



China Song

Elizabeth Lane

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*To Jumbuck,
our little dog.
who, for ten years, was
my devoted friend
and companion.*

1970–1980

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Foreword

Many ghosts walk the pages of this book. George Chinnery's grave still occupies one corner of the wall surrounding the small Protestant cemetery in the Macao he painted so lovingly. A fanciful visitor to this tiny peninsula can almost hear the sonorous tones of Reverend Karl Gutzlaff thundering from the pulpit of the nearby church or catch glimpses of the retreating figures of such titans in the old China trade as Matheson, Jardine, Hunter and Innes. Young Vincent Stanton still lives here in spirit, as does old Howqua, plump Mowqua, and the other hong merchants of Canton.

As for Lin Tse-hsu, he stands as an heroic figure even in the China of today, and his confrontation with Charles Elliot is legendary.

These men lived, and into the milieu of nineteenth-century China, I have placed my own imaginary characters, the Bellamy, Robards and Cheng families, blending fact and fantasy, mixing the real and the unreal until even I am no longer certain how much of this story is fiction and how much is history.

Elizabeth Lane

One

Macao
February, 1839

The Pearl River ran brown with silt as it flowed past the city of Canton, snaking through a network of islands to emerge in a broad estuary where its waters blended with those of the South China Sea. Far from shore, the estuary was emerald green, speckled with brush-covered islands that rose sharply upward from their bases. But where it lapped its way along the tiny peninsula of Macao, the Pearl was the color of rich congou tea laced with cream.

High-pooped junks, their heavy sails ribbed like bat wings, and smaller, arch-roofed sampans, which were paddled or poled, glided over the surface of the outer harbor. Their decks were cluttered with nets and baskets, with racks of drying fish, with clotheslines, cats, cooking pots and children. Their occupants paid little attention to the girl who walked along the sweeping crescent of beach that the Europeans called the Praya Grande. All of them had seen *fan kuei*, foreign devils, before, and even the foreign women were hardly worth a second glance. For the most part, they were tall, rawboned creatures with florid skins and faded eyes. Chinese men did not usually find them attractive.

Even so, when Kathleen Bellamy pulled the pins from her long red hair and let it fly loose in the breeze like a scarlet banner, the boat crews slackened their lines for a moment to look at her and catch their breaths.

Kathleen was nineteen years old and long accustomed to being stared at. By general agreement, she was the most spectacular beauty ever to walk the streets of Macao, and she knew it. In spite of the drab,

well-worn gown and sturdy, high-laced walking boots she wore, she turned almost every male head that passed.

Yet Kathleen's was not a conventional prettiness. In a world where daintiness was the measure of feminine beauty, she stood out like a fire lily among violets. She was tall, tall enough to look many a man in the eye. Her robust young body was lush and lithe, and she walked with the easy grace of a tigress.

One could argue, perhaps, that her features were too strong, that the thrust of her chin showed too much willfulness, the height of her brow more intelligence than was becoming to a woman. But none could deny the startling beauty of her eyes, which were the blue-green color of the sea under a cloudless sky, or of that wild mane of dark red hair that never seemed to stay pinned in place.

Her dress, which she hated passionately, was four years old, home-made of serviceable Nanking cotton that had once been dark blue but had long since faded to a dirty gray color. Kathleen's mother had made it for her fifteenth birthday, and now it was too small. It bound at the sleeves and strained at the buttons where Kathleen's full bosom had worn the fabric thin. When she fastened the collar all the way up to her chin, she felt strangled. As soon as she left home, she would unbutton the bodice all the way down to the tops of her breasts, filling in the indecent gap with the jade-green silk scarf that her brother Morgan had sent her from Canton. The scarf was one of the few lovely things Kathleen owned. It was almost as long as she was tall, and it floated back over her shoulders when she wore it around her neck. She wore it often, even though her father raged against the idea of a minister's daughter flaunting herself in bright colors. She loved the silken feel of it, and its deep hue, which brought out the green flecks in her eyes. The scarf was a symbol, a token of rebellion against the father who ruled her life like a despot. How she envied Morgan, three years her senior, who had managed to wriggle out of the paternal grasp long enough to go up to Canton for the trading season.

The Praya, lined with white and pastel-toned colonnaded buildings, teemed with activity. Sampans bobbed at the quays and jetties, piling their cargoes onto the cobblestones. Chinese coolies and women trotted along, their burdens dangling from bamboo poles neatly balanced on their shoulders: ducks, hanging in bunches by their feet, bundles of lettuce and onions, big red hunks of meat, slung on hooks,

baskets — baskets for everything. There were special baskets for crabs with tops that curved inward, baskets for chickens and long baskets, closed at both ends, for pigs.

Sedan chairs, their silk curtains mysteriously closed, jogged past, borne on sinewy shoulders. Macao, unique in all the world, was a delicious melange of Portuguese and Chinese culture. With Chinese permission, the Portuguese had occupied this tiny peninsula for three hundred years. The homes, business houses and public buildings were, for the most part, Iberian in style, with arched colonnades, wrought-iron balconies and tile roofs. But the sights, sounds and smells of Macao were unquestionably Chinese.

Kathleen sidestepped an eel vendor. His living wares writhed in twin buckets balanced on the ends of a split bamboo that dug into the flesh of his bare shoulder. The sight of those gleaming, snakelike bodies sent a shiver up her back. She had never tasted eel . . . or squid, for that matter, or the funny little amber pickles called tea melons that were sold from a dim doorway around the corner from the Ma Cho Temple. Except for rice and cabbage, Kathleen's father regarded Chinese food as "heathen's fare" (or "'eathen's fare," as he would say, since he had brought from home the Cockney habit of dropping his h's). Kathleen and Morgan were forbidden to touch it. At home they ate porridges, stews, biscuits and salt beef shipped all the way from Calcutta.

A child brushed passed her, a ragged little boy with slanting eyes and a basket of dried, salted plums slung over his skinny arm. Kathleen smiled, feeling the weight of a single copper in the pocket of her skirt. She touched the lad's shoulder. He turned swiftly, startled that one of the foreign devils would pay him any mind. "If you please," she said softly in Cantonese, holding out the coin and gesturing toward the plums. He took the coin solemnly, his eyes huge as he bit into it with his crooked little teeth. He reached into the basket, took a handful of the shriveled pinkish-brown treasures and counted ten of them into Kathleen's waiting palm. Then, almost as if he were unable to contain his fright any longer, he scurried away like a small crab and was lost in the crowd.

Kathleen popped one plum into her mouth and put the others in her pocket. The taste made her mouth pucker — sweet, sour and salty all at the same time. A bit of China on her tongue. Her father would

scold her if he knew . . . Pleased with herself, she strolled on down the Praya toward the water stairs, her hair fluttering like a red flame in the afternoon breeze.

The harbor near the Praya was too heavily silted to permit the approach of large ships. They anchored off the Typa, the small island that lay a mile and a half south of Macao. Their passengers and crews were conveyed to the mainland by round-topped sampans, expertly manned by young Chinese girls who chattered to their English-speaking clients in pidgin. "You wantchee go boat? One dolla. Can?"

The girls were clean and pretty and wore their hair in long pigtails. Bamboo hats shaded their faces from the glare of the sun. They kept their little boats spotless. Kathleen had heard it whispered that for the right price they would give a man more than a boat ride, but her brother Morgan had said it wasn't true. A friend of his had tried, he'd told her, laughing as he said it, and the girl's father had chased him into the water with a fish cleaver.

She missed Morgan. The Macao winter had been long, with him gone off to Canton. Soon he would be home again . . . home, to sit and talk with her, to tease and be teased and to bear with her the brunt of their father's tyranny, Morgan. She sighed deeply, overcome by a wave of loneliness. Her hand caressed the green scarf he had given to her. Something in her spirit reached out to him across the distance, as if mere wishing could bring him nearer.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, suddenly troubled. A dim premonition of danger had crept over her senses. She glanced up and down the Praya, then turned back toward home, weaving her way among the strolling nut sellers and clusters of boys playing at dice and *fantan*.

Without knowing why, Kathleen walked swiftly. She had a vague sense of being pursued, not by any human menace, but by some grim black cloud of foreboding that would not go away. Once, as a child of three, she had awakened from an afternoon nap screaming her brother's name. Her mother had searched the house in vain for Morgan, and had finally run to the nearby millpond to find the boy thrashing in the water, half-drowned. Some people said Kathleen was fey, that she was gifted with a sixth sense, especially where Morgan was concerned.

Outside the stuccoed governor's palace, she paused for breath, and the blackness caught and enveloped her. Her pulse began to pound. *Morgan!* her senses shrilled —

"Kathleen!" The young Portuguese dandy had stepped out of the gate of the governor's palace and seized her arm with one hot hand. Joaquin Luis Silveira was the governor's nephew, and as such was accustomed to having his way.

His breath was damp in her ear. "Tonight, my sweet?" he whispered.

"Maybe." Kathleen tossed her head and pulled away from him, remembering how he'd kissed her with his tongue the last time, and how his hand had crept upward, cradled her breast and then ripped loose the top four buttons of her dress before she'd panicked and run away. He would want as much and more next time, and Kathleen was not sure she was ready to give it to him.

Joaquin, not to be discouraged so easily, slipped an arm around her waist and eased her toward the gate. He was tall and elegantly slim, with a narrow chin, a fussily curled mustache and smoldering black eyes fringed with long lashes.

"Tonight," he insisted. "In the grotto. Don't tell me you can't get away, *queridinha*, or that you don't want to. I know better."

"My father — "

"Your father! That old *touro*! You can outsmart him! Come here, don't be in such a hurry . . . "

He reeled her in like a struggling fish. In a moment, he would have her inside the gate. Desperately, she glanced up and down the street. A slight figure with a parasol was coming up along the south end of the Praya.

"Pris! Priscilla!" Kathleen called, waving.

The dainty figure waved in return. Joaquin released his quarry with a sigh. "Tonight, Kathleen. And don't disappoint me!" He vanished inside the gate.

Kathleen raced down the Praya to meet her friend.

"Joaquin again?" Priscilla Robards was exquisitely small, with dark hair, warm brown eyes and skin like white porcelain. "Kathleen, your father would have apoplexy if he knew!"

"So? He doesn't have to know."

"But a Catholic? You can't be serious about him!"

Kathleen fell into step beside her friend, swinging her arm so that it whipped the side of her skirt. "If you're talking about marriage, Pris, no, I'm not serious. But Joaquin's amusing, and at least he's a man. Can I help it if all the English and Americans — all the interesting ones

at least — are cooped up in Canton?" She sighed. Every year, in the fall, the merchants and their staffs migrated up the river to Canton for the six-month trading season. There they spent their winters, confined to a complex of buildings known as the Factories, where no women were allowed. In March, they returned to spend the summer with their families in Macao.

"They'll be home soon," said Pris, with a little skip of her feet. "And what will poor Joaquin do then? I wouldn't lead him on like that if I were you, Kathleen."

"Oh, Joaquin's harmless enough. And if I hurt him, he'll mend." Kathleen forced a smile. The brief encounter with Joaquin had taken her mind off the black premonition for a few moments, but now it had returned, stronger than ever.

"Harmless? I'm the one who helped you sew your buttons back on so you could go home! Remember?" Pris twirled the handle of her pink silk parasol. "Oh, Kathleen, I have the most exciting news! I was coming to tell you. My father's coming back early — and he's bringing Morgan with him! I just got his letter!"

The blackness grew and darkened. "When?" Kathleen asked softly.

"Soon! Within the next few days, if he can get clearance — Kathleen, you look so strange — what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing, dearest Pris." Kathleen squeezed the fragile hand. The blackness was closing in, enveloping them both. "It's only that I'm surprised. Come on, let's walk a little."

Kathleen shortened her stride to keep pace with Priscilla's dainty steps. A Portuguese woman glided past them, her features hidden by the folds of the *dó*, the long, flowing mantle she wore that covered her head and most of her body. Two sway-bellied Chinese pigs ambled along the Praya, snuffling for bits of fish and discarded vegetables.

From out of the corner of her eye, Kathleen studied her friend. Although she had never seen her homeland, Pris Robards was an American. She'd been born in Macao almost seventeen years ago. Except for a few trips with her father to Manila and Singapore, she'd spent all the days of her life on that little spit of land which was only half a mile wide and less than three miles in length from its southern tip to the barrier gate that marked its boundary with China. Priscilla's mother had died giving her birth. The girl had been raised by doting Chinese *amahs*, as a result of which she spoke Cantonese like a native.

Pris twirled her pink parasol, looked up at Kathleen and laughed. "I envy you so," she said in a voice that was like a little bell. "The wind musses my hair. The sun gives me freckles. But being out of doors only makes you more beautiful, Kathleen." Priscilla sighed wistfully. She was wearing a leghorn bonnet over her dark brown curls. Her dress was new and of the finest cream-colored Shantung silk, cut modestly round at the neck, with long, full sleeves. Her neat little hands were encased in hand-crocheted lace mitts.

"Envy me?" Kathleen threw back her splendid head and laughed out loud, a sound that would have horrified her father. "God's blood, Pris, how could you envy anyone?" Kathleen swore not from habit but from studied, deliberate intent. It gave her an identity of sorts, a separateness from other girls she knew. Pris never reproached her for it. Perhaps that was one of the reasons the two of them had remained friends for so long.

"Look at you, Prissy!" Kathleen ran a hand through her flame-toned hair. "You're a *lady*! Fine clothes, fine manners — and the loveliest eyes! Why, most girls would give a fortune for lashes as long as yours! And look at your father! Blake Robards, *taipan* of the fourth-largest trading company on the China Coast! You've got everything!" Involuntarily, Kathleen's eyes darted to her own faded gown.

Pris had missed nothing. "I've a new bolt of silk," she said with a smile. "It's pale blue — oh, it would be wonderful on you, Kathleen! And my dressmaker's not busy now . . ."

Kathleen squeezed the small, lace-enclosed hand. "You're a gem, Pris, but you know my father would never let me accept it."

Priscilla nodded, tightening her lips and looking down at the cobblestones in silence as they walked. Kathleen hurt for her friend and for herself, for that was the one insurmountable barrier between them. Reverend Bellamy would never let his daughter accept anything Blake Robards had purchased with money he'd made in the opium trade.

Opium, the most hated and most desired commodity on the China Coast, was shipped in from India and Turkey by British and American traders to be sold clandestinely at Lintin Island in the river's estuary or carried up the coast to be smuggled ashore at night. It was no secret that the great trading *hongs*, including Blake Robards's own Red Eagle Line, had made their vast fortunes not in bringing Manchester textiles and raw India cotton into Canton nor in shipping silk, rhubarb root

and huge quantities of tea back to their homelands, but in smuggling illegal opium into China.

The reason for the smuggling, as Kathleen had heard Priscilla's father explain, was simple enough and perfectly justified in many eyes. The demand for Chinese goods, especially tea, was great in Europe and America. The quantity of Western items that could be sold in China, however, was very limited. The Chinese had been self-sufficient for more than two thousand years. Although they welcomed the bales of raw cotton, which were sent to spinners in Nanking, they had little use for most foreign commodities. To put it simply, the Western nations had almost nothing that the Chinese wanted to buy.

Thus, the Chinese had become the sellers, the Westerners the buyers. The buyers were spending money, the sellers making it. Silver was flowing into China from Europe and America at a frightening rate. Something had to be done. Some item had to be found that the Chinese would buy in large amounts.

The solution was opium.

For centuries, the Chinese had grown the white opium poppies and harvested the potent sap that came from their pods. Its use, however, had been chiefly medicinal. The amount and quality of the drug produced had not been high enough to cause widespread addiction. The Westerners had changed all that. Over the past several decades, illegal importation of opium had risen to such a scale that it now exceeded the total price of all Chinese exports combined. The silver was flowing in the other direction now, back into Western pockets.

"There's no other way," the voice of Blake Robards echoed in Kathleen's ears as she walked south along the Praya beside Kathleen. "D'ye think we'd be trading in opium if those cursed Chinees would open their ports and let us take our goods to the people the way we'd like? Can't you see that if the Chinees want opium, they'll get it one way or another — from others, if not from ourselves?"

Priscilla, Kathleen realized, had mixed feelings about opium. On the one hand, it fed and clothed her. It bought her silks and laces and paid the rent on the elegant Portuguese villa that looked out over the Praya. To forsake opium would be to forsake all. Yet when she went to church on Sundays and heard Reverend Archer Bellamy, Kathleen's father, thunder from the pulpit about the evils of opium and the depredations it wreaked on the Chinese body and spirit, Pris

squirmed uncomfortably. Once, last summer, when Reverend Bellamy had waxed especially strong against the wickedness of those who lived by "the devil's wages," the wives of three wealthy opium traders had stood up and walked out. They had never returned to the little white chapel that adjoined Macao's Protestant cemetery. Priscilla, however, had stayed. She had stayed, Kathleen suspected, because of Morgan.

At the thought of Morgan, the black premonition pressed in on Kathleen again, oozing like smoke into the cracks and corners of her mind no matter how she fought to keep it out. She could be wrong, she told herself again and again. Morgan was probably fine. He was most likely helping Blake Robards take a final inventory of the trade goods before the return to Macao, and was safe as a babe in its mother's arms. She would not think of it!

Priscilla had been silent, her great dark eyes focused inward on her own thoughts.

"Where are you, Prissy?" Kathleen squeezed her arm. She was amused by her friend's frequent dreamy spells.

"Oh." Pris blinked. "I was only thinking . . . how nice it will be to have my father home again."

"Your father!" Kathleen hugged her impulsively. "You're such a mouse! It's my brother you're thinking of! He'll be home, too!"

Priscilla did not reply, but a pink flush had begun to creep upward from her throat to her pale cheeks and temples.

"Come on!" Kathleen coaxed. "Everyone knows you're sweet on Morgan! And if it's my blessing you want, why, you have it!"

Pris only shook her small head in useless denial and blushed to the roots of her hair. Kathleen laughed, too long and too loudly, as she struggled to push away the blackness. Pris was the lucky one, she told herself — and not just because she had beautiful clothes and a rich, indulgent father. Kathleen envied her friend most of all because here in this isolated corner of the world, with only a handful of young men to choose from, Priscilla had found someone to love. It was true that Morgan did not yet return that love. He acted as if he still saw Pris as a little girl. But Priscilla was growing up. Surely it was only a matter of time . . .

As for Kathleen herself, she had scrutinized every eligible man who'd come to Macao in the past three years. Some of them had been

attractive, and any number of them had wanted her. She had flirted with some, kissed a few and garnered herself a reputation as a hussy. Yet none of them had stirred her deeply. She had never been in love, and her body was as untouched as her heart.

In her own way, Kathleen adored Macao. She relished its pungent blend of East and West, of Moorish arches and Chinese pagodas, of bully beef and crumpets and sweet-sour dumplings. She never tired of wandering through Macao's Chinese sections, filling her eyes, ears and nose with Oriental delights. But she was nineteen years old now, a grown woman with a woman's passions.

And the Macao she had once loved so much was slowly becoming the prison of her desires.

Blake Robards leaned on the rail of the schooner and peered out into the mist — mist so heavy that it formed droplets on the dark stubble of his cheeks and chin. Damn Canton, he thought. Damn the fog, and rot the Hoppo who'd delayed giving him his departure chop until midafternoon, so that he'd barely cleared the Bogue by sundown and was forced to anchor in the estuary till dawn. Only a fool would try to make Macao in the dark.

And blast Morgan Bellamy, who'd come up missing that morning, only to be found, after a search of several hours, passed out cold, his face half-buried in the mire of Hog Lane, a stinking, crowded alleyway that ran down between the Parsee and New English Factories. Hell, Blake Robards cursed under his breath, it was a wonder the lad hadn't suffocated!

Young Bellamy's misadventure had been a disappointment to Robards. He'd taken a liking to the boy in spite of the fact that his father was a starch-faced prig. Morgan was bright and ambitious. He'd tended well to his duties as an assistant clerk. Aye, Robards told himself, the lad had shown promise. In fact, Morgan Bellamy had exhibited only one fault: There was apparently very little he would not do for money.

It was a wager, Robards had learned after he'd grilled the crew, that had set young Bellamy's feet on the road to disaster. A wager made in jest, of two hundred silver dollars to any man who could spend a night on one of Canton's infamous floating flower boats and return to the Factories alive the next morning. Any fool who'd been at the Factories

for more than a season would have known it was a joke. The ornate floating brothels that decorated the riverbank, where the girls lolled on the balconies, smiling and beckoning, were forbidden to the non-Chinese. Within remembered years, only two foreigners had penetrated their carved, swinging doors. One man had been tossed out violently within minutes. The other man had gone in and had never been seen again.

Morgan Bellamy had been half-dead when they found him in Hog Lane. His pockets had been empty and he'd reeked of *samshu*, that devastating Cantonese concoction of rice liquor, tobacco juice and arsenic that was sold as "number one chop rum" in dingy booths along Hog Lane. When even a good dousing in the river had failed to rouse the lad, Robards's suspicions were confirmed; along with the *samshu*, Bellamy had been drugged.

They'd dried him off and stowed him in a secluded bunk below decks, where he was still sleeping soundly, snorting and whimpering occasionally like a hurt animal. Blake Robards dismissed him from his mind and turned his thoughts ahead to Macao.

He had no regrets in leaving Canton a month ahead of schedule. His legal goods had been sold, his three former Indiamen, big vessels purchased from the old East India Company, bound for home, their holds laden with tea; and his four clippers were racing to the Red Sea ports to claim the prime of the Turkish opium harvest. There was nothing to hold him to Canton, and he hated the place. He hated the stale confinement of the Factories. He chafed in the company of the other American traders, such a pious lot that the more easygoing British had dubbed the American Factory "Zion's Corner." He had even grown tired of the Cantonese girls smuggled discreetly into his rooms by his comprador, Wu Hung-li, who bought supplies and managed the Chinese help.

Not only that, but Wu Hung-li had brought him a secret rumor, a rumor that the emperor had it in mind to strike a new blow at the opium smuggling. Wu had heard that a special commissioner with imperial powers was headed south from Peking and would be at Canton before the end of the season. Characteristically, Robards had kept the news to himself. If there was a way the information could be used to his advantage, he would use it. Meanwhile, he'd gotten his opium clippers as far away from Canton as possible and he'd

wrapped up his own affairs there at once, leaving Wu Hung-li to close up his offices in the American Factory.

Aye, he reflected, but he'd had a bellyful of Canton this year. He longed for the freedom of Macao, the comfort and privacy of his own house and the sight of his daughter's face.

Priscilla. Now there was another worry. She was growing up, and it was time he sent her to his sister in Boston. Macao was no place for a young lady, especially a lass as comely as his little Pris.

He'd seen the way she looked at Morgan Bellamy. Although he hadn't really noticed Morgan looking back, he'd been concerned enough to invite the lad up to Canton with him for the season. Young Bellamy had leaped at the chance. He'd been wild with restlessness in Macao. It was plain to see that he lacked his father's vocation for preaching, but he was energetic, ambitious and anxious to get ahead in the world. The China trade had absorbed and fascinated him.

But Morgan Bellamy was not the man for Pris. He was young, poor and lacking in refinement. Worse, he had a wild streak in him, a touch of the devil that no one could predict or control. Why was it, Robards wondered, that preachers' sons were so often full of Old Nick? Well, never mind. He'd keep the lad with him, perhaps, and one day young Bellamy might make a good first mate or chief clerk. But Robards would be damned if he'd have him as a son-in-law!

Yes, Boston was the place for Pris, and as soon as he'd gotten settled, he'd send her packing. His sister had married well, and had fine social connections. She'd find Pris a proper husband. A man with money, land, ships and perhaps an honorable position. Blake Robards leaned his chin on his fist and stared out into the darkness. He could see his Pris as the wife of a governor, perhaps, or a senator, elegantly gowned, presiding at balls and banquets. He smiled to himself and stroked his chin. Before he knew it, he could have a whole pack of grandsons; and maybe some of them would come back to the China Coast to take over the Red Eagle Line when he passed on.

The deck was silent except for the tread of the watch. Robards inhaled the muggy odor of the river and listened to the slap of the waves against the stern. He knew the Pearl River Estuary as well as he knew his own bed. North of him lay the Bogue, a long, straight channel whose steep banks were lined with Chinese forts. Upstream of the

Bogue, the river curved and meandered through treacherous bars and shoal, past Whampoa Island, where the trade vessels anchored, and on up a maze of channels to Canton itself. Except for a few intrepid Catholic priests, no Westerner had been beyond Canton.

Below the Bogue, the land opened like a woman's thighs. The estuary was forty miles across where it met the sea, with Macao on its western shore and a jagged cluster of islands on the east that rose up from the sea in hills. Barren Lantau was the largest; then towering Hong Kong, where ships sometimes stopped for fresh water. The others were smaller — Lamma, Tsing Yi, Cheung Chau and a myriad of others that were no more than dots on the charts. For the most part, they were rough, waterless places, uninhabited except for occasional fishing villages.

Near the center of the estuary lay Lintin Island, where the great receiving hulks, their masts removed, rocked at anchor, floating warehouses for the raw opium that the clippers brought in from the docks of Calcutta or from ports on the Red Sea. There the Chinese opium smugglers and dealers picked up their illegal cargo in long, slender boats known as "scrambling dragons" or "fast crabs," although they more closely resembled centipedes with their double lines of rowers, whose oars worked in furious unison like the legs of some huge water insect.

The Chinese authorities knew about Lintin. They knew and they did nothing, aside from an occasional reading of the Tao Kuang emperor's edict against opium. How could they do more, when practically every mandarin and customs official on the South China Coast was growing rich from his cut of the smuggling profits?

The irony of the situation never failed to amuse Blake Robards. The straight, pious faces of the Chinese authorities as they collected their "squeeze" for allowing the opium chests to be brought ashore; the mock pursuits staged by the war junks once their quarry, usually an opium clipper, was safely out of the range of their antiquated guns.

It was a lively business for a man who liked it, which Blake Robards did, and a profitable one as well. But he wanted Pris away from it. If she stayed in Macao, her prospects were dim. Marriage to some poor young clerk like Morgan Bellamy or, at best, another opium baron like himself. It was no life for a gentle girl.

It was a shame he hadn't married again, Robards told himself. He'd have had growing sons by now, and a man needed sons. Silently, he listened to the river as it rippled past the bow of the schooner. There was still time, he told himself. He was only forty-six, still strong-limbed and hard-bellied, and he'd fathered at least three half-breed bastards by his Chinese mistresses. God only knew where they were by how.

Maybe he'd go back to Boston with Pris, get her settled and stay long enough to do some courting. The thought excited him. He hadn't had a non-Chinese woman since his wife died. He'd make sure she was young and good-looking, he promised himself as he took a deep breath, flexed his shoulders and stared out into the night.

An absence during the long months required for the journey to Boston and back was not practical, he reasoned, but perhaps it would not be necessary. There were women in Singapore, in Manila, in India. And the prettiest of them all, perhaps, was right in Macao. Robards ran a hand along the rail and resolved to take a closer look at that red-headed Kathleen Bellamy, his daughter's friend. She just might be the one for him. True, her father would fight the match, but Robards would have young Morgan on his side, and even the old preacher could be bought. Any man could.

Blake Robards was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the rhythm of sculled sampans as they slid up alongside the schooner. He did not even hear the muffled cry from the man on watch as the pirate's dagger slit his throat.

Robards was not even aware that anything was amiss until he felt strong arms grab his neck from behind. He twisted, grunting like a bull, and threw the man across the deck, but there were others, too many of them, and he was unarmed. They swarmed over him, hacking at him with cutlasses. He bellowed an alarm, then whirled to face them.

Something struck the back of his neck. He cried out. Then his mind burst in a sheet of red and died suddenly into a blackness that was darker than the night itself.

Two

Morgan Bellamy opened his eyes. The pain in his head was blinding. The inside of his mouth felt powdery, and his tongue was a stiff, swollen thing that did not even seem to belong to him. With excruciating effort, he rolled over onto his back, gritting his teeth against the nausea that boiled in his stomach. Lord! Where was he?

With some concentration, he recalled the flower boat. He'd stolen a set of clothes from the comprador, Wu Hung-li, put a conical straw hat over his blond hair and managed somehow to get inside. There'd been a girl . . . God's blood, had he gone to bed with her? He couldn't even remember. And where in hell was he, anyway?

As his head cleared, the pain was even worse. He was aboard a ship. He recognized the blended odors of musty wood, salt, tobacco and the stink of perspiration-soaked bunks. The timbers creaked gently as the vessel rocked on the water. Around him, he could hear the heavy breathing of his sleeping bunkmates, whom he foggily recognized as three of Robards's other clerks. From somewhere above his head, he heard a sudden shout and the sound of running footsteps. The dark around him exploded into frenzy as men roused themselves, seized axes, clubs, pistols — whatever they could lay hands on — and poured up the hatchway and onto the deck.

Morgan tried to get up. His legs refused to move. His stomach was a tempest. He moaned out loud. Pirates, most likely, he thought despairingly. And the schooner — if, indeed, this was the Robards schooner — was small. She'd be carrying a crew of less than a dozen, Morgan reckoned, forcing his spinning mind to concentrate, plus Robards himself and a handful of clerks. Easy prey for even a piddling band of river pirates.

Clenching his teeth, Morgan tried once more to rise. He reached down with one hand and forced his legs off the edge of the bunk, aware for the first time that he was naked. Overhead, the deck rang with pistol shots and the echo of plunging feet. A gut-wrenching scream was followed by a splash. Morgan swore and pulled himself up by gripping the bunk above his head. His legs would not support him. His pounding head reeled and he fell back to the bunk with a crash. To hell with it, something in his tortured brain said. He couldn't even fight a ninety-year-old woman. Not in his condition.

More shouts and splashes from above deck. Was it the pirates hitting the water, or the crew? Damned pirates. Must have *smelled* the chest of silver aboard the schooner.

No more cries from above. One way or another, the struggle was over. Morgan lay sick and shivering in the darkness. Stealthy footsteps approached the hatchway. They were coming down!

Morgan's skin was slimy with cold sweat. With a supreme effort, he rolled toward the edge of the bunk and lunged for the floor. His body hit the lower deck with a thud that sent waves of nausea shooting up into his head. The hatchway ladder creaked under the descending weight. Morgan gathered the last of his strength, rolled under the bunk and lapsed into unconsciousness again.

He dreamed. Shapeless, multicolored fantasies swirled in his head, flowing, amorphous monsters that held him fast, refusing to release him. Even in his dreams, he was aware of the danger close by. He lay rigid under the bunk, shivering against the coldness of the deck. But luck was with him. He was not discovered.

Finally, it was the buzzing of a fly that awakened him fully. Morgan blinked, stretched and eased his aching body out from under the bunk. He still felt like bloody hell, but at least he was able to stand up and his mind had cleared a little.

The deck seemed to be listing, though, and in his foggy state, Morgan wondered if he was imagining that the bunks, beams and timbers of the ship were slanting at such a cockeyed pitch. The sun was shining down through the open hatchway, and he realized that morning had come. Except for the lap of the current against the hull and the persistent buzzing of flies, the ship was silent as a tomb. As the dim memory of last night crept over him, Morgan felt the flesh contract on the back of his neck.

A discarded pair of breeches lay over the side of a bunk. He put them on and found that they fit. Then, trembling, he climbed up into the daylight.

The fat black flies lifted like a cloud as Morgan stepped onto the deck. He willed himself to look first at the condition of the ship. He'd have no stomach for it later, he knew. The schooner was listing to port, the anchor line slack where it had been chopped through. It was evident that the vessel had drifted toward the bank and lodged on a sandbar. The shore, grassy and deserted except for a solitary water buffalo, lay less than a hundred yards to starboard.

Fighting nausea, Morgan forced himself to look down at the deck. The flies had settled again, black clusters on the pools of clotted blood. He found the second mate crumpled at the foot of the mainmast, his throat slit and his face gray. A few feet away lay the sprawled body of a Chinese river pirate, his chest partly torn away by a pistol ball fired at close range.

The headless corpse of Blake Robards lay against the rail, back toward the stern. Robards's head was nowhere in sight. Most likely it had fallen overboard or been taken as a trophy by some pirate who'd recognized the American *taipan*. Morgan stumbled back down the hatch, ripped three blankets off the bunks, carried them back up onto the stinking deck and used them to cover the bodies. Then he leaned over the rail and retched up everything that would come out of him.

Robards's staff and the rest of the crew were gone. Morgan could only hope they'd escaped. One of the schooner's two dinghies was missing, which raised his hopes for them. The other one. Lord be thanked, was undamaged and still in place.

Morgan leaned against the rail and tried to assess the situation as calmly as possible. The sun was rising over the water, which meant that he was on the west side of the estuary, a point in his favor, since he would only need to follow the shoreline south to reach Macao. He went below deck again and inspected the ship. The silver was missing, all right. Only he and Robards had known that it had been hidden in an empty salt pork barrel, but the bastards had known just where to look for it. The cabins had not even been ransacked. Morgan cursed. Either the pirates had forced the information out of Robards himself aboard the schooner or — the thought made his stomach contract — they'd known about it ahead of time.

The ship itself had a hole chopped in her hull and her bilge was full of water. She'd been saved from foundering only when she'd run aground on the bar after the pirates had left her.

Morgan had no appetite, but he knew he'd need food later on, so he went through the galley. The schooner had carried few provisions for the short trip downriver to Macao, but he found some oranges and a few stale biscuits left over from last night's supper. He grabbed a ragged shirt to protect his fair skin from the sun and went back on deck.

The body of the pirate he dumped over the rail. Then he wrapped Robards and the mate in the blankets, dragged them into the dinghy, found a spade and lowered the little boat with its grim contents down to the water.

In the damp red-brown soil of the riverbank, Morgan buried the bodies of Robards and the mate. Briefly, he'd contemplated taking them back to Macao for a proper funeral, especially since Robards had been an important man. Then, considering the smallness of the dinghy, the heat of the sun and the fact that he did not know how far he was from Macao, he'd dismissed the idea.

Morgan's back was strong, the soil of the riverbank was soft, and it was not long before the graves were completed. A clump of bamboo grew near the water's edge. With a penknife he'd picked up in the cabin, he cut four short lengths of it and fastened them into two crosses, using a strip from the hem of his ragged shirt to bind on the crosspieces. They were not as sturdy as he'd have liked. They wouldn't last long once the cloth had begun to rot. But never mind. The gesture had been made.

He thrust the two crosses into the earth, then stood there beside them, hesitating like a child who wants to leave but has not been excused. Some words, he prodded himself, a prayer, perhaps, would be necessary. He would not like to have to tell little Priscilla Robards that he had neglected to pray over her father's grave.

His knees would not bend until he forced them. Except for mumbling grace at meals when he was asked to, Morgan had not prayed in years. To him, God was too much like his father, stern, remote, disapproving. Morgan could no more cast his burdens on the Lord than he could take them to the Reverend Archer Bellamy.

Morgan pressed his knees into the dirt and looked up at the sky, which was as blue as his father's eyes but not as cold-looking. Did God have eyes like that? he wondered. Did God even exist?

A sense of his own unworthiness swept over him like a hot flood. Here he was on his knees when he'd been out-of-his-mind drunk the night before. Too drunk to even remember whether or not he'd committed fornication as well. But he'd gone to an evil house. He'd gone lusting, and everybody knew that was enough to qualify him as a sinner of the blackest degree. Worse, he'd just had it in his mind to deny God!

With his face turned to the sky, Morgan knelt beside the two graves. His handsome features were twisted with anguish. The breeze that swept the pale gold hair back from his forehead produced an unexpected coolness against his cheeks. Ashamed, he wiped away the tears with the back of his hand. His lips moved, but no words were formed. He was unfit even to utter the name of God.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. "Rest their souls," he muttered, and then he turned his back on the two graves and walked to the dinghy.

The rowing made him feel better. He stroked furiously until the sun was high and hot. Then he rested the oars on the gunwale and allowed the boat to drift. The current alone would carry him down to Macao.

As he watched the green land slide past, he had time to think, to look at himself and his situation in life. It was clear, he told himself, that he could expect little help from God. Not unless he wanted to change his ways and become a tower of righteousness like his father, and he did not. It was the *world* he wanted. It was money, and all it could buy. Fine clothes, food and drink, beautiful women, houses, land, power. Power. The word sang like a gong in his mind. Power. He seized the oars again, eager to reach Macao.

He slowed a little in his rowing when he remembered Priscilla. She'd be waiting in Macao, and someone would have to tell her about her father. Kathleen was Pris's friend. She would do it gently enough, he was sure. And she'd be willing if he asked her.

Morgan rested his oars again while he pondered. Evade the matter as he might, instinct told him that Priscilla would rather hear the news from his own lips. He knew — and had known for many months — that she was in love with him.

When he'd first become aware of her feelings, Morgan had been amused. Quaint little Pris, so shy, so sheltered. Pris, who blushed pink whenever he looked at her. He felt a certain tenderness toward her, the sort of emotion one would feel for a puppy or a kitten. She was such

a fragile creature. His regard for her was almost brotherly. But he did not love her. She did not even stir him as some girls did.

Even if he had loved her, he reflected, precious little good it would have done him. Blake Robards would never have let him touch her. Robards had had grand plans for his little Pris. Damned rotten luck, Robards getting killed like that. Priscilla was his only child, as far as Morgan knew, and he'd been acquainted with Robards and the girl for the five years his own family had been in Macao. Robards had been a loner. He'd had no close friends, no partners in his business, only Priscilla.

Morgan took up the oars again. He would tell Pris himself, he resolved. And he would comfort her. He pulled back hard, his fine muscles rippling under the ragged shirt, the oarlocks creaking with the strain.

By the time the fortress on Macao's Guia Hill loomed into sight above the horizon, Morgan had made his plans.

Kathleen slipped out between the whitewashed doors of the little chapel and closed them quietly behind her. She paused on the doorstep for a moment and listened to the thunder of her father's voice from the pulpit. Had he seen her go? Most likely he had, and she'd surely be punished when he caught up with her. For the present, however, there was little he could do. He could scarcely stop right in the middle of a Sunday sermon to chase after his errant daughter. She bit the knuckle of her left index finger in delight at having made good her escape. Then she danced down the walk and out the gate, the skirt of her yellow dimity swinging wickedly.

The day was warm with the promise of spring, the acacias popping with golden buds. Kathleen swallowed a twinge of guilt. Her sins for the day already included irreverence, disobedience and slothfulness. But there were times when her bursting spirit could not be contained within the small circle of restraint her father had drawn around her. There were times when she had to escape, she told herself, or she would explode like a Chinese firecracker.

It had not been so difficult. She had been sitting next to Pris and Morgan, and those two had been so engrossed in each other that they'd scarcely seen her slip away. Her mother, too, from her seat on the organ bench, had been looking elsewhere. Later, Kathleen scolded

herself, she would pay for this little rebellion, but for now she was at the mercy of her own restlessness.

She paused outside the gate, wondering which street to follow. She could take the one that led up to the Monte Fort at the top of the hill. From its heights, she would be able to see all the way past the barrier gate and into China. Kathleen liked to gaze at the hills that lay beyond the narrow bridge of land the Chinese called the Stalk of the Lotus. They beckoned her, those distant, forbidden ripples of green earth. When she looked at them, she liked to imagine the wonders that might lie beyond them . . . palaces and pagodas . . . temples and tombs . . . emperors with harems of a thousand wives . . . warriors in bronze helmets charging across the landscape on their stubby-legged Mongolian ponies. Kathleen had read and reread her father's worm-eaten copy of Marco Polo's journal at least a half dozen times over the past few years. From it she had learned most of what she knew about that vast, looming mystery the young thirteenth-century explorer had called Cathay.

When this fascination with China had begun, Kathleen could not say. Perhaps she had been born with it. Or perhaps her strictly conservative upbringing had fostered a secret love of the exotic in her. Even as a young girl back in England, she had thrilled to tales of the far-away East. Any mention of the Orient had conjured up enthralling visions of silk fans and jasmine, of temple bells and ivory and jade. At the age of fourteen, when the London Missionary Society had sent her family to China, she had told herself that she was coming home at last. And even though her first impressions of the longed-for East had been disappointingly gray and dirty, she remained convinced that somewhere, beyond those hills, lay the China of her dreams.

She had already started up the road toward the Monte when she remembered the Portuguese officer who commanded the garrison of sepoys there. The last time she had climbed the path alone, he had come out of the gate to talk with her, a squat, swarthy man with a lop-sided droop to his lower lip. The fact that he had a wife and four children in a house on Rua do Campo had not stopped him from putting his hand on her arm and speaking in an intimate whisper, his face so near to hers that she could smell the onions on his breath. Remembering, she stopped, then turned her steps back in the other direction, down the hill toward the Inner Harbor.

In the last week, Kathleen reflected as she walked, she had been spending a good deal of time alone. She had looked forward joyfully to Morgan's homecoming, eager for his companionship, his little confidences, his good-natured bullying. Morgan, however, had returned from his ordeal on the river with an intensity of purpose that made him almost a stranger to her. He had gone at once to Priscilla's house to break the news about her father, and the two of them had been inseparable ever since. Kathleen was genuinely happy for them both, but she could not help feeling left out. Morgan and Pris were the only people to whom she felt truly close.

Even her mother . . . Kathleen strode down the hill with exaggerated vigor, her starched petticoat swishing. Rose Bellamy was a pristine marble monument to womanhood. She never cursed or slammed doors, never even raised her voice. She obeyed her towering husband in all things, was scrupulously neat and ran the household with the efficiency of a machine. Being with her only fed Kathleen's growing sense of her own unworthiness.

Looking back into her childhood, Kathleen remembered a different Rose — warm, impulsive, a bit of a rebel herself. She had loved waltzes and bright colors, and her gaiety had served as a buffer against her husband's strictness with their son and daughter. Once, Kathleen recalled, when she was nine, she and her mother had sneaked out of the house and gone to see a company of traveling players perform *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Candy, as a rule, was forbidden in the Bellamy household, but on the way home they'd bought a whole pound of treacle taffy and eaten every bite of it except for six pieces they'd saved for Morgan.

That afternoon had been one of the most wonderful of Kathleen's life. Not many days afterward, Rose had gotten word that her own mother had died. She had left her family in Portsmouth and gone up to London alone for a fortnight to attend to the funeral and the settling of her mother's affairs. She had returned a changed woman — quiet, subdued and pliant as water; a prim, self-contained echo of her straight-laced husband. Baffled, Kathleen had first blamed the change in Rose on grief for her mother's loss and told herself that it would pass. But the weeks went by, months and years — time that only served to set Rose Bellamy more firmly than ever into her new mold.

Kathleen's sense of bereavement had diminished only a little with the years. She felt oddly betrayed, deserted.

The cobblestones of the street, worn smooth as glass by the centuries, gleamed warmly in the sunlight. Kathleen strode down the hill, her head held high and the breeze plucking tendrils of red hair loose from her tightly bound chignon. A frustrated suitor had once told her that she walked like a man, and she had not been unflattered by the comparison. In an age where females were expected to be delicate, mincing creatures, Kathleen found physical movement exhilarating. Only the fear of drawing too much attention to herself or causing a panic kept her from picking up her skirts and breaking into a run just for the fun of it.

She slowed her step now, for the street was becoming more crowded. The Chinese, who knew no sabbath, went about their usual business seven days a week, selling fish and buying cabbages, sweeping and sewing, gambling and arguing. While the Praya, on Macao's southern edge, was quite European in character, the Inner Harbor, facing northwest, was traditionally Chinese. Kathleen sidestepped a cluster of coolies crouching around a wooden tub in which two crickets battled. The betting was loud and enthusiastic. She glanced over their shoulders for a moment, then moved on. As a rule, the Chinese ignored her unless she showed too much interest in what they were doing. She often wandered along this street. Those who lived here were accustomed to the sight of the tall, young foreign woman with hair like dark fire who walked alone among them without fear.

As for Kathleen, she found the Chinese world intriguing and exotic, an escape from the confinement of her own home. She had even acquired a fair fluency in their language by listening to the lessons her father had taken for two years from an old Chinese who had since died. She'd also picked up words and phrases from the Chinese servants in the other English households, particularly the *amahs* who had cared for her friend Priscilla. The Bellamys employed no servants. Her father maintained that it would only encourage laziness and that surely two strong women were capable of doing all the work in the house. Kathleen suspected other motives. In spite of his professed love for China and its people, she sensed that at close range the Reverend was uncomfortable with anything that was strange or foreign. He seemed

to shrink from the idea of having any Chinese person in his home on such an intimate basis.

Three women in black tunics and trousers, their faces hidden by the domes of their bamboo hats, squatted around a heap of mud-brown marine snails. Their knives deftly dug the gray-white flesh out of the shells into waiting bowls. Behind them, a girl of about twelve spread the gelatinous bodies out on a piece of canvas to dry in the sun. Later, Kathleen knew, the dried snails would be stored and used for flavoring in soups.

A tiny girl child of two or three sat on the stoop of a prosperous-looking house nearby, watching the women and sucking her thumb. She was such a pretty sight in her quilted jacket of plum-colored cotton and so exquisitely small that Kathleen stopped, entranced, to gaze at her. The little girl's head was shaved up to a point just below the crown, from which sprouted a glossy tuft of short hair. Not until she was four years old would her hair be allowed to grow long. Her black trousers were conveniently slit all along the crotch seam and stitched back so that her little bare buttocks rested on the hard stone of the stoop. Kathleen noticed, as she moved closer, that the small face was streaked with the salt wash of dried tears. The child whimpered softly, her wet thumb jerking in and out of her rosebud mouth.

Kathleen leaned over her, forgetting for the moment that the Chinese would resent any intrusion on the part of a foreigner. "What's wrong, little one?" she whispered, leaning closer — and then she saw, and she knew. The tiny feet that peeped out of the black trouser legs were tightly wrapped in fresh white cotton bandages.

Kathleen knew about footbinding. No one who had ever seen the results of it could forget the sight of Chinese women hobbling along on those pitiful stubs that were often no more than four inches long. She'd been told long ago how the process was begun in early childhood, how the soft, young feet were wrapped in cotton bandages, wrapped tighter and tighter each day. Over the years, they would bend the instep of the foot, curling the small toes under like the fingers of a clenched fist, until the big toe and the heel met to form what the Chinese called *kin lien*, golden lilies, objects of beauty to celestial eyes.

Kathleen had long known about the custom, but never before had the cruelty of it struck her with such force. She fought back the

impulse to seize the little girl in her arms and run away down the street with her, to take her and keep her someplace where no one would ever touch her feet again.

With a murmur of sympathy, she reached out and brushed a tear from the small, satiny cheek. The child looked up, truly seeing her for the first time, suddenly terrified by the sight and touch of a foreign devil. Her little face puckered up in horror and she let out a long, piercing wail.

The three women who were gathered at the snail heap flew into action. Like a flock of crows, they dashed at Kathleen, screaming, scolding, pelting her with empty shells that stung as they struck home. "Child-stealer!" they shrilled. "*Fan kwei!* Devil!"

Kathleen fled. She picked up her skirt and petticoat and ran back up the street the way she had come, the curses of the three women and the screams of the little girl echoing in her ears.

None of them tried to follow her. She rounded the next corner and flung herself into the shelter of an empty doorway, gasping for breath in her tightly laced corset. Something welled up into her throat — something hard and hot and bitter. She battled against the tears, but they came in spite of everything, oozing out between the fingers that she pressed against her eyelids. She had reached out. She had reached out . . . Sobs came bursting up out of her throat.

This would not do, she told herself firmly, swallowing hard. Kathleen Bellamy, standing in a doorway on a public street, crying her silly eyes out — what a sight! And the women had only startled her. She hadn't really been frightened. It was only the child, the terror in that wail . . .

She began to walk again, striding purposefully in the direction of the Praya. The sun had climbed higher since she'd left the chapel. Services would be over by now. People would be taking their Sunday strolls, enjoying the spring sunshine. Maybe if she hurried, she would find Morgan and Pris. She did not want to be alone anymore.

The clash with the Chinese women had loosened her hair. Impatiently, she pulled out the pins and stuck them into the pocket of her dress. She shook her head, sending the fiery cascade rippling down her back. As she walked, she passed a clump of white hibiscus, just coming into early bloom. She plucked one of them, twirling it in her fingers as she moved down the street.

By the time her feet touched the cobblestones of the Praya, the breeze had dried her tears and she was ready to smile again.

Reverend Archer Bellamy paced beneath the trees, his agitated breathing the only sound that disturbed the peace of Macao's small Protestant cemetery, the one spot he loved above all others.

The grass was velvet beneath his shoes; the warblers twitted softly from the banyans. Gethsemane must have been like this, he told himself.

When his mind was troubled, the Reverend often came here to meditate and stroll among the tombstones. There was something about a graveyard that put earthly problems in eternal perspective. The grave markers were like old friends, for the Reverend had known many of the souls who'd been laid to rest here. Young souls, most of them. Women in their twenties, dead of childbirth; children; men in the spring of their years, dead of tropical fevers or drowned at sea. Old people went home to England to die. Those who perished at Macao were often taken unexpectedly.

The Reverend was a tower of a man, thin to the point of gauntness. His face was long, with a heavy jaw and slightly hooked nose. His eyes were the clear blue of a winter sky, and his thick silvery hair had once been as red as his daughter Kathleen's.

Kathleen. Aye, but that was a sore point with him. She'd had the gall to slip out of services early and was probably down on the Praya, flaunting her body like a Jezebel. 'Twould only be a matter of time, he raged inwardly, before she fell deep into mortal sin, if she hadn't fallen already. Every day he lectured her on the virtues of modesty and submissiveness in a woman. He'd taken down the Bible, found the section in the Book of Proverbs that began "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies . . ." and made Kathleen write the entire passage from memory one hundred times. In spite of all his efforts, she was not repentant. Once, in a fury of exasperation, he had raged at her, "Why can't you be like your mother, Kathleen?"

It had been a sensible question. Rose Bellamy was the embodiment of ideal womanhood. She was decorous, obedient, industrious, a model of piety. She did not nag, gossip, laugh out loud or wear clothing that called attention to her body. That she was beautiful as well was a mere accident of nature, not rightly to be counted among her virtues.

Kathleen had looked up at him, her cheeks hot, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Because," she whispered in a tight, measured little voice, "I don't *want* to be like my mother!" She had turned and run from him then, out of the house and down the street, and she had not returned until after dark.

She needed a husband, he told himself. That would settle her. Nineteen — she should be having children by now, not gallivanting about Macao like a strumpet. True, there were not many suitable men in Macao, at least not by the Reverend's standards. Peter Parker, the young American medical missionary who'd set up a clinic on Hog Lane in Canton, was single, and Reverend Bellamy would have been proud to claim him as a son-in-law. Kathleen, however, thought him homely, pompous and dull, and said so. As for Parker, he only seemed terrified of her.

The rest of the marriage market consisted of young sailors, mostly ne'er-do-wells, clerks and widowed traders — unsuitable in the Reverend's eyes because so many of them dealt in opium. He could send her back to England, he thought, but he had no more family there. There would be no place for her to go.

In his rambling, he paused in a quiet corner by the grave of Robert Morrison, China's first Protestant missionary. Morrison was laid side by side with his wife, Mary, in twin graves that rose above ground, covered by granite slabs. Tenderly, Archer Bellamy fingered the incised letters.

Sacred to the Memory of Robert Morrison, D.D., the First Protestant Missionary to China, where after a service of twenty-seven years cheerfully spent in extending the kingdom of the Blessed Redeemer, during which he compiled and published a Dictionary of the Chinese Language, founded the Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca and for several years labored alone on a Chinese version of the Holy Scriptures, which he was spared to see completed and widely circulated among those for whom it was destined, he sweetly slept in Jesus. He was born at Morpeth in Northumberland, January 5, 1782; was sent to China by the London Missionary Society in 1807. Was for twenty-five years

translator in the employ of The East India Company, and died at Canton, August 1, 1834. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth, Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors and their works do follow them."

Reverend Bellamy had met the dying Morrison only once, just after his own arrival at Macao in the summer of 1834, but it was a meeting he would never forget. Morrison had gripped his hand feverishly; his dark eyes had blazed. "Bellamy," he'd said simply, "carry on!" At that moment, Archer Bellamy knew how Simon Peter must have felt when Christ had said to him, "Feed my sheep."

It had been raining, he remembered, a pelting drizzle that had drenched Morrison to the skin and no doubt contributed to his death, for he was already very ill. Leaning on the arm of his son John, he had boarded a sampan to go out to the cutter that would take him back upriver to Canton. With worshiping eyes, Bellamy had watched the tiny boat until it vanished from sight.

How could Archer Bellamy follow the footsteps of a titan like Morrison? He'd tried. Truly he'd tried. He'd plunged at once into learning Cantonese, looking ahead with eagerness to the time when he'd be carrying the Word into China. That time had not come. The Chinese, those pagan devils, kept their gates firmly closed against the light. It rankled Reverend Bellamy to no end to think that the Catholics, those cursed Papists, had smuggled a small number of their priests into the country, where they were quietly spreading their poisonous doctrine.

As for Macao's Chinese, they were so recalcitrant, so steeped in their wickedness, that the good Reverend had abandoned them to eternal damnation and turned his energies, for the time being, to the spiritual needs of his little congregation of Western Protestants.

Although his Cantonese was at least passable by now, and good interpreters were in demand among the trading companies, he had not sold himself as others had. The German Reverend Karl Gutzlaff, who'd been in the Orient since 1827 and who had an astounding command of the coastal dialects, had delivered up his very soul to opium. Although Gutzlaff claimed that by passing out Christian tracts on one side of the boat while opium was going off the other side, he got more of the Word into China than anyone else did, Bellamy was adamant

that the end did not justify the means. Even Morrison's son John now worked for Jardine Matheson, the biggest opium-dealing company of them all, and it was said that he'd become very much a man of the world, not at all inclined toward his father's vocation.

Reverend Bellamy sighed and ran one long, thin finger along the still-crisp edge of the granite slab that covered Morrison's mortal remains. At least Morrison had not lived to see the loss of *his* son.

A week had passed since Morgan had drifted into Macao's harbor in the little dinghy, saved, by God's grace, from the pirate attack that had killed Blake Robards. Since then, the Reverend had seen little of his son. The young fool spent his time at the Robards villa, and it was plain to see that he was courting Robards's daughter, to no good end. Priscilla Robards was a fine girl, but as sole heiress to a fortune in the opium trade, she could only lead Morgan further down the road to hell.

Archer Bellamy felt an ache well up into his chest. His son! His only son, the fruit of his loins! And Morgan was going astray! A spasm of love and panic seized him so hard that he trembled. Impulsively, he fell to his knees on the grass beside Morrison's tomb. His lips moved wordlessly.

Suddenly, the Reverend became aware that he was not alone. Another presence had made itself known in the small cemetery, not so much by sound as by an aura of strangeness, a subtle fragrance that did not quite blend with the air.

He looked up and saw the Chinese hong merchant Cheng Lo striding down the sloping walkway that led into the lower part of the graveyard. For a Chinese, Cheng was unusually tall, and he moved with the hard-muscled grace of a snow leopard, the felt soles of his black velvet boots making no sound. The Reverend knew him well — at least as well as it was possible for an English Christian to know a Chinaman after a two-year acquaintance.

In spite of the cautious friendship that had grown between them, something about Cheng Lo disconcerted Reverend Bellamy. Most of the other Chinese he knew were coolies, humble fisherfolk or servants in Macao's European households. They behaved as one would expect poor heathens to conduct themselves before their betters — smiling, bowing, subservient and anxious to please . . . *Mista wantchee tea? My catchee, chop chop*. Cheng Lo, though he was exquisitely polite, had the air of a visiting lord about him. It was not that the fellow was arrogant; indeed, he was not. But he wore his breeding, intelligence and author-

ity like an invisible cloak, something that, in the good Reverend's eyes, a Chinese had no business doing.

The tall hong merchant's expression was apologetic. "Ah, but I have disturbed you," he murmured in Cantonese. "I should have had myself announced. Forgive me, my friend."

"Nothing to forgive. And no one to announce you." Archer Bellamy rose to his feet. "What can I do for you, Chengqua?"

"The 'qua," a corruption of the Cantonese word *kuan*, equivalent to "mister," was a suffix that the English added to the names of all eleven hong merchants, the only Chinese tradesmen who were permitted to deal with the foreign devils. Old Howqua, his real name unpronounceable to Western tongues, was the senior hong merchant, followed by Mowqua, Tingqua, Puankequa and the others. Cheng, the newest and, at forty, the youngest member of the Co-hong, had been at his post for only two years. His features were lean and firm, with fierce black eyes, lending truth to the story Bellamy had heard that the man's mother had been a Manchu concubine from the North. The front of his skull was shaved bare, the remaining hair braided from the crown to form a thick, glossy queue that hung to his waist in back. He was dressed in a dark brown robe of heavy silk, belted at the waist and cut short enough to show his black boots.

To Reverend Bellamy, the man exuded barbarism, paganism and pride — everything he had come to despise in China. Yet since that day two years ago when Chengqua had come to him for English lessons, a curious blend of friendship and respect had developed between them.

Cheng bowed slightly — but only slightly — from the waist as the Reverend approached him. "You are well?" he inquired formally in Cantonese.

"Quite well, thank you," Bellamy huffed, impatient for the customary greetings to be finished.

"And your family?"

"Also well. What is it, Chengqua?"

"I only came to inquire . . ." Cheng spoke very slowly, seemingly aware that the barbarian could not understand rapid speech, "and to bring you word that I have secured permission for one of your boats to travel up the coast and bring back the bodies of the American *taipan* and his companion."

"Oh. Excellent. I'll plan to send my son in the morning. With coolies to dig and two . . ." he groped for the word in Cantonese, "boxes." He felt an urge to shake the man's hand, then restrained himself, remembering that handshaking was a foreign custom to the Chinese.

"I have brought yet another small gift. A token of my sympathy for the young daughter of the *taipan*." Cheng's voice, though very deep, had a silken quality that concealed any emotion he might be feeling. Turning toward the gate of the cemetery, he clapped his hands sharply. A lackey clad in dark blue came in through the gate, a red brocade-covered container the size of a hatbox resting on his outstretched hands.

Bellamy took the proffered box, which was unexpectedly heavy. Under the scented brocade, he could feel the hardness of wood.

"It is good," said Cheng, "for a man's body to be buried whole. If a part is missing, his spirit will not rest. Do you not agree?"

The Reverend's eyes bulged. His hands began to quiver. Resting the box on a nearby headstone, he fumbled with the red silken cord that held the lid in place.

Cheng stepped forward and put a restraining hand on his arm. "Do not trouble yourself, my friend. I assure you that the box contains what you think it contains: the head of the *taipan*."

Bellamy's face froze. His gaping mouth formed the word "'ow?"

Cheng remained calm. "The pirates were caught and punished two days ago."

"Your justice is swift." Bellamy pulled his fingers away from the box, leaving it atop the stone.

"Their deaths will not be."

The Reverend shuddered. He knew the fate of pirates: the cage — a bamboo structure enclosing the body from the neck down. The condemned man would be made to stand inside on a pile of stones. Each day, one stone would be taken away until the poor wretch, suspended from the top of the cage by his neck, either starved or strangled.

But Robards's head! By all that was holy — !

"You will see that the box is properly given to his daughter?" Cheng was asking him.

Bellamy caught his breath. "She doesn't know — ! About 'is 'ead, I mean . . ."

"Ah . . ." Cheng sighed his understanding. "Then, my friend, if I may, I suggest that you place this box inside the coffin when she is not present — then all will be well."

Reverend Bellamy choked and nodded. As he looked past the Chinaman, he saw three familiar figures approaching the gate: Morgan, Priscilla and Kathleen.

Three

Kathleen came dancing down the walkway ahead of the others, a determined smile on her face. The sight of Cheng Lo flooded her heart with relief. Perhaps, in the presence of his Chinese friend, her father would not be so harsh with her. She had dreaded facing him alone.

"Father! Chengqua!" She twirled over to a convenient headstone and came to rest like a butterfly, laughing and out of breath. The skin of her yellow dimity billowed out from her miniscule waist, and she had pinned the white hibiscus blossom behind one ear.

"Kathleen." Cheng nodded his greeting. He spoke her name meticulously, placing even accents on the first and last syllables.

"Stand up, Kathleen." Her father frowned. "How many times have I told you not to sit on the graves?"

Kathleen, only a trifle subdued, sprang to her feet again. "Father, Pris and Morgan have the most wonderful news!" She waited, eyes twinkling impishly, knowing full well that the news would not be wonderful to Reverend Bellamy. Well, the devil with him! She was elated, and nothing was going to dampen her spirits!

Priscilla and Morgan came down the walk more slowly, arm in arm. Kathleen studied her father's face, watched his brows come together like two stormclouds closing in on a patch of sky.

Pris, in mourning for her father, was all in black. A black satin bonnet with a veil that cascaded down her back, a black bombazine gown, simply cut, black lace mitts on her little hands and a black silk fan, which she fluttered nervously. She was glowing like a pearl.

Morgan's fair coloring contrasted strikingly with her exquisite darkness. He was dressed casually, in buff-colored breeches and jacket, the white silk cravat that Priscilla had given him knotted at his

throat. Kathleen filled her eyes with them. How beautiful they were together. Her dearest, only brother and her best friend!

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chengqua swiftly take up a brocade-covered box and slip it out of sight behind a headstone.

Morgan, his Adam's apple rippling, licked his lips as he and Priscilla approached the Reverend. Priscilla only beamed.

"Father." Morgan cleared his throat. "I — Priscilla and I — " He took a deep breath. His brow had broken out in droplets of sweat.

Oh, damn him, thought Kathleen, her impatience getting the best of her. "They're going to be married!" she blurted out. "Next week!"

There was a flicker of relief in the glare Morgan gave his sister. "That's right, Father," he said stiffly. "And we'd like your blessing."

Reverend Bellamy seemed to grow taller by inches. His ruddy face deepened in hue, but his voice was controlled.

"So, it's my blessing you'll be wanting? Wouldn't you say it's a bit sudden, Morgan? And with 'er father only dead a week?"

Priscilla stepped forward and laid a small hand on the Reverend's arm. "Please understand, Reverend Bellamy." She spoke softly, sweetly. "If I weren't alone — but — I *need* Morgan. I've — I have no one now. I can't run my father's company — " Her voice wavered, then broke. She took a quick little breath and smiled up at the Reverend again. "And we love each other, Morgan and I. Surely you can see that." Her fingers tightened against his sleeve. "We'd like you to marry us. Please say you will."

"Next week, you say." Reverend Bellamy stepped back from them, his eyes narrowed, as if he were looking down the barrel of a musket. "And 'ave you sinned together? Is that the reason for the 'urry? Is it lust? Is it fear of the wrath of God?"

"Father!" Kathleen had flung herself between them, her arms around Pris and Morgan. "You know better than that! You know they wouldn't! How — how can you ask — ?"

In the face of his daughter's intensity, the Reverend backed down. "Ye'll be buryin' your father proper first, Priscilla. Chengqua's just brought word. Morgan's to go upriver for the bodies tomorrow. A funeral and a wedding in the same week — 'tisin't right."

Priscilla had not heard his last remark, for she had turned at once to Cheng, who had been standing, somewhat uncomfortably, in the background. "Thank you," she whispered in Cantonese, gripping

his hands. "Thank you, Chengqua! You don't know how much it means . . . "

"If it serves to comfort you," Cheng murmured.

"There's no other way, Father." Morgan had found his voice arid taken up the battle. "Red Eagle Line's got to be managed. It's got to be taken under control at once. If not by Pris, then by her husband. Why, there's a clipper due within a fortnight! We'll have to get it up to Lintin for unloading — "

"Lintin!" the Reverend breathed. "That devil's rock!" He turned his back on his children and walked down to Morrison's grave again. "Very well!" He spun and faced them. "You want my blessing? You want me to marry the two of you? Well, you'll be 'avin your way on one condition, and one condition only!"

Priscilla, her face flushed with excitement, moved to Morgan's side again. His arm went around her shoulder and pulled her close. Kathleen stood beside them. Expectantly, they waited.

Reverend Bellamy's voice rose from his throat like the first ominous breath of a typhoon. "Opium?" he hissed. One hand reached into the pocket of his black frockcoat and drew out a small Bible. "Swear on this, both of you, that you'll get the Red Eagle Line out of the opium trade! Get it out at once! Swear, on this 'oly Book, and I'll marry you today if you wish!"

Priscilla's eyes met Morgan's. She squeezed his arm. "It's you who must decide, Morgan," she whispered.

Morgan hesitated only a moment. Only long enough to square his shoulders and take a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Father, but it can't be done," he said.

The Reverend thrust the Bible back into his pocket and turned away to hide his disgust.

"We can't just stop, Father," Morgan argued. "We've thousands — hundreds of thousands of dollars in contracts . . . The clippers are on their way to the Red Sea. The last of them won't be back until May — it's impossible!"

"Sell out to Jardine Matheson, or to Dent. They'd buy it all, the devils!"

"True." Morgan's arm tightened about Priscilla's shoulder. "But that would mean the end of Red Eagle Line. Our legitimate trade barely brings in enough to maintain the ships and pay the crews. We'd go bankrupt in a year without opium!"

