. Ceen."

"Great." He started piling boxes. "I'll clear this out and bring you some bedding from the store."

It didn't take him long to empty the room, carrying piles to the store and earning more curious looks from Jeremy. Alan brought up a rolled mattress and blankets and dropped the bundle on the floor in the hallway. Then he watched Shu-Ann sweeping her new bedroom with the broom he'd provided her.

Perhaps he should give her his room, have her sleep on a proper bed and take the smaller room for himself. It felt wrong to sleep in relative luxury while his guest bunked on the floor. But she might think he was suggesting something if he offered his room. Only an exchange of labor for basic lodging would make their arrangement acceptable.

She couldn't clean house while wearing a wedding dress so Alan went back to the store and selected one of the ready-made frocks. Most women bought fabric and sewed their own clothing, but he kept on hand a few dresses ordered from a catalog. His new housekeeper might not care for a Western-style gown, but it was all he had to offer.

When he held out the plain white blouse and navy blue skirt, Shu-Ann stared at them for several long moments.

He pointed at her dress. "Too fancy. You need work clothes."

She bobbed her head and accepted the pile of clothing. Alan looked down on the top of her head, the shining blackness and the white line of her part. He imagined her combing her hair and pinning it up with those shell combs. The mental picture of her performing this intimate task made him ache. She was such a pretty, delicate thing yet with an iron will that had driven her to escape from her prison. Alan

couldn't imagine anyone hurting such a doll of a woman, but he knew well that some men simply enjoyed breaking things.

He stepped back. "I have work to do in the store. Fix up your room and then rest. You must be exhausted from all you've been through."

Before he went downstairs, he remembered she'd have basic needs to satisfy and got the empty slop jar from his room. He set it on the floor by her door. "For your, uh, needs." He gestured below his waist and Shu-Ann dipped her head, pressing her lips tight and flushing. "If you need anything else, I'll be in the store."

She bowed and rattled off a few words.

"You're welcome." He returned her bow and clumped down the stairs in boots that felt as if they weren't touching the floor. He hadn't felt this alive or excited about anything in years. For the first time in a long time, life seemed interesting.

When Alan entered the store, Jeremy was serving a customer. Alan ignored the clerk's glances and went back to the task he'd been performing when Shu-Ann exploded into his world. Inventorying hardware was simple work, leaving most of his mind free to think of the woman upstairs. What was she doing right now? What was she thinking? How long would she stay? And good God, if she stayed, how would that impact on his fledgling political campaign?

If people discovered this woman was sharing his living quarters, it would be disastrous. During the heat of a campaign, his opponents would be looking for morally questionable behavior they could use as fodder against him. But it didn't matter. He wouldn't

think of putting Shu-Ann out on the street because of what people might say or how her presence might hurt his chance of winning a seat on the board. His decision to help her might have been impulsive but it wasn't unconsidered. He knew he was doing the right thing. His next step would be to learn more about the man she'd run away from and whether he'd be searching for her.

Alan lost count for the third time and gave up trying to tabulate the bin of screws. The freight delivery arrived and he and Jeremy unloaded boxes and barrels. They spent the next hour unpacking their contents and restocking shelves. Alan could feel questions trembling on the tip of Jeremy's tongue as they lifted a heavy rolled-up rug and carried it to the front of the store.

"I want this open for display, but I don't want people walking all over it. We'll hang it on the wall here."

"Yes, sir." Jeremy cleared his throat. "May I ask—"

"I decided I needed a housekeeper so I hired one." Alan stared at the younger man. "Taylor, please keep this information to yourself. No gossiping to anyone. Understand?"

Jeremy nodded, but Alan could tell how much it pained him to bite his tongue.

After they'd hung the carpet, a hot and time-consuming project, Alan left Jeremy to mind the shop and went to check on Shu-Ann, bringing supplies with him.

She was in the kitchen, scrubbing the doors of the cupboards. She wore her hair in a single braid down

her back and the front was tied in a kerchief. The blouse he'd given her hung loose. She'd rolled up the sleeves and tucked part of the skirt into the waistband to keep the hem from trailing on the floor. And somehow she was even more attractive in the oversized clothes and with the simple hairstyle.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her cheeks pink from the effort of scrubbing. One long strand of hair clung to her sweaty face. She blew it back with a puff of breath and the purse of her lips made tension gather in his groin.

Ignoring his body's automatic response, Alan set the items he'd brought on the table and patted the pile of fabric. "Can you sew? I've brought material for you. And canned goods since there's nothing in my cupboards. I usually eat at a restaurant."

He carried the tins of meat and vegetables to the counter near her and showed her how to open them. "Like this." He pushed the key into the slot on one of the cans and rolled the tin back to reveal a gelatinous brown substance inside. "Instant meat."

Shu-Ann sniffed the processed meat and winced.

"It's hardly the butcher's best cut, but it's convenient. I have some beans here too, and peas. If you wouldn't mind putting a meal together, I'll show you how the stove works."

He got out a pan, showed her where the utensils were and fetched more water from the communal pump in the courtyard behind the building. Five stores with apartments above backed onto this area. Dozens of people shared the water source and the communal outhouse. It wasn't a pleasant-smelling courtyard.

When Alan returned with a pair of full pails of water, Shu-Ann was slicing the blob of meat with a knife. Her mouth was downturned as if she were cutting up dog turds instead of meat. Alan chuckled at her expression and she glanced up and smiled. Damn, she had to stop doing that. Every time she did, he lost his Good Samaritan perspective and wanted to grab and kiss her.

Shu-Ann went to the table where the sheet of butcher paper lay and drew circles with little lines coming out of the top.

“Um, apples? You want me to bring you some apples? Sure.”

“Appu,” she said, and then spoke a word in Chinese.

“*Ping*,” Alan echoed then went to get some from the store.

At the end of the day, after he’d bid Jeremy good-night and closed the shop, Alan returned to a fragrant kitchen. A cloth covered the set table and steam wafted from a pan on the stove. In the years he’d lived here, it was the first time he’d felt as if he was entering a real home.

A moment later, Shu-Ann padded down the stairs, her slippered feet almost silent. Alan bowed and she returned the greeting. She went to the stove and began dishing up a plateful of food while Alan sat down at the table.

After placing the plate in front of him, she went to the corner of the room and stood like a servant with her hands folded and her eyes downcast.

“Please, sit.” Alan gestured to the other chair.

She kept her eyes fixed on the floor, looking as if she’d like to sink into it. Perhaps she was trying to

establish her place as a servant in his house, or maybe it was taboo for an unmarried Chinese women to eat with a strange man. Whatever the reason, Alan felt self-conscious shoveling food into his mouth while she hovered nearby. The meal was delicious. She'd done amazing things with the tinned beef and beans, adding slices of barely cooked apple and spices that gave it a different flavor and texture, but it was hard to swallow when he was the only one eating.

Alan devoured his food quickly. Before she could step forward and whisk it away, he rose and put it in the sink. Taking another plate from the cupboard, he filled it, set it on the table and pulled back the chair, making it impossible for Shu-Ann to refuse his offer.

She perched on the edge of the seat and touched the fork and spoon which Alan gave her. At last she chose the spoon, holding it awkwardly as she scooped a bite of food.

Alan left her to eat in peace, picking up the buckets to fill them at the pump. It was a balmy evening. A few stars were sprinkled in the square of sky surrounded by buildings on all sides. Alan didn't like the confining courtyard penning him in, but ignored his growing sense of anxiety and concentrated on pumping water.

By the time he returned to the kitchen, Shu-Ann was washing the dishes. When he tried to help, she waved a hand at him and squawked like an angry jay. She jabbed her finger at her chest, indicating it was her job.

He held his hands up in surrender and retired upstairs to leave her to her work. He removed his boots and washed up at the basin in his room then

couldn't resist a peek into the spare room to see what Shu-Ann had made of it.

The white dress hung from one of the hooks on the wall. The bedroll was laid out below the window, the green wool blanket tucked in so tightly there wasn't a single wrinkle. The rest of the room was bare except for the little table he'd left in the room. She'd placed it beside the bed and on its surface were the two decorative combs she'd taken from her hair.

Alan walked across the bare, clean-swept floor and picked up the ivory combs. The strings of shells tickled his hand as they brushed against it. He lifted the combs to his face and sniffed, trying to catch a whiff of her hair. A noise from below made him jump. He quickly set the combs back in place and retreated from the room to go sit in the parlor.

After lighting the lamp, he picked up the book on city planning he'd been reading the previous evening, but he could no more concentrate on the page than he'd been able to count screws earlier. The printed words swam in front of his unfocused eyes while he listened to the tiniest movement from the woman downstairs.

Finally, the stairs creaked as she came upstairs. His pulse quickened. Would she join him in the parlor? He wanted to try to communicate with her more.

But her soft footsteps headed toward her bedroom. Alan felt a stab of disappointment as the door shut behind her. He let his book fall shut too and stared at the yellow flame in the lamp. He couldn't stop picturing Shu-Ann in the next room, so pretty and so unattainable. He'd never take advantage of a woman in her situation but couldn't smother the flame of lust that

rose in him. He'd wanted her before he ever knew her, and now to have her settling to sleep on the opposite side of the wall was killing him.

Alan imagined going to her room, knocking on the door and being invited inside. He could almost feel how soft her hair and her skin would be and how her lips would feel under his. He imagined her hands gliding over his chest, his belly, unfastening his trousers and reaching inside, the firm grip of her hand around his cock.

The parlor was too warm, the air too stale. Alan tossed his book aside and hurried from the room. He had to get outside into the fresh air and take a brisk walk. That was the only way to eradicate the unbidden fantasies tormenting him. He definitely had to get his body and his mind under control before he proved true all of Shu-Ann's worst suspicions about men.

Chapter Five

Huiann moved the night table in front of the door as if the flimsy piece of furniture would stop the big man from bursting into the room if he chose to do so. Sitting on the thin sleeping mat on the floor, the blanket draped around her shoulders, she stared at the door as his heavy footsteps came down the hallway.

She leaped from the bed, bird wings fluttering madly in her chest as she pictured his hulking body filling the doorway. He could do whatever he wanted to her. If only she'd taken the sharp knife from the kitchen as she'd intended. But no, her foolish heart had told her it was safe to trust the white man's welcoming smile. Now she had no weapon except her fingernails with which to fight him off.

But Alan Somma walked past her room without stopping and went downstairs. Moving close to the door, Huiann listened to the squeak of the hinges on the kitchen door as her benefactor left the building.

She breathed a sigh of relief and moved to the open window to catch a breath of fresh air. The wall of another building was only a few hand spans away. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the starry sky above. Below, footsteps caught her attention and she looked down to see the top of the giant's head and his wide shoulders as he walked down the narrow alley toward the street. The pale streaks in his light brown hair caught the moonlight. She watched until he disappeared around the corner of the building.

Huiann pulled her head back in the window and removed the blouse and skirt her host had given her, glad to be rid of the unfamiliar garments. She wrapped the blanket around her and lay on the pallet, staring at the shapes of the shadows on the wall.

This day had ended far better than she could've hoped, but her good fortune in landing in what seemed to be a safe place didn't stop melancholy from washing through her. She feared she would never be able to earn money to return home. What if she died in this country with no relatives to mourn or bury her properly? She would wander in this foreign land as a ghost—forever parted from her ancestors.

She worried about Xie Fuhua. Would he let her go so easily or send his men to look for her and question the shopkeepers in this area? Not only did he have a financial investment in her, but his pride would be injured that she'd dared to run away from him.

As if these thoughts weren't enough to keep her awake, Huiann's mind kept returning to Alan Somma, the friendly giant whose looks, speech and manner were utterly different from any man she'd ever met. Yet she felt certain he wouldn't harm her. She'd felt safe at last.

Her first impression had been that he was ugly—huge and gangly with eerie transparent eyes. But when he'd smiled at her, lights danced across those blue eyes like sparkles on a river, and she'd seen beauty in his unfamiliar features. How could anyone with a smile that warm be evil or untrustworthy? After she got over her initial fear, she even found the man's size appealing and powerfully masculine. Fireflies flitted and glowed in her stomach whenever their eyes met.

In the kitchen, when he wasn't looking, she'd studied him. His hair was light brown with strands of gold and copper running through it. It reminded her of colorful autumn leaves and she wondered if it was as soft as fine silk. Would it feel cool or warm sifting between her fingers?

In the parlor, she'd had only a glimpse of him in the lamplight, reading a book, but she'd noticed his boots were off and one of his socks had a hole in the bottom. She would darn it for him. The idea of caring for his house, his clothing, his personal items, struck her as very intimate, almost wifely, and inappropriate for a single woman. But she must earn her keep, and part of her was happy to serve him, pleased to tend to a man who so clearly needed to be taken care of.

And even as she'd feared him coming to her room tonight and demanding sexual payment for his help, a small part of her had been disappointed when he walked past her door.

Such a shameless woman she'd become. She couldn't rein in her galloping mind, which kept racing toward ideas Madam Teng had planted in it, ideas about what a man and woman did together in bed, astonishingly intimate acts performed with mouth and hands and sexual organs. What would Alan Somma's large hands feel like touching her body? What would he look like without clothes on? Her insides turned to warm liquid at the thought.

Huiann gripped the blanket tighter and pushed her face into the flat pillow, the smell of cheap cotton filling her nostrils. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to erase the erotic images from her mind, but Madam

Teng's voice continued to instruct her even though the woman was far away.

Her whirling thoughts finally settled as exhaustion overtook her. At last, she fell into a light doze, but even in her sleep she listened for Alan Somma's boots on the stairs and didn't fall sound asleep until she heard him return to the house.

The next morning Huiann woke with a stiff back and a full bladder. The pink light of early morning shone through her window. She rose, relieved herself in the chamber pot, dressed in yesterday's clothes and opened the door of the room. Her heart lifted at her ability to perform the simple act of turning the knob after days of captivity. No locks. No bars on the window. She was a free woman. Or as free as she could be in a foreign country with no money and no way to cross the ocean and return to her family.

She walked down the steps and halted at the foot of the staircase. Alan Somma stood at the kitchen sink, washing himself. He was shirtless, his back to her as he rinsed off the soap on his face and chest. She stared at the bumpy ridge of his spine, the muscles flowing in his shoulders and arms as he splashed himself with water. The pale canvas of his back was marked by a few constellations of small dark moles sprinkled across it. She wanted to connect the dots with her fingertip. His skin would feel warm beneath her hand.

Huiann inhaled. The small sound caught his attention and he turned to look toward her, his face and chest dripping with water, slick, sleek, glistening. Something ancient and primal awoke and stirred within her—*fenghuang*, the phoenix, her yin to his

powerful yang embodied by a dragon. She swallowed and looked away from his nipples.

Alan Somma made a surprised sound and grabbed his shirt, which was draped over the back of one of the chairs. He slipped his arms into it, while she studied the wood grain in the planks of the floor. She'd hoped to rise early and have his breakfast ready before he began his day. She'd never expected to walk in on him half-naked.

"Pardon me, sir," she apologized in Wu and started to retreat upstairs, but he called out a command that halted her.

He crossed the room to stand before her. The heat of his body and the smell of soap and damp flesh aroused an answering heat in her belly. He touched her arm, and her skin burned at the pressure of his hand even through her long-sleeved blouse.

Huiann was ashamed at the way her body responded to his nearness. Her sex tightened at the mere sound of his low voice. He led her to the stove, where he lifted a pot from the burner and poured dark brown liquid into the two mugs they'd drunk tea from yesterday. The rich aroma she'd smelled since she'd awakened came from the beverage. He offered her one of the steaming mugs.

She took it carefully and inhaled the scent of the brew, then blew across the surface before sipping. The bitter taste took her by surprise.

Alan Somma laughed at her expression of distaste. He took a tin of brown sugar from the cupboard and put a spoonful into her mug. Then he measured a portion of oatmeal into a pan of water which was also bubbling on the stove.

Huiann set the mug of black brew aside, picked up a wooden spoon and stirred the oatmeal. She would not have him cook for her. It was completely improper for their roles to be reversed in such a way. Even if she hadn't been his housekeeper, as a woman it was her duty to cook and to serve him.

Alan Somma stood too close. His shirt was on but still unbuttoned and, from the corner of her eye, she could see a slice of his naked torso. Shadows on his pale skin delineated muscles in his chest and stomach. The phoenix inside her ruffled its feathers and stretched, tickling her insides.

As he fastened the shirt buttons, concealing this intriguing glimpse of his body, Huiann returned her attention to the boiling oatmeal. With any luck, he'd think her cheeks were pink from the rising steam.

Alan Somma sipped his bitter drink without adding any sugar, leaning against the counter and continuing to talk to her as if she understood him. When the cereal was thickened, she spooned some into a bowl and carried it to the table for him. But before she could withdraw to a respectable distance as she'd done the previous evening, he shook his head and pulled out the chair across from his, demanding she eat with him.

It was improper for her to share a meal with a man without a chaperone, especially a foreigner, but what did it matter if she completely broke convention? The life she'd known had been twisted beyond all recognition. What was this small impropriety compared to nearly being sold to a stranger for sex? She took the seat he offered, sitting up straight with her hands primly folded on her lap.

Alan Somma filled a second bowl with oatmeal and brought it to her. His act of service made her cheeks burn again. She waited for him to sit and begin to eat before she took tiny bites, keeping her face lowered, embarrassed to have him watch her chew and swallow.

His table manners were confusing. He did not behave in the way either a guest or the host would at her father's table and seemed to have no ritual about his eating at all.

"The oatmeal is sticky. I apologize," Huiann gave the obligatory apology for the quality of her cooking. But if Alan Somma responded with the customary assurance that it was the best food he'd ever eaten, she had no idea. And he didn't tap his fingers on the table to signify that the food was to his liking. Either he hated it or Americans did not show their appreciation in the ways she was used to.

Her stomach rebelled against the lump of oatmeal she swallowed. She was simply too nervous to eat. But perhaps Alan Somma was also nervous, because he continued talking between bites of cereal.

Oddly, the fact that he might be uncomfortable put her more at ease. She wanted to relieve his awkwardness so she began to talk back to him. They carried on two solitary halves of a conversation that never met in the middle. And because this man could not understand her, Huiann felt free to say anything she wanted and speak in an open manner that would be considered improper even when addressing her close family members. It was like talking to herself—no constraints, no formality, only the truth she felt inside.

"It was wonderful to be able to walk out of my room this morning and not have the door locked. I

wish I could go outside and run in a field somewhere, run until my legs and my chest ache and then fall down onto the grass and watch the clouds roll by in the heavens.

“Between the ship and Xie Fuhua’s house, I haven’t been free to roam in many weeks. At least I got fresh air on the deck of the steamer. The crossing was quite smooth and I was only seasick for a little while at the beginning.

“I wish I could tell you everything that happened to me, about the women I found in cages in the hold of the ship and about Xie Fuhua. And there are so many things I’d like to ask you about your life and your world. I’m going to learn English so we can really talk together.”

Alan Somma smiled and Huiann smiled back, feeling almost as comfortable with him as if he were one of her sisters or her brother, Bolin. She could tell him anything. He would not judge her or say she was too reckless, impulsive or imaginative.

Then it was his turn to relate some tale, punctuating the story with occasional laughter. It didn’t matter that she had no idea what he was saying. The sense of friendship between them felt easy and natural. Again she was reminded of Bolin, the only male she’d been allowed to talk with so informally.

Before she knew it, her bowl of cereal was empty. Huiann made another attempt to drink the brown liquid in her mug because she didn’t want to shame her host by refusing it, but even with the addition of sugar the dark beverage was too strong for her palate.

Alan Somma rose and took the cup from her, shaking his head and clearly letting her know it was all

right not to finish. He helped her clear the table although she tried to get him to stop. And then, while Huiann washed the dishes, he went outdoors to refill the water pails.

Through the dirt-smeared window above the basin, Huiann watched him pump the handle until water gushed from the well and filled the pail. His movements were as fluid as the water itself. How had she thought him gangly or graceless?

An old man came from one of the other buildings across the courtyard, carrying his own pail to be filled. His shoulders were stooped and he walked slowly toward the communal pump. Alan Somma greeted him and they chatted for a few moments, then the younger man took the white-haired man's pail and pumped water into it for him. When it was full and the old man reached for it, Alan Somma carried the bucket for him to his door and inside.

A man who is respectful and kind to his elders is generally trustworthy, Grandma Mei's voice reminded her. Not that Huiann needed any convincing. She'd already decided that Alan Somma was a good person. If he'd meant her harm, she would have learned it by now.

While he was inside the old man's house, a brown-haired woman wearing a shabby dress came out to use the pump. A man slammed open the door she'd come through and lumbered after her, bellowing like an angry ox. He looked like an ox too—big-shouldered and ugly-faced. Huiann wouldn't have been surprised to see big, curved horns sprouting from his shaggy head. She cringed inside, fearing for the skinny woman who would bear the brunt of his fists. She knew such

things happened between some married people, although her own parents' marriage had been as tranquil as a garden of water lilies.

Marital harmony is based on two important things—listening to your wife and doing everything she “suggests,” Father had sometimes teased, but then he would add a serious adage. *Quarreling is like cutting water with a sword.*

When she was little, Huiann had puzzled over that expression, but as an adult she'd come to realize the pointless nature of an ongoing argument, when neither side would yield or even hear what the other was saying. Right now she witnessed that uselessness firsthand as the ox-man charged at his woman, grabbed her arm and shook her. She yelled back at him and he slapped her across the face.

Huiann dropped the pan she was washing into the sink, preparing to run outside and try to intervene. But before she could step away from the window, Alan Somma emerged from the old man's house and hurried toward the fighting couple. He called out something and the ox-man looked at him.

Alan Somma approached him with his hands open, the way a person would confront an angry wild animal. He talked as he came closer and the big man's grip on his wife's arm relaxed a little.

The woman pulled away, stooping to pick up the bucket she'd dropped and going to the pump. Meanwhile, Alan Somma continued to gentle the angry beast. Huiann's friendly giant was as tall as the ox-man and looked directly into his eyes while he talked.

After another moment, he put his hand on the man's elbow and steered him toward home. From the way the man stumbled it was obvious he was drunk, had perhaps been drinking all night. He seemed to have forgotten his wife and his anger as he trudged inside the building.

Alan Somma went back to the well and talked to the skinny woman for a few seconds. She shook her head a couple of times then lifted her water pail and followed after her boorish husband like a pathetic shadow.

He watched her go and then, at last, Alan Somma was free to collect his own pails and head back to the kitchen.

Huiann plunged her hands back into the barely warm dishwater and finished scrubbing the last of the sticky oatmeal from the pan by the time he came indoors. She pretended she hadn't seen the little drama outside the window, but it was a scene she wouldn't soon forget.

Alan Somma beckoned Huiann to follow him. He took her into the store where he handed her an empty shopping basket and indicated she should choose what she wanted from the shelves. She browsed the store, trying to identify the items she needed for cleaning the house and cooking a few meals. Difficult to do when the boxes and tins had labels in English and nothing else to indicate what was inside.

A knock on the door made Huiann duck behind one of the shelving units while Alan Somma went to answer it. The man at the door was a farmer with a cart full of fresh vegetables and fruit. Through the window she saw Alan Somma paid him for several baskets and

began to fill the trays in front of the store. When he was finished, he came inside with a basketful of fruits and vegetables for Huiann. She nodded her approval of the glossy fresh produce.

Next he showed her the dry goods area where bolts of fabric were stacked. Several premade gowns hung on hangers. Inside a thick book, he showed her detailed sketches of women dressed in elaborate frocks with draping bustles behind.

Huiann felt a stir of excitement as she looked from the illustrations to bolts of material as untouched as a scholar's empty scroll. Since her father owned a textile mill, fabric had been readily available all her life. She was a good seamstress and could copy any design, including these intricate Western gowns if she put her mind to it. Perhaps she could supply dresses to the store. Her hands itched to feel the smooth silk and satin, the light linen and heavy wool. She selected a few bolts—starting with plain cotton until she got the knack of the foreign designs.

Joy bubbled through her and she remembered to thank her ancestors and Buddha once again for steering her through rough waters to this safe port. Alan Somma was a guardian spirit sent down from the heavens to save her. She owed him her very life. And she'd find a way to repay him, even if it was through something as simple as sewing dresses for him to sell in his shop.

Chapter Six

“Vote for Sommers. Vote for change.” Jeremy offered a handbill and a big smile to a customer along with the man’s purchase. Alan might be having trouble blowing his own horn to prospective voters but his clerk more than made up for his reticence. In fact, it had been Jeremy’s idea to print up sheets stating Alan’s basic platform and distribute them. Alan was happy to talk to customers about any issues troubling them and baldly stated his stance on a topic even if it contradicted theirs, but Jeremy’s brand of outright campaigning didn’t come naturally to him.

“I agree with you it’s time to put an end to graft and corruption.” Albert Hennegar, a local business owner, faced Alan over the cracker barrel where several men had gathered. “But what I want to know is how you’d handle the sewage problem. The city’s growing by leaps and bounds. We need a modern, efficient system installed citywide.”

“A better equipped fire brigade,” another man chimed in. “That should be the top priority. Sewer system won’t mean much if the whole damn city burns down.”

Alan listened to the half dozen men voice their various complaints, all legitimate, all worth accomplishing, and every one a politician’s nightmare. He certainly didn’t want to make big promises he couldn’t follow through on.

“As a councilman, I’d do my best to ensure all the basic services are given primary attention. You’re all absolutely right. The city infrastructure should be modernized but by dependable contractors and without payoffs or bribery.”

By the time the last of his constituents had aired their grievances and gone on their way, Alan was exhausted. And this was only the beginning. Soon he’d have to make speeches, participate in debates and attend society functions, the thought of which made his skin crawl.

“I’m going for lunch,” he warned Jeremy before retreating to the kitchen and a breath of fresh air in his busy day—Shu-Ann.

Usually at midday he’d snack on beef jerky, crackers, cheese or pickled eggs, any convenient food that didn’t require preparation. It was a pleasure to walk into his kitchen and inhale the fragrant aroma of a hot meal mingled with the sharp scent of bleach and soap. The room had never been so spotlessly clean.

Shu-Ann wasn’t in the room so he went upstairs to look for her. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed with a lapful of fabric, her head bent over her sewing. She looked up as he entered the room and her dimples flashed.

“Will you join me for lunch?” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

She rose, the cream-colored cotton slipping off her lap.

“What are you making?” He pointed at the material.

Shu-Ann shook her head, her embarrassed expression suggesting she’d been sewing ladies’ unmentionables.

He led the way downstairs. "The food smells delicious. Thank you for making it."

She replied and maybe she was telling him what she'd cooked or remarking on the weather or telling him he was a big ugly baboon. It didn't matter. Alan realized he'd been lonely for a very long time. Although it made so sense, he felt more of a connection during these incomprehensible chats with Shu-Ann than he did talking with people like the Dodges.

"You'll have to learn English because I'm pretty sure I can't learn Chinese. Dong Li tells me English is as simple as a child's reader compared to the complex novel of your language."

Shu-Ann sat with him at the table without protest this time. While they ate, Alan told her the names of objects around the room and by the end of lunch she knew *table, chair, floor, window* and *water*.

"Alan Somma, appu?" She offered him a dish of baked apple coated in sugar and cinnamon.

He pointed to his chest. "Alan," he corrected. "Alan."

"Alan," she repeated, pronouncing it closer to *Aaron*.

He liked hearing her say his name. She made it sound exotic and interesting. He forked up some of the apple desert and it melted like honey on his tongue.

"Very good, Shu-Ann." He set down his fork and bowed his head. "Thank you."

"Sank you," she echoed and then pointed to herself. "Huiann."

"Wan?" he tried.

She shook her head and repeated, "Huiann."

Alan repeated her name until he'd gotten the pronunciation close enough to please her.

"Hao," she approved with a nod.

"I should get back to the store so Jeremy can take a break." Alan went to the stove and filled a plate. He pointed toward the store. "For Jeremy. Jer-e-my."

He lifted his hand in a wave goodbye and headed back to work where he handed the plate of food to the clerk.

"Thanks." Jeremy sniffed the steaming vegetables and rice. "Did she make this?"

Alan raised his eyebrows at the inane question. "Do I ever cook?"

Jeremy took a sampling bite. "Mm. Maybe I should hire a housekeeper."

Business was slow that afternoon. Alan worked on the books while Jeremy waited on the few customers. Late in the day the bell tinkled and Mrs. Dodge and her daughter, whose name Alan had already forgotten, entered the shop. He slumped in his chair behind the counter, not wanting to have to deal with Abigail Dodge, but she caught sight of him and steamed toward him with her daughter following like a tugboat.

"Mr. Sommers, it was so pleasant having you for dinner the other night. I'd like to invite you again for next Thursday. There are several people I'd like to introduce you to who could prove important to your campaign."

"The meal was wonderful, Mrs. Dodge, and the company much appreciated. But as for next week. I have a..." He should've had an excuse ready for such a situation. "I have a friend I might need to help move that night."

She stared at him hard, as if seeing through the transparent ruse. "Well, if you can attend, let us know. Cynthia will be cooking a meal to shame a French chef. Miss Hatter's Academy offered a wonderful education in homemaking skills as well as fine arts and deportment."

Cynthia fiddled with the ribbons of her handbag. "I do hope you're able to come, Mr. Sommers. Mother, I'm going to look at the stationary. I need envelopes and a pen."

Jeremy had been standing nearby and now leaped forward eagerly. "We have some wonderful new papers in from the east, Miss Dodge. Floral patterned and embossed. Let me show them to you."

He ushered the young woman toward the stationary display, discussing the merits of different weights and styles of paper. Alan didn't miss the starry look in Jeremy's eyes as he beheld Cynthia Dodge. He'd clearly be thrilled to receive a dinner invitation but wasn't likely to get one as Mama Dodge had set her sights higher for the girl.

"You know, Mr. Sommers," Mrs. Dodge continued, "the contacts one makes can be the difference between winning and losing an election."

She was right, of course. He shouldn't have been so quick to refuse. But the thought of another night with the Dodges when he could be at home with Huiann was completely unappealing. "Perhaps another time, Mrs. Dodge."

She shrugged. "You might recall I mentioned the other night that Mrs. Wallace Finch and some of the other ladies of her club are holding a fundraiser to build an opera house for the community. Such a

worthwhile endeavor. The rough edges of this city are slowly being ground away and civilization will prevail. Various merchants are contributing items to the dinner and dance. It's a worthwhile cause and will reflect well on you as your name will be featured in the program."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well..." Abigail Dodge spoke for the next five minutes, requiring no input from him as she detailed a shopping list of goods he could donate, and pointed out how grateful Mrs. Wallace Finch and the ladies would be. Her entrée into this illustrious social club was clearly a big part of Mrs. Dodge's interest in the project. As a banker's wife, she surely deserved to mingle in that rarified circle yet didn't have quite the pedigree they required. Alan could read the unspoken message between the lines. His mother had been a bit of a social climber herself.

Alan glanced at Jeremy and Cynthia leaning close together over the paper display. He wanted to give them more time alone so he continued to nod and agree long after he normally would have interrupted Mrs. Dodge.

"You'll be doing the community a great service," she finally ended her plea.

"I'm sure I can help with some of the supplies."

"Excellent." Mrs. Dodge started toward the door then seemed to remember she'd had a daughter when she arrived. She frowned when she saw Cynthia laughing and chatting with Jeremy. "Cynthia! It's time to leave."

The girl's smile faded and her hands dropped to her sides. "Yes, Mother."

Jeremy carried the stationary and pen set she'd chosen to the counter for her and rang up the purchase. After the ladies left the store, he turned to Alan. His face glowed pink and even his copper-colored hair seemed to shine brighter as though he was lit from within. "Did you see her?"

"Uh, yes. She's very pretty."

"No. She's beautiful. Like an angel. How could you turn down dinner at their house? Although I'm glad you did. Do you think her parents would let me call on her? Her mother's a bit of a battle-ax, isn't she?"

"Yes. A bit."

"Cynthia is unhappy here. She misses her school and her friends back east. She writes volumes of correspondence to them. If she'd marry me, I'd take her back to Massachusetts. There's nothing keeping me here."

"Whoa! Marry? You just met this girl. You know nothing about her." Alan had seen Jeremy tumble in and out of love before. It always ended with the romantic young man getting his hopes shattered and moping around the store for several weeks until a new pretty face stole his heart.

"But I'm only a clerk. Her mother won't take me seriously," he continued as if he hadn't heard Alan's protest.

"I can't offer you a raise, Taylor. I'm sorry, but I can't afford it."

Jeremy blushed even redder. "I didn't mean that. I like my job here, but sometimes I think I need to strike out on my own to get ahead in the world."

"Then you should. As you said, nothing's holding you back."

"Is that what brought you out west, Mr. Sommers, trying to strike out on your own?" Jeremy rested his arms on the counter and looked intently at Alan.

"Something like that. Look, Jeremy, I appreciate that you're taken with Miss Dodge. She's a lovely girl, sweet and well-mannered, but slow down. Take your time. She's not going anywhere."

"That's the problem. Her mother's determined to marry her off soon. With the proportion of women to men in this city I don't need to tell you how hard it is to find a nice girl. Sometimes the loneliness is just too much. You understand." His pointed glance suggested that he believed Alan's new housekeeper was there for more than cooking and cleaning.

Alan ignored the inference. "All I'm saying is don't be impetuous. Court her if you like, but be cautious. Don't throw your heart at her feet."

Jeremy smiled. "But that's love, isn't it? You have to offer everything. That's the only way she'll know how much you care."

Alan shook his head. Jeremy was hopeless. Either he'd find an equally soft-headed girl and they'd live happily ever after like two cooing doves, or he'd be eaten alive by some she-spider.

He closed his account book. "I'll tell you what. Why don't we close up a little early tonight? Go out, get drunk and maybe you'll find another girl just as pretty as Cynthia Dodge to fall in love with."

Jeremy frowned and his jaw tightened. "I'm not a fool, Mr. Sommers."

"I'm sorry," Alan apologized. "What if I take Mrs. Dodge up on her dinner offer for next Thursday, but ask if I can bring you along?"

The frown erased and Jeremy's ruddy face glowed once more. "I'd really appreciate that."

