



Elizabeth Lane

China Quest

Elizabeth Lane

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To Scott, Tanya, and Teresa

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Foreword

This writer's imagination could never have created a Hung Hsiuchuan, a Frederick Townsend Ward, or a Charles G. Gordon. Such men tower above the realm of invention. They lived and shaped history in the China of the early 1860's, as did the *Chung Wang* and the flamboyant Augustus Lindley. Ward's aides, Burgevine, Forrester, and Macanaya, really existed, as did Ward's lovely little Chang Mei and his venerable father-in-law, Taki.

Fact and fiction mix freely in this story. Characters who actually lived mingle with those whose births took place only in my own mind. The entire Bellamy family is imaginary, as well as Daniel Cheng, Jason Frobisher, Harry Bolton, and many others. But their presence has helped to make this turbulent and complex chapter in China's past real to me, as I hope it will for my readers.

Elizabeth Lane

One

Hong Kong
February 11, 1861

The wedding of Serena Rose Bellamy to Mister Harry Bolton of Shanghai promised to be the most talked-about event of the Victoria social season. This in itself was not surprising. Morgan Bellamy was one of the wealthiest *taipans* on the China Coast, and it was only to be expected that he would marry his daughter off in high style. But it was not just the anticipated spectacle that kept tongues wagging over afternoon tea in Hong Kong's poshest residences, over brandies at the exclusive English Club on Queen's Road, or on the cricket fields, the bridle paths, and military parade grounds.

Wagers had been laid among Hong Kong's young bloods as to which of them would be lucky enough to wed and bed Serena. When she had chosen Harry Bolton, all bets had been canceled, and a dazed pall had settled over the ranks of merchants' sons, young diplomats, and military officers who'd hoped to win her. Blinded by their own dreams, they'd had no inkling that Serena would single out a stranger — cultured, soft-spoken Harry Bolton who, at fifty-five, was eleven years older than her own father.

The ceremony was scheduled for the afternoon of Friday, February 17, 1861, in the parlor of the Bellamy mansion on Caine Road, with a reception and ball to follow. Serena, it was said, had insisted on prolonging her engagement so that the wedding could take place during Race Week, when Hong Kong was at its gayest, with European visitors pouring in from all the treaty ports along the China Coast.

Stephen Bellamy, Serena's twin brother, knew better. It was for his return that she had waited. Serena would never have married and

gone away to Shanghai without first having seen him safely home from his studies in England.

As he strode up the stairs, his nose still tingling with the well-remembered richness of the Hong Kong air, Stephen wondered whether she had changed. Somehow he found it difficult to reconcile the memory of lively, laughing Serena with the image of a woman who would marry an old man like Harry Bolton.

Stephen's long legs covered the length of the upstairs hallway in a few strides. The house, at least, was the same — the cream walls lined with paintings, the burgundy-toned carpet running up the curved staircase and along the floor of the hall, the full-length mirror from Boston, an eagle carved at its crest, that had been his mother's. He smiled, remembering the times he and Serena had pranced and posed before the mirror in old capes and plumed hats. Stephen seldom bothered with mirrors anymore, except to shave. They made him feel shy, oddly startled by the thin-faced, blue-eyed image that looked back at him, discomfited by the shock of light brown hair that tumbled down over his forehead. He turned from the mirror without looking into it and rapped softly on the door of Serena's room.

"Who is it?" Her voice was as he remembered it, whispery and almost as deep as his own. He did not answer, only rapped again, a bit louder.

"Well, then, come in if you must!" she said, a trace of petulance in her tone. Slowly, he turned the knob and opened the door.

The room was pink and white, intensely feminine, with a ruffled canopy over the bed and lace curtains at the windows. Serena was standing in the center of the pink and green Persian rug, wearing her white silk wedding gown. Two Chinese seamstresses and her *amah* — the fat one, he remembered — knelt in a circle around her, fussing with the dress. The sun, shining through the tall french windows, gleamed like living gold on her loose-hanging blond hair. The elfin brows above her dark eyes shot upward like wings when she saw him.

"Stephen!" In the next instant, she was upon him, enfolding him in a fragrant cloud of silk and tulle and flying golden hair, knocking him off-balance as she flung her arms around his neck and covered his face with wet little puppy kisses. Behind her, the two seamstresses sat back on their heels and glowered at him, their mouths full of pins. The *amah* twisted her plump hands nervously, fearful for the gown's basted seams.

"Stephen!" Serena pushed him back and held him at arm's length, her cheeks glowing, her smiling lips showing small, perfect teeth. "Let me look at you! Four years! *Four years!* I can't believe it! Lord, but you're tall! And skinny!"

"And you're prettier than ever! My little sister!"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Your *big* sister, you lout! I was born first — remember?"

"Remember?" He laughed. "You never let me forget it, runt! First by ten minutes, and for that you've lorded it over me all our lives!"

"We didn't expect you till next week, you know." She linked her arm through his. Her blond head came only to his shoulder. "Have you seen Papa?"

Stephen frowned. He had missed his father, but for reasons of his own he was not looking forward to their reunion. "We found space on the mail steamer," he said. "It left a week sooner than the ship we'd planned on."

"And where's your Madeline? I'm dying to meet her! Imagine, you getting married so far away, and not a one of us there!"

"Well, Grandmamma was there at least." He cleared his throat. "Madeline's aboard the steamer with our things. Since there was no one to meet us, I walked up here to get the buggy and a couple of the boys to fetch everything. She'd have come, too, but she hasn't been well."

"Oh?"

"Rough passage, you know . . . and she's, uh, with child." Stephen glanced down at his shoes.

"So soon? Stephen! You devil!" She laughed when the blood rose in his cheeks. "Oh, I just want to talk to you! For hours! Let me get rid of these old hens . . ." She clapped her hands to dismiss the three Chinese women.

The two seamstresses glanced nervously at Serena's gown. "Missee," the *amah* spoke up timidly, pointing to the dress.

"Oh, drat!" Serena pouted. "Yes, I suppose I'd best take it off before they go. Turn around, please, brother dear . . ."

Stephen turned his back while the women divested Serena of her unfinished wedding gown, carefully unpinning the waist. "It's pretty, don't you think?" she said to his back. "Harry gave me the silk . . ."

"And when do I get to meet your Harry?"

"Next week, love. He'll be down from Shanghai the day before the wedding. You'll like him. Everyone does." Stephen heard the rustle of silk and crinoline; seconds later, the three Chinese women minced past him and out of the room, bearing the white clouds of Serena's gown and petticoats in their outstretched arms.

Stephen kept his back turned. "And what about Evan Ames?" he said. "You wrote me about him, I remember . . . the newspaperman's son, wasn't it? I half-expected to see you marrying him."

"That was over a long time ago," she answered, "before I ever met Harry. Evan — when I got to know him — he was . . . well, strange. Jealous. He'd fly into a fit if I so much as looked at anyone else. I knew it wouldn't work for us, and I told him so. That was the end of it." She paused, and Stephen heard the sound of a silk sash being tied into a bow. "There," she purred, taking his arm again. He saw that she was dressed in a pink wrapper that matched her cheeks.

"Serena," he said, something aching inside him when he looked at her. "Why Harry Bolton? You look so happy . . . but I can't believe you're in love with him. He's almost old enough to be your grandfather!"

Her face was thoughtful as she led him toward the french windows. "Harry is everything I want," she said softly. "He's kind and gentle . . . well educated . . . distinguished . . ."

"And the richest man in Shanghai! Don't tell me you haven't thought of it!"

"Of course I have, and I know what people are saying. But that's not the reason — " She tossed her head, snapping her hair like a whip. "Oh, damn them all! Let them say what they want! I don't care!" Suddenly, she laughed, flinging wide the french windows that opened onto the narrow verandah. "Oh, Stephen, I'm so glad you're here — you just don't know — " She tugged him toward the open doors. "Come out!" she commanded. "Look at it! Breathe it! You're home!"

He followed her out to the stone balustrade and stood looking down, his arm looped about her shoulder. The city of Victoria spread below them, a ruffle along the steep-rising gray-green skirt of Hong Kong Island. The place had grown in the four years of his absence, for Victoria was a young city, no older than the pair who gazed down at it from the verandah.

Stephen inhaled, filling his senses with the glorious potpourri of fragrances that he had carried in his memory for four years — the drifting aromas of ginger and cloves, of white Canton cabbage pickling in salt brine; of fennel oil and fish and Indian curry . . . of smoke and seawater . . . “Aye, Serena,” he whispered, “I’m home.”

“Has it changed much?” She squeezed his arm.

“Changed?” He laughed. “Why, I’d hardly know the place! New buildings everywhere I look! What’s that one down past Government House, north of the Parade Ground?”

“That’s the new ice house. Just think, ice all summer! We’re having mango ice cream at the reception — wait till you taste it! And over there is Dent’s new godown, just down from the Club . . . ”

“It’s amazing!” Stephen’s eyes picked out the public garden surrounding Government House, the gaol, and the military barracks. To the east, rounding the curve of the harbor, lay Morrison’s Hill, and below that the tract of flat land where Jardine Matheson, the biggest trading company on the China Coast, had its godowns. Around to the north of the hill would be Wong Nei Chong — Happy Valley, where the racetrack kept incongruous company with the English cemetery.

He looked to his left, out to where Taiping Shan, Victoria’s Chinese section, sprawled to the west like some teeming fungus, fecund, bulging, swelling, as refugees poured in from rebellion-torn China; “By heaven,” he whispered, “is there any end to it?”

Serena shook her head. “They just keep coming,” she said. “By the thousands . . . month after month. We can’t keep them out. We can’t send them back . . . ”

Stephen sighed. The massive Taiping movement was nothing new to him. It had sprouted when a young Hakka schoolmaster named Hung Hsiu-chuan had awakened from a forty-day delirium claiming to be the brother of Christ and the God-appointed savior of China. Through the late 1840’s and 1850’s the movement had grown, until Hung’s fanatical followers spread throughout the southeastern part of the empire and controlled the area from Kwangsi Province to the Yangtze River. Now, these “God-worshipers,” with their own strange version of Christianity, threatened to overcome the Celestial Throne itself.

The refugees had come to Hong Kong first in a trickle, then in a flood, fleeing both the Taipings and the ravages of the imperial troops who followed them. Stephen remembered them from his boyhood, their clustered huts where hollow-eyed children crouched in ramshackle doorways and thin, weary women hung out laundry on bamboo poles, where human waste ran down the streets and rats scurried through the shadows. And now there were so many more of them . . .

"You can't go out at night anymore," Serena was saying. "There've been pirate attacks almost right in the harbor, and it's getting worse. Maybe you should have stayed in England."

Stephen shook his head. "I don't belong in England," he said softly. His eyes swept out to the harbor — the finest harbor in the world, he'd heard it said — where scores of ships dotted the green water. There were towering clippers and old East Indiamen, still in service after two, three, even four decades; newer paddle-wheel steamers, and the creaky, aging opium hulks that had long functioned as floating warehouses for the *taipans*, the trader barons of the China Coast. Junks winged their way about the harbor, their thick, ribbed sails patched and ancient looking. Tiny sampans and slipper boats, propelled by single oars in their sterns, sculled about like water beetles, dodging the more imposing craft.

The mail steamer that had carried Stephen and his bride from England lay at anchor off Pedder's Wharf. Madeline would be waiting for him, he reminded himself. He'd best be getting back to her . . .

But the view of Hong Kong held him like a spell. He closed his eyes and heard the departing whistle of a steamer far out in the harbor. A vendor of squid, his wares swimming live in two pails balanced on the ends of a bamboo shoulder pole, called to customers in a Chinese falsetto. Somewhere a child was crying . . .

Serena stirred beside him. "Tell me about England," she said. "And what's Grandmamma like? I'd give anything to know her."

"Oh, a bit like you, perhaps . . ." Stephen smiled as he watched an old peasant woman laboring up the street below them. Serena's curiosity about her grandmother was natural. It had been more than twenty years since Rose Bellamy had left her missionary husband in Macao and gone back to England. She had since married again, happily. "She's still beautiful," he said. "And busy. Her husband's up for Parliament this year. Once, when we were alone, she asked me about

Grandfather." He shrugged. "What could I tell her about a man I'd never seen? Only that he was alive . . . " Stephen's throat tightened with anticipation as he wondered how he could best break the news that was bursting inside him. It would have to be done soon. He would need her on his side when the time came to face their father.

Affection warmed in Stephen's eyes as he gazed down at this small sister who had been his special companion from the moment of their conception. Strange, he'd always thought, how the two of them could be twins and yet be such opposites in appearance and temperament. He had always been known as the serious one — quiet, reserved, scholarly . . . a model son. It was dainty little Serena who had once dipped the queue of the number-one boy into a pot of honey as he dozed; Serena who had tossed a string of firecrackers off the verandah just as the governor's carriage was passing below; Serena who burst into a fit of tears every time Stephen beat her at chess. The two of them had always been close, and had grown even closer in the thirteen years that had passed since their mother died giving birth to their younger sister, Moira.

"How's Moira?" he asked, putting off the moment of truth a little longer.

"You'd hardly know her. She's getting to be quite a young lady, bosoms and all. But she's shy, as you'd expect. Spends most of her time painting. Actually, she's quite good. Papa's even had some of her things framed and hung."

"No improvement in her foot, I suppose."

Serena shook her head. "The doctors say it's hopeless. She'll always be like that . . . clubfooted. Even the word's ugly."

"And Papa?"

"The same as ever. Spends most of his time at the Club. He's probably there now. He'll be glad to have you back. The way the company's grown, it's about time we had a lawyer!"

Stephen felt a sudden dampness on his palms and the back of his neck. It was now or never, he told himself. He took a deep breath.

"Serena," he said in a tight voice. "I'm not a lawyer."

"What?" She spun lightly away from him and stood with her head cocked, blinking like a bright little bird. "But your letters — It was what Papa always wanted, and he was so pleased — "

"My letters were lies!" Stephen turned away from the view of the harbor to face her. "It was the only way. If Papa had known the truth,

he wouldn't have sent me another shilling; but now it's too late. It's done and he can't change it."

"Stephen!" She managed a bemused chuckle. "What in heaven's name are you talking about?"

He took her arm again and ushered her back into the bedroom. "I tried," he said. "I knew Papa wanted it, and I really tried. But by the end of the first term, I knew it was no good. I knew what *I* wanted, and it wasn't law —"

She pressed the side of her face against his sleeve in sympathy. The gesture gave him courage. His next words came in a rush.

"I transferred from law school to a theological seminary," he said. "Serena, dearest, I'm an ordained minister."

She let go of his arm and sank down onto the bed. "Oh!" she said, her brown eyes growing huge. "Oh, my God!" She stared at him for a very long moment. Then, suddenly, inexplicably, she began to giggle, then to laugh, until her face turned a deep rose pink and the tears rolled down her cheeks. Finally, she caught her breath. "Oh, Stephen! Oh, how delicious! Papa is just going to have a stroke!"

"It's not funny, Serena." Bewildered and a little hurt, he turned and walked back out onto the verandah. She got up and followed him.

"I'm sorry, Stephen. It's just that I've heard so many stories about Grandfather and how he disowned Papa when Papa wouldn't stop selling opium! And then to think that you — What will you do?"

"That's the exciting part! The London Missionary Society's put me in touch with Grandfather. They say he's getting old and needs an assistant . . . He's on his way to Hankow. I'm going there to work with him!"

Serena's lips parted in surprise. "Hankow! But it's so far away! And they just opened it with the new treaty. Why, there'll hardly be anyone there except Chinese —"

"That's how I want it, Serena. You'll probably think I'm daft, but it's what I've always wanted . . . It's just that I never told anyone. Not even you."

She came to him then and put a hand on his arm. "I wish you had told me," she said softly. "I don't think you're daft. I think it's wonderful. As long as it's really what you want to do —"

"Then you'll help me tell Papa?"

"I'll do what I can — " Her gaze drifted out over the city and the bustling harbor. Suddenly, he heard her gasp. Her fingers tightened on his sleeve. "Look!" she whispered.

He followed her pointing finger with his eyes to where a plume of black smoke rose above a cluster of godowns near the water's edge — smoke that had not been there a few minutes earlier.

"I think it's coming from one of ours!" exclaimed Serena, her voice tense.

"Couldn't be!" Stephen shaded his eyes with his hand. "Not down there — "

"Yes! Papa had that godown built after you left." She leaned over the rail. "I'm sure — "

Their ears were shattered by the shrill clanging of the fire bell. At the sound, some long-buried instinct surged up in Stephen's mind. He suddenly found himself ripping off his coat and flinging it to the floor. "Got to help . . . !" he muttered as he sprinted out the door and down the hall toward the stairs.

Heedless of the dangerous slope, Stephen pounded down the hill, his long legs flying as the fire bell screamed its warning in his head. It was reflex more than reason that drove him. In the last few years he'd spent in Hong Kong, with hostilities fermenting between the Chinese and the English, he had rushed to a number of such fires. It made little difference to him whether it was one of the new Bellamy godowns that was burning or something else. Every able-bodied man might be needed if the flames began to spread.

The crowds of Chinese that filled the noisy streets parted for him as he skirted Saint Paul's College and raced past the new ice house. Glancing westward down Queen's Road, he could see well-dressed Englishmen pouring out of the Club, and he wondered if his father would be among them. He could smell the smoke now, and taste it, dark and bitter in his throat. He coughed, but he did not stop.

Another half-block and he could see the burning godown, a huge but simple structure of brick with a double-peaked tile roof. Emblazoned in two-foot red letters along one side was the familiar BELLAMY & COMPANY, with its traditional symbol, a red eagle on a field of blue.

There was little on the outside of the godown that could burn, but the fire was inside; and the vast building's inner floor structure and

roof supports were of bamboo and wood. As to the contents — Stephen came to a halt at last, his throat raw and his ribs bursting — opium, most likely, he guessed. Opium from the fields and factories of India, brought to auction at Calcutta and shipped from there to Hong Kong. Opium, packed in one-hundred-fifty-pound mango-wood chests that were wrapped in gunny and sealed with pitch. Opium — the foundation of the Bellamy fortune. For a moment, Stephen almost hoped it would burn. All of it.

The new steam-powered pumping engine, drawn by a pair of fat Mongolian ponies, came clanging up Queen's Road from the east and swung around the corner just as the fleetest of the men from the Club arrived on the scene. Morgan Bellamy was not with them.

The harbor itself was the nearest source of water. The hundred or so men who'd gathered formed a living chain as the firemen passed out the buckets that would be used to refill the cistern on the big iron engine. Not all of the men in the long line were English. Hong Kong's Chinese were also fearful for their homes and livelihoods. Those who had been nearby pitched in feverishly. Stephen, his eyes still searching for his father, took his place between a perspiring Chinese shopkeeper and a tall, broad-shouldered stranger who had the look of an American about him. Then he threw his concentration into passing along the heavy, sloshing buckets.

Smoke was pouring from the open doors of the windowless godown, smoke so black that it nearly obscured the pumping engine where it sat at the main entrance like a squat, iron dragon, belching flame out of the top of its boiler. It was the pitch that made the smoke so black, Stephen told himself. The pitch that sealed the opium chests, beginning to blaze. And if the fire consumed the wooden chests — he gasped at the thought of the burning opium, the smoke drifting over the harbor and the island. Most likely it would be too diffused to cause any ill effects, he reassured himself as he looked around one more time for his father. Morgan Bellamy was nowhere to be seen.

Stephen's shoes had grown soggy. His soft, uncalled palms had developed blisters. He passed the tin buckets along one after another, taking them from the Chinese shopkeeper and passing them on to the sun-browned hands of the tall American. When he could, he glanced

up and down the line. Surely his father was here someplace, hidden from view by the crowd . . . How could he not be here?

Two more pumpers, older, hand-driven models this time, came clanging up to the building, drawn by teams of Indian firemen. The men with the buckets stepped up their speed in an effort to keep all three cisterns filled. The Indians manned the long bars of the hand pumps, fifteen men to a side, stretching and bending in unison until their brown torsos were grimy with sweat and smoke. Streams of white water hissed into the blackness of the warehouse. Stephen fought down a growing apprehension. If his father was not somewhere outside the burning godown, then there was a good chance he might be . . . inside.

Stephen's heart crept into his throat as he passed along the buckets. He fought back visions of his father's body, sprawled somewhere in that blazing, blackened horror, face down on the floor, perhaps. Dead, certainly. No one could survive in that inferno.

He thought briefly of Madeline, still waiting for him on the steamer. She'd probably be frantic by now. She was frail and high strung in any case, and now, with the baby and the strain of the long voyage . . . For a moment, he was tempted to drop out of the line and run back down to Pedder's Wharf to let her know that he was all right. But the buckets kept coming and he passed them to the American, his broken blisters smarting from the sting of the salt water.

Gradually, Stephen became aware that the smoke was lessening. The swish of the waterstreams could be heard more clearly. "By gum, oy think we got 'er licked!" he heard one of the English firemen exclaim.

Murmuring an apology that no one heard, Stephen slipped out of his place in the line. He could stand it no longer. He had to find his father.

First he ran down to the end of the line where the buckets were coming up off the wharf. Slowly, he walked back, looking at each man's face in the line. Some of them he knew, but none of them was Morgan Bellamy. He saw one of the Turner boys who'd come out of the Club when the fire bell sounded. No, the answer to his question came back. Morgan Bellamy hadn't been in the Club. Not all that afternoon. Stephen circled the crowd that ringed the front side of the godown. Chinese mostly, and a few Sikhs. No sign of his father. His

dread growing, Stephen slipped back into the line. At least that would keep him occupied until the fire was out.

The tall American glanced at him. "Are you all right, friend?" he asked, eyeing Stephen's pale face.

"Yes . . . I think so." Stephen took the next bucket from the Chinaman and passed it on. His hands felt weak, but he clenched his teeth and kept on with it. There was nothing he could do.

Another backbreaking half-hour passed before the signal ran down the line to stop the buckets; the men stretched and wiped their dripping foreheads. Some cursed. Some turned their backs and urinated on the wet cobblestones. The American flexed his lean, muscular arms and took a cheroot out of his vest. "Could you use this?" He held the cheroot out to Stephen.

"Thank you kindly — " Stephen shook his head, "but I have to find someone . . . "

He circled the crowd once more. When he did not see his father, he strode at last to the charred doorway of the godown. A burly fireman dressed in black oilskins stopped him. "Ye can't go in there, mon! Too bloody dangerous yet!"

"Look, my name's Stephen Bellamy and this is *our* godown . . . " He pressed against the man's resisting arm. "And I think my father's in there! I'll take the responsibility — " With a sudden lunge, he shoved the man aside and charged into the smoky darkness of the warehouse.

"Well, if yer father be in *there*, you young fool, 'e'll bloody well keep till the place cools down a bit!" The man's voice boomed after him, echoing hollowly in the vast interior. Stephen paused and peered through the thinning smoke. It was hot in the godown, and steamy as a Turkish bath. He coughed and rubbed his eyes.

The upper floor had burned through and collapsed, sending what must have been two or three thousand opium chests crashing down onto the bricks of the main floor. The charred chests lay in huge, jumbled piles. Stephen smelled no opium and could not see any sign that they'd been burnt through to their noxious contents. "Papa!" he called vainly as he wandered about through the smoking rubble. At the sound of his voice, the end of a jutting support beam quivered and crumbled. The man was right. It wasn't safe in here.

Stephen wiped his eyes and gazed frantically around in the dimness. If his father was really gone, he realized, this place would be his.

This, and the other godowns . . . the ships . . . the offices . . . the mansion on Caine Road . . . His head had begun to swim. He didn't want any of it! He never had! He'd sell it all, by thunder, and give half the money to his sisters and the other half to the Church!

Then he caught sight of a blackened form huddled along one wall — a form that suggested the size and contours of a man's body.

"Papa?" He walked closer, his throat constricting painfully. The body appeared to be burned beyond recognition. The hair was gone, the face nothing but a mass of charred flesh. Little remained of the clothing except a few burnt shreds.

The fireman had been watching him uneasily from the doorway. "'ere, lad," he called softly. "Wait. We'll get a stretcher." He hurried away and was back a moment later with two of the Indians, who scooped the body expertly onto the taut canvas, picked it up, and trudged out into the late afternoon sunlight. Stephen followed, swallowing hard to keep down the lump in his throat and wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

As he emerged, blinking, from the building, two smartly dressed coolies came trotting around the corner bearing a closed sedan chair between them. They had evidently been running a long way, for their tunics clung wetly to their heaving shoulders. A few yards from the building, just clear of the engines and hoses, they stopped and swiftly lowered the chair to the ground. Dazed and weary, Stephen watched as the curtains parted, only half-seeing it, half-wondering who was inside, and hoping it wasn't one of his sisters. A hand emerged, then a man's shoe and trouser leg.

Stephen's jaw dropped dumbly open as Morgan Bellamy, immaculate in a suit of pale buff, his gray-blond hair flawlessly combed, his mustache waxed and curled, stepped out of the sedan chair.

In a gesture of helpless rage, the *taipan* of Bellamy and Company flung his half-smoked cheroot to the ground. "How in hell's name —" he sputtered. Then he saw his son.

"Stephen!" He took an unbelieving step forward, then held out both his arms. Begrimed and exhausted, Stephen stumbled into them.

"Stephen! God's blood, boy, what are you doing here? Let me see you. By hell, you're near' as tall as your grandad! What's the matter? You're shaking like a jellyfish!"

"Oh, Papa . . . I — I've gotten soot all over your clothes . . ."

"The devil with my clothes! I've got thirty suits at home! What the hell's happened here?"

"I — I don't know. It had already started when I got here. Oh, Papa . . . for a little while, I thought — Where have you been?"

"Just came from Taiping Shan. On . . . business." Morgan Bellamy's finely chiseled nose lifted as he spotted the burned corpse on the stretcher. "And who the devil's that? The watchman?" He moved a few steps closer, staring down at the burned remains. "Aye, the poor bloke. Wonder if he had a family?"

"I don't know," Stephen said shakily. "Until you stepped out of that chair, we thought it was you."

Morgan Bellamy put an arm around his son's shoulder. Stephen realized with amazement that the top of his father's head came only to the bridge of his nose. "Come on home, son. We'll see to this mess tomorrow. What the hell! It's insured! Aye, boy, but your legal expertise is going to come in right handy . . ."

Stephen walked beside him, shortening his long stride to keep pace. I should tell him right now . . . he thought. But when he tried to speak, his throat was so dry that no words would come.

Two

Hong Kong
February 17, 1861

Serena adjusted the tiny circle of gold, set with pearls, that had found its home on her finger just two hours ago. She had left the choice of a design for the ring to Harry, trusting his good taste, and he had not disappointed her. It was beautiful. Elegant but not ostentatious, like Harry Bolton himself. She had thought long and hard before making up her mind that she wanted to marry him. So far, she was not sorry.

She stood alone for a moment, beside a big potted fern in one corner of the Bellamy ballroom, and let her dark brown eyes sift through the mob of bejeweled guests who'd come to celebrate her wedding. Most of them, she reflected cynically, would have come to celebrate anything. Hong Kong society already had its leisure class, the idle ones, the bored and the stagnant, whose fathers and grandfathers had made their fortunes in the opium trade along the China Coast. Serena was tired of Hong Kong. She tingled with pleasure at the thought that within a fortnight she would be in Shanghai, meeting new people, seeing new sights. Even the element of danger sent a thrill up her back. Shanghai was almost surrounded on the landward side by Taiping territory. The rebels wanted a port. Only that past summer, they'd launched an attack on the city and been driven back. Harry, of course, had assured her father that she would be safe. Shanghai was well protected, and in case of an attack Serena would be on one of the first ships to leave the river. Still, she nursed the delicious hope that she might get to see some action.

Her eyes found Harry where he stood before the marble fireplace with one hand on the mantel, deep in conversation with Hercules

Robinson, the colony's new governor. Almost as if he'd felt his bride's gaze. Harry raised one eyebrow and smiled at her. He was of medium height, like her father, slim and graceful, with a dazzling thatch of silver-white hair that was flawlessly trimmed and brushed forward into neat little muttonchops on his tanned cheeks.

Serena blew him a discreet kiss before he turned politely back to the governor. That was all right, she told herself. Why, if she'd married one of the young Dents or Jardines who'd paid court to her in the past, the half-baked fool would probably be following her about, drooling down her neck the whole time. Harry was too refined for such displays. But he cared for her. She knew that well enough.

Chinese serving boys in matching black and gold livery scuttled like crickets among the guests, bearing lacquered trays of champagne glasses and seasoned nuts. The mango ice cream was delicious, and Serena had even been able to engage a touring string quartet with a repertoire of all the newest waltzes, polkas, and quadrilles — a great stroke of luck. Hong Kong had never known such dancing! The Bellamy ballroom swam with color, with the swirl and swish of stiffened crinolines beneath billowing skirts — here a lavender voile, there a deep pink tarlatan and a splendid mint-green brocaded silk . . .

The tall American stood against one wall, looking bored and restless. Stephen had met him after he'd shown up to help at the fire, and it was only later they'd found out that he was also a good friend of Harry's. Frobisher was his name, the master of a clipper, the *Tarpon*, which had come to Hong Kong with a cargo of ice and was now loading tea chests for San Francisco.

Morgan Bellamy had invited him to the club a few times since the fire, and he'd been up to the house for dinner once. Serena thought him arrogant and cold, for he had made no effort to be charming with her, especially after he'd learned she was going to be Harry's wife. A man's kind of man, she mused as she studied him. Lean, sun-bronzed, silent as the bottom of the sea itself. And Lord help any woman fool enough to set her cap for him!

The devil with Frobisher, she thought as she glided along the edge of the dance floor with a radiant smile on her face. Many eyes were on her, but that was what she wanted. She had fully expected to be stared at, to be desired by the men and envied by the women. A glance into a mirrored panel reassured her that she had never looked lovelier. Her

wedding gown, a copy of one she'd seen in the latest issue of *La Vie Parisienne*, had taken two bolts of the most expensive white silk in all China. The neck, cut in a wide "V", was edged with rows of delicate Biwa seed pearls that came from the river near Canton. The sleeves were short and fully puffed, to emphasize a waist so excruciatingly cinched that Serena could almost span it with her own small hands. The skirt was a marvel — a billowing cloud of flounces, ruffles, and ribbons that floated out over layers of stiffened crinolines and swayed elegantly when she walked or danced.

Her veil, the same airy length of silk that her mother had worn at her own simple wedding, had been caught up in the middle and fastened to Serena's blond head by a single fresh pink rose.

The gown and veil in themselves would have been enough to make almost any bride look pretty — but Serena knew that she was beautiful. From her mother, she had inherited her exquisite smallness and her great, dark eyes; from her paternal grandmother had come her warm apricot skin and the wild cascade of honey-gold hair that made such a startling contrast with her eyes and eyebrows. She had her father's fine, straight nose and, she'd been told, his stubbornness as well.

She brushed past her father now, where he was standing with his back to her, talking to some of his cronies from the Club. "Aye, the place was bloody well gutted, but at least we salvaged the opium. We'll just have to repack it in new chests, that's all. Aye, the body turned out t' be the watchman, all right. Damned pity, it was . . ." His speech was slurred and a trifle too loud. Serena recognized the signs that he'd been drinking. Morgan Bellamy had always had a taste for liquor, especially in the years that had passed since he'd lost his wife. "If y' be askin' me," he declared, "'twas those Taiping blokes did it. "Tisn't enough t' grab our opium cutters up the coast. They've got t' set fire t' our godowns right here in bloody Hong Kong!"

"Here? Really, Morgan, old fellow. They'd never dare. Charge it up to those two Hakka boys you fired last week. I told you not to hire them when you had Puntis working for you. They'll fight every time."

"Taipings. Bet your arse on it, Alf." Morgan Bellamy was growing noticeably louder. Several guests turned their heads to look at him. "Mark my words. You could bloody well be next. Any one o' you!"

Serena slipped her arm through his. "Papa," she said sweetly, "come and walk with me through the house. We'll be parting so soon,

and I want a little time alone with you . . . ” She tugged him away from his clustered friends. He came with a childlike acquiescence, patting her hand as they strolled out of the ballroom.

Poor Papa, she thought as they passed through the arched teakwood doors and out into the foyer of the grand house. He’d been at least a little drunk for the better part of a week, ever since Stephen had broken the shattering news about his entering the ministry.

Morgan Bellamy had taken his son’s announcement with a bitter calm that still disturbed her. If he’d merely been angry . . . if he’d shouted and raged, worked the venom of disappointment out of his system, then Serena would have assured herself that he’d be all right once he settled down. Instead, he had merely stared at Stephen with a look of the deepest melancholy she had ever seen. “The hell of it is,” he’d said in a dull voice, “that I’m not even surprised. I’ve seen it in you for years, Stephen. You’re so like him. So bloody damned like him!” He’d sighed and run a hand through his graying hair. “Aye. ’Tis my punishment for breaking the Fifth Commandment. I dishonored my father, and now he’s come back to haunt me through my own son.” He’d suddenly looked years older, Serena thought, as he muttered, “Well, go to him, then! I won’t try to stop you. Go and be damned!” And he’d turned his back on the trembling Stephen and stalked off without saying another word.

She glanced at her father’s profile as he walked beside her. At forty-four, he was still handsome, although his waist had thickened and there were faint, puffy shadows below his eyes. Harry, she told herself, had aged with more grace — but then. Harry wasn’t a drinker. With a sigh, she wondered what Morgan would have been like if her mother had lived. But then she’d promised herself she wouldn’t think of that. Unlike poor Stephen, Serena knew exactly where her father had been on the afternoon of the fire. She knew why he hadn’t seen the smoke any sooner, and why he’d returned in a closed chair instead of in one of the family carriages.

In Taiping Shan, Victoria’s teeming Chinese sector, Morgan Bellamy kept a mistress, a young woman named Ai Ling. Serena had found out about her a year ago when, suspicious of his absences, she’d had him followed. Then, like a fool, she’d confronted him with what she’d learned.

“’Tis not your place to judge me, Serena,” he’d rebuffed her coldly. “While your mother lived, I loved her well — so well that I’ll never call another woman my wife. But a man has his needs. Now, girl, you’re not to speak of it again!”

Chastened and embarrassed, she’d respected his wishes. But in the months that followed, she’d kept her eyes and ears open and was amazed to discover how many of Victoria’s leading citizens had Chinese women tucked away. Now, sometimes, she looked at Harry Bolton and wondered . . . Harry had been a widower for eight years. Five of those years he’d spent in Shanghai. What, the question badgered her, had he done about *his* needs?

As they reached the foot of the curving staircase, Morgan Bellamy circled his daughter’s waist with his hand. “Serena, darlin’”, he said, “now I know Harry’s got a fine house in Shanghai with everything you’ll be needin’ . . . an’ you’ve got your trousseau and your dowry. But if it would comfort you some in a strange place, I want you t’ know that there’s nothing in this house you’re not welcome t’ take with you. Chairs . . . rugs . . . paintings . . . ”

It was a sweet gesture, Serena thought as she squeezed his hand. “I’ll not be wanting for furnishings,” she said slowly. “But yes. Papa, if I could take a painting or two . . . ” Her eyes swept the length of the wall above the stairway where the best of the paintings in the Bellamy collection were hung. A number of them — the most prized — had been done by Macao’s immortal George Chinnery, who’d died in 1852. At once Serena’s gaze fixed on Chinnery’s small portrait of her mother — Priscilla Robards Bellamy, prim and lovely in white lace, her hair brushed forward to hide the place where the Chinese had cut off her left ear. How Serena longed to take it — but no, that would break her father’s heart. “May I have the one Moira painted of you?” she asked. “She says it’s not one of her best, but I’ve always liked it.”

“With pleasure, love. I’m flattered you’d want to have me! But wouldn’t you like one or two of the Chinnerys as well? Now that harbor scene . . . ”

“Perhaps . . . ” Serena smiled as her eyes traveled upward and stopped. All at once, she knew exactly what she wanted. “Oh, Papa.” She clutched his arm. “If only you’d let me take Aunt Kathleen!” Lifting her skirt, she swept up the stairs until she stood below the

largest and most magnificent painting of all — George Chinnery's portrait of Kathleen Bellamy, her father's sister.

Serena had no memory of the woman she called Aunt Kathleen, although she knew that as a baby she'd been cradled by those strong, slender hands. Kathleen Bellamy had been blind by then — the result of some hideous accident during the Opium War of 1840. Not long afterward, she had disappeared, she and the Cantonese hong merchant who had become her lover. They'd gone into China, Serena's father had always said, but no one knew where. And no one in Hong Kong or Macao had ever seen or heard from her again.

Serena could not remember a time when she had not worshiped the figure in the painting. George Chinnery had painted Kathleen at the age of nineteen, a year before the loss of her sight. His portrait showed her from the waist up, a jade-green scarf drifting about her shoulders, the breeze sweeping a mane of glorious red hair back from a face that was at once strong and delicate, proud, passionate, and saintly — the most beautiful face Serena had ever seen.

"Oh, Papa, could I?" she breathed. "Even for a few months?"

Morgan Bellamy chuckled. "Aye, girl. It's yours! I'll call one of the boys t' have it packed so it'll be ready t' go with you. I always had the idea you fancied it."

"Thank you. Papa." She kissed him on the cheek. He smelted of brandy and cigars, a warm, mannish aroma she'd come to like. "I've got to go back in," she whispered in his ear. "Harry and the others will be missing me." She squeezed his shoulders and kissed him again. He'd be all right now, she told herself.

The small string orchestra had struck up one of the new Viennese waltzes. The music had caught the dancers and stirred them to a rainbow froth of spinning skirts. Swaying lightly, like a white rose on its stem, Serena glanced about the room. Harry was still talking to the governor. Most everyone else was dancing, except for little Moira, who would never dance. The poor girl sat in one corner, the fullness of her peach-colored gown hiding her deformed left foot. At thirteen, she was the image of her pale, dark-haired mother — a cruel resemblance that tormented her father whenever he looked at her. On Moira's lap was a pad of foolscap. She was sketching the dancers with a stick of charcoal, biting the side of her lower lip in a fury of concentration. Her fingers were black from the charcoal and there were

smudges of the stuff on her skirt. One sketch lay crumpled on the polished floor near her feet.

With a huff of sisterly impatience, Serena took a step toward her, then paused. No, she resolved. She would not be unkind. Instead, she let herself drift around the edge of the floor until she stood looking over her sister's shoulder.

"That's nice, Moira," she said in honesty. The sketch was little more than a few lines, but already Moira had captured the essence of the scene before her — the arch of a slim back above a flaring skirt, the tilt of a man's face, the sweep of a daintily held fan. The child had talent.

"No, it's not!" Moira scowled. "See that arm? It's too long! And the hand isn't right! Why can't I do hands the way I want to?"

"Well, *I* like it," Serena said. "And I like your portrait of Papa so much that I asked him if I could take it to Shanghai with me. You don't mind, do you?"

"No. I'll do a better one next time." Moira filled in the shadow on one side of a man's face. "Serena, will you let me come to visit you in Shanghai? I've never been anywhere except Hong Kong and Macao and Canton."

"Of course, mouse! I'll write Papa as soon as I'm settled." As Serena patted her sister's thin shoulder, she glanced down and saw the sturdy little bamboo cane propped against the chair. It was a good thing Moira had this love for drawing and painting, she thought. It would give her something to fill her life if she never married . . .

From where she stood, Serena saw her brother and his wife slip out of the whirling carousel of dancers and make their way to the chairs along the side of the hall. Madeline looked ill, she thought. Her eyes were half-closed, her head drooping against Stephen's shoulder. She was a pretty girl, with ivory skin, dove-gray eyes, and a cloud of baby-fine brown hair, but she was too pale, too thin, too frightened in this alien land. Serena shook her head as she watched Stephen trying to cool his young wife with her own fan. In a few days, he would be taking the poor girl to Hankow — remote Hankow, which lay on the Yangtze, more than five hundred miles upriver from Shanghai. It wasn't fair to either of them, she mused bitterly. Madeline belonged to the gentleness of England. Stephen should have come home and married some Hong Kong girl, one who'd grown up with the sultry climate, the food, the insects, the diseases, and the intricacies of dealing with

Chinese servants and shopkeepers. No, it wasn't fair, Serena's mind protested. But then, love and fairness, she supposed, were elements that came together by chance . . . only if one was very lucky . . .

Serena felt a soft but insistent touch at her elbow. She turned with a smile, thinking for an instant it might be Harry.

"One last dance, Serena? For old times' sake?" The face looking down at her was damp and flushed pink, like a child's, with round blue eyes and a cleft chin. A pleasing face, crowned by wavy blond hair that was just beginning to thin on top.

"Evan — " She nodded and accepted his arm, fearful that he might make a scene if she did not. Evan Ames, the son of one of the men who ran the *Daily Press*, had been the most persistent of her suitors, if not the most favored. His arm came swiftly about her waist, pulling her tight against him as he spun her out into the moving sea of dancers. There was a fierceness in the way his big hand clasped the small of her back, a tautness in his stocky, muscular body, that belied the placid expression on his face. He smelled of bay rum and fresh perspiration. "It was kind of you to come, Evan," she said, freezing her face into a mask of congeniality.

The lines hardened around his full lips until he was no longer smiling. "I didn't come out of kindness," he said in a low, tense voice. His fingers tightened until she could feel the pinch of them through her corset. A little shiver of apprehension ran up her backbone as she looked up into his eyes and saw the storm gathering there. Once, she remembered, when he'd taken her riding up near Wong Nei Chong, she'd waved a greeting to a young army officer. Evan had become so incensed that he'd whacked his horse with the riding crop, hard enough to send the poor beast into a frantic dash that ended at the foot of a shattered fence, the horse dying and Evan's leg broken.

"Be my friend, Evan," she said. "And be happy for me. Why, you could have your pick of any girl in Hong Kong!"

Evan Ames did not answer her. His arm only pulled her closer, so hard against him that she could feel the buttons of his black swallow-tail coat through the silk of her wedding gown. His left hand gripped her fingers so painfully that she began to struggle.

"Evan . . . please . . . that hurts!" she whispered through her teeth.

"Aye, I want to hurt you, Serena Rose Bellamy."

"I've another name now, you know!" The waltz was drawing to its close. Surely he would let her go now.

"Aye. The name of an old man! Perhaps if I'd had money — "

She was angry now, and a little frightened of him. "You're a child, Evan," she said coldly. "Storming and pouting like a little boy whenever you don't get your own way! It's a man I've needed — and Harry's a man!" The music had ended. Evan released her waist, but did not loosen his iron grip on her hand. Serena felt pairs of curious eyes on them. She forced herself to smile. "Let's get some champagne, dearest Evan!" she said, a bit too loudly, pulling him in the direction of the buffet table. He followed her in grim silence, unresisting until they neared the open french doors that led out onto the terrace. Then, abruptly, he whipped her around, seized her waist, and swept her out into the darkness.

He was strong as a young bull, too strong for her to escape. And she did not want to make a scene. Reluctantly, she let him pull her along, wondering who had seen them go out. Oh, Lord, she didn't want a scandal. Not now, with Harry here —

They rounded the corner of an immense potted palm and he jerked her into his arms. His hand grasped her jaw like a vise, hurting as he twisted her face up to his. His breath, warm and wet, filled her nostrils as his lips came crushing down onto her own. She thrashed in his arms, trying to stamp on his feet with her little satin slippers as his hot mouth worked its way down her neck to her bare shoulder.

"Evan, let me go this instant! I'll scream — "

"Do that," he breathed against her skin. "Let them all come out and see that you're mine! I'll never let you go, Serena!"

"You're insane!" she hissed. She had managed to work her hands up against his chest and now she shoved with all her strength. He only laughed, softly, bitterly, and locked his arms around her.

"I won't let you go, Serena." He forced her face upward and kissed her again, his tongue straining against the hardness of her tightly closed teeth. One hand tore her mother's wedding veil from her head and flung it away. "You'll thank me later," he murmured. "He'll never satisfy you . . . not you . . . not an old man like that. Come with me this minute, Serena. I can give you what you need. He can't. He never will."

She stood rigid against him, her heart pounding with dread. Yes, she'd known Evan was troubled. That was one of the reasons she'd never have married him, even if Harry Bolton hadn't come along. But if she'd known it would come to this — She could scream, she told herself. That would bring help. It would also bring Harry and the governor and three quarters of the important people in Hong Kong.

Evan raised his voice. "You hear me, Serena . . . Serena Rose? He's not man enough for you! He's *old!*" He had her by the shoulders now and was shaking her so hard that his face had become a blur in front of her eyes. Over his shoulder, in the darkness, she saw a dancing dot of red that jumped crazily with each jarring jerk of her head. Suddenly, Evan stopped shaking her and stood still, breathing heavily, like a winded horse, as he clutched her against him. The red dot moved closer. Serena's nose caught the whiff of tobacco as the American named Frobisher came strolling up the path toward them, the tip of his cheroot glowing red in the night.

"Out for a breath of air, Mrs. Bolton?" the tone of his voice was cool, sardonic. "And Mr. Ames, is it? I met your father at the Club on Tuesday. He pointed you out to me then." His smile glittered with mockery as he held out his hand. "Jason Frobisher of the *Tarpon*. Hear you've been to San Francisco, Mr. Ames." He waited, his deep-set eyes glinting in his lean face. His hair was dark brown and curled low on the back of his neck.

Evan Ames had let go of Serena and dropped his arms to his side. His flowerlike blue eyes stared roundly at Jason Frobisher, but he made no effort to answer or accept his handshake. Frobisher turned to Serena with a slight nod of his head that passed as a bow and offered his arm. "Mrs. Bolton, your guests will be anxious about you. If you'll do me the honor —"

Serena took his arm, hating his smugness, his damned, bloody American arrogance. But at least he'd gotten her away from Evan, and without the scene she'd dreaded. For that, she was grateful. She was about to tell him so; but when she looked up into his face, something in the lift of one black eyebrow tightened her throat with a new surge of resentment. Damn him! He thought he was saving her virtue! He thought she'd gone out there with Evan willingly! Well, let him think so! What was it to her? She tossed her head.

His arm was hard and tense beneath her fingers. "I want you to know one thing," he said, his tone deepening. "Harry Bolton is my friend. I've been his guest in Shanghai, and he's been mine in San Francisco. He's the most decent man I've ever known, And so help me, Mrs. Bolton, if you ever do anything to hurt him, I'll break your pretty neck myself!" In spite of the menace in his voice, his expression was totally bland, almost pleasant. Serena fought the urge to fly at him like an enraged cat and cover that smug, handsome face with scratches. They were just a few steps from the doorway now. She forced her lips into a smile, opened the white silk fan that hung by a ribbon from her wrist, and fluttered it gaily.

Then she remembered her wedding veil. Evan had torn it off. "Oh — " "What is it?" Jason Frobisher glanced down at her.

"My veil — "

"Where is it? I'll get it."

Both of them turned back toward the shadows of the garden — just in time to see Evan Ames pull a small pistol out of his coat and raise the barrel to the side of his head.

Serena screamed, and in the same instant Jason Frobisher leaped forward with the speed of a lightning bolt. Still, Evan had time to cock the pistol. His finger was pressing the trigger when the hurtling weight of the American hit him, knocking him off his feet. The shot went wild, shattering the quiet of the garden and bringing the wedding guests to the open doors in a flood of buzzing curiosity.

Serena felt Harry Bolton's arms around her. She turned with a sob and buried her face against his chest. He patted her hair. When she found the courage to raise her head, she saw Evan sprawled on the ground, his legs twitching and thrashing. Jason Frobisher was bending over him, the smoking pistol in his hand. Evan's father had pushed his way to the front of the crowd and stumbled to his son's side. Frobisher spoke to him, touched his shoulder, and handed him the gun. Then, as he stood up, his fingers brushed something weblike from a rosebush. With it in his hand, he strode toward the spot where Harry stood with his arms around Serena.

Jason Frobisher's first words were for his friend. "Don't be alarmed. Harry," he said calmly. "The boy's not hurt, only a bit dazed. Some fool game he was playing."

Then he turned to Serena. "Your veil, Mrs. Bolton." His expression was icy as he handed Serena the gauzy silk. "I trust you'll not lose it again." Abruptly, he turned and walked back into the ballroom.

Serena leaned over the washbowl and splashed cold water into her tear-swollen eyes. She had cried into the shoulder of Harry's evening cape most of the way from the Bellamy mansion to the cottage on the peak that Harry had rented for their honeymoon. Harry, bless him, had let her cry. He had raised three daughters, Serena knew, and so the sight of a woman's tears was nothing strange to him. "But I so wanted things to be perfect tonight," she'd sobbed. "I wanted them to talk for weeks about how lovely it was. Now they'll only talk about poor Evan — "

He had stroked her hair with one hand as he guided the carriage up the steep, tortuous road. "Let them talk, Serena, my little love. It wasn't your fault. The people who really care will know that. The rest don't matter."

Serena raised her face and stared into the mirror. She looked awful, like a red-eyed ghost, with the candlelight flickering on her pale features. What would Harry think?

She bent over and dipped her hands into the basin again, shivering as the cold water splashed her throat. Then she took a linen towel from the rack and pressed it against her face. Harry would understand, she comforted herself. Dear Harry. And everyone, including that awful Frobisher person, probably thought she'd married him for his money!

She had taken off her gown and her crinolines and flung them over a chair. Her corset, pantalets, slippers, and stockings followed, until she stood trembling in her silk chemise. She walked across the rug, took the silver-handled brush from her dressing case, and began to brush her hair. Five strokes, ten . . . The stiff boar bristles swished through the golden cascade that hung past her waist. Fifteen . . . She tried to blot out the memory of Evan's face, to think only of Harry Bolton. Tonight she would be his. The wondering was all but over. She would never again — she promised — ask herself whether she truly loved him.

She'd known Harry for ten months to the day. Her father had met him at the Club, where he was staying while he explored the possibilities of shipping his silk from Hong Kong as well as from Shanghai.

Morgan Bellamy had liked Harry Bolton well enough to invite him up to the house for dinner, and it was there, smiling at her across the roasted capon and sweet potatoes, that Serena had met him for the first time.

She remembered telling Moira later that evening that he was quite the handsomest older man she'd ever met. His eyes were a deep, sharp gray, his face tanned a wonderful golden color by the sun, and framed by a magnificent thatch of white hair. His manners were flawless, and so unaffected that they seemed second nature, as if gentleness and courtesy had been born in him. Even then, she had found herself wishing that he were younger.

In the months that followed, Harry Bolton had found many excuses to come to Hong Kong — none of them contrived. He was not courting Serena. Yet they often found themselves together, at dinners, at the races and cricket matches she attended with her father, and even at the balls, where he stood on the sidelines and watched her as she danced with her younger beaux. He never asked her to dance; yet when he was nearby, she found that she was dancing *for* him. With Harry's calm eyes on her, her feet moved even more daintily, her petticoats swished more enticingly, and she held her head a little higher.

From her father, she learned that Harry had owned a big textile mill in Manchester. When his wife had died and the last of his daughters had married, he'd sold the mill and, lured perhaps by some romantic dream, invested the profits in the Shanghai silk trade. A veritable Midas, he'd done splendidly. It was well known that he had the finest house in Shanghai and a complex of offices and godowns that covered half a city block. More and more, Serena began to imagine herself at his side.

Yet it was not his wealth that attracted her, she told herself time after time. No, it was *Harry*, his strength, his gentle, unhurried ways, that made her young suitors seem immature and silly by comparison. If his money was part of his charm, it was only because he wore the aura of wealth with such naturalness that when she was with him she did not even think of it.

The months passed — Harry had been tender with her, considerate and attentive. She knew he cared for her; yet he had made no move to ask for her hand. Finally, Serena had simply gone to her father. "Papa," she had announced, "I want to marry Harry Bolton."

She had expected Morgan Bellamy to be pleased, and he was. He had liked Harry from the beginning, and it was a sensible union. A marriage of almost dynastic proportions — the Bellamy opium and the Bolton silk. What but good could come of it?

Serena never knew exactly what her father had said to Harry, but the next time he came to Hong Kong he had walked her out into the garden and, with surprising shyness, asked her to marry him. It was not until she had said yes that he had taken her into his arms and kissed her for the first time.

She put the brush down on the dresser and walked back to the long, dark oval of the mirror. Slowly, she crossed her arms, grasped the lacy hem of her chemise, and slid it up over her head. Light from the candle flickered over the gleaming curves of her body. She licked her lips; the fingers of one hand bunched and twisted the silk of her chemise. Serena was no fool. She'd heard enough *amah*-chatter to know what was expected of her. After tonight, her body would cease to be hers alone. It would belong to Harry and to the children she would give him. She turned her slim profile to the mirror. Marriage was a bargain of sorts, she reasoned, an exchange between two people. In Harry, she was getting a great deal, and she was determined to repay him in kind. She studied her small, exquisitely rounded breasts, her narrow waist, her hips, which were rather too plump (but men liked that, she'd heard), and resolved that she would hold back nothing. She would be a perfect wife to Harry Bolton, gracious, devoted, and, by heaven, if he'd had any Chinese girls in the past, he'd have no need for them now.

The touch of her hair against the bare skin of her back sent a shiver through her body. Her arms crossed over her breasts as she hugged herself, half-fearfully, the reality of what was about to happen still dawning on her in its fullness. She would go to Harry's bed. He would put his arms around her and touch her in the places that not even her *amah* had seen . . . and then he would lie with her (surely there were more descriptive words for it, more tantalizing words, but Serena did not know them). She wondered whether it would hurt. It always did the first time, she had heard, and girls who were virgins always bled. If that were true, she could surely count on bleeding some.

With a nervous little sigh, she dropped her chemise on the rug, turned to her open portmanteau, and unfolded the long white gown

she had saved for her wedding night. She tossed it lightly over her head. The soft white silk floated down over her, sheer as a moonbeam. With her two hands, she lifted the back of her hair, raised it clear of the neck, let it fall, and fluffed it with her fingers. Then, trembling a little, she walked back to the mirror. Harry would be waiting in the bedroom, she reminded herself. She'd delayed long enough.

She leaned close to the glass for a last look at her face. For the briefest of seconds, her image blurred in the mirror. A barely perceptible shudder seemed to run through the little cottage, as if the earth itself had suddenly caught its breath. Serena felt the floor shiver beneath her bare feet. The flame of the candle flickered. The strangeness passed so swiftly that a moment later Serena found herself wondering if she had imagined it.

"Harry — " She flew into the bedroom to find him standing beside the bed in his dressing gown, puffing on his pipe. The covers had been turned down. "Harry, did you feel it?"

"Feel what, dearest?" He put his pipe on the nightstand and held out his arms. She ran into them.

"Something shaking — the house — "

"I can feel your heart, little love. Maybe that's what it is." He cupped her chin in his hand, lifted her face, and kissed her very tenderly. His lips were smooth and cool, his face newly shaved. He smelled of pipe tobacco and expensive French soap. She responded, her arms sliding up and around his neck. She closed her eyes and felt herself being lowered to the bed.

Again he kissed her, his satiny mouth warming against her lips; then, moving down the taut length of her neck, nibbling gently, almost reverently. With a little purring sound, she pressed his face into the hollow of her shoulder. His hair was thick and soft and fragrant. She stroked it, tangled her fingers in it, kissed it. "Harry . . . " she murmured.

The rhythm of his breathing had deepened, had become warm and moist against her skin. One hand toyed with the lace at the neck of her nightgown and began to tug it downward, baring her shoulder, then downward again . . .

A warm, pink wave of shyness flooded her entire body. "Harry — " she whispered. "Please . . . the lamp . . . "

He raised up one arm and reached for the lamp that sat on the nightstand beside the bed, turning the wick down until the flame went

out, leaving the little room bathed in moonlight from the french doors that opened onto the balcony. For a moment, he sat beside her, gazing down, his face in shadow. She knew she must look beautiful, with her long golden hair spread out on the pillow, the moon gleaming white on the smoothness of her shoulders and breasts. And she did not mind having him look at her. Not at all.

"My little love . . ." He ran one finger along the curve of her cheek. "Are you frightened?"

She smiled. "No, Harry . . . only very, very happy." It was true. The fears and uncertainties she'd felt only moments before had taken wing in his arms, to be replaced by a delicious contentment. She would be his — and his taking of her would be as tender and lovely as her dreams.

He touched her hair, smoothing a lock of it back behind her ear. Was his hand trembling? "You're sure? We can wait, you know, if you'd rather — " He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. Yes, he *was* trembling.

"I'm sure, my dearest." Her voice was calm, but inexplicably her heart had begun to pound. To reassure him — and herself — that she had really meant what she said, she reached out and tugged at the sash of his dressing gown. Harry's breath sucked in as the knot loosened and parted under her fingers, letting the robe fall open. The moonlight shone on his chest, which was firmly muscled and lightly frosted with hair. She opened her arms.

"Serena!" He flung himself into them, one hand clasping her shoulders against him, the other hand clutching her nightgown, wrenching it downward, off her hips. His kisses were like blows, not hurting but hungry and desperate, the gulping kisses of a man too long deprived. Serena felt herself stirring, felt the hot current of her response begin to trickle down through her body, to flow, to surge like the pounding of the sea. She raised her breasts to be kissed, her body arching eagerly upward, upward, hips thrusting, legs parting without thought . . . Ah, no, she laughed at herself, it would not be sweet and tender, this first coming together. It would be wild and glorious, savage, like a plunge over a towering waterfall — and she would never be the same again. "Oh, Harry . . . yes! Yes!" she moaned, frantic with desire.

He buried his face against her neck, his breathing labored and damp, his shoulders heaving with effort. His hands ranged up and

down the length of her, moving too swiftly, like creatures gone mad. His body was tense as a bowstring, sweating, quivering.

"Harry . . . please!" she begged, need throbbing in her. "Please!"

With a sigh that was almost a sob, he rolled away from her, onto his back, one arm flung over his eyes.

"Harry . . . ?" She put out her hand and felt him quivering violently.

"Serena," he groaned. "My little love, what have I done to you?"

"Harry — what is it?"

"It's been so long," he murmured. "But I thought with you . . . so young . . . so lovely . . . surely I could — " He pressed his palms to his face. His body shook silently. Bewildered, Serena stroked his long, slim fingers. They were wet with tears. Slowly, the awful reality of what he was saying began to dawn on her. She remembered the bitter words of Evan Ames.

"Harry . . . Harry, dearest . . . " She put her arms around him and kissed his hands. "It's all right. We have time. We have forever, and I can wait. Oh, Harry, just hold me!"

He did not answer, but his arms slid around her. She held him close, patting and kissing him, until his breathing slowed and deepened and at last he slept. Serena lay next to him all night, her eyes staring up at the dim outline of the fringe on the canopy above the bed.

Three

Taocheng, Szechwan Province

February 17, 1861

The tremor that blurred Serena's mirror had convulsed mountains in eastern Tibet and western Szechwan, cracking the earth, sending hillsides pouring into gorges, uprooting trees, and damming, for a time, the torrent of the upper Yangtze. The peaks of the great Tahsueh Shan had rumbled and quivered in the evening darkness, avalanches of dirt, snow, and rocks roaring down their slopes.

Cheng Li-t'ung, whose Christian name was Daniel, had been in the village of Taocheng when the earthquake had struck. By some miracle, the damage had been relatively light there — ten or fifteen houses toppled, the rest of them knocked askew on their mud footings, many people hurt, but only a handful dead.

Daniel had lent the strength of his twenty years to helping where he could. His foreign blood made him the biggest man in Taocheng; hard work had made him one of the strongest. The moon was high in the sky before he stopped to rest, his hands cracked and bloody from moving timbers and stones. He wiped them on his short trousers, leaned back against the half-toppled town gate, and surveyed the mountain village where he had been born and spent his entire life.

Taocheng by moonlight had become a nightmare world of crumbled walls and fallen roofs, of crying children and broken bodies. Daniel had lost track of the number of people he had dug out from under the rubble. Sick with weariness and despair, Daniel pressed his hands to his face, and for the first time allowed himself to think of the safety of his own house, which sat on a hillside, removed from the

clutter and noise of the village. Surely, he reasoned as he tried to quell the panic that had reared in his mind, his mother's God would have protected the spot. One small house — surely it would not have been harmed. But his father was old and his mother was blind. If the roof had fallen on them, they would be helpless.

Fear sent new strength shooting down into his legs as he sprinted out of the village gate and up the path, scattering a flock of long-haired goats that had huddled bleating near the wall when no one came to bring them inside. The shoes on his feet — feet so big that their size was a joke in the village — pounded the path as he ran. Even the path was changed, as if some great hand had jerked it taut and let it go slack again to follow new convolutions where it led toward the hill. He passed the village water wheel, crazily tilted now, the stream forming a pool in a low spot beside the path. Further on was the stone schoolhouse where Daniel's father had taught an entire generation of Taocheng's sons to read and write, giving the small village a certain fame for its enlightenment. Daniel was heartened when he saw that the familiar walls were undamaged. Perhaps the house had been spared as well.

He ran faster, the moonlight gleaming on his shaved skull, his long, braided queue flying behind him. The path grew steeper, winding up through the pines and cedars. He took it with powerful strides. As he rounded the trail's last bend, his heart drummed with fear.

In the clearing where the house had been, he saw nothing but a huge fan of fresh earth, so immense that the house and the garden had totally disappeared beneath it.

For an instant, Daniel only stood and gaped at the sight. Then he rushed forward and flung himself upon the landslide. Like a mad-dened dog, he began to dig, gasping with the effort as he pawed away at the damp dirt, clawing with his hands, pushing back with his feet until he collapsed into sobbing exhaustion.

The earth formed itself to his face where he lay. The salt of his tears mingled with the soil's icy moisture. It was useless to dig like this, to waste the last of his strength in the darkness. When he found his mother and father, they would be dead.

Except for the cry of a distant bird, the night was silent. Daniel lay on the slope, numb with grief, exhaustion, and cold. A fox barked somewhere up in the woods. A snowbank, slowly thawing, dripped tiny trails of moisture on the black moss below.

It was dawn when he awoke, aching and hungry, his hands crusted with dirt and blood. The scene that had held the feeling of a bad dream the night before assumed its full, horrible reality in the light of morning. Daniel brushed the dirt from his clothes and walked to the stream, where he carefully washed his hands and splashed water on his face. Then he went on down to the devastated village.

The people of Taocheng were too heavily burdened with their own tragedies to do any more than shake their heads in sympathy for Daniel and in sorrow for the loss of their schoolmaster, which was as much as Daniel had expected. A woman he had helped the night before did give him a bowl of cold noodles, and a man who owned two spades lent him one of them. Thus fortified, he went back up the hill alone to begin the grim task of finding the bodies of his parents and salvaging what he could from the house.

The landslide proved to be even deeper than he'd thought. It was midday by the time the iron point of the spade rang out against one of the rooftiles of the house. Daniel redoubled his efforts, sick with the anticipation of what he would find.

The roof had been crushed and swept forward by the flow of the landslide, so that the rear part of the house was filled with dirt and rocks. The sun was low over the mountains by the time Daniel found his father and mother, their bodies wedged between the collapsed roof and the front wall, not far from the door. They had died in each other's arms.

Gently, Daniel lifted away the broken tiles and planks and brushed the dirt from his father's face. Cheng Lo, the son of a Cantonese merchant family and one of the most promising scholars in the kingdom, had been exiled to Taocheng for alleged treason against the Tao Kuang emperor. Here he had lived for the past twenty-one years, earning his livelihood as the village schoolmaster, giving the priceless gift of learning to Taocheng's children.

The woman who had called herself Kathleen Cheng lay with her face pressed tight against her husband's chest. Daniel reached down and touched her hair — that strange amber hair, now streaked with gray — and he wondered whether her spirit had gone to the heaven he'd heard her speak of. He wondered if she could see now — and he wondered if anyone, ever again, would call him Daniel.

He stood up, reached for the spade and began to clear the earth away from around the bodies. Everyone in Taocheng, even his father,

called him Li-t'ung. It was his mother alone who'd called him Daniel, but because of her, in his own heart, he *was* Daniel. Although she had been blinded more than a year before his birth and had brought no books of her own to Taocheng, she had carried a good portion of the Christian Bible in her memory. Daniel had been raised on his father's Confucian philosophy and on his mother's tales of Noah and Moses, of David and Ruth and Jesus Christ. His favorite was the story of his own namesake, Daniel, who had stood alone in the den of lions.

She had taught him her language as well, and his father, who also knew a good deal of it, had taught him to read and write the English letters. When Daniel had shown a natural aptitude for languages and an eagerness to learn, Cheng Lo had also taught him Manchu, Mandarin, and the Cantonese tongue of South China. The languages had been little more than an amusement to Daniel, a challenge to exercise his remarkably quick mind. They were of no use to him in Taocheng, where nothing was spoken except the local Szechwanese dialect. It stretched his imagination beyond the point of belief to think that there were places where millions of people talked in these strange ways. His mother had told him of England, so alien and so remote that it might as well have been on the moon, of seas of water so vast that it took months for a ship to cross them. His father had drawn him maps of the Celestial Empire, showing him the locations of great cities with names like Peking, Chunking, Hangchow, Nanking, and Canton, where his family lived. Cheng Lo, who could never be permitted to leave Taocheng himself, had even talked of sending his son to Canton, where the boy's prosperous uncles and elder brothers could establish him in some profession and find him a wife. Such talk had only made Daniel unhappy. "While you live," he had said to his father, "I will stay with you in Taocheng."

While you live . . . The words drummed in Daniel's brain as he thrust the point of the spade into the dirt. Cheng Lo was sixty-two years old. Daniel's mother was twenty years younger. If events had followed their natural course, Daniel might have taken her back one day, to her own people in the place called Macao. She had spoken to Daniel about them, her venerable father who was a Christian minister, her mother, golden-haired and gentle, her brother, Morgan, who dealt in opium, his wife, Priscilla, and their twin son and daughter, Stephen and Serena. She had urged him to find them if ever he should go to

Macao. But Daniel had chosen the way of his father. He had little desire to know an uncle who lived off the profits of opium, for Cheng Lo had hated the drug and the damage he had seen it do. He leaned on the handle of the spade and looked at the two of them where they lay, a quiet sweetness on their faces. Perhaps it was best, he thought. He could not imagine either of his parents without the other. Fate had seen fit to let them die as they had lived — together.

When he had cleared away enough of the dirt, rocks, and debris, he lifted each of them in his arms — neither was heavy — and carried each as tenderly as he would have carried a sleeping child, to the foot of a pine tree. There he laid them with their hands at their sides and covered them with a feather-filled quilt he had found in the ruins of the house. Then he washed his hands and face and went off down the hill again to the house of the coffin-maker.

The man who made tables and cabinets and coffins in Taocheng was an old stick of a fellow named Liu. It was with some trepidation that Daniel approached his house, for he knew Liu to be a hard man, especially when one was in need of a coffin — a need that could not wait. His house was the finest in the village and, as luck would have it, one of the few to be left untouched by the earthquake.

Daniel swallowed hard as he rapped at the high wooden gate. His knock was echoed by the sound of hammering from the courtyard. Old Liu would be doing a good deal of business today, he reflected, glancing back over his shoulder at the cracked and toppled houses that lined the street. A woman with a baby strapped to her back was pawing dejectedly through the rubble of her home. A sway-bellied red pig sniffed its way around the edge of a crumbling foundation.

“Who is it?” The high-pitched voice of a woman came through the heavy planks of the gate in answer to Daniel’s knock.

“Cheng Li-t’ung.” He paused politely. “The unworthy son of the schoolmaster.”

The gate swung inward, silent on its well-greased hinges. The woman who stood in the doorway eyed him haughtily. Daniel caught his breath in surprise. He had never seen her before, but he’d heard enough village gossip to know who she was. Old Liu, with his wife faded and ailing, had gone all the way to Chengtu this past fall to buy himself a concubine.

She was small and delicate, her face powdered white, her cheeks rouged with carmine, and her black hair hanging loose, like a street girl's. In one hand, she held a brush. It was surprising, Daniel thought, that she would come to the door like this to admit a stranger. In a less remote environment, she would have been sequestered away in the women's quarters and it would have been unthinkable for her to expose herself to a man's eyes. But Taocheng was only a small mountain town. Even the house of Liu had but two servants, and with the earthquake it was likely that they were seeing to the needs of their own families.

As it was not proper for him to stare, he lowered his gaze. Her feet, he saw, had been bound from babyhood into tiny "golden lilies," little clenched balls of flesh and bone whose slippers were no longer than one of his fingers. He glanced up and saw that she was looking at him, her eyes wide and bold. She laughed softly when he turned his face away from her. Perhaps the thing Daniel had heard was true then, that Liu had bought her from a flower house.

"This worthless one wishes to speak with your honored lord," he said, demeaning himself in the most polite way.

The woman merely turned away, indicating with a jerk of her head that Daniel was to follow her. She was dressed in a robe of apple-green silk that swished softly and sent up a cloud of fragrance as she moved. Her steps were painfully small, delicate and tottering. Daniel slowed his own stride to a shuffle to maintain a respectful distance between the two of them. The aroma of smoked duck wafted from the kitchen to blend with her perfume. Daniel had not eaten since dawn, but this was not the time to think of the needs of his own body.

The man named Liu was working in the courtyard, his bare frame bent over the top of an unfinished coffin. He was past fifty, but he labored hard at his trade — whether for pleasure or gain Daniel could not be sure, for Liu also owned a good deal of land that he had taken in payment for his coffins. By Taocheng's poor standards, he was a rich man. Today he worked alone. As Daniel came into the courtyard, he straightened and turned toward him.

"Yes?" He had a long, sour face. Particles of sawdust clung to his eyebrows. The courtyard was carpeted with wood shavings.

Daniel inclined his head politely, his heart pounding. "Have you eaten rice, Master Liu?" It was the accepted form of greeting, a polite inquiry about the state of one's health and affairs.

Liu spat in the sawdust. "I am getting old, and my apprentice, that son of a turtle, disappeared two days ago and left me with more work than these old hands can do. Aside from that, yes, I have eaten rice, Cheng Li-t'ung." He took a plane from his workbench and began rounding the edge of the coffin lid with it. "I was told of the death of your parents. My condolences."

"Then you know why I have come."

Liu shrugged and went on smoothing the wood. "Many have come here today."

"I must have two coffins at once."

"Two coffins!" Mirthless laughter rattled his throat. "Two coffins, like that! And why not the moon and the stars, while you're asking? Eleven people died last night. Their families have already come to me. I have no more coffins."

"But I must — What can I do?"

Liu shrugged his bony shoulders again. "Give them to the earth. I warned your father only last year that he should order his coffin made so that it would be ready, but he put me off. There was time, he said. Pah! These fools who expect to live forever!"

Daniel's mind worked with the fury of desperation. "With your permission, I can make them myself and owe you for the wood and the use of your tools — "

"Two coffins! Do you know how many days that would take? Even if you were to carry the bodies up the mountain and leave them in the snow until you'd finished . . . to cut the wood; to shape it, smooth it, bind it, and seal it with pitch — "

Daniel closed his eyes and shook his head hard to clear away the horror of the vision that had taken shape in his mind. "No — surely — "

"Burn them, then. I'll sell you two jars for their ashes."

Daniel met his eyes stubbornly. "Burning is not the custom among my father's people, nor my mother's. I could not wish it for them."

"Then put them in the earth to rot and be done with it! You've no choice, you young fool."

"No." Daniel stood fast as his mind flew back over a span of ten years to a day in his life when he had made what was now proving to be a most fateful decision. The two old servants, husband and wife, who had accompanied his parents to their place of exile in Taocheng had died within a month of each other. Cheng Lo had

spent the meager last of his savings to buy them good, sturdy coffins and to have their bodies transported — first by horse litter, then by river barge — all the way back to Canton. “Why?” Daniel had argued with his father, using much the same reasoning as the coffin-maker was now using with him. “Their going has made us poor. We could have buried them here.”

Cheng Lo had only smiled wistfully. “A man’s spirit can rest only when he lies in the soil of his native land, my son. Our friends — they forsook everything to follow me in my misfortune. This much I owe them for their loyalty.” Daniel had hung his ten-year-old head in shame. Then he had looked up into his father’s dark eyes and made himself a silent, solemn promise; when the time came, he, Cheng Li-t’ung, would spare nothing — his strength, his fortune, his very life if need be — to return the body of Cheng Lo to Canton for burial.

And now the tragedy had descended upon him with the suddenness of a thunderclap. He had not just one body to care for but two, and he was alone. With his feet planted wide, he stood before the coffin-maker, dogged and unyielding.

Old Liu looked him up and down, his small eyes narrowing. Daniel tried to envision himself as the coffin-maker would see him — a strapping youth who towered a full head above the other villagers, still a bit awkward, like an overgrown puppy, with huge hands and feet. His eyes, like his father’s, were deeply set above high, strong cheekbones, but the irises were light brown in color, flecked with green. His skin was warm in tone, like his mother’s, and his long, braided queue, which appeared to be coal-black at first glance, took on a reddish sheen in bright sunlight. A mongrel. An oddity, not entirely Chinese and yet not entirely foreign. Liu was measuring him, computing his merits and flaws like beads upon an abacus.

The coffin-maker’s sharp black eyes squinted until they almost closed. “Come,” he commanded abruptly, motioning Daniel to follow him. His black cloth shoes slapped across the tiles of the courtyard as he approached a small, locked doorway. From a heavy key ring, which hung on a cord about his waist he selected a long-nosed brass key, twisted it into the lock, and swung the door open.

Daniel stepped over the threshold, straining his eyes to see into the dimness. The room appeared to be empty except for two long, dark objects that almost seemed to float in midair. As Daniel’s eyes grew

accustomed to the darkness, he realized that he was looking at two finished coffins that rested on crude pine racks.

Catching his breath, he stepped forward and touched the nearest one. Beneath his fingertips, the surface was as smooth and hard as jade.

"Teakwood from Burma," Liu commented dryly, "finished with the best Chengtu lacquer money can buy. I gave a month of my unworthy life to the making of these caskets."

"But you said you had no more coffins — " Daniel's hand trembled as his fingers explored the contour of the lid, the dragon carved in low relief on its surface.

"As indeed I do not, my young friend. These were ordered and paid for by a rich merchant from Baongshi for himself and his wife." He paused, his breath whistling softly through his teeth as he studied Daniel with eyes that were narrowed to bright little slits. He looked like a lynx, measuring, the leaping distance between himself and his prey. "When last I heard from them," he said, "the good man and his honorable lady were both in excellent health."

He let his words dangle in the air like bait in a trap. Daniel looked at the coffins and he looked at Liu. A sense of total helplessness flooded his heart. He would have the coffins. He would have them at any price, and old Liu knew it. Daniel was at his mercy. He bowed his head. "Ask what you will of me," he said softly.

"You have money?"

"Twenty taels of silver, hidden beneath the floor of our house. I can find them again."

"Pah! Not one tenth enough!"

"Anything — anything that I can salvage from our house is yours."

"A peasant hut?" Liu spat into a pile of shavings. "On a spot of worthless mountain land?"

"My father's books . . . his scrolls . . ." The words came out with the pain of blood. Cheng Lo had cherished those books, and among the scrolls were many essays he had written himself.

Liu brushed a shaving from his arm. "I cannot read," he grunted.

Daniel chewed his lower lip. It was plain that Liu wanted something from him, or he would not have shown him the coffins in the first place. A shaft of something cold and ominous passed through his heart as he realized that he had only one thing more to offer the coffin-maker.

Liu circled him, his cold eyes taking in Daniel's broad back and strong arms. "Keep your books and papers, Li-t'ung," he said with a sly smile. "For two coffins, the finest these old hands ever made, I will take your twenty taels . . . and I will take you."

"Under what terms?" Daniel forced his voice to be calm.

"Bondage to me, and to the house of Liu, for the rest of your life."

Although the evening was cool, beads of sweat had formed on Daniel's forehead. He swallowed a bitter lump in his throat. "And if this unworthy one agrees, will you also send the bodies of my parents to be buried in Canton?"

"If you agree," said Liu, "I will provide for the burials here in Taocheng or a spot in the House of the Dead if you wish, and give you two sets of white clothing to wear for your three years of mourning."

"And . . . if I do not?" The words came with great effort. Daniel's breastbone rose and fell in anguish. His heart was a frightened bird that thrashed against the walls of his chest.

"Need I tell you, Li-t'ung? You may look elsewhere for your coffins, and you will find none in Taocheng." He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "But the choice is yours. I am risking a great deal of trouble to sell you these fine caskets. If the merchant were to suddenly ascend the dragon, before I had time to make new ones — "

Daniel stared down at his big feet while he contemplated his dilemma. He knew that old Liu was a hard master, so overbearing and so niggardly that his assistants seldom stayed with him for more than a few months. He beat them often and paid them barely enough to buy noodles and bean curd at the end of the day. This in itself Daniel could endure, he thought — but binding himself to Taocheng for life was another matter, especially while his father slumbered so far from the place of his birth —

"Send my father and mother to Canton and my life is yours."

Liu shook his head. "Take my terms as they stand or be on your way."

Daniel looked at the coffins. He walked slowly between them, running his hand along the jewel-like smoothness of their lids, feeling the coolness of their bronze hinges and fastenings beneath his callused fingers. He thought of his parents, where they lay like sleeping children on the hillside beneath the pine tree. No, he could never deny them.

He had one hope, a hope that tugged at his heart to lift it out of the abyss of resignation. If only, somehow, he could get word to his father's family in Canton, then all would be well. He knew that Cheng Lo had left two elder brothers in Canton, as well as three sons by his first wife, Jung Fei. The House of Cheng was among the most respected merchant families in all South China. If he could reach them by letter, his troubles would be at an end. Surely they would send someone at once, with money to buy his freedom and to bring the bodies of his parents home to rest among their ancestors.

Slowly, he turned to face the coffin-maker. "You will see to the expenses of their burial? The clothing . . . the wadding for the caskets . . . a place in the House of the Dead?"

Liu's little ferret eyes gleamed. "Under the proper conditions," he answered.

Daniel bowed his head under the sudden weight of the imaginary yoke that settled onto the back of his neck. "Then," he whispered, his voice trembling, "I accept your terms . . . and I accept you as my master."

"A wise decision, Li-t'ung. Come, I'll lend you a cart to bring the bodies — we can have the papers drawn up tonight." He turned to leave the room.

The woman had been listening in the doorway. Liu scowled at her. She tossed her head and moved aside to let him go out, swaying on her tiny feet. Daniel lowered his eyes as he passed her, but she leaned so close to him that her perfumed sleeve brushed his arm. Startled, he glanced up and saw her little pink tongue part her teeth and sensuously lick her lips. When he looked away, she laughed roughly, low in her throat.

Four

The China Coast

February 1861

Serena leaned into the evening wind and closed her eyes. Although she had journeyed a number of times from Hong Kong to Macao and Canton by paddle steamer, this was her first voyage in a sailing ship on the open sea. And she had never, she admitted to herself, known anything so exhilarating.

She had given her hair to the breeze, to be swept and tossed like a streaming golden banner. Her lips tasted of salt, her ears sang with the swish of the clipper's bow as it sliced through the frothy green waves of the East China Sea.

With awe, she gazed up at the three towering masts, their great sun-bleached sails flapping in the wind. Yes, a clipper, she thought, wrapping her merino shawl more tightly about her shoulders, was one of the marvels of the world. Even the fact that this particular clipper had the name *Tarpon* painted alongside the bow in bold red letters, and that the dark figure at the helm was none other than Jason Frobisher dimmed her wonder but little.

It had been a convenient arrangement, she mused, resting her elbows on the *Tarpon's* brass rail. Jason had loaded tea and rice in Hong Kong and had enough space left in the hold for a good-sized order of Harry's silk. It had evolved naturally that he should offer passage back to Shanghai for Harry and his new bride, and that Harry should accept. The short voyage would be all the honeymoon that Harry's busy schedule would permit.

"But we're already booked on the steamer," she'd argued when Harry had broken the news to her. She would never have told him her

true reason for balking: that she did not relish spending the first week of her marriage under the reproachful eyes of the American captain.

"That can be changed." He'd brushed her forehead with his lips. "Everyone should travel by clipper once. Steam's the way of the future, I know, but there's no poetry in a steamship. You'll see, little love."

And he'd been right, she reflected now, pushing a damp wisp of hair out of her face. She had fallen in love with the majesty and sweep of the *Tarpon*. The dour Captain Frobisher had left them scrupulously alone, and had even moved in with the first mate for the duration of the voyage so that Harry and Serena could enjoy the spacious comfort of his own cabin.

A flock of petrels wheeled above the mainmast where the stars and stripes fluttered stiffly against the twilight sky. Serena buried her face in her hands for a moment, suddenly weary. Harry, she knew, had harbored another reason for choosing the *Tarpon* over the noisy, crowded sidewheeler. He had hoped that the peace of sea and open sky would somehow work a miracle upon him and he would regain his lost manhood. That miracle had not happened. Last night, after yet another failure, she had held his head between her breasts while he trembled like a child. "Harry," she had whispered, trying to soften her words though her own disappointment had been almost as great as his, "perhaps we're trying too hard. Maybe if we just wait until we're settled in Shanghai . . . until we're more used to one another . . ." Helplessly, she had stroked his head, shoulders, and back, her own body churning with frustration, until at last he slept.

The red sun seemed to drop into the sea, although in truth it was setting over land. Ningpo lay just out of sight, a few miles past the horizon. Harry had told her earlier. Tomorrow they would be docking in Shanghai, her new home.

"Dinner, Mrs. Bolton." The voice of the young second mate at her elbow startled her. She turned with a smile as he offered his arm. Norwegian by birth, he had come to America as a child. His speech retained its Nordic lilt. Serena had found a friend in him, a source of amusement and delight during the long days of the voyage.

The dining room was paneled in Burma teak, polished to a glowing auburn. A brass hurricane lamp hung from a beam overhead. The men seated about the big walnut table rose as Serena entered — Eli Hall, the gruff and grizzled first mate, his pewter-gray hair slicked back with a wet comb; John Stuyvestant, a plump and bespectacled

American Baptist minister on his way to Shanghai; Harry, of course, immaculate in a charcoal-gray Shetland suit with a white cravat; and Jason Frobisher, in shirtsleeves, his dark hair still wind-rumpled.

With a smile, she seated herself in the chair that Harry held for her, carefully spreading the flounces of her skirt. The gown she wore was one of her favorites, emerald-green faille with a scooped neck and long, puffed sleeves edged with black lace. At her throat, suspended by a black velvet ribbon, she wore a tiny jade cameo that had been her mother's.

Reverend Stuyvestant offered grace over a meal that was a minor masterpiece. Jason Frobisher's Chinese cook, a small, shriveled Cantonese named Fong, was the envy of the China trade. Possessor of the title *Daai See Foooh*, or Grand Master of Culinary Arts, he could prepare masterful Beef Wellington and plum pudding, but tonight's cuisine was Chinese. The star was Five Willows Fish, fresh red snapper steamed and served with a pungent sweet-sour sauce, accompanied by rice, lima beans braised with pork, clear, steamed Chinese mushrooms, and abalone soup.

"Ten thousand dollars if you'll let Fong come and work for me, Jason!" Harry beamed as he sampled the succulent fish. "By heaven, I'd be getting a bargain at that!"

Jason raised an eyebrow. "I'd not part with Fong for ten times that amount. And it's not likely he'd leave me. Five years ago, when I rescued him from a band of pirates off Yuhwan, he swore that he'd serve me all the days of his life. Why, the old heathen's become like a father to me!"

"And he's obviously given you a taste for heathen food." Stuyvestant poked at the mushrooms with his fork, repugnance written all over his fat face. "Next thing you know, he'll be bringing us pickled snake and toadstools!"

"And if I know Fong, they'd be delicious!" Harry exclaimed. "Chinese food's an acquired taste, I'm afraid, Reverend. But you'll find no better examples of it in all China than what that old fellow turns out aboard this ship!"

"One grows quite accustomed to it, really," Jason added, balancing a forkful of rice in his sun-bronzed fingers. "A body fares better on it in this climate, so I've heard, than on a diet of beans and biscuits and salt beef. I've learned a good deal of respect for the Chinese and their ways, Reverend. After all, they were writing poetry and studying the

heavens at a time when our own ancestors were likely squatting around open fires and bashing each other with stone axes. A civilization that endures for three thousand years must have something to offer the Western world."

"Even so, they're nothing but barbarians!" argued Stuyvestant, wagging his soup spoon in emphasis. "Certainly they're clever — but then, so's a monkey! Without Christian enlightenment, they're no better than animals!"

"And where do you place the Taipings, Reverend?" Serena met his eyes boldly. "They claim to be Christians. Does that give them good Christian souls in your eyes?"

"Christians?" Reverend Stuyvestant's glasses had slipped down onto the end of his nose. He pushed them back up to the bridge with one finger. "Why, the Taipings are a blasphemy! For a man to claim to be the living brother of Jesus Christ — "

"But all men are brothers of Christ, are they not?" Lars interjected softly, then blushed a becoming pink when Serena favored him with a smile.

"Aye," Stuyvestant snapped. "But to claim to be the Son of God! To set himself up as the Heavenly King — Blasphemy, of the worst sort! Oh, they've their values. I've heard they have a strict moral code based on the Ten Commandments, and that they've declared themselves against all forms of idolatry and the footbinding of women. But, Christian! Why, the fish on your plate's more worthy of the name!"

"There are those who'd disagree with you, Reverend," said Harry, thoughtfully stirring his soup. "I've talked to men of your own church who say that the Taiping movement is the hope of China. Bring the people to Christ, they'll tell you. Deal with wild claims like this fellow Hung's claiming to be the Son of God later."

"But surely you know that the Taiping movement's all but lost its religious character!" Jason Frobisher leaned forward earnestly. "In the beginning, things were different. They'd accepted only those allies who would convert to their beliefs. But they could never have swept through South China as they have on that basis alone. It was only when they began to clamor for the downfall of the Manchus that they really began to grow in power. Begging your pardon, Reverend, but the Chinese feel no need for Christianity. Every son of Han who's worth his salt, however, would jump at the chance to overthrow the

Manchu Dynasty. The Taipings have become a political force, with allies from all religions."

Serena studied Jason's profile from where she sat, her eyes lingering on the firm chin and sensitive mouth, and on the long-boned hand that toyed with the staghorn handle of a fork. He had been courteous but distant during the voyage, speaking to her only when necessary. Yet the tone of his voice had been soft and he had made no reference to the scene in the garden with Evan Ames. In spite of her animosity, Serena had found herself warming to him. His taciturn manner, she had learned, concealed a keen mind that flew like an arrow to the heart of a complex situation, as it had in the discussion of the Taipings. Behind his stern demeanor lay a warm and gentle wit that had made her smile more than once. Perhaps, she mused, it would be possible for them to be friends after all.

"From what I know of it," she rallied to his viewpoint, "the imperial troops are driving people to the Taiping camps. When the Taipings move out of an area, the imperialists come in and slaughter everyone they suspect of having collaborated — whether they're innocent or guilty."

"That's right," added Jason. "The poor devils haven't much choice. It's join the Taipings or die."

Stuyvestant dabbed at his mouth with a linen napkin. "Well, in that case, Mrs. Bolton, I fail to see why you English persist in backing the Manchu regime against the Taipings. If what you say is true, the Taipings are obviously the lesser of two evils, and there's every evidence they'd be more friendly to foreigners than the Manchu have been."

"It's a matter of dealing with a known element versus an unknown," Harry answered for his wife. "We just whipped the Manchus into some highly favorable treaty terms. We know we can handle them. Why, the dynasty's practically on its knees to us. Their emperor's dying, I've heard. Not that he was ever worth much, the degenerate fop. A hundred concubines and he's produced only one son. The lad's just a tot, mind you, but he's next in line for the throne."

"In other words," said Stuyvestant, "it's a matter of choosing between a weak and manageable Manchu Dynasty and the unknown strength of the Taipings."

"Precisely." Harry nodded.

"But you'd be wise not to underestimate the Manchus, Harry," Jason cautioned. "The real power behind the throne, I've heard, is a woman — Tsu Hsi, the empress, and the mother of the heir. There's a good chance she'll be named regent for her son. It's rumored she has a will of iron, and she detests foreigners. England will have her to contend with over the next few years. Could the Taipings be worse?"

Harry chuckled and took a sip of white wine. "Thank the good Lord it's not up to me! A religious fanatic and a woman! Heaven help us all!"

Old Fong chose that moment to enter from the galley, bearing in his hands the meal's crowning touch, Eight-Treasure Rice, a steaming molded pudding made of layered glutinous rice and candied fruits. Even Reverend Stuyvestant gasped with pleasure at the sight of it. But Serena's eyes were on Jason as he beamed his approval of the little cook's efforts, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners, an affectionate smile playing about his mouth. His throat was deep gold above the open collar of his creamy white shirt, and his hair curled in soft tendrils, low on the back of his neck. The sun-browned hand that rested on the white cloth was long and slender, with tapering fingers and a virile dusting of black hair.

Some instinct made him turn and catch her studying him. His eyes flashed and hardened as they met hers, and she lowered her face, hot with sudden shame. Her hands clenched and twisted in her lap for a moment before she lifted her face and thrust her chin forward. "Harry," she exclaimed gaily, nudging her husband's shoulder, "I think Mister Fong deserves a round of applause for this splendid feast! Don't you? Come, now, all of you." She took a sip of white wine before she began to clap furiously. The others at the table joined in, Lars and Eli Hall with full enthusiasm, Jason, Harry, and the Reverend with a bit more reserve. "Bravo!" she cried tossing her hair. "Bravo!"