The Reverend's face flushed deeper. He drew himself up and faced Morgan squarely. "I'll be givin' you one last warning, Morgan. Any man who sells opium is in the employ of Satan! And if you choose 'im as your master, then you're no son of mine!" He fixed his gaze on Priscilla. "And you — daughter of a black-hearted, opium-selling scoundrel — you'll not be welcome under my roof either!"

Priscilla paled and moved closer to Morgan, seeming to draw strength from his nearness. "Reverend Bellamy," she whispered, "I forgive you for this. Even for what you just said about my father. But Morgan and I intend to be married, with your blessing or without it. Our door will always be open to you — "

Morgan silenced her with a fingertip against her lips. "Save your words, Prissy, darlin'. He's not listening. Let's go."

Kathleen hesitated. Then, as Pris and her brother turned to go back up the walk, she decided to follow them.

"Not you, miss!" her father snapped. "You've still to answer for sneaking out of services! Onto that bench!" He pointed with the length of his arm. "You're not to be getting up until I've done with you!" He jerked his turnip watch out of his vest pocket. "Aye, but I've got an appointment to arrange a christening and it's past time. They'll probably be waiting for me in the chapel!" He strode up the slanted walk, overtaking and passing Morgan and Priscilla without giving them so much as a glance. At the gate, he paused, turned and glared back at Kathleen, who had plopped down on the bench, her full skirt spread around her and her blue-green eyes shooting sparks of resentment. "Remember!" he thundered. "Not a move out of you till I get back, Kathleen!"

Kathleen sat with her slender ankles crossed and her hands clenched in her lap until her father, Morgan and Pris had gone. There was no one else remaining except Chengqua and his lackey. Poor Chengqua, she thought. Having to stand and watch a quarrel that was none of his doing when he'd only come out of kindness. Now he walked toward her, the felt soles of his boots brushing the grass as softly as the paws of a cat. Kathleen remembered her first sight of him, two years ago, when he had come to their house in a brocade-curtained sedan chair: a new member of the Co-hong, humbling himself to take instructions in the barbarian tongue. It was as if he'd stepped straight from the pages of Marco Polo!

She had been totally awed by him in the beginning. He was so splendidly alien, with his shaved head, his glistening queue, and the inch-long nails on his fourth and fifth fingers — a sign that he was of a noble house and not required to do manual labor.

He had come to their home through the summer season of 1837, while the Canton trade was closed. For two hours at a time, every day except Sundays, he had sat in their worn parlor chairs and struggled with the new sounds and the intricacies of English verbs. Kathleen's attitude toward him had shifted from awe to admiration when she realized that he insisted on learning English as it was properly spoken, not the crude pidgin that was used by virtually every Chinese who did business with the foreigners. She found herself drawn to the parlor when he was there, to sew, to dust or just to listen.

At first he had seemed a trifle startled by her presence and that of her mother, and Kathleen remembered that the women of a Chinese household kept well out of the sight of male visitors. He had soon come to accept them, however, and with the passing of time she had discovered that those fierce Manchu eyes could sparkle with humor; that imperious mouth could smile, even laugh; and Chengqua had a mind that grasped at new thoughts and ideas with an eagerness that was almost childlike.

His going, at the start of the new trade season, had left an unexpected void. The following summer he had been too occupied with his affairs in Canton to return, and since then they had seen him only on rare occasions.

Now she smiled at him, admiring the simple richness of his dark brown silk robe, the square design across his chest, a graceful mandarin duck, embroidered in gold and amber silk thread.

His bow was little more than a brief inclining of the head. "If you will excuse me, please, Kathleen . . ." Cheng spoke English meticulously but haltingly, with an Oriental, slightly singsong lilt to his words. One summer of lessons had been too short a time to master the language.

"Must you go so soon, Chengqua?" She answered him in Cantonese, knowing that she was more at ease in his tongue than he was in hers.

"With your father so angry — yes, I think it's best." He switched to his native language with a note of relief in his voice. "It is not my place

to lecture you, Kathleen, but your father would be a happier man if he had a more obedient daughter."

"My father is terrible, Chengqua! He treats me like a prisoner!"

He sat down at the other end of the bench. "Quite the contrary," he said. "If your father were Chinese, you would not be allowed to show your face outside his gate, let alone go roaming about the streets. You would not be sitting where you are right now, talking face-to-face with a man who is not of your household or even your race. And for such willfulness as yours, a Chinese father would be within his lawful right to have you put to death. Now how would you like that?"

Kathleen cushioned the shock of his words with a toss of her hair. "You said it wasn't your place to lecture me!"

He glared at her for an instant, then dissolved the tension between them with a chuckle of exasperation. "Forgive me, Kathleen! The temptation was too great. You remind me of . . . a wild colt, not even broken to the halter rope! I tremble for your father, and even more for your future husband! You're truly a formidable creature!"

She gave him her most radiant smile. "Formidable? Not really, Chengqua. When I've met my match, I'll know it!"

"But in the meantime, your poor unhappy father — " Cheng shook his head. His face assumed an expression of mock severity. "He should have raised you on the teachings of Confucius, who declared that the greatest of all virtues is filial piety!"

"Ah — you're lecturing me again!" Kathleen wagged a finger at him. She sometimes wondered what he thought of her and her barbarian impudence. It was almost as if he viewed it the way one would look at the antics of a puppy, with amused tolerance. She remembered the tiny girl and the three women who had chased her. "And what did your Confucius have to say about the binding of little feet? Is that how you keep your women under control? By crippling them?"

Her question had thrown him off-guard. He fell silent for a moment, his face suddenly pensive, his fingers bunching and smoothing the silk of his robe. "On the subject of footbinding, Confucius said nothing," he answered slowly. "It is quite possible that the custom was not practiced in his time."

"Then how did it begin?"

"Some long-ago empress, I think, a woman vain about her small feet. She bound them to make them smaller, and others copied her. A foolish idea, but now it is custom . . ."

Kathleen met the gaze of his narrow dark eyes. "Today I saw a child, a little girl, who broke my heart," she said. Chengqua had a wife in Canton, she knew, and six living children. His two elder sons had already made him a grandfather. "Chengqua, did you bind the feet of your daughters? Did you listen to them cry?"

"Their mother attended to that — with my approval."

"How could you? How could you bear to hurt them so?"

He stood up, an expression in his eyes that she could not read. Was he annoyed with her, or had her question probed into some painful old wound? "I knew that one day they would be old enough to marry, Kathleen," he answered in a voice that was strangely hushed. "And I knew that if their feet were left unbound, no good family would accept them as wives for their sons! For that reason, and that reason only, I endured the sound of their screaming!"

The graveyard was filled with the silence that his words had left behind. "But it's barbaric," Kathleen whispered at last, "that anyone could think of those stumpy, twisted little feet as beautiful . . ."

"Perhaps." His eyes glinted sardonically. "But it is done. And how can you point your finger so? Look at you, you squeeze in your middle so tightly that your body looks like a wasp's — and you can't tell me it's not painful. You bear it because you think the result is beautiful. Are your ways any less barbaric than ours?"

Kathleen flushed. "I do it of my own will!"

"As our women do. Even the small ones. They cry — but they submit, and they do not try to take the bandages off their feet. They know . . ."

His voice trailed off as his eyes met hers. What a cruel mistress Dame Fashion was! How foolish that a woman would submit herself and her daughters to pain and mutilation for the sake of what was thought to be beauty. And he was right. One culture was as guilty as another. Pain for vanity. Vanity for pain. She saw it all in his eyes as, for an instant, their two minds blended and held.

Then he looked down at his hands, discomfited, perhaps, by the intensity of that moment. "I must go, Kathleen."

"Yes . . . if you must. My father will be coming back soon," she said softly, shaken by the power of what had passed so briefly between them.

Cheng bowed once more, slowly this time. The afternoon sun turned his queue to polished ebony. He smelled faintly of sandalwood. Kathleen inhaled deeply, for it was a fragrance she loved.

“Until another time, Kathleen.”

“Yes.” She flashed him a smile to let him know that she wasn’t angry, then followed him with her eyes as he strode vigorously up the walk, the lackey following a few discreet paces behind.

Alone, Kathleen shifted her buttocks against the hardness of the bench and huffed with impatience. She knew from past experience that her father would not hurry back. The waiting was part of the punishment — the wondering whether he would choose to confine her to the house for a week, force her to copy one of the books of the Bible in long-hand — Numbers and Deuteronomy were his favorites, because they were long and dull — or merely lecture her until she writhed with humiliation. The Reverend had not beaten her since she was fourteen — her mother had put a stop to that, telling him that she was a woman now — but Kathleen would have chosen a good switching over some of the punishments her father contrived for her disobedience.

She sighed and put her chin in her hands. Chengqua was right. Her disobedience *did* make her father unhappy and cross. But Chengqua did not know how many years of her life she had spent trying to please him. As a little girl, she had worshiped her father. He was so tall, so strong and, she’d assured herself, almost as good as God himself must be. The fact that she was so much like him had been a source of secret pride for years. She’d always been tall and slender for a girl, and her father’s hair, before it turned silver, had been the same exact fiery shade as her own. She had his strength of will and his long, blunt-tipped fingers. She was so much his daughter — and yet he had always seemed displeased with her. In spite of her best intentions, she was always being scolded, punished and rejected by him. As the years went by, she had stopped trying to make him love her.

Despite the coolness of February, the sun danced in the graveyard, flickering down through the banyan leaves onto the grass and warming the granite tombstones. Her mother would be waiting dinner, Kathleen thought. Rose Bellamy was always waiting for something or waiting on someone. A saint, people said of her. A drudge, Kathleen thought. A slave. A martyr. A doormat who polished the shoes that walked on her!

I could go back to England, Kathleen said to herself. No — to Spain! I could wear a black mantilla and live in a castle, and eat — oh, snails! Like the French do! And drink red wine and dance on the tabletops in a ruffled skirt — and wear a necklace with a little gold cross on it!

She thought of the necklace again. She'd seen one on a Portuguese girl and had been enchanted by it. Maybe she'd convert to Catholicism just to rankle her father. She could never support the Pope, she knew, but how she loved the old churches with their soaring domes, their gilded altars, their beautiful statues. How she drank in the smell of incense and the sight of rich red velvet robes whenever a procession passed her in the street. How delicious it would be, she thought, to steal up to the carved confessional and whisper small atrocities in the ear of the hidden priest — "Father, I blasphemed yesterday on the steps of the church . . . During the prayer, I was thinking of yellow roses embroidered on black silk . . . and, Father, I let the Portuguese governor's nephew kiss me twice behind a rock in the Camoens Grotto!"

Kathleen laughed out loud and watched a yellow butterfly drift over the graves. It hovered in midair for an instant, then swooped low, to vanish behind a nearby tombstone.

She remembered then the brocaded box that Chengqua had slipped out of sight when she had come into the cemetery with Pris and Morgan. He had not taken it with him when he'd left, she was sure, and neither had the lackey. It could very well be right where he'd left it!

Such a pretty box it had been! Her fingers itched with curiosity. She glanced up and down to make sure her father wasn't watching. Then she got up from the bench and flitted over to the spot where she had seen Chengqua put the box. It was still there.

She lifted it with both hands, surprised at its weight. She'd expected it to contain something light — flowers of silk, perhaps. Curiosity gnawed harder now. Cradling the box next to her body, she carried it back to the bench and sat down with it in her lap. The brocade was heavily scented. She recognized the fragrance. Sandalwood. It made her think of Chengqua. What a strange being he was. So wild, so alien and yet so unlike any other Chinese she had ever known.

The box was cylindrical in form, its tight-fitting lid fastened on either side by a silken cord wound and knotted around two brocade-covered buttons. Kathleen hummed as her nimble fingers plucked at

the first knot, pulled it undone and unwound the figure-eight pattern of the loops around the buttons. When the lid would not lift, she began again on the second clasp, working the points of her nails under the stubborn threads. The loops fell away, the lid loosened. Jade, Kathleen guessed. One of those wonderful carvings that the Chinese valued so highly. Only why would Chengqua bring it here? Why would he leave it? Slowly, she raised the lid.

The thing inside was covered with a white cotton cloth. At first she did not notice the smell, because the bottom of the box was covered with a layer of crushed herbs and flower petals. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply of the scent, which was pungent and oddly sweet. Then she reached down into the box with both hands and lifted out the cotton-wrapped bundle, defining its contours with her fingertips as she placed it in her lap.

Then she knew what it was. The weight of it, the thrust where a jaw would be, the two lumps that would be ears. Kathleen's stomach clenched and unclenched like a doubled-up fist. Her chest tightened so sharply that she could not breathe for a moment.

A head! "God's blood!" she whispered aloud. But whose? And what would Chengqua be doing with it? Her heart had begun to hammer. Put it back! something screamed inside of her. Don't look anymore!

But her fingers were already pulling at the cotton wrapping. As a child, she'd had a morbid fascination with the story of Salome and John the Baptist. She'd dreamed of poor John's head, carried into the hall on a silver platter, and she'd never quite been able to decide whether his eyes would have been open or closed. Now, something was compelling her hands. She could not — would not — will herself to stop until she had peeled away the last folds of the wrapping and was gaping mesmerized at the blood-matted brown hair, the shriveling features and the sunken eyes of what had once been Blake Robards.

Her heart had almost ceased beating; her breathing had slowed to tiny gasps. Her eyes did not even flicker. They only stared and stared, expressionless as the dead eyes that stared back at her.

"Kathleen!" There were hands now, pulling the awful thing away from her, tossing the wrappings about it and thrusting it back into the box. Hands gently shaking her shoulders. And eyes, dark eyes, long, narrow and fierce as a tiger's, probing intently into her own.

"Kathleen?"

"Chengqua . . . " She blinked, moaning softly.

"I remembered and returned too late. Forgive me." His voice was harsh with concern.

She was trembling hard. Her stomach had begun to churn, forcing the taste of bile up into her mouth. She jerked herself up from the bench and stumbled to the drainage ditch that ran alongside the south wall of the graveyard. There she stopped and leaned her arms against the wall's cool stone. No, she told herself. She'd be damned if she was going to let herself be sick. Silently, Cheng watched her.

When her head had stopped spinning, Kathleen turned on him. "How could you? How could you — have it? How could you bring it here?" She stood with her legs braced wide, one hand pressed to the wall for balance, the other gesticulating in the air.

She had spoken in English, but he answered her quietly in Cantonese. "What would you have had me do with it, Kathleen? Bury it in Canton? Throw it into the sea? I brought it here to be buried with his body."

Kathleen hid her face in her hands. "I'm sorry, Chengqua," she whispered in Cantonese. "I — I didn't know. I didn't know how he died."

"One of the pirates was caught with it, Kathleen. The man was seeking a reward from his chief, perhaps, for the head of the *taipan*." Cheng shrugged. "He has his reward now, he and his companions."

Still trembling, Kathleen lowered her hands. Lord! If Pris had seen it! She shivered violently.

Her father was coming back down the walk.

Four

Cheng Lo leaned back against the tufted cushions of his sedan chair and drew the curtains to shut out the view of the crowded Macao streets. The shoes of his bearers slapped rhythmically along the cobblestones as they carried him toward the small residence he maintained in Macao, in addition to the spacious family home in Canton.

It was evening. Lanterns had been hung outside the little shops, and the families of the shopkeepers were supping on rice with slivers of pork or fish. They crouched in circles, surrounded by the goods of their trade, holding their rice bowls up near their chins and scooping the food into their mouths with chopsticks. Customers waited respectfully outside the shops until they had finished. The night was alive with the odors of cooking fish, onions and spices, with the low babble of Chinese voices punctuated by the occasional yap of a dog.

Cheng let his eyes rest on the glow of the lanterns through the thin silk curtains. He was weary, he realized. The gentle jouncing of the sedan chair was lulling him into drowsiness. That would not do, he told himself firmly, sitting up straight and opening one of the curtains. He had a long letter to the emperor to compose tonight, and he must not be half-asleep.

Old women sat on their stoops and smoked tobacco in long-stemmed pipes. Young men clustered on street corners, playing *fantan*, a game in which coins were placed under a bowl and wagers laid as to what the remainder would be when their total was divided by four. *Mah jong* tiles clicked in the dim recesses of doorways. Along the Street of Happiness, a painted girl on a balcony deftly threw a blossom

at the curtains of the sedan chair. Her aim was sure. Cheng picked up the flower, gave her a brief smile and murmured, "Another night perhaps." Tonight he had weightier matters on his mind and, in any case, he was not ready to go to a flower house. Not yet.

For a moment, he thought of his wife, Jung Fei, back in Canton. They had been betrothed as children and married when he was sixteen and she a year older. She had been a most dutiful wife and had honored him with three sons. He, in turn, had been a faithful husband, and even now that she was no longer young, he refused to sadden her heart by going to the flower houses.

He had believed that all was well between them, until one night during the last full moon he had come into her chamber and found her weeping in the bed, her face to the wall.

"For the passing of three moons my blood has not come," she whispered when he had sat down beside her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"So? Perhaps you have happiness in you again."

"I believed it so at first. But I feel no sickness. I feel no life inside me. Alas, my husband, I fear that I am only getting old."

"No!" he protested, genuinely surprised. "You are still young."

She had turned toward him then, her face streaked with tears. She had never been beautiful, but she was a good woman and his heart ached for her. "My mother was the same," she said softly. "After her fortieth year, she could have no more children."

He began to see that she was right. "You've given me seven children," he consoled her. "Fine children. Enough for any woman."

"Seven, yes. But one died and three were only girls. Girls count for nothing. A man like you should have many sons."

He knew then what she meant. Startled, he turned away from her and put his chin in his hands. She sat up and moved across the bed to his side. Her tiny feet, bound into "lotus buds," were encased in satin sleeping covers. "A small wife would bring happiness to our house," she said softly.

Why had he felt such a sudden rush of anger toward her? "Don't trouble me with it now!" he had snapped, rising to his feet. "I will decide when the time is right for a small wife in my house!"

He had left her wounded and weeping. Left her to pace his garden for hours, bewildered by his own emotions.

The crunch of the sedan chair against the cobblestones snapped his mind back to the task of the present: the letter to the emperor, which was to be on its way to Peking by special messenger before dawn.

He entered his house and sat in the garden on a high-backed rattan chair while the old man and woman who served him here brought warm, scented towels to wash his hands and face, and afterward a cup of clear, hot tea. He tasted it thoughtfully. It was green tea, more delicately flavored than the hardier black teas that the barbarians shipped home to be sold in England. He grimaced inwardly, recalling how so many barbarians drank their tea sticky-sweet with sugar and clouded by the milk of the cow. Everyone knew that the barbarians had no taste for fine things. They ate great, greasy hunks of meat, which they speared with knives; and they smelled worse than cattle because they did not wash their bodies. Worse, the young were not respectful of their elders. He had seen ample evidence of that in the Bellamy household.

Cheng shook his head as he remembered the girl, Kathleen. Poor, unhappy, rebellious creature! If only she'd obeyed her father today — he had left the two of them in the garden, the preacher still berating her for having left her seat. As if the shock of seeing the head of the *taipan* had not been punishment enough. Cheng leaned back in his seat. Kathleen. For all her strangeness, she had the most remarkable hair. Like amber silk, wondrously fine.

It was surprising, he reflected, that she would speak to him about footbinding; surprising that she would care about an unknown child of another race. Her concern had moved him, and he had answered her harshly to hide a sudden swell of bitter warmth. The words of her question had stirred up a fountain of memories . . . His own firstborn daughter, sobbing with the pain of her newly bandaged feet until his heart could hardly bear it . . . his own mother, a Manchu concubine in a Chinese household, ostracized, pecked at and ridiculed because her feet were unbound, like a common peasant woman's . . . Jung Fei, his wife, on their wedding night, proudly displaying the tininess of her slippers. It was an ancient practice, made honorable by time. A *fan kwei* girl who knew almost nothing of civilized ways had dared to call it cruel and barbaric. He had been most properly outraged. Then he had looked into her strange, sea-colored eyes and he had realized that she spoke with the untainted wisdom of a child . . .

The old woman came to beckon him to the dining chamber. He had taught her to prepare the dishes of northern China, which he had learned to like during the years he'd spent there as a student and scholar. Tonight he dined sparingly on wheat noodles and a rich soup of duck and Tien Tsin cabbage. Afterward, she brought him more scented towels for his hands and face, followed by a final cup of the same clear, fragrant tea.

In the small chamber adjoining his bedroom, his bath was waiting, perfumed with sandalwood as he liked it. It would soothe his body and rest his mind for the task ahead, his report to the Son of Heaven.

The old man tugged off Cheng's boots, helped him out of his robes and, when he stood lean, muscular and naked, assisted him into the huge ceramic pot where he sat tailor-fashion in the warm water.

"Master, I will stay and wash you," the old man offered.

"Leave me and wait outside," said Cheng, leaning back against the edge of the tub. "I will call you if I need you." He closed his eyes and his mind began to form the characters of the letter he would write, the report of the American *taipan's* death and the punishment of the pirates.

The warmth and fragrance of the water began to soothe him. He felt the tightness in his muscles begin to ease away. His thoughts drifted from his task for a moment, back to that day more than two years ago when he had knelt on the cold tiles of the imperial audience chamber of the Forbidden City in Peking and kowtowed before the Son of Heaven. Three times he had bent his body to the floor, and each time he had tapped his forehead three times against the tile. Three bows and nine taps. Only then had he dared to glance up at the figure seated on the dragon throne above him, the man whose personal name was so sacred that it was never spoken. Instead, as was the custom, he was called by the name of his reign period: Tao Kuang.

The air was rich with incense. Its smoky-sweet sharpness had bitten into Cheng's throat as he inhaled. It had swum before his eyes, forming a haze so heavy that through the dimness he could barely make out the emperor's features. He is only a man, Cheng had reminded himself as he tried to quiet his pounding heart. Only a man, this sixth emperor of the Ch'ing, the Manchu Dynasty, who exercised life and death power over more than three hundred million subjects. Not even a great leader like his imperial grandfather, Ch'ien Lung, nor a brilliant scholar like his great-great-grandfather, K'ang Hsi. Tao Kuang

was merely a competent man. A decent man. A troubled man. Yet, under the mandate of heaven, he was supreme ruler of the Celestial Empire. His very whim could command death. Traditionally, any man summoned to the Imperial Presence would say a final farewell to his wife and family before leaving home. Cheng was no exception to this rule. Yet his curiosity was stronger than his fear. He knew of nothing he had done that would anger the Son of Heaven.

Even in his yellow robes — yellow being the color that was reserved for the Imperial Dragon and his family — the emperor looked more like a prosperous merchant than the intermediary between heaven and earth. He was a trifle stout, with plump, expressive hands, a neatly trimmed beard and large, liquid eyes. His bejeweled fingers drummed restlessly on the arm of the throne.

After a brief silence, the Son of Heaven spoke. "You may kneel, Cheng Lo." His voice was surprisingly ordinary, with a thin, reedlike quality to it. Cheng sat erect with his eyes downcast as was proper in the Celestial Presence. The chamber was dim, for it was well past the hour of the cock, and since it was uncommon for the emperor to finish his audiences so late in the evening, the great hanging lanterns had not been lit.

The Dragon spoke again. "I have been studying the results of last year's imperial examinations. Your name was second in the kingdom, was it not?"

"Eighth, My Lord. Even so, well beyond my worth."

Out of the corner of his eye, Cheng saw a smile flicker across the emperor's face and he knew that Tao Kuang was pleased. More than three hundred scholars from all over the kingdom had sat for the examinations, sealed for three days into tiny brick cubicles, an ordeal so grueling that the man in the cell next to Cheng's had died of the strain. He remembered the cell, its floor tiles faintly spotted with brown blood where, perhaps, some scholar before him had pierced his flesh with needles to keep from falling asleep. For three days, he had hunched over the narrow desk, his fingers almost fused to the ink-brush as he penned seven-hundred-word essays in Confucian philosophy, poems in many styles, both ancient and contemporary, treatises on classic thought, always keeping the strokes of the characters clean and elegant. When his turn came, he had washed and dressed himself and was brought before the Masters where he had been made to quote

pages from the *Li Chi*, the *Ch'un Ch'iu* and other classic books, as well as the writings of Confucius and Mencius. Those few who passed were awarded the coveted degree of *chin shih*. From among the *chin shih* would come the future governors, viceroys and high ministers of the Celestial Empire.

Because of his standing in the examinations, Cheng had nurtured high hopes. With good fortune — good *JOSS*, as one would say — he was sure he would receive an appointment worthy of his merit. To his secret dismay and the open indignation of his wife, Jung Fei, he had been sent instead to the dirty little hamlet of P'inglu, near the foot of the Great Wall, and had served as magistrate there for the past year. It was only two days ago, without warning, that the imperial summons had come.

"You've done well in P'inglu." The emperor smoothed his embroidered sleeve with his right hand. His fingernails were long and pointed, but not so long that they required the gold nail shields worn by some wealthy Chinese.

"Alas, I've done poorly," Cheng replied with proper modesty. "A town like P'inglu governs itself."

"As I realize, Cheng Lo, the administration of P'inglu is no challenge to a man of your talents. But I had my reasons for placing you there. P'inglu is sufficiently obscure that no one of consequence goes there. Yet it is near enough to Peking that it was not difficult for me to have you watched."

Cheng's eyes shot upward, meeting the emperor's for a dangerous instant. Then, recovering his decorum, he lowered his gaze to the floor, his mind churning as he remembered the bribes he had refused, the problems and disputes he had resolved, some of them so complicated that they had almost seemed to be contrived against him. His heart began to race.

"My . . . sources found you to be without fault," the emperor continued in a low voice. "Intelligent, resourceful . . ." He paused to stifle a yawn. He had been receiving visitors since dawn and he was weary. "Evidently beyond the temptations that corrupt many an ordinary man."

Cheng had felt his face growing warm. "I am no better than the meanest of Your Majesty's servants," he protested. What did the emperor want of him?

The Son of Heaven paused to scratch the bridge of his nose with a pointed nail tip. His throne was flanked by two husky Manchu bodyguards, identical in size and appearance. They stood like men of stone, unmoving and silent, their tongues cut out to remove the temptation of repeating anything that passed their ears.

"You are from Canton, I believe," the emperor said.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Of a merchant family there, I understand."

"Yes, My Lord. But when I showed an inclination for learning as a boy, I was sent to Peking to become a scholar."

"And as such you have brought honor to the House of Cheng." The emperor cleared his throat. "Your father was Chinese?"

"Yes . . ."

"And your mother Manchu?"

"Yes, Lord. From Jehol. She was third lady in his household." Cheng thought of his tall, beautiful mother, long dead now. His father had bought her from her parents on a journey to the North, in a time of hunger.

"You are aware, I am sure, Cheng Lo, that your very existence is a violation of imperial law. Such unions between Manchu and Chinese have long been forbidden." The emperor's voice contained a note of parental sternness.

"Alas, My Lord, I cannot help my birth. My father was a determined man. He saw a woman he wanted and he found a way to have her," Cheng had spoken the truth. His father had purchased the young Manchu girl only to warm his bed for a few cold nights, but she had so captivated him that he had defied imperial edict and smuggled her back to his home in Canton. It was only after the deaths of both of them that the thing he had done became known outside the gates of his house.

Tao Kuang sighed. "Would that all my subjects were such! Half Manchu and half Chinese! Aieee! We Manchus have ruled China for two hundred years, and to the Chinese we are still foreigners! There are still those who would see us all dead and the Ming Dynasty restored to the Dragon Throne!"

Cheng kept his silence. He knew of the secret brotherhoods that were pledged to the overthrow of the Manchus, and he knew it was not seemly to mention them in the Celestial Presence.

"And now," the emperor continued in an agitated tone, "another evil has come to trouble us. Tell me, Cheng Lo, what do you know of the *fan kuei*?"

"The foreign devils? Very little, My Lord. I only remember the sight of their ships from the days of my childhood." Cheng searched his mind, trying to recall what he knew of the pale-eyed beings who inhabited the Canton Factories during the trading season. There were the English, the ones called *Hung Mao*, the red-bearded men; and there were Americans, *Hwa Ki*, the men of the flowery flag. The Portuguese were *Si Yang*, men of the western ocean. Even in the Imperial Presence, Cheng savored the memory for a moment. The foreign ships, rocking at anchor off Whampoa Island, towering and sleek of line, faster and more maneuverable than the swiftest Chinese war junks. Into their deep holds went bolts of Shantung silk, crates of rhubarb root, prized by the *fan kuei* as a tonic, and huge quantities of rich black bohea and congou teas.

In turn, the *fan kuei* brought goods of their own to trade. Bales of raw cotton from India, textiles from their own cities, spices, rattans, small trinkets and gadgets for which the Chinese had little use. In truth, the ships of the foreign devils carried only one thing that the Chinese were willing to buy in large quantities: opium.

The emperor's words echoed Cheng's thoughts. "As you know, Cheng Lo, I have issued an edict against the importation of opium. An edict which is ignored by my subjects." Tao Kuang slumped a trifle against the cushioned back of his throne. His eyes were shot with melancholy. "Our kingdom," he whispered, "has never known a more grievous plague than this thing that rots men's minds and turns their bodies to skin and bones! The armies — even my fine Manchu banner-men — at least one man in three is an opium user. The coolies — almost all of them smoke opium. They won't work without it! It makes paupers of rich men's sons, and turns scholars into imbeciles!"

"Yet opium has always been with us, My Lord," Cheng offered.

"As a medicine, of course, my good Cheng. To quiet the pain of wounds and sicknesses, to bring sleep to the sleepless — for this, opium has its worth under heaven. But we have grown only small fields of the white poppy. Now that the *fan kuei* bring it in from beyond the sea — " The emperor spread his hands and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "And our people aid them in this evil! Our own customs offi-

cials and magistrates let it pass the ports for their 'squeeze.' Our own merchants buy opium from the *fan kwei* and sell it to the people. China, the Middle Kingdom, is rotting, Cheng Lo! And the cause is opium."

Cheng waited, knowing that with patience he would come to learn what the Son of Heaven expected of him.

Overcome for the moment, the emperor clapped his hands. One servant, a balding eunuch, appeared with tea in an exquisite cup of carved jade. Another brought a fan to cool him as he sipped. Cheng remained where he was, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"Alas," the Son of Heaven sighed when the servants had left. "I could exercise better judgment in the fight against this curse of opium if my own eyes could see what was happening. But Canton is far away from Peking." Here, the emperor sighed again and folded his hands over the slight roundness of his belly. "I have read the reports of my governors and customs officials. They think their emperor is such a fool that they can falsify the information they send to me in order to protect and glorify themselves! Many of them — many, alas, are involved in the trade, and it saddens my heart to think of it."

The Imperial Dragon leaned forward on the cushioned seat. "It is new eyes I need, Cheng Lo. New ears. A man who knows Canton and speaks the southern tongue, but a man who is not entangled in the web of schemes and intrigues that lie there. A man with the intelligence to see behind the facades of men and the integrity to write only what is true. A man who will not favor Chinese over Manchu or Manchu over Chinese — because the blood of both flows in his veins!"

Cheng drew a long breath. So it was a spy the emperor wanted. Not a scholar, not a mandarin. A spy.

"Ah, your face is a mirror, Cheng Lo." The Celestial Presence smiled. "In time you will learn to mask your feelings. You think — but no. Put your mind at rest. I could pay any common thief to give me names, to carry tales. You are merely to observe, to remember all that you see and to write me a truthful report. The truth. That is all I will require of you. You will bare no man's neck to the sword." The emperor sat up straight and put his hands on his knees. "Most particularly I wish you to inform me as to the nature of these barbarians. Learn their language, their customs . . . Visit their homes and businesses. Become their friend that you may write me a true report." His tone was brusque, businesslike.

"You are to prepare at once for departure to Canton with all your household. I have already sent word to the *hai kwan pu* in charge of customs there that you have purchased for yourself a position as a hong merchant and that the House of Cheng is heretofore a member of the Co-hong, entitled to trade with the foreign devils."

Because he knew it was expected, Cheng kowtowed to show his gratitude. Inwardly, he still reeled with surprise.

The emperor frowned. "Remember, no one is to know of your true office. No one. Not even your family. Your reports to me are to be sent in secret. A way will be provided."

"A question, My Lord."

"Ask it."

"Who besides Your Majesty is to know the truth about what I am doing in Canton?"

"No one — no one save these two stout souls who guard the throne, and they will not speak of it. Yours will be a lonely task, Cheng Lo."

"I am your servant in all things." Cheng kowtowed once more, in anticipation of his dismissal. As he did so, he raised his eyes for an instant and felt his muscles harden with sudden wariness.

Behind the pierced scrollwork of the gold screen that stood in back of the throne, his eyes had detected a flicker of movement.

Cheng had never found out who was listening behind the gold screen. Merely a servant, perhaps, or a concubine, but the memory of that furtive movement had shadowed him, had made him cautious. He had learned to trust no man, to confide in no woman. Even Jung Fei lived in contented ignorance, happy as the wife of a prosperous hong merchant. He had even ingratiated himself with the *fan kuei*, and there were many among them who called him friend. But the Son of Heaven had spoken truly. Cheng's was a lonely task.

Often he found himself thinking of his student days in Peking, the sharpness of the air, the pleasing starkness of landscape that he missed in muggy Canton, where everything seemed to grow too abundantly, where the streets were too narrow and crowded, the people too talkative, the food too lavish.

Fondly, he remembered visits to the farm of his maternal grandparents near Jehol. It was a most unusual thing for the son of a concubine to know his mother's family, but Cheng's mother had spoken often of them, without bitterness, for they had sold her most sorrowfully in a

time of great need. Overcome by loneliness as a young student in Peking, he had journeyed north to Jehol and made inquiries until he found them. His grandmother and his grandfather, a tall, weather-toughened old Manchu who bred and trained horses for the imperial troops, had welcomed him with joy. The old man had taught his grandson to ride like a warrior, to shoot hares and gazelles with a carved bow, and to hunt wild birds with a falcon on his gauntleted wrist.

Cheng closed his eyes for a moment and recalled Jehol — the wind, the waving wheat and the sturdy Manchu ponies on which he had loved to gallop across the countryside.

One day, as a boy of fourteen, he had come to the farm to find a newly purchased yearling colt, wild, unbroken, its coat red as a fox's. With the confidence of youth, he had sprung onto its bare back, clenched its mane in his fingers and clung like a burr as the animal leaped and twisted under him. Suddenly, the horse had exploded into flight and made for the open fields, young Cheng gripping its flanks for his very life as it tore a swath through the wheat.

Gloriously frightened, he had hung onto the pony, its mane whipping his face like cool flame, the solid, silken muscles stretching and bunching between his legs, sending wild shivers of pleasure up through his thighs and into his groin. Faster and faster the animal had raced, with Cheng on its back, the wind singing in his ears, the musky aroma of the red mane intoxicating his nostrils. Faster and faster until something between his legs had burst with such ecstatic pain that he lost his grip on the horse and tumbled off into the sweet summer grass. There he lay, blinking, touching himself and suddenly laughing for joy because he knew that he had become a man.

Cheng, the man of forty years, smiled at the memory and, looking down through the clearness of the water, was mildly surprised to find himself aroused.

Five

On February 23, 1839, the head and body of Blake Robards were laid to rest in the Protestant cemetery at Macao. Four days later, Priscilla Robards and Morgan Bellamy were married in the small, white, open-beamed chapel that adjoined the graveyard.

Although he had presided at the burial service, Archer Bellamy refused to attend his son's wedding. In his place, it was Reverend Karl Gutzlaff, fresh from a successful opium run up the coast to Amoy, who performed the ceremony that made Morgan and Pris man and wife.

Rose Bellamy sat on the front bench next to Mary Gutzlaff, the minister's English bride, and watched the little ritual through misting eyes. Rose was a beautiful woman, still young, for she had married at fifteen and borne her two children early. To Morgan she had given her pale golden hair and high cheekbones; to Kathleen the slender fullness of figure, the delicacy of fine-drawn features and warm apricot skin that made even strangers gasp at her beauty.

She was dressed in her one really good gown of pearl-gray silk. Archer considered bright colors unseemly, and so Rose did not wear them. As a rule, she obeyed her husband in all things, but she had drawn the line at absenting herself from the wedding of her only son.

Reverend Gutzlaff had missed his calling, she told herself, keeping her smile inside. He belonged in the theater, with his curled, waxed mustachios, his flowing cape, his love for the dramatic and his dazzling command of languages. His role as an opium-running preacher suited him well. Rose could not see him bound to a conventional chapel and congregation. Now, he was making a grand occasion of Pris and Morgan's modest wedding, his rich voice, made richer by its

German accent, intoning each word of the ceremony, stringing syllable upon sonorous syllable, like the pearls of a necklace.

Priscilla looked quietly radiant in a simple white gown that was not even new, for there had been no time to have her seamstress concoct a wedding dress. Her veil consisted of a length of the sheerest white silk, gathered and anchored to the crown of her head by a single pink rose from the greenhouse of old Thomas Beale. Kathleen, in her green and yellow Sunday best, stood beaming at Pris's shoulder, a cluster of yellow lotus blossoms in her hand, her splendid hair knotted primly at the back of her head.

Morgan's young friends were all in Canton, and so, after some deliberation, he had asked old George Chinnery, Macao's resident artist, to stand up with him. Chinnery, an ugly little Irishman with a bulbous nose and an unruly thatch of white hair, had been delighted.

Rose brushed a tear from her cheek, remembering her own wedding. She had been so young, even younger than Pris, and so bedazzled by the tall, flame-haired young minister whom she'd known only a few weeks. Archer had been handsome and gentle then, and little Rose had been thrilled at the prospect of spending her life with a man of God.

Within the passing of a few months, she had faced reality; she had married a man to whom any form of pleasure was sinful. Food was for sustenance only. Spices and sweets were forbidden. Clothes were for the decent covering of the body; adornment in any form was wicked; and any woman who wore bright colors, lace, ribbons or jewelry was a whore in her heart, for she sought the lustful eyes of men. Music — Rose still shivered at the memory of the day Archer had caught her playing a waltz on the parish organ. As for lovemaking — involuntarily, she closed her eyes for a moment. Archer considered it an animal act, to be performed only in the duty of begetting children. A year after Kathleen's birth, Rose had suffered a miscarriage so severe that it had nearly killed her, and she had not been able to conceive again. Archer, after a time, had abandoned his duty as a vain effort.

Her children — oh, thank God for her children! They had come into the world with their own identities, squalling, fighting, asserting their rights as individuals from the day of their births. Archer could not control them as he controlled her, for they were as strong in their ways as he was in his. Rose adored them. She lavished upon them all the

love that her straightlaced husband would not tolerate from her. Secretly, she indulged them, spoiled them. They were all that she dared not be!

Only once had she snapped her traces and broken loose from the domination of her husband — Oh, sweet God, how could she let herself think of that now? Her widowed mother had died in London and she'd gone up alone by coach, leaving Archer in Portsmouth with nine-year-old Kathleen and twelve-year-old Morgan.

With the funeral done and provisions made for the disposal of her mother's property, Rose had seen the last of her brothers and sisters to the train and made ready to return for one more night to her mother's lonely house on Kensington Street. It had begun to snow, and she shivered under her thin coat. As she waited for a hack, she thought of home. She missed the children, she even missed Archer, but the brief taste of freedom had been sweet. She had needed to get away.

The snow swirled down in clouds. The cabs were filled with people, their drivers passing up the woman in the thin coat in favor of wealthier-looking fares who would be more likely to tip them. Her voice was lost in the whistle of the wind; her teeth had begun to chatter.

"M'um?" The ruddy, young face had thrust out at her through the whirling snowflakes. "If you're so inclined, m'um, I'd be honored to have you share this cab with me. If not, take it if you please, and I'll catch another." A gloved hand reached out to her. She took it. Impropriety was preferable to freezing, she thought.

He was a Scot, very young, with curly brown hair and a sprinkling of freckles across a countenance so mild, so open and friendly, that Rose had found it impossible to be uneasy in his presence. "Dougal MacKenna, m'um, lieutenant in the twenty-sixth Cameronians," he had introduced himself, then added, "We're casting off tomorrow morning, bound for India."

It was a long ride to Kensington Street, and by the time the cab had arrived at the house, Rose had told the young lieutenant about herself and her family, and throwing caution to the wind, had invited him in for a cup of hot tea. He had been kind, she rationalized. It was cold out, and the empty house was so lonely, so dark. Besides, he was only a boy, no more than twenty or twenty-one.

For more than an hour, they had huddled by the little stove in the parlor, sipping tea with cream and sugar and nibbling on some lemon cookies a neighbor had brought in the day before. Rose had found herself warming to him, laughing as she had not laughed in years. They'd discovered that they both liked William Blake and Ben Jonson, both hated sprats, had both spent summers on the Cornish Coast as children and had been enchanted by the waves there.

"What a pity you're leaving tomorrow," she said, smiling as she sugared her tea. "Strange, but I shall miss you."

"Aye, and I'll miss you. You and all Britain." A shadow crossed his rawboned young face. He was tall and large of frame, with big hands that gripped the dainty teacup awkwardly. "India's a far place. I've never been away from home before. I just received my commission this fall." His hand trembled as he put the cup down, spilling tea into the saucer.

"Dougal," she whispered, leaning close to him. "Are you afraid?"

"Aye."

Moved by sudden impulse, she had reached out and taken his hand. At her touch, his strong fingers closed around her own, sending wild waves surging up her arm and down through her body. Her lips parted, but she could not speak. Slowly, his hand began to move, stroking her palm, caressing the hollows between her fingers until she wanted to weep from the sweetness of it.

Abruptly, he released her hand and stood up. "It's late, I'd best be going."

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll see you to the door . . ."

Too hastily, he whipped on his greatcoat and fumbled with the buttons. Rose watched him from her chair, an ache in her throat.

When he had pulled on his woolen gloves, she stood up and walked with him to the door. "Take care, Dougal," she said in a small, shaky voice.

He opened the door and a cloud of snow came whirling in on them. She caught her breath at the sudden chill. He turned, their eyes met and then his arms were crushing her close, his hands molding her against him until the buttons of his coat bit into her breasts. Even through the thickness of the wool and her own petticoats, she could feel the rising surge of his body. Without her willing it, she responded.

Her arms slid around his neck. Her lips sought his and found them. Such sweet, soft lips he had.

The blizzard flew in around them, catching them up in swirling gusts of wind and snow. With one hand, Dougal MacKenna reached out and closed the door.

Rose Bellamy, adulteress, opened her eyes and saw that her son was placing the ring on the small finger of his bride. Priscilla, her cheeks glowing pink, gazed up at him with adoring eyes. Her hand trembled as the slim gold band found its place. Ah, she loves him, Rose assured herself, the realization warming her. Priscilla would make Morgan a good wife. Rose knew her well. She was sweet-natured, patient, capable and generous. And there was nothing she would not do for Morgan. Anyone could see that. As for Morgan — Rose studied his profile. He was too calm today, she thought, too quiet. She worried about him. True, he was very unlike Archer; but Rose had observed that a man learns much of how he treats a woman from the way his father treats his mother. What had Morgan learned of love, of warmth and tenderness, from Archer Bellamy?

Dougal MacKenna had been gone when she'd awakened on that long-ago morning, the hollow in the bed where he had lain beside her cool and empty. For an hour, she had stared at the ceiling, shattered by the thing she had done.

At last she had come to a decision. She would return to Archer, return at once. She would tell him nothing, but she would spend the rest of her days atoning for her sin. She would dress as he wished her to dress, speak the words he put into her mouth and think the thoughts he put into her head. She would be the most decorous, the most submissive, the best of wives, and perhaps then, someday, heaven would forgive her.

Karl Gutzlaff was thundering out the last words of the little rite. “. . . I now pronounce you man and wife!” Morgan took Pris in his arms and gave her a rather formal kiss. Then they turned to the congregation, both of them smiling as the organ pealed out its music. Rose felt the tears running down her cheeks. “Oh, please,” she whispered, “please let him be good to her! Let them be happy!”

Out in the harbor, beyond the Praya Grande, the lanterns that hung from the prows of the junks glowed silver where they reflect-

ed on the black water. Farther out, near the Typa, where the harbor was deeper, the lights on two big schooner-rigged merchantmen twinkled like stars.

There was no moon, and the night was chilly, even for February. Morgan Bellamy stood on the wrought-iron balcony of the hundred-year-old Portuguese villa and smoked a square-cut Manila cheroot down to the butt. When the ash was within an inch of his lips, he took the cheroot, flipped it out into the darkness and watched the tiny dot of red until it disappeared.

Pris would be in bed by now, waiting for him and probably scared half to death. Well, by damn, he admitted, he was a little scared himself. After all, what did *he* know about this business of lovemaking? What did he know beyond the crude jokes that the clerks and sailors made of it over their grog during the long nights at the Factories? His father had taught him nothing; and as for his own experience, there was not much to be said. Last summer, he recalled, he'd walked Geneva Turner home from a party at the old East India House. Geneva was a pretty girl, blond and buxom, with an intriguing little mole on her chin, and he knew she liked him. She'd giggled and clung to his arm as they took the long way back to her house. When they passed through a small, darkened plaza, he'd swung her around, pinned her against the trunk of a tree and kissed her — kissed her and kissed her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth and his hands clutching wildly at her big, bovine breasts. She'd groaned and panted and swiveled her hips against him until he thought his trousers would split open. Somehow he'd got a hand up her skirt and was in the act of pulling down her silk pantalets when she broke away from him with a nervous titter and went running off up the street. She'd left him in such total agony that he could hardly walk, let alone run after her. After that, he'd sworn he wouldn't have her on a bet. He'd go to some Chinese whore first, by heaven.

As for that night on the flower boat in Canton, the memory was gone, blotted out by the drugged *samshu*. He couldn't even remember if there'd been a woman or not. For the life of him, he didn't even know whether he was virgin.

The night was so still that he could hear the soft splashing of the waves down on the water stairs. The breeze carried the whispered

blend of incense and oranges, of ginger and cloves and cabbage, of the lingering smoke from his burned-out cheroot.

Nervously, he kicked the toe of his boot against the wrought-iron edging of the balcony. Priscilla was not a flirt like Geneva Turner, that was for sure, though she was a good deal prettier. Why, he'd only kissed her three or four times himself, and then very softly. She was so delicate and timid, like a baby fawn, and he hadn't wanted to shock her. But, yes, he'd thought about having her in bed. What man wouldn't? He'd tossed and turned every night for the past two weeks. The anticipation of it had become a torment, and his body ached for want of relief. But now that the time had come, now that she was in there waiting for him — Lord! What he wouldn't give for a drink!

Resolutely, he turned and came in from the balcony. He saw that Pris was in bed, the eiderdown pulled up to her chin.

"Are you cold, sweet?" he asked, fastening the french windows.

"Freezing!" Her cheeks were high pink, whether from the cold or from the thought of what the night might bring, Morgan could not tell. She'd taken the pins out of her hair and let it flow loose down over her shoulders. He was glad she didn't plait it, the way his mother always had.

"Well, stay put and we'll soon fix that!" He forced a laugh. She only watched him with her huge dark eyes. He wished she would say something. He wished she would coax him or giggle seductively like the girls on the Street of Happiness — or even Geneva Turner — would.

Morgan blew out the lamp before he took off his clothes, leaving them in a circle on the rug. Then he got into bed. The muslin sheets were icy, except for a small island of warmth where her body lay. He moved into it, achingly aware of his own nakedness. He should have worn a nightshirt; he cursed himself as he felt her shrink away from him. He could always have taken it off later on. Now it was too late. He put out a hand and touched the curve of her hip. She was wearing a thin satin gown that clung to her skin like water. As he pulled her closer, he felt her trembling. One small, cold hand crept up his arm to rest on his bare shoulder.

The room was so dark that he could not even see the outline of her face. He leaned forward. His fumbling lips found her nose, her cheek and at last the flowerlike softness of her mouth. He kissed her gently,

not wanting to frighten her, and felt her arms moving up and around his neck. Through the thin satin, the two tiny hard points of her nipples thrust against his chest, their pressure sending daggers of heat shooting downward through his body. He felt the sudden surge of his blood. Aye, Morgan reassured himself, it would be all right. His readiness had come with almost embarrassing swiftness. But he felt strangely proud of himself for having achieved it so soon.

As he drew her closer, he heard her gasp softly, and he wondered if she knew what had happened to his body. Her hands, cool and quivering, clung to his shoulders. Morgan found himself wanting her to touch him, to stroke him, but her hands did not move, and she was trembling so.

"Morgan . . . " Her whisper almost startled him. "Morgan, my dearest . . . "

"Aye, Pris . . . what is it?"

"Morgan . . . " Her voice shook. "I want to — I have to tell you how very much I love you. I've always loved you, I think, right from that day you got off the boat with your family and I was only twelve. I even loved you then . . . " She pulled his head down to the soft fragrance of her shoulder. "Oh, Morgan, I'm so happy . . . and I love you so much . . . so very much . . . "

Her skin was warm and smelled of gardenias. Morgan kissed the hollow of her neck and let his lips nuzzle their way up to her ear. She sighed and turned her face so that he could find her mouth again. Through her soft lips, he felt the hardness of her small, perfect teeth. For all her willingness, she was tense and trembling. Morgan wondered how much she knew about physical love between a man and a woman. Maybe her *amah* had told her a few things. His arms slipped around behind her back. He ran his free hand up and down the slippery satin, feeling her shiver as his fingers rounded the curve of her firm little buttocks. Again he kissed her, with more force this time, parting her lips, drinking in the sweet taste and aroma of her. He felt her breathing quicken. Her arms tightened around his neck, and he took advantage of her response to slide the lacy hem of her nightgown up her thighs and move on top of her. She gasped. Aye, she knew now what happened with a man's body. If she had not known before, she knew now.

She would want him to be gentle, he reminded himself, to be loving and tender. But his body was ready for her, his desire urgent and compelling. For a few moments, he tried to lie quietly, kissing her gently, absently, but thinking only of that total touching — the smoothness, the warmth, the searching . . . then the moistness —

He could not contain himself any longer. He would have her, and he would have her now! She cried out at the first thrust, then clung to him, silent except for the jerk of her breathing, as he drove to the shuddering finish, exploded and lay still. It had taken almost no time at all, no more than a minute or two, he calculated as he lay with his head spinning and his weight pressing her into the mattress. Pris was sobbing. He wondered for a moment if he had hurt her, but at last she sighed and kissed the slope of his bare shoulder. "Morgan . . . I love you," she whispered.

Spent and incredibly drowsy, he eased himself away from her. He knew she wanted to hear the same words from him, but he could not bring himself to say them. Dammit, he cursed himself. He had everything he wanted. Priscilla was his. The Red Eagle Line was his. It had all been so easy — she'd fallen right into his lap, like a plum ripe for picking. He had wanted wealth. He had wanted power, and now they were his. But the simple truth was, he had married Pris to get them.

He had known that she loved him — and yet he had not known. Not until now. He had never asked for love. Pris loved him, and he was as incapable of receiving that love as an inkwell is incapable of holding the ocean! Poor little Pris, he thought. You deserve so much better than this . . .

He wanted to talk to her, to say something that would make her feel better, but the dark chains were already pulling him down. He felt himself sinking, and in the next moment he was sound asleep.

Down on the Praya, Kathleen stood alone, clutching a woolen shawl about her as the chilly breeze whipped her skirts. Her hair was loose, and her eyes gazed up at the villa as the bedroom light winked out.

"Ah, little Pris," she sighed aloud, and smiled sadly to herself. She and Priscilla were sisters now, closer than ever in a sense. Yet in another sense, they had grown worlds apart. Pris was a married woman

now, a woman knowing things that Kathleen, even though she was two years older, could only imagine.

Except for the lighted boats and a few silent, scurrying figures, the Praya was deserted. Kathleen turned and faced the sea, the northeast wind whipping her hair to one side. She thought of the men she knew. Her father — hard, stern — did he love her at all? Morgan — he was kind to her, generous and playful. She adored him. But he had a wife now, and a trading company to manage. Her days of closeness with him were over.

As for Joaquin, the governor's nephew, he was a plaything. A silly boy, to be dangled at arm's length until someone better came along. Kathleen was glad that his religion made marriage to him out of the question; It provided her with an escape, a measure of safety.

She kicked a stone down the water stairs and listened to the splash. Dammit, she was so lonely. She was so sick of Macao, the smallness of it, the dirt and the odors, the Chinese faces! She'd go back to England, she decided. Even if she had to scrub floors for a living! At least there might be a man in England, some man who would be loving and gentle and who would care for her!

"Sure, and you'll catch your death, Miss Kathleen!" The elfishly pitched voice came out of the darkness beside her. Kathleen was only a little startled. No one could mistake the Irish brogue of old George Chinnery.

"Hello." She smiled and held out her hand to him. He took it in his small, smooth fingers.

"And does your father know you're out here like this? Doesn't he care that you're not home safe?"

"He doesn't know," Kathleen whispered, her voice catching in her throat.

"Aaah!" His arm moved around her waist. He was no taller than the tip of Kathleen's ear. "See, when a man's threescore and five, he can hug the pretty girls to his heart's content and nobody raises an eyebrow!"

Kathleen kissed the top of his head where his white hairs came to a tuft, like a baby's. "I wish you were my father, George Chinnery," she said.

"Nay, girl! It's a free spirit I am! When I left a harridan of a wife and a mountain of debts behind me in India, I vowed never to entangle meself

again! But if I had a daughter, sure, I'd want her to be you!" He blinked at her over the little round spectacles that sat astride his huge nose.

"It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?" said Kathleen.

"Aye. Two thoroughbreds, your brother and young Pris. Mayhap you'll be next."

Kathleen shook her head. "There's no one here. Not for me."

"Ah, you'll feel differently when the trading season's over in Canton. There'll be young men aplenty here in Macao."

"I want to go back to England."

"You'll find no better there, child. I know. Macao's the most blessed place on earth. I'll die and be buried here."

"But you have everything you want."

"Aye. Me peace and me painting. And speaking of painting, me dear Miss Bellamy, when are you going to pose for me? Every time I see a fleck of sun on that red hair of yours, me fingers itch for the brush!"

Kathleen kicked another stone into the water. "Any time you say. I've not much to do, and with Pris married — "

"Tomorrow then. After breakfast. And bring that long green scarf if you'd like. Sets off your hair. Come along now, dear." He offered his arm and she took it. "I'll see you home."

The two of them turned off the Praya and made their way up a narrow street in the direction of the Bellamy residence.

As they disappeared from sight, Joaquin Luis Silveira stepped out of the shadows, cursing his timing, cursing his luck and cursing George Chinnery.

Six

Canton
March, 1839

Along the river by the Factories, the Canton waterfront teemed with life. The river crafts, little sampans, great ocean-going junks, painted pleasure boats, lavishly carved and decorated, and occasional cutters from the foreign ships anchored downriver at Whampoa, swarmed like water insects, so densely packed that it would have been possible to jump from one deck to another. Orange peels, eggshells, vegetable parings and discarded odds and ends danced on the swell and fall of the waves between the boats. Women washed clothes on the decks; neighbors gossiped and bickered; vendors hawked their wares from the sampans; strings of fish hung drying in the sun.

Morgan Bellamy had never seen Venice. If he had, and if he had been of a more scholarly mind, he would have compared the two cities, centers for maritime trade, gathering places for the ships and goods of the wide world, cities in which the waterways had an ambiance all their own, and Canton would not have come off unfavorably. It was, for its time, an enormous city, said to contain more than a million Chinese. The European Factories sat on its very lip, at the river's edge, separated from the city's towering thirty-foot walls by a motley spillover of huts, shops and warehouses that spanned a distance of two hundred yards.

No European, to Morgan's knowledge, had ever been within those huge walls. By Chinese law, the foreign devils were confined to the Factories, to their adjacent streets and to a broad square and garden that filled the space between the Factories and the river.

Morgan paced across the flagstones, his head down, his mind oblivious to the jostle of the beggars, the pimps and peep-show vendors and loiterers who frequented the square.

He should have known, he pummeled himself mentally. He should have read the signs, listened to the rumors, believed the pessimists. If he had, perhaps he would not have returned to Canton to find the sky falling around him.

The real trouble had begun about three months earlier, when the Chinese authorities had shown signs of cracking down on the opium traffic. No one at the Factories had taken them seriously at first — so many Chinese in high places were getting rich from their own cut of the opium trade — not even in December, when one small-time Chinese opium seller had been dragged to the square in front of the Factories to be publicly strangled. The assembled traders and their staffs had succeeded in driving the executioners away to put an end to their hapless prisoner someplace else, but the Chinese crowd that had gathered had broken out into a riot. The Europeans had fought their way back to the Factories and barricaded themselves in. For hours they had huddled inside, while the howling mob battered at the doors and threw bricks, stones and dirt clods at the windows. Finally, two Americans, Hunter and Nye, who worked for the big American firm of Russell & Company, had stolen across the rooftops and alerted old Howqua, the senior hong merchant. Whether it was through Howqua's intercession or through some other official action, no one knew, but the crowd had soon cleared the square and dispersed.

Opium trade had slowed to a near halt in January, and prices had begun to drop. Even so, the traders had been optimistic, especially Blake Robards. The slowdown in trade was merely a ripple. It would pass. By spring, opium would be moving as briskly as ever.

In early February, more Chinese soldiers had marched into the square, carrying a man, another known opium dealer, trussed up in a basket between two poles. Before anyone could stop them, they had slipped out a cord, wrapped it around the poor wretch's neck and strangled him.

The merchant community had grown tense, wary. But opium trade had flourished for years. With hundreds of thousands of users in China, it was not likely to stop. Again, Robards had led those who pre-

dicted higher prices and more sales than ever with the new spring crop. And Morgan had believed him.

On March 1, two days after Morgan's marriage to Priscilla, the *Peregrine*, the fastest clipper of Robards's Red Eagle Line, had dropped anchor off the Typa, its hold carrying six hundred chests of prime Turkish opium. Morgan had boarded her, broken the news of Robards's death and seen the ship to Lintin for unloading into the Red Eagle receiving hulk. Then, since she had also carried a consignment of raw cotton, he had taken her on up to Whampoa to be rid of her cargo and to be filled with chests of tea before the end of the trading season.

In the two weeks that had passed since Blake Robards's death, the situation in Canton had gone from bad to worse. Opium prices had plummeted from over a thousand dollars a chest to five hundred dollars for prime Patna and Benares opium, six hundred dollars for Malwa, which, though not as good, was more densely packed in the chests, and a pathetic three hundred fifty dollars for Turkish opium, which was hardly moving at all. And the prices were still going down.

Morgan thought of the two hundred chests stowed in the *Condor*, the receiving hulk of the Red Eagle Line, which was anchored at Lintin. He thought of the *Merlin*, the *Osprey* and the *Kestrel*, the three clippers that would already be sweeping down past Ceylon and Singapore with more Turkish opium. It was too late to call them back. He was going to be ruined. He laughed bitterly, nervously. He'd been married to Pris for less than a week, and already her fortune was slipping through his fingers!

Morosely, he gazed back at the Factories, the vast, two-story, colonnaded complexes that held a warren of offices and storerooms on their ground floors and living quarters for the merchants and their staffs upstairs. The flagpoles outside the American, English, Dutch and French sections stood bare against the sky. The flags had been struck in February, after the second strangling incident, and had not flown since.

"Bellamy!" It was lanky William Hunter, a merchant with the biggest American firm, Russell & Company, who had hailed him. He came across the square at a half-run, his coat rails flapping. Morgan stood still and waited for him.

"I've been looking for you!" Hunter exclaimed, breathing hard. He had a strong, pleasant face crowned by a high forehead and wavy hair

that blew loose in the wind. "Did you hear about John Green's announcement?"

"Not a thing." John Green was the *taipan* of Russell & Company. Morgan felt a heavy sense of foreboding.

"We're getting out of the opium trade!" Hunter's cheeks were red with excitement. "It's gotten too prickly for us, with the prices going down and with the Chinese fighting it! The other American houses have agreed to go along with us." Hunter took a deep breath. "All of them."

"And you're asking me to do the same, Mr. Hunter?" Morgan studied him coolly.

William Hunter moved back half a step. "No one can force you, of course. But it would make it easier on us all if the Americans could take a united position. There's going to be trouble with the Chinese, mark my words, Bellamy, and we'd rather not be a part of it."

Morgan looked down at his shoe. "I've six hundred chests of bloody Turkey at Lintin and more on the way. My father-in-law planned for a busy season when he sent his clippers off ahead of schedule. He wanted to have the first ship back with the new harvest. Look at me now. I've four damned shiploads of Turkey to dispose of, and no one to buy it!"

"Talk to Matheson. He wouldn't pay you much, but he'd take it off your hands. They're going to ride it out. So are Dent and Innes and the rest of the British."

"Aye." Morgan glared at the back of a nut-seller who had brushed against him. "Jardine Matheson can afford to ride it out. So can Dent. They're big enough. And Innes has no choice. Neither do I."

Hunter was waiting. Morgan could almost feel the tension in him from where he stood. Getting out of the opium trade was a big concession for Russell & Company, but they wouldn't be hurt greatly. They were large and diversified and had their fingers in other pies. As for the rest of the American dealers, they had trafficked in opium only a little. Some, like King, had refused to touch it. Only Blake Robards had thrown the bulk of his resources into the opium market. And without opium, Red Eagle Line would not survive. Morgan was certain of that.

Hunter drew in his breath. His brows were knotted. "We were hoping you'd be willing, Bellamy," he said. "We've talked about it

amongst ourselves. We're willing to give you a share of our legitimate trade till you're back on your feet if you'll join with us."

That would please my father, Morgan thought. But then, his relationship with his father was over and done with. The Reverend had made that clear enough when he'd refused to attend the wedding. Morgan would be damned if he'd get out of the opium trade just to please Archer Bellamy. The American merchants were a decent lot, though, and he disliked the idea of being the one to weaken their position.

He pondered his dilemma as a troop of ragged Chinese urchins tumbled past his legs in pursuit of a flock of pigeons. There *was* a solution. An insane possibility, true, but a solution nonetheless.

"How can I join with you, Mr. Hunter?" he asked slyly. "I'm not even an American. I'm a British citizen."

Hunter's long jaw dropped. "Dammit, Bellamy, your company's American! Your ships are flying American flags! By thunder, your wife's American! How can you — ?"

"My wife is my wife, and what's hers is mine. As for the flags, that can be changed." Now that he'd voiced the idea, Morgan was beginning to like it. Why, as an English merchant, he wouldn't have to settle for shipping Turkey opium. He could buy Patna, Benares and Malwa opium right out of Calcutta! God's blood, he should have thought of this sooner!

William Hunter drew his breath in and let it out slowly. "Well, it's your nose, Bellamy. But I don't envy you. It's going to be rough. That new plenipotentiary from Peking's due here any day now, and from what I've heard of him — "

"Oh, rot him!" snorted Morgan. "Look, Hunter. Governor Teng takes his 'squeeze' from the opium trade and closes his eyes! So does Viceroy Lu, and so does the Hoppo! Why should this new fellow be any different?"

Hunter took a cheroot out of his pocket, tapped it on his palm and lit it. "Don't wager on it, Bellamy," he said. "I was talking to old Howqua just this morning about him. Name's Lin — but they call him 'Blue Sky,' which means his reputation's as clear and untarnished as the heavens themselves! Used to be governor of Hunan and Hupeh, and he cleaned up the opium trade there. The emperor's counting on him to do the same here in Canton!"

"And he's arriving when, you say?"

"Any day now. You'd best wait before you cast your lot with your fellow Englishmen, Bellamy. You might regret it."

Morgan shook his head. "It's the only way for me, Hunter, if Matheson says it can be done. I've got to talk to him."

"Hell, man, your ships have American captains. American crews! They won't sit still for this!"

"They can work for me or go home. I'll hire others. Lascars if I have to, or even Chinese!"

"And you'll be having to move Red Eagle's offices out of the American Factory, you know that."

"I know." The wheels in Morgan's mind were clicking at full speed now. "There's an empty suite in the old Swedish building that would do. It's not big, but I won't need a lot of space, not at first."

Hunter rocked back on his heels, puffed his cheroot and gazed at Morgan Bellamy. "I'll be the son of a jackass!" he said softly. "You really intend to do it!"

"Aye, if I can, Hunter. And if I do, Red Eagle will need a new name. The old one's too — oh, too colonial, you might say."

"A new name, you say! Such as?" Hunter cocked an eyebrow.

"Bellamy! Just Bellamy! Or, maybe Bellamy and Company! What do you think of it?"

William Hunter swore under his breath, tossed his cheroot down and ground it into the flagstones with his boot. "Why, I'd say you were the most arrogant young son of a — " Hunter's breath exploded out between his teeth. "What would your father-in-law say to that?"

Morgan drew himself up to his full height of five feet eleven inches and glared up at Hunter, who was a hand's breadth taller. "Mr. Hunter," he said in a low voice, "I'd like to remind you that my father-in-law is dead! And I, sir, am not!"