"I could fall ill at the last minute and you could go alone and make my excuses."

"You'd do that?"

"I'd be happy to do that."

Jeremy thanked him again and went to take in the outdoor displays for the night while Alan cashed out the day's receipts. He felt a little jittery and realized he was nervously anticipating the prospect of spending another evening with Huiann. Damn, he was as foolish as Jeremy, going cow-eyed about a woman he didn't know. Next he'd be casting his heart on a mud puddle for her to step on as she crossed it.

Huiann had set two places at the table and sat with him without question. She served him from the dishes on the table, and afterward waved Alan away when he tried to help clean up. Tonight he didn't give her a chance to escape to her room but waited in the kitchen until she was finished washing dishes then indicated the butcher paper he'd set on the table.

"Tell me more about your family." He found the segment of paper where she'd drawn her village in China and tapped his finger on it. "Family. Father. Mother. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

She stared blankly. Until now they'd done fairly well at communicating without speaking each other's language, but they'd hit a frustrating wall. Alan tried to think of a pantomime for *family* then remembered he had a tintype of his own family taken at a studio before he left home.

"Just a minute." He held up a finger and went upstairs, returning with the framed tintype of himself, his younger sister, Sarah, and their parents. They looked as stiff as pokers and grim. Of course, at the time Alan hadn't done a lot of smiling and the rest of the family was angry with him for leaving so soon after returning home from war. His mother was distraught at losing him again and he'd had no way to explain why he had to go.

Huiann's eyes widened. She pointed to Alan in the picture and spoke rapidly.

"Yeah. That's me." He studied himself, hollow-cheeked and dead-eyed. He didn't quite look like the walking skeleton he'd been when the Union forces had freed him from the camp, but he didn't look alive either. "This was taken after I got back from the war so I was still pretty skinny.

"This is my mother." He pointed and repeated the word several times. "And my father. Fa-ther."

"Motha—*Mu*. Fatha—*Ba*," she translated for him. Grabbing up the grease pencil, she sketched stick people and pointed to them. "*Mu. Ba*. Bolin, Bao, Mei."

Her eyes shone with tears. It must hurt like hell for her to think about the family she'd left behind and the father who'd sold her into slavery.

Alan pointed to his sister in the photograph. "Sarah, my sister. I had another younger sister but she died when she was only two. I don't think my mother ever got over it. She grew harder after that and Sarah could never do anything to please her. Funny how a grieving person sometimes drives away those he loves."

Huiann studied his family photo then pointed to his map of America on the butcher paper. He guessed she was asking where they were.

There was a United States map displayed on the back wall of the store, a more detailed representation than his crude sketch. He picked up the kerosene lamp and beckoned Huiann to follow him into the store.

It was evening now and no light came through the shuttered windows to illuminate the room. The glow of the lantern scattered the shadows before them. He showed her the faded map tacked to the wall.

“Here’s California, where we are. And here’s my family.” He traced a finger across the entire country from San Francisco to Milton, New Hampshire. So many miles and so much misunderstanding separated him from the people who loved him the most.

“New Hampshire is a lot different than here. Crisp and cold in the fall with beautiful leaves on the trees. Snowy in winter and never too hot in the summer because we’re near the ocean. Here it’s rainy and foggy all the time. Even in winter it rarely gets below freezing. It took me some time to get used to it.

“People ask how I ended up here, but I don’t have a good answer. I headed west and it was the last stop on the train.”

She murmured something and touched her finger to the map, tracing the western coastline before her finger headed out to sea as if it would cross to China. But the map ended as though the rest of the world had been cut off by its edge.

“We’re alike, you and me. Except I chose to leave my family and you were probably forced to leave yours behind. I could board a train any day and go

back home while you're stuck here. I'll pay you though, Huiann, and someday you can afford a ticket home."

He studied the map and his gaze was drawn inevitably to Georgia. Camp Sumter was only a labeled dot on a map, but reading the name made his stomach churn. Camp Sumter was the formal name for the Confederate prison dubbed Andersonville.

He pointed to the spot. "I was here during the war. I'm sure you don't know about our civil war. Why would you? But it tore everyone's lives apart. I didn't do anything, just sat around waiting for the war to be over, first in a prison near Richmond and later in the stockade they called Andersonville. It wasn't unlivable at first but by the end there were over twenty thousand men crowded in space meant for half that many. I read those numbers later in the newspaper. Don't know if they're accurate. All I know is we were packed together waiting for something to happen—release, death, it didn't much matter which. There was little food and only a muddy stream running down the middle of the camp for water. We fought over scraps like dogs, but I also saw some heroic behavior there, men sacrificing for their friends.

"One morning we woke and the guards had gone. A little while later or maybe it was days—time had lost meaning by then—a platoon of Union soldiers set us free. The war was over and we could go home."

Alan listened to his voice telling her all this as if he were an observer, a stranger listening to an interesting story from long ago. He hadn't spoken to anyone about his experience in the war, not his family or friends, and he could only tell Huiann because she didn't

understand. He began to understand why the Catholics were so eager to unburden themselves in the privacy of a confessional booth.

"I should be past this by now. As my father pointed out, I didn't suffer any real harm. I didn't even have to kill anyone. I was barely in a battle before I was captured. A lot of veterans have amputated limbs or are deaf or blind. I should rejoice in being alive and whole. My father's right, I know. But here it is five years later and I can't stop having nightmares."

Then Alan told Huiann his deepest secret, the one he tried not to admit to himself. "I know I should be grateful for my life, but sometime I feel like I already died and I'm just going through the motions. I'm pretending to be alive, running a business, running for government, talking to people, eating food, shitting it out again, going to bed at night then starting all over again the next day. But it all means nothing to me. I'm hollow."

He glanced at her, and her soulful eyes were riveted on his face. A slight frown puckered her brows. She bit her lower lip. He wanted to reach out and hold her hand. Just that. To feel the warmth of human contact and know he wasn't alone. But after what she'd been through, she'd think he wanted something else and he didn't want to ruin her fragile trust in him.

There was a moment of silence so profound he could hear the scurrying feet of a mouse somewhere in the room and the voices of passing pedestrians, horses' hooves, rattling wheels, even distant piano music from a saloon.

Huiann began to speak quietly. The cadence of her lilting voice had a tangible feeling, shapes floating in

the air he could reach out and pluck like strange fruit. The gravity of her expression reached inside him and wrapped around his heart. She was confiding a secret or something important to her.

As her story ended and she fell silent, Alan dared to reach out and brush the back of his hand against hers. When she didn't pull away, he slipped his fingers around her soft hand.

All other noises receded and they were alone in a hushed bubble of warm companionship. Alan never wanted to let go. He listened to her quiet breaths and his own chest rose and fell steadily. A peaceful calmness stole over him even though his heart was beating fast.

Finally, they both let go, their hands sliding apart with a whisper of skin against skin until they were separate once more.

Alan thought he would never see her busy hands cutting vegetables, wiping the table, holding a pencil or sewing cloth without remembering how her hand had felt resting like a nesting bird in his.

Chapter Seven

Huiann fled to her room to escape the spell that wove her and Alan together. She closed her door and leaned against it then rubbed her palm, trying to erase the warmth of his touch. It had felt so good and comforting but she mustn't allow such closeness between them or he might expect more from her. There'd been such pain in Alan's voice and eyes that she'd found herself returning the confidence he shared.

She closed her eyes, frowning as she recalled what she'd told him.

"I know we must revere our parents, but whenever I think of how mine sent me off with a stranger I'm full of rage. Of course, my father didn't know what Xie Fuhua intended, but even so he let me go to a foreign land, never to see my family again. If he loved me, how could he send me away? I'm a bad daughter, not dutiful or respectful. I should be happy to have brought some security for my family. But I'm angry. I'm angry!"

The burning feeling in her chest had lifted a little as she admitted the truth at last. And when he reached over and held her hand, Huiann had gripped him like a shipwreck survivor clinging to flotsam. She could've held his hand all night.

With a curse, Huiann pushed off the door and crossed the room to the hook where her nightdress hung.

She was in the middle of changing when she heard Alan's footsteps on the stairs. Her fingers froze on the buttons of her dress as she listened to the floorboards creak in the hallway. Her heart beat faster. Would those footsteps stop in front of her door? Would he knock or call her name? But Alan's heavy tread continued on down the hall to his own room.

She exhaled and the heaviness of disappointment filled her. Shameful woman.

Huiann finished dressing for bed and lay down on her bed. She stared at the faint light and shadows on her ceiling for hours, thinking about secrets exchanged in the stillness of night and the potent force of attraction between phoenixes and dragons.

In the morning they behaved politely to one another over breakfast as if nothing had happened the night before, then Alan went into his store and Huiann began another day alone in the house.

Although she would've liked to launder the clothes and bedding, she didn't dare go to the water pump for buckets to fill the washtub. She'd cleaned the rooms so well the previous day there was little that needed to be done so she started sewing muslin into curtains—a project that would fill many hours.

At noon, Alan came for his lunch and taught her more English words for objects around the room. There weren't specific words and intonations for variations of a thing like in her native tongue. In English a word had only one pronunciation no matter what the context.

“Huiann eat appu...apple.” She repeated the simple sentence he taught her then pressed a hand to her chest. “*I eat apple.*”

“Yes!” He grinned. “Good.”

She would parrot phrases all day if it earned that bright smile.

Alan returned to work and left her to her sewing. Even with taking a break to cook dinner, she was able to show him a stack of curtains to be hung when he returned that evening. Her neck, shoulders and fingers were stiff from hours hunched over her work, but a glow of pride filled her at his pleasure in her accomplishment.

After supper, he went to the store and brought back lengths of wooden dowels and metal brackets. The rest of the evening was spent hanging curtains, a job that didn’t go smoothly. As Alan pounded a nail into the wall of the sitting room, the thin plaster layer crumbled away and bits fell into his face. He sneezed and muttered what Huiann could only surmise were curses.

She was embarrassed that her curtains had caused him extra work when he would normally be relaxing for the evening. But after he’d brushed the dust from his eyes, he smiled at her. And the curtains covered the damaged plaster.

When all the windows were finished—the bedroom and parlor casements and the small window above the kitchen sink—Alan stepped down off of the stool and smiled at her again. “Good. Good job.”

“Good” must mean *bu lai*. Huiann accepted his compliment with a bow.

Alan reached into his pocket, pulled out a flat pouch and took several American coins from it. She

started shaking her head even before he tried to hand them to her. But he grasped her hand and pressed the coins into her palm, closing her fingers around the cool metal. He pointed at the bleached muslin curtains hanging above the sink and then at the stove, the table and the broom in the corner, indicating all the housework she'd done.

Huiann understood he was paying her for her service, but she couldn't accept money when she owed him her very life.

Alan squeezed her hand lightly and looked into her eyes. She didn't need more than his potent gaze to understand what the words *thank you* meant. She felt she was tumbling into the blue pools of his eyes. Her body yearned for him and the phoenix inside her rustled its feathers once more.

Huiann cast her gaze down and stepped away, pulling her hand away from his. She murmured her thanks for the payment. She would not hurt his pride by refusing, but it was time to put some distance between them before the phoenix and dragon bridged the gap between them. Such a union would not be good—not for her in her precarious situation and not with this foreign man.

Huiann hurried upstairs and felt his gaze burning into her back as she climbed them. In her room, she stacked the coins on the little table next to her ivory combs then removed her clothes and lay down in her drawers and chemise. It was her third night in Alan's house and once more she lay in bed listening for him to come upstairs. He didn't spend time in the parlor tonight, but went straight to his bedchamber and closed the creaking door behind him.

She knew his room intimately now that she'd cleaned it and pulled up the covers on the bed herself. Heart fluttering at the wrongness of it, she had pressed her nose into his pillow and breathed deeply, smelling his scent. Now she could picture him moving about the room, sitting on the bed to take off his boots and tossing them in the corner, unbuttoning his shirt and shrugging it off his shoulders. She imagined his hands unfastening the front of his trousers before she forced her mind to abandon such a shameful game.

Did he think of her in the same way as he lay in his bed at night? The look in his eyes tonight had been hungry. Did he think of her with desire and consider coming to her room? What would she do if he did? Protest and fight against him or yield and welcome him into her bed? She shivered, her body feeling hot and cold at the same time.

Pulling the blanket tighter around her, Huiann turned her mind to sending up her nightly prayers to her ancestors. She asked for Grandma Mei's guidance, believing she of all people would understand the power of attraction and could give wise counsel about how to combat it.

Govern yourself and you can govern the world. The proverb floated into her mind like an answer, perhaps not an easy one, but a wise one nevertheless.

Slowly Huiann's tension ebbed, and the thick, hot feeling between her legs lessened. Her nipples became soft again instead of sharp points. She drifted into a dream about a hungry tiger stalking a rabbit which suddenly turned and attacked the tiger.

Another night in a foreign land slipped away.

The following morning Huiann prepared breakfast and bid Alan goodbye when he left for work. Her mother had seen her father off to work like this every day of Huiann's life. It was a warm and friendly ritual that made her feel like a wife, for a moment. But that was an illusion she mustn't give in to.

After Alan left, she decided she could no longer put off washing clothes and bedding. No one had come looking for her since that first day so Alan had indicated it was safe for her to use the water pump and outhouse without fearing the neighbors would spread tales of her whereabouts all the way to Chinatown. But after one horrifying visit to the smelly outhouse, she preferred to use the indoor commode and only spend enough time in the privy to empty the basin.

Now Huiann took a large, cobwebbed washtub from a hook on the wall outside the back door and carried it inside. Laundering in the kitchen might leave dampness on the floor by the time she was finished, but at least she'd have privacy.

Filling the tub took many trips to the pump, carrying heavy buckets of water that strained her arms, and then heating the water in kettles and pots on top of the stove. At last she had enough water in the tub to submerge Alan's sheets. The water sloshed over the edge and puddled on the floor. There was no washboard so she scrubbed the cloth as best she could with the lye soap from the sink. Soon her hands were red and raw from the hot water and harsh soap. Her knees hurt from kneeling on the hard floor and her back ached from bending over the tub, plunging and scrubbing. Washing was much harder than she'd anticipated. She understood now why her mother had

sent theirs to a laundress. Huiann and her sisters had done light housework, cooking and sewing, but there'd been servants to perform the heavy, rough work.

It was hard to rinse the sheet clean of the slimy soap and as Huiann squeezed out water and coiled the sheet beside the tub, she suddenly realized there was no clothesline on which to hang it to dry. She lifted the heavy, wet bundle and carried it to the stairs to drape over the banister. When she was finished, she pushed a stray lock of hair from her sweaty cheek, blew a long breath and added another heated kettle of water to the tub before immersing one of Alan's shirts.

Laundering took much longer than she'd anticipated. Her clothes were soaked and her body streaming with sweat by the time she'd made it through only a few of Alan's clothes. She wouldn't get to clean any of her own today.

As she leaned over the washtub scrubbing a pair of drawers, the kitchen door opened and Alan entered the room. He stared at the chaotic kitchen. Every chair, the table, the curtain rod and banister were festooned with dripping clothes. Puddles covered the floor, and there was no lunch ready.

Huiann scrambled to her feet, leaving his drawers floating on the scummy surface of the water. She bowed deeply in apology. "I'm so sorry. I lost track of time. I don't have your meal ready. I'll make something right now."

The loud explosion of his laughter snapped her gaze up to his face. His eyes sparkled like the sun shining through raindrops and he laughed so hard his body shook.

Huiann's mortification evaporated under licking flames of irritation. She was hot, exhausted, soaked and miserable, and her pride in her homemaking skills was terribly bruised. She didn't appreciate being the source of his amusement. She pierced him with a dagger glare before squatting by the tub to wring water from his undergarment.

Alan crossed the room, talking. He took hold of her damp forearm and pulled her stiff body upright, pointed at the tub and shook his head. He was telling her that he took his laundry out. Suddenly Huiann realized everyone in the neighborhood must do the same, which explained why there was no clothesline rope hanging between the buildings.

She looked in dismay at the dripping clothes then back at Alan, who was still grinning. The humor of the moment hit her at last and a reluctant smile replaced her frown. Alan's grin turned to laughter again and mirth bubbled up inside her like water in a dry well.

The sound of her own laughter almost startled her. It had been so long since she'd laughed about anything. The last time she could remember was with her sister Bao over Bao's baby, Lin. The little girl was just beginning to totter on two legs and she'd kept the sisters giggling one morning with her lurching steps. Sweet little Lin, whom Huiann would never see grow into a young woman or a mother with children of her own. The flash of memory stopped Huiann's laughter.

Sensing the change in her mood, Alan stopped laughing too. He released her arm, folded his hands together and bowed in apology for his laughter. "Sorry."

A little thrill went through her at his charming contrition, as well as a stab of mortification that she'd shown anger toward her employer. She owed him everything. He owed her nothing, certainly not an apology for wrecking his kitchen and forgetting his lunch.

Alan picked up the tub and carried it outside, his arms straining and water spilling all the way. Huiann hurried to open the door for him and watched as he hurled the water across the dirt and sparse grass. Then he loaded the tub with the wet clothes and piled the dry ones on top. Wiping his hand across the air, he erased the incident.

Huiann was still humiliated by her failure, but as the saying went, *Gold has its price; learning is beyond price*. She started to get out the skillet, intending to fry up some vegetables, but Alan stopped her with a hand on her arm. Her sleeves were rolled up and her bare skin prickled at the heat of his hand.

He led her from the kitchen into the store where the young man named Jeremy was putting tinned goods on a shelf. He stared at her. Alan said something and the clerk went to lock the front door and flip the sign.

Alan escorted Huiann to a chair behind the counter then moved around the shop, collecting items from shelves and bins. He returned and introduced her to the other man.

"Huiann, Jeremy."

The red-cheeked man started to extend his hand to shake hers then gave a little bow instead as he said, "Pleased to meet you." His hair was an amazing shade of orange. Huiann had a hard time dragging her gaze from it long enough to return his bow.

When all three of them were seated, Alan passed out bits of dried meat, a leathery, salty chew he called “jerky” that Huiann politely nibbled. There were flat white crackers and pickled cucumbers he’d fished from a large barrel.

“Pickle,” he said, and she repeated the word.

Huiann’s mouth puckered at the taste. It reminded her of her mother’s sour *zha cai*, made from wild mustard tubers packed in brine.

Alan offered her an apple, its sweet juiciness a good contrast to the pickle.

Sharing this meal with Jeremy was a pleasure—like having an uncle or cousin arrive unexpectedly for dinner. She hadn’t realized how isolated she’d felt even in the safety of Alan’s house. It was good to meet someone else. Once Jeremy got over his initial shyness, he did seem excited at the prospect of teaching her English words.

During the brief lunch, Huiann learned the words *counter*, *cash register*, *jerky* and *stool*. She reviewed *chair*, *floor*, *ceiling* and *apple*. Then Jeremy enthusiastically began naming body parts—*eyes*, *ears*, *nose*, *mouth*, *hands*, *feet*.

It was too many words to remember all at once and Alan seemed to understand that, because he stopped him after a few minutes. Then it was time to open the shop again and Alan walked her back into the kitchen where he hoisted the tub of wet laundry in his arms and headed for the door.

“Laundry,” he told her.

Huiann held the door for him then stepped outside to watch him disappear around the corner of the

building. She hoped he didn't have to carry the load far.

A few puddles remained in the empty kitchen, but otherwise it was back to normal. She appreciated Alan's kindness in saving her from laundering and his sense of humor, which prompted him to laugh instead of scold at her disastrous attempt. He was a good man and she would make him the most delicious supper he'd ever eaten.

It wouldn't be difficult to improve on what they'd had for lunch.

Chapter Eight

To make up for laughing at Huiann's laundry disaster and then offering her a truly horrible lunch, Alan decided to pick up a few things in Chinatown to make her feel more at home. The streets of that part of the city were steep and narrow. It was difficult to find a place to park the wagon that was accessible to both the laundry and Dong Li's warehouse. Rather than go to the market, he'd buy from his supplier, whom he could trust for quality merchandise and fair deals.

The long, low building took up a large part of the block. Whatever the wholesaler didn't sell directly at the wharf, he stored here. The contents included household goods, carpets, fabrics, tin ware, machinery, books in both Chinese and English, footwear, tarps, tools, and—in the back—alcohol and firearms. Few of these items had officially passed a customs inspector.

Alan was a good customer so the dapper Dong Li, whose clothing and manner far outclassed his establishment, escorted him personally through the dimly lit warehouse to choose what he wanted for the store. As the darkness and the musty air closed in around him, Alan felt trapped. He forced himself to breathe deeply and relax.

"Last time we spoke you mentioned a man named Xie Fuhua."

Dong Li frowned. "What of it?"

"A friend told me he can get some special items."

Li narrowed his eyes. "Most of the goods he deals in are nothing you want to become involved with. Nothing you would sell at your shop unless you were considering starting an opium den in back or a whorehouse on the second floor."

"Oh. But that was a passenger steamer you pointed out to me."

Even though they were alone in the warehouse, Li lowered his voice. "Passengers, yes, but also illegal contraband and slave trafficking. Xie Fuhua is one of the most powerful, dangerous men in San Francisco. His influence extends far beyond Chinatown. He is not a man you should become involved with."

"Thank you for warning me. I don't know what my friend was thinking of suggesting him to me."

There was no way he could ask more questions about the extent of Xie's power or which politicians fed at his trough, let alone where he lived. In fact, Li seemed suspicious enough that Alan was showing a sudden interest in Chinese cuisine and cultural items as he made his selections for Huiann.

After they left the claustrophobic confines of the warehouse, Alan paid Li, and the man set his crew to loading the wagon.

On his way home, Alan hit a traffic jam. It took nearly an hour to go several blocks, and the congestion didn't let up until he'd turned onto a side street. He pulled to a stop in front of the store, inviting curses from drivers of other vehicles that had to pass around him. Jeremy helped him unload as fast as possible. Alan was sweating by the time he hopped onto the empty wagon to take it to the livery around the corner.

When he returned to the store, Jeremy had cleared away most of the boxes, replenishing the shelves and storing the rest.

"Go ahead and leave, Taylor. I'll finish this up tomorrow."

"I can come in, if you want."

"No. Enjoy your Sunday. Go to church for me."

Jeremy smiled and went to get his coat from the hook behind the counter. He stopped at the front door. "Mr. Sommers? I was wondering if you'd responded to the Dodges about that offer of dinner." His tone was hopeful.

The truth was Alan had completely forgotten. "I'll send a note tomorrow and ask Mrs. Dodge if you may attend too. But if you're serious about winning over the girl's mother, you might think about going to their church. You'd be able to see Cynthia every Sunday."

Jeremy left with a thoughtful look in his eyes. No doubt the young man would soon be joining the Methodist congregation.

Alan abandoned the unpacking, excited to present his gifts to Huiann and see if they'd awaken those dimples in her cheeks.

The kitchen was restored to order and a fragrant meal steamed on the stove. Huiann looked up from her ever-present sewing with a small smile for him. She rose to get his dinner, but he waved her back into her seat and offered her the paper-wrapped parcel he'd hidden behind his back.

She looked startled as she accepted the bulky, loaf-sized object and turned it over in her hands. She untied the twine and unrolled a length of red satin, enough to make a sash or handbag or trim a hat. Wrapped inside

the material were several small items—a carved jade Buddha the size of Alan's fist, several pairs of ivory chopsticks, a Chinese newspaper and a book on some unknown subject. He'd also chosen a figurine of a woman carved in rose quartz and combs like the ones she'd worn when she arrived, but this pair had pink flowers attached to them. A brush and comb set with mother-of-pearl backs concluded the items in the first parcel.

He felt smugly satisfied at the surprise and pleasure on her face as she touched each object. And when she looked up from examining her new treasures to gaze at him with shining eyes, his chest ached. Alan held up his finger and went to the store, returning with the rest of his gifts.

As Huiann unwrapped dried herbs, noodles and jars of unidentifiable substances, she exclaimed at each item. By the time she reached the set of ivory tiles and the glossy, red-glazed plate and bowl, tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I figured you could teach me to play that game." He indicated the box of tiles. "Give us something to do in the evenings." *Something other than me lying in bed thinking about you and getting hard.*

She caressed every item then rose and bowed deeply, offering the English words he'd taught her. "Tank you." Her cheeks were damp and her lips trembled.

Alan eyes prickled at the depth of her gratitude for such simple gifts. It made him wish he'd given her much more. He crossed his arms over his wildly thumping heart and resumed a casual pose as she

picked up the Buddha and rubbed her thumb over his bald head and fat stomach for luck.

Huiann told him something about the statue in her native tongue. She set down the Buddha so she could gesture with both hands as she told the tale. Her smile flashed and she burst into laughter at the end of the story. Alan laughed too.

Huiann gathered up her presents to make room on the table for dinner. Another delicious supper made Alan more grateful than ever for his new housekeeper. She could do things with tinned goods, a few vegetables and spices that made simple meals taste like fine cuisine.

After washing up, Huiann laid out the tiles on the table and told him the game's name was *mah-jongg*. She tried to show him how to take his turn, but Alan had no idea what he was doing. Huiann ended up playing a two-sided game, his tiles and her own as she kept tally of the points on a piece of paper. Her animation as she explained the scoring was like lightning crackling through the room.

When Alan finally thought he had the gist and insisted on taking his own turn, she giggled at his move. Alan took back the pieces and growled, "Show me what I should do, then."

Still smiling, she selected one of his pairs and placed them. Alan caught a whiff of her scent as she leaned over the table. She smelled like soap and spices from the food she'd cooked but also an indefinable aroma from the natural oils of her hair and skin. He inhaled deeply to take her in. This vibrant woman's companionship already seemed like an essential part of

his life. He couldn't imagine the silence in his house without her.

It was late when at last they ended the game and put away the tiles. Alan let Huiann precede him up the stairs, his intentions gentlemanly but his libido aroused as his gaze was trained on her backside all the way up. He appreciated the shape of her bottom, glossy thickness of the braid falling straight down her back and elegant curve of her neck. He loved the rounded shape of her shoulders and wished he could see them naked.

His cock swelled and he forced his gaze to the stairs in front of him. That brought the heels of her white socks in flat black slippers into view and made him want to cradle her feet in his hands. He should get her some heavy brogans to wear outside. Maybe indoors too, if it would keep him from thinking about her bare feet.

Alan bid her good-night in front of her door and for a long moment their gazes met before she went inside and closed the door. Blood rushed through him and his lips tingled as if he'd actually given her the kiss he wanted to.

As he lay in bed, Alan pictured Huiann's blouse soaking wet and molded to her chest when he'd walked in on her failed laundry experiment. Her sleeves had been rolled to the elbow, the white cotton enhancing the olive tone of her forearms. The two black slashes of her brows knitted together above worried eyes and her hair straggled from its neatly braided queue. He'd never seen a more adorable sight, or any woman appear more desirable.

The ache of having her so close yet unattainable was beginning to wear on him. Huiann sharing his living quarters was an accident waiting to happen, not only potentially damaging for his political aspirations but also for his soul. He'd made a vow not to take advantage of her, but tonight a kiss had hovered in the air between them. How long could he keep his feelings at bay and his lust under control?

Who is fit to govern others? He who governs himself. Alan's father had been fond of quoting those words from the Hare brothers. He should cling to that adage now.

But then Alan remembered the tongue-in-cheek response that actually completed the passage, the part his father hadn't quoted. *You might as well have said: nobody.*

Chapter Nine

Huiann touched the pink silk cherry blossoms fastened to her new combs before tucking them into her hair on either side. They were too dressy for everyday use, but she wanted Alan to know she liked them and, if she was honest, to admire how she looked wearing them. She wondered if he knew the blossoms might be construed as a symbol of love. Was he trying to declare some feeling for her or did he not know what the token might suggest? He was, after all, a Westerner, who did all sorts of unexpected things without any idea of the proper etiquette among her people.

Some of his gifts had been proof of his ignorance, a few were completely inappropriate. The rose quartz figurine, for example, was Kwan Yin, the fertility goddess, hardly a suitable gift for an unmarried female. The book he'd chosen was a dull text about agriculture. At least the local newspaper had been interesting and she'd learned much about the Chinese section of the city.

And she'd very much enjoyed trying to teach Alan the rules of mah-jongg last night. Perhaps they would have to use simpler rules, simply removing pairs as children did without worrying about the complicated point system.

Huiann knelt before the small Buddha on her bedside table and prayed for several moments before she went downstairs. She thanked the god for all his

good gifts to her and asked for protection and good fortune for her family and for Alan.

When Huiann descended the stairs to the kitchen, the expression on his face upon seeing her was everything she'd hoped for. She imagined how the pink blossoms looked against her dark hair then chided herself for her vanity. How awful of her to purposely try to appear attractive to her employer—a foreigner, a stranger. She should minimize her looks, not flaunt them. Nothing good could come of enticing this kind man, who had refrained from making any demands on her despite the sparks that leaped between them whenever they shared a look. For a moment in the hallway last night, she'd been certain he would kiss her. And she'd wanted him to. Her mother would be horrified.

Now, as she walked across the kitchen toward the stove, Alan said something she supposed was a compliment. She flushed and concentrated on making oatmeal for breakfast, but was powerfully aware of him moving around the kitchen performing his own morning routine. She'd not caught him bare-chested since that first morning, but he did wash his face and hands in the kitchen sink and comb his dampened hair.

A knock on the outside door made Huiann nearly jump from her skin. Alan signaled her to hide in the store. She stood behind the door but watched through the crack as he admitted a Chinese youth bearing a large wrapped bundle on his head. Yesterday's laundry. Alan paid the delivery boy and, from his deep bow, must have included a very good tip which his employer need never know about.

When the door closed behind the boy, Huiann returned to the room. A faint whiff of starch and fresh air lingered in the kitchen as well as a damp chill from the fog. Back home there'd been plenty of mornings when mist rolled in from the Yangtze, but this city was the haziest, dampest place she'd ever seen.

After breakfast, Alan left for work and Huiann put away clean clothes and made the beds fresh. She wished she might've gotten her skirt and blouse cleaned, but soon she'd finish sewing another dress and could alternate her clothing. As for the white dress which was to have been her bridal gown for the sinister Yankee, she'd happily burn the garment and all the bad luck it contained. But perhaps not such bad luck after all, because she'd been wearing the dress when fortune steered her into Alan's store.

The horrible fear and dread of her days at Xie's house were fading as if they'd been a nightmare. Her new life here with Alan eclipsed those dark days. Her only regret was that she'd been powerless to help the other women he kept in his brothel or installed in pens to be used by any man with a few coins to rub together. But there was nothing she could do except pray for them. It was a miracle she herself had made it to freedom.

When all the rooms were put in order and after she'd finished sewing the hem on her dress, Huiann went to the pump to fetch water. In all her trips back and forth yesterday she hadn't run into any of the neighbors, but today a young woman came outside as she was filling the second pail.

Huiann recognized the pale, skinny woman from the day when Alan had diverted her angry husband's

attention from her. Her brown hair straggled greasily on either side of her acne-spotted face. She stared at Huiann and offered a smile that showed crooked front teeth.

“Howdy. Who’re you?”

Huiann pumped faster, wanting to fill the bucket and get back inside.

“No English?” The girl pointed at herself. “I’m Dora.”

Huiann nodded politely and stooped to pick up her bucket.

The girl put a hand on her arm. “Stay.” She spoke loudly as if Huiann were deaf. The word was unknown, but her intent was clear. She wanted Huiann to stop and visit with her.

The girl had a bruise on one cheekbone stretching all the way up to her temple. Her eyes looked sad, maybe lonely and afraid. Huiann understood those emotions too well. This girl needed a friend.

“*Shi*,” she agreed, and set the pails back on the muddy ground. She wrapped her arms around herself. Although the fog had burned away, it was cold outside. Tapping her chest, she introduced herself by her sister and grandmother’s name, Mei. Not that a false name would help if Xie’s spies were still searching for a Chinese woman in this neighborhood. She stuck out like a wrong thread woven into a piece of cloth.

Dora grinned and began talking fast. Huiann’s offer of her name had opened dam gates and let a flood pour through. Dora babbled continuously while pumping water into her empty buckets, occasionally pointing to the second story of the building she’d come from.

One of the windows was thrown open and the man with the black bushy beard stuck his head out. "Hey, Dora!"

He hurled a string of words like knives and the skinny woman flinched as they struck her. She snatched up her buckets, water sloshing over the rims as she hurried toward the building.

When she reached the door, Dora looked over her shoulder at Huiann with a lopsided smile. Her beseeching eyes reminded Huiann of a stray dog that used to wander her neighborhood, ribs visible in its sides, tongue lolling as it begged for food. Her mother had forbidden her and her sisters to feed it scraps lest the animal attach itself to their household. But Huiann had snuck the remains from their plates to it each night after dinner until her mother caught her and she was punished. The dog eventually moved on to another neighborhood, but Huiann had never forgotten its hopeful face or the irresistible urge to help it which she couldn't deny.

She might not be able to aid Dora in any way, but she could at least befriend her. She waved goodbye before picking up her own buckets and trudging back to Alan's house, grateful for the warmth of the nest where she'd landed. Although she'd only known Alan for a few days, she couldn't imagine him yelling or raising a hand to her.

Huiann knew more comfort and safety living in a stranger's house than Dora did with the man she was wedded to. The world was an unfair place in which families made arrangements for which their daughters suffered.

Weeks passed and Huiann's life fell into a pattern of work and play, quiet days and companionable evenings either playing mah-jongg or practicing English with Alan.

She kept house and worked on her sewing each day—new sheets to replace the worn ones, cotton pads for her monthly cycle, undergarments and, when she felt confident, a fancy gown for Alan to sell at the shop.

The dress she'd made for herself was a simple red-flowered calico with no decorations of lace or ribbons. The gown for the store was made of blue satin with wide bands of trim and was as close to a copy of the catalog picture as Huiann could make it. When she finally finished it and Alan hung it in the store, he came to her that evening with a grin on his face and a few American dollars in his hand.

"Your dress sold."

Her heart swelled with pride. She'd been afraid that all her effort and Alan's expensive fabric would be wasted, that no one would be interested in buying the gown. Yet it had sold within hours of being displayed. Her mind was already busily planning her next project—a bottle-green brocade with black lace trim on the bustle.