Serena lay beside Harry in Jason Frobisher's bed, biting her lip to keep from sobbing out loud. Harry slumbered fitfully, exhausted after yet another failure to consummate their marriage. He had been so determined this time, so desperate to fulfill her. Serena had borne it as long as she could before her patience, at last, snapped, and she burst

into hysterical tears. "Stop it!" she'd pleaded. "Oh, Harry, I'd rather you didn't touch me at all! Leave me alone and go to sleep!"

She had hurt him. Poor, dear Harry who in no way deserved to be hurt. It was not his fault. Sick with remorse, she lay on her back and listened to the creak of the ship as it glided through the waves. The darkened lantern suspended from the center beam of the ceiling swayed gently back and forth. "Harry," she whispered into the night, "I'm sorry. I love you and I only want to make you happy. There are more important things in life, surely, and we have so much, you and I . . . "

Harry slept on without hearing her. She sat up with a sigh and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. The room was cold. She reached for her rose velvet wrapper, which she'd hung on the bedpost, and put it on, jerking the sash tight about her waist.

The brandy was in a crystal decanter in the wall cabinet. Jason, she knew, kept it mostly for visitors. He drank very little himself. Well, she was a visitor, by damn, and that entitled her to help herself. She needed something — anything — to dull the anguish that sliced into her heart like a razor, she thought as she wrenched out the stopper with a savage twist. The brandy tinkled into the glass . . . one finger, two fingers . . . three. She'd poured it for her father often enough. Brandy had been Morgan Bellamy's refuge from the painful reality of his wife's death. Serena had always considered herself stronger than her father. She had never thought she would need the crutch of a drink. But she needed it tonight.

The first swallow sent a trickle of heat down her cold, tight throat. She took another sip, quietly pacing the rug. The cabin was stuffy. Her lungs ached for fresh air.

Slipping her feet into pink satin mules, she opened the door softly and stole up the companionway. The night air struck her face like a dash of cool water. With the glass of brandy in her hand, she strolled to the rail of the ship.

Tonight the East China Sea was tranquil. There was just enough of a breeze to flutter the sails of the *Tarpon* and send her sharp bow whispering through the waves. Serena leaned on her elbows and filled her lungs with the damp, salty air. The black sky shimmered with stars. She took another sip of the warm brandy.

She had married Harry Bolton for better or worse, she reminded herself. In sickness and in health. And surely this impairment of his was a sickness of some kind. She had known women whose husbands were crippled or ill. These women had stood by their men and managed somehow to make a life of it. So must she. And if she truly loved Harry, she would never reveal to him the depths of her disappointment. With a silent prayer for strength, she drained the glass.

"Mrs. Bolton?" For the second time that evening, the young mate had startled her. "You shouldn't be out at this hour. You'll catch your death!"

"Ah — it's you, Lars. I thought I was alone. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"What am I doing? I've the watch tonight, ma'am." His blond hair gleamed like silver. "Are you ill? Can I get you something? There's coffee still hot in the galley."

"No, Lars." Moved by his earnestness, she reached out and patted the shoulder of his light pea jacket. "It's just that I couldn't sleep, and coffee wouldn't help that, would it, now?" She was conscious of the empty glass in her hand and wondered if he could smell the brandy on her breath.

"But you're shivering. Let me — Here!" He fumbled at the buttons of his jacket, pulled it swiftly off, and wrapped it around her shoulders. His smooth young face was inches from her own. The jacket was still warm from his body. Gratefully, she snuggled into it. The night *was* cold.

He was studying her face. Suddenly, he caught his breath. "Why — you've been crying! There are tears!"

"It's all right, Lars. Nothing but a woman's foolishness. Don't let it trouble you."

"Is it your husband? By thunder, if he's hurt you — " His intensity was almost comical.

"My dearest Lars." She patted his hand. "No, it's not my husband. It's nothing. By morning I'll have forgotten all about it. Now here, take back your coat, and I'll go below." She slipped the jacket off her shoulders and thrust it back at him.

Reverently, he accepted it. "Oh, Mrs. Bolton . . . If there's anything I can do for you — ever — " He seized her fingers in his and pressed them hard against his lips.

Serena heard the creak of footsteps on the deck behind them and she jerked away the hand that she had planned to withdraw more gently. At the clearing of a masculine throat in the darkness, Lars stiffened.

"I suggest you get back to your watch. Mister Larson," Jason Frobisher's voice rumbled out of the night. "They say there are pirates about in these waters. If we don't keep a sharp eye out, we're liable to regret it."

"Aye, Captain." Lars flushed with embarrassment and swallowed.

"Get along now. Off with you, lad." Jason's manner was jovial enough, but his eyes were hard as granite. "I'll see Mrs. Bolton to her cabin."

Serena stared down into the empty glass as Lars's footsteps echoed off in the direction of the quarterdeck. The sails flapped softly in the night wind.

"What you do ashore is your own business, Mrs. Bolton," Jason's voice grated thinly in his throat. "But I'll thank you not to play your games aboard my ship. Especially not with the members of my crew."

Serena's face flashed hot with sudden rage. She drew herself up, though the top of her head barely reached his chin. "I don't know what you think you saw. Captain Frobisher — "

"I'll not venture to guess *what* I saw. Nor what I'm seeing now — a lady alone on deck with brandy on her breath and her husband asleep below."

"Damn you!" she hissed. "It was as innocent as — "

"As innocent as your encounter with our friend Mr. Ames in the garden the other night? I'll not venture to judge your innocence or lack of it, Mrs. Bolton. I'll only leave you with a warning. It's a fine man you've married. Do anything to shame him and you'll answer to me!" He turned on his heel to go, then paused once more. "As for young Lars, he's a good lad. You'll leave him be if you've a spark of kindness." He inclined his head in a mocking bow. The starlight glinted on the waves of his hair. "And now I'll bid you good night, Mrs. Bolton. May I respectfully suggest you take shelter below before you catch a chill from the night air?"

Serena gulped back her fury as he walked away. Her teeth were clenched in anger; her whole body trembled as she strode toward the companionway. At the entrance, she turned and glared at the retreating back of Jason Frobisher. In a final gesture of defiance, she raised her arm and flung the crystal brandy glass as hard as she could, far out over the dark water.

Five

Hankow

April 20, 1861

The small stern wheeler, flying the banner of Russell and Company from the masthead, churned its way up the Yangtze, black smoke pouring out of its twin stacks and the Union Jack dancing from the masthead. It was morning. The rising sun gilded the tops of the hills and made yellow circles on the ripples of the brown water. A river sampan bobbed past in the opposite direction. Its lone occupant, a peasant in a conical rattan hat, dropped his hand from the tiller to stare with gaping astonishment. Foreign devils and their ill-boding contraptions were still a novelty in this part of China.

Stephen Bellamy opened the door of his cabin and stepped out onto the deck. The crispness of the dawn air was heaven after the long, stuffy night in the tiny room where he and Madeline were quartered. He had scarcely slept — but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered today except the fact that they would be in Hankow by midmorning. Hankow — where his grandfather and his life's work would be waiting for him.

Stephen had dressed and shaved by the first threads of daylight that filtered into the cabin through the louvers of the door. He wanted to miss nothing. Madeline was asleep. She'd slept a good deal during the five-day trip upriver from Shanghai. Her pregnancy seemed to drain her of her old vitality. She was perpetually tired. Stephen walked softly back to the door, opened it a crack, and looked in at her where she lay in her narrow bunk, one slim white hand trailing on the floor. Her eyes were closed, their lashes dark blurs against pale cheeks. Her light brown hair, made curly by the dampness of the climate, framed her face like a cloud. Something tightened around Stephen's

heart as his eyes traced the rounded bulge their growing child made beneath the sheet. Lord, how he loved her!

Closing the door cautiously, he walked back up along the deck toward the bow. The sound of the paddle wheels throbbed in his ears. The water, like thick cocoa with the silt from spring flooding, swished along the prow to foam in the wake of the paddles. At the deck's forward most point, Stephen paused, his hands resting on the rail.

Even now, on the morning of the fifth day, he was still astounded by the immensity of the Yangtze. It stretched before him as far ahead as he could see and for half a mile on either side, brown and timeless, bounded here by rice fields and low, brushy hills. The steamer had chugged from Shanghai, up the river's great mouth to Chinkeang, and had passed the Taiping-held capital of Nanking without incident, although Stephen had peered through the morning fog at the ancient walls in hopes of catching a glimpse of activity. In the villages that lined the river's banks, however, he saw ample evidence of the strife that was tearing China apart — burned houses and abandoned fields, rotting heads impaled on spikes, bands of refugees, thin, ragged, and hungry, trudging downstream.

"Have a cup o' tea, friend. You'll not be seein' Hankow for 'nother hour or more."

The voice of the mate startled Stephen for an instant, but he turned with a smile and accepted the proffered cup of steaming tea. "Thank you." He took a taste. It was hot and good. "I'm anxious to arrive, and I suppose it shows."

"Well, don't expect much. Miserable place — only been open t' settlement a month, y'know. Look for Hankow and all you'll be seein' is a batch o' bloody little Chinese houses. Treaty calls for the Chinese government to buy the land from the owners. Little yellow bastards — they're askin' twice what it's worth and they won't budge till they get it. Most everybody lives 'cross the river in Hanyang, in whatever houses they can get off'n the Chinese. Fine kettle o' fish!" He sipped his own tea out of its thick porcelain mug and swallowed noisily. He was a middle-aged man with a dark-jowled face and short-clipped hair the color and texture of steel wire. "'Twon't be an easy life there."

"I know that. But the chance to serve — " Stephen paused and downed his tea. How could this gruff old man ever understand the way he felt about coming to Hankow, the thrill of planting gospel

seeds in virgin soil, the opportunity to work alongside a man he'd secretly worshiped for years — his own grandfather.

"And that pretty little lady you've brought along with you, friend. Looks like a good strong wind 'd blow 'er away. What's she got t' say 'bout it all?"

"Madeline promised she'd follow me anywhere."

"Aye." He cleared his throat and spat down into the muddy water. "I know the sort. My woman followed me t' Hong Kong twenty years ago. She lasted seven months."

"She left you?"

"Died. Fever. Hell, China's no place for a woman. Got me a Chinese girl back in Shanghai now — but that's something else again."

"Thank you for the tea." Stephen handed him the cup, suddenly uncomfortable. Not because of the Chinese girl — heaven knows he'd seen enough of that. No, it was the other thing, the woman who'd died. He thought of Madeline; the small worm of guilt that had been gnawing at his conscience for weeks grew in size and voracity. He knew she was delicate, knew things wouldn't be easy in Hankow. And yet he had brought her here.

Curse it, he'd had his life all planned by the time he met her — Madeline Curry, the daughter of one of his professors. The first time Stephen had set eyes on her at her father's house in Cambridge, he'd realized that he could not live without her. He was determined to have her and to have his dream as well, the dream of returning to China as a missionary. He could not give up that dream, even for Madeline — and he could not give up Madeline, even for the dream. He could only pray that God would be good enough to let him have both.

"It's a big river, isn't it?" Stephen leaned on the rail with his elbows, although he found it a trifle awkward because of his height.

"Aye." The mate handed the cups to one of the Chinese galley boys who happened to pass. "Bigger than usual. It's in flood stage now. Happens damn near every spring, they say. Hear tell at Hankow the riverbanks are near fifty feet above water in the winter. Then, come March an' April, the river starts t' rise. By May or June, like as not, it'll be floodin' over the banks, turnin' the whole bloody town into a lake!"

The paddle wheels chunked and churned, leaving twin trails of froth behind them. The mate sauntered off to attend to his duties. Stephen fished his watch out of his vest pocket. Ten minutes after

seven. For a moment, he thought of waking Madeline. No, he resolved, let her sleep. Who could say what this day would demand of her once they reached Hankow?

They had stayed in Victoria for fifteen days after Serena's wedding, waiting for a shipment of hymnals that they'd been instructed to bring to Hankow with them. While Madeline made friends with Moira, Stephen had spent his days reading or touring the offices and godowns with his father. Morgan Bellamy had been civil but distant, as if the bond of kinship had broken between them and they were little more than strangers now. It had been painful, Stephen recalled. He had not expected his father to approve of his decision, but neither had he expected him to withdraw his love. A burst of anger, followed by reconciliation — that was what Stephen had anticipated, not this cold acceptance of the inevitable.

But it *had* been inevitable, he rationalized. The break had to come. He had never wanted to manage the company. For as long as he could remember, he had hated the musty vastness of the godowns, the clutter and bustle of the trade, the long columns of figures, the smell of the opium, and the knowledge of what the foul stuff did to people. He could not help it.

Pity Serena had been born a girl, he thought. She was the one with the ambition, the drive, and the head for business. The godowns fascinated her, and even when she'd played as a child, it was never with dolls. She had set up imaginary shops where the goods were paid for with paper money that she cut and designed herself. Like some trader baroness, she had sent her toy ships out across the blue carpet of their nursery with their play cargoes of silk, tea, and opium. Unlike Stephen, she had never had any scruples about the drug. Opium was just another commodity to her, to be bought at auction in Calcutta and sold at a handsome profit along the China Coast.

Stephen sighed, remembering his sister as he had last seen her. He had spent three weeks in Shanghai while Madeline recovered from a bad case of the grippe, and so he'd had ample time to observe Serena. What he had seen perplexed and worried him.

Serena had every visible reason to be happy. The Bolton house was the finest in Shanghai, a superb edifice of white stone with a colonnaded porch and a commanding view of the Bund — Shanghai's splendid riverfront road that was already one of the most elegant thor-

oughfares in the Far East. The interior of the house glowed with the richness of teakwood paneling and the icy sparkle of crystal chandeliers. The carpets were Persian, the furnishings mostly Chippendale, imported from England. Every week there were parties — teas, levees, balls — at which Serena presided like a queen. As for Harry Bolton himself, Stephen had concluded that the man was a veritable prince — a gracious and cultured host, a gentleman in his business dealings, a loving, generous, and considerate husband.

But Serena . . . Stephen stared down at the ripples that trailed from the point where the bow of the steamer cut the water. She'd been too gay, he told himself — laughing too long and too loudly, chattering even when she had nothing to say, bubbling with charm and wit. She'd reminded him of a violin string too tightly drawn, or perhaps a pretty little mechanical doll that some child had overwound. She had clung to his arm like a drowning person, he recalled, and more than once he'd caught the smell of brandy on her breath. Stephen knew Serena almost as well as he knew himself. Yet, surprisingly, it had never occurred to him before how much like their father she was. Not until he smelted the brandy.

He'd tried to corner her alone a number of times. "But are you really happy, Serena? It's important to me . . ." She had only beamed at him in the too-radiant way she'd acquired since her marriage and replied that she couldn't be happier. Then she had laughed, a tinkling, brittle sound, like shattering crystal, and flitted off to a cricket match or a horse race or someone's afternoon tea.

Harry Bolton had been more accessible. He had cheerfully escorted his young brother-in-law around Shanghai in his smart black phaeton, pointing out the sights along the Bund — the imposing buildings and grounds of the British Consulate, the headquarters of such trade giants as Jardine Matheson, Dent and Company, and his own substantial tract of offices and godowns on Maloo Road, just off the Bund itself. He had chatted freely about his own business, about the growth of Shanghai, the turbulent situation in China, and the looming threat of the Taipings. However, he had gracefully sidestepped Stephen's guarded questions concerning Serena and her happiness.

One day they had driven west along Maloo Road, out toward the racecourse, Harry's trim, Australia-bred gelding splattering the mud along the rain-puddled road. To the north, across Soochow Creek, lay

the American settlement, a ramshackle cluster of taverns and sailors' inns. To the south, the French Concession sprawled to the foot of the old, walled Chinese city. Only that portion of Shanghai that was British came close to grandeur, Stephen told himself smugly, forgetting for the moment that his own mother had been an American citizen.

As they'd moved westward, however, the quality of the streets and buildings deteriorated rapidly. Stephen had found himself looking out of the carriage at a Chinese slum, even worse than anything he'd seen in Victoria. Pitiful huts, shelters of dried mud, sticks, canvas, even brush, crowded each other in a vast jungle of human misery. Hollow-eyed men, women, and children slogged or squatted in the gooey dark-brown mud of the Yangtze Delta — mud that went all the way down to hell, as Harry had remarked in one of his irreverent moments. Garbage and human offal rotted in piles and in pits and choked off the sluggish creeks that meandered here and there through the settlement. Coolies trudged through the mud carrying buckets of water on the ends of split-bamboo shoulder poles. Fish and freshwater crabs steamed over tiny charcoal fires. Flies swarmed around the cooking pots. The stink of the place filled Stephen's head like poison. He forced himself not to gag.

"Good Lord, Harry — I've never seen anything like this!"

"Refugees." Harry drew deeply on his pipe.

"From the Taipings?"

"Aye, and from the imperialists as well. The Taipings are bad enough. But then they move out of a town and the emperor's troops come in behind them to rape and loot and slaughter everyone they think might have collaborated. Poor devils . . ." Harry's eyes swept over the expanse of the settlement. "They only want to be left alone. Either they join the Taipings and move out with them, stay in their villages and die, or come here. God knows, they've no place else to go."

"And are they safe, even here?"

"We beat off the Taipings last summer. But they want Shanghai. They'll be back. We'll beat them off again." Harry tapped his pipe on the edge of the carriage to clean it. "You know we're supposed to be neutral," he continued. "But we've got to defend ourselves. The Chinese bankers and merchants hired an American — some brigand named Ward — to organize a private army of mercenaries, but he's not done too well. In fact, the bloke disappeared last winter and no one's

seen him since. We've a few regiments here — but their hands are tied unless Shanghai's attacked."

They had rolled along in silence. Harry filling his pipe with fresh tobacco, Stephen trying to sort out his own feelings about the Taipings. He would not judge them, Stephen promised himself, until he had learned more.

The Chinese settlement was thinning out, and Stephen's thoughts returned to Harry. He looked thoughtfully at the slim, confident man who had married his sister. "Harry," he said, "didn't you say you had some property out here?"

"Aye. A fair piece off to your right, along Soochow Creek. I was saving it for some new godowns, although my friends say I'm a fool not to divide it up and sell it to the Chinese. Why, even Serena . . ." He trailed off and paused for a moment, leaving Stephen wondering what he'd been going to say. "This land is dear. Men who bought parcels of it for a few taels ten years ago are making fortunes now."

"Then why not sell it? You could build your godowns someplace else when the time comes."

"Aye, that's what your sister says, too. But I've made my living doing what I know best — importing Manchester woollens and exporting Chinese silk. Land?" He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't need the money. And maybe I'm getting too old to begin something so new."

Stephen studied his brother-in-law. It was the first time he had ever heard Harry mention his age. "Then why not let Serena sell it?" he heard himself saying. "She's good at that sort of thing, Harry, and —" He caught his breath, knowing he was meddling where he had no business, but determined to go on. "And it would give her something to do . . . at least till the children start coming —"

He *had* said too much. Stephen remembered again as he stared out past the bow at the undulating green countryside. Something in Harry's eyes, some faint flicker of anguish had cut him off in midsentence. "It's not the sort of thing you'd ask a lady to do, is it?" Harry had replied, and then he'd pleasantly changed the subject.

Shanghai seemed far away now. Stephen did not envy his sister and her husband. The complexity of their lives struck him as burdensome, and he'd never cared about money. Even now, faced with the possibility of his father cutting him off without a shilling, he felt no dismay, only a rather heady sense of freedom.

Stephen checked his watch again. It was half-past seven. He wavered for a moment, torn between the longing to have Madeline share the excitement of the morning and the awareness that she needed her rest. A full two minutes he struggled with his impulses before he turned with a faint smile and strode back down along the starboard side of the steamer to their cabin door. Softly, he lifted the latch, slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

Madeline was still asleep, her white hands curved above her head like an infant's. Stephen's throat ached as he moved toward the bunk and knelt down beside her. "Madeline . . ." He kissed her closed eyelids, drinking in her sweet, fragrant warmth. She began to stir. Her arms slid up around his shoulders; her fingers invaded his hair. She moaned, a delicate, dovelike sound, as he found the softness of her mouth and kissed her . . . kissed her until both of them were deliciously dizzy and his loins had begun to throb.

"Stephen — " She stiffened in his arms, a look of wonder in her wide gray eyes. "The baby . . . he's kicking!" She took his hand and moved it swiftly down along the curve of her body. Through the thin silk nightgown, he could feel the warmth of her skin, but not the movement of his child. "Did you feel him?" she whispered. "Oh, Stephen?"

He shook his head, struggling against the urge to fling off his clothes and make heedless love to her. The doctor had warned him that it might not be safe for the baby, and so it had been nearly four months since his body had known fulfillment. The pressure of his desire was agony, but he swallowed hard and kissed the tip of her nose. "The boy's too fast for his old man already!" He smiled. "But just you wait. I'll catch him yet!"

Her fingers crept up to his face and brushed the unruly lock of brown hair out of his eyes. "Are we there?" she asked with a smile. "Are we in Hankow?"

"Not yet. I thought you'd want to be ready."

"Oh, yes — " She sat up, and nudged him out of the way so that she could swing her slim legs over the edge of the bunk. Slowly, she stood. No sooner had she taken a few steps than she paled, swayed slightly, and leaned against the wall of the cabin, one hand pressed to her lips. With a worried sigh, Stephen offered her the basin. Madeline's morning sickness had become almost a matter of routine in the past few

months. This time, however, she waved the enameled metal basin away, straightened, blinked, and took a deep breath. "No," she said. "I won't be ill today. Not the first day in our new home." She opened her arms; he came to her and clasped her close. "Stephen, darling . . ." she whispered against the tightness in his chest. "I'll try to be strong . . . I promise you. You can't do your work — God's work — if you've a sickly woman to nurse. I won't be a burden — " She stretched up on tiptoe and kissed the edge of his lower lip. "I promise."

Her hair smelled of the gardenia-scented soap she always used. Stephen buried his face in it, the familiar tightness around his heart almost choking him. "Go on — " she whispered. "Don't miss a minute of it! I'll get dressed and come right out." She began nudging him toward the door, a little too forcefully, Stephen thought, but he complied, slipping out of the door again and closing it behind him. As the latch clicked into place, he heard the scrape of the enamel basin against the washstand and the sudden sound of Madeline retching. Poor Madeline. The thought of what she was going through to give him a child made her all the more precious to him. He turned to go back in and comfort her, then stopped. No, he told himself. She was so determined not to be ill today. It would be best not to let her know he'd heard.

He returned to the rail and gazed anxiously ahead, his eyes scanning the horizon. The huts along the bank, many of them clustered on mounds of earth and rocks or built up on stilts, were much more numerous now, a sign that a city might be nearby. The water traffic, too, was growing more intense. River junks glided past, their decks piled with chests of tea, bales of raw silk, hemp, or timber from the mountains. Their crews stared impassively at the foreign devils on the deck of the steamer. Fishing boats and sampans bobbed along near the shore. Stephen studied the bank, measuring with his eyes. Fifteen feet, perhaps, remained here between the top of the bank and the surface of the water, and the rainy season would not let up till midsummer at least. Though the spring sun was warm by now, Stephen felt a current of coldness pass through his mind.

Far ahead, the sun glinted on something flat and pale buff in color, its top looming just above the horizon. A wall. Hankow? His heart leaped as he consulted the map in his head. Hankow would be on the right, not the left, and there would be no wall. It was Wuchang he was seeing, he decided.

Stephen's hands gripped the rail as the steamer drew nearer. He wished Madeline would hurry. Now he could clearly see the place where the Han joined the swelling Yangtze, the lakes and inlets, the walled cities of Hanyang and Wuchang, and the sprawling, unwalled village that was Hankow. Stephen shivered with delight as he drank in the sights, smells, and sounds.

There were no European-style buildings, either on the Hankow side or near the two walled cities. Stephen thought of the embroidered linens and Sheffield china that Madeline had insisted on bringing along. What in the name of heaven was she going to do with it all? Where was she going to put it?

The steamer crossed the current of the Yangtze and made for the mouth of the Han. Stephen felt Madeline come up beside him, felt the softness of her as her arm slipped through his. She stood quietly beside him, her little body taut with excitement. Suddenly, she clutched his arm and stifled a scream. He let his eyes follow her pale, pointing finger. A headless corpse, bloated, naked, obviously male, rolled in the yellow-brown waves just below the prow of the steamer. He jerked her against his shoulder, hiding her gentle eyes from the horror, but he watched in sickened fascination as the human carcass drifted under the paddle wheel and disappeared from sight. In spite of himself, he shivered. He'd seen such things before. Why, anyone who'd made the journey up the Pearl River from Hong Kong to Canton was likely to bring back tales of floating bodies, the spawn of pirate attacks, clan feuds, and political unrest so typical of that part of China. But here, on the day of their arrival in their new home, the hideous thing loomed in his mind like some bad omen. He swallowed his dread and lifted Madeline's white face. "It's gone, sweet," he whispered. Wanly, she smiled.

The steamer, its boilers still hissing, dropped anchor in the Han. The sampans were already flocking out from the Hanyang side to unload the tins of salt beef and kegs of flour, lard, and sugar that the tiny British community found so essential. The grizzled mate came up the companionway with a pouch of mail. The captain himself shepherded off the few precious cases of brandy, Scotch whiskey, and Manila cheroots. Stephen glanced anxiously about the ship, feeling vaguely stupid as he realized he had no idea what to do next. He'd expected to be met, he'd hoped by his grandfather. Except for the ones who had come

on the steamer, there were no Englishmen in sight. The unreasonable fear tugged at him that they'd somehow come to the wrong place — that the whole trip had been some ghastly mistake.

Then Madeline pulled at his sleeve, drawing him toward the starboard side of the deck. "There — " she whispered, a touch of awe in her voice.

A small junk had cast off from the Hankow side and was moving with the breeze, across the current toward the steamer. It was a dilapidated craft, the painted eyes on its prow almost weathered away, its sails faded and patched like a beggar's robe.

A lone figure stood before the mast — tall, thin as a scarecrow, wearing a black frock coat, the morning sun gleaming on a leonine thatch of silver hair. Stephen bit his lip to keep back the sudden surge of emotion that filled his soul to bursting. Grandfather! He wanted to shout, to weep! Instead, he stood quietly, his hand gripping Madeline's, his heart leaping. Grandfather!

The junk glided closer. Stephen's eyes ached with the strain of trying to make out the man's face. He had never seen a picture of Archer Bellamy, yet he would have known him anywhere. He had grown up with the name and the legend of this tower of a man who'd given the past twenty years of his life to missionary work in China. Canton knew his name, as did Amoy, Foochow, and Ningpo. In missionary circles at Shanghai, Stephen had been introduced as "Archer Bellamy's grandson," and the appellation had fallen on him like a halo. His more seasoned colleagues had regarded him with a respect of which he felt totally unworthy. The very name invoked awe.

The junk drew up alongside the steamer. The old man stepped neatly from one deck to the other. Paralyzed with joy, Stephen remained where he was on the upper level. In his agony of anticipation, he was barely conscious of Madeline's hand on his arm. For an instant, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, Archer Bellamy was standing before him, almost as if he'd emerged from thin air.

"Stephen?" Even when he spoke softly, his voice rolled like thunder.

"That's right, sir." Stephen extended a trembling hand and felt his fingers suddenly overwhelmed by the fervor of his grandfather's crushing grip. Under the jutting bush of silver brows, the old

man's eyes were the pale blue of a December sky in his native England. Stephen had been told that he resembled his grandfather. He could see now how weak the comparison had been. He resembled Archer Bellamy the way a sapling resembles a great, gnarled oak. His pale young face bore only the hint of those craggy features. He had his grandfather's height, but not his massive bone structure, not the broad shoulders and huge hands, not the deep, stentorian voice.

"I said, did you bring the 'ymnals?"

Stephen blinked. He had been so overcome that he'd scarcely realized the old man had asked him a question. "Oh — the hymnals. Aye, they're in the hold." Strange, he thought, that Archer Bellamy's first question should be not about the voyage, not about Stephen's father or his sisters, but about fifty English songbooks.

"Well, let's be t' getting them out. Then I'll show you the 'ouse I've found for us. 'Tisn't much, only two rooms, but then, we'll not be spendin' much time there — "

Suddenly, Stephen was aware of Madeline's touch at his elbow. The old man had not even noticed her. "Sir — " He brushed his grandfather's arm. "This is my wife Madeline."

Archer Bellamy turned. His ice-blue eyes took in Madeline's dainty parasol, her lace shawl, then narrowed as they passed over her rounding figure. "I told the mission I wanted a single man," he said gruffly.

Stephen felt as if he had suddenly had a bucket of ice-cold water dashed in his face. He heard Madeline gasp beside him. "I — I wasn't aware of that, sir," he said awkwardly. "But they knew I was married. Perhaps because I'm your grandson — "

"No matter. You'll soon be learnin' that you've come t' be a servant of God — and 'tis only by chance that you 'appen t' be a Bellamy. But this is no place for a woman!" He glowered at Madeline, his brows bristling like twin thickets covered with hoarfrost. "It's back to Shanghai she goes on the next boat!"

Madeline stood beside him, shocked into silence. Stephen felt weak with dismay. Had it come already, the crossroads where he would be forced to choose between his love and his dream? "Please, sir," he managed to say. "She's come all this way to be with me, and you've not even given her a chance — "

"By 'eaven, she's a woman! And she's with child, boy!"

They stood at an impasse, the three of them. Perhaps it would be best, Stephen thought frantically. She could go back to Shanghai and live with Serena, at least until the baby came, at least until the English had time to build decent housing and streets and sanitation facilities . . .

Madeline stepped forward, small and rounded, as delicate as a spun-sugar fairy in her lavender dress, lacy shawl, and little white parasol. "I'm stronger than I look. Reverend Bellamy," she said. "I can cook and sew and help look after the women in your congregation. You'll be getting an organ soon; I can play. My mother was an invalid, and so I'm quite experienced at nursing and running a house. Mind you, I'll follow my husband's wishes, but if you let me stay, you won't be sorry. I promise you." She stepped back and took Stephen's arm.

"A pretty speech, madam. It changes nothing." Archer Bellamy's eyes were pools of ice. Torn, Stephen glanced from his towering grandfather to his wife. Madeline was wrong. She was frail and sickly. She could die in this place.

"Stephen, I can't leave you. Don't make me," she pleaded.

Her fingers clung to his arm. Stephen felt them through his sleeve. His grandfather was right. He'd be a fool to keep her here. Yet she wanted to stay. She had promised to go anywhere with him, to endure what he endured. He pictured her in Shanghai, giving birth to their child without him. He pictured himself alone in the night, his arms empty. No, fool though he was, he could not let her go.

He drew himself up and looked into those formidable eyes. "I'm sorry, sir. Madeline's my wife. If she goes, I go with her."

Archer Bellamy took a deep breath. "Then I pray t' God I don't live t' see the day when you curse yourself for letting 'er stay!" He turned and, with a jerk of his head, stalked back down toward the companionway to where the hymnals were stored. As he disappeared down the steps, he looked back over his shoulder for a moment. "'Tis a bit of your father you've got in you, Stephen Bellamy. I can see that already!"

Six

Shanghai

June 1, 1861

Harry Bolton sucked at his pipe and studied Serena through the haze of smoke that filled the parlor. She was losing weight, he had noticed, and it worried him. Her round-cheeked, almost babyish golden beauty had been replaced by a strange gauntness. Her cheekbones stood out in her face. Her arms were too thin. She'd become a wild creature, lean and restless, much too quick to take flight. And — Harry sighed and nursed the pain in his soul with another deep drag on his pipe — he had no one to blame but himself.

Tonight she sat in the rose velvet armchair beside the marble fireplace reading a letter from her brother. Her hair was brushed simply away from her face and tied with a brown velvet ribbon that matched the sash of her long white dress. In the days before their marriage, she had preferred pinks, blues, yellows. Now she often wore white. Sometimes Harry saw it as a reproach. White. A symbol of virginity in the Western world. The color of mourning in China.

He thanked heaven that at least she was sweet and patient with him. At night she still slept in his arms, soft and warm as a kitten, but it had been a long time since he had attempted to make love to her.

In the early weeks of their marriage, he had tried again and again, in the hope that her passion would be the key to unlock his own. When failure after failure had left her sobbing tears of frustration, he had abandoned all hope. Arousing her desire, he reasoned, would only increase her need for fulfillment. It would only hasten the day

when her woman's body would demand what his love could not give her, and she would be tempted to find it with someone else.

Across the room from her, Jason Frobisher sat on the matching loveseat, sipping cognac from a long-stemmed crystal goblet. The dainty glass seemed out of place in those rough brown fingers, just as his lean-framed body was so ill-suited to the grace of the Chippendale, with its pink upholstery and its curving arms and legs. He belonged. Harry decided, in some immense oak captain's chair with a leather seat, his boots propped on the desk.

Frobisher had brought the *Tarpon* upriver two days ago and was spending the week in port while his ship was being loaded with tea and with Harry's own silk. Harry always welcomed his visits for he liked Frobisher immensely — liked him so much that he almost looked on him as the son he'd never had. The two of them shared a basic honesty, a strong dislike for pretense and hypocrisy; and if the thirty-one-year-old American admired Harry's wealth and position, then Harry admired Jason Frobisher every whit as much for his independence.

Thus, it pained Harry to see that Jason and Serena had taken an instant dislike to one another. His good friend and his wife, whom he loved dearly in spite of what had happened — or more precisely what had not happened — between them.

Jason and Serena spoke to each other, if they spoke at all, in tones of icy civility. He still called her "Mrs. Bolton." She found endless excuses to be out of the house when he was visiting. Except that both of them denied it. Harry could almost have believed that they had known each other — unpleasantly — before the week of the wedding. Harry sighed as he knocked the side of his pipe against a jade ashtray. Jason likely considered her a fortune hunter, he concluded, and perhaps had let her know it. That would explain a great deal, even though he knew Jason was wrong.

A shadow crossed Serena's beautiful face. "Lord," she said in the throaty voice Harry loved. "More rain up there! The river's rising and Madeline's sick in bed again! Harry, what's to become of them? I've begged him to bring her back to Shanghai!"

"You know what Madeline says to that." Harry nodded sympathetically. "She won't leave him and she won't force him away from his work."

"I could go to them . . . I could help somehow." Serena leaned forward in her chair, her fingers touching the small cameo she wore at her throat. "Please, Harry — "

Jason Frobisher had listened in silence, his dark eyes moving from Harry to his wife. "Be sensible," he said gruffly. "What could you do? You're no doctor, and you'd be no help at all in a flood!"

"He's right, Serena." Harry watched her face fall and was glad that Jason had delivered the brunt of the blow for him. "And from what Stephen says about your grandfather, he'd not take kindly to having another woman on his hands. When's the baby expected?"

"August. Early in the month, Stephen says. Please, Harry — She'll need someone — "

"August?" Jason swallowed the last of his cognac. "The river could be in full flood by then! Harry, don't you know somebody — ?"

Harry smoothed the mutton-chop whiskers on the right side of his face. "There's a doctor, a new one, staying at the Tates," he said. "I met him last week and he mentioned to me then that he'd like to see more of China before he settled down to a practice. I'm sure he'd not mind having his way paid to Hankow. He could bring Madeline back with him if she's got sense enough to come. I'll speak to him tomorrow if you'd like, Serena."

"Oh, if you could!" She clapped her hands, like a delighted child. "And I could go along."

Harry crushed her hopes with a shake of his head. How could he risk her?

"Don't be a fool." Jason Frobisher leaned forward on the loveseat, his elbows resting on his knees. "You told me yourself they'd hired an *amah* to care for your sister-in-law. There's nothing you could do that she couldn't do with less fuss and bother."

Serena rose to her feet and fluffed her crinolines, the sugary smile on her face masking the indignation that her clenched hands could not hide. "Well, since I'm obviously of no use to anyone, perhaps I'll just go to bed." Her voice was a husky, controlled whisper, laced with a child's hurt. "Harry . . . Captain . . . if you'll excuse me — "

Jason stood up, a liquid, catlike motion. "I was just leaving myself. Got word that an old friend of mine is back in town, and I want to look him up."

"Not Ward?" Harry's concern was almost fatherly. Frederick Townsend Ward, the American-born soldier of fortune, and the band of ruffians he employed as mercenaries were as unsavory a bunch as he'd ever laid eyes on. Thieves, lechers, murderers, who'd do anything for money. Ward had reappeared in Shanghai in May, after an absence of five or six months, and soon after that had been arrested for luring British soldiers and sailors away from their posts to join his forces. The cagey Ward had first demanded that he be tried in an American court. Then, before the judge and jury, he had produced documents showing that he was now a Chinese citizen — outside the bounds of their jurisdiction. The court had had no choice but to free him. "You'll not be making any friends in Shanghai if you're seen with that double-dealing freebooter," Harry warned Jason.

"It doesn't matter. I'll see him anyway. We were boys together, you know, back in Salem: Then I met him again years later, in San Francisco. It's an old friendship." Jason shrugged his arms into the buckskin jacket he'd tossed on the arm of the loveseat.

"Well, take care. If word gets around that you're a friend of Ward's, you may find that some doors in Shanghai won't be open to you anymore."

"Does that include yours, Harry?" Jason paused in the buttoning of his jacket and looked him in the eye.

Harry raised his eyebrows. Then he shook his head and laughed. "You know better than to ask! Go on! Have a good time!" He held out his hand. "But that doesn't alter the fact that the man's an unmitigated scoundrel. I'd steer clear of him if I were you."

"Really, Harry — " Serena swished about the room, gathering up ashtrays and glasses, fluffing cushions — work that she might just as well have left for the houseboys. "The captain's a grown man. Quite old enough, I'd say, to choose his own company."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bolton." Jason inclined his head in a mocking little bow and turned to grip Harry's extended hand. "I'll be going. You needn't have anyone wait up for me, Harry. I may not be back till tomorrow."

"Well, you've a key to the house. Take care, Jason."

With a terse good night to Serena, the young captain strode out of the room. A moment later, the front door closed behind him. Harry

sighed and unfolded the latest edition of the *Shanghai Daily Shipping List*. He envied Jason Frobisher's youthful vigor. More now than ever. Tonight he felt every day of his fifty-five years.

Serena had settled down at her little cherrywood desk to pen a reply to Stephen's letter. Harry watched her over the top of his newspaper, thinking that maybe he should have told her she could go to Hankow. Floods and pirates she could take in stride. Serena was a strong woman. Harry knew that he was making excuses, hiding his real reason for keeping her with him behind a facade of concern. She was lovely, frustrated, and vulnerable. His real fear, he admitted to himself at last, was that if he let her out of his sight she would meet someone else and he would lose her.

The hell of it was that he needed her, and that need involved so much more than mere physical satisfaction. He loved her strong, open spirit, her stubbornness, her temper. He loved her wide-eyed, fawn-like grace, her beauty, her softness. When Morgan Bellamy had written to tell him that Serena wanted to marry him. Harry had been thunderstruck with joy. He had worshiped her, wanted her, for months. But even then, the dread had begun to haunt him — the cold fear that when the moment of consummation came, he would fail.

Harry had married for the first time when he was only twenty. His wife, Margaret, had borne his inexperienced lovemaking like a martyr. She had never pretended to like it. A pretty woman, Margaret, but a cool, fastidious pillar of goodness. After fifteen years of marriage and three daughters, she'd let him know that she considered her duty done.

Although he had always hoped for a son, Harry had accepted her decision. He had never known another woman — in the biblical sense of knowing — and even after Margaret's withdrawal from their bed, he had remained faithful to his chaste marriage. He threw himself into his business and saw his efforts bear fruit. He expanded the old textile mill, built a new one, began exporting woolens to America, cottons to the colonies in India and Africa. The years flew past and Harry Bolton found himself a wealthy man.

In a numb sort of way, he was contented; His financial success had brought him comfort and respect. His growing daughters were pretty, modest, and well behaved. Margaret was a fine hostess who ran his household with flawless efficiency. Their relationship was courteous

as long as he made no effort to open the doors that she had closed between them.

His existence could have run along for years on the same smooth track if a friend of his had not persuaded him that he was less than a man for his stoic acceptance of Margaret's bitter medicine. "You're missing half your life. Harry, old fellow," the friend had cajoled. "And I know just the girl . . ."

Her name was Bridget — from Dublin, her heavy brogue announced even before she'd told him. A warm, buxom creature with breasts like well-risen bread dough and hair like dark honey. Her white skin smelled inexplicably of fresh-mown hay, except in the hollows of her armpits and the deep cleft of her bosom, where the aroma was musk — heady and hot. Harry had paid her five guineas.

Her room had been small, he recalled with a bitter sigh. The walls were covered with flowered paper and hung with theatrical posters. Her bed took up most of the space and the sheets looked as if they were in need of changing. But no matter. Her lips were wet and eager, her arms compelling as they pulled him down. Her plump thighs parted with a readiness that Harry found almost frightening after Margaret and her protests. For the space of a heartbeat, he had hesitated. Then her legs had drawn him close, and in the next moment he was lost in her, in the yielding, heaving, warmth of her. He felt himself falling, soaring, spinning, like a sky-rocket about to burst —

It was then that the door of the little room had crashed open, and Margaret, her brother beside her, had walked in. It no longer mattered how or even why.

The girl had disappeared under the covers. Sick with mortification, Harry had shrunk back against the brass-plated bedstead. If Margaret had shrieked at him or cursed him, maybe he could have borne it, but she just stood there, her eyes wide with the shock of his betrayal. As Harry watched her, he saw those eyes harden. He saw the ice creep into them. Then Margaret turned away without a word and closed the door.

Even now, the cold pain of the memory made Harry shiver. His wife had not wanted the scandal of a divorce and neither had he. They had remained together for the next eight years while Margaret slowly died of consumption. Even on her deathbed, she had not forgiven him.

He had waited for three months after the funeral before he sought out another woman — only to find himself haunted. It was Margaret who lay between them in the bed, her eyes cold and condemning. She'd had her victory in the end, and her vengeance.

Harry gazed wistfully at Serena where she sat at her desk, one foot curled under her, her pink lips pursed in concentration as she penned her letter. He ached to sweep her up in his arms, to carry her up the stairs to the waiting bed and love her with all the passion his heart felt. But he knew what would happen. Even in the sanctity of his marriage to a fine, pure girl, Margaret would not let him go. Harry saw Serena drifting away from him, and he was helpless to hold her. Unless he could find a way to keep her with him, it would be only a matter of time before he lost her.

He settled back in the armchair and let his eyes drift down the columns in the newspaper, half-reading, half-thinking. An item about a land sale caught his eye, and it was only then that he remembered his conversation with Stephen Bellamy. Impulsively, he decided to gamble.

"Serena . . . Serena, love — "

She glanced up, her eyes wonderfully large and dark.

He put down the newspaper. "I was thinking — that piece of land on Soochow Creek. You may be right. Perhaps we ought to sell it. What do you think?"

"I've told you. Divide it up into lots for the Chinese. You could make fifty times what you paid for it! More, at the rate the refugees are coming in."

"True," he sighed. "I'd sell it tomorrow if I weren't so busy with the new season. It would be a big project, love. The planning, dividing it up, contacting the buyers . . . I just don't see how I'm going to find the time. Still, it's a shame to let it go — " He paused a minute, dangling the bait. "Why, if I thought you could take it on — "

"Harry — could I?" She was half out of her chair. "I know I could — Oh, please!"

"A lady doing business? People would talk, you know."

"Let them!" She was up and flying across the room to him. "Oh, let them talk and be damned! Oh, Harry!"

He caught her as she flung herself into his arms and nestled there like an excited child. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against the silk of her hair.

* * *

Jason Frobisher's footsteps echoed over the heavy planks of the wooden bridge as he crossed Soochow Creek. The sky was murky, with only the waning oval of a moon drifting above the clouds. The water licked softly at the bridge pilings.

The night was alive with the sounds of the east — the click of chopsticks and *mah-jongg* tiles in dark doorways, the muted babble of Chinese voices, the soft ripple of sampan paddles along the bank of the creek. Jason liked China, liked British Shanghai and the gentility of men like Harry Bolton. Yet no visit to Shanghai was complete for him unless he had passed an evening or two with his countrymen in the American Concession.

His boots left the bridge and stepped into the gooey mire that passed as a street on the American side. The Bund was graveled and graded, and there was talk among the English of putting down a Macadam surface next year. The British Concession had an air of permanence. They had come to Shanghai to stay, to live and live well.

American Shanghai, on the other hand, was only an outpost, a stopping place for wanderers like himself. Inns, taverns, a few second-rate houses and godowns, no police, fire, or sanitation departments — no wonder the British across Soochow Creek looked down their staid noses at their American neighbors.

Still, there was a frontier spirit about the place that appealed to Jason. It reminded him of a much younger San Francisco, the buildings thrown up in careless haste, the easy camaraderie of lonely men, far from home, the warm toughness of women who'd not had easy lives.

He paused and looked back across the bridge, down along the Bund where the Bolton mansion sat like a marble monument. He saw the lamps flicker out in the parlor windows and flicker on in Harry's bedroom. He turned away and lit a cheroot. The smoke was bitter in his throat.

Serena Bolton was everything he mistrusted in a woman. Spoiled, pampered, pretty as a wax doll or a Christmas angel. She had only to crook her dainty finger, and anything she wished for would be hers in a twinkling. As if being the daughter of an opium trader wasn't enough, she'd had to go and marry poor old Harry for his money. Well, he hoped to hell that Harry was getting his money's worth out

of her. Women like that weren't good for much else. Jason knew. A long time ago, he'd almost married one of them.

His teeth had bitten into his cheroot. Cursing under his breath, he spat the flakes of tobacco out into the mud and walked on down the street in the direction of the Liberty Hotel, where his friend Fred Ward stayed when he was in town. Tonight, he told himself, he was going to get wonderfully drunk. Then he'd find the ugliest whore in Shanghai, pay her a hundred silver dollars, and tell her to go home to Soochow and start a duck farm.

The Liberty was a two-story structure of rough-sawn boards with a casino on the first floor and rooms on the second. The fellow who ran it was a retired second mate from New Bedford who'd married a Ningpo woman ten years before. To wandering Americans who found their way to Shanghai, it was home for an hour, a day, or a week. To Frederick Townsend Ward, it was a haven, a place to find shelter when his fortunes were ebbing, to lick his wounds and regroup for the next charge.

Ward looked up from his poker game as Jason walked in, then grinned broadly. "Jason . . . by damn! Jason!" He rose to his feet, a small, dark man, wiry and quick as a weasel. In a flash, he was across the room, gripping his tall friend's shoulders, his black eyes glowing like two hot coals.

"Jason! By God, it's been . . . how long? A year?"

Jason thumped Ward's back, swallowing the surge of warm emotion that threatened to bring tears to his eyes. "I came by in February. They said you'd been wounded, that you'd gone — "

"Paris. Best damned surgeons in the world there. Lord, you should've seen me! Come on, sit down! Have some champagne!" He motioned toward an empty seat across from his own; Jason pulled out the chair.

Ward took a puff on his cheroot. In the light of the oil lamp above the table, Jason saw that his friend's face had changed. There was a twist to the angle of his lower left jawbone, a white scar on his right cheek. He'd grown a short black beard to hide the deformities. "Got it in that fiasco at Tsingpu last summer. Bullet broke my jaw — then came out here — " He touched his cheek. "I couldn't even talk. Had to give the orders on paper. And the damned thing wouldn't heal! Festered for months! Finally, when things quieted down a bit, I

went to Paris and got it done right. How are things with you, Jason?"

"The same. Business is good." Jason glanced at the two men who shared the table. One he remembered well. Henry Burgevine, an elegant, dark-haired southerner whose father had been an officer under Napoleon. The other man was a stranger, a tough-looking little Filipino with one front tooth missing.

Ward picked up his cards where he'd left them face down on the table. "Deal you in, Jason? You know Henry, don't you? And this is Vicente Macanaya. He commands our Manila troops. Best damned fighters in the world! They'll be one of the keys to our new operation!" Ward drained his glass of champagne — which he so preferred that it had become a kind of trademark with him — and refilled it from a bottle sitting next to him on the table. Jason had seen him consume huge quantities of the stuff without ever appearing to be drunk. "And how are things back home?" he asked.

"From what I've heard, that shouldn't concern you anymore."

"What?" Ward snorted. "You mean that yarn about my becoming a Chinese citizen? It was a fake, Jason. Old Taki himself had the papers forged. Damned good job, too. But I'm as American as you are, and I asked you how things were back home!"

"Sorry, Fred. And I'm glad to hear it's not true." Jason gazed at his hand, an unpromising collection of fours, sixes, and sevens with the queen of diamonds. Serena Bolton's face flashed through his mind. "As for things back home, they're not good. If you've been in Paris, you know that Lincoln won the election. The South is up in arms about it. He doesn't claim to be an abolitionist, mind you, but they're saying he sides with them. The southern states threatened to leave the Union if he was elected. Now that it's a fact, that's exactly what they've done."

"I'll be damned." Ward laid a jack on the table. "Looks like war, does it?"

"Looks that way." Jason leaned back in his chair and let his eyes drift around the smoke-hazed room. A half-dozen sailors from the British warship *Calcutta* clustered around a table, drinking noisily, the white stripes on their jerseys gleaming yellow under the lamps. Two Chinese girls hovered about them, leaning low to fill their glasses with cheap rum, letting their slim, silk-clad bodies brush the muscular arms of the seamen, slowly, seductively. Jason glanced down at the red

queen again. Again, Serena's face swam before his eyes. With an inward curse, he blinked the vision away.

Then Jason realized that the prettier of the two girls was gazing at him from under her long, sooty lashes. When he did not look away, she sidled over to where he was sitting and rubbed her hip against his shoulder like a cat. She was tall for a Chinese woman, and her feet had not been bound. The carmine on her cheeks clashed with the purple satin robe she wore and with the pink paper flowers in her hair. Her eyebrows had been shaved off, then painted back in high black wings on her forehead.

The girl touched his hair, lightly, then boldly, running her fingers through its dark waves. Impulsively, his free arm hooked her waist and whipped her around in front of him. She gasped as he jerked her down and caught her lips in a long, crushing kiss.

In his arms, she softened. One hand stole around behind his neck. The other snaked its way down the front of his shirt to toy with his belt buckle, then slid on down to his crotch. She smelled of cheap perfume. Her mouth was wet and tasted like somebody else's tobacco. He waited for the familiar stirrings and felt . . . nothing. He let go of the girl and eased her to her feet.

"My God, Jason," Ward was saying, "if you're in the mood for that sort of thing, I know better places than this one."

Jason gave the girl a silver dollar and dismissed her with a shake of his head and a light slap on the rump. "Looks like I'm not in the mood, Fred," he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm not really in the mood for poker, either. Sorry." He laid down his cards.

"It's all right. I wasn't doing so well myself. Hell, Macanaya's winning it all tonight. How about some air? Just you and me, Jason. Been a long time, hasn't it?"

They left the others and drifted out into the mist-dampened night, Jason Frobisher, tall and quiet as a western pine; Frederick Ward, diminutive, intense, energy exploding in his every step. "It's looking good at last, Jason," he said. "Hope's agreed to work with me. I think he'll even let me buy some good British field equipment from the arsenal at Hong Kong — "

"Admiral Hope? Wasn't he the one who arrested you in the first place?"

"He was." Ward laughed, pleased with himself. "But he's a reasonable man . . . open to persuasion. Good old 'Fighting Jimmie!' He tried to keep me aboard the *Chesapeake*, you know, even after the American court had to let me go. I jumped ship one night and Macanaya was waiting to pick me up in a sampan. Glory, Jason, you should have seen it! The gunners wanting to blast us out of the water — poor devils. Vicente had brought *thirty* sampans out there. They were afraid to shoot because they didn't know which one we were in!"

Jason laughed, imagining the confusion. "And you're saying that Hope was still willing to bargain after you'd made such an ass of him?"

"He's practical. He was losing too many men. And the British don't like the Taipings any more than I do. A couple of days later, I sent a message from Sungkiang, offering to meet him as a free man. He gave safe conduct to me and to Burgevine and Forrester — " Ward's eyes burned as he spoke.

"My first aim is to clear a thirty-mile area around Shanghai as a safe zone, free from the Taipings. That will mean taking Tsingpu, Nanchaio, and likely Minghong and Kiating. I'll be weeding out my foreign troops . . . keep the best ones for officers, let the others go. There'll be two hundred Manila men under Macanaya. The rest of my army will be Chinese. Two thousand of them at least! More if I can get them."

"Chinese?"

"Chinks!" Ward's grin flashed in the darkness. "Those yellow bastards can fight, Jason. Believe me, I know!" He rubbed his crooked jaw. "Six good months of discipline and training — hell, they'll be unbeatable! I just hope the Taipings will wait till we're ready!"

They walked on, the sticky mud clinging to their boots, past dimly lit bars and brothels. The stink of the river lay over the city like a cool, damp blanket. Jason filled his lungs with it. "I still don't know why you do it, Fred. It can't be the money or the loot. It must be pure craziness."

Ward chuckled good-naturedly. "Naw, I do it because I can! But I really brought you out here to ask you more about things back home."

"It looks like war," Jason answered. "I don't see any way out of it. Feelings are too strong on both sides."

Ward rumbled for a cheroot, pulled two of them out of his vest, and offered one to Jason. "Ever thought about going back home? There'll

be a cause now. Something to fight for. I'd go back in a minute if I didn't have my hands full here. Maybe by the time I mop up this Taiping mess, there'll still be a war left for me there. What about you?"

"Not me. Oh, I've given it some thought. Always hated the idea of slavery, but to leave the peace of the sea, of a good ship with the wind in her sails — "

"By hell, the sea's in your blood just like fighting's in mine! She's always been your mistress, and you'll not leave her. Not for God, for your country, or even for a woman, I'll wager!" He lit his cheroot and puffed at it thoughtfully.

"Would you leave her for me, Jason?"

The question caught Jason off-guard. He stared at Ward. A wisp of fog floated between them. Ward raised his left arm and unbuttoned his cuff. He turned his palm upward to let the waning moon gleam for a moment on a tiny white scar at the base of his wrist. "Remember this?"

Jason nodded slowly. "I look at mine now and again. Lord, how old were we? Twelve?"

"Eleven when we cut our wrists and let the blood mix. We called ourselves blood brothers then, and we swore that if one of us ever needed the other — " Ward cocked his head to one side and looked at Jason, his black eyes warm and penetrating.

"You're asking me to join you?"

Ward coughed. "Not really. I'm only saying that I'd like very much to have you. It would be so good, Jason, you and me again. And I need another man I can trust."

"It's not that easy, Fred. I've commitments. Here, in Hong Kong, in San Francisco."

"I know. It's the answer I expected from you. You like being free, being your own master . . . " Ward began to walk again, back toward the Liberty. "I needn't tell you the pay would be good. Much better than you can make with your ship."

"It's not that." Jason walked beside him, his boots sinking into the gooey mud. "It's not the pay and not the freedom or lack of it. I just don't like war. I've no stomach for it."

"You've never had anything to fight for, old friend. Maybe you'll change your mind some day. If you do, you'll know where to find me." Ward tossed the cheroot off into the darkness. "Where are you staying?"

"At Harry Bolton's. You know him?"

"Only by sight — and by reputation. Maybe you can introduce us some time."

Jason chuckled. "He doesn't think much of you."

"That's not surprising. Most Britishers don't. That will change. . . . Bolton — just got married, didn't he? A lovely creature, with all that golden hair . . . and so young." He glanced knowingly at Jason. "So you didn't have much appetite for Lotus Petal back there, eh? Well, don't go back to Bolton's. There's an extra bed in my room. In the morning, we can ride out to Sungkiang and I'll show you the troops."

Jason walked beside him, following him without protest. He glanced up at the moon and was dismayed to realize that its pale gold color was the exact shade of Serena's hair.

Seven

Taocheng
July, 1861

Daniel lay awake on his mat and stared at the stars through the slate of the roof. The house of Liu was not large, especially with two women demanding their separate quarters, and so Daniel was housed in the lean-to where the spare tools and lumber for the coffins were kept. When the weather was stormy, wind and water came whipping in between the thin boards, soaking him in his ragged blanket. Rats scurried in and out of the cracks to rummage in the sawdust on the floor. Daniel had built a platform of wood scraps to raise his bed above them. Still, he could hear them below, squeaking, fighting. The place was bad enough in summer, with its dampness, its fleas, and mosquitoes. Daniel could not help wondering what he would do when winter came.

He had received no answer to any of the four letters he had written to Canton. It had cost him nearly all of the meager savings he had held out from Liu to have them sent by horse down to Chengkiang where the river junks came. How many times had he traced the route on the map he had found among his father's papers? Down the river that began as the Nanpan, became the Hungshui, and changed names several times more before emptying into the estuary south of Canton as the Chu Chiang. His own soul had gone with those letters, his hopes, his life. Every day he waited. Every day he rankled with the knowledge that Liu had taken cruel advantage of him.

He rubbed his hands in the darkness, feeling the familiar calluses, the bumps and ridges on his nails from misjudged hammer blows and slipped logs. His skill as a carpenter was growing. Only last month he

had finished two coffins to replace the ones he had bought at the price of his freedom. The rich merchant had come from Baongshi and taken them away, fully satisfied. Daniel knew the value of coffins now. He knew that under the stress of urgent need he had sold himself for a price of less than one hundred taels. Even at an apprentice's wage of two taels a month — and his strong, skillful hands earned Liu many times that — his debt would be justly repaid in four or five years. Yet the documents of his bondage had been signed and witnessed. He had taken the beautifully carved ivory *chop* that had been his father's and affixed his own seal to the paper. Daniel was legally bound to the house of Liu for life, and his hopes for deliverance were fading.

He stretched painfully. Liu had beaten him with a bamboo pole that morning, for no particular reason except that the old man had quarreled with his concubine, Min Fei, a headstrong and cantankerous young woman. Daniel saw her often in the house. Sometimes she would come and sit with her sewing under the eaves of the courtyard and watch him as he worked, her eyes bold as imps. He had seen her once or twice without the carmine and white powder she wore on her face, and he realized that she was not so young as he had first thought. Twenty-two or three, perhaps even older, and she had no fear of any man. The more Daniel saw of her, the more he was convinced that the story about the flower house was true.

His ears caught the sound of scurrying in the shavings below. A rat squealed in mortal terror, then fell silent. The air sang with the whine of mosquitoes. Daniel closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The creak of the door sent him bolt upright on his mat. Min Fei stood in the open doorway, silhouetted against the waning moon.

"Li-t'ung — " Her whisper stabbed the darkness. Daniel rubbed his eyes. Her hair blew softly in the summer night's breeze as she drifted closer to him. "I brought you something . . . " she murmured. "For your back."

Daniel did not answer. He had never spoken to her. To do so would have been a serious breach of propriety.

"Don't be afraid," she laughed, reaching out toward him. Her fingertips, their nails long and pointed, brushed his arm like feathers. "I saw him beat you today — the old goat — and I knew it was my fault. It was I who had angered him. I have some ointment here. It will ease the pain."

Daniel felt his heart pulsing against his eardrums. "My back will mend," he said in a low voice. "And our master will beat us both if he finds you here."

She laughed again, a bit harshly. "Ah, but he will not, Li-t'ung. He left this evening for Masang. Lie down and turn over." She nudged him, and Daniel did as he was told. His shoulders *did* pain him some. The warm, pungent smell of the ointment made his nostrils twitch. For a long moment, he lay still and felt the smoothness of her oiled palms sliding up his bare back. Their touch sent a shiver down into his thighs.

"Our master will be gone for at least ten days," she said. "Do you want to know what is in Masang? No." Well, I will tell you anyway. There is a house in Masang. A house of women."

Daniel closed his eyes and let her chatter wash over him like a wave. In spite of his apprehension, he felt warm and pleasant. It had been a long time since anyone had touched him in kindness.

"Did you hear him shouting at me this morning, Li-t'ung? He was angry because I have not given him a son! Pah!" She punctuated her disgust with a little slap on his shoulder. "His wife gave him only females. Maybe that old dry stick can't get a son from any woman!"

Daniel opened his eyes, her words penetrating his mind as the strong oil penetrated his back. He thought of Liu's first wife, bedridden and growing weaker every day. She would not live much longer. When she died, Min Fei, as the only concubine, would be the most likely woman to succeed her as Liu's legal wife, with the right to inherit his land and money. But Min Fei would have a rival — an unknown woman from the town of Masang. And the chance was great that the favored concubine would be the first woman to present old Liu with a child. Min Fei was fighting for her future.

Her hands were as strong as they were soft, circling up and over his shoulders, massaging his bruised and aching muscles, sending the warmth of their touch trickling along his spine. "You are kind to me, Min Fei," he said.

"I am as much a slave as you are, Li-t'ung, but we can help one another, you and I — Aiee! There are rats on your floor!" With a little squeal, she clambered up onto the bed beside him. "How do you stand it here? When I am mistress in this house, I will not permit you to be treated so — " She knelt beside him now, her hands slithering like

twin serpents over his skin. The night was warm. Low in his body he felt a strange, pulsating heat. One of Min Fei's hands slid casually beneath the waistband of his trousers, moved lower to brush the tense curve of his buttocks.

Daniel knew then what she wanted, and suddenly he was terrified. With a jerk, he turned over and sat up. "I — think my back is better now," he mumbled, his face hot.

She crouched back on the heels of her tiny, bound feet and laughed softly, her painted face sharp as a vixen's in the moonlight. "You have never taken a woman, have you, Li-t'ung?" She paused long enough to let his silence answer her question. "Ah, how I envy your innocence!" Her silk robe swished as she slid off the bed and tottered toward the door. "Another night perhaps . . . for now I will congratulate myself on having found a pure man at last!" With a knowing smile and a flutter of her hand, she slipped through the door and glided off into the night, her laughter tinkling like a distant bell.

Daniel flung himself onto his back and lay still, except for the pounding of his heart. When he touched his face, he found that his cheek was damp with tiny jewels of sweat.

Shanghai
July, 1861

Evan Ames was married. He had wed the sixteen-year-old daughter of a man who worked as a typesetter on his father's newspapers. Serena got the news in one of Moira's long letters, and it brought back with biting clarity the night of her own wedding, when Evan had stood in the garden and pressed the muzzle of the little derringer to his temple. Poor, wild Evan, and a sixteen-year-old bride. Lord! She shuddered with pity for the girl.

Sometimes she wondered what might have happened that night if Jason Frobisher hadn't come along. Would Evan have used the gun to force her to go with him? Would he have shot her with it? Would he have succeeded in shooting himself? Thanks to Jason, she would never know. When she closed her eyes, she still saw his body hurtling through the darkness, one arm reaching out for the pistol, one powerful shoulder striking Evan and knocking him off-balance. She still felt his eyes, cold and disdainful, as he handed her the lost wedding veil. His voice raked her memory with its contemptuous utterance of her

name — *Mrs. Bolton*. Oh, if Harry and the others hadn't been there, she'd have put him in his place!

And then, to have him as a guest in her house that week while his ship was being loaded and provisioned. To endure those arrogant eyes, to seethe with buried rage every time he spoke to her, his voice dripping scorn — the strain had worn her patience spider-web thin! Yet for Harry's sake, she had made an effort to be gracious. Dear Harry who, in his choice of friends, was as indiscriminating as a puppy. She had smiled at the dour young captain over what seemed like an endless succession of breakfasts and dinners, answered him politely whenever he growled some question at her, and all in all maintained a civil tongue. Only once had her tight veneer of reserve cracked. Only once — but she would not think of that now. Jason Frobisher was gone, the *Tarpon* winging its way to California with a cargo of tea, rice, and two hundred bolts of Harry's finest silk. She would put him out of her mind, knowing that the ordeal of his presence would not have to be faced again for at least another four months. And in the meantime, she had other fish to fry!

Harry had given her an office of her own. Not a cubbyhole in some dim recess of one of the godowns, but a large, splendid corner suite on the second floor of the Bolton Building, its windows overlooking Maloo Road along one side and the Bund on the other. Serena had spent the past week selecting furniture and hanging draperies of cream-colored Shantung to contrast with the mahogany-paneled walls. In a spare bedroom of Harry's house, she had discovered and appropriated a priceless Persian rug, patterned in hues of cream, brown, gold, and pale blue. On the wall of the office, she had hung her beloved Chinnery paintings — a small harbor scene with an orange-sailed junk in the foreground, a black and white sketch of Macao's Ma Cho Temple, and of course the magnificent portrait of Kathleen Bellamy, which she placed opposite her desk, where she could see it when she glanced up from her work.

The decorating of the office had been a delight, a work of love to Serena. But now the fun was over and the challenge ahead loomed large and formidable: to justify Harry's faith in her business ability and to prove herself to the merchant community of Shanghai.

There had been raised eyebrows aplenty when her intentions had become known. The idea of a woman, especially a young and pretty

one, engaging in the cutthroat business of land trafficking was unheard of! And in many cases, the women of Shanghai were more hostile to her than the men. Already the number of invitations to tiffins and teas had diminished to a trickle, and Serena suspected that the gossip had flourished in inverse proportion. Well, let them talk! Let them talk and be damned! She'd had enough of their silly teas and their trivial hen-chatter. Clothes and servants and weddings and babies! That was all they ever discussed, and she was weary of it!

Serena leaned back in her chair, which was upholstered in creamy goatskin, tanned to petal-like softness. The expanse of the great walnut desk lay before her like a kingdom, scattered with contracts, deeds, and charts. An ivory-handled pen reposed in its crystal inkwell, and Harry's face smiled in miniature from its little silver frame on one corner of the desk.

The scratch of steel pen-nib on paper was just audible from the adjoining office. Harry had lent her Yao, his Ningpo-born secretary and accountant. Like the room and its furnishings, Yao was first class, a whisper-footed marvel of efficiency who concealed behind his homely, bespectacled face a whole library's worth of useful information. He was also a Christian, an early convert of Serena's own grandfather. When he had learned that she was Archer Bellamy's granddaughter, his face had assumed the closest thing to a grin she had yet to see, and he had declared in his formal, stilted English that he was honored above all men to be serving her. She suspected, however, that he nursed secret reservations about her, a woman inexperienced in business and of an age when she should be at home rearing children. Yes, she acknowledged inwardly, she would have to prove herself to Yao as well as to everyone else.

Well, by damn, she had no doubts she could do it! She was not all *that* green! Her father had let her help out a bit in Hong Kong, enough at least so that she was familiar with ledger books and shipping invoices and inventory sheets, with credit and debit and profit and loss. She knew opium, and soon, she swore, there would be nothing she would not know about the lease and sale of land in Shanghai. It was a shame, she thought, that her father hadn't just let her jump right in and learn the running of Bellamy and Company. But he had always expected that job would go to Stephen. Poor Papa! And poor Stephen! She wanted to cry for them both. Morgan Bellamy had made such

plans for his son — and Stephen had wanted no part of them. Serena picked up Moira's letter from where she had put it down on the desk. What a pity she hadn't been born a boy! She was the eldest, if only by minutes. The company could have been hers, and Stephen would have been free to follow his dream without bitterness.

She sighed as she scanned the letter and took up Moira's train of thought once more: "Papa sends his love and asks me to apologize for his not writing more often. He's busier than ever with the company, but something has changed. It doesn't seem *fun* for him anymore. Maybe it's because of Stephen, or because he misses you even more than he'd feared he would, but something is wrong. He's drinking a bit more now, not a good deal, but enough to notice. Oftentimes he'll go out in the evening and not return until dawn. I sometimes wonder whether he would come home at all if I were not here.

"Oh, Serena, how I would love to come to you in Shanghai for a few weeks. But I dare not leave Papa by himself for that long. Maybe if Harry would let you come home for a visit — "

Serena folded the letter again. She had already read it once, and its contents only saddened her. Poor, dear Papa. He and Stephen had never been truly close, they were so different from one another. As for Moira, her birth had killed the one woman Morgan truly loved — the woman whose likeness she bore like a curse. That alone, if nothing else, stood as a barrier between them. Try as he might to hide it, Morgan Bellamy had never forgiven her.

Serena alone was truly, totally his child — so like him in appearance and temperament that if she had been a man —

She shook her head, breaking off the thought. Even the brandy — But that was behind her. She had not felt the need for it since the night Harry had suggested she take over the land sale. Still, she could never be the son her father wanted. Hers was a woman's body, a woman's mind, and a woman's heart. She had no choice but to make the best of what she had. Perhaps if there were any hope of giving her father a grandson who could be raised to take over both the Bellamy and Bolton firms when he was grown . . .

Picking up the silver-framed miniature of Harry Bolton, she cradled it between her palms. A mist of tears blurred the image of his handsome, white-crowned features. "Oh, Harry . . . " she whispered.

She loved him, she told herself. How could anyone not love Harry? He was the sweetest, kindest, best man in the world! He adored her and indulged her. He was as patient as a saint, not only enduring but understanding her restlessness, her sudden change of mood, her outbursts of temper. It was Harry who'd had the wisdom to realize how much she needed this new business involvement, when in the beginning she had not even realized it herself.

And it was because she did love him that she took such pains to hide her despair over his inability to give her a child.

She and Harry had not talked about it a great deal. Neither of them had wanted to. He would only say that years ago something had happened to him, something tragic and very painful, and since that time he had found it impossible to make love. His voice had broken and he had almost wept. "If it's an annulment you're thinking of, Serena, rest assured I'll grant it willingly and hold nothing against you."

She had put her arms around him and kissed the line where his beautiful white hair met his tanned forehead. "Oh, no . . . no, Harry," she'd whispered. "It doesn't matter. I love you, and I want to stay with you always. Maybe with time, it will happen. I can wait."

But it had not happened. By now, after five months of marriage, Serena realized that Harry had given up. He still took her in his arms often enough; he still kissed her, but not with passion. She still shared his bed, snuggling in her long nightdress against the warm curve of his body, but even in sleep he held her the way a father would hold his child, one arm softly circling her waist, his hands avoiding any touch that might arouse her desire.

Gently, she put the little portrait back in its place on the corner of the desk. Some women, if they knew, would call her fortunate, she mused. She had heard tales of brutal husbands who forced themselves obscenely upon their brides, bruising and tearing. She'd listened with horrified ears to descriptions of the agonies of childbirth, the screams, the blood, the hours, even days of excruciating labor. Her own mother's death attested to their truth. Some would say Serena had the best of two worlds, a wealthy, handsome, considerate husband, as well as freedom from the pain and degradation of being a wife. Yes, she told herself, she should count her blessings. Yet she had never wanted or expected anything less from life than the total experience of being a woman, and she ached for what she was missing.

But enough of woolgathering! She straightened in her chair and reached for the stack of unsigned contracts. They were written out both in English and in Chinese, and she always made sure that either she or Yao had read every word of them. Later on, she promised herself, she would hire a larger staff and delegate much of the paper work, but at this stage the watchword was caution; She wanted to make sure everything was done exactly right.

Only three days ago, she had paid a call on the leading Chinese banker in Shanghai, Yang Tse-tang, usually called Taki because he was the head of the great Taki Bank. At first the venerable man had been somewhat taken aback at the idea of doing business with a woman, even a woman who spoke to him most excellently in his native Cantonese. However, as soon as he had learned that Serena was Harry Bolton's wife, his attitude toward her had changed completely.

"A word of advice from this unworthy one," he had said, leaning confidentially across his ebony desk, which was gorgeously inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a flying crane design. He was a man of middle age, plump-faced and sumptuously gowned in a robe of burgundy silk brocade embroidered in gold thread. The dagger-pointed nails of his fourth and fifth fingers were sheathed in yellow jade to protect their near-six-inch length. "Because you are the wife of a very good man, I tell you this. Do not sell your land. Buy more if you are able. Buy all you can. Then lease it to those who come fleeing the rebellion. Their numbers grow with each moon. The price of land is going up. Those who sell now will be sorry later." His eyes were narrow slits, the pupils tiny and bright, like a wren's. "You need only to have ditches dug for drainage and streets laid out, and if I can serve you in any way, you've only to ask."

She had almost skipped down the Bund after leaving his office. It was a good beginning, rich with the promise of things to come. She had checked Taki's counsel against the figures that Yao had brought her, and had concluded that he had advised her soundly. As more and more refugees poured into already-crowded Shanghai, the price of any available plot of ground was bound to skyrocket — and the rebellion that had ravaged China for more than ten years showed no signs of abating.

In the conflict between the Taipings and the Manchu Dynasty, the European community at Shanghai stood staunchly neutral. English

and French troops had marched on Peking the year before, and a state of war still officially existed between these nations and imperial China. Some very valuable concessions had been obtained from the Peking government, however, including the right of trade for foreign ships up the Yangtze River to Hankow. England, for one, was not ready to risk these hard-won advantages to an alliance with the Taipings. A declaration had been made that no military forces on either side would be tolerated in the Shanghai vicinity. This position had made Shanghai a haven for the starving, impoverished thousands fleeing depredations of both the Taipings and the imperialist troops.

The summer of 1861 found the Taipings in strong possession of the beautiful coastal city of Hangchow, in control of practically all of rich Chekiang Province and undisputed rulers of all Kiangsu Province, except a cramped semicircle of territory around Shanghai. Ahnui and Kiangsi were also largely in their hands, and they ruled more than seventy million people. They lacked nothing in the way of food or manpower, but they were in dire need of the seaport of Shanghai and of access to the markets of the world, both for exports of tea and silk, and in order to import war materials from abroad.

For the time being, Shanghai seemed safe enough. Jason Frobisher's friend Colonel Ward was engaged in training a thousand Chinese troops out at Sungkiang, and it was said that he planned to recruit at least two thousand more for a major offensive against the Taipings in January of the coming year. The entire effort was being financed by Shanghai's Chinese business community, headed by no less a personage than old Taki himself. Even so, in the light of Ward's early failures, most of the British residents had grave doubts about his abilities. Among the doubters were Serena and Harry.

When Jason had returned from Ward's base at Sungkiang with enthusiastic reports of what the man was accomplishing, Harry's protests had touched off a spirited debate.

"Bloody dangerous training these Chinese," Harry had muttered. "A Chinese would just as soon stick a knife in you as look at you. Put a gun in his hand and you're asking for trouble! Your so-called friend's a fool to trust them!"

"You're wrong. Harry. They *worship* him! They've never had what he's giving them! Look, the imperial troops and the local Green Rags are a joke. Their cowardice and incompetence are a discredit to the

whole Chinese race. The Taipings are somewhat better. At least they've a bit of discipline and something to fight for. But these yellow bastards of Wards — excuse me, Mrs. Bolton — they're equal to any fighting force I've ever seen!"

Serena cleared her throat. "And being from the wilds of America, Captain, that's certainly not surprising."

Jason Frobisher's black eyebrow shot upward. "Permit me to remind you, Mrs. Bolton. My great-grandfather fought in the revolution that sent the British scooting for home with their tails between their legs!"

Serena let her smile come slowly, the dimples deepening little by little. "Why, Captain, so did mine," she purred. "Samuel Franklin Robards, on my mother's side. It was at Yorktown, I believe. He died with an English musketball in his chest. Maybe he and your great-grandfather were comrades-in-arms!"

Jason glanced over at Harry. "You know, you've no business turning this woman loose on an unsuspecting public, my friend. She's got a bite like a rattlesnake!"

Harry had the grace to laugh. Then he pulled the neat little watch he carried out of the pocket of his gray silk vest. "My apologies, Jason . . . Serena, my dear. I promised Abner Heard I'd join him in the bar of the Astor House. He's bringing a chap from Melbourne who's talked about investing in a cargo of silk, and I promised him a bit of free advice. I'd be happy to have you along, Jason. Might interest you as well." He rose from his chair and reached for the little silver-headed ebony walking stick he usually carried when he went out. All for show, Serena observed. He moved with the sprightly ease of a man half his age. "Coming?" he asked Jason.

Jason Frobisher leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs. Traces of dried brown mud clung to the edges of his boot soles and left tiny flakes on the cream-colored carpet. "Thanks, but I'll pass this time. Harry. We're casting off tomorrow, you know. I thought I'd round up my gear and turn in early on board the *Tarpon*. If I don't see you again — "

"Of course. Until next time. A speedy voyage, friend." Harry extended his arm and the two of them shook hands warmly. Then, with an affectionate nod to Serena, he strode into the hallway and out the front door, leaving her to face her adversary alone.

Serena, who had been sitting in the rocker poring over a book on finance, stood up and fluffed out her skirt of pale yellow organdy. Uneasily, she flitted about the room, placing Harry's empty glass on a lacquered tray for one of the boys to take out, plumping and straightening the sofa cushions, hoping her flurry of activity would induce Jason to leave.

He lounged in the armchair, his long legs extended and crossed at the ankles, one hand cradling a half-emptied goblet of Harry's finest *amontillado*. He was dressed casually as always, in fawn-colored breeches and an open-necked shirt of the softest Irish linen. His buckskin jacket was flung haphazardly over the back of the chair. As Serena moved about the parlor, his dark, heavy-lidded eyes — gypsy eyes, she thought, secretive as night — followed her.

At last he gave her a mocking smile. "Rest assured, Mrs. Bolton, I'll be leaving as soon as I finish this glass. *Amontillado*, alas, was never meant to be wasted, or gulped in a hurry."

She flushed. He had read her thoughts and had been rude enough to say so. "Stay as long as you like, Captain," she answered coldly.

He took a small sip from the goblet, savoring the rich amber liquid for a moment before he swallowed it. "Harry tells me you're going into business for yourself," he said.

"And what of it?" The retort had sprung to her lips without thought. "We've the land, and there's money to be made on it. Can I assume you don't approve?"

"You can, for what it's worth." He stared down into the glass.

"And why not, Captain? Do you think that just because I'm a woman I won't succeed?" Serena gave her hair a defiant toss.

"I've no doubt you'll succeed. With your determination and Harry's money, you can hardly fail."

"Well, then?" She spun around to face him, her hands on her hips.

"Putting aside my feelings about getting rich off other people's misery," he said slowly, "it's for your own sake, yours and Harry's. I've known businesswomen in San Francisco and a few other places. The strain, the competition, it does something to them. Before long, they get hard. Hard and mean and mercenary and bitter. I wouldn't wish a woman like that on a man like Harry." A finger's worth of *amontillado* remained in the goblet. He swirled it for a moment, gazing down into the amber whirlpool. Raising it to his lips, he quaffed

the last of it. Then, abruptly, he stood, jerking his coat from the back of the chair.

Serena had planted herself an arm's length in front of him. When he rose to his feet, she found herself strangely rooted to the spot, her face inches from his chest. In the silence of the room, she could hear the drumming of his heart, echoing her own racing pulse.

Lifting her face, she met his eyes — angry eyes, little black fires of contempt smoldering in their depths. With a little gasp, she stepped backward.

"Harry doesn't need a business partner, Mrs. Bolton," he said icily. "Any man can see that's not why he wed you. If you've any sense, you'll give up this foolishness. You'll stay home and have his babies and make him happy!"

His words sliced into her like a razor. Her lips parted in anguish. Some wounded instinct sprang up in her as she saw his expression, insolent and mocking. By reflex, her hand went up, drew back. With all her strength, she slapped him hard across the face. The sound echoed like a gunshot in the quiet parlor.

Serena fell back, her wrist aching from the blow, her palm smarting viciously. Silent and terrible, he towered above her, his features a stony mask as he draped the buckskin jacket over his left forearm. A red patch had begun to glow on his cheek.

Without a word, he turned, brushed past her, and strode to the double doors that opened into the foyer. For an instant, he paused, his hand on the doorknob, a twisted smile on his lean face. "I'll be getting my things, Mrs. Bolton. Then I'll not trouble you any longer. My thanks for your hospitality, however reluctantly it was given, and my wishes for success in your new undertaking." He opened the door, stepped out, and closed it softly behind him.

Hot-cheeked and quivering, she stood where he had left her. Her heart was jelly beneath her ribs. Her tongue trembled with unspoken retorts, each one angrier and more vicious than the last. Bastard! Insolent, arrogant bastard! She wanted to scream the words after him, so that he could hear them all through the house. She might have, too, if the number-four boy had not come into the parlor just then to tidy up for the night. Instead, she nodded at the lad and swept out of the room with her head held high. Biting her lips, she mounted the long stairway and found the bedroom door. Only when it was discreetly

locked behind her did she dare fling herself across the bed and burst into wild, bitter tears.

Taocheng

July, 1861

Daniel bent over the lid of a coffin, a plane in his hands, smoothing the edges with long strokes. The setting sun blazed red and hot in the cloudless sky. Perspiration ran in rivulets down his bare back as he worked with the fury of a man possessed, driven by the nameless fire in his blood. For ten nights, he had barely closed his eyes in sleep. To sleep would be to dream of Min Fei's perfumed hands gliding along the contours of his body, stroking him in forbidden places, churning his newfound passions to a tempest.

Min Fei had advanced and retreated with the experienced skill of a Manchu general, leaving him exposed and open to the next assault. Since the night she had come with the ointment for his back, she had made no move to touch him; she had spoken no words — but her black eyes followed him everywhere. At night he tossed in his bed, afraid that she would come to him again — afraid that she would not.

As he worked, he forced his frenzied mind to recite the words of Confucius as he had learned them from his father. *There are three things that the superior man guards against. In his youth, when the physical powers are not yet settled, he guards against lust. When he is strong . . . quarrelsomeness . . . when he is old . . . covetousness.* He reminded himself again and again of his mother's story about the young Joseph, a slave in the house of Potiphar. Tempted by the wife of his master, the youth had fled, leaving his garment in her hands. Daniel thought of Min Fei and wondered whether he would have the strength to run from her. He did not know. His strength had never been put to the test

Daniel brushed the shavings from the workbench and carried the tools into the shed where he slept. The day had been long and he had worked alone. He had not seen Min Fei since midafternoon, when Liu had returned from his journey to Masang with a new concubine. Daniel had caught a glimpse of the girl as she stepped from her curtained sedan chair in the courtyard. She was younger than Min Fei, and prettier.

Darkness was gathering as Daniel walked across the courtyard to the kitchen. Liu had feasted on spiced pork and crackling rice cakes

earlier in the evening. The lingering aroma made Daniel's mouth water. Perhaps, with good luck, there might be a little left over to go with his customary fare of cold noodles and bean curd.

The cook had gone. The kitchen was deserted except for a forlorn figure huddled beside the brick stove. When Daniel came closer, he saw that it was Min Fei. For a moment, he hesitated in the doorway, telling himself that he should forget his hunger and flee like Joseph. Then she raised her face and saw him, and he knew that he could not be so cruel as to go.

"Come in, Li-t'ung," she said in a voice that cracked like an old woman's. Her white robe was smudged with soot from the stove, her hair hung down around her face in strings. Lines of despair etched her unpainted face, and her eyes were red. "I have kept the food warm for you," she said.

"Thank you." Daniel sat down at a cautious distance and accepted the covered pottery dish she held out to him. When he opened it, he saw that it was filled with pork and rice cakes. Although he was ravenous, he took the chopsticks and lifted small pieces, chewing slowly with his mouth closed, the way his mother had taught him.

Min Fei sat with her chin in her hands. "Did you see her, Li-t'ung? Did you see how she looks? How she walks? Her feet are like tiny shells, and she calls me *je-je*, elder sister."

"I saw her for a moment." Daniel savored the spiced fried pork. It had been months since he had tasted anything so good. He wondered whether Min Fei had set it aside for him.

"Look at me," she said with a bitter laugh. "I am already old. What will become of me?"

"Surely Liu will not cast you out."

"Liu will not live forever. His wife, the old woman, is dying. When the time comes, he will choose between us." Her voice was harsh and low in her throat. "What chance do I have against such a one? When my lord Liu brought me here, I was happy. A rich man. A sickly wife. I had only to endure the old dry stick for a few years, and then, if the gods willed it, I would be a proper widow, with land and money. Perhaps . . ." she raised her tear-shot eyes and something of the old boldness flickered in their depths, "perhaps I could have even married again, a man of my own liking this time . . ." She plunged her face into her hands. "Why do I pretend, Li-t'ung? He will make her his wife,

and when he dies, this wretched one will be lucky to have a mud hut and a bowl of rice." She sniffed and poured Daniel a cupful of hot tea.

He took the tea from her, her fingers brushing his. The touch was accidental, but it quickened his pulse. Even with Min Fei sitting here before him, her face an ugly red and her eyes streaming tears, his lust was a hungry monster, crouched and ready to spring. He knew that if he put out even a friendly hand to comfort her, he would be lost.

"Surely," he said with caution, "it is too soon to lose hope. The old woman could live many months . . . and perhaps the new one will not please our master."

"Empty words, Li-t'ung." She gave a little snort and tossed her hair. "The old woman already sees the beckoning hands of her ancestors. As for our master — he is so taken with his new plaything that he did not even look into the room of his wife when he came home. A son! Only a man child can save me now!"

She took the empty bowl from Daniel's lap and gave him a moistened napkin to wash his hands. He trembled as he looked at her. In her determination, she was as fierce as a wild beast. "Perhaps it is the fault of the old one," she said. "I know that I am not barren, because I had a daughter once." A shadow of sadness passed across her face. "I had no money to care for her, and so I sold her to a peasant family, to raise as a bride for their small son."

Daniel forced himself to rise. "I can only wish you well, Min Fei," he said in a voice that was too calm, "and thank you for your kindness tonight."

As he turned to leave, she gave him a wan smile and slumped dejectedly against the side of the brick stove. Only her black eyes darted after him, bold and hungry as twin ferrets.

The moon was a mere sliver against the inky sky. For a time, Daniel slept fitfully, bolting awake at every small sound in the darkness. No, she would not come, he reassured himself. Not with Liu in the house, and not when he had given her so little encouragement there in the kitchen. There were other men in Taocheng. A determined woman like Min Fei could find another way to get what she wanted.

He drifted at last into a deep sleep, only to dream of her scented warmth beside him, her skin smooth as polished jade against his own burning flesh.

A dove murmured in the rafters of the little shed. Daniel opened his eyes, jarred awake by the familiar sound and the sense that someone was nearby. He lay still as his ears caught the rustle of silk beside the bed. The scent of jasmine filled his nostrils. Min Fei had come.

He began to tremble, for he knew the depths of her determination. She would not be easily turned away. Moving his head slightly, he saw her, silhouetted where the rays of moonlight wafted through the cracks between the lumber of the shed. She had brushed her long hair and perfumed her skin. Her very desire was a fragrance that filled the room. Daniel closed his eyes, dizzy with sudden fear.

Her hand reached out and brushed his bare shoulder. "Li-t'ung," she whispered, and he could tell from the sound of her voice that she was still weeping. "Li-t'ung, I have come to beg you."

He opened his lips to protest, to argue, and found that he could not speak the words that would send her away. He groped in the depths of his soul for strength, but his resolve was gone, washed away by the tides of his desire and Min Fei's need.

"Li-t'ung — "

"Lie down," he whispered hoarsely.

With a little sob of gratitude and anticipation, she came into his bed. He opened his quivering arms, drew her close, and at last the dream that had haunted him for so many days became a warm, wild, bitter-sweet reality.

Eight

Hankow

July, 1861

All through the summer, the rains had come, pelting down week after week on the battered plains and hillsides until the streams gushed like severed arteries. Day by day, hour by hour, relentless as time itself, the level of the Yangtze crawled upward until it licked at the very tops of the steep banks that had towered forty feet above its winter waterline.

Every day for the past month, Stephen had stood at the top of the water stairs and counted the steps that remained visible above the yellow-brown torrent. Today the river lapped at his feet.

Hankow was the lowest of the three cities that ringed the confluence of the Han and the Yangtze, and since it was also without walls, it was always the first to be flooded. Many of its wealthier inhabitants had already fled to the safety of Wuchang, where they would pass the time of danger in comfortable inns, visiting, drinking, and gambling. Among the poor, those who were able took to boats and fled across the Han, where they camped on the open slopes of Hanyang's hills, wet, hungry, and miserable. For others, there was no escape. They remained, and many perished, wretched sacrifices to the angry river gods. Year after year, they perished.

With a sigh, Stephen turned away from the river and made his way back along the waterfront street that Hankow's British promoters declared would one day be as elegant as Shanghai's Bund. Today it was nothing but a quagmire dancing with raindrops. The planks that had been laid out over the gooey brown mud were slippery from the rain. Those who were unlucky enough to have business on the streets

teetered along in single file, their burdens swinging from bamboo shoulder poles as they fought their way through the stinging down-pour. Hankow was far from being a deserted city — The rich could leave servants behind when they fled, their lives pledged to guarding the possessions of their masters. Those less fortunate could count on finding their homes picked clean by thieves when they returned after the flood. And even for those with little to lose, the prospect of squatting in the rain on Hanyang Hill kept them clinging to their homes until the last possible moment of imminent danger.

Stephen cursed the crated china, silver, and linens that Madeline had brought all the way from England. Too cumbersome to load into the small sampans that ferried passengers to Hanyang, they would most likely be left to the mercy of thieves and looters should the flood force them to flee. Indeed, it was Madeline's fear for her treasures that had kept them in Hankow this long.