Macao

March 1839

Kathleen was reading Marco Polo again. Archer Bellamy sighed as he studied her from his armchair. She was curled up on a corner of the settee, her high-laced shoes discarded on the rug and her bare feet tucked up under the skirt of the faded blue Nanking cotton she hated

so. Her hair, which had been pinned back into a neat bun at the beginning of the day, floated about her brow in loose wisps. Her face, yellowed by the lamplight, was a study in concentration.

Sometimes it disturbed him, this preoccupation of hers with China. It was all to the good, he assured himself, that his family prepare themselves for that great harvest of souls that was bound to take place as soon as the land was opened to missionary work, but Kathleen's interest did not lie in the area of China's potential conversion. She seemed fascinated by China as it was, by its heathen architecture and styles of dress, by its perverted customs and pagan philosophies. In Archer Bellamy's eyes, hers was an unhealthy fascination.

As he watched her, his heart contracted with an unexpected stab of feeling. For all Kathleen's womanly appearance, she was still such a child, stubborn, impulsive, vulnerable and so in need of guidance. He forced his attention back to the worn Bible in his lap, its pages open to the Book of Proverbs. His eyes wandered down the page . . . *My son (his mind substituted the word daughter), hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head and chains about thy neck . . .*

Kathleen was not what he would have wanted in a daughter had the choice been his. He saw her beauty as a curse, a red flag to arouse the lust of every young bull in sight. Archer Bellamy would have preferred her plain and demure, submissive, industrious and spiritual. Kathleen was none of those things. She contradicted and defied him at every turn. She was his rage and his despair. Yet she was his — flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. And in the depths of his heart . . . aye, he did love the girl.

"Marco Polo again?" He'd meant to speak softly, but his voice boomed out in the quiet of the room. Rose, in the rocker, glanced up from her mending. "And why not the 'oly Scriptures, Kathleen?" he asked.

Kathleen's eyes glittered defensively. "You've said yourself that we'd be going into China one day, Father. I'm only trying to be prepared."

"But Marco Polo? The man visited China more than five 'undred years ago. The Mongols were in power then. Do you really think that what you read there 'as any value in these times, with China under the Manchus?"

"Perhaps not, but it's all I have." There was a flicker of reproach in the look she gave him. There were more recent writings on China to be had. A Jesuit priest named Ricci had written extensive journals on China in the early seventeenth century, but the Reverend, passionately anti-Catholic, would not allow such Papist devilry in the house. Marco Polo, along with the reports of the traders who'd wintered at Canton or ventured up the coast and a few sketchy descriptions by the members of the McCartney and Amherst expeditions, would have to do.

"And you'd like to go into China, would you, girl?" he asked gently, trying to appease her a bit.

"Oh, yes! If we're ever allowed — " She clasped her hands on the open pages of the old book. Her blue-green eyes danced in the lamplight. "Listen to what it says about the palace — " She held the book up a little so that the light shone on the page. " ' . . . the roof is all colored with vermilion and yellow and green and blue and other hues, which are fixed with a varnish so fine and exquisite that they shine like crystal, and lend a resplendent luster to the palace as seen for a great way round . . . ' Can you imagine anything so beautiful, Father? Oh, what do you think China is really like?"

Archer Bellamy scratched his jutting chin. "Not like your Marco Polo saw it, I'll wager. No more like that than our England is like it was in the days of Richard the Lionhearted. 'Tis a black place, China is, steeped in the ways of the devil!" When he saw how her face fell, he was sorry he had spoken so harshly. "And 'ow do you see it, Kathleen?" he asked in a softer tone.

She leaned forward, casting her face into shadow. Her voice was almost a whisper. "When I think of China, I think of . . . of someone like Chengqua. Elegant . . . proud . . . strong, and so wonderfully strange . . . " She lowered her long lashes, suddenly afraid, perhaps, that she had revealed too much of herself. "When he comes here to our house . . . yes, I think that to know Chengqua, to really know him, would be to know a little of what China is like."

"'e's 'eathen! Like all China!" The Reverend raised one eyebrow. "And your learnin' would best be done from books!" He cleared his throat and pretended to immerse himself in the Bible again. Odd she would mention Chengqua, when he'd been half-thinking of the man himself only moments before.

A week had passed since Archer Bellamy had seen Cheng Lo, but he would not soon forget their last meeting. He had been walking up the Praya, on his way home from some business at the old East India House, when the tall hong merchant had hailed him from the water stairs. The Reverend had hurried to his side.

"You are well, my friend?" Cheng's greeting was a formality. The Chinese Archer Bellamy had known never could seem to get down to the business at hand without first inquiring after one's health — even when one's health was obviously good.

"Quite well, thank you, Chengqua." He saw the sampan waiting at the bottom of the stairs. The girl at the oar gave him a saucy grin. "You're leaving Macao?" he asked his Chinese friend.

Cheng nodded. "For Canton. I've been summoned back on most urgent business. A meeting with the new imperial high commissioner. It's fortunate you appeared just now. I passed by your house and no one was at home."

The Reverend's eyes traveled out over the cluttered harbor to the red-sailed junk that was anchored a few dozen yards offshore. "You were looking for me?"

"I was." Cheng's robe was dark blue, with a tunic-length overvest of richly quilted black silk. He was wearing a black silk cap, unusual for him. "I came as a friend to warn you," he said, glancing casually about to see if anyone was listening. "For the safety of your son, you must not let him return to Canton. Do whatever you can to keep him here."

Archer Bellamy's face had paled slightly as his heart congealed in a lump of dread. "My son's gone, Chengqua. He left last week for Canton . . . Can you tell me what the danger is?"

Cheng's eyes had narrowed in the brightness of the morning sunlight. He had unusual eyes, deep-set and very black, with thick, straight brows. "Perhaps it is nothing," he said at last. "I only thought it best to warn you. The *ch'in ch'ai*, the new high commissioner, will be arriving in Canton any day, if he has not arrived already. His reputation precedes him. He is known to be a hard man, and somewhat unpredictable . . ." Cheng stepped closer to the Reverend and lowered his voice, speaking this time in English.

"Your son's father-in-law was well known as a dealer in opium. But Morgan, if he has not yet taken part, there is yet hope that he may be spared the anger of the *ch'in ch'ai*."

"My son no longer listens to me!" Archer Bellamy spoke from a tight throat, tasting the bitter gall of futility. "I have implored him to get out of the opium trade. He has refused. Let the wrath of your *ch'in ch'ai* fall upon him as God's own punishment!" He had choked on the last words and turned away, unable to endure the pity in Cheng's eyes.

He had said nothing about the warning to Rose or to Kathleen. There was no use worrying them. And he'd heard nothing from Canton — nothing from Morgan and nothing from Cheng.

Rose glanced up from her mending again. "It's time you went up to bed, Kathleen. You're to help me make soap tomorrow, so you'll be needing your rest."

Kathleen moaned. "It's early. And I'm nearly finished with this chapter! God's blood, I'm nineteen years old, and you still send me to bed like a little girl!"

"That will do, Kathleen!" Archer Bellamy was on his feet. "There'll be no cursing from your lips, and you're to mind your mother without arguing! Now, off with you — before this book goes into the fire!" He snatched the worn volume from her hands.

"Oh!" she gasped. Her cheeks were warm with indignation, but she knew better than to fight him. With a little huff, she put her bare feet on the floor, picked up her shoes and stormed up the stairs to her room.

"You're too easy on Kathleen," he told Rose later, as he lay in bed and waited while she brushed and plaited her hair. "She's getting out of 'and!" The bed was cool. He pulled the tails of his long, flannel nightshirt down to cover his legs.

"She's a spirited girl, Archer." Rose's voice sounded weary. The brush moved mechanically through her wealth of golden hair, its motion long devoid of sensuousness. She laid the brush down on the uncluttered surface of the dresser and began to plait the right side of her hair with practiced fingers. "She's every whit as stubborn as Morgan, and she has — oh, a gaiety, an appetite for sights and sounds and colors that's all her own. Give her her head a bit, Archer. She'd be more docile if you did."

"Give 'er 'er 'ead! She's not a blinkin' 'orse! It's time she was married. An 'usband, a babe or two; aye, that would settle 'er."

"Yes." Rose's hands moved to the other side of her hair, her fingers swiftly braiding the gleaming strands into a thick golden rope, knotting a bit of brown string about the end to hold it. "And you think she

doesn't want to be married?" Rose stood up and brushed a loose hair from the sleeve of her high-necked white nightdress. She looked like an angel, he thought, not much older than she'd looked at fifteen when he'd made her his bride. An angel in pigtails, sweet and good, with the patience of a saint. His throat tightened as he watched her climb into bed beside him, felt the lumpy straw mattress sag a bit with her weight.

She lay down beside him, he on his side of the bed, Rose on her own. He had long since conquered Old Demon Lust — and since Rose could have no more children, lust was all his desire for her could be.

"Kathleen wants desperately to be married," Rose was saying. "This wildness of hers, this preoccupation with China . . . it's all just a substitute for what she really wants and needs."

"Aye," he said, only half-hearing her. He was thinking of his father, a great, bellowing bull of a man, unkempt and uneducated. Although Benjamin Bellamy had not been a cruel man, Archer had feared his size and his big, booming voice. He'd hated the smell of his sweat and the dirtiness of the smithy where he worked.

Their house had been small, with very thin walls, and sometimes, as a small child, Archer would lie awake at night and listen, half-sick, to the grunting, animal-like sounds that came from his parents' room. His mother had been a beautiful woman, and in the beginning Archer had felt sorry for her. Then, at last, the day had come when his pity had been laid to rest forever.

Rose sighed wearily. "Good night, Archer."

"Aye, good night," he breathed. For a brief moment, he experienced an urge to reach out and pull her to him, to taste her mouth and feel her sweet warmth. Then he thought of his father and the feeling passed. It always did. Lust was a powerful adversary, but with the help of God, Archer Bellamy had conquered it.

Cheng Lo sat in the meeting chamber of the Consou House, a building that lay opposite the foreign Factories and that served as a sort of guild hall for the hong merchants. From his place as junior member of the Co-hong, he looked across the semicircle of his fellow merchants at old Wu, the man the *fan kuei* called Howqua. A small, thin figure approaching venerable old age, Howqua was dressed in his best blue robe with its insignia of a long-tailed jay embroidered in

red on the chest. The jay, along with the silver button he wore on his blue silk cap, proclaimed him to be a mandarin of the ninth, or lowest grade — a rank the old man had achieved by purchase, but which no one begrudged him. His narrow mouth was drawn inward, and his eyes, which so often sparkled with wit and good nature, were dull and downcast. His spidery hands clenched and unclenched on the arm of his carved mahogany chair or tugged uneasily at his short, pointed beard.

The second merchant of the Co-hong, known to the barbarians as Mowqua, sat beside him, dressed in a lighter shade of blue. His fat cheeks quivered with each sigh; his lower lip trembled like a child's.

The other hong merchants were equally agitated as they awaited their first audience with the new *ch'in ch'ai*, the imperial high commissioner, who had just arrived in Canton. None of them had met Lin Tse-Hsu before, and none of them looked forward to the meeting. The *ch'in ch'ai*, they knew, would not be pleased with them.

Cheng glanced down at his own amber-colored robe of the finest silk brocade with a design of two mandarin ducks emblazoned across his chest. The duck insignia was likewise a badge of rank. Cheng had been awarded the seventh degree, third in ascendancy, during the year he had served as magistrate at P'inglu, and was thus also entitled to wear the plain gold button on his cap and a silver clasp on his robe, a thing with which he seldom bothered except on auspicious occasions like this. He was, he admitted to himself, as nervous as the rest. True, he had less reason to fear Commissioner Lin than the others did. He was in Canton on imperial orders himself. There was just one question that plagued and tormented him so grievously that he had not slept the night before. Would the new commissioner know about his own orders? Would he be expected to work with Lin Tse-hsu, or only to observe him as he did everyone else?

In the system of Chinese commerce, the hong merchants occupied a unique position. Since the Son of Heaven deemed it undesirable for his subjects to be contaminated by the foreign devils, the Co-hong served as intermediaries, as buffers between the barbarians and all China. In theory, the hong merchants were the only Chinese allowed to traffic with the *fan kwei*. In practice, of course, this was not possible. Each foreign trade house had its comprador, who acted as purchasing agent and who hired and supervised the household servants, dock

hands and boat crews that were recruited from among the Chinese. The raunchy little shops on Hog Lane dealt directly with the foreigners, as did the vendors, sampan operators and wash-girls on the river. Officially, however, any business between barbarians and Chinese, particularly that involving the mandarins, the governor, the viceroy or any other imperial official, was conducted through the Co-hong.

As everyone knew, the *fan kuei* were much like children, ignorant of proper customs, impulsive and quite uncontrolled. Thus, it was also the duty of the Co-hong to see that the foreigners behaved. If any barbarian violated the complex system of social rules set down for him — if he wandered too far from the Factories, left Canton without permission from the *hai kuan pu*, or perhaps was caught smuggling a Cantonese girl into his quarters, it was the Co-hong, not the foreigner, who were punished, usually by a heavy fine.

Still, the position of a hong merchant was an enviable one. With proper management, a member of the Co-hong could become very wealthy. Old Howqua, it was said, had accumulated a fortune of five million English pounds. Some hong merchants, however, went bankrupt from the constant fines and payments of “squeeze” to those over them. Cheng himself had managed to make a modest profit in his two years as a member of the Co-hong. Plump Mowqua, he had heard, was heavily in debt.

Cheng and the others stiffened as the shuffle of approaching footsteps echoed down the hallway. The chamber’s great double doors swung open, and two liveried servants entered to conduct the procession into the room. The clerks and secretaries shuffled in first and took their seats in a row behind the huge, ornate chair that sat empty in the room’s center. Next, the *hai kuan pu*, the head of Cantonese customs, referred to by the foreigners as the “Hoppo,” came through the door. He was an old man, and today he looked even older. Lu, the viceroy, followed him, visibly trembling. Governor General Teng came next: he looked ill. All three were dressed in white, the color of mourning.

The hong merchants rose as one, bowed and waited, holding their breaths, as imperial high commissioner of the Son of Heaven, Lin Tse-hsu, entered the chamber.

He was fat. So fat that his body rolled from side to side as he walked. Fat, thought Cheng, and dignified as a mountain. The hong

merchants fell to their knees, Cheng with them. The commissioner motioned them to their chairs with an impatient wave of his hand.

He sat, his body flowing down over the edges of the chair. His head rose from his shoulders with no visible neck. His robe was of heavy black silk embroidered in silver sycee thread with the insignia of the first and highest civil rank, the Manchurian crane. The black cap he wore, its peacock feather denoting his high rank, looked small above his vast, shaven brow. His nose was arrow-straight, his mouth firm and full, not remarkable. But his eyes — gripping eyes, deep, hard, penetrating eyes, caught and held all who looked at him.

Cheng studied those eyes, watching for some flicker of recognition when they passed over him. He saw none. Perhaps, then, the *ch'in ch'ai* had not been told about him after all.

A clerk tiptoed up to Lin and handed him a scroll of paper. Lin took it, unrolled it and began to read the words he had composed himself.

"Know you first of all," his voice was grim and sonorous, "that I, Lin Tse-hsu, have come to Canton to put a stop to the selling and use of the foreign mud, opium, and that I will not rest until every last chest has been destroyed, every addict cured or dead and every trafficker punished!"

The lights in the colonnaded buildings along the Praya Grande gleamed warmly, dancing like fireflies where they reflected in the dark water. At the foot of the water stairs, the harbor waves whispered and sighed. Spring evenings were the time for strolling on the Praya, and the pavement was crowded with people enjoying the night air. Families walked in clusters; young Portuguese belles minced along, their chaperones hovering close. Youths lounged in doorways, laughing, smoking and watching the girls. Chinese nut-sellers and sweet-meat vendors blended their voices with the night. Here on the Praya, the Chinese, the English and American *fan kuei*, and the Portuguese-Macaense, even though they mingled physically, kept aloof from one another. Life in Macao, as everyone knew, moved in three distinct circles, and as a rule, those circles did not overlap.

One who chose to ignore that rule was Joaquin Silveira. He had caught Kathleen coming around the corner of the old East India House and had fallen into step with her.

Kathleen was returning from Priscilla's and, lured like a moth by the cheer of the lights, had decided to take the long way home. She should have known, she lashed herself ruefully, that Joaquin would be there and that she would not escape him.

"I have to go home," she lied. "My father will come looking for me, Joaquin, if I'm not home by eight o'clock, and it's already a quarter to —" She tossed her head and quickened her step. In truth, she'd told her parents that she might be spending the night with Pris, and so they would not be at all anxious if she did not come; but that was not for Joaquin to know.

"Only a moment, *linda*." His breath was damp in her ear. "I have to talk to you, Kathleen," he whispered.

"Not now. I can't stay." She walked on, trying to hurry as inconspicuously as possible. Joaquin had been amusing at first, with his courtly manners and scintillatingly forbidden Catholicism — Kathleen took secret delight in flouting her father's rules — but lately she had begun to be afraid of him. He was too persistent, too intent on having her. Nervously, she glanced up and down the Praya. If she were seen with him in public, things would not go well for her at home.

"The garden," he murmured. "Please, Kathleen. I only want to talk, and we can't do it here. Then I'll let you go. You think I want your father to be angry with you, *queridinha*?"

He was different tonight, she mused, his usual arrogance almost absent. His earnestness intrigued her. "For a moment," she relented. "But I can't be long. He'll come after me!"

The governor's palace lay a short distance down the Praya, surrounded by its high wall and secluded garden. The watchman, a plump fellow who smelled of pork grease, grinned knowingly as he let them pass. The swine, thought Kathleen as she let Joaquin lead her to a moonlit bench. What the wretch was thinking was written all over his fat face. If Joaquin gave her any trouble, she could expect no help from him!

Joaquin moved close to her on the bench, ran a finger up her spine and tickled the inside of her ear, making her quiver. "You wanted to talk," she said lightly, moving away from him.

"Very well. We'll talk . . . first. Look at me, Kathleen."

She moved a little away from him and studied him in the moonlight. His narrow face was handsome to the point of prettiness. The long lashes shadowed his black eyes; his hair curled darkly around his face, making his silk shirt look very white. He was tall and elegant, flat-rumped as a bullfighter. Inwardly, Kathleen shrugged. Beautiful men had never appealed to her. For the most part, she found them vain, arrogant, self-centered and spoiled. Joaquin was cast in the typical mold, and to make matters worse, his mind never seemed to venture beyond the realm of clothes, parties, cards and women. Kathleen liked intensity in a man, intelligence, responsibility and a curiosity that matched her own. Joaquin had none of these qualities.

He leaned forward and took one of her hands in his. His palms were as smooth as a child's; her own rough, callused from washing and scrubbing at home. "You know I'm only visiting here, Kathleen," he said. "Before long I'll be going back to Portugal, to my father's estate." He took a deep breath. "I'm asking you to come with me."

Kathleen's eyes shot open. "Only to come?"

"As my wife, of course." Joaquin slipped his arm around her shoulders, bringing her close. With his lips, he began to nibble at her neck. "You've beaten me, *namorada*," he murmured. "All this time I've wanted you . . . thought I could take you, like some women . . . but I was wrong." He jerked her close against his chest, laughing softly. "So I'm prepared to make the supreme sacrifice. If marriage is your price, *querida*, consider it paid. But let's make it soon. I'm not a patient man, as you know." He kissed her swiftly, roughly.

Kathleen squirmed away from him and stood up. "Don't ask me, Joaquin."

His silence questioned her.

"It's my father," she whispered, knowing that the gateman was listening. "He'd never stand for my marrying a Catholic."

"He'd come around, once we were married. And I know you, Kathleen. You've never let your father stop you from doing anything."

"Then think of your own family. What would they do, Joaquin, if you came home to Portugal with an English bride? And a Protestant at that!"

"They'd accept it. I've an older brother to carry on the title and the family name. What *I* do doesn't matter a great deal to them." He rose

from the bench and moved toward her, the moonlight glinting blue on his black hair.

Kathleen turned away from him and took a deep breath. "And what if I told you I didn't love you?"

He squeezed her shoulders and spun her around. Through the bamboos, she caught a glimpse of the watchman's leering face. "You'd be lying!" Joaquin hissed. "But this — this doesn't lie." He crushed her lips in a kiss that bent her body backward in a painful arch. She struggled like a bird, trapped in the cage of his arms. "You love me . . ." he murmured, his wet mouth creeping down her neck. "You can't deny it, Kathleen!"

As one of his hands groped for the buttons on her bodice, Kathleen gathered all her strength into one great explosion of effort. With a gasp, she twisted away from him and spun out of his reach.

"It's over, Joaquin!" she panted, clutching a slender palm for balance. "I can't marry you and I can't see you anymore! I'm sorry! I should never have let things go this far!"

He stood erect in the moonlight, a bitter half-smile on his handsome face. "I don't believe you, Kathleen. And I'm not giving up. You love me! I'll never let you go — "

She turned and fled from the garden, lifting her skirts as she ran. "You love me . . ." Joaquin's voice echoed after her. The gateman barred the way back to the Praya. As Kathleen pushed past him, he caught her in his arms.

"Not so fast, *linda*." His body reeked, like a goat's, and his breath smelled of liquor. "Our friend's not finished with you and neither am I . . . you can't run out on us now, girl!" His rough hands encircled her wrists. Joaquin was coming toward them. The gateman was quaking with laughter. "Here, I've caught this little bird for you — " He doubled over with pain as Kathleen's knee caught him in the groin. Swearing loudly, he clutched at her skirt, but she was too quick for him. In a flash, she was out of the gate and had lost herself in the safety of the crowded Praya.

As she glanced back over her shoulder, she saw Joaquin raise his hand and strike the gateman a furious blow across the face.

James Matheson, *taipan* of the biggest trading house on the China coast now that his senior partner, William Jardine, had gone home to England, leaned back in his oak and leather captain's chair and sipped

a glass of good rye whiskey. "Aye, but old Howqua was shaken when I talked to him," he replied in answer to a question from Morgan Bellamy. "It seems that this Lin really laid it to the Co-hong. He's got them quaking in their boots! Even accused them of closing their eyes to the opium trade for the past twenty years!"

"Which they have, of course!" white-haired, feisty James Innes, an independent British merchant put in. "As long as no opium comes into Canton, it's no business of theirs! That's why we've always unloaded at Lintin."

"But they've known about it! That's enough for our friend Lin!" Matheson was a handsome, fair-haired Scot in his late forties. His dining room was well appointed with solid English furniture of the best quality, Chinese screens inlaid with mother-of-pearl and, on the most prominent wall, a life-sized portrait of young Queen Victoria. Matheson snapped his fingers at one of the Chinese servants. "You catchee more all same whiskey. All same glass. Can?" he ordered in Pidgin.

"Can." The servant scurried away for more whiskey.

"I must say our new friend Lin's informed himself well. He already knew who the major Chinese dealers were, who arranged for the boats, where and how the stuff was unloaded — he even knew that Russell & Company," here Matheson raised an eyebrow, "is still dealing in opium, in spite of their announcement to the contrary."

Bennett Forbes, Russell & Company's newest partner, who had stopped by the Creek Factory for a drink, bristled. "We're getting out," he protested. "Just takes time, that's all. We have to sell off what we have!"

"Granted, dear fellow. I meant no offense. I just wanted to point out that this Lin's no fool. And he means business. Howqua says he even threatened to execute a couple of the hong merchants, just to show that he was serious."

"Execute them!" Morgan Bellamy blanched. "He has to be bluffing!"

"My dear Bellamy, let's hope so. For their sake and for ours!"

Morgan looked at the circle of faces around the table. Matheson, Innes, the balding, imperious Lancelot Dent, whose opium-trading volume was second only to Jardine's, Dadabhoy and Rustomjee, the Parsee merchants from Calcutta, their dark heads covered by turbans

— among these were men Morgan had worshiped for years. The *taipans*. And now he was one of them. Even under the direness of their circumstances, the thought warmed him.

“Where the hell’s Elliot when we need him?” groused Innes. “Off cooling his arse in Macao! Why doesn’t he get up here and do his job?” Captain Charles Elliot served as the Crown’s official representative in the merchant community. His role was an ambiguous one at best, for the Chinese tolerated the barbarians as mere guests, unentitled to any form of diplomatic representation before the emperor.

“Don’t be so hard on him, James,” soothed Matheson. “He couldn’t have known. And what can he do, with England half a world away? When it takes six months to get a reply to a letter — ”

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. The Chinese servant opened it to admit a forlorn-looking Howqua.

Matheson rose to his feet. He towered over the frail old Chinaman. “Any news, Howqua?”

Howqua wrung his hands. “All same bad news! My catchee trouble too muchee.” He shook his head. “Too muchee bad!” From his sleeve, he drew a folded piece of paper. “From *ch’in ch’ai* Lin. Number one grand chop! Ver’ bad, *taipan*! You read!”

Matheson unfolded the paper and sent the servant for John Morrison and a clerk named Thom, who read Chinese. Both arrived within a few minutes.

John Morrison scanned the paper. “It’ll take some time to do a word-for-word translation,” he said. “But it looks like Lin’s demanding a surrender of every chest of opium we have!”

“Within three days,” added Thom. “Three days, or he’ll stop all trade, cut off our supplies and punish the hong merchants — with death!”

Morgan sprawled on the wide four-poster bed that Blake Robards had shipped to Canton for his own use. The mattress was of the finest horsehair, the sheets of silk and the eiderdown the best made in England. But Morgan could not sleep. Matheson’s whiskey sat ill on his stomach. The news about Lin’s demand for the opium had his nerves jumping like treed cats, and to top off the evening, he’d returned home to find a letter from Pris waiting for him.

Pris wrote to him almost every day, mostly little pleasantries, news of his family and declarations of love and longing. Since mail from Macao was delivered sporadically, Morgan would often find three or four letters from her in the same packet.

For the most part, he welcomed them. They provided him with a diversion at the end of the day, and Pris was a delightful correspondent. Her letters were full of warmth and humor, laced with little stories about goings-on in Macao. Tonight's letter had been different. Pris was worried.

The three American clerks who'd been on the ill-fated Robards schooner with Morgan the night of the pirate attack had been picked up on Lung Kwu Chau, where they'd drifted in the dinghy. Now they were back in Macao, and the stories they were spreading in the taverns and on the streetcorners strongly implied that Morgan had been in league with the pirates that had killed his father-in-law.

It was easy to believe, Morgan reflected. Everyone on the schooner who hadn't escaped had been killed except him, and he hadn't been touched. Then he'd been almost too quick to snatch up Pris's hand on his return. He turned over and punched his goosefeather pillow.

Pris had defended him, as he knew she would. But the damage was done. Although nothing could be proven, Morgan had a blot against his name that he did not know how to clear. He asked himself what Blake Robards would have done. Robards, no doubt, would have told everyone to go to blazes. He'd been tough. Morgan, as he admitted to himself, was all too vulnerable.

Morgan sat up, lit a candle and rang for a servant. "Tea!" he grunted when the pale moon face of his night boy appeared around the door. Then he negated the order with a wave of his hand. "Brandy!" he said. Morgan's father had studied Cantonese; Kathleen, a natural mimic, had picked it up almost effortlessly, but Morgan knew none of the language.

He put his feet on the cold floor and waited with his head in his hands. The clerks could go to hell. But Lin and the opium — that was something else again.

There were six hundred chests from the *Peregrine* in the hold of the *Condor*. A thousand more had just come in on the *Kestrel*. Morgan had sent out a schooner in the hope that he could intercept the *Osprey* and the *Merlin* in time for them to make for Singapore or stay on the

open sea. But sixteen hundred chests within Lin's grasp! Morgan's mind refused to multiply the cost of the chests to determine what he'd be losing.

A pox on the boy! Why didn't he hurry with the brandy? Morgan closed his eyes and tried to think about Pris. Her delicate features refused to come into focus. Well, they'd only had three days — or three nights; Morgan supposed it was the nights that counted in a marriage — before the *Peregrine* had come in and Morgan had thought it best to take the ship back to Canton himself.

Curse it, he'd tried. He knew what was expected of a good husband or a good lover. But whenever that slight body lay beneath him, so willing, so yielding, and whenever he looked down into that trusting little face and listened to her whisper how much she loved him, he was seized by such a spasm of self-loathing that it was all he could do to function. At least, he consoled himself, poor Pris was so innocent that she probably didn't know what she was missing.

In truth, Morgan had been glad for any excuse to leave Macao, to leave Pris and to leave — in part, at least — his guilt. He did not look forward to going back again.

The bedroom door opened, it was not the night boy who had returned. It was Wu Hung-li, the comprador.

Wu Hung-li bowed, then stood with his hands in his sleeves. He was a bony man, long of face, vaguely middle-aged.

Morgan sighed impatiently. "What is it, Wu? Where's my brandy?"

"Boy, he speak my. He say *taipan* no sleepee. No can. Brandy — " He shook his head. "No good! Better cow chilo."

Cow chilo? Morgan rubbed his eyes. Was the bastard talking about a girl?

Wu Hung-li moved further inside, drawing behind him a small, slim, veiled figure. He bowed low. "Ch'iu Ming," he announced. "My catchee fo' Robal' *taipan*. My catchee all same cow chilo fo' you." He pushed the girl forward and raised the hem of the veil a few inches to show her tiny, bound feet.

"All same little foot! Like so!" He indicated the length by a three-inch span between his thumb and forefinger. Morgan groaned.

"No wantchee, Wu Hung-li. My no wantchee cow chilo. Wantchee brandy!"

Wu Hung-li was not to be discouraged. Now he took the veil by a corner and pulled it away with a flourish. The girl stood trembling in the candlelight.

She was pretty. Very pretty, Morgan admitted, even in his grumpy state of mind. Wu Hung-li motioned with his hand, and the girl tottered forward on her little stumps, swaying like a fern. "You no wantchee, cow chilo ver' sad," he said in a sly voice. "She lose face. Swallow earrings. Eat opium." He leaned forward and squinted at Morgan. "Die!"

Morgan studied the girl. Her face was round and pink, her satiny hair twisted high on her head, held in place by pearl-trimmed combs. She was dressed in a flowing robe of the softest mauve silk.

Wu Hung-li beamed. "Ch'iu Ming," he repeated her name.

Morgan sighed. "No," he insisted. "No can." The girl stayed where she was. Plainly, she did not understand a word, not even pidgin. He could not restrain a smile at the irony of it. It seemed he had inherited more from Blake Robards than his daughter and company.

At his smile, the girl smiled in return, her cheeks dimpling, and toddled a few more steps toward him. Morgan shook his head, but the burdens of the day were crashing in on him. Lin, the sixteen hundred chests of Turkey opium, the rebellious clerks and captains, Pris's letter, the frustrations of his marriage and his own damned aching head.

Ch'iu Ming smiled again, showing a row of tiny, pearl-like teeth.

"Aye, the devil with it!" muttered Morgan, and he turned back the covers of the bed.

Wu Hung-li, his horselike face split in two by a grin, slipped out and closed the door behind him.

Seven

Priscilla-Robards Bellamy jabbed the needle in and out of the linen sampler. Ordinarily, she embroidered beautifully, with fine, even stitches. Today her distraction showed in her work.

"Your thread's tangled," said Kathleen. "Here, let me — "

Pris plopped the linen piece down on the tea table, the clatter of the bamboo embroidery hoops making the teacups dance. "It's all right," she sighed, "I hate cross-stitch anyway."

Kathleen shook her head knowingly. "Pris, how long has it been?"

"Four weeks since he left. Three since I've heard from him." Pris's face was grave. "Oh, Kathleen, if — "

"You'll make yourself ill, Pris." Kathleen squeezed her hand. "Morgan can take care of himself."

Pris stared glumly out the window at the brown and green water, her dark eyes trying to see all the way to Canton. Word had gotten out that Commissioner Lin had closed the port and blockaded the Factories. The Chinese servants had deserted, leaving the forty-odd Europeans and Americans, Morgan among them, to fend for themselves.

"If anything happens to him — " Pris picked up the embroidery again and began to jerk at the tangled thread.

"Oh, hush, Pris! He's in no danger." Kathleen brushed a hand through her magnificent hair. She was wearing a dress of pale green Shantung, a gift from her new sister-in-law. "Captain Elliot's there. He's doing all he can."

"Yes," said Pris. She knew Charles Elliot, a young man for such a grave position, with a pregnant wife and little son here in Macao. She knew that he was bright and pleasant, inclined to bend rather than to

take a position and hold it. From what Pris had heard of Commissioner Lin, Elliot was no match for him.

The silken strands of embroidery floss clung to her fingers. She tugged at the knots impatiently as she thought about Morgan, trapped in the Factories as a hostage against Lin's ultimatum: the delivery of twenty thousand chests of opium to the Chinese.

Priscilla had prayed fervently for his safety. The traders were only blocked in, she was told, not actual prisoners in Chinese hands — but that could change. And life, to the Chinese, was cheap.

Achingly, she thought of the time they'd had together as man and wife. Three days, three nights — so remote now that she found herself wondering if she had only dreamed them. She twisted her narrow gold wedding band. Her cheeks burned as she recalled the sweet, secret thing they had done in the dark warmth of the bed. It had hurt the first time, so much that she'd cried from the pain. The second and third times had been only a little better, but she had welcomed even the hurting of it. Morgan was hers now, and she was his. Perhaps she was even carrying his baby.

Ma Li, the *amah*, came in with more tea from the kitchen. She was a plump woman of about thirty, ugly but good-natured. Her worst feature, in Chinese eyes at least, was her heavy jaw. Oriental standards of beauty demanded that the line of a woman's chin be narrow, so narrow that when one looked at the back of her head nothing of her jaw could be seen at the sides. Ma Li's jaw jutted and flared like an old man's, and her teeth were crooked. Although her plumpness itself was not undesirable, she had large breasts where the feminine ideal called for small, firm buds. Worse, her feet had not been bound in childhood. Her family had been poor, and she had gone into the rice fields to work at the age of five. When Blake Robards had engaged her to help care for his young daughter, her family had considered it an incredible stroke of good *joss*. They had despaired of ever finding her a husband, and an unmarried female was not only a disgrace to her house, but provided one more mouth to feed.

Ma Li poured more tea into Kathleen's and Priscilla's cups without asking whether they wanted any. She smiled at them, showing her crooked teeth, her small eyes almost disappearing into the plump crease above her cheeks. The poor woman was no more intelligent

than she was pretty, but her affability and her willingness to please redeemed her in everyone's eyes.

In the absence of a mother, it was Ma Li who, days before the wedding, had taken upon herself the task of enlightening her young mistress about a woman's duty to her husband. Shy and totally without experience herself, she had accomplished her purpose in the only way she knew how — a book of engravings, discreetly left under the covers of Priscilla's bed. The book was one sometimes given to Chinese brides and new concubines. It contained no writing (what woman could read?), just a series of twenty engravings, so old that no one even knew who had first made them. Twenty intricate pictures, explicitly showing the ways in which the strength of the man could enter the softness of a woman.

Pris had found the book and kept it secret, even from Kathleen — though she had no doubt that her friend would have liked to see it. Wide-eyed, she had lain awake by candlelight in the curtained privacy of her four-poster bed, studying the stylized black and white prints. Prim and reserved she might be, but she was the daughter of a lusty man. The Robards blood surged hot in her veins. She had found herself looking forward with trembling eagerness to the moment when she would be the woman in the pictures . . . and Morgan would be the man.

Things had not gone quite as she had hoped. The night — and the bed — had been so cold. Morgan had been strangely distant and grumpy, as if he wanted nothing more than to get the experience over with as quickly as possible. In spite of her own desire, her natural shyness had taken over, and she had been almost frozen with fear. The pain, too, had come as a total surprise. She had not expected that he would have to forge a path into her tight flesh, or that it would hurt so.

Pris shook her head as she attacked the tangled threads once more. It had not been a good beginning, she admitted. It was plain to see that Morgan was not pleased with her. What man would be? she lashed away at herself. A woman limp with pain and fright, innocent and stupid . . . It was no wonder that he never told her he loved her. No wonder that he'd found an excuse to go back to Canton after only three days!

She had made the tangle worse. With a sigh, she laid the thread on her lap. Could she help it if she did not know what pleased a man? She'd had no experience with men, and no mother to advise her. Ma Li had known enough to give her the book, but she was unmarried

herself, and such a poor, homely creature. If she spoke of such things at all, it would only be in whispers and giggles, Pris was sure. The thought of going to a woman like Rose Bellamy for help made her cringe with embarrassment, and as for Kathleen — Pris studied her friend out of the corner of her eye. Kathleen was so at ease with men. Flirting came as naturally to her as breathing. She'd be the one, perhaps . . . but no, Pris decided, looking away from Kathleen to stare at the pot-bellied iron stove that heated the little sitting room, Kathleen's knowledge would extend only a little beyond her own. She needed more. And she needed Morgan.

"Listen, Pris." Kathleen faced her and took both her hands. "Whenever Morgan's in danger, I *feel* it. I have a sense about things — and I feel nothing now. Nothing. He's all right, Pris. I know it."

"But Lin wants the opium. He won't let any of them go until he gets it. And they won't give it to him!"

"Prissy, you're only making things worse! You think Morgan would want to know you're stewing like this?"

Pris sighed and took up her cross-stitching again, attacking the tangled thread carefully this time. Her mind had begun to bubble like a kettle making tea. "You're right," she said cheerfully. "How's your portrait coming?"

"Mister Chinnery almost has it finished. It's beautiful."

"The subject is beautiful!" Pris smiled at her sister-in-law. "Who's going to buy it? Joaquin?"

"Joaquin! Oh, damn Joaquin! I'm sick of Joaquin! All hot hands and spit — and he won't leave me alone. I know you'll say that I asked for this, that I led him on, but — oh, rot Joaquin!"

"It's that bad?"

"I can't even go to the Praya without him popping up — *Ay, mi Kathleen . . . queridinha mia!*" she mimicked him ruthlessly. "I've half a mind to sic father on him — except for what father would do to me as well! Dammitall, I'll be so glad when the men are back from Canton! . . . Oh, Pris, I'm sorry! Don't look like that!"

"It's all right — " Priscilla smiled through the sudden mist of tears. "It really is, Kathleen!" She sat back and plied her needle, a secret serenity on her face. Pris had thought of a plan, a plan so daring that she could not speak of it, not even to Kathleen. She would need a lit-

tle money, she mused, and that she had. She would also need courage — and courage, somehow, she would find.

The Yueh-hua Academy, near the Consoo House, was a gracious building, a maze of classrooms and courtyards, designed for study and contemplation. It was a place where willows hung over quiet pools, their reflections broken only by darting goldfish, where purple lotus blossoms swayed above their jade-green pads, where thrushes piped from the trees. The rooms were austere, gray-walled, unobtrusive to the thinking mind. Here, the *ch'in ch'ai*, Lin Tse-hsu, had chosen to make his quarters.

Cheng Lo felt the coiled-spring tightness of his own nerves as he awaited the summons of the high commissioner. Lin had sent for him without warning. But then, in the short weeks he had known him, Cheng had come to realize that the *ch'in ch'ai* was full of surprises. His demand that the foreigners surrender their opium had come like a lightning bolt. Now, his restraint in the face of their defiance was equally unexpected. Declaring that he would rather “weary his mouth” than do harm to the *fan kwei*, who were, after all, no more than impudent children, Lin had settled down to outwait them. Despite his threats, he had spared the hong merchants as well. He had placed chains upon the necks of Howqua and Mowqua and sent them to the *fan kwei* to plead with them to release the opium, but he had done them no actual harm.

Cheng stood in the main courtyard and gazed down at his own reflection in a lotus pool. A dragonfly, its wingspan as broad as his hand, flashed across the water. What beauty one found in small things, Cheng told himself. What tranquillity in simple nature. He stared into the pool, composing himself inwardly so that he would be serene for his audience with the high commissioner. The lines of Wang Wei, the great poet whose work had survived more than a thousand years, drifted through his mind:

“ . . . I have always been a lover of tranquillity.
And when I see this clear stream so calm.
I want to stay on some great rock.
And fish forever on and on . . . ”

A servant shuffled into the courtyard and bowed low. "The *ch'in ch'ai* requests the honor of your presence," he announced. Cheng turned, drew a deep breath and followed the man into a small room, its walls unadorned, where Lin sat behind a vast writing desk.

The *ch'in ch'ai* had been brushing a poem in black ink on a white silk fan. The characters were exquisitely formed. "A note of thanks," he explained, "for the favor of a tray of green lychees, the first of the season. Are you well, Cheng Lo?"

"Quite well, thank you, lord." Cheng bowed. "And you?"

"Sit down. I'll order tea." Lin clapped his hands and the servant brought small porcelain cups, which he filled with fresh orange pekoe. "Yes, thank you, I'm very well. Except for a rupture, which pains me at times. They tell me that a foreign physician at the Factories has medicine for such things. Do you know if that is so?"

"There is a physician named Parker at the factories. You will permit me to inquire of him?"

"You are most kind. Most kind." Lin's expression was mild, like the sky on a sunny day — the same sky that could tremble with the rage of thunder and lightning at other times. "You are from Canton, are you not, Cheng Lo?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And you have three sons?"

"Yes, lord." A momentary coldness stole over Cheng's mind. Were his sons in danger? Lin was looking at him, expecting him to go on. "Two of them are married and work as merchants in the town. Already I am twice a grandfather." Cheng dared not lie. The *ch'in ch'ai* would know.

"A joy which I share with you." Lin's plump cheeks quivered as he nodded his head. "And your third son? . . . Ah, the child of your heart! I see it in your face!"

"Studying. In Peking."

"A scholar, then. Like his father."

Lin had changed neither his expression nor the tone of his voice. Yet Cheng felt as if the jaws of a trap had closed on him. The commissioner knew after all.

"Not a mere scholar," Lin continued in the same mild voice, "but a *ch'in shih*, eighth in a field of three hundred for the imperial examination. An accomplishment, Cheng Lo. I myself was seventh in my

own year." Lin's brow darkened. "What are you doing in the Cohong?"

Cheng wondered if his face had paled. "It was the will of heaven that I return to represent the House of Cheng," he answered quietly.

"Ah, yes. The will of heaven." Lin pushed the inkstone, brushes and fan out of the way and shuffled a stack of papers on his desk. "You will recall, Cheng Lo, that some time ago I asked for a memorial from each of the hong merchants, giving his appraisal of the situation at the Factories. I have them all here, your own included." He drew out one of the papers. "Look! This one is from old Wu, the one they call Howqua. Look at the style, the choice of words, the formation of the characters. He writes like a peasant! A bumpkin! And the rest are worse! All except your own!"

Cheng felt his face grow hot. What a reckless fool he'd been, so anxious to give a worthy appraisal that he had written as a scholar, not as a merchant with only the rudiments of a good education!

Lin shook his head, causing the layers of his chin to ripple. "Ah, Cheng, you are a man without guile. You have not a drop of devious blood in your body! Could you not see that I would know you for what you are? Could you not guess that I would recognize your hand as the hand that wrote the memorials to the emperor, more than fifty of them, that I read three times over back in the Forbidden City?"

Cheng bowed his head, the blood in his temples pounding like a gong. "I am your servant," he said softly, "and the servant of the Son of Heaven."

Lin leaned forward, as far as the desk and his great bulk would permit. There was a note of tenderness in his deep voice. "Cheng Lo, you need have no fear of me. I will ask nothing of you save that you continue to serve the Son of Heaven, even as I serve him. But take care, I implore you. There are those in the Forbidden City who would use you if they could; ruthless men, who would stop at nothing. They want to see the use and sale of opium made lawful, so that they might benefit from the taxes it would bring. They care nothing for the people. Only for themselves."

Cheng remembered the movement behind the gold screen.

"Hsu Nai-chi?" he ventured in a whisper. "Lord Muchanga?"

"These, yes. They are known advocates of legalizing the opium trade. And there are others — many others. Dangerous men, and cruel."

"I will take care," said Cheng. "Thank you, my lord."

"And one thing more." Lin's chair creaked as he leaned back. "If you value the safety of your youngest son, get him out of Peking. At once."

The rat was a huge one. Gray and sleek, its pink tail vulgarly naked, it scurried along the base of the storeroom wall and disappeared under a heap of empty salt-pork kegs.

"Tally ho!" With an eager shout, Morgan was after it. The kegs rolled in all directions as he gave the pile a mighty kick. The rat dashed for the other side of the room. Morgan bounded after it, whooping and brandishing a barrel stave above his head.

"Head him off, John!"

John Morrison, the translator, crouched and danced from side to side, sweeping his own stave in a clattering arc on the brick floor. "There he goes! Quick, while he's cornered!"

"This one's mine! I saw him first!" Morgan moved in on the cowering rat, where it huddled in one corner of the storeroom, swinging its head and forelegs one way, then another, in a futile search for escape. Its eyes glowed like rubies in the flickering light of John Morrison's lantern.

"Watch my left. John! Smash him if he runs!" Morgan raised the oaken stave above his head and brought it down swift and hard. The rat jumped to one side, but the blow glanced off its head, stunning it for a moment. Morgan raised his stave again. This time he struck home. Blood spurted onto his shoes as the rat died. Morgan whacked the lifeless body a couple times more for good measure, then turned to Morrison, grinning. "Well, that makes four for us!"

Morrison nudged the bloody carcass with the toe of his shoe. "You killed him, Bellamy. You have to carry him out."

"Pity we can't leave him here for one of the boys! Hell, they'd take the thing home and eat it if they were here!"

"Come on. It'll stink up the room if you don't."

"Aye." Morgan picked the rat up by the tip of its tail. "Let's go see if this beats Matheson and Forbes. They had three last I heard." He followed John Morrison out into the cool afternoon sunlight, holding the

rat out away from him where its blood would not rub onto his pants. Little red blotches formed a trail behind him on the dirty floor.

The rat hunt had been the brain child of one of Innes's clerks, and it had served, for a time at least, to ease the pall of boredom that had sealed over the Factories. The time for returning to Macao had long passed, and the men were feeling the strain of their captivity. Troops of coolies, armed with sticks and rattan shields, paraded in the square; soldiers of the regular Chinese army, a scraggly lot by European military standards, patrolled the adjacent streets, their Manchu ponies tethered by the Consoo House.

The Chinese servants had evaporated in the first heat of the crisis. The merchants and their staffs, so unaccustomed to cooking and cleaning that most of them did not even know where the Factory kitchens were located, turned out gluey rice and salt pork the consistency of leather. They were in no danger of starving. There were ample stores of biscuits and butter, salted meats, wines, beers, preserves and pickles, even several milk cows and some pigs within the Factory confines. Fresh produce, meats and bread had become luxuries, however, and the poor cows were running low on fodder.

Water was another matter. Hauled into the factories in tubs by the servants, it became a most precious commodity. There was little for drinking, and even less for washing. The floors became filthy. Laundry went undone and the merchants and their staffs wore their dirty clothes on their unwashed bodies until they stank. The air in the Factories was rank with the odors of chamber pots and garbage, for there was no one to carry the slops away.

Morgan followed John Morrison through the labyrinth of offices and godowns, back to Matheson's suite. Up one of the corridors lay the rooms occupied by Charles Elliot, the Crown's superintendent of trade in China. Poor bastard, thought Morgan, I wouldn't be in his shoes. Elliot was a pleasant chap, a bit washy at times, true, but decent. He'd made enemies among the merchants, however, and probably earned the contempt of the Chinese by his hesitancy to take a strong stand on the issue of the opium surrender.

"There's a rumor going around, Bellamy, that the blighter's going to give in to the commissioner," John Morrison remarked. "Get ready to turn over your opium!"

"Turn it over, hell! Who's going to pay me?"

"The Crown! That's what I've heard. Elliot's going to promise us that Whitehall will pay back every bloody cent!"

"I'll believe that when the money's in my hand!" Morgan kicked open Matheson's door. "Four rats!" he announced, flinging the carcass down onto the floor. "Do we win?"

A dozen of the *taipans* were lounging around Matheson's long beechwood table. William Hunter raised his eyebrows. "Where have you two been? The hunt closed half an hour ago!"

"And so your rat doesn't count!" said Matheson. "Get the bloody thing off my dining room floor!"

Morgan picked up the rat again, strode to the window, opened it a foot or so and tossed the rat down into the square where the coolie guard was drilling. A wail and an explosive string of Chinese epithets filtered upward through the opening. Morgan grinned. "Well, so much for old number four. We still have three. Who won?"

"You're tied with Forbes and Matheson," said Innes, who had put up the prize, a bottle of fine scotch whiskey. "A toss of the coin, perhaps?"

"Call it, Forbes!" said John Morrison. Innes flipped a shilling.

"Heads!" declared Forbes while the coin spun in the air.

Innes chuckled as he slapped the shilling down on his palm. He was not a young man, but his eyes still burned with mischief and he loved a good fight. "Give this chap a drink!" he proclaimed with a bow and a flourish, producing the whiskey bottle as if by magic. The assembled merchants applauded, even the losers, Morgan and John Morrison, joining in.

"Get your glasses!" beamed Forbes. "Let's pass it around!" The room rocked with laughter — the desperate laughter of men who must be merry or go mad with despair.

"Sit down, Bellamy!" Hunter pulled out an empty chair. "Gad! Not so close! You stink!"

"I stink? I?" Morgan assumed an expression of exaggerated horror and was rewarded by guffaws. "A toast, gentlemen — " He struggled to his feet. "To Her Majesty, the Queen!"

"To the Queen!" Even the Americans rose and echoed the salute.

"To President Martin Van Buren!" Forbes raised his glass and the others drank with him.

"And to good old Commissioner Lin!" growled Innes. "May his arse rot in 'ell!"

"Aye!" the others chorused, and drained their glasses.

The full moon was high in the black sky and the stars gleamed like pinpoints of ice by the time Morgan had taken his leave at Matheson's and made his way along the side of the square to the old Swedish factory where he had his quarters. With the servants gone, he was virtually alone in his section of the factory. Robards's old staff had departed with their ill-fated *taipan*; Morgan had had no chance to hire any one else.

He carried a lantern to light his way down the blackness of the corridors. A rat squeaked and darted across his path. He thought of the hunt and the faro game that had followed it. He'd won twenty pounds from Hunter and lost fifteen to Dent. He felt bloody tired and more than a little lightheaded from the whiskey. The thought of his waiting bed, dirty and rumpled though it was, and the sweet oblivion of sleep, hurried his footsteps.

The door of Morgan's bedchamber squeaked as he opened it. The lantern threw its quivering beams of light around the cluttered room. Boxes and bags were piled in the corners. Morgan's dirty clothes were tossed in a heap on a leather-cushioned chair.

The massive four-poster bed that Blake Robards had shipped from Boston stood in one corner of the room. The bedclothes had been turned up. Morgan studied the graceful curves of the form beneath them and smiled to himself. He was not alone.

"Good old Wu!" he whispered. "May he get the coolest spot in hell for this! I'll give the old buzzard a bonus when he comes back."

A cloud of dark hair showed against the pillowcase. Morgan wondered whether it would be Ch'iu Ming or her sister, Chou Ling. Well, no matter. One was as good as another, and he'd find out by morning. With a yawn, he blew out the lantern and began to peel off his clothes.

Priscilla lay trembling in the bed. She heard the clink of Morgan's belt buckle as his trousers slid to the floor. She held her breath, trying to remember everything the woman from the Street of Happiness had taught her.

The arrangements had not really been difficult. With her *amah* acting as go-between Pris had engaged the most sought-after prostitute in Macao to instruct her in the art of pleasing a man. For an exorbitant fee, the woman, a voluptuous creature of mixed

Portuguese-Chinese ancestry, had closeted herself with Pris for an hour while she described in most precise detail the ways to excite a man in bed. Pris had emerged hot-faced and quivering, but with no regrets for what she had learned. Soon she would know whether the instruction — and the twenty taels of silver she had paid the woman — had been worthwhile.

The journey to Canton and the entry into the Factories had required all the courage she could summon. Ma Li had engaged the fishing junk at Macao's Inner Harbor and dickered with its Chinese captain over the price — outrageously high in spite of her efforts. She had dressed Priscilla in the shabby cotton tunic and trousers of a *Hokla* boat girl, braided her long dark hair down her back and placed the low-brimmed straw hat on her head. But from the moment the junk slipped away from the dock and glided out into the murky waters of the harbor, Priscilla had been alone, totally dependent on her own resources.

She had tried to reassure herself that she looked just like any one of a thousand Chinese girls who frequented the Canton docks. Only her eyes would betray her — she'd pulled the brim of the hat lower. Her Cantonese was good, but was it good enough? She'd spent the long journey upriver huddled below the deck, trembling. There had been moments when she'd almost called out to the captain to turn back to Macao, but the thought of Morgan, alone in the Factories, gave her strength.

The captain of the junk had known a former servant at the Factories, a smirking man who, for another handful of silver, had smuggled her in through a side entrance off Hog Lane, guided her through the maze of dirty corridors and finally pointed out the room where Morgan lived.

Priscilla had been slightly disturbed to find him gone so late at night — but never mind. It would give her time to prepare herself properly. She had undressed, brushed out her hair and perfumed the seven orifices of her body with jasmine, as the woman had instructed her to do. Then, warm with anticipation, she had slipped into Morgan's bed.

She had heard him coming down the hall, and guessed, from the faltering rhythm of his footsteps, that he was at least a little drunk. Dismay almost overcame her; she stifled a groan. But she had come this far, and with Morgan drunk or sober, she would do as she had planned.

"Don't speak unless he speaks to you first," the woman had cautioned her. "Some men are only distracted by words, and it is to make love that he comes to you, little one, not to talk." Pris remembered the advice and kept her silence.

Morgan stepped out of the circle of his pants and rolled into bed. Soft and scented, she moved into his arms. Though he uttered small moans of pleasure, he said nothing, only gathered her close and began to slide his hands up and down the silky contours of her body. There was no satin nightdress to cover her this time; only her own perfumed flesh, quivering under his touch. Her spinning mind tried to remember what the woman had told her . . . *The hips, rippling like twin serpents . . . the fingers . . . the hands, searching for his pleasure . . .* the jaded voice droned in her memory as she fought with her own fear, her own natural modesty . . . *The openings of a man's body are most sensitive to pleasurable touching . . . first the ears . . . the mouth . . . the nostrils . . . then, ah, then . . .* She heard Morgan groan as one timid hand slid up the inside of his thigh to the trembling in the warm hollow at the top of his leg, afraid to go further. The heat of his body, the sweat and brandy odor of his skin made her gloriously dizzy. She felt him reach down, take her hand and move it inward. A tiny gasp of wonder escaped her lips as she discovered that the stabbing thing that had hurt her so was as delicately made as an orchid.

He kissed her then, and she remembered . . . *The tongue, a darting arrow of love . . . curious, eager . . .* She opened her mouth and tasted the brandy, faint and sweet on his lips. He responded with a thrust of his tongue that filled her mouth and arched her neck back . . . back . . . His hands were suddenly hot and wild, roaming hungrily over the small, firm hills of her breasts. Her nipples tingled and ached, the music of her singing body drowning out even the words of the painted woman. She ceased to think of her, ceased to remember her words and found that it no longer mattered. She had needed nothing. Her own passion was enough to sustain her. Their love was more than enough . . .

When he pulled her under him and took her, there was no pain at all — only waves of rapture radiating up from the place where their bodies were joined. How could she not have known this? This heaven? And the key to it all had been within her all along!

Her soul was no longer her own. It had merged, with Morgan's in a flight of ecstasy that carried them both higher and higher until some-

thing within her exploded like a rocket, with a sweetness so intense that she cried out.

“Morgan!”

He had reached his peak with her. At the sound of his name, he went cold. Raising up on his hands, he stared down at her through the veil of darkness.

“Pris!”

There was no need for her to see his face. The shock, the undisguised amazement in his voice told her everything.

All this time, Morgan had thought she was someone else.

Eight

Macao
July, 1839

The Bellamy house, a neat rectangle of dark gray stone with a tile roof, stood on a corner two blocks east of the chapel and cemetery. It had been built in the mid-1700s by a Portuguese captain of modest means, and although it was well constructed, it was plain to the point of ugliness. The barred windows were small and narrow like the windows of a prison. Only the window boxes, filled with Rose Bellamy's red geraniums, lent life to the drab exterior, for there was no yard. The walls of the house came all the way to the street and met those of its neighbors at the side and the rear.

The inside, too, was utilitarian. The heavy old English furniture, with its faded maroon upholstery, had already been in the house when the Bellamys had moved in five years before. Reverend Bellamy had seen no sense in refurbishing the dilapidated pieces when the money could be better spent for the printing of religious pamphlets in Chinese. Rose had made a home of the Spartan surroundings with embroidered cushions, crocheted doilies and hand-braided rag rugs.

Kathleen could look at those rugs and see the bits and pieces of her growing up — the green muslin she'd loved as a ten-year-old, strips of the long, dark brown cotton socks that had frozen to her legs in the English winters, the gray serge she'd worn almost every day of the long voyage from Portsmouth to Macao (how she'd hated it!), the white shirt Morgan had grown out of the year his voice had changed Now she looked down at the faded blue-gray of her fifteenth

birthday frock and blessed the day when it, too, would be braided into one of her mother's rugs!

Chengqua had come, on the kind of casual visit that was all too rare in these troubled days. Kathleen watched him out of the corner of her eye as her mother served him tea in one of the good cups. He held it Western fashion, with one hand, taking small, polite sips as he conversed in Cantonese with her father. His robe was rich, raw silk, the color of oiled teakwood, unadorned and simply cut.

From a little bowl, Kathleen took two large lumps of the clear Chinese rock candy that served as a cheap source of sugar. She dropped them into her tea and stirred, watching the candy dissolve in the hot liquid before she added a few drops of cream. Cheng was looking at her when she glanced up, his black eyebrows lifted in mock dismay. She smiled at him. Like almost all Chinese, he took his tea clear, and regarded the addition of cream and sugar as the height of barbarism. Her eyes danced as she stirred the creamy tea and sipped it from the spoon, a flaunting gesture, inviting challenge. He rewarded her with a barely perceptible shake of his head and the faintest flicker of a smile before he turned back to her father.

She amused Cheng, she knew. He regarded her with the kind of affectionate condescension one would show toward an adorably naughty child or an organ-grinder's monkey. In his eyes, she misbehaved outrageously, she was sure. But her behavior — or lack of it — was excusable. After all, she was only a barbarian, a most devilish foreign devil.

Kathleen had read and heard enough to know that China was called the Middle Kingdom because the Chinese believed it to lie at the center of the universe. Nothing that existed outside its vast boundaries could be of any importance. No foreign object or idea could be of great significance to a nation whose recorded history went back more than three thousand years. China — in its own eyes at least — was omnipotent and eternal. A land so vast, a culture so ancient, that these foreigners who flitted along the southern lip of the land were no more than insects, creatures of the moment who would fade away in time.

Was that the way Chengqua saw her? Kathleen sipped her tea and pondered the incongruity of his hands — strong, broad, masculine hands, whose long nails stabbed the air when he gestured to emphasize the point he was making. Not long ago, she had said that to know

Chengqua would be to know a little of China. For two years, he had been their friend, yet she could not claim to know him well. She knew only this one facet of him, this polite, soft-spoken presence who drifted in and out of their lives like a genie. Did he know anger? she wondered. Did he know joy? Passion?

Her gaze followed the line of his profile — the fierce Manchu brows that sheltered the intensity of his eyes, the prominent cheekbones and straight nose, the strikingly virile mouth. Strange, but she had never realized before that he was a handsome man. She squinted at him and tried to picture the way he would look in a good English suit with a Western haircut. No — she could no more imagine it than she could imagine her father in a silk robe and a queue!

Kathleen stared at her own reflection in the bowl of her pewter spoon. Odd . . . the reflection that stared back at her was upside down. She turned the spoon over. Now her image was right-side-up as it should be. She did it again to make sure her eyes were not deceiving her. Upside down. China itself was upside down. Once, long ago in England, she and Morgan had talked about digging a tunnel all the way through the earth to China, and she had wondered out loud whether she would emerge standing on her head. Perhaps she had. The Chinese wore red for weddings and white for funerals. Their women wore trousers and the men wore gowns. They bought their coffins before they died and cared more for their dead ancestors than for their living children. In China, it was a mark of prestige for a man to have several wives, but it was a capital crime for a child to defy his parents.

The Chinese ate dogs and swallows' nests and pickled — snakes, she'd been told, and they married complete strangers, chosen by their families. There was no courtship among them . . . no romance. Why, she had heard that Chinese men and women did not even kiss! She glanced furtively at Chengqua and tried to make herself believe that, with six children, he had never kissed his wife. Impossible! she decided at last.

Maybe one day she would feel bold enough to ask him. She could ask him now, she thought, except that he was talking to her father. Talking earnestly, in Cantonese. She sipped her own sweet tea and strained her ears to listen.

Archer Bellamy leaned forward in his rocker, silvery eyebrows bristling. "You saw the destruction of the opium with your own eyes, Chengqua?"

"Most of it. They dumped it into trenches, poured lime on it and washed it out into the river. The *ch'in ch'ai* took great care that not a cake should be missed."

The Reverend's eyes bulged. "Twenty thousand chests! What I wouldn't give to have seen it for myself!" He gulped his tea. "I spoke to King. They let him visit, you know, because he'd never sold any of it. He said they killed one workman for trying to smuggle out a few cakes of opium in his clothes. Cut his head off on the spot!"

Kathleen dropped another lump of sugar into her tea and stirred it slowly. All Macao had held its breath when Charles Elliot announced that he'd ordered the merchants at Canton to turn over their stocks of opium to Lin in exchange for their release. The announcement had come at the end of March, but Lin had not permitted the last of the merchants to depart until virtually all twenty thousand chests of the opium, over half of it from Jardine Matheson, had been delivered and destroyed on Lankit, a tiny spot of an island at the mouth of the Bogue.

Sixteen of the most notorious opium dealers, Dent, Matheson and Morgan among them, had been detained in Canton until the end of May. Then they'd been booted out by Lin with the pronouncement that they were never to return to Canton.

"Chengqua?" Kathleen broke into the conversation. Her father scowled at her.

"Kathleen?"

"You've seen Morgan? He's all right?"

"He was well when he left Canton, Kathleen. He is aboard one of his ships now, I believe." Cheng nibbled tentatively at one of Rose Bellamy's biscuits.

"Thank you, Chengqua." Kathleen dropped her eyes to her tea again to hide the flash of tears. Morgan had not even returned to Macao. Pris had become cold and silent, throwing herself into helping Mary Gutzlaff with the orphanage that the Gutzlaffs ran for abandoned girl children. "I'm tired of embroidery, Kathleen," was all she would say. She refused to discuss Morgan or the thing that had happened between them. Kathleen was desolate and bewildered.

Reverend Bellamy frowned and cleared his throat. "Kathleen," he said in English, "I'll thank you not to mention your brother's name in my 'earing! You know my feelings, and you've no respect for them."

Kathleen did not raise her eyes. "He's still my brother. I only wanted to know."

"Nay, you only wanted to torture me." The Reverend's voice was hard. "You wanted to remind me that I'd a son — a son who's no son of mine since 'e's in the employ of the devil!"

Kathleen stood up, brushing biscuit crumbs off her skin. "Mother needs me in the kitchen," she said in a tight voice, turning away so that her father could not see the resentment in her face.

"Aye! That's a woman's place! Be off with you!"

With a stricken glance at Cheng, who was politely pretending not to hear, Kathleen fled to the kitchen.

Rose was chopping cabbage for soup, her face pink and damp from the heat of the summer afternoon. Her hair, which was curly like Morgan's, hung down around her face in damp ringlets where it had escaped from its severe chignon. She looked young, Kathleen thought. Too young to have a grown son and daughter.

Kathleen picked up a paring knife and began to peel some potatoes. "Father doesn't want me in there," she pouted. "I may as well help you."

Rose paused in the midst of humming "*Blest be the Tie that Binds*" to answer her, "Well, you know how it is with men. Sometimes when they talk, they don't want women around. It's the same with us women, isn't it now?" She paused to gather up the sliced cabbage and dump it into the big iron pot. "I can finish this if you like. Maybe it would be a good time for you to run along and have a nice visit with Pris."

Kathleen looked down at the cut surface of the cabbage and said nothing. Her eyes followed the delicate curves and convolutions of the leaves. A cabbage was a wonderful thing. She didn't want to think about Pris.

Her mother saw her hesitation. "Don't tell me you and Pris have had a falling out!" she said, her hands never stopping in their motion.

God's blood, doesn't she know? wondered Kathleen. Has she been so buried in her kitchen and her house that she doesn't know, or is she only pretending not to know?

"It's not Pris and me," she said, deciding to be direct. "I think it's Pris and Morgan."

"Oh?" Rose's voice masked whatever she might be feeling inside. "What makes you say that, dear?"

Kathleen came down hard with the knife on the cutting board, chopping the potato in two. "You haven't seen her, Mamma! She looks like a little ghost! And when I mention Morgan's name, it — it's like cutting her! You can see her hurting! And Morgan hasn't come back at all."

"They seemed happy enough."

"They did at first." Kathleen took a deep breath. "I think Morgan had another woman. And I think Pris found out."

"Kathleen!"