When she tried to refuse Alan's payment, he pressed the money into her hand. "No. Take it."

Huiann reluctantly accepted the cash and even more reluctantly pulled her hand from his. As she added the paper money to the coins in the jar in her room, she decided she needed to learn the value of Yankee dollars and cents and the price of passage on a steamer to China.

For the first time it seemed possible she might someday earn enough to return home, but although she was pleased at the prospect, doubt mingled with her joy. She would bring shame on her family for fleeing the agreement her father had made, even though the agreement had been under false pretences. And a man as powerful as Xie might have connections in China who would make her family suffer for her escape. She was a business loss to him, and his retribution might fall on her family whether she returned home or not.

Her ancestors were buried in her home country and her ghost might never find its way to them if she died here—an ocean away. But back home, she could be forced into another marriage not of her choice. Here she was a wage earner with the ability to earn money for herself and live life on her own terms, as much as a woman could.

Besides, there were other reasons for her to stay in America, she thought while picturing her friendly giant, his wide, kind smile and his large, open hands.

She screwed the lid on her money jar and tucked it behind the skirt of the white dress hanging on its hook in the corner. Then she went downstairs to begin drawing and cutting new pattern pieces from the long roll of paper Alan had given her.

Huiann's English improved each day as she visited with her new friend from across the way. It became their habit to go to the pump at the same intervals every day. Dora enjoyed teaching her new words and giggling at her difficulties in pronunciation. In exchange, Huiann taught Dora a few Wu words which

she twisted into unrecognizable shapes, causing Huiann some amusement too.

As her understanding of English slowly grew, and with the aide of Dora's extravagant pantomiming, Huiann pieced together some of her neighbor's story. The man, Ralph, who it seemed might not be her husband, drove horses or maybe a delivery wagon. Dora had been pregnant but lost her baby. Ralph wanted her to get a job, but she hadn't been able to find one. When he drank, he hit her. Huiann didn't ask why Dora didn't leave him. She understood a woman's duty and powerlessness all too well.

Each day as she went through the pattern of cooking meals, cleaning, sewing, visiting with her new friend, part of Huiann's mind was always on the coming evening and the precious hours she would spend with Alan. He taught her new words and the characters for the Western alphabet. She practiced writing them on paper and making the sounds each letter symbolized.

He told her things about American culture and asked questions about hers. Trying to understand each other often ended in laughter at misunderstandings or concepts too impossible to explain.

He got better at mah-jongg, finally understanding how to build the wall. On the night he at last beat her without any guidance, she cheered and clapped. She watched his hands clear away the tiles and put them in their box and imagined how those hands would feel touching her body. Desire was simply a part of her now, like a toothache that never quite went away. It continued to pulse in the back of her consciousness.

She knew the attraction between them was mutual. Sometimes she'd glance up and find Alan watching her. He'd look away quickly and his cheeks would redden. Other times he wouldn't look away and their gazes would lock for several seconds before one or the other broke the connection. It was only a matter of time before this tension broke. A tooth couldn't stay throbbing forever. At some point it would have to be pulled.

Footsteps woke her one night. Alan walking down the stairs. He often got up at night and sometimes left the house and came back hours later. She always wondered if he'd been with a woman. The idea was disappointing but not unexpected. Her mother had told her men had needs a woman couldn't comprehend and she should never show disapproval if her husband should graze in other pastures. At the time, Huiann hadn't understood what that meant, but after Madam Teng's detailed explanations, she understood thoroughly what restless men were capable of.

Tonight Alan did not go out. Instead, she heard metallic clangs as he poked up the fire in the kitchen stove, followed by silence.

Huiann lay for a few minutes longer, listening to the silence, and then she got up and put on the robe she'd sewn. Should she disturb him? What if he wanted to be alone? Whatever sadness kept him from sleep at night—the story he'd told her that night in the store that had affected him so deeply—it was very private. He'd only told her because she couldn't understand him, which was exactly the way she'd felt about her own confession. But what if he was tired of

being alone and wanted a friend to share his burden? She could be a friend to him. She owed him that much.

She descended the stairs to the kitchen. The kerosene lamp was turned low, casting large shadows on the walls and ceiling that made the room seem unfamiliar. Alan was seated at the table with his head resting on his folded arms, his face hidden.

The exhaustion apparent in his slumped shoulders made her heart twist. He looked so tired she wanted to rub his back and stroke his hair, as a mother would for a child. This was natural compassion, she decided, and walked toward him to give him what comfort she could.

He finally heard her and lifted his head from his arms. Locks of sandy hair fell over his forehead and he looked up at her with deep indigo eyes. Even in the dim light, she could see pain etched across his features. What horrors stalked his dreams? What could she do to help him sleep peacefully?

For a long moment they gazed at one another and then Huiann rested her hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Alan leaned into her body. They came together like two halves of an eggshell carefully broken. He slid a hand around her waist and pulled her closer. His face pressed against her breast. His arms wrapped around her.

She held him, cradling his head, rubbing his back. His body was so warm in her embrace. Her heart beat steadily and her stomach flipped in slow, lazy somersaults. The moment she'd sensed coming for so long was here. What would happen next?

For a long time, they remained locked in perfect union, contented, safe, no longer alone. As she

caressed his hair, soft as she'd imagined, he tilted his face to look up at her. His eyes glittered in the lamplight. He wanted more and Huiann realized she did too.

He swiveled his body toward her and drew her between his legs. He was so tall that even seated, the top of his head was level with her chin. She barely had to stoop to incline her face to his. As inevitable as the sun sinking in the western sky, she bent until their lips were so close she felt his breath on her mouth. Her lips parted and she touched them to his, a single caress like the whisper of a falling leaf.

Alan made a small, hungry sound and the noise tugged at something in her breast, which coiled through her body down to the place between her legs. She felt the gentle pull and the tightening of her sex responding to his desire. He pressed his lips more firmly against hers, warm and moist.

She cradled his face in both hands, feeling the hardness of his jaw, the prickle of stubble, the strength of his neck muscles and the lifeblood coursing through his veins. His soft, exploring kisses made her body melt into his. He nibbled her lips and then his tongue slid over them. She caught her breath as it dipped into her mouth. The sinuous wetness aroused her response, and their tongues twined around one another, two satin ribbons weaving together. Her mouth fused with his, tasting him, breathing his breath.

Her head spun and she pulled away to draw breath. He gasped for air too and murmured her name. His deep, husky voice sounded like a temple gong resounding. "Huiann."

He pulled her onto his lap, his hard arms holding her close. Those soft, sweet kisses grew more demanding, claiming her mouth until she couldn't think straight and her body was a pulsing bundle of need. His hands pressed against the back of her robe but Huiann wanted to feel them sliding over her naked skin, flesh to flesh.

He moved his mouth to her cheek then nibbled the tender spot just under her jaw. She tipped her chin up and closed her eyes, moaning softly as his mouth skimmed her throat and nuzzled between her collarbones. Alan tugged at the neckline of her nightgown, pulling it lower so he could kiss her chest and the top swell of each breast. The tickling brush of his mouth against her flesh made her body shudder. He bunched up the material of her robe and nightdress and touched her bare leg.

Huiann gasped and pressed her thighs together—not to shut him out but to ease the ache at their juncture. Her pulse pounded in her ears and she heard a high-pitched keening rising above it. The mundane sound of the kettle whistling on the stove snapped her back to reality.

She opened her eyes and looked at the top of Alan's head, his face pressed to her breast, his hand moving higher beneath her gown. Her thigh quivered beneath his palm and she wanted more, but this was moving too fast. She needed to stop and think.

And yet she couldn't bring herself to pull away. His touch and nuzzling mouth felt so good. She could imagine lying beneath his thrusting body or doing other things Madam Teng had told her about, like

fondling his private parts and letting him touch hers. She tried to muster shame but only felt desperate need.

Alan lifted his head from her chest and gazed at her with glazed, unfocused eyes. He glanced at the steaming teakettle then back to her and, reluctantly, took his hand from beneath her nightgown and smoothed the material over her leg. He ran his tongue over his lips as if savoring traces of her flavor, then kissed her one more time before helping her to rise from his lap.

Huiann felt the precious moments slipping away. He wasn't going to take her hand and lead her to his room. He was withdrawing, giving them both time to consider. It was the right thing to do, but she felt bereft, abandoned.

Huiann let go of his hand, steadied her trembling legs and started for the stairs.

"Thank you." His murmur stopped her in her tracks and nearly brought her whirling about to race back into his arms. Instead, she nodded and continued on her way.

Soon, her heart whispered. It's as inevitable as the tide.

But the promise didn't help her tonight when each step took her farther from where she wanted to be and closer to the cold loneliness of her bed.

Chapter Ten

Stopping was the right thing to do, Alan reminded himself for the hundredth time since the night he'd almost taken Huiann to bed. She was an employee living in his house, a refugee relying on his help. To take advantage of her sexually, even if the gift was freely offered, wouldn't be right. But days later he couldn't stop dwelling on the way her body had felt in his arms, her weight rubbing his aching groin, the taste of her mouth, the smoothness of her skin, the soft press of her breasts against his chest. How could he view her as merely the woman who kept his house when her face lit up every time she saw him and her eyes held the same yearning he felt?

"My change, Sommers?" Bert McGuffy's voice broke his reverie. The grizzled old ex-miner stared at Alan across the counter and his boxes of supplies.

"Sorry." Alan counted coins into the man's calloused palm.

"Only two things distract a man like that—hankering after a woman or trying to win her back after you've made her mad—which is it?"

Alan smiled at his astute guess. "Neither. Just thinking about a new business prospect. It seems ladies' fashions are a big seller. I'm considering eliminating some of the general merchandise to make room for more ready-made clothing."

"Mmm," the old man grunted. "Didn't your folks ever warn you against putting all your eggs in one basket?"

"I'm only planning on streamlining a little."

"Well, don't stop carrying my tobacco."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Mr. McGuffy." Although there was a tobacconist shop several blocks away, McGuffy came to Alan for the particular brand of pipe tobacco he liked.

"Good. Then I'll vote for you when election time comes around. You couldn't do worse than them that's already driving this city to the dogs. Maybe an upstart like you is just what's needed." The old man lifted the box off the counter and clomped, heavy-footed, out of the store.

Alan had already sold three of Huiann's dresses and had orders for four more which customers had chosen from styles in *Godey's Lady's Book*. Huiann couldn't sew fast enough to keep up with the orders. Her friend Dora now spent a large portion of each day in their kitchen, cutting fabric to pattern pieces modified for the particular styles, and basting them together while Huiann did the finer needlework. There wasn't always a hot meal waiting for Alan at noon now, but that was fine by him. He'd subsisted on lunches of sardine sandwiches before and would likely do it again. After all, Huiann wouldn't be with him forever. He must remember that.

So be with her while you can, an insidious inner voice insisted. *She wants. You want. Take her.*

"What do you think of derby hats? I understand it's the coming style back east." Jeremy walked over to the counter, modeling the one derby Alan had in stock. It

perched high on his big head and the rounded crown made his head look even bigger than normal.

"Um, no. Stick with a Stetson or no hat at all," Alan advised. "Is this for Cynthia?"

Jeremy nodded and plucked the hat from his head, running a hand over the felt. "It doesn't make me look stylish?"

"Not really." *More like a pumpkin wearing a hat.* "Are you planning to see Miss Dodge again?"

The clerk smiled broadly. "I told you what happened at dinner the other night."

"Several times." Alan leaned on the counter and prepared to hear it again.

"Of course Mrs. Dodge was none too pleased when I arrived alone and made your excuses, but Cynthia smiled at me. Then all through dinner she kept looking at me. You know the look. I kept trying to think of ways I could get her alone for a minute or two, but her parents were right there. Her mama watched us like a hawk."

"Mmm-hmm." Alan could well imagine the formidable Mrs. Dodge ready to dive down on a helpless rabbit like Jeremy and tear him apart if he dared get too close to her precious daughter.

"Then it happened." Jeremy's eyes glowed and his smile widened. He hadn't really stopped smiling since last Thursday. "I think Mr. Dodge approves of me, because he made his wife come with him to his study to discuss something and left us alone in the parlor for a full five minutes."

"Did you kiss her?" Alan asked, pretending he'd forgotten what came next.

"No, but she spoke to me again about how much she wants to return east, how she feels like she belongs there. She was almost in tears. I told her if she was my girl I'd find a way to take her. Then she let me hold her hand until her mother came back into the room."

"Congratulations."

"So I know she likes me. I just have to find a way to see her again. I attended their church on the past two Sundays like you suggested and I'll be seeing her there every week, but I need more chances to be alone with her."

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Alan wished him well, but doubted if Jeremy had a chance of ever actually marrying Miss Dodge. The girl enjoyed his sympathetic ear and his adoration, but wasn't the type who'd cross her mother for love when it came right down to it.

Alan checked his pocket watch, impatient to close the shop and get back to the exquisite agony of spending another evening with Huiann, yearning and pretending not to. Maybe Taylor had it right—a man should lay himself open for a woman, take his chances and damn the consequences.

A flurry of customers made the rest of the afternoon pass swiftly and at last it was closing time. Jeremy tidied up while Alan cashed out the register and put the money in its pouch in the safe to be transferred to the bank in the morning. After bidding Jeremy good-night, Alan locked up behind him.

The kitchen smelled of an Oriental variation of chicken soup. Since he'd bought Huiann the ingredients from Chinatown, she'd prepared all sorts of exotic meals he'd never eaten before. Some were

spicier than he was used to, but all were delicious. Of course, he wasn't too picky about food. After nearly starving to death during the war, he was grateful to eat anything.

Pots steamed on the stove, but the room was empty. Alan followed the joyful sound of feminine laughter up the stairs to the sitting room. Dora stood on a small stool, wearing the gown they were working on, and Huiann knelt at her feet, pinning the hem.

The pale rail of a girl looked almost beautiful and it wasn't because of the elegant dress. Dora's cheeks were pink and the bruising around her eye had faded. Her hair had been combed and was tied with a bow at the back of her neck. Her smile lit her face so brightly it eclipsed her crooked teeth.

"Howdy, Mr. Sommers. What do you think?" She turned so he could see the intricately draped bustle.

"Beautiful. Another winner." He returned her smile. "And you look lovely in it, Dora."

She laughed and her cheeks flushed from pink to red. "Naw. I told Huiann she should be the one wearin' it. She'd be like a fancy doll. But she says she's too short and the hem would be wrong. Now that you're taking orders, I think the ladies need to come here to be measured and fitted."

Alan wasn't too keen on the idea of anyone seeing his dressmaker for fear Huiann's whereabouts would somehow get back to Xie. Although the likelihood of information traveling from San Francisco's middle-class ladies to Chinatown was slim.

"Maybe you could do the measuring, Dora," he suggested.

Huiann rose from her knees, plucking pins from between her lips. "Good?"

"Yes, good. A beautiful dress," he said. "Someone will snap that right up. At this rate you're going to need more fabric soon."

Dora lifted her skirts showing dingy stockinged feet as she stepped down from the ottoman. "Mr. Sommers, thanks for payin' me to help Huiann with the sewing. I was gettin' desperate to find work. No one would hire me, and Ralph...he wanted me to start earning my keep one way or another."

Alan understood her meaning. Ralph wasn't particular about whether Dora earned cash on her back or on her knees if she couldn't get any other job. Alan would like to punch the man in the face, but it wouldn't change things for Dora. The only way a bad-tempered drunk like Ralph would stop smacking her was if she left him or he landed himself in jail. Unfortunately, the law didn't concern itself with the way a man treated his wife, let alone some woman he was just living with.

"We're grateful for your help, Dora. With both of you working, this dressmaking is turning a nice profit." For the highest echelon of society there were private dressmakers, but supplying New York fashions at prices middle-class women could afford was proving very lucrative.

Alan pulled out his wallet and he offered Dora a dollar. "Here. You're going to want something to show Ralph this is a real job."

Her eyes glowed as she accepted it. "But we ain't finished the dress yet, let alone sold it."

“This is an advance. When I pay you the rest, you might want to hold some back. Hide it someplace safe in case you need it.”

The concept should've been obvious to a woman living with a man who'd drink up every penny in the house given the chance, but Dora wasn't too bright. Her eyes opened wide as the idea sunk in. “Oh. Sure, Mr. Sommers. Maybe I'll do that.”

She went to Huiann's room to change from the half-finished frock into her own worn dress. Without the buffer of Dora's chatter to distract them, the simmering tension between Alan and Huiann resurfaced. She bent to collect scraps of fabric and pack her sewing kit while he retreated downstairs. He brought coal for the cookstove from the bin in the cellar and fetched more water into the house. By the time these tasks were finished, Dora was gone and Huiann was dishing up their dinner.

The domesticity of the pair of them sitting down to share a meal had become an integral part of his day. He was always happy to face Huiann across the table, even when things were awkward between them, as they had been since the night of the kiss over a week ago. He talked to her and she responded, using her newly learned English to tell him about her day in short sentences, each syllable painfully pronounced.

“I get the water. Make the soup. I and Dora sew the dress. You?”

In return, Alan told about his day in the shop in the simplest terms possible. But beneath the frothy waves of small talk floated an iceberg of attraction that filled the room. While they both staunchly ignored it, lust

threatened to sink the flimsy raft of words that carried them from postwork to bedtime.

After dinner they went to the sitting room, cleared of sewing paraphernalia, and worked on Huiann's lessons. Alan quizzed her on all the words she knew and on the written words he'd taught her. The Chinese language was constructed in an entirely different manner from English, but she'd caught on to the concept of alphabet letters strung into words and words added together to form sentences.

Sitting beside her on the sofa while he tutored her was torture. He could smell her hair and his arm kept brushing against hers. Memories flashed in his mind—her weight on his lap, the feeling of her lips mashed against his, the whimpers she'd made as he kissed her. It was getting hard to remember why he shouldn't kiss her when it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Aran?" Her soft voice mispronouncing his name brought his attention back to the present. "I and Dora sew dress. More dress. More money." She frowned as she searched for words to express her thought. "More women sew dress. More money."

She gestured around the room and held her fingers an inch apart. "Too small."

Alan nodded. "You need more space for a workshop, and I'm sure there are plenty of women like Dora who'd be happy to earn an honest wage. I've been thinking of renting space."

Her eyes were trained on his mouth, decoding his speech, and he realized he'd used too many words. He rephrased. "Yes. More women sew dresses. Bigger room. Good."

Huiann's dimples flashed as her plump lips curved and something inside Alan snapped. Logic fled, instinct took over and he bent to kiss her smiling mouth. The sense of relief was overwhelming. This was all he'd needed, just one kiss to satisfy him that her lips really were velvety soft. Now he could stop thinking about them.

But of course one kiss wasn't nearly sufficient. He cupped her face and her skin was warm satin. Her jaw moved beneath his palm as she opened her mouth and latched on to his. Alan put his other hand around her waist and pulled her to him across the worn sofa cushion. Her body was solid and warm in his arms.

Her hand slid up his chest and curved around the side of his neck. She wanted him too, and there was nothing wrong with them kissing a little, nothing wrong at all.

Kissing would be enough. He didn't need to go any farther. He plucked at her lips with his, running his tongue over her lower lip before catching it lightly between his teeth. His cock grew harder as his tongue slid into the wet heat of her mouth. His kisses grew greedier as he ached for more. Gripping her cotton blouse in back, he longed to slide his hand beneath and touch her skin.

Sitting side by side on the sofa was awkward so he pulled her onto his lap. The small bumps of her breasts pressed against his chest and her bottom settled across his thighs and rubbed his erection. He groaned. God, he was a fool to imagine that kissing would be enough. It only made him hungry for even more. His hand drifted lower, from her blouse to her skirt, but there

were too many folds of material and he couldn't feel her bottom.

Huiann pulled away. She took her hand from the back of his neck, pressed it against his chest and gazed into his eyes from inches away, her lips moist and her chest heaving. She said something and touched his face, tracing the shape of his eyebrow and cheekbone before resting her fingers on his lips. The soft caress stole his breath and sent a new wave of heat coursing to his cock.

She might be saying she wanted him or politely telling him they must stop now. He had no idea which so he kissed her fingertips and drew her index finger into his mouth. She gasped as he sucked on it and rolled his tongue around her finger.

He placed a hand on her thigh, pushing her skirt up a little, making a silent suggestion and waiting for her response. She murmured something. Encouragement? Denial? Impossible to tell but she didn't push him away.

Alan released her finger from his mouth and kissed her lips again, then her chin and throat, her pulse fluttering beneath his lips. He licked her, tasting her salty-sweet skin.

She wiggled on top of him. Exquisite torture since his cock was now throbbing. He kissed her chest then rested his head against her breast and listened to her rapid heartbeat. She stroked his hair, but the comforting which he'd enjoyed the other night was no longer enough. He wanted so much more. He needed to be inside her, longed for it with a raging thirst that couldn't be quenched by anything less.

Closing his mind against concepts like ethics or consequences, Alan moved her off of his lap, rose and held out his hand. "I wish you would come to my bed." He pointed toward his room with his other hand. "My bed."

Huiann took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. She looked up at him with her dark eyes and nodded. "*Shi*." Then she bit her lower lip and her cheeks flushed as she added more. Touching her hand to her sex, she shook her head.

Alan nodded. "No. You don't have to."

"You bed." She nodded. "Lie down. No more."

"No more," he agreed. How many men in the history of the world had made such a promise to a woman then used the rest of the night to chip away at her resistance? He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't push for more, but be content to have her lie with him all night long. That would be enough, though his cock ached with need.

He took her hand and led her from the room. In the dark of night, with only the kerosene lamp he carried to drive away the shadows, there was a dreamlike sense of freedom to do things that weren't allowed in the bright light of day.

In his room, Alan set the lamp on the nightstand and turned to face Huiann. She looked nervous, but a tiny smile let him know she was happy with her choice. This was not something he'd compelled her to do.

Alan stepped forward and did the one thing he'd longed to since he'd first seen her. Taking hold of her shoulders, he turned her around and unfastened the braid that bound her hair. Plait by plait he worked it loose then combed the silken mass with his fingers

until it hung straight down her back. He gathered up handfuls of the shiny black strands and pressed his face into her hair, feeling the softness against his cheeks and inhaling her scent.

"I love your beautiful hair." He turned her to face him again and pulled some of the locks over her shoulders.

She smiled and reached up to touch his hair, saying something in Chinese. Then she fluffed her fingers through it. "Silk. Like dress."

He grinned. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever gotten. Although a man would usually rather be praised for his manly physique." He looked at the bed, the covers drawn up earlier in the day by her hands. "Would you like to lie down?"

Her eyes were somber and her smile gone, but she nodded. "*Shi*. Yes."

"We could... We'd be more comfortable without our clothes. Not naked," he rushed to add. "In our underclothes." He demonstrated by unbuttoning his shirt.

Huiann swallowed but nodded curtly. As resolute as a soldier going into battle, she began to unfasten her blouse. Alan prayed she wasn't complying from some sense of obligation. He didn't want that, but neither could he bear for her to leave him to spend another night alone.

After stripping off his shirt, Alan sat on the edge of the bed and removed his boots and socks then hesitated over his fly. If he kept the trousers on, that would be two layers instead of just one keeping his eager cock battened down. But it would be so much more comfortable wearing only his drawers. He

unfastened the first button and glanced up to see Huiann hesitating over the waistband of her skirt.

She wore only a chemise on her top half, leaving her arms, shoulders and cleavage bare. Her small breasts filled the front of the garment, and her nipples made two dark impressions against the fabric. Alan choked back a groan and left his trousers on.

Huiann pushed her skirt down her hips and let it drop to the floor. Beneath, she wore no petticoat, only bloomers which covered her to mid-calf and the pair of slippers she always wore around the house. She kicked them off, removed her socks and her feet were bare.

Alan pulled back the bedcovers and offered her his hand to help her into the high bed. She sat with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. The drawers crept higher to reveal more of her legs. With her hair down and little clothing covering her body, she looked very young and vulnerable.

Alan lowered the lamp flame until there was only a glimmer of light in the room. His skin burned with fever as he climbed into bed beside Huiann. He felt like a groom on his wedding night except, he reminded himself, there would be no copulation. None. Not tonight.

But there were other things they could do. He slid an arm around Huiann's back and cupped her chin in his hand as he kissed her. Her lips opened willingly. The tip of her tongue met his without shyness. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the joy of having her in his arms and in his bed, her tongue tangling with his. He pushed his hand through the slippery strands of her hair and cradled the back of her head.

Together they sank onto the mattress, lying face-to-face. The bed was too narrow for two, but Alan would've been entwined as close as possible with her even if they were lying in his parents' huge tester bed, the one his Dutch grandfather, a wealthy merchant, had brought over from Amsterdam.

But there were more interesting things to think about right now than a fancy bed. He had one arm around Huiann's back. With the other he stroked her arm from shoulder to wrist, feeling the texture of her skin. When he lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist, she sucked in a breath. He slid his mouth up the inside of her arm, eliciting murmurs of pleasure. Each soft moan made him harder and hungrier. He could devour her rather than just kiss her arm. His need pulled against the harness of his control like an unbroken horse. Lying with her like this was a dangerous game, but he was confident he could stop himself from going too far.

Alan kissed her neck and then her chest above the neckline of the chemise. He kissed her shoulders, collarbones and the curves of her breasts, warm and plump beneath his mouth. He dared to dip lower and roll his tongue over the bump of a nipple under thin cotton. He drew the bud between his lips and sucked.

Huiann gasped louder. She cupped his head and he thought she might push him away, but instead she held him there.

Although the wet fabric clung to her, it was still a barrier to what he wanted. Alan pulled down the neckline of the chemise until her breast popped free. It was petite and round, the dark nipple slightly upturned. He nuzzled the small globe with his nose, breathing in

her scent before taking her erect nipple into his mouth again. He savored the taste of her sweet flesh and cupped her other breast, softness filling his palm.

Huiann arched into his touch then reached down, grasped the hem of her chemise and pulled it up. She took it off then lay down again. Her hands fluttered like birds, starting to modestly cover her breasts, hovering for a moment then changing course. She brought her hands down to her sides and lay still, allowing him to look at her.

Her naked torso gleamed in the faint lamplight. He feasted on the sight of the delicate collarbones and curve of her shoulders, the mounds of her breasts topped by dusky, distended nipples, her flat stomach and slender waist. More than lust pulsed through him. Alan felt a physical pain in his chest at the sight of her fragile beauty, and a savage desire to tear apart the man who would have sold her into slavery. He would keep Huiann safe with him forever.

She plucked at his undershirt and he sat up and removed it. Before he could lie back down, she stopped him with a hand on his chest and took her turn examining him. Chinese women were supposedly demure and diffident, but Huiann often displayed such spirit and confidence. These qualities were what had helped her escape Xie Fuhua rather than giving in to her fate.

It was difficult to sit still while she looked at him. Her scrutiny made his muscles twitch and his skin tingle as if it were her fingers rather than her gaze wandering over him. The admiration in her eyes made his cock grow even stiffer. At last she reached for him with both hands, an imperious empress demanding the

attention of her slave. He surrendered to her will and lay beside her, resuming his attention to her breasts. He caressed and kissed them and sucked on each nipple. If he wasn't going below her waist, he'd take full advantage of this area he could explore. But soon his hand glided of its own accord down her stomach toward her pussy.

Huiann murmured a protest and stopped him with a light touch on the back of his hand. "No. Alan. No good night."

Chastened, he slid his hand back up to her belly and rubbed little circles there. Such smooth, taut skin. He rested his head on her breast and felt her chest rise and fall. His cock dug into the side of her hip and he thrust a little to relieve the tension, but that only made him want more contact.

Huiann rolled onto her side and patted the pillow, indicating he should lie flat. She lay beside him and explored his chest, her fingers fluffing through his hair and tracing circles around each areola. She plucked at one of his nipples and his stomach tightened.

"I'm never going to make it through an entire night with you if you keep that up," he warned.

But she was relentless. She dragged her tongue over one nipple while her fingers toyed with the other. Her long hair tickled his skin and sent shivers through him. She splayed her hand wide over his belly and moved it slowly down toward the bulge in his trousers. His stomach muscles jerked as she drew closer to his painfully swollen erection. Then she touched it and the warmth of her hand, even through two layers of fabric, nearly made him explode.

He grabbed her wrist. "Jesus, do you know what you're doing?"

She stopped licking his nipple and looked at him with a worried frown. "No?"

He realized then that she was trying to please him. She was offering a generous gift, but was it right for him to accept it?

Alan hadn't the strength to answer that question. His need was too great and she was too willing. He released her wrist.

Huiann molded her hand around the bulge in his pants and stroked its length. She murmured something in Chinese as Alan's eyes closed and he groaned.

After a few moments of petting his cock through his trousers, she unfastened the buttons of his fly and untied the drawstring of his drawers, setting his cock free.

Alan looked down as Huiann took him gingerly into her hand. Her light grasp and the slide of her palm over his sensitized flesh made him shudder and his hips lifted toward her gentle caress. But he needed her to grip him harder. Alan wrapped his hand around hers and showed her what to do.

She massaged him with the perfect grip, the hot friction of her hand on his cock driving him closer to the edge of climax. It had been so long since he'd had a woman touch him that any woman's hand could have quickly brought him to orgasm. But the fact that it was Huiann made the experience so much more than indulgence in a primitive need. This woman became more precious to him every day. Without her smiles, his days would be bleak. She was smart, strong and

full of life. To have her here in his bed at last was a beautiful dream that eradicated all his nightmares.

Alan pushed into her fist and she pumped faster. His balls drew tight and his cock pulsed as he released with a groan. Pleasure swelled through him coupled with sweet emotion. This woman, this night, this moment, drove away all bad memories, giving substance to his life again so he no longer felt like a hollow man.

When the last peak died away, Alan opened his eyes. Huiann was watching his face. He was embarrassed until he saw the glitter of tears in her eyes.

He touched her cheek. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." His sticky spunk was all over her hand and his belly and he felt like a fool. He reached to grab the undershirt he'd tossed aside and wiped both of them clean. "I'm sorry."

"No. No, Alan." She touched her fingers to his mouth. "*Gou*. It is good. You face is beau-ti-ful." She pronounced each syllable with exquisite care.

He kissed the fingers pressed to his lips. "No, *you're* beautiful. A damn miracle."

She smiled and laid her head on his chest, curled against his side, snug and warm. Knowing she'd be there when he woke made it possible for Alan to drift toward sleep. He didn't fear any nightmares. How could they possibly disturb him tonight?

Chapter Eleven

Huiann listened to her lover breathing and felt his hot skin branding her. His taste still lingered in her mouth and his smell filled her senses.

Grandma Mei had been right. It was too easy for a woman to lose herself in a man as the dragon swallowed the phoenix. Huiann had not even had Alan inside her yet and already she felt overcome with feelings for him. His kisses had turned her into a primitive creature operating on instinct. She'd wanted to do everything men and women did together and felt no fear or shame about the unknown act. They belonged together. She would've opened herself to him, but her body ensured she take a few more days to consider since she was in the midst of her monthly cycle.

Simply having him kiss and suckle her breasts had been heavenly. And she loved the feeling of his hard muscles and warm skin beneath her hands and hearing him gasp when she held his penis in her hand. It was satiny yet hard as stone and so warm and alive. It was amazing to have the power in her hand to bring him to climax. His blissful expression afterward had moved her. And he had slept through the night at peace because of her.

Now the early-morning sunlight through the window gilded his hair and his tranquil features. Huiann pressed closer to his hot body and clung to him for a few more moments before sliding out of bed.

She dressed quickly, suddenly shy and not wanting him to wake and find her half-clothed. But he still slept as she hurried down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

The meal was nearly ready when his heavy tread on the stairs set her heart racing. She poured a cup of coffee for him and carried it to the table, and then she had no more excuse to avoid his eyes. Huiann looked up and smiled.

Alan's smile was warm and maybe little shy too. "Good morning."

She bowed and returned the greeting. "Good morning."

And then they had nothing to more to say. It was strange to do such intimate things together while nearly naked and then face each other fully clothed yet far less comfortable the next day.

Alan sipped the coffee, burned his mouth and cursed. Huiann returned to the stove and dished up their regular breakfast of oatmeal. They sat to eat, each focused on the bowl before them.

After a while, Alan cleared his throat. "I want to thank you for last night."

"Thank you," she replied automatically, her cheeks burning.

"I... It was..." He fell silent and resumed eating.

Huiann was glad when the silent meal was finished and she could clear the table. She hadn't known that coming closer together might drive them farther apart.

Things got better later in the day when Alan returned from the store for lunch. In front of Dora, they acted as they normally would, and the strained

tension didn't resurface until later that evening when they were alone once more.

At dinner, Alan was rather quiet and remained that way as he sat in the parlor with a book in his hands. Finally, Huiann could stand the tension no longer.

She looked up from her sewing. "What book?"

Alan closed the cover and handed it to her. She studied the letters on the cover and flipped through the pages of close-set type, stopping when she came to an engraving. The illustration depicted a human body stripped of flesh, the muscles lying in bands over the skeleton beneath. This was a physician's book.

"My father wanted me to be a doctor, a man who heals sickness," Alan explained. "But I left school to join the army."

"You want be a doctor?"

"No. I was just looking at the book."

She handed the book back to Alan. "Father angry you no be a doctor?"

He nodded. "Mostly because I left school. He would have been happy to have me study anything."

"My brother, Bolin, make angry Father. No work for Father." She didn't know the word for mill or the one for sailor. "Go to sea."

"Your brother went to sea instead of working for your father."

"*Shi*. We want him home. Mother sad."

"Mine too," Alan said. "After the war, my family wanted me to stay home."

"Why you go?" She couldn't imagine someone choosing to leave their family. Why live on the opposite side of the country from the place he'd shown

her on the map? Had he fought with his father and left home angry?

He shrugged. "I needed to go." He turned his attention back to his book but soon put it down and went to the desk where he took out a pen and paper and began writing. A letter home, she hoped.

Silence fell again and Huiann could think of nothing but the moment when it would be time for them to retire for the night. Would he invite her to sleep with him again? She didn't want to refuse but this was not a good night for it as her flow was quite heavy. It was a private thing one couldn't explain to a man even if he spoke the same language.