It was time he got her to safety in Hanyang, Stephen admonished himself. The river was within inches of the top of its banks, certain to spill over within hours. And there was no telling when it would stop. In most years, it did little more than flood the streets, but in 1850 it had risen so high that the houses looked like so many duckweeds floating in the water. Thousands, it was said, had drowned or starved.

Madeline would be wondering where he was, he reminded himself as he turned his steps away from the river road. His shoes were like sponges, sucking in the muddy water and sloshing it out again in spite of the feeble protection of the planks. He was even more worried about his wife than he cared to admit. For all her good intentions, Madeline had been ill most of the time these past months — bedridden toward the last of her pregnancy. Stephen had watched her grow thin and pale until she looked like a malnourished child, with her haunted eyes and swollen belly. At first she had tried to keep house herself, hanging pictures and curtains in their wretched quarters to make it more homelike, sweeping the dust and cockroaches from the corners with a reed broom, doing her best to cook up the noodles and unappetizing hunks of mutton that Archer Bellamy fetched home from the marketplace. But the effort had proved too much for her. The day after she'd fainted in the kitchen, almost scalding herself on the boiling water she'd knocked off the stove, Stephen had hired a local woman to help her — a surly creature who was neither trusting nor

trustworthy — and with whom poor Madeline could exchange no more than half a dozen words.

Stephen had hoped that the woman would at least provide some companionship and give Madeline some practice with the dialect. Instead, the witch had stolen Madeline's pearl earrings and had the effrontery to deny it even when they were found thrust into the hem of her trousers. She'd been dismissed at once, but no one could be found to replace her. The people were fearful and suspicious of the foreigners. Only those few who, like the thieving woman, were bold enough to think they could exploit the *fan kwei* or steal from them seemed to be willing to cross their threshold. At last, in desperation, Stephen had hired the woman back.

The doctor Harry had sent upriver in June had been a young bachelor, not very experienced either with women or with China. He'd given Madeline a rather cursory examination and had pronounced that there was nothing wrong with her that a bit of rest and some good English food would not cure. As to the question of her going back to Shanghai, he had recommended it, but only as a precaution. "I'd not advise any woman to risk having a child in a place like this!" he'd exclaimed. His advice had not been strongly worded enough to persuade Madeline. She had insisted on staying.

As he raised an arm to wipe the raindrops from his face, Stephen heard the familiar crackling of paper in the pocket of his shirt. Serena's last letter, entreating him once more to send Madeline to Shanghai for the baby's birth, had arrived twelve days ago on the last steamer to brave the raging floodwaters — too late, even then. Madeline had refused to leave him. Something in her pleading voice and in the way she'd clung to his hand had torn at his heart, and he sensed that if he let her go he might never see her again.

Stephen slogged through the muddy streets, lost in thought. He remembered Moira's birth. He'd been eight years old that day when his beautiful, dark-eyed mother had kissed his face and Serena's and sent them off with the *amah* and the driver for a long day of picnicking and swimming on the other side of Hong Kong Island. They had returned at dusk to find their sister — a tiny, black-haired girl child with a grotesquely twisted foot — squalling in the arms of a nurse. Their mother lay in the parlor, already in her coffin, cold and white and still.

If only he could have been there, Stephen had thought in his small man's way, he could have held her hands; somehow he could have tugged her back from the arms of death. But he had been away, laughing and splashing in the surf while his mother screamed and bled and died. And now, suddenly, he knew why he had not forced Madeline to go back to Shanghai.

She would have gone, he realized, if he had insisted. It was his own desire that had kept her here, the sense — totally beyond reason — that she would be safe beside him. He began to tremble. Yes, he would get her to Hanyang at once. There was an Englishwoman in Hanyang, Mrs. Abernathy, the wife of the vice-consul, who had offered to take them in during Madeline's confinement. The baby wasn't expected until early next month, but with Madeline looking so frail and the river getting higher every hour, he'd be a fool to delay. He lengthened his stride to a run, his sodden shoes splattering muddy water where they struck the ground.

The mud grew worse as Stephen approached the two-room hole-in-a-wall he shared with Madeline and his grandfather. The street was the filthiest in all Hankow because it was the lowest. Whenever the rain fell, the muddy water flowed down into it like a funnel, washing refuse, slops, dead fish, all kinds of awful things, into pools where they lay rotting when the sun came out. Flies, rats, and cockroaches flourished, but there was no other place to be had. Stephen had searched in vain. In Hanyang, where the rest of the forty-odd Europeans lived, there was better housing, but Archer Bellamy had insisted on following the explicit directions of the mission supervisors: to live and proselytize in Hankow.

Stephen stamped the mud off his feet on the well-worn stoop and stepped in through the door, which was open even in the rain because there was no other source of light and ventilation for the two cramped rooms that had once housed an herb shop. The outer room served as a kitchen. Archer Bellamy had curtained off one end of it for his bed, leaving the other room for Stephen and Madeline. There were no sanitary facilities. Water for drinking, cooking, and washing was carried from the river by a grinning coolie who charged exorbitantly for the service. Chamber pots were left on the stoop each morning, to be emptied into buckets by the slop coolies who carried the human waste out to the fields.

The room was empty, which was strange because Stephen's grandfather had been there half an hour ago when Stephen had gone to check the river.

He stepped to the doorway of the room where he and Madeline slept on a straw mattress that was laid across the crates packed with dishes and linens. Parting the curtain, he saw the Chinese woman crouched at the foot of the bed, her eyes narrow and malevolent. Stephen wondered what she had stolen today. The pearl earrings had disappeared again shortly after she returned to work — this time with impunity. Her surly ministrations had become indispensable to poor Madeline, and so the wretch did as she liked. Stephen came as close to hating her as he had anyone in his life.

"Get our clothes packed," he said, his words stilted in the unfamiliar dialect. "We're going to Hanyang."

The woman replied with a rapid-fire explanation of which he understood scarcely a word and remained where she was, squatting by the bed. Stephen turned toward Madeline where she lay on the gray sheets, her light brown hair spread outward around her face like the rays of a pale sun. There were violet shadows below her eyes.

To Stephen's anguished gaze, she looked as if the life had already gone from her body. He had not realized until this moment just how gravely ill she was. Only the great, swelling lump of her abdomen remained growing and vital, as if it had sapped the strength from the rest of her body.

"Stephen . . ." Madeline smiled feebly and held out her hands. He hurried to her side to clasp them in his. They were soft and boneless, like wilted flowers.

"I'm taking you out of this place, dearest," he said. "While Ping packs your clothes, I'll go back to the river and hire a sampan. With luck, I'll be able to find a sedan chair as well, so you won't have to walk. Then we're taking you to Hanyang. To Mrs. Abernathy's. You can stay there till the baby comes."

She squeezed his hands hard as a shadow of pain crossed her face. "The baby's coming now," she whispered.

He felt his throat tighten in sudden panic. "But it wasn't supposed to —"

"I know. It's coming early." She hesitated, her fingers gripping and releasing like the claws of a cat. "My water burst just after you left this morning. Your grandfather's gone to find you."

"But you can't have it here!" His groping mind pictured the Abernathy's house in Hanyang, the gleaming floors and starched white sheets, the big four-poster bed with its feather mattress, where he had assured himself their child would be born with the capable Mrs. Abernathy, who'd raised eight children of her own, assisting. "The river — " he whispered. "It'll be flooding over by tonight."

She raised her head slightly. "My things — "

"We'll save what we can. The devil with the rest! It's you and the baby we've got to think of first!" Stephen glanced at the sloping bulge beneath the quilt. "We could still try to get you to Hanyang! How much longer, do you think?"

Madeline's head rolled back and forth on the pillow. "I don't know! Oh! Stephen!" Her hands dug into his as the pain surged upward through her body. Her back arched and twisted as she writhed in the jaws of agony. Stephen gripped her hands, the tears squeezing out of his eyes as the seconds plodded past.

After what seemed like an eternity, the pain ebbed. Madeline sighed deeply. "I promised myself I wasn't going to be a ninny about this," she whispered with a faint smile. "But it's the first time, and I'm not very good at it yet. Maybe when I've had as much practice as Mrs. Abernathy — Oh, I want to give you so many babies, Stephen!"

"Madeline, if we could get you into a boat within the next few minutes, do you think you'd be all right? It'll take close to an hour to cross the river, but if we hurry — "

Softly, she moaned. "I just don't know, Stephen."

He kissed her hands. "Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

Stephen heard his grandfather's feet on the brick stoop, stamping off the mud. A moment later, Archer Bellamy came into the kitchen, water dripping off the brim of his soggy hat and the hem of his black frock coat. In his haste to find Stephen, he had rushed off without his umbrella.

"I went t' fetch you," he said, scowling. Drops of water gleamed like jewels on his bristling silver brows.

"I know. I'm sorry." Stephen helped ease him out of his sopping coat, which he hung over the back of a chair. The wet shirt clung to the pink skin of his back, outlining his almost fleshless ribs. "I'm taking Madeline to Hanyang," Stephen said.

The rainstorm howled and hissed outside the open doorway. Archer Bellamy walked over to the stove and stood warming his back-

side. Clouds of vapor began to rise from his clothes. "Aye," he rumbled at last. "And it's 'igh time. 'Twas folly to bring her here in the first place. But you'd best go and hire a sampan. Once the river breaks its banks, there'll be none to be 'ad, I promise you that."

"Yes, you're quite right," Stephen heard himself saying. "It could mean her life or the baby's to get her to Mrs. Abernathy's." His own voice sounded strange to him, as if he were listening to someone else speaking about Madeline.

"Stephen!" The cry from the bedroom interrupted him. He plunged back through the doorway to see his wife thrashing in the bed again. "Stephen!" He could almost see the invisible hands of the tormentor squeezing her fragile body. Kneeling beside the bed, he took her hands. They clutched at him wildly.

"Madeline — " Her wavy hair was dark with sweat. It twisted about her neck as her head lolled back and forth. Stephen turned on the Chinese woman who crouched unmoving at the foot of the bed. "Can't you do something?" he raged in English. "My God, you're a woman! You should know what to do!"

She only stared at him through slitted eyes like a sinister but stupid rabbit. *Foolish man*, her gaze seemed to say. *This is females' business. You need only go away and let things take their natural course.*

Madeline's gasps of pain slowly diminished to a sigh. Stephen kissed her forehead. "I'm going to find a sampan to take us to Hanyang," he whispered. "You'll be in Mrs. Abernathy's big white bed before you know it!"

She gave a little moan of despair and pressed his knuckles hard against her mouth. "I can't," she murmured. "Don't move me, Stephen, it hurts so much . . ."

Archer Bellamy's towering frame filled the doorway. "You've no choice," he rasped. "The river's rising fast. This room's liable as not t' be under water by morning!"

As Stephen rose to go, Madeline's fingers gripped his. "Don't leave me!" she pleaded through clenched teeth as another wave of pain began to radiate from the center of her body. "Don't . . . don't leave me, Stephen!" she sobbed as the agony took her again.

Torn two ways, Stephen glanced helplessly up at his grandfather. The old man glowered back at him, his eyes cold with blame. If he'd made her go back to Shanghai or even forced her to stay in Hanyang,

they'd not be in this devil's trap of a predicament. The Reverend's wet clothes clung to his body. Stephen realized for the first time that his grandfather was old and frail. The flesh on his massive bones had wasted away. His back was beginning to stoop a bit. His chest heaved with weariness. "Stay with 'er then," he said. "Stay with your wife. I'll go and find a sampan."

With a sigh, he shrugged on his wet frock coat once more, took up the umbrella, and stepped out into the lashing downpour.

Madeline was whimpering softly. Stephen knelt beside the bed once more and put his arms awkwardly around her. Her delicate body was bowstring-taut. He pressed his face against her damp white neck. "My dearest love . . . " he murmured.

He had asked too much of life. He had dreamed of serving God in China with Madeline at his side. His dream and his love. He had been so determined to have them both. Now he realized that the two were at odds. He would have to choose.

The contraction had passed. She lay in his arms, trembling and soaked with perspiration. One slim hand moved up to stroke his hair.

"Madeline, I'm taking you out of China," he said in a choked voice. "As soon as you and the baby are well enough to travel, we're going back to Shanghai . . . and then, when you're feeling up to it, we'll sail home to England."

"No," she whispered. "This is what you've always wanted — "

"They'll give me a nice little parish somewhere. We can have a cottage of our own with roses and tulips and a swing in the yard for the children . . . "

"Stephen, I've failed you — "

"Hush, dearest one. It's I who've failed. I've failed you and grandfather and myself. I don't belong here."

"No," she whispered, but the protest was more feeble this time. Her hand tightened on his as the pain crept into her body once more and grew second by second into a gnawing, gripping monster.

As the minutes ticked by, Stephen became increasingly worried about his grandfather. He stood up and paced through the kitchen to the doorway that opened onto the street. The water covered the stoop now, and it was not just the muddy brown torrent caused by the rain. The street swam in the yellow *Nan shuei* waters of the flooding river!

There was no time to be lost. He had to find his grandfather. "Stay with her!" he barked at the Chinese woman. "I'll be back as soon as I can!"

"Stephen — " Madeline opened her eyes and held out her arms.

"I won't be long!" Before she could call him back, he swung out of the room, seized the umbrella, and strode out into the rain, his head bowed against the whipping drops.

There were two usual routes to the river. Stephen resolved to take the shorter one first and, if he did not find his grandfather, return by the longer one, which wound through the market section of Hankow.

The water swirled around his ankles as he walked. He shielded his eyes as best he could with his hands as he peered down the sidestreets and alleys. The sodden carcass of a drowned chicken washed past his feet, rolling end over end. He could not see his grandfather.

The street opened onto the river road, almost indistinguishable now from the river itself. Stephen slogged twice up and down the length of the river road looking for his grandfather. When he did not find him, he headed back in the direction of home.

The yellow water was knee-deep as he rounded the corner onto their street. It lapped at thresholds, spilling over some. Stephen found his own doorway. "Grandfather!" he shouted into the dim hollow of the kitchen. The silence mocked him as he came inside, dripping mud heedlessly onto the floor that would soon be covered by the river. "Grandfather!" Only the sound of Madeline's moaning answered him from the bedroom.

As he stepped through the doorway, he gasped. Madeline lay beneath the sheet, twisting in agony. The Chinese woman was nowhere to be seen, but the room had been ransacked. The wooden crates supporting the bed, the ones containing Madeline's linens, fine Sheffield china, and heirloom silver, had been hacked open, their contents torn out and scattered, the more valuable items carried off. Madeline's modest jewelry box was missing from its place on the makeshift dressing table and — a quick glance into the kitchen confirmed it — even the stew was gone.

Madeline moaned and stretched out trembling hands. Stephen gathered her into his arms. "It was Ping," she sobbed. "A man came for her, and they took . . . everything . . . even the quilt. They used it to bundle up all the — " The press of her wet face against his chest muffled the rest of her words.

"Hush." He smoothed her sweat-tangled hair, thanking God that at least they hadn't harmed her. "It's all right, love, they're only things . . . I'm here now . . ."

"The river —"

"Aye. It's flooding over. But there's nothing to fear now." He looked back through the doorway at the fingers of water that were already spreading onto the kitchen floor.

"And you found your grandfather?"

"He's still waiting for a sampan," Stephen lied. "He'll send word as soon as he's got one, and then we'll be on our way to Hanyang —"

She shook her head vigorously. "I'm going to have the baby here —" The last word slid into a groan as her body tensed for another contraction. She sobbed with pain, her head tossing wildly back and forth against his arm. "Oh, Stephen, make it stop!" she whimpered senselessly. "I can't stand any more. It takes so long . . ."

He held her, rocking her back and forth like a child as he knelt beside the bed. Quiet tears flowed down his own cheeks as he cursed himself for not having gotten her back to Shanghai — or at least to Hanyang — while there was still time.

The sky darkened to the purple-gray of a stormy evening. The fury of the rain seemed to have spent itself, but the drizzle that remained continued into the night. Slowly, relentlessly, the river crept upward. It puddled around the broken crates that supported the bed, soaking what remained of Madeline's beautiful linens with muddy water. It slithered wet tongues between the cracks of the brick stove, dealing hissing death to the red coals of the fire. Stephen had put the boxes containing his grandfather's priceless books on the kitchen table. The yellow flood swirled around the four wooden legs like a pack of hounds circling a treed fox.

Stephen groped in the darkest pockets of his mind for anything he might have heard about delivering babies. He came up empty. But anyone could have guessed that her time was very close. With a silent prayer on his lips, he tried to examine her. His clumsy hands felt the bulge of her abdomen, taut with strain. Sweating, he drew back the sheet. The room was so dark that he could see only shadows.

He heard the sucking in of her breath and he knew that another pain was coming. "Push," he urged. Yes, that was what they told

women to do, he remembered from somewhere. "Push, love. We can do it!"

"I can't," she sobbed. "Stephen, I'm so tired . . ." The pain washed over her with the force of a tidal wave. She tossed helplessly in its grip.

He seized her twisting hands and held them. "Dear God," he prayed between clenched teeth, "I can't do it alone . . . Help me!"

Madeline's hands went limp in his as the pain eased. The darkness was strangely silent, and Stephen suddenly realized that the rain had stopped some time ago.

Straining his ears, he heard a distant splash, then voices growing nearer and the scrape of a boat's side against the outside wall. The beam of a lantern flashed in the doorway.

"Stephen!" It was his grandfather's voice. "I've brought Mrs. Abernathy with me! Are you there?"

"Aye — hurry! Hurry!" Stephen shouted back, sick with relief.

Beulah Abernathy, a lantern clasped in one hand and a black medical bag in the other, came splashing in through the knee-deep water. She was a tall woman, broad-shouldered as a stevedore with breasts like two great, comforting pillows and a plain, plump face that glowed with energy and goodness. She and her husband had lived thirty years in Manila, where she'd borne and raised eight children. Now, at fifty, she had embarked on a new phase of life in China.

"Pull back the sheet. Let's see her." There was no time for amenities now. Stephen did as he was told. "Aye, we're just in time," she grunted. "Hold the lantern." She thrust it into Stephen's hand and opened her bag. "When the pain comes, push, dearie. Push for all you're worth!"

Madeline tried. She tried until her eyes rolled back in her head like white marbles.

"Higher!" Mrs. Abernathy motioned for the lantern. "By the — it looks like a breech! And her so weak! We've got to get that baby out. And you'll have to help me, Reverend. When the next pain comes, push down on her, on the baby! I'll try to turn it."

"The pain — " Stephen shook with horror. "It will kill her!"

"It's killing her already! She'll die if we don't get it out! Now! Push . . . push!"

Stephen pushed, tears streaming down his face. He pushed with his hands, then his arms, then the weight of his whole body. Madeline

screamed, a high, shattering cry that was like no human voice he had ever heard. He felt her flesh yielding, rending, tearing.

Through the blur of tears, he saw that Beulah Abernathy was dangling a pale, sticky form from one hand. The other hand slapped, a stinging sound, again and again, until at last, after what seemed like an eternity, there was a tiny gasp, followed by a wail that was astonishingly loud in the silence of the room.

"A boy!" she exclaimed. "And a big one! Ten pounds if he's an ounce, I'll wager!"

"Madeline . . ." Stephen touched her face, his eyes damp now with tears of relief and joy. "Madeline, dearest — " He took her hand. "It's over. It's all right now!"

Her lashes fluttered once, twice, in answer to his voice. Her fingers tightened ever so slightly around his, then slackened.

"Madeline . . ." There was no response. Her lashes lay still in the violet pools of shadow that ringed her eyes.

Hanyang
July, 1861

Madeline was buried the next afternoon, in a quiet hollow on the far side of Hanyang Hill. Stephen had dug the grave himself with the help of the consul, Hamish Abernathy. The burial had been conducted with as much secrecy as possible, for no graveyard had yet been set aside for Christians here, and the Chinese did not welcome foreign bones in their soil. One of the Abernathy's Chinese servants had sold them the coffin reserved for his own remains. Madeline's fragile body had been placed in it and carried out of the city before the light of dawn. Stephen, his grandfather, and Mr. Abernathy had lowered the coffin into the grave and shared a brief reading of the Twenty-third Psalm. Then they had obliterated the burial spot and left it, for the present, unmarked except in Stephen's memory.

Afterward, the disconsolate Stephen had walked the streets of Hanyang for hours, wandering aimlessly until he stood at sunset on the crest of Hanyang Hill, in the shadow of its delicate pagoda.

In the distance, Hankow and its surrounding plain lay under a sheet of yellow-brown water. It covered all but the roofs of the peasant huts and had already swept away many that were not well constructed. Although the rain had taken a respite, the river was still ris-

ing, lifting thatched roofs from the huts and carrying them away, surrounding the low hills where clustered pigs and goats and cattle belowered with fear and hunger. Many of the beasts had already died, their bloated carcasses drifting downstream with the relentless current. Now and then a human corpse bobbed up and down in the yellow waves.

The slopes of the hill below him swarmed with refugees from the hungry jaws of the Yangtze. They huddled under lean-tos that were little more than rags and sticks, or crouched beneath the open sky like starving birds, their eyes fixed on what had been their homes. Hanyang had offered them the safety of its hillsides, but it did not have the capacity to feed and care for these homeless thousands. They clung to the slopes, shivering and hungry. Food was scarce. Often the strong stole from the weak, and the weak died. There was no fuel for cooking or even for boiling water for tea. The flooding and the deplorable sanitary conditions had contaminated the streams, sending flux and fever sweeping like wildfire through the camps.

Their stench drifted up to Stephen's nostrils from the slope below, an overripe blend of ginger and human offal, of garlic, soya sauce, urine, and wet smoke. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to hurl down curses at the massed misery below him. Each upturned face was the face of the slit-eyed Ping who had robbed Madeline of her treasures and fled as she lay in her agony. And they were all the same. Like toadstools in their domed hats, sprouting out of the filth. Maggots crawling on rotten meat, endless in their number, each as vile as the others. In the three months he had been here, Stephen and his grandfather had not made one convert among them!

He'd had such dreams in England! How laughable they seemed now! Carrying Christianity into China like a white banner! Thousands flocking to his feet to receive the truth. His own grandfather smiling his proud approval. As if Archer Bellamy ever smiled at all or approved of anything Stephen did. What a dreamer he'd been! What an arrogant, puff-headed fool!

The sun was setting behind Hanyang Hill, casting dark shadows across the flooding river. A cool wind had sprung up, roiling the gray clouds and sending them tumbling across the sky. Stephen smelled the rain. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he gazed down at the black

swarm that covered the slope. For these, these rotten dregs of mankind, he had thrown away Madeline's life. In his arrogant belief that his love could protect her from all harm, he had brought her to this miserable place to die, and for that he deserved all the punishments of hell.

His feet stumbled over something solid. An old man was lying on the bare ground, directly in his path. He moaned as Stephen's shoe struck his leg. Still lost in thought, Stephen glanced down at him. He was dressed in what had once been a long gray robe. The gown of a scholar, perhaps? Stephen did not know, but the ancient eyes were haunting. Like liquid coals, they lay in the shadowed hollows of their sockets, intelligent eyes, filled with pain. One thin arm, so frail it seemed to float, strained upward, the palm open. The shriveled lips moved but could not speak. Where were his people? Stephen wondered. Maybe they'd drowned in the flood, for certainly they would not leave an old one to perish. They would starve their children and themselves to feed their aged.

Stephen had come empty-handed to the hilltop. He had nothing to give the man. He shook his head, patted his empty pockets, and spread his hands. The old man understood. The fragile fingers wavered and the arm dropped, falling a little outward this time, its movement opening the front of the tattered gray robe. The old man's chest was a mass of festering boils.

Sickened, Stephen turned his face away. He would have run if he could, but the hill was steep and slippery. He made his way slowly, the haunting sight of the old man floating after him like a spectre. Misery, pain, and death everywhere.

A clap of thunder split the sky and the rain burst from the clouds in a sudden torrent, the drops swift and stinging. The refugees huddled like sparrows, chattering and shivering, as the water streamed off their conical hats. Stephen tried to hurry, but his thoughts were drawn hack to the old man. *No . . . don't look!* he admonished himself. *There's nothing you can do!* But some power greater than his own will was pulling him backward, turning his face and his footsteps. He wiped the rain from his eyes as he toiled upward, trying to remember the way he had come. The rain plastered his thin shirt to his skin.

The old man lay on his back, his eyes closed, the rain lashing his face. He was too weak even to turn over. Stephen gazed down at

him through the curtain of water. Raindrops spattered against the wrinkled eyelids.

For a long moment, Stephen stood and looked at the old man where he lay in the mud. The rain was coming harder than ever now, beating the flat-trodden grass into mud and trickling down the wrinkles of the wise old face.

"Come — " Stephen tugged at the withered hands, trying to lift him to his feet. The old man groaned sharply with sudden pain. Stephen studied the slope below them. No, it was too steep and too far for him to carry the poor fellow to Mrs. Abernathy's, especially when the old man whimpered with pain whenever he was moved. He glanced around for anything with which he could improvise a shelter, but the hillside had long since been stripped of everything but its grassy pelt.

There was nothing more he could do. Stephen shrugged his shoulders, a forced gesture, and turned away. But his feet would not move. Somehow this wretched old man had become important to him — as a fellow sufferer or perhaps as an instrument of penance; or maybe it was only his haunting eyes. Whatever the reason, Stephen found himself unable to walk away.

With a sigh of anguish, he squatted down in the mud. The old eyes opened and looked up at him. When the aged man showed no fear, Stephen spread his knees and bent over him, his weight on his two arms, to make a human shelter against the rain. The stinging drops peppered his back as he braced his body against the storm and against the discomfort of the unaccustomed position, which grew excruciating as the minutes passed. Then numbness set in and his mind became detached from his body. He could think only of Madeline . . . Madeline . . .

The night blackened and the wind grew, sobbing and sighing under the eaves of the old pagoda at the top of the hill. A dog howled somewhere in the night, far off. The old man slept, moaning and tossing now and again in his misery. Little by little, the clouds thinned and drifted away. The rain stopped and the moon shone down like a pearl in the sky. Only then did Stephen let his tortured body fall to one side. The stinking mud was soft, a welcome bed. He stretched his legs and slept next to the old man.

Morning brought the sun. The sounds of hunger awoke Stephen from his stuporlike slumber. Children were crying. He stretched his aching limbs and sat up. His clothes were stiff with mud, his hands

caked with it. The cold reality of Madeline's death stabbed into his consciousness. Today he would visit her grave, he promised himself.

A feeble groan from the old man broke the chain of his thoughts. He was gazing up at Stephen, his black eyes stunningly cognizant in his wizened face. This morning he was weaker, and the hideous boils on his body were pink and swollen from last night's soaking. His lips were drawn inward over toothless gums. His mouth worked furiously in an effort to speak, but only faint little mews of sound gurgled from his throat. Yet he spoke with his eyes — eyes so sharp and bright that Stephen could not doubt the clarity of the mind that lay behind them. The mercy of shock and stupor had not dulled his awareness. The old one felt fully the wretchedness of his situation, and he knew what Stephen had done for him in the night. He knew, too, that he would die soon if he did not get food and dry clothing. Resolutely, Stephen unkinked the knotted muscle of his long legs and stood up. "I will return," he said, expressing himself haltingly in the local Hupeh dialect. The eloquent old eyes spoke their understanding.

Stephen wound his way downward through the clumps of refugees. Children cried, as they had the day before, wailing their hunger and misery into the clear morning air. Today he heard them. The pathos of their cries touched a chord of urgency in him that had not been there yesterday. He would get food somehow, even if he had to go from door to door begging for it. He would get blankets and what medical supplies he could from the mission stores and be back here on the hill with it before the morning was gone.

He walked on, his face and hair caked with mud, his clothes soiled and stained, his eyes taking in the suffering around him. Only when he heard a distant shout did he glance up.

"Look! The river!"

The flooded Yangtze was running red. It was the *Ch'wan shuei*, water bearing the rust-colored silt of Szechwan — a certain sign that the river had stopped rising. A faintly rippled "ahhh . . ." passed over the hillside; and Stephen, at last, allowed himself to weep.

Nine

Shanghai

August, 1861

Archer Bellamy had written the letter — if one could call it a letter — informing Serena of Madeline's death and the baby's birth. In reality, it had been little more than a curt note, addressing her as "Dear Mrs. Bolton," with no acknowledgment of their kinship. It said little; but what it did not say spoke more eloquently than words of the bitterness that still lay between Morgan Bellamy and his father.

Another letter arrived a few days later, this one from a Mrs. Abernathy who had evidently befriended Stephen. "Since your brother shows no inclination to write you, my dear," it began, "I have taken it upon myself . . ." And so it was that Serena learned the details of Madeline's pitiful death.

"Rest assured that the baby is well cared for," the letter continued. "I have engaged a healthy wet nurse for him, a clean and competent young woman for a Chinese. Would that she were Christian as well — but then, one can't have everything, I suppose. The child has been christened Noah — apt, wouldn't you say, since he was born during a flood? It was your grandfather's idea. Poor Stephen, I must tell you, hardly seems aware that he has a son. If he were prostrate with grief, perhaps I would understand it. Instead, he seems determined to bring about his own death — either from overwork or from the foul diseases that abound among China's poor . . ."

Serena glanced up from the letter as Harry walked into the office, his face gleaming with dampness from the heat of the August afternoon. He was dressed in an immaculate white tropical suit that set off his golden skin. The ebony walking stick swung jauntily from his left

hand. "Is something wrong, little love? You look worried." He came around the desk to kiss the spot where her hairline formed a peak at the center of her forehead.

She patted his hand. "It's Stephen," she said, and she read the rest of the letter aloud to him. Her brother, according to Mrs. Abernathy, had been instrumental in saving a goodly portion of Hankow's poor from starvation in the days following the flood. Haggard as a beggar, he had trudged the streets of Hanyang, pleading for donations from the wealthy, from the merchants' and craftsmen's guilds, and from the foreign community. They gave, not only for charity's sake but because they feared the strangeness in his blue eyes and because they pitied him, knowing he had just lost his wife. They had given money, wheat, rice, animals for slaughter, quilts, and clothing.

But even these gifts had been woefully inadequate; mere crumbs tossed into the gaping maw that was Hankow's hunger. In desperation, Stephen had sent an appeal downriver to Nanking, the ancient city that the Taiping rebels had taken in 1852 and made their capital. The Taipings were friendly to foreigners, he'd been told, especially to missionaries, whom they considered their Christian brothers. Surely, he had urged them, as followers of Jesus, they could not stand impassive in the face of such need.

To everyone's astonishment, the Taipings had responded, sending two huge river junks up to Hankow, their hulls heavy with stores of rice and wheat, dried fish, peanut oil, cabbages, and salt, along with an invitation for Stephen and his grandfather to visit Nanking at their pleasure.

"But he has lost himself," Mrs. Abernathy's letter declared. "He cares nothing for his own comfort, his own health, his appearance, or even his son. Already there are those who call him a saint. Others call him a madman . . ."

Serena glanced up at Harry with tears in her eyes. His hand tightened on her shoulder. "When I told him I was writing to you," the letter continued, "his only comment was, 'We could use more wheat and rice, and a doctor. Ask her to see what Harry can do . . .'"

"Consider it done," Harry added softly.

Serena finished the letter, concern for her brother crushing her mind. Gentle Stephen, so kind and so serious. Slow to give his heart, Stephen, when he loved, loved totally. Only Serena, who knew him so

well, could begin to understand the depths of his feelings for Madeline or to comprehend the devastation her death had wreaked on him. Some people, she reflected, loved only once. They gave absolutely the full commitment of their hearts and souls, and once that love was gone —

Harry touched her cheek. "If you want, Serena, I could send you upriver with the supplies in the next few days. Would you like to go to him?"

She pressed his smooth, warm hand against the side of her face. Harry, always so reluctant to be parted from her, was making a great sacrifice by his willingness to let her go. "You could come with me," she said.

"Not this time. I just received a letter from Jason. It's war in America. In the next few weeks, we'll be buying up every bale of cotton we can lay hands on for shipment to England. Timing is critical. I can't spare myself to go to Hankow with you."

Serena had stiffened slightly at the mention of Jason Frobisher. For an instant, the memory of those insolent eyes burned into her mind and she felt the sting of her palm against his hard brown cheek. "A letter so soon?" she said sharply. "He must have had the wind at his back all the way across the Pacific."

"It would seem so." Harry put his hands lightly on her shoulders and turned her in her chair so that she was facing him. His fingers were trembling. "If it would please you, dearest," he said in a hushed voice, "and if Stephen will permit it; why not bring the babe and his nurse back to Shanghai with you? Surely the child would be safer here. And if you'd enjoy a little one in the house — "

His voice cracked and trailed off painfully. Serena looked into his face and saw the hidden agony buried beneath his smile — the spoken acknowledgment, at last, that their marriage would never know its physical fulfillment. He would never be able to give her a child.

She squeezed his hand. "We'll see," she whispered. "Thank you, Harry."

"Will you be finished here soon? I was just on my way home."

"It's early yet." She shook her head. "Yao just finished these contracts, and I want to have a look at them before I leave."

He touched her hair, which she had coiled atop her head like a twist of molasses taffy in an effort to make herself look less like a young girl.

"My little businesswoman," he said. "Who'd think to look at you that you'd doubled your profits in the past month?"

"And next month is bound to be even better. Harry. We're planning to open up that section on the creek, the one I bought from Lloyd's in June for such an outlandish price — look, it's worth twenty percent more already! And I heard from Papa last week. He's sending up a shipment of opium in mid-September. Yao's already found buyers for it — "

"Opium?" Harry frowned. "You're sure you want to involve us in that, Serena?"

"Involve us? Why, Harry, I cut my teeth on the opium business!" Serena's laughter was a golden ripple. "Besides, it won't involve Bolton and Company. I'm doing it as an agent for my father. I've also lined up a cargo of tea for the same ship to carry back to England. There'll be room enough left, I think, for a few hundred bales of cotton if you can get it in time — "

Harry gave a low whistle. "Land, opium, cotton — You astound me, little love! What will it be next? Coolies?"

"Who knows?" She laughed again. "Things just happen, Harry. I see a chance to make a profit and I can't resist taking it! Oh, I know I've overstepped my bounds. I know you never counted on this when you suggested I sell the land. But you don't mind, do you? Not really?"

He bent down to rest his cheek against her hair, the fragrance of his expensive Manila pipe-tobacco teasing her nose. "Do I mind? I'll tell you if you'll answer the one question."

"Yes?"

"Are you happy, Serena? If you are, then nothing else matters to me."

She turned her face up toward him. "Then — yes, I'm happy, Harry. I've always dreamed of doing something like this, and you've made that dream come true for me." Serena closed her eyes and let him kiss her, softly, his lips closed, his passions tightly reined.

Yao, the secretary, shuffled in from the adjoining cubicle and paused, embarrassed, in the doorway. Serena broke away from Harry's kiss in time to glimpse him turning away.

"Yao!" Serena called out to him, more amused than embarrassed. "It's all right. What did you need?"

"Ah — my apologies for disturbing you. It is only that you told me to bring the new lease contracts in as soon as I had them ready for your signature."

"Of course." Serena smiled at him. "Just leave them here," she said sweetly. "I'll get right to them, and you'll have them back by the end of the day."

Yao bowed his acknowledgment and quietly left the room. Harry sighed. "Well, it appears you're going to be busy. I'll send the carriage for you at six if you'd like, love."

"Thank you. Harry," she squeezed his hand, "but after sitting all day, the walk will be pleasant. I'll be home before dark."

After he had gone, she sat for a time, staring at the sheaf of contracts Yao had left on the desk, her mind far away. She would go to Stephen, she determined. Harry could have the shipment of supplies ready in the next few days. Her thoughts raced ahead, to the journey up the Yangtze and to what she would find at its end; to Stephen — a changed Stephen, transformed by grief into a wild-eyed zealot. She wondered if he would welcome her, or if he would regard her visit as an intrusion. And the grandfather she had never seen . . . Stephen, in his early letters, had described him as a harsh old man. Serena shivered with apprehension and turned her thoughts to the baby. Stephen's son.

She would reserve judgment, she promised herself. True, there were times when her arms ached for a child — but it was her own child she had always wanted, the fruit of her own love, and Harry's. To accept another in its place, even her own flesh and blood — She pressed her fingertips to her eyelids in suppressed anguish. She had deceived herself too long. She had told herself too many times that Harry's impairment was temporary, that given sustained love and patience it would pass. Harry had already faced the truth. She had seen it in his face today when he suggested that they take Stephen's baby. It was time she, too, grew up and accepted reality.

The fateful word hung over her like the blade of a headsman's ax. It had been there all along, but she had chosen not to see it, not to think or speak it. But it was there nonetheless, dark and looming. In her mind, she reached out clutching hands and grasped it, its edges cutting her like razors. "Never," she whispered, letting the word's full implications penetrate her awareness. "Never . . . never . . . never!"

Her body shuddered, once, deeply. Then she lifted her face from her cupped hands and reached determinedly for the stack of land contracts Yao had left on the desk.

Ten

Taocheng
August, 1861

More than a moon had passed since that dark and breathless night when Daniel had discovered the pleasures of Min Fei's body. For many nights thereafter, those pleasures had so held him captive that he thought of little else. Min Fei was a sensual sorceress, the accomplished mistress of a hundred unspeakable ways to drive a man to the brink of frenzy. Min Fei was a whore, he reminded himself in his rare moments of reason. She was nothing but a scheming, opportunistic bitch in heat, and she was using him, as she would have used any man. Yet he was trapped — hopelessly caught — in the tentacles of her need, her sensuality, and his own accursed lust.

In the beginning, he had been passive, letting her skill guide him as she wished. Then, as time passed and he rapidly learned the things a man can do with a woman, it was he who became master, he who dominated, he who ravished her body until she sobbed with ecstasy. Yet it puzzled him to no end to realize that this very surrender of hers made him all the more her slave.

His days had become blurs in time. His waking hours were long, tedious, and dreary, enlivened only perhaps by an occasional glimpse of Min Fei tottering across the courtyard on her tiny, bound feet, her face powdered and carmined like a singsong girl's, her wing-browed eyes flashing brazen glances at him over her pink silk fan. More than once at such times, he had caught old Liu watching him, and he wondered how much the old one suspected. Perhaps Liu did not care. Lai Jing, the new concubine, obviously pleased him. While Min Fei had the run of the house and went where she liked, Lai Jing was kept so

strictly closeted that Daniel had scarcely seen her since the day of her arrival. Liu had spent his every night with her, leaving Min Fei free to steal out to the shed where Daniel slept.

On this particular day, Daniel was working as usual in the courtyard, sealing the inside of a newly assembled coffin with resin. Min Fei had come into the courtyard to watch him, standing boldly under the shade of the upturned eaves. She had little to fear. Liu had gone into town for his regular barbering and was likely to spend a few hours gambling with his cronies in the winehouse. Still, there were servants about who might talk, and so they could not throw discretion to the winds.

Something was wrong, Daniel concluded as he watched her out of the corner of his eye. Min Fei's agitation showed in the rigid posture of her neck and in the nervous twisting of her folded fan. For a time, she stood beside one of the pillars, half in shadow. Then, very deliberately, she minced around to the back of the kitchen and glided into the tool shed.

Daniel waited a safe interval. Then, glancing around to make sure the cook was not watching, he followed her with the casual haste one might use to retrieve a forgotten tool.

She was standing beside the bed when he entered and closed the door behind him. "Are you mad," he hissed, "coming to me in broad daylight like this? Anyone could have seen us!"

"Hush!" Min Fei laid a scented finger against his lips. She was dressed in a robe of apricot-colored silk, so light that its hem and the trailing edges of its sleeves seemed to float around her. Her hair was twisted into a tightly wound double bun atop her head and she smelled of lilacs. He felt awkward and dirty beside her. "I thought you should be told something," she said a bit testily, "and I did not know whether heaven would grant me a better opportunity."

"Be told what?" He was mildly angry with her for interrupting his work and for taking foolish chances just to talk to him.

"The old one. Our master. This morning he visited my chamber, and when he departed he left his silver pipe beside the bed. You know what that means, do you not?"

Daniel knew, but he said nothing. While he stared sullenly past her at the wall of the shed, she filled the silence with her explanation. "Tonight he will return for it," she said, her voice expressionless. "And he will stay."

Daniel swallowed a sudden surge of jealous rage. After all, the she-turtle belonged to any man who wanted her. "Then it must be he has tired of his new toy," he said disdainfully.

"Pah! The gods would not drop such luck into my worthless lap! I think it more likely that my younger sister is having her woman's time, and since our master is unaccustomed to sleeping alone — " She let her words hang in the air for a moment. "I find it a good sign nonetheless. It means she has not conceived."

"So. Go to him with rejoicing then."

"Li-t'ung!" She gripped his arm and he felt the small daggers of her nails. "Don't be a jealous fool! I *must* go to him, or we are lost! If I find myself with child and I have not been with him — "

He turned away, jerking free of her grasp. "Do what you must," he growled. "It is nothing to me. Only leave me to my work."

"Li-t'ung!" She reached out for him, stumbling slightly on the wadded stumps that were her feet. But he had already strode out of the shed, pausing only to pick up a small chisel from its place on the shelf, justifying his actions to any unseen eyes that might be watching.

For the next four nights, Liu demanded Min Fei's presence. Daniel tossed endlessly on his straw-filled mattress, listening as the rats quarreled and mated among the wood shavings. Vainly, he tried to blot from his mind the vision of Min Fei with the old man. He knew well the range of her talents and he realized that with Liu she would utilize them to their fullest. Min Fei was fighting for her future, using the only weapons she had.

For the first two nights, he wallowed in his own misery. Then, on the third night, his head began to clear. Deprived of Min Fei's intoxicating presence, he began to see himself through the eyes of truth and to see his situation for what it really was. When the light dawned at last, Daniel was stunned at the enormity of the thing he had done.

Blinded by lust, he had forgotten everything but Min Fei. He had forgotten who he was: Cheng Li-t'ung, the son of a wise and noble man, the bearer of his name and his blood. He had all but abandoned his fight to contact his brothers and uncles in Canton, as well as his vow to see the body of his father buried in the soil of his homeland.

Most heinously of all, he had befouled his family line. He had contrived with a woman of the lowest sort to produce a son: the grandson of Cheng Lo. A son on whom he and his could have no claim, and

who, when he was grown, would worship with his own sons and grandsons before the ancestral tablets of the house of Liu.

Daniel writhed with the anguish of remorse. His own seed, the descendant of a man like his father, growing up as the son of Liu, who was nothing but a heap of dog offal — He put his face on his arms and cried like a child.

There was but one saving hope. Min Fei had not yet told him she was pregnant. If their coupling had not borne fruit, it was not too late to make an end to it. Min Fei could find someone else to suit her plans, someone as unscrupulous as herself, with no family pride to dishonor.

He would never touch her again, he promised himself. Min Fei was like opium that clouded the mind, poisoned the blood, and stole away the spirit. Whether she had his child or not, she would ruin him if he did not break free of her. The next time he had a chance to speak with her, he vowed, he would tell her boldly of his decision, and he would not be moved from it. With that resolution made, he was at last able to drift into a fitful, exhausted slumber.

He did not see Min Fei again for a day, a night and a day. She kept herself hidden from him until old Liu returned to his second concubine once more. Later, Daniel was to recall that it was the seventh lunar month, the festival day of the weaver maid and the herdsman.

She came to him late at night as was her custom, well past the hour of the rat, when the full moon had climbed to the peak of the sky.

"Li-t'ung!" She touched his shoulder. He pretended to stir sleepily, although in truth he was wide awake and trembling. With a little laugh, she slithered onto the bed beside him. "Free!" she breathed happily. "My younger sister is now fit to receive her lord once more. Pah! I return him to her with pleasure! When he touches me — "

"Do not speak of it!" Daniel interrupted with a growl. Jealousy burned hot in him despite his resolution. "Do you think it pleases me to hear of him?"

"This foolish woman is sorry," she whispered contritely. "It is only that I am so happy to be with you again."

He grunted something under his breath and sat up, confused and infuriated by the sudden rush of warmth that had welled up in him at her words. The task ahead would not be an easy one. For a moment, he only stared at the beams of moonlight that drifted in through the loose planks of the door. How was he to begin?

Min Fei sat beside him on the rough bed, her knees drawn up close to her body, her head tilted backward, and her long, loose hair flowing past her waist. Her fragrance tonight was jasmine, his favorite. It wafted softly into his nostrils, intoxicating as wine.

"When I stole across the courtyard to come to you," she whispered, "Oh, Li-t'ung, the night is so beautiful! The moon like a great, golden cake, and the stars — You must see them!" Her slanted ferret's eyes danced in the darkness. "Take me out to the hills where we can lie under the heavens just once!"

"Have you lost your reason? If we are caught — "

"Do it for me . . ." she cajoled softly. "Do you know that I have not been outside the walls of this house since the old stick brought me here? And tonight is the night when the little weaver maid crosses the sky on a bridge of magpie wings to visit her husband! A special night for all women."

"Don't speak like a fool! Besides, the gate is locked, and the old one himself has — "

"This?" With a tinkling laugh, she pulled a long-nosed brass key out of the neck of her dress. "I even took care to oil the lock and the hinges so that they would not squeak!"

Perhaps, after all, it would be easier to talk with Min Fei when she was pleased, Daniel told himself as he followed her across the courtyard and waited like an obedient child while she unlocked the gate, a ragged quilt from the bed slung over his shoulder. Min Fei was a determined woman, formidable as a typhoon when she did not get her way. Daniel admitted to being vaguely afraid of her.

As they slipped out into the deserted street, she sighed deeply, gulping, the forbidden air of freedom as if she could not get enough of it. Her fragile "golden lilies" could not negotiate the rough cobblestones. He swooped her up in his strong arms without a word and began to carry her. Her body was warm and light, like a bird's. Her head lay quietly, contentedly, in the hollow of his neck. She did not speak until they had passed through the sleeping town and gained the grassy slopes of the foothills.

"Here!" She indicated a level spot where the grass grew long and thick as fox fur. He put her down gently and knelt to spread the quilt. When he had smoothed it out for her, she lay down on her back, spread her arms, and gazed up at the sky. "Glorious!" she breathed. "Li-t'ung, come and look. No, like this, beside me!"

His eyes followed Min Fei's pointing finger to find the weaver maid and the herdsman, separated by decree of the gods for neglect of their marriage duties. Only once a year were they permitted to come together.

"The little weaver maid is happy," Min Fei whispered, "and I am happy as well, for she has her love, and I — " She let the words hang unspoken on the air. Daniel writhed inwardly.

"Do you have any idea what it is like being a female, Li-t'ung?" she said. "To be spat upon from the day of your birth because you are not a man child? To be denied learning? To have your feet bound so tightly that you scream with the pain of it? And in time of hunger — " her voice had dropped to a murmur, "to be sold like a pig or a goose?" Min Fei sighed pensively. "My family sold me when I was ten," she said. "The man who bought me for a few taels was a keeper of a flower house in Chengtu. For three years, I slaved in his kitchen like an animal — carrying in loads of wood, scrubbing floors and dishes until my hands cracked and bled, carrying pails of hot water up many stairs for the scented baths of the other females in the house. Then — " She smiled bitterly, an ugly, twisted smile. "Then I became a woman.

"It was my master, the fat, filthy pig, who initiated me and taught me the things I should know to practice my trade." She brushed his lips with a perfumed finger. "I bore my life as best I could, Li-t'ung, although there were many times when I wished to die. Once, I even had the noose about my neck and had looped one end of it over a beam when — ah, but that is another story. Enough to say that I lived and endured."

The moon mottled Min Fei's face with pools of light and shadow. With her skin washed clean of white powder and carmine, she looked tired, Daniel thought, and vulnerable. Her features were stark in the pale blue light, the face too square for the melon-seed standard of beauty, the nose lacking in delicacy, the chin strong and thrusting, a sign of determination — a most undesirable trait in a woman. Yet she had lovely eyes. They were large and luminous, black as the wing of a raven, and fringed by lashes that were like thick velvet. He had learned that she was twenty-four years old.

She began to speak again, her voice hushed this time, with an edge of tears. "You know that I bore a daughter. Who her father was I could never be sure. I always took precautions, but now and again they fail.

She was a beautiful child and I longed to keep her. Of course, I could not." She sighed. "As the years went by, I began to see my future. Already my master had lowered my price. Most men prefer very young girls if they can pay for them. I knew that someday he would have no further use for me at all, and I would have no place to go but the streets . . . "

A long shudder passed through her body. Daniel was aware of the tension in his own muscles. His fists were clenched, his mouth dry. The stars in the black sky were blurs of light. With a little moan, Min Fei lifted herself on one elbow, rolled over, and laid her head across his chest. Her jasmine-scented hair fell around him like a net.

"I began to look for a man — any man — who might take me as a concubine." She laughed bitterly. "The handsome, wealthy ones were naturally beyond my worth, but there was Liu, our noble master, who had made the journey to Chengtu to buy teakwood and lacquer for his coffins. How I flattered the old dried stick! He left me each dawn thinking himself more of a man than the emperor himself! Pah! In truth, I could hardly stand the sight of him!"

She had begun to tremble. Helplessly, Daniel patted her hair, his breast churning with pity and revulsion. Part of him longed to comfort her. Part of him, again, quivered with loathing at her touch. He squirmed with self-disgust. He had known what she was from the beginning. Yet he had allowed her to defile him, to enslave him. He would speak now. He would say the words that would set him free —

"Li-t'ung — " she whispered, her hand stroking his cheek. "I want you to understand that of all the men I have known, you are the only one to whom I have given myself willingly . . . and you are the only one I did not hate!"

Daniel's throat tightened. His lips moved vainly as her devil fingers wandered down his chest to toy with the light frosting of hair that grew there — a legacy from his barbarian ancestors. When her hand crept downward to tug enticingly at the gathered waist of his trousers, he felt the familiar surge of warm blood and the tightening. She glanced down for a moment and smiled. Yes, she knew, the witch.

The grass sang in the soft night wind. The air smelled of damp earth, of flowers and pine needles, of jasmine, and of Min Fei herself. She opened her robe and lay clothed in starlight, a carnal moon-goddess, wanton and welcoming. Her mouth was flushed red and her

naked hips twitched softly, beckoning, compelling. *No!* Some weak voice of restraint cried out in Daniel's head. *No — remember!* For a moment, he fought against the pulsing desire that had begun to fill every part of him. Then nature's savage music filled his ears, drowning out all reason. He seized her brutally in his arms and took her, his trousers jerked down to bind about his knees. Whimpering like an animal, she arched upward to meet him. Her hands fluttered over the heaving contours of his body, not with their usual artfulness but with total abandon, as if this escape to the open sky had set her free — as if, for the first time, it was not Min Fei the whore but Min Fei the woman who lay gasping beneath him.

The sudden revelation flooded Daniel with unexpected tenderness. Without knowing why, he gentled the smashing momentum that would have carried him to his peak in the space of a few heartbeats. With a soft urgency, he began to stroke and caress her, not for his own pleasure, but for hers. His hand lingered on the graceful curve of her throat, on the firm rise of one breast, its nipple exquisitely shriveled and hard as a jewel. As his hand slid downward, she moaned. Her head rolled from one side to the other in speechless wonder.

His desire for her was astonishingly tender and sweet — perhaps because he knew it would be the last time. It almost seemed she knew it, too. She clung to him, trembling like a child in her need. "Li-t'ung . . ." she murmured, "to know you . . . to know this night, has made my wretched life worth living." She cried out as she felt him catch fire again, meeting the surge of his passion with complete surrender.

Startled by a prowling fox, a covey of quail burst from the hillside in sudden flight, skimming the moonlight slope, crying and twittering against the night sky. Daniel lay quietly with Min Fei in his arms, spent and wholly filled with the wonder of her giving. She pressed her face against his chest. Her eyes were wet. Wordlessly, he stroked her hair. For a long time, neither of them spoke. At last, she stirred a little and smiled up at him. "From such nights as this come fine, strong sons," she murmured.

After he had carried her back to the house, Daniel flung himself on his own crude bed, devastated by what had happened.

Min Fei's hold upon him was a hundred times more powerful than he had ever suspected. He'd been fool enough to think he could break

it with simple resolve. Now he knew that he could not. Her seductive witchery had ensnared him, and tonight her woman's passion had made him hers.

If she came to him tomorrow night, the next night, or the next, the result would be the same. He had no will to resist her. He would forget his family name, forget his vows, his goals, his very life, for her. It made no difference that she was unworthy, or that she was shamelessly using him. He was already bound to her. Min Fei had stolen his soul.

Daniel tossed on his bed until the moon was gone and the inky sky had begun to fade. One terrifying idea had risen in his mind, and he trembled as he contemplated it. The only way to keep faith with his name and his father would be to flee Taocheng at once.

He would act swiftly, he resolved, before his courage faded. His heart drummed against his ribs as he made his plans. He would take what he could and be off before dawn. Somehow he would find a way to reach his father's family in Canton. Then, with their help, he would buy his freedom from Liu and bring the bodies of his parents home.

He rose, lit a candle, and began to rummage among his meager possessions. He had no money, but perhaps there was something he could sell along the way. From the ruins of the destroyed house, he had salvaged a simple jade necklace, a gift from his father to his mother. Moisture clouded his eyes as he remembered how she had treasured it and how it had set off her green-flecked eyes and amber hair. Could he part with it? Yes, he told himself. She would understand. She would gladly have sacrificed it to save him, had the choice been hers.

He opened the chest containing his father's scrolls and the beautifully carved ivory seal that had been Cheng Lo's signature and was now his own. Daniel was heartsick, for he knew that he could not carry the chest all the way to Canton. Yet he could not leave the precious scrolls here. Liu, in his rage, would surely destroy them. The dilemma almost shattered his resolve to go. Then he remembered a small cave he had discovered one day in the hills. He would hide the chest inside, block the entrance with stones, and pray that it would be safe until he returned. The ivory seal, however, he would carry with him and guard with his life. It was his identity, his indisputable link with the house of Cheng.

The drawstring of the small kidskin bag in which the seal was kept was long enough to loop over his head and hang beneath his tunic. Its weight was strangely comforting, and it occurred to him that if he had worn it thus all along, he might not have weakened and fallen into Min Fei's clutches.

The sky had faded to the color of the black pearl ring Min Fei wore on her little finger. Daniel fought back a rising panic. He could not let haste make a fool of him. Like a shadow, he stole into the kitchen. Two stale bean-curd cakes, rejected even by the fat cook, lay on the cloth lining of a bamboo basket. Brushing away a slumbering blowfly, he wrapped them in the cloth, which he stuffed inside his tunic. They would stem the tide of his hunger for the first day. Then he would have to use his wits to feed himself.

In running away from the house of Liu, Daniel knew he was in violation of imperial law. He was old Liu's legal property. He had signed his own document of bondage with the ivory *chop* that now hung about his neck. If he were caught, he could be beaten, tortured, even executed, according to his master's whim. But a man's first and highest duty was to his ancestors. He could lie, cheat, even kill — if his actions defended and perpetuated his family line, he was traditionally justified. Thus, Daniel was fleeing Min Fei and the house of Liu for the most sacred of causes.

A distant rooster crowed. Soon the men of Taocheng would be rousing themselves to go into the hills, taking their dogs and their herds of sheep and goats, or their saws and axes for logging. Resolutely, Daniel stuffed the little jade necklace into his pocket and hoisted the chest of scrolls to his shoulder.

Min Fei, rather than risk the dangers of returning the key to Liu's pocket, had simply dropped it among the shavings, where it would appear that the old man had lost it. Daniel found it again without effort. For a moment, he stood wavering, the key in his hand and his eyes on the closed door of Min Fei's room that opened onto the inner courtyard. In his mind, he pictured her sleeping, her hair spread like a black silk fan, her face serene and rosy, smiling perhaps at the memory of the night that had passed. For the space of a breath, the image held him. Then he broke the spell, turned, and let himself out of the gate, tossing the key back over his shoulder. By the time the unlocked gate was discovered, he would be well away.

The day would be hot, for even the dawn was warm. Daniel walked with controlled haste along the narrow streets he had known since childhood. Here and there, the smoke from an early morning cooking fire curled from a chimney. A pug-nosed dog sniffed at his heels and, concluding that he was no stranger, let him pass without barking an alarm.

As the town thinned out, the roadway became a path and then a trail that wound and twisted into the hills. Daniel mounted it eagerly, his long legs striding upward without effort. He knew these mountains well, for he had grown up without friends in Taocheng, where his barbarian blood had made him an object of fear and suspicion. Except for rare instances when his size and strength were needed, the townspeople had avoided him. Daniel had spent the years of his young life in study, in work, and in roaming the foothills of the Tahsueh Shan. The summer of his fourteenth year, he had found the little cave.

He kept his eyes averted as he passed the place where the landslide had buried his home. The raw earth was green now, waving with the lacy pink wild flowers whose fragrance his mother had loved.

Daniel gained the ridge and made his way upward to a small, level clearing. The mouth of the cave was an inkblot against the dark green of the hillside. It was a small cave — too shallow to serve as a den for a leopard or bear. Yet its interior was dry, clean, and well protected. Crouching at the entrance, he whispered “I will be back for you” to his father. “I promise. I swear on my life!”

Working through a blur of tears, he placed the locked chest in the cave and slipped the key into the kidskin bag with the ivory *chop*. Then he sealed the entrance with boulders and chunks of turf so that it was indistinguishable from the rest of the hillside.

The sun shot fingers of light into the clouds that drifted above the Tahsueh Shan, turning them to bubbles of gold. Daniel stood on the ridge and gazed down into the shadowed valley where Taocheng lay. Even at this distance, he could make out the whitewashed roof of the House of the Dead, where the bodies of his parents slumbered in their coffins. A flash of fear darted through his mind. If Liu should decide to take his revenge — But no, he reassured himself, there was no reason to worry. Disturbance of the dead, one of the most horrible crimes known, was punishable by execution. Liu would not dare to touch them.

He turned and began to climb toward the high pass that led into the next valley. There was an easier road out of Taocheng, but Daniel could not risk taking it. Liu might well have him pursued, and there was little he could do to disguise his extraordinary height. It would be safer to keep to the mountains.

Above and ahead of him, the great white peaks rose in a line, the newborn sunrise brushing their snowy crests with gold. A dark eagle lifted from its nest in the top of a gnarled and ancient pine tree. Its massive wings beat the air until it broke free of the earth and sailed upward like a kite. Higher and higher, it glided against the rising sun, the strokes of its wings no more than occasional ripples as it circled, dipped, and at last flew off in a straight line toward the pass that lay between the distant peaks.

More slowly, Daniel followed.

Eleven

Hankow

September, 1861

Serena, prim in a conservative traveling gown of gray silk gabardine and a matching bonnet trimmed with violets, lifted her petticoats and sprang from the gangplank of the steamer onto the floating dock. She did so a bit hastily, at the risk of her own safety, for the plank had not even been secured. But once she'd spotted Stephen on the water stairs, nothing could hold her back.

He was waiting alone. There was no sign of an old man with him. "Stephen!" She raced upward to meet him, tripping on the lace edging of her crinoline. He descended slowly, which troubled her at once. The old Stephen would have covered two or three steps at a time with his long legs to close the gap between them.

Her ascent sputtered and stopped as she came face-to-face with him. Slowly, her lips parted. She was scarcely aware of the bustle around her, of the coolies trooping up and down the water stairs with chests of black tea on their shoulders, the swarming of the bumboats, like flies about the hull of the steamer, the raucous cries of the lychee vendor, the odor of cuttlefish sizzling in peanut oil.

He was thin beyond her worst imaginings, so thin that his collar stood out loosely from his neck. His coat and trousers, originally fitted by the best Chinese tailor in Hong Kong, hung on him like bags. The planes of his face were hollow, and his eyes burned with a zealous fire.

"Stephen!" Her lips formed his name without a sound. He held out his arms and she stumbled into them. "Stephen . . . oh, Stephen!" Her hands slid beneath his jacket and felt his ribs. They were as sharp and

distinct as the tines of a rake. But at least he was holding her, his hands pressing her against his bone-hard chest.

"Hello, runt." His voice was harsh with emotion.

She raised her tear-filled eyes and forced herself to smile at him. "I wanted to come sooner," she said. "I wanted to be here for . . . the baby. But Harry felt that with the flood — "

"It's all right, Serena. There's nothing you could have done."

"Stephen, I'm so sorry about Madeline — " What trite, inadequate words to answer the desolation in those blue eyes.

"Aye," he said softly. "I'll show you her grave later on if you'd like." He scanned the riverboat. "Were you able to bring a doctor?"

"I'm sorry, Stephen. Harry tried. He asked everyone. There's a new outbreak of the flux in Shanghai, and none of the doctors could leave."

His face fell. "Then we'll have to make do as we are. The mission's promised us a doctor early next year. That's a long time off. But the Taipings sent us one of theirs. He's not so bad, really. Maybe Chinese medicine's best for Chinese people. At least it's what they'll accept."

"And Grandfather . . . ?" Her question hung on the air.

"At the dispensary. He said he couldn't be spared to come and meet you. Too much to do. You'll be meeting him later."

"I see." For a time, she stood beside him in silence and watched an old man fishing with his cormorant from a small boat. "Stephen, what's he really like?" she said at last.

"A terror on first impression, I'll guarantee you." He patted her shoulder. "There's not an iota of charm in the old fellow. He says exactly what he thinks, and most of the time what he thinks is not pleasant to hear." Stephen kicked a pebble down the water stairs. "And he despises women. I never realized before how much Grandmamma must have hurt him. He took it out on poor Madeline these last months. You wouldn't believe how difficult it was." Stephen's thin face darkened for a moment.

"But he's a good man, Serena. One of the best men I've ever known, in his own way. You have to be strong for this kind of life. There's no room for weakness or softness or frivolity. He's taught me that. I resented him a good deal at first." Stephen shook his head. "In time, I came to learn that he was right about everything . . . including Madeline. He said that one day I'd curse myself for bringing her here."

"Hush! Don't, Stephen. You couldn't have known!" She gripped his arm hard. She had feared that her brother would torture himself in such a way. She groped for something more cheerful to say. "Stephen, I brought a whole trunkful of things for the baby! I can hardly wait to see him!"

"That was good of you." Stephen's voice was oddly listless. "Mrs. Abernathy has him at her house in Hanyang, where you'll be staying as well. Our little place here in Hankow's hardly fit for . . ." His voice trailed off and Serena supposed he was remembering that he had brought his wife there. "I was hoping he'd look like Madeline," he said, brightening a bit.

"But he looks like you instead?"

Stephen shook his head. "Noah's all Robards. He's dark like Mother and Moira. Darker, if anything. I've not much time for him now, but I suppose when he's older — "

Serena squeezed his hand. Yes, she reflected, he might well be glad to have her take the baby back to Shanghai. But she would not ask him. Not yet. "The boat's loaded with wheat and rice," she said. "And ten cases of powdered quinine. Harry asked the doctors what you'd need most."

"Quinine. Aye, there's plenty of malaria. It was a good choice."

"And there's a case each of iodine, ipecac, foxglove, colchicum, and ether, with instructions on how to use them."

"Thanks. Tell Harry we're grateful. We've been making do with Chinese herbs. There's an empty godown just up the street. If the captain can see to the unloading of the supplies, I'll show you the clinic. Unless you don't mind walking, I'll get you a sedan chair.

"Mind?" She laughed, for the first time that day. "Why, I'm looking forward to it!"

When the unloading was safely underway, Serena linked his thin arm with hers and together they strolled up the river road, Stephen adjusting his long-legged stride to her delicate steps. With one hand, she lifted her skirt and petticoats. Although the end of the monsoons had come a good two weeks earlier, the streets of Hankow were still puddled with yellow water. An aging melon-seed vendor paused in midcry to stare at her billowing hooped skirt and primly coiffed golden hair. Two ragged little boys playing with straw boats in a rain pool clutched one another in sudden fright,

scrambled to their feet, and fled, leaving the tiny boats bobbing alone in the muddy water.

"Lord," she grimaced. "Haven't they ever seen an Englishwoman?"

"Not likely. All the foreigners except us have moved into Hanyang, waiting for the time when they can buy land here for building. And Madeline didn't get out much. She wasn't well."

Those simple words hid months of anguish, Serena knew. She glanced around her and shuddered. Hankow was a dirty, primitive smudge on the face of China. Most of the prosperous Chinese lived across the river in Hanyang or in Wuchang. Here, the streets were narrow and filthy, the houses little more than dark holes in gray masonry walls. Rats scuttled through the shadows. Even the people were rat-like, bustling and furtive in their drab cotton garments, casting secretive, sidelong glances at her as they passed. Soon, once the Europeans were allowed to move in, the ramshackle clutter of huts and Chinese warehouses along the river road would be razed to make room for princely mansions and business houses. Hankow would grow as the once-grubby, insignificant Shanghai had grown, into a splendid outpost of trade and culture in an alien world. But now, to bring a frail girl like Madeline to a place like this — Again, Serena shuddered. Glancing up at Stephen from under her violet-trimmed bonnet, she saw that he had aged years in these past months.

"Stephen, are you well?" Her hand tightened on his arm.

"I've not had a sick day since I came here."

"That's not what I'm asking," she said softly. "Look at you. You're burning yourself away to skin and bones. What are you eating, locusts and wild honey?"

He smiled at the prick of her sarcasm. "I eat what all Hankow eats. Rice when it's available. Fish when it can be bought. And when there's nothing to be had, I go hungry, as they do."

Some call him a saint, others a madman. The words of Mrs. Abernathy's letter floated through her mind. She found her fingers digging into his sleeve. A saint or a madman. Yes, he was one or the other. Purified or maddened by the loss of the woman he loved. Biting back tears, she poked his ribs playfully. "You look like that starving old horse they found on one of the islands a few years ago. Remember? Your bones poke out like doorknobs, Stephen Bellamy!"

There was a bit of the old Stephen in his shrug. "You were always the one with the beauty. How's Harry?"

"The same. Always. He sends his love."

"You know, it's really none of my business, but I thought you'd be working on Harry Junior by now. You've been married seven months. But you're still the girl with the smallest waist in Hong Kong."

"All in good time." Serena heard her voice give the answer that had become her automatic response when people asked her about children. Yet something inside her wanted to fling herself into his brotherly arms and sob out the truth.

They had turned off the river road, and he was guiding her up a narrow alleyway. "Here's our infirmary," he announced, stopping before a doorway that was no more than an empty black rectangle in the drab wall. "This is where I sleep — when there's a bed. Don't be shocked. It's not much. We've taken a few of the sick ones we've found on the streets, that's all. We can't offer them much, just a clean bed and a bowl of rice gruel. But it's a beginning. The medicine you brought will make things easier . . . if we can just get them to trust us — "

"You said you had a Taiping doctor." Serena lifted her skirt and daintily scraped the mud off her shoes on the narrow stone stoop.

"Aye. Sun Wai-dak. You'll meet him."

"But a Taiping?"

"And if he's a fair sample of the lot of them, I hope they take China from the Manchus." Stephen took her elbow again and gently ushered her inside.

Serena stood blinking for a moment in the dimness. The sour stench of sickness, blending with the odor of stale boiled cabbage, made her gag. Determined to keep a brave face, she swallowed hard and looked around her. The cramped room was filled with beds — beds made from old packing crates, beds with rusted iron frames. Except for the brick stove and table in one corner, they filled the room. Through the doorway, Serena caught a glimpse of another room with more beds. Nine or ten in all. Only one of them was empty. The moldering walls absorbed muted moans and the hiss of labored breathing.

"We bought what beds and bedding we could with mission funds," Stephen was saying. "Some were given to us. The rest I made out of packing crates. The mission didn't authorize us to set up a hospital, but I saw the need for it, and I managed to convince Grandfather as

well." Stephen broke off as a stocky young Chinese in a cotton tunic stepped through the doorway.

Serena could not help staring, for he looked like no Celestial she had ever seen. His countenance was plump and well scrubbed, almost ruddy above the pale blue of his tunic, his smile of greeting open and full of confidence. But — she blinked as she realized what had struck her — never before had she seen a Chinese male whose head was not shaved and pigtailed Manchu-fashion. The man's hair, long all over his scalp, had been pulled back into a braid, which was wound around his head like a turban.

"Serena," Stephen announced in the Cantonese tongue they had learned from their *amahs*, "may I present Doctor Sung, from Nanking."

"Ah," he extended his hand Western-fashion. "The Reverend's charming sister at last. God's blessings be upon you, and the blessings of our Heavenly Elder Brother as well. This humble one is honored."

"Thank you," she whispered, extending her hand, which he shook very formally and released.

"Serena's brought some cases of our medicines along with the wheat and rice," Stephen said.

"Excellent!" the young doctor exclaimed. "I was apprenticed once to a great physician, a very old man whose grandfather had studied with the Jesuits in Peking. He spoke most respectfully of Western medicine, although of course our own treatments are quite superior now. I confess I am most curious to see what you have."

Serena's brows lifted at his smugness, but she said nothing. For the next hour or more, she followed her brother and the young Taiping doctor about the small clinic, watching as he examined each patient. Among them was the old man whose life Stephen had saved the night of the flood. When Serena approached, his ancient face creased in a broad, toothless grin.

Dr. Sung kept his medicines in a camphorwood chest with brass fastenings. He crushed and blended each preparation of herbs individually, in a small porcelain mortar. Stephen assisted by brewing the herbs in a cup with hot water from a teakettle on the stove and, very gently, helping each patient to drink. Serena marveled at her brother's tenderness. There was love in the way he supported their heads with one hand and pressed the cup to their lips with the other. His blood-shot eyes glowed with patience and devotion.

"I'll help," she offered, unbuttoning her cuffs.

"Not just yet." Stephen waved her away. "We have our system for doing this. Dr. Sung and I. But if you could help us with the soup later on — we usually have a woman for that. She's ill today." Serena stepped back and contented herself with watching.

One skeletal man, about fifty years old, lay twitching and moaning on a cot, his mouth gaping like a fish's. Every few moments, his hands would claw at his face and he would whimper, "Uh-uh-uh-uh . . ." The young doctor was strangely cool toward him, ignoring him until his cries became annoyingly loud. Then he would turn to him and bark out a sharp rebuke in the tone of voice one might use to quiet a troublesome hound.

"What's wrong with him?" Serena inquired at last.

"Opium." Dr. Sung's answer was brusque. He worked on in silence for a few moments, his fingers crushing a bit of dried ginger root. "When the Celestial Empire is truly ours," he said in a low voice, "such evils will no longer exist. Among the Taiping, the penalty for the use or the selling of opium is death."

Serena felt a shiver pass over her skin. She met Stephen's eyes. In their long years of closeness, they had learned to communicate with more than words. *No*, his gaze assured her, *I have told him nothing*.

It was dusk by the time Serena and Stephen boarded the steamer that would carry them across the Han. Serena was weary. A lock of hair had come loose from her upswept coiffure to dangle in front of her eyes and flutter in the breeze. She had yet to meet her grandfather. He had sent word to the clinic that he would see them that evening at Mrs. Abernathy's in Hanyang.

Bone-tired, from her travels and from serving up the gruel, she leaned on the rail and closed her eyes. The evening was deliciously cool, the air bracing after the stench of the clinic.

The lights of Hankow grew faint with distance as the evening sky deepened. Lanterns glimmered on the prows of sampans and junks, their light zigzagging down into the water.

Serena rested her head against her brother's shoulder. "You're happy, aren't you, Stephen?"

"Aye," he whispered after a long silence. "Though I'd not really use that word. I was happy with Madeline — in a way that I'll never be again. But I've found my place in the world and I'm comfortable in it. How many men can truly say that?"

Serena stroked the worn fabric of his sleeve. A button was missing from the cuff of his coat.

"I hated the Chinese at first, now that I think back on it," he said. "I was going to come charging into China like a knight on a white steed and save them all!" He chuckled wryly. "When I found they'd have none of it, I put the blame on them, not on myself, where it belonged. I always knew God wanted me in China . . . but it took me a long time to learn that I was sent not to save their souls, but to wash their feet."

"What does Grandfather say to that?"

Stephen laughed. "Oh, he's still chiseling away at their souls! Twenty years in China, and he still hasn't given up! I tell myself I shouldn't judge him, Serena. He's got so much goodness in him. But I think it's the *work* he loves, not the people. I respect him, but we don't always agree." Stephen let the wind ruffle his light brown hair. "To change the subject, Serena, what did you think of Dr. Sung?"

"Intelligent . . . dedicated . . . cocky as a bantam rooster. I can't say I liked him." Serena examined a broken fingernail. "Stephen . . . he's a spy, isn't he? A spy for the Taipings!"

"Of course." Stephen smiled. "He admits it freely. He was sent by no less a personage than the *Chung Wang*, the commander-in-chief of the whole Taiping army, to see what the British plan to do in Hankow. But he's been invaluable to me. I couldn't manage the infirmary without him." He took a deep breath of river air. "We've become good friends."

There was nothing ominous in Stephen's words. Serena could not explain the sudden chill of foreboding that passed over her like a cloud, and vanished within the space of a breath. "I'm glad," she said vaguely, squeezing her brother's hand.

The house of Hamish and Beulah Abernathy was, like every house in Hanyang, of Chinese construction. Inside, however, it was a bit of dowdy, comfortable England, with its sagging, overstuffed furniture, hand-crocheted doilies, and gilt-framed Turner prints. The fragrance of roast suckling pig tantalized Serena's nostrils as Beulah Abernathy flung open the door and enfolded her against her spongy bosom.

"My dear, we expected you hours ago! Let me look at you — so pretty, Stephen! You didn't tell us! But you're exhausted! Where've you been?"

"Helping me at the infirmary," Stephen answered, putting down Serena's portmanteau. "We've been there since early afternoon. She's a good nurse."

"The infirmary! Lord's mercy, Stephen Bellamy, just because she's your sister — " She shook her head at him, disapproval puckering her chin. "But there's plenty of time to wash and change before dinner. Your grandfather's not even arrived yet. I'll show you to your room, dear."

"Thank you." Serena smiled. "But first I want to see my nephew. Please! I've been so anxious — "

"And you won't be disappointed. He's a darling! Right down this hallway — Ah, yes, he's awake. Hear him?" Mrs. Abernathy bustled ahead of Serena and Stephen to open the door.

A broad-boned Chinese peasant girl, her hair in pigtails, sat on a low stool. A small, dark head was pressed against her bare breast. She glanced up shyly as they entered, but did not try to cover herself or turn away. "Nancy," Mrs. Abernathy commanded brusquely, "wantchee look-look bull chilo. Can?" Turning aside to Stephen and Serena, she explained, "Lord knows I can't pronounce her real name, but I've taught her to answer to Nancy. She learns fast for a Chinese."

Obediently, the girl popped her nipple out of the baby's mouth and thrust him away from her breast. In protest, he squeezed his eyes shut and began to scream with rage.

"My son." Stephen rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Here — oh, please — " Serena held out her arms. Nancy, glancing first at Mrs. Abernathy for reassurance, placed the squirming, squalling baby in them. His little face was beet-red below a thatch of black curls. The small pink hands that clutched at the air in fury were long and beautifully formed, with the promise of strength already in them. It was those hands, Serena was to remember later, that captured her heart at once.

Instinctively, she gathered him close and snuggled him against her shoulder. One hand stroked his back through the thin cotton gown, the fingers tangling in the long, sweat-dampened hair at the back of his neck. Gradually, his screams diminished to whimpers, his whim-

pers to forlorn hiccups. "Noah . . ." she crooned. "Let me look at you, Noah . . ." Gently, she moved him away from her shoulder until she could gaze into his face.

"Oh, you were right, Stephen! He's all Robards! Remember Mamma's little portrait of her father? The one she kept on her desk? But he's going to have your blue eyes, I can tell! Ah, Noah, what a handsome little devil you're going to be!"

Stephen's son returned her gaze with a scowl, his lower lip jutting petulantly outward. His head begun to thrust this way and that, seeking nourishment where there was none. Frustrated, he began to howl again.

"He's not trying very hard to make a good impression," Stephen grinned helplessly.

"But he's a baby, you lout! He only cares about eating and sleeping — don't you, little one? Here, get back to your supper, then!" Serena kissed the baby's forehead and handed him back to his nurse. He clutched ravenously at the nipple, rooting like a little pig. Nancy bent over him, stroking his cheek with one work-roughened finger. She looked very young, Serena thought, no more than fifteen or sixteen.

"And the girl?" she asked Mrs. Abernathy quietly. "Doesn't she have a baby of her own, and a husband?"

"Wouldn't you know, dear?" Mrs. Abernathy clicked her tongue behind her fan. "These people have practically no morals at all — no more than rabbits! Husband, indeed! Of course not — and worse! When she gave birth to a girl, her father took the baby out and threw it in the river!"

Forewarned about her grandfather's Spartan preferences in women's fashion, Serena had dressed conservatively for dinner. Though her gown was a deep, rich burgundy faille, it was primly cut, with a high jabot of white lace at the neck and long sleeves. It was a dress in which she had always felt regal, and tonight she needed all the confidence it could give her.

She glanced across Mrs. Abernathy's well-laid table at the towering old man she had met only a short while ago. Archer Bellamy had greeted her stiffly, like the stranger she was. His handshake had been cold and rigid, his acknowledgment of their meeting little more than a murmur. Serena remembered the tales she had heard of him — how

he had disowned his son for selling opium; how he had taken a pair of scissors and cut off his daughter Kathleen's long red hair for flirting with a Portuguese boy. For years, he had been a legend in her life, hero and bogeyman, a figure only half-real.

She had not expected him to like her, she admitted. But his subdued attitude toward her had come as a surprise. She had anticipated hostility, flaring up at her like fire and brimstone. Instead, when she met his wintry blue eyes she saw only the icy shadow of dread.

When she reflected on it, his reaction to her was not so surprising. Archer Bellamy was a man who had been hurt by every woman in his life: by Rose, the golden-haired wife who had left him after twenty-three years of marriage, by the passionate Kathleen, forsaking all he had taught her to flee with her Chinese lover, and by dark-eyed Priscilla Robards, the opium trader's daughter who had stolen his only son.

And Serena was tied by blood to each of these women. She had her mother's delicate bones and great, dark eyes, her grandmother's wealth of honey-gold tresses, and, she'd been told, something of the fabled Kathleen's proud carriage and fiery temperament. When Archer Bellamy looked at her, Serena sensed the opening of old wounds that had healed only on the surface. She was the pain of his past, returning to haunt him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she studied her grandfather. He was sipping broth, the fine silver spoon almost lost in his huge hand. His fingers were very long and square at the tips, like Kathleen's and like Stephen's. Her throat tightened at the sudden awareness of the link between one generation and the next. Noah, Stephen's son, had those same hands.

Serena took a sip of wine and cleared her throat. "Grandfather, I saw the infirmary today," she ventured. "I must say, I was impressed with what you've accomplished on so little."

He glanced up at her coldly. "I thank you, but the clinic's your brother's doin'. I've sworn not t' set foot in the place while that infidel witch-doctor's there."

Stephen smiled. "It seems, Serena, you've managed to hit upon the one point where Grandfather and I disagree. I welcome help from the Taipings, whatever their motives. In fact, I welcome help from any source, as long as we can use it for good — "

"And you'll be sorry for it!" the old man rasped. "They're nothing but blasphemers masquerading as Christians. With one o' them claimin' t' be the Son of God an' the equal of Our Lord 'imself! Wouldn't give a shilling for the lot o' them!"

"I watched Dr. Sung at work," Serena defended her brother's point of view. "He seemed very competent. Oh, not like one of our English doctors, but with what he had to work with — "

"Chinese medicine is pure deviltry, 'ow can any good come out of an 'eathen nation?" Reverend Bellamy jabbed the air with his fork for emphasis. "The mission's promised us a real doctor by next March. Till then, you'd best leave well enough alone! This 'oldin' 'ands with the Taipings will come t' no good, mark my words!"

"And how many will die between now and March that we could have saved?" Stephen was pale with fervor. "We must do what we can, with what we have! How can we stand blameless if even one child or old man dies when we could have saved them?"

"My dear Stephen," Hamish Abernathy expostulated. "Put your finger in the Yangtze and take it out again. Then you'll know how much difference your saving a handful of derelicts and children will have made in this vast, crawling termite nest of a country!"

Mrs. Abernathy clapped her hands for a pot of fresh tea. "Lord's mercy, Hamish, this is no place for one of your political arguments. You'll curdle your dinner and everyone else's! Now mind you, I've got a cherry tart coming for dessert, and I'll not be serving it to riled up stomachs!" She reached over and patted Serena's hands. "Don't mind them, my dear. I can usually count on some spirited talk when I put my husband at the same table as your brother and grandfather. Come, come, now let's eat!"

The meal continued in uneasy silence. From across the table, Serena studied her grandfather and Stephen where they sat side by side. The resemblance between the two of them was stronger than she had first thought. But there was a harsh vitality in the old man that was lacking in Stephen. The years had toughened him, like old whip leather. Trial and hardship had honed him down to sinew and bone and wind-weathered skin. He was, perhaps, the man Stephen might become if he stayed enough years in China, but now Stephen only looked frail and tired. At twenty-two, he had outrun his youth. He had buried his own young manhood in that pitiful grave on the

far side of Hanyang Hill. There was little of life left in him except the fire of idealism that burned in his eyes and consumed his flesh like an illness.

The moon rose late over the hills of Hanyang — a melon-seed moon, waning in the dark sky. Archer Bellamy had left early, making his excuses as Serena had known he would. She sorrowed at his going, for she would have liked nothing better than to sit and talk with him for hours, about his life, his work, and the son he had not seen for more than twenty years. But her presence only pained him, she knew, and so she had clasped his hand and let him go, wondering if she would ever see him again.

At least now she could be alone with Stephen. She could walk with him in the garden of the Abernathy house and speak of the matter now closest to her heart.

"Must you go back tomorrow?" Stephen said. "You've only just come, Serena."

"Harry can't spare me for long," she answered, patting the sleeve of his threadbare coat, "and neither can the business. It's become very demanding, you know."

"I can imagine." He laughed lightly, his profile black against the night stars. "I've always known you had a head for it. And it agrees with you, I can tell. You're looking ever so much better than you did when I saw you in Shanghai."

"I know what you're wondering, Stephen. No more brandy. That was . . . temporary."

"Harry's good to you?" His tone was concerned.

"Harry's an angel. Twenty times better than I deserve! He lets me do anything I want to." Serena twisted the folded fan that hung from her wrist. Taking a deep breath, she filled her lungs with the sharp night air, cool with autumn and damp with the mist of the river. The top of the inner gate with its eaves curled upward was silhouetted against the moon. The high-pitched song of a late-night drunkard echoed from the darkness outside the wall.

"Stephen," she said, her voice quivering a little, "when I go back to Shanghai tomorrow, I'd like to take Noah and his nurse with me. Would you let me?"

"Why — Serena, I'd never thought of it! For how long?"

"For as long as you'd allow. A month or two if you won't be parted from him longer. Or even until the time you get married again. He'd have a proper mother then."

Stephen drew in his breath, the sound harsh and hurting. "You know that I'll never marry again."

Serena let the silence speak for her. "He'd have the best money could buy, Stephen," she said at last. "The best care, the best education, the best social connections . . ."

"And would he have love?"

"All that Harry and I could give him. As much as if he were our own."

"I don't know . . . ?" Stephen turned away from her. "It's not that you wouldn't be good to him. And I know he'd have all the advantages. That can be important. He may not want to follow me into the ministry, and I'll not force him." He paced to the end of the brick path and back, clenching and unclenching his hands. "I know I don't have much time for him now . . . But, Serena, it's just that he's all I have left of Madeline. As long as I can see him, she's *real* to me, something more than a grave and a memory."

"That may be enough for you," Serena said gently. "Is it enough for Noah?"

He shook his head. "But you'll have a baby of your own one day — soon. God willing. You won't feel the same about Noah afterward."

"That isn't so," she whispered. "But even if it were — " Serena clasped the trunk of an acacia tree, something in her bursting with such pain that she could no longer contain it. She turned back to face her brother. "We'll never have children, Harry and I. We . . . can't."

"Oh, Serena!" He reached her in a stride and gathered her tight against his chest. She felt the sharpness of his ribs against her cheek. "Are you sure? You've not been married long."

Serena nodded her head against his thin shirt, gulping back the tears.

"But have you seen a doctor? Does he say there's a problem?"

"There's . . . no need to see a doctor. The problem is quite self-evident." *Oh, Stephen, don't ask me any more; don't make me tell you!* her mind pleaded.

"Serena — " He lifted her face. "Is it you?"

She felt the tempest of grief and frustration welling up in her, and she could not hold it back. "It's not me, Stephen. Oh, would to God it

were!" She choked out the words before the storm burst and she flung herself against his chest once more, sobbing.

"Serena!" The horror in his voice bespoke his understanding. He stroked her back awkwardly. "Oh, Serena, I had no idea — "

Swallowing her tears for a moment, she looked up at him. "You see, I'm not wanting Noah for your sake, or even for his. I'm wanting him for my own."

His arms tightened around her, warm and comforting. "Then you shall have him, Serena, my dear. You and Harry. For a month, for a year, for as long as you love and want him . . . I know it's best . . . Oh, Serena, don't cry . . . See, you've got me doing it, too!"

Twelve

Canton

October, 1861

Daniel had followed the water courses down from the mountains, tracing the streams and small rivers until at last the sweeping Yangtze had borne him to Chungking. In his head, he carried the memory of his father's map, and he knew every detail of it. No map, however, could have conveyed to him the immensity of the land that lay between Taocheng and his father's birthplace. Distances that he'd imagined could be covered in a matter of days had taken many times that long to traverse. He had discovered mountains where the map showed none, rapids where he had visualized an easy passage by river junk.

As for Chungking, that sprawling monster of a city had totally awed him. He had wandered its streets for days, gaping open-mouthed like the mountain boy he was at the bazaars and shops where one could buy anything within the realm of the imagination. So entranced was he with the city that he let several days pass before he took up his quest again. A friendly beggar at the gate pointed out the road that led south in the direction of Kwangchow, which was the name given to Canton by everyone except foreigners like Daniel's mother. Daniel had hitched up his trousers, settled the burden of his meager possessions on his shoulder, and set out once more.

The way had been far from easy, but at least one problem had readily resolved itself. With bandits abounding in the countryside and pirates lurking around the bends of the rivers, there was no caravan leader or river-junk captain who was not happy to have a man of Daniel's size and strength in his company. Thus, work was easy

enough to come by, and Daniel seldom lacked food, money, or companionship.

It was an older, more seasoned Daniel who finally, at his journey's end, stood on the quay at Canton and watched the light of the rising sun play upon the awakening city. He had come a long distance in the past two lunar months. His companions, for the most part, had been rough sorts, loggers, porters, and sailors. He had worked, eaten, and slept alongside them, gambled, brawled, and listened while they talked of women, recounting their escapades with lavish embellishments and gestures. Daniel joined in the laughter and followed each tale, but told no stories of his own.

As he walked up the quay and into the sprawling riverfront section of Canton that lay outside the city walls, he tried to picture in his mind the maps his father had drawn him, juxtaposing upon them the descriptions he had heard from sailors and travelers. If his orientation was correct, he calculated, the southwest corner of the wall lay ahead of him, and the distant gate, still closed for the night, would be the Bamboo Gate. Daniel turned his eyes upstream to his left, where he could make out the huge white colonnaded structure that marked the old site of the Factories. Beyond it, still swathed in morning fog, lay Shamien Island, separated from the mainland by a narrow canal, where Canton's foreign colony lived. Satisfied as to his bearings, Daniel walked slowly up the quay, his heart palpitating with sudden uncertainty.

He knew where to find the House of Cheng. His father had instructed him well. He had only to enter Canton through the Bamboo Gate, pass through the Southwest Gate of the Old City, and follow the inside of the west wall until he came to Sam-lai Street. From there, it would be an easy matter to find a house behind a high gray wall, a dragon carved above its gateway. But what would he find within that gate?

The weight of his father's ivory seal in its leather pouch swung reassuringly from the thong around his neck — ample proof that he was the son of Cheng Lo. But would they welcome him? Daniel shivered with anticipation.

Two rats, fighting over a rotting fish, fled squeaking at Daniel's approaching footsteps. He walked slowly, for the day was new and full of waiting wonders. His stomach growled. He savored the hunger, remembering that the junk's captain had paid him that morning. The

weight of Mexican silver dollars and Chinese copper cash jingled com-
fortingly in the purse that hung at his waist. He would not arrive at
the house of his father with an empty belly.

But his appearance — that was another matter. Daniel ran a hand
over his scalp and felt the prickle of growing stubble. The cotton
tunic and trousers he wore, once white in mourning for his parents,
were a dirty gray, stained with mud from the river and splotted
with grease and soot. He looked as filthy as a coal coolie, he scolded
himself as his mind recounted his money, and he probably smelled
worse. There was just enough, he calculated, to buy a new suit of
white cotton clothing with a pair of reed sandals, and to get himself
shaved and bathed.

Daniel walked on, casting his eyes up and down the side alleys
until he spied a street barber just setting up for the day.