"Mamma, you're so *naive*! You think everyone you love is perfect! Just because Father wouldn't ever do anything like that, it doesn't mean — "

"Kathleen — " Rose's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Morgan's a man, Mamma, and he has a man's weaknesses. He's not strong like Father. He's nothing like Father, really — "

Were her mother's hands trembling as they poured cupfuls of water into the iron pot? Kathleen wondered, but she could not be sure.

"I'm not saying it's true," Rose said softly. "But if it might be, then Pris needs you more than ever, child. Be a friend to her."

"I don't think she wants a friend. Not a friend who's Morgan's sister."

"And I think you're wrong, Kathleen. Give her a chance. Go and see her." Rose opened the front of the stove and poked at the fire. It was sweltering in the kitchen. "Go on. I can manage here."

Kathleen wiped her sweating forehead with the back of her hand. She did not want to stay in the hot kitchen, but the thought of Pris's wan face and big, reproachful eyes made her feet drag. "All right, Mamma," she sighed, then turned and opened the door.

"Mind the flies, Kathleen. Don't stand with it open like that."

"Yes, Mamma." Rose had a horror of flies. No matter how hot the weather, she always cooked with the door closed. The kitchen windows were covered with netting. Kathleen closed the door behind her, then remembered that she wanted to tell her mother not to wait supper for her. She opened the door again. Rose was standing with her face buried in the folds of her raised apron.

Kathleen quietly closed the door, holding the latch so that it would not click.

Priscilla was not at home. Vaguely relieved, Kathleen wandered back down the hill toward Macao's shallow Inner Harbor. The lofty merchant ships, with their deep draughts, could not enter here, but the

surface of the brown water was alive with sampans and junks. The docks were swarming with Chinese, unloading fish, shrimp, crabs and slimy squid in baskets, unloading pigs and flocks of ducks, baskets of rice, bundles of sugar cane, sacks of birdseed. Tiny Macao depended heavily upon China for its food supply. In turn, it provided its huge neighbor with a small window on the world.

Across the muddy harbor, scarcely half a mile in width, loomed the hills of China. Kathleen shaded her eyes and studied the distant villages. It was possible to make out individual houses, even windows and doors. The houses were gray, not lacquered in green, blue, gold and vermilion like the palace Marco Polo had described. Gray and drab — and the people were likely as poor over there as they were in Macao. Perhaps it was just a fantasy after all . . . this dream of China.

The twilight sun was hot. Kathleen loosened her hair and ran her fingers through it, turning her head to catch the slight breeze. She would climb the hill to the Camoens Grotto, she decided. From there it would be no more than a few minutes' walk to her house.

The grotto had been named for a much-loved Portuguese poet, one-eyed Luis de Camoens, who had passed a time of exile in Macao. It was not a true grotto — only an engaging tangle of elephant-sized boulders, pathways and gnarled trees — but on a hot summer evening it was the coolest spot in all Macao. Here old men gathered to play *mah jongg* and discuss the events of the day. Young men gathered to joke and gamble and to watch the pretty servant girls returning from the docks with fresh fish and vegetables. Those who kept thrushes and warblers in cages at home often brought them to the grotto in the evening, to give the captive birds fresh air and to let their songs mingle with those of their wild brothers.

Kathleen strolled along beside a crumbling stone wall, past a row of bamboo cages. The thrushes fell silent when she came too near, so she stood back and listened to them trilling, singing their hearts out in their cages, so near to the freedom of the trees and the open sky.

She followed the path upward until she stood at the grotto's summit. From here she could see the entire harbor and the land, all the way to the barrier gate where China began. The sky was pink and lavender, deepening to red. In the embrace of a twisted banyan root, she curled up to watch the sunset, filling her eyes with hues of scarlet, rose, flame and purple until her senses were drunk with color. Her

arms ached to embrace the sky, to encompass the world. Yet here she was, trapped in Macao, confined to the narrow existence of a minister's daughter. Like the thrushes, captive. Perhaps one day, she dreamed, Morgan would take her to Manila or Singapore, or even all the way to Calcutta. She would like to see England again as well, she thought, although she had never liked the cold winters. But even in England, she had been restless and alone. This pattern of solitary roaming had developed early in her. Many were the times she had slipped out of the house to wander the streets and docks of Portsmouth, a skinny little girl, tall for her age, wearing a faded dress that showed the tops of her high shoes and the bones of her wrists. The sailors and dock hands had called out to her, making gruff jokes that became all the more crude as she'd approached womanhood, but none of them had done her harm. She had felt strangely at home there, on the dirty, sea-worn docks, as much a part of the setting as the gulls and sandpipers.

Even as a child, she had spent hours staring out over the gray English Channel, trying to imagine what lay beyond it. France . . . Spain . . . Greece . . . Egypt . . . names that danced in her young head. Now, in much the same spirit, she gazed toward China.

Strange, it was. Others looked at China, too. Morgan saw it as a vast marketplace, just waiting to be opened for trade. He saw teas and silks, sweeping home toward England in spanking new Bellamy clippers. He saw buyers for his gingham and woollens, rattans and opium. Most of all, opium. To Morgan, China was wealth and power beyond the wildest dreams of a minister's son.

When Archer Bellamy looked at China, Kathleen fancied that it was only evil he saw. Some great, writhing yellow dragon with claws of sin and fangs of idolatry. Loathsome. Defiant. Coiled in waiting for the coming battle with the forces of God. To the Reverend, China was all wickedness, poverty and ignorance. Even their friend Chengqua was a heathen first and a man second, pleasant enough when the occasion required it, but still not to be trusted.

As for Rose, Kathleen wondered whether she thought of China at all. Rose was the same wherever she went, because her gaze was always turned inward, upon her home, upon her family, upon herself. Did she dream? Did she desire a different world for herself and those around her? Kathleen did not know, for her mother kept her silence.

She spoke only of events, of tasks, of duties, never of dreams. It had been many years since she had hummed love songs and nursery rhymes, since she had tied yellow ribbons in Kathleen's hair and waltzed with her, giggling, around the dining room table. Kathleen remembered the day Rose had returned from her mother's burial in London, pale and sober. She had embraced her husband with determined swiftness, as if the touch of him shot pain into her arms. Then she had brushed a hand on Kathleen's shoulder, smoothed Morgan's rumpled hair and gone into the kitchen to tidy up and make tea. Kathleen had followed her, her eyes sparkling. "Here Mamma," she had whispered. "I saved you two pieces of hoarhound!"

Rose had turned toward her with a dead expression on her beautiful face. "There'll be no more of that, Kathleen," she'd said in a voice that was as soft and cold as newly fallen snow. "Throw it away."

Perhaps it was then, Kathleen recalled, that very afternoon, that she had sneaked out of the house and gone down to the docks alone for the first time . . .

The sunset faded and the sky darkened to pewter, then to the hue of a black pearl. It was time to leave, Kathleen told herself repeatedly, but something in her was reluctant to shatter the peace of the evening, to break the harmony between her own body and the curving root of the banyan. What fun, she thought, if she were to fall asleep here. She could open her eyes in the morning and watch the sunrise from this same spot. Her father would be so deliciously angry. Why, with luck, she'd have half Macao out searching for her.

She huddled down into the curve of the root, enjoying the fantasy for a moment before her good judgment got the upper hand again. No, she was being a reckless fool. Already the stars were coming out, and the grotto was not safe after dark. Likely as not, she wouldn't wake up at all. They'd find her tomorrow with her throat slit, and blood, her lovely red blood, all over her awful blue dress.

Somewhere off behind her, a twig snapped. Her body stiffened like a doe's at the first whiff of danger. She held her breath and listened as the darkness gathered. She'd heard nothing, she reassured herself. Only a bird, or a rat rummaging in the dead leaves. Still, the desire to stay until morning had fled. She got up quickly, brushing fragments of leaves and bark from her skirt. The trees were black ghosts around her as she turned and began to walk rapidly down the path.

Something caught her waist and jerked her backward. Her heart stopped for an instant, then sank with dismay as she heard a smooth voice out of the darkness.

"Ah, Kathleen, *queridinha!*" Joaquin's hands slid around her. As he pulled her close, she felt his wet lips on the back of her neck. "You were waiting for me, eh?"

Swiftly, she sized up the situation. The Praya was far away. She could not burst away from him and lose herself in the crowd. Not here. And there was something in his voice, a determination in the way his hands held her tight, that filled her with dread. She knew she would not escape him easily. "Would you like to walk me home, Joaquin?" she asked with forced gaiety, knowing that her only chance to get away lay in luring him out of the isolation of the grotto.

"Yes, but very slowly, and not now . . . certainly not now . . ." He turned her in his arms. Thin as he was, his muscles were like steel wires. She stiffened and pushed with her hands against his chest. His arms only tightened, flattening her breasts against his ribs.

"Joaquin . . . you're hurting me!"

"And you're hurting *me*, *queridinha!* Don't you know it when a man's on fire for you — ?"

"It's over, Joaquin. I told you."

"Listen to me, Kathleen!" One hand reached up and cupped her face in a grip that was strong as a vise. "There's going to be trouble. My uncle's heard rumors . . . The Chinese are going to come in here one of these days, and they'll kill every English man, woman and child in Macao! It's coming to that! But the Portuguese have no quarrel with them. As the wife of the governor's nephew, you'd be safe. So would your family!"

"Would you be safe, Joaquin, as the brother-in-law of a known opium seller? No, it won't work. Let me go!" She pushed against him.

"In my own good time, *amor!* I mean to have you, Kathleen — " He began to stroke her hair, pulling so strongly downward that she winced. "I've had the decency to offer you honor, but since that doesn't suit you — " He bent and kissed her hotly. His tongue snaked between her teeth, forcing her mouth open as he bent her backward over his arm.

". . . Joaquin!" She wrenched her face away, leaving a trail of spit across one cheek. Drawing back, she kicked him in the shins, feeling

hard bone crunch against the toe of her shoe. He cursed in Portuguese, but his grip on her waist only tightened. His thin fingers dug into her ribs like needles, hurting until she whimpered. "Joaquin . . . no! I'll scream!"

His eyes gleamed like a wolf's in the darkness. "Scream, *queridinha*. Who's to hear you? The birds? Some poor coolie who'll only think the evil spirits are after him?" His tone softened, sweetened. "Don't fight, Kathleen . . . You were born to be loved by me — " He bent his dark head and pressed his damply open mouth onto the curve of her neck. His tongue savored her protesting flesh. She felt the pressure of his teeth . . .

The trick had worked before. She relaxed in his arms, pretending to yield for a moment. His grasp softened. Her heart drummed like a wild bird's as his lips moved up her neck. For a few breaths, she rested, gathering her strength for flight.

Just as he found her lips again, she tore herself from his arms. Not fast enough. He was a cat, catching her again with one lightning pounce; jerking her close again as much in anger as in passion. She was fighting now, scratching and biting. Her fingers clawed at him, the nails raking his cheek. Gathering her force, she screamed, but the sound was muffled by a quick, cruel hand that clasped and twisted her mouth. Terrified and enraged, she sank her teeth into his soft palm, feeling the flesh part, tasting salty blood. He yelped with pain, raised his hand and brought it down hard across her face.

"I said I meant to have you, Kathleen," he hissed between his teeth. "And I shall have you on my own terms, here and now!" Gasping with fury, he seized the neck of her dress in his fist and ripped it open to the waist. Blue buttons flew and bounced down the path.

"I — hope my father kills you for this! If I don't kill you first!" White with rage and panic, Kathleen clutched her dress with one hand and flailed at Joaquin's chest with the other. To her dismay, she felt herself growing weaker. His hands were everywhere, holding her fast, pulling back her dress where he had ripped it, invading her chemise, clawing at her breasts.

His breath rasped in her ear as he swept her up in his arms and turned toward a leaf-filled hollow beneath the banyan tree. "Here, Kathleen . . . " he muttered, "and now!" He threw her hard into the

leaves and flung himself on top of her. With his hands, he pulled up her skin and ripped at her pantalets. She began to plead with him.

"Joaquin . . . no, please . . . You'll ruin me for any decent marriage . . . I'll kill myself afterward — I swear it! Joaquin, for the love of God, don't . . . !" Her words were lost in a scream as she heard the tearing of the cloth.

Her strength was gone. She lay on the ground, moaning, pleading, even praying, as he fumbled with the buttons of his trousers. He was more careful with his own clothing than he'd been with hers, the bitter thought flashed through her mind. A light breeze swept through the grotto, chilling her where she had never been chilled before, and she knew that below the mound of her skirts and petticoats she was naked. No man had ever seen her naked before. To a degree, she was already ruined. "I'll kill you!" she hissed between her teeth. "Joaquin — I vow by heaven, if you don't let me go — " She thrashed feebly on the bed of leaves, but his strength and his weight held her down and he did not answer her threat. Nothing she thought or said or did could make any difference to him now.

"Joaquin — " she sobbed in desperation as she felt the press of his body against her thighs. "Joaquin — for the love of God — " She had dreamed of the first time, of how it would be with a man she would love. Not like this. Not brutal and dirty and shameful. She struggled. She kept her legs pressed together, tense and hard. But he was strong . . . She could not stop him —

Suddenly, she heard a sound — was it a shout? She felt Joaquin being jerked upward and wrenched off her by some force that was even stronger than he was. It was almost as if he had been snatched away by some heavenly hand.

The moon had come out. As she rolled over, pulling her petticoat down over her bare legs, she heard Joaquin cursing. "Filthy Chinese! Dog! Pig!" She looked up at the figure towering above her, the moonlight gleaming on his shaved skull, his white-soled boots planted firmly on the earth.

"Chengqua!"

"Kathleen, are you harmed?" There was an underlying rage in his voice, something she had never heard before.

"No." She rolled herself into a ball to hide her bare breasts. "You came just in time." She could not say more. She could only huddle

there in the hollow of leaves, shaking and whimpering like a frightened puppy.

When she looked up at Chengqua again, she saw that he was standing in the same spot, the muscles of his face taut with suppressed anger. His broad chest rose and fell as he stared over at Joaquin, who lay sprawled against a tree, breathing hard and pulling the gap in his trousers together.

"It is an unspeakable thing you have done!" Cheng spoke slowly, in measured English, his voice like hot lava flowing under a glacier. Kathleen looked over at Joaquin, at the way he was spread-eagled on the ground, still dazed by the force of the landing. She trembled with awe as she realized that Chengqua could well have killed him if he had chosen to.

Joaquin had recovered sufficiently to spit his contempt in Cheng's direction. "Pig!" he muttered dully. "Chinese scum!" His eyes boiled with hatred as he got his pants together and pulled the buttons through the buttonholes. Kathleen half-expected him to scramble to his feet and hurl himself at Cheng, but then she noticed the two husky bearers standing beside the sedan chair at the edge of the path. Joaquin had seen them, too. He chose to spend his venom through his mouth. "Are you coming, Kathleen? You're better off with me than with that slant-eyed son of a Manchu whore!"

Kathleen saw Cheng tense, but he did not move from where he stood. "Get out of here, Joaquin," she said disgustedly. "If Chengqua doesn't kill you, I will!"

"A Chinese! A damned, filthy Chinese! You'd choose him over me! *Cadela!* Red-haired bitch!" He was swearing in English and Portuguese. Cheng stood impassively, his arms folded across his chest, his face a mask of Oriental inscrutability. He slipped his coffee-colored outer robe over his head and tossed it to Kathleen. His inner robe was of white silk, similar to the brown one except that it was not so loose-fitting. He did not look at her as she covered herself.

Joaquin stood shakily on his long legs now. He flashed Cheng a final glare of contempt, spat in the dirt once more and strode away down the path.

Cheng, his shoulder muscles rippling under the thin white silk of the inner robe, extended a hand and lifted Kathleen to her feet. His face had lost some of its tautness. His fingers were gentle. Once again,

he resembled the Chengqua she knew — and yet, to Kathleen, he would never be the same, for she had seen him in anger. And she had learned that even his fury was calm and controlled. There was violence in him, and a physical strength that was awesome. But Chengqua was in total command of himself, and she did not know whether she liked him the more or the less for it. Part of her, at least, would have relished seeing him pound Joaquin Silveira into a mass of bruised and whimpering flesh.

She clung to the strength of his hand for an instant before she gained her balance. Then she pulled his brown robe down over her ripped dress. The fabric of the robe was pure, raw silk, masculine in its heaviness and texture, surrounding her with Cheng's own faint aura of sandalwood. Underneath its concealing folds, her mortified body quivered with rage and pain. Yes, she swore inwardly, if Joaquin had violated her, she would have found a way to kill him.

She pressed her hands against her face until the shaking had nearly stopped. When she took her hands away, Chengqua was looking at her, but he lowered his eyes at once, which was not at all like him. She reached out and touched his arm. Did he shrink away from her or had she only imagined it? "Chengqua," she whispered, "if you hadn't come — "

"I had left your father's house and my chair was passing near the grotto when I heard a cry." His voice was curiously flat. "I remembered that you had not yet returned home — " He drew in a deep, sharp breath. "I will report the young man to Governor Silveira Pinto myself," he said in his normal manner, the veneer of politeness in place once more. "The governor is a just man. He will see that his nephew does not trouble you again, Kathleen."

"Thank you, Chengqua." She studied him, the way his eyes turned away from her. And when she had touched him a moment ago — no, she had not imagined it. He *had* pulled back.

Momentarily, she puzzled over it. He was angry, perhaps, because she had defied her father's rules about going out at night, or because he suspected it was *she* who had enticed Joaquin, but neither possibility seemed to justify his manner toward her. It was something deeper that troubled him, something more unsettling. Her eyes searched his face, the lowered eyelids that hid his feelings from her — and suddenly, with a lurch of the heart, she knew.

In the moment his hands had seized Joaquin and flung him off her exposed body, his own eyes had glimpsed her in the moonlight. Chengqua had looked on her and found himself a man, without the will to look away.

For an instant, her cheeks flamed hot with indignation. Then she looked into his face again and saw the pain there. No, she realized, he had not desired it so. The sight of her body had disturbed him in a way he had no wish to be disturbed. In truth, it was she who had offended him. She stared down at her feet, mortified. Oh, Chengqua, my dear friend, she thought, I would not have wished this shame on either of us!

His voice was a whisper in the darkness, deeper than the sigh of the breeze but not a good deal louder. "Kathleen, some things that cannot be changed are best forgotten."

He had read her thoughts and answered them. She could not look up at him, but she felt the tendrils of her sixth sense reaching out to him. For the briefest of moments, their minds clasped like two hands, and even what he had seen became a secret bond between them.

The trembling power of the moment could not last. Kathleen caught her breath and forced herself to meet his eyes. They were warm and dark, and now, in their depths, she saw only kindness.

"Look at me, Chengqua! I'm a sight!" she said in English. The laugh she attempted came out a hollow, nervous titter. It was too soon to laugh.

"Get into the chair," he commanded. "My bearers will take you home to your father, Kathleen. Close the curtains and no one will see you."

"My father!" She sucked in her breath. "No! He'll kill me, Chengqua!"

"The wife of your brother, then."

"No. She's not at home —"

Cheng sighed. "Then my own home, if it pleases you, Kathleen. I have an old serving woman who is skilled in sewing. She can mend your dress."

"Yes. Thank you." Kathleen climbed into the single seat of the sedan chair and drew the curtains.

"I will follow at a distance," he said. "That way, the people in the streets will not see me walking next to my own chair and wonder who is inside."

"Then I will return this," she slipped out of the brown silk robe and passed it between the closed curtains, "so that they will not wonder why Cheng walks in the street without his robe."

He took the robe without a word, pulled it over his head and clapped his hands for the bearers to be off. Kathleen leaned back against the quilted silk lining of the sedan chair and closed her eyes. The brocaded cushions smelled of sandalwood. She inhaled hungrily, as if the warm, clean fragrance could drown the memory of what had happened. But she could not blot out the reality of her torn dress and smarting body, of her hair, tangled with dirt and leaves, her nails broken and edged with Joaquin's blood. A measure of her virtue was gone, if not her virginity itself. Love, when it came, would never be as pure and beautiful as she might have hoped. Slowly, then faster, like rain, the tears began to come. She cried until they were spent.

The sedan chair slowed, swung sharply to the right and then again to the left before it came to rest. Even with the curtains closed, Kathleen knew that she had passed around the "spirit gate" that marked the entrance to Chengqua's house. She had never been here before, but she had seen many such gates. Any Chinese dwelling built around a courtyard might be expected to have one — a high, plain wall standing a few feet beyond the entrance, forcing anyone coming in to turn aside and go around it. A spirit gate provided only privacy for the household, but protection as well, for it was commonly known that *kuei*, or evil spirits, traveled only in straight lines and could not turn corners.

Holding her torn dress together with one hand, she parted the curtains of the chair and stepped out onto the paving stones. She found herself in a small courtyard, overhung with flowering plum trees whose blossoms gleamed like clustered pearls in the moonlight. A path wound through the garden, circling a stone bench, a round stone table with two stools and a silvery lotus pool, where goldfish darted like fiery shadows. "Oh!" Kathleen gasped, first in delight, then in surprise, as she saw the old woman standing before her, a spidery little creature all in black, wizened with age, her white hair knotted atop her head. Her eyes were small and sharp, like a bird's, and they surveyed Kathleen with a lively fascination.

Cheng had managed to arrive ahead of the chair. He spoke rapidly to the old servant, so rapidly that Kathleen could not understand him.

"Follow her," he said more slowly to Kathleen. "She will get something for you to put on while she mends your dress."

The old woman trudged away, looked back over her shoulder and smiled reassuringly. Kathleen followed her, clutching the front of her dress to her chest as the woman led her to a small room off the kitchen.

It was evidently the old woman's bedroom. A narrow bed stood in one corner, with a wicker chest at its foot. There was a little dressing table with bamboo legs and a small, cheap mirror with a copper frame fastened to the wall above it. On the opposite wall was a wooden crucifix inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"You're Christian?" Kathleen was surprised.

"No." The old woman grinned, showing a black hole where her two front teeth had been. "But it's pretty. I found it in the street, outside a church." She bowed and looked up at Kathleen with her soft old eyes. "You speak our tongue. That is good. I am Kao Ma, your servant, my lady."

"Kao Ma." Kathleen copied the bow and the old woman beamed. Then her wrinkled brown hands reached up and began to pull Kathleen's tattered dress off her shoulders.

"Ahh . . ." she murmured sympathetically, clucking her tongue. "Some bad man did this to you, lady. But Kao Ma will fix it. You'll see." She chattered as she peeled away Kathleen's clothing, layer by layer, petticoat, corset, chemise and pantalets. Ahhh . . . she gasped, seeing the state of Kathleen's torn undergarments. "A bad man!" She shook her head. "When I was a girl, I was servant to a *fan kwei* woman. She was fat. Ugly. But you, lady — " She cocked her head and studied Kathleen like a wise old bird. "Not so ugly for a *fan kwei*. A bath would make you smile, yes?"

Kathleen turned her nakedness away from Kao Ma's unembarrassed gaze. A bruise the size of an orange was darkening on her hip where Joaquin had flung her to the ground. There were scratches on her breasts and on her thighs where his nails had raked her as he tore away her pantalets. She felt filthy, contaminated, tainted. "Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes, Kao Ma! Thank you!"

She emerged from her sandalwood-scented bath in Cheng-qua's porcelain bath-jar in much higher spirits. What luxury! What warm, soothing, soul-pampering luxury, she mused as Kao Ma towed her dry and rubbed perfumed oil into her shoulders. She closed her eyes

as the old woman brushed the leaves and tangles out of her hair. Now she knew why the Chinese called the Westerners "barbarians."

"I have only my poor clothes to offer you while you wait for your own to be mended." Kao Ma surveyed the length of Kathleen's towel-wrapped body. "You are very tall, lady, but I will see what I can find." She opened the lid of the wicker chest and carefully raised each layer of packed clothing, serviceable gray cottons like the simple jacket and trousers she was wearing, quilted coats for winter. As her hand found the bottom of the chest, she grinned, showing the gap where her front teeth had been. "Ah! This will do, perhaps!" Still beaming, she lifted out a set of folded garments in gleaming red silk.

"You like this?" She shook out the simple red gown and the embroidered, knee-length robe that was to be worn over it.

"It's beautiful, Kao Ma!" Kathleen held out her arms. The old woman pulled away the towel and slipped the fragrant silk over her head. It smelled deliciously of old wood as it slid like water over her skin, just brushing the curves of her body. True, it was not long enough. Kathleen was taller than Kao Ma by nearly a foot, and the hem of the gown came only halfway between her knees and ankles.

Kao Ma wrinkled her brow. "Too short. But for a time . . . I am old, but my fingers are swift. It will not take me long to mend your gown. Now the robe — hold out your arms — ah, the sleeves will be short, but that can't be helped. No — let me fasten it. It's been so long since this poor woman has dressed a young lady. I find it pleasant." Kao Ma's nimble brown fingers took each gold frog fastener and pulled the knotted cord through its matching loop. Then she stepped back to survey the results, cocking her head to one side and squinting a little.

"Ahhh . . .!" she breathed, the gray knot of hair atop her head bobbing. Kathleen smiled to show the old woman her pleasure.

"And now — " Kao Ma's old eyes twinkled, "my master has asked me to conduct you to the garden to have tea with him. Come . . . come!"

Cheng was seated at the round table in the garden when Kao Ma led the barefoot Kathleen through the moon gate. A big stone lantern glowed beside him on its three-legged base. She saw that he had changed his brown robe for one of royal blue. He blended into the spell of the night and the garden like a figure in some ancient silk tapestry. For a moment, he gazed at her without speaking, silent and inscrutable, as she stood in the circle of the gateway. Then he smiled.

"I approve," he said. "You should wear our clothing more often, Kathleen. Come, sit down." He indicated the round stone stool on the near side of the table. Kathleen tiptoed toward him, the paving stones cool under the soles of her bare feet, and eased herself onto the stool. The thin, fragrant silk of the red robe caressed her skin as she moved.

Kao Ma brought tea in a flowered pot and poured it into porcelain cups that were as delicate as eggshells. On each cup was the traditional painting of Mon San Gun, the god of longevity. Cheng looked amused as Kathleen automatically glanced around for cream and sugar. "Tonight," he said, raising his cup with both hands, "you will try it the Chinese way. Pure tea. Taste it."

Kathleen lifted her cup and sipped the clear tea cautiously. It was hot, steaming in the evening coolness and lightly scented with sweet olive. "It's . . . good," she said. "Strange, but good."

Cheng beamed his approval. "Tea is made with great devotion," he said. "It should be drunk with reverence . . . not with rock candy and cow's milk! This is *oolong*; the name means black snake. The *souchong* your mother makes is so called because it is picked when the leaves are small, before the spring rains. Sometimes I like *pekoe*, which is named for the white fur that covers the leaf."

When Kathleen leaned forward to show her interest, he explained to her how the tea was picked and cured by passing the leaves in baskets over charcoal fires. After each firing, the individual leaves were unrolled by careful hands until, when perfectly fermented, they kept their tight curl. The final drying of the tea took place in a room called the "human oven," into which the workers rushed with covered mouths for a minute each time to rescue the laden baskets. At last the tea was mixed with flower petals, if fragrance was desired.

As he spoke, Kathleen gazed at him over the rim of her teacup, their eyes meeting comfortably. How at home he was in this setting, she thought. The pagan features, the braided queue and exotic, long-nailed hands that seemed so out of place in the Bellamy parlor belonged here in the enchantment of this moonlit garden, in the charm of this small house with its secluded courtyard, its simple gray walls and its tile roof with upturned eaves. Chinese roofs were so often so beautifully made, she had heard, in order to give heaven the most favorable view.

"I see that Kao Ma is fond of you," Chengqua said.

"Kao Ma is a darling. But why do you say that?"

"Because she has given you her wedding robes to wear." Kathleen felt a sudden rush of feeling. The old woman could have given her rags! Instead, she had lent her the most precious thing she had.

"I know how much she treasures those robes," Cheng said. "She was only a farm girl when she married. Most brides from poor families rent their wedding dresses, but Kao Ma has told me how she worked at night in the house of a silk merchant to earn the cloth, and how she made every stitch with her own hands. After her own wedding, she put it away to save for her daughters — but not one daughter, alas, lived to marry. Kao Ma has done you great honor."

"I am honored, Chengqua," Kathleen whispered, momentarily overcome by the image of a young Chinese girl, cutting and sewing fine red silk with her work-roughened fingers; of a woman, waiting, aging, bearing and burying girl children who would never grow up to wear her treasure — then of those same hands, brown with age, fastening the gold frogs across the breast of a stranger and a foreigner.

"Kathleen — " Cheng's voice held a note of anxiety. "Are you unhappy?"

"No, Chengqua. Only . . . unworthy of Kao Ma's gift. To wear this lovely, precious gown is an honor greater than I deserve."

"If I may be so bold, Kathleen . . . " He was leaning back a little, studying her, the cup balanced in his fingers. "It is you who honor the gift. You have no doubt been told many times that you are a beautiful woman. Allow me to add my own humble compliment."

Kathleen, who was well accustomed to male flattery, looked down at her hands, suddenly and inexplicably shy. "Thank you, Chengqua," she murmured. "But it is the gown that is truly lovely . . . and this garden, and this night." She gazed into her empty teacup, surprised to find that she was trembling. Perhaps it was only the coolness of the air, for her robe was thin. Yet she sensed something else, some impending force hanging over her like the crest of a breaking wave, and she felt strangely vulnerable.

Her eyes, searching for some diversion, darted about the garden until they came to rest on a circular design that was carved upon the back of the spirit gate. It was a curious thing — two interlocking shapes, like teardrops or swirled comets, one light, one dark, fitting

together to form a perfect circle. Light and dark — each part containing a small dot of the other, like an eye.

"*Yin* and *yang*." Cheng had followed the line of her gaze. "The symbol of balance and order, of harmony in the universe . . ." When her eyes questioned him, he continued, "*Yang* is the sign of the sun, of light, fire, heaven and goodness — the male element. *Yin* is female. *Yin* is earth, the moon . . . darkness, evil —"

She wrinkled her nose. "Evil! Ah, that's not fair! And everyone knows that most of the evil in this world is done by men! I don't like your *yin* and *yang*!"

His smile was the smile of the East, tranquil and mysterious. "But you must understand, Kathleen, that no one is pure *yin* or *yang*. Each of us has elements of both, and it is the balance of *yin* and *yang* that produces harmony. Not only in man, but in all nature."

"Chengqua, are you a Buddhist?" It was strange, Kathleen mused, that in the two years she had known him she had never questioned Cheng's religion. To her father, he was simply "heathen," like almost all Chinese, but she knew that even among heathens there were strong differences, just as there were many shades of belief among Christians.

"I see some good in all religions," Cheng answered, his chin resting lightly on his hand, "including your own, Kathleen. And I also see the fallacies and the hypocrisy inherent in each. I honor my ancestors in the traditional way, and I studied for years the teachings of Kung Fu-tse, the one you would call Confucius. One could say that I am more of a Confucian than anything else — but then, Confucianism is not so much a religion as a philosophy . . ." He mused in silence for a moment, the moonlight throwing his features into stark light and shadow. The stone lantern at his side had burned low. "My wife gives gifts of food and incense to Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and to the little god of the kitchen who is said to take his report of the family's doings to heaven at the end of each year. I allow it to please her, though to me it seems a trifle foolish. Such things have always been done." He sighed. "I have also studied the *Tao*, and conversed many long hours with an old friend who is a Muslim — and as you know, I have Christian friends as well. I find elements of value in all their beliefs . . ."

His voice trailed off softly in the evening twilight. Kathleen sat beside him in companionable silence, her eyes on his right hand where

it rested on the table, lightly cradling the porcelain cup. Not a large hand, but broad, strong and firmly shaped. On his little finger, he wore a simple ring of fine white jade.

"But what do *you* believe?" she asked softly.

Cheng paused, thinking before he spoke. A cricket chirped from the tangled roots of an old plum tree. "I believe in the wisdom that created a universe based on laws of order," he said. "And I believe that in the true harmony of nature everything has its place. *Yin* as well as *yang* . . . darkness as well as light . . . pain and adversity as well as joy, for without one, the other loses its meaning." He had put the cup down. His face was calm as he studied his own hands, the expressive fingers extended and touching at the tips. "The truly happy man, the superior man, sees his own small place in the world for what it is and makes the best of it, whether he is a beggar, a merchant or an emperor." Unexpectedly, he smiled at her. "That, you might say, is the Confucian in me speaking, Kathleen."

"Then you believe it is wrong to strive against fate? To try to change one's lot in life?"

"It is wrong when it is useless, for it only wastes one's strength and causes unhappiness. We have a saying: A pig is made fat so that he will not go far from the mud and learn that he is a pig. If he should go to Tientsin and see larks . . . ah, then he would never be content to be even a lean pig?"

She smiled. "You have sayings for everything! But is it so wrong to challenge one's fate if something can be done? Is it wrong to fight against injustice?"

"Ah — you are right. That is different. Injustice is the enemy of peace and harmony. To battle against it is honorable."

Kathleen brushed a hand through her long red hair. "And that is why your Commissioner Lin is fighting against the sale of opium?"

Her question had surprised him. No — it had pricked him. She had caught the flash of hidden anguish in Cheng's eyes, and she realized there was much she did not know about this strange man.

"Opium has ruined many promising lives, Kathleen," he said in a voice that was tinged with bitterness. He stared down at his hands, and she sensed that some invisible door had closed between them.

"Chengqua," she said at last. "Joaquin told me that the Chinese would come into Macao and kill all the English one day soon. Is that so?"

"I think not. We have always left Macao in peace."

"Your Commissioner Lin, would he do such a thing?"

"The *ch'in ch'ai* is not a violent man, Kathleen."

"What is he like, Chengqua?"

Cheng put his teacup down on the table, rose to his feet and walked to the edge of the pool, where he stood gazing down at the movements of the goldfish. "A strong man," he said. "Patient and wise, but very determined. Perhaps too determined. But Lin Tse-hsu, I believe, is a man of destiny."

Kathleen walked over to where he stood, the flagstones cool under her bare feet. "You admire him?"

"Perhaps."

"And do you like him?"

"Yes, I do, Kathleen."

"Is he handsome?"

Cheng shook his head. His eyes danced with amusement. "Commissioner Lin is nearly sixty and as fat as two men! The questions you ask!"

Kathleen gazed down at the goldfish that flashed like liquid sparks in the glow of the lanterns. Cheng was standing very near to her, so near that she could hear the rise and fall of his breathing and smell the light aroma of sandalwood on his skin. She found herself acutely conscious of his maleness — of Cheng Lo the *man*, who concealed beneath his serene Chinese exterior a man's heart and a man's passions. She remembered the afternoon in the parlor, looking at him and wondering whether it was really possible that Chinese men did not kiss their women. She could ask him now, she mused, her pulse quickening, or she could even —

Seized by a sudden devilish impulse, she turned swiftly toward him, pulled his head down and kissed him full on the mouth.

She felt his breath stop. His lips were tense against hers, his body rigid against her clinging warmth. He made no move to thrust her away from him. Yet she felt him fighting her, felt the struggle raging inside him as he resisted.

She released him and stumbled backward, shaken by her own boldness. His face was pale with shock.

"Kathleen . . . why?" He spoke at last. There was pain in his voice and in his eyes. Pain and genuine outrage. Only then did she realize

what a fragile thing the friendship between them was. In Chinese society, it would have been unthinkable for a man to have such a relationship with a woman outside his own household. The easy comradeship that had existed between Chengqua and herself had been possibly only because she was foreign, and thus outside the realm of normal social boundaries. This barrier between them had been a convenience, a protection. Now she had stormed and smashed it, and in doing so had destroyed the fine and delicate thing that lay behind it.

"Why, Kathleen?" he asked again, his voice still harsh with surprise.

Because she did not know what else to do, she laughed. "I don't know. Curiosity. Wondering what it would be like . . ." She shrugged. "I'm sorry, Chengqua. I've behaved like a fool."

"I should not have let you be brought to this place," he said. "Forgive me, Kathleen."

"Chengqua," she whispered, genuinely sorry, "you said yourself that sometimes what cannot be changed is best forgotten."

His narrow eyes reflected the lantern like burning coals. "And can it truly be forgotten? Can I see you again at your father's house without remembering? I am no more than a man, Kathleen." He sighed deeply, and when he spoke again, his voice and manner had softened. "Listen to me, as one who truly wishes you well. You're young and full of life — and so lovely that no man could resist you for long. But you are like a flame that sets fire to everything it touches, even that poor, bedeviled Portuguese boy that I had to pull off you tonight. Even — " he touched his chest, "even this one."

Kathleen stared down at her feet in silence, her face hot.

"I have two daughters near your age. Both of them are married. You should be, too. Your father should find you a husband."

She drew herself up. "We English find our own husbands!"

"A bad custom. See where it leads!"

"Did your parents choose your wife for you, Chengqua?"

"Certainly." The edge had gone from his voice. "I had never seen her before I lifted the wedding veil."

"And you are happy with her?"

Was there an instant's hesitation in his answer? "She's a fine woman, Kathleen."

"And have you taken concubines?" She risked a smile.

He scowled at her. "I have not. But you lead me away from what I wanted to say to you. You must be more careful. If I had been a different man a moment ago, you'd have found yourself right back where you were with the nephew of the governor! Why do you do such things?"

"Because — " She pressed her hands to her face. "Because I'm *bored*! I'm smothering in Macao, Chengqua! There's nothing for me — nothing and no one!" Her voice had begun to quiver. "And now . . . I've offended you!"

"Offended me?" Wry amusement flickered about the corners of his mouth. "Quite the contrary. Once I recovered from the shock of it, I'll confess I was flattered that you would think me — " He broke off and turned away from her, his eyes fixed on the circular *yin* and *yang* symbol carved into the back of the spirit gate. "Kathleen," the anguish had returned to his voice, "If I had felt nothing, then perhaps it would not be necessary for me to say this." He paused for the length of a deep breath. The moonlight rippled on the blue-black plaits of his thick queue. "For the sake of discretion . . . and for the sake of your own reputation and honor . . . it is best that we do not meet again."

"Chengqua!" Her whisper barely stirred the air. "Forgive me!"

"To the good fortune of us both," he said softly, still facing the gate, "you have done nothing that needs forgiveness. It is only my own thoughts, Kathleen. They have already begun to wander forbidden paths, and they must be stopped. For your own sake as well as for mine."

His honesty had moved her as nothing else could, and she was shamed by the magnitude of it. How many other men's thoughts had she set upon forbidden paths? Even Joaquin — how much of the guilt was hers? Her every teasing glance had driven him on, had taunted and enraged him until his passions had erupted against her.

"Look at me, Chengqua," she pleaded. He turned toward her, his face infinitely sad in the moonlight. "My dear friend," she whispered, "you are wiser than anyone I have ever known. And I will never forget what I have learned from you this night . . . only I must know that we will part with only good feelings between us — "

"Of course, Kathleen." He reached out to take her hand in the manner he had learned from her father. Impulsively, she seized his fingers, raised them to her face, and for an instant pressed his palm hard

against her cheek. "Kao Ma should have my gown finished," she murmured in a tight little voice. "And then your bearers can take me home. Good-bye, Chengqua . . . and thank you." She did not have the courage to look up at him. If his face showed pain or anger, she did not want to see it.

She walked from the garden without looking back. Kao Ma and the mended blue gown were waiting in the bedroom. The old woman helped her change, chattering softly like an ancient, amiable monkey. Kathleen could not help wondering what those old eyes had seen in the garden, but Kao Ma's manners revealed nothing.

When the sedan chair took Kathleen away once more, the old woman was at the gate to wave farewell — but Chengqua was nowhere to be seen.

After the bearers had taken Kathleen away in the sedan chair, Cheng retired to his chamber. He sat down at his desk, wet the ink-stone and smeared it with a stick of scented ink. His report to the emperor would be overdue if he put it off even one more day, and the Son of Heaven would not be pleased.

Lin had given an ultimatum to the foreigners. No ship was to enter the river unless her captain signed a bond, putting up his ship, his cargo and his own life as forfeit if his vessel were found to contain opium.

The foreign *taipan*, Captain Elliot, had replied that the bond was outrageous. The other English merchants had joined as one man in refusal to sign it. Rather than do so, they would take their trade elsewhere. They were now anchored far out in the estuary, many of them in the harbor that lay north of Hong Kong Island. Worse, the opium trade along the coast was picking up once more, and the destruction of the twenty thousand chests had only served to drive the price upward.

With a sigh, Cheng took up his writing brush, shaped it to a point with his mouth, dipped its tip into the ink and carefully wrote the customary greeting to the Imperial Dragon with which he began each memorial. Then he paused, his brush hanging in midair, his mind fumbling vainly for words.

He touched his lips. They still tingled warmly from the strange thing Kathleen had done. When he closed his eyes, his body still felt the press of her breasts, naked beneath the thin layers of silk. No — it

was not wise to think of her. Not in that way or in any other. Not even when the most innocent thought of her filled him with an ache that was as sweet as it was frightening.

With a faint smile at the memory, he recalled their very first meeting — the way she had come dancing into the parlor of her father's house and had clasped her hands to her mouth like a delighted child at the sight of him. She had been seventeen then, a gangling young colt of a girl, all legs and eyes, yet even then so much a woman that his throat had tightened when he looked at her. Her strange, wild beauty had captivated him from the beginning. Yet, because of the delicacy of their relationship, he had cultivated an attitude of paternal tenderness toward her. He had buried his desire and kept it buried. Until tonight.

Cheng cursed the foreigners and their uncivilized practice of letting their daughters run wild like goats. In a proper Chinese household, he would never have set eyes on a girl like Kathleen, and neither would Joaquin Silveira. She would have spent her early life in the seclusion of her home, unseen by any male eyes except those of her father and brother. Her first knowledge of a man's embrace would have come in the marriage bed, not in the secret warmth of a summer night, when she had no business being away from her home!

He rubbed his arms. His muscles still ached from the strain of holding back his response to her. It had taken all his strength to keep from seizing her in his arms and — But no. Even to think of it was wrong. Nothing could change the fact that she was a *fan kuei*, a foreign devil. And the barriers were as high on her side as they were on his. Liaisons between *fan kuei* men and Chinese girls were, perhaps, inevitable, and looked upon with acquiescence providing things were done discreetly and providing the girls were of the common class. But a Chinese man and an English girl — unheard of and unthinkable from any point of view!

He had stayed too long in the South! He found himself yearning for the icy crispness of a Peking winter, for wheat fields and yellow dust, for the wide plains of Jehol where a man could ride for days. He remembered too often the feel of a horse between his legs, the push of a falcon's weight against his wrist as it thrust upward to take flight, the twang of a bowstring close to his ear.

These warm spring nights found him tossing on his bed or rising to pace the length of his room like a caged leopard, unable to sleep.

He was at a loss to explain this new restlessness. Perhaps it was the strain of the burden his duty to the emperor had placed upon him, or only the wind and the damp heat. Or perhaps, all along . . . it had been Kathleen.

Cheng drew in his breath and let it out slowly. He had friends his own age who took their morning tea with ginseng root and dried, ground tortoise penis to preserve their virility. But as for himself, there were times, like tonight, when he wished for some potion that would cool his simmering blood and free his mind to think.

Jung Fei, his wife, was a wise woman. She understood him better than he understood himself. When this tiresome business of the opium was settled, he would ask her to choose a small wife for him — a girl of her own liking, placid and sweet, who would keep the peace of his household. Then all would be well.

His thoughts flew to the house in Canton, where his sixteen-year-old son, Cheng Shen-lan, had returned from Peking three days ago. The boy was taller than Cheng remembered him, but so thin and hollow-eyed that his mother had been alarmed. "It's nothing." Cheng had assured her. "He's been studying too hard and neglecting his meals and rest, that's all." He had tried to make his words light and confident. Yet the sight of his son's peaked face, the shadows beneath his eyes, the silence where once there had been eager laughter, had chilled Cheng's heart with dread.

Perhaps the boy was ill, he speculated, perhaps only tired after the long journey. He would be his old self again with good meals and care. It was only that, nothing more, Cheng reassured himself. His father's heart would not let him consider any other possibility. Yet something in the youth's haunted eyes spoke of an awful, looming reality that would have to be faced. No, Cheng cried inwardly, it is too soon to think of it! Let me have my son a little longer without knowing! He put his hands over his eyes. His mind would not speak the fateful word. But the word was there. And the word was opium.

Nine

Hong Kong
July 7, 1839

Morgan Bellamy leaned on the rail of the *Peregrine* and watched the sun come up over the South China Sea, brushing the distant hills with gold. His ship, along with twenty or thirty others, rocked at anchor in the sheltered harbor off Hong Kong, its mainmast flying a red eagle on a blue field. The insignia had belonged to Blake Robards. Morgan, though he had changed the company's name, had chosen to keep its flag.

On his right, Hong Kong Island rose out of the water to wooded peaks that soared nearly two thousand feet in height. On his left, the hills of the Kowloon Peninsula tapered to flatness where the land reached out into the water. Already the fishing junks were at work, flitting over the waves like lopsided brown moths, their winglike sails spread to catch the breeze. Morgan ran a hand through his rumpled blond curls. His eyes burned; his mouth tasted like hell. He had not slept all night, and already he could tell that it was going to be hot.

He squinted into the rising sun and cursed the memory that had kept him tossing in his bunk until dawn. Pris, her stricken face in the light of the lantern as she'd crouched beside the bed and pulled on the clothes that she'd borrowed from some Chinese coolie. The last words she'd whispered to him in her hurt little voice before she disappeared into the night: "You've got what you want, Morgan. My father's company's yours and I'll not try to take it from you . . . but don't you ever come hear me again!"

Morgan cleared his throat and spat down into the green water. He could only hope she'd gotten back to Macao safely. For all he knew,

some thug could have slit her throat before she'd even reached the water stairs. But he'd have heard from his family if she'd been missing for long, he calculated, so he could only assume she was all right.

The damnable thing was, now that he'd lost her, he wanted her — wanted her so much he could almost taste the longing. What a jackass he'd made of himself that night! He should have known! No Chinese girl had ever responded to him that way. Ch'iu Ming and Choy Ling were both as passive as dough. But he'd been a little drunk, the night had been so dark, and he'd no inkling that Pris would smuggle herself over from Macao like that. Morgan leaned hard on the rail and moaned out loud, sick with remorse.

He'd find a way to make it up, he swore. Somehow. He'd written a score of letters, only to tear them up and throw them out through the porthole of the *Peregrine*. He had his own pride! And with the situation in Canton so tight, it was urgent that he stay with the ships. Who could tell what that Chinese madman Lin Tse-hsu was going to do next!

True, things could have been worse. At least Lin had kept his promise and allowed the Chinese servants to return to the Factories once 25 percent of the opium chests had been delivered. Some of the merchants, those less involved in the smuggling, had been given permission to leave Canton as the destruction progressed, and finally, when the last chest had been dumped into the lime trenches on Lankit Island, Lin had given even the most notorious of the opium merchants leave to depart. Morgan had boarded the *Peregrine* at Whampoa and sailed her down to Hong Kong where the other merchant ships were anchored.

His own sixteen hundred chests of Turkey opium had been among the first to go into the trenches, but the *Osprey* and the *Merlin* had sailed into Hong Kong Harbor since then, each with a thousand chests in her hold. Morgan had sent them up the coast where the trade was picking up again and good Patna and Benares had risen a little, seven hundred dollars to a chest, with Malwa nearly as high. Morgan's Turkey opium, however, was not doing well. The Chinese preferred the India-grown varieties, and Morgan's vessels were handicapped as well by the lack of decent interpreters. Oh, for a Karl Gutzlaff, he lamented, or a John Morrison! But the good men went where the pay was best, and Bellamy & Company had to be content with a couple of pidgin-speaking Chinese shroffs, or money-counters, of dubious reputation.

The American captains of the *Merlin* and the *Kestrel* had informed him that rather than sail under a British flag, they would be quitting at the end of the summer. As yet, Morgan had found no replacements that were both competent and willing. He suspected that the rumor about his complicity in Robard's death, along with his increasingly shaky financial condition, frightened qualified men away.

Morgan lit a cheroot and chewed on the end as he puffed in and out. Life was a vise, and he was caught in the squeeze of it. He had everything he'd set out to get — Pris, the Red Eagle Line, money and power — and he was riding a tiger to keep it! With a sigh, he flung the cheroot over the rail, turned away and went downstairs to wash and shave himself before breakfast.

Days were tedious aboard the ships, and the men welcomed any chance for diversion. Thus it was when the comprador, Wu Hung-li, brought a sampan alongside with the weekly stores of water and fresh meat and vegetables, a half-dozen of the American sailors pleaded with Morgan and the captain to be allowed ashore.

"We could go in the chop boat, sor." A wizened, tough little seaman named Pratt spoke for the group. "There's only a village there. We wouldn't do no harm, and you could send the longboat for us at sundown. Please, sor. We be agoin' stir crazy 'board ship."

Morgan hesitated but briefly. He had sensed a smoldering of resentment among the crew members — because he was British, probably, and because he'd taken over so abruptly from Robards. Here was a chance to allay some of that resentment. "Go ahead then," he said with a smile. "Just be careful. And be there when the longboat comes or you'll be swimming back to the ship."

The sailors rewarded him with broad grins. Then, laughing and thumping each others' shoulders, they scrambled down the rope ladder and boarded the sampan. Wu Hung-li's homely face assumed a look of martyred resignation as he followed them with his three coolies.

As Morgan watched the sampan grow small with distance, the coolie at the stern sculling with the single oar, the *Peregrine's* captain moved alongside him at the rail. His name was Adam Peabody, from Salem, and his cheeks were permanently chapped from forty-five years of sun and salt spray. His hair was gray as pewter and the brows above his blue eyes were frosted with age. At sixty-six, he was serving

his last year in the China trade and had no need to polish the rear end of his brash young employer.

"Ye didn't ask my opinion," he began gruffly. "But if ye had, I'd not have let them go. There's nothing save mischief and deviltry for them over there. They'll meet men from the other ships . . . get drunk, doubtless. Throw in some fisticuffs and a woman or two, and they'll not be worth spit for the rest of the week!"

"I thank you for your advice." Morgan thrust his hands into his pockets. "But they've been cooped up a long time without much to do. 'Twill be good for them, I'm thinking. Take the longboat and go yourself if you've a mind to, Peabody."

The old captain turned away and walked off, muttering under his breath. Morgan knew that it rankled him to be in less than full command of the *Peregrine* and to take orders from a man one-third his age. I should have asked the old sea dog about letting the men go, he thought. Ah, well, what's done — He gazed out over the harbor. The sampan had already made half of the distance to the mainland.

The hot morning wore into muggy afternoon. Even the expected rain did not come. Morgan gazed off toward the hills of the Kowloon Peninsula and began to wish that he'd gone with the men. Aye, the waiting was the worst of this cursed stalemate with the Chinese. Like sitting on a powder keg, wondering when some spark was going to blow you to kingdom come! With Lin insisting on the bond and Elliot refusing to sign it, something or someone would have to break. It not, heaven help them all! One thing the British merchant community had agreed upon: They would not go back to Canton in the fall. Not unless conditions were very much changed.

Commissioner Lin, in the interim, was using the time to thrust his torch into the opium nests in and around Canton. Wu Hung-li had reported to Morgan that Chinese dealers and smugglers were being rounded up and punished with strangulation. Even the addicts, poor devils, were being given a time limit of eighteen months to cure themselves or face execution as well.

Morgan played checkers with a grumbling Adam Peabody and won, as he usually did. The next time he looked toward the mainland, a thin column of smoke was rising above the fishing village of Chi'en-shat-sui.

Peabody was on his feet at once. "Nay, I don't like the looks of it!" he muttered. "Someone's up to no good!"

Morgan stared at the curling gray plume where it rose against the sky. "Aye," he said at last. "Lower the longboat and get me two stout men, Peabody. I'm going ashore."

By the time the longboat had made half the distance to Chi'en-shat-sui, Morgan could see that the smoke was coming from a Buddhist temple. He cursed under his breath. If the sailors had done it, the Chinese would be mad as hornets. Things could get ugly in a hurry.

The boat crunched onto bottom and Morgan leaped out ahead, splashing in the shallow water. The rocky beach was strewn with drying nets and discarded shells. Chi'en-shat-sui was no more than a hamlet, a cluster of thatch-roofed stone houses, shops and a temple or two. A quiet place ordinarily — but not today. The air was thick and hot with smoke from the blazing temple roof. From the square came the sound of shouting. Morgan ordered one man to follow him, the other to stay with the longboat. Then he darted up a narrow alleyway between two rows of huts, running at full tilt toward the village's center. Toward the end of the alley, he almost stumbled over the leg of a sailor collapsed on a garbage heap. He turned the fellow over, clutching him by his striped jersey, and recognized one of the six men he'd allowed to come ashore. "Drag him back to the longboat!" he ordered the burly seaman who'd come with him. Then he sprinted on up the alley.

The little square was a melee of shouting, cursing men and swinging fists. There were forty or fifty sailors, most of them roaring drunk on native *samshu*. In their quest for excitement, they'd evidently pushed the villagers too far. The Chinese had armed themselves with pikes, clubs, tools, anything they could heft, and swarmed out in defense of their village. The sailors now were fighting in earnest.

Morgan plunged out into the square and pushed aside a wild-eyed Chinese youth who rushed him brandishing a stick of firewood. The smoke stung his eyes. Most of the sailors were British, but he recognized a few of them as Americans. A man from the *Peregrine* staggered past him, blood streaming out of a gash in his head. "The longboat, man!" Morgan seized the dazed fellow's arm and shook him hard. "Run for it!" The sailor nodded wordlessly and stumbled away in the direction of the beach. Two, Morgan counted to himself. Four more of his men to find.

An old man, swinging a big iron meathook, caught a Britisher in the thigh. The sailor yowled as the metal sank into his flesh, turned

and knocked the old man sprawling. Then he jerked the hook out of his leg and advanced on the old man, murder in his eye and blood oozing down his ankle and into his shoe. With his hand, he raised the hook high.

Morgan sprang toward him and grabbed the meathook before the sailor could bring it down. "Don't be a fool!" he bellowed above the din. "You kill him and we're in *real* trouble!" The sailor turned, swore, then took a drunken swing at Morgan. Morgan sidestepped and the other man collapsed in the mud, blubbering and holding his leg. The old Chinese skittered away like a crab.

Feisty little Pratt and another sailor from the *Peregrine* were cornered in a doorway, fending off three Chinese with well-placed kicks. "Good to see you, sor!" Pratt hailed him with a grin. He'd lost one of his front teeth. Blood mixed with saliva drizzled down his chin.

Morgan swung one of the Chinese around by his collar and dispatched him with a blow to the chin that hurt his knuckles. He felt a wild satisfaction as he saw the Chinaman crumple. "The longboat!" he roared, the hair rising on the back of his neck as the other two Chinese jumped him. "Get to the beach!"

He was down in the mud by now, the two Chinamen kicking and pummeling him. He rolled over to protect his face and his vitals. The smell of the mucky ground made him gag. Pratt rushed one of the Chinaman head first, like a billy goat, ploughing into his midsection and sending him tumbling over backward. "Dammit, get to the beach!" Morgan bellowed. "This next bloody devil's mine!"

He lunged to his feet, his clothes plastered with mud. The third Chinaman hesitated, measuring the odds. Then, seeing that Pratt and the other seaman were heading for the beach, he picked up a fish cleaver someone had dropped and began to circle Morgan.

Morgan danced in toward the man, crouching and feinting with his fists. The cleaver whistled down through the air. Morgan leaped backward like a cat, the blade missing his arm by an inch. His blood was racing. One good blow, he calculated. That would have to do it. He eyed the Chinaman, an ugly bloke, he thought, with a broken nose and an upper lip that was split, like a hare's.

A middle-aged Chinese woman was whaling away at one of the British tars with a stick of kindling. The perplexed Englishman was trying to take the stick away without having to strike her, but she was

quick as a mongoose. Around and around him she danced, screaming curses and getting in some painful blows with her weapon. Morgan's antagonist was momentarily distracted by the sight of her. He glanced away from Morgan for an instant and Morgan was at him, knocking the cleaver out of his hand and sinking one lightning-hammer punch into the man's belly just below the rib cage.

As soon as the blow landed, Morgan knew he'd hurt him. He could tell it from the way his fist penetrated the softness of relaxed flesh to strike and break some vital thing beneath. The Chinaman staggered backward, clutching himself and coughing. Then he collapsed in a quivering heap at Morgan's feet. Morgan bent over him. The man was alive but gasping in pain, his split-lipped mouth moving like a fish taken out of water. Another Chinese had picked up the cleaver and started toward Morgan where he crouched over the prostrate form.

Morgan jumped aside, but not quickly enough. The cleaver sliced deep into the muscle of his shoulder. The blood came spurting out in a fountain of red. He clutched at the wound, blood running through his fingers like water. He'd never realized he *had* so much blood.

He tried to for the beach, but he could only stagger and fall. Lord, I'm dying, he thought as he lay there with the side of his face pressed into the mud. In this stupid, dirty little town, in this senseless drunken brawl — I'm *dying*! The sun was very bright. Morgan closed his eyes and Priscilla's delicate face swam into his mind. He wondered if she would cry. Then, slowly, his world began to grow darker.

Kathleen was peeling potatoes for supper when the knife slipped and cut her thumb. She dropped the knife and pressed the thumb to her mouth, her tongue probing for the sliced edges of skin. The instant she tasted the saltiness of her own blood she *knew*. "Oh, dear heaven," she whispered to herself as the cold panic crept through her senses. "Morgan!"

There was no sense in alarming her parents with something she could not explain, so she kept the feeling to herself. Evening wore into night and she could not sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw blood, and the blood was Morgan's. He was lying in it. She buried her head in the pillow and tried to shut out the awful vision, but even the darkness was red.

It came almost as a relief when, toward dawn, there was a soft tap at the door. Kathleen threw on her wrapper and flew down the stairs. Even before her fingers touched the latch, she knew it would be Pris.

Priscilla's face was white, her dark hair loose and disheveled. "Oh, Kathleen," she whispered, "it's Morgan!"

"I — I know, Prissy . . ." Kathleen held out her arms and Pris ran into them, sobbing. "Is — is he — ?" She looked back over Pris's shoulder and saw a wiry little seaman with a curiously wrinkled face standing on the doorstep.

"He's not dead, miss, but he's hurt bad. Big Chinees got him in the shoulder with a cleaver. Saw it happen meself. Me and me mates, we ran the Chinese off and got him to the longboat. He'd passed out from the bleedin' by then."

Kathleen felt her spine grow rigid. "Chinese?"

"Aye. Little village off the Hong Kong Road. Some of us went ashore for a bit of fun. We didn't mean no harm . . ."

"Was anyone killed?"

"Not to my knowledge, miss. Your brother's 'board the *Peregrine*. I come to fetch his missus, but she wanted to stop here first."

Archer Bellamy was coming down the stairs by now, with Rose behind him. "What is it?" he rasped, knotting the sash of his dressing gown.

Kathleen turned. "Morgan's been hurt. Pris is going to him."

Rose caught her breath. "Pris, is it bad?"

Priscilla pulled away from Kathleen. "I don't know, Mother Bellamy. They say he's lost a lot of blood . . . I said I'd come. Oh, I don't know!" Her voice had begun to shake. Kathleen put an arm around her waist.

"Can you wait for me?" Rose had started back up the stairs. "I'll come with you."

"Hurry," said Pris. "There's a cutter waiting at the Praya."

"I'll come too, Pris!" Kathleen started up the stairs and found her path blocked by the towering figure of her father.

"You'll not be going, Kathleen," he said in a tight voice. "Nor you, Rose. We've washed our 'ands of Morgan. If 'es come to 'arm debauching 'imself in some Chinese village, it's no concern of ours!"

Rose turned back to face him. "You washed your hands of him, Archer. I did not, and neither did Kathleen. Don't try to stop me. I'm going to my son!"

Kathleen's lips parted. She had never seen her mother defy her father before. Archer Bellamy's florid color deepened.

The little seaman stepped through the doorway. "Beggin' your pardon, Reverend, sor," he said. "Pratt's the name, Japeth Pratt. An' your son weren't debauchin' himself. He only come ashore to fetch the rest of us back to the ship. 'Tweren't his fault, sor, not meanin' no disrespect."

The Reverend took a deep breath. At that moment, he looked old, Kathleen thought, and weary. "Very well," he murmured at last. "I won't stand in your way, Rose, if you choose to go to 'im. But Kathleen stays with me. A ship's no place for a young unmarried girl."

"Father!"

Archer Bellamy glared at his daughter. "Ships are filled with lustful men, who spend their idle time in wickedness! Is that not so, Mister Pratt?"

"Oh, no, sor! Not so," protested the little seaman, but he was looking at Kathleen as if she were the most seductive creature he'd ever seen in his life.

Kathleen turned her pleading eyes up to her mother. "Oh, please," she begged. "I want to go to Morgan!" But Rose could not meet her gaze. She had spent her spirit in that one small burst of defiance and had nothing left for her daughter.

"Your father's right, child," she said softly. "The ship's no place for you. You'd best stay here."

"Pris!" Kathleen turned to her last hope. She held out her hands to her friend.

Priscilla kissed her on the cheek. "We'll take good care of him, Kathleen. And we'll send word to you when we know how he is — Oh, don't cry, dearest — "

Morgan opened his eyes and saw his mother. She was bending over him, the lantern behind her making a halo of her golden hair. He felt strangely light, as if he were floating a little above the bed, his body as insubstantial as air. "Am I dead?" he whispered.

She made a little sound then, a sound that was part laugh and part cry, leaned over and pressed the side of her face against his chest. He put his right arm around her, moved his left to do the same and felt a tearing pain explode in his shoulder to radiate out through his chest. The pain answered the question he'd asked.

"Don't try to talk, Morgan," his mother said in a shaking voice. "You're still very weak. They couldn't stop the bleeding . . . oh, Lord, they couldn't stop it! We thought we'd lost you!" She was weeping. Morgan could feel her tears against his bare skin.

"Mother . . . how long have I been here?"

"A night, a day and a night, son. It's almost dawn. No, don't try to move — you'll start it again!" She took a limp handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. "Wait," she said, standing up. "Someone else is here! Don't move — I'll be back." She slipped out of his range of vision. Morgan heard the swish of her petticoats and the creak of the cabin door. He closed his eyes and felt the *Peregrine* rocking like a cradle on the lapping waves of the harbor. His shoulder throbbed, but his left hand was oddly numb. He could not move his fingers. A horrible thought struck him. He reached across the sheet with his right hand and felt for his arm. He was wrong, thank God. The arm was still there.

The cabin door creaked again. Priscilla stood in the open doorway, her eyes two dark smudges in her pale face. Her hair was tied back from her face with a simple blue ribbon. There were smears of blood down the front of her blue Shantung silk gown. Very softly, she walked over to Morgan's bedside.

"You came . . ." he whispered, his pulse quickening.

"Of course I came." Her voice was without expression. "I'm your wife." For a time, she would not meet his eyes. When she looked at him at last, it was as if the sight of him pained her.

"They had to cauterize the wound by sticking a red hot knife into it," she said. "It kept you from bleeding to death."

For a moment, Morgan thought she was going to say something else, but she only walked around the bed, fussing with the sheet, tucking it in beneath the mattress where it had pulled loose. Morgan closed his eyes and thought of the knife, thrusting down into the gap in his flesh, searing, sealing off the ends of blood vessels and nerves. He groaned out loud. Pris raised her head. Her beautiful eyes were bloodshot.

"Pris . . . what about my arm?"

"I won't lie to you, Morgan. It's bad. The doctor thinks he can save it. But you'll be lucky to have the full use of it." She stood beside the bed looking down at him, her face a mask.

"Pris . . ." he whispered. "Sit down. Stay with me."

In silent obedience, she sat down on a chair beside Morgan's bunk, hands folded in her lap. Her rigid spine barely touched the chair's wooden back.

Morgan wanted to speak to her. My poor Pris, his mind wanted to say, how tired you look . . . how good you were to come when I needed you so much . . . But his mouth would not move to say the words. He was exhausted and numb with fear for his arm. He saw himself crippled and flawed, the arm dangling at his side, a useless piece of flesh. He moaned softly, then drifted off into unconsciousness again.

When he awakened at midday, he saw that Pratt, the ugly little seaman, had taken Priscilla's place at his bedside. "Mornin', sor." The fellow grinned, showing a gap where he'd lost a tooth at Chi'en-sat-sui.

Morgan groaned. "Where's my wife?"

"Asleep, sor. Little mite wore herself out watchin' you. She's in the cap'n's bunk. By damn, if I had a woman who loved me like that, I'd not be a seafarin' man like I am. You be a lucky man, if you don't mind my sayin' so, sor. And your ma — aye, but she's got some broth. Wanted me to tell her when you was awake!" Pratt got up and disappeared momentarily through the door of the cabin. He came back with Rose, holding the door open while she glided in with a bowl and a spoon.

"Raise him up a little," she said to Pratt. "Mind his arm." Morgan winced with pain as Pratt's rough hands stuffed an extra pillow under his head and upper back. "Beggin' your pardon, sor, but I never was cut out to be no nurse," he said.

Morgan forced a weak smile and wondered why Pratt had been the one to stay with him. God's blood, could it be that the little bloke liked him?