At last Alan rose from the desk and put away his writing materials. Huiann hung up the gown on the dressmaker's form he'd bought for her. When she turned, he was waiting at the door with the lamp in hand.

"About last night... I don't want you to do anything you don't wish to. But if you want to sleep with me again, I would like that."

She wasn't certain of the exact meaning of all the words but the hope in his voice was clear. She went to him and rested her hand on his arm as she looked up at him.

"I like your bed. But tonight, no good." She willed him to understand. To make certain he knew she did want him, Huiann grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down for a kiss.

"Soon," she said when at last they broke apart.

His eyes widened and she thought he might have realized the reason behind her refusal. "Oh. Good."

He smiled and she returned his smile and the awkwardness that had haunted them all day evaporated like a ghost. Alan offered her his arm and escorted her to her room, lit her lamp so she could get ready for bed then backed out of the room with a murmured, "Good night."

"Good night," she echoed. "Soon."

He stepped back into the room and pulled her into his arms. His mouth invaded hers, sealing her promise, and when he pulled away, he repeated, "Soon."

Chapter Twelve

Mrs. Kittridge's fitting took longer than Huiann would've liked. Her initial measurements were correct so the gown fit the woman perfectly, but she quibbled over details. She wanted the bodice to be even tighter and was uncertain about the length, requiring Huiann and Dora to adjust the entire hem.

Huiann was glad she could pretend to know no English and simply kneel, placing pins in the fabric while Dora soothed the flighty woman with compliments. When the work was finally finished, Dora escorted Mrs. Kittridge from the parlor/fitting room back to the store. Huiann picked up the room and prepared for their outing.

As she buttoned the heavy-soled shoes Alan had given her, her heart beat fast. She was nervous and excited to be going out after weeks of seclusion. Dora had lent her an ugly broad-brimmed felt hat, which could be pulled low over her face. In Western-style clothing, she would blend in. If by chance one of Xie's men saw her, they wouldn't recognize her in this attire, and she certainly intended to be watchful and ready to run if necessary. The fact she didn't tell Alan she was going didn't reflect any doubt she was doing the right thing. She simply didn't want him to worry. Her errand was an important one. Besides, she couldn't stay indoors for the rest of her life.

Dora returned from seeing Mrs. Kittridge out. "That woman is such a snob!" She pulled a face and tipped her nose high in the air. "Snob."

"Snob. Yes." She'd known such women in Suzhou, the ones who spent their lives demonstrating their superiority over others. Although Huiann's family had been well-respected and fairly well-off, there were always those who placed themselves higher and enjoyed talking down to those they considered social inferiors.

"Ready? Let's go." Dora led the way out the kitchen door and down the narrow alley to the street in front of the shop.

Huiann paused at the entrance of the alley, studying the busy street, the traffic, pedestrians and shops. There was no one who looked like her among all the pale faces that passed by. She tipped her face down, tugged the brim of her hat lower and followed Dora onto the board walkway.

Dora linked arms with her so they walked side by side. They went around the corner and Huiann gazed in fascination at the teeming thoroughfare. She'd thought Suzhou was a large city, but San Francisco was beyond belief. So many people packed into so little space. It felt good to stride along under the open sky and to breathe fresh air after being indoors for days. Relatively fresh air, for a thousand smells assaulted her from horse dung to body odor to cooking aromas.

Dora stopped to examine frosted pastries in a bakery window, pointing out the ones she'd buy if she could afford them. Huiann barely glanced at the sweets before resuming her study of the milling crowd. She

couldn't let her vigilance drop in case Xie Fuhua was still searching for her even after these many weeks.

She plucked at Dora's sleeve. "Come."

"All right, but look at these shoes. Aren't they beautiful? Wouldn't you love to have a pair like that?" Dora dragged her to another window.

A salesperson took a pair of shoes from behind the glass pane and replaced them with another pair. All the shoes were displayed on a length of black velvet and were arrayed at different heights in an attractive presentation.

Alan needs to put our dresses in a front window. We'll have so many orders our fingers will bleed trying to keep up with them. She was excited by the prospect. A workroom full of seamstresses and her ingenuity in duplicating the magazine fashions, and they'd have a solid business. Maybe over time she could introduce some designs her own.

This time it was Dora who pulled on Huiann's arm. "We'd better get going. We have quite a walk ahead of us."

After several more blocks, Huiann's feet began to ache. The heavy brogans had rubbed blisters on her heels and toes. She wished she'd worn her soft-sided slippers. They wouldn't have shown beneath her skirt. But she marched on without complaining.

They made a few more twists and turns, ending up on a quieter street. Dora stopped before a door with a placard above it. "Dr. Harrigan will have what you need."

Dora opened the door and ushered Huiann inside a dimly lit, stuffy room. A woman sat behind a desk, knitting, and a few wooden chairs were placed in a

row along the opposite wall. Two of them were occupied—one by a very fat man with a sweating red face, the other by a pregnant woman whose hands were cupped around the bulge beneath her gown. Huiann stayed a pace or two behind Dora as her friend went to the desk and talked to the knitting woman. The woman rose and left the room.

Dora returned to Huiann. “She’ll get the elixir.”

Huiann was suddenly very nervous about taking whatever concoction this doctor might provide. What if it poisoned her? This place was so dingy and a bad smell hung in the air. She folded her arms and turned away from the seated patients who were staring at her. Minutes of waiting felt like hours before the woman returned and held out a small bottle. Dora paid her with some of Huiann’s money.

Outside the doctor’s office, Huiann drew a deep breath. Dora gave her the change and the bottle of brown liquid. “You drink this before...you know...and again after.”

Huiann nodded, her cheeks flaming at the idea of doing “you know” with Alan.

On the way home, they walked faster and each step was painful. Huiann couldn’t wait to take off her shoes. She paused near the shop window with the shoe display and leaned against the brick wall, rubbing her heel. But there was no relief through the thick leather and no way to loosen the shoes since they were buttoned from ankle to calf.

Dora wrapped an arm around her waist. “Poor thing. Lean on me.”

Gritting her teeth, Huiann pushed off the wall, anxious to make the last few blocks to home. It was

late in the afternoon. Alan might already have closed the shop and be wondering where she was.

She noticed a tall, heavily built white man about a half block ahead watching them. His hair and beard were reddish brown and his face was blotched with freckles. As his gaze met hers, he started toward her, bumping aside other pedestrians in his hurry.

Huiann's heart leaped to her throat. She grabbed Dora's hand and pulled her in the opposite direction. Dora squeaked as Huiann nearly pulled her off her feet. "What...?"

"Run!" Huiann demanded in Wu, too panicked to remember any English. Their pursuer might be Xie's agent or only some street thug, but she wasn't going to wait to find out which. They ran around the first corner they came to then turned down an alley between two buildings. Emerging onto another street, Huiann turned again without glancing back to see if they were followed. She simply ran and Dora followed her lead.

People and buildings flew past, but all Huiann could feel was the pain in her chest and Dora's sweaty hand clenched in hers. Not until they'd zigzagged several more times did she finally risk looking over her shoulder.

The man was no longer there.

Dora dug her heels in at last, forcing her to stop. "Who was that?"

Huiann shook her head, aware of the curious glances they were receiving from pedestrians. "Bad man."

Dora had learned Huiann's story and realized what that might mean. "Well, he's gone now. Let's get on home afore your man gets mad."

They'd added extra blocks by dodging their pursuer and it was nearly sunset when they reached their street. Huiann continued to look for someone following them, but didn't see the big bearded man again.

When she bid Dora goodbye outside the kitchen door, the other woman gave her a hard hug. "You'd best keep safe inside from now on. Good luck tonight. Don't be scared. First time hurts some, but it ain't too bad after that and sometimes it's real good."

Embarrassment at Dora's frank talk mingled with a rush of affection. Huiann returned her hug. "Thank you."

The kitchen was empty and silent. A lamp burned on the table. She went to the foot of the stairs and called for Alan, but there was no answer and the upstairs was dark. After removing her hat and coat and hanging them on the hook, she went to the stove, added another piece of coal and built up the fire. She got out a pot and poured water into it to boil rice.

Suddenly the back door burst open, banging against the wall. Huiann jumped and whirled around. Alan filled the door frame. He strode across the kitchen to her in three steps. His brows twisted in a scowl. She shrank back from his anger.

"Where have you been?" He lifted his hand and she winced, half expecting a slap. But his hand settled on her shoulder, gripping hard but not squeezing. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

His frown relaxed. "Where did you go? I was worried."

"I go doctor. Dora too." She shook her head. "Sorry."

"The doctor? With Dora? Huiann, you can't leave here. It's not safe for you." He shook her once then pulled her into his arms. "Not safe. Understand?"

After being chased by a frightening stranger? Absolutely. "Yes," she said in a small voice, and repeated, "Sorry."

"It's all right. I'm sorry I yelled."

He was apologizing to her. She'd never heard her father apologize to her mother in her entire life. Men didn't admit fault to women, or at least not where anyone could overhear them. Maybe in private a man did all sorts of apologizing she wasn't aware of. Alan's contrite tone was as arousing as his arms holding her or his hard chest against her cheek. She hugged her arms around him, closed her eyes and leaned into his body, nuzzling her face into his shirt.

He kissed the top of her head. When his stomach rumbled, Huiann pulled away. She was being paid to feed him and dinner wasn't even started. Her lax attention to her duties was shameful.

"I cook now." She limped over to the counter and pulled one of the onions from the string hanging from the ceiling. She'd almost forgotten the pain in her feet, but now the tenderness flared again. Wincing, she bent to unhook the shoe buttons.

Alan dropped to a crouch beside her and lifted her foot in his hands. Placing it on his bent knee, he worked open the buttons for her and pulled off the shoe. She hissed and he glanced up. "Hurt?"

She nodded, embarrassed yet strangely excited by having him on his knees before her. He peeled off her stocking and cradled her sore foot in his palm. Her discomfort mingled with pleasure. Alan examined her

blistered toes and raw heel and he clicked his tongue at the damage.

He ordered her to sit down while he went to the sink to dampen a cloth and got a jar of ointment from the shelf. Again he knelt at her feet, took off both shoes and held the wet cloth against each one before smoothing cool ointment over her abraded skin. Shimmers of delight turned to a deeper thrill as her body responded to his gentle touch. A little pain seemed a small price to pay and she thought she'd gladly walk her feet into bloody stumps for this kind of attention.

When he was finished, Alan wrapped her feet in strips of cloth, put his hands on her knees and looked up at her. "Sit. I'll cook."

"No," she protested, but he rose and pressed his hand on her shoulder, not allowing her to rise.

"Sit." His deep, commanding voice sent another delighted shiver through her.

Huiann hadn't realized how tired she was, but a wave of exhaustion flooded over her. Folding her arms on top of the table, she rested her head and listened to Alan move around the kitchen. When he stroked his hand over her head, smoothing back her hair, she started from a light doze.

He placed a plate before her and sat across from her to eat the simple meal of leftovers from the pantry. Huiann hardly felt like eating. Her stomach was jumpy from the incident with the stranger and from nervousness about the upcoming night, but after one bite she found she was starving and soon her plate was empty.

Before she could rise to clear the table, Alan whisked the dishes away. Huiann was both flattered and uneasy at the way he treated her as an honored guest rather than a servant. She sipped the cup of tea he'd given her and watched him move around the kitchen, efficiently performing her tasks.

After he was finished, he came and stood before her. He leaned over and scooped her up out of the chair. She squeaked in surprise. One of his arms supported her back, the other slid under her legs, and he cradled her against his chest. She looped an arm around his neck and held on while he carried her upstairs. He set her down in front of her room.

His expression was tense and his fingers tapped against his thighs. "You're tired. You probably want to sleep."

"No." She shook her head and whispered huskily, "Tonight."

He swallowed. "All right. I'll wait for you." He jerked a thumb toward his room. "Come when you're ready."

Backing away from her, he tripped on a warped floorboard. His clumsiness lessened her own fears and made her smile. Alan smiled back, his eyes glowing. The promise of something to come simmered in the air between them.

Water spilled from a kettle can never be put back, Grandma Mei's voice helpfully reminded her.

Huiann ignored that bit of wisdom as she went into her room, stripped naked and washed in the basin of water. She'd washed her hair early that morning after Alan left for the store. Now she brushed it with the silver-backed brush he'd bought her. She put on a

simple white cotton shift she'd sewn, collarless and sleeveless and ending at mid-calf. Beneath the garment, she was naked. The material brushed against her skin, which was already tingling, and the tickle of the fabric against her breasts and bottom made her sex tighten with desire.

Uncapping the bottle from the doctor, she took a swig of the bitter brown liquid. She scrubbed her teeth with toothpowder and rinsed, then stood, staring at her bandaged feet. All her preparations were finished. Nothing but nerves was keeping her from walking down the hall and entering his room.

Her heart raced at the prospect and she drew a deep breath. She was about to have sex with a man who was not her husband—a shameful act which dishonored her family, including her long-dead ancestors. She tried to feel the appropriate guilt, but she couldn't summon any about giving herself to Alan Sommers, who'd been nothing but kind and generous and respectful to her from the day she'd stumbled into his life.

No holding back now. This was what she wanted and she would not be afraid. Huiann extinguished her light and padded down the corridor to Alan's room. The door was open and flickering candlelight rather than a kerosene lamp lit the room. She paused in the doorway.

Her protector and savior was shirtless and barefoot, dressed only in a pair of drawers. He stood beside the bed with his back to her, turning down the covers. She studied the rippling muscles of his shoulders and arms as he performed the mundane task. His back was a beautiful, pale canvas on which she could imagine painting letters and designs. She admired the bands of

muscle and the shadows beneath his shoulder blades. His drawers sagged low, revealing narrow hips and the intriguing curve of his rear. Her sex tightened at the glimpse of his buttocks.

His face was in profile and his nose no longer seemed too big or his features too coarse as she'd once thought, so long ago it seemed. Instead, they appeared assertively masculine except for the thick sweep of eyelashes and the generous fullness of his lips.

Alan noticed her and turned. The blanket fell from his fingers as he gazed at her with the eyes of a hungry dragon. His lips parted and the exhalation of his breath floated to her across the quiet room. Then he walked toward her.

For several moments they gazed at one another. Huiann's blood raged, a river in flood, but she held still like a crane perched at the water's edge. Holding her breath, she waited for Alan's touch.

He lifted his hands and stroked her hair then bent and kissed her lips, raindrop-light kisses that stirred the growing storm within her. His fingertip traced the neckline of her shift, trailing over her chest and leaving ripples of heat in its wake. He cupped her bare shoulders then slid his hands all the way down her arms to lace his fingers with hers. Huiann opened her mouth to his exploring kisses, flicking her tongue lightly against his, tasting the same tooth powder she had used.

He groaned quietly, reminding her of a distant thunderstorm rolling in off the Yangtze, and kissed her harder. The heat between her legs burned as she leaned into him. She slid her hands up to his shoulders and held on. His hands went around her hips and cupped

her bottom, bunching the fabric of her shift, pulling the hem higher and higher. Air brushed the backs of her legs and then her naked rear. When he stroked her bare flesh at last, her buttocks tightened. Her sex felt slippery wet and throbbed in steady pulses.

Alan broke off their kiss and tugged her shift higher. She raised her arms so he could pull it off. His gaze locked with hers and Huiann felt a connection between them—as if an invisible chain rather than a mere gaze bound them together. Yin and yang, the negative and positive principles, locked together in eternal union.

Alan dropped his gaze to her body. As he beheld her nakedness, Huiann held still, her stomach quaking and her nerves singing like crickets. Her flesh burned not with mortification but with lust. The hungry look in Alan's eyes reminded her of the men Xie Fuhua had brought to examine her. But while their assessing stares had revolted her, Alan's turned her insides to golden honey. She had hoped those men thought she was the ugliest woman they'd ever seen. She wanted Alan to find her beautiful and desirable. When she saw in his eyes that he did, her heart floated.

He leaned to kiss her shoulder, a tickling touch that made her squirm and smile. Then his lips traveled across her chest to each breast, suckling one then the other, while his hands moved restlessly over her back and buttocks. She thrust her chest toward his mouth and whimpered at the delightful tugging sensation of his mouth on her nipples.

He moved lower, over her rib cage and down her belly. Kneeling in front of her, he pressed his face to her stomach, his hands holding her hips. Huiann stroked his caramel-colored hair. The sight of this big,

strong man on his knees before her gave her an excited thrill. She wanted to hold and love him and take him deep within her body.

Alan pulled his head from its resting place on the pillow of her stomach and he pressed a kiss right below her navel. Her muscles twitched at the feathery touch. He kissed her again lower...and lower still. She gasped when he kissed her right above the dark tangle of curls. Would he kiss her sex? Madam Teng had told her to expect some men to enjoy that intimacy.

Her labia felt swollen and feverish. Her stomach jerked with every soft lick he bestowed. He made a path around the triangle of her pubis and nibbled on her thighs on either side. Wetness trickled from her vagina as if it were a river that had overflowed its banks.

Alan looked up at her with an intense soul-stealing gaze then nudged her legs apart and lowered his face to her golden lotus. She watched, enthralled by his profile, his closed eyes and his fingers spreading her wide. When his mouth settled on her bud, her eyes closed and she moaned. Wet flicks of his tongue sent lightning crackling through her. She wiggled but his hard hands held her steady while his tongue lapped relentlessly over her.

She clenched fistfuls of his hair as lightning flashed within her, bolt after shining bolt. The charged air of a storm grew closer. Her hips rocked and her breathing grew ragged. Her whimpers turned into needy whines.

"Please, please, please," she begged breathlessly as her need intensified. Suddenly relief exploded through her. Rain burst at last from a towering thunderhead. She cried out and shook, her knees buckling. Alan

caught her in his arms and guided her down to her knees.

She leaned against him, overwhelmed with surprise and pleasure and little sparkles of light that were slowly fading. She didn't know she could feel such things, and now she understood the look of ecstasy on Alan's face the other night. Had she given him this much delight? Madam Teng had been right, the business of satisfying a man wasn't difficult, but she'd neglected to tell Huiann that she might be just as easily satisfied.

Alan held her close, rocking her. She felt his softly furred chest beneath her cheek and smelled his rich male scent. His arms wrapped around her made her feel safe and protected. That man chasing her earlier seemed far away. Nothing could touch her here.

But something was touching her, pressing hard against her damp cleft and her belly. Beneath his underwear, Alan's erection strained to reach her. And Huiann realized she wasn't perfectly satisfied after all. Even as the last flickers of lightning died away, her opening felt empty, yearning for something to fill it.

Alan rose and lifted her in his arms. He carried her to the bed and laid her down. Her gaze swept from his face to his torso and the trail of hair that led to the waistband of his drawers. Although she'd held his cock in her hand the other night, she hadn't seen it clearly. Now she was eager to see what she'd only touched before.

Catching the focus of her attention, he reached for the drawstring at his waist, loosened the tie and pulled the drawers down the sharp bones of his hips. More tan hair covered his groin and his penis bobbed free.

The head was a dark reddish-purple, a round knob rising from a cowl of foreskin. As he pulled his pants farther down, the long, smooth shaft was revealed. She was struck by its length and girth and imagined what it would feel like inside her. Her lotus tensed in anticipation.

When he'd pulled his undergarment off, Alan reached for something on his nightstand. Huiann watched as he stretched a thin sheath over his erection, pulling it snug and fastening the casing at the base of his shaft with a tie. This must be the preventative device Madam Teng had told her about, the condom which she'd said men couldn't be expected to use because it dulled the sensation.

Huiann's heart lifted as she realized Alan had planned ahead and cared for her enough to be prepared in this way. He was a kind man and her feelings for him grew deeper with his every generous act. She wanted to give all of herself to him and accept all of him into her.

He climbed onto the bed and lay half covering her, giving her time to adjust to his weight. He stroked her hair back from her face, fanning it across the pillow.

"Your hair is beautiful," he murmured in his rumbling voice. Now that she was used to English words, the language no longer sounded flat and dull. "I love your eyes, your nose, your cheeks, your lips, your chin." He touched each feature as he named them. "I love all of you."

He covered her lips with his, kissing her lightly then angling his mouth to possess her more deeply. Without ending the kiss, he moved on top of her and settled his body between her spread legs.

Her heart hammered with desire and excitement and a little fear, but the fear was part of the excitement. She slipped her arms around Alan's back.

He reached down to guide himself to her opening and she felt the pressure of his entry, a mild stretching, not too painful. He continued to push and she caught her breath as the stretching became a burning sensation.

He paused. "All right?"

She looked into his worried eyes and nodded. And she was all right, with him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and pushed again, slowly but deeply filling her.

Huiann clutched his back. The pressure burned for a moment then began to ebb. He remained buried in her while her body adjusted. He pulled out just as slowly, receding like a river after a flood. Her inner muscles released him reluctantly and Alan gave a soft groan as if it hurt him to part from her.

His brow furrowed in concentration and his eyes were nearly closed. He thrust again. Huiann relaxed and this time her body accepted his presence more easily. He supported himself on his arms, protecting her from the full weight of his body, but still he filled her arms and covered her. She took pleasure in his heavy maleness. As he entered her a third time, she was fully open and ready for him.

Alan moved a little faster, a little less carefully as passion overtook him. In and out he glided on a slick of her juices, filling her over and over. The heat and friction inside her built. Huiann raised her knees on either side of his hips, making a cradle for his body. The new position allowed him to go even deeper, and he hit a place inside her that sent a jolt of pained

pleasure through her. He grunted and froze and she actually felt the moment he released inside her.

"Oh," he exhaled with his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth open and gasping for breath. She smiled, caught up in his rapt expression and the wonder of his body merged so completely with hers. A moment passed with only his heavy breathing disturbing the silence.

At last he sighed and opened his eyes and he was back with her once more. "Huiann." She loved the way he mispronounced her name. "Thank you." He slowly withdrew from her one last time. "I hope I didn't hurt you. Are you all right?"

"*Shi.* Yes, I am good," she acknowledged. *Better than good. I am absolutely content.*

He shifted to his side, releasing her from his imprisoning weight. She missed it. He rolled off the bed and went to dispose of the contraceptive then returned with a glass of water filled from the pitcher. She thanked him and emptied the glass in several thirsty gulps.

Huiann wondered if she should put her nightgown back on, but Alan climbed into bed beside her and pulled her naked body against his. She settled into the curve of his body, his front heating her back.

"Huiann, is it all right?" His breath tickled her shoulder. "I shouldn't have..."

She looked at him over her shoulder. "You are sorry? I am not."

"No?" His eyebrow lifted.

"No." She patted his arm, feeling the coarse hair and solid muscle. "Sleep now."

“Yes, ma’am.” He kissed the nape of her neck, making her laugh, and laid his head on the pillow behind hers.

Huiann fell asleep almost instantly, exhausted from the unaccustomed exercise and stress of her day, but later in the night she jerked awake. Alan’s arm was no longer around her and he was sitting up in bed. She reached for him in the dark. His back was slick with sweat and he was breathing hard.

“Alan? All right?”

“Yes. A dream.” He patted her hip and rose from the bed. “Go back to sleep.”

He walked from the room.

Should she go after him and soothe him as she had the other night? She could heat water for his coffee and sit with him at the table. But maybe he wanted to be alone. If he’d wanted her comfort, he would’ve stayed in bed with her.

She stared at the darkness and wondered what demons filled it, continuing to disturb Alan’s peace even after the joy they had just shared.

Chapter Thirteen

Alan's jaw ached from smiling and his throat was sore from making small talk. If having dinner with Mrs. Dodge and her ilk was what it took to be a politician, he didn't know if he could make it to election day. It wasn't that his friendliness toward the constituents was false. He cared about them, their families and their concerns, and wanted to be in a position to help them make their lives better. But the road to hell was often paved with good intentions, as his father had been fond of pointing out, and the deeper he got into campaigning, the more Alan realized the extent of the compromises he'd have to make in order to get anything done once he finally achieved office. There were too many different agendas, too many people to please.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul. That was one of his mother's expressions. It seemed government was a tangled tapestry—pull one thread and chaos ensued. Even the best of men would end up giving ground on one issue in order to gain support for another.

"The Chinese have their place and it's doing menial labor. The only businesses or property they should be allowed to own should be in their section of the city." George Harrelson, a railroad man originally from New Jersey, flicked the ash from the end of his cigar.

There was a general murmur of agreement from the gentlemen seated around the table in the Dodge's dining room.

"Where do you stand on the Oriental menace?" Mr. Dodge prompted Alan to respond.

He exhaled and searched for the most diplomatic way to disagree with the consensus that the Chinese race was inferior and therefore not deserving of equal rights.

"It's often feared that new immigrants will take away too many jobs from American citizens but, gentlemen, we are all descended from immigrant stock. While I agree with the idea of yearly quotas concerning the number of immigrants allowed to enter our fair country, I don't think we can hobble the rights of those already established here. During the recent conflict, did we not fight for freedom and equality for all?"

"Some of us fought for our independence." Robert Jay's soft Carolina drawl reminded Alan he was treading on treacherous ground. Invoking the civil conflict was probably not the best idea.

"Do you agree that if a man has enough money, he can buy a loaf of bread?" Alan began again.

"Yes. I suppose," Jay agreed.

"Or a ticket on one of your trains, Mr. Harrelson?"

"I'd be happy to sell him a ticket anywhere he wants to go—so long as he rides in the proper compartment." Harrelson chuckled at the caveat and the others joined in.

"Say you want to rent or sell a house," Alan suggested to Tolliver, a real estate broker. "Wouldn't one man's money be as good as the next so long as he paid on time?"

"No," Tolliver stated flatly, puncturing the argument Alan was trying to build. "I don't sell

property to coloreds, yellows or Mexicans. They can rent as long as it's someplace appropriate. They're inferior races and belong with their own kind."

Dodge could see Alan was backed into a corner and stepped in to bail him out. "Taxation. That's something we can all agree needs change. Our dollars keep flowing into the city coffers but do we see the results in the roads or sewer system or schools? That's the kind of change Sommers stands for."

Alan was able to end the discussion on a subject he could enthusiastically discuss and after that the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the parlor. A few pleasantries and compliments later, Alan was free to leave, having fulfilled the duty he'd shirked a few weeks earlier.

He walked home, exhausted and feeling rather ill from the rich food, the cigar smoke and the Chinese-bashing that struck much closer to his heart now than it ever had before. If the truth about his relationship with the seamstress at his store ever got out, he wouldn't have a vote to his name. But he hated that he had to keep Huiann a secret when he wanted to shout his feelings about her to the world.

It was late when he arrived home, but a lamp burned in the kitchen, welcoming him home. He climbed the stairs, each step lighter as it brought him closer to the best part of his day.

Huiann was asleep in his bed, curled up as soft and warm as a kitten. He stripped off his clothes and crawled under the covers, spooning up against her back, his erection prodding at her rear. She made a small protesting noise and wiggled against him, which only made him harder. He didn't mean to disturb her

sleep so he held her close, his cock resting in the groove of her rear, her breast cupped in his hand, her hair tickling his chin.

Just as he was drifting to sleep, she shifted her bottom and pressed her breast into his palm. She hummed in her throat and rubbed harder against his growing erection. Alan pushed aside the silky mass of her hair so he could kiss her neck and back. He reached into the front of her nightdress and fondled her breast.

She sat up long enough to remove the gown and then settled back into his embrace once more. He moved his hand from her breast to her belly and down to her pussy, stroking her clitoris until she moaned and rocked against his finger.

Nudging her legs apart, he guided himself to her entrance and slid inside. It was like coming in from a cold day to roast in front of a roaring fire. Her heat and wetness surrounded him as he thrust deep within. Setting up an easy rhythm, he pumped into her, aroused by the slap of her bottom against his groin. Her slender form seemed too small to hold him, but her body accepted every inch he had to give.

It wasn't until he'd moved them both almost to climax that Alan remembered he'd forgotten to wear one of the condoms he'd purchased. As the heat and tension built to a critical point, Alan pulled out and spilled over her backside. He stared at the spatters of white against her golden skin marking her as his, excited by the sight as waves of climax surged through him.

When he was finished, he returned his attention to stimulating the bud of her clitoris. Underneath his

circling finger, Huiann began to moan and writhe. Her ecstasy thrilled him as she bucked in his arms.

Afterward he wiped them both clean, then they curled together once more. Soon Huiann fell back to sleep, her heavy breathing lulling him into a doze. But he was afraid to sleep too deeply. Over the past days since he and Huiann had first come together, the nightmares continued to haunt him. She'd made him the happiest he'd ever been, so why, after a week of falling asleep in the bliss of her embrace every night, did he still suffer the claustrophobic prison dreams—those wretched, reaching hands and the frustrating inability to move or to help? If these transcendent moments with Huiann couldn't dispel them, maybe nothing ever could. What would it take to slay those wartime demons at last?

“Mr. Sommers, do you want me to put out the new wheel of cheese or sell the rest of the old one first?”

Alan paused in restocking the laundry flakes and regarded Jeremy's earnest face. Only he could take a block of cheese so seriously and be so indecisive about it.

“Whatever you think best. You decide.”

Jeremy paused and thought then brightened. “I'll put out the new one, but mark down the old. That should get it moving.” Impressed with his marketing genius, he went whistling off to put his plan in place.

Alan shook his head. Jeremy wasn't the sharpest nail in the bin, but he was good-natured and loyal—a born follower, not likely to ever be a leader. He hoped Cynthia Dodge didn't lead him right into folly. He could imagine her making use of Jeremy to attempt to

manipulate her mother into sending her back east and then dropping him cold when it became clear her mama's will was stronger than hers and would not be denied. Jeremy was ready to abandon his life in San Francisco, pack a bag and buy two tickets to New York if Cynthia so much as crooked her little finger at him. Hopefully those tickets would be refundable. In the meantime, Alan would hold his job for him.

Alan slit the top of another carton and unpacked more boxes of laundry flakes. He thought of Huiann as he worked, imagining how he would make love to her tonight. They existed in a little bubble of bliss right now, rushing into one another's arms the moment Dora was gone for the day. Dora arrived every morning about the time Alan left for the store, stayed for lunch and left just before supertime. If she noticed the heated looks that passed between them during the noon hour, she ignored them and chattered on about every single thing that crossed her mind.

The evenings he and Huiann used to spend in the parlor practicing her English now took place in Alan's bed. When she learned new words, he rewarded her with kisses and caresses, and her understanding grew rapidly.

Huiann's dresses were selling well and they discussed plans to expand her business. Alan looked into renting space, supplies and hiring workers. He was close to purchasing an abandoned farm near the outskirts of the city. It would be hard to have Huiann so far away from him, but she would be safer there, less likely to be discovered by Xie Fuhua and free to go outside, take a walk and breathe fresh air. She was

nearly as caged living with him as she had been in her captor's house.

A pang of guilt went through him as he considered her future—their future. The conversation at the Dodges the other day had served to remind him of the severe prejudice they would face if they married. Mixed race couples invited censure from both of their races. Not only would Alan's political aspirations be finished, but very likely his store would be boycotted if he took Huiann as his wife.

But what was the alternative? To keep her hidden in his rooms like a doll he took out to play with only when no one was looking?

The bell above the door rang, distracting Alan from his worries. Cynthia Dodge entered the store, wearing a lilac frock and carrying a matching parasol. Jeremy looked up from fussing with the wheel of cheese and glowed at the sight of Miss Dodge. If he had a tail, he'd wag it.

Cynthia returned Jeremy's smile but headed across the store to Alan. "Good morning, Mr. Sommers."

"You're out early, Miss Dodge." He was surprised to see her without a chaperone and wondered if her mother knew where she was.

"I heard you have a new dressmaker. I've seen some of her lovely work and thought I might order something."

"She duplicates designs from *Godey's*, if you'd like to take a look." Alan took the magazine from beneath the counter. "I have an errand to run, but Mr. Taylor will be happy to assist you." He beckoned Jeremy over. The clerk beamed like someone had bequeathed him a fortune, but Cynthia's expression was less clear. She

seemed genuinely pleased to see Jeremy but Alan still felt she was using him.

Alan went to the back of the store where the safe sat in an alcove. He removed the previous day's receipts in the small canvas bag, put on his coat and hat and headed out of the store to take the deposit to the bank. The midmorning streets were already crowded and the sidewalks had a steady flow of pedestrian traffic. Alan carried the bank bag strapped around his body beneath his coat. He had his derringer, which he'd never needed, tucked into an inside pocket of his coat. He hadn't fired a gun since that aborted battle during which he'd been knocked unconscious almost immediately.

He kept an eye out for rental signs in windows of buildings as he passed and turned down a side street to check on one he knew was vacant. The proximity to his store would be convenient and it didn't hurt to investigate all possibilities.

Alan was so focused on his thoughts he didn't register footsteps behind him until a man grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back and slammed him face-first into the wall. A hard hand gripped the back of his neck. Alan kicked out and his foot connected with a leg. The grip on his neck loosened and he snapped his head back, hoping to connect with his opponent's face.

A burlap sack came down over his head. He smelled dirt and old potatoes and felt the rough jute against his face. That was when he realized there was more than one attacker. They dragged him between them, his feet stumbling. From the stink and the feeling of walls close on either side, he guessed they'd taken him into an alley. He fought against the hands

holding his arms, lashing out with his feet. One of the men cuffed him in the side of the head with something hard enough to make stars burst in the darkness.

"Enough, boyo." A thick brogue colored the rough voice. Alan smelled ale and onions on the man's breath. "We're not aiming to kill ya, just deliver a message. A rich Chink hired us to look for one of his whores. She was last seen on your street and now word is you've got some Chink gal sewin' dresses."

Alan forced himself to breathe, fight back his mounting panic. The silent giant who held him while the other man talked was as solid as a rock. Struggling against him was futile. "You heard wrong. I have a Mexican woman sewing for me. I hired her several weeks ago. You can tell your boss that."

"Maybe so, maybe not. But if it's his property you've got, you'd best give her up quick. This is only a warning. Shite will rain down if we find out ya got the girl."

Before Alan could make more denials, the heavy object struck his skull again and everything went black.