The price agreed upon, he squatted on the barber's low bamboo
stool and submitted his skull to the scrape of the razor. The barber was
a man of skill. His nimble fingers worked the blade so smoothly that
Daniel's scalp soon gleamed like ivory, without a single scratch or
nick. He shaved his face as well. "A heavy beard for one so young. By
the color of your eyes, I would venture to guess that I am shaving the
son of a foreigner." He laughed when Daniel returned his impertin-
ence with a scowl. "Ah, I meant no offense, young lord. There are a
good many of your breed here in Kwangchow. Why, even the sister of
my wife bore the child of a foreign sailor. It's a common thing among
poor folk like us."

Daniel kept his silence while the man chatted. To blurt out the truth
— that his father was the son of a noble house, and his mother, though
indeed foreign, was a gentle and virtuous lady — would have been, in
his mother's words, to cast pearls before swine. Still, the barber's idle
patter created a small rustling of fear within him. He had never been
ashamed of his foreign blood. No one who had known his mother
could look upon it as anything less than an honor to be of her descent.
But many people in the Middle Kingdom hated the foreigners. They
called them barbarians, hairy, smelly foreign devils. It could be that his
relatives of the House of Cheng would look down on his mixed blood.
Perhaps they would be bitter or contemptuous, because his father had
taken a foreign concubine.

"Hold still, young lord! Do you want me to cut you, when I am so nearly finished? Ah, here, lift your face. This part is the most delicate of all, and if you so much as twitch — " With the steady hand of a master, he shaved the inside of Daniel's nostrils. "There!" he declared triumphantly. "Now you look like the noble one you truly are! Though I grant you are in need of a good washing." He leaned closer to Daniel's ear. "The son of my elder brother is the proprietor of a most excellent bathhouse not far from the Tranquil River Gate. If you tell him I sent you, he will lower the price!"

When the shops opened, Daniel bought new trousers and a tunic of white cotton, as well as new reed sandals. Then, with his purchases under his arm, he made for the city wall once more and found the bathhouse near the Tranquil River Gate.

The sun had risen well above the hills when he emerged, his skin pink from scrubbing, his queue washed and freshly braided. Regretfully, he gazed down at his new cotton garments and wished for a moment that he could arrive at the House of Cheng in the silks of a mandarin, wearing fine black satin boots with soles of thick white felt like his father had once worn. But — he shrugged — at least no one could fault him for his lack of cleanliness.

He passed through the Bamboo Gate into the "New City," which was enclosed within an extension of the original wall. The streets were narrower here, and more crowded, the shops set back in neat compartments behind stone counters, their banners upright on small granite pedestals. Daniel's steps slowed as he wound his way through throngs of morning shoppers. Sweet smoke from burning joss sticks bit the air, the offerings of shopkeepers to the gods of their trade. Daniel's pulse had begun to race with excitement. His father had walked these very streets. And soon . . . soon he would be standing in the courtyard of the house where Cheng Lo had been born. For the first time in his life, he would be bowing before his father's ancestral tablets, and he would be meeting, at last, those who were bound to him by blood.

"The Southwest Gate? Yes, it's just ahead of you. Follow the bend in the street," the proprietor of an ink shop answered Daniel's question. Daniel hurried on. The loneliness of the past months, so nearly at an end, welled up in him like a flood, almost choking off his breath. It had been so long since he had been with people of his own. The months he

had spent in the house of Liu had been as barren as a desert. Only his passion for Min Fei had kept him alive and feeling. A sudden surge of gratitude stung his eyes. It was strange that he should think of her now — especially strange that he should think of her with such tenderness when she had used him so shamelessly.

The solemn cadence of a gong greeted him as he rounded the curve of the street. The crowd parted, jostling him back against the wall as a wedge of soldiers, part of Canton's Manchu garrison, came tramping out of a side street.

Shackled by iron neckbands, seven prisoners shuffled along in their midst. Their eyes were glazed, their faces blank like the faces of sheep. Their hands — Daniel caught only a wrenching glimpse of them — were the color of overripe plums, pus crusting on the ends of the fingers where the nails had been jerked out.

"Not a pretty sight, my young friend," the one-eyed beggar at Daniel's elbow cackled at his discomfiture. "But look and learn, I always say. Even when your eyes have seen as much death as mine."

The crowd was moving, pouring down the street behind the procession of soldiers and prisoners. Daniel and the old beggar were swept along with it in the direction of the Southwest Gate.

"What have they done?" He raised his voice above the din.

"Nothing, most likely." The old man's eye socket was a shadowed hole lined with scarred pink skin. "The viceroy's work, I'll wager. Part of his quota of Taiping sympathizers." He squinted with his good eye. "It doesn't matter whether they're guilty or not, you see. But the numbers that go on the viceroy's report to Peking — now they're important."

The procession had reached the Southwest Gate. The officer in charge called a halt. Turning to the prisoners, the soldiers began to unfasten their iron collars. The seven men stood passively, swaying a bit like sleeping cattle, without struggling.

"Why do they look like that?" Daniel whispered loudly to the old man.

"Opium." The old beggar belched. "They tear out their fingernails and promise them opium to kill the pain if they'll confess to being with the Taipings. By then, they've not much to lose. Murderers and thieves get their heads chopped off at the execution ground. But with Taipings they want to make an example. They do it at the gates, where

the people will see and tremble!" He spat again. Daniel moved to one side to avoid getting spittle on his new sandals and was caught in a sudden forward surge of the crowd that carried him away from the old beggar.

"Aiee! One side, tall one! Was your father a pine tree? I can't see around you!" Someone jostled Daniel out of the way, but the press of the mob was such that he could only squeeze forward. He wanted nothing more than to be on his way, to pass through the Southwest Gate and into the old part of the city where his father's family lived. But between him and the gate, the squad of Manchu soldiers had set up their small pageant of death. Little by little, Daniel was thrust forward, until he found himself at the inner edge of the teeming circle that had formed around the executioners and their victims. He could count the beads of sweat that glittered on the foreheads of the Manchus as they forced the seven prisoners to kneel on the stones. He could read the characters on the papers that were pinned to the backs of the begrimed tunics, declarations that each prisoner had confessed to being in league with the Taiping rebels and was meeting his death according to the law. Two soldiers stood beside each prisoner, one of each pair holding a drawn sword.

At a command from the officer in charge, the soldiers grasped the queues of the prisoners and jerked them forward, lowering the heads and stretching the necks. The young officer barked another order and seven broad-bladed swords lifted high in practiced unison. The crowd was silent now. The prisoners knelt passively, waiting. The Manchu soldier who held the sword above him — he looked no older than Daniel — licked his lips nervously.

The spoken command came almost softly, a single syllable that dropped like a jade bead from the officer's lips. The seven swords flashed downward, faster than thought. The sound of steel meeting flesh and bone was not unlike the simple chunk of a knife chopping bamboo, but the crowd gasped as the bodies fell forward, their severed necks spurting little fountains of blood.

Daniel watched, his throat dry and his stomach lurching, as the heads were tossed into a pile like cabbages — cabbages with sunken eyes and twisted, gaping mouths.

Sick with horror, he skirted the edge of the small square and made for the gate, shouldering past the crowd in his eagerness to be gone.

Suddenly, he became aware that the Manchu officer was staring at him with narrowed eyes. Daniel felt his skin prickle. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was simply because of his height, which often attracted attention. Or it was possible that he had departed with too much haste, arousing the man's suspicion? Feeling the sudden coolness of sweat on his face, Daniel slowed his steps. The eyes of the officer followed him as he passed beneath the gate of the high wall and into the Old City. He had done nothing, he reassured himself. And yet, if he was to believe the old beggar, that hardly assured his safety.

Seized by a sudden wave of tremors, Daniel stepped into the shelter of an empty doorway. He closed his eyes and leaned against the frame, his heart like a gong in his ears. His knees were water. Taking long, deep gulps of breath, he forced himself to be calm. The danger was past. The officer had not stopped him. Surely there was little to fear.

Little by little, his galloping heart slowed. The tightness in his chest eased and he opened his eyes. The morning sun slanted glaringly down across the roofs, making a pattern on the street. Passersby hurried about their business.

With a sigh, Daniel stepped out of the doorway. The sunlight struck his forehead. He squinted, looked downward, and felt his face turn pale.

His new white tunic was splattered with blood in a diagonal streak, like a red sash across his chest.

Without thinking, he tried to rub it off with his hand, but the fresh blood soaked into the cloth and was already drying in the heat. Daniel fought back a rising sense of panic. He was not harmed. He was not in danger. But the blood was on him like a brand or like some grave omen, and the sight of it chilled him. He began to walk, as swiftly as he dared, north along the street that paralleled the towering wall. He wanted only to find his family, to safely establish himself as a son of one of the most respected merchant families in Canton. Then all would be well.

His hand brushed his chest, where his father's seal still hung, its solid weight a comfort as he moved up the teeming street, through the Manchu quarter, and into the oldest part of the city. He hurried on. This older part of Canton was the most crowded of all. The streets were narrow and dim with shadows, even in the brightness of the morning. The walls of the houses, constructed with a slate-blue brick, lent to the feeling of coolness. People flowed along like water, moving

with the currents that carried them, pressing against the walls to let sedan chairs pass. Daniel had begun to watch the street markers, his eyes eager for the sign of the sam-lai — the shad fish — that would tell him he had come home at last.

Something, or someone, brushed his sleeve, the sensation sending an unexpected tingle of fear up his arm. Quickly, he glanced around him. Young people and old, coolies, servant girls, shoppers, and sidewalk vendors flowed around him in the narrow street, none of them menacing and none of them paying him any heed. Yet something had made his instincts rear in alarm. And it was still there, the tightness at the back of his neck that whispered of danger.

His mother, Daniel recalled, had been gifted — or cursed, some might say — with the ability to sense impending events. It was she, he remembered, who had sent him into the village on a trivial errand the night the earth shook and the mountain toppled. Perhaps she had felt something, and had somehow known that she and her beloved would not escape. Daniel had inherited a mere flickering of her gift, in him it came and went erratically and was often overshadowed by the flights of his own imagination. Thus, it often played him false, and so he did not always heed it. He glanced about the crowd, and satisfied that no one here could possibly mean him ill, he continued on his way.

He had almost passed the street marker before he saw it. Sam-lai, the sign of the fish. With his heart in his throat, Daniel turned the corner. His eyes darted ahead, from one doorway to the next, searching for the dragon chiseled in stone upon the lintel of the gate.

"You seek someone, my friend?" The young man who spoke wore the simple cotton tunic and trousers of a tradesman, but his clothes were new, so new that they still bore the creases of the shop folding. His face was round and bright and friendly. He bowed slightly, his hands in his sleeves. "Not many strangers pass through this street," he said. "Have you lost your way?"

Daniel hesitated for a moment, his eyes searching up and down the street for the dragon gate and not finding it. Perhaps he was indeed lost. "It is the House of Cheng I seek," he said at last. "A merchant family of this city. I was told they lived on this street."

A broad smile creased the corners of the stranger's eyes. "Ah, yes. Who does not know of the House of Cheng? One of Kwangchow's most illustrious families. They do indeed live on this street, but not

here. You must continue on down some distance before you see it — a red gate with a dragon above it." He scratched his ear. His nails were unusually long. "And you have business with the honored House of Cheng?"

Daniel drew himself up proudly. "The House of Cheng is the house of my own ancestors," he said.

"So!" The smile widened. "A lost one returning home. A most fortuitous occasion!"

"You know them?" Daniel asked eagerly.

"A humble coppersmith like myself? I could not be so honored. I only know them by reputation, as does everyone. But I must not delay you. You must be most anxious to arrive. It is not far. In the time it takes to sip two cups of tea, you will be standing before the gate."

"My thanks." Daniel bowed politely.

"Your servant." With a respectful nod, the young man backed away a few steps, then turned and melted into the crowd that flowed along the main thoroughfare.

With a lighter step now, Daniel hurried on up the narrow street. This was clearly a neighborhood of quality. The pavement was clean and free from refuse. Here and there a plum or cherry tree hung over a stone wall. The gates in the wall were widely spaced, a sign that the houses behind them must be large.

To quiet his tingling nerves, he forced his mind to rehearse what he would say to the servant who opened the gate. *I beg you, tell your masters that Cheng Li-t'ung, the fourth son of Cheng Lo who is of this house, has come to bow before the tablets of his ancestors.* His feet were leaden lumps that would not carry him fast enough. His eyes flew from one gateway to the next until at last he spied the weathered stone dragon, carved long ago when the city was young, slithering across the lintel of the red gate.

With a trembling hand, he lifted the brass knocker and rapped loudly, three times. After a long pause, the gate creaked partway open and the wrinkled face of a tiny old man peeped out. "Yes?" he demanded in a thin, wavering voice.

Daniel cleared his throat. "Tell your masters," he began stiffly, "that Cheng Li-t'ung, the fourth son of Cheng Lo who is of this house — "

"By the nine dragons, be still if you want to keep your head!" The old man's skeletal fingers clutched Daniel's sleeve. His ancient face

had turned white. "If you value your life and mine you will flee this place at once!"

"But I have journeyed more than three thousand *li* . . . all the way from Taocheng — Look, I have proof of who I am. My father's seal — " He fumbled at the leather thong around his neck.

"Be silent, I tell you!" the old man hissed. "And I need no proof of who you are! This is the house of Wu. It belongs to the grand secretary of the viceroy himself!" Thrusting his head out, he glanced up and down the street. Satisfied that no one was watching, he jerked Daniel inside and closed the gate. They stood in a dim passageway, still outside the spirit wall that blocked the entrance to the courtyard. "The less you tell me, the better it will be for us both, young lord," he said more gently, and Daniel saw to his amazement that the old eyes were filled with tears.

"But I was told — " Daniel protested, totally bewildered.

"Hush, young master. Do not speak words you may live to regret. Only let me look upon you a moment before you go." He stood back a bit, gazing at Daniel while the tears ran freely down his wrinkled cheeks. "Only a blind man," he whispered, "could fail to see that you are the son of Cheng Lo. This old one served the house of Cheng for more than fifty years and watched your father grow to young manhood within these walls."

"My father is dead — " Daniel's throat ached.

"I guessed as much. I see that you are in mourning. And you would not be here, carrying his seal, if he still lived."

"But what of my uncles? And my brothers?" A band of dread had clamped itself around Daniel's chest.

"Dead. All of them save one. The House of Cheng is no more."

"When?" The word came choking out.

"More than a year past — no, be still and listen, there is little time — it was the third son of your father, Cheng Shen-lan, who brought down the calamity. On a journey to the North, for the buying of silk, he fell in with the Taiping rebels and went off with them to Nanking. When word of what he had done reached this city, the viceroy sent a troop of Manchu banner men to this house — "

Daniel felt the shaking of his limbs and the sharp sucking in of his breath. His mind saw blood and mutilated hands and the flash of broadswords before the sense of total devastation came crashing in on him.

"All of them?" he managed to whisper.

"Men, women, children, even babies. The entire household, all but the servants." The old one spoke quietly through the roaring in Daniel's ears. "The women and children they slaughtered here in the courtyard. The men were taken to the *yamen* for trial."

"And my third elder brother? He still lives?"

"No one knows. He never returned." The old man shook his head. "But you are in great danger. If the viceroy's men learn that one of the House of Cheng has come home — "

Fear clutched at Daniel's throat as he remembered. "One knows," he answered softly. And he told the servant of his meeting with the friendly stranger who had directed him to the house.

"*Aiya!* I know the man! He spies for the viceroy! Your life is not worth a drop of spit! We must think swiftly — " His small ancient eyes took in the length of Daniel's frame. "One of my new master's chair-bearers is large. Perhaps in his clothes — " He peered around the spirit wall. "Wait here! Let no one see you!" He hurried off as fast as his feeble old legs could carry him.

Daniel shrank back against the wall, his heart thudding as the gravity of his situation sank into his senses with agonizing pain. The House of Cheng was no more. The treachery of his third elder brother had brought down its obliteration and put Daniel himself in such peril that he could not even take the time to weep for his loss. But the anguish was there, like a knife twisting in his innards, and he knew that if he lived to be an old, old man, it would never truly go away.

Even the returning footsteps of the ancient one made his heart leap like a startled rabbit's. The old servant came around the spirit wall, a begrimed and tattered tunic slung over his arm. "We must hurry," he hissed. "The bearer is a good and simple fellow who hates the Manchus as much as I do. He was more than willing to give you this. Put it on. I've a hat as well. We can hide you in the chair closet — "

Daniel was half into the tunic before he realized what he was doing. "They will likely find me in any case," he said, stripping the tunic off his arm. "And if they find me here, in these clothes, it will mean death to you and to the bearer as well as to me."

"Life is cheaper than straw in these times. We die today or we die tomorrow. When one is old and poor, it makes no difference. Take the tunic and come. Hurry!"

Daniel shook his head. "I will not risk the lives of two friends. Give this back to the bearer with my thanks. I will trust to the speed of my legs."

The old man smiled. "You are a stubborn, independent young fool," he said. "But then, so was your father, as I well remember. You are truly the son of Cheng Lo." He pressed his ear to the door. "If the years have not dimmed my hearing, they are already outside! Whatever you must do, do it swiftly!"

"Is there a back gate?"

"No. Only the roof. Hurry. That wisteria vine along the wall is strong. Quickly! Up with you!" The furious rapping of the knocker shook the gate. "Hurry!"

Daniel scrambled up the vine and over the edge of the low-peaked roof as the knocker sounded again, sharp and menacing. With a last upward glance, the old man hurried to open the gate.

Daniel slithered across the roof, his body scraping tiles that were crusty with age and soot, tormented with fear for the old man. A small, narrow alley lay three rooftops away. If he could reach it and drop down unseen, he could make it appear that he had indeed not been in the house. He moved as swiftly as he dared, the tiles clicking and rattling with such fearful loudness that he was sure all Canton could hear. A lizard, sunning itself atop a gable, skittered away as he crawled past to gain the edge of the roof. The alley was just below him. Holding his breath, he swung his legs over the edge, sprang free of the house, and landed in the soft mud.

The cries of the old man were shrill now, but it was evident that he was telling the Manchus nothing. Swallowing his fear, Daniel strode boldly out into the street. The attention of the soldiers was centered on the old one. No one looked his way. It would be easy, he thought, to slip away unnoticed and make good his escape. Easy — and the old servant would die. Daniel took a deep breath and let the old man's words echo in his mind. *You are truly the son of Cheng Lo . . .*

Swiftly, before his courage had time to flee, Daniel picked up a plum pit from the edge of the street and tossed it in the direction of the soldiers. It landed with a little click, just loud enough to make one of them turn his head. By then Daniel was running hard up the street.

"*Ai!* There's the son of a turtle! After him!" The soldiers who had gone inside came pouring out of the gate. Daniel had a block's head-

start on them, and fear gave his feet wings. Still, they came pounding after him, some with astonishing swiftness. He turned the corner and sprinted for his life, ploughing a furrow through the crowds of shoppers and vendors — a furrow that his pursuers followed like hounds.

Daniel's long legs and mountain-toughened lungs gave him a natural advantage over the soldiers. But he was a stranger to Canton. Its streets were a bewildering maze that twisted and zigzagged, circled and doubled back upon themselves. Once, then twice, the Manchus had nearly cornered him by shortcutting up alleyways that intersected his path. Only his speed and strength had saved him. And now his endurance was winning out. A swift glance over his shoulder told him that all but three of them — the officer and two others — had given up the chase.

Darting up an alley, he cut sharply to one side and raced across a tea yard where a cluster of women sat rolling tea leaves with their hands. They stared at him in alarm as he clambered over the back wall with the three soldiers in hot pursuit. Dropping from the wall, he found himself in another alley, narrow and dark — and bricked off at the other end. He was trapped.

The three soldiers were already scrambling up the wall. He could hear their heavy breathing and the scrape of their shoes against the weathered bricks. Cursing his predicament, Daniel glanced at the overhanging roofs above his head. He had no place to go but upward. The leap would be impossibly high, but one of the roofs had a curled edge. If he could jump high enough to grasp it, and if its strength would hold his weight . . . Dizzy with hope, he crouched low and sprang upward with all the strength of his legs. Reaching, agonizingly reaching, his fingers clawed at the edge of the roof before he fell backward into the mud of the alley. One leg twisted under him as he landed. He felt the wrenching pull of muscles and tendons as he collapsed with a cry of despair.

The head of the Manchu officer had already appeared over the top of the wall. In the space of a few heartbeats, they would be upon him. Daniel forced himself to a crouching position. The agony in his leg cut like a knife through his senses as he gathered the last of his strength for one final spring.

As the first Manchu flung himself over the wall, his sword drawn, Daniel clenched his teeth against the pain and gathered all the forces

of his body into one desperate leap. He plunged upward, pain and fear his greatest strength. This time his fingers caught the upturned edge of the roof and held.

For an instant, he swung, the Manchu slashing wildly at his legs. Then the power in his arms pulled him up until he was able to swing a leg over the edge of the roof. As he heaved himself upward, he felt the blade slicing deep into the flesh of his calf. He cried out, fighting the black curtain of shock that fluttered over his senses. Upward, upward, bit by bit, until he had gained the roof.

Below him, the other two soldiers had scaled the wall. Daniel could not wait to see what they would do. He crawled forward, dragging his wrenched and wounded leg behind him. A trail of smeared blood marked his passing.

The buildings in Canton were so closely spaced that even the wounded Daniel could drag himself from one roof to another. Ahead, on one sloping rooftop, was an abandoned dovecote. Gritting his teeth, he made for it.

The two Manchus were boosting their officer onto the roof. Daniel reached the dovecote and tugged at its door. The door was locked. With a groan of dismay, he pulled himself around to the far side of the rickety little structure, his heart thudding with exhaustion and pain. While he grasped a few precious seconds of rest, he forced his mind to think. It was just as well, he reasoned, that the dovecote had been locked. It was the only hiding place on the roofs, the first place the Manchus would look. Once inside, he would have been trapped like a rat in a cage. He glanced back the way he had come. His wounded leg had left a trail of blood, and the Manchu officer was heaving himself upward onto the roof now, like a dog on the scent.

Daniel crouched in the shadow on the far side of the dovecote, savoring what might well be his last few breaths of life. If the other two soldiers came up onto the roof with the officer, there would be no hope for him. He could not run anymore. But for only one man, or even one at a time, he might yet prove a match. Cautiously, he glanced around the side of the dovecote. The officer was coming alone, making his way across the slippery gray tiles.

With his fingers, Daniel caught a trickle of blood from his slashed leg, reached around the corner of the dovecote and dabbed it onto the tile at the base of the door, smearing it underneath the door's edge. If

the Manchu could be made to think he was inside, even for a moment, it might give Daniel the element of surprise he needed.

The Manchu officer came across the roof, balancing here and there with his hands. For the first time, Daniel had a chance to study him. He was a stocky, powerful fellow, four or five years older, perhaps, than Daniel himself. His square-jawed face bore the cool, grim expression of one who has dealt much in the commodity of death. As he neared the dovecote, he drew his broad-bladed sword from its leather scabbard.

Daniel shrank into the shadow of the dovecote, tensing his muscles against the pain in his leg as his adversary followed the trail of blood up to the door. Sword in readiness, the Manchu jerked at the handle, cursing when he found it locked. He grasped the crude iron latch and began to work it up and down in the rotting wood to loosen it.

With the fury of a wounded animal, Daniel struck. One arm circled the Manchu's neck and jerked tight. The other twisted the sword from his hand. The weapon went sliding down the roof, clattering as it bounced along the tiles.

Although the officer had been caught off-guard, he was strong and quick of wit. Expertly, he twisted, freeing his arm, but the roof was slippery. His feet slid outward. One shoe flew off to follow the path of the sword, and he hung kicking, suspended only by the frenzied grip of Daniel's arm about his neck.

Maddened by pain and fear, Daniel tightened his hold. The muscles and cartilage in the Manchu's neck strained against the tightening pressure of his arm. He gurgled for air, thrashing like a fish, but Daniel could not stop. Tighter and tighter he forced his arm to bend; tighter and tighter until he felt the crackle of bones beneath his wrist. Still he squeezed, his head swimming with the stench of blood and the sweat of his enemy's body. Tears of horror ran out of his eyes and down his cheeks as he pressed harder. The soldier was only twitching now. Soon even the twitching had stopped.

The lifeless body slumped to lie against the side of the dovecote. Sick and trembling, Daniel drew away. He crouched in the shadow and buried his face in his hands. He had killed a man. He had ended a human life, and the sheer awfulness of it swept over him like a flood.

For a time, he squatted beside the dovecote and waited for the next Manchu to come over the edge of the roof. Since one would have to

boost the other up, he reflected, it was not likely they'd both come at once. Spent as he was, he had a chance against a lone man.

His leg was still bleeding, dripping down the tiles in a thin red line. Daniel tugged the sash from the dead officer's body and used it to bind the deep, slicing wound. It was a clean cut, at least, and had bled well. With luck, it would not fester. With more luck, he might even live to see it heal. But the wrenched ankle was swelling badly. Even if he escaped from his predicament, it would be many days before he would be able to run freely.

The Manchu lay on his back across the low peak of the roof, his head lolling pathetically, like a dead bird's. Daniel shuddered, still feeling the crunch of the collapsing windpipe against his wristbones. A life was gone. Surely somewhere there would be a woman to weep for him, children to cry, perhaps old parents to mourn. Daniel stared at the body, waiting for the surge of triumphant joy that did not come. He had destroyed an enemy. He had, in part, avenged the hideous wrong done to the House of Cheng. Yet nothing was restored by the Manchu's death. Daniel felt oddly tainted by what he had done, almost like he had felt after his first night with Min Fei.

With a shaking hand, he closed the lids over the glassy brown eyes. Desolation welled up in him like a great, bitter lump and sat upon his heart as he waited. Two vultures, gliding high on the rising currents of warm air above the city, dipped their wings and drifted closer. From the alley below, where the two Manchus waited, there came no sound.

If he lived to see the setting sun, Daniel resolved, he would journey north to Nanking. There, among the rebels who worshipped his mother's god, Jesus, he would seek Cheng Shen-lan, the elder brother whose defection had brought calamity down upon the House of Cheng. There he would condemn him — or embrace him. Despair and loneliness pulled at Daniel's will like opposing winds. He would wait, he promised himself. When he knew his brother, then he would judge him.

The sun had risen to its peak in the sky, bright and blazing. Daniel stripped off his bloodstained white tunic and laid it across the face of his dead companion on the roof. A waste of a new garment when one was poor — but it would only serve to mark him now. Slowly, painfully, he dragged himself across the rooftops, leaving the body of the Manchu beside the dovecote. Overhead, the vultures circled lower.

Thirteen

Shanghai

November, 1861

The Bolton mansion glittered like a jewel in the Shanghai night. Strings of tiny Chinese lanterns festooning the portico danced like reflected stars on the rippled black surface of the Whangpoo. Hitched to the waiting carriages, blooded horses snorted and stamped in their traces, white puffs of breath clouding their nostrils.

The tall windows of the ballrooms were golden with light, and the music that wafted out into the darkness — polkas, reels, quadrilles, and luscious Viennese waltzes — was as light and sparkling as champagne.

The cloakroom was piled with furs — capes of ermine and lynx, greatcoats trimmed with sea otter, seal, or American beaver, cunning little evening wraps of white fox and glistening Russian sable. The chill of the November night was not oppressive, but it provided a delightful excuse for the first season's airing of winter finery. In the ballroom, the swirling pastel organdies and tarlatans of summer had given way to jewel-toned satins and velvets. Plump white throats and arms dripped with pearls, garnets, amethysts.

Pine logs, shipped down the Yangtze from distant mountains, crackled in the ballroom's two fireplaces, perfuming the air with the subtle aroma of burning resin. Silver and crystal tinkled here and there above the strains of the music. Smoke from pipes and Manila cheroots lent a soft haze to the air.

Serena, gowned in emerald-green ottoman silk with a band of diamonds about her neck, surveyed the ballroom from behind her peacock-feather fan and pronounced herself satisfied. It was going well.

Even the lavish twelve-course banquet had come off flawlessly. Everything had been absolute perfection, from the iced oysters and parsley soup to the braised fish, the roast lamb with mint jelly, the Peking-style chicken stuffed with mushrooms and pickled cabbage, then baked in a ball of clay, followed by cherry-filled crêpes served with flaming brandy sauce. She had Jason Frobisher to thank for that, she reminded herself, swallowing the bitter pill of gratitude. As a favor to Harry, he had lent her his incomparable Fong for the past two days. That venerable Chinese master chef had transformed the Bolton kitchen into the studio of an artist. Yes, Serena admitted to herself as she reflected back on the dinner that had fed more than two hundred people, it hadn't been easy, gulping down her pride and accepting Jason's favor. But the results had been well worth it.

As for the ball that followed, there was no fault to be found. The orchestra, brought up from Hong Kong, was the best to be had in the Far East. The guest list included all of Shanghai's leading citizens, and — Serena's mind ticked off their names — not one of those invited had failed to come.

And that was not in the least surprising. The fluttering fan hid Serena's amused smile. The guest of honor was one of the most notorious figures on the whole China Coast — and now one of the most celebrated. Gazing across the crowded ballroom, she saw him holding court before the fireplace, flanked by Harry, Jason, and the Chinese banker, Taki. He was dressed all in black, his pale skin a startling contrast with his dark eyes and neatly trimmed black beard, the only beard in the room. Even at this distance, his short, wiry figure exuded energy and magnetism. He gestured as he spoke, binding all around him with the spell of his words. Again Serena smiled at the irony of the sight before her.

Frederick Townsend Ward, the American mercenary, so long anathema to proper Shanghai society, had received his baptism of respectability. Only six months ago, he had been a prisoner aboard a British warship, accused of luring away seamen for his own forces. Since that low point in his career, Ward had formed an alliance with Admiral James Hope, the very man who'd imprisoned him. From his headquarters in Sungkiang, he had set about training and outfitting his army of some seventy-odd Americans and Europeans, two hundred Manilamen, and more than two thousand Chinese.

Ten days ago, Admiral Hope had returned from a visit to Sungkiang with glowing reports of Ward's success. The uniformed troops had paraded for his formal inspection — Chinese infantry in dark green tunics and knickers with darker green turbans and leggings, a company of Chinese artillery in light blue and scarlet, the two hundred Manilamen of Ward's personal bodyguard in dark blue and scarlet, with the dark green turbans common to all the forces. The troops had proven to be much more than just an impressive show. They had astounded the admiral with displays of tactics, marksmanship, and first-rate military discipline.

At the banquet that had followed Hope's inspection. Ward had made two requests. The first was for official recognition and assurance that the growing army under his command be included in any allied force that might be launched against the Taipings if Britain and France moved to side openly with Peking. The second was that he be allowed to buy modern arms and ammunition from Queen Victoria's Royal Arsenal at Hong Kong. Without hesitation, the admiral had granted them both.

It was Harry Bolton, never one to hold a grudge, who had offered, through Jason, to sponsor Ward's official introduction to Shanghai society. Thus, Serena had become involved as hostess. In truth, she did not mind. She prided herself on her ability to plan and carry out lavish social functions. As for Frederick Townsend Ward, she held nothing against him. One reason to give a party was just as good as another.

The peacock fan had been an October birthday gift from Harry. The diamond choker had been another. Serena strolled around the edge of the dance floor, stopping every few steps to flash a smile or exchange greetings with a guest. She carried herself with the assurance of a woman who knows she is beautiful. Her hair was coiled atop her head like a golden tiara.

The emerald silk ball gown was cut to show off her creamy shoulders, the soft, outward curve of her breasts and the tiny circle of her waist. Like a queen, she glided along the edge of the floor, drawing the eyes of everyone she passed.

Moir was curled in a corner with her sketch pad, her little bamboo cane hung over the back of the chair. She had arrived only the day before, on the ship that had delivered the string orchestra.

Delicate and demure in ivory lace, her features glowed with the promise of womanly beauty. What a pity it was about her crippled foot, Serena thought.

Serena approached her and was admiring her drawing, when Ward, Jason and Harry came up to them. "Mrs. Bolton, I'd like the pleasure of one dance with my hostess, if you'd so honor me." Ward glanced at Harry. "May I?"

Harry smiled graciously. He disliked dancing himself, and never objected to Serena's being partnered by others. "With my wife's permission, of course," he said.

"Gladly, Colonel." Folding her fan, Serena took Ward's arm. The orchestra had just struck up a waltz.

Jason Frobisher turned quickly to the seated Moira. "If I may, Miss Bellamy — "

Moira's face paled. "But, Captain, you know I can't — " She touched the sturdy little cane that hung on the back of her chair.

"Oh, not a reel or a polka maybe." Jason's smile was reassuring. "But you can walk. And anyone who can walk can waltz."

Moira shook her head. True, she could walk with the help of her cane. However, she was ugly walking, graceless as a one-legged bird, bending to balance on her twisted foot. "No," she whispered. But her eyes bespoke the longing she felt to be part of that gay, swirling mass of color and music, even for a few moments.

"Try." Jason held out his hands to her. "You can do it if I hold you." He bent down to her. "Come, Moira. If you don't like it, we'll stop at once."

"You may be sorry, Captain," Moira wrinkled her nose and laughed, but the hands that reached out to take Jason's were trembling. Her lips parted as he lifted her to her feet.

Serena held her breath as Jason took Moira in his arms, his right hand firmly supporting her waist. He paused a moment, listening to the pulsing count of the waltz. "Ready, Miss Bellamy?" he said, flashing her a conspiratorial grin. "Now! With me — !" He stepped once, twice, turned slightly while she followed him, cautious amazement wreathing her face. Incredibly, it was working. The secret, Serena observed as she watched them, was in the way Jason supported her waist on her lame side. With each step she took on her crippled foot, he lifted her just enough to ease the weight on it.

Moira was dancing. Her pretty face flushed with elation.

Ward touched Serena's arm. "I think they can manage without our coaching them, if you'd like to dance, Mrs. Bolton," he said with a smile. Serena blew Harry a furtive kiss as she glided into the American's arms.

Frederick Townsend Ward was a competent enough partner, but he waltzed stiffly, as if he were marching in three-quarter time. He was clearly more at home on the parade ground or the battlefield than on the dance floor. Serena smiled up at him. "Your friend the captain is full of surprises," she said, making conversation. "What made him so sure Moira would be able to dance with him?"

"Jason's never told you? One of his sisters had a crippled leg. She was older than he was by a year, but Jason was taller. She always used to make him dance with her that way." He paused, his expression clouding slightly. "She was sixteen when she died. Jason took it hard. Celia . . . that was her name."

"You've known him for a long time, haven't you?"

"Aye. Since we were boys back in Salem. Look at this!" With a wry chuckle, Ward twisted his arm to show Serena a little white scar at the base of his hand. "Blood brothers! When we were eleven, we cut our wrists and let the blood mix. Just like the Indians do." Ward studied the scar for a moment before he took Serena's hand again. "I went to sea at seventeen. For about ten years, we lost touch. Then we met once more in San Francisco."

Serena let herself move with the music. Her eyes followed Jason and Moira, still dancing. Moira had never looked more radiant. Jason's dark head was bent toward hers and he was laughing! "Captain Frobisher's never married?" she asked Ward.

"No." Ward chuckled again. "He came close once, though. Amanda Hodges, the prettiest girl in Salem! They were engaged. He made his first voyage to China then, planning to come home and set her up in style. While he was gone, the richest man in town lost his wife, and Amanda up and married the old duffer. Poor Jason. A man like that only gets hurt once. He's too spooked to get caught a second time."

"I see." Serena smiled into Ward's black eyes.

"It was kind of you to invite Taki," he said. "Not everyone would have, you know. He may be the head of the biggest bank in Shanghai, and half the people here are likely in hock to him, but he's Chinese, and that would matter to some."

Serena glanced over to where the portly Chinese stood beside Harry, conversing spiritedly in his halting English. As leader of Shanghai's Chinese business community, Taki had been instrumental in getting financial backing for Ward's military operation. "Taki's been a friend to me as well as to you," she said. "Tonight wouldn't have been complete without him."

Ward grinned. "I'm in your debt as well, yours and Harry's. This evening's made me a good many valuable friends. Let's hope I won't lose them once shooting starts."

"I see," was Serena's only comment. She knew Ward was being paid, and paid well, by Taki and the other Chinese businessmen to defend Shanghai from the Taipings, with the additional promise of loot from any captured Taiping strongholds. The underlying bedrock of all his motivation was money, and in this he was not alone. Personal danger aside, a Taiping takeover of Shanghai would mean financial disaster for the European community, including Harry and herself. He wasn't likely to alienate anyone in *this* room if he defended Shanghai against the Taipings — for whatever reasons.

The strains of the waltz climaxed and died away. Ward released Serena with a smile, and led her to where Moira was standing with Jason at the edge of the dance floor.

Moira was flushed and laughing. "Oh, Serena, it was glorious!" she gasped. "May we try it again, Captain?"

"Isn't it about my turn?" Ward stepped forward with a mischievous grin on his face. "I'll be hanged before I'll let you have Miss Bellamy all to yourself, Jason! Your sister taught her trick to me as well as to you, and I know a few of my own to boot! If the ladies don't object, I propose an exchange of partners!" He snapped his fingers and caught the attention of the orchestra conductor. "Another waltz, if you please, my friend!"

Almost before she knew what was happening, Serena found herself in Jason's arms. He held her lightly, almost gingerly. His face wore the expression of a man who'd just been manipulated. Serena stared at the knot of his black silk cravat as they danced in awkward silence. Her mind groped for some witty remark that would unhorse him in their perpetual jousting of words. She could think of nothing.

The waltz was a new one, its melody light and airy as a bubble. Serena tried to concentrate on the steps as Jason guided her skillfully

around the floor. They danced well together, she had to admit, even with the tension that hung like an electrified curtain between them. She began to wonder what she would see if she glanced up at his face. Would it be that smug, superior expression she hated so, or would he be smiling, the way he had smiled with Moira? Slowly, her eyes crept upward, from his tie to his sun-bronzed neck, then to his chin and his firm, sensitive mouth. No, he was not smiling.

He glanced down, suddenly meeting her eyes. Their gazes locked and held. Serena felt the heat stealing up her neck and into her cheeks. His face was as stern as a hawk's and as hard as granite — almost. The twinkle that had been lurking like a hidden trout in the dark pools of his eyes slowly surfaced and spread, tightening the corners of his mouth and crinkling his eyes until his whole ironbound face dissolved in laughter.

"Truce, Mrs. Bolton! I surrender! You've managed to out-scowl me!"

Serena stared up at him, a tentative smile teasing about her lips.

"Come," he coaxed. "Hasn't this silly charade gone on long enough? If it's an apology you need, you have it. I behaved like an ass that night in your parlor. It must have been the wine. I fully deserved to be slapped, and horsewhipped as well!"

She let the smile have its way. "My hand hurt for two days," she said, dimpling. "Very well, Captain. Truce." Serena sighed, letting the tightness ease out of her body. The tense grip of his hand on the small of her back softened and warmed as he drew her a bit closer. Her body moved in perfect harmony with his as the music carried them around the ballroom floor.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. "Tonight meant a great deal to my friend Ward. I know this party was Harry's idea to begin with, but most of the responsibility for it fell upon you. It's been a magnificent evening."

"Thank you," she said softly. "And I'm twice grateful to you. Captain. Once for Fong, and once for Moira. I've never seen her so delighted."

"She's a lovely child," he said. "And speaking of children, motherhood seems to agree with you. Harry tells me you've taken in your brother's baby."

"Yes." She beamed proudly. "Little Noah. He's a wonder." Something tightened around Serena's heart at the mention of Stephen's son. In the weeks that had passed since the return from

Hankow, Noah had totally enraptured her. He was so small, so helpless, so needing of her love. And yet he was so much a man child; already so much the person he would become. "You must come up and see him if you're here tomorrow," she said. Jason's ship had been in port for nearly two weeks, but he had stayed out at Sungkiang with Ward this time. Whether because of their explosive clash in the parlor the last time or because of his growing interest in Ward's activities, Serena could not be sure.

"Mrs. Bolton?" Jason's voice penetrated her thoughts. He was looking down at her, his brown eyes half-concerned, half-amused.

"Oh! Forgive me! My mind was on the baby." She laughed lightly. "And isn't it about time you began calling me Serena?"

"With pleasure." The warmth in his voice was genuine. "And I was just about to compliment you on your business ability. Harry says you're doing very well indeed."

"Thank you again." She smiled and tilted her head, making the diamond-studded pendants of her earrings dance like tiny flames. "I wish I could take full credit, but a good part of that goes to Yao, my secretary. Harry assigned him to me, and he's a marvel. Why, I'd even go so far as to say that Yao is to business what your Pong is to cooking!"

Jason raised an eyebrow. "Such clever folk. Like monkeys! Isn't that what so many people say? Lord, when will we Westerners wake up and realize what the Chinese really are, and how much we can learn from them?"

"You're new to China," Serena said. "A good many people who haven't grown up here feel the way you do. But you didn't spend twenty years of your life on Caine Road in Hong Kong, looking down at their filth, like I did. When you get to know them, when you've seen enough Chinese, you realize that men like Pong and Yao are very rare exceptions. Your average Celestial is backward, ignorant, superstitious, and devious as a weasel."

"Maybe after twenty years in this country I'd feel that way," he said, his black brows meshing above his straight nose. "But I don't feel that way yet. And as for Pong and Yao, they'd be exceptional in any culture."

"*Touché!*" Serena laughed again, and then immediately wished she had not, because it sounded so hollow and contrived — and Jason did

not respond. "You could advise me on something if you will," she said, rallying her wits. "In the past few years, they've shipped thousands of coolie laborers out of Canton. Most of them, I understand, have been bound for the mines in California. There's money in it, my father's told me. With all the refugees pouring into Shanghai, surely there'd be a market for passage here as well. But I don't know California. Is the demand for coolies still high there?"

Jason frowned. "The demand's always high. Mining contractors will take coolies over whites or Mexicans anytime. They'll work harder and longer, and for lower wages. They don't make trouble, and they don't spend their pay on liquor. But I'd not get involved in it if I were you, Serena. To be sure, you'd make a profit. But you know how I feel about exploiting human misery. The poor devils are treated worse than dogs. At least the black slaves in the South are someone's personal property. They're fed and housed and taken care of when they're sick, because they represent an investment. If some poor coolie dies — if a hundred of them die — it's of no consequence. The bossman just goes down to the docks and hires more."

Jason had stopped dancing, but his fingers still gripped the small of Serena's back. "You asked for my advice. Well, I'll tell you. In my opinion, trafficking in coolies is no better than trafficking in slaves!"

"I asked you about the demand for labor in California," Serena snapped. "No one invited you to sit in moral judgment, Jason Frobisher!"

"And that's all that matters to you, isn't it?" He moved his hand away from her as if he'd touched a serpent. "If there's money to be made, then there's nothing more to consider!"

Serena felt the blood draining from her face. She bit back her rage. "People are looking at us," she hissed.

"Let them." He glowered down at her, tall and terrible. For a long, quivering moment, his dark eyes held hers. The music had stopped.

Serena turned away from him without another word and swept off the dance floor. Her heart was pounding. Her eyes stung. She fixed a glittering smile on her face and spread her peacock fan as she glided around the periphery of the dancers. Glancing toward the fireplace, she saw that Harry was lost in conversation with Taki. No, she resolved, she would not bother him now. She would go and get a glass of brandy as if nothing had happened. A blue-liveried Chinese waiter was moving her way now, his goblet-laden tray balanced high above his head.

Serena had taken a step toward him by the time she caught herself. Was she going to let Jason Frobisher drive her to drink? It had been a good five months since she'd indulged in her father's brand of self-consolation. She'd be damned if she was going to start that up again. Squaring her shoulders determinedly, she turned her back on temptation.

But she was still hot, bubbling gall inside. Jason Frobisher had enraged her all out of proportion. The tempest would overcome her if she could not find a quick moment to herself, to breathe cool air and collect her thoughts. The french doors that opened onto the garden were just ahead. The key was in the lock. Quickly, she opened one of them and slipped out into the night, striking out along the brick path that meandered through the garden.

Serena shivered as the night wind struck her face, cooling her anger. Jason Frobisher was only a man after all — a stubborn, smug, opinionated, irritating man. She was foolish to let him bait her like that. As long as he could anger her, he could control her. She would simply not allow him to do so again. With a deep breath, she turned back toward the ballroom. Jason Frobisher could go to the devil.

He was standing in the shadows, the rip of his cheroot glowing red in the darkness. "I thought perhaps I should see if you were all right," he said.

"You needn't have bothered. Captain," Serena answered coldly. "As you see, there's nothing wrong with me. I was just going back inside." She let the peacock fan snap shut with a smart little click. "After all, you're entitled to your opinions, as well as the right to express them. And who am I, a mere woman, to question what you have to say?"

"You needn't be sarcastic."

"And you needn't be so damned holy about everything!"

They glared at each other in angry silence, the light from the french doors casting flickering square patterns on the flagstones around them. Just as Serena turned away to sweep on past him, a peal of giggles floated down from an upstairs window around the corner of the house. A woman's voice called out in a teasing tone, to be answered by male laughter from the street below. It was Nancy, up to her tricks again, flirting with some street coolie.

With a huff of annoyance Serena turned and made for a doorway near the corner of the garden. The nursery window was the kind that

opened in the middle, like the doors of a church. No doubt Nancy had the panes flung wide, and the chilly night air could harm the baby.

Serena glanced back over her shoulder at Jason, who had begun to follow her. "Really, there's no need for you to — " The rest of her words were lost in the rending, high-pitched scream that burst from the nursery window to shatter the air again and again.

With a little cry, Serena raced for the doorway. Jason plunged ahead of her to jerk it open. "Which way?" he demanded.

"To your left. Up the stairs. Oh, hurry! The baby — "

Jason's long legs took the stairs three at a time. Serena followed as fast as she could, gripping her long skirt with icy hands. Nancy's shrieks echoed down the corridor. Serena could hear them as she ran. They were bloodcurdling, vibrating with horror. Serena strained her ears, panic pounding against her eardrums. No, she concluded with a sinking heart, she could not hear the baby.

Jason, following the screams, burst into the nursery ahead of her. She heard him gasp. "Get back, Serena! Don't come in!" But no power on earth could have stopped her from charging into the room behind him.

Nancy cowered on the floor in the far corner, her jacket pulled up around her head. The candlestick had been knocked over. In the pool of wax that ran across the top of the dresser the wick of the candle still sputtered with light. Little Noah was stirring in his crib, whimpering and kicking his plump legs.

"Jason, what — ?" Her eyes darted about the room, seeing nothing amiss except the candle.

"Get the baby, Serena." He was stripping off his coat. "Wrap him in a blanket and then get out of here! Quickly!"

"But what — " Then she looked up and saw it, clinging to the pale blue velveteen of the drape. A large gray bat, its tiny eyes glittering like jet beads in the flickering light, its pink mouth gaping open. As she stared at it in numb terror, the creature sprang from its hold on the drape. Its leathery wings fluttered as it caught the air and shot across the room in a fury of panic.

With a little cry, Serena flung herself across the nursery and covered the baby with her own body. She was personally terrified of the filthy things, and knew that their rabid bites often proved lethal. Jason was using his coat as a flail, trying to knock the bat out of the air. One sweeping blow struck a wing, causing the creature to veer in

its flight and plunge downward for the space of a breath. Nancy screamed again.

Swiftly, before the bat could regain height, Jason spread his coat like a net and tried to scoop the creature out of the air. He very nearly succeeded, but the bat twisted and ricocheted off against the coat's edge. The new momentum sent it careening low, straight toward the cradle. Serena felt the brush of its wings across her bare shoulders. She screamed as it clung for an instant to the wall beside her, then launched itself in a bullet-like flight straight toward Nancy.

In a lightning movement, Jason flung the outspread coat in its path. The bat struck the cloth and fell to the floor. Jason covered it swiftly, but it managed to wriggle partway out from under the edge. Serena thought she saw Jason flinch as he jerked the fabric over the creature once more, holding the coat to the floor with his hands. "Get me something!" he gasped.

A coal scuttle sat beside the blue and white enameled potbellied stove. In it was a small shovel. Serena seized the shovel in both hands and brought it down swiftly, with all the strength of her terror, on the writhing form under the coat.

"No — for godsake don't kill it!" Jason had cried out while the shovel was still in the air, but horror had made her deaf to his voice. He reached for her, stopping the second blow with his arm, but the movement beneath the coat had already ceased. The bat was dead.

Noah was squalling in his cradle. Nancy rushed to comfort him. Serena flung the shove down and burst into hysterical tears. "Oh . . . Jason! Oh, if it had bitten the baby!"

Jason rose slowly, trembling and strangely pale. "It's all right now," he said, his voice tight. "You don't have to be afraid anymore, Serena."

Serena held her breath and closed her eyes, trying to stop her tears, but they poured out like a storm. Revulsion and fear shook her whole body. "Jason . . . " she sobbed. "Jason . . . !"

"It's all right. It's over, Serena." She felt his arms around her, the muscles taut beneath the thin silk of his shirt. He held her fiercely against his broad, hard chest, a strange anger in him that she could feel. "It's over, Serena. That's enough."

She bit her lip, fighting for control. The coat lay in the middle of the floor, the lump of the dead bat's body beneath it. The candle sputtered and flared up again. Nancy had given the baby her breast to quiet him.

Jason's tense arms were of little comfort to Serena, even though the pressure sent disturbing little waves down through her body. There was nothing of warmth or tenderness in the way he held her, and he was trembling strangely, just as she was.

"Serena, listen to me. Are you all right?"

She nodded against his chest.

"Then I want you to do exactly as I tell you. Have the girl get me some soap and a basin of water as quickly as possible."

Serena looked up at him with wide, questioning eyes as his arms released her.

"Then I want you to run back to the ballroom. Two of your guests are doctors. Get one of them up here at once. Hurry."

Serena's lips had shaped his name, but she realized that no sound had come out. Her eyes crept downward from his face to his shoulders, then to his hands. A small trickle of blood was dripping the length of his left forefinger.

Fourteen

Shanghai

November, 1861

Rabies: An almost invariably fatal infection of the central nervous system. Onset begins with a sense of apprehension, headache, fever, malaise . . . progresses to paresis or paralysis: muscle spasms on attempts to swallow leads to fear of water. Delirium . . . convulsions . . .

Jason had long since memorized the printed paragraph from the leather-bound medical text in Harry's library. Even when he tried to put them out of his mind, the words danced before his eyes. *Paralysis . . . Delirium . . .*

"How long before we know?" he had asked the doctor who cleaned and dressed the fleshy area between thumb and forefinger where the bat had sunk its fangs. The wound was small but deep.

"A good three weeks at least. That's if you've been infected. If not — " He took off his spectacles and polished them on his sleeve. "I'd say you can start breathing easier in about two months. Occasionally, it takes even longer. Bloody shame you killed the bat. If you'd kept it alive, we'd have been able to tell within the next few days. As it is, we'll just have to wait."

Serena had been hovering nearby. At his words, she turned away and pressed her hands to her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Oh, dear heaven, I'm sorry, Jason."

"This kind of bat doesn't attack humans as a rule." The doctor shook his head. "Since it did bite you, we can only assume it was probably rabid. I suggest you put your affairs in order, Captain Frobisher. Merely as a precaution, of course."

Harry had come up to the nursery with the doctor. Pale-faced, he stood beside Serena, one arm around her shoulders. "But the creature was confused," he argued hopefully. "It was in a state of panic! Any animal would have lashed out — "

"Perhaps." The voice of the balding, middle-aged doctor echoed hollowly in the silence of the room. "In any case, we'll know in a few weeks. That's all I can tell you. I'm genuinely sorry, Captain."

Yes, Jason remembered as he paced the floor of Harry's small upstairs study five days later. Everyone had been sorry. The doctor had been coolly regretful. Harry had been unbelieving and Serena had been devastated. As for sweet little Moira — ah, but she did not know. Jason had sworn the doctor and the rest of them to secrecy there in the nursery. Shanghai had enough to gossip about, he'd insisted bitterly, without wondering when Jason Frobisher would begin frothing at the mouth. Even Fred Ward had left for Sungkiang without knowing. Harry had insisted that Jason stay a few days, at least until his hand was healing properly. To explain the bandage, they'd concocted a story about his having slashed himself on a thorn bush that grew in the garden. A silly story, Jason reflected, but no one had questioned it.

He had regretted almost immediately his commitment to stay that week with Harry. It gave him too much time to brood, and too many occasions to flee Serena's haunted eyes. She seemed to feel an obligation to be with him, even though it was plain that she could scarcely endure his presence. Either she flitted about like a black-eyed moth, laughing at her own pathetic jests, or she sat huddled across the room from him, a wretched, silent bundle of self-reproach. It was strange — he welcomed her nearness. But he could not endure her pity.

Twice he had taken Moira riding out by the racecourse, one of Harry's *mafoos* tagging along to make it all proper. Moira blossomed on horseback, where she was the equal of anyone. She was gayer than he had ever seen her, bubbling with good spirits as they raced over the plain on Harry's matched dappled geldings. Her dark eyes — very like Serena's but deeper, more docile — fixed on him adoringly when she spoke. She was thirteen, he reminded himself. A most romantic age. He found her devotion funny and touching, her genuine gaiety like water in the wilderness. But then, unlike the others, she did not know. And Jason was glad.

He had spent most of his time, however, shut away in the study writing letters — long detailed lists of instructions regarding his ship and his property, letters to what was left of his family in Salem, farewells to friends he might not live to see again. He had sealed each one with dark brown wax, and on each had written its designation. *To be given to — in the event of my death.* He performed these tasks calmly, with a grim detachment that amazed him. It was as if his mind and body yet refused to acknowledge reality: that within a month, two months at the most, the probability was great that he would die from one of the most agonizing diseases known to man.

Jason walked to the window and stared down at the Bund in the fading daylight. The Whangpoo was alive with ships, hundreds of them. English and French, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, American. Three-masted steamers and clumsy old brigantines, chunky, stern-wheeled riverboats, Chinese junks and lorchas, clippers with their elegant, soaring lines. His eyes picked out the *Tarpon* among them, straining gently at her anchor as she rocked in the breeze, her sails neatly furled, her hold packed with rice and cottons and endless coils of hempen rope. Like a great Pegasus, she waited, ready to spread her canvas wings and carry him to the other side of the earth at his bidding. For the first time since the bat's fangs had set the mark of death upon him, Jason felt the sting of tears in his eyes. Dear Lord, how he loved the sea.

For as far back as they could count their generations, the Frobishers had been ocean-faring men. It was a Frobisher who'd been among the first to search for the Northwest Passage, and who'd been knighted by Queen Elizabeth for his part in the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Jason's own father had perished at sea, as had his grandfather and two of his uncles.

Yes, he reflected, that was the way to die. Shouting defiance into the full fury of a gale, fighting nature's howling rage to the very end, then shrouded by the cold green water and cradled at last by sand and rock and coral . . .

The sound of a carriage stopping outside the gate snapped the chain of his thoughts. The Bellamy coachman dismounted from the seat of the black phaeton and helped Serena alight. Jason's eyes followed her as she hurried up the walk to the house, her skirt of fawn-colored wool fluttering in the wind that blew off the sea. She disap-

peared under the portico, and a moment later he heard her footsteps coming up the stairs, light and quick, like the patter of a squirrel running across the roof.

"Harry!" She burst into the study, her complexion pink from the wind, wisps of golden hair curling about her face. Her expression froze as Jason turned from the window.

"Harry's down at the docks," he said. "Word came in that a shipment of woolens had arrived and the vessel had sprung a bit of a leak. Some of the cargo was water-damaged, the messenger said, so Harry went to have a look for himself."

"Oh, dear. He'll not be happy about that." She stood poised in the doorway, one slender hand on the frame, a white merino shawl flung gypsy-like about her shoulders. Her loveliness tightened Jason's throat. He would miss the sea — and he would miss the sight of a beautiful woman. He drank her in with his eyes as she smoothed her hair back and arranged her shawl, like a wild bird folding its wings.

The color heightened in her cheeks as she became aware of his gaze. At first she struggled to meet his eyes boldly. Then she caught her breath in a strange little half-sob and looked down at her skirt.

"Don't, Serena." He took a step toward her. She turned away from him, trembling, her hands clenched against her face.

"How can I help it?" she whispered in anguish. "It was my doing."

He touched her shoulder, feeling her shiver. "Was it your doing that opened the window, Serena? Was it you who drove the creature inside? And the clumsy fool who gave it the chance to use its teeth — was it you?"

She shook her head. "But it was I who led you there. And I killed the bat. If we'd kept it alive, at least we'd have known by now —" Her whole body was shaking. He felt it beneath his hand.

"Jason — how do you bear it?" Serena lifted her face and looked at him. He saw that her eyes were bloodshot, with little blue hollows beneath them. She seemed thinner than he remembered from the night of the ball.

With one arm, he pulled her against his chest. It was a gesture of mutual comfort, innocent of any seductive thought.

"Death is like an old acquaintance to a man who chooses the sea, Serena," he whispered. "I've felt his breath on me a hundred times, but never the touch of his hand. All men die. Perhaps it's my turn."

Perhaps not. There's always a chance the poor creature was just frightened."

She pressed her face into his shirt, her body touchingly small and frail in the circle of his arms. He had never blamed her for her part in his present peril. And now, with her hands stealing so trustingly around his waist, he found that his heart could not blame her for anything. Not for Evan Ames, not for young Lars aboard the *Tarpon*, not for Harry. She was innocent. As innocent as a child.

Her hair smelled of sea wind and lavender. As his arms tightened around her, Jason felt a profound sense of regret that he had never known the sweetness of total fulfillment with a woman. To be sure, he'd passed through the brothels of half a hundred exotic ports. And he'd even fancied himself in love once, with the proud and faithless Amanda. But complete and total happiness, the sense of giving and trusting, the joy of children conceived in love — these things he had yet to know. And now, perhaps never . . .

Abruptly, he released her. She remained where she was, only her eyes questioning the suddenness of the change in him. Serena. How could he tell her that if he had held her one more second he would have bent his head down and kissed her? Searchingly, hotly, passionately. And then, after that —

"I'm sailing tomorrow," he said. "I'm taking the *Tarpon* back to San Francisco."

Her childlike pink lips parted in unspoken protest. The words surprised even Jason, but as soon as he said them, he realized that he had made the decision before she walked into the room.

"I've never wanted to die on land," he said. "If these next weeks are to be the last of my life, I want to spend them on the deck of my ship."

"But we wouldn't know — " she argued. "Not for months, Jason. It would be torture not knowing, for Harry and for me."

"Serena," he said softly, "would it be any easier on you if I stayed? Pacing the floor day after day? Snarling at you like a caged animal. Letting you watch me die, if it came to that? I saw a man die once from the bite of a rabid dog. It took him three days. If you think that's something I want you to see — " Jason clenched his fist. The man had been a sailor, a boarder in his mother's house. The doctors had strapped him to the bed where he'd lain wild-eyed and drooling, screaming, moaning, jerking convulsively until, at last, the merciful end came. It

was a time Jason had remembered far too often in the past five days, and nothing he did could shut out the unspeakable horror of it. He saw himself in the man's place, thrashing against his bonds, strangling in his own saliva . . .

Serena's face was white. One hand clutched the jade cameo at her throat. He had meant to shock her, and he had. Now he was sorry.

"Look at it from a practical standpoint, Serena," he suggested, trying to soften the impact of what he had said. "I may not be infected. By the time the *Tarpon* reaches San Francisco, I'll know. And I won't have wasted all those precious weeks waiting . . ."

Serena lowered her dark eyes. Yes, she saw it his way now. "At least let me send a doctor with you," she whispered.

Jason shook his head. "Either I'd have no need of him, or he'd be no help. There's nothing a doctor can do, Serena."

Her pale hands twisted her skirt. When she spoke, Jason could scarcely hear her. "Then I'll have Yao bring you a bit of opium and a pipe to take along. It eases pain. If it will help . . ."

"Aye." He thrust his hands into his pockets and turned away from her. "That it might." He strode back to the window and stood looking down at the evening traffic on the Bund.

"Will you be going to Sungkiang again?" she asked him.

"Fred and I said our farewells the night of the ball. It's best left that way." He stared down at the street, where wheelbarrows and mule carts mingled with elegant carriages. An open landau stopped at the gate. "Harry's home," he said in a toneless voice.

"Yes. He'll be wanting to see you. I'll tell him you're up here."

Jason stood by the window waiting for her to go. He dared not turn and look at Serena. His eyes might reveal too much of what his heart felt in this last moment alone with her.

He waited for the sound of her retreating footsteps, light and rapid across the floor, and for the opening and closing of the study door. His ears heard only the ticking of the clock on the mantel.

"Jason."

He whirled at the sound of his name. She was standing poised like a hummingbird in the doorway. "Jason!" She flew to him, their bodies meeting and blending in midstride in the center of the room. His arms caught her waist, lifting her off the floor, crushing her against him like a scented rose as her mouth found his. One long, wild, desperate kiss.

That was all time and circumstances would allow. He drank in her sweetness, his heart throbbing in his chest. Oh, Serena . . . Serena . . . too late, my love. It was always too late for us . . .

The sound of the front door closing echoed up from below. They broke apart at once. For an instant, her stricken face gazed up at him. Then she turned and fled, her fawn skirt flying behind her as she bolted out of the door and down the hallway to her room. Jason stood stunned where she had left him as the rhythm of Harry's sedate footsteps mounted the long staircase. The sweet moistness of her mouth still clung to his lips. He touched them in wonder and dismay as he stared at the empty doorway. In his churning mind, only two thoughts shone clearly: he loved her . . . and he would not see her again.

Kiangsi Province

November, 1861

Daniel had fled Canton, wounded, lame, and with little more than a handful of cash. The money had run out after the second day, and with his maimed leg the work that had come so readily on his journey to Canton was now impossible to find. Too proud to beg, Daniel had limped along the side of the road until, on the eighth day of his journey north, he had collapsed in the dust, half-dead from hunger, fever, and exhaustion.

For the space of a day and a night, he lay there, too weak to move, while the traffic on the road streamed past him. A river of people. They trudged along with their scanty belongings on their shoulders, the poor, the homeless, fleeing the same terror that had driven Daniel from Canton. They had no strength to help him, no food to spare a stranger when their own children were whimpering with hunger. And so they passed him by.

Daniel's mind drifted in and out of consciousness like the sun on a cloudy day. The times of reality were worst. That was when he lay shivering in the pale brown dust, his tongue like a hunk of old, dried leather in his parched mouth. The dust sifted between his teeth and into his nostrils. With the salt of his tears, it had formed a black crust around the rims of his eyes. His body had become a lifeless thing that only ached and burned. His leg throbbed and had begun to swell and fester around the place where the Manchu blade had sliced into his

flesh. If he lived, he would likely lose his leg. But it didn't matter. He was going to die . . .

Something wet was touching his lips, a hand supporting his head. "Master! See — the tall one lives!" someone was exclaiming.

Water — it was cool and tasted wonderfully clean. Daniel swallowed, the movement agonizing in his cracked throat. He tried to open his eyes, but his lids were weighted with exhaustion. He was aware of a flurry of activity around him, of hands tugging at him, lifting him, carrying him. Then the blackness descended once more and he felt nothing.

When next he stirred, he sensed that he was lying naked between clean cotton quilts. His skin was deliciously cool, as if he had been bathed with scented soap. His wounded leg felt sodden and weighted; he could barely move it. The air smelled of boiled sage and ginger . . . and very faintly of blood.

With great effort, Daniel opened his eyes. He saw a gray wall and a narrow window with the sun shining through it, its rays slanting low. A man sat beside his cot studying Daniel with an anxious expression on his face. The robe that covered the length of his body was of red silk, its cut strangely simple, with a hood falling about the rounded neck. His face was smooth and plump, just beginning to crease about the eyes and mouth with lines of age. The man's head was unshaven. His hair was long, like a woman's.

Daniel raised his head and tried to sit up. The wave of dizziness that swept over his senses almost washed him into another pit of blackness. He struggled for consciousness. His mind fixed upon the beam of golden light coming in through the window. His thoughts clasped it as a drowning person would clasp at a lifeline.

"No, rest yourself." It was the voice of his benefactor speaking in Cantonese. The man had risen to push Daniel's shoulders gently back to the bed. "You're still very weak. I'll send for some broth — " He clapped his hands once, and a servant who had evidently been waiting nearby shuffled to the edge of the bed. He was a plain little man, oddly dressed in wide black trousers, bound at the waist with a wide sash and topped by a short red jacket. His head was uncovered and, like that of his master, unshaven. The long locks were drawn back into a braid that was plaited with a bright red cord, then wrapped about the head like a turban with the tasseled end hanging over the left shoulder.

A brief mist passed over Daniel's mind. He seemed to hear his mother's voice, drifting in and out of the clouds of memory, reciting stories from the Christian Bible that her sightless eyes could no longer read . . .

The blurred face looking down at him began to clear, the features to swim into focus. Daniel smiled foggily up at his rescuer. "Of course . . ." he murmured with effort, for his tongue was thick and his mind still clouded. "Noble One, you must be the Good Samaritan . . ."

The jaw of the servant dropped open in astonishment. "Master, did you hear that one? He knows — But look at him! Surely he is not one of us!"

"I think not." The clean, plump fingers brushed Daniel's scalp. "But he knows. Somehow he knows. And we will find out how and why. Quickly! Some duck broth for our tall young friend. We must make him strong!"

The man did not question Daniel again until the servant had spooned a generous bowl of rich brown soup into his mouth. It was steaming hot. Its spicy warmth curled down into his stomach, sending shivers of life rippling through his body and limbs. Then Daniel remembered. "My leg . . .?" he whispered.

"Cleaned and bound, with a poultice of herbs to draw out the poison. We had no physician here, but the remedy is one that has been passed down through many generations in my family. It does its work well. Otherwise, such a wound would have rotted your flesh and you would have spent the rest of your life a one-legged cripple." The stranger touched Daniel's heavily bandaged leg through the quilt. When he spoke again, his voice was low and strangely tender. "Truly, it is only by the grace of God you live, my son. For three days, you did not open your eyes. For three days, we have tended you, my manservant and I."

Daniel smiled his gratitude. "Then this foolish one was right. You are indeed the Good Samaritan."

The stranger leaned forward. "I am only the poorest servant of the Most High. Liang Yuin-fah is my name, a humble soldier by profession. A soldier of the cross."

Daniel studied the man. No, he would not have guessed him to be a soldier. He had the eyes and the manner of a scholar about him. But his cheeks were windburned. The hands that lay open on his knees

were callused, from the reins or the sword, perhaps. And the red robe, the strange hair, the repeated reference to a God . . . Daniel's mind was working furiously now as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place . . .

Liang Yuin-fah smiled. "Your face is the mirror of your thoughts, my young friend. Yes, you have fallen among the worshipers of the True God. You lie within the reaches of the Heavenly Kingdom — the *Tai ping*."

The servant brought tea in red cups edged with gold. Liang took one for himself. Daniel, strengthened by the broth, sat up a bit and accepted the other. The tea was exquisite.

Liang sipped his tea, holding the cup in both hands. "I confess that I cannot restrain my curiosity about you. If I may be so rude as to ask — you know the parable of the Good Samaritan. Can this lowly one assume then that he is sharing tea with a fellow Christian?"

Daniel stared down into his cup. No one had ever questioned him forthrightly about his religion. In truth, he had questioned it very little himself. His father had taught him of Confucius, of Buddha, and of Lao Tsu, the ancient one who conceived the principle of the *Tao*. And his mother had taught him of Jesus Christ. In his mind, each set of beliefs had its merits, and each stood equal to the others.

Was he Christian? "No," he answered at last, his eyes meeting those of the man called Liang. "It was my mother who was Christian. She taught me many things. My father was not Christian, nor am I."

"So." Liang's pleasant expression did not change. "Your mother was a convert of the foreign missionaries then?"

"My mother herself was foreign. She came to the Middle Kingdom from beyond the sea, from the place called England."

Liang's fine-drawn brows lifted. "To be sure! How could I have kept my eyes upon you these past three days and not seen it?" Liang handed his teacup to the waiting servant. "My curiosity has become a wild beast that gnaws at my throat. If you have strength enough, my friend, then I beg you to tell me how such a one as you came to be where I found you."

Daniel began willingly, but with difficulty. He spoke first of his father, of Cheng Lo's involvement in the opium crisis, of his exile to Taocheng, and of how the daughter of an English minister had forsaken everything she held dear to go with him.

When Daniel's voice began to tire, Liang plied him with tea and begged him to continue. And so, choking with emotion, he told of the

earthquake, of his bondage to Liu and his long flight from Taocheng. From the man who had saved his life, Daniel kept secret only one thing: his shameful involvement with Min Fei.

By the time the narrative had carried him to the gates of Canton, he was gasping with weariness.

"But I have exhausted you!" Liang apologized. "In my selfish desire to know your story, I have spent your strength. Too easily. I forget how close you came to death. Rest for a time. When you have slept — "

"No." Daniel raised a feeble hand in protest. "When I sleep, I may sleep a long time. It is better that I finish now. Another cup of your excellent tea will sustain me long enough — " He spoke on, Liang's servant holding the red porcelain teacup to his lips from time to time so that he could refresh his throat. In a trembling voice, he told of the execution, of arriving at his father's ancestral home only to find that the entire House of Cheng had been killed, of the desperate chase through Canton's labyrinth of streets, of the wound, the dovecote, and the Manchu officer he had strangled with his own hands.

Daniel was shaking when he finished. He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"My young friend," Liang whispered, "you have come far indeed. I will leave you to rest now, but I wish to leave you with one thought. Your enemies are our enemies. We contend against the vile army of the Manchu Dynasty, against the very devils who killed your family. Join us. In your delirium, you spoke in many tongues. With that gift, you could be of great service, and avenge your house as well."

Daniel opened his eyes. "You are asking me to become a Christian?"

"No." Liang's voice was gentle. "It would give me joy were you to accept our faith. But such a thing can come about only when your heart is ready. Even without baptism, you may serve with us. Think on it as you sleep — "

At the sound of many hoofbeats in the courtyard, Liang's head whipped about. He sprang to the window, flattened himself against the wall, and very cautiously peeped out. Daniel saw the tensing of the muscles in his back through the thin red silk.

The servant burst into the room. "Master, it is — "

"Yes, I know." When Liang turned from the window, his flat-nosed face wore a rueful smile. "Alas, my friend, it seems that my watchdogs have found me."

"And God be thanked it's not the imperialists." The servant breathed a sigh of relief as three sets of footsteps came pounding up the brick stairway of the inn from the common room below, two of them heavy and hurried, the other light as a deer's. Then he went to the closed door and waited for the urgent rap, its cadence oddly measured, like a code or a password, before he opened it.

The young captain in full Taiping military dress almost knocked the servant tumbling as he strode into the room. Seeing Liang where he stood beside the window, he dropped to one knee in salute.

"My general!" He was flushed and out of breath. "Thanks be to heaven — we feared you lost!"

A general. Daniel raised up on his elbow and looked at his friend Liang through more enlightened eyes. A second officer, older and with the appearance of higher rank, burst into the room. His wide chest was heaving, from the dash up the stairs. He looked like a fleshier version of Liang.

Liang had turned to face them, one eyebrow lilted in mild annoyance. "Lost? Pah! Merely delayed! You're a flock of old mother hens that fly into a panic when the rooster leaves! And for nothing!"

The second officer did not kneel. "I may be a mere *leu shwei*, a colonel in your army, but I speak now as your elder brother, Liang Yuin-fah. These lone missions of yours into enemy territory are foolhardy and dangerous! Your loss would be a devastating blow to your troops."

"Come now, my brother and my colonel." Liang chuckled. "You exaggerate both the danger of my mission and my importance to the army. Besides, I learned much about the movement of the imperialist demons. Not only that, but look at the prize I have brought back!" He gestured expansively toward the cot where Daniel lay. "He may not appear to be of great worth, for he has been on the brink of death for many days. But he has the body of a young Samson and the mind of a scholar. He is a speaker of tongues — even the language of our foreign brothers! I have asked him to join us!"

The two Taiping officers eyed Daniel skeptically. The plump colonel would have spoken, but at that, moment a third figure entered the room, a slender girl dressed in a bright blue robe. She paused in the doorway for a moment, like a butterfly on a blossom, before she flitted across the floor to spring into Liang's open arms.

"Father!" She pressed her face against his chest. Her hair hung loose to her waist like a gleaming black veil below her little jeweled cap. "Father! We were so worried!"

Liang rocked her tenderly in his arms. She clung to his neck, her little embroidered slippers with their upturned toes swinging above the floor. Her feet were dainty, even though they had not been bound. "Worried? You, Lai Jyu, my little pearl? Ah, then I apologize for not sending word. I would burn my own flesh before I would cause you a moment's anguish." He held her away from him a little and looked into her face. "But what are you doing here? I told your uncle to keep you in camp."

The colonel spread his hands helplessly. "Keep her in camp! Keep a young tigress on a tether of moonbeams! When we got word that you might be here, she would not be stopped. She threatened to swallow her gold earrings if we did not take her with us. Such a one — !"

"Ah!" Liang took his daughter's face between his hands and pushed his features into the semblance of a frown. "Incorrigible! Willful as a storm! . . . And I would not have you any other way!" He swung her around by the hand and brought her laughing to Daniel's bedside. "Look at her, my young friend! Have you ever seen such a splendid creature? In the Heavenly Kingdom, we do not lock our women away from the world. We do not flatten their breasts or bind their feet. Instead, we glorify them! We teach them to read, to write, to know the Holy Scriptures. Look at her, and look well. This is what a woman should be!"

A pained expression furrowed the colonel's face. "If I may remind you, my brother, your young friend should be cautioned that he may only look. She is promised, as you well know, to one who is above us all — "

His words buzzed about Daniel's head like troublesome flies, but they could not find the way to enter his ears. He was gazing transfixed at the vision that floated before his eyes.

Lai Jyu leaned over the bed, a curious smile on her oval face. Her skin was like the petal of a peony, delicately shaded and deepening to pink at the fullness of her cheeks. Her eyes were soft and perfectly set beneath the exquisite arch of her brows, brows whose shape and color were natural, not painted. Her black hair was cut in a fringe across her brow — a badge of her maidenhood. Tiny silver bells dangled from

the scalloped edge of her little blue cap. They tinkled their faint music when she moved. The lantern that hung from the ceiling above and behind her made a halo of golden light about her head.

He tried to speak to her, but he was weak and befuddled beyond belief. His long accounting to General Liang had sapped his strength to the bottom of its well. When he opened his lips, nothing emerged except her whispered name.

"Lai Jyu . . . Beautiful Pearl . . . " Daniel could say no more. He closed his eyes, exquisitely contented.

Fifteen

Hankow

December, 1861

Two of the letters that the steamer had brought upriver were addressed to Reverend Stephen J. Bellamy. Stephen's grandfather had brought them to the clinic and placed them quietly on the table. Stephen had been so busy working alongside Dr. Sung that he had scarcely noticed when the old man came in and left again without speaking to him. And that was just as well, perhaps. Relations between the two of them had become increasingly strained over the past weeks, and when they spoke at all it was usually in terse questions and monosyllabic answers.

The clinic was the cause of it all, with Sung's presence the center of the old man's displeasure. Archer Bellamy had first hinted, then asked, and then demanded that Stephen send the Taiping doctor back to Nanking.

"I can't," Stephen had replied time after time, his patience worn raw. "I can't operate the clinic without him, and the mission's not sending us one of their doctors till March."

"Then shut the clinic down. 'Tis getting so you've no time for your other duties, Stephen Bellamy."

"I can't." The same reply. "We've twenty people now. They'd die, most of them. I can't."

And so it had gone. Archer Bellamy had moved into an anteroom of the partially completed chapel down by the docks, leaving Stephen to sleep at the clinic — on the floor, usually, for the beds were almost always full. Their living apart had only increased the tension between them.

As for today — Stephen straightened to ease his back and wipe his smarting eyes. He had scarcely thought about his grandfather, nor given more than a glance in the direction of the two letters tucked among the clutter of plates and jars on the table. Fan Jung-mao, the old man who had been the clinic's first patient, was dying.

So stealthily had the fluid crept into his lungs that its presence had not been detected even by the astute Dr. Sung until it was too late. The ancient one lay near death now, his skin dry and fevered, his breathing like the sound of someone blowing through a tube into a glass of liquid. Only the old eyes remained vital and alert. They burned with intelligence, with thoughts and ideas that his worn-out body was too feeble to express.

There was little that could be done. Stephen had propped him up with cushions to ease his labored breathing and gone about the tending of the other patients in the clinic. In the past months, Stephen had lost eleven patients. For some, he had wept as he closed their eyes and folded their hands. And he would weep for Fan Jung-mao. But the anguish he felt as that ancient one approached the gates of death was more than mere grief. One stage of Stephen's life had ended when he had lost Madeline. Another had begun with his finding of the old man with the haunting eyes.

He set the flask of quinine water down on the table and strolled over to the old man's bedside. "*A-yeh*," he whispered, his voice hushed with affection, "Grandfather, are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?"

Those wisdom-filled eyes gazed beseechingly up at Stephen. The toothless mouth worked frantically in an effort to speak. Stephen's barbarian ears could not understand the faint mews of sound that emerged, but the old man's breathing was more labored than ever. He was gasping, drowning in the rising tide of fluid that filled his lungs. Alarmed, Stephen called out to Dr. Sung, who came hurrying in from the other room.

"Our dear little *a-yeh*." Stephen gazed down at the old man with tears in his eyes. "He sounds, worse than ever, and he is trying to speak to us. Hurry, my friend, I need your ears!"

Sung pressed the side of his head against the old man's chest. The medical supplies Serena had escorted up from Shanghai included a stethoscope, but Sung had tried it only once. He did just as well with

his keenly trained ear. When he looked up at Stephen, his broad face was grave. "The end is near for this old one," he said.

The withered hand lifted and brushed Sung's sleeve. The old man's mouth worked desperately, choking out semblances of words that Stephen, try as he might, could not catch.

But Sung was listening intently, his features transfixed in disbelief. "What . . . ? Again, if you can, *A-yeh!* I must be sure that joy has not muddled my hearing — ah! Yes! Yes! It shall be as you wish, Grandfather." Sung turned to Stephen, his face radiant. "Fan Jung-mao wishes me to inform you," he announced in a formal voice, "that he has chosen to die a Christian. He asks if you would honor him by performing the baptism!" Aside, to Stephen, he whispered, "You must make haste and do it soon, my friend. He is dying."

Stephen's hands trembled as he held the small tin basin above the old man's head. "In the name of the Father . . . and of the Son . . . and of the Holy Ghost . . . I baptize thee Peter Jung-mao Fan . . ." he murmured, biting his lip to keep from weeping aloud. As he lowered the basin, the ancient one smiled his satisfaction, and then his beautiful eyes closed peacefully for the last time.

Though his spirit slept, the heart of the old man lived on until the end of the day. When he died, it was like the flickering out of a tiny candle, so quietly ended that Stephen, who sat beside the bed, did not realize for several minutes that he had gone.

He stood and ran a loving finger down the shriveled cheek. Then, slowly, he covered the old man's face with the blanket. Sung had already gone to arrange for the burial. Stephen walked to the open doorway and leaned against the frame.

The sunset lay red over Hankow, glowing even in the wretchedness of the little street. A water coolie trudged past, his shoulders bent low with the burden of his yoke. The water in his big tin pails splashed a bit with the rhythm of his weary step, droplets catching the orange sunlight like sparks of fire. Stephen's eyes followed him down the street. *My yoke is easy and My burden is light.* The phrase sang in his mind. He wanted to run down the street after the poor man and embrace him, to tell him he offered a gift that could transform his miserable life . . .

Stephen shook his head and massaged the back of his aching neck with one hand. Eight months in Hankow. Eight months and one soul.

One soul for Madeline's life. Some men would have been bitter. He was only tired.

Then he remembered the two letters. He got them from the table and returned to the doorway, where the light was still strong enough for reading.

One letter was from Serena. He knew her hand well, the letters small and delicately formed, yet marching across the line in a determined, straightforward flow. The other bore the seal of the London Missionary Society headquarters in Victoria. A bank draft for his wages most likely. Well and good, since he'd spent his last month's pay on bedding for the infirmary. He drew on the dispensary for food and medicine, but since the little clinic was not a properly authorized institution, he was largely reliant on his own resources for its support. Serena and Harry had sent him money. Even their generosity was not enough to meet all the needs, and he was loathe to ask them for more.

Dropping the envelope from the mission into his pocket, he opened up the one from Serena. Along with the letter he found steamer tickets — passage for two from Hankow to Shanghai and back again.

"I know if I sent you the money, you'd spend it on your clinic . . ." Serena had written, "so these tickets are my way of begging you to come. Come to Shanghai and spend Christmas with us. Bring Grandfather if you can. The second ticket is for him. Please. You need a change, and I need you . . ."

I need you. Stephen read the first paragraph again, trying to fathom the cause of the agitation that showed itself in every line. She had seemed happy enough in September — so contented that the truth about her relationship with Harry had come as a total shock to him. He had given her Noah then, without hesitation, seeing it as the will of heaven that she should raise his son.

Stephen scanned the rest of the letter anxiously. Yes, Noah was well. He could roll over by himself now, and was cutting his first tooth. So it did not seem to be the baby who distressed Serena's heart. He read on. Harry was fine. Business was going marvelously. She was still looking into the possibility of shipping coolies to America. (Oh, Serena, haven't you enough toys to play with already? Must you do this as well?)

Then one short paragraph. The sentences terse and clipped, totally unlike Serena's ebullient style. A bat had flown into the baby's nurs-

ery. Jason Frobisher had been bitten on the hand. He had boarded his ship and sailed for San Francisco, still not knowing whether he had been infected with rabies. There had been no word of him since.

Stephen lowered the letter to his side and stared into the sunset, which had deepened in streaks to the color of blood. He liked Jason Frobisher, what little he knew of him. Rotten shame if the bat was rabid. It was an awful way to die. He shuddered, then sighed as the answer came to him. An aging, impotent husband. A lovely and frustrated young wife. And a handsome sea captain. What else? He shook his head. Poor Serena. Yes, she needed him. No one else understood her as he did — and no one else knew about Harry.

Stephen read the letter's affectionate closing. Then he folded it up and put it back in the envelope along with the steamer tickets. How could he leave Hankow and his clinic when he was so needed here? Even for Christmas? Even for Serena?

While light remained, he opened the other envelope, tearing off the end and leaving the wax seal intact. It contained the long-expected draft written on the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank for fifty dollars in the local currency. And there was a letter as well, penned on crisp white linen stationery engraved with the mission letterhead.

Victoria

November 4, 1861

Dear Reverend Bellamy:

It has come to our attention that you have taken it upon yourself to open a small hospital in Hankow. We understand as well that it is staffed only by yourself and by a Chinese medicine man who is associated with the Taiping rebels.

While we do commend your initiative, Reverend, and your sincere desire to help the people of Hankow, we wish to respectfully point out that you have placed the mission in most awkward circumstances. Your acceptance of Taiping assistance could be seen by many as a tacit mission endorsement of their cause — an impression that we certainly have no wish to create. The existence of your clinic implies as well an approval of

Chinese medical practices, which in many instances are barbaric and decidedly harmful. If we are to convert the Chinese to Western Christianity, we must convince them of the superiority of our ways. At the same time, Reverend Bellamy, we must be cautious. Any death or other tragedy resulting from the practices in your clinic would be upon our heads, and might permanently impair our prospects of gaining conversions in Hankow.

Therefore, we are sure you will understand our position. Under the circumstances, we feel that we have no choice except to ask you to close the clinic until such time as we can send a qualified missionary doctor to Hankow.

In the meantime, you should have quite enough to occupy you, helping your grandfather with his ecclesiastical duties and with the establishment of the chapel, the school, the dispensary, and the planned orphanage.

We sincerely trust that you will see the wisdom of our counsel and wilt abide by it.

Stephen crumpled the letter in sudden anger. *Close the clinic.* Such a cold, black-and-white phrase. It was an embarrassment to them, was it? A worry? Would they rather let people die in the streets than risk any unfavorable light falling upon their work? *Might impair our prospects of gaining conversions . . .* Stephen punched the frame of the door in frustration. Why, the only conversion they'd made in the whole time he'd been in Hankow had just come about as a direct result of the clinic! He would protest! He would write and tell them!

But no, reason argued in his head. They would not listen. They had made up their minds and would not be budged. If he stirred up already troubled waters, he would only be taken out of Hankow and sent elsewhere, someplace where he could be kept well under the mission thumb.

It has come to our attention . . . Someone, by damn, had brought it to their attention, or they would not have known. Hamish Abernathy? Not likely, he concluded after a moment of thought. Hamish's opposition to the clinic was philosophical, and not vehement enough to warrant such open interference. And if it had not been Hamish, only one

other person in Hankow would have betrayed Stephen and the work he held so dear. His own grandfather.

Stephen's hand pressed the crumpled letter into a hard ball and thrust it into his pocket. The setting sun crouched red and hot above the horizon as he stepped out into the street. His thin face was white with rage.

By the time he found his grandfather, the sun had almost disappeared, and the sky had turned from red to purple. The old man was just locking up the dispensary, a plain brown wooden shed that lay within sight of the docks.

"Let's go back inside," Stephen said, his throat muscles aching with the tension in him. "What I've got to say to you shouldn't be said in the street!"

Archer Bellamy had just pocketed the key. He drew it out and opened the lock again, saying nothing until the heavy door had creaked open.

"Twill be dark soon," he said as he walked slowly inside. "Will you be wantin' a candle?" The eyes that turned and looked at Stephen were veiled with caution, their defenses already thrown up and manned. Something was in the wind, and like an aging stag, he sensed it.

"This won't take long." Stephen stood before his grandfather, his hands on his hips and his legs braced apart as if he were getting ready to face a typhoon. "I've just heard from the mission," he said.

The silence in the shed was broken only by the sound of a rat scurrying among the wheat. Fading daylight shone through cracks between the boards, silvering Archer Bellamy's hair and features until he stood like a towering ghost in the darkness.

"Aye," he said at last. "I suspected as much."

"How could you?" Stephen sputtered, unsure of what to say next now that the confrontation had come. "How could you do it? The clinic's been my life! And now you'd take it from me!"

"I?" The syllable echoed in the hollow space.

"It was your doing. Deny it, I dare you!" Stephen felt the pulsing of the veins in his own neck.

"Nay." The old man spoke slowly and calmly. "I could deny it. But you'd not believe me if I did."

"But why? You saw the good we were doing. The old man — the first one, with the boils on his chest. He died today. And he died a Christian!"

"You baptized him?"

"I did."

"Without my approval? Without a Christian witness?"

"Dr. Sung — "

"I'd not call him Christian! The baptism's not valid. Your old man's rottin' in ell with the rest o' the 'eathens!"

Stephen felt the blood drain from his head. The veins and nerves in his neck jumped with fury, but he kept his voice under control. "I don't believe that," he said between his teeth. "I don't believe in a God who'd show no more mercy than that! Peter Jung-mao Fan died a Christian! If you can prove that he didn't, I — I'll leave the ministry!"

Archer Bellamy drew himself up. In the darkness, he looked as tall and thin and ghostly as a white birch on a winter night. "Knowledge needs no proof," he said coldly. "The man was improperly baptized. 'e died as 'eathen as the day he was born!"

Dizzy with rage, Stephen clutched at one of the wooden supports of the shed. "You're only saying that because it was my doing and not yours," he rasped. "Since the day I came here, I've not been able to do one thing right in your eyes. Everything you've got against my father you've taken out on me!"

"Tisn't so!" Archer Bellamy's breath hissed out between his teeth. "I was ready t' welcome you as a brother minister! Instead, I got a 'alf-grown puppy I 'ad t' wet nurse from one day to the next! They sent you t' 'elp me! T' 'elp me, mind you! But you've been nothin' but a thorn in my side from the day you stepped off the boat! First it was your wife — God rest 'er poor soul! An' then that blasted clinic! By thunder, I'd 'ave been better off alone!"

Stephen's hand gripped the wooden upright so hard that the splinters dug into his flesh. "Aye — and you shall! I'll keep the clinic open, without you and without the mission! You'll see!"

"Then you'll 'ave t' do it without food from the dispensary an' without wages from the mission! An' I'll oppose you at every turn!"

"So be it then!" Stephen's stomach was churning. He felt sick. "Lord, I can see why my father left you! And Aunt Kathleen! And Grandmamma as well!"

He turned away, only half-seeing the horrified mask that was his grandfather's face. His own words choked him as he stumbled out of the shed and into the twilight street. For most of his life, Stephen had worshiped the legend of Archer Bellamy. He had wanted to be exactly like him. Now the ironies of life and fate lashed at him like a lead-tipped cat-o'-nine tails. The legend was an illusion, as was Stephen's ability to live up to it. For all the old man's hard ways, Archer Bellamy was right. Stephen had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. He had failed.

He strode up the street, wanting to run, to escape everything he had ever wished to be. He had never been cut out to be a saint! He'd not been raised for it. Catholic priests took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Poverty seemed a natural state now, as did chastity now that Madeline was gone. It was as if he'd lived two lives, and the first one, filled with love and comfort, was gone forever. But obedience was another matter. He'd always done as he pleased. Even his entering the ministry had been an act of rebellion. Now, in the face of the need he saw all about him, he found that he could not submit his will to that of his grandfather and the mission.