Rose sat down on the chair and blew on the surface of the yellow broth. "Chicken," she said. "Don't talk, Morgan, just eat this, all you can. You need to build up your strength." She put the spoon to his mouth and he sipped the broth awkwardly. It was hot and good. Rose laughed nervously. "It's been a long time since I fed you this way!" Her lips were dry and pale. Her eyes were red. It was a long vigil she'd kept, Morgan reflected.

Pratt hovered in the background, straightening the cabin. "Glory be, I'll not forget it, sor," he said. "The way you lit into them Chinese with nothin' save your fists. Just might be that you saved my skin over there!"

Ah, thought Morgan, swallowing the broth, so that was it.

"A bit of gossip, sor," Pratt bent to the floor to pick up a blood-crusted bandage that had fallen under the bunk. "Heard it from one of the tars. Seems one of them Chinees up and died this morning. Elliot's payin' one whale of a bribe to keep it hushed up. If the word gets to ol' Lin, you can bet all hell's bound to break loose!"

Morgan swallowed hard. "Died, you say, Pratt? How? Was he wounded?"

"I heard not. Just up and died of a bellyache."

"What was the man's name?" The hot broth had begun to freeze in the pit of Morgan's stomach.

"Don't rightly know. The tar didn't say. Only mentioned that the Chinees who died was an ugly devil. Big, he was, with a split lip."

Morgan stared past his mother's shoulder to where the little seaman stood. Pratt was grinning broadly. As his eyes met Morgan's, he winked, and Morgan felt the bars of an invisible cage closing in around him.

Ten

Rose had come back to Macao within the week with the news that Morgan was mending. "He was walking about when I left," she told the anxious Kathleen, "and eating well . . . " She did not mention Morgan's arm, which had been put in a sling to ease the strain on his shoulder. The wound had been a deep one, severing vital nerves and blood vessels. The cauterization performed as a last desperate measure to stop the bleeding that was draining away his life had done further damage. There'd been no sign of gangrene, thank heaven for that, but the shoulder was not healing well and Morgan still could not move his hand.

"And he and Pris?" Kathleen clutched her mother's arm. "They're together? Everything's all right?" She'd braided her red hair into two long plaits that hung down over her breasts. Her eyes were round and questioning, like a child's.

Rose squeezed her daughter's slim fingers. "They're together, Kathleen. That's all I know. We can only pray for the best."

Again, Rose could not find it in her heart to say the words. Pris had been pale and silent. The radiance that would have shone in her eyes if things had been reconciled between herself and Morgan was absent. She shared her husband's cabin, true, but on the pretext that she did not want to injure his arm, she had made herself a pallet on the floor. Rose had left the *Peregrine* as soon as she'd felt that Morgan was out of danger. Her presence, she sensed, was only adding to the strain between her son and his bride. That, Rose told herself, and the realization that her absence from the house was angering Archer, had sped her homeward.

Rose leaned back in her rocker and picked up her knitting. Kathleen had evidently managed well without her. The house was clean, its atmosphere peaceful. "It appears you've done all right here," she said.

Kathleen bounced a little in the faded maroon chair. "Yes," she smiled, except for the food. Father found fault with everything I prepared. Remind me to marry a rich man. Then I'll never have to disappoint him with my cooking!" She laughed bitterly. "If I ever marry, that is . . . Nineteen! I'm almost an old maid!"

"You could marry if you chose," Rose protested softly.

"Aye!" Kathleen tossed her head. "To some widowed old hyena who's drooling for a young piece of meat, perhaps, or to some chinless puppy like Vincent Stanton or — " She let the unfinished thought hang on the air. "I want a *man*, mother. I want to be in love, at least once in my life!"

"Young Vincent's not so bad." Rose picked up a dropped stitch with a skilled needle. Vincent Stanton had recently come to Macao to tutor the young children of some of the merchants. The Gutzlaffs had rented him a room in their house. "He's bright," said Rose, "and honest and kind. And he adores you. I've seen the way he looks at you in church. Your father'd even approve of him."

"He's homely," said Kathleen, "and so bashful he can't even look me in the eye!"

Rose frowned. "Physical beauty is an accident of nature, Kathleen. The fact that you have it does not make you better than those who don't."

"I'm sorry, Mother. But Vincent Stanton!" She wrinkled her nose and stood up, fluffing out the skirt of yellow dimity that she wore for everyday now that Pris had given her the pale green silk for Sundays. The long-hated Nanking cotton had taken its place in one of Rose's braided rugs. Kathleen straightened her plaits and adjusted her sash, obviously pleased with herself. Then she stiffened like a doe at the first scent of the hounds. Archer Bellamy had just crossed the threshold, thunder in his step and lightning in his eye.

"Kathleen!" he rumbled, his face red with indignation. "Stay right where you are, girl. I'll be 'aving a word with you!"

Kathleen stood poised for flight at the foot of the stairs, her eyes huge and her hands quivering. Rose watched the two of them from her chair.

The Reverend glared at his daughter. "Strumpet!" he rasped. "Common streetwalker! That's what you are!" Rose gasped and sprang to her feet. Kathleen fell back against the railing of the stairway.

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about . . ." she whispered.

"Nay, you know it!" he took a step toward her. "I was down on the Praya this afternoon. The governor was there to see 'is nephew off for Portugal. I stopped to pay my respects and to wish the lad well — " The color deepened in Archer Bellamy's face. Kathleen grew even paler. "Then I learned 'e was leaving because of you! Because you'd . . . enticed him . . . you'd tempted 'im, you Jezebel, until 'e was at the point of disgracing you both! You . . . you 'arlot!"

Kathleen had been cowering back against the stairs, but as the last word struck her she sprang forward, quivering with rage. "He tried to *rape* me, Father — "

"Aye! But you drove him to it! A man has a natural desire, girl; 'e can't help it. It's up to the woman to see that 'e's not enticed! Look what Bathsheba did to a man like David! Nay, girl, the fault lies with you!"

"Archer — !" Rose had hurried to Kathleen's side to put her arms around the girl's trembling shoulders.

"Get back, woman," he growled, taking another step forward and loosening the buckle of his leather belt. "You've 'ad an 'and in this! If you saw that she dressed proper, and spent 'er time at 'ome cooking and sewing instead of walking the streets — "

Rose's eyes flew to his unbuckled belt. "Archer, you're not going to beat her! You promised — I won't let you — " Her voice wavered and broke.

The Reverend's hands went to the buckle and paused while he took a deep breath, then fastened the belt once more. "Nay, Rose, I'll not beat 'er. You can rest your mind on that. I've a better idea!" His eyes darted about the parlor until they fell upon his wife's sewing basket. The handles of Rose's scissors protruded from the top.

With two rapid strides of his long legs, Reverend Bellamy had crossed the parlor. He snatched up the scissors and held them aloft, blades pointed upward, like some sword of divine vengeance.

"Archer, what are you doing?" Rose clasped Kathleen's head tight against her breast. Kathleen was sobbing.

"Get back, Rose. I'll not 'arm 'er. What I'm bound to do is for 'er own good!" Slowly, calmly, he walked toward the two women.

Kathleen saw the scissors. "No!" she breathed.

"Get back, Rose! You'll not stand in my way!" He seized Kathleen's arm and pulled her out of her mother's grasp.

"No, Father!" She clung to his legs. "I couldn't help it! I fought him! He tried to —"

Her words ended in a gasp as Archer Bellamy took the ends of her braids in his left fist and jerked them above her head. With his right hand, he opened the scissors and closed them at the base of one thick plait. Sharp as razors, the blades sliced through the glossy red strands. Kathleen writhed with rage and humiliation as he brought the scissors down again at the base of her other braid. For a moment, she hung suspended by that one long rope of hair. Then the scissors did their work. She collapsed in a sobbing heap on the floor.

The Reverend was breathing hard. "There," he said to his wife, who was almost paralyzed with horror, "that'll keep 'er 'ome where she belongs!" He flung the braids on the floor. There they lay, slowly unraveling at their cut ends, as if they possessed a life of their own. Archer Bellamy stared at them for a long moment. Then he turned on his heel without another word and strode out of the house.

Rose clung to the back of the chair, listening to the pounding of her own heart. Its rhythm filled her ears and her body, drowning out the weary tick of the grandfather clock and even muffling the sound of Kathleen's broken sobs.

So it had come to this. Rose let her senses reawaken slowly, bracing herself for the shock of the reality that she knew was bound to come. She had just witnessed a scene out of nightmare — Archer, half-mad with rage; Kathleen, struggling, pleading; the flash of twin steel blades . . .

Could she have stopped it? Her knuckles whitened on the back of the chair as the full weight of the responsibility came crashing down on her. Yes, she could have stopped it. Not today. No — the strength of Archer's anger would have been too great for that. But she could have stopped him years ago — and she could have stopped Kathleen.

Time stood still as she examined herself with cruel objectivity. She saw a woman obsessed with her own sin; a woman so bent upon atonement that she had turned away from the one who needed her most of all: her own daughter. She remembered the times when Kathleen had come to her seeking understanding, and had found only disapproval. She remembered the times she had stood silently by

while Archer lectured, berated and punished the poor girl, so often without justification. And she, Rose, had done nothing to succor Kathleen afterward. She could have provided a counterbalance to his temper, a balm to his ire — but in her submission to her husband she had become little more than an echo of his harshness.

She gazed down at Kathleen where she lay trembling on the floor. Oh, dear God, she prayed inwardly. I'll change. I'll make it up to her. I'll do anything. Just don't let it be too late . . . please, don't let it be too late!

Two anxious steps brought her to Kathleen's side. She knelt down and touched the girl's quivering shoulder. "Kathleen . . ." she whispered. "Kathleen, dearest, I'm sorry . . . Are you all right?"

With an explosive movement, Kathleen twisted away from her touch and sat bolt upright. Her eyes were two red hollows in her white face. Wisps of hair stuck out from her head in pathetic little tufts. "If you're asking whether I'm still virgin, Mother, you've no need to worry on that account!" she hissed. "And as for the rest . . . as for the rest . . ." Her voice began to shake uncontrollably. Rose put out a hand again, but Kathleen tore herself away, Struggled to her feet and fled toward the stairs.

"Kathleen!" Rose's voice followed her.

She turned on the stairs, one hand clutching her shorn head, her beautiful face ugly in its anguish. "I wish to God you'd let him beat me!" she cried. Then she plunged upward to the landing, ran blindly into her room, slammed the door shut and locked it.

That night it rained, as it so often did during the time of the south-east monsoon. Archer Bellamy lay on his back, eyes staring up into darkness. Rose lay rigid at the far side of the bed, her back turned to him. She had not spoken since he'd taken the scissors and cut off Kathleen's hair, but the evenness of her breathing told him that she was asleep at last.

There was no doubt in his mind that he'd done the right thing. It was time Kathleen learned her place! A rebellious girl, wandering the streets like a gypsy, flaunting herself before strange eyes, was bound to find herself in trouble sooner or later. He could only pray to heaven that he'd caught her in time. Young Silveira had sworn before God and before his uncle, the governor, that he'd not violated the girl, but one could never be sure. It might have been wise, the Reverend reflect-

ed, to delay his going long enough to make certain Kathleen was not pregnant — but maybe it was just as well. A Catholic son-in-law was even worse than no son-in-law at all!

Aye, he reflected, it was time she was properly married, with a baby or two to settle her once and for all. Vincent Stanton would likely take her, and now that she wasn't so proud and haughty, Kathleen might look at him with different eyes. By thunder, he'd done her a favor! Someday she'd thank him!

He was getting sleepy now, drifting slowly away. His mind saw the severed braids lying on the rag carpet, and suddenly they were not Kathleen's, but his own mother's. She was loosening them before the mirror, smiling at her beautiful reflection as the red hair flowed out over her shoulders. He was a small boy again, and she was handing him the tortoise-shell-backed brush. "Please, Archer, you do it so well . . ." He took the brush and ran it down through the silken curls that were the same shade as his own. One hundred strokes . . . two hundred . . . three . . . until his mother's long hair gleamed like autumn sunlight. He lifted it, played with it, let it glide through his small fingers . . .

A bolt of lightning turned Macao's sky a luminous gray for an instant before the thunder rocked the house and rattled the window panes. Archer had always been fearful of storms. That was the reason why, on that long-ago day, he'd run home from the neighbors' where he'd been playing, and crawled under his parents' bed, to escape the tempest that flashed and rumbled across the English heavens. It was dark under the bed, warm and cozy. Archer pretended he was a lion in a cave, crouched, growled and finally dropped off to sleep, curled in a little lion ball.

He was awakened by the sound of his mother's voice, whispering, laughing, as she danced into the room. "Hurry! See . . . no one's at 'ome!"

"Your husband's at work?" Archer peeked out at the polished riding boots and recognized the voice of black-haired Sir Alfred Hillam, who owned a big estate down the road.

"Aye! Ben's at the shop till six and the boy's next door. 'E won't come 'ome in this rain. The lad's afeared of storms!"

"Well, lock the door, Maggie. No use taking chances. If my wife were to find out — "

The key turned in the lock on the bedroom door. "Oh, fie! Forget your wife! *I'm* here!" She slipped out of her shoes and ran to him, her bare feet flying across the braided rug. He lifted her in his arms.

"Ah, Maggie, dearest . . . Here, take down your hair . . . your lovely, lovely red hair . . ."

The rain continued until dawn. Aboard the *Peregrine*, Morgan paced the floor of the cabin, the throbbing pain in his shoulder making it impossible to sleep. Pris stirred on her pallet and opened her eyes. "You may as well take the bed," he said gruffly, "I'll not be sleeping in it."

She sat up, brushing the curtain of dark hair from in front of her face, "Does it hurt much?" she asked softly.

"Aye."

"Can I rub it for you?"

"It won't help!" he snapped. "Leave it alone and pray to God it mends, that's what the doctor said. There's nothing I can do except wait and see if the damned thing heals or rots! If you want to do something, pour me a glass of whiskey!"

She got up, pattered about the cabin in her white nightgown until she found the flask. Then she filled a small glass on the nightstand to the level of three fingers. "More!" he growled. She poured in another small splash of liquid and handed him the glass. He took a sip and closed his eyes.

"What did Pratt want last night?" she asked him.

"Nothing. Only an advance on his wages."

"You gave it to him?"

"You saw me do it."

"Morgan . . ." She paused and watched him drain the glass. "I don't like him. He's an evil-looking little man, and he has some power over you." Her face was very pale in the gray darkness. "Something's wrong, isn't it, Morgan?"

"Nonsense!" His voice rang hollow.

"You can tell me," she persisted. "What's a wife for?"

"Dammit!" he snarled, slamming his good fist against the side of the bunk. "I'll tell you what a wife's for, and it's not for spending her bloody nights on a pile of rags in the corner while her husband lies alone in his bed!"

Priscilla took a step backward. "I told you that was finished," she said, tonelessly. "Morgan, I'll stand by you, I'll take care for you, work with you . . . but I won't — I can't — Not after what you did!"

Morgan opened a lacquered box on the desk, took out a cheroot and thrust it between his teeth. Awkwardly, he struck a match against a stone paperweight and lit the cheroot with his right hand, puffing until the tip glowed red. "If it will make you feel any better," he said, "I've lived like a blasted monk ever since that night in Canton." He put the cheroot down in an ashtray and held out his hand to her. "Pris, a man can change! . . . Please . . ."

She lowered her eyes, her resolve visibly crumbling, and he was encouraged for a moment. "Give me time, Morgan," she whispered. "Maybe someday — but not yet. It's too soon. And don't try to force me before I'm ready. It won't do any good."

"Force you!" A bitter chuckle tore its way out of his throat. "With one dead arm! Have no fear — your virtue's safe with me, Pris!"

She walked over to the porthole and stared at the rain. When she turned back toward him, her face was composed. "You still haven't told me about Pratt," she said.

"Nothing to tell. You're imagining things." He picked up the cheroot again and took a long draw. There was no sense in telling her the truth about Pratt — that the little bilge rat was blackmailing him. So far, his demands had been small — an extra round of grog, exemption from standing watch at unpleasant hours, the advance in wages that Pris had noticed — but Morgan shuddered at the thought of what they might become once the little seaman realized the extent of his power. To make matters worse, Elliot's efforts to hush up the news of the villager's death had been unsuccessful. Commissioner Lin had gotten wind of the incident within the week, and was making official demands that the British turn over the murderer.

Morgan would have gone straight to Charles Elliot with his confession had Elliot been available, but Her Majesty's superintendent of trade was in Macao. Morgan had not been well enough to make the journey to see him, and the burden he carried was too dangerous to entrust to anyone else.

Pris had gone to the porthole again. "It's stopped raining," she said.

Morgan ground out the stub of his cheroot. "I'm going up on deck," he said. "Go ahead and get some sleep. It's early yet." She shook her

head, her long hair swishing. "I'm not sleepy. Go on up. I'll get dressed and join you."

The dawn's wet coolness was welcome after the stuffy cabin. Morgan took a deep breath and gazed up at the emerging indigo sky. Above his head, water from the reefed sails dripped down on the wet deck, the masts creaking and sighing with the motion of the ship. A flock of gulls winged its way out from the shores of distant Lantau, skimming low over the waves in search of fish. The peaks of Hong Kong loomed high and black.

It was funny about Pris, he thought, how she'd come to stay with him — sweet, devoted, a perfect wife in every respect save one. It had been her own decision, he reflected, a compromise between her high ideals and the reality that his conduct had made so unbearable for her.

At first, when he'd been so weak and in so much pain, it hadn't mattered. He'd only welcomed the touch of her small, cool hands and taken with gratitude what little tenderness she'd given him. Now that his strength was returning, he was beginning to discover that it mattered a great deal. Pris. He ground his teeth and adjusted the cloth sling where it chafed the back of his neck. If she's intended to punish him, she could not have chosen a more exquisite form of torture. He pictured the outline of her slim body where she lay on her pallet, the discreet turning of her back when she dressed or prepared for bed — a hundred tantalizing little intimacies that were denied their natural fulfillment. If it had not been for his shoulder, he would have brought her to the bed by force if necessary, and put an end to this nonsense.

Priscilla came up onto the deck and stood beside him at the rail, not so close that any part of her was touching him, but close enough that he could smell the fragrance of her hair and almost feel the warmth of her skin. She was dressed in a simple frock of pale pink muslin with a high collar, and her hair was tied back with a matching ribbon. She looked as innocent as a child, he thought.

She gazed out over the surface of the harbor, where more than a score of English merchant ships rocked at placid anchor. Not far from the *Peregrine* lay the bulk of the *Condor*, the big receiving ship Blake Robards had converted from an old man-o'-war for the store of the opium. It had no sails, no masts. More than anything else, it resembled the biblical description of Noah's Ark. The even larger *Hercules*,

Jardine Matheson's receiving vessel, lay to the west, off little Peng Chau, while the *Fort William*, Charles Elliot's official headquarters when he was at Hong Kong, was anchored a few hundred yards to the east. Sleek-prowed opium clippers and roomy old East Indiamen bobbed peacefully, interspersed with smaller schooners, brigs, cutters and a few lorchas, strange little hybrid vessels with European-style hulls and Chinese rigging.

The *Hellas*, a Jardine Matheson coastal schooner, had come in from an opium run during the night. Karl Gutzlaff would be aboard, Morgan reflected, anxious to hear the Reverend's reports. The coast trade was becoming more and more dangerous. A few weeks earlier, the Jardine Matheson opium brig *Ann* had been set upon by Chinese war junks off Tinpak and, after a four-hour battle, had narrowly escaped. Morgan had spent many a sleepless hour worrying over the safety of his own *Osprey* and *Merlin*.

Lights were burning in the little village of Chi'en-shat-sui, where the trouble with the Chinese had come to its recent head. Fishermen getting an early start, Morgan speculated, casting a furtive eye at his seventeen-year-old wife. Priscilla's cheeks were pink and fresh as rose petals, her hair was almost black. The dress clung softly to her figure, defining small, high breasts and a waist so tiny that he could easily have spanned it with his hands. He felt his body begin to stir. Dammit, but she was beautiful, and he'd been such a fool! Bursting with desire and remorse, he turned to face her. Her lips parted as he caught her with his right arm and jerked her hard against him. She struggled, but not too vigorously, as he pinned her against the rail with his legs and body, freeing his hand to seize her hair. Then, with a passionate, pent-up desperation, he ground his mouth onto hers. His tongue parted her lips, thrust its way between her teeth to take tingling possession of her mouth. Her body arched against him as he pressed her close. He felt her responding, trembling against him as his mind calculated the distance down to the cabin, the time they would have alone before daylight. Now! his pounding, pulsating body demanded. Quickly.

His mouth released her. His arm circled her waist to sweep her back down the stairs to the seclusion of the cabin. She stiffened and clung to the rail with one hand, resisting, her eyes two dark wells of reproach. Stunned, he let his arm fall loose.

She glared up at him, still quivering from the impact of his embrace. Her breasts rose and fell spasmodically. "Is that the way you kissed the others?" she whispered, her voice razor-edged.

"Oh, hell!" Morgan released her and brought his fist down hard against the rail, so hard that for a few seconds he was afraid he'd broken his hand.

She turned away from him and stared out over the water. "I came because you were hurt," she said softly. "But now that you're so much better, Morgan, I think it's time I went back to Macao."

"Why?" His shoulder was worse. The pain made drops of sweat pop out on his forehead.

"You know why." She would not look at him.

He swallowed the agony, gulping hard. "I can have the cutter alongside anytime you're ready," he said.

They stood silent at the rail for a time, a wall of ice between them. The sun rose over the distant hills to the east. The rain-soaked deck began to steam. From the direction of Chi'en-shat-sui, a cluster of fishing junks bobbed toward the anchored merchant fleet, their sails amber in the newborn light.

"Good day t'you, sor. Feelin' better, I see." Pratt had sidled up to Morgan and was gazing out at the junks. Morgan did not answer him. The junks were moving closer. Now the big eyes that were painted on either side of their prows could be seen, as well as the fishermen on their decks.

"Something's wrong," Morgan muttered as he shaded his eyes. The men on the fishing boats were not working, tending the nets or going about other duties. They only sat and stood along the gunwales, watching the English ships. In grim quiet, they moved closer. Morgan felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to bristle. Beside him, he heard Pris catch her breath.

"What the hell is it, sor?" Pratt nudged him.

"I don't know, but they're up to no good," Morgan answered him.

The junks were moving into a line, each with a man hanging out over the prow. The Chinese on the far right tossed the end of a round bundle to his neighbor on the bow of the next vessel, who caught it deftly, passing it onto the next until a huge cloth banner was strung between half a dozen junks. Something was written on it in characters three or four feet high.

"Wish t'God I could read it," Pratt muttered.

Morgan shook his head and glanced at Pris. Her great dark eyes were fixed on the boats, her lips moving slightly. Morgan had almost forgotten that she'd been raised by Chinese *amahs*, spoke the language fluently and read it passably.

"What does it say?" he asked her quietly.

Her voice shook as she answered him. "It says 'Give us the murderer of Lin Wei-hsi.'"

She had not answered in a loud voice, but Pratt had been close enough to hear her. A gnomish grin spread over his face. His upper gum showed red in the place where the recently lost tooth had been. "I been thinkin', sor," he said. "I've a sick old mother back in New Bedford. 'Twould ease my heart right nice to know she be well provided for."

Morgan glowered at him. "Pratt, you told me once that you were an orphan."

"Well — " His expression did not change. "Call her my auntie then. A few thousand would set her up proper, sor." He glanced out at the junks and his grin broadened.

The fishing craft were drifting closer now, so close that the watchers on the ships could see the angry Chinese faces. The fishermen had begun to chant and shake their fists. Although Morgan could understand none of the words, there was no mistaking their tone or their meaning.

"The Chinees got some interesting ways of dealin' out justice," mused Pratt. "Heard tell they can tie a man twixt two horses, one leg to each, an' whip them off in different directions. Or they can take him an' slice little pieces off him, nice an' slow like — so's it takes 'bout a week for him to die. Or maybe they put him out in the hot sun, with pieces of wet rawhide tied 'round his — "

"That's enough, Pratt," Morgan growled, seeing Pris's pale face. The little bastard, he cursed inwardly. Pratt had him on the rack now and was twisting the screws.

The junks had stopped advancing. Morgan saw some of them drop anchor and begin to lower their sails. The decks of the merchant ships were crowded with watchers now, men staring tensely at the fishing boats from the rails or the riggings of their vessels. The intensity of the chant grew to a howling roar as the fishermen of Chi'en-shat-sui shrieked for vengeance. Their rage was genuine — Morgan had no

doubt of that — but he could not help believing that Commissioner Lin had put them up to it.

Pratt nudged him in the ribs with his elbow. “Now about me poor old auntie, sor . . . ”

Morgan closed his eyes and groped to the depths of his own soul for the courage to call the fellow’s bluff and to face what must be faced. If he did not, he could find himself Pratt’s prisoner until one of them died. But to confess might open the gates to an even more grievous ordeal.

No Britisher who trafficked on the China Coast would ever forget the case of the *Lady Hughes*. The name of the vessel had been raised often enough in the past few days, even though the infamous incident had taken place in 1784. A gunner on the ship, it seemed, in firing a salute to a visitor, had failed to see a chop boat anchored beneath the canon. The firing of the gun had killed one Chinese instantly and mortally wounded another. As they were doing now, the magistrates at Canton had demanded that the British turn over the man responsible for the deaths.

The English had resisted at first. But then, when the Chinese had stopped all trade and confiscated the *Lady Hughes*’s supercargo, they reluctantly turned the man over. After all, the killings had been accidental. No English court would have charged the poor gunner with murder. The fellow was thrown into prison. Later, the British authorities learned the Chinese had strangled him.

For years, the case of the *Lady Hughes* had stood as a blot on England’s record of strength and integrity. Never again, the British vowed, would they stand for such an outrage.

But this vow had never been forced to a test. Not until now.

Morgan touched his shoulder, which hurt so much that it almost made his knees buckle. There was no escape. Either he was at the mercy of Japeth Pratt or he would be at the mercy of Charles Elliot. And Elliot had made the decision to turn over twenty thousand chests of prime opium to Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu.

Pris was gazing at him like a startled fawn, with huge, frightened eyes. Had she guessed the truth at last? Pratt took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket, bit off a chaw and waited.

Morgan took a deep breath. “Pratt,” he said, “have Captain Peabody signal the cutter to come alongside. I’m going to Macao.”

One of Pratt's eyebrows shot upward, furrowing his forehead below the sparse hair. "And me auntie, sor?"

"Your aunt, Mister Pratt, can damned well go to hell."

Charles Elliot sat behind the vastness of his mahogany desk and stared at Morgan over his spectacles. At thirty-eight, he was slender and pleasantly nondescript, neither handsome nor homely, with light brown hair and a face that would have done justice to a master poker player.

"Excuse me, Bellamy," he said in his impeccable Oxford accent, "but I don't believe I heard you correctly."

Morgan fought the urge to clutch at his shoulder, which felt wet and sticky under the clean dressing. The trip in the cutter had taken several hours over choppy waves, and the wound had begun to ooze blood again. Charles Elliot's face wavered and swam before his eyes. "I said, Captain Elliot," he spoke with effort, "that I believe I was responsible for the death of the villager at Chi'en-shat-sui."

"You were obviously there," Elliot's tone was sharp. "But you can't be sure, can you?"

"Sure enough to know that I punched a big, ugly Chinese with a harelip, punched him in the stomach, maybe hard enough to kill him." Morgan gripped the arm of the leather chair.

Charles Elliot's face was as impassive as his voice. "We've no official description of the man who was killed, Bellamy. In fact, there's no real proof that anyone was killed at all. We've only the word of the Chinese, and that does not constitute evidence. Do I make myself clear?"

"But the description of the man — it's all over the fleet!"

"A mere rumor." Elliot scratched the tip of his nose. His hands were immaculate.

Morgan bit back the waves of dizziness. "But I know how hard I hit him — he was *hurt*!"

Charles Elliot rose to his feet. "Blast it, Bellamy, can't you get it through your young fool head that you're telling me something I don't want to hear? It only makes my position all the more difficult, and it's bloody rough as it is! I don't care if you strangled the wretch with your own two hands! I don't care if his blood's dripping off the end of your nose! I speak for the *Crown*, my good fellow, and my official stand is

— and will continue to be — that we can't hand over the man who allegedly killed the villager because we've no way of knowing which man it was! Curse it — if you think I'll stand for a repetition of the *Lady Hughes* — " Elliot sat down again and pushed his spectacles up on the bridge of his nose. Then he cleared his throat and spoke in a gentler tone. "Look, Bellamy. It took a good deal of courage for you to come to me like this, and don't think I don't respect you for it. But I'm handling this in my own way. Five of our British sailors — roisterers, all of them — have been thrown into the brig aboard the *Fort William*. They'll be tried for drunkenness and assault, given short sentences at hard labor and shipped home to England. I'll send secret orders with the captain that their sentences are to be revoked the minute they set foot on home soil. If that doesn't placate our friend Lin — " Elliot spread his hands and shrugged.

Morgan's head felt as if it were floating about the room, detached from his body. "You mean, sir," he said with effort, "that you don't believe me?"

Elliot leaned toward him across the desk. "I'm saying, dear fellow, that in my position, I can't *afford* to believe you! And you can't afford to let me! Now I want you to walk out of here and let that sweet little wife of yours take you home and put you to bed. You don't look well."

Shakily, Morgan stood and extended his hand to Elliot, who had also risen. His troubles were not over by any means. There was still Pratt to be dealt with. But he had faced Charles Elliot and come away clean. In part, at least, the battle was won.

With great concentration, he managed to keep his legs from wobbling as he walked toward the door that separated Elliot's office from the parlor, where his pretty, pregnant young wife sat at tea with Pris. Elliot's two-year-old son, Frederick, played on the floor with a pile of blocks.

Priscilla's eyes flashed up at him, full of questions, as Morgan came through the door. He'd told her everything on the way to Macao and she was as anxious about Elliot's reaction as he had been. Morgan opened his mouth to speak to her. Her lovely face blurred before him; the room began to whirl. Pris sprang toward him and he collapsed in her arms, his weight carrying both of them to the floor.

Eleven

Cheng sent his bearers home with the empty sedan chair. The August evening was pleasantly cool, and though it was not considered fitting for a man of his station, he had decided to walk the distance from the Consou House near the Factories to his family home inside the walls of Kwang-chow-fu, the teeming city that the outside world knew as Canton.

With long strides, he passed through the narrow lanes that ran parallel with the old city wall. His felt-soled boots would be filthy by the time he reached home, but it mattered little. He needed the peace that only a long walk could bring. In his student days in Peking, he had spent long evenings wandering the streets of that vast city, dodging mule carts and camel trains, inconspicuous in his plain scholar's robes, his mind immersed in some problem or philosophical question. In winter, he had donned layers of quilted clothing and skirled the snow-dusted wall of the Forbidden City or roamed the environs of the circular, blue-tiled Temple of Heaven, his breath clouding the icy air before his face. It had been two years since he had seen snow, and just as long since he had enjoyed the freedom of the streets. He was an important man now, apt to be recognized and besieged by beggars, thieves and favor-seekers. It was both proper and practical for him to travel everywhere in the confining privacy of the sedan chair. But tonight his mind and body had rebelled against it. His every muscle cried out for physical exercise, and the burden of his thoughts was too heavy to be borne in inactivity.

Canton had long outgrown its ancient boundaries. Houses, shops and streets sprawled outside the gates over an area that was nearly as large as the city proper. Much of it consisted of peasant houses and

warehouses for the docks, it was true, but by no means all of it. Old Howqua maintained a palatial residence on the street called Shap Pat Pu, not far from the Consoo House, as did other wealthy merchants who wished to be near their businesses and take advantage of the less crowded conditions.

As he turned onto the bustling Ho Pun Kai, the street that ran along the foot of the wall, Cheng breathed deeply, clearing his lungs and head of the tension that had built up inside him during the long day at the Consoo House. Lin had ordered all supplies to the British fleet cut off, and had sent word to Macao that any Chinese servant who continued to work for an English household should consider himself a traitor to the empire. Rumor was buzzing among the Co-hong that a Chinese invasion of Macao was imminent.

Cheng himself did not give the rumors a good deal of credence, perhaps because by now he had come to know the *ch'in ch'ai* somewhat better than did his fellow hong merchants. Lin was a determined man, but violence was not his way. And an invasion of Macao would involve not only the English but the Portuguese as well in the conflict. Surely Lin was too prudent to move against a nation with whom the empire had no previous quarrel.

Still, Cheng could not help worrying about the Bellamys, whom he had not seen since that night in the garden when Kathleen's lips had worked their strange magic. They would be worried, frightened (*she* would be frightened) and he was in no position to reassure them (to reassure *her*, his mind insisted) that all was well. And suppose he had misjudged Lin and the invasion rumors were true? To warn his English friends would be tantamount to treason.

The Son of Heaven had chosen the wrong man for this delicate mission, Cheng berated himself. He should have selected some straightforward soul who would see only his own side of any conflict, someone with the good sense not to get involved in the personal affairs of the foreigners. Cheng knew a number of instances where people had stood passively by while a man, or even a child, drowned within their easy reach. To save the poor victim would have been to interfere with fate — and to interfere was to take on the responsibility for the life thus saved. The wisdom of the ages had taught them that he is happiest who does not entangle himself in the affairs of outsiders. It was a lesson Cheng had learned too late. He had saved Kathleen's virtue, if

not her life. Now, through no will of his own, he was bound to her. Bound to worry about her in spite of himself, bound to care what became of her.

Cheng made his way along the base of the massive wall, sidestepping the reeking tubs of a manure coolie and walking carefully around a sidewalk barber who was shaving the hair from inside his customer's nostrils. The air was as rich as good soup, teeming with a hundred different aromas — boiled fish and cabbage, noodles, roast duck, incense smoke, urine, wet clay and rice straw. He filled his lungs and savored the familiar blend, happy for the moment that he had decided not to take the chair. On his first free day, he resolved, he would take a horse and falcon and ride out into the country alone for a day of hunting. He was weary of the mess that held him so closely to Canton, tired of the uneasiness, the worry and the waiting.

At the Petition Gate that led into the walled city he was set upon by an army of caterwauling beggars, holding out withered, deformed limbs, baring sightless eyes. It was seldom that they saw a wealthy man on foot, and they took good advantage, crowding in on Cheng as they cackled and pecked like hungry chickens. Men who frequented these streets often avoided their onslaughts by paying a regular fee to the head of their organization, the "king" of the beggars, but Cheng had made no such arrangement. The grimy, tattered horde converged upon him like a flood. A skeletal woman thrust out a half-starved girl child whose eyes were nothing but empty holes, and Cheng realized from the scarring of the eyelids that the blinding had been performed deliberately. He turned his face away, shuddering with horror, only to be met by the sight of a man with no arms or legs, his lump of a body pulled along on a little cart by a ragged boy who looked no more than ten. The boy tugged at Cheng's robe and held out his hand. Other hands clawed and clutched; voices wailed . . . "A few small cash, noble one . . . A bowl of rice for the child . . . Aiee, look at this arm, generous one, have pity!" Cheng fumbled for the purse that hung from his belt, his hand scooping out the entirety of the loose coppers and small silver coins. He tossed them high into the air, and while they fell among the scrambling mass of misery, he made good his escape through the gate and into the city that lay inside the wall.

Canton was a veritable warren of small streets, lanes and alleys, twisting and jogging to confound the ever-present *kuei*, the mischie-

vous spirits who traveled only in straight lines. The city was so old and so crowded that every last inch of living space had been utilized. The streets, so narrow that even the widest of them could be spanned by two men standing with outstretched arms, were paved with granite slabs, worn down by centuries of trudging feet to a recess in the center where the rainwater ran off. They were crowded with people. Water coolies jostled fortune tellers, shoppers and strolling umbrella dealers. Strings of copper cash jingled as they changed hands. Cheng stepped into a doorway to let a funeral procession pass. The white-clad priests and gong-men came first, followed by the brothers and sons of the deceased carrying white lotus blossoms as a badge of mourning, and sprigs of growing bamboo to signify that the soul would sprout again in another world, in another form. White cords were braided into their queues. The widow came next, led by a child and wearing white flowers in her hair. She was wailing loudly, as much out of social propriety as out of grief. The coffin, veiled in white, was carried between poles by hired bearers, followed by a rag-tag band of professional mourners, recruited from the ranks of beggars, shrieking, yowling and beating their chests. One of them stopped in midcry to grin a greeting to a friend as the procession passed on.

Lost in thought, Cheng made his way northward. Some of the streets were lined with houses, presenting nothing to passers-by but blank walls and small gateways. Much of Canton was built of a blue brick that was manufactured within the city and owed its strange color to dampening during the firing process. The effect was one of pleasing coolness on hot days. Where there were shops, they were no more than neat little compartments along the sides of the streets, each with its counter of brick or granite for the display of everything from eels pickled in wine, swallows' nests, paper, charcoal and fine Hweichow inks, to silks, jade, rattan mats, wax-encased pills, dried herbal restoratives and animal parts. Each shop had its own tall sign-board, supported by a granite base, and each had its own tiny altar where incense — or *joss* paper, which the deities accepted as a substitute for money — was burned to honor the particular god of the tradesman-owner.

Cheng walked along between the rows of shops, scarcely giving them any attention. The bustling shoppers and workers, seeing that he was obviously a man of high rank, made way for him as he passed

through the crowded "New City," which had been built long ago within an extension of the original wall. He entered through another gate into the Manchu quarter, where a garrison of the emperor's imperial bannermen made its home. The Manchu had been in Canton for two hundred years, since the beginning of the dynasty. The streets were more open here, and the houses and walls were not of the familiar blue brick but of rammed earth, coated with whitewash and often decorated with the painted forms of animals. The present-day bannermen were a sorry lot indeed — soft, lazy, and so underpaid that some of them had taken to banditry and smuggling. Pity Canton, Cheng reflected, if it ever had to depend on these unhappy souls for its defense.

Cheng's own house was in the oldest and quietest part of the city. It was not a simple dwelling but a vast complex of many rooms and courtyards, of which Cheng Lo, his wife and sons occupied only a part. Cheng Lo's elder brother, who had been head of the family since the passing of their father, lived in the largest suite of rooms, and the second brother in yet another part of the house. All told, with husbands, wives, children, concubines, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, the family members who lived in the house of Cheng came to more than forty, along with an almost equal number of servants who cared for their needs.

It was a lively place, filled with laughter, gossip and bickering, with the crying of babies and the shrieks of quarreling women. Jung Fei greatly preferred it to the isolated life they'd led in Peking. She was an affable creature, genial and comfort-loving, who was happiest when she was sitting in the courtyard, bouncing some baby — any baby — on her knees, enjoying the sunshine or the evening coolness and chatting with the other women. Now that her sons' wives were producing children, she had slipped with proud delight into the role of grandmother, with all the deference and special privileges that were her due. Her contentment, it seemed, was complete, and she came to her husband's bed with increasing reluctance. My duty is done, her manner toward him said clearly, and there is no more reason for this futile act.

The matter of a small wife had been raised a number of times, and each time Cheng had put her off. He was too busy, too troubled, he insisted, to give proper attention to a new concubine. Perhaps when this bothersome matter of the opium was sealed —

In truth, Cheng admitted to himself, he was a little wary, a bit hesitant to take on the uncertainties of life with a new woman under his roof. His had always been the most peaceful part of the house. The two elder brothers, both of whom had taken concubines early in their marriages, were plagued with rivalries and disputes among their women, and Cheng wanted no part of that for himself. But then, perhaps if Jung Fei were to choose the girl —

The pattern of his thoughts dissolved as he swung around the corner and down the narrow lane that led to the secluded entrance of the Cheng dwelling. No, there was to be no more evading of the thing that was truly gnawing at his heart. All day he had tried to make the time pass by concentrating on other problems — Lin, the *fan kuei*, the Cohong, Jung Fei and the matter of a small wife — but he knew that when he came home at last, if his son was not there, something drastic would have to be done.

With increasing concern, he had noticed his third son's absences from home. "The boy is bored," he'd assured Jung Fei. "He misses his classes and his friends." But within him, the conviction had grown that young Shen-lan was "chasing the dragon."

In the hope of occupying Shen-lan's gifted young mind, Cheng had enrolled him at Canton's foremost Confucian academy, only to learn that the boy had been suspended for failing his examinations and missing most of his classes. Cheng had confronted his son outright with his suspicions, but the youth had strongly denied that he had even sampled opium. The denial did not surprise Cheng; addicts, he knew, lied freely to cover their habit, but at least he had given the boy a chance to make a clean breast of it. Now it remained for someone to catch him in the throes of the loathsome habit so that the problem could be faced squarely.

Cheng had seen enough of opium and opium smokers to know how the addiction progressed: from the casual, euphoric early stages to the point where opium became the only thing of importance in the user's life, where even one day without the drug brought indescribable agony, where the addict became pale, thin, lethargic, a living corpse.

He could only hope that if opium had gained a hold on his son, that hold had not become so tight that it could not be broken.

The old gateman let him in. Cheng passed through the outer courtyard with a bow to the portly wife of his eldest brother, and entered

his own suite of rooms, which opened onto a separate courtyard. Jung Fei, smoking her little silver pipe, was seated beside the fountain with the wife of their second son. Their grandchild's wet nurse, a stout peasant girl from the village of San-yan-li, squatted on a stool at the feet of her mistress, the pampered nursling at her breast.

"See how the child grows." Jung Fei beamed. "Almost as plump as his father was at this age!" Cheng's wife was short in stature, broad of bone but not fat, with plain features that radiated goodness. Her hair, swept back into a simple knot at the neckline, was streaked with gray.

Her daughter-in-law glanced up with fearful eyes, and Jung Fei remembered herself. "Such a sickly child, and a girl at that!" she complained loudly with a purposeful glance at the sky. "If only this worthless daughter-in-law had given her lord a son — "

Cheng smiled in spite of his preoccupation. It was believed dangerous to boast of a child's virtues before the gods, for then they might become envious and take the child away. The little boy had even been given the "milk-name" of Kai Tsu ("Ought-to-have-been-a-boy") to deceive the spirits into mistaking him for a useless female. Like many small sons of his age, he was also dressed in girl's clothing.

The nurse popped her long brown nipple out of the baby's mouth and laughed as the milk spurted onto his little robe. Still laughing, she held the child up for Cheng to see. She had left her own girl child in her village to come and nourish the young master.

Cheng ruffled the baby's thick black hair with his hand. "Is our third son here?" he asked with deliberate casualness. "I wish to speak with him."

"Alas, no," Jung Fei answered him. "He is studying, perhaps, or walking in the markets. I have not seen him since the morning meal." Her answer was as bland as her face. Jung Fei, like any well-bred Chinese matron, never ventured from the house except in a closed sedan chair. She knew but little of the outside world and its pitfalls. It was best for her that way, Cheng told himself.

She rose and tottered toward her husband on her tiny bound feet. "Sit down and have some tea," she said. "It's hot, and steamed with jasmine."

"Later, perhaps," he said, trying not to appear too brusque. "Now I wish to go in search of our son."

"Aiee! That is a job for the servants! Rest yourself, my husband, and I will summon them."

"No," he insisted, wanting to be gentle. "I wish to look for him myself. Perhaps if he's still at the academy, I will have time to speak with his teachers." Without waiting for further argument, he went to his chamber, took off his silken robes and put on the simple trousers and tunic of a lower-class tradesman. "This way I will not be so troubled by beggars and thieves," he answered the startled look she gave him when he returned to the garden. "Have the evening meal without me if I do not return in time. When I find our son, I may take him to visit friends or to the theater."

Amazed at the glibness with which he had lied, Cheng took his leave swiftly, departing again from the house on foot. If he found his son in an opium den, he wanted no tales of it carried by the chair-bearers.

In the two years he had spent in the service of the emperor, Cheng had come to know Canton well. Among other things, he had ferreted out the locations of nearly every opium den in the city, and he knew them by heart. It was surprising, he reflected, as he walked briskly up the lane, that Lin Tse-hsu had never tried to pry this knowledge from him. "You do your work, Cheng Lo, and I will do mine," the *ch'in ch'ai* had once said to him. "You are here to observe and report; I am here to fight. The less we entangle ourselves, the better the Son of Heaven will be served." Cheng had nodded his agreement, his respect for Lin growing. A lesser man, almost any man, would have tried to take advantage, to use Cheng's knowledge to serve his own ends. Lin's sobriquet of "Blue Sky" was well earned.

In the deepening twilight, Cheng wandered from one opium nest to another, to find that most of them had been closed down. The *ch'in ch'ai* had managed very well without his help. In those few places he found to be open, he made discreet inquiries about his son. No one had seen the boy.

Perplexed, Cheng turned his attention to the flower houses. The youth was old enough, he reflected, to have a desire for a woman. Aiee, but it would be a relief to find that it was a female, not a drug that had stolen the soul of young Cheng Shen-lan!

But though his silver crossed many a palm, Cheng found no trace of his son in the brothels. He sat at last, alone and weary, at a small table in a cheap pleasure house, sipping rice wine and listening to a

skinny, pockmarked girl play the *peipa*, and sing in a plaintive voice. At least she sang well enough, he told himself as he fished out a coin and tossed it to her, not knowing whether he did so out of admiration for her talent or pity for her ugliness.

The proprietor, an old man with glass-stoned copper rings on his grimy fingers, sidled up to him. "Two silver taels and she's yours for the night, noble one."

"Another time perhaps," Cheng said politely. "I came here looking for a boy. A youth of sixteen."

"Ah!" The man rubbed his hands together. "We can serve you in this as well. Upstairs — " his eyes rolled toward the ceiling, "we have five to choose from, all as graceful as young deer and well trained — "

"You misunderstand." Cheng fought the urge to grab the fellow by the throat and him like a rat. "It's my own son I seek."

"A thousand pardons, lord! But no, no young man has been here. I would have noticed him. Have you tried the Street of Doves?"

"That and the Street of Whispers as well. All of them."

"Then perhaps the young lord has gone home."

"Perhaps." With a sigh of weariness, Cheng rose to his feet and placed a coin on the table to pay for the wine. His head had begun to ache. Two Manchu soldiers, distinguished by their tight leggings, hip-length brown tunics, white vests and jaunty feathered caps, strolled in the door and jostled their way to a table.

"Manchu dogs!" the proprietor hissed under his breath. "Trouble follows them everywhere! Why can't they stay in their own quarter?" He rubbed his hands on his robe and ambled away, still muttering to himself.

Cheng stood and watched the Manchu soldiers. Already they were drunk. They banged on the table with their fists and shouted for service; when the old man reached them, they swore at him and whacked him across the buttocks with the flats of their swords. A pity, Cheng thought. These indolent, quarrelsome fellows and their comrades would have made good soldiers with some discipline, some purposeful training and some true pride. As it was, they languished uselessly in Canton, barely living off the pittance the government sent them, too proud and too lazy to work. Fights and riots were common among them; opium addiction was rampant, for the Manchu quarter, as a military installation, had little to fear from Lin Tse-hsu's purges.

Suddenly, Cheng realized where his son had gone.

The night breeze struck his face, cooling him as he strode toward the Manchu quarter. The air smelled of rain. Already the clouds were rolling across the sky, covering the stars. Cheng hastened his steps. Few Chinese ventured into the Manchu quarter at night. To do so was thought to be foolhardy. But young Shen-lan had learned to speak Manchu from his great-grandparents in Jehol. The boy was tall for his age, and the little Manchu blood he had showed strong in his features. It would have been easy for him to pass unnoticed through these streets and to gain entrance to one of the many opium dens.

Cheng did not know this part of the city as well as he did the rest of Canton, but he could start at least with some of the larger establishments and work downward to the smaller ones. Wearily, he began, asking his questions in the Manchu tongue he had learned from his mother, going from one shadowy opium den to the next. In the fifth place he looked, he found Shen-lan.

The establishment was a small one, little more than a doorway on the street with a weathered sign proclaiming its name: *Yung Chi*, the Sign of the Eternal. Slipping a coin to the attendant at the door, Cheng stepped inside. The single room was dusky and filled with smoke from the opium pipes. Its only light came from little brass lamps placed at close intervals around the room's perimeter. Along broad wooden benches, like books set out on a shelf, the opium smokers lay. They stretched in rows, lying on their sides, facing the lamps, features ghastly pale in the flickering light. From time to time, one of them would take a drop of gumlike opium on the point of a long needle and hold it over the flame of the lamp. When the drop softened, swelled and began to bubble, he would place it carefully on the bowl of his long pipe, tilt the pipe over the flame, put his mouth to the stem and inhale the thick white smoke.

"A boy?" The proprietor twisted his greasy queue and squinted at Cheng through the haze. "Perhaps. When a man comes here, it's his money we look at, not his face. Walk around if you like. Just don't bother anyone who's not your son." He turned away to welcome a new client.

Cheng, his eyes stinging from the fumes, walked over to the benches. In the darkened room, it was difficult to make out individual fea-

tures, so as he had so many times that night, he had to bend and look closely at each face.

Most of the faces were young, gaunt and pale as death. The smokers did not see Cheng with their eyes, even when he bent near. Their minds were far away, in some smoky, floating dream world where the senses seemed to be heightened, where colors and music come to life and words flowed like molten jade, where reality was no more than a distant, faded memory.

A clap of thunder shook the room, and rain began to patter down upon the roof tiles. Water came through a leak and dripped upon the face of an old man, splashing off his tightly closed eyelids, dripping, along the scraggly ends of his white beard. The old man did not even flinch. The stem of an opium pipe was clenched tight in his toothless gums.

"Grandfather — " Cheng shook the skeletal old shoulder. The man did not move; his flesh was cold. Sick with dread, Cheng felt the bony wrist; there was no pulse. He rose and signaled the proprietor. "This one has gone to his ancestors," he whispered hoarsely.

The proprietor, a flabby, aging Manchu, shrugged. "Well, leave him there. Why disturb the others? I'll have someone bring a cart for him in the morning."

Cheng turned away, shuddering with disgust. He could not go on. Surely his son would be home by now, he told himself. Surely if he went back, he would find the boy there, safe and well, and he would laugh at himself for this foolishness. He took a step toward the door, then turned, his eyes unable to resist one last look at the pathetic spectacle of the old man.

Then he saw the face of the slender youth who lay opposite the corpse, sharing the same lamp. It was Cheng Shen-lan.

Two swift strides carried Cheng back across the room to his son's side. The boy was in a stupor, his eyes half-closed. When Cheng tried to pull him to his feet, Shen-lan wilted like an empty stocking.

A murderous frenzy welled up in the breast of Cheng Lo, a rage so intense that he could have strangled the proprietor with his bare hands, overturned the benches, thrown the smokers out into the rain and left the place in flames. He contented himself with breaking his son's opium pipe into pieces and stamping it into the floor. Then, without a word to the bung-eyed proprietor, he lifted the boy in his arms and walked out into the rainy night.

Where to go, that was the question. Should he take the boy home, to break the heart of his mother and shame him before his uncles? Cheng walked swiftly through the drenching rain, Shen-lan cradled in his arms like a child, long, thin legs swinging below his father's right arm. The youth did not feel the downpour. He felt nothing. He only opened his eyes occasionally, a dreamy half-smile on his face.

Surely, Cheng resolved, it would be best not to involve the household, bringing grief and shame down upon them all. He would save face for the boy and for himself if they went at once to Macao. There, in the seclusion of his private residence, Shen-lan could rest and recover. Recover. The very mildness of the word made Cheng shiver. He had seen men, too many of them, in the throes of opium withdrawal. He had seen them — wild with pain, screaming, clawing at the walls, vomiting, shivering with imagined cold . . . At the thought of the ordeal that lay ahead for his son, Cheng moaned aloud. Tears mingled with the rain that flowed down his cheeks.

Twelve

Feverish and incoherent, Morgan whimpered and tossed for five days upon the bed in which he'd spent his wedding night. It was early on a Saturday morning when his fever broke at last, soaking the bedclothes with perspiration. Several hours later, he opened clear eyes to the world.

Kathleen was sitting at his bedside. She held her breath as he stirred. "Oh, thank God," she whispered as her brother's golden lashes fluttered and lifted.

"Pris . . ." he murmured, his eyes darting about the room.

"She's sleeping, Morgan. I made her. She stayed with you the whole time. But she looked ready to swoon, so I put her to bed. The servants are all gone, you know, even her *amah!*"

"Why?" He opened his eyes wider.

Kathleen shrugged. "Commissioner Lin's orders. People are getting worried, Morgan. They say he's going to invade Macao."

Morgan rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. "It won't happen. He wouldn't dare . . . Why — Kath, you're wearing a bonnet. I've never seen you wear a bonnet before, 'specially not in the house . . ." He made a move as if to raise his hand and pull at the strings, but he was so weak that he could do little more than flutter his fingers. "Take it off. It looks silly on you . . ."

She shrank back, her eyes large and full of hurt. She was thinner, Morgan realized foggily. Her cheeks were hollow and there were shadows beneath her eyes. "Rest, Morgan," she whispered. "You mustn't even talk . . . I'll get you some tea."

"Kath — " he called in a voice that was no more than a sigh, but she had fled from the room. He heard her footsteps down the hallway as

she hurried toward the kitchen. Morgan closed his eyes again. Even holding them open required more strength than he possessed.

By the time she'd returned with tea and warmed-over soup, he had rallied a little. He let Kathleen prop his head up and feed him the hot liquids with a spoon, and he did not try to speak again until he had emptied the soup bowl. As he swallowed, he studied Kathleen's bonnet. It was an ugly thing of blue calico with a ruffle that hung down and covered her neck, the kind of bonnet an old woman would wear for working in the garden. Morgan had always liked Priscilla's hats, perky little concoctions of tarlatan or leghorn that shadowed her dark eyes so intriguingly, but this monstrosity of Kathleen's —

"Take that thing off!" he ordered gruffly.

Her lips parted. She shook her head.

"What — what is this? It looks awful, Kath. Why cover your beautiful — " The words died in his throat as her stricken eyes met his, and he read the truth in them.

"What the bloody hell happened to your hair?" he whispered.

She gazed down at her clenched hands. "Father . . . he cut it."

Morgan struggled to sit up, then fell back, exhausted by the vain effort. "Why?" he gasped. "Why would he do it?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, Morgan."

"The hell it doesn't!" He felt the blood rush to his face, "Either you tell me or I'll go to him and — "

"Lie still, Morgan. You'll make yourself ill again." She pushed his shoulders down and smoothed the coverlet. Her eyes would not look at him. "Father found out I'd been with the governor's nephew, and he cut it. That's all."

"With the governor's — you mean Joaquin Silveira? That — that *fop*? By heaven, Kath, you didn't let him — "

She looked directly at him then, her eyes blazing emerald. "No, I didn't let him! God's blood, Morgan, what do you think I am?"

Morgan took a deep breath and let it out. "Sorry," he said. He lay back and closed his eyes for a moment. "What did Father do to Silveira?"

"Nothing. He blamed it all on me. But you needn't worry, Morgan. Joaquin's on his way back to Portugal — and my reputation — " she laughed bitterly, "well, it wasn't spotless to begin with — " Her voice

began to shake. She covered her face with her hands and the tears trickled through her fingers.

"Kath . . ." Morgan said gently, "take off the bonnet. I want to see your hair. It can't be all that bad."

Kathleen shook her head vigorously. "I'll not take it off! Not for anyone! Not till my hair's long again!"

"You mean you wear that ugly thing all the time? Even to church?"

"I haven't been to church. I won't go. He can't make me!" She flung herself down beside the bed, her wet cheek against Morgan's hand. "Morgan, lend me some money," she whispered fiercely. "Enough to get passage back to England . . . rent a little flat, live till I can get work. I'll pay you back every cent — with interest!"

"Kathleen, you'd be all alone in England," he murmured, stroking the shoulder of her yellow dimity gown. "Anything could happen to you, and I'd be responsible. Besides, what could you do in England?"

She sat up and glared at him. "What in hell's name can I do here? Walk the streets? Marry some milk-faced yokel I don't love and have his babies?" Her face fell; her shoulders rounded. She seemed to shrink into herself, to grow smaller, younger. "Please, Morgan . . ." she begged in a tiny, childlike whisper that tore at his heart.

"We'll see," he said feebly. "When I'm well . . ."

She stumbled to her feet. "Pris will want to know you're awake. I'll go and get her." Her voice was dull as lead. She got as far as the bedroom door and swung it open to come face-to-face with her father.

Archer Bellamy did not even look at his daughter. His blue eyes flew past Kathleen and riveted on Morgan. "So, you're awake at last," he said.

"And you've come . . . at last." Morgan did not smile.

"Aye, I've come." He paced across the Persian rug. "Only to see whether you've discovered the error of your ways, Morgan." He loomed above the bed like some gaunt genie, Morgan thought. In the heat of the room, his eyes were winter-blue.

Morgan leaned back into the cushions and regarded his father with awe. Archer Bellamy's presence always made him feel watered down, like some diluted, undersized specimen of the Bellamy line. Morgan sensed that he disappointed his towering father, always had and always would. "Where's Mother?" he asked.

"Home, making dinner. Don't fret, she's been 'ere aplenty."

"And you?" Morgan asked softly.

"I've come every day to ask after you." He glanced at Kathleen. "She hasn't told you?"

Kathleen fluttered beside the doorway, uncertain whether to go or to stay. "I've scarcely had a chance," she said.

The Reverend eased himself into the leather armchair beside the bed. "Aye, to tell you the truth, Morgan, I've prayed for something like this to 'appen!"

Morgan's jaw dropped. He could only look at his father.

"Something to bring you to your senses, boy! Look what chasing the devil's cost you! An arm, maybe! Your life almost! The 'andwriting on the wall — can't you read it?"

"Was it the handwriting on the wall that told you to cut off Kathleen's hair, Father?" Morgan was amazed at his own temerity.

The Reverend paled, but his voice did not waver. "Your sister was chasing a devil of her own, Morgan, and you didn't answer my question."

Morgan was trembling. Dammit, he'd never really had the courage to stand up to this cyclone of a man who was his father, and now, when his own body seemed about to fail him —

"Stop it!" Kathleen flew to his side. "Father, you'll have him sick with fever again! Morgan's in no condition to fight with you! Make your peace and let him rest!"

He turned on her. "You keep to your place, you Jezebel! I thought to 'umble you, but you've learned nothing!" His face grew dark with rage. "You enticed a man, girl, to the point of sinning! Disgraced me in public, flaunted your body like an 'arlot! By thunder, I 'ad every right and reason to throw you out in the street, and if you defy me one more time, I shall!"

Kathleen clung to Morgan's side, tremulous but defiant, the ugly blue bonnet framing her white face. Her lips were pressed tightly together.

Reverend Bellamy rose to his feet and towered above her. "You're to be in church tomorrow, girl, to stand and make a public confession of your sins! Maybe that will save you!"

Kathleen's lips parted. "No," she whispered. "You can't make me!"

A vein throbbed purple in the Reverend's temple. "Nay, girl, I can't force you! But I can take my razor and shave off what's left of that devil hair! And I'll do it if you don't obey me!"

Morgan felt Kathleen's fingers digging into his arm. She was still glaring up at their father, her chin thrust outward. Dash it, but she's got spunk, he thought, envying his sister. She'd inherited a good deal more of the Bellamy fire than he had. He was soft, Morgan told himself, squirming with despair, soft like their mother.

But even Kathleen was no match for Archer Bellamy. Morgan felt her fingers loosen, heard her tight breathing slacken. She slumped beside him. "Oh, Morgan," she whispered, almost as if she were praying, "help me . . . please, help me . . ."

Morgan could not look at her. He was nailed to the bed by those two steel-blue eyes. He tried to speak and found his throat so constricted that he could not. It was no use. He was beaten and he knew it. He had never had a chance against his father.

"Morgan?" Kathleen's voice was little more than an echo now. He heard the breath catch in her throat, heard the first small sob break loose before she sprang to her feet and fled from the room.

Archer Bellamy did not even turn to watch her go. He only stood and stared down at his son. Morgan lay on the pillow and stared back at him. You old bastard, he thought. You sanctimonious old bastard! But he could not speak the words.

From the doorway, they heard a little cry. Pris, still disheveled from sleep, ran to his side. "Morgan . . . oh, thank heaven . . ." Silken and fragrant, she buried her head against his chest. A lump rose in Morgan's throat as he stroked her hair with one hand, awkwardly patted her arm with the other. She stiffened and sat up.

"Morgan!" she whispered, her eyes wide with joy. "Your left hand! You were moving it!"

"What?" Cautiously, Morgan willed the fingers of his left hand to flex. They responded. He wriggled them with delight. "Pris!" He reached out and clasped her close. Over her shoulder, he caught a glimpse of his father. In the cold blue eyes there were tears.

Kathleen, her face twisted with suffering, walked north, up the Praya. Her eyes stung, but she bit her lip and willed herself not to cry. By heaven, she would never cry again! Her father had destroyed her beauty, had condemned her and threatened her with worse. And even Morgan, her adored Morgan, had refused to come to her aid. With fury in every step, she strode past the governor's palace and

the East India House. She could expect no help from her mother, or even from Pris. No one had the courage to stand up to Archer Bellamy.

She was almost alone on the Praya. Tension hung like black smoke in the air. The English had been warned by Governor Pinto to stay indoors as much as possible. The enmity between Chinese and *fan kwei* that had broken out at Chi'en-shat-sui and spread to Canton had now reached Macao. Poor old George Chinnery had been chased home by a mob of Chinese youths only the day before, and Kathleen knew that it was dangerous to be in the streets without protection. Today, however, she was too angry to be frightened. She glared out at the harbor, its waves muddier than ever from the runoff of the summer monsoons, and swore that somehow she would find a way to leave Macao.

With a sigh, she turned her steps inland. There was nothing to do now except go home. Rose would be there, fussing over dinner, and she'd be anxious to hear about Morgan.

The cobblestone street had begun to climb. Kathleen followed it, her eyes on the ground. When a stone struck her shoe, she could not even tell where it had come from at first. Then she saw a skinny Chinese boy of about fifteen leering at her from behind a gate.

"*Fan kwei!*" he hooted. "*Fan kwei!*" Boldly, he stepped out into the street, a chunk of broken tile in his hand. He was dressed in nothing but a pair of faded, patched trousers; an ugly red birthmark ran down one side of his face and onto his neck.

"*Fan kwei!*" Another boy, smaller and younger, sidled out of a doorway, grinning impudently. He was followed by another youth, who balanced a knife between his thumb and forefinger.

Kathleen's heart had begun to pound, but she knew that she must not show fear. She walked on up the street, trying to ignore the jeers and taunts of the boys.

The roof tile struck the middle of her back with such suddenness and pain that she almost cried out. There were five boys now. She did not even know where the other two had come from. She moved ahead with even strides, wanting to break into a run, knowing that to do so would be foolish, even fatal.

A shrill whistle from the youth with the birthmark brought four more boys pouring up out of the street where she lived. They had cut her off now. She could not go home.

She glanced desperately up and down the street, hoping to see someone, anyone, who might help her. Even an open doorway —

There were perhaps a dozen boys, following her now, and they had begun to chant. "*Fan kuei! Fan kuei!*" They could easily have overtaken her, but they did not. Instead, they stayed a few yards behind her, driving her the way a pack of wild dogs drives a doe until it drops from weariness.

The sky was darkening fast. A low rumble of thunder echoed in the distance. Kathleen pressed ahead, the chanting voices filling her tortured ears. "*Fan kuei! Fan kuei!*"

The worst of Cheng Shen-lan's agony was over. For four days and nights, Cheng Lo had held the boy in his arms, soothing him when he screamed with pain; washing him when he shivered, with blankets Kao Ma had hung by the kitchen stove; washing him when, in his anguish, he soiled himself. The ordeal had been worse — ten times worse, a hundred times worse — than anything Cheng had ever imagined. For the first day, the youth had only been cranky and nervous. Then, as the time wore on, he had demanded opium, had begged and cried for it and finally descended into the horrors of withdrawal — the excruciating cramps in the stomach, head and limbs, the vomiting that all but tore out his insides, the endless nightmares, the burning, the chills.

At last, in the heavy heat of the August afternoon, the third son of Cheng Lo slept. Grateful and exhausted, Cheng left him under the watchful eyes of Kao Ma and her husband. He lay down on his bed, totally drained, and tried to rest, but found his nerves drawn so bow-string-taut that he could not close his eyes.

Perhaps a walk would help, he told himself. It had been so long since his eyes had seen the sun, since his ears had heard anything but the cries of Shen-lan. Without bothering to wash or to change his clothes — he was too tired even to think of it — he took his leave of the two old servants and went out of the house.

No one recognized Cheng as he wandered the streets of Macao in his plain, rumpled jacket and trousers. The people hurried past him,

intent upon their own business, a strange urgency in their manner. He had had no news of Lin since he'd left Canton, Cheng realized. Perhaps the rumors had been true — that the *ch'in ch'ai* intended to march on Macao and drive the English out. He thought of stopping someone and asking, then dismissed the notion. His exhausted mind was simply not up to the effort, and he would look the part of a fool for not having known in the first place.