He woke with his cheek pressed against dirt and the smell of garbage in his nostrils. The burlap bag had been removed from his head. His coat, deposit bag and pistol had been taken. He rolled to a sitting position, head whirling, and touched his fingers to his temple. They came away smeared with blood.

He cursed himself for leaving the main thoroughfare before going to the bank. He should've made this detour on his way home. Huiann was in danger. These men were looking for her and suspected she was at the store. If these thugs had forcefully

entered and searched for her while he was unconscious, there would have been only Jeremy to stop them.

Alan climbed to his feet, bracing his hand against the wall. Taking a kerchief from his pocket, he pressed it against the wound on his head. He considered going to the police and reporting the attack, but if Xie was as powerful as Dong Li claimed, the police might very well return his "property" to him. The best thing he could do was stay close to Huiann and be more vigilant about her safety.

Alan hurried home and entered by the back door. Huiann was making lunch in the kitchen. The sight of her bent over the stove settled the flock of crows fluttering madly inside him. She was safe—for now, but he must find someplace better to hide her. He'd grown too smug and secure during these past weeks and had nearly begun to think of Xie Fuhua as a child's bogeyman. But the devil was a very real and present danger to Huiann still.

Huiann gasped at the sight of Alan's bloody face and rushed across the room to his side. She guided him to a chair, dampened a clean cloth and began swabbing the wound. When he jerked, she grabbed hold of his chin and held him steady while she continued to gently sponge the cut. "What happen?"

"I was robbed. Money stolen." He didn't want to frighten her with the suggestion that Xie's men were looking for her, but on the other hand, she'd be more careful if she knew they were. In the end, he decided to keep quiet about it for now.

She clicked her tongue and muttered something then stepped back and examined his temple with a frown. "I sew."

“Stitches? No. I’ll just bandage it.”

“I sew,” she said firmly.

She went to get a needle and thread and placed them in a bowl. The kettle was steaming on the stove and she poured boiling water over them, washed her hands and rinsed his wound again.

He began to rise as she started toward him with the needle. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Yes. Sit.” Huiann pushed him back into the chair then held his head steady, her brow furrowed in concentration.

The needle pierced his flesh. He gritted his teeth but held still. Even though it hurt like hell, she was damned adorable fussing over him like this.

When she’d finished, she cut the thread with a pair of scissors, patted the wound once more and stepped back. “Better.”

“No bandage?”

She shook her head. “No bandage. Need air.”

“All right. I guess you’re the doctor.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her onto his lap. Even in the midst of inflicting pain she’d aroused his lust. “Don’t I get a reward for being a good patient?”

“I don’t understand.” She delivered the all-purpose phrase he’d taught her.

“Reward. A kiss.”

The grooves in her cheeks flashed as her lips turned up. “Yes, you need a kiss.” And she bent her head to give him one.

He loved the firmness of her body filling his arms and the warmth of her mouth against his. Huiann cradled his face in her hands, her palms soft against his jaw. A rush of emotion filled him. Was it love? All he

knew was that he wanted to protect her and couldn't imagine life without her. If that was love, he was deeply in it.

Huian pulled away with a little sigh. "I make lunch now. You go to lie down."

"I should tell Jeremy what's happened," he said as she rose from his lap. "I'll be back soon."

In the store, Jeremy was in the midst of serving a line of customers. Alan helped him get through the rush before explaining why his face was banged up.

"Have you noticed a couple of men in here recently, both big fellows, one with an Irish accent?"

"I'm not sure. Did you get a look at them?"

Alan shook his head and held on to the counter until his dizziness passed. "Keep an eye out. If any big Irishmen come into the store, let me know right away. Also keep an eye out on the street."

"Yes, sir." Jeremy nodded briskly. "Did you tell the police?"

"I don't know what they can do with no more description than that. The money's gone."

"We'd better take the deposit together from now on. The streets are getting dangerous when something like that can happen in broad daylight."

"Mmm-hmm," Alan agreed, but his thoughts were on finding a way to overcome the kingpin of Chinatown. Even if he moved Huian to the country she might not be out of his reach. Only if Xie was arrested and jailed would she truly be safe from him.

"Did Miss Dodge buy a dress?" Alan changed the subject to divert Jeremy's worry from the robbery.

The clerk grinned. "Not yet. She says she'll just have to come back and browse some more."

"You could keep her wavering between dimity and organza from now until Christmas."

"She told me she'll save me a dance at the opera house benefit. I'm really in love this time, Mr. Sommers."

"Good luck." *But be cautious.* "I'm going to leave you in charge the rest of the day. I think I need to lie down."

"Sure thing, boss."

By the time Alan climbed upstairs to his bedroom where Huiann was pulling back the covers, his legs were trembling and his head spinning. She helped him sit on the edge of the bed then knelt and took off his boots. Her efficient hands removed his trousers, shirt and socks and swung his legs onto the bed as if he were an invalid. He felt as if he were outside of himself, watching the pair of them together—a petite woman with fine features and long black hair, a brown-haired man a little too thin for his height. They would look wrong to an outsider. What kind of a future could they have together?

From his disconnected feeling, Alan guessed the blow to his head might have been more serious than he thought. He allowed Huiann to push him back onto the bed and pull the covers over him. She sat beside him and stroked her hand over his hair.

"Shh. Close eyes," she ordered, but when he obeyed the room spun so he opened them again and focused on her eyes. They grounded him like anchors.

"Hurt?" she asked.

"A little."

She sat, silently gazing at him for several moments, then began to sing. It was a strange, foreign lullaby as

different from the familiar tunes of his childhood as a peacock was from a mourning dove. He listened to the rise and fall of her voice and thought how far she'd come to be here by his side. How resilient she'd been to suffer everything she'd been through yet remain brave and cheerful. She seemed to be managing much better than he to put her past behind her.

When the last quavering note died away, she said, "My mother song."

"It's beautiful."

"Song is of—" she put her forefinger and thumb an inch apart and made a high-pitched chirping sound, "—small bug."

"A cricket?"

"Crick-et. Cricket sing—all is good in house." She ground her palms together in a crushing motion. "Kill cricket. Good go away."

"Don't kill crickets or you'll bring bad luck."

"Yes." She smiled and rose. "Now you sleep. Later eat."

He grabbed her hand. "Stay. Lie with me for a while."

Huiann stretched out beside him, wrapping an arm around his body. He sighed and curled his arm around her. If it weren't for the terrible ache in his head, this would be a perfect way to spend an afternoon.

"Why don't I take you someplace tomorrow—a picnic in the country? Would you like that?"

She ruffled her fingers through his chest hair. "I don't understand. No talk. Sleep."

"I'm going to take you someplace and show you there's more to America than this city." He would show her the house in the country and, as soon as he

closed the deal, he'd move her there. A safe place where no one could find or harm her.

But in the meantime, he would keep handy his service pistol, which had been in the bottom of his trunk since he moved here. It was a heavy Colt that made the flimsy derringer look like a child's toy.

Chapter Fourteen

Huiann was excited at the prospect of a day away from the house. She packed their lunch while she waited for Alan to bring a wagon from the nearby livery stable. At first she hadn't understood where they were going today, but finally realized it was an outing simply to take a break from their daily routine. She wondered if they would fly kites such as she and her brother and sisters had enjoyed on family excursions back home.

Dora leaned against the counter with a cup of coffee in her hands. "You have a good time. I'll finish Mrs. Henderson's dress and start the next one. I'd rather be here than at home. Ralph's out of work again and hittin' the bottle hard."

Huiann felt guilty at the sad look in her friend's eyes, but not enough to invite Dora along. This time was for her and Alan to be alone. She patted Dora's arm. "Thank you for sew dress."

The other woman smiled. "That's why I'm here."

The kitchen door opened and Alan entered along with a gust of fresh air. He wore a dark gray hat—a Stetson, Dora had called it—and a long black coat that made him seem even taller than normal. His cheeks were flushed from the cold and his eyes bright. Purple and red bruises marred one side of his face, and the stitches at his temple were white against them. Huiann had never imagined her sewing skills would be used to sew a man's flesh together.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." She put on her coat and the broad-brimmed hat Dora had given her, tying the ribbons underneath her chin to keep it on in the stiff breeze.

They bid Dora goodbye and another pang of guilt shot through Huiann as she stood in the doorway waving them off. The woman had been a good friend to her, the nearest thing she had to a sister in this foreign land. Dora had been sympathetic about her relationship with Alan, for which Huiann was grateful. But Dora would continue to be unhappy as long as she stayed with Ralph, and Huiann couldn't change her fate for her.

Fate weaves a tapestry, but it's up to each man to choose what color of thread he will be.

"Keep your face covered," Alan warned as he ushered Huiann down the alley to the waiting horse and buggy. He helped her onto the seat and jumped up beside her.

She kept the brim of her hat pulled low over her face and pressed back against the seat, hidden by the hood of the buggy that rose over them. A shiver went through her that had nothing to do with the cutting wind. Inside Alan's house it was easy to feel protected. Out here she remembered that Xie Fuhua was not the kind of man who would take the loss of a possession easily. He had probably not forgotten her.

Alan snapped the reins on the horse's back and they rolled forward, merging into traffic. He leaned toward Huiann and murmured, "Don't be afraid."

She looked into his blue eyes, brighter than ever in the sunlight, and her fears faded. Luck was on their side. They would be careful, cautious, and all would be well.

In front of them, the horse's glossy chestnut back gleamed. The metal-strapped wagon wheels clattered against the street. The sound of their wheels and those of all the other vehicles was deafening. Huiann didn't look around but remained hidden in the shadow of the buggy hood until they drove out of the city's bustle.

As they headed southwest, she smelled the briny scent of the ocean growing stronger. They weren't going to the seashore today, however. Alan had drawn a map to show her where the city stood on a peninsula between the ocean and the bay. He drew a misshapen oval and told her it was Lake Merced. He had brought fishing poles and Huiann was excited about using them. She used to fish in Lake Taihu with Bolin when she was younger. Those times spent with him had been very special.

When Bolin had renounced her father's textile manufacturing business to join the navy, Father had roared and Mother had wept, and Huiann had only seen her brother once since then, when he came home for a visit. She thought of his black eyes, his teasing grin, his wild ways, and her chest tightened. Likely she would never see him again.

She glanced at Alan, sitting so straight and tall beside her. What would her family think if they could see her with this man? Father and Mother would die from the shame and her sisters would weep at the loss of their little sister to a foreign demon. Likely all her relatives both living and dead would also be horrified. Among them, only Bolin and possibly Grandma Mei might understand her choice.

Alan glanced at her as he steered the wagon onto another road. "What are you thinking about?"

“Fishing with Bolin.”

“I’m sorry. You must miss your family terribly.” His low voice blended with the rumble of the wagon wheels.

She shrugged. It was true she didn’t want to die here in America. Her spirit might never find its way to her ancestors. But neither could she picture herself returning to her family. She wasn’t the same girl who’d left them and, in a very short time, Alan had become the center of her life. She couldn’t imagine being without him. But she didn’t know if he felt that way about her. Maybe she was only someone to warm his bed until the right woman—a white woman whom he could marry and have children with—came into his life.

As the wagon rolled on and the horse’s hooves beat a steady rhythm on the dirt road, city became country. The buildings were spread farther apart and there were houses with yards and gardens rather than businesses. Woods and grassland were interspersed with them. This countryside didn’t look so different from China. After days of living in a loud, coal-smoke-shrouded city, the beauty of nature soothed Huiann.

When they passed a hedgerow of berry bushes, she pointed them out. Alan stopped the buggy and they both climbed down to gather some plump blackberries to add to their lunch.

He grabbed her waist to pull her close and popped a berry into her mouth. Its juicy sweetness burst on her tongue and the big hard seeds crunched between her teeth. Alan leaned to kiss her with purple-stained lips and he tasted as sweet as the fruit. He slipped his tongue between her lips and coiled it around hers. Her

response was as automatic as breathing now as she melted against him.

She loved how he couldn't seem to get enough of touching her, kissing her, holding her hand or hugging her, and she wondered if that was a common manner among white men. Her mother and father had rarely displayed such physical affection in front of their children. But maybe they had behaved that way when people weren't around.

Alan stole one more kiss from her before they climbed back into the buggy. Not too much farther down the road he again stopped the buggy. He pointed at a farmhouse with several outbuildings at the end of a long drive. "There, Huiann. That is the house I'm going to buy. What do you think?"

"Good." Why was he showing her this house bought for a future in which she could never take part? He would marry some woman with yellow hair and snow-white skin, and their children would play in that yard, climb that apple tree. Huiann's mouth tasted as if she'd eaten bitter fruit.

"You will live here and make your dresses. There will be space enough for several workers and you'll be safe. Xie won't find you."

She frowned in confusion, trying to understand what he was saying. Was it possible he was asking her to be his wife? "And you will be here?"

"I'll come as often as I can to see you. It's quite a long way from the store."

Her rising hopes plummeted like a bird whose wings had been clipped. He would visit, but she would no longer share his bed every night and his life every

day. She would be his occasional companion when he chose to see her. Like a courtesan.

Huiann's joy in their outing dimmed. "What you think is best." She tried to sound thankful but could hear the stiffness in her voice.

Alan grabbed her hand. "Huiann, I don't *want* you to leave me. I love having you live with me, to think of you so nearby all day long as I work in the store. But here you would be safe."

She managed a smile to alleviate his frown. She mustn't be so ungrateful when he was offering her a truly generous gift—a place to work and to live. "Yes. It is good. You give much to me. Thank you, Alan."

A shadow lay over her bright day, but Huiann decided to ignore it and appreciate the moments they had together for as long as they lasted.

Alan urged the horse forward and they rode for several more minutes before coming around a bend in the road. Huiann's heart lifted at the sight of a blue lake glimmering on the other side of a glade of trees. She loved water, whether it was gemlike Lake Taihu, the muddy yellow Yangtze or the stormy gray waves of the ocean. She sat up straighter on the hard wooden buggy seat and searched for more glimpses of the lake.

Alan pulled off the road and onto a grassy path with rutted tracks. He parked in an open area, set the brake and climbed down. As he set a picket line for the horse, Huiann took the hamper and blanket from the wagon bed. The smells of fresh water and earth were like perfume to her after so many days spent indoors.

Alan took her hand and led her down the sloping path to the water's edge. This lake was larger than Taihu, and from the dark color she guessed it was

deeper. A breeze rippled the surface, making the sunlight dance across it. They found a grassy spot to set their picnic supplies in the shelter of a tree.

“Hungry?” Alan asked.

She shook her head, wanting to explore the area first, to touch leaves and grass and cattails and maybe dip her feet in the lake, though it would be icy cold today.

He picked up the fishing poles he’d brought and handed her one. “Fish?”

“Yes. I get big fish. More than you,” she teased.

He raised his eyebrows at the challenge. “I’ll show you the best spot for bluegill and then we’ll see who catches more fish.”

They hiked around the marshy perimeter of the lake, water rising in each footprint they left behind in the damp earth. Her cheeks stung from the cold gusts of wind. Only the firmly tied ribbons kept her hat on her head.

Alan finally stopped on a point of land that jutted between two lobes of the lake and set down the tackle box. Using a trowel from the box, he dug for worms. Huiann stripped off her gloves and pawed through the dirt as he turned it up. She picked out worms and put them in an empty tin can.

After they’d baited their hooks and she’d rinsed the dirt off her hands, Huiann was glad to slip her cold fingers back into the warm gloves. She grasped the handle of the pole and tossed out her line. Her memory of performing these actions with Bolin beside her was so strong that, a sharp pang of homesickness pierced her heart.

As if he could see inside her thoughts, Alan said, "You used to fish with your brother. What is he like?"

"Tall." She held a hand over her head to show how much taller. "He smile all the time. Then he go to sea. I miss him. Like you family miss you."

Alan nodded. "It's hard to go, but sometimes it's harder to stay."

"Tell me again why you leave school. What is army?"

He mimed shooting a gun. "Soldiers. Fighting. War."

"Ah." Now she understood more about those nightmares he couldn't shake. "What happen to you?"

"I was captured and locked up in prison."

"You dreams?"

"Yes. It was..." He trailed off and glanced down at her line, stretched like a straight line into the water. "Hey, you caught one."

Huiann cranked the reel slowly, making sure the fish had truly taken the bait, but she wasn't ready to let Alan off the hook any more than she was her bluegill. "Tell me."

He turned his attention back to his own slack line and began winding it tighter. "It was bad. You couldn't lie down for fear of being trampled. No food. No water. By the time we were set free, many had starved to death."

Huiann thought of the women in the hold of the steamer, the skinny wrist of the girl reaching between the bars toward her. And she thought of herself, locked in the comfort of her room at Xie Fuhua's house, just as much a prisoner, trapped, unable to breathe. No wonder Alan woke up at night gasping for air.

“Hard to...” She didn’t know the English for *forget*. “Hard to wash clean your head.” She tapped her temple.

Coming back from his memories, Alan focused on her face and smiled faintly. “Yes, it is.”

Huiann’s fish began to struggle harder, zigzagging back and forth. She let some of the line out, giving the fish the illusion of freedom and, when it settled down, reeled it in. The parallel between the struggling fish and their talk of captivity wasn’t lost on her. But when she finally pulled the fish from the water, it didn’t stop her from taking it off the hook and putting it in their catch basket. It would make a delicious dinner for later in the day.

A companionable silence fell between them as they continued to cast and reel in their lines. Alan hummed then sang a song and she listened in delight to the odd tune. His music was so strange and different from hers. She responded with a folk song of her own. When she tried to teach him the simple chorus, she dissolved into laughter at his inability to pronounce the words. It made her feel better about her mangled English.

After she’d caught three fish and Alan one, they pulled in their lines for the last time and went to eat the lunch she’d packed. Cold chicken, vegetables and rice, spiced canned pears and Alan’s bottle of wine. Huiann sprinkled a few of the berries they’d picked over the platefuls of rice and vegetables and handed one to Alan.

He looked doubtfully at his plate. “With blackberries?”

She seesawed her hand to represent balance. “Salt with sweet is good. Eat. You see.”

He forked up a bite, ate it and pronounced it “great.”

Using her chopsticks, Huiann tried her portion. The combination wasn’t what she would’ve wished. The blackberry seeds were the problem. She carefully moved the garnish of berries off to the side.

Alan laughed. “I see how it is. You use me as the canary to test the coal mine for you.”

She had no idea what he was talking about, but laughed along with him. She was too happy not to. The day was beautiful and she wished this afternoon could go on forever.

After they’d eaten their fill, they stretched out on the blanket, wrapped in their coats and in each other’s arms. The breeze continued to blow, cool and insistent, and seagulls flew overhead, screaming to one another. The chill announced the coming winter. Alan had told her there was no snow here, only heavy, cold rain. She would miss the crisp, cool whiteness that blanketed her home in winter.

He rubbed her back. “What are you thinking about?”

“Snow.” She recalled his drawing of lacy snowflakes tumbling from a cloudy sky when he’d taught her the words for different types of weather.

“No snow here. Wish there was. I miss it and the lakes icing over so you could skate. New Hampshire is a beautiful place to live in the winter.”

She gazed at the aching blue sky and the few wisps of clouds.

He put his finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up so he could see her eyes. “You’re thinking of home again too, aren’t you?”

"No," she protested, and she really wasn't. In fact, she'd been thinking about him.

"You'd be safer far away from San Francisco. I should buy you a ticket."

She wasn't sure she'd understood him correctly. "What?"

"Passage home. It can't be all that much. Instead of buying this house I could send you home."

She shook her head. "Too much money." Yet she would let him buy her a house? It made no sense, but the truth was she no longer wanted to leave America, at least not now. Maybe some day before she died she would return to the land of her ancestors, but right now Suzhou was the last place she wanted to be. And it wasn't only about her growing feelings for Alan. The feeling of satisfaction her sewing business gave her was immeasurable. Here in America she was a woman with income of her own. She was not ready to return to her old life even if she could.

"Father and Xie Fuhua make..." She clicked her tongue in annoyance and joined her hands together to illustrate an agreement.

"Bargain?" Alan said. "But your father didn't know what he planned to do with you."

"No matter. Bargain is made. Xie is big man maybe in China too. I not safe there more than here." She drew a deep breath and added, "And I don't need house. You give me too much."

Alan cupped her cheek in his hand and looked into her eyes from so close she could see the different shades of blue in his iris. "Not as much as you've given me. Besides, I want to buy this house. We agreed you needed more workspace."

“Near store. Not so far away.” *From you.*

He caressed her lips with his thumb. How could something as simple as that light touch be so powerful?

“You want to be close to me,” he said.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“I will come to you often, I promise. Every day if I can.”

Her lip slackened beneath Alan’s caressing thumb, the subtle movement drawing shivers of pleasure from her. She pursed her lips around his thumb and drew it into her mouth. He made a soft sound in his throat, a little appreciative groan that intensified the quivers inside her. She sucked on his thumb, stroked it with her tongue and made him groan louder before she let it go with a wet pop.

“Huiann, the things you do to me...” He slid his hand around her neck and leaned to kiss her, a warm, melting sensation against her cool lips. After several passionate kisses, he pulled away and rested his forehead against hers. “You’re cold. We should go home.”

She wanted to argue, to prolong this glorious afternoon. But another gust of wind blew across the lake, rushing over them like a cold spirit, and her chattering teeth answered for her.

Alan rose, grabbed her hand and drew her to her feet. “Come on.”

While she cleared the remains of the picnic and washed the dishes, he gutted and cleaned the fish, wrapped them in wet leaves and stored them in the catch basket. By the time he’d hitched up the horse, the few thin clouds overhead had multiplied and the blue sky was concealed behind them. A single

raindrop like a tear from the heavens spattered against Huiann's cheek.

"We may get wet before we get home." Alan slapped the reins against the horse's back and the buggy rolled up the grassy trail to the road.

He was proved right. The few raindrops turned into a light mist then a drizzle that pelted them despite the buggy hood protecting them from the worst of it. The dirt roads were churned-up mud. A few horses and delivery carts were out, but most of the carriages and pedestrians had taken refuge inside. The city looked different without the teeming activity in the streets, hushed and gray and somber.

Huiann's coat repelled the rain, but a fine mist bathed her face, making her shiver. She pressed close to Alan's side, content to be rained on as long as she was in the shelter of his arm.

He let her out of the buggy in front of the store and waited until she'd gone down the alley toward the back of the building before leaving to return the vehicle to the livery stable.

By the time he returned, she had the fish frying in a pan and was making compote from the rest of the blackberries they'd picked. Alan came up behind her as she worked at the kitchen counter, slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "I hope you enjoyed your day out even if it was cold."

"Good day. Thank you. Good fish too." She indicated the sizzling filets in the frying pan. "How many you catch?"

He laughed and tightened his arm around her. "Not as many as you, and you won't let me forget it, will you?"

She smiled. He was easy to joke with, like Bolin had been. She stopped stirring the compote and leaned back into his body. He turned her to face him and kissed her. She clung to his neck, overwhelmed by his powerful body pressing against hers. Amazing that she'd once been alarmed by his size. Now it was one of her favorite things about him, the sense of being protected and adored by a sweet and loving giant.

His hands roamed down her back and cupped her bottom, pulling her against his groin. Hard again. He was always hard for her. Huiann's sister Mei had once hinted that her husband's demands grew tiring, but Huiann didn't find it so. Her sex softened immediately, yielding to the pressure of his erection rubbing against it. How quickly she'd changed from an innocent virgin to a woman whose body sprang to full arousal at the mere thought of her lover entering her.

She twined her fingers in his hair and opened her mouth to his plunging tongue. He lifted her half off her feet in an effort to pull her even closer. The kitchen counter pressed into her back and Alan's body against her front. Her mind floated as light as thistledown on a breeze as he kissed her until she was breathless.

The smell of fried fish brought her back to earth with a thud. She braced her hands against Alan's shoulders and pushed him away. "Fish!"

He set her down and she pulled the pan off the stove and set it on a trivet. She forked out the golden brown filets, a little blackened around the edges, and laid them on a plate.

Alan reached out to break a crispy bit off the edge of one of the fish, burned his fingers and pulled away with a hiss.

“Sit,” she ordered. “Dinner now.”

Huiann found she was ravenous from all the fresh air and she devoured several pieces of fish, a good portion of rice and the blackberry compote on thin fry bread.

Alan sat back after he'd emptied his plate for a second time. “Delicious. Thank you. It's a wonder I didn't starve before you came.”

He helped her clear the table and Huiann started to heat water in preparation for washing dishes. He stopped her with a hand on her wrist. “Let's leave them until tomorrow. This is our holiday.”

He pulled her toward the stairs and Huiann was happy to abandon the dishes and go with him.

In his bedroom, Alan removed her clothing item by item slowly, kissing each bit of flesh he uncovered. Huiann liked this game. She held perfectly still and let him do everything, anything, he wanted with her. After he peeled off her blouse and chemise, Alan kissed her throat, her chest, her breasts. He suckled her nipples and her sex tightened as if a line was attached from her breast to her crotch. With every tug of his mouth her sex responded like a fish on that line. But unlike the fish, her pussy wanted to be caught and didn't fight against that insistent tugging.

He removed her skirt and petticoat, her drawers, shoes and stockings. He unbound her hair from its plait then stood back and gazed at her nude body, her flowing hair, studying her as if she were a work of art.

Huiann kept her eyes modestly downcast, but her body burned with arousal, anticipating his touch. She remembered what Madam Teng had told her about men liking a woman to be submissive and meek. It

was a role Huiann found could be exciting to play, but she also liked that she was free to make requests of him too.

She lifted her gaze and met his hungry eyes. "You now."

Some nights she helped him undress, reveling in each button popped from its hole, each hook unfastened, but tonight she remained still and watched him strip for her. His hands moved down the front of his shirt. When all the buttons were undone, he shrugged it off his shoulders. Beneath he wore a long-sleeved undershirt. He pulled this over his head, leaving his tawny hair tousled and making her want to plunge her hands into its softness. The hair on his chest looked golden in the lamplight, and shadows delineated the muscles of his chest and stomach. Huiann ached to rub her face against his chest. She knew how that hair felt now, how his skin smelled and tasted, and the more of him she had, the more she wanted. He was more addictive than opium.

He unfastened his breeches and the drawstring of his drawers and slid both down his hips. The sight of the sharp blades of his hip bones sent a surge of excitement through her, and when his erect cock was revealed, she couldn't take her eyes from the thick staff. Was it normal for a woman to be so aroused by the sight of a man and to want him inside her so desperately?

Neither her mother nor Madam Teng had said anything about experiencing such pleasure. Huiann had no idea how to feel about her boundless lust for Alan. It was probably shameful, as most things that felt good seemed to be. *Enjoy yourself, it's later than*

you think was likely not one of the proverbs her mother would want her to live by, but she decided to stop worrying and simply enjoy the sensations coursing through her.

Completely naked, Alan crossed the floor to stand before her. He touched her, light strokes up her arms, over her chest, down her stomach, like a sightless man learning her shape with his hands. He grasped her waist and turned her away from him then continued his soft strokes, brushing over her back and buttocks, down her legs to her feet. She felt him crouching behind her, and her body blazed as his hands bracketed her hips and his mouth touched her bottom. He kissed her on her buttocks, soft, warm presses of his lips on her flesh that made her moan as her anus clenched tight.

He delved a hand between her legs, fingering her sex and gathering the moisture there. Then he slid his wet finger farther to the hooded nub at the apex and tickled it in that delightful way she'd come to love so much. Soon she was moaning and thrusting against his hand.

After several moments, Alan removed his hand and stood. He brushed the length of her hair with his palm and leaned to kiss the skin just behind her ear.

"Huiann, I want to do something new."

Yes. All right. Anything. Her heart pounded. She nodded and drew a deep breath, waiting.

He guided her across the braided rug to the wardrobe and pressed her against its flat surface. The wood was cool and smooth against the length of her body, her flattened breasts, belly, groin and thighs. He placed her arms on either side of her head, palms flat,

and held them there. Then he moved in behind her, his erection nudging at her bottom.

He'd taken her from behind like this in bed, but it felt different standing. Exotic, decadent and wicked. The heat of his body baked her backside like an oven. His skin slid seductively against hers as he nuzzled the side of her neck and the crook of her shoulder.

Then suddenly his heat was gone. He'd stepped away, leaving her pressed against the wardrobe. Huiann glanced over her shoulder and watched him prepare his cock with a condom then stand and study her once more. She'd learned that the sight of her nude body was extremely arousing to him, as his was to her.

Moving closer, he stroked his hands over her back and buttocks. He traced his finger down the crack between her cheeks, skating lightly over her anus, which clenched spasmodically. Once more, he reached between her legs, fingered her engorged vulva and dipped inside her, testing her wetness, then he grasped her legs and moved them apart. She held her breath as he moved in behind her and the head of his cock bumped against her entrance. Her muscles tightened as if to grab hold and pull it inside.

With one strong, piercing thrust, he filled her completely. She gasped at the abrupt invasion. His knees bumped her legs. He had to stoop to match his height to hers and allow his entry. Huiann was pressed hard against the wardrobe door. Her breasts ached—not from being flattened, but from her excitement at Alan's harsh breathing. She loved having the power to transform him into a creature of primitive lust made helpless by his desire for her.

He withdrew his length and thrust again, pushing her against the unyielding wood. She lifted up on her toes as he slammed into her over and over. His grunts made her blood race and she pushed her body back onto his erect staff. He pumped fast and recklessly, a completely different pace than the slow communion they usually shared. The dragon was rampant in him now, the male aspect of aggression and dominance, and her phoenix, the female principle, unfolded to envelope him.

Suddenly Alan groaned and buried himself deep once more, pinning her beneath him. She felt the swell of his cock as his release pulsed through him, and wished she could feel the warmth of his seed filling her. The condom wasn't necessary since she still dutifully swallowed the concoction she'd bought from the doctor. But Alan insisted on taking extra precaution against pregnancy, saying something about "quacks and charlatans."

He collapsed against her back, gasping for breath. She closed her eyes and felt every inch of his body covering hers. At last, his rough breathing slowed and his softening penis receded. He stepped away and turned her to face him.

Framing her face in his hands, he kissed her and whispered, "Thank you." Always kind, always respectful. He was a perfect balance between primal animal and polite gentleman, and she loved both aspects.

He slid his hand down between her legs and located her clitoris. "Now you," he murmured. "Let go for me."

Between the husky rumble of his voice and the insistent rubbing of his finger, she couldn't refuse. Only a few strokes brought the flitting fireflies in her belly swarming together into a mass of glowing light. She whimpered then groaned, eyes closing as she squirmed against his hand and ecstasy washed through her.

When she opened her eyes, Alan was watching her face. He smiled, smug like a cat with a fat bird in its mouth. He enjoyed his ability to satisfy her as much as she liked having that power over him. Too bad not every man realized there was as much joy in giving as in receiving pleasure.

Alan lifted her and carried her to bed. She burrowed under the covers, shivering at the coolness of the cotton sheets against her bare skin. He lay down beside her and she curled up against his side and closed her eyes, thinking about their glorious day by the lake and the lovemaking that followed. If it weren't for her worries about Xie and Alan's insistence on moving her to the country, she'd be completely content.

But how long could they play at being husband and wife? She'd willingly embraced this relationship, but wondered if it could ever become more—a real marriage with all the difficulties that would entail.

Shoving these thoughts from her mind, she relaxed and enjoyed the moment. Right now she was safe, warm and loved, and that was enough.

A pounding on the door downstairs snapped her awake. She bolted upright. Alan tossed off the blanket, jumped out of bed and pulled on his trousers. He

reached in the nightstand drawer and took out a large pistol with a long barrel.

"Wait here," he commanded then ran from the room. His bare feet pounded down the stairs.

Huiann rose and put on her dress. If trouble was coming, she didn't want to face it naked. Below, the kitchen door opened and there were voices and footsteps. Heart racing, Huiann slipped out into the hallway to the landing. She recognized Dora's voice speaking through loud sobs. Ignoring Alan's command to stay, she ran downstairs to the lamp-lit kitchen.

Alan was helping Dora to sit on one of the wooden chairs. Her hands covered her face. Tears and blood trickled from between her fingers. Dora's body shook as she gulped in breaths of air between wracking sobs.

"Dora, *an ning*," Huiann hurried to her side and moved her friend's hand away from her face. With a damp rag Alan offered her, she dabbed at Dora's bloody nose.

Heavy pounding shook the door in its frame and Ralph's voice bellowed, "Dora, you in there? Come on out, you slut!"

Alan strode to the door.

"No!" Huiann called, but it was too late.

Alan opened the door, his big body filling the frame. "You're drunk. Go home."

"Let me in," came the slurred voice of Dora's man.

Alan stepped outside and closed the door behind him. Huiann could still hear his quiet, commanding voice and the other man responding with loud belligerence. Dora clutched the bloodied rag against her mouth and whimpered.

Outside, the arguing intensified, the men's voices rising. Then the sound of flesh hitting flesh was followed by a yell. Huiann snatched up the pistol from the table where Alan had laid it. The grip was cool against her palm and the weapon was much heavier than she'd expected. She ran to the door and pulled it open, dimly aware of Dora calling out her name.

It was dark in the yard, only the light shining from the kitchen window illuminating the scene. The two men were throwing punches and staggering back and forth across the courtyard. Alan was taller, Ralph bulkier. But the other man was also drunk and unbalanced. Alan hit him in the jaw, snapping his head to the side. Then he punched him in the stomach. Ralph doubled over with a loud grunt.

The ox roared in anger and charged Alan with his head down. Alan sidestepped him but the man's shoulder caught him and knocked him sideways. Alan raised both hands knotted together and brought down his arms in a chopping motion across his opponent's neck. Ralph sprawled facedown on the ground.

Breathing heavily, Alan bent and grabbed Ralph by the back of his shirt and hauled him to his feet. "Go home and sober up."

Alan pushed Ralph, who staggered backward then stood swaying from foot to foot. Huiann pointed the gun at him, fighting to keep the barrel steady as she felt for the trigger with her finger. If Ralph charged Alan again, she'd pull it.

The drunken man pointed a finger at Alan. "Send that bitch home if you know what's good for you." He stomped off into the shadows toward his place.

Huiann exhaled a shaky breath and lowered the gun.

Alan turned toward her and stared at the weapon in her hand. "You were going to shoot that?" He walked over to her and held out his hand.