The night was cold. A breeze had sprung up, biting his ribs through the threadbare coat. Stephen shivered. The steamer tickets rustled in his breast pocket. He thought of Shanghai, the warmth of a crackling fire, the thick Persian rugs on the floors of the Bolton mansion, Serena's eager face, his son in his arms. How easy it would be to go back, to forget he ever saw Hankow. His father would forgive him. They'd not written even once since he'd left Hong Kong, but Morgan Bellamy would understand. The business would be waiting . . .

He struck his fist hard against his leg, so hard that the muscles of his thigh throbbed with pain. Now, quickly, while his resolve was strong, he jerked Serena's letter out of his pocket. His hands shook as he tore the envelope — letter, tickets, and all — into shreds and let them blow away on the wind. Like red and white snowflakes, they vanished into the twilight.

He could not go back. If he went back to Shanghai, he would stay. He would forget the people he had come to love, the sick, the starving, the homeless. In a few years, he would be like his father — living for the profits he could make and the pleasure he could seize hold of. He could see himself, drinking at the English Club, gambling at the race-

track, visiting some pretty Chinese doxy tucked away in Taiping Shan (he'd never caught his father at it, but Stephen had no illusions about Morgan Bellamy). Anything to pass the time, to kill the pain of loneliness. That was not for him.

More slowly he began to walk again, back in the direction of the clinic. The wind plucked at his hair and his coattails. Two bright stars, cold and far away, twinkled above the silhouette of a distant pagoda. Stephen's mind ceased its wanderings and began to focus on the immediate problems at hand. After tonight he could not work with his grandfather again. And if he insisted on keeping the clinic open, he could not work with the mission, either. There was enough food at the clinic for, perhaps, one more day. The fifty dollars in his pocket would buy supplies for two weeks — much less with the rent coming due the day after tomorrow, and the water and slop coolies each wanting their pay. The money would be gone before he knew it. And afterward . . . Despair tightened his throat. He would have no choice except to appeal to Serena and Harry, or to the Taipings themselves. He remembered the steamer tickets and cursed under his breath. Why had he torn them up when he could have cashed them in for money? Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he lowered his head and waded through the whistling wind.

The clinic was quiet except for the sound of a woman coughing in the far room. Sung had evidently not returned. Stephen settled himself on the stoop to wait, resting his face in the cup of his hands. The damp mud stank beneath his shoes.

He must have dozed, he was to recall later, for the next thing he remembered was Sung's voice and the touch of a hand on his shoulder. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the sky was black, the moon a low crescent over the western hills.

"Forgive the lateness of this unlucky one," Sung whispered. "The director of the cemetery was playing *mah-jongg* when I found him, and would not do business until he had finished. I was forced to wait all this time, may his stick turn to turtle dung!" He spat a most un-Christian curse into the mud. "But all is arranged. The old one has gone to his heavenly rest?"

Stephen nodded wearily and moved over a bit to accommodate Sung's buttocks on the stoop.

"At dawn then." Sung sighed. "Coffins cost dearly, my friend, and with so many homeless old ones . . . *aiee!*" He crossed his arms on his

knees and stared morosely at the night sky. "One hears talk sometimes. Silly rumors. While I was waiting for the game to end, I overheard the tale of a young foreigner who quarreled most bitterly with his grandfather tonight."

Stephen's jaw dropped.

"Walls of wood are thin," said Sung.

"The mission's ordered the clinic closed. It was his doing. I — I'm thinking of leaving the ministry," Stephen blurted out.

"Ahhhh — this cannot be. And I fear that my presence here has brought about this great sadness."

"Only in part. I would not have it otherwise, my friend."

"You will do as they ask?"

"No."

"And if you so refuse, they will cut you off."

"I have no choice. After what passed between us tonight, there can be no more good feelings with my grandfather. And how can I close the clinic? Twenty helpless people in the street with no place to go!"

"But they will not pay you?"

"No. My grandfather will see to that."

"Then how will you live?" Sung asked gently.

"I don't know. My sister has money — " He punched the palm of his left hand with his right fist. He'd be asking for charity, he realized. And that was hard. Even from Serena.

A pair of nighthawks darted through the air, the bars on their wings flashing silver. Cicadas chirped from the inner garden of the house across the street. Stephen lowered his face into his hands again in mute despair.

"I've been summoned back to Nanking," said Sung. "Come with me."

"What?" Stephen raised his head,

"Come with me. There's need of you there. As a teacher. Our church is so young. We've so much to learn. You could live well there, and be respected as a man of wisdom . . . "

"But the clinic!"

"Those who truly have no place to go can come with us. We have institutions to care for such miserable ones. Even now the junk is anchored in the Han, awaiting my word."

"But I'm not Chinese — "

Sung smiled away the last of Stephen's protests. "It does not matter. As a Christian brother, you would be welcome. If it comforts you to know it, you would not be the only foreigner in Nanking."

"But . . ." Stephen's voice trailed off as he realized he had run out of arguments. For a long time, he sat beside Sung in silence, his chin on his hands. Perhaps it was meant to be, he mused. Things had fallen into place so neatly. And after the discouragement of Hankow, Nanking beckoned like some distant paradise. A city of Christians, clean, upright, eager to be taught. Christians who would look upon him as a man of learning, not as some foolish young foreign devil who knew next to nothing. His mind, he realized, was already plunging ahead, along the path of least resistance.

"We would need tomorrow to bury the ancient one and to close the clinic," he said slowly.

Sung grinned broadly. "With help from the crew of the junk, we can be underway by midday, well before the hour of the sheep."

Sixteen

Kiangsi Province
December, 1861

Daniel was well enough to ride by the time the army was ready to march out. They moved north, two thousand Taiping troops, their women, their bearers, and their children. The general rode at their head, flanked by his officers, all of them mounted on sturdy Mongolian steeds. Dressed in red and black, the infantry marched behind them in a body, the tassels on their bound hair dancing smartly over their left shoulders. Families and baggage brought up the rear.

The first sight of Daniel astride one of the barrel-bellied horses, his long legs dangling nearly to the ground, sent Lai Jyu into peals of laughter. She scorned the conventional litter to ride behind her father. Like a boy, she straddled her black pony, skirt hiked above her trousered knees. Today her robe was as red as a wedding gown. Over it she wore a little blue silk jacket lined with sable. Her hair hung in a glistening stream down her back, crowned by the tiny belled cap. The crisp morning air had pinked her cheeks. Daniel looked at her and felt an ache that quivered all the way downward from his throat to his knees.

"You'll like Nanking," she chatted as she rode beside him. "It's so big that if you and I parted at dawn to ride in different directions around the wall, it would be sundown before we met. Can you imagine?"

"Maybe I'll find my brother in Nanking," he said, changing the subject. He had asked General Liang if he had heard of one Cheng Shen-lan among the Taipings. A strange expression had flickered across the general's face, and for a moment Daniel thought that he

had stumbled upon something. But the good man's answer had been vague and noncommittal. Yes, the name had a familiar ring to it, he had replied. It was possible that he had indeed met him in Nanking, but he could not be certain. "The surest way would be to check with the military registry. They would have all the names. I can arrange it for you. But it may not be easy, my young friend. Many men who join us change their names to protect their families. And since you do not know his face — "

Daniel had agreed that it would not be easy. But Nanking was his only hope. And the prospect of sharing the journey with Lai Jyu had filled his days with sunshine.

"Perhaps if you found your brother safe and well among the Taipings, then you would truly become one of us." Lai Jyu leaned across the gap between the two horses, her nearness making Daniel's heart jump. "Your mother raised you as a Christian, Li-t'ung. How happy we would be if you were to accept baptism. Why do you refuse?"

"My father — " Daniel risked a glance at her, meeting her sparkling fawn eyes. During the days of his recovery, he had taken instruction in the Taiping Christian faith and found its tenets acceptable — all save one. Inherent in Taiping baptism was a total rejection of traditional Chinese values, including the Confucian teachings Cheng Lo had held dear. To deny the worth of these principles, to spit upon them and call them the work of demons — no. Love and respect for his father would not allow this.

"Your father is dead." Lai Jyu bounced in the leather saddle. "With baptism, you could rise high, Li-t'ung. Perhaps you'd be a general like my father one day, or even one of the *wangs*, the heavenly princes. Without it — why, you may not even be permitted to enter the gate of Nanking. You just may have to stay outside the wall."

"Yes," Daniel murmured regretfully, one hand brushing the growing stubble on his shaved scalp. His long queue was wound around his head Taiping-fashion, but without the red tassel. Idly, he wondered how he would look with his hair fully grown out. The queue was a Manchu fashion, which the hated conquerors had imposed on their Chinese subjects more than two hundred years ago when they drove the reigning Ming Dynasty from power. To the Taipings, it was a symbol of oppression. Their return to the hairstyle of the Ming Era was a flag of defiance in the face of their enemies.

Daniel was dressed once more in the white of mourning. General Liang had thoughtfully provided him with a new tunic and trousers and lent him a quilted jacket against the chill. Daniel glanced covertly at Lai Jyu, caught her eyes on him, and smiled. Perhaps she thought him handsome, perhaps only strange with his great size, shaved head, and half-foreign features. Little difference it made! Her uncle, the colonel, had made sure Daniel understood that she had been promised since childhood to Hung Siut-suen, the Heavenly King of the Taipings. Though she sat within arm's length of him, Lai Jyu was as unattainable as the moon.

Liang and his officers rode ahead of them, their banners of rank fluttering from staffs affixed to their saddles. They were relaxed, totally at ease as they chatted in low tones. The army was well into Taiping territory and there was little danger now from imperialist attack. From time to time, the general glanced back over his shoulder at them, and at the gaily uniformed troops that filed behind.

Perhaps it was the peace of the morning that charged Daniel with sudden boldness; or maybe it was the memory of a woman to whom he had been an object of desire. Whatever the reason, he found himself speaking, and the rashness of his own words astounded him. "What if I were to accept baptism, Lai Jyu? What if I were to rise high, as you say, to a position of importance among the Taipings? Would I then be permitted to ask for you?"

"Li-t'ung!" One hand flew to cover her little rose-petal mouth. The gesture was one of outrage, yet he had caught the flicker of excitement in those dark eyes and he knew his words had pleased her. "You would do it? For me?"

"You've not answered my question."

"Alas . . ." She wove her fingers into the pony's black mane. Her face was flushed. "You know that I am promised. To the *Tein Wang* himself. On my father's word of honor. There is nothing that can be done."

"And if you were not promised?" Daniel felt the pounding of his heart.

"Perhaps . . ." Lai Jyu looked down at her hands. "But it is useless even to think of it."

"But how can this be? You told me once yourself that in the Heavenly Kingdom it is common for a man to choose his own wife, and that the woman has the right to refuse him if she does not want —"

"Yes. That is so. But how could a woman refuse the *Tien Wang*?"

Something sank in Daniel's heart, like a stone in a black pool. "You want this, then?"

"It is the highest honor that can come to a woman, Li-t'ung. But it makes no difference. I was ten years old when I gave my consent, and my father pledged his word — "

"They say the Tien Wang's wives and concubines are more numerous than the days of the year!"

"So I have been told." Her voice was cool.

"And you would still — "

"I've no choice. To break my pledge would dishonor my father."

The implication in her words, that the pledge *could* be broken, even at the price of honor, gave Daniel heart. "How well do you know the *Tien Wang*?" he asked.

"I saw him once, as a child. He was nearly forty years old then, and he had a fine, strong face and an upright carriage. I found him pleasing, and so I consented to become his wife when I reached the proper age. Now, I await only his summons." Lai Jyu folded her hands neatly on the front of her saddle. "Surely in seven years, he could not have changed so much."

"You've not seen him in all that time?"

"No one has. He lives in seclusion now, inside his palace at Nanking. Only women attend him." Her slender fingers tightened, loosened, and tightened again on the front of the saddle. "He rules through his edicts, which he receives from the Heavenly Father and Heavenly Elder Brother. The women who wait upon him write them down and deliver them to the people . . . " A note of strain had crept into her little bell-like voice. "In seven years, no man has seen his face."

"Lai Jyu!" Daniel fought the urge to seize her hand and press it to his cheek in sudden sympathy. He glanced ahead at the broad back of General Liang. "Your father — ?"

"Once I enter the palace of the *Tien Wang*, I will never see my father again. Nor any other man, except my husband." Her voice was hushed now, almost a whisper.

"Lai Jyu . . . surely you cannot want this! And you're trembling. Are you afraid?"

There was no sound from her except the faint tinkling of the little silver bells that hung from her pony's bridle. It was a long time before

she spoke. "I do not fear the *Tien Wang*," she said slowly. "He is our Lord, the essence of all good. But the palace . . . the confinement, the long days of my life . . . this I fear, Li-t'ung. Never to ride again in the open country with my father, never to shoot with a bow or sleep under the stars on a cold night . . . This — oh, this I fear!" She gripped the reins with a sudden intensity that made her pony leap to one side. With the skill of experience, she pulled the animal in, soothing it with her voice and her hand until it had settled once more into the plodding rhythm of the march.

"But your father — " Daniel guided his mount closer. "Surely, as much as he loves you, he would not force you — "

"My father is above all a man of his word." The emotion was gone from Lai Jyu's voice, as if she had reined it in with her horse. "It is true, Li-t'ung, that he has no other living child, and so I have been both daughter and son to him. My going will grieve him. But to dishonor his promise to the *Tien Wang* would be a most unthinkable sacrilege." She leaned back in her saddle, the very portrait of resignation, her exquisitely pink lower lip thrust out a bit, like a baby's. The curve of her small, tapered chin was so soft that it was all Daniel could do to keep from reaching out and turning her face toward him.

"How . . . how soon?" he asked her.

"When he summons me."

"And if he does not summon you?"

Unexpectedly, she smiled. "Then I must wait."

In the days that followed, they passed northward, following the course of the Kan River from Kanhsien to Chian and beyond.

Every seventh day, the march halted for the Taiping sabbath, which began at midnight with the beating of the hollow bamboo drum and the call to prayer. Two services were held during the day, to the accompaniment of much kneeling, rising, and chanting, the burning of the paper on which a sacred sermon had been written, and the lighting of incense and firecrackers at the closing. The remainder of the sabbath was devoted to study, prayer, and rest. For Daniel, such days were long and tedious. Lai Jyu was secluded in her tent with her maids, and all but religious activity in the camp was suspended. There was nothing to do except wander aimlessly, read from the scrolls and pamphlets the general had made available to him, or pass the empty hours

conversing with the soldiers as they lounged about the camp. They were good fellows for the most part, simple and straightforward, accepting without question the tenets of their faith. Any attempt on Daniel's part to begin a discussion of ethics or compare philosophies was met with blank stares.

"But the *Tien Wang* has said it is so, my tall friend. Who has need to question his word?"

"Yes. The way of the Heavenly Kingdom is the perfect way. Does one question the commandments of God, Cheng Li-t'ung? Certainly not. The *Tien Wang* is His living son. He sees into heaven and talks face-to-face with our Heavenly Elder Brother. Who are we to place our own interpretations upon his laws?"

"Join us, tall one. Accept baptism. You will feel as we do once the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

Except for Lai Jyu and the hope of finding his brother among the Taipings, Daniel would have dropped out of the march and melted into the countryside. He felt stifled in a world where everyone seemed to think the same thoughts and speak the same lines, like puppets in a play.

Only General Laing, a Confucian scholar before his conversion, seemed open to Daniel's desire to talk. Daniel would have sought him out more often, but he was busy with the affairs of the camp and surrounded by his men. Only on rare evenings, after the nightly prayer, would Daniel be lucky enough to fall into step with him as he strolled about the camp. Tonight was one of those evenings.

"They are the fortunate ones, my son," the general remarked in answer to a comment of Daniel's about the rigid belief of the soldiers. "They are like children, as Our Lord would have all men be. They accept what they are taught and do as they are told." He stopped to ruffle the hair of a small boy who was slashing the air with a wooden sword. The evening campfires glowed over the vastness of the hillside like a field of stars. "It is learned men like you and me who are cursed, Li-t'ung. We question everything. We can do nothing without knowing the reason. We can accept nothing without asking why. We see a river before us — and we must know its place of beginning and end before we can truly accept its reality. We must know its name, what cities it passes! Pah! The man with the heart of a child need only see the river

and for him it is enough. It is drink to his thirsty tongue, water to his animals and his rice fields. Nothing else is truly important."

Liang walked on, vehemence manifesting itself in the length of his stride. He was shorter by a head than Daniel, his solid body possessed of a commanding vitality. The firelight glowed orange on the lumpy contours of his flattened nose. "I was born in Tsangwu, in Kwantung Province," he said. "As a young man, I passed the scholarly examination in my village. Then, after yet another year of study, I went to Kwangchow to sit for the provincial testing."

Daniel listened with interest. In the complex system of the Middle Kingdom, an able man had one hope of rising to a position of authority: through the passing of scholarly examinations, first in his own city, then in the capital of his province. Last and most difficult of all were the imperial examinations in Peking, in which Daniel's own father had finished eighth in the kingdom in his year. From those who succeeded in these grueling tests came the magistrates, the governors, the viceroys, who administered the Celestial Empire.

"There was one who sat with me," Liang continued, "in the little brick cubicle next to my own. Ah — you say you've never sat for an examination? It's torture, my friend. They take off your clothes and search your mouth and your ears and your anus for hidden notes. Then they put you into a tiny cell with space for only a stool and built-in desk and a slop bucket. After they've given you the assignment, they go away and lock the door until nighttime. You're in there alone with nothing but your papers and brushes and inkstone. And you write. You brush the letters as if ten thousand devils were driving your hand. You sweat and you cry and you wet yourself from fear that you won't succeed. For three days, you suffer. Men die from it sometimes, Li-t'ung."

The camp was quieter now, the fires flickering low. The distant yap of a black-faced wild dog from a hilltop probed the darkness. Liang cleared his throat and spat carefully in the dirt. "There was one who sat for the examination with me," he began again. "A young schoolmaster. For three days, I listened to him breathing in the next cell. We weren't allowed to talk, you understand, but I got to know him just from the sound of his breathing. I knew he was suffering, as I was, as we all were. Yet something in him seemed to reach out — but no, you have to experience it to understand . . .

"I met him face-to-face while we were waiting for the lists to be posted. It's an awful time, your whole future hanging in the balance. We became friends in that time, I and the one who had labored beside me. I found him straightforward and earnest, most anxious to succeed." Liang paused to nod a greeting to one of the sentries on the edge of the camp. The grass on the moonlit hillsides rustled in the wind.

"The lists were put up at last. My name was near the top. His at the bottom. He said nothing, only turned and walked away. Later, I learned that it was his second failure."

The general sighed and interlocked his sturdy fingers. "They say he failed because he had no money to bribe the judges. I don't believe that. You see, I had no money, either. I think that rather his mind had already transcended the level of traditional classic thought. The ideas that flowed from his brush were his own, not those of the ancient sages. And so he failed."

Liang walked on in silence for a brief time, lost in his own musings. "I at the top of the list . . . he at the bottom. The ways of heaven are mysterious, Li-t'ung. I was appointed first secretary to the *taotai* of Tsangwu, a humble position, but a good beginning for one who wishes to rise, eh? The years passed and I began to hear strange reports of my friend. Ah — but I only listened in passing. I was contented with my life and busy studying for the imperial examinations in Peking."

"The examinations?" Daniel's eyes widened with interest.

"Yes. I was forty-second out of five hundred thirty candidates. Not among the highly honored like your father, my friend, but high enough to be awarded the title of *chin shih*. I returned home to Tsangwu in triumph a month later — " Liang swallowed, his voice suddenly harsh. "In my absence, some enemy, some vile one who held a grudge against me, placed rumors in the ear of the viceroy at Kwangchow about my friendship with the man who had shared the provincial examinations with me. The accusations were false. I had not even spoken with him since the day the lists were posted. But the viceroy's Manchu bannermen did not even wait for my return."

Something seemed to catch in the general's throat. A shiver ran across the broad shoulders. The scarlet tassel trembled at the side of his thick neck. "They slaughtered them all," he said. "My old parents. My brothers and their families, all save one who was away on a journey.

My wife. My sons and daughters . . . only the youngest was alive, a tiny girl child. She'd been hidden by her *amah*, and they'd overlooked her."

"Lai Jyu." Daniel whispered her name in awe.

The general nodded. "I took her and fled for my life. In Kweilin, I found my old acquaintance, surrounded by his armies and followers." Liang's voice had dropped to a harsh whisper. "I, Liang Yuin-fah, a *chin shih*, a man of learning, I fell at his feet and pressed my face to the earth where he stood and begged him to let me be his servant."

The coals of the campfires glowed red and purple in the night. Blanketed figures huddled around them like quail bunched against the chill. The talk was low now, a gentle purr of blended voices. The resting horses snorted softly and shifted their feet against the dry and trampled grass.

At the sound of distant hoofbeats moving closer, General Liang raised his head. Without hurrying, he turned and began to walk back in the direction of his own tent, Daniel keeping pace. "My baptism was born of hate, Li-t'ung," he said. "My faith fed on anger and revenge. Months — years passed before the true spirit of the *Taiping*, the Supreme Peace, sweetened the bitterness of my soul. Perhaps with you it will be the same — "

He broke off as a messenger cantered his sweating horse into the camp and wheeled to a stop before him.

"My general — " The man vaulted from the saddle and knelt in front of Liang before drawing a sealed scroll out of the recesses of his tunic. "From the *Chung Wang*, my lord."

Liang took the message without comment and broke the seal. The *Chung Wang*, the Faithful King, was the supreme commander of the Taiping military forces. Leaning a bit to catch the light of the lantern that was hung on a pole outside the tent, Liang unrolled the scroll and read its message, his face expressionless. At last he rolled it up again, balancing it thoughtfully between his hands.

"The *Chung Wang* requests my presence at once," he said. "At Nanchang tomorrow I will take leave of the troops and board the junk that will be waiting at Poyang Lake. The journey is much swifter by water." His voice was curiously leaden. He turned abruptly to go into his tent, then swung back around to face Daniel.

"You will accompany me, Li-t'ung. Your many tongues could be useful in the planning of our coming assault on Shanghai." He paused, then added almost as an afterthought, "Lai Jyu and her maids will be coming as well. It seems . . . it seems the *Tien Wang* has summoned her."

Seventeen

Shanghai

December, 1861

Serena's eyes blurred with weariness. The contracts and bills spread out upon her desk swam for a moment. So much black and white. She needed to go home and rest, her thoughts nagged at her. Surely if she kept up the pace she'd thrown herself into over the past month, she would soon be ill.

Today she had spoken with Taki at the bank. The loan for another thirteen *mou* of land — a little more than two acres at six *mou* to the English acre — had been promised by next week. The price was high and Taki's rate of interest wicked. But the crafty Chinese knew as well as she did that the return on the rental of the land would be high enough to allow a handsome profit for them both. Serena was buying farther out now, well beyond the racecourse. Some of their holdings extended to the very border of the area allotted as a treaty port. Rents were cheaper there, especially with rumors of a coming Taiping attack racing like wildfire through the settlement.

Serena shivered at the thought of the danger, more intrigued than frightened. Shanghai was well protected, the strength of Ward's Chinese forces swelling day by day. And hadn't Ward himself told her that the rebels had no quarrel with foreigners, especially Christians? Ward, after all, was in the pay of Taki and the Chinese business community of Shanghai. Lord, it wasn't England's war. Not yet.

As for the rents, it didn't matter. The refugees poured into Shanghai like herring into the nets. There would always be a demand for land. Yao and his little army of rent collectors siphoned their own bit of squeeze off the revenues. Who they were and what methods they used

she did not ask as long as the rents came in. Some things, Serena had learned, it was better not to know.

Things like where Yao was going to recruit the coolies they'd be shipping off to California in mid-January. It was a good business. Serena's father had told her all about it. You sent the coolies to America, and afterward the price of their passage — always high, and always lent at soaring interest — was paid with the wages they made in the California gold mines. Serena had heard tales of the drugging and kidnapping of coolies for such voyages, but for the most part such practices were unnecessary. In a place like China, with poverty, famine, and war galloping rampant over the countryside, surely there would be strong young bucks eager to seek their fortune in the Land of the Golden Mountain. Yao would find them. She would not worry about it.

No, she would not worry. She would fling herself from one involvement to the next. She would bury herself under the piles of estimates and invoices and contracts and schedules until they crushed the pain out of her. She would buy new gowns — silks, satins, velvets — and jewels fit for an empress. She would give balls and levees, each one grander than the last. She would never stop —

Oh, Jason! Jason! God help me!

Harry came in, a letter in his hand. Serena forced herself to smile as he bent to kiss her forehead. Dear Harry. Her eyes flew to the letter, grasping for it. "Oh, Harry, is it from — ?" She knew better than to hope. A month was too soon for news of Jason.

"From Hankow," he said with a gentle smile. "For you, love."

"Stephen?" She'd not heard from him in weeks. Maybe it was a reply to her last letter. Maybe he'd be coming for Christmas after all. She ached to see him.

But the writing on the envelope was not Stephen's. Serena recognized the pinched, precise hand of Mrs. Abernathy. Trembling strangely, she broke the seal with the little jade-handled letter opener that lay on the desk. "Harry," she whispered, "why am I afraid?"

"Do you want the to read it first?"

When Serena nodded, he took the letter from her quivering hands. Slipping on his reading glasses, he slowly unfolded the paper. Cautiously, he scanned it. Serena watched his face, her heart in her throat.

He touched her shoulder, the pressure of his hand warm through the dark blue gabardine of her sleeve. "Serena, your brother's left

Hankow. He . . . evidently had a row with your grandfather. The clinic was found empty. Completely cleared out except for the heavy furniture. No one's seen him."

"Where is he?" She breathed the question, her voice tight with shock.

"Mrs. Abernathy and the others think he must have gone with Doctor Sung. To Nanking."

"Dear God — " Serena felt the room spinning about her. She clutched at Harry's arm. "He's with them. He's with them and they're going to attack us!"

Nanking

December 1861

The ancient capital of seven dynasties sprawled on the south bank of the Yangtze, cradled by the undulating arms of the *Zijin Shan* — the Purple Mountain. Outside the massive city walls, Nanking's teeming suburb spread to the river. Here, Taipings and non-Taipings worked side by side, traded, haggled, and at times clashed. Shaven heads with queues mingled in the crowded streets with red-tasseled braids and scarfs. Here, anyone was free to come and go.

Inside the immense walls that towered upward for more than fifty feet, however, with very rare exceptions, only Taipings were allowed. Stephen had arrived some days ago with Dr. Sung. It had taken half of a morning to clear his entry. Three hours by his watch, waiting while Sung argued with the gate attendants and while messengers on horseback galloped back and forth between the gate and the *yamen* of the *Chung Wang*. At last he was given a small wooden ticket on a string to tie around his waist. Such tickets were worn by all who entered or left the city.

With Sung at his side, Stephen had passed through three enormous gates and down into a cool, dim tunnel, its walls scrubbed free of moss and mold. Stephen had counted his echoing footsteps. The tunnel was more than a hundred feet long and crowded with tradesmen hauling their wares in and out of the city. At last they emerged to stand blinking in the daylight within the Taiping capital.

Nothing could have prepared Stephen for the immensity of what he saw. The area enclosed by the walls was not a mere city, but included vast open stretches of fields and gardens, dotted with houses and

small villages. The metropolis itself gleamed distantly through the morning haze, three or four miles from where they stood.

Doctor Sung had borrowed horses. They'd ridden for half an hour down the main road before they reached the outskirts of the city. People were everywhere, clean, orderly, dressed in bright colors, the heads of men and women alike covered by triangular scarves that tied at the back of the neck. The children stared at Stephen, awed by his height, but it was clear enough, judging from the behavior of the crowds and the casual smiles of greeting, that Sung had told him the truth: Foreigners were welcomed and accepted in Nanking.

The days had been full, crowded with receptions and meetings. Stephen had been introduced to the personable and charming *Chung Wang*, as well as to a number of other *wangs*, which was what the Taipings called their leaders. As for the *Tien Wang*, the Heavenly King himself, he remained in seclusion behind the walls of his gaudy red and blue palace, sheltered by its roof of yellow tiles. Shut away with his God and his women. Stephen shuddered. In the past few days, he had learned much about his hosts, most of it pleasing. The Taipings were supremely devout. They adhered strictly to their own interpretations of God's commandments. True, like the Jews and Adventists, they celebrated their sabbath on Saturday. Even that could be overlooked in the light of their devotion. Under their ironbound moral code, such sins as adultery and opium-smoking were punishable by death. Drunkenness, dishonesty, and divorce were simply not tolerated. The rank-and-file Taiping male was monogamous, and as devoted to his family as any Englishman.

But the *wangs* and their multiplicity of wives and concubines — Lord! Stephen saw it as the height of hypocrisy.

He was needed here, Stephen reflected as he strolled along the walkway atop the city wall. It was evening, the gathering dusk turning the gentle slopes of the *Zijin Shan* to violet. The Purple Mountain. Its soft beauty touched him as nothing had since Madeline's death. With a sigh, he lowered his body to sit on the wall's gray and ancient parapet. Shadows crept stealthily into the clutter of shacks and shops that clung like fungi to the base of the wall. Smoke from brick stoves stuffed with precious bits of dried fuel grass rose to his nostrils, carrying the odors of sizzling river prawns, garlic, ginger, onions, soya sauce, and mutton. The smells of China.

"Here you are! I say, why are preachers always such brooding chaps?" The voice was English and youthful, almost boyish in its exuberance. Stephen turned and smiled into the face of the young man who'd been among the first to welcome him to Nanking.

"Hello, Lindley. Looking for me?"

"Yes, old top!" Augustus Lindley, Lin-li to his Chinese associates, had joined the Taipings some months ago, with his fiery Portuguese wife, Marie. He was slender and graceful, the delicate beauty of his dark eyes and fine features totally belying his lust for adventure and excitement. "What do you think of Nanking now that you've had a few days to get used to it?" he said, sitting down next to Stephen.

Stephen cast his eyes out over the rolling plain that stretched from the foot of the wall to the purple mountain. In the twilight, he could barely make out the road that led to the Ming tombs in the hillside. "It's overwhelming," Stephen said at last. "Within these walls lies the greatest potential for good that China has ever known. Or the greatest potential for damnation. Ironical, isn't it? A movement called the *Taiiping*, the Supreme Peace — and they've turned China into a bloodbowl."

"Don't blame the Taipings," Lindley replied a bit sharply. "It's the imperialists."

"It's both of them," Stephen said patiently, as if he were speaking to a child. "I've no illusions about that. But, Lindley, I keep telling myself — Lord, how can I say it? If they can hold out here for another generation . . . If they can just outlast this craziness of Hung's long enough to become true Christians. They've got the faith. They've got the good, high moral standards. All they lack is the *truth* —"

"But of course." Augustus Lindley cocked his head, looking wise. "Isn't that precisely what *you're* doing here, old man?"

"I — I don't know. I've thought about it. But — it's awesome! I'm only one man, Lindley. There are so many of them. To think that I could be of any influence —"

"You can!" Lindley's voice was harsh with intensity. "With patience, with subtlety — you can't clash openly with their leaders, mind you. That would be fatal to your cause, but you can reach them little by little. The young ones especially. The ones born in the faith, who've never seen the Heavenly King, or leastwise —"

He broke off at the sound of the prayer gong, a single deep, rich note of brass that echoed through the dusk, calling all within its hear-

ing to kneel. A sigh seemed to ripple through the ancient streets as every knee bent in submission and the murmur of the spoken prayer rose to the sky. Stephen shivered.

"I know," Lindley said softly. "It's overpowering, isn't it? Listen."

Stephen closed his eyes. He could almost feel the massive wall vibrating as the prayer gathered volume and lifted to an all-pervading hum. The sound filled his head and set the pulse to pounding in his temples. Its magnitude awed and shook him. So many people. So many. Dear God, and such an undertaking, to bring them once and for all to the true feet of Christ . . .

"Bellamy — " Augustus Lindley touched his arm. "They've finished." The air was still as death for a moment. Then, little by little, the comfortable sounds of night began again. The creaking of cartwheels, the cry of a melon-seed vendor, a puppy's yap, and the wail of a baby.

They sat in silence for a few minutes more. Then Augustus Lindley cleared his throat. "Bellamy, old chap, there's something — "

"Yes?" Stephen felt a strong sense of an impending confidence.

"Sooner or later, you're bound to hear about this. I thought it best you hear it from me. And I can reassure you as well — "

"Reassure me? About what?" Stephen felt the tightness in his own hands.

"That your son and your sister won't be harmed."

"What?" Stephen jerked around to face him.

"Then you didn't know," Lindley said quietly. "The Taipings plan to march on Shanghai."

Stephen gasped. "Lord — well, I knew. I knew they'd try again — but you mean soon?"

"After Christmas. In a couple of weeks or so." Lindley caught his breath and then rushed on. "There've been rumors, you know. It's no secret. But the *Chung Wang* just told me officially today."

"And you, Lindley? You'll march with them?"

"I? Oh, no. They'll keep me busy elsewhere. But it's all right. The Taipings have no quarrel with foreigners, you understand. It's the Manchu imperialists they're fighting. They need Shanghai badly. But the *Chung Wang*'s given me his pledge that the foreign settlements won't be harmed. Lord's mercy, Bellamy, I'm an Englishman first! I wouldn't be here if I thought for a minute — Look — the *Chung Wang* himself led an army on Shanghai last year, you'll remember. A huge

force. They could have overrun the place! But they came peacefully. The *Chung Wang* fully expected to be welcomed by his Christian brothers!" Lindley shook his head. "When they opened fire on him, even killing some of his men, he could have retaliated. He could have crushed them into dust! Instead, he just turned around and marched away!"

Lindley brooded in silence for a moment, brows knotted above his clear brown eyes. The wolfskin edging his black silk vest fluttered against his cheek.

"You're truly with them, aren't you?" Stephen said.

"Aye, with all my heart. For all their strange ways, they're the noblest people I've ever met. The hope of all China. And when I see how the English government treats them — " He slammed his fist hard against the parapet.

Stephen shivered in the wind. "Would it be possible for me to write to my sister? I'd like very much to assure her — "

"Sorry, old chap." Lindley touched his arm. "Security, you know. The enemy might intercept it. And there's no regular mail in and out of this place, except to other Taiping positions . . . Understand?"

Stephen let his silence answer. Serena would be frantic with worry for him. If only there'd been time to write her from Hankow. Aye, but he'd let her down badly. With a glance at the sky, he murmured a swift, silent prayer for her safety and Noah's — and for her understanding as well.

Daniel had found his brother at last. He raised the lantern and studied the characters inscribed on the little stone cross. A name — Cheng Shen-lan, along with the date of his birth and the date of his death, the second day of the third month of that very year. Daniel had been a bondsman in the house of old Liu when his brother died.

Daniel shifted his haunches and stared morosely at the small cross and the mound beneath it. The thin wooden ticket, his badge of admission to the Taiping capital, pressed against his ribs. General Liang had obtained clearance for him after half a day's haggling, and Daniel was grateful. Liang had also given him lodging in his house, a modest dwelling with its accompanying garden and stables, located in one of the small villages that clung to the base of the wall, well away from crowded central Nanking.

He had begun the search for his brother at once. His questions had led him from the marketplace to the military barracks, and at last to the registry of the dead, where he had come upon his brother's name, inscribed with the date and place of his birth. After much questioning, Daniel had learned from the clerk that his brother had died by his own hand — when news of the slaughter of his family had reached him. The final leg of Daniel's search had taken him here, to the cemetery. He had been looking for the grave since midday.

He blinked at the grave once more, his eyes clouded with weariness. He had planned to confront his brother, to lash him in the face with the news of his family's death. But his chastisement would not have been so harsh that there could be no reconciliation. They would need one another, he and this rebel brother who would have been thirty-seven years old had he lived.

With a sigh, Daniel rose to his feet. The wind whipped the long, dry grass of the graveyard about his ankles. He shivered with cold, more alone than he had ever been in his life. He was the last, the very last of the House of Cheng.

No — his hand made a tight fist. Not the last, he resolved. He would live. He would marry — the sooner the better — and beget many fine sons to perpetuate his father's line. The descendants of Cheng Lo would walk the earth forever! He would see to that!

He began to walk, the sky dark above him and the wind tugging at his robe. He swung his legs with a contained frenzy. The resolution to marry had roused his passion for Lai Jyu — a passion he had determinedly buried since their arrival at Nanking.

He had seen little of her. She was immersed in the preparations for her coming marriage to the Heavenly King. Still, he carried with him the tingling memory of one night aboard the big war junk, crossing Poyang Lake. She had come up out of her cabin and found him where he was standing watch, her long black hair tousled from sleep. The blue silk jacket she wore against the chill was lined with snowy ermine, and the skirt of her pink sleeping robe drifted about her legs.

"Li-t'ung . . . " She touched his arm, her fingers like the brush of a flower petal in the darkness. A shiver of ecstasy went through him as he turned to face her. "I could not sleep," she whispered.

Daniel had glanced uneasily toward the poop deck, where a crewman was dozing at the tiller. His throat ached as he answered her. "The summons?"

"Yes." She folded her arms tight about her body and stood near him, not touching him but close enough for him to feel her warmth. "I — I always told myself I wouldn't be frightened . . . but then it always seemed so far away, like a dream that would never really happen." She shivered.

"You don't want to go to him?"

"I must."

"But you don't want to?"

"It doesn't matter. I mustn't even think it. I will go to him, that's all."

"Lai Jyu — " He had put his hand on her shoulder, the first time he had ever touched her except for an accidental brush in passing. She trembled beneath his fingers, her face white in the moonlight, framed by her softly blowing hair.

Desire conquering fear, Daniel had enfolded her in his arms and pulled her tight against his throbbing chest. She came without protest, her breathing fast and light, like tiny sobs. Her little hands crept about his waist and they held each other. Daniel's heart was pounding like a gong. He fought against the warm wave that surged into his loins, but he was helpless. Chagrined and horrified, he felt the rising pressure between her body and his.

"Lai Jyu, I'll find a way to take you away. I'll find a way to stop this — "

"No — There's no way, Li-t'ung. There's nothing you can do!"

"If there's a way, I'll find it, I promise . . . "

"No — " She broke off as the helmsman snorted in his sleep and sat up. He rubbed his eyes, realized the boat was drifting, and grabbed the tiller.

"He'll see us!" Lai Jyu pulled away from Daniel's arms and faded into the shadows. The next thing Daniel had heard was the stealthy closing of her cabin door.

He had not seen her since then, except in the presence of her father. They had docked in Nanking three days later, and she had vanished into the women's quarters of her house, plunged, Daniel supposed, into the preparations for her wedding. He had not even caught a

glimpse of her. Only the endless procession of silk and jewel merchants, shoemakers, and dressmakers trooping in and out of her quarters attested to the fact that she was truly there.

Daniel had racked his mind for some possibility of escape. There was none. Nanking was a great, sprawling fortress, its gates carefully guarded, its walls too high to ascend. And he was a stranger, with no place to hide. He began to see that Lai Jyu was right. There was nothing to be done. Forget her, he had admonished himself again and again. Yet it was not easy. Not when her face floated before him every time he closed his eyes. Not when he could not even sleep for thinking of her.

He turned toward the gate of the graveyard. It would be a long walk back to General Liang's house in the city, and the wind was bitter.

Eighteen

Shanghai

December 24, 1861

Harry'd had a Christmas tree brought down from the hill country upriver. It was no mean feat. The Shanghainese captain of the junk he'd hired to do the job had thought the whole idea ridiculous. A cut tree couldn't be planted, and it was too green to use for fuel. There was no accounting for the strangeness of foreign devils! In the end, he had thrown up his hands and done the job he was paid to do. The tree had been enormous, a forest monarch so tall that Harry had to cut away the bottom third of it to get it into the high-ceilinged parlor — all of this in perfect stealth. The tree was meant to be a surprise for Serena.

It would be worth it to see her smile, he assured himself. Serena's smiles had grown rare and fleeting of late. She was working too hard, leaving for her office at dawn and seldom returning to the house before nightfall. She was growing thin and weary, Harry's efforts to get her to rest were brushed off and sweetly dismissed. She was never cross with him. But the shadows were deepening about her brown eyes, and the strain showed itself in the set of her jaw and in the tautness of the velvety voice Harry so loved. At night she lay awake beside him, shifting restlessly, her eyes staring at the canopy above the bed.

Some demon was driving her, Harry mused as he stood beside the fireplace and watched the number-three and four boys tie candleholders and little paper lanterns to the branches. Strings of red berries and little silk flowers lay in coils on the carpet, ready to festoon the green boughs. The whole room smelled wonderfully of pine. Harry could only hope that Serena would be pleased.

He filled his pipe and lit it with a coal from the fireplace. If the tree didn't do the trick, by heaven, his other surprise would. Morgan Bellamy and Moira had arrived on the afternoon steamer, just in time for Christmas Eve. Serena, who'd been at work all day, had not known they were coming. They were upstairs now, the two of them, unpacking their bags and getting acquainted with Noah. Harry sucked at his pipe and smiled with anticipation. If only Stephen —

He shook his head in dismay. Stephen had disappeared behind the walls of Nanking, unreachingly and unreachable. They'd heard nothing from him, and Serena's anxiety was eating her alive. Curse him for what he was doing to her, Harry thought. Curse the devils of despair and worry that would not let her rest.

The problem had not begun with Stephen, Harry knew. Serena blamed herself for what had happened to Jason Frobisher, and there'd been no word of Jason, either. Not that it could be helped. With favorable winds, a clipper like the *Tarpon* could speed across the Pacific in as little as six weeks. Two months was a more usual crossing time. It could be late February or even March before they learned whether Jason had lived or died. An eternity, or so it seemed.

The danger period would be over soon. Even now, Jason could be pacing the deck of the clipper he loved, safe and well, God willing. Or he could be chained to his bunk, raving and slathering like a wild beast in his agony. Harry shuddered, the picture all too real. He knew that Serena saw it, too — even more often and more vividly than he did. It was her fault, she insisted. She had led him to the nursery. She had killed the bat. And now guilt and worry were meting out her punishment!

He surveyed the tree, trying to regain some of the pleasure he had felt earlier. "Careful," he ordered the two boys who clambered up and down matching ladders, their long queues swinging energetically. "No hurry too muchee!"

They answered him with good-natured grins. It was clear they considered the tree pure foolishness, but at least it provided a break from their more humdrum duties.

Harry heard the sound of Serena's carriage in the drive. She was home early. He heard her say something to the driver as she stepped down onto the sidewalk, then the light, rapid sound of her walking. With a motion for silence, he slipped out of the parlor into the foyer and locked the door behind him, leaving the boys to finish the tree.

Pink with cold, Serena hurried in through the doorway. She was wrapped in a hooded cloak of royal blue, one hand thrust into a sealskin muff, the other still clutching the door latch. Her golden hair peeked out in little curls from under her fur-trimmed hood. Harry's heart ached with love at the sight of her. He opened his arms. Wearily, she walked into them and let him hold her close. How thin she'd become. Even through the cloak, he could feel the sharpness of her bones.

She kissed his cheek. "How's Noah?"

"Sleeping," Harry said. "We thought you'd be arriving later. Nancy fed him and put him down so he'd be fresh for you."

"I took the afternoon off and went shopping." She flashed him a smile. "It is Christmas Eve, after all. Oh, the carriage is full of bundles! Wait till you see what I found for Noah in a little shop out on Foochow Road! A stuffed hobbyhorse all made of leather — big enough for him to ride when he gets a little older!" She turned back toward the door. "I've got to get it —"

"Hush —" He drew her head against his chest. "I'll send the number two out for them. You've done enough, little love. Promise me you'll go up to your room and lie down a while. Then I'll have Nancy or someone bring you up some paper and ribbons so you can wrap them."

"Oh, I'll just do it in the parlor. Why go to the bother —?"

"Ah — numbers three and four are waxing the floor in there," he lied. "They've been at it all day. The rug's rolled back and the furniture's all stacked up, one thing on top of another. They'll be through by dinnertime." He kissed her hairline. She smelled of cold, fresh air.

"Oh — very well." She turned away from him and drifted toward the stairs, her cloak slipping down off her shoulders. "You're right, I suppose. A nap might do me good. Oh, Harry!" She turned and ran to him; "We *will* have a good Christmas! I promise! Just the three of us. Our first Christmas as a family —" She broke off, her lips parted as a faint sound from overhead reached her ears. A muffled, dragging step punctuated by the soft rap of a cane. A dear and familiar sound. Serena's eyes widened with delight "Moira!" She raced up the stairs. "Moira! Where are you?"

Moira hurried out of the nursery onto the landing, and stumbled, laughing, into her sister's arms. Serena hugged her, then stiffened as she looked beyond Moira's shoulder and saw Morgan Bellamy step out into the hallway.

"Papa! Oh, Papa!" Serena flew down the hall and flung her arms about his neck, clinging to him like a child who has just awakened from a bad dream. "Oh . . . Papa!" She put her head against his chest and began to cry.

The tree was beautiful, its candles gleaming in the darkness of the parlor. Serena sat with Moira on the white bearskin rug. Noah lay on his back between them, his plump arms and legs waving in the air. He was wearing nothing more than his nappy, and his pink skin glowed golden in the candlelight.

Serena looked up and saw Harry watching them from his armchair. She blew him a kiss. Dear Harry. The tree had been a sweet gesture, so like him. He was so anxious to see her happy. And she would be happy, Serena resolved. She would smile and be gay for him, whatever it cost her.

Last night in her dreams, she had seen Jason again. Cold and still this time, his shrouded body slipping over the rail of the *Tarpon* to lie in the depths of the sea. She had awakened, knowing that he was dead.

He was at peace now, she had assured herself desperately. After days of the most unspeakable pain and agony, he was at rest. She had soothed herself, striving to bury the memory of her headlong rush to him across the study, of his hard, strong arms crushing her close, his mouth claspng hers.

It had been an impulse, a gesture of farewell, nothing more. And yet his kiss had seared her soul. *Oh, Harry!* She shuddered with guilt. But it was over. She would never see Jason again.

Noah gurgled and grinned and kicked his fat legs. Moira laughed and tickled him behind the knees. She was growing up beautifully, Serena mused. Every day the resemblance to her mother waxed stronger. But there was a resilience in Moira that Priscilla Robards Bellamy had never possessed. Perhaps growing up with her affliction had produced a certain toughness in Moira, a maturity far beyond her years.

"I could paint him like this, Serena," she said. "Naked on the white fur rug. What do you think, Papa?"

Morgan Bellamy beamed, pride and total fascination with his first grandchild glowing in his face. "I think you'd best wait till he's old

enough to pose for you! He'd never hold still now. And naked? Do that to the boy and I can promise you he'll grow up hating that picture! A photograph — now that's what you need! They've made some incredible strides in the past few years. There's a young fellow visiting Hong Kong. Thomson — that's the name. Does excellent work — I'll see that he gets to Shanghai."

"Get him here and I'll see that you get enough pictures of Noah to cover the parlor mantelpiece, Papa!" Serena laughed, the sound forced and hollow. Stephen's absence loomed larger than any presence in the room. They all felt it. The family was incomplete, the holiday incomplete, without him. Morgan had not even asked about his son, but he wondered, Serena knew. And like the rest of them, he ached inside.

Serena had ordered eggnog laced with rum from the kitchen. The venerable number-one boy had carried it ceremoniously into the room and placed it on the buffet in its great silver bowl. They drank it chilled, from silver cups. Its golden foam clung to Moira's upper lip and left a row of bubbles on the ends of Morgan's mustache. Then one by one, they opened the gifts — all except Noah's, which would be left for the fun of Christmas morning. Serena had mailed the gifts for her father and sister to Hong Kong. They had brought them back to Shanghai still in their wrappings.

Morgan had finished his eggnog and poured himself a glass of Harry's best Napoleon brandy. He sat on the loveseat taking nervous little sips. Serena knew the evening would end with her father being led tipsily to bed by one of the houseboys. She swallowed a tear and blew him a kiss.

She was opening Harry's gift — a pearl and opal necklace fit for an empress — when the sharp rap of the big brass doorknocker echoed across the foyer to pierce the parlor's determined gaiety. It was the number one who glided out to answer it as was his duty, closing the double doors behind him. He was gone for several minutes. Once or twice Serena thought she heard voices — the falsetto pidgin of the old number one and a deeper tone, speaking to him in slow, measured English. Her heart leaped. If only Stephen — But the voice was deeper than Stephen's; the stride that clicked across the entryway to the parlor doors, then hesitated, was stronger and more vigorous. One of

Harry's cronies, Serena thought, slightly annoyed at having the intimacy of their Christmas interrupted by an outsider.

Then the doorknob turned, one door swung open, and Jason Frobisher walked into the room.

The instant he saw Serena's face, Jason knew that he should not have come — and he knew as well that he could not have stayed away. She was seated before the fireplace, the skirt of her mauve velvet gown spread about her like the petals of a rose. Her hair was parted simply in the middle, drawn to one side, and tied with a silver ribbon.

Her lips were parted in astonishment, her lovely face porcelain-white. One hand had crept to her throat. Jason took a step toward her. He was dimly aware that there were other people in the room, that the baby was beside her on the polar-bear rug and Moira was nearby. But his eyes saw only Serena.

Then, in the next moment, Harry Bolton was out of his chair, clasping him about the shoulders. Morgan Bellamy was pumping his hand. Moira fluttered about him like a pretty little moth, still innocent of knowing his peril, but delighted to see him nonetheless. Serena only stared at him, relief and anguish blending in her dark eyes.

The number one took Jason's coat, holding his brandy while he slipped his arms out of the sleeves. Jason found himself seated in Harry's armchair relating how the *Tarpon* had been hit by a freak storm off Kyushu, a tempest so savage that the foremast, the mainmast, and the mizzen had snapped off like twigs and vanished into the sea, trailing sails, spars, and rigging. The hammering waves had ripped the rudder loose and almost torn the ship to pieces. Somehow the *Tarpon* had held and survived.

Afterward, they'd drifted helplessly for seventeen days, blown far to the south of their course by the stormy winds. They'd managed to hoist and rig their spare mainmast, but the rudder had been hopelessly damaged. The ship had wandered into the path of the northeast trades and been carried back toward the China Coast once more. At last they'd been sighted by a Shanghai-bound steamer, the *Liverpool*, which had given the *Tarpon* enough spare parts and assistance to bring her limping into port. They had arrived, Jason explained, less than an hour ago.

"And you, Jason?" Harry leaned forward in his seat. "You're all right?"

"It's been six weeks. The danger's not yet over, but it diminishes with each day. I'd say I was all right." Jason sighed. It was just as well not to talk about the nightmare of the past month. He'd tried to keep busy aboard ship, but the spectre of death had been with him constantly. A headache, a slight cold, a twinge of muscle fatigue — any symptom that could have marked the beginning of the end had chilled him with dread. He remembered the storm. For a few wild moments, he had *wanted* to die. He had flung himself into the tempest, climbing the mainmast at the height of its fury to cut loose the sails and yards. He had felt the mast whipping like a willow beneath him, felt it splinter and fall toward the pitching sea. Jason had experienced a sense of savage exhilaration as he hit the cold water. The sea would take him. The sea he loved would end the torment. Then, in spite of himself, he had begun to swim. He had fought for life with all his strength. When at last someone had thrown him a line, he had seized it and held on for all he was worth. He wanted to live. He had never realized how much.

And the longing for the sight of Serena's face had been like a hunger in him, all the way back to Shanghai.

He would see her once, he'd resolved. Only long enough to hold her in his mind forever. Then he would leave, never to cross the threshold of Harry Bolton's house again.

"Your ship, Jason," Morgan Bellamy was saying. "What'll it take to get her seaworthy again?"

"A great deal, I'm afraid. Her hull's leaking in several places, to say nothing of the rudder. She'll have to be dry-docked, of course. It'll take weeks — and that's if all the parts can be found here in Shanghai. I'd have put into Hong Kong if I'd had any say about it. Better chance of getting it done there."

"I know a good man," said Harry. "There's a chance he'll have a dock available. We can see about it day after tomorrow."

"And in the meantime, you can spend the holidays with us!" Moira flashed him a smile. She was wearing a high-necked red dress and had tucked a sprig of evergreen from the tree into her black hair. She was growing up, Jason reflected.

"Only until I've seen to the ship," he said. "Then I plan to ride out to Ward's camp at Sungkiang. I'm anxious to see what he's doing."

"Getting ready to defend Shanghai, I hope." Harry pulled at his pipe. "Taiping scouting parties have been spotted within sight of Defense Creek. Maybe you'll see some action, Jason."

"Maybe." Jason handed a half-emptied glass of brandy to the number one. "The devil with it is that I need to be in San Francisco by the fifteenth of March. There's a shipping contract coming up for bid then — one I've had my eye on — cane and tobacco out of Manila. With the profits, I could invest in another ship. If the *Tarpon*'s not ready by mid-January, I'll be faced with the choice of missing the bid or leaving her here in Shanghai while I take passage on another clipper."

"Less than three weeks," Morgan calculated. "Not much time. I'd be making up my mind fast if I were you. You'll be bloody lucky to have the *Tarpon* ready by then!"

"Yes. I know." Jason looked beyond the circle of faces, through the haze of Harry's pipe smoke, to where Serena sat on the white rug. She had taken the baby in her arms and she was as beautiful as a Christmas madonna. But her eyes were strange. Something glittered in their depths that Jason could see even halfway across the room. Pain. Vulnerability. Anger.

"Cane and tobacco, Captain Frobisher?" She spoke for the first time. "Doesn't America get most of its tobacco from the southern states? Why, with the war on and the supply cut off, a man could make a fortune shipping tobacco from Manila! But you? Don't I recall being lectured on the immorality of making profits on the misfortunes of others? Why, Captain, I'd never have believed it." Her voice was as brittle as glass. She let her words trail off maddeningly as she impaled Jason's heart with her eyes. His hands tightened on the arms of the chair as he felt an inexplicable rage boiling up into his throat.

Serena clasped Noah against her. He whimpered, feeling the sudden tension in her body. When Jason had walked into the parlor, she had almost wept for joy. She had clenched the fur rug with her fingers to keep from running to his arms. Jason. Oh, thank the Lord, Jason. Tall and strong and whole. Jason.

Then her conscience had reared its head. Suddenly, she was terrified by the intensity of what she felt for him. His kiss came back to her;

the strength of his arms and the passion of his mouth. The fire crept over her again, consuming her soul and sending the hot blood of shame rushing to her face.

Like a line of spears, her defenses had sprung up. She had flung at him the only weapon she had — a sharp and bitter retort. And she had hit the mark. She saw him reel at the shock of her words. His knuckles whitened on the arm of the chair as he struggled to hold back his own anger. She had wounded him — and she was shaken by her own power. Their eyes locked and held across the room. *Oh, Jason, leave me . . . my love, my dearest love, I can't see you. I can't be with you. We mustn't even think of it . . .*

It was Noah who broke the spell. He screwed up his face and began to howl. Serena held him against her shoulder, grateful for the momentary distraction. But he would not be still. His head thrust furiously back and forth as he butted for nourishment like a baby ram. Serena's frantic glance at the number one sent the old man flying to summon Nancy. When she hurried into the room Serena thrust the wailing Noah into the girl's outstretched arms. He stopped crying at once and began to chomp furiously on one of the loose frogs of her jacket. Serena sighed as Nancy whisked the baby out of the room.

Even at four months, she thought worriedly, Noah had a most ungovernable temper. When his fretting grew to screams of demanding rage, only Nancy could quiet him. And even though Nancy was awakening to an awareness of her power in the household, Serena was afraid to send her away. Day by day, she was coming more full of herself, her conduct less and less acceptable. And Serena was afraid.

She tossed her head defiantly, making her pearl earrings dance in the firelight. "Harry, I can't wait to see how your necklace looks," she said with a glittering smile. "Come, dearest. Pull me up, and then you can help me with the clasp." She held out her arms appealingly to her husband. Harry put his pipe on the stand, rose from his chair, and lifted Serena gracefully to her feet. She fluffed her skirt and petticoats like a preening bird, feeling Jason's eyes burning into her skin.

"Hand me the box, Moira — yes, that black velvet one. I can hardly wait to see how it looks!" She opened the lid and drew out the necklace — the one she had only glimpsed before Jason had come into the room to drive all thought of it from her mind.

It was magnificent — clustered pearls and opals set into delicate swirls of silver filigree. Serena loved opals. She studied the blue fire that flashed in their depths. “Oh, help me clasp it, Harry! Please!” She held it up to him and turned around so that he could fasten it about her neck. The silver was heavy and cool against her skin. She closed her eyes, savoring the richness of its weight.

Moirra clapped her hands in delight. “Serena, it’s just beautiful! With your hair, and that dress — why, it’s perfect! You’ve got to see it!”

“Splendid choice, Harry,” Morgan added over his third brandy. “She always did like pretty baubles, and you’ve got elegant taste. Turn around, girl! Let’s have a look!”

Serena turned obediently to face her father, carefully avoiding Jason’s eyes. She felt as vulnerable as if she’d been naked. Jason sat leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his long brown hands clenched. He did not look at her as she bent low to show the necklace to her father.

“Very nice. Very nice indeed,” Morgan mumbled his approval, his tongue thick.

Serena spun away from him with a little laugh. “Well, then, I must see it for myself. If you’ll excuse me — I’ll only be a moment.” There was no mirror in the parlor, but the foyer contained a beautiful full-length glass framed in gilt. “I’ll just have a look — ” Her throat was tight as she danced across the parlor to the doors and slipped out into the quiet of the foyer. The air was cool here. Serena leaned back against the wall to catch her breath. Her skin was warm and her heart was pounding as all the emotions she had kept in check in the presence of the others burst out upon her. Slowly, shakily, she walked across the entryway to the mirror.

She could feign illness and go to her room, she thought. She could run away, disappear — anything but go back to the parlor and endure the torment of Jason’s eyes. She was in love with him, she realized, the knowledge shaking her to the bone. Truly in love for the first time in her life. She’d thought she loved Harry — and she did, in almost the same daughterly way she loved Morgan. She admired him, respected him, felt warm and secure at his side. She would die before she’d hurt him in any way. But Jason . . . She pressed her hands to her face. Her fingers were hot.

It had been easy when she'd thought he was dying. A convenient end to what had begun the first moment she'd set eyes on him. For all her grief and anguish, she'd felt safe. It would end. She could even kiss him once in farewell . . . oh, dear God! What had she done?

"Jason!" She whispered his name.

Just then, Jason appeared in the hall, having made his farewells to Harry and the others. He only looked at her, just long enough to fill his eyes. "Good-bye," he murmured, and in the next moment he was gone. Serena leaned against a wall for support as she heard his footsteps rounding the walk to the stable, heard the heavy door swing open and, moments later, the sound of hoofbeats on the stones, ringing clear, then dying away into the night.

Nineteen

Nanking

January, 1862

The Heavenly King had been stricken with a sudden illness; not grave, but serious enough to justify putting off his marriage to Lai Jyu until the time of his recovery. Daniel was giddy with relief. While there was time, there was hope. Somehow he would find a way to save her. Somehow he would win her for himself.

Thus buoyed by the dauntlessness of youth, it was with unsuppressed excitement that he accompanied General Liang to a command audience with the *Chung Wang*. His heart pounded as he walked beside his benefactor up the long, marble-paved approach to the *Chung Wang's* reception hall.

"What does he want of me?" Daniel had asked General Liang when the summons arrived.

The general had smiled mysteriously, as if he already knew. "Your assistance, perhaps, my young friend. That is, if you would offer it freely."

Daniel's eyes had glowed like two amber coals as he answered, "To repay you for my life and to avenge the deaths of my father's family, there is nothing I would not offer."

And there was nothing he would not do to gain merit in the eyes of Lai Jyu's father. For while there was time, there was hope — hope that the *Tien Wang's* illness might linger or even prove fatal, that somehow the Heavenly King might change his mind, or that Liang might find a way to cancel his promise. And if he, Cheng Li-t'ung, could manage to rise . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the great, dragon-painted door that led into the *Chung Wang's* chamber. Daniel quivered with excitement as they walked forward. The floor was cold and glassy beneath the leather soles of his new Taiping-style boots — specially made to accommodate his huge feet. Their upturned toes flapped softly against the polished marble.

The *Chung Wang* sat on a dais at the opposite end of the hall, beneath a round canopy splendidly hung with gold-colored silk. The members of his war council, about twenty men, sat along the sides of the room in high-backed chairs. One of them was Augustus Lindley — Lin-li.

Following the general's example, Daniel dropped to one knee as they approached the throne. How much less demeaning this simple homage was than the *kowtow* required in the presence of Manchu emperors.

"You may rise." The *Chung Wang's* voice was thin, but melodious and pleasing. A soft ripple of sound passed through the room as the occupants of the chairs shifted for a better view, rustling their silk robes.

The *Chung Wang* leaned forward. "Cheng Li-t'ung, you have lived among us for more than a moon. Has God opened your heart?"

Daniel sighed inwardly. This was going to be more difficult than he had hoped. "The kindness of my friends has opened my heart," he replied cautiously. "But if you speak of baptism, my lord, I fear that I cannot become one with you until I have proven myself the true son of my father."

"Well said," the *Chung Wang* answered with a gentle smile that made Daniel's knees sag with relief. "We force no man. But are you then our ally against the imperialist demon-imps, the Manchus?"

"I am."

"Even though there is Manchu blood in your veins?" The musical voice had hardened. Daniel's heart stopped for an instant. He had told no one that his paternal grandmother had been a Manchu concubine from Jehol.

"As a member of the Co-hong, your father was well known," said the *Chung Wang*. "His ancestry was no secret."

"My brother was of the same blood. Yet he was one of you." Daniel spoke with a bravado he did not feel.

"Your brother was baptized. He was a loyal and brave officer under General Liang who stands beside you."

Daniel's jaw went slack in surprise. He felt a vague sense of betrayal stealing over him.

The *Chung Wang* read his thoughts. "Do not blame the general. When I got word that he had found you, I ordered him to keep silent about your brother." His penetrating eyes gazed levelly at General Liang. "I now withdraw that order."

"My lord, I am your servant," he said to the *Chung Wang*. "Ask what you will of me."

The *Chung Wang* gazed about the room to meet glances of confirmation in the eyes of his advisors. "A mission. We need information from inside Shanghai. The strength and nature of their defenses, the presence of imperialist troops, if indeed they are there, and most particularly the state of affairs in the foreign communities.

"Your duty would be only to observe, listen, and report back to us in seven days' time," the *Chung Wang* said. "It should not be necessary to say that this mission will be a test, Li-t'ung — a test of both your ability and your loyalty. If you prove yourself worthy, we have many uses for a man of your talents. The heights to which you can rise are almost without limit. Few are the years since I myself was no more than a simple soldier. In the Heavenly Kingdom, we advance by merit — not by virtue of wealth or noble birth."

Daniel lowered his eyes, his chest tight with emotion. "My lord, I will do my best," he murmured, fighting back a storm of conflict. To rise . . . almost without limit. With perseverance and luck, there was nothing he could not achieve. But to rise in the world of the Taipings required one fundamental step: baptism.

Lin-li rose to his feet, drawing a sealed envelope from beneath his vest. "A favor, my lord *Chung Wang*, with your permission. The young English minister, who has become my friend, is most distressed because he has been unable to contact his sister in Shanghai and assure her of his safety. I have here a letter that he has written to her. He has entreated me most plaintively to find a way to send it out of Nanking. I have read it, my lord, and can assure you that it contains only things of a personal nature — nothing that the enemy could possibly use against us should it fall into the wrong hands. Could our friend Cheng here not carry it with him and deliver it to her?"

The *Chung Wang* contemplated the matter for a moment. "Indeed," he mused out loud. "Such a letter could be useful. It might provide him with an excellent excuse for being in Shanghai, particularly in the English community. Yes, I see that it might be used as a key to open any number of doors." He turned to Daniel. "You are willing to carry the letter to this woman in Shanghai?"

"If my lord so wishes."

Stephen, who occupied a small but luxurious apartment in a wing of the *Chung Wang's* palace, was dressed for bed and enjoying a night-time cup of jasmine-scented tea when Augustus Lindley walked in without knocking.

"Your letter's on its way, old man," he announced with a grin.

"Ah! He agreed to take it then! Was there any trouble with it?"

"None. In fact, the general consensus was that it was a capital idea! Gives the bloke a good excuse for being in Shanghai, in case anybody asks." Lindley poured himself a cup of tea from the little porcelain pot that rested on the low table. "Wish you could have met the chap. Interesting sort, he was. Funny thing, the *Chung Wang* told me he was half English. Didn't really look it. Chinese blood runs strong, I guess."

"Half English, you say? On his father's side, doubtless."

"No. That's the odd part. It was his mother who was English. Can you imagine any woman fool enough — Lord, what's the matter, Bellamy? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Stephen had choked on his tea. It scalded his throat. The idea that had struck him was ridiculous. To think that among three hundred million Chinese — "What else do you know about him?" he asked in a casual voice.

"Not much, really. I'd never met him until tonight, although the *Chung Wang* had told me that General Liang would be bringing him before the council. Why?"

"Just curious." Stephen felt a drop of sweat roll down his face. Maybe it was just the tea. "Did you happen to catch his name?"

Lindley closed his eyes and scratched his nose. "Let me see . . . I was never very good at names . . . was it Chin? No — Cheng! That was it! And his given name — Oh, dash it, Bellamy, I've forgotten. But the surname was Cheng. I'm sure of it! And now that I remember, the *Chung Wang* mentioned that his father'd been a member of the Co-

hong! Picture that if you will! Gad, but I'd like to hear the story behind that one — I say, Bellamy, are you sure you're all right?"

"Aye . . . " Stephen let his breath out slowly, but his hands were trembling. He had spilled tea on the table. He put the cup down. "You say he looked Chinese?"

"Except for his eyes. They were lighter than most. Looked as though they might have a touch of green in them. And when he stood under a lamp, you could see that his hair wasn't quite black. It was . . . oh, just a bit on the red side I'd say . . . "

"Lord!"

"What's that, old chap? Maybe you'd better lie down! You don't look well!"

"Lindley, I must see the fellow! It's important! Would you take me to him?"

"You're a bit late for that, I'm afraid. He's gone. Shipped out for Shanghai tonight."

Stephen sighed, still shaken by what he had heard. The young man had to be Kathleen's son. There were too many coincidences, too many pieces that fit too well for him to be anyone else. For a moment, he contemplated telling Lindley the truth, then decided to wait. There was time. And in the prejudice-ridden world of British Asia, Kathleen Bellamy's story was not one to be told lightly. "Do you know when he'll be coming back?"

Lindley shrugged. "I could let General Liang know that you want to see him. That's the best I can do, old chap."

"Thank you." Stephen settled back into his chair and picked up his tea again. Something else had been bothering him, and now was as good a time as any to bring it up. "Lindley," he said, "they've been wonderfully good to me here. I've never lived better, not even back in Hong Kong. But, dash it, it's not what I came for. I've done nothing since I arrived. Doctor Sung's taken my clinic patients somewhere and I've not seen them since. Matter of fact, I've not even seen Sung since my first couple of days here. I'm beginning to feel like a bird in a gilded cage! When are they going to put me to work?"

Augustus Lindley blew on his tea, studiously avoiding Stephen's eyes. "I really don't know what they've got in mind for you, old man. It's not my department. I'm only the *Chung Wang's* military advisor.

But I can ask him if you like. I can let him know you're getting anxious. All right?"

"Yes. Thanks, Lindley."

"I'd best be going." Lindley stood up and stretched elaborately. "My last night with Marie for a while, you know. I'm going into the field tomorrow. One of the divisions captured half a dozen nine-pound guns last month. Capital, eh? But they don't know how to use them. That's where I come in!"

"Well, good luck with it. I must say, I envy you. I'd welcome some activity. Anything. By thunder, sometimes I think I was happier in Hankow . . . Say, there's not a chance I could go with you, is there?"

"Be serious, old top! You're not a military man! Besides, I'm sure they'll be needing you here. Be patient. It's only a matter of time." He turned toward the door. "I must be going. A thousand perfumed delights are waiting for me! Oh, Marie! Marie!" He danced out the door, whistling as he went.

Stephen sat for a long time without moving, his eyes staring at the top of the table.

Shanghai

January, 1862

Daniel's journey from Nanking to Shanghai was made by simple river junk and took a night, a day, and a night. He had stepped ashore at dawn, just as the city was awakening to a gray winter's day. The air had been cold and thick with smoke.

Now as he swung his arms to increase the circulation of his blood, he remembered the young minister's letter, which he had delivered earlier that morning to a young woman who looked like a golden goddess.

General Liang had shown him a map of the city, which Daniel's quick mind had committed to memory. The North Bund, or Soochow Road, ran along Soochow Creek, which divided the British settlement from the American Concession. Some distance to the south, the Yang King Pang Canal marked the boundary between the English and French areas, with the old, walled Chinese city lying even farther to the south of the French Concession. Yangtze Road, the East Bund, fronted the broad, brown Whangpoo River. There he found Number 27, the place where the minister's sister lived. The woman known as

Mrs. Harry Bolton. His mind had already invented another name for her: the Golden One.

Daniel shivered and ran a hand over his freshly shaved scalp. During his stay with the Taipings, his hair had begun to grow out all over his head. In places, it had been almost as long as the joint of his smallest finger. A glance into a mirror had shown a wild-looking stranger staring back at him, his forehead strangely low under the thatch of new hair. He had welcomed the excuse to have his head shaved once more.

There were no Europeans about. Daniel crossed one of the quays that spanned the expanse of mud flats and sandbars fronting the Bund. The sky was the color of dirty ice. Smoke wafted from the chimneys of the great houses. Daniel's nose caught a strange scent in the air. It must be frying sausage and boiled oats, the English breakfast his mother often described to him. A bitter smile flickered across his lips. Kathleen Bellamy had given up everything but her memories when she entered China. Yet even after twenty years, the fearful, superstitious people of Taocheng had never accepted her. Her husband, her son, and their little house had constituted the entirety of her dark world. Daniel sighed as he strode along the Bund. Today, perhaps, he would see something of the life she had left behind.

Daniel found a stand that sold tea, noodles, and rice cakes. He ate a little in spite of the smell, for he'd had nothing since yesterday afternoon and he was hungry.

"You're new. I've not seen you before." The proprietor of the stand had spoken first in Shanghainese; then, when Daniel did not respond, in broken Mandarin.

"I just stepped off the boat. From Kwangchow."

"*Aiee!* Any man who'd leave the South to come to a place like this dunghole, especially in the dead of winter, would have to have a good reason!"

"As I do." Daniel leaned closer to the wiry little man whose decaying teeth showed when he smiled. "A dangerous reason, I fear. My trail was growing too hot."

"Ah . . ." The man scratched his sparse beard. "Twenty taels says it's the imperialists! Well, they'll not trouble you here. There's nothing here they want. Nothing but the miserable dogs they've run out of their homes!" He hawked and spat in the mud. Slowly, the spittle

began to turn to ice. "A thousand curses on the imperialists and the Taipings as well. May they all turn into turtle dung! Maybe then people like me, who just want to live without any trouble, can go back home. Three years ago, I left a good business in Foochow. A tea-house, it was, with a few pretty girls upstairs. And what have I got now? Pah!"

"One must eat," Daniel answered, fishing a handful of copper cash out of the purse that hung at his belt. He was careful to overpay the man generously. "And in order to eat, one must work. I am a stranger here."

The man looked him up and down. "You're a strong young fellow. Work's not easy to find, but my cousin runs a wheelbarrow stand at the corner of the Bund and Maloo Road. Wong's his name. But if he takes you, you owe your first day's wages to me. Agreed?"

"Agreed. If you promise me a rice cake and a cup of tea tomorrow morning. I'll have spent everything I have by then."

"Done." The small man studied Daniel with narrowed eyes. "Kwangchow was your birthplace?"

"Szechwan." Daniel was suddenly wary. He sensed that the man might be trying to trap him in a lie.

"You lived in Kwangchow?"

"I only made it the beginning of my journey to Shanghai."

"Then you do not wear the flower?"

"The flower?" Daniel asked in total innocence. "I am sorry. I do not understand."

The man spat again. "Since you do not understand, it must be that your answer is no, my friend. Never mind, then, but when you see my cousin Wong, you might mention that you wear no flower. He will explain, if he chooses to do so."

"But how — "

"Enough for now, my tall friend. I've other customers coming. And in these times, it's not wise to be seen talking too closely for too long. You understand? *Hao!* Good, then! Remember me to my cousin — " The man turned his face elsewhere as Daniel walked away.

He found himself wishing he could have seen Lai Jyu before his departure, but there had been no time. While Liang's servant had shaved his head, the general had shown him the map and given him a set of rapid-fire instructions. A change to the simple, ragged clothes

of a coolie and Daniel had been pronounced ready to leave. After swearing him to secrecy, Liang had led him not to the main gate but to the cluttered little shop of a coppersmith in his own village, which huddled at the foot of the wall. The general had pulled aside a large rack to expose the square trapdoor in the floor. "This leads out of the city," he whispered. "Reveal its existence to anyone, and I swear you will die by my hand! Now go, Cheng Li-t'ung — and may the protection of our Heavenly Elder Brother go with you!" He had raised the door and thrust Daniel down into the darkness of a narrow tunnel. Daniel had groped his way along to emerge at last in a rickety wooden shed surrounded by pigs and spotted ducks. He had marked the area well, memorizing the particular contours of the wall, the streets, the houses, so that he could find his way back in if need be. Then he had hurried down to the docks to find the junk that he'd been told would be waiting.

Why Liang had taken him to the secret tunnel and not out through the main gate was something that still puzzled Daniel. Perhaps even in Nanking, there were elements of discord and distrust. Perhaps there were those who might do him harm if they knew he had left, or who would betray the Taiping cause. He did not know — but the awareness of the tunnel was a comfort to him. If ever he might need it, it was a sure way into Nanking — and a way out.

Twenty

Nanking
January, 1862

Daniel stole into the shed that huddled at the foot of the great wall. Moving carefully, so as not to cause a stir among the pigs and the black and white spotted ducks, he brushed aside the dirty straw. The trap-door was there, its brass ring, crusted with age and filth, barely visible in the night. Daniel raised it gingerly and slipped downward into the blackness of the tunnel.

His heart stopped as the door thumped shut above his head. He had not brought a lantern for fear of being seen, and the blackness pressed in on him like a tight, cold hand. Cobwebs brushed his face as he groped his way along the hard-packed walls, counting his footsteps to quiet his racing pulse. Lai Jyu would be waiting inside the city, he assured himself. For her he could endure the longest, darkest tunnel in the world!

He counted his mission a success, for he had learned that Shanghai was vulnerable. The man named Wong had hired him on as a wheelbarrow coolie. For the space of six days, he had worked, trotting up and down the Bund like a horse, picking up passengers, both Chinese and foreign, and depositing them at their destinations.

The wheelbarrow was pushed from behind. Although Daniel was in superb physical condition, he had found the work exhausting at first. The angle of the body required for pushing and the constant, loping dog-trot gait had taxed his muscles excruciatingly. At the end of the first day, he had returned to the wheelbarrow shed, turned in his money, collected his wages, and collapsed in a corner, totally spent. He had awakened the next day with every joint and tendon in his body

screaming with soreness. But he was young and strong. The work warmed his muscles, and by the third day he was able to run easily, without strain.

When Daniel had mentioned to the man named Wong that he wore no flower, Wong, a stout, greasy fellow with powerful hands, had begun to question him carefully. Little by little, Daniel had revealed bits and pieces of his background — his birth in Taocheng, the death of his parents, his bondage to Liu, and his flight to Canton. He had stopped when he'd come to the part about his father's family and his killing of the Manchu officer. Daniel's prudence had come a long way since that day in Canton when he had revealed himself to the stranger who betrayed him.

Wong had squinted at him and stroked his long, thin mustache. "How is it," he had asked, "that one such as you could have been in Kwangchow without learning what it means to wear the flower?"

"In truth, I did not stay there long. I left on . . . most urgent business."

"The imperialists, perhaps?" Wong leaned closer. His breath smelled of garlic. "They wanted you that much, eh?"

Daniel had looked down at his feet and kept his silence.

"Speak, boy! You've nothing to fear from me! The Manchu have as many enemies as there are grains of sand on the beach. If you are one and I am one, then that makes us brothers — brothers in vengeance. The dogs murdered my father back in Foochow. They'd have gotten me, too, if I hadn't come here! Speak, young Cheng! If you've made an enemy of the imperialists, then you've a friend in me! In part, that's what it means to wear the flower!"

Daniel remembered the old servant and the chair-bearer back at his ancestral home in Canton. "You mean," he whispered in amazement, "that you're with the Taipings?"

Wong threw back his head and guffawed until the layers of fat around his middle rippled like dough. "The Taipings? The God-worshippers? Pah!" He spat twice on the floor. "That for those fools and their foreign God! By the ten thousand Buddhas, do I look like a Taiping, boy?" He shook his head in mock despair. "Come with me tonight, Cheng Li-t'ung. You will see what I truly am, and you will know what it means to wear the flower! Are you willing?"

"Perhaps . . . yes, I think so." After all, Daniel reasoned, he was in Shanghai to learn all he could.

"Hao! Excellent! But I must warn you — " The smile dropped like a mask from Wong's greasy face. "What you hear tonight, consider it secret. The faces you will see you will forget until the next time. Betray so much as a word, and you are a dead man!"

The meeting, Daniel remembered, had been held in an unused part of one of the vast foreign godowns off Maloo Road. Men had drifted in like shadows, two or three hundred of them, until the space was filled to overflowing. The Brotherhood of the Red Lotus, they were called, and the man named Wong was one of their secondary dragons, or leaders. The High Dragon, who conducted the meeting, was a diminutive fellow, slim and bespectacled, who commanded by force of his intelligence rather than by strength. His questions were sharp and penetrating, his answers astute, his control over his assembled brethren total. His name was Yao, Daniel surmised from the comments around him, and he worked as secretary to one of the foreign silk firms — Daniel's eyes widened when he heard the name — Bolton and Company.

On the coming Taiping invasion, the brethren were sharply divided. In the early days of the rebellion, Wong explained to Daniel, the Brotherhood and other similar societies had fought side by side with the Taiping rebels, their hatred of the Manchu overlords a common bond. With the passing of the years, however, it became clear that the Taipings would allow only the elite of their own faith to be placed in positions of authority. The *wangs* began to put on the airs of great lords, to build lavish palaces with the spoils of war, to accumulate harems, and to look down upon those who had aided them in the past. Disillusioned, many of the secret societies had fallen away to pursue their own methods of ending Manchu dominion in the Middle Kingdom.

"Open Shanghai to the God-worshippers and we hold out our necks for their yokes!" Wong declared aloud to the assembly. "We have it as we like here with the foreign devils, eh? They're stupid. They don't interfere with us. Their treaties with Peking keep the imperialist armies out of Shanghai. We've a safe harbor here for our business. Who knows what would happen with the Taipings? Why wake a sleeping tiger?"

"The Taipings will have Shanghai in any case," argued a man from across the dim chamber that was lit only here and there by swinging

lanterns. "If the foreigners go to war with one another, there will be no one to keep them out. And how will things go for us if we've been slow in offering our help?"

"I say we deal with the Manchu in our own way and in our own time!" someone cried out.

The debate continued far into the night, with neither side gaining sway over the other. High Dragon Yao kept order with admirable skill, interjecting questions and comments of his own where they were needed. Although he did not state his views openly, Daniel sensed that Yao was prospering in his present position and, like Wong, he had no wish to stir up a new hornets' nest by welcoming the rebels into Shanghai.

In the end, no final decision was reached. The Brotherhood resolved to wait. When the question of war among the foreigners was settled, then the time would come, perhaps, to side openly with the rebels. As High Dragon Yao succinctly put it, "A cunning hare has three holes to its burrow. We would be fools, brothers, to choose our hole before we know where the hound will be digging."

As the meeting dispersed, Daniel felt himself being edged forward, toward the improvised dais where High Dragon Yao stood. One firm shove from Wong's beefy hand thrust him to the front of the crowd. Yao's small eyes gazed down at him from behind the thick spectacles. They were black eyes, hard and bright as diamonds. He smiled with his mouth, such an amiable, horsey smile that a stranger who had not heard him speak or looked into those eyes might take him for a simpleton.

"*Wei!* What's this you've brought us, my good Wong? A new recruit?" He was surprisingly young, no more than thirty. From a distance, in the hazy light of the lantern, he had looked much older.

"Maybe." Wong's tongue probed at a sliver of fish that was stuck between his teeth. "Well, boy," he said, turning to Daniel, "has this night convinced you that you're among friends? If you won't tell me why you left Kwangchow in such a hurry, then maybe you'll tell your story to the High Dragon himself!"

"Yes . . ." A trembling Daniel found himself relating the account of his family, and his flight from the soldiers. As he described how he had strangled the Manchu officer, Yao began to smile again. This time with his eyes.

"Any man who has killed a Manchu with his bare hands is more than welcome in the Brotherhood," he declared. "Would you consider joining us?"

"I am honored," Daniel murmured, his heart pounding with dread. He had carefully left out any mention of Nanking or of the Taipings. "With your most generous permission, this undeserving one would ask for a few days to think upon the matter."

"Granted," said Yao. "In any case, as the oath must be taken before the body of the Brotherhood, you will have until the next gathering to make your decision. If your answer is no, then we ask only one thing of you: that you blot from your mind all memory of this place and of the men you have seen and heard. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Daniel had forced himself to return Yao's smile.

The memory dissolved as his groping hands met the end of the tunnel. The trapdoor that opened into the coppersmith's shop was just above his head. He lifted it cautiously with his hands. Dust trickled downward into his face, but above him all was quiet. Sweating with relief, he pulled himself upward and emerged amid the clutter of the darkened shop.

The house of General Liang lay only a few streets away. Daniel hurried through the thinning nighttime crowds, fighting the urge to run. *Lai Jyu!* Her name echoed in his footsteps and in the drumming of his heart. He pictured her in the garden, beside the moon gate, graceful as a willow, or dashing across the plain on her little black pony, her hair flying in the wind. *Lai Jyu.*

The gateman at the general's house recognized Daniel and let him in. Another servant hurried to summon Liang, who appeared in his night clothes, a cup of tea in his hand.

"Li-t'ung!" He came forward with a smile, but there was a note of distraction in his voice. "I'd quite forgotten that you would return to us tonight! Forgive me!"

"The *Chung Wang* instructed me to come back in seven days. I have come, and I have learned much. Could we see the *Chung Wang* tonight?"

"Whatever you have to tell him I can pass on tomorrow, after you have left once more for Shanghai."

"What?" Daniel's jaw went slack.

"The *Chung Wang* wishes you to remain in Shanghai and send him regular reports. He has arranged for a messenger to carry your words

back to Nanking. Had we known how to reach you during these past days, we could have spared you the return journey." The general finished his tea. "I will summon my scribe at once. You can tell me all you have learned and he can write as you speak — ah, but you must be hungry and tired. You have come a long way, and the meals aboard a junk are scarcely tolerable. Rest and eat well tonight, my son, for you must depart once more at dawn tomorrow."

Daniel swallowed his dismay. The urge to see Lai Jyu once more was like a fire in him. Dared he ask about her? Dared he beg to be allowed into her presence?

"And how does the Heavenly King fare?" he inquired obliquely, his heart thudding in his ears. "Has his illness proved to be serious?"

"Not at all. He is quite recovered."

Something dark and cold had seized Daniel by the throat, he fancied, and was slowly squeezing the life out of him. "And . . . Lai Jyu?" he whispered.

"Gone. She entered his palace this morning."

Twenty-One

Shanghai

January, 1862

Jason had brought back Harry's roan stallion early that morning, the one he'd borrowed Christmas Eve. Serena had watched him from her bedroom window, her hand clutching her throat as he rode into the stableyard, swung himself out of the saddle, and handed the reins to the *mafoo*. His breath frosted white on the air as he spoke, but she could not read his lips. His eyes did not even glance upward to see her where she stood looking down at him, her pulse pounding like a tom-tom. Her fingers ached to brush the dark hair where it curled low on the back of his neck, to toy with the soft fringe on his buckskin jacket. She tried to tear herself away from the window, but her eyes could not let him go. Not until he had bidden the boy a cheery good-bye and strode out the gate without even coming up to the house.

Twenty minutes later, she had taken the carriage to the office, still shaken inside by the power of the longing that had swept over her at the sight of him. She had thrown herself into her work like a fury, snapping at the clerks and secretaries until they cowered in the outer hallways. Only the unflappable Yao endured her disposition today. He hovered about the desk, bringing her bills and contracts, answering her questions from the vast stores of information in his mind, his face like the smiling mask of a skinny, bespectacled Buddha.

Even with Yao's help, the morning had gone badly. One of the new Chinese accountants had made three mistakes in the past week. When Yao had confronted him, the poor fellow had burst into tears and threatened to hang himself by his own queue. Someone, Serena learned, had outbid her for a piece of land she had particularly want-

ed, and to top it all off, a boy came in at eleven with a note from the captain who'd been hired to skipper Serena's first shipment of coolies. The man was sick, the note read, and the doctors had diagnosed his illness as yellow jaundice. Bed rest had been ordered for at least a month, and the ship was scheduled to leave in three days! Serena swore like a deckhand. She had contract commitments to honor in San Francisco, to say nothing of the extra expense of feeding and sheltering the three hundred coolies that were already waiting in an improvised barracoon not far from the docks.

The ship itself, a dowdy old bark called the *Marie Estelle*, had been leased at a bargain rate from a firm in the French Concession that had also contracted to supply the provisions. Serena had inspected the vessel herself and it seemed seaworthy enough. The lavish assurances of the owners had quieted what doubts she had. Besides, the captain was a man of superb reputation. An Englishman named Short, he had a long and impeccable career as a ship's master behind him. It was Harry who had found and hired him, and in Serena's mind his presence would have more than compensated for the *Marie Estelle's*, dubious condition. After a tense and frustrating morning, the news of his illness had hit her like a hard punch to the midsection. Serena had fumbled her way through the rest of the morning, irritation piling upon irritation, the memory of watching Jason ride into the yard a dagger in her conscience. By the time Harry appeared at half-past twelve to take her to lunch at the Astor, she was exhausted and almost in tears.

"There, little love," he soothed her over hot tea and biscuits. "It's only business, after all. We'll find another captain. Short's not the only good man who's at loose ends in Shanghai."

"I know." Serena stirred her tea. "But it was going so well, Harry. It was almost as if — " She broke off as she saw Harry's face. He was staring past her shoulder, beaming with delight.

"Jason!" He rose up, halfway out of his chair. "Jason! Over here!"

Holding her breath, Serena turned around. Jason was making his way toward them, weaving a path among the crowded tables of the dining room. He had traded his buckskin jacket for a well-cut suit of chestnut gabardine. His white silk shirt gleamed against the sun-burnished skin of his throat, set off by a chamois vest and a coffee-brown cravat. His eyes avoided hers as he greeted Harry. "I was hop-

ing I'd see you," he said, reaching past Serena to clasp Harry's extended hand.

"What a pleasure!" Harry indicated the empty chair on his left. Jason pulled it out and sat down. The accidental brush of his knee against Serena's skirt sent shivers of guilty pleasure tingling upward through her body. She stared at the pattern of the tea leaves in her cup.

Harry leaned back in his chair. The clink of china, silver, and crystal blended with the low babble of voices in the spacious elegance of the Astor dining room. Beneath the gleam of lighted chandeliers, Chinese waiters, silent as lizards, glided here and there in their dark green jackets. They set out plates of roast beef, chicken, fish, vegetables, and steaming bowls of soup, whisking away the dirty dishes with the ease of magicians. The air was hazy with tobacco smoke.

"How was Sungkiang?" Jason had gone there to see Ward.

"Excellent. I'm not at liberty to discuss his strategy, not even with you, but he's fully ready. He's planning a major attack on one of the Taiping-held strongholds within a matter of days. He'll win this time. The troops are splendid! I've never seen anything like them!"

"You always were enthused about Colonel Ward, Captain," Serena commented dryly. "I only hope your enthusiasm is justified."

"I assure you it is, Mrs. Bolton." Jason's voice was cold and tightly controlled. His dark eyes revealed nothing. "And it's *General* Ward now that he's in command of two full divisions. Burgevine, Forrester, and Macanaya are colonels now."

"Very convenient." Serena surveyed the poached fish that the waiter had just put down in front of her. She could not eat.

"You got here last night?" Harry was saying. "Why didn't you come to the house? You know you're welcome."

"I know." Jason looked swiftly at Serena, and in his eyes she caught a sudden glimpse of naked pain. "I'm staying on board the *Tarpon*. I thought it best that I be with her."

"I understand," said Harry. *No you don't*, Serena thought. *Oh, thank God you don't understand, Harry.*

"Harry tried his best to find a dry dock for you," Serena said, "but no luck."

"Oh, I forget to tell you, Serena, I found one just yesterday," Harry said. "We can move her in tomorrow and they'll get right to work."

Jason sighed. "I appreciate it, Harry, but I'm afraid the race is already lost. The repairs on the *Tarpon* will take two or three weeks at least. If I'm going to make San Francisco by the fifteenth of March, I'll have to leave within the week. I plan to start looking about for passage this afternoon — "

"By thunder!" Harry leaned across his roast beef, his eyes dancing. "Why didn't I think of it sooner? Jason, we can help you and you can help us! We need a captain for the *Marie Estelle*. She's scheduled to sail in three days. Why not take the job? It would get us all out of a bind!"