Instead, he let his feet carry him where they would. He wandered down to the Inner Harbor. At a time when the place should have been swarming with activity, the docks were oddly silent, almost deserted. It was not difficult to guess that Lin had ordered supplies to Macao cut off. Wide awake now, Cheng stood and stared at the empty piers. The situation was even more serious than he'd thought.

He turned his steps inland now and strode uphill in the direction of the Monte Fort, which perched on a rise above Macao's center. The Portuguese governor maintained a garrison of sepoys there, and it would be easy enough to spot any preparations for a Chinese invasion.

The sky was darkening rapidly, black clouds boiling across the sun. Another storm was brewing, ready to burst in full fury upon the hills of little Macao. Cheng lengthened his stride. For a few moments, he allowed himself to think about his son again. The child of his heart, as Lin had so aptly guessed. His mind saw the boy as he had once been, burning with a special intensity, with a pure desire for knowledge. As a child, Shen-lan had been so full of questions that he had driven his mother to the brink of her patience. But Cheng had understood, had seen in those bright eyes the reflection of himself at that same age and had lavished upon the boy an extra measure of love.

Had Shen-lan been spoiled? No, Cheng told himself. It wasn't that. If anything, he had demanded more of his third son than of the two who were older. Perhaps, then, it was the boy's own driving curiosity, his compulsion to learn and experience everything, that had first led him to sample opium.

The sky was dark with seething clouds. A drop of rain fell on Cheng's hand. He hurried his steps. Below the rise of the Monte Hill, the soaring facade of Saint Paul's loomed into sight. Once the most imposing church in Macao, the building had caught fire in a high wind just five years before. The flames had destroyed the roof and the interior of the church. The rickety walls that remained had been torn

down for safety's sake, leaving only the elaborately carved facade to stand alone, open sky showing through its arched windows.

The threatening rain had cleared the streets of all but a few last-minute scurriers. As Cheng stepped out into the small square that lay at the foot of the church steps, a sound caught his ear. Looking to his right, down the main street, he saw the distant figure of a lone *fan kuei* woman in a yellow dress. She was half-running, half-stumbling up the steep, narrow roadway. Every few steps, she would pause and glance swiftly back over her shoulder. Something about the slender carriage of the figure was hauntingly familiar, but the woman was wearing a quaint, ugly hat of blue cloth that hid her hair and face, something that Kathleen Bellamy would never do.

Lightning split the sky, flickering silver through the windows of Saint Paul's. A gang of street youths came around a corner, not far behind the woman, brandishing sticks and knives. They were walking swiftly, allowing her just enough time to flee before them, playing a nerve-splitting game of cat and mouse with the poor creature.

As she glanced back at them in terror, they began to chant — "*Fan kuei! Fan kuei!*" Clattering their sticks on the pavement, they quickened their measured pace, their voices rising to yowls.

The woman was running now, stumbling over her long skirt and petticoats, gasping with the effort. Cheng walked out onto the steps that led up to the face of the church. She saw him then. Their eyes met. Yes, under that queer hat, it was Kathleen.

She had reached the bottom of the steps. "Chengqua!" she breathed, reaching upward with her hands like a drowning person. Her yellow dress was soaked with perspiration. The hem was ragged and filthy. He wondered how long they had been chasing her.

Without hesitating, he reached down, caught her hot hands in his cool ones and pulled her up beside him. She collapsed at his feet, choking with fear and fatigue.

The ragged mob came swarming up the street. Cheng stood still and faced them. He knew these fellows, most of them. They were a cowardly lot, made bold only by their number. Still — he quickly estimated that there were about twenty of them. Enough to overcome him easily if they chose. And what would they do to Kathleen? He stood his ground, his heart hammering.

At the foot of the steps, they stopped and stared at him, their faces frozen with hatred and defiance. Silence rippled over them like a cold wave. Then he heard one of them whisper, "It's Cheng Lo!"

The sound of his name swept through the crowd. "It's Cheng Lo . . . Cheng Lo . . . Cheng Lo . . ." They stood still and looked up at him, their eyes shifting back and forth, hesitating, measuring, perhaps, the consequences of attacking one of the Co-hong.

The leader, a skinny youth with a birthmark down the side of his face, lowered his club. The others did the same. Cheng let himself exhale deeply. No, they would not attack. But they would not retreat, not if it meant losing face. When he spoke at last, it was slowly and cautiously.

"I thank you," he said, "for bringing me this woman of the *fan kwei*. She is my prisoner now and I will deal justice to her, but your efforts should not go unrewarded." Without taking his eyes off them, he dug into the purse at his waist. In it, there remained only one silver coin. With an air of confidence he did not feel, Cheng tossed it to the leader, who caught it deftly, bit it with his crooked teeth to make sure it was not hollow and nodded to the others to follow him back down the street. The raindrops were thickening now, spattering down upon the cobblestones. The southeast wind whistled through the empty windows of Saint Paul's. The youths began to run, sprinting for the shelter of overhanging eaves and doorways. Cheng waited until they were gone from sight before he reached down with his hand and pulled Kathleen to her feet. Her wet, muddy fingers clung to his for a moment, but she did not look up at him.

"We were warned not to go out alone," she said, her voice still husky with fear, "but you know I never listen. One of them called me a name . . . then there were three of them — and before I knew what was happening —"

He scarcely heard her, for at that moment the full frenzy of the storm burst out of the blackened sky. The rain came down in sheets, pelting in waves across the little square, flowing around their feet where they stood on the steps.

Cheng turned toward the facade. "Come," he said simply.

She walked beside him in silence through the stinging rain. Together they mounted the steps of Saint Paul's, passed through the empty doorways of the facade and out the other side. Cheng did not

hasten. He welcomed the rain. After the long, agonizing days he had spent with his son, it was sweet, like some divine cleansing. He glanced at Kathleen and saw, in profile, only the soggy outline of her bonnet, but her unhurried stride matched his. He sensed that she felt as he did about the storm. They did not touch, not even their hands, but the feeling of her nearness was so strong that it warmed his blood.

The rain streamed down the hollows of the gray roof tiles and puddled in the gardens and squares. The wind whipped the palms and banyans, stirred the inner harbor to a brown froth that set junks and sampans to pitching wildly. Cheng and Kathleen rounded the foot of the Monte Hill and found themselves looking down a narrow street toward the gate of a small Buddhist temple. The temple was an old one, deserted most of the time in favor of more elaborate shrines. The once-red hangings above its modest altar were pink and rotted with age. The *joss* sticks, thrust into little pots of sand, had long since burned out. To the pair of wanderers, the place offered a quiet, secluded shelter from the rain.

Cheng did not know what had led him here, or even why Kathleen had remained at his side. He only half-knew why his pulse pounded against his eardrums as he led her under the upturned eaves of the roof and into the shadows.

Drenched and shivering, she stood facing him. Her lips parted as his hands reached out to untie the strings of the dripping bonnet. She shrank back, then closed her eyes, her lashes dark and damp against her pale cheeks.

The wet bow was stubborn. Cheng tugged at it until it pulled loose, then lifted the soggy blue covering from her head.

He caught his breath.

Her beautiful red hair was as short as a *fan kuei* boy's. The rain and the wet bonnet had plastered it to her skull.

She opened her eyes. "My father," she said softly. "He found out about Joaquin — and he cut it."

"Kathleen!"

"Say it! I'm ugly! No man would want me now!"

"Nonsense! And it will grow — " His hands found their way to her head and he began to comb her hair outward with his fingers, mar-

veling at its fine, silken texture and the way it curled at his touch. It was short, but not so short as he had first thought.

"That isn't all," she said. "My father wants me to make a public confession in church! If I don't, he'll shave off the rest!"

Cheng caught his breath in sudden pity for her. To punish a wayward daughter was understandable enough, but to lay bare misfortunes that should be kept secret, to cause the poor girl to lose face before the community — he did not understand how Archer Bellamy could do such a thing.

"And . . . will you do it, Kathleen?" His hands, he discovered, had abandoned all pretense of arranging her hair and were now merely caressing the back of her head, cradling her skull, massaging the taut cords of her neck.

She did not answer his question. In the quiet of the temple, he could hear her breathing. She smelled of fragrant musk and rain and foreign soap. The pupils of her eyes were huge in the shadows. Cheng's hands fell away from her head, his palms tingling from the touch of her damp curls. A sense of the inevitable overwhelmed him. He felt as helpless as a twig in a torrent, as if the very hand of fate had carried him here to this place, to this moment, to this woman whom he had no right to touch. He knew what would happen next. He knew, because this time he *wanted* it to happen . . .

He felt her quiver as his arms went around her. Her face was starkly beautiful in the flash of lightning that split the heavens just as he bent his head and covered her lips with his. Her mouth, wonderously soft and warm, opened like a flower as she melted against him. Weak and dizzy from the sweetness of it, he allowed his own lips to move, to stroke and caress hers. With a tiny moan, she slid her arms up and around his neck.

Strange, he thought, his head spinning wildly, he had never known what it was to hold a woman this way. His family had betrothed him to Jung Fei at the age of four and he had seen her for the first time on their wedding day, when he was no older than Shen-lan. He had first touched her in their marriage bed, and by his seventeenth birthday he had become a father. Among his people, courtship between man and woman was almost unknown. Even now, after so many years, he embraced his wife only when he slept with her. That was the proper way, the way things had always been done in the Middle Kingdom.

But this *fan kwei* madness! Kathleen clung to him, her body warm and wet from the rain, as his hands explored the curve of her slender back, the intriguing stiffness of her corseted waist. His senses were burning with the fragrance and feel of her, with the sound of her breathing. Overcome by desire, he raised her chin and tasted her lips again, this time with the full force of passion. His arms crushed her against the length of his body and she responded with her own wildness, her mouth blending eagerly with his, both of them trembling with a need that had become almost unbearable.

Gently, she pulled away from him, her lips clinging to his until the last moment. His loins were throbbing. The wet trousers clung to his body, revealing everything. She glanced down, then quickly raised her eyes to the level of his chest. Color flooded her cheeks.

He had the grace to smile. "See, Kathleen, even this poor man has no secrets from you," he said softly.

She hesitated, then slipped back into his arms and rested her head trustingly in the hollow between his neck and shoulder. Filled with tenderness now, he cradled her as he would have cradled a child. "Chengqua . . ." Her anguished whisper barely stirred the air. He could almost feel her mind struggling, fumbling for the words. "Chengqua . . ." Her arms tightened about him. "Take me. Please."

At first he thought perhaps he had misunderstood her, but then he knew from the way she was trembling that he had not. His arms pulled her closer against him. He pressed his face to her wet hair, his heart pounding. It would be easy, he reflected. They were alone; he was fully ready and, he realized, he wanted her. He wanted her so much that his whole body throbbed with the sweet pain of it.

"Chengqua . . ." She stirred in his arms, not seductively but timidly, like a frightened little girl. "It's not worth it," she said. "All this great to-do about honor and virtue . . . it's not worth it. It's cost me my hair and my self-respect — all for nothing . . . nothing! I'm sick of virtue and virginity! I'm tired of waiting for that one special man who'll never come to a place like Macao." She paused, and when she began to speak again, her breath came in jerking little gasps. "Chengqua, you saved my virginity once . . . Now I want you to be the one to take it!"

Cheng's heart surged with sudden longing, but he knew what his answer must be. This, after all, was the real world, a world of rules

and penalties and consequences, and he would not have her hurt by it. He held her close as he gathered his strength. "No, my heart," he whispered.

"Why?" She drew back a little to gaze up into his face.

"Because I would not make of you what you would become if I were to do as you ask."

"It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing I could become would be any more wretched than what I already am!"

"Hush — " He touched her lips with his fingertip and drew her head down to rest against his shoulder once more. "You don't know, Kathleen. You think you have experienced despair . . . You think you have felt hate. But that which you have known is nothing compared to what you would have to endure if we were to — "

"It doesn't matter! Oh, Chengqua, I'm so alone — "

He stroked her hair, tangling his fingers in the short, damp curls. "Someday, Kathleen," he murmured, "someday he will come, this man you speak of, the man you would choose for yourself . . . And when he does, you will thank me ten thousand times for refusing you."

She only sighed and pressed her face into the front of his wet tunic.

"Promise me something," he continued softly, feeling the nod of her head against his chest. "Promise me you will wait for him . . . that you will keep yourself safe and pure. No more taking foolish chances. Will you promise that much . . . to one who cares for you?"

She nodded again, mutely, and he wondered if she was weeping. The lightning silvered the sky through the archway of the temple door. The rain gurgled into pools beneath the eaves. A swallow stirred and twittered among the rafters of the ancient temple. Cheng held her in silence, his heart swelling with tenderness and concern as she rested against him, her breathing low and even. Her slender body felt as frail as a child's in his arms, and her need was a child's need, to be held and comforted. He closed his eyes.

The sound of the raindrops on the roof tiles blended with the pulsing of his own heart to hum in his ears, a song like the sigh of the Yangtse in springtime when it surges with the runoff from mountain snows. The strange, musky perfume that was Kathleen crept into his senses, filling them, warming them, until he felt there was no part of him that did not hold her.

The rain gentled, diminished, dissolved into mist and into stillness, except for a stream of water drizzling softly off one corner of the roof. Kathleen moved in his arms and raised wide, questioning eyes to his. Without speaking, Cheng lifted his two hands to cradle her face, feeling the strong, taut line of her jaw beneath his thumbs. Softly and tenderly, he pressed his lips upon her forehead, her closed eyelids, her cheeks and, for the last time, the sweetness of her mouth.

"Never again, my Kathleen," he said, his voice grating in the dim silence of the temple.

She turned away as his hands released her, breaking the bond between them. "No — never again," she said dully. "You are right, Chengqua. I know that." She paced as far as the altar, then whirled suddenly to face him again, her head thrust high, like a wild mare's. "But wouldn't it have been splendid! Standing up in church tomorrow to confess my sins! By damn — " she swore in English — "I'd have had something to confess! I'd have set them all on their bloody ears, my father included!"

For an instant, he stared at her, his brows raised in shock. She was incredible, this savage, vulnerable girl with her mad notions!

Then he realized that she was throwing up a barrier between them, a necessary barrier against the pain of their separation. He allowed himself to smile, to see her statement in the light of its absurdity. A surge of laughter welled up inside him and burst out between his lips. Soon she was laughing with him, the tension between them magically dissolved.

Magically, too, the sun had burst through a small patch of blue sky. A pair of wagtails piped their elation from the edge of the roof. "Grant me one favor, Kathleen," Cheng said, his cautious smile maintaining the barrier.

"Perhaps."

"Give me this ugly hat — " he bent down and picked up the bonnet from where it lay in a puddle of water, "and the promise that you will go back to your family with your head held high."

Her blue-green eyes widened. "And tomorrow?"

"That you will do what must be done . . . and do it magnificently!"

"I'm frightened, Chengqua."

He shook his head. "You yourself know who and what you are. What is manifest within will be manifest without. And I see nothing

but good in you, Kathleen. Nothing but beauty. Others will see it, too, if you let them."

She bit her lower lip. "But I look . . . terrible." Taking the bonnet from his hand, she began to twist the water out of it.

"No." Afraid to touch her again, Cheng cocked his head and studied her. Her hair had begun to dry a little, and it curled softly about her face, making her eyes very large. Her neck was long and graceful, like a white heron's. "You look . . ." he began slowly, "like one of the little winged children on the ceilings of the old Portuguese churches."

"Cherubim?" The idea seemed to please her. "If that is the word, yes. Now, will you promise me?"

"Perhaps." Her eyes were dancing now. "On one condition."

He waited, a little half-smile of amusement on his face.

"Call your chair to take me home. Don't make me walk."

"Done! Wait here — you'll be safe. My house is not far. When I get there, I'll send it for you." Resolutely, he strode to the gate. He would be lost, he knew, if he stayed.

"Chengqua!" She ran lightly to his side. "You forgot something!" With a smile, she held out the wadded-up bonnet. Even with her short hair, she had never looked more beautiful, Cheng thought. For just a moment, she stretched on tiptoe and pressed the softness of her cheek against his. His arms ached to hold her once more, but he willed them to remain at his sides.

"Kathleen," he whispered. "You know that if we meet again, it can only be as friends."

"Yes, I know it well, Chengqua." She brushed a kiss against his ear, then stepped back to let him go. He took the bonnet from her hand.

"When he comes," she whispered, "the man I choose to marry, I will bring him to you, Chengqua, for your approval and your blessing. Then you will know that I have kept the promise I made you today."

"Yes," he said, filling his eyes with the sight of her. "Yes, if such a thing is possible, it would please me to see you happy, Kathleen." But who could say, he thought, who could know, in these turbulent days, if they would ever see one another again?

While a little of his strength remained, he turned and left her.

The mynah birds, happy to see the end of the rain, whirled and chuckled as Cheng walked swiftly along beneath the trees. When he sent the chair back for Kathleen, he resolved, he would not go with it.

It would be best for them both if he never saw her again, except, perhaps, in the presence of her father.

He walked on, eyes fastened to the gleaming wet cobblestones in the street. He hoped that Shen-lan would still be sleeping when he arrived home.

As soon as the boy was well enough, they would return to Canton. Then, with no more delay, Cheng told himself, he would go to Jung Fei and ask her to find her husband a small wife. Maybe a concubine would quiet the seething in his blood. Maybe, if the new wife proved to be sweet and pretty, she would even ease the pain of remembering Kathleen's tall, strong, young body in his arms, her barbarian lips warm against his own.

Thirteen

Kathleen's room was in the attic of the old house. It had never been given a proper ceiling, so when she lay in her bed, she could see the bamboo framework that supported the roof tiles. When the Bellamys had come to the house five years before, there had been rats and lizards in this framework, but Rose, with her horror of vermin, had soon put an end to them with traps and poison. Then she'd had even the smallest openings sealed so that no more of the creatures could scurry across the ceiling to drop on Kathleen as she slept.

There was little chance of sleeping tonight. Kathleen lay on her back, covers tossed aside in the room's sultry air, and rehearsed in her mind the "confession" she was to make at the next morning's service. By now she had spoken the words to herself so many times that they marched through her brain like a column of tin soldiers. Her father had demanded a public confession, she would begin, but in truth she had little to confess. She had been guilty of nothing more serious than welcoming the friendship of a young man, a man who had betrayed that friendship. Like any decent girl, she had fought for her virtue and had been saved from vile degradation by the grace of God. She would substitute God's name for Chengqua's she told herself, and hope that God would not mind. As long as no one knew of Chengqua's involvement, there was no sense in dragging him into the mess. But she would stand tall, as she'd promised him she would. She would wear her light green silk and brush her short red curls until they framed her face like a halo. Perhaps she would even add a tiny bow to match her dress. Kathleen quivered with fearful anticipation. She closed her eyes and whispered Cheng's words aloud, in Cantonese, so they would

sound the way he had spoken them: "Do what must be done . . . and do it magnificently!"

With a sigh, she flung herself over onto her face and tried to remember exactly how she had felt in his arms. Already the sensation was fading, even though she fought to keep it. She'd kissed Joaquin, of course, and a dozen English lads over the past few years. Boys. All of them. Today she had found herself in the arms of a man.

Kathleen sat up, swung her feet to the floor and tiptoed to the small, open window. A crescent moon silvered the street below where a lone dog sniffed in the gutter and trotted out of sight. She lay with her cheek on the windowsill, wanting to weep for herself and for Chengqua, who was everything she had ever wanted in a man — except for three great looming faults that overrode all his attractions: He was twice her age, he was married and, worst of all, he was Chinese.

Everyone in Macao knew the story of Maude Pickett. Mothers made a point of telling it to their daughters. If an English or American girl so much as looked at a Chinaman, the admonition "Remember what happened to Maude Pickett!" was usually enough to snap her back into line. Maude Pickett, according to the tale, was an Irish girl who'd come to Macao to work as a governess for the children of an English trader in the late 1700s. She'd not been a beauty, the story went, but she'd had a few respectable suitors to choose from among the clerks and sailors. She could have had a decent life until Maude Pickett did the unthinkable: She fell in love with a Chinese coolie, a Christian named Wang.

In spite of Wang's conversion, no preacher, priest or public official could be found who would take on the burden of marrying them. No trading firm would give Wang employment and no respectable man or woman in Macao would speak to poor Maude. The couple was ostracized and hounded from one end of Macao to the other. Wang tried to take Maude into China to live, but the Chinese authorities would not allow her to enter. They'd settled at last in a wretched little village near the barrier gate, where they lived in abysmal poverty until a cholera epidemic took them both.

The story varied in the retelling. Sometimes Maude was Welsh, not Irish. Sometimes it was smallpox, not cholera, that had wiped out their lives. In one version of the story, the lovers had built a sampan, tried to sail from Macao to the more liberal ambiance of Singapore, and per-

ished at sea. However changed or embellished, the story of Maude Pickett always made the same point in the end. Caucasian girls were not to mix with Chinese men.

In the reverse of Maude's situation, the rules were a little less rigid. Chinese prostitutes and mistresses were necessary evils. If a man was discreet, if he did not flaunt his almond-eyed woman in public, his friends and associates simply looked the other way. Let him try to marry her, however, or live with her openly, and his fate would be little better than the unfortunate Maude's.

Kathleen leaned against the windowsill and gulped the moist air that blew in off the Praya. The night echoed the way she felt — turbulent and full of change. Thin clouds swept across the face of the crescent moon. She shivered, hugged herself in her white nightgown, and wondered what she would be feeling now if Cheng had taken her at her word and done as she had begged him to do. Looking back, she realized that her request had been born of despair, and she had not really meant it. She would not have said it had she not trusted him so completely. But he *had* wanted her. His body could not have lied. He had wanted her, and his denial was the greatest act of love she had ever known.

She opened the window wider and let the breeze ruffle her curls. Chengqua had said she looked like a cherub. Well, maybe she would start a new fashion in Macao! She laughed softly, feeling as if she had been given some marvelous present. She was loved. True, Chengqua's was a love that lay beyond all hope of fulfillment, but for the present it was enough. It would warm her, sustain her in her loneliness, until that one special man, the man she would love forever, came into her life. And when that day came, she promised herself, she would go to him with Chengqua's blessing.

The moon emerged from its veil of clouds, a thin, radiant line against the blue-black of the sky. "Thank you, Chengqua . . . " Kathleen whispered into the night. "Oh, thank you . . . "

She waltzed back to the bed and lay down, her arms spread wide, her eyes closed. For just a moment, the impression returned with perfect clarity — the soft, warm strength of his lips at the very instant they had touched her own . . .

Turning over, she punched her pillow hard with her doubled-up fist. *Remember Maude Pickett*, the words rang in her head. Poor Maude

Pickett. A fate worse than death, they said . . . Kathleen closed her eyes tightly and, with great effort, forced the image of Cheng's face from her mind.

Still, long moments later, when she drifted off to sleep, it was with the warmth of his arms around her.

Kathleen was never to have the opportunity to make her public "confession." Vincent Stanton came to the house at dawn, pounding on door till the walls vibrated.

Archer Bellamy was already up and dressed in his black frockcoat. He flung the door open to find young Stanton on the stoop, pale, disheveled and out of breath from running. "My God, it's happened!" he gasped, stumbling across the threshold. "The Chinese . . . !"

Rose, in her faded wrapper, came out of the kitchen with a pot of tea in one hand and an empty cup in the other, her eyes startled and questioning. Silently, she poured a cup of tea and handed it to Vincent Stanton. Lord, thought Kathleen, looking down at the scene from the top of the staircase. If the devil came in to announce that we were all going to hell, my mother would pour him a cup of tea!

Vincent Stanton, however, took the cup gratefully and gulped down the warm liquid without cream or sugar. His light brown hair stuck out around his thin face; his spectacles sat askew on his nose.

" . . . Just came from the Praya . . . " He was still breathing hard. "They'd towed in one of the passage schooners . . . the *Black Joke*; you'd know it. All of the crew — dead, except one. Only Lascars they were, thank heaven, but there was an Englishman aboard . . . chap named Morris . . . " Stanton's hands were shaking so badly that he almost dropped the teacup. Rose quietly took it from him. His voice wavered. "They'd cut off his ear, sir, and stuffed it in his mouth!"

"He's alive?" Archer Bellamy rasped, his face white.

"Aye. They say he'll mend, though he was knocked about in a bad way. Some broken ribs, broken nose . . . " Stanton coughed, putting a long, thin hand over his mouth. "It was Chinese, they say. Seven boatloads of them. They hit the *Black Joke* last night off Lantau."

"It wasn't pirates?"

"Not this time. Regular Chinese, I heard. Besides, the *Black Joke* didn't have anything aboard worth stealing." He accepted a second cup from Rose and downed it in a single gulp. "But that's not the worst of

it, sir. The Chinese — they're camped on the other side of the barrier! Governor Pinto's got word from Lin that the English have got to leave Macao tomorrow. If not, Lin says, he'll come in and drive us out!"

Kathleen, huddled at the top of the stairs in her white nightgown, could not restrain a little cry. Vincent Stanton's eyes flew up to where she sat. It was the first time he had seen her short hair, but the expression on his face reassured her that Cheng had been right. She was not undesirable.

Archer Bellamy clenched his jaw. "Chinese," he muttered. "Filthy savages! And what did Pinto reply to that?"

Stanton spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "What *could* he reply? No one's blaming Governor Pinto, sir. He hasn't much choice. Macao would have no chance in a war with the Chinese."

"Then — " Rose's hands clasped the porcelain teapot, "we'll have to leave! Just take what we can carry and . . . get out!" Her voice had begun to quiver. She turned and called up the stairs. "Kathleen! Get your clothes on and come help me! There's washing to be done, and packing and — "

Her words died in the withering coldness of her husband's glare. "'Tis the sabbath," he said firmly. "Whatever the rest of Macao does, the Bellamy family will spend it in the proper way. In church. You'll be there, Vincent Stanton?"

Stanton's pale gray eyes darted from Kathleen to the towering figure of her father. "I've my pupils to think of," he said slowly, "and the things for their schooling. They can't be left behind. Forgive me, Reverend, but I'll need the time to pack." With a last, longing look up the stairway, he backed out of the door and was off down the street at a run.

Their nerves pulled tight as piano strings, the Bellamys completed their usual Sunday morning toilet. Then, with Rose taking her husband's arm and Kathleen walking behind, they rounded the corner and walked up the slope of the street to the little white chapel.

For half an hour, they waited. No one, not even the most faithful members of the congregation, came into the chapel. At last the Reverend motioned for his wife to take her place at the organ. Kathleen sat on the front row and stared at her slippers, feeling foolish, while her father preached a brief sermon from the pulpit on the evils of sabbath-breaking. Then the three of them sang one verse of

"From Greenland's Icy Mountains," followed by a word of prayer. No one mentioned Kathleen's planned "confession."

The streets were deserted except for occasional Chinese, headed north toward the barrier. Kathleen thought of Cheng and wondered whether he was still in Macao.

The afternoon passed excruciatingly. Kathleen, under the watchful eyes of her father, sat on the old maroon sofa and tried to read. Even the Book of Ruth, which was usually her favorite part of the Bible, failed to hold her attention today. Rose wandered through the house, fretting over her geraniums, over her rugs, quilts and dishes, agonizing over what would be packed and taken away and what would be left behind to the ravages of the Chinese. Vincent Stanton had come by with the news that a fleet of ships was approaching the Typa, ready to receive the English families and carry them safely to the harbor off Hong Kong. Elliot had already sent his wife and little son to the safety of the *Fort William*, and was said to be on his way there himself.

"And Morgan?" Kathleen asked him when her father was not listening too closely. "You've seen him and Pris?"

"I went by their place before I came here." Stanton looked down at his shoe. Although his eyes worshiped Kathleen from a distance, he could not find in his timid nature the courage to meet her gaze close up. "Your brother's much better, Miss Kathleen. He was sitting up in bed when I saw him. But he's too weak to walk. He'll have to be carried down to the Praya tomorrow."

"Vincent," she pressed his arm and saw his face pink a little, "could you take me to see him? I know they say it's not safe out, but I wouldn't be afraid with you."

Before Stanton could answer, the Reverend's frosty eyebrows shot upward. "Nay, you're not to go out, Kathleen. It's dangerous. And your mother will be needing you soon."

"Very well, Father," she murmured with charming submissiveness. Out of the corner of her eye, she studied Vincent Stanton. His hair, unruly by nature, had been combed back and slicked down with water. He looked at the world through a pair of small spectacles, framed in silver wires, which rested upon ears that were large and very clean. The sleeves of his gray suit were too short for his long arms. But her mother was right. He was kind and honest and intelli-

gent. And he did adore her. Inwardly, Kathleen sighed as she reminded herself of Maude Pickett. She supposed she could do worse than Vincent Stanton.

Her father's voice jolted her from her reflections. "Would you say, then, that we are at war with China, Mister Stanton?"

"That's a matter of opinion, sir." Stanton leaned forward on the sofa and rested his elbows on his knees. "Officially, of course, we're not. Why, it'll take three months even to get word to England of what's going on here. Add in the time it would take for Parliament to debate the issues and make a declaration back to China — well, sir, anything could happen by then."

"And we've no way of protecting ourselves?" Archer Bellamy was not as ignorant as he sounded. More than anything, he was measuring young Stanton's understanding of the situation against his own.

"I didn't say that, sir. We've a few fighting ships — the *Louisa* and the *Fort William*, of course. And the *Cambridge*, which Captain Elliot hired on in June. She's a good one." Stanton stretched his arms, flexing and extending his incredibly long fingers. "They say Captain Elliot's already sent for help from India. A warship or two, at least. Should be here any time, with luck. And if things get worse, we can have more ships and even fighting men here within a few weeks. There's no sense in worrying."

"Then you don't think it will come to war between England and China?"

Vincent Stanton was conscious of Kathleen's eyes on him and he stammered a little. "Uh — that's right, Reverend. I left England only a few months ago. Nobody there cares about China, sir."

"But a war would clear away all this rubbish that the Chinese 'ave 'eaped on us for years! An English victory would open up ports for free trade! It would pave the way for the Word of God to be carried in —" Archer Bellamy slammed his fist down on the closed Bible that lay across his knees. "By thunder, everyone would benefit from it!"

"True, sir." Vincent Stanton spoke timidly, but with conviction. "But England has bigger problems. France. Russia. Turkey . . . They don't even want to be bothered about China."

Reverend Bellamy ruffled the pages of the Bible with his thumb. "And the two million pounds that Elliot promised the merchants for the chests they turned over to Lin? Will the Crown pay it?"

"I think not. They haven't the money."

Kathleen laid a hand on Stanton's sleeve and felt him tremble at her touch. "Vincent," she said earnestly, "when we leave Macao tomorrow . . . Do you think we'll ever come back again?"

In a gesture of unprecedented boldness, he covered her hand with his own big, warm palm. "Nobody knows that, Miss Kathleen," he said softly. "Nobody knows."

The British exodus from Macao took place, as scheduled, the following morning. From dawn to early afternoon, the lanes and streets leading down to the Praya were crowded with men, women and children hauling their possessions down to the boats. There were no coolies to help with the loading. Everyone from tall, aristocratic James Matheson to old George Chinnery, who was almost weeping from the strain of the past days, helped haul boxes, bundles and what little furniture they could, down to the jetties.

"It's unthinkable!" The little Irishman clung to Kathleen's side like a child. "Thrown out of me own house! Forced to leave me life's work behind! Aye, but it's a black day, Miss Kathleen! Imagine my portrait of you, hangin' in some Manchu soldier's tent!" He wiped his eyes and took a small swig from a flask in his pocket. Kathleen patted his shoulder to comfort him.

Vincent Stanton saw to the loading of his books and slates, then hurried to the aid of a group of sailors who were carrying Morgan Bellamy's stretcher down the water stairs. Morgan was pale but smiling, making jokes about the ineptness of his carriers. "By damn, if you drop me in the water, I'll take the lot of you with me! We'll *swim* out to the ship!" Pris, wan and silent, hovered at his side.

Rose Bellamy fluttered about her boxed dishes and bundled quilts and mattresses. "Kathleen," she fretted, "you packed the tea set?"

"It's in with my dresses, Mother. It wouldn't fit anyplace else."

"And the spare sheets?"

"Rolled up with the other bedding!" Kathleen hefted a bundle of quilts to her shoulder, conscious of the way a burden carried high made a woman appear more graceful. She was not particularly dismayed by their going. To her, it was more of an adventure than a trial.

"Archer," Rose called to her husband, who was helping lower a cradle off the jetty into a small boat. "Archer, the bundle I packed your clothes in — it's not here!"

Tall and gaunt, he straightened up and strode over to where Rose and Kathleen were moving their things down the wharf. "I didn't know 'ow to tell you any sooner," he said. "I'm staying in Macao."

Kathleen reacted to his words with a leap of the heart. Hong Kong . . . without her father! The possibilities were thrilling. Then, as she stared at the man who had ruled her existence since her birth, the man who had scolded her, lectured her, punished her, restricted her freedom and finally cut off her hair, her spirit clouded. He would be placing himself in danger; and in spite of all he had done to her, he was her father. Deep in her heart there still remained something akin to love for him.

Rose's hand had flown to the side of her face, and her lips were open in prelude to an argument.

Archer Bellamy preserved her silence with a shake of his head. "I've more cause for quarrel with these cursed opium-runners than I 'ave with the Chinese. I won't board their ships and leave God's house open to desecration." The muscles rippled at the sides of his lean face as he tensed his jaw. "Lin is not my enemy. We work for the same cause, 'e and I. God willing, 'e'll see that, and I will come to no harm."

"Father — " Kathleen put a hand on his sleeve. The black gabardine was hot in the August sun. "Get word to Chengqua! He has some influence — "

"No, child. Chengqua is Chinese first, and our friend a very distant second. I'll not try to compromise 'im."

Kathleen gazed up at the Reverend Archer Bellamy and felt a lump rise in her throat. He was right about Chengqua. In the final analysis, he was right about everything. She'd been a hellion, she told herself, a shameless rebel. The punishments he'd dealt out in an attempt to set her right had been, for the most part, well deserved. She felt a sudden impulse to throw her arms about him and tell him so. But it was too late now. She had never freely admitted to him that he was right. In the past few years, she had not even told him once that she loved him. She could not begin now.

Rose wiped her eyes with a crumpled linen kerchief. "I know better than to fight you, Archer," she said. "Just promise me you'll not be reckless."

George Chinnery, who'd been fluttering in the background, extended a quivering hand. "It's a brave man you are, Reverend. I'd stay with you, meself, had I the strength."

Archer Bellamy shook Chinnery's hand. "Chances are I'll be safest alone," he said. Then he stood silent for a moment, his eyes following the longboat that by now had carried Morgan and Priscilla halfway out to the *Peregrine*. Vincent Stanton came up the water stairs. The Reverend beckoned him over.

"I charge you with their care, Stanton," he said. "But mind Kathleen, I warn you. She needs a firm hand." He clasped Stanton's shoulder warmly. Kathleen chewed her lower lip, half-angry and half-amused. There was no mistaking what her father meant. If Vincent Stanton wanted to marry her, he had the good Reverend's full support.

An empty longboat had touched the bottom of the water stairs. Archer Bellamy and Vincent Stanton loaded the things from the Bellamy household into it, along with George Chinnery's bundled up paints, rolled canvas, brushes and clothing.

"Take care, Archer." Rose gripped her husband's hand. He did not kiss her. She let Vincent Stanton help her into the boat, where she sat forlornly among the lumpy baggage. Kathleen came next, then Chinnery and finally Stanton himself. Archer Bellamy stood on the jetty, a towering monument to his own stubborn courage, as the sailor bent his perspiring back to the oars and the boat moved away from the water stairs. Kathleen gazed back at him until his figure grew small with distance. Then she turned her head in the direction of the Typa, where the schooners, brigs and clippers of the merchant fleet were anchored.

There had been no Chinese at the Praya to see them depart. Most of them, not wishing to be caught up in a war with the *fan kuei*, had taken their worldly goods and fled beyond the barrier gate. Kathleen's eyes had swept the circle of the outer harbor again and again. No, she concluded at last, a gloomy pall settling over her like a veil, Chengqua had not come.

The harbor was still. Even though the distant clouds promised a storm, the sun burned hot in the sky. Most of the sampans had moved to the safety of the inner harbor, but a few fishing junks dotted the undulating brown water. There was just enough wind to send them

sweeping lazily around the point of the peninsula. One of them, Kathleen noticed, was moving on a course that would take it within a few yards of the longboat.

The sun beat down on her head. The breeze stirred her hair, teasing the wispy curls around her face. Vincent Stanton was studying her from behind his little silver-rimmed spectacles. Kathleen looked away from him and trailed her fingers in the creamy water as she watched the junk move closer.

It was an ordinary craft, its brown hull weathered and encrusted with barnacles, its thick, ribbed sails spread high to catch the breeze. The painted eyes on the bow were so faded that they could scarcely be seen. The sailor in the longboat cursed. "Damned Chinese! Think they be ownin' the harbor." He pulled hard on the oars.

The junk swept closer, on a direct collision course with the longboat. Then, at the last moment, it veered to one side and glided past, within a stone's throw of the passengers. The dozen or so Chinese crewmen, ragged and bare-chested, leaned on the gunwale and grinned at the sweating English.

One man stood apart from the rest, leaning out from the ladder that led up to the poop deck. He was taller than the others and not so dark, with fine, broad shoulders and a thick queue that gleamed blue-black in the sun. He gazed calmly at the longboat, his narrow eyes squinting in the afternoon sunlight. Kathleen was the only one who recognized him. Her hands gripped the side of the boat. Her lips parted and silently formed his name.

Chengqua!

He had seen her, but his expression did not change. He only touched his hand to his head in brief salute. Chengqua. She wanted to call to him, to reach out with her arms, but she kept her silence. He would want it that way. With the tears welling up inside her, she drank him in with her eyes, burned his image upon her mind to keep and hold. Who could say, she wondered, whether they would meet again as friends, as lovers or as enemies?

She kept her gaze upon him until the junk had turned away, hiding him from view. Then she sat looking down at her clenched hands, a cold blackness descending over her spirit.

It was that old warning she felt, that awful sixth sense of hers, that had come to tell her the truth.

She would never look upon Cheng's face again.

Fourteen

Macao
August 1939

Morgan came aboard the *Peregrine* by way of the hoist that had been rigged to haul up cargo and supplies. He was still too weak to stand, but he'd insisted on being fully dressed for the departure from Macao. Damned if he was going to arrive on board his own ship wearing a nightshirt!

It was old Peabody himself whose stentorian voice barked the orders. "Easy with him now! Slow an' gentle, mates. It's not a blasted bale o' cotton ye've got there!"

The pulley creaked as the men hauled. Morgan clung to the rough ropes. From down in the longboat, he saw Pris's worried face gazing upward before the sling swung him over the deck.

"Easy . . . easy now . . . " Peabody rumbled. He looked up at Morgan's, descending figure and grinned. "Good to have ye aboard again, Mister Bellamy!"

The hoist creaked, lowering Morgan to the deck with scarcely a bump. Two sailors sprang forward to ease him out of the sling and into a waiting chair.

Perplexed, Morgan studied the captain. There was no trace of the usual surliness in Peabody's manner. Why, the old sea dog seemed genuinely glad to see him!

The men, too, were moving smartly and cheerfully. Something in the atmosphere aboard the *Peregrine* had changed since Morgan had left for Macao. Anxiously, his eyes darted about the deck and swept up the rigging to the crow's nest. Japeth Pratt was nowhere to be seen.

"Captain — " Morgan motioned Peabody to come within whispering range. "Are — are all your men here?"

"Aye. All save one." Something secret flashed like a trout in the quiet blue pools of his eyes. Morgan, his stomach in a knot, waited for the old captain to go on.

Peabody paused for breath, taking his time. "It's Seaman Pratt," he said matter-of-factly. "Mate caught him with a keg full o' *samshu*. Ye know my rules about drinkin' aboard ship! He's been in the brig near a week now."

"A week you say?" Morgan spoke very slowly, trying to keep the tightness out of his voice.

"Aye." The captain gnawed at the stump of his clay pipe and blew a puff of smoke into the air. "Might have let him out afore this, Mister Bellamy, but to tell you the truth, Pratt seemed a bit . . . touched. Thought it best t' keep him locked up till ye got back."

Morgan willed his fingers not to tighten on the arm of the chair. Pris was coming up in the hoist now, her full skirt and petticoats flying in the wind. A pretty sight for the men on the deck, he thought with a stab of jealousy. Quietly, he waited for the captain to go on.

"Seems. Pratt was tryin' t' spread some wild tales, Mister Bellamy."

"Tales?" Morgan watched Pris alight gracefully from the sling.

"Aye. About what happened over in that fishing village. Claimed it was you killed the Chinee," Peabody sucked his pipe. "Nobody paid him any heed. Pratt's a born liar and we all know it. But 'twouldn't make an ant's piddle's worth o' difference if it'd been true! We'd never turn a man over to the Chinee and neither would Mister Elliot. By damn, the *Peregrine's* a brave ship. We'd not be lettin' her name go down 'longside the *Lady Hughes*!"

Morgan was overcome by a wave of emotion so strong that it brought the tears to his eyes. "Captain — " he began awkwardly.

"Nay, ye'd best hush. No sense awastin' your strength on talk. Ye can deal with Mister Pratt later." Peabody doffed his hat to Pris, who had come up beside him. The skin of his bald head was almost white in contrast with the ruddiness of his sunburned face and hands.

"How nice to see you again, Captain," she said prettily. "Will we be sailing for Hong Kong soon?"

Peabody squinted at the sky and shook his head. "Storm's abrewin'. Best ride 'er out here in the Typa. We should be safe enough from the

Chinee." He puffed his pipe in silence for a few moments as he scanned the rumbling clouds on the horizon. "Word is that a warship's on its way here. Ordered by your Mister Elliot. Might be worth wait-in' a piece to have safe escort back to Hong Kong."

A shout from the lookout told them that the longboat carrying the remainder of the Bellamy family had come alongside. The sling went down and Morgan guessed from the ripple of excitement that swept through the deck hands that Kathleen was being lifted aboard.

A few moments later, she rose into sight, magnificent as a clipper under full sail, her white skirt billowing around her and the breeze whipping her short red curls. Even Morgan caught his breath. This was not the same Kathleen who'd refused to take off her ugly bonnet and who'd run weeping from his chamber. Something had changed her — something, or perhaps someone, Morgan speculated. She was splendid! As the sling descended, the sailors jostled one another in an effort to be first to assist her. "Oh, Lord help us!" Morgan heard Captain Peabody mutter under his breath.

Kathleen accepted the most convenient hand, gained her footing and hurried to Morgan's side. "Father didn't come," she said, her eyes grave. "He wouldn't leave Macao."

Morgan felt stung. "You mean he wouldn't come aboard my ship. He wouldn't even let me save him."

"That was only part of it," she said gently. "It was mostly the church. He didn't want to leave it to the Chinese."

"No one tried to stop him?" Morgan gazed back at the distant Praya, but the people there were no more than moving dots. He could not even see his father.

"Not really. Not even Mother. You know how he is once he makes up his mind." Her eyes looked past him, beyond the rail, following a dilapidated junk as it disappeared around the tip of Macao. Aye, he reflected, his sister had changed. There was a new softness, an underlying resiliency in her, that had not been there before. It was as if she had been glass — bright and brittle — and had somehow evolved into pearl.

Rose came aboard next, followed by Chinnery and then Vincent Stanton, whose calf eyes trailed Kathleen wherever she went. Morgan raised an eyebrow. God's blood, could it be Stanton? That shy, gangly young ox? He watched his sister for a time. No, he concluded, it was

not Stanton. Kathleen was responding to something within herself, not to the people around her.

Morgan was bedded down at once in Adam Peabody's cabin, with the women taking his own more spacious quarters. Chinnery and Vincent Stanton would bunk with the mates. It was not the best situation, Morgan reflected as his mother tucked the light quilt over him. He'd have liked Pris with him, but there were only two decent cabins aboard. When the fleet returned to Hong Kong, he'd make arrangements that were more to his liking. There was plenty of room aboard the *Condor*.

The transfer from Macao to the *Peregrine* had sapped Morgan's precious strength, and for the next two days, while wind whistled and groaned about the masts and rain pelted the decks of the ship, he did little but sleep and eat. The three women, his mother, his sister, his wife, tended him and fussed over him, for they had little else to do. In his dreams, he saw faces that shimmered into focus only to drift apart like clouds — Pris, as she looked that night in Canton; the Chinaman with the split lip; Ch'iu Ming Choy Ling, simpering, naked behind huge fans; Wu Hung-li, laughing silently, the candlelight glinting yellow on his big front teeth; and Pratt most of all. Japeth Pratt, his wizened little face peering between the bars of his cell. As soon as he was strong enough to stand, Morgan resolved, he would have to do something about Pratt.

On Thursday, the weather cleared, and Morgan awoke to the singing of the wind in the sails. The ship was moving. He stretched, his limbs surging with new strength and restlessness, and decided it was time he got up.

The sky still glowed pink over the violet horizon to the east as Morgan, rumpled and unshaven, came up on deck. The captain stood on the bridge, his old legs braced wide, his hands on the wheel. He did not even look down as Morgan walked across the deck. The women, he surmised, were still below. Chinnery, he knew, had taken to his bed. Except for the dark, wiry Lascars, agile as gibbons when they clambered about the rigging, the only person on deck was Vincent Stanton.

Stanton was hunched at the rail, gazing down at the white froth that glided past the bow of the *Peregrine*. Startled by Morgan's approach, he jumped a little.

“Ah! It’s you, Bellamy! Splendid to see you about!” He took off his spectacles, wiped away the salt spray with his handkerchief and put them back on.

“Thank you, Stanton. Good to be — Lord, will you look at that!”

Sweeping along on a parallel course with the *Peregrine*, a scant hundred yards to starboard, was a British man-o’-war. From the mast, the Union Jack snapped in the wind; cannons bristled from the deck; Morgan counted thirteen on her port side alone.

Stanton grinned at Morgan’s astonishment. “Quite a sight, isn’t she! The *Volage*! Twenty-six guns! Just got in last night! Word is that another one, the *Hyacinth*, is just a few days behind!”

Morgan blinked at the vision, still stunned by the events of the past few days. So it had come to this. Her Majesty’s fighting ship, come all the way from India. England had taken a definitive step toward armed conflict with the Chinese. Morgan’s fist tingled with the memory of the split-lipped man’s yielding belly. Had he been the catalyst that had set off this explosion? He gripped the rail, suddenly trembling.

“You’re all right?” Stanton’s high brow furrowed with concern. “Wait, I’ll get you a chair.”

Morgan shook his head. “Any news from Macao, Stanton?”

“If you’re talking about a Chinese invasion, no. It’s quiet as a graveyard over there.”

“And my father?”

“No word from him. But Gutzlaff finally got out on Tuesday. He’d planned on staying, you know, because he’s Prussian, not English.” Stanton shook his head. “But he’s pretty well tarred with the English brush. He’d have been a fool to stay.”

“His wife’s English. What about her?” Morgan’s eyes were on the *Volage*, watching the way the rising sun caught her sails.

“She’s taking the orphan girls to Manila. Smart under the circumstances, I’d say.” Stanton raised his glasses and scratched the bridge of his long nose. His hair had been carefully combed and he smelled of lye soap. He’d been waiting for Kathleen to come on deck, Morgan guessed. Poor Stanton. Such a mild soul. It was damned difficult not to like him.

He stood and gazed out at the *Volage* for a few minutes, the muscles at the back of his neck tightening like a vise. Yes, he would have to find

a way to handle Pratt. At once. Morgan cleared his throat, made his excuses to Stanton and went down to shave.

The brig was below decks in the very bow of the *Peregrine*, where the timbers and planks came together in a tight "V." It was a cramped spot, dark, hot and stuffy; the worst place to feel the rise and fall of the ship. Morgan sniffed the foul air and swore that he could not leave any man, not even Japeth Pratt, in such a place.

Behind the bars, Pratt lay belly-up on his bunk. One arm was thrown across his unshaven face. He was snoring softly, a bubble of saliva rising and falling on his lips. Morgan hesitated. He could always come back later.

No, he told himself, best get it over with. He gripped the iron bars of the door and rattled them. Pratt did not stir. An unemptied slop bucket sat in one corner of the cell, a swarm of flies buzzing around it. Morgan, who'd inherited his mother's repugnance toward flies, grimaced. Peabody ought to have someone take care of it, he thought.

He rattled the bars again. "Pratt!" he hissed.

The seaman groaned, rolled onto his side and sat up. His washed-out eyes blinked in the lantern light. "Mornin'?" he rasped. Then his vision focused on Morgan. "Aye, but it's you, sor. Heard you was feelin' poorly." He stumbled over to the gate and stuck his simian face through the bars, the way he had in Morgan's dream. "Good t' have you back!" he exclaimed with admirable bravado.

Morgan only looked at him. He braced his legs apart against the nauseating smell and the roll of the ship and stared at Pratt until the little seaman began to sweat.

At last Pratt broke. "Aye," he muttered, scratching his head, "I ain't done right by you, have I, sor?"

"You have not. It would serve you right, Pratt, if I left you in here forever!"

Pratt slid down the bars until he was on his knees. "Not that," he whimpered. "For love o' God, take me out an' flog me! Lay it to me with the ol' cat, sor . . ." The tears sprang to his eyes. "But don't be leavin' me down here no longer! I can't stand it!" He began to blubber, the tears leaving streaks of dirt down his weathered cheeks. Morgan turned away from him. He had come down to the brig without having decided what he would do with Pratt. Some punishment would have

to be meted out, he knew, or Pratt would be his old, impudent self in no time. The wretch seemed repentant enough, but who could tell what he might do if he were freed? Leave him in there, the voice of Morgan's common sense whispered in his ear. Walk away and don't even listen to the little cur whine! Inwardly, he swore at his own weakness. Pratt deserved to go to prison for what he had tried to do. Yet Morgan could not forget that the ugly little seaman had saved his life at Chi'en-shat-sui.

Morgan turned away from the cage. "I'll recommend to Captain Peabody that you be given ten lashes," he muttered. "I ought to send you home on the next ship back to England. I've no use for you here, Pratt. But I'll be damned if I'm letting you out of my sight!"

"Oh, thank you, sor!" Pratt's voice quivered with gratitude. "You'll not be sorry . . ."

The rest of the words were lost in the darkness as Morgan strode back to the hatchway and clambered up into the fresh air like a drown-man.

The flogging of Japeth Pratt took place at ten o'clock that morning, under the direction of Adam Peabody. The women had been ordered to their cabin for the duration of the punishment, even though Kathleen had intimated that she'd rather like to see it. Vincent Stanton had also declined to stay on the deck and watch, but the crew was there in force. Ostensibly, Pratt was being punished for smuggling liquor aboard ship, but scarcely a man was not aware that the little seaman was taking his licks for the attempted blackmail and public slander of the *taipan*. With no vocal exceptions, they approved. Ten lashes was mild punishment for such an offense. Some masters would have seen the wretch hanged.

Morgan had never witnessed a whipping before, let alone ordered one. He stood on the quarterdeck and bit his lip as Japeth Pratt, grinning stoically, was lashed with his arms around the mainmast and the burly second mate brought out the cat o' nine tails. Adam Peabody bawled the order; the tails of the "cat" snapped in the air and laid smartly on the freckled, pink skin of Pratt's back. Pratt gasped as the knotted cords bit into his flesh, but he did not cry out.

Two . . . three . . . four . . . Morgan counted, clenching his teeth each time the stinging cords danced in the air, whistled forward and thud-

ded into the skin and tissue that was Japeth Pratt. Ten had never seemed so great a number. He had heard of men getting beaten twenty, even forty lashes. With forty, they often died, and for the first time Morgan could see why. Even after five blows from the infamous "cat," Pratt's back was little more than raw, bleeding meat. Six . . . seven . . . Pratt was slumped against the mast, his weight hanging from his bound arms. By heaven, he hadn't even whimpered. The little bastard had spunk. Nine . . . ten. The mate stepped back, the tails of the "cat" hanging slack at last. Peabody nodded to the crewman, who dashed a bucket of sea water on Pratt's oozing back. This time Pratt yelped with the pain.

Kathleen turned away from the open porthole. "It's over," she announced to the circle of grim faces that surrounded her in Morgan's cabin.

Priscilla shuddered and unclenched her hands. She considered Japeth Pratt one of the most repulsive men she'd ever met, and after what he'd tried to do to Morgan, he well deserved the flogging. But the thought of physical cruelty in any form had always made her cringe in horror.

"Do you think he's all right?" Rose's fingers fluttered about her mending. Her voice was strained and she looked weary. Pris studied her mother-in-law's hands, the only part of her that looked old. They were callused and rough, red from years of close acquaintance with hot water, lye soap and scrub-brushes. Other Englishwomen in this part of the world, even those of the most common sort, had servants. Yet Pris had never heard Rose complain. Rose never seemed to complain about anything. Pris envied her strength.

"All right? Certainly he'll be all right, Mrs. Bellamy!" Vincent Stanton leaned forward, his bony hands clasped around his legs. "Why, on the voyage here from England — off Sumatra it was — a man of the crew got thirty. I watched the lashing then, and swore I'd never watch another, even though ten strokes is nothing! Rest assured, ladies, he'll be up and about in no time."

Stanton had given the good seats to the women and taken a low stool, where he sat with his knees thrusting upward, like a grasshopper's. Pris liked him. He was such a gentle person; a patient, amiable foil for the fiery Kathleen — if only Kathleen would see that! In the

past few days, with Reverend Bellamy in Macao and Morgan so ill, Stanton had taken on the mantle of surrogate patriarch with a becoming grace. In the absence of a minister, he'd even conducted a Monday evening prayer service, giving thanks for their safe deliverance from the hands of the Chinese.

Footsteps rumbled overhead on deck and down the companionway as the crewmen carried the moaning Pratt to his bunk. Priscilla restrained a shiver. She wondered if Morgan had enjoyed giving the order to have Pratt whipped. She could not imagine that he relished cruel punishments any more than she did, but then, there were many things she had not known about Morgan when she married him. She stared down at the crumpled cambric handkerchief in her lap and tried to recall a girl named Priscilla Robards, who had almost danced down the aisle of the little white chapel to marry the young man she had loved for so long. If anyone had told her that Morgan would be unfaithful to her within a matter of weeks, she would have called it madness! Yet the unbelievable, and unforgivable, had happened.

She had thought of leaving him, perhaps to go to her aunt in America. Then he had been wounded at Chi'en-shat-sui and she had flown to his side. For more than six weeks, she had tended him. She had changed his bedclothes and bandages, had sponged his hot face and gripped his hands as he moaned in delirious pain. She had lived at his side, her heart overflowing with love, his past failings forgotten in the light of his need.

Priscilla sighed and twisted her handkerchief into a damp knot. It was easy enough for her to love Morgan when he lay helpless and bleeding, his very life in danger of slipping away. But he was getting well. Soon enough, he would be about his work again. Soon, too soon, he would be fit and lusty once more — and he would be wanting her in his bed.

She quivered, remembering the last time he had taken her in his arms, there on the deck, in the dawn. Her body had responded to his embrace with all its old ardor — until she remembered. The thought of another woman in his bed and in his arms had chilled her where she stood. All the hurt of that night in the Factories had come rushing in like an icy flood, killing every emotion except her pride.

She had never tried to find out who the other woman might be. Some Chinese harlot, most likely. It made little difference who she

was. The outcome was the same. No matter how much she might wish it, she told herself, she could never truly return to him.

A cough from George Chinnery roused her from her reverie, and she realized that she had completely missed the past several minutes of conversation in the room. Chinnery was huddled in the deepest armchair, nursing a small flask of Irish whiskey. Even though the estuary was calm, his old elfin face was bilious. This was the first time Pris had seen him out of bed since the day of the boarding.

Kathleen was still standing at the porthole, staring off toward Macao, even though the tallest hill of the little peninsula had long since vanished over the horizon.

"Sure, and I know what you're thinkin', me girl," Chinnery rumbled over the mouth of the flask. "We're all askin' ourselves if they're there; we're wonderin' if we've got Chinese camped out in our parlors and sleepin' in our beds!"

"Please, Mister Chinnery." Rose paused in her mending. "We're worried enough as it is without you putting more fear into us."

Morgan had sauntered into the cabin and was leaning against the back of his mother's chair. He was pale but appeared stronger and more cheerful than he had since the fateful skirmish at Chi'en-shat-sui.

"If you ask me, we were fools to leave," he said. "A few good field pieces at the barrier gate could have held off the whole bloody Chinese army! I tell you, if I hadn't been flat on my back at the time, I'd have been for staying!"

"And I might well have stayed with you!" echoed Vincent Stanton. "I've tried to steer clear of the opium issue, mind you, and I've not tried to judge it. I've no personal quarrel with the Chinese. But to turn tail and run off in the face of mere primitives — it's most disturbing to me. Cowardice is so downright un-English!"

"Un-English! Has it occurred to either of you that it might be un-Chinese as well?" Kathleen turned from the porthole, her green-flecked eyes blazing with a fire that Priscilla had never seen before. "What if the shoe were on the other foot? Picture yourselves back in England. Imagine that the Chinese have come in their ships to trade tea and silk. Would we give them the run of the country?" Her gaze flicked about the cabin like the tip of a lash. "Likely as not we'd put all sorts of controls on them. We'd make them stay on their ships, or fence them off at someplace like Land's End!" She had begun to pace back and forth, regal as a

tigress, her petticoats swishing with each stride. She had never been more beautiful, Priscilla thought, even with her short hair . . .

"Suppose," Kathleen said, "that in spite of everything you'd done to prevent it, you found out they'd been smuggling — say — gin! They'd been bringing so much of it ashore and selling it so cheaply that England was well on its way to becoming a nation of drunkards! The soldiers — an army of sots! The farmers and shopworkers — worse! What would you do, Morgan? What would you do, Vincent Stanton, if you were on the throne or in Parliament and had the power?"

Morgan cleared his throat. "That's not really a fair comparison, Kath. England's a civilized nation. Things are different here in China."

"Are they? Would you do less than what the Chinese have? Wouldn't you try to make them turn over all the gin so you could dump it in the Channel? And if that failed to stop it, wouldn't you go in with an army and drive them out?"

"Really, Kath — " Morgan sank to the edge of his bunk, and Pris realized that he was not feeling as well as she'd first thought. "You're not fit to judge such things. You've not left Macao since our family arrived there — "

"Through no fault of my own!" snapped Kathleen.

"You've not seen places like Canton, how the wretches live there, like rats in filthy holes! And they lay no more value on the life of a man than on the life of a dog!" His face was growing flushed. Priscilla began to worry.

"If you could see the things I've seen!" Morgan continued, his voice harsh. "Heads stuck up on gateposts like so many bloody paper lanterns! Stranglings in the square, right in front of the Factories! If you had seen the deck of that boat I was on after Chinese pirates had finished their business — bodies from one end to the other! Without heads!"

There was only one sound in the room, a subtle, surging pulse that filled Priscilla's ears. The others — Kathleen, Rose, Stanton and Chinnery — were staring at Morgan in horror. Suddenly, Pris realized that all of them, with the possible exception of Vincent Stanton, had known something that she did not.

"Morgan — " Her throat was so tight she could hardly speak. "Was that the way my father died?"

Morgan was staring down at his shoes with the expression of a man who has opened his mouth once too often and loathes himself for it. "Aye, Pris," he muttered without looking at her. "That's how."

Priscilla put a white hand to her neck. Her fingers felt the taut cords and muscles, the rigidity of bone and cartilage, the throbbing pulse of blood. She had never asked about the blow that had killed her father. She had never really wanted to know, and it was easy enough to suppose that he'd been stabbed or shot. The words swam and spun in her brain . . . beheaded . . . decapitated . . . headless . . . Her mind's eye saw her father's body, the bleeding stump of the neck.

"'Tis a swift and merciful death, girl," George Chinnery's voice soothed. "Bad as it might seem, he'd not have felt much pain."

She stared at the opposite wall where the ship's charts and maps hung. The coffin, she remembered, had been sealed. She had not seen the body. "Then, he was buried without his — " She choked on the whispered words.

"Oh, no! No, Pris!" Morgan had started to rise, then sank back onto the edge of the bunk. Kathleen walked over to where Priscilla sat, knelt on the floor and took the trembling hands tightly in her own.

"It was Chengqua who got it back," she said softly. "That day in the cemetery in Macao . . . He'd brought it to my father. Oh, Pris, how could we tell you?"

"It's . . . all right." Priscilla gripped her friend's hands hard, so hard that she could feel the bones beneath Kathleen's firm flesh. Bones and blood and flesh. Nerves and cartilage. "I think I'll go and lie down," she murmured, releasing Kathleen's hands and rising to her feet. She felt everyone's eyes on her as she made her way toward the door. The pulsing sound was the only thing she could hear. It hammered and echoed in her head. It was her own heart; the pumping and flowing of her own blood.

"Morgan's right, Kathleen," she heard Vincent Stanton say as she reached the open doorway. "The Chinese are nothing but savages. Why, if you could have seen that poor devil Morris from the *Black Joke*. His ear cut off and stuffed in his mouth — !"

The pulsing sound drowned out his voice. The room began to swim. Pris clutched at the door frame, felt her fingers slipping. Then her mind whirled down, down into blood-filled blackness.

By midafternoon, the fleet had rounded Lantau and was heading into the welcome shelter of Hong Kong Island. Priscilla was sleeping in her cabin, exhausted at last by long weeks of nursing her husband and the final shock of her father's manner of death.

Morgan sat huddled in a chair on deck, his feet propped up on a stool. Aye, he reflected gloomily, he should have told Pris long ago about the way her father had died. That, or he should never have told her at all. He'd blurted it out like a fool, in order to make his point with Kath. Lord, he'd even exaggerated the bloody horror. Headless bodies from one end of the deck to the other, he'd boasted. In reality, there'd been only three bodies; the pirate, the mate and Robards. And only Robards had lost his head. What an ass he'd made of himself!

Pris, he realized, had never really mourned her father. Morgan had not let her. He had pressed his suit so urgently upon the poor girl, had so smothered the pain of her loss with the excitement of courtship, that there'd been no time for grief. But the grief had been there, like a buried wound. It had put a strain on Pris that he, in his blind selfishness, had totally ignored. He had used sympathy as a tool to bring her within his grasp, but once she was his, he had only taken without giving. Taken and taken, until he had all but lost her. It would take a good deal of giving to win her back, but win her he would. She loved him, and in time she would be his once more. Nothing could stop him from having her.

Morgan stretched his legs in the sun and for a moment let his mind drift back to that awful night aboard the passage boat, the night he'd spent shivering under the bunk, naked and too sick to fight. Those of the crew who'd escaped in the dinghy were working for Russell & Company now, and they were still spreading rumors that Morgan had been in league with the band who'd killed Robards, rumors that many people believed.

Morgan's tanned knuckles whitened on the wooden arm of the chair. *Someone* had been in league with the bastards. They'd known right where to look for the silver. And until he could find out who it was, his own name would be forever suspect. He stood up and began to pace the deck.

The bow of the *Peregrine* sliced the calm green water of the harbor. The peaks of Hong Kong Island thrust upward like the fangs of some long-dead dragon-monster, dwarfing the cluster of ships that dotted

the harbor. Chippers and schooners, lorchas, junks, sampans and beetle-browed opium hulks. The *Peregrine* was almost into the midst before Morgan spotted the *Osprey* off the starboard bow.

The opium clipper, anchored off Green Island, was listing dangerously to port, a hole in her side just above the waterline. Her foremast had been shattered two-thirds of the way up. Someone on board had seen the approaching *Peregrine* and sent out a longboat to meet her.

Morgan, his mind churning, clasped the rail as the boat drew closer. Weeks earlier, he had sent the *Osprey* and the *Merlin* up the coast, both of them loaded with Turkish opium. For safety's sake, he'd instructed them to sail together, staying always within one another's sight. Now the *Osprey* had returned badly crippled, and the *Merlin* — frantically, Morgan's eyes scanned the harbor — the *Merlin* was nowhere to be seen.

It was the young mate of the *Osprey* who climbed up the gangway from the longboat to stand before Morgan on the deck of the *Peregrine*. "Pirates," he said in a trembling voice, as if he'd rehearsed his words for hours. "Off Pinghai. Four junks, with cannon. We held them off as best we could, but after they'd looted and sunk the *Merlin*, we had to run for it."

"Sunk . . . the *Merlin*?" Morgan whispered hoarsely.

"Aye, sir, with all hands. And our captain's dead. Shot with their cannon." He looked down at the deck and chewed his lip. Morgan, in mute despair, put a comforting hand on his shoulder. He wanted to weep like a baby, to wail, to beat his breast and curse the heavens; but the presence of the lad, who could not have been more than nineteen, and the curious eyes of the *Peregrine's* crew, restrained him.

He stood gaping at the maimed *Osprey*, with its splintered foremast and heart-rending tilt. He stood and let the full weight of what had happened come thundering down upon him. The *Merlin*, gone. Two able captains and one entire crew, dead. The profits of an already bleak season, in the hands of pirates or at the bottom of the Formosa Strait. The loss: his. The burden: his, all his. And there was no one to run to. He was the *taipan*!