Huiann handed him the gun, glad to be rid of its awful weight. Her legs trembled like jellied eel and threatened to buckle beneath her, but she willed strength into them and went inside to check on Dora. She almost ran into Dora coming toward the door.

Huiann took her arm and led her back to the chair. "Sit now."

Alan closed and locked the door behind them. "It's all right for now. He's gone home." He bent over Dora and examined her nose. "I don't think it's broken."

Huiann draped a cool compress over Dora's swelling nose and treated the other wounds she'd received from Ralph's beating. She brewed her hot tea to soothe her nerves and listened to her story. Alan leaned against the counter, staying out of the way. When Huiann was about to take her upstairs and put her to bed, he finally spoke up.

"You can't go back to him tomorrow just because he's sober, Dora. This will never stop. He'll always treat you this way. But you can stay here until you find some other arrangement."

Huiann's heart swelled with pride in this kind man, who offered Dora safe harbor just as he'd done for her.

Dora paused at the foot of the stairs, her lips trembling, but she didn't give way to tears again. "I'm done with him now," she said at last. "And thank you."

Chapter Fifteen

Ralph Stubbs was in jail thanks to his own stupidity, more whiskey and a broken window. Instead of sleeping off his drunk like Alan had warned him to do, he'd staggered back out into the city, found a bar and a fight to get into. During the brawl, he'd thrown a chair through the window and, while the bouncer held Ralph, the owner got the nearest patrolling policeman to take him away.

When Alan accompanied Dora to her place the next day to collect her things, they learned this story from a neighbor who'd witnessed the fight. Alan half expected Dora to run to her man's aide with bail money, but she showed more backbone than he credited her with.

"Good. They'll probably keep him for a few days at least. I'll find myself someplace to live by then. Someplace he can't find me. And thank you, Mr. Sommers, for lettin' me stay with you in the meantime."

"Glad to help. You know, I'm buying a house outside the city. Huiann will be setting up a workshop there and I don't think she can do it without you."

Dora's grim mouth split in a wide grin that displayed her snaggletooth. "Me?"

"You two are a good team. As she hires more girls, she'll need you to help train them." He picked up the worn carpetbag she'd packed with her meager possessions. "To tell you the truth, I don't like the idea

of her out in the country all alone on the nights when I might not be able to see her. She'll need a friend with her."

Dora stood with a pair of boots hanging from one hand and stared at Alan. "You ain't comin' home every night, just visitin' her whenever you please?" Her grin disappeared and he nearly squirmed under her disapproving stare. "What do you suppose that'd make a gal feel like?"

Alan swallowed the excuses that instantly rose to his lips. *I can't marry her. It would ruin my business and my political ambitions. People would never accept us, can't you see?* "I just want her to be safe," he answered instead. "And I believe she will be there."

Dora shrugged and dropped the boots into a box along with a battered tin bowl and a faded quilt. "'Tain't my nevermind," she said calmly. "I'm just pointin' it out to ya."

Alan was intent on getting both Huiann and Dora moved before Ralph returned to cause more trouble or the Irishman and his partner came looking for Huiann. He left Jeremy in charge of the store and went to see the broker handling the house sale. Since the building was already empty, its owners foreclosed on by the bank, Alan was able to arrange for quick occupancy. On Monday, he could sign the papers and take possession.

But meanwhile, there was the rest of the weekend to get through. Saturday was the date for the opera house fundraiser he'd so blithely offered to help with. He couldn't get out of the obligation and he'd have to attend the event too, since it was the social high

watermark of the season, an imperative occasion for a would-be politician.

"Dora, maybe you could take charge of the store tomorrow," he suggested over the dinner table when he returned from his visit to the broker.

Her face lit up as she plunked flatware down on the table. "You want me to mind the store?"

"I'll teach you to use the register. It shouldn't be for long, but Jeremy and I are going to be busy with this fundraiser and I don't want to close the store on a Saturday. It's the busiest day of the week. Do you know how to make change?"

"Sure, I can."

"Then you're hired." He turned to Huiann, who was placing a dish on the table. "I will have the house by Monday. You and Dora will move there then."

Huiann stared at him over the steaming dish, her almond eyes inscrutable. She didn't smile but she didn't frown either. She dipped her head in acknowledgment.

Alan wanted more from her, some sense of what she was feeling, but it wasn't a discussion they could have in front of Dora.

Later that evening, after they'd spent a short time in the parlor, Huiann accompanied Dora to her bedroom. She stayed there so long that Alan began to fear she wasn't planning on coming to his room. He shifted restlessly in bed, throwing back the top cover then getting up and opening the window to let in more air. He decided she'd had an attack of propriety because of Dora's presence, although heaven knew why, considering Dora had lived in sin with Ralph. Or

maybe she was punishing him because he was planning to—in her eyes—“send her away.”

He cursed and kicked a shoe across the floor. *Ungrateful woman.* Couldn't she see that he did everything with her best interests in mind?

Well, maybe not everything or he would never have slept with her and given her the impression they could have some kind of future together. He was a damn hypocrite, telling her he cared for her, but using her like she was the whore Xie had tried to make her into, refusing to marry her because of the damage it might do him. God, he hated himself. She had every right to hate him too.

Alan was boiling over with worry, regret, shame, guilt and a sudden deep sorrow that it was finished, that Huiann would refuse to be with him ever again. He'd never touch her skin, her hair or be allowed to kiss those sweet lips.

And then a soft tapping at his door blew away all those turbulent emotions like a sudden stiff breeze. The door opened and Huiann glided across the floor and into his arms like a ghost in her airy white nightgown. His life was complete again.

He kissed her hard, like a drowning man sucking in a last breath of air. He felt himself skating on the edge of losing her and that was not something he could live with.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked after he pulled away.

“Angry?”

He frowned to illustrate. “Mad. Upset. Unhappy because of the house.”

"No." She shook her head vigorously. "No, Alan. Not angry. I know you do good thing for me. I thank you."

"But..." They didn't need to speak the same language for him to feel the stiffness in her body or see the unhappiness in her eyes.

"But?" She gazed at him, confused.

"But you are sad."

"I no want...don't want not be with you. And..." She hesitated, her lips compressing into a straight line for a moment. "And you not ask me. You *tell* me go to house. I no belong...I *don't* belong to you."

"No. I know that. I'm sorry. I should have asked what you wanted. But we discussed having more room for workers, didn't we? You want a proper workroom."

"Yes. For work. Not live." She waved a hand, erasing the entire argument. "But no. It is good. I sorry to be..." She broke into Chinese, at a loss for the right words.

Alan grabbed her hand and held it. "No. I was wrong. Let me ask you properly. Huiann, will you move to my house in the country and live there?"

She bowed deeply. "Yes, Alan, and thank you." But when she straightened, although she smiled at him, he still saw clouds in her eyes.

Mrs. Dodge had volunteered Alan's services as well as supplies from his store to the illustrious Mrs. Wallace Finch and her society friends. He and Jeremy hauled foodstuffs to the kitchen and sundry items for the decoration of the hall—items which ended up requiring stops at other locations around the city.

The spacious hall had been transformed into a flowery bower. Crystal dishes, silver cutlery and lavish floral arrangements graced the white-clothed tables at one end of the room. The dance floor glistened as if it had a layer of ice glazing it rather than beeswax. Alan pictured couples in formal wear skidding over its surface and perhaps landing on their well-dressed asses.

As they grunted and wrestled with a stone fountain Mrs. Finch had decided at the last minute was absolutely necessary to install as the room's centerpiece, Alan deeply regretted ever agreeing to Mrs. Dodge's plea for help. His arms strained, and sweat made his shirt cling to his back as he and Jeremy carried the heavy fountain to the spot Mrs. Finch indicated.

"Right there, please." She pointed imperiously then floated away without offering thanks for their efforts. Feeling more like a menial laborer than a member of the business community, Alan set the base on the floor and steadied it while Jeremy righted his end, then he dusted his palms together, wiping off the stony grit. He stared at the dry fountain with the toga-clad nymph in the center.

"It's going to be simply lovely," he remarked dryly. "Worth coming to the ball just to see this thing in operation. Let's get out of here before one of these ladies realizes there's no way to run water through it without laying pipe."

"Would you distract Mrs. Dodge for a few minutes?" Jeremy begged.

Cynthia stood on a low ladder, draping a floral swag over a mirror. Her mother hovered nearby,

chatting to several other ladies—too close for Jeremy to snatch a second alone with the object of his affection.

“Sure.” Alan doubted whether Cynthia would give Jeremy any attention with her mother and the other women on hand, but he tucked in his shirt, straightened his vest and strode across the floor toward the ladies.

“Mr. Sommers, thank you for all you’ve done,” Mrs. Dodge greeted him. She might be annoying but at least she was more polite than snobby Mrs. Finch. “I see you got the fountain in place.”

“We delivered it, but I don’t know anything about plumbing.”

She burst into laughter and the rest of the group joined in. They reminded him of a flock of pigeons in a park, rustling their feathers as they kept up a constant cooing.

“The effect of flowing water is to be achieved with sprays of ivy and cascading flowers,” Mrs. Dodge explained.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Alan smiled. “I’m sure it will be charming, and the event is sure to be a huge success.” He complimented the ladies and kept them talking while occasionally checking on Jeremy. The young man held on to Cynthia’s ladder, his face turned up to her like a flower to the sun.

At last Mrs. Dodge ended the conversation. “I suppose we’d better let you be on your way and finish our decorating, but we’ll see you tonight at the ball, won’t we?”

“That seamstress you employ is a wonder,” one of the others added. “My daughter’s dress couldn’t look

any finer if it came direct from New York. You must see her in it.”

You wouldn't think I was such a catch if you knew what the seamstress and I get up to. “I look forward to seeing you all in your finery,” he answered. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

He beckoned Jeremy and the clerk broke off what appeared to be an intense discussion with Miss Dodge to follow him from the room.

“Did you get what you wanted? Will she save you a dance tonight?” Alan asked as he drove the wagon back to the store.

“I haven't been invited to attend the event,” Jeremy said bitterly. “But Cynthia said I should wait for her outside at nine o'clock. She'll come out and meet me.”

“A dangerous game for a young lady to play.”

Jeremy looked at him. “I know you think I'm a fool and that she's only toying with my affections, but you're wrong. And you'll find out how wrong soon enough.”

Alan had never heard him so serious. Easygoing Jeremy suddenly sounded very much a man instead of a boy. Alan held his tongue but prayed his employee wouldn't do anything so foolish as to elope with the Dodge girl. Her parents would have his hide.

Back at the store, they found Dora knee-deep in the Saturday afternoon rush of customers. Although her nose was swollen and her face bruised, she was a natural saleswoman, serving people with chatty friendliness.

Alan barely had a chance to take off his coat. He served one customer after another until it was time to close up for the day.

Before he left, Jeremy came over to Alan and shook his hand. "I just wanted to say good-night and thanks for everything. You've been a good boss and a friend."

"Are you thinking you might not be back on Monday?"

The man's always ruddy cheeks flushed darker. "I'm not quitting, but if things go the way I hope..."

"Tell me you aren't planning to run off with this girl. That's not a good idea." He could've asked how he planned to keep Miss Dodge in the manner to which she was accustomed, but the stubborn set of Jeremy's mouth told him it wouldn't do any good. "Good luck, then," he said instead. "Your job will be here any time you might want to return to it."

After Jeremy left, Alan locked the door and went to the kitchen where his harem of two was preparing dinner and setting the table. He'd gotten used to his solitary bachelor ways and felt a little ridiculous sitting at the table while the women worked around him.

"Miss Cynthia Dodge is the prettiest thing, don't you think?" Dora asked. "Her skin is so pale and her manners so fine. She's a real lady. I wish I could be like that. I don't much like the material she chose for her gown though. I tried to steer her toward light blue to bring out her eyes, but she insisted on lime green. Still, imagine how she'll look at that dance tonight in a fancy dress *we* made! She'll be the envy of all the other young ladies. Men will swoon over her. Oh, I wish I could see the ball. How beautiful it must be." Dora stood halfway between the cupboard and the table with empty cups clasped in her hands, sparkling

fairy dust coating her vision of San Francisco's elite waltzing the night away.

Alan recalled dances he'd been to in his youth and a particular night with a girl he hadn't thought of in years. She'd laughed at the wilted corsage he'd given her, and they'd danced until past midnight one hot August night.

"These things are usually hot, smelly, long and dull," he told Dora. "You're not missing much."

"Do you have a tuxedo to wear?"

"No. I'll have to make do with my best suit and hope they won't turn me away." Not that he'd mind. An evening at home sounded infinitely more pleasurable than spending time with the stuffy society set and he hoped to make his appearance there as brief as possible.

"You go dance?" Huiann poked at her dumpling with her chopsticks but her gaze was focused on him and there was a mischievous gleam in her eye. "Dora show me to dance American."

"Oh, yes?" He glanced back and forth between the two women. He smiled, but his heart sank. Did Huiann hope he'd escort her to the ball tonight? She must know it was impossible.

"I showed her how to waltz," Dora said. "Get dressed up and give us each a whirl before you go."

His tension eased but guilt mingled with his relief. He was attending the kind of event at which Huiann would never be welcome, and he was hiding her from the world not only to keep her safe but because it was better for him that way. Not the actions of an honorable man.

Huiann leaned across the table and put her hand on his. "It is all right, Alan. Good for business. You go. We stay. It is good."

He grasped her hand, so delicate yet so strong, just like her. She was a resilient and capable woman who appeared as fragile and breakable as a doll.

"All right. I'll get dressed and we'll have our own little party before I go."

The women cleared the table then went upstairs so Alan could wash up at the sink. After that he went to his room and got his dress suit from the bottom of his traveling trunk. He should've taken it out days ago to let it air, but the garment didn't appear to be too wrinkled. Outdated maybe, but not moth-ridden or musty. He'd packed the suit before he left New Hampshire on his Western trek, but hadn't had call to wear it until now.

He put on a clean white shirt and the black suit, which still fit him, although it was tighter across the shoulders. Physically he hadn't changed all that much since his college days, the last time he'd had occasion to dress up. The weight he'd lost during the war, he'd put back on again. He brushed back his hair and straightened his tie before heading downstairs. Passing the other bedroom, he heard the women chatting and laughing behind the closed door and wondered what they were up to.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. As he paced the kitchen floor, the click of feminine heels on the stairs drew his attention. He turned and caught his breath at the sight of Huiann and Dora descending the staircase. Both were dressed in the stylish gowns they sewed for their clients. Huiann wore wine-red satin

that enhanced her flawless complexion and jet-black hair, which she'd piled on her head and fastened with the combs he'd given her. Dora's pink-and-white-striped dress enhanced her rosy cheeks and made her look young and almost lovely. Although Huiann was the shorter of the two, she was a more vibrant, imposing presence than the other woman. She seemed to suck the very air from the room. Dora was a shadow compared to her.

Alan gave a low, appreciative whistle. Huiann smiled and dipped her head, her high-piled hair threatening to tumble down.

Dora giggled at his praise. When she reached the floor, she spun around, making her skirt bell out. She reached behind herself to adjust the elaborate bustle with its little train. "They're day dresses, not evening gowns. But they're real pretty, ain't they? Customers don't ever need to know we wore 'em for a spell."

The garments didn't quite fit. The hem of Huiann's dress trailed on the ground and the bodice was a little large for her. Dora's was made for a wider woman and sagged on her skinny frame. The pair of them playing at dress-up like young girls was touching. They both deserved to own fine clothes of their own, tailored to their bodies. It seemed wrong that they sewed all day for other women. He would insist they add to their own wardrobes. Let their eager customers wait a bit. Waiting would only add to the cachet surrounding Huiann's services.

"You both look beautiful." He bowed to each of them then approached Huiann and took her gloved hand, turning her around in a circle so he could admire

her from every angle. "But how are we supposed to dance without music?"

"I'll sing," Dora said. "I'm a good singer, my ma always said. Ralph used to tell me to shut up, that I gave him a headache, but he don't have to hear me no more." She laughed. Her ability to find amusement in her life and remain cheerful was inspiring. And then she began to sing "Barbara Allen" in a rich soprano. The melancholy folk ballad wasn't the best tune for dancing, but Alan offered Huiann his hand.

She slipped one hand into his and rested the other on his shoulder. Her waist was warm beneath his palm and he felt her ribs expand as she breathed. Her face turned up to his, eyes bright and shining. In her deep red dress she glowed like a ruby, making his heart swell.

Alan guided her around the floor in a waltz. She followed his lead as if she'd been made to move in unison with him, and as she dipped and swayed, her skirts swirled around her. Her graceful beauty would eclipse any one of those society misses at the ball tonight.

"I dance good, yes?"

"You do," he replied with a smile, gripping her slender waist just a little harder. "Beautifully, thanks to Dora."

Their heels clicked softly on the wooden floor, and Dora's voice warbled to the sad conclusion in which Barbara Allen and her lover are laid in separate graves, a rose and briar growing from each to entwine above them.

Alan ended the song by lifting Huiann's hand and turning her in a circle. She laughed with pleasure as he bowed and kissed her hand.

"Dora dance now," she said, stepping aside so her friend could take a turn.

Dora hummed a fast tune Alan didn't recognize and he swung her in a galloping polka around the table. The song deteriorated into breathless laughter by the time he'd spun her around several times, and they finally collapsed into the kitchen chairs.

Dora fanned her flushed face and blew a deep breath. "We'd better stop. We'll ruin these dresses sweating in 'em like this, and you don't want to be all rumpled when you get to the shindig."

"One more dance." Alan couldn't resist taking Huiann in his arms once more. He swayed her back and forth, hardly moving his feet, and hummed some tune from his childhood. Maybe it was a lullaby. He couldn't remember.

And then suddenly he recognized where he knew the song from. It was a tune one of the other prisoners at Andersonville had hummed endlessly. The man had been half out of his mind from starvation and dysentery, as most of them were by the end. He'd stand and rock back and forth and drone his song for hours. One day Alan had had the nagging feeling something was different and finally realized the man's singing had stopped. Later he saw his body on the pile of the dead before they were removed from the compound.

Alan stopped humming the tune but didn't let go of Huiann. Heedless of Dora watching, he gathered her

lush body close and breathed in the scent of her hair as she rested her head against his chest.

At last she pulled away, smoothing his vest and the lapels of his jacket. "You go now."

"Lock up behind me and don't go out to the pump. There's plenty of water indoors. I'll be back soon."

He gave Huiann a last kiss as a promise for later and then set off for the ball.

A curious cross-section of the upper echelon from Nob Hill and those who aspired to be a part of their circle attended the opera house fundraiser. Alan was out of place in his dated suit among gentlemen in tuxedos or more stylish suit coats. But, as a successful businessman and potential councilman, at least some of the women appeared to consider him an eligible bachelor. He danced with a few hopeful daughters around the flower-bedecked hall, past mirrored walls which reflected the lights and the colorful couples whirling past. The strains of a string quartet playing a Strauss waltz filled the air, and the cascading fountain of flowers really did make a lovely centerpiece. Dora would have been enchanted.

Between dances, Alan held cups of punch that he barely drank and talked about inconsequential things with women who didn't remotely interest him. At last Mr. Dodge drew Alan away from the perfumed flock, giving him a much appreciated break.

"You're a good man, Sommers. I'd be pleased if you wanted to come and call on my Cynthia."

"Oh." For a moment, Alan couldn't think of anything to say. "You flatter me, sir, but I'm currently seeing another young lady."

“Really?” Dodge’s thick eyebrows shot up. “My wife, who’s always up on the latest gossip, is going to feel a fool for missing that tidbit. Who’s the lucky girl?”

“I don’t believe you know her.”

“Well, her gain is my daughter’s loss.” Dodge gave him another hearty clap. “But that’s no reason two old soldiers can’t enjoy each other’s company. Why don’t we take a break from the ladies’ folderol and go outside for a smoke? I have some cigars and scotch that’s as smooth as silk.” He tapped his jacket, indicating a flask in an inside pocket.

Alan smiled. “Sounds wonderful, Mr. Dodge. A stiff drink and less dancing would suit me fine.”

He followed the older man outside where other male refugees had taken shelter from the ball. A pall of blue cigar smoke shrouded a group huddling in the dark like cavemen in formal wear. The low rumble of their masculine talk was a blessed relief after the clamor of female voices and the orchestra’s relentless up-tempo waltzes.

Alan joined in the talk of local politics and what the upcoming elections could mean to area businesses, but kept an eye out for Jeremy. Was he fool enough to come sniffing around after Cynthia tonight? The likelihood of the pair slipping off somewhere with this group nearby seemed slim.

“Sommers, I hear you’re branching out into the dressmaking business. Proving lucrative?” asked Ed Bratt, another general mercantile owner.

“I’ve sold a few.”

"My wife said she had her fittings in your parlor with some China gal. How'd you come across her?" another man asked.

Not liking the drift of the conversation, Alan ignored the question. "How's your business going, Ed?"

"Not as good as yours apparently." Bratt refused to be deflected away from the subject. "How *does* one go about finding a seamstress, particularly a Chinese one?"

"One of my neighbors, Dora Stubbs, sews the dresses. The Chinese woman helps her," Alan said, but every word felt like a betrayal. Huiann couldn't take credit for her own work and he continued to hide her like a dirty secret. Although it was mostly for her safety, it felt wrong. And to refer to her as "the Chinese woman" as if she meant nothing to him tore at his gut.

He turned the conversation in another direction and, as soon as the opportunity arose, he made polite excuses and left. Sweet violins and the unearthly glow of gaslights poured from the open windows, but Alan didn't go back into the ballroom. He headed toward his store, his shoes ticking off the blocks that brought him closer to the comfort of home and Huiann.

And with each step, his confusion cleared a little more. His doubts and fears and worries faded away and one truth shone through like a beacon. He loved Huiann with every part of him. It didn't matter that they would be outcasts in society, or that he would likely lose everything he'd tried to build here in San Francisco. He wouldn't keep her as a mistress, a secret. He wanted to marry her and weather whatever storm

that brought—even if it meant risking the wrath of a powerful tong boss.

If Huiann was his wife, it would change things. Xie Fuhua couldn't just snatch her away or kill her. Could he? Maybe it would be best to simply sell everything and flee the city with her, move far beyond the man's reach. It didn't sit well with Alan to run away but he'd swallow his pride and do it, if that's what it took for her to be truly safe.

Excitement and hope swelled through him, bearing him the rest of the way home on air. He would ask her tonight to be his wife, wipe away the sad shadow from her eyes.

As he drew closer to his street, the acrid smell of smoke singed his nostrils. Fear stabbed him. A fire in a city full of wooden buildings was serious. More than once entire blocks had been consumed. His heart sped when he saw flickering light coming from up ahead.

Alan ran around the corner. His street was in chaos, crowded with residents who lived above their shops and people from neighboring blocks. They were working in a bucket brigade, trying to douse the flames that shot from the windows of Alan's store. His stomach lurched and plummeted as he ran faster. *Huiann!*

A steam engine drawn by a team of four horses was parked in front of the building and a fire crew pumped water from the cistern on the back of the wagon. Water gushed through a wide hose, as the firemen drenched the wooden structures on either side of Alan's store to keep them from burning.

Alan shoved through the crowd. His skin felt as if it was searing before he even reached the heat of the fire.

He mentally chanted Huiann's name over and over as if he could protect her by his willpower alone. *Please, God, let her be all right!*

The heat from the store was like a blast furnace. The stench of burning dry goods and wood choked him. He grabbed one of the firemen by the arm. "Did anyone come out of the building? Two women?"

The man shrugged off his hand. "You're in the way, sir. Move aside or join one of the bucket brigades."

"I own this store. I'm telling you someone might still be inside," Alan yelled. He raced toward the blazing windows, screaming Huiann's name.

Chapter Sixteen

Huiann was still floating like a kite on a string from dancing with Alan when the distant crash of shattering glass brought her down to earth. She and Dora bolted from the kitchen chairs where they were sitting, drinking tea, and dashed into the store. Fire was spreading across the floor in a crooked line. The smell of kerosene mingled with smoke rose from the burning trail. Flames licked at the bottom of the dry goods shelves, singeing a burlap bag here and a cardboard box there.

For a moment, Huiann stared in horror at the spreading disaster then snatched up a broom to beat out the fire. Her heart pounded but she was too shocked to feel afraid. Her only focus was on exterminating the flames, which were spreading like hungry locusts. She must save Alan's store.

A hulking figure of a man crashed through what remained of the front window and crunched across the broken glass and strewn merchandise toward her. Only then did Huiann consider who'd started the fire and why. The sleeping dragon, Xie Fuhua, had finally awakened and reached out his long, sharp claws to pull her back to him.

Pistol! I should've brought Alan's pistol. She cursed her foolishness in coming here unarmed as the big red-bearded man lunged at her. She brought up the broom, straws still smoking from the flames, and jabbed at him. He swatted the broom from her hand

and grabbed her arm, dragging her toward him hard enough to lift her off her feet.

Another man entered the store behind his partner and hurried to help contain Huiann, who thrashed about in a helpless attempt to free herself from Xie's henchman. She'd once thought of Alan as a giant. This man was larger and far more unyielding, gripping her arms so hard she gasped with pain.

"Hey!" Dora rushed across the room to help, but the second man shoved her away, knocking her on her backside. The last glimpse Huiann had of her friend, she was on the floor rolling away from the fire that threatened to set her skirts alight.

The shorter man shoved a bag over Huiann's head and tightened a drawstring around her neck. She gasped for air as rough burlap swathed her face. Her arms were pulled behind her and bound at the wrists, then she was hoisted off the floor and slung over someone's shoulder. His muscle dug into her stomach as she hung upside-down against his back.

And at last Huiann felt real terror coursing through her in an icy river. Xie would not be content to kill her for her transgression. A man like that would want to see her suffer first. Her mind scrambled over all the possible methods of torture he might devise. She twisted in her captor's grip and cried out.

A hand pressed something against her nose and mouth, further stifling her breath. She sucked desperately for air and inhaled a strong medicinal scent through the burlap. Immediately her head began to go cloudy.

Before consciousness slipped away, she pictured Alan's face, his glowing eyes as he'd looked at her

tonight in her borrowed gown. Sorrow filled her. She would never see him again.

It was inevitable. Did you think you could escape Xie Fuhua forever? was her last thought before everything went black.

Alan fought against hands that held his arms, keeping him from charging into the burning building. He continued to call out her name, his voice hoarse from inhaling smoke.

"Mr. Sommers, they took her. Some men came and took her!" Dora's soot-streaked face bobbed up before him, dragging his attention from the smoke billowing from the shop windows.

"Who? When?"

"Sometime after you left. We were in the kitchen and heard glass break in the store. Someone had thrown bricks and flaming bottles through the front window. We tried to douse the fire, but then a couple of men came right through the window frame. A big man with a beard grabbed Huiann. His partner knocked me down on the ground and they dragged her away. By the time I got up they were gone." Tears streaked Dora's cheeks and she ground the heels of her hands into her eyes.

Alan's pulse throbbed in his temples and his feet felt frozen to the ground. He couldn't move, didn't know what to do. His chest was so tight he could scarcely breathe. His gaze darted around the crowd as if he might see Huiann suddenly there. "Can you describe the men?"

"The one who grabbed her had a red beard. He's the same one that followed us the day I took Huiann to

the doctor. I don't think she ever told you about how he followed us so I never said anything either. The man who knocked me down had a long scar down one side of his face. I couldn't stop them. I tried." She broke down again, sobbing into her hands.

"All right." Alan glanced at the bucket brigade and the firemen working to extinguish the blaze. He couldn't stop to help. Let the store burn. Nothing was more important than getting to Huiann before Xie hurt her. How had he imagined she'd be safe living in the same city as that monster? He'd been stupid, kept her in harm's way, and now Huiann would pay the price.

Alan hadn't felt so helpless and frustrated since his days locked in the prison stockade. He couldn't stop blaming himself for Huiann's kidnapping. If only he'd stayed home tonight, or gotten her out of the city sooner. If only he'd found Xie and killed him.

A police officer was standing nearby. Alan and Dora approached him and he took down Dora's description of the arsonists and the kidnapping. But when Alan explained about Xie Fuhua, the man was blunt. "If she was his property, you'd best let her go. Find some other Chink gal to sew for you. Best to leave those people to their own affairs."

"You son of a bitch, Huiann ain't no Chink!" Dora yelled. "She's my friend and she's in trouble. You're supposed to help people."

Alan put a restraining hand on her arm. "Are you finished taking our testimony, officer?"

"If I need anything else, I'll let you know." The policeman glared at them both before he walked away.

Tears tracked through the soot on Dora's face as she looked up at Alan. "What are you gonna do?"

“Get her back.”

Huiann huddled on the floor in the corner of the dark room, her arms clasped around her legs, breathing in the acrid stench of scorched wood on the red dress. She stroked the material of the gown Mrs. Sanderson would never get to wear. *Ruined, after all our hard work.* She should've taken it off after Alan left, but had wanted to be wearing it when he returned. She'd wanted to see again the admiration in his face, like a groom gazing on his bride. But her pride in wearing another woman's gown had brought bad luck upon her.

She had no idea how much time passed after she'd been taken. When she awoke, she was here in the bedroom where Xie had kept her prisoner before. Her plans for a future, her love for Alan, the safety of his arms, all seemed like dreams now. This was the reality from which she could never escape—Master Xie's world in which she was a mere playing piece to be moved at his whim.

She prayed the fire in Alan's store had been quenched before it destroyed everything. Her shame at the destruction she'd brought to him was immeasurable. He'd saved her life and she'd ruined his.

Huiann lifted her face from her knees, and the faint smells of incense and starched sheets in this evil room made her stomach churn. The panicked feeling of being trapped made her body quiver. She wanted to lie down on the floor, close her eyes and drift back into blackness so she wouldn't have to face what was happening. But she rose to her feet, both physically and mentally dragging herself off the floor. This was no time to give in and become weak. It would be all

too easy to surrender to the notion of powerlessness, but she needed to search every part of this room for something to protect herself with.

She recalled the story of Jade Tiger and Clever Rabbit which her grandmother used to tell. Jade Tiger ruled the forest. He was so powerful no one dared cross him. One day he caught a young rabbit, pinning the quivering creature under his huge paw and staring into its brown eyes with his golden ones. Many rabbits before this one had filled the tiger's belly, and the young buck realized he would join his ancestors very soon if he didn't stop trembling and start thinking. As the tiger's jaws yawned wide ready to engulf him, the rabbit spoke up.

"Honored Sir, poor lowly being that I am, it is my humble pleasure to serve you in any way, but I must warn you before you take a bite that I am not the meal for you."

Jade Tiger closed his mouth to stare at the small being which had the effrontery to speak to him. "Little Brother, pray tell why should I not eat you. I'm most interested in hearing your reasoning."

"The taste, sir, would not be to your liking. My family has often noted my sour disposition and terrible temper, and I fear I would not sit well on your stomach. It would shame me to cause the king of the jungle indigestion."

The tiger roared with laughter. "You care so much for my well-being that you would give up your death for me? What a clever one you are. You almost deserve to live for your wit." He paused and showed his razor-sharp teeth, leaning so close that his rancid breath bathed the rabbit's face. "Almost." With that,

Jade Tiger scooped up the rabbit and swallowed him whole.

At that point in the story, Grandma Mei used to stop. Huiann and her sisters would feign shock at the horrible fate of the clever rabbit then prod their grandmother toward the exciting conclusion of the story.

She could hear Grandmother's voice now, as clearly as if the woman were beside her. "But sometimes, when all hope seems to be gone, that is the very time we must be our bravest. Clever Rabbit had not gone into the jaws of death unprepared. In his paw he clenched a long, sharp thorn, as well as the sharp little claws a rabbit is born with. All the way down greedy Jade Tiger's throat he scratched a bloody trail, and once inside the belly of the beast, he ripped and shredded, causing the tiger unbearable pain."

"What happened then, Grandma?" one of the girls would always ask. "Did the rabbit get free?"

"Yes, my child, he certainly did. The tiger rolled on the ground, groaning in agony, then he vomited the offending creature from his stomach. The young rabbit didn't hesitate. Before the tiger could recover, he bounded away into the woods, and you can be sure he was never again so careless as to be caught by Jade Tiger."

A wonderful story, Grandmother, Huiann thought, but I'm not sure it will help me now.

She navigated the bedroom in semidarkness, searching for a makeshift weapon. The bed frame was joined together with large bolts, and the mattress was supported by interwoven strips of leather lashed to the

frame. She tried to loosen one of the bolts, but it was immovable.

After she'd investigated every bit of the bed, she went to the wardrobe. Inside were several hooks for hanging clothing. She tested each hook until she found one that was loose. After twisting and turning it, she wrenched it free of the wood, leaving a splintered hole behind. The pointed end of the hook was sharp. She tested it against her palm and scratched a thin red line. Then she hid it up her sleeve and practiced letting the metal hook drop down into her hand then clawing at the face of an imaginary foe. She wouldn't hesitate to stab Xie Fuhua or any of his men if the opportunity arose.

Footsteps approached her door. Heart pounding, Huiann tucked the hook into her sleeve along the inside of her wrist and stood waiting for whoever might enter.

Liu Dai threw open the door and strode into her room. Another man carrying a lamp entered behind him. Grabbing hold of her wrist, Lui Dai flung her onto the bed. His eyes were savage with hatred, and Huiann could imagine the trouble he'd gotten into for allowing her to escape.

"Pull up your skirt. The doctor will examine you."

Her gaze swept to the shorter, older man. He wore a pair of spectacles and a Western suit. He set the lantern on the nightstand and regarded Huiann. "Don't be afraid, girl. I won't hurt you. Master Xie wants your body checked for...intrusion. I need to make sure you are intact."

Terror rushed through her. She had planned to convince Xie she still had value as a courtesan, that he

shouldn't kill her or throw her into one of the cribs, but now he would know she was no longer a virgin, and her value would diminish.

"Come now." The doctor tugged up her skirt and pulled down her undergarment then pushed her legs apart. "Hold the light close so I can see," he told Liu Dai.