"The *Marie Estelle* . . ." Jason pondered for a moment. "Good Lord, it's that old French tub, isn't it?"

"I had her inspected," Serena flared defensively. "Her hull's sound. There's nothing wrong with her!"

"The *Marie Estelle* . . ." Jason shook his head. "What's her cargo?"

"Coolies. Three hundred coolies."

Silence, as thick and heavy as tar, hung on the air. At last Jason gave a long, low whistle. "You know I've never tried to hide my feelings about the coolie traffic. Harry. Frankly, it doesn't sound like the kind of business you'd be into."

"It's not Harry's business, it's mine," said Serena. "And there's no reason it won't work. Not unless we can't find another captain for the ship. Please, Jason . . ." She gazed at him imploringly. "Who knows what kind of man we'll end up with if you won't take it — "

"You'd be doing us a favor," added Harry. "And yourself as well."

Jason took a cheroot out of his vest and toyed with it, balancing it between his fingers as he weighed the factors. Convenience against principle. Pride against friend's need.

"The crew?" he asked.

"A good lot. Most of them have sailed with Short."

Jason sighed and put the cheroot back into his vest pocket. "I owe you a number of favors, Harry. It's against my better judgment, but all right. I'll do it. For you."

"Thank you." Harry smiled his relief. "It means a great deal to me, Jason."

As they busied themselves with plans, Serena studied them over her teacup, the two men she loved. Harry, gentle and kind, ready to offer anything for the sake of her happiness. Jason, free and strong, so much his own man, so reluctant to tie himself to anything except the

sea and his ship. She saw through him, she told herself. What he passed off to the world as independence, she recognized as fear. Jason Frobisher was a vulnerable man. A lonely man. A man in great need of warmth and closeness and loving. Serena twisted her napkin and ached inside because she could not be the one to give it to him.

Daniel stepped off the gangplank of the junk and onto the quay, his throat tight with apprehension. The trip downriver from Nanking had taken five days — three days longer than it should have. The accursed junk had sprung a leak just short of Kiangyin, and they'd hauled into the town for repairs. There the captain had gotten into a series of *mah jongg* games that lasted for two days and two nights — so long that Daniel suspected the wretch had punched the hole in the boat himself.

He glanced back over his shoulder to where the captain stood on the deck, a pot-bellied silhouette against the evening sky. "Your mother laid turtle eggs!" Daniel muttered under his breath. He'd been in a foul mood from the moment he'd learned that Lai Jyu had married the *Tien Wang*. That night he had lain awake on his cot, his eyes staring hopelessly into the darkness. To dream was to picture her naked in the arms of the Heavenly King, young and soft and willing, ready to do anything to win a place as her lord's favorite.

A curse on all women! He walked up the quay, toward the setting sun. Yet how he longed for her, his desire a sweet pain that even bitterness could not destroy. Someday, he vowed, he would have her. The time of the *Tien Wang* would pass, and then he would find Lai Jyu again.

For the present, he had other worries. He had been gone from Shanghai for seven days. What sort of excuse was he going to conjure up to explain his absence to Wong? Illness? Perhaps, Daniel mused, but he was robust and sun-bronzed. A man like Wong would not be easily convinced that his employee had just passed a week on his sickbed. And as for family problems, that would not serve either. It was no secret that Cheng Li-t'ung had no family. A woman, then? Now there was a possibility. With luck, greasy Wong would not only believe him, but he would have a good laugh in the bargain. Wong had been young himself once.

"Ssst! . . . *gou yan!* Tall one!" The whisper had come from a dim alleyway. "Tall one! . . . Over here!"

Cautiously, Daniel moved toward the sound. When he peered into the darkness, his eyes saw nothing.

"You! Son of a pine tree!" the voice hissed again. "Come closer. I've got a message from the *Tien Wang* himself!"

Daniel felt the skin begin to prickle on the back of his neck. A message from the *Chung Wang* would not have surprised him so much, but word from the Heavenly King? It made no sense at all, unless someone was trying to trap him. Or unless, somehow, the message was from Lai Jyu. He stepped into the alley. The small space was dark and smelled of urine. Daniel caught his breath. "Where — "

A sharp, hard blow on the back of his head ended his words and his thoughts. His eyes saw fiery red stars that exploded like rockets against the night sky before they died away into blackness.

Serena was sitting up in bed, two plump, satin-encased feather pillows supporting her back. Absentmindedly, she leafed through the latest issue of *La Vie Parisienne*, the French fashion magazine that had arrived on the last mail steamer. She loved clothes. Most nights the magazine would have provided her with an hour of welcome, fascinating diversion. Tonight, however, the pages might as well have been blank. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Jason's face floated before her, his tapering brown fingers on the white tablecloth not quite touching her own . . . his knee almost brushing hers as he stood up to take his leave . . . Jason. She moaned softly, a feeble, fluttering sound.

Harry came into the bedroom, drying his hands on a towel. She closed the magazine and smiled at him tenderly. "Are you tired, little love?" he asked her.

"Very." She snuggled down into the featherbed.

He slipped out of his dressing gown, snuffed out the lamp, and climbed into bed beside her, wearing his soft linen nightshirt. Serena lay still as he bent over and kissed her on the cheek. "Good night, then, my sweet," he said.

"Harry," she whispered as he stretched out beside her, "hold me. Please."

Puzzled, he turned over and took her in his arms, drawing her gently against his chest. She clung to him, quivering. "Serena . . . what is it?"

"I don't know. Oh, Lord, I don't know. Just hold me. Tighter." She lifted her face and kissed him, furiously, desperately, her whole body trembling with need. "I love you, Harry," she whispered.

He returned her kiss with gentle firmness. One hand moved up to stroke her hair. "And I love you . . ." His lips brushed her eyelids. "Go to sleep, dearest. Don't be frightened. I'm here. I won't let you go . . ."

Daniel stirred. The pain pulsed in his head like some living creature that had attached itself to the inside of his skull. His eyelids fluttered. He groaned sharply as the light shot into his eyes.

He was on some kind of cot, in a small room that was lit by an enormous foreign-style lantern swinging from a hook on the ceiling. And he was not alone. The other presence in the room was something he felt rather than saw or heard. Cautiously, he turned his head away from the light. The movement sent tiny arrows of agony singing into his brain. He whimpered like a child.

The presence moved closer. Daniel heard the rustle of a satin robe, the brush of a slipper on glazed tile. With great effort, he opened his eyes and blinked them into focus. He found himself gazing up into the homely, bespectacled face of High Dragon Yao.

"So." Yao lowered himself to a stool beside the cot. His eyes were cold behind the thick glasses. Daniel looked into them and felt his heart turning to lead. He swallowed, his throat tight with fear.

"So the sparrow has flown and returned?" Yao's voice was silken and totally expressionless.

Daniel kept his silence. What good would it do him to speak?

"Are you such a fool that you did not think we would have you watched?" Yao continued in the same flowing voice. "You were seen leaving the junk here in the river. For a few taels, the captain quite willingly told us that he'd taken you on at Nanking." He shifted his position on the stool, his body at ease. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "My good friend Dragon Wong has sworn to kill you," he said with a smile. "I thought it might be advantageous to us both if I were to find you before he did. My apologies, Cheng Li-t'ung, if my assistants were less than gentle. Their orders were to see that you did not escape, on pain of their lives. They took no chances." His face hardened. "Taiping spy!"

Daniel sat up and rubbed the back of his head. Crusted blood came away on his hand. Yao had him. There was no weapon left except the

truth. "I told them nothing about the Brotherhood," he said, his tongue strangely thick. "I was sent to report upon the plans of the imperialists and foreigners, and that is what I did. But I swear to you on the graves of my ancestors that I did not break the promise I made in your presence."

Yao studied him, his sharp little eyes narrowed to slits. "If you speak the truth, then you cannot be one of them. The Taipings demand absolute loyalty. You would have told them."

"The Taipings saved me after I left Kwangchow. I owe my life to one of their generals. But I am not one of them. And I did not tell them about you."

Yao took a deep breath, and Daniel sensed an easing of the tension that weighted the air in the tiny room. "Cheng Li-t'ung, would it surprise you to learn that I am Christian?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I was baptized John Yao ten years ago, by an English missionary. An old man — I've not seen him since, although I understand he's in Hankow — but never mind. Enough to say that I am a son of Han first and a Christian when it suits me. If you speak the truth, there is no reason you and I should be enemies."

Daniel put his aching head in his palms and allowed himself to breathe normally for the first time since he'd opened his eyes.

"However," Yao continued, "there is the small matter of Dragon Wong. He has sworn the blood oath to kill you on sight. Nothing I do or say can change that, I fear."

"Not even if he can be convinced that I did not betray the Brotherhood?"

"A blood oath is binding. In any case, Wong is a man who acts first and thinks later. As Wong himself might put it, my tall friend, your life's not worth turtle shit."

"*Ai-yah!*" Daniel stood up, then slowly sat down again. His legs were as weak as noodles. He was at High Dragon Yao's mercy. "What would you suggest I do?" he asked.

"Do you have any money?"

"Enough for three days' worth of rice cakes and bean curd."

"No matter. There's a way out. In two days' time, you will be on your way to the Land of the Gold Mountain!"

"What?" Daniel's jaw fell. "To America?"

"So it is called by the foreign devils. I know of a ship that's ready to sail with three hundred men bound for work in the gold mines. The list is full, mind you, but for a price the ship's agent might be persuaded to fit in one more man."

"But how can I think of it?" Daniel's head was swimming.

"Don't be a fool! It's the answer to all your problems. Come! Think! What is your first obligation? You've told me as much!"

"To my father . . . to return his body to the place of his ancestors."

"Precisely! And that will cost a great deal! You'll never get enough money pushing Wong's wheelbarrow up and down the Bund! Think, Cheng Li-t'ung! Men get rich in the Land of the Gold Mountain!" He moved the stool closer to the cot. "This is how it works. Your passage costs one hundred dollars — more for you because we'll have to pay *cumshaw* to the shipping agent. Say — another fifty! Don't look so perplexed, I'll lend it to you. You can pay me back — at interest, naturally. You don't need money to leave on the ship. It's paid by the mining contractor. He takes it out of your wages and sends it to the shipowner. In no time at all, your passage is paid and the rest of the money is yours to keep! In three years, you come back a wealthy man."

Three years! It seemed like an eternity. Daniel pressed his hands to the side of his head to quiet the ringing in his ears. Three winters and three summers, the coffins of his parents gathering dust in the House of the Dead in Taocheng. Surely there was an easier way. Three years . . . But then, nearly one year had passed since the earth had trembled and the landslide had come roaring down the slope of the Tahsueh Shan to end life as he had known it. And he was no closer to the fulfillment of his pledge than he had been the day he left the house of Liu. High Dragon Yao was right. He could not stay in Shanghai. He could not return to Nanking. There was nothing else to do. He would go to the Gold Mountain.

Twenty-Two

Nanking

January, 1862

Stephen paced his quarters in a rage of frustration. The tedium of his life in Nanking, especially since Lindley's departure for the field, had worn upon his nerves as the toil and deprivation of Hankow never had.

He was looked after with exquisite care, but the *Chung Wang* had yet to grant him an audience. He was "occupied with affairs of state," the palace lackeys explained, smiling their bland, meaningless smiles.

With so much time on his hands, he found that Madeline had returned to haunt him. He saw her slender form in the nighttime shadows of his room, heard her voice in the tinkle of the wind chime that hung outside his window. He awoke in the darkness murmuring her name. Was he going mad?

Another figure haunted him. As he went about the city, his eyes searched everywhere for the tall young Chinese that Lindley had described to him, the one whose name was Cheng. There was always the chance that he had returned from Shanghai, Stephen fantasized, and that somehow they would meet by chance. *Excuse me, sir*, Stephen would exclaim in his best drawing-room English, *but is it possible that you could be my cousin?* He laughed himself to tears at the ridiculousness of it, but the longing was real. He belonged to no one here. With Augustus Lindley he had at least shared the bond of being English. Now, with Lindley gone, the thought of having a kinsman — even a Chinese kinsman — here in Nanking filled his heart with a wistful sweetness. What a grand time they could have, filling one another in on the events of the past twenty years!

But Stephen had not found him. After many days, he had gone to the house of General Liang, where a servant told him that the young man had indeed returned from Shanghai after seven days. However, he had departed the next morning and no one knew when he would be coming back.

Dejected, Stephen had returned to the palace, to the books he was weary of, to the comforts he had come to hate. Day by day, his mind was losing ground, he told himself. He had to get out of Nanking! It was either that or lose his reason.

Footsteps approached the open doorway of his room. Stephen stopped his pacing and turned to find Dr. Sung standing at the threshold.

"*Sikjo fan mei a?*" the doctor greeted him in the traditional way.

"Yes, thank you, I have eaten," Stephen gave the traditional reply, hiding his great surprise at Sung's sudden appearance after so long a time. "How good it is to see you."

"Thank you, my friend." Sung smiled as he stepped into the room. He was formally dressed in a long red robe. The upturned toes of his slippers peeped from beneath the hem. A red kerchief covered his head. "I regret that my duties have kept me from your side these many days. But tonight the *Chung Wang* bade me come to you with good news. It seems he has found a position for you."

At last! All thought of leaving temporarily fled from Stephen's mind.

"You will begin tomorrow," Sung continued. "The *Chung Wang* wishes his sons and certain of his counselors to learn the language of your people. You will be their teacher."

"He wants me to teach English?" Stephen gasped in dismay. "I came here as a missionary, to teach the Word of God! You may tell your *Chung Wang* that I decline his offer to teach English. Furthermore, you may tell him that I am leaving for Shanghai by the end of the week, as soon as I can get passage on a junk —"

"I am truly sorry, my friend. That is not possible."

"What —?" Stephen sputtered. "With a hundred junks going down-river every day?"

"You are to remain here . . . as our guest, until such time as my lord the *Chung Wang* permits you to leave."

Stephen sank onto an embroidered velvet hassock, his legs suddenly folding like wilted dandelion stems. When he spoke, his voice was a harsh whisper. "You mean to tell me that I am a prisoner here?"

Sung smiled. "Such an ugly word. We would prefer that you think of yourself as an honored visitor. Have we not treated you with utmost kindness?"

Rage impelled Stephen to his feet again. "You have wrapped me in lies from beginning to end! And I was fool enough to believe you! You call yourselves Christians! Why, I've heard nothing but lies from Taiping lips since the day I met you!"

The pleasant mask fell from Dr. Sung's face. Stephen could almost hear it clatter on the tiles. "You would prefer the truth, then?" he said coldly. "It was your own stubbornness and vanity that brought you to Nanking. You thought you would be a great man here! You thought you would teach the True Religion! We *have* the True Religion! We have the *Tien Wang*."

Stephen closed his eyes for a moment. He could feel the blood pounding in his head, almost hear it, almost see the surge of red. "I came to serve," he said through clenched teeth. "I came because I could no longer serve in Hankow. My grandfather had betrayed me."

A slow, cold smile stretched the corners of Sung's mouth. "You fool," he said. "You gullible foreign fool. I thought that surely you would have guessed by now."

"What —?"

"You say you've heard nothing but lies from us. Listen then, fool, and know that we are also capable of truth. It was not your grandfather who wrote the letter to your mission board in Hong Kong."

Stephen's mind reeled backward. What was it Archer Bellamy had said when Stephen had confronted him with the letter from the mission? *I could deny it, but you wouldn't believe me.* But men, who? Hamish Abernathy? His wife? Serena, God forbid?

"The barbarian mind works slowly." Sung's eyes swam with contempt. "The letter was written at my own suggestion."

"But . . . why?" Stephen felt like a total fool, but he did not understand anything at this point.

"I thought your presence here might be . . . useful. You could amuse us for a time. And one day perhaps you might be truly valuable — as a hostage, or even as a spy once your loyalty was proven. Don't look so startled. How can you not have thought of it?"

"But there have been other foreign visitors to Nanking." Stephen's voice shook. "Missionaries, journalists, traders . . ."

"Ah, but they came under the auspices of their churches or their employers. To take them prisoner would have caused a great outcry against the Taipings. We could not risk it. But you — you broke with your family and your church to come of your own will. And you have wealthy connections on the coast. You were an ideal choice."

Stephen felt the weight of his dilemma like a lead ball in the pit of his stomach. The sweat on his forehead was cold. The pretty little Chinese lanterns in the room cast yellow lights and purple shadows on Sung's face. "The letter to the mission . . . Sung, you can't write in English."

"True. But there is one who can — and who did."

Stephen's mind groped for the truth; then, finding it, shrank in revulsion.

Sung smiled once more. "I see you have guessed. This time you are right. It was your English friend, the man we call Lin-li."

Shanghai

January, 1862

Harry had insisted on inviting Jason to dinner the last night before the departure of the *Marie Estelle*. Studying him from across the table, Serena realized that Jason would rather not have come. He was noticeably ill at ease, brooding, toying with the sliced pheasant and wild rice on his plate, and scowling at the wall. He had not wanted to captain her coolie shipment, she knew. He was already regretting the decision, and Serena was sorry. She should never have let Harry talk him into it.

"I hope you don't mind taking Fong while I'm gone," Jason was saying. "When he heard what the cargo was to be, he refused to come with me. Can't say as I blame him."

"Mind?" Serena dimpled at him over her goblet of white wine. She knew she looked beautiful in her gown of cream-colored lace, set off by Harry's necklace of opals and pearls. "Do I *mind*? Why, Captain, I'm going to give three teas a week and a ball and banquet every Saturday night! Mind having Pong? Indeed!"

Her laughter was tinsel. A lovely sham. Jason was leaving again, and it seemed she could bear neither the bleakness of his absence nor the torment of his presence. In deference to the British custom of

dressings for dinner, he was formally clad in black. She knew he'd rather have worn his buckskin jacket, and she loved him for it.

The ship was to load and sail at dawn. It would carry no other cargo except the three hundred coolies and their provisions, which had already been stashed away in the hold by the *Marie Estelle's* owners: a ten-week supply of salt pork, rice, and flour, along with tin pots and small coal-burning stoves for cooking. The journey was expected to take no more than two months, but Serena wanted to insure that the ship would be well stocked. She'd taken no chances. "I plan to be there in the morning," she said. "I've not even had a look at the coolies; Yao's taken care of the recruiting and lodging. Before you go, I want to see it all."

"If you like." Jason shrugged in feigned indifference, "I've checked the hull myself. *Marie Estelle's* old and she's no beauty, but she seems solid enough to make the trip."

The three of them glanced up as the door opened and the number one came gliding into the room with a folded piece of paper in his hand. He passed it over Harry's shoulder. Frowning, Harry opened it.

"Strange," he murmured. "It's from Abner Heard. He's at the Astor . . . wants me to come at once. Says it's most urgent. Well, I suppose — " He stood up and put his napkin on the table. "I'll try not to be long, my dear. You and Jason enjoy your dinner."

"I'll come along if you'd like." Jason rose out of his chair almost too quickly.

"No need for it." Harry motioned Jason back into his seat. "I'll take the carriage. Can't imagine what Abner'd want at this hour. He's always been an excitable sort . . . " Harry went out into the foyer, still muttering. A few moments later, Serena heard the sound of the one-horse chaise rounding the gate. She and Jason were alone at the table.

Silence hung heavily in the room. "I'll finish and be gone," he said gently. "Have no fear of me, Serena."

"I've no fear of you, Jason. I . . . want to thank you for taking the ship. I know it's meant going against your principles."

"I've other principles as well, you know." His voice was hushed, his eyes warm on her face. "You and Harry are two of the dearest friends I have. There's very little I wouldn't do for you."

"Jason — " She twisted the napkin in her lap, her heart bursting.

"Let me finish, Serena. Who knows when I'll have another chance to talk with you like this?" He leaned back in his chair, as if to increase the safe distance between them. "I want to apologize," he said, "for all the mean, rotten, asinine things I've ever said to you. When I see how happy you've made Harry, I realize that you didn't deserve any of them."

"Jason — " She could not look at him. "That day in the study — "

A shadow crossed his face and she knew he was reliving her wild flight across the room to his arms and that one long, searching kiss. "An impulse," he said. "You thought I was going to die."

"And you . . .?"

His cheeks flushed with unbidden color. "I thought so, too, I suppose. That's behind us. It has to be. We both know that." He reached across the table and covered her small hand with his. Her heart fluttered against her ribs, but she willed herself not to respond to his touch. "The ways of fate are strange," he said softly. "Who knows if we'll meet again after tomorrow? I want us to part as friends, Serena — as two people who care deeply about each other . . . and about Harry. Agreed?" His hand closed slightly around hers.

His palm was warm and smooth. Serena wanted to lift his long fingers and press them against her face. But Jason was right. He loved Harry almost as much as she did. And for Harry's sake, the two of them could not be antagonists — nor could they be lovers.

She studied his sun-browned hand, her senses clinging to its gentle, enfolding strength. "Yes, Jason," she whispered, and she felt as if her heart would break. Tenderly, he cradled her face in his hands, and placed an almost reverential kiss on her forehead.

Then he was gone.

Dawn lay like a dirty gray blanket over shivering Shanghai. The fog swirled about the bare masts of the barks and clippers, freezing in white streaks along the folds of the reefed sails. A solitary gull, dragging one lame wing, poked for tidbits on the half-frozen mud flat.

John Yao was up even earlier than usual. Despite the cheerless day, he smiled as he sipped his morning tea and nibbled at a rice cake. Today his coolie ship was to leave for the Gold Mountain. He had consulted two fortune tellers — an old soothsayer renowned for his wisdom, and the best astrologer in Shanghai — regarding the auspicious-

ness of the date. Every sign was favorable. Surely the venture would be a profitable one for all concerned.

All in all, the project had been more difficult than he'd anticipated. Serena Bolton had selected the ship, but had left to him the leasing of an empty godown on the docks to serve as a crude barracoon as well as the recruiting of the coolies themselves and the provisioning of the ship.

Three hundred coolies. Three hundred and one, he reminded himself, with the addition of the tall, husky youth named Cheng he'd had smuggled into the barracoon two nights ago. One more wouldn't matter. He should really have picked up several extras. A few deaths were inevitable on such voyages. The ship would likely dock in San Francisco with fewer than three hundred men.

But no matter. He picked up the small red abacus that he always kept close at hand. His fingers moved like lightning as he shifted the beads on the wires. Three hundred men at one hundred dollars each made thirty thousand dollars. And sixty dollars of every fare was his.

He smiled. Serena Bolton understood that the passage would be fifty dollars each, and so she had offered him ten dollars for each man he recruited. Yao had simply doubled his price. It didn't matter. The men were eager to sign up for any amount. They'd all be rich in the Land of the Gold Mountain. One hundred dollars. Forty dollars for Bolton and Company, ten dollars plus fifty for John Yao. And he'd charged young Cheng another fifty extra to bribe the shipping agent, who of course was none other than Yao himself. His fingers fluttered among the beads. Sixty times three hundred, plus one hundred fifty for young Cheng, who would not need to be reported to the Boltons at all. If nobody died or renege, Yao calculated he would be eighteen thousand, one hundred fifty dollars richer within the space of a year. And most of the men would pay, those who lived. The Brotherhood of the Red Lotus was already well established in the Gold Mountain. They would see to it that no one cheated their High Dragon.

In addition to the passage money, for which he would have to wait, Yao had come into another more immediate windfall. Serena Bolton had given him six thousand dollars for the provisioning of the ship. "I don't want the men arriving weak and sickly after the voyage," she'd instructed him. "Get the best, Yao. They're to be well fed. And I want

medicines — good English medicines, mind you; quinine, ipecac, the usual things. You'll see to it, I'm sure."

Yao had nodded dutifully, laughing behind his sleeve after she had gone. The best, indeed! They were coolies, and coolies could eat anything! The best? Why, their stomachs wouldn't recognize good food if they had it. And as for Western medicines, most Chinese wouldn't touch them. What a waste!

He had gone to the French company that had contracted the supplies as well as the ship itself. Working with their Chinese agent, who was one of the Brotherhood and understood such matters, he had purchased a ten-week supply of rice, wheat, tea, and salt pork for three thousand dollars. It was old, and a trifle worm-infested, but it was enough to keep three hundred men alive for the two-month journey across the sea to the Gold Mountain. They would eat it because there was nothing else. No one would starve. He and the agent had split the two-thousand-dollar savings. (Three thousand, in truth, but what the agent did not know would not hurt him.)

With a sigh of satisfaction, Yao surveyed his courtyard. The Boltons had never seen his house. If they had, they would have been astounded by the grandness of it. John Yao was, by anyone's standards, a comfortably wealthy man. And one day he would be so rich that his quarters would make this place seem like a hovel by comparison.

His fourth and youngest concubine came mincing along the stone path, swaying like a plume on her tiny bound feet. He gave her rump an affectionate squeeze as she passed him. He'd bought her only three months ago, and she was already pregnant. John Yao shivered with happiness. In its purer interpretation, his religion forbade more than one wife at a time. But Jacob of old had kept concubines, and so had the wise King Solomon. Besides, who was to know? Christianity, to him, was a matter of convenience. In reality, Yao had only one true religion: it was called Pragmatism.

He smiled as he sipped his tea and planned his day. Maybe if the ship left early enough, there'd be time to visit his friend and fellow dragon, Wong. He would have to fabricate some story about the tall young man named Cheng. Wong was basically a kind fellow, and he had expressed deep regret and concern at the youth's disappearance. He knew nothing, of course, about young Cheng's being a Taiping spy or about his having signed on as a coolie. And as for the ridiculous story about

Wong's having taken a blood oath — Yao chuckled out loud as he finished his tea. He'd used similar stories on at least twelve other men who were now waiting in the barracoon. Every one of them had believed him without question. Very astute, John Yao, he congratulated himself as he wiped his hands on a perfumed napkin. Very astute indeed.

The sun was a blinding disk of light, just rising above the dark line of the sea, when Daniel mounted the gangway of the *Marie Estelle*. Cautiously, he looked about him. Although he was at home on junks, he had never before boarded a foreign ship. In spite of his fears, he was curious.

He gulped the fresh, cold air and scratched at his thigh. The barracoon had been a dismal place, dark and windowless, its air stale and putrid from the crowded conditions. Daniel had slept on the floor, as the others did, wrapped in a single thin blanket. Once a day the guards brought in pots of tasteless boiled rice and took out the slop buckets, which were always overflowing because there were not enough of them. Worse, there was no way to wash, and the place was infested with fleas and lice. The tiny pests were everywhere. There was no escape from them. The creases of Daniel's body were raw from constant itching and scratching.

Each man quickly discovered that once his *chop* was on the contract, there was no leaving the barracoon. They were prisoners. Some of the men were from as far away as Chungking, but most had come from nearby towns such as Tsingpu or Kiating, Paoshan or Minghong. Some of them, like Daniel, were in trouble, fleeing the wrath of the local authorities, the imperialists, or one of the secret brotherhoods. Most, however, were simply poor, with no other hope of rising in this life except the Gold Mountain, which glittered like a distant beacon in each man's dreams.

Daniel was surprised to learn how many of the men had dealt with High Dragon Yao or his underlings. He'd felt foolish once he'd thought things out. It was plain enough that Yao had tricked him, just as he'd tricked others. But it was too late now. For better or for worse, he was going to the Land of the Gold Mountain. Perhaps it had been fated all along.

The men were assembled on the deck of the creaking ship in ten tight rows of thirty each. (A vicious quarrel the night before had already dispatched one of their number.) Some of the crew had been lounging at the rail. They snapped to sudden attention as a lean dark man in a deerskin jacket and a black seaman's cap strode up the gangplank and onto the deck. The captain, Daniel surmised, study-

ing the strong planes of his face, the set of his wide shoulders and the brisk assurance in his step. He wore the look of authority like an invisible insignia.

Daniel shivered as a gust of wind ruffled the surface of the water and passed across the deck. His coat was of the cheapest kind, heavy blue Nankeen wadded inside with cotton. Its warmth was minimal. He hunched a little to make his size less noticeable as the captain's fierce dark eyes flicked over the lines of coolies.

"They're all healthy? They've been checked by a doctor?" The captain spoke to High Dragon Yao, who just come up onto the deck.

"Certainly," said Yao, although Daniel knew he lied. No doctor had been near them, and two of the men had bad lungs. They'd kept the whole barracoon awake at night with their coughing. He thought of speaking up, then decided against it. In new and unknown surroundings such as these, it was wise to avoid stirring up trouble or making oneself conspicuous in any way.

Every head swiveled in sudden fascination as a delicate figure swathed in a plum-colored cloak trimmed with silver fox swept up the gangplank. Daniel swallowed hard. It was the Golden One. Even with her hair covered by the cloak, he recognized her birdlike grace. Her eyes were big and dark and bright as she surveyed the ship and the lines of assembled coolies. "Is everything ready?" she asked, appearing to be very much in charge. "Yao, are the supplies loaded? Did you put on plenty of fresh water?"

"I saw to it last night," Yao answered with a slight bow. "And you may rest assured that the water supply is ample."

"There are three hundred men?" She brushed a stray lock of golden hair out of her face.

"Exactly."

From his place at the end of the second row, Daniel studied her. Of course, he told himself. She was the employer of High Dragon Yao. The ship was hers. It was to the Golden One that he would owe the price of his passage.

Slowly, she turned toward the captain. Their eyes met, and Daniel caught a flash of some powerful, hidden bond between them.

"We'll be casting off now, Serena," he said softly.

She strained forward as if she longed to touch him, but her hands remained inside her fur muff. Her eyes blinked away tears. "God keep you, Jason," she whispered. Then she turned swiftly and almost fled down the gangplank to the waiting dock.

Twenty-Three

The Pacific Ocean
February, 1862

Jason Frobisher drove the ship hard, piling on sail, taxing vessel and crew to the utmost. The men, he knew, complained behind his back. He cared little. Nothing mattered except to bring this miserable voyage to an end as soon as possible.

The sea was gray, the sky bleak and overcast. The sun was a cold white ball, veiled by leaden clouds. The wind howled about the masts like an animal, setting nerves on edge, making even the most amiable seaman surly and snappish. But it filled the sails. It sent the hull of the ungainly old *Marie Estelle* ploughing through the waves. Each day it carried her closer to San Francisco.

There had been days when Jason would have given anything for a clipper. Piloting the *Tarpon* was a joy. Her trim, sharp bow sang through the water. Her sails embraced the wind. On good days, she almost seemed to fly. Jason had missed her at the beginning of the voyage. He missed her no longer. Not for all the world would he have tainted his beloved ship with the filth and foulness of this awful cargo.

He had made it a point to descend personally into the depths of the hold once a week, with daily inspections by the men. Many other captains on such voyages, he knew, simply sealed the hatches and left the Chinese to rot until the ship reached its destination. Not for all the world would Jason have done such a thing. He was scrupulously attentive to the welfare of his wretched passengers — even when, as the days wore on, the realization grew that there was damned little he could do for them.

Few, if any, of the Chinese had ever been to sea. They were perpetually sick, moaning and cursing in their bunks and vomiting copiously. Dysentery had broken out early in the voyage. Now it was rampant. In the past two weeks, eleven coolies had been dumped over the rail, dead.

Nate Robbins, the burly second mate, had served on coolie ships before. "This," Robbins had advised, fondling the stout, blunt stick he always carried with him, "this is the only way t' keep 'em in line, Cap'n. It the only lingo them Chinks understand."

"Perhaps, Mister Robbins," Jason had replied coldly, "but if I hear of you striking any of those men, you'll answer to me. They're paying passengers, not prisoners."

"Passengers! Hell, Cap'n, they's only Chinks! They'd just as soon slice out your gizzard as look at you. They ain't even human! No humans could jive like they do! You'll see. Just give yourself a few weeks with 'em, Cap'n. You'll come 'round t' my way o' thinkin'!"

Jason had not come around. Between himself and Robbins, a subtle enmity had sprung up. He did not trust the man. Robbins was like a cocked pistol, ready to go off at the slightest pressure.

There were accounts on record of coolies rising up, butchering crews, and taking over ships. Too much bullying on the part of Robbins could provoke such trouble. Tempers were short in that festering hold, and coolies outnumbered the crewmen more than three to one. Jason had assigned Robbins to the running of the ship and placed gentle young Lars Larson in charge of the Chinese.

That, too, might have been a mistake, Jason admitted to himself as he finished the nightly entry in the ship's log and leaned back in his chair to enjoy his cheroot. Poor, sensitive Lars. The lad had been so appalled by conditions below that he often came back up on deck with tears in his eyes. "By heaven, we've got to do something, Captain. They're living like rats down there! Most of them are sick from the roll of the ship. And the bunks weren't built right. They're coming apart. Half the time they can't cook, sir, because the seas are so rough. They're having to eat their rice dry. They don't like that, sir, and they say the meat's bad as well. It's rotten and full of worms — "

"Wait a minute, Mister Larson!" Jason had halted the frenzied flow of words. "*They* say the meat's rotten? That's interesting. I didn't know you spoke Chinese."

"Oh, I don't, sir. One of them speaks English. A big fellow, all the way down on the orlop deck. Why, his English is almost as good as mine!"

"Oh." Jason had been busy at the time, and a sudden change in the wind had called him away, leaving the conversation with Lars unfinished. He recalled it now, as he tilted backward in the chair and watched the smoke from his cheroot float lazily to the ceiling. He wondered whether he'd really heard Lars right. Any Chinese who spoke proper English was a rare bird. Except for squint-eyed little Yao who worked for the Boltons, Jason had not met one.

But an English-speaking coolie — the idea intrigued Jason mightily. A mission product maybe, like Yao. Or the half-Chinese bastard of an English father. Whatever his background, he might be put to good use. On a sudden impulse, Jason rose, stepped to the door of the cabin, and asked the watch to summon Mister Larson.

Lars appeared a few minutes later, his clothes hastily pulled on, his blond hair tousled, and his blue eyes still blinking themselves awake. It was late. Jason had forgotten.

"Forgive me, Mister Larson," he said. "I didn't realize you'd gone to bed. I was just wondering if you could go and fetch me that Chinese fellow. The one you told me about this morning. I'd like to speak with him."

"Aye, aye, sir." In his sleepy state, Lars could not suppress a shudder at the mention of going down once more into the reeking hold. Nevertheless, he departed without an argument, stumbling a bit at the threshold. A moment later, Jason heard the sound of the hatch being lifted.

He lit another cheroot and waited, sorry now for having awakened the poor lad on a whim that could just as well have kept until tomorrow. Lars was a good boy, he reflected, cheerful, bright, and willing, the sort he'd like to have for a son one day.

Jason closed his eyes and for the first time that day allowed himself to think about Serena. He had hoped it would make matters easier to leave her with a good feeling between them. He'd been wrong. He wanted her more than ever. He remembered the dining room, her hand warm as a bird under his. He should never have touched her. He should never have taken her lovely face between his palms and kissed her on the forehead. Even that well-meant gesture had burned him to

the core of his soul. And it was not enough. He wanted all of her — in his arms, in his bed, for all his life. Oh, damn her!

What an ass he'd made of himself. She was the wife of a good man. He had no right to touch her. If he was wise, he would not go back to Shanghai. Eli Hall could bring the *Tarpon* home. He could get the tobacco contract on the Manila route and never think about China again.

Jason shook his head. He knew he would go back; and he would see her. He could not help himself. Serena was part of him. She was love. She was life. God help him!

He turned in his chair and stared at the porthole, trying to clear his mind of her image. His eyes began to droop. Strange, he was more tired than he'd thought . . .

"You asked to see me, Captain?"

Jason jerked himself awake and spun around in his chair. The voice had been low and melodious in quality, the spoken phrase carrying the barest hint of a British accent. A tall, shadowy form filled the doorway.

"Lord, you *do* speak English!" Jason mumbled, still half-asleep.

"Yes . . . " Jason detected a note of apprehension in the answer. "Your man said you wished to talk with me."

Jason cleared his throat. "Yes — so I did. Come inside. Come closer."

The shadow moved. A young giant stepped out into the light and stood uneasily before the desk. Jason sized him up from his chair. A good six-foot-three at least, he estimated, broad and deep across the chest, with shoulders like a Greek statue's. And speaking the king's English! Jason blinked. Maybe he hadn't really awakened after all.

His eyes rose to the young man's face. The bone structure was Chinese, maybe even Manchu, but something about the eyes, their color perhaps, was decidedly Western. And the long braided queue of his hair was less than coal-black. A half-blood, most certainly. The thickly growing stubble on his cheeks and chin confirmed Jason's conclusion. No pure Chinese could have a beard like that.

He had brought the scent of the hold with him. Jason's nostrils flared in distaste. The fellow stank like death itself — but then, he could not help it. Anyone would stink after two weeks in that hellhole below the decks.

"Where did you learn to speak English?" Jason asked him.

"From my mother."

"And your name?"

"Cheng."

"Please have a chair." Jason remembered his manners. "Would you like some tea? It's still hot."

"Thank you." The young man seated himself gingerly, aware of the filthiness of his clothes. When Jason poured tea into a pewter mug, Cheng took it gratefully, savoring its aroma before he tasted it.

Jason studied him more carefully. He was even younger than he'd first thought. No older than Lars. Intelligent, clearly a potential leader. If only a way could be found to put him to good use, maybe this miserable voyage could be made easier for them all.

"You say the provisions are bad, Cheng?"

"The rice is full of worms. The meat is worse. It's rotten. We've found maggots — "

"Good God! Why didn't anybody tell me sooner?"

"The first sacks and barrels we opened were not so bad. Only now — "

"All of them?"

Cheng's voice remained even and melodious, like a chant. "The men who tried to eat it became ill. The rest of us — we cannot bring ourselves . . . " He paused, groping for words that were strong enough. "A pig would not eat it!" he said disdainfully.

Pride, Jason thought. This one had not been a coolie all his life. Perhaps when he got to know him better, he would ask him more about where he came from. To do so now might be considered rude in Chinese eyes. "Mister Larson told me there were other problems as well."

"Yes." Cheng had finished his tea. He put the cup down on Jason's desk. "The rice can be cleaned. But when the sea is rough, it cannot be cooked. The pots fall off the stoves and spill. There are the rats. And the beds. The motion of the ship has worked the nails loose. One row collapsed on top of another in the night. One man lost an eye from a splintered plank."

Jason gasped.

"There is sickness — but that you know. Your men carry out the dead. Everyone is afraid — " The young man betrayed his own fear by the convulsive grip of his fingers on the arm of the chair. "Captain — " his voice mingled dread and hope. At that moment, he looked terri-

bly young. "Captain, how many more days must pass before we reach the Gold Mountain?"

Jason sighed, knowing his answer would wreak devastation in the boy's heart. "Come over here," he said, getting up and walking to a chart on the wall. Cheng's eyes lit up as he saw it.

"This is the Middle Kingdom," Jason began patiently, pointing with his finger.

"Yes, I know. And there is Japan, and there is the Gold Mountain. But where are *we*? That much I do not know."

"Here." Jason touched a spot on the map, three or four inches off the coast of Japan. Cheng's face fell in despair.

"Only there?"

"I'm sorry. It takes nearly sixty days to reach the Gold Mountain. We've been at sea only fifteen days."

"Sixty days!" The young man stared at the map. "Sixty days!"

"You can tell the men that we'll turn back if they want," Jason said, "It won't be easy. We'll be sailing against the wind and we'll have to tack, or circle to the south. I'd say twenty days, twenty-five, maybe, back to Shanghai. But there'd be no land till then, and there's none between here and your Gold Mountain."

The tall young man stared pensively at the floor. "I think I can speak for the others," he said at last. "Sixty days to reach the Gold Mountain is better than forty days wasted for nothing. I will ask them, but I can promise you they will want to go on. For some of us — " he glanced at Jason and his voice dropped to a whisper, "death waits in Shanghai. We cannot go back."

"Then . . ." Jason rubbed his chin. "We must make do as best we can with what we have. We've no resources except what is on board this ship. Do you have any suggestions?"

"The meat — throw it over the side. It only stinks and feeds the rats and maggots. The rice — with more lanterns to see by, the men could be put to work cleaning it. That would occupy them as well."

"Done," said Jason. "And your cooking pots could be rigged to hang from hooks in the beams overhead, just resting on the stove tops. That way they wouldn't capsize. Is there enough rice, without the meat?"

"We can measure and ration it. On one bowl of rice a day, a man can live for a long time."

"We have hammers and nails on board . . . " Optimism had crept into Jason's voice. "The bunks can be made stronger — "

"And if you would permit a few men to come on deck each day, maybe they could catch a few fish or other creatures to be cut up and mixed with the rice — "

"It's possible. I never fished these waters, but by thunder, it's worth a try — " Jason was grinning with relief. "We'll do what we can! It's a beginning! Would you talk to the men?"

"Of course." Cheng's voice and manner were still restrained, but he offered Jason a cautious smile. "When would you like to begin?"

"Tomorrow. Why not?"

"Why not indeed?"

They said good night with a Western-style handshake and young Cheng took his leave. Jason went to bed with a lightened heart. No problem was insurmountable. There were always solutions to be had if one pondered long enough. Still, he could not help wondering who had been responsible for the spoiled, infested provisions. Surely Serena had not known. But the French company she had dealt with had a bad reputation. Likely as not they'd cheated her. They'd do that to a woman. When he got back to Shanghai, he'd see them sued for every cent they owned!

Daniel gripped the sides of the ladder and descended once more into the black bowels of the ship. The brief respite from hell he'd enjoyed in Jason Frobisher's cabin, sitting in a chair, drinking good tea from a clean cup, had only made his return to the hold more revolting.

At least he had put on a good face before the captain. He had remembered the Western manners his mother had taught him, and he had used them well. The captain had listened — at least he had appeared to listen. One could never tell about foreign devils and their promises, the other coolies had warned Daniel. They were as capricious as the spring wind, and it was said they awakened each morning with no recollection of what they had given as their word the day before. But Daniel's mother had not been like that. And the captain seemed to be a good man, genuinely concerned about the awful conditions on the coolie decks.

Only a few of the men were asleep. There were no days and no nights here, for it was always dark except for the lanterns. Many of them were clustered here and there, gambling. They gambled incessantly, with dice, with coins, with grains of rice, or splinters of wood.

"How many days to the Gold Mountain, tall one?" someone cried out.

The murmur of the gamblers stopped. The only sound in the hold was the rustle of the rats among the rice bags. Suddenly, Daniel feared the impact of his answer. His skin felt cold. "We've been on the sea for only fifteen days. The captain told me that another forty-five days must pass before we see the Gold Mountain."

A groan of despair passed over the clustered men. One young boy of sixteen began to weep. Forty-five days! It was unthinkable! Muttered curses arose here and there. They cursed the ship and the captain, the food and the rats. They vilified High Dragon Yao, who had persuaded most of them to go, and they spat upon the Golden One and all her descendants, for it was she who commissioned this infernal voyage. Then, still dazed, the men returned to their gambling.

Daniel had feared worse. He had feared their anger upon him as well. When they did not attack him, he stretched out on his bunk, sweating with relief. There was no mattress. Only bare boards and one thin cotton blanket. Daniel made himself as comfortable as possible and tried to sleep. Sleep was not easy, but it was the best time.

Daniel shut his eyes tightly and tried to remember Lai Jyu, the way she had looked on the first night he saw her, bending over his cot, the lamp making a halo about her head. He pictured her riding, her black hair flying in the wind. It whipped his face as he drew close to her. Then, all at once, the hair was Min Fei's, and he was lost in its jasmine perfume. Her tormenting hands glided up and down his body. Her legs parted like the welcoming gate of home and he entered joyfully . . .

Daniel opened his eyes and slammed his fist hard against the wood. A man was a fool to dream of women here. Such dreams could drive him to madness. He lay back and tried to make his mind a calm, glassy sea, free of thought, free of trouble.

But another woman entered, unbidden this time. The Golden One, with her great beauty, her furs and velvets and jewels, her grand house on the Bund that he remembered so vividly from his brief glimpse when he delivered the letter. The way her eyes had met those of the young captain. Of course, he concluded. She was nothing but a

common whore, like Min Fei, who had married Bolton for the purpose of inheriting his property. Daniel's imagination took wing. In the captain's dilemma, he saw a parallel with his own. Likely she was mistress of ten thousand deviltries, just like Min Fei. And it was easy enough to believe that she had used them on the poor captain.

All women were alike. He began to hate her. So much wealth at her fingertips and she had sent three hundred men off in this vermin-ridden hell of a ship with food that was unfit even for animals. Their misery was on her head, their blood on her hands. It was all her doing.

He would live, he swore. He would return to China one day, a man of wealth and power. His first duty would be to his parents. He would see them at rest. Then, he vowed with clenched fists, he would go back to Shanghai. He would find the Golden One and make her answer for every life lost and for every unspeakable day of this journey!

Twenty-Four

Shanghai

February, 1862

Serena had never seen snow before, but she was already tired of it. Dirty and gray with soot, it lay over Shanghai and the surrounding plain, nearly two feet of it.

Snow was a rarity in Shanghai. Some had hailed the unprecedented storm as a miracle, coming as it did when the Taiping army was within shooting distance of the city. It had stopped them in their tracks, the more credulous claimed. Those who knew better, however, gave full credit for halting the advance to the combined forces of the British Admiral Hope, the French Admiral Protet, and the crack troops of Frederick Townsend Ward.

Ward was on the move at last. His army had won a smashing victory over the Taiping-held stronghold at Kwanfuling, which he had taken by surprise attack. The garrison of seven thousand Taiping troops had fled, leaving more than nine hundred of their dead behind. Another eight hundred rebels had been captured. Ward's own casualties amounted to an incredibly low eighteen killed and forty-two wounded.

Kwanfuling was a serious loss to the Taipings, because of its strategic location. It would have served as a principal base in the rebel march on Shanghai. Its capture by Ward was a major blow to their invasion plans, and it provided Shanghai with an added measure of safety.

All Shanghai celebrated the victory. Harry and Serena had attended five balls in the past week, to which Serena had worn five different lavish gowns, with matching fans and slippers. She had danced until

her feet ached, laughing up at her partners, flirting harmlessly as she blew secret kisses to Harry over their shoulders.

It was a time of giddy madness. Shanghai's elite feasted on oysters and caviar and drank vintage French champagne. Early in the morning, when the dancing was done, they piled into their carriages. Wrapped in furs, with hot soapstones at their feet, they drove to the barricades. There they watched the flare of artillery and the blaze of burning villages out on the plain. On some nights, the distant fighting lit up the sky like fireworks. It was glorious.

Serena had plunged into the maelstrom of parties and dances like a desperate swimmer, determined to blot out the memory of Jason's hands cradling her face, his lips burning her forehead. She would try to forget for a time the last sight of his face in the gray dawn and the worry of having sent him away on such a dubious errand. She would put aside her agonizing concern for the brother who had disappeared among the Taipings and might be dead for all she knew. She would find distraction . . . or she would go mad with grief.

This time her refuge was champagne. And dancing. And beautiful gowns, each creation more fabulous than the last. She laughed until she wanted to cry. Her eyes were red, her head ached. But she would not stop. The next ball would be her own, and she would make it the talk of all Shanghai — a masquerade!

Fong would have the refreshments well in hand. Serena had no worries on that score. The old man ruled the Bolton kitchen like a despot, but everyone from the regular cook down to the little scullery maids worshiped him. He pushed them all to their best, and the results were spectacular.

The orchestra was tuning up downstairs. They had played for other balls and were the best to be had in Shanghai, this time of year at least. They would have to do. The ballroom sparkled from the mirrorlike sheen on the floor to the glittering chandeliers. The crystal, china, and silver had been polished and laid out. Now, at last, Serena could attend to herself.

On a whim, she had chosen a charmingly simple shepherdess costume with a white blouse, tight-fitting black bodice, and embroidered peasant skirt. The maids helped her to dress, laughing and chattering as they laced her tightly and slipped her into the costume. Then they fluffed and brushed her hair, which Serena had chosen to let hang loose. When they added the final touch, a wicked little black silk mask,

the result was pure enchantment. Serena smiled and pronounced herself satisfied.

The full moon rose in the icy sky. To the distant west, the rumble of gingalls, howitzers, and field cannon echoed over the flat land. Fires flared here and there in the darkness. Men died, as well as women and children, their blood freezing in pools on the crusty snow.

But the ballroom was beautiful, a fairy-tale world where knights and princesses, scoundrels, slave girls, and milkmaids laughed, feasted, and danced. Shanghai had never known such gaiety. Serena floated among her guests like a butterfly, her hair a shining beacon in the whirl of revelers, dancing every dance.

She stopped to rest beside Harry, who stood at his usual post to the left of the fireplace. His only condescension to costume was a simple white mask, which he wore with his evening clothes. "You're the handsomest man in the room!" she said, meaning it.

"Then you've forgiven me for not coming as a mandarin or a monkey or an Egyptian pharaoh? I'm too old for that sort of thing, little love."

"You're perfect. And I adore you." She squeezed his arm.

"Then I'm happy, Serena," he said, and had to struggle to keep his voice from breaking.

Serena's hand crept into his, then stiffened as Evan Ames, dressed as a pirate, walked into the ballroom. Evan had been in Shanghai for several weeks, representing his father's newspaper. Serena had seen him before, and he had been polite and pleasant. She hadn't really wanted to invite him tonight, but if she hadn't, people would have wondered why.

Serena braced herself as Evan strolled her way. "The costume suits you, Evan," she said, putting on a smile.

"Thank you." He bowed over her hand. "It seems I've arrived a bit late — but not too late to dance with my hostess, I hope. Would you do me the honor, Serena?"

The orchestra had struck up one of the new Strauss waltzes. No, she could not refuse him without a scene. "Certainly, Evan — " She gave him her hand.

He held her tightly. His breath smelled of gin. "You always did give great parties," he said. "I still remember your wedding — "

"I was hoping you'd forgotten that," Serena said uneasily.

"Now that isn't easy. Not when I see that fine Captain Frobisher of yours coming and going from your house at all hours. I'm not as

big a fool as you take me for, Serena. An aging husband . . . a dashing captain . . . ”

“Stop it!” she snapped. “Jason’s Harry’s good friend. He’s always welcome at our house!”

“Too welcome, I’d say, from what I’ve seen. And there are others who’d think so, too, if they knew what I knew.”

Serena was getting tired of his vicious little game. “What is it you want, Evan?” she demanded angrily.

“You. And I’m holding all the cards, Serena Rose.” His arm tightened. “I can make things most unpleasant for you if I choose to.”

“What about your wife?” Serena asked coldly.

“She’s a fool. And I never did get you out of my system.”

Serena stopped dancing and let her arms drop to her sides. “I don’t have to listen to this, Evan. Stay or leave as you like, but don’t bother me again.”

His smile was ugly. “You and your fine captain put me through a humiliating time the night of your wedding,” he said. “I’ll have you, my lovely, or I’ll have my sweet revenge. Either way, I’ll be satisfied.”

Serena turned her back on him and walked off the dance floor. Let him rot, she told herself. Him and his empty threats. What could Evan possibly do to her that wouldn’t get him thrown in jail?

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he moved to the edge of the floor and selected a new dancing partner. His choice was an odd one — a plain little spinster of forty named Harriet Plumm. Harriet was no beauty. Worse, she had an acid tongue and a reputation as the most vicious gossip in Shanghai.

They moved out onto the dance floor, Evan talking in a low voice, Harriet listening, her eyes growing bigger and bigger. She looked over at Serena and giggled.

Suddenly Serena knew what was happening. Her heart sank. Yes, Evan had his revenge. She would pay for refusing him. So would Jason. And — something hurt deep inside her like the cutting of a knife — so would Harry.

The Pacific Ocean

February, 1862

Nate Robbins stood in front of Jason’s desk, *his* stout legs braced wide and the long, blunt club grasped in both hands. “I tell you,

Cap'n, this is the only way t' handle them Chinks. It's not my place t' say so, mind you, but lettin' 'em on deck like you are's gonna come to nothin' but trouble."

"Something had to be done, Mister Robbins." Jason tried to be patient. The fellow meant well. "Since the meat had to be thrown over the side, they've nothing to eat but rice. I see no harm in letting a few of them up to fish, even though they haven't caught much. They've not made any trouble, have they?"

"The men don't like 'em, sir. They look funny an' they stink like pigs. I tell you, if one o' them yellow bastards steps out o' line white I'm on deck, he'll get a good whack — "

"Give me the stick, Mister Robbins." Jason held out his hand. "You can have it back when we get to San Francisco. Strike one of those Chinese and I'll see you in the brig for the rest of the trip!"

Robbins hesitated, and Jason braced himself for an argument. For a long moment, the two men glared at one another across the deck. Robbins's square-jawed face was scarred and battered from twenty years of round-the-globe brawling. One thin white line ran from his left ear to the corner of his mouth. Another slashed across his right eye. His nose was little more than a lump of twisted cartilage. Here was a man who waded into a fight like a buffalo bull into a mud-wallow.

"Robbins, there are nearly three hundred Chinese down there. The only way we'd hold out against them in an open fight would be to take pistols and gun them down. I'll not be having a battle provoked aboard this ship. Not by you or by anyone else. Now I'll have that stick."

Robbins let his breath hiss out between the gap in his teeth. "Aye, Cap'n. You're the boss." He handed Jason the stick. "But don't say ol' Robbins didn't try t' warn you. And another thing — you'd best take them hammers an' nails away from them Chinks. I tell you, I've shipped with 'em before. I seen a Chink kill a man once with nothin' but a board with a nail in it! Drove it right into the poor devil's eye, he did."

"As soon as the bunks are fixed, they'll be gathered up. And Mister Larson is keeping an account of everything to make sure it's either used or given back. Was there anything else you needed to talk with me about?"

"Seam openin' up on the main topgallant, that's all."

"Will it hold till morning?"

"Not much wind. I suppose so."

"Then send a man aloft to fix it as soon as it's light enough to see. Anything else?"

Robbins shook his head. He had salt-and-pepper hair, curly beneath a blue knit cap.

"Then that will be all. Thank you, Robbins." Jason bent to shuffling the papers on his desk. When he looked up again, Robbins had gone.

Restlessly, he got up and walked to the porthole. The sun was setting behind the ship, washing the sky a thin blood-red. In a few hours, it would be setting over Shanghai. And Serena.

Shrugging into his buckskin jacket, he went up on deck. The sea was as red as the sky, rippling black in the hollows of the waves. It was a calm evening, with barely enough wind to fill the sails. Jason's eyes wandered up the mainmast. Yes, there was the small separation in the seam of the sail. It would keep till morning.

From the quarterdeck, he watched the crew at work. They were Americans, most of them, and they knew their jobs. Not a bad lot at all. But his efforts to be fair with the Chinese had put him at odds with them. The air was tense with their hostility. It was not an open thing, but Jason felt it. Most of them had sailed with Robbins, and felt as he did about the coolies. Jason was a stranger to them, and he had dared to change the accepted way of doing things.

Only young Lars saw things as Jason did. Jason smiled with affection as his eyes picked out the beacon of the boy's fair hair on the rigging. He and Lars stood alone against the growing unrest of the crew.

Even the Chinese did not trust him. They had hated the foreign devils too long to trust any of them. They were as sullen and fearful as the day they'd trudged up the gangplank. Their conditions had improved some under Jason's supervision. The stink of the hold had lessened a bit, and the bunks no longer collapsed at night. The coolies could cook their rice in all but the roughest seas, and they cleaned it by the light of half a dozen new lanterns. But there were no smiles of acknowledgment or gratitude, for they were still wretched, and they still died. Jason could do nothing about the seasickness, the flux, or the depressing dimness of the hold. He had nothing with which to combat the

fleas, which had now moved up into the crews' quarters. And the rats multiplied as fast as they could be killed.

Misery and contention rode the ship like a plague. Jason felt as if he were sitting on a keg of black powder that might explode under him at any time. The sorest point with the crew was his having allowed the coolies to come up on deck.

The Chinese had rigged miniature seines from the stern that trailed down into the water. Although the speed of the ship lessened their effectiveness, they were pulled up several times a day and yielded a small harvest of seaweed, tiny sea creatures that looked like shrimp or jellyfish, and an occasional larger fish or squid. These they cut up and cooked with the rice, and Jason had no doubt that these gleanings did much to make up for the loss of the meat in the coolies' diet.

The crew fared better. Their rations had been purchased as a separate lot, and the salt pork and biscuits were at least edible. There were potatoes and carrots, as well as coffee. The men worked hard. They had to be well fed. He could not ask them to share their food with the Chinese passengers.

But, by damn, he did expect them to tolerate the Chinese and their fishing from the stern of the ship! He asked only that the crew leave the coolies alone!

Tempers were growing short. There were incidents every day. Just that morning a seaman claimed one of the Chinese had spat on him. He retaliated by smashing out the coolie's front teeth with a marlin-spike. Only the intervention of tall, quiet Cheng had prevented a brawl. He had gathered the bawling, cursing coolie like a child in his strong arms and carried him below so swiftly that even the men nearby were unsure of what had happened. Jason had ordered ten lashes for the seaman. It was the first time in seven years as a ship's master that he had ever had a man flogged.

The sky had deepened to purple, the sea to black. Jason's knuckles whitened on the rail at the memory of the whip cutting into the man's flesh, the sharp moans of pain, and the smell of blood on the air. The crew had watched in sullen silence, resentment seething in their eyes. Any one of them would have done the same, their manner clearly said, if some dirty Chink had dared to spit on them.

Jason turned at the sound of a creaking board. Cheng had come up onto the quarterdeck, his shadow as long as a tree's. "You sent for me, Captain?" he said softly.

"Yes." Jason cleared his throat. "I wanted to thank you for your help today."

"I was not helping you." Even in Cheng's water-smooth voice, there was a note of angry pride. His blood might be half-English, but his heart and mind were all Chinese.

"Very well then, Cheng," Jason answered. "But I need your advice. There may be more of the same if something is not done. We've not finished half the journey."

"It is your men who make me trouble."

"Aye . . . I know that. I saw it today."

"You've seen only a small part of it. When your back is turned — that is when your men open the hatch and urinate down into the hold. And the things they say — but perhaps that is not of so much importance. No one understands them but me, and I do not translate for the others."

"And what else?" Jason felt sick.

"Yesterday we found dead rats in the rice pots — not freshly killed rats, but rotted and full of worms. Some of the men had been down to inspect the bunks earlier in the day. One of them carried a sack. I don't know how they did it. No one saw them. And they cut holes in the fishing nets. We hear them laughing when we pull the nets up empty."

Jason felt his chest tighten with frustration. Little things like these were the hardest to combat. It was almost impossible to catch the guilty men — and likely as not that included most of the crew. They were completely at odds with him. He could only keep a lid on things as best he could and pray for a swift completion of this infernal voyage.

"We do not fault you," Cheng continued. "We know that you have tried to help us, and that your efforts have angered your men. But there will be trouble if things do not change."

"Can't you reason with them?"

"I have not yet acquired the wisdom of age. They do not listen to one as young as I."

Jason sighed as he watched the edge of a cloud fade from mauve to gray. "I could seal the hatches until we reach San Francisco. That's what my men want." He turned in time to catch a look of sheer panic that flashed across Cheng's young face before the features relaxed into Oriental impassivity once more.

"Please — " he said, making an effort to control his voice. "There are those of us who cannot bear the thought of so many days without sight of the sun."

"Then there must not be trouble. Otherwise, I'll have no choice."

"I — I will tell them what you said." The young man took a step backward and inclined his head in a slight bow before he vanished down the steps. Jason stood alone on the quarterdeck for a long time after he had gone, watching as the sky deepened to inky blackness and the stars came out one by one.

The wind picked up the next day, swelling the sails of the dowdy old *Marie Estelle* until they bulged like the belly of a pregnant woman. The ship was running well. Almost too well, Jason observed. The crew was too quiet, the Chinese too unobtrusive in their treks to the stern to check the nets. Silence hung in the air like a poisonous vapor, and the nearly new navy Colt .38 hung heavy in its holster at Jason's hip.

He could not name the sixth sense that had told him to wear the gun today. Lord knew he wasn't anxious to use the thing. But trouble was in the air, and if it came he knew that it would take more than his captain's authority to put it down.

He walked about the deck. The crewmen were studiously busy, checking the rigging and scouring the planks. Nate Robbins stood at the base of the mainmast, legs wide, hands in his pockets, cheeks red from the bite of the wind.

"Cap'n," Robbins nodded curtly.

"Robbins. Seems to be going well enough here, now that we've got some wind."

"Aye. That it is, sir." Robbins's gray eyes flickered toward the stern, where six or seven coolies were cleaning out the nets.

"I don't see Mister Larson."

"He's below, sir. Makin' his daily check on the Chinks like you told him to do. He took Booth with 'im."

"And the sail?"

"Mended, sir. I sent Johnson aloft an' he done it."

"Very good." Jason's eyes roamed the rigging. There seemed to be an unusually high number of men aloft, particularly on the mizzen, above the area where the Chinese were working. The hair rose on the back of his neck as a man on the crossjack uncorked a small flask and

began sprinkling something down on the heads of the coolies. Enraged shouts from below told him it was not water.

"Mister Robbins, get that man down here! Get them all down!

"Aye, aye, sir!" Robbins bawled out the order and the men who were aloft began to scramble downward.

"I'll see that man flogged!" Jason muttered. "Ten lashes, Robbins! Now!" He glanced toward the stern where the Chinese were huddled together, chattering angrily. "And get those coolies below before anything else happens! Get them down and close the hatch! Move!"

Robbins himself strode aft to where the coolies stood. "All right, you yellow bastards! Get a move-on! Down the hatch with you!" He did not have his stick this time, but he jabbed one Chinese in the ribs with his fist and yanked hard on the queue of another.

The Chinese whose queue had been pulled turned on Robbins, spitting a string of epithets that crossed every language barrier. Jason moved swiftly toward the stern, but not swiftly enough. With an oath, Robbins whipped out a knife, seized the coolie's long, braided queue, and hacked it off at the base.

"Robbins! Get back, you fool!" Jason roared above the din of the gathering crowd of deckhands. "Dammit, let me through!"

The coolie was white with rage. He reared back and landed a solid, crunching kick in Robbins's groin that sent the burly mate crumpling to the deck. Jason fought his way toward them, but he was wedged so tightly among the men that he could not even draw his gun. "Kill 'im, Nate!" somebody shouted.

The coolies were crowded back against one corner of the deck. Robbins, still doubled over with pain, raised the knife and flung it with a lightning downward motion of his wrist. It caught the Chinese neatly through the throat. For a moment, the coolie swayed, his eyes bulging, the handle and the tip of the knife protruding out opposite sides of his neck. Then he toppled. The impact of his landing sent a fountain of red blood splashing outward onto the shoes of the men who stood watching.

Then the crowd of seamen surged forward. The five remaining Chinese shrank back in a cluster against the rail. "Kill the yellow bastards! Kill 'em all!" the cry rose and echoed.

The movement of the crowd freed Jason's arm. Jerking the Colt from its holster and cocking it in the air, he raised it above his head and fired.

All sound and motion ceased. Jason cocked the pistol again and aimed it at his crewmen. "I'll kill the first one of you who makes a move!" he rasped. "Back to your posts and your quarters, all of you! We'll not be having a bloodbath aboard this ship!"

Slowly, reluctantly, the men backed off, some of them muttering under their breath. Robbins lay on his side, still cursing and moaning. The dead coolie was sprawled in his own blood. Jason jerked out the knife himself and flung it far out over the water. "You and you — " he picked two crewmen at random. "Get this poor devil over the side and clean up the deck. The rest of you — " He jerked his gun toward the five quivering Chinese. "Get below!"

The coolies could not understand his words, but the gestures were plain enough. They trooped down into the hold. Jason heard the loud murmuring below decks. The Chinese were stirred up, and who could blame them? He'd have to lock them in for a day or two until they settled down. In spite of the cold wind, sweat trickled down his face as he let the hatch fall and kicked the bolt into place. It had been bad enough, Lord knew, with one coolie killed and the rest of them madder than hornets. But without the Colt, it could have been worse. Much worse.

The crew had scattered to their duties. Jason was walking away from the closed hatch when he realized that Lars Larson and Seaman Booth were still below.

He whirled back as if he had been shot, panic gripping him like a seizure. One hand grasped the Colt, still cocked. The other ripped the bolt back and raised the hatch.

The stink of the hold rose like a miasma as Jason gazed down into the darkness. It was strangely quiet. "Larson! Booth!" he shouted, his voice echoing against the inside of the hull. No one answered him. Gripping the pistol tightly, he descended the first three steps of the ladder, then two more.

"That's far enough. Captain." Cheng's voice rang out in the stillness. "Throw your weapon back up on deck or your men will die."

Jason eased off on the hammer of the Colt and laid it on the hatch cover. When he looked down again, Cheng's face was gazing up at him like a pale moon in the darkness. "What do you want, Cheng?" Jason asked cautiously.

"Can't you guess? The lives of your two men for the murderer of our friend Yeung Shih-k'ai.

Jason drew in his breath. "It is not in my power to give him to you,"

"As captain of this ship anything is within your power."

"Mister Robbins will be turned over to the authorities in San Francisco."

"That's not enough. For the murder of a poor coolie, your judges would slap his hands and let him go. Yeung Shih-k'ai left a wife and five young children in Shanghai. They must be honorably avenged."

"They cannot survive on vengeance. Release Mister Larson and Mister Booth and I promise to give poor Yeung's family enough money to live for the next ten years. You have my word." It was a reasonable offer. Jason studied the young man's face in the dim yellow glow of the lantern. He was probably right about San Francisco justice. They'd not punish Robbins harshly for killing a Chinese. And Robbins had thrown the knife when he was maddened with pain and anger. Racial considerations aside, he did not deserve to die for it. To give him to the coolies, even in exchange for Lars and Booth, was unthinkable. It was out of the question. Jason prayed inwardly as Cheng pondered his offer.

"It is not for me to decide," Cheng said at last. "I will ask the others." He turned to the assembled coolies and addressed them first in Cantonese, then in Mandarin. There were accompanying murmurs as others translated for those who spoke only their own local dialects.

The reaction of the coolies was swift and unmistakable, a rumble of angry protest. It was revenge that mattered. Honor, not the lives of Yeung's widow and children. Cheng's face was grave as he spoke to Jason. "I am sorry. They say that if you don't deliver the man with the stick, your two crewmen will be killed." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I have seen you with the younger one, the fair-haired one. He is like a son to you, I know, and he has been kind to us as well. He is worth ten of the man who stabbed Yeung. Captain, if you do not do as they ask, I cannot prevent them from killing him."

"How much time will they give me?" Jason felt the tightness on his own throat.

Cheng consulted with four coolies who stood behind him. "Two days," he said.

"I want to see the men now. I must know they're alive." Cheng nodded and glanced at the others. The crowd parted to reveal two pale, dim figures lashed to upright timbers in the recesses of the hold.

Patrick Booth was Irish, small, tough, and feisty. He hated the Chinese and had surely been one of their chief tormenters. Now he wrenched at his bonds, which appeared to be made of twisted gunny. "Damn you all to hell, Cap'n!" he snarled. "You got me into this, you bloody Chink-lovin' sonofabitch! I hope you rot!" He spat onto the planks at his feet.

Lars Larson stood quietly, staring straight ahead. His coat had been torn away and there was a bloody welt on his left cheek. With his pale hair and skin, white shirt, and white pants, he stood out like a ghost in the darkness. Jason swallowed hard. "Are you all right, Lars?"

"Aye . . ." His voice could scarcely be heard the length of the hold.

"Don't be afraid, lad. We'll think of something!"

Lars nodded, his jaw set and his fists clenched at the sides of the beam to which he was tied.

"Two days," Cheng repeated. "That's all you have, Captain."

"Cheng — surely you don't want them to die — " Jason turned to the tall young man as his last hope.

"What I want makes no difference. I cannot save them."

"Then tell them — tell your coolies — " Jason paused as a jumble of meaningless threats and warnings poured through his mind. At last he turned without another word, and climbed the ladder back up into the sunlight. Two days. He had two days to deliver Robbins to certain death or to come up with a miracle.

Twenty-Five

Nanking
February, 1862

The *Chung Wang's* dungeon was cold and damp and dark. Slimy clusters of mold and mushrooms grew out of the walls, and strange little crablike creatures scuttled about on the floor. The prisoners inside saw light only once each day when the guards came in to bring rice and water and carry out the slops.

The Taipings had brought Stephen here when he had refused, as a matter of principle, to give English lessons to the *Chung Wang's* sons and chosen advisors. He had come to Nanking as a minister of God, he'd declared stubbornly, not as a teacher of languages. They had lured him here under false pretenses. They could put him to proper use, or they could let him leave Nanking.

Displeased by Stephen's arrogance, the *Chung Wang* had ordered him thrown into the dungeon. A few days in that wet, dark hole would take the starch out of any foreigner. After a week, he'd be begging to teach English, to polish the floors, to feed the pigs — anything!

Stephen had astounded them all. He had been in the dungeon a month, and his spirit remained unbroken. Each week the guards dragged him out and hauled him before the *Chung Wang*, who inquired solicitously about his health and asked him whether his spirit had come to a true repentance. Each week, filthy and unshaven, Stephen had stood silent in the presence of his captor, refusing to answer.

He had wondered for a time if he would be tortured as well. But the Taipings evidently reserved such practices for heathens, and there were enough heathens in the dungeon to fill any torture chamber.

Stephen had paced off the dimensions of the cell during his first days of captivity. It was about thirty feet square, he calculated, and held between twenty and twenty-five men. Oddly enough, in the past month it had become . . . home.

He moved about with relative ease now, each ridge and hollow of the rough stone floor familiar to his feet. In one hand, he carried a basin of water, from which he gave drinks to those of the prisoners who could no longer walk.

Stephen's head swiveled toward the heavy iron door as it grated open against the stones. The guards shoved a new prisoner inside. Stephen caught only a glimpse of him before the door banged shut once more. He was young and handsome, his hair braided and bound Taiping-style. His red tunic, though torn, was richly embroidered.

The young man had been thrown roughly inside. He landed on one knee. By the time he had regained his footing, the door had closed behind him. For a moment, he stood facing the door, cursing under his breath. Then, little by little, he collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably.

Stephen, the son of a Manchu prince, made his way toward the sound, but another prisoner had reached the young man first. "A fine fellow such as you," he said. "Whatever did you do to land yourself in such trouble?"

"And who are you to ask?" the young man snapped.

"A brother. We're all brothers here."

"Well, I'll not be your brother for long! I'll be leaving you in the morning!" The defiance in his voice broke into sobs once more. Such an answer could mean only one thing. He was to be executed.

Stephen reached the young man's side and laid an arm about his shoulders. It was a most un-Chinese gesture in a land where a familiar touch from a stranger was regarded as an insult, but the young man accepted it. Slowly, his weeping subsided until he could speak again. "The *Tien-Tien*," he whispered. "Tomorrow at dawn . . ."

The words struck his listeners with horror. The *Tien-Tien* — the lighting of the heavenly lantern — was a rare punishment. It was reserved for the most terrible crimes and was said to be even worse than the death of the thousand slices. In the *Tien-Tien*, the victim was stripped naked and wrapped in oiled paper, which was set on fire. Once the paper was burned, the process was repeated again and again, dozens of times, until the body was reduced to ashes.

"What did you do?" The voice of a Manchu prince's son was subdued.

"The *Chung Wang's* youngest concubine." He gave a bitter half-laugh, half-sob. "We were caught together."

"The girl — ?"

"Dead. Stoned in the square before the palace. They made me watch . . ." The young man began to weep again. Stephen tightened his arms around him.

"Courage — " he whispered.

"We could not help ourselves . . . We tried . . ."

"Tomorrow she will be with you."

"We were going to be married. Then the *Chung Wang* saw her. What he wants, he takes . . . Last night I stole into the garden to see her — " His body shook with racking sobs. "We — we could not help ourselves . . . And now she is dead — "

Wordlessly, Stephen held the quivering shoulders, his mind fumbling for something to say in the face of such overpowering anguish. "Perhaps," he whispered, "you will have found a way to be together after all, you and she — You must keep reminding yourself of that — "

"Drivel!" someone snapped. "If she's waiting, she's waiting! If not — at least you must die well! The *Chung Wang* will be watching, may all his daughters be whores! Spit in his face! Show him how a *man* meets death! That is the only way!"

But the young man only continued to quake and sob. Silent and helpless, Stephen held him in his arms. The other prisoners stirred and mumbled. Some of them sat up and edged closer.

Suddenly, the young man raised his head. "You could do it," he said. "You could kill me tonight, and save me from the *Tien-Tien*!"

"That's easy to say," the prince's son rejoined. He stretched out on the floor. "But the Taipings have thought of that. The man who helped you to cheat the executioner would be forced to take your place. And there is no way for you to take your own life here. No hooks or beams in the ceiling, no knives or tools, nothing to swallow." He sighed and scratched at his hair. "No, my young friend. From some things there is no escaping. You will face the *Tien-Tien* tomorrow. Face it like a hero."

"I can't . . . By all that's in heaven, I can't!" The youth pressed his face against Stephen's shoulder and began to wail like a child.

"I've seen the *Tien-Tien*," said the prince's son. "The first burning only blisters the skin and singes the hair, but it's worst of all because of the shock. The second takes most of the hair and skin . . . the third or fourth, the eyes . . ."

"*Mh-hou chou!* Be still!" Stephen snapped. "He's only a boy! And it's an awful death! You wouldn't talk that way if you were facing it yourself!" He rocked the young man in his arms, much as a mother would rock her child. "Cry . . ." he whispered. "Cry for all of your lost life. Cry for your love, cry for your pain . . ."

All night Stephen held the youth, cradling him, comforting him, wiping the wet face with his ragged shirt. Dawn was something sensed rather than seen. Stephen and the young man were awake and waiting when the massive door scraped open again. Six guards walked in, carrying lanterns and spears.

"Good-bye, my friend." The young man rose shakily to his feet. "I — I will die as well as I can — " His tears were spent, his face pale and set.

"Courage." Stephen pressed his shoulder for the last time. "It will pass," he whispered. "All things pass at last."

The youth turned and walked away, surrounded by his guards.

At the door, he paused and looked back for a moment, his face impassive. Then he was gone.

The prince's son stretched and stirred. "He will die like a man, that one, I think. Last night I had my doubts. But you seem to have given him courage."

"The courage was inside him. It may be that he found it."

"Pah! Don't be so modest, foreigner! You have a gift. I've seen it before! That priest who was sentenced to be sliced —"

"But I did nothing —"

"As I said, you're too modest. You did everything."

Stephen walked to the iron door and laid his cheek against its coldness. He could hear nothing outside. But then he almost never did.

"You're a fool to stay here when you could leave," the Manchu said. "I'd kiss the *Chung Wang's* feet if he'd let me out. His feet! I'd kiss his bare ass if need be!" He scratched his head. His stomach growled noisily. "I don't understand you! Why do you stay?"

Stephen pressed his forehead against the door. "I don't know," he said softly. "It's almost as if I . . . belonged here."

"Rubbish!" The prince's son yawned. "Nobody belongs in a place like this!" He turned over and went back to sleep.

The Pacific Ocean

February, 1862

Daniel sat on an empty hogshead and studied the two prisoners out of the corner of his eye. Days and nights were the same in the blackness of the ship's belly, and there were no clocks. The only sure way to tell day from night was by the increase and decrease in the sounds of activity on the upper decks. From what he could hear, Daniel calculated that this must be the morning of the second day. The time of reckoning was close at hand.

Most of the coolies were optimistic. The lives of two innocent men for the life of one who wasn't worth turtle dung. The choice would be easy they said, and they joked about the things they were going to do to the man with the stick once he was in their hands.

Daniel knew better. Jason Frobisher was a man of principle. Even to save the life of a friend, he would not violate what he believed to be right. But neither would he leave Larson and Booth to die. In all likelihood, he would storm the hold. More than one man would lose his life today.

Earlier Daniel had happened across one of the small kitchen knives that was used to cut up the fish, and he had hidden it away in his tunic. He patted his sleeve and felt its reassuring stiffness. It was a pitiful weapon, but better than nothing.

The two prisoners slumped in their bonds. They had not been untied since their capture, nor given food or water, and they were already beginning to weaken. Although they had not been seriously harmed, the coolies had made sport of them, jabbing them with sharp sticks and burning their skin with opium lamps or hot coals from the stove. Their faces and arms were covered with small red brands.

Surprisingly, it was Booth who had broken first. The tough little Irishman, so defiant in the beginning, had begun to scream uncontrollably by the end of the first day. Now he hung in his lashings like a bag of onions, blubbering softly to himself and whimpering if anyone came near. The coolies spat on him as they walked past.

Lars Larson, drawing on some hidden strength, had borne his torment with dignity. Though he flinched with pain when the hot coals

burned his skin, he had not cried out once. Sometimes his eyes would close and his lips would move silently in what Daniel could only guess to be prayer. He stood now, leaning into his bonds to rest, his eyelids drooping and his fair hair plastered damply to his skull.

Daniel had not spoken to him. He had turned his back on the tormenting of the prisoners, telling himself that these foreigners were of no concern to him, that he felt no kinship with them. By choice he had denied his mother's blood and elected to be totally Chinese. Yet he had hated cruelty all his life, and he sat now, torn by the desire to go and speak a word of comfort to the young man or even to press a furtive cup of water to the parched lips.

Daniel scratched at a troublesome flea bite under his knee. He could hear the subtle creak of the ship's timbers and the scamper of the rats among the food stores. He fingered the goatskin bag that held his father's seal and the key to the box of scrolls. He was the last of the House of Cheng, he reminded himself. If a fight was coming, his first duty was to live. He would stay out of trouble, he resolved. This, after all, was not his quarrel or his doing.

He was about to get up and look for a safer place when one of the stoves exploded with a thunderous roar and a burst of smoke that filled the hold with choking black dust. Men staggered backward, some fell. The hatch overhead flew open; the crew, led by Jason Frobisher, charged down the ladder.

The hold was a melee of shouting men and swinging clubs as they fought their way toward the prisoners. Only the captain seemed to be armed with a gun. The rest of the men brandished cutlasses and timbers. The coolies seized hammers, boards, razors, pieces of the stove — anything they could find — and flung themselves at the foreign devils.

Daniel crouched beside the prisoners, the little kitchen knife clutched in his fist. One sinewy, bare-chested coolie leaped out of the mob, jerked Booth's head upward by the hair, and slit his throat with one lightning stroke of the long barber's razor in his hand. A river of blood spurted out of Booth's neck as the man turned to Lars Larson. Lars's blue eyes opened wide as the strong fingers grabbed his hair and the razor lifted.

Then Daniel struck. The flying weight of his charge knocked the coolie off his feet and carried both of them into the thick of the fight.

He felt the lean, hard body go down under him, heard the man scream as the mob shifted, crushing flesh and bone under its weight.

Daniel struggled to his feet and shoved his way back toward Lars, but another coolie had reached him first, this one wielding a small hatchet. As he raised it to strike, a bullet from Jason Frobisher's pistol slammed into his back. He pitched forward and slid down Lars's chest, leaving a bloody smear all the way along the lad's white shirt and trousers as he fell to the deck.

A final lunge brought Daniel to Lars's side once more. His head swam with fear and battle-lust. His nostrils quivered with the odors of death. It was instinct above reason that drove him, he was to conclude later, some hidden legacy from his mother, perhaps. Without really knowing why, he slipped behind Lars, took his little knife and sawed away at the young man's bonds until the strands of twisted gunny were severed and Lars staggered free.

The captain had seen him. Rushing forward, he caught Lars in his arms and pulled him back toward the ladder. With one hand, he fired the pistol twice at the ceiling, the signal for retreat. The sailors began to regroup and pull back, swinging swords and clubs as they went. Through the clearing smoke, Daniel could see four or five huddled bodies on the floor, all of them Chinese.

The coolies pressed in upon their retreating foes, but the sailors were tightly grouped now, with Lars in their midst. They made an orderly exit up the ladder, those in back fending off the attackers with their cutlasses.

Jason Frobisher was among the last to ascend. Across the smoke-filled hold, his eyes met Daniel's for a moment, his level gaze saying everything that needed to be said. Daniel suddenly realized that he had been a vital part of the captain's plan all along. Frobisher would never have attempted such a perilous rescue if he had not sensed strongly that Daniel would help him save Lars. And he had been right.

Daniel lowered his eyes, flooded with sudden confusion. He had told himself that he was all Chinese, that his foreign side did not count. Yet when Lars had been about to die, Kathleen Bellamy's blood had surged up in him and he had attacked a man of his own race, a man whom he had not considered his enemy until that moment. He sank down beside the timber where Lars had been tied and buried his face in his hands.

"Seal the hold!" Jason Frobisher's voice, from the deck above, rasped with bitterness. "Seal it tight. We'll not be opening the hatch till we dock in San Francisco!"

Daniel looked up. His eyes grasped at the last beam of sunlight coming down through the hatch before the cover slammed into place, plunging the hold into darkness. He clenched his fists to control his panic. From anger he drew courage as he cursed the captain, cursed the ship, then three times over cursed the Golden One!

Twenty-Six

Shanghai

May, 1862

Spring had come to China. The plains and terraced hillsides waved green with growing rice seedlings and sprouting wheat. Clouds of plum, peach, and cherry blossoms flooded the high valleys, and summer swallows returned to nest under the eaves of ancient pagodas. Dogtooth violets and peonies pushed up tentative shoots out of the damp soil, then budded and bloomed as the land gave birth. Water buffalo, their early spring plowing done, wallowed and basked like children at the beach.

Across the plain that stretched to the west of Shanghai, the battles raged on. By early March, Frederick Townsend Ward had achieved three spectacular victories at Kwanfuling, Kaochaio, and Hsiaotang. For a time, Ward was the darling of Shanghai. On his rare visits to the city, he was lionized, petted, praised, and sought after. Wealthy matrons paraded their unmarried daughters before him. Shanghai hostesses competed savagely for his presence at their soirees. Their husbands stocked their cellars with his favorite champagne.

Then, with his prestige at its crest, Ward had done the unthinkable. In a traditional Chinese ceremony, he had taken pretty little Chang Mei, the daughter of the Chinese banker Taki, as his wife.

A horrified Shanghai society had promptly turned its back on him. Ward had not seemed to care. He had secluded himself and his bride in the house that he maintained in the French Concession for a brief honeymoon. Then he had returned to the emergencies of the battlefield.

Tsipao fell, then Wangkiatze and Kiating. So great was the slaughter that when the wind blew across the plain from the west, the citi-

zens of Shanghai veiled their faces with perfumed handkerchiefs to block out the stink of rotting corpses. The critical walled city of Tsingpu, where Ward had been wounded in the jaw two years before, was taken in early May, but so vast were the Taiping holdings and so numerous their forces that they only flowed back like the sea, to surge up and strike in another place.

Jason Frobisher had left the *Marie Estelle* in the care of a San Francisco shipping agent and booked passage on a clipper for the return trip to Shanghai. For six long weeks, he had paced the deck, a driven man, haunted by the memory of that awful voyage.

Of the three hundred coolies who'd signed on the *Marie Estelle*, two hundred and sixty-three had stumbled down the gangplank onto the San Francisco docks. Of the rest, twenty-six had died and the other eleven were so ill that they'd had to be carried ashore.

Jason had paid off the crew and handed Robbins, who'd been in the brig, over to the authorities. Then he'd turned his back on that stinking pit of a ship and walked away.

Later, he'd heard that Robbins had gotten off with a reprimand. The killing, after all, had taken place on the high seas, and not within the jurisdiction of the California courts. By the time Jason learned of it, he no longer cared. He wanted only to put the nightmare behind him.

He had taken Lars home — a shaken, silent Lars. Physically, the young man was sound enough, but the sweet, trusting light that had shone in his eyes was gone forever. Lars flinched whenever he was touched, and he shrank from strangers. He would recover, Jason reflected. In a few months, perhaps Lars would be ready to sail with him again. But something precious had died in the horror of the hold. Lars had lost his innocence.

The question of whether he had done right in sealing the hatch had kept Jason awake for many nights. It had seemed such an inhuman thing to do, but the only way to prevent a full-scale bloodbath. Yet the sight of young Cheng shuffling down the gangplank, gaunt and gray-faced, his light-starved eyes squinting in the sun, would torment him to the end of his days.

It was past midnight when the clipper sailed up the river and anchored off the Shanghai Bund. Jason was awake and straining against the rail. He had not slept for days. One thought had lashed his mind constantly, like a whip. Serena. To find her. To dump his ghastly

burden of guilt at her feet. To stop her before she launched another shipload of hell and death for the Land of the Gold Mountain.

Impatient, he struck his fist against the rail. His passion for her only intensified his rage, and his rage intensified his passion. The distant lights of Shanghai mocked him across the water. Morning seemed a hundred years away.

"We'll not be tying up and disembarking till dawn." The captain had come down off the quarterdeck to stand beside him. "You may as well turn in, Mister Frobisher." He lit his pipe. The match flared up in the darkness, then died away.

Jason shook his head "I don't think I can wait. If you'll lend me a lantern, I'll signal for a sampan. You can send my things ashore in the morning."

"Anxious to see to your ship, are you?" The captain puffed at his pipe, its bowl glowing red in the night.

"I — I suppose. Yes."

"Very well then I'll have the watch signal for you. Been a pleasure having you aboard Frobisher. It's not often I've the privilege of another clipper cap'n's company." He extended his hand. "I'll be going below now. It's been a long day and my bunk's waiting. Best of luck to you. Hope you'll find your own ship ready."

"Thank you," Jason responded to the hearty handshake. "Thank you for everything."

After the captain had gone, he stood and waited for the sampan, his pulse galloping strangely as he thought of seeing Serena again. The sky was moonless, the stars scattered like spilled diamonds against the black sky. A spring wind blew in from the sea and sang in the rigging of the clipper. Threads of mist drifted above the water. Damn her, he thought, for what she had done to him. He wanted to take her in his arms and crush her until she sobbed with the pain of it, to bruise her lips with his until they tasted each other's blood.

But no. He would see her with Harry. He would tell them what had happened and then he would go. He would sleep on the *Tarpon* or ride out to Sungkiang, and never set foot in Harry Bolton's house again.

This was madness, to wake them up in the night. Things had waited this long. They could wait till morning. He would send the sampan back and go to bed, he resolved. He could make the little craft out

now, slipping along through the dark water, the Chinese boatman standing in the stern. He raised his hand to wave it away —

But the fever was on him, so fiery and fiery that he could hardly stand still. He could not live for even another hour without seeing her.

The bow of the sampan bumped lightly against the hull of the ship. Cursing himself with every motion, Jason lowered the rope ladder.

Serena stirred restlessly on the white silk sheets. A warm wind blew in off the river, lifting the gauze netting that hung about her bed. She sat up and brushed a hand through her hair.

It seemed strange, not having Harry here. He'd left for Amoy on business five days ago, and would not be returning for at least another week. It was the longest separation of their marriage, and for Serena it had been a time of unrest.

Maybe it was only the spring — the thawing of the land, the freshening of the breeze, the reawakening of life. Perhaps it was because she had not seen Jason in nearly four months, or simply because she was alone. But a sweet, poignant ache had begun to well up inside her. She could not rest. She laughed and cried too easily. The sight of a flower beaded with dew or a sunrise over the river was enough to send the tears surging to her eyes. The intricacies of contracts, ledgers, and invoices, which had so long fascinated her, had suddenly become tedious, and she would often find herself gazing across the office, her eyes searching the portrait of Kathleen Bellamy who had lost everything but love — and thus, perhaps, had lost nothing at all.

Serena smoothed her pillow and lay back, her eyes staring into the darkness.

The rap of the knocker on the front door below snapped the thread of her thoughts. She sat up. It was well past midnight, much too late for any sort of social call.

The knock sounded again, more urgently. The boys would all be asleep in their quarters. Maybe it was an emergency. Maybe it was bad news, something about Harry —

She flew out of bed, snatching up her wrapper and flinging it on as she hurried down the stairs.

The door was locked for the night. She struggled with the bolt until it slid back, then lifted the latch and cautiously opened the door.

Jason stood on the porch, his face gaunt, his eyes shadowed in the light of the lantern.

"Serena, I have to speak with you and Harry."

"Harry's in Amoy," she whispered, stunned by the sight of him.

She saw him visibly slump, as if he had suddenly found himself overwhelmed by insurmountable odds. "Come in, Jason," she whispered. "Hurry, before anyone sees you — " She reached out and tugged his arm.

He stepped inside and she closed the door, surrounding them both with darkness. He was very near, warm, breathing. Oh, this was peril for them both! What if someone saw him, she thought in sudden panic. How the rumors would fly in the tight little world she inhabited!

"Come into the parlor," she said, moving away from him. "I'll light the lamp and get you something to drink." She flitted ahead of him and opened the parlor door.

"Never mind the drink. Or even the lamp. I won't be staying." He stood in the doorway, strangely rigid. "I'll say what I came to say, Serena, and then I'll be on my way." His voice was tight with suppressed rage.

"Jason — " His anger puzzled her, "What is it? Did you get the Manila contract?"

"That? Lord, I'd almost forgotten. No. I was underbid for it. That's nothing." He cleared his throat. "You sentenced me to eight weeks of hell when you sent me off in that ship! And those coolies — it was worse than hell for them!"