Fifteen

Canton
October 1839

Late in the evening, well past the hour of the boar, Cheng Lo went into his study — the one room in the raucous, rambling House of Cheng that was kept inviolably quiet — and bolted the door behind him. The time had come to write another report to the Son of Heaven.

He pulled out the simple teakwood chair, sat down and took from his desk the special paper that he used only for such reports, the ink-stone that had belonged to his great-grandfather and the cake of scented ink. With great care, he mixed the ink with water on the stone and selected the brush. Then he sat and stared at the books and scrolls on the opposite wall, his mind in turmoil.

The House of Cheng was a merchant family. Only rarely, once in a generation perhaps, did a son emerge who had the makings of a scholar. Traditionally, the library was reserved for him. Cheng's great uncle, the brother of his grandfather, had used it last, and now it was Cheng Lo's, this modest room with its polished gray tiles, its shelf-lined walls and its serene view of the inner garden. One day it might have passed to Shen-lan. Cheng had always planned it so. But a man's plans and dreams for his children do not always come to pass.

Cheng Shen-lan was asleep in his room, a servant posted outside his door. Only days after Cheng had brought the boy home from Macao, his body free of the drug, Shen-lan had escaped from the house and gone back to the opium den. Once more, the horror of opium withdrawal had been necessary, and now the entire House of Cheng shared the pain and the disgrace of young Shen-lan's addiction.

"Why, my son?" Cheng had asked the boy after the second agonizing recovery.

Cheng Shen-lan had sat on his bed and looked at his father with hollow, haunted eyes. He was a handsome youth, with his mother's smile and his father's height and strong, straight features, but the hideous addiction had robbed him of his vitality. His face had become almost skeletal. His ribs rippled the surface of his skin. "Without opium, I am empty," he had said softly. "Without opium, I am a blank page with no writing upon it, a lost flute that no one plays. Opium is the music in me, my father. It is the poetry that my soul writes."

"Then you would go back again?"

"I would go back."

"And if I will not let you?" Cheng's temples ached from the clenching of his jaw muscles.

"I'm sorry, my father, but I will find a way." There was no expression in the boy's voice. Cheng Lo shivered.

"Do you know that the *ch'in ch'ai* will have you strangled if you cannot cure yourself?"

"I know. It makes no difference."

It was then that Cheng had placed his son under guard day and night. Since the boy could not attend his classes, a tutor had been engaged to come to the house for lessons in history, mathematics and philosophy. But Shen-lan had lost interest in his studies. He recited the lessons in a singsong fashion, his mouth having little connection with his mind, and they were promptly forgotten. One day the tutor, an old man, had come to Cheng Lo and said, "I can no longer accept your money, noble one. The boy has learned nothing."

"Stay, honored friend," Cheng had implored him. "Persevere and I will double your fee, for there is no other hope for my son."

So the old man had stayed, pouring out his learning upon Cheng Shen-lan's unreceptive mind like water upon a stone. But there had been no change in the youth. Four times in the past month, the servants had caught him trying to steal out of the gate or climb over the walls.

Time had forced Cheng Lo to realize that his third son, the child of his heart, was lost to him. The monster of opium had crept in and stolen the boy's will. Someday, perhaps, Cheng Shen-lan would be cured. With long patience, the craving for the drug would depart; but that special fire that had burned within him, that wonderful, consum-

ing eagerness to learn, to see, to accomplish, was gone forever. The library would pass to some nephew, perhaps, or some grandson of the House of Cheng, but not to Shen-lan.

When Cheng closed his eyes, he saw his son's face, the way it had looked through the smoky lamplight of the opium den, the eyes half-open and dreamy, the jaw slack, head lolling like a baby's. The fury rose in him again, so intense that he sprang to his feet and paced the tiles of the study, bursting with shackled rage. Even one tragedy like Shen-lan was too many. Multiply it by a hundred thousand, by a million, by all the lives that had been touched in one way or another by opium —

Cheng walked to the window, which looked out on a secluded garden behind the family's ancestral temple. The night was quiet. Crickets sang among the roots of the blooming chrysanthemums. Moonlight silvered the fishpond and the flat seats of the stone benches. Cheng thought of the report again and sighed. When he had accepted the imperial commission, he had resolved to hold himself apart from all conflict in Canton, to keep his eyes and mind unclouded by blinding emotion. Only by remaining neutral, by accepting no viewpoint as his own, could he hope to give a truthful appraisal to the emperor.

Now, he realized, Shen-lan's disaster had drawn him into involvement. He hated opium; and his sympathies were leaning more and more toward Lin Tse-hsu and his efforts to eradicate it. As an agent of the Son of Heaven, it was his duty to remain aloof from all factions — Lin, the *fan kwei*, the smugglers, the corrupt Chinese officials . . . As a father and as a man, he was finding this to be impossible. He turned away from the window, walked back to the desk and sat down. Taking up his finest sable-tipped writing brush, he wet the bristles with his tongue and smoothed the point with his fingers.

The sound of his second daughter-in-law scolding her serving woman drifted in through the open window. Cheng tried to close his ears to the noise. How he longed for the peace of his small house in Macao! But he had not set foot in Macao since the time the English had gone to their ships. More than seventy days had passed since he'd seen Kathleen from the fishing junk, the wind stirring her hair like wisps of the autumn grass he had loved in Jehol.

For an instant, his mind held her image. Then he forcibly blotted it out. She was a *fan kwei*, one of the enemy now, and he, above all, was

a son of the Celestial Empire. There could be no thought of their being together. Besides, he had kept the promise he had made to himself on that rainy afternoon in Macao. Jung Fei had found a small wife for him, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a distant kinsman. The girl would be waiting for him when he finished the memorial to the emperor, if he chose to visit her bed.

Hsu Yu was her name — Happy Rain. She was fairly pretty, plump, accommodating and not particularly intelligent — everything, he supposed, a concubine should be. They had come together without emotion, she out of duty, he out of resignation. True, she gave him a fleeting pleasure. But she was like candy, this small Hsu Yu; candy that sweetens the mouth but does not nourish the body.

The fault, Cheng reflected, was not in Hsu Yu but in himself. Beyond the shelter of his roof, food, clothing and security, he had little to offer her. He was too preoccupied with Cheng Shen-lan and the opium crisis, too busy with his imperial task to give her the attention a new concubine merited.

At least she seemed contented enough in his household, and if Jung Fei was jealous, she did not show it. Rather, Cheng's wife had taken the girl under her arm like a little sister, another child to nurture and fuss over. She was the best of women, Jung Fei. Cheng dipped the brush into the ink and tried to piece together the events that he would report to the emperor. The *fan kwei* were still aboard their ships off Hong Kong Island. Lin's efforts to have their supplies cut off had met with little success.

The Chinese had been even less successful in the two sea battles that had recently taken place between Admiral Kuan's war junks and the armed ships of the English.

The first skirmish had erupted off Kowloon, where a handful of small English vessels had driven off three big war junks that were trying to enforce the blockade of supplies. The fixed guns aboard the junks had shot high, doing little damage to the foreign ships except in the masts and rigging. The small vessels had run at first, with the junks in pursuit. Then the English had turned and fired vigorously into the hulls of the junks, doing enough damage to send them limping back to their ports.

After that, there were only half-hearted attempts to cut off the ships from their supply sources. The compradors moved freely between the

vessels and the shore villages, paying their “squeeze” to the local magistrates and buying whatever they wished.

Cheng had not seen that first battle, but he had witnessed the second, touched off when the *Thomas Coutts*, an English freighter coming in from the open sea with a cargo of rattans and cottons, had sailed up the Bogue and — either in ignorance or defiance of Elliot’s orders — had executed the hated bond. Lin, who had been on the verge of a compromise with Elliot regarding the bond, had toughened his position at once. If the *Thomas Coutts* could sign the bond guaranteeing that the ship carried no opium, so could the rest of the *fan kuei*. In fact, he threatened, the English could comply and could turn over the murderer of Lin Wei-hsi at once, or be driven from the China Coast.

When the British remained defiant, Lin had ordered Admiral Kuan to mass his junks off Chuenpee Fort at the mouth of the Bogue for an assault on the merchant fleet.

Anxious to give the emperor an eyewitness account of what was happening, and bursting with concern for Kathleen’s safety, Cheng had obtained a horse and ridden down to Chuenpee by land. By the time he’d arrived at the fort, two British warships, the *Volage* and the *Hyacinth*, had already beaten their way up the estuary, against the wind, to the mouth of the Bogue. There they faced a fleet of six war junks and a swarm of small fireboats under the command of Admiral Kuan himself.

What followed had been a nightmare for the Chinese. The English vessels, with their wonderous maneuverability and deadly firepower, had charged into the fleet like two tigers into a herd of water buffalo. One junk was blown up in the melee, three others sunk and the rest of the Chinese fleet scattered and running. Only the lone flagship, with Kuan himself braced before the huge mast, had stood and fought. With a vainglorious courage that a pragmatic man like Cheng saw mostly as foolhardiness, the junk took hole after hole and was all but foundering when the English called a halt and sailed back toward Hong Kong.

It was not until seven days after the battle that Cheng had been summoned for an audience with the *ch’in ch’ai* — an interview that he had approached with the greatest uneasiness.

Cheng had entered the gray room at the Yueh-hua Academy in midafternoon, at the hour of the monkey. He had found Lin Tse-hsu composing a scroll of commendation for the bravery of Admiral Kuan.

"Your coming is timely, Cheng Lo." Lin had glanced up from his work with a smile. His calligraphy was exquisite. "Read it. What do you think of it? I value your opinion."

Cheng took the beautifully written scroll and read, apprehension tying a massive knot inside his chest. Contained upon the scroll was a glowing account of Admiral Kuan's valor at Chuenpee, where, in the face of formidable odds, he had humiliated the foreign ships.

"No one can deny the courage of our admiral," Cheng hedged.

"Kuan himself gave me the details of the battle." Lin accepted the proffered scroll. "His captains confirm the story. The *fan kuei* warships were damaged in the masts, and afterward they turned their tails and fled back to Hong Kong. I have already forwarded an account to the Son of Heaven."

Cheng drew in his breath sharply, cursing himself for not having come to Lin immediately after the battle. The truth, now, would be devastating to the *ch'in ch'ai*. "I am told you were well received at Macao, my lord," he said.

"Ah, yes. A most enjoyable visit. The Portuguese governor gave me an escort of his dark-skinned soldiers; many people stood in the streets to welcome me . . . red banners were everywhere." Lin spread his hands, a faint smile on his face. "I know of your fondness for Macao, Cheng Lo, and I must confess I fail to understand it. The place is so . . . alien. I was not sorry to leave the next day."

"And the tall Englishman, the preacher? Was he there?"

"Braced in the doorway of his white church like an old she-goat protecting its kid. I remembered what you told me about his being against the selling of opium, and I passed by without doing him harm." Lin's gaze sharpened. "You call this man friend, my good Cheng?"

"I have so called him." Cheng forced himself to be calm. Lin shifted his great bulk in the wooden chair.

"And his son is a seller of opium?"

"True, my lord. But the father has cast him out for this."

"Ah!" Lin tugged at his thin, dark beard. "The great virtue of all virtues, Cheng Lo, is filial piety. That the *fan kuei* are so lacking in it proves that they are truly barbarians . . . but the scroll. I have yet to hear your opinion of it,"

Cheng's heart was thudding, but he strove to keep the anxiety from his voice. "I saw the battle, as you know," he began. "The bravery of

the admiral is not exaggerated. Truly, his daring was remarkable. As for the rest — " He paused. Outside in the garden, a thrush was singing from a mulberry bush.

"Yes?" Lin had leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting like pillars on the top of the desk. "I respect you as an honest man, Cheng Lo."

"As I saw it, my lord, the *fan kuei* departed out of mercy, not out of fear. Truly, the battle was theirs."

The *ch'in ch'ai* paled slightly. Slowly, the breath went out of him. He fingered the edges of the scroll. "And I am to take your word over that of my admiral, Cheng Lo?"

"My lord, I have nothing to gain by lying. Believe what you choose."

Lin folded and unfolded a red silk fan. "And if I choose to believe you," he said, "explain to me, please how two *fan kuei* vessels could defeat an entire fleet."

Relieved that the *ch'in ch'ai* was at least willing to listen, Cheng took a deep breath. From the days of his childhood, he had marveled at the ships of the *fan kuei*, at their speed and their sleekness of line. He spoke from long observation. "Their vessels are swift, lord. The hulls are made to cut the water like a knife; and their sails — they can be moved to catch the most capricious wind. Where our junks bob about like fat ducks, the *fan kuei* ships can wheel and turn. As you must know, they carry more guns than our junks do, but this is not all. Their cannons — and this is most important — they are affixed to their carriages so that they can be raised and lowered or swung about, whereas our own — if you will permit me, lord — " Bending over Lin's desk, Cheng took a brush and a discarded sheet of paper and began to sketch.

"Our guns," he continued, "are fastened in place. One can only aim their fire by moving the ship itself — most impractical, if you will forgive me. Not only that, but worse, our guns are aimed high. Their balls hit only the sails and masts of the *fan kuei* vessels." Cheng replaced the brush and stood back, waiting. Had he spoken with too much daring?

Lin Tse-hsu scratched the side of his face with one long, pointed nail. "What you say has merit, Cheng Lo. I will keep it in mind in the planning of future battles and the building of new vessels." The *ch'in ch'ai* sighed wearily and leaned back, making the teakwood chair groan with his weight. "But for the present, my friend, I fear that if you have sent your own report to the Son of Heaven, either you or I will be in most serious trouble."

From where he stood, Cheng studied the strong, full face of Lin Tse-hsu. The penetrating eyes of the *ch'in ch'ai*, their pupils very large and bright, looked back at him without wavering, transfixing him, measuring him. Lin was right. The emperor would be faced with two conflicting reports of the battle at Chuenpee, and he would believe only one of them. Would he take the word of Lin, the most trustworthy of men, whose position depended nonetheless on his success, or would the Son of Heaven choose to believe Cheng, who heretofore had told him nothing but the truth?

"The emperor does not like receiving bad news." Cheng spoke cautiously. "Perhaps, then, he will choose to accept your version of the battle over my own."

Lin's face was grave. "I think not. You, as you say, have nothing to gain by lying, whereas I have everything. The Son of Heaven is no fool. He will realize this and I will be finished at Canton."

"My lord, I have not yet composed my report. There is still time for you to send another, to explain to the Son of Heaven that you were misinformed —"

"And dishonor my dear friend Kuan, who fought so bravely?" Lin shook his head. "No, the damage has been done, Cheng Lo. The responsibility is my own and I will not shift the blame to another. I have never been guilty of *p'ang-tai* and I have no wish to be." His eyes drilled into Cheng's. "No doubt you will make your report."

"I must."

"And you will be truthful?" Even the thrush outside had fallen into silence.

"I must be."

"Then," Lin said, his voice calm and rich, "if I am ruined, my friend, I wish to make it clear that I bear you no ill will. I only count it an honor to have met a man whose sky is as blue as I would wish my own to be." He rose to signal that the interview was over. "Go and do what you must, Cheng Lo. Your duty is to the Son of Heaven and to the Celestial Empire."

Afterward, Cheng had walked home in the coolness of the autumn afternoon, his shoulders sagging with the weight of his burden, his tormented spirit bursting with the realization that if ever in his life he had worshipped a man, that man was Lin Tse-hsu.

Now, in isolation in his study, Cheng confronted his dilemma. Impatiently, he pushed the inkstone and papers to one side and

pressed his face against his arms, a man torn apart. His sworn duty to the emperor and his lifelong love of truth pulled him in one direction. His regard for Lin, his hatred for opium and his concern for his son dragged him just as compellingly in the other.

It was within his power to destroy Lin with just a few strokes of the writing brush. In doing so, would he be serving the best interests of his sovereign and of the Middle Kingdom? He had his doubts. In spite of the frustrations, the failures, no one had shaken the *fan kuei* opium trade as Lin had, and his attack upon their Chinese accomplices had been just as vigorous. If one man in the kingdom could bring about an end to this heartbreak of opium, surely it was he.

And Lin's misreporting of the battle had not been intentional. He had only believed what his subordinates had told him. Surely he deserved the chance to stay at Canton and finish what he had begun. Cheng had almost persuaded himself.

But to lie to the emperor — ! The thought of the act and its possible consequences was almost unbearable.

Then, too, there was Kathleen. In spite of his efforts to forget her, Cheng's constant worry for her safety clouded his every thought. Was Lin likely to order another attack on the merchant fleet after the disaster of Chuenpee? Would Lin's successor, whoever he might be, act with more prudence or more recklessness than had Lin? Cheng closed his eyes tightly and tried in vain to loosen Kathleen's hold upon him. No, he told himself firmly, he could not let his feelings for a foreign woman influence so grave a decision.

He had put off writing the memorial for as long as he dared. The imperial messenger was waiting at the inn beside the northeast gate. He would expect to see Cheng before dawn.

For a few moments, Cheng let his head rest in his hands. Then he sat up, resolutely took the brush in his hand, dipped it into the prepared ink and began to write.

The moon was high in the heavens by the time he had finished. He stood up, stretched his cramped legs and paced the floor while he read the memorial over. In spite of the cool night breeze that wafted into the study through the window, Cheng found himself perspiring. With deliberate haste, he took his own carved ivory *chop* from its ebony case, dipped it in ink and affixed the seal that was his signature. Then

he rolled up the memorial, put it into a small cylindrical container and closed up the openings with melted wax.

It was not far from the House of Cheng to the northeast gate. Cheng delivered the memorial himself, as he always did. The messenger, waking the slumbering gateman, sprang to his horse and galloped off down the road without even waiting for sunrise. The report would be carried in a continuous relay by more than a score of these young Manchu horsemen and several times that number of steeds. In eighteen days, it would be in the hands of the Tao Kuang emperor.

Cheng walked back to the house slowly along the dark, narrow streets, pausing to listen to the high-pitched cries of hunting bats in the night above him. Yes, it was done now. He had not actually lied, but he had bent the truth. He had been kind to Lin and to Admiral Kuan and had done the *fan kuei* less than justice. He had also, he reflected, very possibly put himself in mortal danger.

Hsu Yu was waiting in his bed when he returned. She was propped up against the silk cushions, eating some ripe plums from a wicker basket. Her face, round as the moon, was washed clean of the white powder and carmine rouge that she wore during the day, and her hair had been brushed so that it hung down her back. On her lap was an embroidered kerchief that held a dainty circle of plum pits. Her little mouth was stained with the juice.

Cheng swallowed a surge of annoyance at finding her here when he had not asked for her. He was tired and he wanted nothing more than to lose himself in sleep. Yet she was so young and so tender of heart that he could not bear to be gruff with her.

"It's nearly dawn," he said softly. "I expected to find you asleep in your own bed."

She gathered up the plum pits in the kerchief and put them, along with the basket, on a little table beside the bed. "I have something to tell you," she chirped, bouncing up and down with excitement. "And I couldn't wait. I couldn't even sleep until you knew —"

"And what thing is so important that it cannot wait for sleep?" He walked over to the side of the bed. She reached up and pulled his head down until her lips were almost touching his ear.

"My lord," she whispered, "I have happiness in me!"

"So soon?" He cupped her childlike face between his two hands. Strange, he marveled, how even with his mind so far away from her, his body had accomplished its natural task.

"My lord is pleased?" Her small features tilted into a smile.

He stroked the black hair that hung down her back, gleaming against the pink satin sleeping robe. "Yes, your lord is pleased, little one," he murmured. "You do me honor, Hsu Yu. Tomorrow I will visit the seller of pearls and buy you a set of earrings."

She clapped her hand to her mouth in delight. "And tonight? You wish me to stay?"

He sighed. "Yes, stay, but only to sleep. I am weary, and perhaps with the baby —"

"You are right I think. Elder Sister told me it is best not to risk harm —"

"You told Jung Fei?"

"Oh, yes. She was so pleased that she gave me her jade ring. Here —" Hsu Yu scooted across the bed, her tiny bound feet in their satin sleeping covers rumpling the quilts. "I have kept this spot warm for you."

He shed his outer robes and slid in beside her, still dressed in his undergarments. She curled at his side like a kitten, and in no time at all she was asleep, soft and jasmine-scented in the warmth of the bed.

Cheng lay awake, watching the shadows in the room fade with the coming dawn. To keep his restless mind from the memorial he had just sent out the northeast gate, he thought about women — a subject he had taken very much for granted until recently. The lot of a woman in the Middle Kingdom was dreary and predictable. Her birth was greeted with sighs of disappointment — not so much because girls were inferior, but because a female child made no contribution to the family line. To invest anything in the upbringing of a girl was to sow one's seed in the field of another, for as soon as she reached womanhood, she would be married, her sons born to honor the ancestors of her husband, not those of her own father.

And that, after all, was the first duty of men and women. To marry, to mate, to beget sons who would pray and make offerings before the ancestral tablets. Sons perpetuating sons, from generation to generation. And women were no more than tools in this eternal scheme. Vessels to carry a man's seed to the time of birth. Hands and arms and breasts to nurture each new crop of children.

The primary relationship between a man and his wife, especially in a household where there were servants, was reproductive. If a woman bore strong sons, any other failings in her — an ugly face, a stupid or venomous disposition — were happily forgiven. She was honored and her husband was envied.

Outside the marriage bed, little close association between husband and wife was expected. In fact, a husband who fell into the habit of conversing with his wife would likely find himself the object of ridicule and the butt of many crude jokes. Cheng knew a story of one young bride and groom who enjoyed one another's company. The fellow's brothers tied knots in a long white string, one knot for each time the two were seen talking together. Later, amid a barrage of derisive teasing, the brothers had presented the young husband with the string.

In traditional households, the men and women did not even dine together. The first time Cheng had eaten with a woman since childhood was when he took tea and biscuits with the Bellamy family, and strange as it seemed, he had rather enjoyed it.

Still, there were those marriages in which a man and woman developed bonds of love. Cheng's own father and mother had had such a closeness, even though she was no more than third lady in his house. It was only after she died that he had truly become an old man, feeble and sad. Cheng had not been foolish enough to expect the same kind of intimacy from his own marriage. Jung Fei had given him six living children and a house filled with the peace of her good nature, and for that alone he counted himself among the luckiest of men. He could have been content forever with things as they were, as they had always been in life's eternal scheme.

Then he had met a woman — a woman who walked with a man's ease and boldness. A tall woman, strong and graceful as a doe, who looked into his eyes and spoke to him as a friend and equal. A woman who had wept in his arms like a child and embraced him with a lover's fierce passion. Kathleen . . . her name sang in his mind. Perhaps he would never see her again, but now, because he had known her, he looked at life, at marriage and at women through new eyes. It had never been the way of a man to pay attention to anything so trivial as a woman's feelings, and Cheng had been as callous as any. Now, when Jung Fei was cross with a servant or daughter-in-law, or when little Hsu Yu was slow to smile, he found himself wondering why. He

found himself making a greater effort to be patient with his women, to express gratitude when they pleased him, to speak to them with courtesy and tenderness. You see, Kathleen . . . his thoughts whispered. You see, my heart, I am learning from you . . .

With a sigh, Cheng reached out and stroked Hsu Yu's satin-clad shoulder. She yawned sleepily and snuggled against him. Poor Hsu Yu. He had given her so little of himself; and in return she would endure pain and danger to give him a child. She was no more than a child herself. He raised up on one elbow and looked at her in the light of the pewter dawn, feeling vaguely monstrous for the thing he had done to her.

As for Jung Fei, she was free. Cheng had made up his mind that he would not go to her bed again. She would have his respect, his affection, but he would no longer take from her what she gave with such reluctance. Looking back on the long, tranquil years of their marriage, he could not help wondering if, even in the beginning, she had ever desired him. He put his head back on the pillow and stared up at the dark beams of the ceiling. No, he told himself, it had been mere duty with Jung Fei, as it likely was with Hsu Yu. The women of his race did not choose their men. They were capable of passion, yes, but it was not a thing expected of them. Traditionally, they found their joy in their children and grandchildren, not in the marriage bed.

He recognized the current of his thoughts and knew where they were sweeping him, but he had no will to resist. Kathleen, the sweet, musky fragrance of her body as her arms slid around his neck, her mouth warm against his, her eyes flashing like the sun on the distant sea . . . He closed his eyes and she was all around him, filling his senses with her memory. Kathleen . . . a foreign woman; one of the enemy.

Sixteen

Hong Kong
December 1839

By the end of November, Morgan had regained the full use of his arm and was spoiling for action — but there was little action to be had. After the initial flurries at Kowloon and Chuenpee, the situation with the Chinese had settled into an icy standoff. Lin had cut off all trade with the British. It was the Americans who now hauled English goods upriver to Whampoa and reaped a healthy cut of the profits. As one disgruntled Scottish *taipan* put it, “We hold the horns, while they milk the cow!”

Restless as hornets in a stopped-up jug, the traders and their women and children waited aboard the ships off Hong Kong Island — waited for Lin to make a decisive move, waited for word of declared war from faraway England.

George Chinnery, who hated shipboard life, had taken the first cutter back to his beloved Macao, insisting that if he was going to die, he would bloody well do it on dry land. Rose Bellamy had almost gone with him, but the boat that had come to pick up Chinnery had carried a letter from Archer stating that in his opinion Macao was not yet safe for women and, in any case, she was not to leave Kathleen unchaperoned aboard the ship.

It was strange, Morgan thought, seeing his mother without his father, for they had been apart so seldom. The only separation he could remember was back in Portsmouth, when he’d been twelve and Rose had gone up to London for a week to see to the burial of her mother. Something about that journey had changed her, he recalled.

She had come back to Portsmouth with a new submissiveness, a strange, sad serenity in her manner that had puzzled him. Morgan had always attributed the change to her mother's death, but there were times, even now, when he wondered about that week.

Rose had taken her uprooting with the same evenness of stride that had enabled her to endure twenty-three years with Archer Bellamy, the last five the them spent halfway around the world from her native land. She settled into the routine of reading, mending, chatting and promenading on the deck with an ease that was part of her nature. Kathleen, however, was like a caged lioness.

By now her hair had grown down to the nape of her graceful neck, and her temper had grown with it. She paced the deck like one of the furies, teased the crewmen and quarreled with Morgan when he attempted to set her right. Poor Kath, Morgan reflected, watching her day after day as she stood beside the rail, glaring at the horizon. Macao was a prison, she'd always said, but compared to the confinement of the ship, the little peninsula was a wonderland.

There were — thank heaven — at least a few diversions. Families visited from ship to ship. There were picnics on the shore of Hong Kong Island, and even occasional dances. The two clerks who played fiddles and one of the sailors who had a concertina were in high demand. And, of course, for Kathleen, there was always Vincent Stanton.

Stanton, who weathered Kathleen's outbursts of temper with the patience of a stone, had proposed at least once that Morgan knew of and maybe more. Kathleen had put him off, neither refusing nor accepting.

"Why not, Kath?" Morgan cornered her alone on the quarterdeck one evening. "Vincent's a fine fellow — decent, ambitious. And any fool can see that he loves you."

Kathleen faced the red sun where it was setting, off toward Macao. Its glow gilded her skin and turned her fluttering hair to flame. The green scarf Morgan had given her floated about her shoulders. "You're right, Morgan," she said in a soft, faraway voice. "Vincent's good and kind, he's bright, he knows what he wants out of life . . . and he treats me wonderfully — " She chuckled. "Better than I deserve . . . "

She'd lapsed into a silence that lasted until Morgan began to grow impatient. "Well, then, why not, Kath? Dash it, Vincent's not the only one you're keeping in suspense! There's Mother and me and Pris and the whole ship!"

Kathleen watched the sun disappear in a cloud of violet fire. It was a long time before she spoke. "Vincent's studying for the ministry," she whispered.

"And?"

"I don't want to be a preacher's wife. I don't want to be like mother."

"Does it matter that much, Kath? If you love him, I mean . . . ?"

"Morgan, I don't think I love him that much." She gripped the brass rail of the ship and turned away from him.

Despite Morgan's efforts to arrange things otherwise, Pris still slept apart from him. There were two bunks in the cabin they shared aboard the receiving ship, the *Condor*, and she'd made it clear that she would scream if he came near her in the night. Since the next cabin, through the thin planking, was occupied by Rose and Kathleen, Morgan had decided not to risk the humiliation of finding out whether her threat had any teeth to it. Still, with each day and each night, his longing for her grew more consuming.

Whether it was this very longing that moved his decision, whether it was the itch for adventure or simple, dire economic necessity, Morgan had determined, by early December, to make one more opium run up the coast.

With Canton closed to them, the coast trade was all that was left to the British merchants. Some, like Matheson and Dent, were still prospering, for opium prices were on the rise again and selling was brisk. The hold of the damaged *Osprey* still held eight hundred chests of last year's Turkey opium, and with the new crop due in soon, it was sell it now or dump it in the harbor. The *Kestrel* was already winging its way along the Strait of Malacca to pick up a cargo of Patna and Benares opium at Calcutta, but the *Peregrine* was empty and available. He'd already ordered the eight hundred chests transferred to her hold from the limping *Osprey*.

Morgan went down to his desk and opened the big, leather-bound account book that had belonged to Blake Robards. His eyes roamed up and down the columns, not really looking at the figures. Bellamy & Company was in debt to the top of its mainmasts, and Morgan knew it well. The only thing keeping him afloat now was the cargoes of Manchester cottons and serges that two of his East Indiamen had brought in during the past month. Russell & Company was hauling the goods up to Whampoa for him, and after their cut there was bare-

ly enough money left to pay the crews and to pay for the repairs to the *Osprey*. As for the new cargo of opium that the *Kestrel* would bring, hopefully by the first of March, he had, as usual, signed a note against its sale. Since the Turkey opium he had given up to Lin, as well as that which he had lost with the sinking of the *Merlin*, had been purchased with similar notes by Blake Robards, the money for them was still owing.

Pris came down into the cabin, her cheeks glowing from the cool December breeze. She hesitated when she saw Morgan. Evidently she had not expected to find him here.

"My sewing — " she murmured, going to a chest at the foot of her bed, opening it and rummaging through the silks and linens.

Morgan watched her from his chair. "Pris, come here, please," he said softly. She hesitated, then pattered over to the desk and stood beside him, her narrow waist at a level with his eyes. Impulsively, he reached out, caught her with his hand and began to draw her closer. Her body stiffened in protest. With a sigh, he loosened his hand and let his arm drop. "Sit down," he said. "I really only wanted to talk to you."

She perched on the corner of his desk, her full skirt of white dimity, with its pattern of little pink roses, spread out around her. Warily, she eyed her husband. As a rule, she was pleasant and natural with him as long as he left her alone physically. Morgan remembered the warm wildness of her response to him there in the big bed at the Factories. Surely she was hurting almost as much as he was from this self-imposed hell. Oh, Prissy, love, he thought, aching for her. Let's put an end to this insanity!

She glanced down at the open ledger. "We're in trouble, aren't we?"

"We've got to sell the rest of the Turkey, Pris."

She knew what that meant. "How soon?"

"Soon as possible."

"You won't be here for Christmas?"

"The Chinese don't celebrate Christmas. Maybe there won't be so much competition from the others then."

"You can't just send Captain Peabody? He's done it before."

Morgan shook his head. "It's time I learned firsthand what it's all about. Maybe then I'll be able to run this business the way it should be run." He opened the door of the desk and rummaged for a box of che-

roots. "Like your father ran it. Oh, Pris, what a bloody damned mess I've made of things!"

She watched him in pained silence while he found the cheroots, jammed one between his teeth and lit it with a match. "Who will you be taking along?" she asked finally.

"The best I can get. Peabody. The shroff from the *Osprey*. The strongest of the Lascars for crew. And Wu Hung-li will have to double as interpreter." Morgan blew a puff of smoke into the air. "He's not much good in English, but I've no one better."

Pris leaned toward him across the desk, her little breasts straining against the white dimity, her eyes wide as a baby fawn's. "Morgan, you have me," she said softly.

He only stared at her, but he had felt his heart leap.

"It's my business, too," she argued. "I've as much a stake in it as you do. And my Cantonese is as good as John Morrison's. Why not take me, Morgan?"

"Pris, it's too dangerous — "

"You're going — "

"And your Cantonese won't be enough. By the time we get as far as Amoy, we'll need Fukienese, and at least Wu Hung-li's good for that. He was born in Tsinkiang."

"Then take him. Don't you see, with my translating from English into Cantonese for him, you'll have perfect communication, even in Fukien!"

A dozen more excuses sprang to Morgan's tongue, but he knew she would have answers for all of them — answers he would accept, because in spite of the dangers, he wanted her with him. His pulse quickened as he remembered the double bed in the main cabin of the *Peregrine*.

It was not long before the news had spread the length of the ship. Kathleen was openly envious and pestered a reluctant promise out of Morgan to take her on a later trip. Adam Peabody, on the *Peregrine*, rumbled about the bother of having a woman along on such a perilous journey, but it was Rose who came out most adamantly against the decision.

"Morgan," she confronted him, hands on her hips. "Priscilla has no father or mother to speak for her, so I feel it must be my place. The voyage is too dangerous for her."

It was Pris herself who overruled her. "I want to be of *use*, Mother Bellamy," she insisted. "I've cross-stitched myself cross-eyed! If I can help Morgan and help save the business my father built — "

"But you lost the *Merlin* that way — "

"The *Peregrine* will carry six guns," Morgan reassured her. "And Adam Peabody knows how to use them."

With a sigh, Rose capitulated. "I can see you're both determined," she said. "I could never win an argument with your father, Morgan, and I'm no better with you. Go then, and take your wife. But I won't feel right about it until you're safely returned." She busied herself with helping Priscilla pack and said no more about it.

Hong Kong

December 25, 1839

Morgan and Priscilla had been persuaded to stay until Christmas. There were not many gifts, but at least there were carols and hymns, sung in the *Condor's* largest cabin, which Rose had converted to a sitting room and made homey with her doilies and braided rugs. There was no piano, but Vincent Stanton played the flute passably, and Rose's clear, true soprano carried every song. Morgan's rather flat baritone blended with Kathleen's rich contralto, the whole almost drowning out Priscilla's tiny, bell-like voice.

Archer Bellamy's resounding bass was painfully absent. He had written from Macao to say that he was well and comfortable, and that there was no need to fear for his safety. Yet this was Kathleen's first Christmas without him, and she was amazed to discover how much she missed her father. In this bleak Christmas season, it was all too easy to forget the scoldings and restrictions, the lectures and punishments, and remember only his strength, only the feeling of total safety that his towering presence had always given her.

She wondered if her mother missed him as much. Serene and self-contained, Rose seldom spoke of him — but then, she so seldom revealed any of her feelings. She was like a lake, a placid mirror that reflected its surroundings and kept its own depths hidden from the world.

Kathleen studied her mother now, where she sat on the worn sofa, winding blue yarn into a ball. Even on Christmas Day, Rose kept her

hands busy. They were little more than blurs, so expertly and swiftly did they move.

The small mantel clock chimed the half-hour. Nine-thirty. Morgan and Priscilla had already gone to their cabin, but Vincent Stanton had stayed. He sat opposite Rose on the sofa, patiently stretching the skein of yarn between his long, thin hands to keep it from tangling. Dear Vincent. He was already like one of the family. Twice he had asked her to marry him. The first time he had blushed and stammered so comically that she would have laughed if she had not felt so sorry for him. The second time he had spoken with more confidence, but still she had put him off. She was fond of him and he seemed so right for her — and yet she was not sure.

Strange, she roused, he had never attempted to do more than hold her hand. After Joaquin Silveira's hot-lipped impetuosity, Vincent's restraint was downright refreshing. Kathleen had not been kissed by a man since that rain-filled afternoon in Macao when Chengqua — She closed her eyes and forced the well-remembered image from her mind. She had promised herself that she would not dwell on that day. She would remember Chengqua only as the dearest of friends, a dark-eyed guardian angel who had saved her virtue, her self-esteem and quite possibly her life. She knew too well the danger of reliving those aching moments she had spent in his arms. She had lain awake too many nights, aching with memories of silk and sandalwood and warm, compelling lips. Kathleen shook her head. She was no Maude Pickett. She was English, and she would marry her own kind. But — she smiled softly, remembering the promise she had made — she would marry with Chengqua's blessing.

With a happy sigh, she turned to the Christmas gift Morgan and Pris had given her earlier that day. A book, a long-forbidden book, that Pris had unearthed in her father's old collection aboard the *Condor*. Wonderingly, she fingered the worn edges of the leather binding. It was an old volume, and quite rare: an English translation from the journals of Father Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary who had lived at the Ming court in the late sixteenth century. "To replace poor Marco Polo!" Pris had beamed as she thrust the book into Kathleen's hands. Kathleen had recognized it at once — the book that Archer Bellamy had not allowed her to read because it had been written by a Catholic priest. She had almost wept with delight.

Now she touched the time-worn pages, turning them gently, reading here and there, passages at random. She smiled at the account of the Ming emperor's reaction to Western clocks. He had appointed four scholars from the Imperial College of Mathematics to attend them. To this day, the Chinese loved clocks. They valued them not as instruments to measure time (they had their own time system), but as amusing toys that ticked and chimed with great charm. She caught her breath at the descriptions of the Forbidden City, the yellow tiles, the red-lacquered pillars, the little stone animals that crowned the peaks of the roofs . . .

"Kathleen — " Vincent had touched her shoulder. The ball of blue yarn lay in her mother's lap, plump and fully wound. "Kathleen, would you like to go out for some air? It's getting late. I've got to be going soon." He closed the book softly and put it aside for her. Kathleen rose and took his arm, hoping that he wouldn't upset the peace of the night by proposing again. Rose was already casting the blue yarn onto her knitting needles. She glanced up with an affectionate smile as they passed her, walked through the cabin door and out onto the deck.

The black sky was studded with stars, like diamonds sprinkled on velvet by some great, whimsical hand. Orion had climbed above the peaks of Hong Kong, three stars in his belt dazzlingly bright. Vincent Stanton walked Kathleen to the rail, and for a few moments they only listened to the lap of the waves against the bow of the ship.

"I brought you a little gift," he said, fumbling in the pocket of his coat. The night was cool and she shivered a bit as she watched him take out a very small box. She stared at it. Dear Lord, she thought, don't let it be a ring! I'm not ready! I know I'm not!

"Here. Open it." He held it out and she took it with trembling hands. It was covered with blue satin. She could not raise the lid, her fingers were shaking so. He took it from her and opened it himself.

"Oh!" she said, laughing with sudden relief. It was not a ring after all, only a dainty gold locket gleaming in the starlight. "Oh — it's beautiful, Vincent! I love it already!" She took the box and tugged the delicate chain free of the base. "I can hardly wait to try it on!"

"Here, I'll help you, Kathleen."

"No — that's all right. I have it." She fumbled with the clasp behind her head. Her hands were cold, and the chain tangled in the ends of her short curls. "Drat!" she muttered. "It's caught — "

"I'll help you — "

"No . . . I've got it . . ." She pulled at the fine chain. "It's only — " Her words ended in a gasp as the chain pulled free too fast with the momentum of the jerk. The locket spun outward and slipped from her fingers. She clutched at the air, caught a glimpse of light on metal and then heard the tiny splash as the locket hit the dark water of the harbor far below. "Oh! Oh, Vincent, your lovely gift!" Her voice shook with dismay. The tears sprang to her eyes. Poor Vincent. The locket had probably cost him a month's wages, and she had lost it overboard in a moment's carelessness. She began to weep.

"It's all right, Kathleen. It doesn't matter. Don't cry."

But she could not stop. It wasn't just the locket. It was much more. Dearest Vincent. He had offered her everything he had. His future, his life. And she had tossed them about with the same insensitivity that had caused her to lose the locket. What kind of person was she?

"Please, Kathleen. It was nothing. It wasn't even expensive."

Liar. Poor, dear liar.

"I'll get you another locket tomorrow. James Matheson has a whole case of them on board the *Hercules*. Don't cry." His hands were on her shoulders.

Liar, she thought.

"Kathleen — " His hands moved down her back, and suddenly, naturally, he was holding her. She felt him trembling against her like a young leaf as she lifted her face and let him kiss her, softly, gently with growing wonder.

She closed her eyes and willed herself to respond to him. His kisses were tender and sweet, but her thoughts took wing and flew away from him. They flew above the harbor and the sea, above the hills, searching. Chengqua . . . they whispered. Chengqua, is he the one? You would see me happy . . . Would you give us your blessing?

Like doves the words returned, without answers.

The China Coast

January 1840

The *Peregrine* labored up the coast against the northeast wind, tacking at least twice the two-hundred-mile distance from Hong Kong to the first port, Namoa Island in Swatow Bay, on the border between the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien.

Pris, upon seeing the single wide bed in Morgan's cabin, had promptly taken her own things to smaller quarters. "A woman needs privacy," she hedged, "and with Captain Peabody and the crew coming in to see you at all hours . . ." She'd spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

Morgan said nothing. It was a plausible enough excuse, and what else, after all, could he have expected? But he vowed under his breath that before the trip was long underway he would have her, on his own terms, in his cabin, and in his bed. The very thought of it caused a subtle stirring in him.

But Priscilla was not born to the sea. For the first days of the voyage, she was wracked with seasickness. She spent her hours hunched at the ship's rail or huddled in her little cabin, gray-faced and miserable. It was not until the *Peregrine* was gliding into the little harbor on the leeward side of Namoa that she felt well enough to change her dress, brush her hair and come up onto the quarterdeck to stand beside her husband.

"I'd have thought we'd come in at night," she said, surveying the bustling harbor where sampans scuttled about like water insects. Morgan followed her gaze and recognized Jardine Matheson's *Hellas* anchored close in to shore. It was evident that Namoa's boat population was used to the presence of foreign ships, for they paid no heed to the towering vessels. Namoa was a popular port for opium smugglers.

"No need t' skulk about here, sor." Japeth Pratt, his mangled back healed and his demeanor saucy as ever, sidled up to Morgan and leaned on the rail with his knobby elbows. A strange one, Pratt, Morgan reflected. He'd bounced right back from the whipping and seemed to bear no ill will to anyone for it. "This be wild country. Chineese lawmen, they give 'er a wide berth. Even the pirates, they come right int' the harbor."

"You've made this trip before, I take it, Pratt."

"Aye, sor. Many a time for Mister Robards. Know this spot like the palm o' me hand. Over there — " he pointed southwest to the distant mainland where the sun glinted on clustered rooftops and pagodas, "that there's Swatow. Purtiest girls in all China come from there, they say — real she-cats! Claw the skin right off'n your back — but 'scuse me, Missus Bellamy. Didn't see you. Feelin' better, I see." He grinned at Pris and she gave him a feeble smile in return.

"Mister Pratt," she asked hopefully, "do they speak Cantonese here?"

"Fukienese! The divil's own tongue! Like nothin' you never heerd afore!"

Her face fell. Pity, Morgan thought. He knew Pris wanted to be useful. Wu Hung-li had risen like a plume of smoke from some unknown sanctuary below decks and was gliding toward them. He looked out over the harbor and grunted with satisfaction. An elaborately carved scow was moving out from shore.

"Mandarin boat, he come now," Wu announced in pidgin.

Pris asked him something in Cantonese; probably, Morgan guessed, trying to find out what was going to happen next. Wu Hung-li ignored her.

"No pay mandarin too muchee," he cautioned, wagging a finger at Morgan.

Pris spoke to him again in Cantonese. He answered her very deliberately in pidgin. "Not to worry, missee. Mandarin, he allee same come. Allee same squeeze." He pointed to his own chest. "My talkee him. Not to worry."

Morgan studied the long-jawed face of his comprador. Why, the arrogant old bastard was jealous! Wanted to make sure Pris didn't horn in on his job as interpreter. And he'd hurt Pris. It showed in her face. A word with the fellow in private was in order, Morgan resolved.

With the ship safely in the harbor, Adam Peabody turned the wheel over to the mate for securing. "D'ye be needin' my help?" he asked Morgan. "Or d'ye want to handle this one yourself?"

The scow was drawing nearer. A plump, purple-clad Chinese sat in a canopied chair in the center of the deck.

"Please," said Morgan, moving aside for the captain. "Just let me watch and see how it's done this time."

Adam Peabody stepped to the rail and peered out at the approaching scow, shading his eyes with his hand. "Aye, but it's old Fong," he chuckled. "Thought I recognized the fat buzzard." He motioned for Pris to come closer. "He speaks Cantonese as well as Fukienese, m'dear. Want to see how ye do at bein' my interpreter? If ye can charm him out of a few dollars less squeeze —"

Gratified, Pris gave him a radiant smile. She did not look at Wu Hung-li, and so she could not see the expression on his face.

The scow had touched alongside. Two of the mandarin's men preceded their lord up the gangway. Only after they'd seen that he had a proper chair to sit in, shaded by a big silk parasol, did they go back down to assist him onto the deck.

The mandarin was fifty, perhaps, puffy about the eyes, with a long, scraggly beard and gold nail shields upon his fourth and fifth fingers. The white egret insignia embroidered upon his purple gown and the shell button on his cap proclaimed him to be a mandarin of the sixth rank. He sat in the chair and eyed the barbarians, a distant, imperious smile on his face.

The captain nudged Pris. "Welcome him to our ship, m'dear," he said, "and ask him if he would like a cheroot and a cup of Madeira."

Pris translated the request into fluent Cantonese. The mandarin raised his eyebrows, but did not comment except to decline the Madeira and accept the proffered cheroot, which he smoked expertly. Wu Hung-li glowered in the background.

The mandarin blew a puff of smoke into the air and said something in Cantonese that Pris did not translate. "Come now," urged the captain. "What did he say?"

Pris's cheeks pinked becomingly, a welcome sight after the long days of sickness. "He says," she whispered, "that he had heard the *fan kuei* women were ugly and that he is most delighted to find it is not so." Softly, she thanked the mandarin for his compliment.

"She be the woman of our *taipan* here," Peabody nodded at Morgan, "a most excellent man . . . translate that for him, m'dear."

Blushing, Pris translated into Cantonese. The mandarin beamed at Morgan. More pleasantries were exchanged. Then, almost abruptly, the mandarin nodded to his secretary, a skinny Chinese dressed in a grass-cloth robe and wearing a conical rattan hat bound under his chin with a cord of red silk. The secretary drew a well-worn red paper scroll from the top of his boot, thrust out his chest and began to read from it in a high, singsong voice.

"True copy of imperial edict dated Tao Kuang, seventeenth year, sixth moon, fourth sun," Pris translated during the pauses. "As the port of Canton is the only one at which the outer barbarians are permitted to trade, on no account can they be allowed to wander and visit other places in the Middle Kingdom. His Majesty, however, being ever desirous that his compassion be made manifest even to the least

deserving, cannot deny to such as are in distress from lack of food through adverse seas and currents the necessary means of continuing their voyage. When supplied, they must not linger but put to sea again immediately. Respect this."

With a solemn face, the secretary rolled up the edict and put it back into his boot.

"Can I assume, Captain," the mandarin cocked his head, "that your ship was brought to Namoa by some misfortune?"

"Aye, that she was," Peabody answered after the translation. "Blown off-course she was, by a tumble storm on the way to Manila."

Dutifully, Pris repeated the tale in Cantonese.

The mandarin nodded, then rose to his feet. As if by prepared signal, his attendants vanished down the gangway and into the scow.

"You have chests of foreign mud on board?" he asked casually.

"Aye, eight-hundred of them."

"Too many for Namoa, I think."

"We be leavin' only what we can sell. With Your Excellency's permission, o' course."

"My permission awaits your offer, Captain." The mandarin took a final puff on the butt of the cheroot and delicately tossed it over the side.

Peabody nodded. "Aye. The usual."

"Very well, then." The mandarin glanced warily about him before Wu Hung-li came forward with a bag of Mexican silver dollars, common currency on the South China Coast. The mandarin tucked it into the ample folds of his robe. "And now," he announced, "I have changed my mind about having a taste of your wine, if it does not trouble you."

With smiles all around, the glasses were brought out. After a polite interval, the mandarin took his leave, carrying a handful of the best cheroots with him. As the scow pulled away, a half-dozen junks left the shore of the island and made for the *Peregrine*.

Japeth Pratt, who had moved off to one side, watched them come. "Well, sor," he exclaimed with a grin that showed his missing tooth, "here be our customers!"

Seventeen

The China Coast
February 1840

Over the days and weeks that followed, the same performance was repeated many times — the reading of the imperial edict, the village mandarin collecting his “squeeze,” the dealers and smugglers filing down into the hold of the *Peregrine* to examine the cargo.

Opium was generally stored in one-hundred-fifty-pound mango-wood chests that were sealed with pitch and wrapped in skins or gunny. Except for Malwa, which came in brick form, the gumlike raw opium was shaped into three-pound balls, sealed on the outside with pressed poppy petals, then rolled and packed in “poppy trash,” a mixture of dried, crushed stems, leaves and petals.

The buyers were often disappointed to find that the opium was from Turkey, and in such cases Morgan had to lower his price from four hundred dollars a chest to three-fifty, but even so things were going remarkably well. The coffers of the *Peregrine* were growing heavy with silver.

Morgan sold two hundred chests at Namoa, fifty at little Tungshan and three hundred forty at Amoy. The rest of them trickled away in tens and twenties in such villages as Anhai, Futsing and Yuhwan. A hundred miles or so south of Shanghai, he sold the last at them, and happily gave the order to turn the *Peregrine* for home, nearly a quarter of a million dollars in silver stashed away in her hold.

In spite of her initial enthusiasm, Pris had been of little use as an interpreter. As the ship moved north, Wu Hung-li’s command of the coastal dialects had become increasingly needed. When it came to her

translating his Cantonese into good English, he had simply refused to cooperate with her. In Morgan's presence, the thin, middle-aged com-prador spoke only pidgin. Though she did her best not to show it, Pris, Morgan suspected, was crushed.

As for the battle of the bed, it remained to be fought and won. The long days, the anxiety over the sale of the opium — these and other things had diverted Morgan from his conquest. But now, with the opium sold and the bow of the *Peregrine* turned homeward, his desire rose like a new flame.

Tonight, he resolved as he looked at Pris across the little teakwood table in his cabin. Her dark hair glowed in the light of the ship's lantern that hung overhead. Already the hour was late. They'd enjoyed a jovial supper with Adam Peabody, who'd retired early to his own quarters, and now they sat alone in the small, matching, chintz-covered chairs, she sipping jasmine-scented tea and he twirling the stem of an emptied goblet of brandy between his fingers. The brandy lay warm in the pit of his stomach, spreading its subtle fire outward to his limbs and loins. She said little, but from time to time she glanced at him nervously over the little porcelain teacup. She knew. Oh, she knew!

She rose at last, fluffing out her petticoats and brushing the creases from the skirt of her light pink India muslin. "It's late," she said softly. "I'd best be going. Good night, Morgan."

Her eyes were huge and bright in the gleam of the lantern. Her delicate hands, he noticed, trembled as she pulled at the latch on the door. The door was locked and the key well hidden. He'd seen to that.

"Morgan," she whispered. "Let me out. Please."

He only sat and smiled at the sight of her fluttering like a moth there against the door. The brandy was liquid fire in his veins.

"Morgan . . . this isn't funny . . ." Her breath was coming faster now. She tugged at the latch in a fury of helplessness. Slowly, he got up from his chair. "Morgan — " she hissed. "No — I need time. I told you . . . You've got to be patient with me!"

Two sudden, swift strides — he caught her about the waist with his hand and jerked her against him. "Lord, Pris," he muttered hoarsely, "it's been eight months! Eight months without you! Dammit, you've tortured me long enough!" Her little fists were drumming against his chest, but she was no match for his lust-fired strength. With his free

hand, he grasped her chin and wrenched her face upward, forcing her to look at him. "By heaven, Pris," he gasped, "I'm your husband! You love me — I know it, and you want this as much as I do!"

She parted her lips to speak, but he stopped her protest with a bruising kiss, then another. His body was bursting. Surely she would feel it, too; surely she would respond. He would feel her catch fire, feel her arms slipping upward to lock about his neck . . . Oh, Pris . . .

But she continued to fight him, gasping and struggling until he felt the pain of anger bubbling up inside him like hot lava. What little patience he had left exploded. With one hand, he gripped the back of her dress and pulled hard, ripping loose the row of tiny shell buttons. Through the roaring in his ears, he heard them click and roll across the cabin floor. Pris caught her breath in a little sob and tried to back away, but his strong arm about her waist held her fast.

Morgan had never fully undressed a woman before. He cursed under his breath at the stubbornness of the laced corset. The whale-bone stays were like iron. The knotted laces would not untie and would not break. "You're hurting me," she breathed, still struggling.

"Then you take it off!" he panted. "Take it off or by damn I'll knock you out and *cut* it off!"

"Very well," she snapped as his arms released her. "You're bigger than I am, Morgan Bellamy. You're stronger. I can't fight you." As he watched her, she shed her dress and reached back with practiced fingers to untie the knot that his impatient hands had pulled tight.

With her gaze fastened stubbornly upon the floor, she loosened the corset and slipped it up over her head. Then, bending over, she took off her little slippers and stockings. Next she hesitated, her eyes raised pleadingly.

"Go on," he said, and when she did not comply at once, he took a step toward her.

"No, I'll do it," she replied coldly, untying the drawstrings of her petticoat and pantalets and stepping out of them, her mouth set defiantly. Last of all she crossed her arms, pulled her short chemise over her head, flung it to the floor and stood there naked, her eyes blazing. "This is what you asked for, Morgan," she whispered, her small chin thrust forward. "Do what you will, but you can't make me want you!"

The sight of her — so beautiful, so angry, so woefully helpless — totally melted him. "Oh, no, Pris . . . Prissy darling . . ." His arms were

around her, his lips moving down the satiny whiteness of her bare shoulder. "Not like this, love . . ." he moaned as she stood rigid and unyielding against him. "Not with you like this . . . Come to bed and we'll make it right . . . I'll make it up to you, love, all the rotten things I've done . . ."

He bent his head and caught her lips again, with more tenderness this time, trying to warm her, to draw her up to his own pitch of ecstasy. She stood cold and passive in his arms, neither resisting nor responding as his hands moved up and down the curves of her body. Her breath came evenly, with infuriating slowness. Was she made of ice?

He reached down and lifted her in his arms. Damn her, he thought. She loved him — he knew she loved him! And even ice could be melted. "Oh, Prissy, please . . ." he whispered. "I'm sorry . . . so sorry . . ." She did not answer him. Her lips formed a tight, hard little line, even when he kissed her. Finally, bursting with desire and exasperation, he carried her to the waiting bed and jerked the quilts.

She lay still as death on the sheet where he had put her down, her jaw clenched, her eyes huge and defiant. Morgan blew out the lamps and peeled off his clothes, his hands quivering with desire as he remembered that last night in Canton, the way she had touched him, the wildness of her response that had carried them both to peaks of rapture he had never dreamed existed. And this time would be even better, he vowed. This time there would be no barriers of deceit between them. She was his wife, the woman he wanted . . . "Oh . . . love me, Pris," he moaned as he slid into bed beside her.

When he touched her, she did not move. His hand crept along her shoulder, and then, even more cautiously, skimmed and cupped one taut little breast. Her skin was warm. He could feel the frantic pounding of her heart beneath the softness of her flesh, but she did not move or speak. He gathered her in his arms and drew her against him, tight and hard, his body on fire with her nearness. She was trembling like a bird, but her breathing was slow and shallow, her hands closed into fists. "Please . . ." he murmured, finding her lips in the darkness, covering her face with a rain of frantic kisses. She lay stiffly in his arms, as cold and unresponding as a wax doll.

Something snapped in Morgan Bellamy. So she didn't want him! Well, she'd have no bloody choice about it! He would have her! Her

and the Chinese girls and any other damned woman he pleased! Women were only good for one thing anyway! He flung himself on top of her with his full weight, crushing her, hurting her and not caring. She did not cry out, but he felt her breath stop as he took her — took her brutally, roughly, wanting her pain to equal his. Oh, Pris . . . oh, damn you, Pris . . . He drove in hard, thrusting, pounding, bruising her flesh until anger and passion erupted in him and he lay still.

Afterward, as Morgan slept, Pris lay with her cheek against the pillow and cried a stream of silent tears.

Her stubborn pride had not deserted her. With the stoicism of a martyr, she had lain unfeeling and unresponding in her husband's arms as he'd made love to her. In their struggle for power, it was she who had won the empty victory. Won — when she could have had the joy of losing.

His last words to her, the words he'd uttered before he'd rolled over in disgust, still echoed in her ears: "In the name of heaven, Pris, what do you *want* from me?"

She had not answered him, because she realized she did not know. Even after an hour of anguished mulling, she still did not know.

She could not bear to have him touch her. She'd told herself again and again that she could not look at him, let alone be held by him, without picturing another woman in his arms. It was too much for her pride to bear after she'd had such faith in him.

And yet, even through the worst of it, she had never stopped loving him.

It was wanting to punish him, then; to hurt him as she had been hurt — surely that was the reason she had refused to be a wife to him. She *had* hurt him. She knew that now, and she loved him enough to be sorry. Part of her wanted to roll over and touch him, to wake him up and cry wonderful healing tears in his arms. But her cursed stubbornness, that and the fear that he might take his turn at rejecting her, held her fast where she was.

She needed to think things out, and she could not think here where she lay, with Morgan so near. A stroll on deck, perhaps, would clear her mind. In the fresh night, under the stars, she could walk and ponder. Then she would make the decision, to return to Morgan's bed or go back to the solitude of her own cabin.

Stealthily, she dressed. Enough of the buttons remained on her gown to hold the back together, but she snatched a Shetland shawl from its hook behind the door to cover the gaps and to keep her warm against the cool air of the East China Sea. It took her only a moment to find the key in the pocket of Morgan's cast-off trousers. She turned it in the lock. Then, willing the door not to creak, she stole up the stairs and onto the quarterdeck.

The sky was almost black. The stars looked very faraway and even the moon was not to be seen. Pris clutched her shawl tight about her and tiptoed to the rail.

The ship lay at anchor not far off the island of Chusan, for that day's final trading had finished at dusk, and Adam Peabody had decided to wait until dawn to begin the journey south. All outside lanterns had been doused as a precaution against marauding pirates and imperial patrols. The *Peregrine* rocked with the gentleness of a cradle, and Pris found herself wondering how its now-familiar motion could ever have made her so ill. A chilling breeze whined about the masts and the reefed sails.

Shivering, Pris decided to seek shelter in the lee of the quarterdeck. She fumbled her way down the steps in the darkness. The deck appeared to be deserted. Pratt and one of the coolies had the watch, she recalled, wondering where they were. The odd little seaman had his peculiarities, but even he would not dare desert his post at night in pirate-infested waters.

A yard aft of the bow she saw a lone figure hunched at the rail, intent on something below. Pratt, maybe, she thought, moving closer. But what was he doing?

From where she stood in the shadows, she looked down over the rail. Something bright was reflecting in the water — a lantern, on a long rope, swinging back and forth! Pris stifled a little cry and edged closer.

Her feet struck something soft and solid. Instinctively, she dropped to her knees. Even in the darkness, she could make out the striped jersey of Japeth Pratt, his limp form sprawled on the deck at her feet. With her pulse bursting against her ears, she felt his body. His heart was beating, but he was unconscious. When she touched his hair, her hand came away wet and sticky. Without thinking, she wiped it on her shawl. A little gasp escaped her lips.

The figure at the rail jerked upright and whipped around to face her. In the dim glow of the hanging lantern, Pris recognized the gaunt silhouette of Wu Hung-li.

"You — " Before she could cry out, something hard struck the back of her skull. The stars did a red dance in her head and went out.

With a sleepy sigh, Morgan reached out and flung an arm across the bed. Pris was gone. Not that he was surprised. Nothing he'd done had succeeded in moving her. She could bloody well go back to her cabin then, if she wanted to, and stay there. He was tempted to have old Wu Hung-li bring his girls around again when they got back to Hong Kong. By damn, that would show her.

With a groan, he rolled over onto his back, a great black lump of desolation riding his chest. If only Pris had warmed to him . . . if only she'd responded —

A plank squeaked above his head. Footsteps! Many of them, stealthy and slow. Pirates! And where the hell was Pratt? Morgan was out of bed like a shot, pulling his trousers up his bare legs.

The loaded pistol, a brand new Colt .45 that Blake Robards had ordered from America, was tucked beneath his pillow. He grabbed it in one hand, jammed a cutlass into his belt, jerked the door open and charged up the steps.

They were on the deck, about forty ragged Chinese, milling around the hatch cover that opened down into the hold where the silver was kept. Without hesitating, Morgan fired into their midst.

One of the pirates slumped to the deck. The others came at Morgan in a swarm, their long knives clattering. The revolver barked again and a man dropped his sword to clutch at his arm.

The first shot had roused Adam Peabody. Still wearing his flannel nightshirt, he thrust himself into the doorway beside Morgan, matched ivory-handled pistols clutched in his hands.

A few of the pirates had Western guns. Now they fired back. Morgan and the captain crouched low in the doorway, aiming with care. Every shot was precious.

The hatch opened, and the Lascars, armed and drilled by Peabody, poured up onto the deck. Some of them had guns. The others swung swords, knives and clubs like dark furies, for they were fighting for their lives. The Chinese had the utmost contempt for these brown-

skinned sailors, and seldom showed them mercy. The two American mates appeared around the side of the cabin, firing at the pirates who had taken refuge behind masts, boxes, coils of rope.

Morgan's Colt was empty. He jammed it into his belt. The door to Priscilla's cabin was closed. He could only pray she'd have the sense to keep it locked and stay inside.

The final Lascar to come out of the hatch was trying to bolt it shut. A rangy pirate raised his cutlass high; the blade sliced downward and the lopped-off head of the Lascar rolled across the deck. Ripping his own sword out of his belt, Morgan leaped forward to defend the hatchway. If the pirates got the silver, Bellamy & Company would be ruined.

Morgan was no swordsman, but he had the advantage in size and determination over the pirates who swarmed around him. With his back protected by the mast, he slashed outward in sweeping arcs. The blade cut nothing except air, but he did succeed in protecting the vital hatch while Peabody and the mates picked away at the pirates with their pistols. The Lascars, too, fought like devils, giving the pirates strike for strike. One of them, a strong fellow, had no weapon except a heavy oaken barrel stave with a nail in it. Morgan watched him kill a pirate with a smashing blow that hit the wretch squarely between the eyes.

The battle did not last long. The pirates, whose attacks depended heavily on surprise, had not counted upon the fury of the resistance. Soon it became evident that they were falling back. While the Lascars howled in jubilation, the intruders began to slip over the sides to where their sampans were waiting below in the water. Within a few moments, the pirates had gone as swiftly as they'd come.

Morgan stood astride the hatch and whooped with elation as Adam Peabody strode out onto the deck. "You think they'll be back?" he asked the captain.

"Nay, I think not. They'll be lickin' their wounds for a piece, methinks." Peabody's nightshirt was splotted with dirt and blood-stains. The Lascars were dancing and chattering like monkeys. The captain wiped his bald head. "And where be that blighter, Pratt? 'Twas he had the watch. He and one o' them blasted coolies."

Morgan glanced around the deck. He realized that he'd not seen the little seaman since nightfall. "By thunder, you don't suppose they got him?"

The mate came up, grinning. "You'll never guess where we found that crazy Chineese, Wu Hung-li. In the hold, with a little knife no longer'n your hand, ready to give his all protectin' the silver!"

Morgan thrust the point of his sword into the base of the mast. "Come on. Let's look for Pratt."

"Nay, we'll look," growled Adam Peabody. "Ye'd best see t' your missus. She'd be afeared out o' her pretty head by now, I'll wager."

"Of course." Morgan strode toward the stairs. Poor Pris. Thank God she'd been smart enough to stay in her cabin.

In the sudden quiet below the deck, he tried her door. It was locked and she did not answer when he knocked. "Pris," he said, his mouth against the wood. "It's all right, Prissy. They've gone."

No one answered him. He chuckled and shook his head. She'd slept through it all. Incredible.

"Pris?" He knocked more firmly. Still she did not answer. He stood at the door a moment, vacillating. Finally, he decided to let her sleep. After what had happened between them, she'd not want to see him anyway.

Slowly, less elated than before, he walked back up the steps and onto the deck. Adam Peabody was waiting for him, the heavy, grim lines on his face discernable even in the darkness.

"You found Pratt?" Morgan asked him.

The old captain shook his head. Something pale and soft was clutched in his hand. Without a word, he thrust it toward Morgan.

It was Pris's white Shetland shawl. Morgan seized it from the captain and examined it incredulously, horror seeping its cold way into his bones.

One corner of the shawl was stained with fresh blood.

The hold of the aging junk was dank and smelly. Baskets of dried fish hung from the rafters, rustling softly with the motion of the sea. Plump rats scurried among the sacks of rice, leaving their offal to mold on the floor. Spare masts and canvas lay rolled along side; chests of opium sewn into pigskins, lined the other.

The only light came through small cracks in the planking of the deck overhead. The tinny sound of Chinese voices and the creak of walking feet filtered downward through dimness of muggy air, muffled by the splash of waves against the hull. It was morning outside.