The other man picked up the lamp and stood beside him, examining Huiann's private parts. Humiliation enflamed her as the doctor's hand touched her vagina, parting her and thrusting cool fingers into her opening. She gripped the bedding on either side of her and felt the metal hook pressing into her wrist. She considered rearing off the bed and striking at one man then the other, taking them by surprise. But there was no way she could fight both men and get out of the house before being caught. The time for escape was not yet right.

The doctor grasped her knees and brought her legs back together. He smoothed her skirt down and Huiann met his enigmatic gaze with a pleading look. *Lie for me. Please, I beseech you, lie to Xie Fuhua. Protect me from his wrath.*

"What's the verdict? Is she still pure?" Liu Dai snapped.

"It is not a question for me to answer to you. Take me to your master."

The two men left, taking the light with them, and once more Huiann was left in gray limbo to ponder her fate. What would Xie do with her now? Could she still convince him of her worth, promise to behave and to satisfy his clients to the best of her ability? Having sex with strange men here would be bad, but anything

would be better than being locked in the cribs from which there would be no chance of escape ever. This way she'd still have hope. Pretend to be chastened, obey completely and, when the moment came, attack like the clever rabbit with her sharp, little claw.

She turned on her side and pressed her legs tight together as though to belatedly stop the doctor's invading hands.

Time passed. She dozed and dreamed of Alan. He came to her and lay with her on the bed, cradling her in his arms. He whispered words of love and covered her with kisses. But all the while anxiety made her skin prickle. Something evil was coming to get them—a devil that would imprison them in an everlasting world of darkness and pain.

"Run," she warned Alan. "Don't stay here. Save yourself."

He looked at her with his eyes as blue as the sky, but in the next moment he disappeared, vanishing like a ghost from her embrace.

Huiann jerked awake as the door opened and again Liu Dai was silhouetted in the frame. "Come."

She rose from the bed. He grabbed her arm and held tight as he escorted her to Xie's office once more. The route was familiar and felt like a recurring nightmare from which she couldn't escape. They passed several other people on the way, servants cleaning, guards watching. There was no chance to fight or to run.

In his study, Xie stood looking out the tall, manypaned window. He turned toward them. Huiann imagined rushing past him, catching a glimpse of his surprised face as she crashed through the casement.

She'd run away through the city streets and out to the country where he'd never find her.

"So, your flower is plucked. What have you to say for yourself?" Xie's voice brought her back to the room like a tether. His tone and words reminded her of her father taking her to task for one of her childhood misadventures.

She swallowed the bile in her throat, folded her hands together and bowed deeply. "I humbly beg pardon, Master, for my foolish behavior. I was afraid to face the man you'd chosen for me and ran away, only to find a worse fate. Afterward I was too ashamed to return to you, even if I'd had the opportunity."

"You're saying the man, Sommers, kept you and used you against your will?"

"Yes, sir." She prayed forgiveness for the lie as she stared at Xie's shiny black shoes in abject contrition.

"That's very interesting, especially since one of the men I hired to search for you informed me weeks ago that he spotted you walking freely on the street."

"I wasn't alone. A woman was with me, watching me. We ran from the white man because I had no idea you'd sent him."

He took a few steps closer and his shoes seemed to fill her vision. A cloying whiff of bay rum aftershave tickled her nose, making her want to sneeze. He was so close she could strike at his eyes with her hook if she dared. Liu Dai would kill her, but it might be worth it.

"Do you think I am a stupid man, Chua Huiann?" Xie's tone was calm and even. "Do you think I'm not aware you've been working for the shopkeeper? My agents thought you were there, but their suspicions were only recently confirmed. A man named Stubbs

told them about you for the price of a couple of drinks. After that it wasn't hard to find a way to get you back."

Rage and guilt slammed through her with every heartbeat. It was her fault the store had been destroyed. They'd thrown the firebombs to get to her. She'd already known that, but hearing Xie state it aloud made it worse. Alan had been her savior and she'd been his ruin.

"Now you try to pretend you were a prisoner there?"

"Yes, sir." She continued the lie with a leaden heart.

Xie Fuhua heaved a loud sigh. "Such trouble you've turned out to be, Chua Huiann. You are neither kind nor peaceful, as your name implies. And now I'm afraid the time has come to punish you for your misdeeds and to continue the training which Madam Teng had begun. Today you will learn how to properly beg forgiveness from your master. Put your hands on the arms of that chair and lean over."

Her mouth was so dry she could barely swallow as she moved to obey, gripping the leather-covered arms of the chair in front of Xie's desk and bending her body.

"Lui Dai will administer your punishment, which will gratify him greatly since he suffered due to your foolish behavior, as did the useless Madam Teng who trained you so poorly. She's a whore once more. It's amazing how some men will fuck a woman no matter how old or ugly."

Heart pounding, Huiann tightened her grasp on the chair arms. She would almost prefer Xie to beat her since his temper appeared to be under control. She

listened to Liu Dai's quiet footsteps cross the carpet then felt him raise the skirt of her dress, fling it over her back and bare her bottom. She wore no undergarment. Liu had taken her drawers and stockings when he left with the doctor, and no other clothes were in the room.

Having her naked rear on display for the two men made her skin crawl. Yes, she'd submitted to this kind of treatment before, when Xie would bring a prospective client to examine her, but with her head down and her bottom lifted and the prospect of pain to come, it was even worse.

The first blow came suddenly and unexpectedly, a smack of Liu's hand across both buttocks. She caught her breath and waited for another. Liu kept her waiting and wondering before abruptly hitting her again. The second blow was much harder and must have stung his palm as much as her rear.

Huiann rocked on her feet and braced her arms against the chair as a hail of blows rained down on her. She clenched her teeth, refusing to cry out as the slaps jolted her body.

Suddenly he walked away, leaving her breathing hard, her bottom heated. She longed to glance over her shoulder to see what he was doing but kept her face submissively turned down toward the chair.

When he hit her again, the pain sucked the breath from her chest. This was no slap of a hand but the sharp bite of a leather strap. It cut into her tender flesh and nearly startled a howl from her. She clamped her jaw even tighter. She wouldn't give these men the satisfaction of hearing her cry out.

But her silence was a mistake, inspiring Liu Dai to give greater pain. As the strap struck her again and again, the stinging pain turned to burning fire. There was no escape from the whipping that flayed her buttocks, lower back and thighs. She gasped for breath and a whimper escaped her.

“Ah, at last you begin to learn. Liu Dai has earned your tears from all the trouble you’ve caused him. Now beg the man’s forgiveness and mine.”

She heard Liu Dai’s grunts as he struck her, the slap of the whip against her flesh and her own harsh breathing. Three more strikes and she could stand it no longer. “Please. Please stop! Forgive me. I’m sorry. I was bad to run away. I was wrong. Forgive me.”

Her litany of pleas went on until her words dissolved into sobs. She slumped over the chair, her head lowered so her cheek rested on the leather seat. Hot tears burned her eyes and she felt destroyed, weak, pitiable, less than human.

Then she became aware of the metal hook, still tucked up her sleeve and pressing hard against her inner wrist. Its solidity gave her hope. She might weep and beg for this torture to end, but when it was finally over, she would remain unbroken—still waiting for her chance to rip and claw out the insides of her tormentors.

Chapter Seventeen

Alan walked through the wet, ashen rubble of the store to his rooms in back. The kitchen area was barely scorched and he was able to go upstairs to his room where he'd placed his service revolver in the nightstand drawer. He checked the chamber and loaded it with bullets, then tucked the heavy pistol in his belt since he had no holster. He buttoned his suit coat over it as he hurried back downstairs.

Dora was in the store, starting to pick up debris as he strode through. "Good luck. Be careful," she offered her blessing.

The livery stable was closed so Alan walked to Dong Li's warehouse, where he hoped to learn the location of Xie's bordello. But the warehouse was locked and Alan didn't know where Dong Li lived.

Frustrated at the wasted trip, he went to Chinatown and walked along the row where prostitutes were kept in stalls. This late at night the street was quiet, the visitors who paid a few coins for a fuck had all gone home. Despair swept through Alan as he imagined Huiann behind one of those doors, or she might have been tortured or even killed by now.

A man leaned against the wall, arms folded. "You want pussy? Good pussy here. Only ten cent."

Alan hesitated. For a few dollars he could take a look into each of these enclosures, although he was almost certain Xie had Huiann in his house. She was

more valuable than this. She was too beautiful to be wasted as human cattle.

"Come on. You try Chineese pussy."

Alan took a coin from his pocket and tossed it to the man. He unlocked and opened one of the doors and stepped inside to light a candle before ushering Alan into the cell.

After the door closed behind him, Alan immediately wanted to bash it open as his claustrophobia rose. The tiny chamber contained a low cot, a chamber pot at the foot of it and a basin of water in one corner. The woman sitting on the edge of the cot was completely naked. She leaned forward so her long hair shielded her face. White hairs threaded the black.

Alan stared at her hands, thin and bony like those in his recurring nightmare. She lifted her face to stare at him with dead eyes as she reached for his fly. He pushed her hands away.

"No. Don't." He crouched before her, trying to make eye contact, but her eyes were unfocused. "Do you know a woman named Chua Huiann?"

A flicker of recognition lit like a candle flame in her vacant eyes and she finally appeared to see him. Her lips formed the name soundlessly, and then she shook her head.

"Yes, you do." Excitement surged through him. "You know her name. Where is she? Where does Xie Fuhua live? Tell me." He grasped her shoulders and gave her a little shake.

The woman cringed and spoke a few words in Chinese.

"Tell me!" He shook her again.

"No English," she whimpered.

Alan realized he was going to get no information from her. He let go of her shoulders. "I'm sorry." He rose to his feet, pushed open the door of the stall and stepped outside, drawing a deep breath of the fetid air.

The procurer smiled. "Quick one. Come again. Bring your friends."

"No. I'm looking for something else." An idea came to him. "I heard there was a place owned by a man named Xie Fuhua where a man could get a princess. That's the kind of girl I'm looking for."

The man stared at him.

Alan drew a half dollar from his wallet and offered it. "Xie Fuhua's place?"

The man tucked the coin in his pocket and gave him directions.

Alan's heart lifted for the first time that evening. At last he was on the right track. He jogged several blocks to the street the man had indicated and soon came to the red door with the sign above which the man had told him meant Pleasure Palace.

Alan stared at the unassuming board front, the barred grilles over the darkened windows. He studied the second-story windows where Huiann might be right now. He wanted to break down the door, climb the stairs and rescue her, shooting anyone who stood in his way. But a guard standing near the door of the building stopped him from making an impulsive charge that might put her in more danger.

He'd come armed with a weapon but not a plan. Now he must use his wits to get her out of there safely. To do that he needed backup. The only man he

considered a trustworthy, loyal friend was Jeremy Taylor. But could the man handle a firearm?

After one last look at the house, he walked quickly away, heading for Jeremy's place. It felt like he was abandoning Huiann.

By the time he reached the clerk's apartment, it was a few hours before sunrise. Alan knocked, waited and knocked louder. He was beginning to fear Jeremy had eloped with Cynthia Dodge, when the door finally opened.

The clerk's hair was tousled and his nightshirt was unbuttoned. He stared at Alan. "What are you doing here?"

"I need your help. Do you have a gun?"

Jeremy's eyes opened wider. "A gun?"

"The store was broken into and burned and some men took Huiann. I believe I know where she's being held, but I'd like someone outside when I go in. If I don't come back, you should get the police."

"Did you tell them all this?"

"They made it clear they won't go after a kidnapped Chinese woman, but a missing storekeeper whose business has been burned might get their attention."

Jeremy rubbed his furrowed forehead. "Why would someone take Huiann?"

"I'll tell you on the way. We have to move fast." Alan pushed past Jeremy into the room and saw why he'd blocked the doorway. Cynthia Dodge stood in a corner of the one-room apartment with a blanket wrapped around her naked body.

Alan was too worried about Huiann to feel more than a flicker of surprise. He pushed Jeremy toward his bureau. "Get dressed. Hurry!"

"I—I'm not sure this is a good idea."

Alan growled with impatience and quickly blurted the story to get Jeremy moving. "The man who took her is a Chinese crime boss. Huiann came to America to be his bride, but he planned to put her in a whorehouse. She ran away and ended up in my shop. Now he's taken her and I have to get her back." He glanced at Cynthia. "I can see this is bad timing, but I didn't know who else to ask for help."

Cynthia clutched the blanket tighter around her. "That poor girl! It's terrible that the police won't help her simply because she's an Oriental. Jeremy, you must go save her!"

Alan blinked in surprise. He'd never have expected support from Cynthia Dodge. It showed an unexpected side of her. Perhaps she was one of those young ladies who read Gothic romances and daydreamed about villains and the heroes who vanquished them. Maybe she didn't understand the real danger Jeremy might be facing.

"Give me a minute and I'll be right out." Jeremy's voice was deeper than normal, his expression somber. "Yes, Alan, I do have a pistol and I'm a crack shot."

In less than a half hour they were back on the street in front of Xie's establishment. The streets were a little busier now as it was almost morning. The growing crowd of pedestrians would've been a better hiding place for two men casing a building except for the fact that their Caucasian faces drew attention to them.

“Are you sure about this?” Jeremy asked. “Walking right in the front door doesn’t sound like much of a plan to me.”

“I want to approach Xie as one businessman to another. Short of having a shootout, which will likely get both of us killed—and Huiann too—offering to buy her is my best bet.”

“So I’m supposed to stand here and wait for you to *not* come out then go get the police? How will I know when you need help? I should go with you. The man can’t kill two white citizens. This isn’t the Wild West any longer.”

“I don’t want to drag you into this more than I already have. If I’m not back in an hour then get the police.” He took his revolver from his belt and handed it to Jeremy. “Take this. Going in armed won’t help make my case.”

Before Jeremy could argue, Alan zigzagged through the traffic of pedestrians and pushcarts toward the house across the street.

He went straight to the large man posed like a statue near the dark red door. “My name is Alan Sommers. I’m here to see Master Xie Fuhua about a business matter.”

Alan stared confidently into the man’s eyes, which were mere slits above his heavy jowls. His round face and bulky body gave him the appearance of an oversized baby but his stance, light on the balls of his feet, ready to attack, announced his lethal nature.

“He’s expecting me.” Alan hoped the man understood English.

Another long moment passed before the man nodded. “Wait.” He pulled a cord beside the door,

which was answered by a young boy dressed in a scarlet robe with gold collars and cuffs. Most of his head was shaved except for a braided queue. The heavysset guard said something and the boy disappeared into the house, letting the door close behind him.

The big man stood motionless, waiting. Alan glanced down the street to where Jeremy was buying food from a vendor's cart. He couldn't linger indefinitely without drawing notice. Hopefully Jeremy would have the sense to find a better vantage point from which to spy.

The door opened and the boy relayed a message in a high-pitched voice. The guard ushered Alan inside, walking behind him into a mirrored, scarlet-draped foyer that looked like a man's fantasy of an Oriental palace.

After searching Alan for weapons, the man prodded him to walk down the corridor toward the back of the house. There were open archways on either side at intervals through which he glimpsed elaborate antechambers. A trace of opium smoke wafted from one unoccupied parlor in which lavishly pillowed couches were scattered around a glossy black piano. In another, the floor and ceiling were painted black and the walls were hung in black fabric. Chains and manacles were attached to the walls.

Here and there servants cleaned the sleeping whorehouse. A woman scrubbed the floor on hands and knees. A pair of small girls in gray jackets and trousers dusted the gilt frames of erotic-themed paintings that decorated the corridor. A hunchbacked man pulled dead leaves from a large potted plant.

Alan followed the boy's bobbing queue down another hallway, passing closed doors—perhaps bedrooms where the women entertained clients—before the boy stopped in front of a large carved wooden door. He felt as if he was standing before the lair of a dangerous beast.

The boy opened the door then backed out of the room, head down, folded hands pressed to his forehead. The guard prodded Alan in the back and he stepped into Xie Fuhua's office. The man behind the desk didn't look like a beast or a devil. His dark hair was shot with gray and cut short with no queue. He wore a Western-style suit, and a pair of half-moon spectacles perched on the end of his small nose. A cigar burned in a dish beside him, sending up streams of blue smoke that curled around his head. He looked up from the papers on his desk.

Pretending to be busy. He's not that nonchalant. He knows who I am. Alan gazed into the dark eyes and forced his own face to remain neutral no matter how much he felt like launching himself across the desk and ripping the man's throat out.

"Mr. Sommers, sit down." Xie gestured to an upholstered leather chair in front of the desk.

Alan noted the presence of another man in the corner as he crossed the soft carpet and sat on the edge of the chair, ready to leap up if necessary. But Alan didn't believe Xie would shoot him in cold blood. Not here in his office anyway, where it would stain the carpet.

Folding his hands, Xie rested his chin on top of them. "What can I do for you?" As if he was a customer seeking service.

"You know who I am and why I'm here," Alan said bluntly. "Chua Huiann."

"You want to pay for her services, which you've enjoyed these many weeks?"

"She sewed for my shop and I have customers waiting for her to fill their orders. How much would it cost to buy her freedom so she can continue to work for me?"

Xie unfolded his hands and placed them on the desk, tapping a finger against the blotter. "Well, I would need considerable recompense for the weeks of service you stole from me. She wasn't yours to use. You should've returned her to me. Instead, you forced me to spend time and resources locating her. I had to hire extra men. Every day adds up."

"How much?"

His tapping finger stilled and the half smile on his lips disappeared. "You'd pay anything for her, wouldn't you? We both know it's not about her abilities as a seamstress. You fancy yourself her protector, her hero. Maybe you even imagine you love her."

Alan remained silent, furious at how easily the man read him. The clock on the mantel ticked. A floorboard creaked beneath the weight of the guard who'd escorted him.

"How much?" he repeated at last.

Xie sighed. "The truth is, it's not about the money for me either. It's about someone taking what belongs to me and returning it used." He leaned over his desk and stared hard at Alan, his voice suddenly low and hissing like a serpent about to strike. "*No one* takes my things and goes unpunished."

The hair at his nape rose and Alan longed for the weight of the Colt pressed against his belly. Two guards in the room. How many more stood between him and the street, and how could he get Huiann and himself out of here if Xie refused to make a deal?

He stuck to the script he'd planned. "I didn't know where she came from until recently. I didn't mean to take something of yours, but she did good work and I want to hire her again. I could use the income she brought in, especially since my store inexplicably burned last night." He tacked on a threat. "Pointing the police toward the man who hired the arsonists won't make up for the destruction, but having Chua Huiann back might help."

Xie laughed and leaned back in his chair. "Do you honestly think you're in a position to threaten me? I can promise you the police would find no connection between me and the unfortunate fire in your store last night."

"They're already on the trail of the thugs you hired, and those two didn't seem the loyal kind. If they're caught, they'll point the finger at you to save themselves. A fire in this city is serious business. The fire marshal isn't going to take this investigation lightly."

The other man's laughter subsided to a feral grin and he shook his head. "This is a most pathetic attempt at blackmail, Mr. Sommers. Admit it. You have nothing to threaten me with, no cards to play, nothing I need, probably not even enough money to pay me for my investment in bringing the girl over from China. You have no claim over her. She's legally my property

and I have the papers to prove it should the authorities question me.”

If he said one more word about owning her, Alan was going to lose control and attack him, bodyguards be damned.

“Let me add one more thing.” Xie’s narrowed eyes gleamed. “Huiann has already been punished for running away, and the more you wheedle and threaten, the more punishment she’ll receive. You have the power to hurt her or to convince me to be lenient.”

A shivering chill and burning heat possessed him simultaneously at Xie’s threat. Alan had nothing to counter with. “What do you want?”

“Recompense, but not financial. I’ll show you what I mean.” Xie lifted his hand.

Alan started to stand, but the guard grabbed his arms. Alan pulled against him while snapping his head backward. His skull connected with bone, and the guard grunted, but the meaty fists didn’t release their iron grip.

“The more you struggle, the more the girl suffers.” Xie’s voice stopped him as if he’d doused Alan with ice-cold water.

He’d have to play this out, see what the man wanted. Perhaps some abject humiliation on his part would be all the payment Xie would require to soothe his damaged pride. Maybe an opportunity would arise to turn the tables on him. And there was always the trump card of Jeremy fetching the police to come to their aid. Hope was not lost yet.

Xie barked out an order in Chinese and the guard pulled Alan through the doorway. He dragged him

down the corridor back to the black room with the manacles.

The oppressive darkness surrounded Alan, pushing in from all sides, stealing his breath and accelerating his already rapid heartbeat. The urge to fight his captor was strong, but he remained calm while the thick-necked guard shackled his wrists in iron manacles attached to chains that threaded through an eyebolt in the wall.

The moment the guard turned away to receive Xie's next order, Alan tested the strength of the bolt, pulling against it as hard as he could without being obvious.

Xie crossed the room to a low table also equipped with manacles and chains and rested his hand on it. "Now your punishment, and your testing, begins. You'll observe a demonstration that Chua Huiann belongs to me, which you must endure without moving or speaking. Remember, your every reaction will only make her torment greater."

Alan clenched his jaw and continued to pull against the bolt in the wall. The room might be fashioned to represent a dungeon, but it was only an erotic playroom. The bolt sunk into the wooden wall beneath the black-velvet covering loosened. A tendril of hope unfurled inside him.

Chapter Eighteen

The bedroom door was thrown open once again, jerking Huiann out of her uneasy rest. As she bolted upright, pain flared from her lower back all the way down her legs. Her buttocks had received the worst of the beating, but Liu Dai had aimed plenty of blows at her thighs and even her calves. She'd stopped trying to be brave and hold back her cries and afterward had sobbed until she fell asleep on her bed.

Liu Dai stood in the doorway again. Madam Teng would seem like an angel to her now. He strode across the floor and instinctively she cringed away from his hand. She hated this display of weakness and the whimper that rose in her throat. Was the whipping going to begin again or did Xie have a worse, more intimate abuse planned for her?

Liu took hold of her wrist and pulled her off the bed. Huiann gripped the hook in her other hand where she'd held it even as she slept, as if it was a talisman that would protect her from harm. While he dragged her downstairs, she tucked it into the cuff of her dress—safe unless Xie forced her to remove her clothing.

Once more she prayed to Buddha and her ancestors to give her strength to survive whatever ordeal was coming. *Help me to be brave and never give up, like Clever Rabbit who was swallowed by death and still came out alive.* Her body tensed and her legs felt as liquid as water as she stumbled down the hall beside

Liu Dai. The uncertainty was the worst part. Would she be raped, tortured...killed?

He thrust her into a room devoid of light. No, not completely. Flickering candles shone in sconces on the walls, but the blackness of the ceiling, floor and walls robbed their light. Her eyes adjusted and focused on shapes in the room. Xie stood beside a large table. A lamp flickered on a smaller table nearby, casting eerie shadows on his already frightening demon face.

But he wasn't the only figure in the room. Huiann's gaze swept over the huge boulder of a guard and toward the other man. Her recognition faltered. She couldn't grasp his presence there, but it was Alan.

And he was chained to the wall.

"You see, Chua Huiann, your hero has come for you," Xie said in Mandarin. "You must be an amazing woman to lure your lover to follow you into death. What an asset you will be for me, attracting men like bees to pollen. Perhaps you will be as sought after as Madam Teng was in her prime."

Huiann held absolutely still, as if not moving would deflect Xie's attention from her. She understood how small animals felt, frozen by the gaze of the predator that would end their life.

"Come." He beckoned her forward. "You see the trouble you've caused for this man? Don't make it worse by exhibiting disobedience. If you follow my demands exactly, he will be released unharmed. This is merely a demonstration for Mr. Sommers's benefit so he understands there is no hope of him ever taking you from me again."

His words buzzed in her ears, competing with the blood pounding there, and she feared she might pass

out. She walked stiff-legged toward him, her fingers clenched into fists by her sides. The hook from the wardrobe pressed hard into her wrist.

“Now remove your clothes, Huiann.”

With trembling fingers she unbuttoned the bodice of the crumpled red dress and let the gown fall around her feet like a pool of blood. She let the metal hook drop from her wrist into her curled fingers. Her bare arms were chilled, although the air was stuffy in the cavelike room.

“Your undergarments too,” Xie commanded.

Huiann met none of the men’s eyes, especially not Alan’s. If she looked at him she would not be able to hold back tears. This wasn’t the first time Xie had made her strip in front of a man, but the prospective buyers had been nameless, faceless strangers. It had been easy to turn them into ghosts in her mind and let them blow away. Having Alan watch her humiliation made it feel real.

Her cheeks burned as she pulled her chemise over her head and dropped it to the floor. Her bared breasts tingled as air caressed them, her nipples embarrassingly taut. She untied the drawstring of her petticoat and let it fall then stood with her arms straight by her sides, hands still clenched. She was absolutely naked but in her mind she armored herself with invisible steel. The men’s eyes couldn’t touch her, although their hands might. And their physical touch wouldn’t destroy the person she was inside.

“Turn around. Show him the marks of your punishment.”

Huiann at last risked a glance at Alan before obeying Xie’s order. The room was too dark for her to

read his expression, but his posture was rigid, straining against his restraints. He didn't speak a word, but she heard his ragged breathing from across the room. She slowly turned, presenting her backside. Alan gasped audibly.

She stared at the padded table before her, the cuffs and chains designed to hold a body in place. No doubt Xie planned to degrade her body in front of Alan and perhaps torture her. Whatever happened, he'd never set Alan free after this, no matter what he might promise. Xie couldn't let him go. He would have to kill him.

The horrifying thought freed her, and Huiann saw what she must do with a clarity that shone like the sun. She mustn't fear death, hers or Alan's, but must fight against Xie. She had to break the frozen tableau in this room and make some attempt to set them both free.

Xie patted her bruised bottom while he spoke to Alan in English. "Now I will show you what happens to those who would set themselves against me."

Huiann knew the next thing he'd do would be to push her down on that table and rape her. There was no more time to wait for the perfect moment to act. Just then, like a gift from the gods, the sound of the front door crashing open came from down the hall. The distraction was the perfect opportunity.

Huiann gripped the wardrobe hook in her sweaty palm with its sharpened point protruding between her clenched fingers. She twisted toward Xie and stabbed at his eye. The moment seemed to stretch like a piece of rubber. As if in slow motion she saw his eyes widen in surprise and her own fist driving toward his face. She felt the impact when her weapon hit its target, her

knuckles connecting with his eye socket. She let go of the hook and a gush of fluids bathed her hand red.

Xie screamed and staggered backward. Huiann whirled away from the edge of the table and ran past him. In her brief glance around the room, she'd noticed a rack of torture implements on one wall. She grabbed the first to come to hand, a flail of knotted leather. Brandishing the whip, she ran at Liu Dai.

Lunging aside, he drew a gun and pointed it at her. Huiann braced for the explosion of gunpowder and the feeling of a bullet entering her, but it never came. Perhaps he was afraid to shoot her without Xie's permission.

"Stop!" he ordered.

Huiann snapped the flail at his face instead of dropping it. Liu flinched away and his hand jerked as he fired. The crack of the pistol was deafening, but the bullet whizzed past her and hit a wall.

Behind her, Huiann was aware of shouts and punches but she couldn't spare a glance to find out how Alan fared. She raised her arm high and brought the whip down on Liu's arm. The lashes coiled around his wrist and he dropped the gun. He yelped and dove to retrieve the weapon. Huiann kicked the gun far away from Liu Dai, drew back and hit him again. Blow after blow rained down over his head and shoulders. Liu raised an arm to deflect the stinging cracks of the whip, but she was relentless. Bloody welts scored his arms and face.

Huiann's mind hovered outside of her body, watching the whipping as if she were a stranger. She beat her persecutor until he stopped moving and

cowered with his arms around his head. Even then she continued to lash him.

Suddenly strong arms seized her from behind and pulled her against a solid body. The despicable odor of bay rum assailed her and Xie shouted near her ear, "Demon bitch! You will die for this."

Chapter Nineteen

Alan pulled against the bolt in the wall. His arm muscles strained and he shifted his weight back and forth, using the chain threaded through the bolt's eye to wrench it back and forth. The metal manacles cut into his wrists, but he felt the anchor releasing its grip on the wall by tiny increments. Rage blazed through him, and helplessness at his inability to protect Huiann from humiliation, but he didn't stop working against his bonds. Things would be much worse for her if he lost focus. Only by freeing himself could he free her.

He pulled again. The bolt loosened. Another few hard tugs and he should be able to jerk it from the wall. The man's attention was riveted on Huiann's nude body. He was paying no heed to a chained prisoner.

Suddenly the noise of the front door slamming open came from down the hallway. Huiann twisted and punched her fist at Xie's face. The man howled as if he'd been stabbed and leaped backward. Alan gave a mighty tug against the eyebolt and pulled it from the wall. He staggered then regained his balance and whirled toward the guard, who was rushing to help his master. Alan leaped on the man's back and encircled his neck with the chain.

The guard clutched at the chain, digging into his throat, let out a choked cry and threw himself backward. He drove Alan into the wall, knocking the breath from him. Alan loosened his hold enough that the guard could inhale and slip his fingers between the

chain and his neck. The man tugged at the garrote while pinning Alan against the wall. His ribs were crushed and he gasped for air but only pulled harder, straining his shoulders as he lynched the guard's thick neck.

Abruptly the man's body slumped as he lost consciousness. Alan drew a quick breath and dug in even deeper. The chain cut into the man's throat while wheezing gurgles bubbled from between his lips. The guard dropped to the floor with Alan on his back. Only when Alan was satisfied the guard wouldn't rise again did he let the chain slip from his numb hands. The guard's head lolled to the side.

Alan clambered to his feet in time to see Xie Fuhua grab Huiann from behind and hold a knife to her throat. Half his face was a mask of blood that gushed from his ruined eye. Meanwhile, the skinny man with the moustache was crawling toward a pistol. Alan snatched up the weapon and pointed it at Xie.

"She'll be dead before you can shoot me." Xie pressed the blade against Huiann's throat. "Drop the gun."

Alan had cocked the pistol. All he had to do was press the trigger. But Xie held her body in front of him like a shield. There was little target except his face, too close to Huiann's head. Huiann's dark eyes were focused on his, transmitting a silent message. Alan opened his fingers and let the gun droop in his hand until the barrel pointed at the floor. He offered the weapon to Xie.

"Put it on the floor and back away."

Alan slowly squatted. At that moment, the door opened and light from the hallway spilled into the darkened room. Xie glanced toward the door.

Alan didn't. Huiann dropped her head to the side while Alan brought up the pistol and fired a shot straight into Xie's face. He fell backward, a spray of blood misting from his head. At the same moment, Jeremy fired from the doorway. His bullet tore through the man's chest and Xie toppled like a tree. Jeremy ducked into the room as a bullet splintered the doorframe beside him.

Alan whirled to deal with the skinny man with the moustache whom Huiann had whipped into submission. His clothes were tattered and his skin shredded. Alan aimed his weapon at the trembling man. This wasn't the time to worry about whether he was armed or not. He shot without hesitation. The man's body slumped to the floor.

Alan turned to Huiann and she rushed toward him, the chain between his wrists impeding their embrace.

Jeremy gestured toward the door. "I'll hold 'em off. You run."

He didn't wait for an answer, but leaped into the hallway, firing both guns toward the back of the house. Alan grabbed Huiann's hand, crouched low and ran with her toward the front. Not knowing in which rooms gunmen might be hidden, he barreled past them all, dragging Huiann toward the door, still wide open from Jeremy's entrance. Alan glimpsed the frightened face of the hunchbacked man cowering behind a potted fern as they raced past him and outdoors.

Alan searched for more armed men outside the building, but saw only pedestrians running from the

sounds of a gun battle. He shoved Huiann against the wall.

“Wait here.”

Flattening his body against the doorframe, he peered around the corner into the foyer. A stray bullet shattered one of the mirrors, sending shards tinkling onto the carpet. Alan dove into the entry and squatted behind the big fern. The old man who'd been hiding there scurried out the front door. Manacles bit into Alan's wrists and the chain limited his movement as he raised his weapon and sighted down the hallway.

More shots cracked through the air. A man darted across the hall and Alan shot him. The man dropped without making a sound. Jeremy burst from one of the rooms, shooting behind him over his shoulder as he ran toward Alan. His pistol clicked on an empty chamber.

A man with a rifle appeared on the landing at the top of the stairs. Leaping up, Alan fired. The man dodged back out of sight.

“Go!” Jeremy ran past, and Alan followed him out the door, slamming it closed behind them.

Huiann waited outside. Alan grabbed her hand and they pounded down the street. After turning down an alley, they paused to lean against the wall.

“You were a little early. What happened?” Alan glanced at Jeremy.

Jeremy winced as he removed his coat and gave it to Huiann to cover her naked body. Blood soaked his shirt at the shoulder. “I had a bad feeling. Didn't seem like there'd be enough time to fetch the police—if they'd even come with me.”

"I'm glad you didn't listen to me." Alan ripped away the fabric to examine the wound. A neat round hole punctured Jeremy's skin but there was no exit wound on the other side. "You need a doctor. Dong Li's isn't far from here. Maybe he can help us."

Alan's wrists were still manacled and joined together by the bloodstained chain. With no key, he'd be stuck in them for a while. He removed his shoes and gave Huiann his socks so she'd have something covering her bare feet. Just for a moment, he pulled her against him, taking the time to feel her warm body, safe and alive, her strong arms wrapped around him. He'd come so close to losing her.

After slipping on his shoes, Alan searched for pursuers on the street. No one seemed to be following them. He offered Jeremy his arm to lean on, but the other man shook his head. "I can walk."

They hurried the few blocks to the warehouse and Alan knocked on the door. A few moments later, the slide opened and eyes peered out at him.

"I'm here to see Dong Li." He didn't need to give his name. He was a regular customer. The slat closed and the door opened. The servant's eyes widened as he saw the state they were in. He scurried off to get his boss.

Within minutes, Dong Li entered the waiting area, his heavy eyebrows twisted in a scowl. "Why are you here? What kind of trouble are you in?" Without waiting for Alan's answer, he forged on. "It's Xie Fuhua, isn't it? I told you to not to get involved with him. Now you'll bring the demon down on my head."

"He's dead. Please help us, and we'll get out of here as soon as possible. We need transportation, some

clothes, and if you could get these off..." Alan held up his wrists, the chains jangling.