One hand crept to her mouth. "I didn't know — " she whispered.

"That's why I came tonight. To tell you about it, and to warn you that if you're planning any more of those wretched shipments, for the love of God, cancel them!"

"But I'm not — I wasn't. Not until word came back on how the first one had done, at least — "

"Twenty-seven men, Serena. Twenty-six coolies and one of the crew, all dead. I can give you an accounting if you want, one at a time — "

"Jason — " She felt her face go pale with horror.

"And Lars — they almost killed him. He'll never be the same again. Do you want to hear more? I can tell you — "

She pressed her hands to her face. He towered above her, quivering with rage. "No more . . ." she whispered, biting her lip. "Not tonight. Tell me in the morning, when I can think. I didn't know. I swear to heaven, I didn't know — " Her voice was thin with shock.

"I'll save it for when Harry's here," he growled. "For now, I'll be going!"

"Your room's made up. Stay if you like," she said wearily, still crushed by what she just heard.

"I can bunk aboard the *Tarpon*. I'd not risk your precious reputation by sleeping here when Harry's away." His voice carried a note of sarcasm that made her anger flare up like a torch.

"You needn't be so thoughtful, Captain," she snapped. "There's not a great deal left of my reputation — or yours either, for that matter!"

"What?" He had turned to leave. Her words caught him in mid-stride.

"Evan Ames. He's been spreading tales. You may as well know that half of Shanghai believes you and I are lovers!"

She'd shocked him. Now it was his turn to be horrified.

"I'll kill him!"

"No, you won't. That would only call attention to the lie."

"Harry — "

"I don't think he knows. I'm praying the talk will die before he hears it. Stay or go, then. It's all the same to me!"

She turned and walked the width of the parlor to quiet the storm that churned and pounded inside her. Her hands clenched and unclenched as she listened for the sound of his retreating footsteps and the opening and closing of the front door. She heard only the wind, sighing in the acacias that grew outside the garden window. When she turned around, he was still standing in the doorway of the parlor.

"Serena — " He took a step toward her, then another. For a moment, she stood where she was, hating him, loving him, watching him come. Then, with a little cry that blended despair and joy, she ran to his arms.

She felt his breath stop as he pulled her to him. His hands were hard through the thin silk of her gown and wrapper, her body clasped to his — agonizingly pressing her breasts and the curve of her thighs.

With one hand, he grasped her face and lifted her chin. "And is it true, Serena?" he whispered roughly. "You and I . . . Are we lovers?"

Then he kissed her, his mouth cruel and angry. His arms jerked her tight against his chest and held her there, his closeness a torment of bliss to her.

"Jason . . . " she whispered as his lips moved hungrily across her face and down to her throat. "I never wanted this . . . I never asked for it . . . " He kissed her again, the wildness of her response making lies of all her words. Her arms pulled him down to her. Her lips opened. His tongue was warm and strong.

"Are we lovers, Serena . . . Are we?" he murmured against the hollow of her mouth. His hair curled about her frantic fingers. His skin smelled of leather and mist and sea spray.

She protested feebly, but her body betrayed her. Need was a pulsing current that swept through every vessel and nerve and fiber and cell, until Serena could no more resist it than she could keep her heart from beating. "Jason — " she moaned as he found her breasts, his bruising kisses drawing the nipples into hard, quivering peaks and sending an ache of unbearable sweetness down into the most hidden parts of her.

There was a rage in him still. She felt it in his hands and in the anguished rise and fall of his chest. He did not speak as they sank together onto the white fur rug before the fireplace. His jaw was tightly set as he raised long enough to strip away his clothes and fling them off to one side. He had fought it, too, as long and as hard as she had. Useless, all of it. Wasted, all the sarcasm, the arguments, the frantic, desperate resisting. They had been lovers from the first moment their eyes met. They could fight no longer.

He knelt above her in the darkness, his body taut and fully aroused. His breath rasped in his throat. The distant starlight cast silver ripples on his heaving shoulders as he gazed down at her for a long moment. "Damn you!" he whispered. Then, with a small sound that was half-sob and half-curse, he fell upon her like a lion, his kisses brutal and punishing, his arms like steel about her.

Serena gasped as she took the force of his weight. His skin was cool from the night. Her own was warm, and she felt the silken roughness of hair where he pressed her. His hand moved downward to ready her. Long, tapering fingers, swift and expert. She closed her eyes, whispering his name again and again as he opened her. For the first time,

she felt the exquisite parting of her own flesh. And Jason. Jason filling her —

“Oh!” She cried out at the unexpected burst of pain.

He had turned suddenly to stone. “Serena — by all heaven, you’re a virgin!”

“Yes . . . ” she managed to whisper, her head rolling back and forth in unbearable ecstasy. “Harry . . . he can’t — ”

“Serena!” The anger drained out of him. His arms enfolded her; his mouth found hers once more, gently this time, ardently. “Serena, my love . . . Oh, God, if I’d only known . . . There are so many things I would have understood — ” He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her eyes. “Forgive me, Serena . . . Oh, forgive me, my dearest — ”

“Love me, Jason,” she murmured. “Just love me . . . ” Her body arched upward to meet him. He caught her fire, and passion took them both. He was all tenderness now, all giving. Serena closed her eyes and abandoned herself to the wonder of it, until with an almost unendurable burst of sweetness, she passed through death and became one with gods and goddesses.

The night lay soft and black around them. She nestled in the curve of his naked body, her fingers toying with the dark mat of hair on his chest. Never had she known such utter peace.

“Are we lovers, Serena?” He kissed her hair.

In answer, she pressed her face into the hollow of his neck. “Thank you, Jason,” she murmured. “Thank you forever.”

He drew her closer. “We’ll pay for this one day. you know. Everything has its price. There’s got to be a reckoning. With Harry. With each other.”

“Not now — ” She touched his lips with her finger. “I can’t bear it now, Jason. I’m too happy.”

He did not answer, but his arms pulled her tight against him. His fingers wandered through her hair. She lifted her face and he tasted her mouth, nibbling gently at her lips until the tingling began once more, low in her body.

Fiercely, she returned his kiss. “Again!” she whispered.

Twenty-Seven

Placer County, California
July, 1862

Daniel had been quick to discover the realities of life in the Land of the Gold Mountain. To begin with, the gold wasn't just lying around waiting to be picked up. Every grain of it had to be wrenched from the earth, with pick and shovel or with powerful streams of water. It had to be washed out of the dirt and gravel with exquisite care, gathered and hoarded. And it was by no means his for the taking. It belonged to "the company" — some nebulous organization in San Francisco whose name he did not even know. The official penalty for keeping so much as a grain of it was to be whipped and to have one's queue cut off. Rumor had it that even worse things happened.

Daniel and the two-hundred-odd men who'd come with him on the *Marie Estelle* had been shipped as a unit up the Sacramento River by steamer as far as the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. From there they'd been marched up rough, winding roads to their mining site, a claim abandoned by a crew of Americans who'd had a hydraulic hosing operation.

The bosses were Chinese, and there were three of them. Auspicious Wu, so named because he had once enjoyed a lucky streak at gambling, was the man in charge. He was slender and handsome, in a weasel-like way, with the sort of intelligence that lends itself to manipulating others. His second-in-command was Pock-faced Chau, who was whispered to have once been a pirate in the East China Sea. Chau's constant companion was a squat, muscular brute of a man with one puckered ear. He was known simply as Fung, and he seldom spoke. But then, he seldom needed to speak. His size, his strength, and

his reputation for viciousness spoke for him. They were members of the Society of Eternal Benevolence, which was the American arm of the Brotherhood of the Red Lotus. Eternal they might be, but benevolent they were not. Their main purpose was to see that no coolie failed to pay the debt of his passage to the Gold Mountain. Their chief weapon was terror, and trouble was rare.

Because Daniel was among the strongest, he was put to shoveling. The first few days were torture, as muscles that had not been used for the length of the sea journey stretched and strained, and hands softened by inactivity bled and blistered. But he was young, and he toughened with the weeks. Before long, he had reached the point where it was not so much the strenuousness of the work that bothered him as the monotony. In nearly three months, Daniel had not known a day of rest.

They slept in the log huts that had been abandoned by the American miners. Fifteen men in a space that was not much bigger than the toolshed Daniel had occupied in the house of Liu. Sacks of rice, tea, and dried fish took up one corner, the little cookstove with its accompanying clutter of pots and pans another. The chimney did not draw well. The air in the cabin was always hazy with smoke, tinged often as not with the smell of opium. Nights were spent in gambling, smoking, storytelling, and occasional brawling. Sleep was a last resort, something fallen into when exhaustion precluded anything else.

Most of the men were city bred. They were used to the crowded conditions. But Daniel found the nights almost as hard to endure as the days. Each evening was like a return of the hold of the *Marie Estelle*, to stale, smoke-filled air, fetid with the odors of dried fish and unwashed bodies, to the talk and the noise and the cramped sleeping space. Daniel had grown up alone except for his parents. More even than comfort and good food and leisure, he missed solitude.

One night, his head swimming with weariness, he had simply gathered up his bedroll, gone out the door, and lain down on the front porch of the cabin. Lulled to sleep by crickets, he had spent his first truly restful night since the departure from Shanghai.

What followed was as natural — and perhaps as inevitable — as frost in autumn. One taste of freedom demanded another. Soon, in his restlessness, Daniel found himself wandering about the camp late at night, wonderfully alone with the cool air and the sounds of darkness.

It was strange how much at home he felt in these alien mountains. Gently at first, they began to call to him. In the beginning, fear of reprisals was enough to keep his footsteps within the limits of the camp. If he were caught roaming in the hills, he would never convince the bosses that he was not running away. He shut his ears to the music of the wind in the pines and the far-off shriek of the golden eagle. But the siren's call only grew stronger, like the voice of Min Fei — caressing his ears, warming his senses, compelling him until it grew at last to be like a madness in his blood. He could no longer help himself.

The first night he left the camp he went only to the top of the nearest hill.

The second night he grew bolder. Fixing his bearings on the stars, he struck out for a more distant hilltop. A full moon illuminated the way, its liquid light rippling on the smooth-surfaced rocks. A wolf howled from the top of a ridge. It was a glorious night, but Daniel felt a prickle of apprehension along his spine. Instinct told him he should not have left the camp tonight. Why hadn't he listened? He paused, straining his ears for any rustle of danger, but he heard only the comfortable night sounds of the forest. He walked on, more cautiously, remembering the evening meal that night.

One of Daniel's cabin mates was the man known as the Opium King. The two were not close friends — perhaps because Daniel was one of the only men in the camp who had not been one of the wily fellow's customers. Still, they lived together comfortably enough, and Daniel had always left him alone.

It had been something of a surprise, then, when Daniel had glanced up over his rice bowl to find the slitted eyes of the Opium King studying him. "I missed you from the porch last night, tall one."

The muscles tightened at the back of Daniel's neck, but he did not answer.

"At the hour of the tiger." The Opium King smiled. "I had to go to the bushes. When I stepped across your bed — ah! You were not in it!"

Daniel paused between bites. "So? I, too — "

"Perhaps. But you were slow in returning. I heard you come back . . . long after I did." He chuckled softly and drifted over to the stove for a second helping of rice. Daniel had slipped out of his way by the time he returned.

And here he was — out in the hills again tonight! Idiocy! Daniel forced himself to stop climbing. Who could guess what the Opium King had up his sleeve? Betrayal maybe. Or more likely, bribery of some sort. He would likely be waiting on the porch when Daniel returned, laughing under his breath in the odd way he had about him. Daniel shuddered. Then, resolutely, he turned and began to walk back down the mountain toward the camp. The more he thought of what might be awaiting him, the more panic-stricken he became. He would have run headlong downhill if it had not been for the rocks and the darkness.

The slope seemed endless, but at last he reached the camp and flattened himself against the shadowed side of one of the sheds, his heart jumping. From where he was, he could see the moonlit porch of his cabin, empty except for his bedding and the chunks of firewood he had piled beneath the blanket in the shape of his own body. The camp was totally quiet.

As quickly as possible, he removed the wood and got back into bed, where he lay with his eyes staring open at the sky and beads of sweat dotting his face. All that fear for nothing! But he'd been right in coming back he reflected. The risks were too great and the consequences could be grave. He would not leave the camp again, he promised himself, no matter how bewitchingly the freedom of the mountains might call to him.

He held out for six nights, but on a night filled with shooting stars, his resistance broke. Cursing himself, he got up and stuffed his bed with firewood. He would walk only around the camp in a tight circle, he told himself as he stole away. But soon he was running uphill, his muscles singing and his nostrils drinking the wind. The pines were black against a silver sky, and even the grunt of a prowling bear did not frighten him. He was king of the night, drunk on starlight and homesickness.

He crossed one ridge and then another, loping with the ease of a deer. Approaching the crest of the third, he stopped and forced himself to turn back. He was being reckless. If he did not hurry back to camp at once, the dawn would catch him and he would be lost. Anxiously, he lengthened his stride.

His breath came easier as he paused above the camp and looked down into the hollow where the cabins lay. All was quiet.

Daniel swung his arms as he wound his way downward. He was pleasantly tired. An hour's sleep would be enough to refresh him in time to begin work at the sluice at dawn.

The sky was just beginning to fade when Daniel emerged from the fringe of the pines and crossed the open place between the forest and the outer circle of cabins. He was safe now. He sighed with relief as he slipped down along the shadow of the nearest wall.

"No further, tall one!" Strong arms seized him from behind, jerking his elbows backward. Instinct told him that there were two men. He struggled to break loose. One arm tore free as he twisted his body, but the point of a knife against his throat brought him up short. "Enough of this!" The blade pricked his flesh. "One move, and you die like a slit pig!" He recognized the unblinking stare of Pock-faced Chau above the glint of the knife. It would be Fung, then, behind him, twisting his arms until the sockets ground. Daniel swallowed hard, and felt the dagger's razor-sharp tip pierce the skin over his Adam's apple.

"In there!" Chau jerked his head in the direction of a nearby toolshed. Auspicious Wu lounged in the doorway, his arms folded across his narrow chest.

Fung shoved Daniel into the shed with such force that he tripped over the doorsill and fell sprawling onto the dirt floor. Before he could recover, Fung kicked him viciously between the legs with the toe of his miner's boot. The pain radiated up from Daniel's groin like slow lightning as his body curled into a tight ring of agony.

"Blindfold the son of a turtle!" Auspicious Wu's thin voice snapped. "And tie his hands! Your ears, you fat toads, if he gets away!"

While Daniel was still helpless on the floor, Fung and Chau hurriedly obeyed. The coarse hemp rope burned his wrists as Fung jerked it tight. Chau knotted a greasy rag around Daniel's head, covering his eyes.

Auspicious Wu prodded Daniel's ribs with his foot. "So we've caught you, little bird! You'd best tell us. You know what we can do to you. Now — save yourself and us a good deal of trouble and tell us where you've been hiding it!"

"Hiding what?" Daniel spat, though he knew what they meant. He was sitting up now, hurt, humiliated, and helplessly enraged.

Chau kicked him in the side of the head. "The gold, you fool! Why else would you leave the camp in the middle of the night except to hide it?"

" . . . No gold . . . " Daniel's head was still ringing. He felt a trickle of blood pooling in the folds of his right ear.

"Liar! What else would it be?"

"Nothing . . . I only wanted to walk — "

"Liar!" Auspicious Wu slapped him across the face. "You try to cheat the company and the Society of Eternal Benevolence! You hold out gold for yourself and hide it in the forest! Then, one night, you take it and run off! Pah!" Auspicious Wu hawked and spat. The spit-tle clung to Daniel's shoulder and oozed down the front of his blue tunic in rounded globs. Blindfolded, Daniel writhed in hatred. The ropes bit into his wrists.

"Tell us!" Wu snapped.

"No gold . . . " Daniel mumbled, dazed.

"We're wasting time," Chau complained. "Let's kill the maggot-ass and be done with it!"

Daniel ground his teeth in sheer terror. The rumors he had heard of these men's ruthlessness and cruelty raced rampantly through his throbbing head. He could taste his own blood. Somewhere behind him he could hear Fung's impatient breath. "I tell you, there's no gold," he moaned. "I was restless . . . I went into the mountains . . . "

"Lower his trousers, Chau, you take his legs. I'll hold the dog's shoulders myself while Fung does the fine work — "

"No!" Daniel almost blacked out when he realized what they were up to. As they reached for him, Daniel's fear exploded. "By all that lives under heaven! I'm the last of my house!" He rolled away from them, kicking, but Fung was on him, his weight crushing Daniel to the floor. Fung's fat legs gripped Daniel like the coils of a snake.

"I'll kill you all," Daniel swore. "Touch me and I'll kill every one of you!"

"Take off the blindfold. I want him to be able to see — "

"I'll kill your mothers and your sons!" Daniel blinked wildly as the light of a lantern stabbed into the pupils of his eyes. Pock-faced Chau seized his ankles and jerked him flat on the floor. Hot and cold with fear, Daniel twisted and fought, but his captors were strong and they knew their business. Auspicious Wu knelt above and behind him, pinning Daniel's shoulders to the floor with his knees and at the same time imprisoning his head in an upright position between his hard, thin thighs.

"So! You will watch, eh? You will not miss the sight of Fung cutting away your manhood."

"I spit on you!" Daniel's hands and body were slimy with sweat. He felt his bowels loosening as Fung squatted above him, pulled down his trousers, and raised the knife.

Auspicious Wu laughed, his upper lip curled in contempt. "Such a proud one! Maybe it would be safer to cut off his hands after all! What do you say, tall one? Your hands or your descendants? Or maybe a good whipping and a few days in the cangue? Come, I want to see you plead! I want to see you grovel!"

Hope broke Daniel as despair could not. "By all that's sacred . . ." he moaned. "I beg you . . . Do not do this thing!"

"Plead, you son of a turtle. Beg me for your children and your grandchildren! Beg me for your house! For every whore you'll ever bed! Beg!" Wu rose to his feet and turned to stand, straddling Daniel's chest.

Daniel's head rolled back and forth in anguish. "I beg you, Auspicious Wu —"

"Then tell me where you've hidden the gold!"

"There's . . . no gold! I swear it on the graves of my ancestors! On my own body —"

"Pah! Let's be done with the thing!" Chau growled from behind Wu's outspread legs.

Deliberately, Auspicious Wu yawned. "*Wei!* I'm getting bored with this one! We'll let him sweat till another day. In the meantime, maybe he'll change his mind about the gold. Seven days in the cangue to make an example of him for the others! Then we'll see how he behaves —" He glanced down at Fung, who was still squatting with the knife in his hand. "Ah — you're disappointed, are you, friend? Yes, and you cut so beautifully — very well. One finger. And you may choose which one."

Wu stepped aside and Fung grinned as Chau raised Daniel up and untied his wrists. "One move out of you, turtle dung, and it will be your *yang*, not your finger!" He cuffed Daniel in the side of the head.

Daniel fell back, his teeth clenched and his eyes closed. He could not let himself resist. They had told him what they would do to him if he did — and he believed them. He was the last of his house . . . the last of the House of Cheng . . . He concentrated on the words as he felt

his right forefinger being separated from the others and laid on a small block of wood. He tensed unbearably as he heard Fung suck in his breath — then heard the grinding chop of the blade, felt the severing of flesh, nerves, vessels, and bone. He screamed. A warm spurt of blood covered the block. Then someone thrust his hand into the flame of the lamp and he passed out from shock and pain.

Daniel awakened in agony. It was dawn, and he was lying outside the Chinese store — only half-lying, in truth, for most of his weight rested on his neck, which was enclosed in the cangue, a broad, flat square of heavy wood that fit him like a collar. Its edge, nearly an arm's length from its center, rested on the ground. For the duration of his unconsciousness, Daniel's head had dangled to one side. Lightning shafts of pain shot down his neck into his shoulders and spine when he tried to move.

With excruciating effort, he turned and sat up, his shoulders bent forward with the weight of the thick wood square. He was chained like a dog, he realized, to the front porch of the Chinese store.

A piece of paper was tacked onto the cangue, a hand's breadth from Daniel's head. His eyes could not reach it easily, but he could guess what it said. It was a proclamation to all who saw him that he had been caught returning from the forest, where, perhaps, he had hidden gold, and that he was being justly punished as a warning to all who might be tempted to do the same.

His clothes felt oddly damp. When the morning sun reached him, they began to steam with an odor that was all too familiar. Daniel's face twisted with loathing. While he was unconscious, someone had urinated on him, soaking his tunic and trousers. The smell sickened him. He fought back rising waves of nausea, knowing that to vomit would be to lose needed strength.

The camp was beginning to stir. The first man to approach Daniel was the Opium King. He came strutting boldly over to the porch of the Chinese store, a grin on his small monkey face. "So they caught you, did they?" He chuckled. "Such a pity. I tried to warn you."

Daniel only glared at him. The wretch had had a hand in this somewhere. He was sure of that.

The Opium King crouched close to Daniel's head. "I tried to be your friend once," he whispered. "I've got some influence with Auspicious

Wu. He buys from me sometimes. For a share of your gold, I can purchase your freedom with opium. If not, they'll let you rot here. You'll see. They'll take this cangue off your dead body!"

Daniel forced himself to laugh. Yes, the son of a snake was working for Wu. He was certain of it now. Only Wu's suspicion that there might actually be hidden gold had kept him alive so far. Even castration lost its awesome power as a threat once it was an accomplished fact. Wu was holding out for gold. Once they thought they'd found it, or knew conclusively that there was none, Daniel would be at their mercy.

"Can I trust you?" he mumbled, surprised at the thickness of his tongue.

"Of course! Just tell me where it is!"

Daniel frowned thoughtfully. "A cave . . . in a hill. I know the way. But as for telling you — words fail me. Alas, my good friend, I would have to show you myself. You would never find it alone. You would have to buy my freedom first — "

"And have you run off without telling me? I am very sorry, tall one, but I cannot help you unless I have seen the gold for myself. You must find a way to tell me . . . "

Daniel sighed and took the strain off his neck for a moment by resting the edge of the cangue on the ground. "I, too, could be cheated. You could take the gold and leave me here forever. We must go to the cave together. There is no other way."

"Impossible!" snapped the Opium King. "If Wu were to catch me helping you get loose, I would end up next to you!" His tone sweetened. "Trust me. I am your only friend in this camp! The others are rabbits! They won't help you!"

Daniel chewed his lip. His maimed hand hurt unspeakably. His face was swollen where Auspicious Wu and the others had beaten him. His clothes and body stank. "I have time," he said slowly. "I will wait and see what passes. Come to me tomorrow morning. I will give you my answer then."

The Opium King spat into the mud. "Don't wait too long, Cheng *gou*. Time will not fold its hands and sit back while you think. Neither will Auspicious Wu. There is no promise you will still be alive by tomorrow."

"Does any man know that he will be alive tomorrow? I choose to wait."

"Then your fate be on your own head," the Opium King retorted. "The time may well come when you beg me to help you!" He smiled craftily lips pulling back over orange gums and wide-spaced teeth. "A pleasant day to you, tall one. I do not envy you!"

Twenty-Eight

Sungskiang
July, 1862

They had ridden the thirty miles from Shanghai to Sungkiang as a diversion — Harry, Serena, Jason, and Moira, who'd come up from Hong Kong on a visit. The idea of the jaunt had been Moira's, Serena had taken it up with alacrity, and Harry, who let her have her way in almost all things, had acquiesced.

Only Jason had argued. Sungkiang was part of the war zone. In the previous month, it had been under heavy Taiping siege. Even now, it was no place for a pleasure trip, especially for ladies. War, after all, was a deadly business, not a circus for spectators.

It was perfectly safe, Serena had countered spiritedly. The area between Shanghai and Sungkiang was well secured, and as for the walled city itself, General Ward had seen fit to have his bride, Chang Mei, there for the season. Besides, she pleaded, it had been months since she'd seen anything but Shanghai. *She* needed an outing, if anyone did.

And there she had a point, for Shanghai, in the heat of that awful summer, had become a stinking horror. The Taipings and the imperialists were perpetually skirmishing along the banks of the creeks and canals, dumping their dead into the water. Vultures descended on the city in flocks. Flies blackened the air. Worse, the overcrowded, filthy, unsanitary city had bred epidemics of smallpox, typhoid, and Asiatic cholera. Many foreigners, particularly in the French Quarter, had died. The teas, receptions, and balls that had enlivened the winter season were held no more.

Those who could afford vacations had left Shanghai for pleasanter ports. Harry had offered to send Serena to Hong Kong, but she'd refused, insisting that she could not leave the business. She had other reasons as well, Jason knew. As long as he remained in Shanghai, no force on earth could tear her away.

Moir's visit, under such trying circumstances, had come as a total surprise. The girl had arrived on the mail steamer a few days before and appeared without warning on the Bellamy porch with all her baggage. When Serena had questioned her reasons for coming, Moira had simply declared that she was lonesome and needed a change. She would say no more, but her eyes were troubled, her manner restless. After two days of brooding in which neither Serena nor Jason could get her to talk, she had suddenly come up with the idea of riding to Sungkiang.

After a brief argument, Jason, finding himself outnumbered, had thrown up his hands in defeat and agreed to take them. They had left at dawn the next morning, riding in silence through the wretched outskirts of the city, white gauze masks tied over their noses and mouths. Not until they had left Shanghai several miles behind were they able to remove the masks and breathe air that was blessedly untainted.

For protection on the journey, Jason had strapped on the Colt .38 he had not worn since the *Marie Estelle*. Harry had brought two *mafoos* along as well, each armed with a musket and broad-bladed sword.

Even so, Jason had been nervous about the ride. He'd made the same journey alone many times without incident, but the two women could draw all sorts of trouble. He'd been immensely relieved when they'd crossed paths with a small mounted detachment of British Royal Engineers who'd been mapping the area. Their commanding officer, one Captain Charles George Gordon, had gallantly offered to provide escort to Sungkiang "for the sake of the ladies."

They rode along now over a listless yellow plain that shimmered like water in the midsummer heat. Here and there the blackened ribs of what had once been farmhouses and villages rose out of the grass. Insects whined in the sweltering air.

Two by two, they followed the narrow road, slowing the horses to spare them in the heat. Jason led the way, flanked by Captain Gordon. Serena and Harry rode behind them, followed by Moira and the hand-

somest of the young lieutenants. Moira's shy laughter bubbled like fresh water under the torrid sun. It was good to hear her laugh again. She was enjoying the young man's compliments, Jason surmised, even though she knew they might well end when she dismounted.

When he dared, Jason glanced back at Serena. She was all in white, her hair twisted and drawn up under the crown of her wide-brimmed hat. Her linen riding habit looked wonderfully crisp and cool, and she sat her horse so lightly that she seemed to float from the side of the saddle.

Some deep pain twisted in him at the sight of her. The memory of that week came rushing back — the week Harry had been in Amoy. He remembered the satin warmth of her skin against his. Her wanton mouth, her loose hair tumbling about him like a waterfall as she bent to kiss him. Her shameless, open need.

Ward had closed his house in the French Concession for the summer, leaving the key with a discreet friend. Jason and Serena had had the place to themselves those days and nights when she could slip away to join him. The thought of lying with her in Ward's bed tormented him now that she was out of his reach once more. He remembered the mornings he had awakened to Serena's soft, fragrant stirring, her arms and legs deliciously entangled with his. He remembered each time he had loved her, remembered each sweet and secret part of her and the total willingness with which she gave herself. His ears still heard her voice, and the wild whispering of his name as she reached her peak of ecstasy.

For that short week, she had been his. Then Harry had come back from Amoy and she had flown, conscious-stricken, to his side. Since then Jason had not been able to catch even a moment alone with her. She had assumed the role of the loyal and dutiful wife once more. Only her eyes, meeting his across proper distances, spoke of what they had done and what they had been.

And what now? Jason had asked himself a hundred times. He could not leave her, and he could not stay. He could not have her, and he could not live without her. He had moved his things back aboard the *Tarpon* and thrown himself with a frenzy into getting the ship seaworthy once more. But the beautiful clipper had lost its fascination for him. Even the call of the sea was drowned by the music of his passion for Serena. He stayed in Shanghai because he could not help himself.

He stayed, and he waited, knowing that a moment of decision must come. Like a fool, he waited.

He was beginning to hate himself.

They reached the walled city at dusk — acting under orders, the troops had left them as soon as the city hove into view. The sentries had seen them coming, and Ward himself was waiting inside the gate to welcome them. If he was anything less than delighted to see his headquarters invaded by four civilians — two of them female — he did not show it. Clad in shirtsleeves, he helped Serena and Moira dismount, greeted Harry with a warm handshake and Jason with a hearty clap on the back.

“Thought you’d never make it out here again, old friend! And what a sight you are, ladies, for these weary old eyes! Why, Miss Moira, you’ve become a young woman! If I weren’t a married man, I’d sweep you off your feet here and now!” With a bow, he offered her his arm. She leaned on him to ease her limp as they moved toward the square brick building that served as his military headquarters. “Devil of a ride in this heat, eh? We’ll have a cup of tea here while I finish up. Then I’ll escort you to my house. Chang Mei will be honored. We . . . don’t have many visitors. Ladies, especially.”

The tea was weak and only lukewarm, but after the long ride no one cared. At least it was wet, and punctiliously served by a young Chinese corporal clad in the standard summer uniform, white with red piping, topped off by a light green turban. Jason’s eyes surveyed the small reception area, which was bustling with uniformed soldiers, all of them efficiently going about their business.

Serena had been fanning herself with her white leghorn hat. “What now, General?” she asked with a soft smile. “You’ve managed to save Shanghai for the present, but where will you stop them for good?”

“For good? Heaven knows, Mrs. Bolton. It’s like trying to dam the ocean. But they’re threatening again at Ningpo, and that city has a high priority because of its foreign colony. If we can keep them back there, there’s a chance they won’t succeed in holding Soochow.” He shook his dark head and laughed wryly. “They’ve all the advantages, you see. They can choose where to strike. At this stage of the game, I can only counter. But come, you must be exhausted. I’ve sent word ahead to the house. Chang Mei’s to have the servants prepare your baths and they’ll be waiting. Then we’ll eat and we’ll talk!”

Ward's house had once belonged to the richest man in Sungkiang. It was built in the traditional Chinese style, and it was awesomely beautiful. In such a setting, Chang Mei rested like a jewel. A tiny being, shy as a butterfly, she was making a brave effort to accommodate her barbarian husband's strange wish to exhibit her to his guests. Timidly, she smiled as she poured hot tea and minced about on her little bound feet, a fairy creature fashioned of moonbeams and thistle-down. The hand she tremblingly offered to Jason was as small as a child's. Yet it was a woman's passion that flared up in her eyes when she gazed at Ward. Jason sighed in wistful envy. To have Serena look at him like that, openly, across a room filled with people, not caring who noticed — but even that was beyond hoping. She sat beside Harry at the table, solicitous, attentive, wifely. Jason did not dare meet her eyes. Even a glance could reveal too much.

The dinner table was laden with platters of wild rice and braised duck, steamed freshwater crabs, pea sprouts, and salted bamboo shoots, cold chicken flavored with rice wine, noodles cooked with green peppers and soya sauce, minced quail wrapped in lotus leaves — a feast worthy of an emperor. But Jason was not hungry. He had not been hungry for food since the night he had taken Serena in his arms. Leaning back in his chair, he studied Harry Bolton across the table and wished he could find it in his heart to hate the man. That would make things easier. If Harry were a monster who drank or debauched himself with other women, if he'd abused Serena or neglected her somehow, then the solution would be simple. He would take Serena, sail away with her on the *Tarpon*, and feel fully justified.

But Harry Bolton was the finest man he had ever known, and, next to Ward perhaps, his dearest friend. And so, between the two of them, Jason and Serena had evolved this maddening charade. For Harry's sake, they had no choice but to go on as if nothing had happened. Jason still came to the house for dinner, still joined Harry and Serena for tea at the Astor. Serena continued to treat him with cool courtesy, as always. Only now and then did their eyes meet in a flash of naked longing that shook them both to the quick.

When supper was done and the others had gone to their rooms, Jason walked alone in the garden of the outer courtyard. The night was warm and sticky, a sliver of a moon drifting above the thin clouds. The leaves of the ancient plum trees reflected the light here and there,

like silver coins. Frogs piped in a dozen different keys from the clustered lotuses in the pool. The air smelled faintly of death.

He leaned against a tree and looked up at the sky, asking himself questions about his life that had never even entered his mind before Serena. He and Ward had talked for a long time that evening. "I want to go home," Ward had said, his eyes shining with fervor. "There's a war on back there, Jason. I want to fight for the Union! On a soldier's pay! And I'll do it as soon as this bloody mess in China gets to the point where I can leave it to someone else!" He'd turned to Jason and grasped his arm. "Come with me, Jason! You're as much a Yankee as I am! And it could be so good — the two of us together!"

Jason had put him off, as he always did. It seemed that he had spent his life avoiding commitment. In a way he envied Ward, who flung himself into life with full passion, damn the consequences. Perhaps that was what it meant to be truly alive.

And by that definition, Jason Frobisher had never really lived. For years, he had shied away from all entanglement. He had run to the sea, always to the sea, and to the small world that was his ship. He had run from love, from hurt, from all demands except his own.

The moon was no more than a frail silver line against the darkness. Absently, he fumbled for another cheroot. There were none left in his pocket. Cheng Mei's tinkling laughter floated on the night air, muffled intermittently, by kisses perhaps. Then, little by little, the musical sound ceased. Jason was left in silence, with nothing in his heart but loneliness, as bleak and devastating as he had ever known it.

A dry leaf rustled somewhere behind him. He turned. Serena was standing in the shadows at the edge of the garden, her hair loose, her white robe floating about her legs.

She ran to him. Her bare feet flew down the path and left the ground as she flung herself into his arms. "Jason!" she gasped as he crushed her hard against him, his kisses wild and hungry, devouring her mouth, her face, her throat. "Jason . . . oh, hold me! It's been so long!"

"Harry — ?"

"He's asleep. The trip exhausted him. He won't wake up — " She found his lips again, her mouth and her body molding to his. "Forgive me . . . I know it's not safe. But I had to come. I couldn't stand it any longer — "

His hands caressed her frantically through the thin silk. His long fingers tangled in her hair and moved down her back: down and down, drawing her inward against him. There was an urgency in him tonight, almost frightening in its intensity.

Serena sighed with longing as she felt the warm, hard rise of his body against hers. She wanted him. She was desperate with wanting him. Her eyes darted about the garden. "Jason, isn't there someplace — ?"

He pressed his face against her hair, his head moving back and forth. "We mustn't, love . . . too dangerous . . . too many people."

"But when — ? It's torture, seeing you every day like this, and never alone. I can't bear it!" She buried her face in the warm folds of his silk shirt. "What can we do?"

He was silent for a time, his body taut and trembling, his cheek rough against her forehead. "Marry me, Serena," he whispered. "I can't go on like this. I love you too much."

Something passed through Serena's soul. Something sharp and hurting, like a knife.

"What about Harry?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"Harry loves you, too. He's too good a man to deny you what a woman should have. He'll let you go."

She felt the tears. They came slowly, but she could not hold them back. They filled her eyes and her throat, choking her. "Jason," she whispered, "I love him."

"I know, Serena." He kissed her forehead.

"And I love you."

"I know that, too." He wrapped his arms about her, cradling, comforting her. "If it's time you need to make up your mind, you'll have it. Ward will furnish you with an escort back to Shanghai tomorrow. I've decided to stay on here at Sungkiang for the next few weeks."

She looked up at him, her lips parted in surprise.

"It's best," he said quickly. "We can't go on the way we've been, Serena. It's killing us both."

"Yes." She drew in her breath and swallowed hard, gulping back her tears.

His hands moved upward to cup her face. Tenderly, he kissed her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth, lingering until the sweetness flowed downward through her whole body. "Don't answer me

now, love," he said. "It's a painful decision. Take your time. I plan to sail for San Francisco toward the end of September. If it's Harry you choose, I won't be coming back to Shanghai."

"Jason —"

"Yes, dearest." He drew her head to the hollow of his shoulder. She closed her eyes and tried to fight back the thoughts that were swarming into her head. Harry and Jason. Jason and Harry. Need and guilt. Scandal, shame, and desolation . . .

"What is it, Serena?" He raised her chin and looked at her. How she loved his face, the long, firm bones, the sun-weathered skin, the deep-set eyes that were only shadows in the dark.

"Nothing," she murmured. "Nothing that won't keep. Just hold me, Jason. Then I'll go . . ."

She felt his arms tighten around her. With a little sigh, she shut her eyes again and lost herself in the strength of his body. There was no sound in the night except the gentle pounding of his heart against her ear.

Clouds rippled across the sky like fluffs of unwound silk, thickening little by little until they hid the dying moon.

Harry Bolton was not asleep. He had lain awake, staring into the night for what seemed like hours. Not long after they'd gone to bed, he had felt Serena slip away from him. She hadn't returned, but he knew where she was.

Since he could not bear to think of what might happen if he went looking for her, and found her, he could only wait. He could only lie there, curse his impotence, and try to be thankful that if it had to be anyone at all, at least it was Jason.

He had always known it would happen, he reminded himself. Serena was young and full of life. That she cared for him he had no doubt. But she was a woman, fashioned by God and nature to be loved. It was as inevitable as the rise of the Yangtze that she would find someone who could give her what he could not.

Harry shifted on his pillow. Try as he might, he could no more condemn Jason Frobisher than he could Serena. Jason had not set out to betray him. Harry knew Jason well enough to be sure of that. No man could help wanting Serena, and the two of them had been thrown

together at every opportunity. Harry saw that now. He'd had a hand in it himself.

He remembered the bristling hostility that had sprung up so instantaneously between them. A defensive tactic, he now realized. They had struggled, both of them, against that irresistible pull. But nature was stronger than will. It had to happen. And Harry could not find it in his heart to blame either of them. He could only blame himself.

A stray breeze stirred the listless air in the room and rippled the netting that hung about the bed. What now, Harry, old fellow? he asked himself. Confront them? Ignore them? Set her free? He clenched his hands and sighed deeply. The loaded pistol he had carried on the road to Sungkiang lay in his valise. It would be a simple matter to place the muzzle against his temple and squeeze the trigger. That would solve everything.

But Harry was no martyr. He loved life, and he loved Serena. At any cost, he wanted to keep her as long as possible. If he forced her to choose, she would be lost to him. Either she would leave him for Jason or, worse, she would stay out of pity or dogged loyalty, and things would never be the same between them again.

He drew in his breath slowly and let it out again, his chest hurting. The choice was clear. Say nothing. Do nothing. Hope and pray that their passion would run its course and fade away and that afterward she would still be his. He loved her too much to do anything else.

At last he heard it, the stealthy opening of the door and the soft patter of Serena's bare feet across the tiles. She stood beside the bed for a moment, then parted the netting.

Harry closed his eyes, deepened his breathing, and pretended to be asleep.

Twenty-Nine

Placer County, California

July, 1862

Daniel sat cross-legged, his head and shoulders bent forward by the weight of the cangue. From time to time, his head dropped in sleep, only to jerk sharply upward against the strain that wreaked torture on the muscles of his neck.

This was his third day, and third night, in the cangue. His body ached with hunger and weariness. The Opium King had brought him a little water each day and a small bowl of rice that had to be shoveled into Daniel's open mouth with chopsticks, since he could not feed himself. Seething with humiliation, Daniel had submitted to being fed like a baby. It was this or starve — and he wanted to live.

A little at a time he had come to the realization that Auspicious Wu would not simply release him and send him back to work at the sluice. Once Wu thought he had found the mythical gold — or once he discovered there was none — Daniel would be of no use to them. He would most likely be turned over to squat Fung, and the next day his body, unspeakably mutilated, would be found in some convenient ravine.

His only hope lay in escape, and it would have to be soon, while his strength remained and before Wu lost patience with waiting. Tonight, he had told himself as the evening sun sank into the mountains. He could delay no longer.

At the hour of the evening meal, the Opium King had brought him a bit of rice mixed with boiled dried fish, along with a cup of tea, the first tea Daniel had tasted in three days. It was oddly bitter, but the sun had been hot all that afternoon and he was wild with

thirst. He drank it all, and swallowed the last bite of fish and rice without protest.

"You're suffering needlessly, tall one." The Opium King had grinned, flashing his peach-colored gums and wide-spaced brownish teeth. "A word from you and we could be partners in your gold. You'd be free then —"

"I've already told you," Daniel grumbled. "You can't find it alone. Get me out of here and I'll take you to it."

"You think you're dealing with a simpleton, eh? Don't be such a stubborn fool. You've no friend but me in this place. I'm the only one who can get you loose. Auspicious Wu's only waiting for a little *cumshaw*. Pay him, and he'll let you go."

Daniel had finished the meal without speaking, loathing every mouthful he took from the bony, yellowed hand of the Opium King. He swallowed his hatred as he swallowed the food and the strange tea, hoarding it for the moment when he would need all his strength.

Afterward, like a dog chained to its kennel, he sat and watched the diminishing activity of the camp, until the store closed at the hour of the pig. By then he was unusually drowsy, and he remembered the bitter taste of the tea. Drugged, he realized as he fought the floating sensation in his mind. But why? He was already captive. He was at Auspicious Wu's mercy.

The camp was quiet now, the last cabin window darkened. In spite of everything, Daniel slept on and off, his head dangling like a melon in a net until the excruciating wrench of neck and shoulders jarred him awake again. His left hand was swollen, pus oozing from the scab his severed finger had left. He could not lean on it, and he was unspeakably tired, so tired that he would have given anything for simple, sweet oblivion.

Somewhere an owl screeched. The sound roused Daniel. He blinked his eyes and realized that he had slept after all. But now the drug seemed to have worn off. He was suddenly wide awake. Slowly, he sank back onto his haunches shifting the weight of the cangue. The agony of movement sent swift tears to his eyes. He stifled a moan.

Tonight he had planned to escape. But how? He had tested the strength of each link in the chain and found them all sound. The bolt of the cangue was securely locked and fastened to the ring of the chain, whose far end was wound about the corner upright of the porch and held fast by the stout American padlock.

His fingers had explored every contour, nail, knothole, and crack of the cangue. There were no weaknesses. With tools, perhaps it could be pried apart. Otherwise, any blow strong enough to smash that infernal wooden collar would likely kill him as well.

The porch — he had dismissed this possibility earlier, but now it was the only one that remained. If he could dislodge the upright beam and slip off the chain without making enough noise to rouse the whole camp — His eyes darted to the shadowy eave of the porch. Perhaps the nails were rusted, the wood weakened by age or worms. Seizing on the hope, he let his gaze travel slowly downward to the point where the chain wound around the post. The lock — He gaped in total astonishment.

The padlock was unfastened and hanging open.

Trembling with disbelief, he touched it. Earlier in the day, it had been locked, he was sure. No one had been near it except the Opium King, who had certainly not tampered with it. It could only have been unfastened while Daniel was asleep.

His skin went cold. He felt sweat forming on his face like tiny beads of ice as he realized he was being watched. The lock had been opened very deliberately, while he was drugged. Auspicious Wu had grown tired of waiting. He wanted Daniel to escape. And when Daniel fled the camp, as he surely would, the three of them, Wu, Chau, and Fung, would trail him like hounds on the scent.

Daniel cradled the open lock in his right hand. It was plain that Wu was hoping he would lead them to hidden gold. And even if he did not, the escape would provide a good excuse for killing him. The odds on the outcome, at least, were heavily in Wu's favor. Burdened by the weight of the chain and the cumbersome cangue, Daniel's chances of outrunning them in the wooded mountains were indeed small.

The work shed sat across the road from the store. It was an open structure, sheltering a forge, a saw, and the tools that were needed for rebuilding the sluices. Daniel's eyes narrowed as he gazed at it. A tense smile flickered about his swollen lips as he made his choice. If he was fated to die, at least he would die free.

Slowly and deliberately, he removed the lock and unwound the chain from the post. Then, looping the chain over his arm and balancing the cangue on his shoulders, he crept stealthily over to the work shed.

Maneuvering in the cangue was not easy. Daniel stumbled and groped about the darkened shed for several minutes before he found what he was looking for on one of the work benches: a small steel claw hammer.

Bracing his legs, he took the hammer in his good hand, then twisted upward and inward to pry at one of the crosspieces that held the cangue together. The work was awkward, for he could not see what he was doing, and his left hand was so sore and swollen as to be almost useless. But if he could free himself from the cangue, then he would have a chance of living. Unencumbered, Daniel was a match for anyone in the mountains.

He felt the edge of the claw catch in the crack, heard the subtle groan of yielding wood as he pried — and then the hammer slipped, struck him hard in the chest, and fell to the ground. Daniel dropped to his knees and groped in the darkness. His fingers crawled through the gritty sawdust, blind, fumbling things that found nothing but rocks and bent nails and little scraps of wood. Maybe the hammer had bounced, or rolled. Maybe — Daniel froze as he heard the snap of a twig from somewhere out in the darkness, and the unmistakable brush of footsteps. They were nearby, Auspicious Wu and his two slinking brutes, and they knew where he was. Cold resignation settled over Daniel as he realized that they would never have given him time to remove the cangue from his neck. That would have made him too difficult to trail. He would have to play the game by their rules.

Gulping down his fear, he willed himself to move slowly, conserving his strength for later, when he would need all of it. They would not stop him here. They would follow him into the hills in the hope that he would lead them to the gold — or at least to where they could kill him without disturbing the camp.

His heart flung itself again and again against the walls of his chest as he crept out the other side of the work shed and made his way among the cabins. His keen ears caught the sound of footsteps in the blackness behind him as he cleared the cluster of cabins and headed for the trees. Faster now, he told himself, for they would give him his head at first. Only later, when they realized there was no gold, would they close in for the kill. His best chance lay in losing them while he was still fresh.

But the cangue was a devil's trap whose corners glanced off trees as he ran, the impact jarring his whole body. Its weight and the weight of

the heavy chain pressed down on his shoulders, throwing his stride off-balance so that he reeled through the forest. Walking in the cangue was one thing. Running was another. His feet stumbled over rocks and caught on tree roots. Once he stepped in a badger hole and pitched forward, landing half on his maimed and swollen left hand and half with a neck-wrenching crunch on one corner of the cangue. The pain stopped him cold for the space of several long breaths, and as he paused he heard his pursuers coming up the slope, moving stealthily through the brush. Fung was already breathing hard, air rushing in and out of his lungs with the force of a bellows. That at least was a good sign, Daniel assured himself as he struck out again. The brute was short-winded.

As he climbed, Daniel forced himself to think. Weighted down as he was, he could not hope to outrun the three devils. His only chance for survival lay in somehow outwitting them. In hopes of tiring them, he had chosen the steepest possible slope. Now, as he toiled his way upward, he conceived a plan so daring and so preposterous that he would have smiled had he been any less terrified. He knew this hill. From the camp it rose steeply then leveled into a narrow ridge that eased off gently to the north, but dropped to the south in a near-vertical plunge, down and down to the canyon below.

He climbed faster, making no effort to hide the sounds of his progress. Once he deliberately let go of the chain, listening with satisfaction as the end of it clinked and slithered downhill. It was essential to his plan that they know where he was. It was also essential that he stay well ahead of Wu, Chau, and Fung.

With a lunge, he finally gained the ridge. Now — now was the time to hurry, while he was on relatively level ground and the others were still laboring up the steep slope. Hastily, with great care, he made his way along the wooded crest. The canyon yawned below, on his left. Aspens, their slender trunks ghostly white, clung tenuously to the edge of the chasm, branches thrusting outward into black space.

The weight of the cangue bit into his shoulders, hurting. The chain, which he now had coiled around his body, was cold and heavy. It was dark, the sky moonless and thick with finespun black clouds that hid the stars. All to the good, Daniel assured himself, trying to buoy his courage as he stumbled along. His eyes ached with the strain as he peered ahead through the trees, looking, searching.

At last he found what he wanted: a dry, dead aspen, its top broken off, its trunk almost as thick as his leg. He stopped beside it, his lungs throbbing as he gripped the trunk with both hands and pulled.

The base of the tree began to loosen from the soil. Aspen roots wither when the tree dies. A child can topple a dead one. Daniel grunted with satisfaction as the stump came free. Grimacing with the pain in his swollen hand, he hefted it and held it level.

He could hear them struggling up the slope, Auspicious Wu, Pock-faced Chau, and Fung. Soon they would be on the ridge. There was no time to be lost. Moving cautiously, for he could not see his own feet, Daniel edged toward the precipice. When he felt himself to be at its very brink, he swung the stump back and, with a hoarse cry of simulated panic, hurled it over the edge.

He held his breath as it bounced and tumbled, smashing into rocks and clumps of manzanita in its downward plunge. Then, while the sound of it covered the noise of his own clumsy movements, he slipped on up the ridge and crouched as low as the cangue would permit in a thicket of bushy young pines, interlaced with the trunks of fallen aspens.

They came up onto the ridge, the three of them. Pock-faced Chau held a lantern that cast a small circle of light into the darkness ahead of them. Fung was gasping for breath. Daniel swallowed terror and dismay as he saw that Auspicious Wu carried a new American rifle, slung by a strap from his shoulder and cradled beneath his right arm.

"So — " Pock-faced Chau grunted as he stared down into the chasm, "the son of a swine stumbled. Let's go home."

Auspicious Wu cleared his throat and spat over the precipice. "Perhaps he stumbled, slow-witted one. Or perhaps it's a trick. We must not be too swiftly convinced. If the dog's alive, he can't be far away." Wu sat down on a boulder to rest. "Take the lantern and search those trees."

Pock-faced Chau slumped wearily. It was clear that he, too, wanted to rest. "Here." He handed the lantern to Fung, who was evidently a poor third in the chain of command. "Go look for him."

With a discontented snarl, Fung took the lantern and ambled up the ridge in Daniel's direction. Light flickered on the broad, curved blade of the knife that was thrust into his belt. Daniel bit back his fear as the hulking brute came closer. It was too late to run. The sounds of his

flight would be all too evident. He might be able to escape Fung, even in the cangue, but he could not outrace a bullet. His only hope lay in keeping absolutely still and praying that Fung would not look in his direction. If he did — Daniel's good right hand reached out and grasped the slim trunk of a fallen aspen. At least he would have a weapon. He might do some damage before Auspicious Wu had a chance to use the gun.

The stump of his finger had begun to bleed. His left hand throbbed and pulsed. He could hear the sound of Fung's breathing as he entered the clump of trees. The light of the lantern flickered wildly, making the shadows dance. Daniel held his breath as Fung stopped, scratched at his crotch, and belched noisily. His little pig eyes squinted as he gazed into the darkness.

At last, with a rumbling sigh, he turned away and took a few steps back in the direction of the others. Daniel eased the pressure on his tortured lungs. Perhaps, after all —

Some instinct, then, made Fung look back over his shoulder. Maybe he was afraid Wu would scold him for not having taken more time to search properly. Maybe he'd heard something. Scowling, he raised the lantern high, swinging its light outward in an arc. Daniel was horribly conscious of his own shadow on the ground. He kept his head low, but he could do nothing to hide the square outline of the cangue. The beam of the lantern swung back and forth and suddenly stopped. Fung sucked in his breath, and Daniel knew he had been discovered.

Swiftly, before Fung could react, he struggled to his feet, the long, dry aspen trunk clutched in his hands, its base aimed forward. His body tensed as he charged. Surprise was his only ally; this his only chance. He cried out with sudden exertion as the trunk struck Fung's midsection and drove the brute backward toward the brink of the precipice. The aspen splintered as it met resisting flesh, but Daniel threw his weight behind it. Fung staggered backward, eyes round with rage and sudden terror as his feet crumbled the fine rock on the edge of the drop-off. Then, with a gut-wrenching scream, the only sound Daniel had ever heard him utter, he disappeared into the black void. The lantern fell with him, growing small with distance like a yellow star before it went out. Then Daniel ran. Half-crazed by panic, he plunged off at an angle down the north slope. The cangue grazed limbs and trunks of trees as he flew past, twice jarring him almost senseless.

His feet slipped and stumbled. He fell, dirt, rocks, and splinters grating into the palms of his hands before he struggled to his feet again.

Chau and Wu were close behind, following the noise he made. He could hear them shouting to one another as they stalked him in the darkness — blind as he was, but less clumsy. The crack of the rifle split the night. The bullet whined as it glanced off a nearby rock. Wu was firing at the sound. Daniel reeled with shock as the next bullet went through one corner of the cangue. He dropped to the ground and froze, trembling. "You hit him!" Chau's voice sang out.

"Perhaps." Wu's voice was tense. "We won't know till we find the son of a whore."

Chau thrashed through the bushes, stopping within an arm's length of where Daniel lay. "We'll never find him without a lantern," he complained. "And it's cold. Let's go back up to the ridge and make a fire. We can start looking again when it gets light."

Daniel counted his own heartbeats as he lay in the thicket, willing himself not to move. He was well up into the hundreds by the time the retreating footsteps and the rustle of leaves told him that they had truly left. Only then did he dare to creep from his hiding place. This time, he was alone.

The small campfire that Pock-faced Chau had made glowed faintly from the ridge. The faraway howl of a wolf echoed down the canyon. Daniel made his way along the hillside, not hurrying now. Stealth was more important than speed. He had but little idea where he was going. His only intent was to put as much distance as possible between himself and his two pursuers.

Tomorrow he would have to find a way to take off the cangue. Otherwise, he would soon die of hunger and thirst. But there was no time for that now. He could only move ahead, groping his way among the pines, cedars, and aspens, keeping the uphill slope on his left, the downhill on his right. He was headed westward, he calculated. Somewhere to the west lay the ocean, and beyond that the Middle Kingdom. But who could say what stood between?

All night he walked. At last, just as the sky was fading in the east, he came to a rockslide, a vast tumble of sharp-edged boulders that covered almost an entire hillside.

He had gone about a third of the way across the slide when he heard a moan — faint and indistinct but unmistakably human. Daniel froze

with dread, all senses bristling. Again he heard it, coming from somewhere above him and off to the right, a whimper filled with despair and pain. Instinctively, Daniel began to move toward the sound. His fear was great, but his curiosity was greater. Moving cautiously, he mounted a large rock, steadied the cangue, and scanned the slide.

At first he saw nothing. Then, in the gray light, his eyes caught the flutter of something red from behind a boulder, and he heard the moan again, closer this time. Daniel edged nearer, his heart pounding as the red became a tattered flannel shirt with blue-trousered legs spreading oddly below it. He was looking at a man whose body sprawled and twisted among the rocks.

The man was a foreigner (no — Daniel reminded himself; here in the Land of the Gold Mountain, *he* was the foreigner), and of venerable age. His tangled iron-gray hair was matted with blood along one side of his head. His beard was long and scraggly, stained with tobacco in spots, as were the sparse teeth that showed through shriveled lips. Below the bristling gray brows, his eyes were closed, but his chest rose and fell spasmodically. He was not dead.

Daniel stood for a moment, looking down at him over the edge of the cangue, and fought back the temptation to curse. He had not asked to find this old one. He was a fugitive, in danger of being caught at any moment. Who would know it if he were to go on his way and leave this bedraggled old stranger to his fate? What if he had not heard the sound of moaning? What if he had not come this way at all?

Daniel sighed. Who was he, after all, to interfere with what must surely be this old one's destiny? To meddle with life and death was to take the burden of responsibility into one's own hands. He could not afford that responsibility. He was fleeing for his own life. Wu and Chau might come over the ridge at any moment —

He was about to turn away when the old man opened his eyes. They were a startling blue, like the sky on a sunny autumn day, and they looked directly at Daniel, widening as they took in his strange appearance. The cracked lips moved, and with heartrending effort managed to utter a single word.

" . . . Water . . . "

"I have no water, Grandfather." Daniel moved closer, speaking in English. The blue eyes riveted him, wide with surprise at hearing his own tongue spoken by a Chinese.

"Can — canteen . . . somewheres . . . " The old man's fingers groped helplessly. His hands were callused and dirty, the nails broken, some of them smashed and blue. Daniel, remembering his days as a carpenter, felt a sudden bond.

"There's no — " Daniel's eyes swept over the rocks and suddenly he saw it — the round tin canteen sewn into burlap, wedged between two rocks a stone's throw away. "There — " He clambered after it, cursing the encumbrance of the cangue. By the time he had grasped it and climbed back down the slide, the old man's eyes were closed once more. Daniel knelt down beside him and unscrewed the lid of the canteen. Then, propping the grizzled head between his knees, he poured a trickle of water between the parched lips. Water — the sound and smell of it almost drove him mad, for his own throat was raw with thirst. But this was the hell of the cangue. Daniel could not reach his own mouth, and the old man was in no condition to help him.

The blue eyes opened again. "More . . . " Daniel obliged, letting him drink his fill of the precious liquid until the old man shook his head to indicate he'd had enough. "Aaah!" he breathed hoarsely. "Lord in heaven, I wish it was whiskey!"

"You'd best make it last, Grandfather," Daniel said. "Where are you hurt?"

"Both legs. Broke, I think . . . " The dirty old face twisted in pain. "An' mebbey this arm here. Ribs hurt like hell. Goldammed mule shied at a gopher . . . bin here nigh ontuh three days — " His eyes widened suddenly, white showing all the way around the blue irises. "Th' mule! Got t' find — " He jerked upward and then fell back, the old face contorted in agony. "Find m' mule, boy — Got t' find . . . " The old man coughed feebly. Droplets of mucous mixed with blood clung to his beard.

Daniel stood up. "I'll try — " he said uncertainly, wondering how far a mule could go in three days and thinking that the beast would be well worth finding. A mule was a strong animal, and it might well carry both him and the old man out of the mountains to safety. But the chance that it would still be nearby, he reminded himself, was so remote that it hardly justified looking.

The sun's blinding edge rose above the tops of the mountains to the east as Daniel made his way to the far side of the rockslide. An animal

would head for trees and grass, he reasoned, and perhaps water if there were any nearby.

The leaves of the aspens gleamed with morning dew. Stretching his neck in the cangue, he licked at them, sucking up the tiny drops of moisture. But the taste only whetted his thirst. His throat was as dry as ever. Daniel glanced back up the ridge, expecting to see Auspicious Wu and Pock-faced Chau appear at any moment, but the morning was as quiet as death. With a shiver, he moved deeper into the trees. A scrub jay, teetering on a low limb, scolded at his intrusion before it fluttered off with a flash of indigo wings. From somewhere far below, Daniel's ears caught the faint splash of a stream.

If he could hear it, so could a mule. Daniel followed the sound, downward through stands of cedar, yellow pine, aspen, and low-growing scrub oak. The stream was small, willows lining its bank, and suddenly there was the mule. It stood on the other side of a willow patch, a huge brown shape, startlingly near.

"Hah . . . hah . . . " Daniel coaxed, edging around the willows to approach the mule. He had grown expert at handling General Liang's horses, but he had never before faced an American mule and his heart was thumping wildly. "Hah . . . " He reached out with one hand, trying not to hear the maddening tumble of cold, fresh water over stones. The mule's eyes widened, showing white around the edges. Its ears went back, a bad sign, and it moved skittishly to one side — not far, however, for the reins trailing from its bridle had caught firmly on a heavy tree stump. The creature could not escape.

Daniel grasped the reins cautiously and freed them from the stump. The mule eyed him distrustfully. It was a big animal, larger than any Chinese horse he had ever seen, and its packsaddle was laden high with the old man's gear — bedding, tin pots and utensils, gold-panning equipment, and a number of tightly wrapped canvas bundles. There were two shovels and an ax as well, which could be of some use in breaking out of the cangue, Daniel reflected hopefully as he tugged at the reins. Wheezing its reluctance the mule followed him.

They came out of the trees at one corner of the rock slide. Far above, Daniel could see the dot of red and blue that was the old man. As he gazed upward, Daniel suddenly realized that he did not have to go back. The old one was dying — he remembered the flecks of blood on his beard — and it was not within his power to save him. He could

take the mule and go on. Likely there was food in the mysterious bundles, maybe enough to sustain him all the way to the sea. To return for the old man would only mean extra work and trouble, all of it in vain. And if Wu and Chau were close on his trail, it could cost him his life. Daniel stood still for a moment, pondering. The sun was up now, the sky glassy blue, like the old man's eyes. Already the day showed promise of being hot. Without shade, the life in the old one's frail body would not last until sundown — but then, he would not live long in any case. The swifter death might well be the more merciful.

The slanted light of morning cast the buff rocks of the slide into sharp patterns of sun and shadow. Daniel's head grew light. He swayed and clutched at a tree for balance. For a moment, his mind flew backward to the days he had lain in the dust beside the road that led out of Canton, wounded, starving, and insensible. Refugees had trudged past in an unending stream, none of them paying him any heed until General Liang had come along like the Good Samaritan, lifted him up, and saved him.

A snort from the mule brought him back to the present. Daniel started resolutely uphill along the edge of the slide. He was in debt for his life, and since he would never likely have the opportunity to repay Liang, he could only pass on the gift of mercy to another. It was his duty as a man, as a Son of Han, and as the last living representative of a noble house.

The water seemed to have worked wonders on the old man. His mouth stretched into a gap-toothed grin as Daniel came into sight with the mule. "Law's mercy, you found 'im. Here, closer, boy. Y' didn't touch nothin' did you?"

"No." Daniel shook his head.

"Well, then, they's a pack o' chawin' tobacco an' a hunk o' deer jerky in the left front saddlebag. I'll split the jerky with you — got a knife right here. You look like y' could use a bite." He began to cough again, the tiny flecks of blood spraying his lips and beard.

"Here — " Daniel raised the canteen to his mouth. "Drink it all. There's a stream down there where I found the mule."

"Thank you kindly, boy — " Suddenly, for the first time, the old man seemed to notice the cangue. "Bunions of Beelzebub, what they done t' you, boy? I ain't never seen a godawful contraption like that afore! Can't y' get it off?"

"Perhaps . . . with tools — "

"Law's mercy! Don't just stand there. There's an ax on m' mule! Left side — " Coughing overcame him once more. Daniel got a few drops of water down him, and the hacking eased. Then, moving slowly so as not to scare the mule, he found the ax, tied to the left side of the pack-saddle. The old man watched him in exhausted silence as Daniel pounded on the head of the axe with a large stone, forcing the curved blade between one of the crosspieces of the cangue. A better instrument for freeing him could not have been devised, even in heaven. The blade of the ax entered the fine crack between crosspiece and plank. Daniel pulled on the handle. The wood groaned as the nails began to pull loose. One board separated from another until, with a final wrench, he was free.

He stood with the splintered pieces of the cangue around him, shaken and feeling strangely light, almost as if he were floating. The sun shone warm on his blistered shoulders; the air was as clear as a diamond. He had longed to be free of that loathsome burden. Yet not until now, with freedom an accomplished fact, did he realize how much he had wanted it. He stared at the mutilated left hand he had scarcely been able to see before. It was an awful sight, purplish and puffed. He realized with a spasm of dread that he would lose it if something were not done. His right hand crept to his face. His cheeks were damp, and suddenly he was doubled over, crying like a child as the events of the past days swept over him.

The old man made little clucking sounds of sympathy with his tongue. "There . . . there, son. Whatever they done t' you, it's over. You's safe now. Ezra Bone won't let y' come t' no harm!"

The statement was so ridiculous coming from the gravely injured old man that Daniel could not, with any sort of grace, continue weeping. He lowered his hands from his face and blinked away the tears, his heart suddenly warming with admiration for the old one's courage.

"Now — " grunted Ezra Bone, grimacing with pain. "With that bit o' foolishness done, what say y' fetch us the jerky an' m' chawin' tobacco out o' the saddlebag. An' have a sip o' this water afore its all gone. Then we'll see about you gettin' me offn' these godammed rocks . . . "

Daniel found what the old man wanted and knelt down beside him with it. The jerky was an ominous-looking lump of shriveled, red-brown meat, salted and dried until it was almost rock-hard.

"Knife at m' belt . . . " The old man gestured with his head.

Daniel took the knife and cut off two thin slices of meat. One he gave to Ezra Bone. The other he tasted. It was salty and chewy and had a wild, earthy taste to it that grew on him as he gnawed. It was good. He cut another piece, awkwardly, using only one hand.

"Like it?" The old man grinned. "Made it m'self. Shot the deer an' skinned it." He swallowed hard, for his teeth could not chew efficiently. "Y' know my name, boy. Isn't it 'bout time I knowed yours?"

Daniel finished chewing, slowly, thoughtfully. When at last the words came, they came naturally, as if he had been saying them all his life.

"My name is Daniel," he said. "Daniel Cheng."

Thirty

Shanghai

August, 1862

Not until she had been in Shanghai for nearly two weeks with no sign of departing did Moira finally open up enough to tell Serena what had brought her there.

It was on a Sunday, Serena was to recall later, late in the afternoon. In a drunken frenzy, Moira told her, their father had flung harsh, cruel, and maybe unforgivable words at her — deriding her crippled foot, and blaming her for the death of their mother.

“Oh, Moira! Moira . . .” Serena gathered her close, “He was drunk, dearest! Out-of-his-head drunk! He didn’t know what he was saying!”

“Maybe. But he was right.” She sighed brokenly. “Papa hates me.”

“No, Moira — ”

“Yes, he does. He hates me because I’m crippled and because I killed Mother.”

“It wasn’t you. He knows that. But you’re so much like her, Moira. He can’t look at you without remembering.”

“He must have loved her.”

“He did. Very much. I know. He’s hurting, Moira. And he needs us all.”

Moira sat up. Her eyes were dry. “That may be true,” she said, “but I can’t go back to him, Serena. Not yet at least. I’ve tried, you know. You can’t imagine how awful it’s been with his drinking. But now, I can’t even look at him.”

“Surely you haven’t left home for good?”

Moira shook her head. “No . . . of course not. But I have to be away for a while. I have to ponder things out. It’s time I saw myself realisti-

cally, and saw my life for what it's to be. When I can think of what he told me without it hurting, that's when I'll go home." She struggled to her feet and reached for the little bamboo cane. "I heard Noah upstairs a moment ago. If he's awake, I'll go and play with him."

Noah's laughter rang out as Moira reached the open door of the nursery. The child adored her. There was a rapport between them that transcended mere kinship — perhaps because the Robards blood was so strongly manifest in them both, or because Noah, like Moira, had been born at the price of his mother's life.

Serena loved Noah dearly, but his ungovernable nature worried her. After all, she had a responsibility to Stephen to raise his son with some degree of discipline, but Noah did not take to any form of regimentation. Serena needed help. She needed Stephen. And Stephen had simply vanished. She did not know whether he was alive or dead.

The sound of thunder rolled faintly through the closed windows. Rain. Serena sighed. Rain meant a short reprieve, at least, from the stench and the summer heat, although both returned worse than ever once it was gone. She stared at the gray window and wondered whether it was raining at Sungkiang.

Jason had not written, not even to Harry. But then, she had not expected him to. Serena reached out and stroked the silky surface of the white fur rug where he had made love to her the first time. She remembered the texture of it beneath her bare back, the delicious roughness of his arms and hands, his lean, solid weight between her thighs. Jason. Longing shivered in her.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against soft fur.

She loved Harry, and she could not bear the thought of hurting him. He'd been good to her. He deserved her loyalty. But each time she made the resolution to stay with him, she was confronted with the prospect of life without Jason, and even the thought of it left her desolate. She knew what she wanted. She wanted to live the rest of her days at Jason's side, to spend her nights in his arms, to have his children, to love him as they grew old together.

Her heart breaking, Serena pressed her face against the rug and cried.

Placer County, California
August, 1862

Ezra Bone had survived for five days, much longer than Daniel had expected. But he was weakening fast. Tomorrow, or the next day, he would be gone. The thought of losing him filled Daniel with a strange emptiness. To his surprise, he had grown to love the old man.

The old one had been too badly injured to walk or even to ride, and so Ezra Bone had shown Daniel how to rig a travois, such as the Indians used. With the ax, Daniel had cut two lodge-pole pines and stripped the branches from the straight, slender trunks. From these, he had fashioned a frame that could be dragged along by the mule. A blanket from the bedroll, stretched between the two poles, served as a moving bed for the old man.

They had found a trail and followed it westward, hoping to find a town with a doctor. Daniel had splinted Ezra Bone's broken limbs as best he could, but he did not know how to set them. Their daily progress was painfully slow, the old man enduring the torture of the jouncing travois with cheerful stoicism. When the way was unusually rough, Daniel would pick up the end of the travois from the ground and carry it for a time, although in his own weakened condition he could not maintain its weight for long. Generally, he walked at the mule's head, guiding the sluttish beast along the winding trail, still glancing back over his shoulder from time to time to make certain that Auspicious Wu and Pock-faced Chau were not closing in behind them. The fact that he was now wearing some of Ezra's clothes — which served as a partial disguise — allayed his anxiety only a little. Perhaps by now it was foolish to worry. But Wu was a relentless man, and proud. He would not readily give up on finding the one who had sent Fung plunging to his death. The old man had a gun, an old flint-lock musket, tied to the pack. Daniel, remembering the gleaming newness of Auspicious Wu's rifle, knew that they would have no chance against him if it came to shooting.

Daniel's hand was healing, the swelling and the unhealthy purplish color all but gone, thanks to nightly soakings in a hot solution of Epsom salts. The salts had come from one of the bags in Ezra Bone's pack, and were almost as good as the herbs used by physicians in the Middle Kingdom.

The pack itself was a source of wonder. From its depths came not only jerky and tobacco but sugar, salt, and coffee, which Daniel tried but found impossibly strong and bitter compared to tea, of which

there was none. But there were fishhooks and line, and with these Daniel was able to catch a few trout in the streams they passed. There was a little flour, some baking powder, and lard as well. Ezra Bone taught him to make flapjacks in the big iron skillet over the campfire at night. Strange things — Daniel never really acquired a taste for them, but they were warm and filling, and he was grateful for the weight of them in his stomach.

Some aspects of the pack, however, remained a mystery. Daniel was not allowed to touch the tightly wrapped bundles that lay against the packsaddle itself — though once he had surreptitiously hefted one of them and found it surprisingly heavy. One night he had offered to remove the pack from the mule, thinking that the poor animal would become sore. "Leave it be!" the old man had growled. "Had trouble 'nough gettin' it ont' the ornery goldammed critter. Take it off an' we mightn't ever get it back on again! 'Twon't hurt 'im fer a few days." So the mule had worn the pack day and night, and though the beast complained vociferously, it did not appear to suffer otherwise. Every evening Daniel ran a hand under the saddle blanket to check for sore spots and found none.

At night they talked. Ezra Bone was in too much pain to sleep well, and Daniel was too nervous about the possibility of pursuit. Before many nights had passed, he had related the whole of his story to the old man — the death of his parents, his bondage to Liu, his narrow escape in Canton, his encounter with the Taipings, and the hellish voyage to the Gold Mountain. Although he spoke of Lai Jyu, his chest tight with longing as he did so, he kept secret his nights with Min Fei. That episode was finished, buried forever in his heart.

One morning, Daniel paused to drink from a stream. The sun was bright that morning and the water was as smooth as glass, a perfect mirror. Daniel crouched atop a beaver dam, gazing dumbfounded at the reflection of the tall stranger in the water. It was his first inkling of what he looked like in Ezra's Western clothes and hat.

The face that stared back at him from under the old felt hat, jaw shadowed by a light growth of beard, was, except for the slightly Oriental cast of the eyes, as English as his mother's had been.

Ezra Bone, watching him from the trail, guffawed with delight. "Aye! Look at yerself, Dan'l Cheng! Y' don't look no more like a Chinaman 'n I do! Y' could fool yer own ma!"

No, thought Daniel, no one could have deceived Kathleen Bellamy, who saw the world through the eyes of her soul. But as for anyone else — anyone with more ordinary vision — yes, they could be fooled. Stunned, he contemplated his reflection. Some living creatures, certain fish and reptiles, had the ability to change color to match their surroundings. It was almost as if he possessed the same gift. Slowly, Daniel removed the hat. He looked more Chinese now, with his queue and the stubble of his shaved scalp showing. But with his hair grown out and cut Western style — Daniel shivered at the realization that he could have passed for a European anywhere in the world. When he put the hat back on his head, the transformation was complete. He was his mother's son, a foreigner. A Bellamy.

Just how much difference the hat and clothes made he was to learn a few days later when they stopped at dusk to make camp in a wooded glade beside a stream. Ezra Bone had had a difficult day. His breathing was becoming more labored, his cough stronger and more frequent, and there had been a noticeable increase in blood from the tortured lungs. Daniel had left him on the travois and gone into the trees with the ax to gather firewood. He returned to the sound of voices — Ezra Bone's strained croak and another that he did not recognize at first, perhaps because it was speaking in absurdly broken English. He had carelessly stepped into sight before he realized he had made a fatal mistake.

Auspicious Wu and Pock-faced Chau sat astride two horses, not twenty paces away from him.

Daniel was seized by panic, sudden and total. Except for the gong-like pounding of his heart, all his bodily functions ceased. It was too late to run. He froze to the spot.

Ezra Bone was speaking, making a great effort to sound natural. "A coolie boy, y' say? Bah!" He spat a stream of tobacco juice in Wu's direction. "Wouldn't have no coolie boy inside o' ten miles o' me. Ain't nobody here 'cept me an' m' son. Got a claim back up the creek a piece, but when I got hurt, we had t' leave t' find a doc . . ." He began to cough violently. Daniel was torn by the urge to run to him with the canteen, but he steeled himself to stay where he was as the old man hawked and spat blood, clots of it this time. At last, miraculously, Ezra Bone stopped coughing.

Auspicious Wu had sat waiting, the rifle balanced on his knees and his eyes on Daniel, who was pretending to adjust the load of kindling in his arms.

"That . . . your . . . son?" Wu asked in a stilted voice.

"Yep. That's him," answered Ezra Bone, wiping the blood from his beard. "Name's Dan'l. He don't talk much. Some folk say he's a little queer in the head, but I don't hold with none o' that. He's a right good lad. Jist ain't too bright, that's all. His ma was a Shoshone. Died when he was two."

How much of the old man's monologue Wu understood was anybody's guess, but it seemed to satisfy him. From his distance of twenty paces, he looked Daniel up and down. "You see . . . coolie boy?" he asked in a sharp voice.

Daniel shook his head, keeping his eyes lowered. With an impatient jerk of the reins, Auspicious Wu wheeled his horse and motioned with his head for Pock-faced Chau to follow. The two of them pounded on up the trail, the hooves of their mounts tearing up damp green moss.

The mule, still hitched to the travois, brayed derisively. Daniel dropped his load of kindling and sank to the ground, limp with relief. Ezra Bone laughed out loud as the sound of hoofbeats and crackling brush died away up the slope. "See! I told y', Dan'l boy! Y' don't look no more Chink 'n I do in that getup! Ha! Why I coulda — " The coughing hit him again, more severe than ever. He rolled to one side of the travois, writhing in pain. Daniel hurried to him and raised the canteen to his blood-spattered lips. The old man swallowed weakly, his face ashen. Very gently, Daniel laid him back on the travois and plumped up the blanket under his head to make a pillow.

Ezra Bone looked unspeakably weary. His eyes were closed, his face drained of all color. Tiny pinheads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Daniel sponged them away with his sleeve.

The wrinkled eyelids fluttered and opened. The old man's eyes were like two pale azure jewels. "Dan' l," he whispered. "I bin doin' some thinkin'. Had plenty o' time t' think lately, y' know. Long's you're safe, there's no sense pushin' on day after day like we's doin'. We won't find no doctor. Ain't none in these parts fur's I know. An' anyhow, 'twon't make no difference. Y' see, boy, I know I'm dying . . . "

And so he was. The next day, early in the afternoon, they came to a small, clear lake surrounded by ponderosa pines. They stopped and set

up a more permanent camp than those of previous days. Daniel built a lean-to of pine boughs and made the old man as comfortable as possible beneath it. He caught fish for their supper, and even found a thicket of ripe blackberries. Here they stayed and waited for Ezra Bone to die.

While they waited, they talked — at least they talked when the old man felt strong enough. He seemed to have certain things that he wanted to say before the end came. Sometimes the effort taxed the frail old body beyond endurance. Strong feelings, especially, seemed to bring on the terrible coughing spells. But Ezra Bone continued determinedly, pouring out his long life until Daniel felt he knew the old one almost as well as if he'd been his own grandfather.

" . . . Had me a woman once," the dying voice rasped. "An' a boy, back in Missouri . . . Alice, that was 'er name — an' his was Dan'l, jist like yours. Left 'em t' look fer gold. Never went back. Don't know what became of 'em . . . " The grizzled head rolled back and forth on the blanket. "Tweren't no good nohow. Not now. Good woman, she was. Shouldn'ta left 'em . . . You got a wife, Dan'l?"

"No. I've no one at all."

"Well, if ever you get a good woman, boy, don't leave 'er. 'Specially if'n she's give y' a young-un or two. Ain't nothin' worth givin' that up fer . . . not even gold . . . "

Those were among the last words he spoke. Daniel sat with him all that night, huddled beneath the lean to. Each breath the old man took was a labor now. He no longer coughed; he was too weak. A reddish froth crusted the corners of his lips.

Toward morning, Ezra Bone died. The end was peaceful. There were no emotional farewells. But when he realized the old man was truly gone, Daniel took the rough, withered hand and pressed it to his cheek for a long moment.

At dawn Daniel buried him beside the lake, wrapped in the blanket which had served as his bed. In deference to Christian custom, he cut two stout twigs and lashed them together with a strip of bark to form a cross; and over the grave he recited the Lord's Prayer — as he had learned it at his mother's knee.

That done, he turned his attention to the mule. It was a sturdy beast, likeable for all its cantankerousness, a bit like Ezra Bone himself. Daniel resolved to lighten its load. With the old man gone, surely there would be many things on the packsaddle that could be discarded.

He went through the pans, keeping only one. Even the old tin coffee-pot was placed beneath the lean-to, to be left for someone else who might happen along. He would leave the pick as well, and three of the four shovels, the gold-panning equipment, the scale, and the musket that he did not know how to fire. It might be that if he reduced the weight of the load enough, the mule would allow him to ride.

The remaining blanket he would keep, as well as the ax, the smallest shovel, the fishhooks, Ezra Bone's knife, the canteen, and what was left of the jerky. The flour was almost gone, but there was plenty of salt and it would serve any number of purposes. The coffee and tobacco might do for trading — no, he resolutely pushed them aside. He wanted to travel light. He would take nothing extra.

His plans were vague. He would follow the setting sun until he came to the ocean, or perhaps to San Francisco. Maybe there would be work there, or a ship where he might earn his passage. But he would not feel truly safe from Auspicious Wu and Pock-faced Chau until he had left the Land of the Gold Mountain behind him.

The canvas bundles that Ezra Bone had never allowed him to open were heavy. If he could get rid of them, it might make the difference between walking and riding. Impatient to be off, he tugged at the knots on the rope that bound the bundles together. There were six or seven bundles, each one as long and thick as his arm, carefully wrapped and tied in several places. He lifted the first one off the mule. It was incredibly heavy for its size. He staggered under its weight and dropped it to the grass. The mule cocked its head and watched in mild interest as Daniel bent over the bundle. Losing patience with the knots, he took the knife and sliced through the thin strands of hemp that held it closed. When he'd unrolled the canvas, he saw that the bundle contained several smaller bags, laid end to end.

Something tightened at the back of Daniel's neck as he picked up one of the bags and loosened the drawstring at its top. His pulse began to flutter as he tipped the bag and poured a little of the contents into his left hand.

He could not help what happened next. His hand was shaking so uncontrollably that it could not hold anything. The grains of gold spilled and lay like yellow sand among the blades of grass, twinkling as they caught the light of the new day.

Thirty-One

Shanghai

September, 1862

Jason and Frederick Townsend Ward had parted company on the seventeenth of September — Ward to march to the relief of beleaguered Ningpo and Jason to return to Shanghai.

He had entered the city toward evening and gone straight to his cabin aboard the *Tarpon*. He had no doubt that Serena would learn of his return by word-of-mouth.

The repairs on the *Tarpon* had been completed, and she was seaworthy once more, but as yet she had no crew. Only Jason's first mate, the salty, graying Hall, still lived aboard ship to keep an eye on things. After so many months in port, Hall was clearly anxious to round up a crew and cast off for San Francisco. He grouched about it as he brought Jason a supper of beans and scrambled eggs he'd rustled up in the galley.

"Ain't fittin' for such a fine lady as the *Tarpon* to be tied up in port when she's ready to sail, Cap'n. Talked to a good many chaps who'd be tickled t' serve on her. I could have us a crew in a day or two at most, and there's cargo just waitin' to be picked up. We could be out of this hellhole by the end of the week!"

"Patience, Mister Hall." Jason had smiled affectionately at him across the table. "I've a bit of unfinished business to clear up in Shanghai; then we'll be off. I promise." He swallowed another bite of the eggs, which were rubbery and more than a little oversalted, but made with such good intent that he could not find it in his heart to complain. "At least the smell of Shanghai's improved," he said. "No more gauze masks, I see."

"Thank the good Lord! It's the rise in the river what's done it, they say. That an' the end of the hot weather spell. Still, I'm right sick of the place. Itchin' for the open sea, I reckon."

"That I can understand!" said Jason. "Mister Hall, I'm sure you've been tied to the ship most of the time while I've been gone. Why don't you take the night off? Go over to the American side if you like — maybe there'll be a good poker game going at the Liberty. I'll look after the *Tarpon*."

Hall's homely, square-jawed face lit up. "Why, that's right kind of you, Cap'n. Think I'll do just that!"

After he'd cleared away the dishes, Eli Hall departed. Jason was glad Hall hadn't argued. He wanted to be alone tonight. If there was even the remotest chance Serena might come to him, he wanted to be here, waiting.

He stood at the rail and watched Hall go whistling up the Bund in the direction of the American Concession. Twilight was closing in rapidly. The lamps along the shore twinkled to life as each was opened and lit by an old Chinese with a candle on a long pole. Sedan chairs and wheelbarrows mingled with carriages along the Bund. A holiday procession of bobbing lanterns glowed like a bright ribbon as it wove its way in and out of the traffic.

From where he stood, Jason could see the colonnaded exterior of the Bolton mansion. The light flickered on in Serena's window. He gripped the rail, mad with longing for her. Something quivered in him as he remembered the way she had felt in his arms, her lovely breasts taut against his chest. He remembered the sudden, surprising resistance of her maidenhead that first time, her tiny yelp of pain as he broke through . . .

By all heaven, she was his! She had never truly been anyone else's, not even Harry's! He saw it all clearly now. Serena had married the wrong man — a mistake that had to be corrected. Any court in the world would annul a marriage unconsummated after a year and a half — even though, he realized abashedly, Serena could no longer prove it. But then, it wouldn't matter. Harry wouldn't fight it, not if it was what she wanted.

He began to pace, wild with impatience now that she was so near. If she did not come — If she had chosen to stay with Harry — He could not even bear to think of it.

The evening was young. With a sigh, Jason returned to his cabin and tried to read. He was not sure how much time had passed when he heard the brush of footsteps on the deck. He stiffened in his chair, his heart leaping at the sound of the discreet knock on the cabin door.

"Serena — " He sprang to the door and flung it open.

Evan Ames stepped into the cabin. His breath was heavy with gin, and he swayed slightly where he stood just inside the doorway. "Sorry to disappoint you, Frobisher." He took a step forward. "I thought it was time I paid you a little call."

"We have nothing to say to each other, Ames."

"I've a good deal to say to you." His voice was slightly slurred. "Stay away from Serena! She's mine! I saw her first!"

"Really, Ames," Jason raised one eyebrow, his face a study in contempt. "A woman's not subject to staking out to the first comer, like a mining claim. And as to her being yours, I think Harry Bolton would have something to say about that."

Ames grinned crookedly. "You're a fine one to talk. That week Bolton was in Amoy, I was watching the house. I saw you go in. A few nights later I followed Serena to Ward's place in the French Concession. What I know could ruin you both."

"Haven't you done enough damage already?" Jason fought the urge to strike him.

"I've said nothing that won't be forgotten once you're gone, Frobisher. But if you stay around I'll splatter your name — and hers — all over Shanghai." He leaned against the door, grinning tipsily. "Don't worry, I'd treat her right. She wouldn't even have to leave Bolton if she didn't want to. Long as I got a piece of 'er two or three times a week, that's all that matters." He licked his lips. "Tell me, Frobisher, what's she like, eh?"

Jason could not help what happened next. The anger that had been seething beneath the thin crust of his composure exploded in a burst of fury. His fist slammed into Evan Ames's jaw, knocking him out the cabin door and halfway up the steps. "Get out!" he rasped. "Get off this ship! And by damn, if I hear you've been spreading any stories, you won't be spreading any more by the time I get through with you!"

Evan Ames struggled to his feet. His eyes spat hatred, but he said nothing as he turned and stumbled up the companionway. Jason waited, his chest rising and falling as he heard the hesitant footsteps echo

across the deck. By the time he had gained the deck himself, Ames was walking up the quay, quivering with pain and rage. Jason followed him with his eyes until he had disappeared into the dark fog that had moved in off the river. Was Ames a real danger? Jason could not be sure. But it wouldn't make any difference if Serena left Shanghai with him. They would never see Evan Ames again.

As he stood there with his arms folded across his chest, a slight figure came into view out of the darkness, moving down the quay toward the ship. A young coolie, Jason surmised from the clothes and domed hat, the slender frame and peculiar grace of movement. The head was bent low beneath the hat. A messenger, perhaps. From Serena. Jason's heart picked up speed.

He stepped toward the rail as the shadowy form came closer, hurrying a bit. The river lapped gently at the hull of the *Tarpon*. A sampan bobbed silently shoreward.

The young coolie hesitated at the foot of the gangplank, then began to climb. "Here, boy," Jason growled impatiently. "Hurry!" Then his mouth dropped open as the figure reached the deck and the bamboo hat fell back. Serena's golden hair tumbled into the moonlight.

"Jason!" She ran to him. He caught her in his arms and covered her mouth with his. For a long, trembling moment, they clung to one another, kissing wildly. Then he lifted her off her feet and swept her down the companionway into his cabin, pausing for only an instant to lock the door.

Beneath the rough cotton tunic and trousers, she was naked. It flashed through Jason's mind that he should ask her where Harry was at this hour, but all reason evaporated in the frenzy of his need for her.

When his trembling hands fumbled with the knots that fastened her tunic, she helped him. "Oh, hurry . . ." she whispered in a tiny voice. "Jason, hurry — " Her breasts were soft, warm gold in the light of the lantern. He covered them with kisses. She quivered as his hands moved downward to loosen the drawstring of her trousers. Her flesh was honey, sweet and smooth. She moaned. Her fingers clawed at his clothes as he lowered her to the bed.

"Jason . . ." She moved beneath him, whispering his name over and over, her body hungry, and open, her hands searching, finding him. The touch of those small fingers sent arrows of heat shooting through his veins. He leaned outward for an instant to douse the lamp that sat

on the nightstand. "No — " She stopped him with a brush of her lips against his bare arm. "Don't put it out. I want to see you. I want to remember all of it, how you look — " She kissed him, love, passion, and sorrow blending in fevered lips.

He knew then that she had chosen to stay with Harry. Tonight was meant to be the end, not the beginning for them.

"Love me, Jason," she whispered. "For the last time . . . love me — "

He took her then. In tenderness; in anger, in desperation. All that was his to give, Jason gave. With every caress, every thrust of his body, he fought Harry Bolton. Serena was frantic with need. Her arms clung to him. Her legs were silken bonds that pressed him deeper, deeper into that lovely, warm, moist darkness until he was lost in her and she in him. Time and place drifted away. The substance and form of things blurred until nothing existed but the joining of their flesh. Nothing was real but that exquisite inner pulse that grew and grew until its bursting filled the universe.

Serena lay sobbing in his arms. Jason held her, gently now, feeling somehow that he'd won. But there was no triumph, only an overpowering sense of destiny, as if they had been swept away together by some great, irresistible current. "I'll never leave you, Serena," he whispered against her hair. "Whatever we have to face . . . whatever I have to give up . . . I'll not leave you."

"I — came to tell you good-bye . . . " Her voice trembled. "But I can't let you go. God help me, Jason . . . " She was still for a time, only her tears moving, trickling over his arm where she lay against him. "I want it right," she said at last. "I'll tell Harry tonight, as soon as I see him."

His eyes questioned her.

"He went to the Astor with Abner Heard. He said he'd likely be late. And Moira's asleep. That's how I was able to come — "

"Harry will understand . . . " Jason ran his fingertip up her arm. "He's got to understand." He sat up and reached for his shirt. "I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to, Jason."

"I want to. Harry's my friend. I've got to face him."

As he and Serena walked back to the house, he dreaded with each step the moment of confrontation. It wouldn't be easy, telling Harry that he'd come to take his wife away.

She reached for his hand as they entered the house. Her fingers were shaking, but she let go when a distraught Abner Heard, seemingly oblivious to her bizarre costume, rushed into the foyer to meet them.

"Abner, what's wrong?" she cried, seeing the stricken look on the man's face. "Is it Harry? Has something happened?"

Heard's face was the color of stale bread dough. As his eyes darted from Jason to Serena, they took on a sickly expression. Jason remembered that Heard had never liked him. "Aye, something's happened," he said. "It was Evan Ames, the crazy fool! He came into the Astor and started saying things about you. Both of you." Heard's eyes took in Serena's coolie costume. "Harry was there. He — He challenged Ames to a duel!"

"What?" Serena's face paled. "We've got to stop them! Evan's insane! He could kill Harry! Where — "

"You're too bloody late," said Heard.

"Harry — " Serena's hands fluttered frantically.

"He's alive. But he's in a bad way. Took a bullet in the spine. The doctor's got him upstairs now." Heard gave them an accusing glance, "We tried to find you when it happened, Mrs. Bolton. Maybe you could have stopped them. Now — " Heard looked down at the floor. A thin trail of blood led across the foyer and up the stairs.

"What about Ames?" Jason asked quietly. "Where is he?"

Heard shook his head. "In hell, for all I know. The bastard's dead. Harry killed him."

Serena gave no indication that she'd heard. Her eyes darted up the stairs; then she turned to Jason, her face so stricken with grief and guilt that he almost cried aloud.

"I'm going to him, Jason. If he dies — " She could not finish the sentence. With a little sob she spun away and raced up the stairs. Jason watched her go. A sense of cold resignation settled over him, and he knew at that moment that he had lost her.

The doctor worked over Harry for more than an hour, closeted behind the doors of the bedroom Harry and Serena had shared for nineteen months. Serena had insisted on staying at his side for the entire operation. Jason, Moira, and Abner Heard waited in the parlor below. They sat in silence, the three of them, the atmosphere tense and

strained. Jason felt Moira's eyes on him from time to time, but he did not look back at her. They might have talked a little if Heard had not been there, but that squat, glowering presence precluded any conversation. Heard sat in Harry's armchair puffing nervously on his meerschau until he was surrounded by a cloud of smoke. Every flicker of his narrow eyes exuded the venom of blame.

Moira, in her dark blue wrapper, was curled in one corner of the loveseat, feet tucked under her. Her thin hands rolled and unrolled the end of her fringed sash or toyed with the top of her cane. She'd been sleeping when they'd brought Harry in, and the noise of their coming had awakened her. Her eyes still wore the dazed look of a child freshly roused from sleep. Her hair drifted uncombed about her shoulders. Jason was grateful for her presence. God knows what Heard might have said to him if she hadn't been there.

Jason sat like a stone in the rocker, too distraught even to smoke as he stared down at his boots. His gaze wandered to the white rug that lay before the unlit fireplace. Ironical it was, maybe even just, in an odd way, that his purgatory should be here, in the very room where he had made love to Serena for the first time.

He wondered what he would do if Harry died. Serena would be free to marry him then. But could they be happy together at such a price, or would Harry's ghost lie between them forever? Would guilt gnaw at them like a growing worm until it had eaten them so hollow that they were unable to feel, even for each other?

Yes, he told himself, it was over in any case. He loved her — so much that the thought of leaving her was like tearing away a part of his own flesh. But the romantics who said that love conquered all were wrong.

He would send a message to Ward in the morning, Jason resolved. Then, as soon as possible, he would join his friend at Ningpo. Once that city was secure. Ward could turn his command over to Burgevine and see Chang Mei safely to her father in Shanghai. Then the two of them would leave on the *Tarpon*, bound for America, to offer their services to the Union.

The doctor walked slowly into the parlor, wiping his hands on a towel. He was a portly man, pink and bald and very clean, whose little, silver-framed glasses sat firmly on his broad nose. Jason did not know him, but somehow he had trusted him on sight.

"He's alive, and God willing, he'll stay that way," he said with a weary sigh. "But I'm afraid he's paralyzed." The doctor's words confirmed what they had all dreaded. "No movement or feeling below the shoulders. I wish I could give you some word of encouragement, but there's virtually no hope for his full recovery. This sort of thing, when it happens, is almost invariably permanent." He looked at Jason, then at Abner Heard. "Which one of you is Frobisher?"

"I am." Jason leaned forward in his chair.

"He's asking to see you. I must warn you not to tax him. He's very weak."

Slowly, Jason mounted the stairs. His feet seemed unusually heavy. He knew instinctively that Harry had discovered his perfidy and betrayal, and, like Serena, blamed himself that his old friend had been laid low.

His footsteps echoed in the silence of the upstairs hallway. The door to Harry's bedroom was open. Jason stepped inside.

Harry was propped up in bed. His face was pale; he looked old and tired, but the gray eyes that met Jason's were alert. Serena stood beside him, still in coolie costume, her eyes rimmed with red. Her hair hung limply about her face. The sight of her twisted Jason's heart.

Jason stood at the foot of the bed, one hand clutching the bedpost. The lump in his throat choked off all words.

"I have to tell you that I've known about . . . you and Serena for some time now, and with all my heart I promise I don't blame either one of you." With a great effort, he turned his head and looked directly at Serena. "And I don't expect you to stay. Not now, especially," he murmured.

"Don't talk. You mustn't — " She lifted one of his limp hands and pressed it to her cheek. Her beautiful face was lined with pain. *Help me*, her eyes pleaded.

"I'm the one who's leaving." Jason found his voice. "Tomorrow I'll be heading for Ningpo to join General Ward. Once the siege is lifted. Ward and I will be sailing for America together. We plan to go back to Salem and enlist, in the Massachusetts Volunteers, if possible. I'm through with the China trade for the time being."

"Nonsense — " Harry mouthed the word. There was almost no sound.

"So this is good-bye," Jason continued, excruciatingly conscious of the inadequacy of his words. "It's good-bye to both of you." He reached out and clasped Harry's right hand. The feel of those lifeless fingers in his almost wrenched him apart. He swallowed the sting of sudden tears.

"Good-bye, Jason. Godspeed." Serena spoke softly, a catch in her throaty voice. He met her eyes for one last, brief moment. The urge to hold her in his arms once more rose like a flame. He could not speak.

Swiftly, while his strength remained, Jason turned away from them and walked from the room.

Moirra was on the stairs, two-thirds of the way to the top. "Jason —" She was trembling, her eyes huge in her childlike face. "I heard," she said. "I — I'm going to miss you, Jason."

He wondered how much she knew about his relationship with Serena, this sweet, sad, strangely wise child. "I'll miss you, too, Moirra," he said, meaning it.

"Must you go? We all need you, Jason. Especially now."

"I must," he said gently. "It's for the best."

"And if I never see you again?"

"You'll forget me in time. But I won't forget you. Do you plan to stay here in Shanghai?"

She shook her head. "I'm going back to my father. I decided just today." The pink rose in her cheeks. "May I write to you? You don't have to write back. Please —?"

"I'd be honored," he said. "I'll try and answer, but you mustn't worry if I don't. All right?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Good-bye, Moirra."

"Jason —" He had already started on down the stairs but he turned back to her. Because he was below her, her face was on a level with his own. A vein pulsed in the hollow of her white throat.

"Jason," she whispered, trembling, "may I kiss you?"

In answer he leaned toward her. With great tenderness, his hand circled her waist. Her eyes closed, and he felt the fluttering pressure of her lips at the corner of his mouth, as soft as the brush of a butterfly's wing.

She drew back. "Good-bye." There was a tear on her cheek.

"Good-bye, sweet Moira." He turned and went on down the stairs to the front door. The cool mist of dawn struck his face. Just for a moment, he paused and looked back at her. She was still standing on the stairs, a small, lonely figure.

As he walked to the gate, he tried to look ahead to the pleasure of being with Ward again. Yes, it would be good, he assured himself. The freedom of open space, the satisfaction of fighting for a good cause at the side of his dearest friend . . .

The young Filipino was waiting for him just outside the gate, smartly clad in the white summer uniform and green turban of Ward's crack Manila troops.

"Captain Frobisher?" He wore the insignia of a lieutenant. His English was delicately slow, like the tinkling of a music box

"Yes?"

"The mate aboard your ship said I might find you here. I have a message, sir, from Colonel Forrester." He handed Jason a sealed letter, then stood stiffly at attention while Jason broke the wax and unfolded the paper.

Regret to inform you that General Frederick Townsend Ward died in battle at Ningpo, Sept. 20, 1862 . . .

There was more, but Jason could not read it. The paper crumpled in his fist as the shock of the news struck him. His eyes blurred. He reeled with disbelief. "Would you read me the rest?" he managed to ask the young officer.

Dutifully, the lieutenant complied.

When he'd finished, Jason folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

"You'll need a place to sleep," he said to the young Filipino as they walked up the Bund toward the quay. The tide was out. The mud flats glistened darkly "You can bunk aboard my ship." In silence, they moved along the dock. The silhouette of the *Tarpon* rose out of the black river ahead of them. China was behind him, Jason resolved. He would go back to Salem, as he and Ward had planned. He would carry out his friend's passionate wish: to fight for a cause. To fight for the Union. Perhaps in the hot hell of battle, he would forget for a time what he had left here.

Thirty-Two

Taocheng

January, 1863

Daniel had gone alone that morning to the hidden cave. His father's scrolls were still there, safe and dry in the teakwood chest. Daniel's blood sang as he carried the chest down the mountain, the thin snow crunching beneath his high-topped, fur-lined boots. The camp lay below him on a little plateau above the town, not far from the place where his parents' house had once stood. There were four tents, arranged in a circle, one for cooking, one for the servants, one for the *mafoos* and porters, and one, the finest, for Daniel himself. The horses were clustered just up the slope from them, under a shelter made of pine boughs.

He had made the long journey upriver from Shanghai to Chungking, where he had purchased the horses and tents and hired the additional men, then up the Red Basin to Chengtu and across the mountains. Along the way he had entertained visions of riding into Taocheng like some visiting prince. He had tried to imagine the looks on people's faces when they saw him, those who had shunned him because his mother was foreign.

But when at last he had stood looking down at Taocheng, the place of his birth and his boyhood, he had decided not to make a spectacle of himself. He would camp here in the hills and send his most trusted servant down into Taocheng with money to ransom him from legal bondage to Liu and to obtain the release of his parents' coffins from the House of the Dead. It was amazing how easy life became for one who possessed money.

At his journey's end, he had gone to the Taki Bank and seen to the safe deposit of his gold, part of which he converted to taels. Exactly

how much the gold was worth Daniel did not know, but the expressions on the faces of the clerks and bank officials told him that it must be a considerable sum. Silently, he thanked the spirit of Ezra Bone, his benefactor, to whom he owed everything. That done, Daniel had set himself to preparing for the return to Taocheng and the fulfillment of his vow.

As he looked down the hill, he saw the servant hurrying up the slope toward camp. Gwok was his name, a slender Cantonese of forty years who had been recommended by Taki himself. Daniel prized him highly. In the past busy months, Gwok had proven himself to be capable, discreet, and loyal. It was Gwok who had assisted Daniel in finding a suitable house in Shanghai's old, walled Chinese sector and who had hired the cook and the other servants. He had also sent out enough cautious inquiries among the brethren of the Red Lotus to learn that Wheelbarrow Wong's blood oath against Daniel was no more than a story concocted by High Dragon Yao.

Gwok, whose former master was dead, had lived long in the homes of the rich. He was connoisseur of fine food, elegant clothes, furniture, and paintings. With great enthusiasm he had taken up the task of transforming his young master from awkward mountain boy to cultured gentleman — a process that was still far from completed.

Daniel moved down the slope, arriving at the camp only a moment before Gwok came panting over the edge of the hill, his narrow, homely face red from cold and exertion.

Gwok bowed — a ritual that Daniel considered a waste of time, but which the man insisted was essential to a proper relationship between servant and master. "Forgive me, young lord," he gasped. "This thin air! A man cannot live here!"

Daniel smiled. "You could have had your pick of the horses."

"In a small rat's nest like Taocheng, any stranger is conspicuous enough, even without a horse." He took a deep breath, his face assuming an expression of satisfaction. "It went well. I learned a great deal."

Daniel masked his impatience with courtesy "You must be cold," he said. "Have the master of the kitchen bring a pot of tea to my tent. When your tongue is warm again, then we will talk."

A short time later, they were luxuriating in the warmth of the tent, leaning back against plump leather cushions covered with the pelts of bear and long-haired goat.

Gwok smiled broadly. His teeth, straight, white, and fine, were wasted in a face that was large of nose and small of chin. "My lord, you are a free man!" he said. "For the paltry sum of three hundred taels to the House of Liu!" With a flourish he drew out of his vest a folded paper that Daniel recognized at once as the document of his bondage.

"Here. Give it to me." For a long moment, he studied the page, the scribe's cramped writing, old Liu's *chop* and his own mark, the seal of Cheng Lo which he still wore in the pouch around his neck "I have waited long for this," he said, folding the paper for safekeeping.

Gwok refilled both cups with the steaming tea. "The coffins of your parents are safe as well. I paid a few taels for their care to the keeper of the House of the Dead. You may send the porters for them any time before nightfall."

The words fell on Daniel's ears with the sweetness of music. For nearly two years, the secret fear had gnawed at him that something would happen to the coffins, that he would return to Taocheng to find them missing or destroyed. Now, relief overcame him. He blinked away sudden tears as he pondered the good news. It was as if all he had ever wished for had come to pass by magic. Once again, he gave silent thanks to Ezra Bone.

But there were other matters as well and he was wild with curiosity. "What of old Liu and his household?" he asked with studied casualness.

"What I learned of Liu I learned in the winehouse. It seems the old one died this past summer somewhat mysteriously of pains in the stomach. It was most unexpected, for he was said to be in fine health — " Gwok rolled his eyes. "Of course, nothing could be proved . . . "

"Poison?" Daniel asked.

"It would seem so." Gwok's voice was smooth as oil. "His first wife, I was told, preceded him in death by some months. Liu had married again — his second concubine, I believe. A young woman he had bought the year before in Masang. She has since remarried, and lives in Liu's house with her new husband. It was with him I dealt in obtaining your release." Gwok raised his upper lip in a strangely twisted smile. "A handsome fellow he was, and young. I was told he'd been a shepherd before he married Liu's widow . . . "

The man was holding something back, Daniel sensed. He was saving it with delicious anticipation, like the choicest morsel of a meal, for the very last —

Daniel sipped his tea, trying to beat Gwok at his own game of elaborate, feigned disinterest. A wise man hid his anxiety, Gwok had counseled him often enough, and Daniel was learning. But his pulse twitched erratically as he pondered what he had learned. So Min Fei had not married her lord after all. The younger concubine had won, and now controlled everything, aided, it seemed, by a few grains of poison. But where was Min Fei? Could she still be living in the house, as a servant? Could she have gone back to Chengtu and the man she'd hated? Daniel choked on his tea as he realized she might well have been poisoned, too.

"Are you ill, young master?" Gwok proffered a napkin that had been steam-warmed in the kitchen tent.

"I am not," Daniel snapped. "But I wish to hear more of what you learned. What, for example, did you hear about Liu's first concubine, a woman from Chengtu?"

"The first concubine — Ah! Yes, I'd quite forgotten that bit of information. After all, it concerned a mere woman . . ." Gwok was enjoying himself highly. Daniel seethed as he waited for him to continue. Yes, the son of a dog was testing him.

Gwok took another sip of tea. "She was cast out onto the street, some months before the old one died, which was just as well for her. She might have met a worse fate had she stayed."

"And where did she go?" The tightness in Daniel's jaw was excruciating.

"Not far. She dwells in a poor hut alongside the traders' road — a convenient spot, I would say, for one of her profession, Ah! Calm yourself, my lord! How is a woman to live? Would you have her starve?"

Daniel had lunged forward, almost upsetting the tea table. "Enough!" he growled. "Speak no more of her, or I will cut out your tongue!"

"As you wish, master. In any case, I had little more to say . . . although I did mean to tell you why old Liu cast her from his house." Gwok dangled the bait enticingly, irresistibly.

"Speak then!" Daniel scowled. "Finish it!"

Gwok refilled his cup. The vapor from the hot tea swirled in the air, hiding his face for a moment. Daniel waited, a tempest in his chest.

"The story goes that she gave birth to a child — a boy," Gwok began, and Daniel suddenly felt weak. "A fine son it was, strong and

healthy, large of bone and long of limb. But Liu, so I was told, took one look at him and began to scream that he'd been deceived. 'A demon!' he wailed. 'A foreign-devil child! Who can say what the old turtle meant, eh? But the man in the teahouse who told me said that he could be heard clear into the next street. *Aiya!* What a commotion! And the poor concubine was thrown out, she and her baby, that very afternoon!" Gwok's eyes narrowed as he studied Daniel over the cup. "It was said that the old man deserved what he got. The previous year, it seems, he had hired the son of a foreign woman as an apprentice . . . Ah, but surely you know the rest of the story better than I, young lord, for did you not tell me that your mother was an Englishwoman with hair as red as a flame?" Gwok smiled cautiously. He was treading on dangerous ground now. "And if this stupid one might be so bold as to ask . . . could it be that my master has fathered a son?"

With a sharp intake of his breath, Daniel rose to his feet. "Take me to her!" he rasped. "Now!"

"Would it not be more discreet to have the woman brought here?" Gwok ventured.

"I do not wish to wait!" Daniel strode out of the tent. A cold wind had sprung up. It whipped his queue across his face and ruffled the edge of his wolfskin vest as he strode up the hill to where the horses were tethered.

With a shaking hand, Daniel opened the door and stepped across the threshold of Min Fei's hovel. The hut was dark after the glare of morning. His eyes saw nothing but shadows.

"Not until tonight, you lout! My mornings are my own!" The voice, shrill with annoyance, was unmistakably Min Fei's. "And you've let in the cold! What makes you think you can — " The tirade ended in a tiny gasp as she recognized him.

He could see her now, crouched on the straw matting in a thin green robe. Her black hair hung loose to the floor, covering her like a veil. Her face was unpainted. She looked tired. No doubt she'd done some business in the night, Daniel reminded himself. A strange, cold fury welled up inside him as he looked at her.

"What have you done with my son?" he demanded icily.

She began to laugh then, bitterly, with a most unbecoming loudness. He wanted to strike her and perhaps might have had she not

spoken. "Your son! What have I done with *your* son? Ah, Li-t'ung, you have not changed! You are still so much a man! Stubborn, proud, and blind! *Your* son!" She began to laugh again.

"And was he not mine?" He seized her shoulders.

"A man drops a seed onto the ground and goes away. A woman nurtures and cares for it. She gives her life to the young seedling, day after day. Then, years later, the man comes back and asks, 'Where is my tree?'"

His hands tightened, pressing into her flesh. "I want to see him! Where is my son?"

Min Fei's jaw tensed obstinately. She glared up at him, all the protective rage of a mother tiger flashing in her eyes.

At that moment, a cry arose from the far corner of the hut. Daniel was transfixed by the sound. A sensation of the most unbearable sweetness poured into him.

"See," she snapped, "you woke him up!"

A small heap of blankets was stirring on the low bed. Daniel's hands quivered as they released her shoulders. "Get him, Min Fei," he whispered hoarsely.

She glided to the bed and scooped up a squirming bundle. Daniel caught a glimpse of a tiny, waving arm. His heart contracted painfully.

"Come and look, then, at what was created that night under the stars, Li-t'ung." Min Fei's voice was husky with sudden tenderness as she unwrapped the baby and laid him back on the bed. "He was born nine moons ago in the spring — yes, count if you wish; the time comes out right."

Daniel leaned over the bed and gazed down at the baby, who had stopped crying and now lay still, looking back at him with his own green-flecked eyes.

"Li-t'ung . . . does he please you?" Min Fei asked softly.

"He . . . he astounds me!" Daniel permitted himself to smile at her before he remembered once more what she was — a whore, carrying on her despicable trade within sight and hearing of *his* son! "But I am not pleased by this place," he said angrily, "nor am I pleased by what has become of you! How could you let yourself sink so low?" He reached for the baby. "Give him to me, Min Fei. I am taking him away from Taocheng."

"And from me?" She hissed as she snatched the baby away.

"Not so much from you as from what you've become!"

A strangled cry of pure rage tore itself from Min Fei's throat. "You unspeakable wretch! You pious, self-righteous son of a donkey! Who are you to judge me?" Her eyes were wild with fury. The baby began to whimper in her arms. "How was I to live? How was I to keep *your* son from starving to death?"

"Very well," he said at last. "I see that if I want my son I must take you both. I've horses outside. Get your things."

"My things!" Min Fei looked about the small, bare hut and laughed. "I want *nothing* from this cursed place! I am ready! Now!"

The two coffins rested on twin supports of pine logs, sheltered from the lightly falling snow by a small, open tent that had been brought along especially for that purpose. To protect the beauty of their lacquered finishes, they had been tightly sewn into oiled cloth covers lined with sheepskin. The two-wheeled cart on which they would travel all the way to the Yangtze, its sides and bottom carefully padded, rested beside them in the night, awaiting the dawn and the beginning of the long journey back to the China Coast.

Daniel lay on his bed, naked between the layers of fur coverings. His eyes, open in the darkness, gazed at the silk curtain that hung across the middle of his tent as he pondered the events of the day.

So still was the night that he could hear his little son breathing, or so he fancied at least, from the other side of the curtain. His heart unfolded with the purest love he had ever known, as he felt, for the first time, the strength of the bond that ties one generation to the next.

Daniel's head jerked upward, drawn by a sudden urge to see his son in sleep. Slowly, he forced himself to lie down again. The silk curtain that separated him from Min Fei was a very real barrier. To cross it would be to fail.

He had resolved at once that he would not take up their old relationship — not since she had gone back to her former way of life. He was no longer a foolish boy but a man, with a man's responsibilities to his ancestors. He had made the situation quite clear to Min Fei. She was under his protection, he had explained carefully, and she would live in his house, but only as mother and nurse to their son — not as a concubine, and most certainly not as a wife.

Min Fei's eyes had flashed with some of their old boldness. "So be it!" she had snapped. "If I never share a man's bed again for as long as I live, it will be none too soon!" Then her voice had softened as she added, "Dignity and peace, Li-t'ung. Give me those and I will ask you for nothing more."

The curtain had been put up at Daniel's order. There was no suitable place for Min Fei and the baby to sleep other than his own tent, but the temptations of such intimacy were frightening. Daniel did not trust himself, and he trusted Min Fei even less. The curtain, then, was a gesture, a confirmation of his intent. What had been between them was past.

Still, it was not unpleasant having her with him. They had shared the evening meal, Min Fei demurely pretty in a new pink robe — one of several that a servant had bought for her in the town. Afterward, he had given her a long and dramatic account of his adventures since leaving Taocheng. She had listened enthralled, her black eyes shining as she looked at him over her teacup. When the baby awoke and began to cry, she had opened her robe and nursed him while she listened. Daniel's speech had muddled at the sight of her slender neck and bare shoulder, her skin golden in the lamplight. He dared no more than glance at the softly swelling curve of her breast and the puckered brown aureole of her nipple where it met the baby's nuzzling mouth. Even that glimpse had been enough to stir Daniel's body, and it was then that he had thought of the curtain.

Strange, he had expected to sleep well after such a fulfilling day, but his eyes would not stay closed. He stretched and turned over, the fur like satin against his skin. The night was exquisitely still, the bed warm, and on the other side of the curtain Min Fei slept beside their son.

With a restless sigh, he got up, walked to the door of the tent, and opened the flap. The cold stopped his breath. He stepped outside for a moment, lowering the flap to keep the tent warm inside. Dots of snow floated out of the black sky. A horse nickered in the darkness. A servant, assigned sentry duty for the night, drowsed beside his small campfire. Daniel stood where he was until his skin felt numb and his teeth had begun to chatter. Only then, his passion symbolically cooled, did he slip back into the tent. Now, perhaps, he would be able to sleep.

The curtain swayed, brushing his thigh as he passed it. One look at his son, he thought. That much would do no harm. Then he would go to sleep happy. Holding his breath, he moved the curtain aside.

The tent was dark. He could see only the black outline of Min Fei and the child where they slept, but their warmth lay in the air about them, sweet and musky. He crouched low beside the mattress and ran a finger along the baby's cheek. The skin was as soft as a petal. He thought of the act that had created such a wonder, the bursting forth of his seed into that dark and tender place where the miracle had happened. The memory awakened a subtle pulse within him. How alone he had been since that night . . .

"Li-t'ung — " He felt Min Fei's eyes in the darkness. She was awake. "What is it?" she whispered.

"I am cold." The words came from someplace other than his mind.

"Be still, you'll wake the baby." She slipped away from the slumbering child and knelt beside him.

"*Aiya!* You are frozen! Where have you been?" She pressed against him, the heat of her body igniting flames. Her hands crept up and down his back.

"I told myself I was happy when you left," she whispered. "You were free and I soon discovered that I had obtained what I set out to get from you — " She buried her face against his chest, suddenly trembling. "Oh, Li-t'ung, I have missed you so! That morning I woke up to find you gone, I thought my life had ended — "

"Enough!" Daniel's arms were around her, his hands tangling her long black hair. "Your woman's chatter will awaken our son! Come — " He swept her through the curtain and into his bed of furs. She clung to him, whimpering softly as he tugged away her robe and his hands found all the lovely, familiar curves and hollows. Her breasts were swollen with milk. She was weeping.

"Don't, Min Fei," he whispered. "Don't cry. You have given me a son. I will never leave you again . . . "

Then, as it had so many times in his dreams, her body opened like a welcoming gate and he came home.

Daniel's mind cleared later on as she lay beside him, smiling in her sleep. Yes, he told himself, it would be necessary to readjust his think-

ing. Min Fei was in his blood, as much a part of him as his own limbs. No matter what she had been, he could not deny her.

But he was a man with a future now. His head was full of plans, and those plans did not include taking a flower girl as his wife. When he married, it would be to a young woman of virtue.

A maiden — or even a widow, he amended his thoughts, for he had not forgotten Lai Jyu; and if the rumors he had heard in Shanghai were true, the days of the *Tien Wang* were numbered. The imperialist army, under the leadership of the brilliant General Tseng Kuo-fan, was pushing the Taipings back toward Nanking. Unless they rallied soon, it would only be a matter of time before the Heavenly Kingdom fell. As long as there was a chance of freeing Lai Jyu, Daniel was willing to wait.

Min Fei would be his concubine, and he would care for her well. Surely, after what she had suffered, she would accept that much and be content with it.

He sighed as he shifted to make himself more comfortable in the bed, feeling the silken warmth of Min Fei's skin next to his own. How could a man sleep when his head was so full of plans for the future?

Canton was full of dangers. Even the burial of his parents' coffins in the Cheng family tomb could only be accomplished at considerable risk. For the present, he would return to Shanghai. There he would find safety, as well as opportunities to increase his wealth. Ezra Bone had left him a small fortune in gold, but that was only a beginning. He would make it grow as a field of wheat grows from a handful of seed. He would sow and reap, invest and harvest the profits. He would not rest until he had become the richest man in Shanghai.

Only one thing troubled him. He was young, and totally inexperienced in matters of business. He would need expert guidance, perhaps even a partner, if he wanted to succeed in the competitive world of Shanghai trade. The choice was crucial. He would need a shrewd man, one with a swift, calculating mind; a man old enough to have acquired wisdom, yet young enough to take risks and grasp new ideas. A meticulous man. An authoritative man. A commander of others.

Suddenly, he laughed out loud. The choice was so clear, so natural, that he could not believe he hadn't thought of it sooner a man who could squeeze tael from a cabbage, who possessed the guile of a ser-

pent and the avariciousness of a hungry tiger. A man who would leap at the chance to become rich and powerful in his own right.

True, Daniel would have to forgive some minor sins. High Dragon Yao could not have been blameless in the provisioning of the *Marie Estelle*. He was crafty as a weasel and would have to be watched closely, but Daniel needed him. In Yao he would have the perfect tool to accomplish what he wanted.

As soon as he got back to Shanghai, Daniel resolved, he would set the wheels in motion. And then, at last, he would work his vengeance upon the Golden One.

Thirty-Three

Shanghai
April, 1864

John Yao's abrupt resignation in March of the previous year had marked the beginning of a decisive downturn in Serena's fortunes. Yao had not explained a great deal in the terse note she had found on her desk at the end of his last day — only that he had been offered a most attractive business opportunity, one that he could not in wisdom refuse.

Serena did not realize how much she had depended upon him until he had left. With Harry a helpless invalid and the whole of Bolton and Company her responsibility, Yao had become indispensable. With his help, she had managed to keep the business running more or less smoothly and making a profit. Without him, trouble had come rushing in from all sides, all but overwhelming her.

It was not long until she found out where he had gone. A new Chinese-owned business had emerged, dealing principally in tea and silk. Officially titled the House of Cheng, it soon became known to Shanghai's European community as Cheng and Yao — the reason being that John Yao was by far its most visible partner.

As for the titular head of the House of Cheng, his identity had remained a source of the most delicious speculation for months. Not one Westerner in Shanghai could claim to have ever met him. It was fairly clear that in their business relationship Cheng supplied the capital, Yao the expertise and the work, and it was plain to see that they were doing well. The elusive Mr. Cheng, however, remained a mystery.

It was generally agreed that he lived in the old, walled Chinese sector of Shanghai, and that he must be very wealthy indeed to give Yao

the kind of backing needed to deal on such a large scale. Where he and his money had come from, however, no one knew.

Whoever he was, Serena cursed him. The House of Cheng had cut into the Bolton silk trade like a broad-bladed Chinese sword. At every turn, they overbid her agents for the prime silk of the area, and they were just as quick to offer Bolton customers a lower price than she could possibly ask. John Yao knew all the secrets, and he used them ruthlessly.

Serena sighed as she reshuffled the papers on her desk. Not all her problems could be blamed on Yao. With rumors that the American Civil War was drawing to its bloody finish, the Yankee market for Chinese cotton, in which she had invested heavily, was on the verge of collapse. Worse, much worse, the bottom had fallen out of the land values in Shanghai. The reason for this was all too clear.

Little by little over the course of the past months, imperialist forces had pushed the Taipings back into an ever-shrinking circle around Nanking. The Ever Victorious Army, organized and trained by Frederick Townsend Ward, had been instrumental in freeing the area around Shanghai from the Taipings.

Under the leadership of Charles Gordon, who eventually took over from Ward, the Imperialist troops had won smashing victories at Tiatsang and Kunshan, finally aiding the Chinese army in the crushing defeat of the Taipings at Soochow, one of their major strongholds. The Ever Victorious Army was now engaged in helping the imperialists clear the country and waterways around Nanking in preparation for the final assault on the walled Taiping capital.

All Shanghai breathed easier with the threat of the Taipings removed. Safety, however, proved to be very much a mixed blessing. With the countryside at peace once more, the refugees had begun to pour out of Shanghai by the tens of thousands.

The teeming squalor of the streets dried up like a healing sore. The ramshackle wooden houses stood empty, their tenants gone. Those who had grown rich collecting the rent of misery lost fortunes overnight. Serena was among them.

The calendar on the wall said April 3, 1864. She squared her shoulders and opened the books, knowing what she would see. Rentals were down to a tenth of what they had been six months ago, and there were still payments to meet for the land. Balance: negative. The orders

for cotton from American mills had dwindled greatly in anticipation of the end of the Civil War. Serena had bought heavily in the past season. The Bolton godowns were bulging with cotton bales. Another negative.

Opium, at least, was still earning a healthy profit, even without Yao's connections. But it was only a small part of the business and was not really counted as a part of Bolton and Company, since Serena worked it through her father.

As for silk, the Bolton mainstay, she steeled herself as she turned the page. The competition from Cheng and Yao was hurting. They had underbid her for three major contracts in the past six months, even when she had lowered her own bids as far as she dared. How Cheng and Yao could buy silk from the suppliers in China at the most attractive prices and sell it so cheaply to the customers was beyond her understanding. Their profit margin had to be infinitesimal. It was almost as if they did not care about profits, almost as if their real aim was to break her, and this she could not understand either. She had always treated Yao fairly and she certainly had never done anything to the mysterious Mr. Cheng.

The largest silk contract of all would be coming up for bid at the end of April, a London firm owned by a Mister Massinger. Serena's fingers tightened around her ivory pen. She had to get that contract. With it, Bolton and Company could weather the storms. Without it — She closed her eyes. Without the Massinger contract, Bolton and Company would be bankrupt within six months.

Harry's face in miniature gazed calmly from the silver frame on her desk. Dear Harry. She had ruined him. Three short years with her had left him broken in body and spirit, his fortune all but gone.

At first, as the initial shock of his debilitation had worn off, he had been stoically cheerful. It was only temporary, he'd insisted with a smile. He'd be on his feet in a few weeks. He was always apologizing for being such a bother, always asking about the business and offering advice.

Then, little by little, hopelessness had set in. Optimism had been replaced by acceptance, acceptance by gloom and depression. Harry Bolton was slipping away from life.

Serena had been at his side constantly in those early months, abandoning the business to Yao while she tended to his needs. She had

insisted on doing everything herself — feeding him, bathing and shaving him, changing his linens and bedding, reading to him by the hour. No man ever had a more loving nurse, she had assured herself as she put her hands to even the most demeaning tasks.

Morgan Bellamy, on one of his rare visits, had taken her aside at the end of a particularly arduous day. “Serena,” he’d insisted, “there are some things you ought to leave to the boys. You haven’t the strength! As for poor Harry, having to be changed like a bloody baby’s humiliating enough, without having a pretty woman do it!”

“Harry doesn’t complain, Papa,” she’d protested, wiping a stray lock of hair back from her face. “And I do it because I love him.”

Her father’s reply had jolted her. “Love!” He’d shaken his head, his face twisted. “My dear, that isn’t love! It’s penance!”

Much as it hurt, she had taken his counsel and returned to work in the afternoons. The change had been good for her. But when Yao’s resignation had forced her to assume full-time responsibility for the company, the burdens had grown almost too heavy for her to bear. She fell into bed each night and awakened each morning more exhausted than the day before. There were shadows under her eyes; she was growing alarmingly thin. Sometimes Serena found it hard to believe that she was only twenty-three years old.

Harry’s condition had slowly deteriorated over the past few months. Now, he was dying. When the doctor had told her last week, it had come as no surprise. She had seen death in the pallor of his face, the slow hollowing of his cheeks. She had heard it in the weakening voice and in the rasp of his labored breathing. Serena had not cried at the news. She had no tears left. And as for Harry, death was no longer an enemy to him.

Her fingers traced the edge of the frame as she remembered that morning. She had fed him his breakfast of thin porridge as she always did, though any one of a dozen servants could have done it. After she had wiped his mouth, she had read to him from the front page of the *Shanghai Daily Shipping List*. He had listened passively to the headline and accompanying story about the progress of imperialist troops in the siege of Nanking and to several shorter items — the arrival of a new Dutch consul, an increase in the postal rate, and the continuing pirate attacks off Yuhwan. His gray eyes had narrowed with interest only when she’d read a rather stale account from America of the

Union victory at Missionary Ridge, which had completed the success of General Grant's Chattanooga campaign that past November.

Harry's brow had furrowed and his mouth had worked with effort. He was so weak that he spoke with difficulty. "All this time," he murmured. "All this time, and not one letter from Jason."

"Yes — " Serena had simply pressed his cheek with her hand, not trusting herself to say more. He had not mentioned Jason in a long, long time. She had wondered whether he was bitter. She knew now that he was not.

Serena had tried to push all thought of Jason from her mind. She had given away every gown she had worn when she was with him and had ordered the number-three boy to roll up the white fur rug and put it in the attic. Yet, especially on summer nights when the air whispered and the moon hung low above the East China Sea, his memory came back with such overpowering sweetness that she wept. In off-guard moments, she sometimes caught herself scanning the horizon for a glimpse of the *Tarpon's* white sails, and the sight of a tall, dark man ahead of her in the street could make her pulse leap. She had tried to forget. She could not. And that in itself was a purgatory.

With a sigh, Serena replaced Harry's picture on the corner of her desk and turned her attention back to the books, checking and rechecking the figures. She had been working about twenty minutes when her office door swung open and the number one burst in, his cap missing, his thin, old face ashen. He looked as if he had run all the way from the house.

"Harry — ?" She rose from her chair, dread clutching her chest.

The old man was too winded to speak, but the frantic expression in his eyes answered her question.

She drove the carriage herself, as fast as she dared. On the way back to the house, she had managed to glean from the number one that Harry was still alive, but was sinking fast. He had apparently suffered another stroke. The doctor had come to the house, examined him, and ordered the aging houseboy to send someone posthaste for Serena. Not wanting to trust such a vital mission to an underling, the old man had come himself.

Numb with fear, she jerked the carriage to a stop in the yard and flew in the back door and up the stairs. Serena had not prayed in a

long time, but she prayed now, silently, as she climbed. *Please, God, don't let me be too late . . . don't let Harry die without me . . .*

The bedroom door was closed. She paused for an instant to gather her strength for whatever she might find on the other side. The door-knob felt icy beneath her fingers. She turned it, opened the door, and stepped into the room.

Harry was lying in the bed where she had left him that morning, his head propped up by pillows. Against the sheets, he looked small and shrunken, like an ancient gnome, though he was only fifty-eight. The doctor, who was bent over him, listening with his stethoscope, straightened and hurried toward Serena as she came in.

"I stopped to check on him and found him like this," he said softly. "These things often come on rather suddenly. I fear you'd best prepare yourself, Mrs. Bolton."

Serena darted to the bed and flung herself onto her knees beside Harry. His eyes were closed, but they opened when she touched his waxen face. "My little love," he whispered.

"Harry — " She lifted his blue-veined hands and kissed them, though she knew he couldn't feel it. "Oh, my dearest, I'm the one who brought you to this!"

A tiny spasm of pain crossed his face. "No," he whispered. "You gave me the happiest months of my life, Serena in spite of everything — " His breath caught sharply as he struggled to speak. "If only I'd been born later or you sooner, little love. Things would have been better then. But I was an old fool by the time you came along. I don't blame you — "

"Hush — " She kissed him softly. His lips were thin and dry. "I love you, Harry. I've always loved you."

His eyes closed, and she thought for a moment that this was the end. Then, with great effort, they opened. His mouth worked, "Tell Jason — Tell him."

Serena strained to make out his words through the terrifying rush of his breathing, but even as she leaned toward him, the gasping stopped and he was gone.

Shanghai
June, 1864

When the postman had delivered a letter from Archer Bellamy, the first in almost three years, Serena had expected nothing more than an expression of condolence over Harry's death. She had been busy when it arrived and had simply tucked the sealed envelope into her black silk bag, planning to read it at lunchtime.

The morning had been a chaotic one for Bolton and Company, beginning with the arrival of news from Hong Kong that Massinger's China agency had awarded the crucial silk contract to the House of Cheng. Another victory for Cheng and Yao, the death of the last hope for Serena. Without the Massinger contract, bankruptcy was not just a looming threat, it was a certainty.

Squaring her shoulders, Serena had spread the books before her on the desk. There were a hundred decisions to be made; which creditors had to be paid immediately and which ones would carry her a while longer, which employees should be dismissed; where and how to sell the present inventory of silk and cotton and for how much; the eventual disposal of the Bolton offices and godowns. By the end of the first thirty minutes, her head was aching violently. It was then that the letter from her grandfather had arrived.

She had worked feverishly until half-past one, when weariness had forced her to call a halt. Then she had sent a boy for tea and biscuits. With the warmth of the tea curling its blessed way down into her system, she remembered the letter. Reaching for her bag, she took it out and broke the seal.

Her grandfather's handwriting, once so forceful, appeared tremulous and unsteady, but then, he was getting old, almost seventy-four, she reminded herself. Maybe one day soon she could persuade him to come to Shanghai. She would welcome the chance to get to know him better.

The letter began with a brusque greeting and the expected brief expression of sympathy. Harry's death had been announced in the newspaper that went upriver to Hankow.

Serena read on, her fingers suddenly whitening where they grasped the edge of the paper.

By the merest chance, I happened to speak with a Taiping deserter, a man who had fled Nanking before the beginning of the siege. He claimed he

had once been a guard in the palace of the Chung Wang, one of their more important princes. When I asked him whether he knew anything about the fate of your brother Stephen, he replied that he had seen such a man less than two months ago, in the dungeon of the Chung Wang's palace...

Serena sank back in her chair. After more than two years without a word, she had given Stephen up for dead. Now her heart went wild. Stephen. Alive! Steadying her hands on the edge of the desk, she continued with the letter.

My conscience will not let me rest, knowing that my grandson might be alive in such a place. Therefore, I have resolved to do what I can. Within a week of the time you receive this letter, I should be on my way to Shanghai by river steamer. Surely there must be some person in authority, such as General Brown, Viceroy Li, or even Major Gordon, who might assist us in negotiating Stephen's release. However remote the chance of reaching him, we must do what we can . . .

There was more, but Serena's blurred eyes could not read it. Overcome, she buried her face in her hands. Stephen. Alive, perhaps, in the unspeakable hell of a Chinese dungeon. How long had he been there? A year? Two? And with Nanking under siege for the past two months, was there any hope he might still be rescued?

She'd read about the siege in the papers. Nanking's massive walls were surrounded by imperialist troops who pounded the city day after day with artillery fire. Reports that had trickled out from inside Nanking claimed that people were dying of starvation. Under such circumstances, the first to be denied food would surely be those in prison.

Only by some miracle could Stephen have survived, Serena told herself. Yet she clung to that slim thread of hope like a person drowning in a sea of despair. She read the letter again. Whatever could be done, she would do it. If Stephen could be ransomed, she would raise the money. Her head was spinning. She would get a letter off at once to her father. After that — Serena fumbled with the possibilities.

Gordon and Viceroy Li were at Nanking. But General Brown, the British commander, was here in Shanghai.

She would not wait for her grandfather. She would go and see him herself.

It had taken Serena two days to get an appointment with Brown. In the end, she could have spared herself the trouble. "It's out of my hands," he had told her. "Officially, there are no British at Nanking. Gordon is merely on loan to the Chinese. In any case, I have given orders that the Ever Victorious Army be disbanded at the end of the month. General Tseng Kuo-fan has the situation well in hand, and after the wholesale massacre at Soochow, we want no part of what might well happen at Nanking once the walls are breached. I sympathize with your plight, Mrs. Bolton, but your brother entered Nanking of his own free will, and my hands are tied. Only the Chinese can help you now."

Frustrated, she had returned to her office. There was nothing she could do now except wait for her grandfather. And the business needed her full attention. Fighting back her anxiety over Stephen, Serena flung herself into her work.

It was midafternoon of the next day when Butters, the young Scotsman who served as Serena's receptionist and handled her English correspondence in an outer office, came bursting in without even remembering to knock.

"Butters?" She glanced up at the intrusion. He was a pleasant young fellow about her own age. She liked him.

His eyes were round with wonder. "A Mister Cheng to see you, Mrs. Bolton. I — I asked him what he wanted. He'd only say that he had come to pay a debt, and that he would pay it only to you."

"A debt? Well, I must say that's a pleasant switch. Show him in, Butters." Serena put down her ivory pen. "What did you say his name was?"

"Cheng. He's never been here before. Believe me, I'd have remembered him if he had! Spoke amazingly good English, he did."

"Cheng, you say — ?" Serena broke off. Her face paled slightly above the high collar of her black bombazine gown. "Good Lord, you don't suppose — " She swallowed hard. "Show him in!"

Butters disappeared into the outer office. Tingling with apprehension, Serena sat at her desk and awaited the appearance of her nemesis.

The door swung open. The man who came striding into the room was surprisingly young, and tall, almost as tall as Stephen. Eurasian, she surmised at once. No Celestial could be that size, and there was something quite un-Chinese about the color of his eyes.

"Mister Cheng." Her voice shook. "Won't you please sit down?"

"Thank you." His voice was deep and melodious. With the indolent grace of a panther, he eased himself into the chair that faced Serena's desk. He was dressed in a robe of rich blue silk, elegantly plain. His queue, thick and glossy, hung over the back of the chair. Strange, she had the feeling she had seen him before, but she did not know where. Surely she would have remembered such a man.

"May I assume that you are Mister Cheng of the House of Cheng?"

"That is correct." His eyes glittered with hidden irony. "As I told your secretary, I have come to pay off an old debt."

"A debt, Mister Cheng?" Serena smiled bitterly. He had ruined her. What debt could he possibly owe?

"One hundred fifty dollars in Mexican silver." He untied a silk bag from his belt. For all their strength, his hands were long and graceful, the fingers square at the tips, the nails cut short. His left forefinger was missing.

He loosened the drawstring of the bag. Silver coins, all of them newly polished, cascaded noisily onto the desk to lie in a gleaming pile.

"My passage," he said. "My passage to America, on the *Marie Estelle*."

Serena's hand went to her throat as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "May it please you to know, Mister Cheng," she murmured in a tight voice, "I never commissioned another such ship."

"That does not in any way excuse the *Marie Estelle*."

"It was your own Mister Yao who purchased the supplies."

"The ultimate responsibility was yours."

"I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you I was sorry."

"Being sorry will not bring back the dead or undo what was suffered."

Serena's lips tightened. "In that case, I've nothing more to say to you. You've wreaked your vengeance and wreaked it well. Bolton and Company will be closing its doors in the near future. I hope you're satisfied." She picked up her pen, ignoring the heap of silver in front of her. "Butters will show you out."

He moved the chair back slightly and stood up. "When the time comes," he said, "we are prepared to make you a fair offer on this building, as well as your godowns and your inventories of silk and cotton."

Serena did not look up. "I would not sell them to *you* for all the money in the world," she said coldly. "Good day, Mister Cheng."

"Good day." He turned to leave the room, took two steps toward the door and suddenly stopped as if he'd been struck by a bullet. His eyes were riveted on the portrait of Kathleen Bellamy that hung beside the door.

"Where did you get that painting?" He spun back to face her.

"It's been in our family for more than twenty years, ever since George Chinnery painted it in Macao," Serena said a bit haughtily. "The woman is my father's sister, Kathleen — " Her voice died in her throat as she stared at him. The hair, gleaming red where the light from the window struck it, the green-flecked eyes, the long, square-tipped fingers, like Archer Bellamy's, like Stephen's, like Noah's . . .

"Is your name Serena?" His voice trembled.

She could not speak. She could only look at him where he stood, stunned, his eyes darting from her to the portrait and back again. Impossible, she told herself. It could not be. But the tears that had begun to trickle down the young man's cheeks removed all doubt of it.

"Where is your mother?" she whispered.

"She died three years ago, she and my father. In an earthquake."

Serena looked down at her clenched hands, overcome by the presence of this young stranger, this bitter enemy — This sudden kinsman. Kathleen Bellamy's son.

"And what did your mother call you?" she asked softly.

"My name is Li-t'ung. She called me Daniel — as you may."

The words were friendly. Serena wondered whether she should get up and go to him, embrace him, take his hand. But he was so alien; so . . . Chinese! And in spite of their newly discovered relationship, suspicion hung like a heavy curtain between them. They had so recently been enemies.

Serena looked down at her hands again, unsure of what to say next. She wanted to break down and weep, but she was afraid to show such naked emotion before the man who had lured John Yao away from her

and used him to bring her to financial ruin. She was totally unprepared for what he said next.

"I saw your brother in Nanking." He cleared his throat, his own voice thick with emotion. "We did not speak. Neither of us knew, of course — "

"You saw Stephen!" She rose out of her chair. "When? Was he all right?"

"At the time. But it was more than two years ago. I delivered his letter to you and have not set eyes on him since. Surely you've had news of him — "

"None. Not until this week." She sank down again. "We got word by way of a Taiping deserter who'd been a guard that Stephen was a prisoner in the *Chung Wang's* dungeon — "

"When? When was he last seen alive?"

"More than two months ago, at the beginning of the siege. Grandfather is on his way here now from Hankow — "

"My mother's father?" His eyes were as wide as a child's. "The one who was a minister?"

"Yes. He still is." Serena studied him. For all he had done to her, he looked so young and vulnerable. She shuddered at the prospect of his meeting Archer Bellamy for the first time. How would the old man react to having a half-Chinese grandson? "He's hoping to find someone who'll make it possible for him to negotiate Stephen's release with the *Chung Wang*." She sighed. "I fear it's hopeless. I've already spoken with General Brown. He says there's nothing he can do. Gordon will likely say the same thing. And even if he does get into the city, how do we know the *Chung Wang* will see him, or even that Stephen is alive?"

"I will go with him!" Daniel Cheng spoke up suddenly. "Whatever his chances of success, they will be better with me along. I know the city, and the palace of the *Chung Wang*! I am even acquainted with the *Chung Wang* himself! Besides — " he added as an afterthought, "my grandfather is old. He should not undertake such a dangerous task alone. He will need someone to protect him from harm."

My grandfather, he had said. Serena gazed at him, still inwardly reluctant to believe that this strange young man in silk robes, his brow shaved and his hair braided in a queue, was her cousin. Yet there was so much of Kathleen Bellamy in him that she knew she could not deny him, not even to herself.

"I have a grandfather . . . " There was wonder in his voice. "Do I also then have a grandmother?"

"Yes. But she's in England. None of us have seen her in more than twenty years, except for Stephen." Serena paused, something welling up in her throat. "He says she's beautiful. She — she left Grandfather a long time ago. Now she's married to someone else."

He looked puzzled. "My mother did not tell me that."

"She wouldn't have known." Words and feelings came pouring out now. "You have an uncle, too — my father, he lives in Hong Kong. My mother is dead, but there are three of us — Stephen and myself and our sister Moira. And Stephen has a little son, here in Shanghai — "

The muscles in his throat worked painfully. "I have been so long alone. So long without the ties of a family . . . " He smiled shyly, his mouth lifting slightly at one corner like Stephen's. "I myself have two small sons."

Serena looked away from him for a moment so that he would not see her face as she fought back tears. Slowly, she got up and walked across the room until she stood before her aunt's portrait. This, then, whatever their differences, was their common bond: this magnificent woman who had followed her heart into China. "All these years I've looked at this painting and wondered what she was like," she said softly. "I would have given anything to know her."

She turned back to Daniel. "Tell me about her. Tell me everything."

Thirty-Four

Nanking
June, 1864

The sun rose red in the east as the little stern-wheeler chugged its way up the Yangtze. Beyond the gray horizon, the sky flashed yellow with the glare of exploding rockets. The distant rumble of mortar fire shook the dawn. Death walked the land with big, bold strides.

Even from here, the air smelled of smoke. Daniel's nostrils quivered as he inhaled it. He glanced at the old man who stood silent at the rail beside him. "Nanking?"

"Yes."

Daniel was grateful that Serena had warned him not to expect a good deal of grandfatherly affection from Archer Bellamy. His relationship with the old man had been strained from the moment of their meeting two days ago in Shanghai and had improved but little since then. Awed, he had shaken hands English-style with that jut-jawed, silver-haired tower of a man. "Your mother died a Christian?" Archer Bellamy had asked him. Wordlessly, Daniel had nodded as the icy blue eyes drilled into him.

"And your father?" Cheng Lo had been Archer Bellamy's friend until the day the hong merchant had taken the old man's daughter.

"No, he did not change his religion."

"And you?" The craggy old face was as stern as an eagle's.

"My mother taught me well. But I am not baptized."

"We'll soon take care of that!"

"No." Daniel had tried to keep his voice from shaking. "I have chosen the way of my father."

Archer Bellamy had had little more to say to his newly found grandson except to discuss the planning of their mission to Nanking. They had chartered the small riverboat and left the next morning, taking bedding and enough supplies to last for two weeks.

Daniel thought again about the tunnel he had used to get in and out of Nanking. He had told his grandfather about it, but the old man had dismissed the idea of getting into the city that way as too dangerous except as a last resort. Archer Bellamy preferred to accomplish Stephen's release by negotiation, if possible.

The smell of gunpowder and rotting flesh worsened as they neared the dying city. The very air seemed scorched. For the hundredth time, Daniel wondered about the safety of Lai Jyu. Surely the *Tien Wang's* palace would be the last to fall, and as a wife of the Heavenly King, she would be protected to the very end.

He had always planned to come for her; but while the *Tien Wang* ruled, she was not his for the taking. Now, perhaps, with the kingdom about to fall, she would consent to come with him and he would spirit her away. If everything went well, he would leave Nanking not only with his cousin but with his future wife.

The night before the departure for Nanking he had spoken of the matter to Min Fei. It had been one of the most difficult tasks he had ever undertaken. For the past year and a half, Min Fei's place beside him had been unshared by any other woman. She ran his household with wondrous efficiency, cared for all his needs with the tenderness of a true wife, and had even won the respect of the redoubtable Gwok. She had even given Daniel a second son, a boy as plump and strong as his elder brother. For Min Fei to move aside now and surrender her place as supreme lady to another would not be easy.

Min Fei had accepted his pronouncement with outward meekness. "I have always known it might come to pass," she had murmured, her graceful head bowed. "Do as you must, Li-t'ung, and if I am to live as your second lady, so be it. I will console myself with the knowledge that I have given you sons."

But Daniel had raised her face and looked into her eyes. They were glittering black pools of deviltry, and he knew she had not spoken from her heart. In that moment, he pitied Lai Jyu or any other young

girl he might bring home as his wife. With Min Fei in the house, her existence would not be peaceful, nor would his.

That night when he came to her bed, Min Fei had loved him with such fierce desperation that he quivered even now at the memory of it. But in the morning, she had not even come to the gate to bid him good-bye. Her conspicuous absence had left a hollow feeling inside him that would not go away.

Now, in the distance, Daniel could see the walls of Nanking towering above the plain. Rockets burst in fiery showers, raining hell on the wretched souls inside. Mortars lobbed shells over the wall. They burst, their impact shattering earth and air. The low-lying mist of dawn glowed crimson and faded to pewter.

Archer Bellamy had passed the city a few days earlier on his way from Hankow to Shanghai. "The main concentration of troops an' officers seems t' be on this side, betwixt the walls an the river," he said as they came closer. "'Tis there we'd most likely find someone who'd listen to us."

Daniel did not reply. He could only stare at the devastation that had once been the teeming outskirts of Nanking. Not one building stood intact. Only the walls and supports of blackened ruins thrust upward out of the charred ground.

A vast, armed camp lay outside the wall. Tents clustered about the gun and mortar emplacements and spread to the river. The banners of the imperial army hung limply from their staffs in the lifeless air. Ribbons of smoke curled upward from the cook tents.

The pounding of mortars and whine of rockets provided an accompaniment to the ordinary bustle of morning camp activities in this, the second month of the bombardment. "I talked with a man on the boat coming downriver." Archer Bellamy surveyed the camp as the little steamer chugged shoreward. "They're tunneling under the wall, 'e said. Plan t' fill in the 'ole with blasting powder an' blow 'er open. Not much resistance from inside, 'e told me. Low on ammunition in there. But there's enough Taipings left on the wall t' repel the scaling ladders."

"Where do we begin?" Daniel gazed at the hugeness of the camp, a heaviness in his chest. He had known their mission would be difficult. At this moment, it seemed impossible.

"With Gordon, I'm thinking, if we can find 'im. 'e's an Englishman after all. If 'e can't 'elp us, then we work our way up t' General Tseng 'imself. I'm 'oping he'll let us parlay with the Taipings under a flag o'

truce, or at least give us a chance to go in and look for Stephen once the wall's breached."

Daniel was not optimistic. Stephen was a traitor in Chinese eyes. "And if Tseng refuses?" he asked his grandfather.

"Then we'll have no recourse left except t' try your tunnel!"

Gordon proved to be unavailable. In anticipation of the order to disband, he had taken his troops and withdrawn as far from Nanking as possible. And their luck with Tseng Kuo-fan proved no better. After keeping Daniel and his grandfather waiting outside his tent for four days in succession, the Chinese general had sent word through an aide that he would not see them.

Dejected, they had walked back to the boat, Archer Bellamy hunched forward in the black frock coat he wore even in the warmest weather. The sky, gray and muggy with threatening rain, matched their spirits.

"The tunnel, then?" Daniel glanced at his grandfather. The old man looked tired, and frail where the breeze blew his coat against his body. He seemed to sway with the lightest motion of the air.

"Aye. The tunnel. That is, if you can find it."

"I've found it. It wasn't easy." While Archer Bellamy had kept vigil outside the general's tent, Daniel had casually strolled along the base of the wall, looking for the hidden trapdoor. With the old settlement obliterated, it had been difficult to find. Daniel breathed inward thanks that he had memorized not only the huts and sheds but the contour of the wall and even the peculiar pattern of the stones that marked the tunnel's location. Less than one *li* beyond the edge of the camp he had found it, concealed now by the burned rubble of the animal shed that had stood over it.

"Is there any reason we can't go in t'night?" Archer Bellamy asked.

"Maybe." Daniel surveyed the sky. The evening smelted of rain. "We'll eat and rest. Then we'll see how alert the camp is. I needn't tell you what will happen if we're caught." He gazed imploringly at the old man. "Grandfather, I beg you to remain on the boat. Who can say what awaits us inside those walls, or whether we will be alive by this time tomorrow?"

Archer Bellamy was silent for a time. "I've lived my threescore years and ten with four to spare," he said at last. "I've left nothing unfinished. I've nothing to lose."

The storm broke that night, with a heavenly display of thunder and lightning that put man's feeble blasts to shame. Torrents of water swept out of the black sky, driving even the most intrepid under the shelter of the tents.

After midnight, with the tempest at its height. Daniel and his grandfather made their way through the rain and slipped into the tunnel. The captain of the boat, a stocky, taciturn Dutchman, had come with them to cover up the trapdoor. He was visibly nervous, but he said nothing as he moved the door into place above them. They crouched in the darkness for a moment, water dripping from their oil-skins as they listened to the faint scrape of bricks and mud overhead. When the sound ceased, Daniel struck a match and lit the lantern they had brought along. Its yellow light was comforting in the dark tunnel as they made their way.

Daniel led, the muscles at the back of his neck tight with apprehension. Archer Bellamy might have nothing to lose, but as for Daniel Cheng, he had a great deal: a life of comfort and fulfillment in Shanghai; the studies of mathematics, history, science, and philosophy he had only just begun, with the finest scholars in the city as his tutors; two beautiful sons, with the promise of more to come; and Min Fei.

The thought of Min Fei stabbed him with sudden longing for home. He pictured her standing in the moon gate like a porcelain statue, only her black eyes moving, alive, dancing like twin imps. The eyes of his memory saw her face in the night, her hair spread like a silk fan on the pillow, her arms open. He saw her laughing in the garden, his sons bouncing on her lap. The desire to be with her once more almost stopped him in his tracks. He wanted very much to live, and death lay at the other end of the tunnel. Daniel had faced death before, but he had never gone out to meet it. Not like this. He savored every breath.

They came to the end of the tunnel. Cautiously, he raised the door. Darkness greeted him, and silence, except for the rain. The copper-smith's shop, or what was left of it, rose in shambles overhead, rain streaming in through gaping holes in the roof. A rat scurried across the floor. There was no other sign of life.

It was drier in the tunnel, and safer. He moved back down inside, propping the door up slightly with a brick to let in the fresh air. "We'll wait till it's nearly dawn," he said. "It's a good hour's walk into the heart of the city. Sleep if you can, Grandfather."

"Nay." Archer Bellamy folded his long, thin legs like a stork and lowered himself to the sloping floor of the tunnel. "I couldn't sleep. Not tonight." He sat without speaking for a time after Daniel had put out the lantern. The silence grew heavy. "Daniel," he said at last, "I've never asked you much about your mother. I disowned 'er, so 't speak, when she went off with your father. Vowed I'd never speak 'er name again — nor your father's either . . . But we've a little time t' wait. I'd like t' 'ear how she fared . . . what her life was like . . ."

Daniel sat down beside him. Folding his arms on his knees, he began to talk.

By dawn the rain had stopped. They had left their oilskins in the tunnel along with a small cache of food, which they did not dare carry into the famine-ravaged city. Daniel had wrapped his queue around his head and covered it with a red scarf, folded and tied Taiping-style. Then, with the sky just graying in the east, they had set off up the muddy road toward the main part of the city.

Little was left of the village. Its inhabitants had fled or been killed. The houses and shops stood in ruins. General Liang's house and stables must have taken several direct hits, because they were nothing but rubble now.

There were torches atop the walls where the remainder of the Taiping army held their vain vigil. They had kept the imperialists out of the city for two months, but they were powerless to stop the hellish rain of shells and rockets that pounded their city day after day.

The fields were deserted, the ground pocked by shell holes that had filled up with rainwater in the night. Here and there Daniel and his grandfather saw dead bodies, swollen and rotting, some with ants swarming over them. Daniel shuddered and turned his thoughts ahead to Stephen and to Lai Jyu.

They had almost cleared the open fields when the shelling started. The first ball struck a scant fifty paces away, its explosion showering them with dirt. They ran, Daniel slowing his steps to keep pace with his grandfather. Archer Bellamy moved stiffly, with effort. Only the

length of his stride gave him what little speed he had. Another shell struck the road behind them, sending up a shower of mud as they gained the first cross-street and flung themselves gasping against the wall of a house. They were less vulnerable here, but the danger was far from gone.

"Which way to the *Chung Wang's* palace?" Archer Bellamy wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a crumpled handkerchief. The morning was muggy after the rain. The day would be hot.

"Follow me." Daniel moved cautiously up the street, keeping close to the walls. By now the sun was almost up. People had begun to drift out of the houses and into the streets. Daniel's chest contracted as he watched them. After nearly three months of heavy siege, they were walking skeletons. And these were the strong. Children and old ones were long since dead.

A shell slammed into the roof of a nearby house, exploding on impact. The crowds moved away from it in a lethargic wave, then flowed on aimlessly up and down the street in vain search of anything to sustain life. Some had green-stained hands and teeth from picking and chewing the grass of the fields. The body of a woman lay alongside a wall. One arm looked as if it had been gnawed.

These were the Taipings. Daniel remembered the prosperous, cheerful people he had known two years earlier. The feeling that churned in him now was beyond horror.

Archer Bellamy's face was pale, his lips tight as he followed Daniel toward the center of the city. The hope of finding Stephen alive had shrunk to a flicker. Rockets whistled in an arc overhead, exploding somewhere beyond them. The death that rained out of the sky was kinder than the slow starvation that stalked the streets. It struck swiftly.

As they approached the *Chung Wang's* palace, Daniel's sense of the ludicrousness of their plan grew with each step. Nanking was a chaotic hell. The idea that they would find the *Chung Wang*, in his throne room perhaps, and that they would sit down and reason with him over Stephen's release was ridiculous now in the light of what they had seen. The *Chung Wang* was probably dead, or had long since fled the city. And as for Stephen — maybe with luck they would at least find his body to take back to Shanghai.

A shell struck the house just across the street from them, its explosion shattering part of the roof and the front wall. They ran, dodging

flying fragments of wood and brick as more shells fell around them, tearing up the tiles now, in the square that fronted the palace. They raced up the steps and down the main corridor where Daniel had once accompanied Lai Jyu's father, General Liang, to his first audience with the *Chung Wang*. The miniature gardens were ruined now, the fountains dry. The beautiful porcelain jars that had stood in niches along the wall lay in fragments on the mud-stained marble floor.

The massive doors of the throne room were unguarded. "It's not likely we'll find the *Chung Wang* here," said Daniel.

"We've come this far," said Archer Bellamy. "Open the door."

The heavy brass hinges creaked as the two doors separated. Daniel stepped inside.

The room was filled with hundreds of wounded Taiping soldiers. Their reed mats carpeted the floor all the way to the foot of the *Chung Wang*'s gold-leafed throne. Attendants moved among them, adjusting their bandages, spooning gruel into their mouths. Many were in pain. Their moaning was a low hum that filled the vast audience chamber.

"Stephen!" Daniel heard his grandfather cry out as a tall, gaunt figure rose from the side of a wounded man and moved toward them. Stephen Bellamy was dressed in a faded blue robe. Its sleeves and front were spattered with blood, as was the matted brown beard that hung to the middle of his chest. He hurried toward them, his step firm in spite of the skeletal thinness of his body. His eyes had sunk into their sockets, but they glittered with emotion as he opened his arms and embraced his grandfather. "You shouldn't have come," he murmured in a choked voice.

"It's a bit late for that, you young fool." Archer Bellamy wiped his eyes and gestured awkwardly toward Daniel. "Stephen, this is your . . . cousin — "

"I know." Stephen clasped Daniel's hands. "I guessed a long time ago, but by then there was no way to find you."

"We'd heard you were in prison." Daniel spoke over the lump in his throat.

"I was. For more than two years. The *Chung Wang* released me to help with the wounded."

"Where's the *Chung Wang* now?"

"At the wall, if he's still alive. Most of the other *wangs* escaped in the early days of the siege." Stephen's voice was bitter. "The people needed a leader. Somebody had to stay."

"General Liang — " Daniel asked anxiously.

"Liang died at Soochow. A pity. He'd have been of value here."

"Yes." Daniel felt a sudden, stinging wave of grief. Liang had saved his life and treated him like a son. "But what of the Heavenly King? Did he leave with the others?" Concern for the safety of Lai Jyu flooded Daniel's mind.

Stephen's jaw muscles twitched with suppressed anger. "The Heavenly King is in seclusion. No one has seen him, though he was said to be well and safe last week when the *Chung Wang* spoke with him through a screen. The coward! He could rally the people if he'd only come out and fight! He could at least give them something to die for — "

"His cause is lost in any case," Archer Bellamy said. "And we've come to take you home. There's a tunnel out of here, and we've a boat waiting at the river — "

"Home?" Stephen's eyes widened in surprise. "You're asking me to leave these men?"

"Don't be foolish!" Archer Bellamy rasped. "The imperialists are bound to break through any day! They'll kill everything in sight when they do! You can't save these poor devils!"

"Perhaps not." Stephen's voice was curiously gentle. "But I can help them to die well — I've had a bit of practice in that. And if need be, I can die with them. But I can't desert them. Don't you see?"

"Blast it, boy, you've a son in Shanghai! And your sister's a widow now! You've responsibilities out there!"

"And I've heavier responsibilities here. I'm sorry. Serena's a strong girl. Noah's in good hands."

Archer Bellamy gazed at his grandson. "You've changed," he said. "You're as big a fool as ever, but now it's a different sort of foolishness."

Stephen smiled. "Aye. I've changed. Come and help me while I work. That way we'll have some time to talk before you go." He picked up a wad of fresh bandages. "I learned that you didn't write that letter about closing the clinic in Hankow," he said. "You might have told me."

"Would you have believed me, you young 'ot'ead?"

"Not then. But I know better now. You were right about a good many things, Grandfather, including the Taipings."

"Then why do you stay?"

"I told you. These men need me."

Daniel had been wondering how to broach the subject of Lai Jyu. "I've someone else to see to," he said. "General Liang's daughter. She's married to the Heavenly King. I want to get her out if I can. Liang saved my life. I owe him that much."

"You'd best be quick about it then," said Archer Bellamy. "I'll stay here with Stephen and wait for you. Maybe while you're gone, I can talk some sense into 'im!"

Daniel had already started for the door. He turned back at the threshold. "If I haven't returned by sundown," he said, "leave without me!" Then, with what might be his last look at his grandfather and cousin, he closed the door of the throne room.

The shelling was heavier now. Daniel ran back down the long corridor and up the streets. The Heavenly King's palace was not far, and it was easy to find. With its roof of yellow tiles and its lacquered red and blue walls, it was the gaudiest structure in Nanking, as well as the largest.

There were no guards at the outer gate. The first courtyard was jammed with hundreds of frightened people. Maybe they thought that within the palace of their Heavenly King some divine spirit would protect them. If so, it was a vain hope. There were shell holes here and there in the courtyard, and one of the stone lions than flanked the inner gate was missing its head. Even as he made his way through the throng, a rocket screamed into the wall above him, bursting with a shock that sent Daniel and those around him reeling. Shattered bricks, their edges like blades, exploded outward, throwing panic into the crowd.

The inner gate, fashioned of carved mahogany, was flanked by two guards. They clutched uncertainly at the handles of their swords as the mass of people surged against the gate. A woman screamed as she fell forward to be crushed by trampling feet. The guards cried out for reinforcements, but no one could hear them over the shrieks of the crowd.

Another shell struck squarely in the middle of the courtyard, its explosion ripping the earth and leaving a circle of mangled bodies.

One guard raised his sword. In the next instant, he vanished into the hysterical mob. The other soldier fell back his weapon still in its sheath.

Daniel kept to the periphery of the crowd, edging closer to the gate when he could. Someone had found a heavy wooden beam. Passed forward through the crowd it became a battering ram against the gate. Its movement swept the crowd back and forth, back and forth. Daniel fought his way forward, bodies pressing around him like living skeletons. Back and forth, the beam crunched into the gate as the rain of shells and rockets increased. The explosions blew holes in the helplessly jammed crowd. The air was filled with screams and with the smell of smoke and blood. *This is the end of all the world*, Daniel thought.

Then, suddenly, the gate splintered and gave way. The surging throng burst through the opening and poured into the inner courtyard of the palace. Daniel came with them, running now. The Heavenly King's harem would lie at the heart of the vast complex. There would be guards. His best chance of reaching Lai Jyu lay in speed and surprise. He raced inward, taking stairs two and three at a time.

At last he found himself in a long corridor, its walls lacquered red and illustrated with glorified scenes of early Taiping history. Intricately carved pillars covered with gold leaf stood at intervals of ten paces. A troop of palace guards came pounding out of a hallway that branched off to one side. Daniel froze behind a pillar until they were out of sight. Then he ran on. A shell struck the roof just above and behind him, blowing away a portion of the ceiling and pouring rubble and dust into the hall.

At the end of the hall was a huge door, entirely covered with gold. Strangely enough, it was unguarded, its sentinels having deserted, perhaps, or joined others to fend off the mob outside. A sense of awe swept over Daniel as he lifted the latch and found it unlocked. This, instinct and reason told him, was the entrance to the inner sanctum, that holy of holies, the private quarters of the Heavenly King.

The door swung open to reveal another short hallway with an even more splendid door at its end. Daniel walked slowly now, fearful of the silence.

He had expected the second door to be locked. It was not. The latch turned easily, but when he pushed at the door he met with a soft resis-

tance, as if something had been laid against it on the inside. He pushed with his weight. The door opened silently, something sliding before it. Daniel looked down at the body of a woman wrapped in a purple veil. He bent and uncovered her face. No, she was not Lai Jyu, though she was very beautiful. It appeared that she had been dead only a short time.

He looked up then, into a room that was hung with veils of sheer silk in tones of pink and mauve, smoke and flame. They dangled without motion, colors blending in their transparency. Incense, cloyingly sweet, saturated the air.

On a yellow-draped catafalque in the room's exact center lay the body of a man in a bejeweled saffron-colored robe. His hands had been carefully folded across his chest. The Heavenly King.

Slowly, Daniel walked toward him. There were other bodies in the room, ten or twelve of them counting the one by the door. All of them were women, all of them pretty. Each lay slumped or sprawled on the floor where she had fallen in death.

"Lai Jyu?" Daniel's voice echoed in the silence of the room. The only other sound was the drumming of his own pulse in his ears as he went from one still form to another. The breath eased out of him in a long sigh of relief. None of them was Lai Jyu.

"Li-t'ung!" He spun around at the delicate gasp of astonishment. Lai Jyu had stepped through an opening in the veils. She hurried to him. Her embrace was brief and sisterly. Daniel had expected to be stirred by it. Oddly enough, he was not.

"Lai Jyu!" He lifted her face. She was a woman now, lovelier than ever. But that was all. He saw her beauty, but it did not move him as it once had. "I'd feared you dead," he said softly "The others — "

"We were his favorites." She glided away from him to stand beside the catafalque, looking down with a serene face. "When our lord saw that all was lost, he . . . he swallowed a large quantity of gold leaf. His death was not swift — " She turned away from him, each movement a study in perfect grace. She was dressed very simply in a dark blue robe, her hair hanging in a long braid down her back. "After he was dead, we washed him and perfumed his skin and dressed him in his yellow robes. Then — " she lowered her eyes. "Then we brewed a pot of poisoned tea and drank it — "

"And you — ?" Daniel gazed at her, bewildered.

"I only pretended to drink, and to fall to the floor like the others. Once they were all dead, I got up and went and changed my robe. When I came back, you were here." She smoothed the shining wings of hair at the sides of her face. "I have no wish to die, Li-t'ung. I have other plans, you see."

He studied her where she stood poised like a white heron beside the body of her husband. How beautiful she was. Yet she had changed. The liveliness, the vivacity, the warmth that had won him was gone. Incredibly, he felt nothing for her. But he had come too far to be deterred from his purpose now. "I'm here to take you away," he said. "Your father showed me a tunnel —"

"Oh, yes. Father's tunnel." She laughed, an icy sound like a tinkling bell. "There was really no need for you to come, Li-t'ung. There are other tunnels. The best one of all leads from this very palace to a secret cave well outside the wall. Come. You can leave with us!"

As Daniel stared at her, a young man hurried into the room from the outside corridor. "Are you ready, Lai Jyu —?" He stopped in surprise at the sight of Daniel. His hand went to a dagger at his belt.

"No!" Lai Jyu stepped forward. "He's a friend! An old friend of my father's!"

The young man bowed. His head had been freshly shaved. It looked as though he'd done the job himself, and with an unpracticed hand, for his scalp was cut in two places. But the barbering had been necessary. His long Taiping hair would have marked him for death outside the wall. Daniel's eyes traveled from his face to Lai Jyu's. Men were not allowed within the recesses of the palace, but Lai Jyu and this handsome one had somehow found each other. The young man might have been a prince, or a priest, or a member of the outer palace guard. Daniel did not bother to ask. In truth, he did not care.

"As a friend, I offer you the safety of my boat," Daniel volunteered. "It is a small foreign vessel, anchored in the river north of the main gate."

"You are most kind." The young man's speech was rapid and terse. "But we have another boat waiting. Everything is arranged."

"Then I wish good fortune to you both." Daniel gazed at the face that had filled his dreams for more than two years. "We shall not meet again, Lai Jyu."

"No. But I thank you for coming, Li-t'ung. As you see, it was not necessary. I will pray that you live through this day, as I would ask you to do for me if you were a believer." Lai Jyu glided back to the catafalque. With a swift motion, she plucked the pearl and ruby crown from the head of the Heavenly King and slipped it into the folds of her robe. Then, with an odd little smile on her lips and a beckoning nod to the young man, she stepped between the veils and disappeared with him.

Daniel stood looking after them for a moment. Yes, he had lost her. He had fought his way into the palace to rescue the lively, passionate girl he had wanted for so long, only to find in her place a hard-bitten woman who would steal the jeweled crown from her husband's head. What had become of the Lai Jyu he had loved? He shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps, except in his own mind and heart, she had never really existed. He turned and left the way he had come.

The outer part of the palace was in chaos now, the terrified mob running amuck. Someone had discovered the Heavenly King's larder. A man with a bag of rice was attacked by two others. In the struggle, the bag split open, spouting rice up and down the long hallway. People came running like chickens to scoop it up in their hands, even stuffing the uncooked grains into their mouths.

Dodging the exploding shellfire, Daniel raced back toward the *Chung Wang's* palace. The bombardment was more intense than ever. It was possible that the imperialists had taken a portion of the wall, giving them a view of their target, for the shelling seemed much less random than it had earlier. If that was so, there was no time to be lost. He had to get Stephen and his grandfather out of the city.

He found them as he had left them, in the *Chung Wang's* throne room, both of them bent over a moaning soldier whose leg had been shot away. They looked up as Daniel burst through the door.

"We must hurry!" he gasped. "Grandfather, have you persuaded my cousin to come with us?"

Archer Bellamy's hands were spattered with blood. He shook his head. "Quite the contrary," he said softly. "Stephen has persuaded me to stay."

"What?" Daniel's face paled. "But the shelling is getting worse! To stay here would be suicide!"

"We cannot leave these men to face death alone." Stephen stood up and moved toward Daniel, a strange tranquillity in his eyes. "You say

that to stay is to die. For some, that would be true. But for us, to stay is to live."

"That I do not understand," Daniel said. "But so be it. I will stay with you." His voice shook as he spoke. It was honor more than desire that bound him.

"Nay. Not you, lad." Archer Bellamy came forward, wiping blood on his black frock coat. He placed his hands on Daniel's shoulders. His face, wrinkled like old parchment, was shining, beautiful beneath the crown of silvery hair, and Daniel wondered if this was how his mother's God might look. "Someone 'as to go back. Someone 'as t' carry word of what 'appened 'ere."

Clumsily, Daniel embraced them both, feeling the parting all the more keenly for having so recently found them. There was so much about these two tall men whose blood he shared that he would never know. Then, blinded by tears, he stumbled out of the throne room.

"Godspeed, Daniel!" Stephen's voice echoed down the corridor. "My love to Serena . . ."

The mortar fire was closing in now, on the very heart of Nanking. One blast ripped the outer door of the palace off its hinges. Another tore a hole in the roof above the hallway. Daniel ran, only half-heeding the danger, his skin and clothes coated with plaster dust. Part of him ached to turn back, to seize his grandfather and cousin by whatever means he could and drag them to safety. But even now it was too late. The whole world seemed to be crashing down around him as the shells and rockets came shrieking out of the sky. He ran, stumbling over debris and dead bodies, trusting only to fate. If this was his day to die, then he would die.

He did not stop until he had reached the outskirts of the city. It was quieter here, the firing less concentrated. He leaned against a wall, his chest heaving with anguish.

Behind him, Nanking was dying. The roof of the *Tien Wang's*, palace had collapsed in a clattering shower of yellow tiles, burying the body of the Heavenly King beneath its ruins. Here and there, fires had sprung up, darkening the air with bitter smoke. Daniel tasted it. It stung his eyes.

The sun was high, the day hot as an oven. He climbed the walls of a ruined house and tried to see what had become of the *Chung Wang's*

palace. He shaded his eyes, straining furiously, but the air was thick with smoke and dust, his own vision blurred by tears. He could see nothing.

Nanking

July, 1864

Fourteen days later, the imperial army blasted through the wall and swept through the breach in yelling triumph. They met no resistance. There was nothing left of the Taiping military force. As for Nanking itself, it was a dead city, populated by corpses and near-corpses who barely had the strength to crawl.

Daniel had waited out the time aboard the riverboat. The next day, as soon as it was safe, he had gone in with a crew of coolies and dug through the rubble of the *Chung Wang's* palace until he found the bodies of Stephen and Archer Bellamy.

The digging, the finding, the gentle lifting of the dear remains into the two coffins he had bought, had the quality of a familiar ritual. Daniel recalled Taocheng and two other coffins whose purchase had marked the beginning of a long and painful journey. Today he sensed that the journey was over at last. He had come full circle.

He stood that evening at the stern of the riverboat, watching the sky fade from red to purple. The paddle wheel splashed softly through the brown water of the swelling Yangtze. A flock of white birds lifted like a cloud from the far bank.

The two coffins rested beside him on the deck, covered with a piece of canvas. Tomorrow they would be unloaded in Shanghai. He would deliver them to the house of Serena Bellamy Bolton, the Golden One, and the two of them would mourn together. His sorrow was deep, yet intermingled with peace. All men died, each in his own time. And these two who slumbered beside him had met the noblest of deaths.

Daniel pressed his lips together, trembling at the enormity of the decision he had just made. All day he had pondered it, this great desire to pay tribute to his cousin and his grandfather in some way that would please their spirits. He had considered erecting a marble monument, or donating money for a church to be erected in Hankow in their memory. These gifts seemed fitting — and yet, somehow, he felt that they would not be enough. Even the building of a church would involve but a small material sacrifice on his part.

Yes, he knew what they would have asked of him. He had known it all along. But the final commitment required almost more courage than he possessed. Daniel sighed. One hand crept to the kidskin bag that hung about his neck, containing the ivory seal of Cheng Lo. "Forgive me, my father," he whispered aloud. "I do it out of love. You would understand if you were here."

It was to be done, then. The promise was made. Within three days of his arrival in Shanghai, he would find a suitable Christian minister, go to him, and ask for baptism.

His mind moved ahead now, for he had made other promises as well. As soon as possible, he would do the thing he should have done long ago. He would marry Min Fei. She would be his wife, and as long as she lived, he would have no other. This, also, he promised himself as his thoughts raced forward and his heart leaped with a desire to hold her in his arms once more and to gaze upon his sons.

He would deal justly with the Golden One, as a kinsman should. He would buy out her business for a generous price, enough to see her comfortable to the end of her days. Never again would she have to leave her house and go out into the world to deal with men. Such a thing was not fitting for any woman.

That done, he would expand his own base of trade, to Ningpo, to Amoy, to Foochow, even to Hong Kong and Canton. He would build a fleet of ships, Western-style, that could cross oceans. And he would not neglect his studies. One day perhaps he would be not only the wealthiest man in Shanghai, but one of the most learned.

Daniel's pulse quickened with excitement. He was young, life was good, and the past lay behind him. Tomorrow lay ahead. Tomorrow, and Shanghai, and the Golden One, and Min Fei. Forgetting for the moment his burden of sorrow, he smiled.

Epilogue

Shanghai

August, 1865

Moira sat at the desk in the upstairs study that had once belonged to Harry Bolton. She was alone, a common and comfortable circumstance for her. The afternoon was hot, the summer sun brutal outside. She had spent the morning in the garden sketching Noah and Nancy, but had grown weary of that after a time. The shadowy coolness of the study with its leather bound books and large, plain masculine furnishings had beckoned her. This afternoon, she decided, would be a fine time to write a letter.

She found the paper in the drawer and dipped the pen into the inkwell. Then, squirming a bit in the chair to settle herself, she began to write.

August 27, 1865

Dear Jason,

How wicked of you not to answer my letters! In all this time I have received only one — the one you wrote me ages ago when you first arrived in Salem and enlisted in the army. I know you said you might not have time for any more, but I was hoping —

Moira raised the pen for a moment. No, she would not put her worst fears on paper. She knew that Jason could well be dead. But she would not think of that, not until she knew. She would keep on writing letters to him, and that act of writing would keep him alive in her mind and heart.

Next week I will be seventeen years old. People tell me I'm pretty, but I have no illusions. I have planned the life I will live. In August, I am going to London to stay with Grandmamma and study painting with a good friend of hers, a Mr. Whistler. Grandmamma says he's excellent. He consented to take me as a pupil only after he saw the drawings I had sent her. Oh, Jason, I want so much to be a real artist! I want so much to be good!

As you know, I divide my present time between my father in Hong Kong and Serena here in Shanghai. Both of them are well. and Papa seems to be drinking less now. For a long time, he was despondent about the business, I think, especially about not having a son who would carry it on after him. But that's settled now that he and Serena have gone into partnership.

Moira paused to think. It was ironic that in the end it was opium that had saved Bolton and Company. Serena had been on the verge of selling out to Daniel Cheng when Morgan Bellamy had stepped in, paid off her more pressing creditors, and incorporated what was left of the Bolton business into his own. Under the new Banner of Bellamy and Bolton, Serena and her father were doing very well. Although they dabbled in silks, teas, bamboo, and cotton, their chief commodity by far was opium.

It was opium, again, that had severed once and for all the tenuous bond of friendship that had formed between Serena and Daniel Cheng in the weeks following Stephen's and Archer's deaths. When Serena had refused to sell him Harry's company, his relationship with her had begun to cool; and when she had gone into the opium business, he had become incensed. "I'll break you for this!" he had vowed at their last meeting. "Whatever the cost, I'll break you!"

And he had tried. But however much he might undercut Serena in the silk and tea market, opium was the one thing that Daniel Cheng would not touch. Thus, the battle lines were drawn, and would be drawn, Moira suspected, for a long time to come.

Moira glanced up at the sound of the front door opening and closing below. That would be Serena. She always arrived home at quarter past three, took a cup of tea, and then spent the next hour with Noah.

Serena's footsteps, light and quick, echoed up the stairs. A moment later, the door of the study opened. Moira slipped the letter

under the blotter pad. She had never told her sister about her letters to Jason Frobisher.

Serena hurried into the room, dressed in the severe black she had worn for more than a year. Tiny jewels of perspiration dotted her cheeks. Below the edge of her widow's bonnet, damp tendrils of hair clung to her forehead. She looked flushed and agitated, but the color gave more life to her face than Moira had seen in months.

"It must be devilishly hot outside," Moira said. "You look as if you'd just run a race! But it becomes you, Serena. You've been looking much too pale."

Serena flung the newspaper she had been carrying onto the desk. "The evening edition just came out," she said. "I bought it on the way home. Look at the headline — "

Moira snatched up the paper. "Why — The war's ended in America! It happened in April, and — Oh! Oh, Serena! Poor President Lincoln!"

Serena walked away from the desk. "Such wonderful news," she said, her voice throbbing with emotion. "And such tragic news."

"Yes . . ." Moira put the newspaper down. "Serena, do you think there's a chance — " She licked her lips. "Do you think that with the war ended, Jason might come back?"

Serena shook her head. "He never intended to come back," she said. "When he said good-bye to us, he meant it. Even if he's still alive, he'll never come back." She turned abruptly, a brittle movement. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Where's Noah?"

"In the garden. Nancy's watching him."

"I think I'll join them. Bring the paper downstairs when you've finished with it." Serena walked out of the study. A moment later, Moira heard her footsteps on the stairs.

She glanced once more at the newspaper and then took out the unfinished letter. But the news of Lincoln's death had destroyed her mood. She no longer felt like writing, not even to Jason.

Taking her cane from the back of the chair, she moved to the window. From here she could see the heat waves rising off the Bund, the wheelbarrow coolies plodding in the sun.

Flags fluttered limply from the masts of the ships in the river. There was barely enough of a breeze to move the big sailing vessels. One tall clipper glided slowly upriver toward the Bund, an American flag

drifting from its stern. Moira watched it. She loved grace of movement, she who felt so utterly graceless.

She picked up the telescope from the window and put it to her eyes, trying to make out the name on the prow. It was then that something in the peculiar lines of the vessel caught her eye, and she realized she was seeing the *Tarpon*.

"Serena — " The name died on her lips. It was too soon to excite her sister. Someone else, after all, could have purchased the ship. Moira watched, her heart thudding, as the *Tarpon* dropped anchor off the mud flats and signaled for a sampan. Then, when the tiny craft had come alongside, a tall figure, moving awkwardly, descended the rope ladder. Yes! She wanted to shout. It was Jason!

She leaned against the window, blinking her eyes in disbelief. The miracle had happened. It was Jason.

He climbed downward with difficulty, one leg moving as it should, the other held stiffly. Something tightened around her heart as she watched the boat coolie help him down into the sampan.

A few minutes later, they touched the quay. Jason mounted the water stairs. Though he used no cane or crutch, he walked with a noticeable limp.

Moira seized her cane and made for the stairs. Steps had never been easy for her, but she reached the foyer a moment before the knocker sounded. With a trembling hand, she opened the door.

"Jason!" He stood before her in shirtsleeves and a leather vest, his face windburned and smiling. No, he had not changed, except that the small lines about his eyes had deepened. She reached out and clasped his hands. They were warm and wonderfully strong, the palms like smooth leather.

"You didn't answer my letters," she said. "Not after the first one, at least."

"No. But I read them, Moira, from beginning to end. You see, they were waiting for me when I returned to Salem this spring."

Her eyes darted to his right leg. "A souvenir of Petersburg," he said. "A rifle ball in the knee. No more dancing, sweet Moira. I've a limp to match yours now — Ah, no!" He had noticed the dismay in her eyes. "The leg's all there. It's only a bit stiff."

He was still holding her hands. "You've grown quite lovely, you know," he said.

"Thank you," she grinned.

"And your sister . . . has she changed?"

"Serena's changed," she said softly. "But not in the ways that matter." With a little laugh, she drew him inside.

"Don't move," she commanded. "Stay right here."

"At your orders, sweet Moira," he said.

She slipped out of the door and made her way down the hallway toward the back of the house.

Serena was seated on a bench in the garden, watching Noah build a miniature castle out of stones. She turned as Moira opened the door. How beautiful she was in the stark black dress, her hair brushed back from her face, white catalpa blossoms framing her like a portrait. Sorrow and loneliness had softened her, Moira reflected. Pain had given her its gifts of wisdom and sensitivity. Serena, at twenty-four, was no longer the gay and brittle young girl who had come to Shanghai as a bride. She was a woman who had suffered and survived; and she was lovelier than ever.

"You have a visitor," Moira said.

Serena's graceful head lifted. "Oh? Who is it?"

"Go and see. I'll play with Noah."

"You're very mysterious." Serena cocked one dark eyebrow. "Who did you say it was?"

"You'll see." Moira waited while Serena rose, fluffed her skirts, and swept up the walk toward her. They met in the doorway.

"Come now, Moira, who's here?" Serena touched her hand; her fingers were warm.

"You'll know in a moment — " Impulsively, Moira reached out, caught her sister's waist, and pulled her close in a quick, hard hug. It was as near as she could come to a blessing. "Go, Serena," she whispered, a catch in her voice. "Hurry!"

Their eyes met as Moira released her. Serena had begun to tremble. Yes, she knew. She turned, took one step, then another, and suddenly she was running up the hall toward the parlor, flinging open the door.

Moira heard the rush of her footsteps across the carpet. Then, from the parlor, there was no sound.

Noah glanced up from his play. "Come see my castle, Aunt Moira," he said.

Moira smiled at him, took her cane, and walked out into the sunshine of the garden.

Biography

Elizabeth Lane

Elizabeth Lane's travels in Latin America, Europe, and China manifest themselves in the exotic locales seen in her writing, but she also finds her home state of Utah and other areas of the American West to be fascinating sources for historical romance. Lane loves such diverse activities as hiking and playing the piano, not to mention her latest hobby-belly dancing.