"And you thought I'd be the man to help? Have I ever given you the impression we're friends?"

"I can pay you. Not right now, but I promise to pay you back for your trouble."

Dong waved a hand. "There's not enough money to cover this kind of trouble. You've put me in danger simply by coming here."

"No one saw—"

"Hah! Around here someone always sees and will talk if paid enough." He glared at each of them before gesturing them toward his office. "Come."

Inside, he tossed a handkerchief at Huiann and gave an order in Chinese. Jeremy dropped into the nearest chair and Huiann bent over him to staunch the blood oozing from his wound. Briefly Alan told Dong about harboring Huiann, her kidnapping and rescue which had left Xie dead—there was no doubt the shots to both his head and chest had killed him.

Dong stopped rummaging through a desk drawer to stare at him. "You haven't just skipped a pebble across a pond. You've thrown a damn boulder in it. The balance of power among the tongs is precarious. Removing Xie will make more than ripples. It'll be a tidal wave." He shook his head. "Change is almost always bad for business."

Dong summoned the youth who minded the front door and spoke a few words to him. The lad bobbed his head and left, after taking a last curious glance at his master's strange visitors.

"He'll bring a doctor," Dong said.

“A Chinese doctor?” Jeremy sat up straight. “I can wait until we get to my place. It’s not far.”

Dong Li’s withering glance quelled him. “There’s more blood on your shirt than in your body. Besides, a Western doctor’s more likely to kill you than heal you. Consider yourself lucky to be treated by a physician like Chen Ru. You might live.”

Dong found what he was looking for from the drawer. He unfolded a square of material and inside was a row of picks. Alan placed his manacled wrists on the surface of the desk. The man bent his head over the task of picking the locks on the manacles, deftly plying his instruments with the skill of a surgeon.

“How’d you learn to...?”

Dong glanced at him and Alan shut up. He held his breath as the soft click of metal on metal filled the silence. He stared at the top of Dong’s head, the thick black hair streaked with gray, and felt he was in a dream.

“I’m sorry if we’ve caused you trouble by coming here.”

Dong clicked his tongue impatiently and prodded deeper into the lock. A moment later he let out a satisfied snort as the manacle opened. “Hah!”

He turned his attention to the other wrist and Alan looked at Huiann. She was bandaging Jeremy’s arm tight to stem the flow of blood. Her body was swathed in Jeremy’s navy blue coat. Her slender legs sticking out from beneath it looked like a child’s. When her gaze met Alan’s, she smiled.

The other manacle opened and Dong Li sat back in his chair. “Haven’t lost my touch.”

"Thank you." Alan rubbed his chafed wrists. "Please, could you find something for Huiann to wear?"

Dong looked at Huiann and she placed her hands together and bowed. She said something to him in Chinese and he responded. Alan listened as their conversation flowed back and forth, natural, elegant, easy. Hearing her conversing with someone in her native tongue made him aware of the limits English imposed on her ability to communicate. It must be wonderful for her to talk with someone who understood her completely.

He thought of his decision to ask her to marry him and realized he could never be as important to her as her family. And now that Xie was not a threat there was nothing to stop her from returning to the land of her ancestors.

"She wants you to know how much she appreciates everything you've done for her, how much she owes you," Dong Li told him.

Alan frowned at the word *owe*. "It's been my pleasure to have her." The double meaning of the words struck him. "I've told her I'll pay for a ticket to China, but she worries about being even more in my debt. Make sure she understands she owes me nothing."

"Maybe passage to China isn't what she wants," Dong Li said. "What would she be going home to?"

Huiann gazed at Alan and spoke at length, her voice rising and falling in the choppy rhythm of troubled waves. When she paused, Dong Li translated.

"Chua Huiann wants to apologize deeply for the trouble she's caused you, the ruin of your store, the

danger you faced by coming to her rescue. She wishes you to know she will not cause you any more trouble. She will leave you in peace and find work elsewhere to support herself.”

Huiann swallowed, her hands clasped together and her eyes glassy with tears, then she spoke some more.

“Her heart is full of feeling for you, but she knows it is wrong for her to stay with you. She wishes for you to find a white woman who will fit into your life and be the wife you need.”

Alan started shaking his head before Dong Li even finished translating. “No. Tell her *she* makes me happy. She is exactly the wife I need.” He breathed deeply, steadying the quaver in his voice. “Ask Chua Huiann if she will do me the honor of marrying me.”

Dong clicked his tongue, but offered Alan’s proposal.

Huiann’s eyes opened wide and she spoke rapidly.

“How would your family and your people react to you marrying a foreign bride? You would be ostracized. It cannot be.” Dong added his own thoughts to the translation. “The girl speaks sense and sees more clearly than you.”

Alan frowned. He couldn’t promise his family would accept Huiann or ever welcome them home as a couple, but he didn’t care. Maybe she was seeing reason, but he was only seeing her.

Dong shrugged. “Shall I tell her you would give up everything for her because you love her like a romantic fool?”

“Love isn’t foolish,” Jeremy interrupted, his voice strained. “It’s more powerful than anything and it can overcome any obstacles. Look at me and Cynthia.”

“Yes, tell her I love her,” Alan said. “And I’m willing to face whatever difficulties lie ahead as long as we’re together.”

Dong laughed. “How did you manage to communicate without me? And what in the hell makes you think you’re in love? Is she that good in bed?”

He spoke at length in Chinese, making Alan wonder if he was embellishing the message.

By the time he’d finished, tears slipped down Huiann’s cheeks. She dashed them away with the back of her hand as a smile lit her face and brought her dimples dancing. “Yes, Alan Sommers. I will marry you.”

She looked at him with such depth of emotion in her eyes that he knew he did understand her completely. They could communicate their feelings without any words at all. His worry about how they could be together in a world that wouldn’t accept them evaporated. Their need for one another was so elemental, there was no denying it.

Chapter Twenty

Huiann knelt in the washtub while Alan poured warm water over her head. The cascade rinsed the soap from her hair and ran in rivulets down her body. Her shivering stilled at last as she basked in the warmth of the water and the feeling of Alan's hands soaping and rinsing first her hair then her body. The cloth and slick soap glided over her shoulders and down her back. He lathered her then rinsed her with fresh water from the kettle warming on the stove.

The smell of smoke and charred wood lingered in the kitchen, but the fire in the store had been extinguished before Alan's living quarters had been burned, and the building appeared to be structurally sound.

Huiann sighed as the warm water sluiced down her body and the level in the tub rose higher. She shifted and water nearly sloshed over the edge. She pushed back the wet hair from her face and looked up at Alan.

His eyes were dark like a night sky, hungry and yearning for her. After the horror of being kidnapped and nearly raped, it seemed impossible she could summon any feelings of sensuality, but she couldn't deny her rising desire for Alan. She wanted to lie with him, to be as close to him as two people could be, their bodies wrapped around each other in silent communion.

He soaped her chest and breasts with soft caresses of the cloth that made her nipples tingle. The flannel

glided over her belly and Alan's hand plunged beneath the water. The abandoned cloth floated to the surface as he explored her with his fingers, seeking the tight bud at the crest of her sex. Like the minnows that used to dart around her ankles when she waded at the edge of the Yangtze, his fingers tickled her. Her pussy tensed as she rose into his touch.

"Is this all right after everything that's happened today? Do you want...?"

"Yes, I want," she assured him.

He leaned to settle his mouth over hers in a soft kiss and resumed rubbing her erect bud. She moaned and gripped his shoulder with one wet hand and the edge of the tub with the other. She held on while his increasingly demanding kisses and circling finger carried her away. Quickly and unexpectedly, bliss rushed through her and she cried out.

He pulled away with a hum of pleasure. "So fast," he murmured.

His hand surfaced from between her legs and slid up her stomach to cup one of her breasts. His eyes glittered like beautiful gems. Huiann's heart rose into her throat and nearly choked her at the profound feeling filling her. *I love him. He's mine. And we're safe, truly safe at last.*

Alan rose and took her hand, drawing her up from the water. He wrapped a towel around her and lifted her into his arms. Water dripped from her feet onto the kitchen floor and all the way up the stairs as he carried her to his bed. He laid her down and smoothed ointment over the lacerations caused by Liu Dai's whip. Then he laid clean cloths over her rear and thighs before leaving her.

“Rest a while. I’ll be right back.”

He strode from the room, boot heels tapping on the floor as he descended to the kitchen. She listened to the sounds of water splashing and pictured his naked body. Huiann rolled gingerly onto her back and drifted into a lazy doze in which she was observing Alan bathing—his wet hair darkened and molded sleekly to his head, his torso shining, the muscles of his shoulders, chest and stomach sculpted as if by an artisan. The perfection of his long legs and the thrust of his cock beckoned her to touch him. Her hands roamed over all the angles and planes of his body.

Huiann awakened from her fantasy at the sound of Alan’s footsteps in the hallway. When she opened her eyes, he stood in the doorway exactly as she’d pictured him, except for the towel around his waist. She devoured him with her eyes—his damp hair and pale body. He was so tall the top of his head nearly brushed the door frame when he entered the room.

She pointed to the towel and ordered imperiously, “Take off.”

He smiled and loosened the fabric, letting it drop to the floor. He stepped on it as he sauntered toward her with the grace of a cat and sprang lightly onto the bed. On hands and knees he suspended his body over hers. Her body tensed in anticipation as he slowly lowered himself and her gaze met his smoldering stare. Until she’d met Alan, she’d never known eyes could reveal so much. He communicated with her in eloquent ways when neither of them spoke.

His body brushed against hers, skin to skin. His mouth came down on hers and she lifted her head from the pillow to meet his kiss. Lips molded to lips, so

intimate and seductive. He caught her exploring tongue between his teeth and nipped it playfully. She grasped his lower lip in her mouth and pulled lightly. A warm chuckle reverberated in his chest. Oh, how she loved the sound of his laughter at the little games they played.

His body settled into the cradle of her hips and his erection rubbed her seam. When it brushed over her sensitized clitoris, renewed sparkles of light danced through her. She lifted toward him and bent her knees so her legs bracketed him on either side. Huiann ran her hands up his chest, feeling warmth and his steady heartbeat beneath her palms, then hooked her hands over his big shoulders. He was so solid and alive.

Only this morning she'd woken in her captor's house, doubting she'd ever see Alan again. Yet here she was, once more in his bed. It was a miracle. Or maybe it was fate that had led them through trials and back to each other's arms. Or the protection of her ancestors. Whatever had made good fortune smile on her, she sent up a prayer of thanks to all gods, ancestors and anything else that might have had a hand in seeing her through her ordeal.

Alan pressed his mouth to her neck, nibbling and licking his way down her throat and sending delightful ripples through her. He rocked his hips, rubbing that long, hard cock back and forth over her pussy. She was slippery and open, ready for him to plunge inside, but he seemed to be in no hurry.

He kissed her chest and the swell of her breast then flicked his tongue over her nipple until she wiggled with pleasure. He drew the peak into his mouth and rolled his tongue around it, then sucked greedily. The

tugging sent an almost painful ache through her. Huiann cupped the back of his head in her hands, feeling the damp coolness of his hair, the hard skull beneath.

“Now!” she urged him in her own language. “I need you inside me, my love.”

As if he understood, Alan reached between them and positioned his cock at her entrance. He pushed inside, slowly. His girth stretched her and she groaned at the painfully sweet sensation. He paused and she gripped his buttocks to pull him even deeper into her.

Alan filled her then receded like a tide, in and out in an easy rhythm. She watched his face—the rapture in his eyes, his parted lips—and felt the beauty of their communion.

A sheen of sweat shone on Alan’s forehead as he continued his controlled thrusting. Sometimes they came together with frenzied passion, but tonight he made every stroke last, holding inside her as if reluctant to be apart even for a second. And as he filled her again and again, Huiann felt a rising pressure inside her, strengthening with every thrust.

She wrapped her legs around the backs of his thighs and clung to his shoulders, lifting toward him. His tempo increased along with his quiet grunts as their bodies slapped together in rhythmic unison. Abruptly, like a lone flute rising above a drumbeat, Huiann’s bliss soared through her. She gasped and arched as if she would fly away with joy, but his weight anchored her.

Alan pushed into her once, twice, three more times before his body shuddered and his cock pulsed inside her. His warm release reminded her that they’d taken

no precaution. Worry flickered but quickly died. She'd prefer not to become pregnant when they were just starting their life together, but if it happened, it was meant to be.

Alan lay on her and she wrapped her arms around his back. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her nose into his skin, inhaling the salty tang like an ocean and the earthy musk of man.

"Mm." His satisfied groan pleased her and she hugged him even tighter. He lifted his face and looked into her face. "I love you. *Wo ai ni*."

She caught her breath. To hear him declare his feelings in her own tongue made her heart stop beating for a moment. "How you know words?"

"I asked Dong Li. I've been practicing them in my head. I wanted to be able to say them to you."

"*Wo ai ni*, Alan. I love you." She smiled at him and his answering smile lit the room.

He rolled onto his back, throwing an arm up over his head.

She drew a deep breath and glanced down at her breasts flattened by gravity, the slick of sweat on her torso. She felt his juices slipping down her inner thigh and tensed her vaginal muscles, enjoying the slightly bruised feeling that marked her as his.

"I hope Jeremy is good," she said after a moment.

"I'm sure Miss Dodge is taking good care of him."

Huiann looked at him and raised her eyebrows. "Miss Dodge the green dress?"

"Yes, her." He grinned. "There's quite a romance between them. She left her parents to be with him. They had a minister marry them last night."

She tried to picture Miss Dodge and Jeremy together. In her mind she clothed the girl in bridal scarlet and gave them a traditional Chinese wedding. The image made her smile.

"You did not say they like each other," she complained.

"I thought it was only Jeremy, but I guess she feels the same way. Last night while you were being kidnapped and I was searching for you, Jeremy and Cynthia were off getting married. Life is strange."

"Yes." She rested her hand on his chest, reassuring herself of his heartbeat, steady and strong beneath her palm. "But good too."

He covered her hand with his. "Very good."

Huiann's bruised backside ached and she was exhausted, ready to slip into the oblivion of sleep. But when she closed her eyes she pictured Alan chained to the wall, Xie falling to the floor, whips and guns and violence. Her body tensed at the memory of how it had felt when her weapon entered Xie's eye. She felt she was still in danger and jerked awake every time she began to relax.

At last she gave up trying to sleep and stared at the ceiling overhead and then at Alan's sleeping face. She studied the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw and his long nose, the twin crescents of his eyelashes. His eyes moved rapidly behind his lids and he frowned. Was he, too, dreaming of their ordeal?

He made a small sound and reached out for something. Huiann clasped his hand and murmured comforting words. "Rest now. You can sleep. We both can sleep now. We are safe."

Repeating her own advice in her mind, she closed her eyes and rested at last.

Chapter Twenty-One

“We stirred up a hornet’s nest.” Alan handed Jeremy *The Examiner* which featured a story about the rising crime-related violence in Chinatown over the past week. “The police have a special unit investigating the Tong Wars. In a related article, the government’s passing a law against importing Asian women for purposes of slavery. It’s written in delicate terms so as not to shock female readers, but it’s an anti-prostitution law.”

Jeremy set his sandwich on his plate and read the article.

It felt strange for Alan to be a guest in the kitchen that had been his for so long, but this was Jeremy’s apartment now. Taylor had become his partner, putting up half the money for rebuilding the store. Now that Alan’s reputation was destroyed because of his involvement with Huiann, his political ambitions were over, but hopefully customers wouldn’t boycott the store if it was considered to belong to Jeremy.

“How was your meeting with the Dodges yesterday?” Alan asked after a bit.

Jeremy set the paper aside. He seemed a dozen years older than he’d been only last week. “Mr. Dodge was polite, but Cynthia’s mother will never forgive me for stealing her little girl.”

“And Cynthia?”

“Isn’t ready to come home just yet.” Jeremy stared at his plate. “I think you were right. Maybe I imagined

she was different than she is or that she cared for me more than she does. But she was counting on me to take her back east and now that that's changed..." He shook his head. "She doesn't understand that the opportunity to buy into the store was too good to pass up. I've got a real chance to get ahead in the world here which I never could do starting over someplace else."

"Cynthia's very young," Alan said. "And she's listening to her mother. But I believe she does love you and once she gets past her disappointment, she'll remember it. Maybe you shouldn't simply wait for her to come home. Maybe you need to take her—show her how strong your feelings are."

Jeremy frowned. "Do you think so? I've been wondering. Sometimes I don't know whether a man's expected to be forceful or gentle. Women should come with instructions."

"That would make things easier sometimes," Alan agreed. "Come on. I suppose we should get back to work."

They returned to the store, which was still closed for renovation. Construction was almost finished and they hoped to have the shelves stocked and the doors open for customers by the following week.

Alan was squaring the corner of a new shelving unit when someone knocked on the door. "Sign says Closed," he muttered as he went to answer it.

A policeman stood outside. Alan's stomach tightened at the sight of the uniform. This couldn't be good news. "Can I help you?"

"Mr. Alan Sommers? I'm Officer Ronald Crowley. I have a rather unusual request. You might have read

about the task force that's going to clean up Chinatown. In the past the department's policy has been to let the Chinese manage their own affairs, but some of us on the task force are ready to make immediate, serious changes."

"Come in," Alan invited. "We can talk inside."

The policeman entered the store, taking a quick look around the chaos. "You're lucky. It could've been a lot worse. I've heard your story and know about your part in Xie Fuhua's death and your involvement with the Oriental woman."

"Yes." Alan kept his tone neutral until he knew where Crowley was going with all this.

"I'm sure you've seen the cribs, the prostitutes kept like dogs in kennels. It's time someone put a stop to it." Crowley lowered his voice, although Jeremy wasn't in the room at the moment. "What we plan isn't legal. To the Chinese, these women are considered property, bought and paid for. We intend to go in and free as many as we can. I hoped you might be able to help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We'll need a place to take them. Someplace outside Chinatown. I know you just bought a farm and that your lady friend lives with you there." He held up a hand, stopping Alan before he could take offense. "I got nothing to say about that. It's not my business. I just need some place to put these women for a while, and I thought your friend might come along on the raid to act as translator."

Alan pictured the many rooms of his large house, intended for a growing factory full of sewers. They needed to hire more women. These women needed a

home. The match was obvious, but he feared inciting the anger of more crime bosses, bringing new trouble to himself and Huiann. Still, there was no way he could refuse.

"I'll be happy to host them, but I won't put Huiann in danger."

Crowley nodded. "I understand. I can find another translator, but I thought a woman might be more comforting to them."

"I have rooms enough for a dozen." Alan felt a little sick at the magnitude of the responsibility he was taking on with the casual air of a man offering to adopt a basket full of puppies. These were human lives, which would be dependant on him for food, shelter and livelihood.

"I don't know how many to expect, and you're right, there could be danger. But this is something that many of us believe is long overdue," the policeman said.

That evening Alan arrived home as the last glorious blaze of sunlight painted the western sky. He stabled his horse and walked to the back of the house where Huiann was working in the garden. He silently watched as she poked around in the dirt, unaware of his presence. The domesticity of the scene, his soon-to-be wife growing food for their table, seized his heart and tightened his throat.

"Finding any vegetables yet?" he asked.

She shrieked and dropped her trowel, putting a hand to her chest. "*Chuó!* You scare me!"

"Sorry." He stepped over the low fence meant to protect the garden against ravenous rabbits and ground

squirrels and walked between the beds to where she stood—so beautiful in her plain brown dress and muslin smock. He pulled her into his arms, treasuring the warmth of her soft body. She was so short he could comfortably rest his chin on top of her head. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

She squeezed her arms around his waist. “How was your day?”

“Busy.” He paused, considering how to present the news that they would soon be hosting an unknown number of refugees. “A policeman came to the store today.”

She knew what a policeman was since they’d been questioned at the station after the incident with Xie. She pulled away and looked at him sharply. “What he want?” She clucked in annoyance and repeated, “What *did* he want?”

Alan explained the situation.

Huiann’s eyes shone with tears and her throat worked as she swallowed. She spoke rapidly in Chinese before addressing him in English. “I see those women on boat in cages like animal. We must help.”

“Yes. I thought I’d go with the police.”

“Me too.” She bobbed her head. “I will help.”

He thought of Crowley’s request to use Huiann as a translator, but nothing was worth putting her at risk. “You can prepare rooms and welcome them here.”

“Alan.” She had a particular way of saying his name when she was about to disagree with him or tell him something he might not want to hear. Her eyes were two fiery coals. “I want... No, I *need* go with you. I need help free women. I talk to them, make them feel safe.”

He couldn't deny her, because he understood her need to save the helpless all too well. It had been fodder for his nightmares for years, the shaming vulnerability of being powerless and unable to do anything to aid your fellow prisoners. This might be a way to finally exorcise the dreams of grasping skeleton hands at last.

It was the same for Huiann. They had escaped Xie Fuhua, but they needed to free others as well.

Huiann's stomach was sour from nerves as the police wagon she rode on stopped on a dark street illuminated by a rare streetlight. A row of doors with barred windows faced the street, the cribs where women were penned like animals for men to use. Their lives were short. Disease or violence took them young, but they were easily replaced by others, shipped in a hold like any other commodity from overseas.

It could've been her in one of these pens. She had no doubt Xie would've ultimately sent her here when he'd gotten all the value he could out of her. The only thing that had separated her from these girls were some social graces and education that made her more desirable. Peasant girls were treated like pigs and she was billed as an exotic princess, but all were destined to be whores, however packaged.

Alan squeezed her hand. "Are you all right?"

Huiann nodded. She'd demanded he bring her along and now she must be brave. The police weren't here in an official capacity and the task force expected some resistance from the procurers who ran the row for their bosses. The street had already emptied of pedestrians at the sight of the police.

As Alan helped Huiann down from the seat, several uniformed officers dismounted from their horses or climbed down from the back of the wagon. They fanned out, clubbing the procurers, taking keys from them and opening stalls. They roused clients and prostitutes from the small cells. Men ran away, pulling up their trousers or half-naked with clothes clutched in their hands.

The women huddled in small groups like sheep, bleating their fear. Huiann plunged into the melee, calling out reassurances in both Wu and Mandarin. "It is all right. You are saved. The police will not harm you. They are here to help you."

Terrified of the uniformed white men who herded them toward the police wagons, the women clustered around Huiann, clamoring for information.

"The police will not hurt you," she repeated. "You are being rescued. Trust me." She clasped one hand after another, offering comfort and directing them toward the back of the wagon, breathing in the scent of sweat and sex and fear.

Alan had gone to help the policemen in their mission. She glimpsed him farther up the street, speaking to a young girl. He took her hand and led her toward the wagon.

A shot cracked through the air. Several of the women screamed. Policemen shouted and ran toward the source of the gunfire, their pistols drawn.

"Get inside!" Alan ran toward Huiann, dragging the girl with him. "Get them all inside before someone gets hurt."

Huiann jumped into the enclosed wagon. Alan handed one woman after another into the cart while

Huiann continued to try to soothe and calm them. The girl Alan had brought clutched her arm. "Will we go home now?"

"Where will they take us?"

"What will happen to us?" others asked as the door clanged shut and only a barred window emitted light into the black interior.

"My home," Huiann explained. "You will be hidden there. You will be able to work to earn money, for passage home if you like or for any other purpose."

"Earn money how? More fucking?" A hard-eyed woman glared at her. "All lies. Why would the white man's police help us?"

Huiann wanted to slap her. She was making the other women nervous, the way one hen could get a whole flock clucking and scurrying about. She understood the woman's mistrust, but did the woman believe anything could be worse than the hell she'd already been enduring?

"They expect nothing. Some men are decent. Some men want to help. And the work you will be doing, if you choose to, is sewing." She held up her hands. "Please, everyone, calm down and stay seated. You will be out of here soon."

But even as she said it, she felt their panic affecting her. It was easy to feel trapped, packed into the back of a wagon with over a dozen other bodies. The smell and closeness choked her. What if something went wrong? What if Alan had been misled by the police and they really intended to throw the prostitutes in jail? What if she was bundled along with them, locked up, imprisoned?

Alan would never let such a thing happen. He would plead her case and get her out. Besides, nothing of the kind was going to occur. It was only her imagination running wild.

The wagon rumbled over stone paving and then bumped over rough dirt roads. The women chattered and fretted and Huiann breathed into the cuff of her sleeve, trying to shield herself from the horrible stench of the refugees crowded around her. She swallowed bile that rose from her queasy stomach.

At last the hellish ride ended. The wagon pulled to a stop and the door opened. Alan stood framed in the doorway, reaching out his hands for her. He lifted her by the waist and placed her on the ground. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Fine."

He gave her a quick hug, but there was no time for more, as the policemen began to help the women out of the wagon. Huiann had prepared four rooms to accommodate a dozen women. Now more pallets would have to be made up and she'd already used all the bedding Alan had brought from the store. They needed more blankets and some sort of mattresses, no matter how thin. And more food. The big pot of rice and vegetables she'd made would be emptied in one meal. They hadn't planned on housing and feeding this large of a group.

The sad-eyed man whom Alan had introduced as Officer Crowley seemed as eager to be rid of the women as he had been to save them. He spoke briefly to Alan before he and his men left, the rattling wagon flanked by mounted officers disappearing into the night. There would be no help from a team of

policemen who wanted to distance themselves from this rescue operation.

Dora came from the house to greet the refugees and Huiann looked around in dismay at the forlorn group of women standing in the yard. Some were dressed in skimpy nightshifts, others were completely naked. She met Alan's gaze—he stood like a giant among the flock of small women—and his expression was equally bemused. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

She smiled, gathering strength from his kind, caring presence, and clapped her hands together. "Ladies, please listen. You may be free, but you're not out of danger. Someone may try to find you and take you back. To keep that from happening, you have been brought here. We'll do our best to shelter and feed you, but in order to help pay for all your needs, we ask you to work here as seamstresses. You are not prisoners. If any of you wish to leave, it is your choice, but you must not reveal the location of this house for the sake of those who want to live in peace and safety."

Huiann glanced around at their faces and could see some understood her words and were quietly translating to those who didn't. Then a face caught her attention and she froze. She'd never seen Madam Teng without her hair severely twisted in a bun, and it had taken her a moment to recognize the woman with her gray-streaked hair straggling around her face. She appeared a thousand years older than the last time Huiann had seen her. Teng's gaze met hers and she pressed her hands together and bowed low over them.

“On behalf of all here, I thank you for your extreme kindness and generosity. Bless you and thank you.” Madam Teng remained bowed low.

“You are welcome. All your past is forgiven and forgotten here. Every woman has a chance to begin again.” Huiann urged them toward the door. “Inside now. Welcome to your new home.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Huiann stood on the beach watching a lone gull circling in the slate-gray sky. Its raucous screech hung in the air, competing with the steady rush of the surf against the shore. How peaceful it was to be away from the constant chatter of too many women living together. She and Alan had their own bedroom and a sitting room, but even there the hum of female voices was never far away.

But today was for them alone. She looked down at her left hand and the band of gold Alan had placed there earlier today. Her wedding had been nothing like she and her sisters had imagined as girls. There was no procession with a band and all their friends and neighbors marching behind. No carriage ride to a temple, no Buddhist priest or scarlet gown and veil. And her groom certainly looked nothing like the man she'd pictured as she'd once stood on the deck of a ship steaming toward America.

Alan came up beside her and took her hand. She tipped her head back to look into his face. A thread of excitement stitched from the pit of her belly down to her sex. He looked so handsome in his suit, the breadth of his shoulders filling the jacket and making her long to see his beautiful body naked.

"Are you happy?" He slipped his hands around the waist of her lawn dress—periwinkle blue sprigged with tiny white flowers, perfect for an unusual kind of

wedding. He cocked his head, peering into her face in that particular way he had, as if reading her like a book.

"Very happy." She gestured at the sky and sea and sand. "It is a beautiful day."

"I know the wedding was nothing like what you would've had back home. A civil ceremony isn't very romantic."

She rested her palm against his chest, feeling his heartbeat through his vest and shirt, both of which she intended to take off soon.

"You—" She was still frustrated at the way English sometimes eluded her and she had to settle for the few words she knew to describe a much more complex idea. "No need to worry. I am... *Content* is a word?"

His smile broke like a wave on the sand. "Yes. Content is the perfect word." Alan kissed her. She molded to his body like crepe, sliding her hands up his chest and around the back of his neck, feeling his starched collar and the soft curl of his hair.

At last he pulled away. "Maybe we should go to our room."

"Soon," she promised. "But walk on beach first." Alan had rented them a small room in a beachfront boarding house for a couple of nights. Huiann appreciated a reprieve from their busy household. But right now she didn't want to be indoors. The lonely stretch of sand before them beckoned her.

"A walk it is, then." He took off his jacket and tossed it across a driftwood log away from the tide line. Picking up a stone, he shied it at the water. He was so handsome with his hair nearly golden in the sunlight and his shirtsleeves a crisp white against his dark vest.

The breeze loosened locks of her hair from the bun at her nape. She took out the pins and combed it out with her fingers. She wanted to feel the sand and water on her feet so she sat on the driftwood to take off her shoes. Alan knelt before her to help her work the buttons free.

A flock of gulls swooped down to fight over a dead fish a little way down the beach. They screeched and flapped their wings, attacking each other with sharp beaks.

Huiann laughed and pointed. "Jiau and Chan." She named two of the women who fought constantly. Ironically both of their names meant something similar—charming, graceful girl—yet they argued and pecked like these angry gulls.

Alan slipped off her stocking and rubbed her foot, thumbs digging delightfully into her arch. "I don't know how you put up with all those women every day."

"You do not like to live with so many women."

Although some of the refugees had left to find different work, fifteen remained. The factory was producing well, but the living space was crowded. Poor Alan must miss his old life sometimes.

He shook his head. "I'd like more privacy, but it's all right. We'll build a separate home on the property when we can. Your business is growing and a little inconvenience is a small price to pay."

He brought her foot to his mouth and kissed the top of it before setting it on the ground. The sand burned hot beneath her heel, but the imprint of his lips burned even hotter. A pleasurable heat built in her belly, and

she guessed that they would not wait to return to their room before coming together.

Alan removed his shoes then pulled her to her feet. They held hands and ran along the water's edge, dodging in and out of the surf. Huiann laughed and held her skirt high, but the hem was soon drenched and dragging, as were Alan's trouser legs. Her heart felt as buoyant as the swooping gulls. She stopped to gaze at the endless gray and blue waves. "So much water. So far to cross."

"You miss home." Alan rubbed her back, his palm spreading more heat through her.

She smiled. "No. I do not think about going home. I *am* home."

He leaned to kiss her. One long, slow kiss led to another more rushed and hungry and his erection grew hard between them. As fire glowed within her, cold water lapped around her ankles.

Alan took her hand and led her toward tall rocks that lay tumbled in a haphazard pile. In the shelter of the rocks, they embraced again, hands grasping, unfastening and reaching for uncovered bare skin.

With her drawers around her knees and her skirt hitched high, Huiann pressed against the flat surface of one of the boulders. Alan lifted her up, fumbled his cock free from his breeches and brought it to her entrance. They came together with breathless urgency under the sun and sky.

Huiann moaned and clutched the back of his vest as he plunged into her. The unyielding rock behind her pressed her firmly against him and her legs around his waist locked him to her. He nuzzled her neck, grunting with every thrust, which spurred her frenzied heartbeat.

She arched her hips to meet his thrusts, gripped handfuls of his hair, pulling his head close so she could whisper to him how good he felt inside her.

The constant roar of the surf combined with her rising need until the two were one. Incoming waves swept through her, each higher than the last, until finally a huge breaker crashed over her and swept her out to sea. Her head fell back against the rock and she cried out, as wild as a gull's call.

Alan pounded into her with rising intensity. She clenched around his straining cock, urging him to fly with her. He gave a strangled groan as he released.

She clamped her knees even tighter around him, holding him to her. "As the sunlight heats the earth and gives it life, so precious you are to me," she said in Wu.

Alan lifted his head and looked into her face with eyes like sunlight on the waves. She felt she could see into his very soul and wondered if he saw the same thing in her eyes. Could he see her love and her spirit reaching out to him?

He smiled and brushed her wind-whipped hair away from her face. "My wife."

"My husband," she replied, trying out the new word.

Alan let her down to her feet and tucked his cock into his fly. He adjusted his clothes while she smoothed her rumpled dress—a fine way to treat a brand-new frock, wading in the salty ocean then snagging it on a rough rock.

She leaned into him, feeling the heat of his body pressing against hers. "On the ship I thought about what my life here would be. I never dream of you. But

here you wait, perfect for me. I think Grandmother Mei watch over me and bring me to you.”

“I think she did too.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I think we’ve earned our happiness and now we’re being blessed.”

“Blessed.” She liked the sound of it. *Good fortune smiles on us now.*

She looked at the sky, as wide and endless as the possibilities of life, and her hope rose with the seagull gliding far above.

Author's Note

Although card and tile games similar to mah-jongg have been played in China for centuries, the game we are familiar with wasn't known by that name until the twentieth century.

In 1867 the Pacific Mail Steamship Company began regularly scheduled runs between Hong Kong and San Francisco. Between 1870 and 1883 an average of 12,000 Chinese were arriving in San Francisco each year.

In 1870 California passed a law against the importation of Chinese, Japanese and Mongolian women for the purpose of prostitution.

The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed by Congress in 1882, was the only U.S. law ever to prevent immigration and naturalization on the basis of race.

About the Author

Bonnie Dee began telling stories as a child. Whenever there was a sleepover, she was the designated ghost tale teller, guaranteed to frighten and thrill with macabre tales. She still has a story printed on yellow legal paper in second grade about a ghost, a witch and a talking cat.

Writing childish stories for her own pleasure led to majoring in English at college. Like most English majors, she dreamed of writing a novel but didn't have the necessary focus and follow-through at that time in her life. A husband, children and work occupied the next twenty years, and it was only in 2000 that she began writing again. Bonnie enjoys reading stories about people damaged by life who find healing with a like-minded soul. When she couldn't find enough books to suit her taste, she began to write them.

You can see her backlist at <http://bonniedee.com> or join her Yahoo group for updates on new releases at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bonniedee/>.



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