Priscilla whimpered and opened her eyes. She was lying on a pile of empty sacks. A glossy black rat was nibbling at her shoe. She gasped and kicked it. The animal skittered a few feet away and sat up on its hind legs, blinking at her with bold red eyes.

Japeth Pratt was hunched on a battered chest, his head in his hands. He looked up when Pris moved. "Mornin', missus," he said solemnly. "I been a prayin' t' God you'd be dead."

Pris sat up and stared at him. His sparse sandy hair was caked with blood. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Aye. Takes more'n a whack on the noggin t' put ol' Japeth Pratt away. Just give me one helluva headache, that be all." He touched his head gingerly, flaking off a little of the blood. "An' you, missus?"

"Same as you. Just a headache." She gazed around the dim hold. "Mister Pratt, where in heaven's name are we?"

"Pirates got us, I figure. Me, I don't remember nothin' 'cept bein' hit from behind." He squinted up into a beam of light. "Don't matter much t' me. I can take 'bout anything from the filthy divils — but you — Oh, Lord, Missus Bellamy, I'd a' give anythin' if they hadn't got you!"

Pris shivered. She still felt dazed, as if she were in the middle of some wild dream and would wake up at home in bed any minute. "What do you think they'll do to us?" she whispered.

"'Pends on what they want. If we be lucky, maybe ransom. The divils'll have t' keep us alive then. If not — " He spread his bony hands and shrugged.

Pris felt her mind beginning to clear, like morning after a fog. She remembered what she had seen the night before. Wu Hung-li . . . the swinging lantern . . . "Mister Pratt," she said softly, "we'll never be ransomed alive. Not now." And she told him about Wu Hung-li.

Pratt picked up an empty wine jug and flung it at the black rat. The crash startled the deck above into silence for a moment; but when nothing else happened, the babble of activity soon returned. The rat had vanished.

"Wu!" Pratt cleared his throat and spat on the planks. "That old sonofabitch!" He scratched behind his ear and looked at Pris. "You be sure, now, they know you saw him?"

"I told you, Wu turned around and looked right at me. Oh, Mister Pratt!" One hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes were round with horror. "It could have been Wu Hung-li all along! The night my father was killed — the pirates knew right where the silver was! And the *Merlin* this past summer — !" Trembling, she covered her face with her hands. "And Morgan — Morgan doesn't know!"

It was midday before the hatch above their heads opened and a basket was lowered down on a rope. Not until the hatch was closed again did Japeth Pratt edge over to the basket and look inside.

"Rice," he grunted. "Big bowl with two pairs o' chopsticks. Aye, not bad. Come on, Missus Bellamy, have some."

Pris was huddled on the sacks. "Take it all," she whispered. "How can I eat their dirty food?"

Pratt stood up to his full height of five feet three inches, and strode over to where she sat. The cringing, subservient look she'd seen about him so often on the ship was gone. "Missus Bellamy," he said, "you be wantin' t'live? You be wantin' t' see your husbin' again?"

"Yes!" Pris whispered from the abyss of her despair.

"Then you eat what they give you! Even if it be pig slop! You eat it an' you stay alive, Missus Bellamy! An' what they be tellin' you t' do, you do it! They say t' lick their filthy boots, an' you do it! Long as doin' it keeps you from dyin'!" His thin, raspy voice cracked with intensity. He hitched up his trousers and took a deep breath. "Y' hear?"

"I hear, Mister Pratt," she murmured. "Bring me the rice."

He grinned for the first time that day. "Aye, that be the spirit! It be a good sign, y'know. The Chinees'd not be awastin' their vittles on us if they was plannin' t'kill us right away."

They had only one bowl between them. Pris's *amah* had taught her to eat with chopsticks, but Pratt was not so lucky. After a few futile attempts, he gave up. "Eat what you want of it," he said. "Then give the rest t' me and I'll do it me own way." He thrust the bowl toward Pris. Gingerly, she began to eat.

"Mister Pratt, there are . . . *things* in this rice."

"Aye. Looks like chopped octopus. Right kind of 'em." He scowled at her. "Eat it, Missus Bellamy. It be meat of a sort and you'll be aneed-in' it for strength."

At his words, a chill passed through her body. She took the chopsticks and daintily picked up a sliver of the purplish-gray flesh. Part of a sucker showed on one side. She closed her eyes, thrust it into her mouth, gagged a little and swallowed hard. Amazingly, the piece of octopus went down her throat.

"Aye," grinned Pratt. "That be the way! You'll be achewin' it like a Chineese afore you know it!"

Pris was pale. "Water!" she whispered.

There was a small earthenware jug in the basket. She pulled out the stopper and gulped it eagerly. The water had a fishy taste.

"Easy now. This might have to last us a piece." Pratt took a sip and replaced the stopper. "Phew!" he grimaced.

Pris ate her fill of the rice and managed to down two more chunks of octopus. Then she gave the bowl to Pratt, who simply raised it, opened his mouth wide and scooped the contents in with his fingers.

Toward evening the hatch opened again, and two lean Chinese pirates thrust down a bamboo ladder. They came down into the hold, men with hard eyes, their faces and arms streaked with scars. One of them carried a wickedly gleaming cutlass. Pointing at Pris, where she lay cowering against the opium chests, they motioned for her to come with them.

"No — " she breathed as they moved toward her. Pratt sprang to her side. The pirate pressed the point of the cutlass against his ribs, forcing him to back off. The other pirate muttered something in a dialect Pris did not understand before he seized her wrists and jerked her to her feet. "No!" she cried out, beginning to struggle.

Pratt, held at bay by the cutlass, moaned with dismay. "Missus Bellamy," he said between his teeth. "It won't do no good. You can't keep 'em from takin' you." He looked like a whipped cur, beaten but snarling. "Just remember what ol' Pratt told you . . . remember an' stay alive! Y' hear? Just stay alive!"

The unarmed pirate was dragging her toward the ladder. She twisted her head to look back over her shoulder at Pratt. "You, too — " she gasped. She saw the other pirate lower the cutlass and strike Pratt a fist-blow in the side of the head that sent him crunching into the rice

bags. Then they were shoving and jerking her up the ladder and onto the deck.

It was dusk and the junk was on the open sea. The men squatted on the planks, eating their evening meal of rice and steamed fish. They turned their heads and looked with their narrow eyes as Pris was led across the deck. Most likely, she was the first foreign woman they'd ever seen she reminded herself, cringing from their stares. The two pirates, each gripping one of her arms, dragged her aft, to an elaborately carved door below the poop deck.

The door, a masterpiece of teakwood chiseled with a dragon motif, looked so out-of-place on the shabby old junk that Pris could only surmise it had been stolen or salvaged from a more luxurious craft. One of the two pirates raised the lion-head brass knocker and rapped sharply. Slowly, the door opened. A totally hairless man with the demeanor of a servant peered out at them. The pirate with the sword muttered something in his strange dialect; the bald man nodded, opened the door a little wider and stood back as the two men shoved Pris inside.

She was in a cabin, roomy and almost comically sumptuous. Its walls were hung with garishly embroidered silks and the floor was covered with a water-stained Persian rug. The bald servant closed the door and Pris found herself standing before a low, ebony table, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Two sticks of incense smoldered in a brass pot, their aroma chokingly sweet. The saffron smoke swam before the face of the man who sat on the opposite side of the table.

The servant brought Pris a stool and motioned for her to sit. Then, from a tray, he handed her a damp, scented towel. She took it gratefully and wiped the memory of the filthy hold from her face and hands. The man across the table was watching her. He was big for a Chinese, with coarse bones like a horse's and a body that had run to middle-aged fat. Pris trembled as she studied his face through the haze of yellow incense: the jutting cheekbones, the flinty, deep-set eyes, the mouth that curved like a bow beneath the drooping mustache. She had never seen him before. Yet something in the length of his face and in the great, equine teeth that showed when he smiled at her, was chillingly familiar.

"You are staring at me," he said in slightly broken Cantonese, and she realized someone must have told him she spoke the language. Wu Hung-li perhaps — and then suddenly she knew.

"You look like someone," she said cautiously.

"Someone? Someone handsome maybe?" He laughed at his own joke and slapped the table. The nails of his hands were very long, with jade shields on the little fingers.

Priscilla's heart was leaping like a trapped rabbit but she remained outwardly calm. "You look like a man named Wu Hung-li," she said.

His grin split the lower part of his face. "And well I should! That dried-up old stick is my half-brother!"

Pris was dismayed but not surprised. In silence, she sat and watched him, aloofness masking the terror she felt.

"My name — " he rose halfway out of his chair and inclined his head, "is Wu Shih-li. This is my boat, young lady, and those are my men outside. My manservant, Po — " he nodded toward the small man who had no hair, no eyebrows, and no eyelashes, "he's been with me twenty years. He can't speak, but he can hear — " The pirate clapped his hands. The servant, who'd been standing in a corner, brought a tray with a teapot and pretty little cups, which he filled with tea. Pris, remembering the words of Japeth Pratt, drank it.

Wu Shih-li was wearing a magnificent brocaded robe emblazoned with a circular design on the pectoral *pou-fou* across his chest — a badge indicating imperial or princely rank. Even in her fear, Pris could not help wondering where he had stolen it. He downed his cup of tea, wiped his mouth with his hand and then wiped his hand on the robe. "Believe me, lady," he said, "it was only the silver we wanted. We do not like to hurt people." His eyes narrowed. "We like even less to bother with prisoners. But we cannot let you go free, because you know about my brother."

Pris said nothing.

"The man who came with you. He is your husband?"

"You know that my husband is the *taipan*. Wu Hung-li would have told you that."

"The man is your friend?"

"Yes." Strange, Pris thought, how she'd never liked Japeth Pratt. Yet she had answered the pirate's question truthfully and without hesitation.

"I could kill you both. Now. You want me to do that?"

Pris sat quietly, saying nothing.

Wu Shih-li pressed toward her across the table. "But I am not such a cruel man," he said slyly. "Nights at sea are long and cold, with no woman to warm my bed. I might find a foreigner . . . amusing, for a time." He ran two fingers down the length of one side of his mustache.

Pris's heart froze and plummeted, even though she had known from the moment she'd been pushed into the cabin that things would come to this. "No," she said in a tight whisper. "I'll kill myself first."

"Very well," he smiled, showing his big, horsey teeth. "Kill yourself and save me the trouble. But I promise you one thing, lady. On the day you die, your friend in the hold dies with you. A most . . . entertaining death it will be, too. I will arrange it myself."

Pris closed her eyes. "Oh, please," she murmured. "I'll wash your clothes, cook your food . . . keep your boat clean . . . but don't — " She felt weak, helpless and sick. Pratt's admonition spun in her head: *They say t' lick their filthy boots, an' you do it! Long as doin' it keeps you, from dyin'!* The words rang hollow against the gong of reality. Words. Only words. Pratt could well say and mean them. Pratt was not a woman.

"Wash my clothes? Cook my food?" The pirate laughed. "I have men who do that better than you could. But for some things, they're no use at all — at least not much — whereas you . . ." He rubbed his chin.

"But you would not like a foreign woman, a *fan kuei* . . ." Pris played her last card.

"I have never had a foreign woman. But one thing I know already. They talk too much." He stood up from the table, overturning the chair and splashing the tea in his cup.

"No!" She sprang to her feet and backed away from him, but there was no place to go. Po, the servant, had disappeared. Behind a lacquered black screen, she caught a glimpse of Wu Shih-li's bed.

Priscilla flung herself against the carved door, clawing at the latch. It was locked and Wu Shih-li was stalking her in earnest now, like a tiger. In futile evasion, she edged along the wall, frantic fingers clutching the embroidered tapestries, eyes huge with fear. He crouched low, spreading his arms as he moved toward her, a slight smile on his face. "Come now," he chuckled. "Am I so bad?"

The cabin was not large and so she knew the pursuit would be brief. Still laughing, he backed her into a corner. She shrank back as he

moved closer, his breath damp and warm in her face. She kicked out and caught him sharply in the shin. Cursing, he seized her arm and swung her out into the middle of the room, knocking over the table and spilling the tea.

With one hand, he grabbed both her wrists. She fought and twisted at the end of his arm like a speared fish. No longer laughing, he raised his right hand high.

"No!" she gasped.

"Yes!" he rasped. "Say it! *Yes, Wu Shih-li!*"

When she did not reply, he brought his hand down like a hammer and cuffed her hard across the face. His long nails raked her cheek. "Say it; *Yes, my lord! Yes, Wu Shih-li!*" He slapped her again, then again. She felt her flesh bruising under the blows. Her skin was slimy with blood where the jade nail shields had cut her. Again and again, he struck her, until she stopped whimpering and hung limply by the wrists. When he let go of her, she slumped to the floor and lay there. Contemptuously, he kicked her in the buttocks with the toe of his boot. Then, when she only moaned, he seized her wrists again and began to drag her across the rug toward the lacquered screen.

Eighteen

Hong Kong
June 1840

The summer monsoons had come again to the South China Coast, washing brown silt into the Pearl and keeping the restless British huddled aboard their ships in the Hong Kong Harbor.

Kathleen sat before the small mirror in her cabin, brushing her hair, which by now had grown down past her shoulders. With each stroke of the rosewood brush, she counted the time — nine months, nearly ten, since they'd fled Macao to board these wretched ships. Nine months and more since she had looked upon Chengqua's face for the last time. She sighed and brushed her hair upward from the back of her neck. It was long enough now to be pinned atop her head, and Rose had thoughtfully saved the severed braids to make a switch that could be fastened on as well.

She brushed slowly, counting. Five months — five long, terrible months since Morgan had come home, mad with grief. Five months since the *Peregrine* had sailed into the harbor after many days of vain searchings and he had staggered aboard the *Condor* with Priscilla's bloodstained shawl clutched in his arms. For weeks afterward, he'd done little except sit alone in his cabin, unwashed, unshaven and drunk. Then the *Kestrel* had returned from Calcutta with a cargo of fresh Patna and Benares opium. Morgan had shaken himself out of the nightmare and gone back up the coast with the clipper. In spite of another pirate attack, which they'd fought off with the loss of two Lascar crewmen, the run had been successful. Bellamy & Company was out of the red and rolling in a brisk profit. The *Peregrine* and the

newly repaired *Osprey* were expected to arrive any day, their holds heavy with opium chests.

Morgan had changed. The boyishness, the playfulness in him that Kathleen had always loved, was gone. Something in him had hardened. He'd become cold, bitter, mercenary. Nothing seemed to matter to him anymore except the business, the money, the opium and the ships.

He spent little time on the *Condor* with his mother and sister. Instead, he preferred to live on whatever clipper happened to be in port — presently the *Kestrel*. Kathleen strongly suspected the reason for this isolation. She'd heard rumors among the men that he brought his Chinese mistresses — two of them — on board from time to time.

She laid the brush down on the makeshift dressing table, fluffed her hair with her fingers and walked to the window. The sky was clear for the most part. Thank goodness for that, she told herself, because Vincent Stanton would be taking her to Hong Kong Island for a picnic and she did not want to have the day spoiled by rain.

She strolled out onto the narrow walkway that ran around the perimeter of the *Condor's* main deck. The big receiving hulk, constructed for maximum capacity, carried a two-story superstructure built above the deck where the masts had once stood, filled with store-rooms, a spacious galley and more than a dozen cabins.

The sky was a hot, transparent blue, with only a few clouds scudding over distant Kowloon on the Chinese mainland. The breeze was light and fresh. It was a perfect day for an outing. Kathleen gripped the rail and leaned backward, stretching, arching her spine. Then she shaded her eyes and gazed across the wave-dimpled harbor to where Hong Kong's wooded peaks soared almost vertically upward above the beach and the foothills.

Jardine Matheson's *Hercules*, a near twin to the *Condor* except for its even larger size, lay a few hundred yards to starboard. Here Vincent Stanton lived and conducted his classes for the children of the merchant families. She could see him now, coming over for her in the long-boat, pulling eagerly at the oars. Gentle Vincent. Now he had seen her and was waving. She waved back, wondering how she could be fool enough to keep turning down his proposals. He was five times better than she deserved. One day, maybe, he'd wake up and realize that, and she'd lose him. With another wave, she turned and skipped back toward the galley to see if the picnic lunch was ready.

Stanton rowed all the way to the island with Kathleen sitting prettily in the stern of the longboat, the picnic hamper at her feet. The morning was hot and the sweat poured down his long face, making his glasses slide down his nose. His white shirt was plastered to his back. Kathleen laughed and cheered him on as the peaks of Hong Kong loomed higher and closer.

When the boat crunched onto the beach, he jumped out to drag it ashore, wetting his boots up to his ankles. Then Kathleen, delectable in her new white dress, took his hand and jumped nimbly onto dry land.

"Vincent, you pamper me so. No one ever treated me the way you do." She took his hand and swung it up and down as they walked away from the beach.

"Where do you want to eat?" His eyes roamed upward.

"Over there. On that little knoll. We can watch the ships — " She tugged at his hand and danced forward like a little girl as they climbed higher. At last they sat on the knoll on one of Rose's old patchwork quilts, the lunch of biscuits and roast duck spread between them.

They were not alone on the shore. Other couples, families and groups of friends strolled on the beach, played or picnicked. Hong Kong was a popular place for the ship-bound English.

Vincent Stanton surveyed the beach, then let his eyes climb the peaks of the island. "There's talk of a settlement here one day, Kathleen. What do you think of the idea?"

"Here? Why, Vincent, there's no place for a town! Everything goes straight up! What a silly thought!" She nibbled delicately on a slice of duck breast.

"Not really — see, there's room for a square over there, and some streets around the edges. The houses could be built on the foothills."

"But it isn't even ours. It belongs to the Chinese."

"True." Stanton polished his glasses on his shirt sleeve. "But as long as there's going to be a war — "

"Who says there's going to be a war? Hardly anything's happened for months! All we've done is sit out there on our ships!" Kathleen dabbed marmalade on one of her mother's flaky biscuits and took a small bite. Vincent Stanton had fallen into silence. She sat and looked at him, sensed that he was bursting with something that he had not told her.

"Do you think," he said, "that England will sit still for what's happened here? Insulted at Canton, thrown out of Macao . . . no trade except the illegal stuff up the coast! And there's the matter of the six million pounds for opium we turned over to Lin — the Crown hasn't paid it. They can't. I think they mean to get it out of the Chinese."

"You said that England doesn't care about China. I remember."

"That was a year ago, Kathleen. Things can change." Vincent Stanton gazed out at the harbor where the ships lay at rest, peaceful as Jersey cattle in a field of green grass. Even the *Volage* and the *Hyacinth* had seen only a minor skirmish or two since the victory at Chuenpee. Kathleen let her eyes follow his. The harbor, the sky with its drifting fluffs of white clouds, the emerald-brushed Kowloon hills, the sea birds skimming the waves. The scene was almost heartbreakingly tranquil. Kathleen realized that she might never see it quite that way again.

She reached across the picnic cloth and laid her hand across his. "England's declared war, haven't they?" she asked softly.

"I just heard it from Charles Elliot this morning." His fingers closed around hers. "He's known it for months — but his instructions were to keep to himself until the trading season was over and the forces had time to get here."

"Forces!"

"Ships and troops. Some from India; some all the way from England. One of the frigates, the *Alligator*, got in last night with the news that the rest will be here any day." His fingers tightened as he pulled her hand close and pressed it against his chest. "Kathleen — "

She knew what was coming next and she was not ready for it. "Let's walk, Vincent!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet and brushing the crumbs from her skirt. "Here, help me with the things." Quickly, she put the napkins and leftover food back into the picnic basket, shook out the cloth and folded it. Vincent Stanton rolled up the quilt and tucked it, along with the basket, behind a convenient rock.

"Up there!" Kathleen pointed to one of the lower peaks. "Let's climb, Vincent! The view must be marvelous from there — "

He shaded his eyes and squinted at the peak. "It's farther than it looks, Kathleen. And you'll tear your dress on the brush . . . "

"No! There's a path, see! It'll be fun!" She took his hand again and tugged him onward.

Stanton was right about the distance to the peak. More than an hour had passed by the time they'd rounded the last curve in the thin trail to stand gasping on the summit. Vincent Stanton, with his gangly legs, was barely out of breath, but Kathleen, struggling upward in her long dress and excruciatingly laced corset, was totally wilted. She flung herself across a big flat rock and lay there with her eyes closed.

"Here — " With a smile, he took a flask of cool tea from his pocket. She sat up and gulped it eagerly.

"Oh, Vincent. You were right — and you brought this tea — you think of everything. Sometimes I believe you're perfect!" She lowered the flask and gazed out at the sea. "Oh, but I was right, too! It was worth it! Look, how beautiful!"

Far below them, the South China Sea shimmered like a sapphire. To the west, the hills of Lantau rose into a low cloud beyond the little green islands of Peng Chau, Hei Ling Chau and Cheung Chau, with Lamma stretching off to the south. The fishing junks were no more than brown specks on the surface of the water. "It's so blue from here," she whispered. "Why isn't it like that up close, Vincent?"

"It's the distance. Something to do with the air and the rays of the sun." He sat down beside her, put his arm around her waist and drew her toward him so that her back was touching his chest. She let him because she liked him and because she knew he would go no further unless she encouraged him. "Kathleen," he said, "I'm going back to England in the fall. I can't wait for you to make up your mind about us."

"Vincent . . . " There was pain in her voice.

"You've told me how much you've always wanted to go back. Why not?"

Kathleen rested her head in the hollow of his shoulder and watched the clouds gather above Lantau. Why not indeed? Where could she ever find anyone better than Vincent Stanton? He was gentle, he was spiritual, he was even attractive in his own big-eared puppy way. Oh, a girl would be a fool to turn him down. And maybe even the part about being a minister's wife wouldn't be so bad. After all, he wasn't like her father. He wasn't hard or straightlaced, and he didn't seem to mind the way she dressed or behaved. There were a hundred reasons to say yes to him — and damned few not to.

"You've been patient with me, Vincent," she said softly. "So I promise I won't keep you waiting much longer. Give me just a few more days. I'll think on it and give you my answer."

"I'd do anything to make you happy, Kathleen. You know that."

"I know." She lifted her face for his kiss, which was predictably mild and did not stir her. One entry on the debit side of the ledger, she thought as she leaned back against him and closed her eyes. A light breeze had sprung up, sweet with the smell of the sea.

"Kathleen . . . look!" His voice was soft, tense. She opened her eyes.

A dark, drifting thread of smoke had appeared over the distant horizon. Kathleen shaded her brow with her hand as she peered at it.

"A . . . a ship on fire? No — it's — "

"A steamer! First one I've seen since I left England! Look at her come!"

"Vincent — " Kathleen jumped up. "Is it the fleet? The soldiers?"

"Maybe."

"Come on!" Kathleen had seized his hand and was dragging him down the trail. "Hurry! We want to be there when it comes in!" He almost had to hold her back to keep her from falling.

They were in the longboat by the time the steamer had churned her way into the harbor. She was an awesome thing with a great round paddlewheel on either side of the center section and towering masts whose reefed sails could be unfurled when the need arose. The Union Jack fluttered from her rigging and her name was emblazoned on her bow: *H.M.S. Madagascar*.

The troops were on deck, most of them in shirtsleeves, whistling and waving to the crowds on the merchantmen. Vincent Stanton brought the longboat up alongside. The huge wooden wheels had come to rest, seawater dripping from the paddles.

"Ahoy there!" he hailed the ship. Several heads turned and looked at them. A handful of the soldiers spotted Kathleen and clustered at the rail, grinning down at the pair in the longboat.

"So this is why we've come to China!"

"Aye, but this canna be the enemy!"

Vincent Stanton called up to them. "Where's the rest of the fleet?" But he could not be heard over the babble. He scowled as one of the men blew a kiss to Kathleen.

"What's this?" A tall, broad-shouldered fellow with a major's insignia on his collar opened a way for himself among them. "Back to your posts, you sluggards! This is a war, not a bloody circus!" The soldiers scattered respectfully. The major leaned over the rail, his handsome, rawboned face stern. His hair was golden-brown, and curly, Kathleen noticed, and his eyes — green. Even at such a distance. He was — she studied his face and his build — about thirty, she estimated. He looked at her suddenly; their eyes met and she felt a current of warmth surge through her body. She glanced down at her hands, her cheeks hot. At that moment, she knew she was not ready to marry Vincent Stanton.

"Excuse me, sir," the major said politely, "but it's a bit unsafe to bring your boat so close in when our engines are still running. Back in Singapore, we had an accident with a sampan — " His voice was deep, with just a hint of a Scottish burr to it.

"We're going," said Vincent. "Just curious. Where's the rest of the fleet?"

"Two or three days behind us. Just sail, most of them, so we steamed in ahead. You won't be seeing much of the fleet, sir. They're headed up the coast toward the Peiho. If we can close off Peking, that should bring the Chinese to heel fast enough. They're leaving just a few of us to blockade Canton and to keep check on things here."

"How many ships here?" Vincent Stanton squinted up at him, the sun reflecting off his spectacles.

"Three or four, and two companies of infantry. One of the Forty-ninth and one of the twenty-sixth — that's us, out of Madras." The major swept the harbor with his eyes. "How've things been here?"

"Quiet, more or less. A few incidents — last week they set some burning sampans adrift in the fleet at Capsingmung, but no damage was done. I fear you may not have an exciting stay."

"Maybe not, but then . . . one never knows." The green eyes flicked over Kathleen. She gave him her most radiant smile. "Where might I find your Mister Elliot? I've orders to report to him."

"Over there." Vincent Stanton pointed with his long arm. "Aboard the *Fort William*. You can see him on the deck if you look hard." He straightened his glasses on his nose and smiled up at the major. "My name's Stanton, sir, and this is Miss Bellamy from the *Condor*."

Kathleen inclined her head. "Come visit us when you've the time. Major. My mother and I would love to have you over for tea."

"You're most kind, Miss Bellamy . . . Mister Stanton . . ." He tipped his scarlet and gold officer's cap. "MacKenna's the name. Dougal MacKenna, at your service."

Canton

June 1840

The summer moon hung low in the sky above Canton as a weary Cheng made his way home from the rendezvous at the northeast gate. In the early morning stillness, he could still hear the distant echo of hoofbeats as the messenger sped the first leg of the relay to Peking.

Strange, he reflected, how the fine strands of a web, so thin when singly viewed, could multiply until they entangled a man like a net of iron. He had set out upon his imperial task as a mere observer — neutral and determined to remain so. He could not, would not, become personally involved in the situation at Canton. To do so would have been a violation of his duty to the Son of Heaven.

That was before Shen-lan and the opium, before Lin and the battle at Chuenpee. Now, with each report to the emperor, he added a new strand to the web that bound him, a web of half-truths and shaded views, colored by his hatred for opium and his desire to see Lin triumphant.

With a sigh, he recalled their last meeting. Lin, whose term as *ch'in ch'ai* had expired at the end of a year, had now replaced Teng as governor-general of Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces, with even heavier responsibilities than before. He had transferred his quarters from the Yueh-hua Academy to the opulent governor's *yamen* in central Canton.

Cheng had entered Lin's chamber to find the governor-general sipping a bitter herbal concoction and nursing a racking cough. The piercing eyes were red and puffy from lack of sleep. "See, my friend," he gestured toward an open scroll on his desk. The characters on it were written in his own splendid style, but there were notes and comments jotted up and down the margins, all of them in vermilion ink, which only the emperor himself could use. This was Tao Kuang's own peculiar way of answering his correspondence. "The Son of Heaven is

growing impatient. He asks why I do not make an end to this thing! What do I answer, Cheng Lo?"

"What except the truth, my lord? That the English *fan kuei* are more stubborn than anyone had guessed."

"Pah!" Lin coughed and spat into a brass receptacle. "That won't satisfy him! He wants results, not excuses! I've a feeling he's already preparing my replacement — and I can even guess who that will be!"

Cheng waited in silence, knowing that Lin would continue.

"Ch'i-shan. Governor-general of Chinli. You know him?"

"Only his reputation."

Lin shifted his weight in his chair, took a sip of the medicinal tea and grimaced. "Then you know, my friend Cheng, that he is diametrically opposed to me on the issue of opium. He would not punish those who use the cursed drug. He would deal only with the *fan kuei* who sell it. I, as you know, have attacked both sides of the problem."

"And rightly so. If there were no buyers, the seller would go away." Cheng thought briefly of his own Shen-lan, who seemed to be cured of the drug at last. But the boy would never shine as a scholar again. In the face of Shen-lan's loss of interest in his studies, Cheng had put his son to work as a clerk in the shops of his merchant uncles.

"And I have been most patient with the *fan kuei*," Lin continued in the same tone. "Firm, yes — but patient as a father! Ch'i-shan would not be so prudent. He would have us in a war by now!"

"My lord." Cheng's voice was harsh with the intensity of his concern. "Are we not in a war already? The *fan kuei* ships, more than twenty of them — "

"They have gone, Cheng Lo. All but a few. They took one look at our fortifications and sailed away."

"But sailed where? North? To Foochow? To Shanghai? To the mouth of the Peiho itself?"

"I am told, my friend, that England is a small kingdom — no bigger than Korea or Japan. And so far away. To think that a handful of *fan kuei* would attack the Celestial Empire! The Middle Kingdom! Preposterous! I have assured the Son of Heaven that their threats mean nothing!"

"My lord." Cheng leaned across the desk, his eyes narrowed. "I beg you, do not underestimate them. They know no fear, these foreign devils, no limits! Do not lull yourself; do not lull our emperor — "

Lin Tse-hsu bent his head to one side and coughed painfully. When he had recovered, he turned to Cheng once more; his stern features had softened. "Ah, Cheng," he rasped. "My good Cheng, you are the best of men and the most honest. Do you really think I am as big a fool as I appear to be?" His eyes glittered like two black stones. "I know the danger of these foreign devils. I know their boldness, what their guns can do — " Lin took a deep breath, his heavy, rounded shoulders rising and falling. "Cheng Lo, I am gambling for time. Against the *fan kuei* against Ch'i-shan, against the Son of Heaven himself! I can achieve what I set out to do — I can stop the opium trade. But I need more *time!*" The great, plump fist clenched and pounded the desk. "More time! And if I lose, Ch'i-shan or someone like him will come and undo everything I've accomplished . . . So I tell the emperor that the threats of the English are empty! I tell him that, and I beg the gods to make it so, for if I am wrong — I am finished!"

Lin Tse-hsu turned in his chair and gazed through the open doorway out into the garden where the tips of green willows rippled the surface of the lotus pool. "It is on days like this," he said wistfully, "that I miss my family back in Foochow. I've a new granddaughter, Cheng; I just received word of it. They asked me to choose a name for her. I suggested Fragrant Bell. Do you like it?"

"Very much."

"It is true that a man needs sons and grandsons. But the laugh of a little girl is so sweet to the ears of an old man, my friend. And so today I am longing for Foochow." He turned back to his desk, his face grave.

"I know that your reports have been kind to me, Cheng Lo. If they had not, I would be back in Peking by now, answering to the wrath of my emperor." Lin coughed into a silken kerchief. "I have never asked you for anything, but now I find that I must implore you to be kind a little longer . . . " His voice trailed off. For Lin to ask such a thing, Cheng knew, was to strain his pride to the utmost.

As he looked at Lin across the width of the cluttered desk, Cheng felt as if he were standing on the edge of a high precipice. He measured his commitment to the emperor against his own convictions; his fear for what he had already done against his regard for this man. His hands trembled against the mulberry-colored silk of his robe. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out over the precipice. "My lord," he said softly, "I am your servant in all things."

The moon rested on the horizon now as Cheng hurried homeward. From some secluded courtyard, a dog howled its wretchedness into the black dawn. Cheng looked anxiously ahead, down the street toward his own gate. That afternoon the midwife had been summoned to attend Hsu Yu. The evening and most of the night had gone by, and still the poor girl had not given birth. The women of his household had barred him from her chamber. Men were only nuisances at such times, he knew. But they could not keep from him the sound of her cries. They pursued him through the house, those sharp moans of pain — the pain that his lust for another woman had given her. Even now, when he closed his eyes, his mind heard the muffled sounds of her agony and he writhed with guilt at the injustice of her suffering so for him — when he had only taken her because he could not have Kathleen. He would make it up to her, he resolved. He would spend more time with her in the future, try harder to please her. He wondered about the child and hoped that it would live. Hsu Yu was so small and so young for such an ordeal . . .

In an effort to calm his mind, he recalled the dispatch that Lin had given him just as he was about to leave the governor's *yamen*. "Take this, Cheng Lo," he had said, "for I have no use for it. Deal with the information as you see fit."

The small scroll had contained a report from Amoy — an account of the capture of a band of sea pirates by imperial war junks — no more than a routine event except that two *fan kuei*, a man and a young woman, had been found aboard the pirate junk. The pair had been taken to Amoy and in view of the hostilities between England and China, put into prison there.

The news had thrown Cheng into yet another quandary. It was common knowledge that the young wife of Morgan Bellamy and one of the sailors from the *Peregrine* had vanished during a pirate attack off Chusan. They'd been presumed dead. Pirates seldom took prisoners.

It occurred to Cheng that Lin might be testing him. The governor-general knew of his friendship with the Bellamy family, and it was possible that he wanted to be more sure of his loyalty. Cheng pondered the idea, then dismissed it. Lin Tse-hsu would not stoop to such petty deception. It was more likely, he concluded, that Lin had given him the dispatch as a gesture of appreciation. In a subtle way, he was

returning the favor Cheng had rendered him. Yet Cheng could not be sure. Instinct told him to be wary.

For a day, he had carried the dispatch in his robe, the awareness of its contents burning into him like a brand. He had little doubt that the woman was Priscilla Bellamy. No other foreigners had been reported missing.

Even now he wondered whether he had done the right thing. He had argued mightily with himself. He was Chinese, and the Middle Kingdom was hostile to England. What was more, he had cast his lot with Lin against the opium sellers. Priscilla Robards, although she was not English herself, was the daughter of one infamous opium smuggler and the wife of another. He owed her nothing, the strong side of him argued. She was a part of the thing he had come to despise. And he had made his own position precarious enough without undermining it further by helping the enemy.

The gentler side of him, the human side, had taken up her cause. She was an innocent woman, young and unaccustomed to hardship. Cheng had little regard for Morgan Bellamy, but Priscilla was also the daughter-in-law of the preacher, an upright man; and she was Kathleen's friend.

In the end, he had come up with a compromise that had not really pleased either side of him. First, he had sent a discreet letter to the magistrate at Amoy, inquiring as to the woman's identity, her health and living conditions. Second, he had made up his mind to let Morgan know his wife was alive.

To carry the news himself would have been too bold a gesture, and difficult, with hostilities between the Chinese and the English merchants at such a pitch. Few Chinese except the compradors were able to go freely between the ships and the mainland. So Cheng had done the only feasible thing: he had taken his message to the house of Wu Hung-li.

The gaunt Fukienese who worked as comprador for Bellamy & Company had welcomed him graciously and beamed with apparent delight at the possibility that the wife of his *taipan* might be alive. "Yes," he'd exclaimed over tea, "I will go out to the ship at once, Cheng Lo. My master will have the happy tidings before nightfall."

Even now, Cheng wondered why he had left Wu Hung-li's house with such a feeling of uneasiness. He had never liked the man — that was part

of it, he was sure. But it was more than that. Underneath Wu Hung-li's smiling exterior, he sensed that something was wrong. Wu, usually so taciturn and unpleasant, had been almost too friendly, too willing.

As Cheng turned onto the street that led past his own gate, he resolved that he would find another way to inquire of Morgan Bellamy whether the message had been delivered. If it had not, he would know that Wu Hung-li was a man to be suspected.

On the other side of the gate, the old watchman was asleep. Cheng could hear him snoring softly through the thickness of the wood. As he rapped softly to awaken the aged servant, Cheng's thoughts returned to Hsu Yu, poor little Happy Rain. If only her pain had come to a joyful end by now — As he heard the old man stirring, he remembered her cries. Such suffering was new to him. Jung Fei's times had been easy; she had brought forth seven children with scarcely a whimper.

Earlier in the night, Jung Fei had tried to reassure him. "It is nothing, my husband," she had smiled as she hurried out of the girl's chamber. "The first baby is often slow in coming. Remember the small wife of your eldest brother, how she lay for two days — " She had pressed his arm with her hand and bustled off toward the kitchen. Cheng had fled to his study and bolted the door behind him, but even here, Hsu Yu's tortured, muffled screams had followed him, haunting him with the awareness that her pain was his own.

The sky was just beginning to pale at its eastern edge. At last the old man opened the gate for Cheng to enter. Jung Fei was waiting for him in the courtyard, a white-wrapped bundle in her arms.

"A female, my husband," she said softly. "Such a pity it was not another son for you."

"No — it does not matter." Cheng ran a finger along the softness of the tiny cheek and listened to the kittenlike whimper of his daughter. "The laugh of a little girl is so sweet to the ears of an old man," his whisper echoed the words that Lin Tse-hsu had spoken to him. At that moment, he did feel old, and very tired. "Is Hsu Yu awake?" he asked his wife, remembering the promise he had made himself earlier. He would go to Hsu Yu's chamber, tell her how much she had pleased him and promise her a ring to match the pearls she wore in her little ears.

Jung Fei lowered her eyes. Her voice was strangely hushed. "Hsu Yu is dead," she answered.

Nineteen

Amoy
July 1840

Rain cascaded down the barren slopes of Amoy's raw, granite hills, filling the storm gullies with muddy water that ran down the streets of the island city. The junks in the narrow inner harbor lowered their great bat sails and faced the wind like water birds. Their green-painted prows dipped and danced in the waves.

From the deck of a Jardine Matheson opium schooner, Reverend Karl Gutzlaff pulled his oilskin cape lighter about his body and squinted through the sheets of rain at the drab, low-roofed buildings on the shore. It was a bother waiting out a storm like this. He was anxious to be out of this dreary place and on up the coast. The sooner this run was finished, the better, he told himself.

The Reverend could not see beyond the harbor's edge. His eyes could not follow the tangle of streets that led to Amoy's granite-block prison where Priscilla Bellamy stood against the wall of her cell and gazed out into the rain-filled square.

The square was lined with bamboo cages, each of them just large enough to accommodate a man's standing body from the neck down. A few were empty, the corpses of their occupants hauled away for burial on a narrow cart. Most of the cages, however, were full, and in one of them, suspended through a hole in the top by his neck, was the pirate Wu Shih-li.

Pris had spent the past four days watching him die. A perverse satisfaction of which she once would never have believed herself capable had kept her glued to the window of her cell. He had been drugged

with opium to lessen his struggling; even so, it had taken three men to fasten him into the cage where he had balanced on a teetering pile of stones, raging and cursing until his strength was gone.

Each day one of the stones had been removed from the pile on which he stood until, today, his toes barely reached them and most of his weight rested on his chin where it pressed against the top of the cage. He had outlived the last of his men by more than a day, but now — Pris stretched tall and put her face between the bars. He was not moving. The raindrops were falling against his wide-open eyes. Yes, she decided, he was dead or close to it. She felt little emotion. Pain and humiliation had battered her sensibilities until she wondered if she would ever feel anything again.

She turned away from the window, wiping her wet hands on the coarse Chinese smock she wore. The walls of the cell were slimy with mold. The floor was damp and the food little more than rice and bitter tea. But it was better than the pirate junk. Here, so far, at least, the men had left her alone.

Through the smock, she felt the growing roundness of her body. She was, she calculated, close to six months pregnant. Was it Wu Shih-li who had fathered her child? she wondered bitterly. Or was it one of the others — the men to whom he had lent her in exchange for favors or as a reward for bravery? One night Wu Shih-li had even given her to his servant, strange, hairless little Po, and he had stayed and watched — She covered her eyes with her hands, still quivering with shame at the memory. Maybe it had been Po. She dared not even hope that the baby might be Morgan's. The odds were so great, the chance so remote. And since she planned to take her own life at the first opportunity, it was just as well. She would never know.

She had not seen Japeth Pratt since the day their Chinese captors on the war junk had put into port at Amoy. The two of them had been shoved into cramped bamboo cages and carried by coolies from the dock to the prison. The citizens of Amoy had seen foreigners, but never in a captive state, and few of them had ever set eyes on a foreign woman. They had lined the narrow streets, jabbering and pointing with their fingers. Some of them had even thrust pointed sticks between the bamboos of the cage, or cursed and flung stones and rotting vegetables at the captive *fan kwei*. Pratt's cage had been behind hers in the procession. She remembered hearing him curse loudly as

the foul missiles struck his cage. Even after all these months, he had not lost his spirit. He was still fighting, still railing against his fate.

On the pirate junk, little Pratt had been worked, starved and beaten like an animal. Pris, who at least had been well fed, had saved portions of her food, which she smuggled to him when she could. In return, he had kept her alive. His feisty spirit had given her the courage to face each day, and the thought of the brutal death he would suffer had been all that had kept her from slipping over the side of the junk into cold, watery oblivion. When they had entered the prison at Amoy and their cages had been carried off in opposite directions, she knew she would miss him sorely. In Japeth Pratt, she had found — and lost — a friend.

When Priscilla thought of Pratt, locked into a tiny cell like her own, she worried about him. She knew Japeth Pratt well enough to realize that while he could stand an amazing degree of physical abuse, hardship, pain and humiliation, he crumbled under confinement in a small space. Morgan had told her how Pratt had wept after a week in the brig, then taken his ten lashes without a whimper. Put him alone in a prison cell and the poor man could go mad.

She supposed he was still alive, somewhere in the prison. Her cell looked out on the square, and she had not seen him in any of the cages or found his head among those that were thrust onto spikes atop the gate. The creaking handcart that carried dead bodies out of the prison passed directly beneath her view, and she had seen only Chinese corpses laid out on it. Closing her eyes, she envisioned her own body, swollen with the wretched child that would never know life, stripped and flung onto the same grim cart to be taken outside the walls and buried in the part of the graveyard reserved for paupers and criminals. She shuddered, wondering if she would have the courage when the opportunity came. Then she thought of the alternatives — spending years, a lifetime perhaps, as a prisoner, despised and degraded, or the chance of being set free to face the hate and horror in her husband's eyes. And he *would* hate her if he knew what Wu Shih-li and his men had done to her. Death, by comparison, seemed sweetly simple.

She glanced about the cell. Suicide was a common practice among disgraced Chinese, and her captors were in the habit of taking precautions. In the flat masonry ceiling, there were no beams or hooks

on which a man could hang himself by his queue or his clothing. The slop bucket that stood in one corner of the cell was of cast iron, not pottery that could be shattered into sharp-edged pieces. The floors and walls were cold stone, the door a sheet of iron with a small peephole and a slot underneath where the dishes — also of iron — were passed back and forth. The cell was tiny, barely long enough for her to lie down in and little more than two-thirds as wide. She slept on a verminous mat, which she rolled up during the day, except for the hours she spent picking fleas and lice out of the weave and tossing them through the window — wasted effort, since they multiplied faster than she could get rid of them. At night they crawled into her hair and under her smock and trousers, seeking out the parts of her body that were warmest — her armpits, her crotch, the hollow between her swelling breasts. Her flesh was covered with cruel red bites that itched excruciatingly.

The cell's one blessing was its small, barred window, which gave her fresh air, light and a view of the grisly goings-on down in the square. Two days ago, she had clung to the bars, mesmerized with horror as a man was executed before her eyes. The guards had led him into the sunlight, evidently opiated, because he had moved like a sleepwalker, showing no fear. One guard had pressed the prisoner down until he knelt on the stones; the other had grasped the man's queue and pulled it up and forward, stretching out his neck. A third guard had taken a short, broad-bladed sword, raised it high and — Priscilla closed her eyes and trembled at the memory of the head striking the stones and rolling to one side, the blood spurting out of the severed neck. She had leaned over the slop bucket and retched.

The rain continued, drizzling, driving, splashing against the blood-stained cobblestones in the square. Gray, relentless rain, dripping off the ends of Wu Shih-li's mustache. Pris was sure now that he was dead. As she turned away from the window, she felt the child move and kick inside her, fluttering like a little fish. Her eyes moistened suddenly, for she was not without compassion for this small being who was flesh of her flesh.

If she were free, she fantasized, and if Morgan still wanted her — even with a half-Chinese infant . . . but it was foolish to dream. In the first place, she had little hope of freedom. In the second, Morgan would not want her. It was the way of men to sow their seed in every

wild field, but they expected their women to be pure. Morgan was young and proud, too proud to accept a wife who'd been sullied by Chinese pirates and who'd given birth to a Chinese baby.

And if he did not take her back — if she took the child and left him — her experience would still make her a pariah, an eternal outcast wherever she went. She knew the story of Maude Pickett as well as any other girl did. Whatever the circumstances, Priscilla Robards Bellamy had ceased to be fit for decent company.

She cupped her hands, tenderly encircling the roundness of her body. If she did not do something soon, it would be too late. Her child would be born in prison and likely killed — the fate of most undesirable children in this savage land.

The night after Wu Shih-li had given her to hairless Po, she had spent hours on her knees, beseeching God to take her life. With her wish unfulfilled she had abandoned prayer. Bitterness had seeped in to replace the faith she'd had. God would not come to her aid now, and Japeth Pratt had been taken away. She had no resources except her own, no strength except the little that remained within her.

Yet she knew that with vigilance she would find a way to end her life, some breach of caution on the part of a guard perhaps. When the time came, she would find the courage to act swiftly. Then she would be free, she and her child.

She sat on the floor, her back against the moss-streaked wall, her mind far away, on Morgan and the way her pride had spoiled their last chance for happiness. Pride. Yes, she reflected, her own sin was greater than his. He had begged her forgiveness; she had refused him. Now she was paying the price of that refusal.

The child was moving again. Pris closed her eyes, felt the small kicks and flutters, and bit back the tears.

Hong Kong
July 1840

The blockade of Canton had proven to be little more than a gesture. The steamer *Madagascar*, the forty-four-gun heavy frigate *Druid* and the three other warships that had stayed behind the fleet lay unchallenged across the mouth of the Pearl. Except for the show of force, the blockade accomplished little. With the regular trading season at an

end, no foreign vessels had reason to venture upriver. As for Canton, the smaller Chinese boats simply came and went by way of the Pearl's many side fingers that emptied into the sea west of Macao. Only the great salt junks were so big that they had to use the Bogue, and these were forced aside and detained by the British — a mere annoyance to the Chinese.

The two companies of infantry troops, who'd stayed as a precaution against trouble on land, drilled on the decks, played cards or slept, their bodies and spirits chafing in the heat of the long days. Already there was talk of sending some of the idle war ships on up the coast to reinforce the main body of the British expedition.

When James Matheson proposed to give a ball for the officers and the merchant families aboard his newest clipper, the *Mor*, the captains of the vessel and the commander of the infantry, Major Dougal MacKenna, had given their enthusiastic consent at once.

Kathleen had received the news of the ball with the excitement of a Cinderella. She had not seen the dashing major since that afternoon in the harbor. She'd told no one about him, not even her mother, but she already considered him her own. There were other young girls among the two hundred fifty British citizens who'd fled Macao for the ships, but none of them could hold a candle to her and she knew it. She could get any beau she wanted and she'd proved it more than once — which was one reason her only friend among the other girls had been shy little Pris, who was in love with Morgan. Pris. Kathleen closed her eyes and shook away the memory. Tonight was not a time for sadness.

She sat before the makeshift dresser wearing the pale green silk gown, which she'd remodeled for the occasion, cutting and gathering the neckline until it bared her shoulders and revealed the tops of her warm white breasts. Oh, her father wouldn't like it, she told herself as she turned this way and that, trying to see as much of herself as possible in the little mirror. But then, her father was in Macao, and her mother, she knew, would say nothing.

Her hands went to her hair. She twisted it high and pulled a ringlet loose on one side of her face. No. She ran a brush through it and began again, patting, pulling and pinning until the style was perfect. A cascade of red-gold curls down the back of her head, with tiny ringlets surrounding her face. Briefly, she wondered if Cheng would still say she looked like a cherub. She fastened on the dangling jade earbobs

that Joaquin Silveira had given her. Finally, she pinched her cheeks to bring out the color, humming softly as she smiled at her reflection.

The *Mor*, recently arrived from the shipyards at Plymouth, lived up to her name — *peacock* — tonight. Her riggings were hung with streamers and Chinese lanterns. Special platforms had been built out from the quarterdeck to extend the space for dancing. A small but excellent band from the *Druid* filled the summer night with music. Kathleen's pulse quickened as she gazed at the distant vessel, and she tapped her toes to the beat of the waltz.

Rose had come with Kathleen in the longboat from the *Condor*, not to dance but to keep an eye on her daughter and to visit with the other women. She was quietly beautiful in the pearl-gray silk she used for church; she fluttered a white lace fan as the lights from the *Mor* grew closer and brighter. "I'm surprised Vincent didn't come for us," she said. "He'll be there." Kathleen adjusted a loose hairpin at the back of her head. The two Lascars from the *Condor* pulled hard on the oars.

"He doesn't seem to come around as much as he used to."

"I told him I wouldn't marry him, Mother." Rose caught her breath. She hadn't known. "You're sure about it, Kathleen? Vincent's a fine young man, and you might not — " She cut off her words in midsentence, evidently thinking the better of finishing.

"I might not have another chance? Is that what you were going to say?" Kathleen laughed bitterly. "I didn't say no for my sake, Mother. I said no for Vincent's. I'd be no good for him. A preacher's wife? I just can't see myself that way. I'm not like you."

"And what am I like, child? In your eyes, I mean?"

Kathleen was startled by the question. Rose so seldom said anything that called attention to herself. "Oh . . ." she fumbled for the words, "you're so damned *good*! No — I mean it. You're so unselfish and unworldly and faithful — Vincent needs somebody like you. And I'll never be like that!"

Rose, in a rare gesture, reached out and squeezed her hand. "You're not like anyone, Kathleen. You have your own special fire, and in your own way you're quite wonderful. Don't forget that."

"Thank you," Kathleen whispered. She had never been close to her mother. The two of them were so different. But at this moment — "Mother," she whispered impulsively, "I've met someone else! Met him just once, but — " She glanced around to make sure the two

sailors were tending to their rowing and not listening. "He's a major . . . came in on the Madagascar. And he's tall, with curly hair and green eyes . . ."

Rose smiled softly. "And he'll be here tonight?"

"I think so — I hope so!"

"Well, dear, bring him around to meet me if you feel right about it. I'd like to see him for myself." Her eyes flew ahead to the glowing ship. "Look! There's Vincent at the rail! I'd say he hasn't given up on you!"

Vincent Stanton came down to help them onto the float and up the gangway to the deck of the *Mor*. The band was playing a spirited polka. He offered his hand to Kathleen and she flew off in his arms, leaving Rose to drift over to where the other matrons were clustered like setting hens, clucking intently as they compared the gowns, the beaux, the hairstyles and the figures of their daughters.

Vincent Stanton's hair was slicked down with water and he smelled of bay rum. He danced with a sort of spindly grace, like a stork. Kathleen peered around his shoulder. She could not see Major Dougal MacKenna anywhere, but it was early. Too early to lose hope. She smiled up at Vincent and wondered whether Morgan would be coming tonight. Now that he was a widower, the single girls buzzed whenever his name was mentioned. Kathleen had heard that Geneva Turner had set her cap for him. Geneva was blond, plump-breasted and pretty except for a mole on her chin that had two little hairs growing out of it. She whirled past now in the arms of a young naval lieutenant, her lace-trimmed baby-blue frock cut even lower at the neck than Kathleen's. She was giggling audibly. Kathleen couldn't see Morgan and she was glad of it. She didn't like the idea of having Geneva as a sister-in-law, especially after Pris.

The polka ended with a scurry for new partners. Kathleen felt a light touch on her arm and turned to find the green eyes of her major smiling down at her. "May I have the honor, Miss Bellamy?" He extended his hand. The band struck up a Viennese waltz.

"It's Kathleen!" With a dazzling smile, she floated into his arms.

He was even taller than she'd guessed, with broad shoulders and massive bones. Her hand, resting in his, had never felt so small. His face — she smiled up at him and tossed her head, making the jade ear-bobs dance — was not classically handsome, but then, she had never

liked pretty men. His features were strong, blunt, clean and open. The Indian sun had lightly sprinkled his ruddy skin with freckles. Dougal MacKenna's was a face that a man could trust and a woman could love. Kathleen could not help wondering how many women had loved him.

His scarlet tunic with its gold epaulets on the shoulders was splendid; but red, she reflected, was not his color. Not with his warm skin and the short, lightly curling hair that in the glow of the lanterns gleamed more amber than brown. She would like to have seen him in blue, she thought.

He did not try to speak above the music, but he danced expertly, his big hand spanning the small of her back. Kathleen let herself move with him, her heart pounding out its own rhythm so loudly that she wondered if he could hear it.

The music stopped, but he did not let her go. He stood instead with his hand still encircling her waist, his very size defying anyone else to come and claim her.

"Kathleen, would you like to walk around the deck with me?" he asked her.

"That — would be nice," she answered a little breathlessly. A green silk fan hung from her wrist. She snapped it open and fluttered it below her eyes as she looked up at him. "Maybe it will be cooler up forward."

She took his arm and let him head her down off the quarterdeck, away from the blare of the music. She chattered nervously as she walked beside him, forward along the rail, telling him about her father and how they'd had to leave Macao for the ships. The bow of the *Mor* was deserted. Behind them, the bare masts rose against the stars.

"You'll pardon my abruptness, Kathleen," he said, "but that Stanton fellow — are you promised?"

She could hear the sound of her own breathing above the distant music. "No," she said, fluttering her fan, "he's only a friend."

"Then . . ." His hand slipped lightly about her waist. "Do I have your permission to call on you tomorrow . . . and the next day . . . and the next?"

"Dougal . . . !"

"Aye, I know it's sudden," he said, his fingertips stroking the tight silk of her dress. "But the *Madagascar* has orders to sail north in ten

days' time, with our company aboard . . . " His hand lightly drew her closer until she stood touching the side of him. "Kathleen," he said softly, his voice husky, "a soldier learns that he can't put things off. When I saw you that day from the ship, I — I felt something. It was as if I'd seen you . . . known you . . . maybe even loved you before. I can't explain it." He shook his head. "Maybe you felt it, too — "

"I . . . think so," Kathleen whispered, although she had really not. She had only found him very attractive — more attractive, perhaps, than any man she had ever met.

"Ten days isn't a long time. I don't know what's going to happen — to me, to us — I only know that if it's all the time we have, I don't want to waste it."

They were standing at the rail, very close together, and it was the most natural thing in the world for her to turn slightly toward him, for him to take her in his arms.

His mouth, full and strong, took possession of hers with a sudden, gentle intensity that made her head spin. She flung her arms about his neck and let him kiss her, forgetting propriety, forgetting common sense, forgetting that they had only just met. Intoxicated with the thrill of it, she let her lips open. Oh, yes, she thought wildly, he had kissed her before, in her dreams perhaps, or in heaven . . .

They drew apart, both of them breathing deeply. She looked up at him, suddenly a little frightened by the speed at which things were happening. "Oh, Dougal — " she said in a voice so tiny that it did not even sound like her own. "We'd best get back to the dance. They'll miss us and they'll talk — "

"Let them!" He kissed her again and she responded, her heart flinging itself against her ribs. Then, gently, she disengaged herself from his arms. She needed time to catch her breath, to think.

"Dougal, my mother will come looking for me. Let's go back."

He chuckled. "Aye, Kathleen, if you've a mother here — but since I'm going to be calling on you, perhaps I'd best meet her." With his arm behind her waist, he guided her back along the rail toward the brightly lit quarterdeck. The strains of a reel danced in her ears.

"What's your mother like, Kathleen? Is she like you? Or is she an old dragon who'll wither me with one breath?"

Kathleen giggled at the image his words made in her mind. "Neither," she said. "My mother's beautiful. But she's not like me. Now my father, he's the dragon! Luckily, he's in Macao . . ."

He caught her hand just before they entered the circle of light and pressed her fingers hard against his lips.

Rose was sitting with a half-dozen other women, her chair turned so that it faced half-away from the dance floor. Kathleen came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Mother," she said.

Rose turned her head. Kathleen felt Dougal's hand suddenly tense around hers.

"Mother, here's someone I want you to meet. Major Dougal MacKenna." Kathleen glanced from one to the other, wondering why her mother suddenly looked so pale and why Dougal wasn't smiling. Rose stood up slowly. Her fingertips were white where they gripped the lace fan. "Mother, are you all right?" Kathleen said anxiously.

Rose recovered her poise. "Yes . . . quite all right, dear." She extended a slender, workworn hand. "Major, it's a pleasure," she said in a voice that wavered slightly.

Dougal took her hand and held it softly. "Mrs. Bellamy," he murmured. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Dougal wants to call on us tomorrow," Kathleen said brightly.

"With your permission, of course, Mrs. Bellamy." He released her hand.

"Of course," Rose whispered. There was another long silence, even more uncomfortable than the first. It was broken by Vincent Stanton.

"I believe this is my dance, Kathleen." He scowled briefly at Dougal MacKenna and laid a possessive hand on her shoulder.

Kathleen did not want an unpleasant scene; besides, she'd be the talk of the fleet if she danced every dance with the major. She beamed at her two tall suitors, feeling beautiful and desired, just a bit wicked. "Of course, Vincent," she purred. "How silly of me to forget!" The green fan slipped open and fluttered just below her chin as she took his proffered arm.

Dougal MacKenna turned to her mother. How gallant of him, Kathleen thought. How many young men would ask a girl's mother to dance?

"Mrs. Bellamy, if you'd honor me — " Dougal bowed slightly from the waist and offered her his hand.

"Major, I don't dance," she said with a quiet smile. "It wouldn't be seemly, would it, with my husband in Macao?"

"I understand," he murmured, nodded and turned away from her.

Vincent Stanton swung Kathleen out onto the floor as the band struck up another waltz. Kathleen put herself to looking scintillatingly graceful, swinging her full skirt, tilting her head just so, smiling up at Vincent in a way that Dougal would notice in case he happened to be looking at her.

Dougal danced by with Geneva Turner in his arms. Geneva Turner. That blond witch! Suddenly, Kathleen hated her.

Twenty

Hong Kong
July 1840

Morgan awoke late aboard the *Kestrel*. Bright sunlight streamed through the thin curtains that covered the portholes. A fly hovered above his nose, buzzing lazily as it circled. He swung his hand at it and missed.

Choy Ling — or was it Ch'iu Ming this time? Hell's name, he couldn't even keep them straight anymore — lay huddled under the thin blanket beside him, still fast asleep. Her warm behind was thrust across his side of the bed, crowding him onto the edge. Grumbling deep in his throat, he turned on his side, put his foot against her small buttocks and gave a firm shove. She moaned, stretched and settled back into deep sleep on her own side of the bed. Aye, it was Choy Ling after all.

A half-emptied bottle of brandy and a dirty glass sat on the teakwood nightstand. Morgan sat up and poured himself two fingers of the amber liquid in the glass. He took a swallow and felt the stuff slide down his gullet like mellow fire. Again, he looked at the sleeping girl. Her face was chalky with the residue of that awful white powder so many Chinese women used. The carmine from her cheeks and lips were smeared onto the sleeve of her lilac robe. Morgan swung his feet to the floor and drained the glass. He was drinking too much and he knew it. He was also, by his father's standards, deep into mortal sin with Ch'iu Ming and Choy Ling. Most of the time, he didn't give a damn, except that the arrangement was already getting old. Even with two of them. They were so much alike that he couldn't even tell them

apart in the dark. Just bodies they were — two slim, pliant bodies, and the thing he did with them had come to have no more taste than porridge without salt.

He took another swig of brandy straight from the bottle. He should have gone to the dance on the *Mor* last night, he reflected. But he was not ready for English girls. Not ready for the snares they laid. He'd heard that Geneva Turner had set her cap for him. Well, he might consider Geneva for a night or two, but not, by hell, not as a wife. And that was just the price she'd put on herself, no doubt. At least what he got from Ch'iu Ming and Choy Ling had no hooks attached to it.

As he jammed the cork back into the mouth of the brandy bottle, he cursed the memory of his wife. Damn Pris! Damn her for being on deck that night, for letting herself die like that! Damn her for making him love her — so much that he could not even imagine loving anyone else!

Someone was knocking on the door of the cabin. "Sir?" It was the first mate, a stout, laconic Vermonter, one of the few Americans who'd stayed with the company.

The rapping on the door sounded more sharply. "Sir? Are you awake?"

"Aye!" Morgan shrugged into his dressing gown, stumbled to the door and opened it the breadth of a hand. The hot morning light was blinding. "What is it, Preston?" he rasped.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir. A fisherman in a sampan, just off the starboard bow. Got some kind o' folded message with a fancy wax seal. Tried to get him t' pass it on up to me, but he wouldn't do it. Just shakes his head an' keeps sayin' *taipan* . . . *taipan*! Nears's I can figure, he has t' give it to you in person, sir."

Morgan grumbled as he shed the dressing gown and pulled on his trousers. Unshaven, rumpled and barefoot, he strode up the stairs and out onto the deck. The deep scar on his shoulder gleamed an ugly white in the sun.

From down in the sampan, the old fisherman squinted up at him. Morgan studied him, the faded black jacket and trousers, the conical bamboo hat, the wrinkled face. No, he concluded, he had never seen the man before.

"*Taipan*?" The old man stared upward.

"*Taipan*." Morgan nodded emphatically and pointed to his own chest.

The old man beamed and pulled the folded, sealed paper out of the neck of his jacket. "Bell'my *taipan*?" he asked, making sure.

"Aye, you old bastard. Bellamy *taipan*." Morgan touched his chest again.

The fisherman pointed to the paper. "Cheng Lo," he said emphatically.

"From Chengqua?" Morgan's interest quickened.

"Cheng Lo!"

The mate lowered a basket on a thin rope. The old man put the paper into the basket. When the mate had hauled it up again, Morgan took it out himself and held it up to show the fisherman that he had it. Still the man waited.

"I think he wants to be paid, sir," the mate said.

Morgan's own pockets were empty. The mate spread his hands. He had nothing either. "But Wu Hung-li stayed the night, sir. He's below, in his cabin. Thought I heard him stirring a while ago."

The old fisherman stood like a statue in his sampan, grinning squint-eyed up at the ship. "Well," said Morgan, motioning for the old fellow to wait, "go down and get him. He'll have money."

The mate disappeared below. A moment or two later, he came back up on deck, Wu Hung-li gliding at his heels like a serpent.

Morgan was relieved to see him. "Wu, you catchee money this man? He bringee my letter! Can?"

"Can." Wu Hung-li fished a small silver coin out of the purse at his belt and tossed it to the fisherman. The old man caught the coin in midair and bit it with his yellow teeth. Then, grinning, he went to the oar and began to scull the sampan away from the ship.

Wu Hung-li smiled and held out his hand. "My lookee letter," he said. "*Taipan* no can."

Morgan hesitated, then shrugged and handed Wu Hung-li the sealed paper. True, he couldn't expect to read a letter from a Chinaman.

The black wax cracked as Wu broke the seal and unfolded the thin, stiff paper. For a moment, he studied it in silence. "Ah," he exclaimed at last. "Cheng Lo. See father of *Taipan* in Macao. All same good. No sickee. He say — " Wu Hung-li's long brows knotted. "He say salute son."

"That's all?"

"No more. *Taipan* wantchee my say all same other time?"

"No. Thank you, Wu. Once is enough." Morgan yawned and went back down into his cabin, closing the door softly behind him.

Wu Hung-li tucked Cheng's letter into his robe and leaned against the rail, sick with relief. Beads of sweat stood out on his face. What *joss*, he told himself, what great *joss* that he had come onto the deck before the *taipan* had opened the letter. If Morgan Bellamy had seen what Cheng Lo had written, it would have been the end of him.

True, he'd been watching for something like this. He had never liked Cheng Lo. Wu Hung-li was a much more powerful man than his humble position would indicate. Years of siphoning off the cream of Blake Robard's goods and profits had made him wealthy, but even he would have found it difficult to operate without some leeway on the part of the Co-hong. A few of the hong merchants were open to outright bribery, and all of them, even old Howqua, had been known to bend the rules when it was to their advantage. Cheng, however, had proven himself unapproachable. The bits of bait that Wu Hung-li's intermediaries had dangled before him had been rebuffed or ignored. He was a man of unimpeachable integrity, of the same blue-sky stripe as Lin Tse-hsu himself. And Wu Hung-li despised such men.

The news of Wu Shih-li's capture had disturbed him greatly, for he had not known about it. Not that he bore any great affection for his half-brother. There was none. And Wu Hung-li had been furious about the sinking of the *Merlin*, a foolish act that could have meant the downfall of Bellamy & Company. Even a parasitic worm had more sense than to kill the host upon which it fed. Still, Wu Shih-li had been useful in his way. He would be missed.

Wu Hung-li cleared his throat and spat down into the green water. The fisherman's boat was just a distant speck now. Oh, the gods were with him today! He had feared that Cheng Lo might try to get word to Morgan Bellamy. The Bellamys were his friends, and it was evident that the tall hong merchant had not been satisfied when they'd parted in Canton. Yes, he had been watching for just such a letter. But he had come so close to missing it. The old fisherman's voice had awakened him from a sound morning's sleep, and he had just had time to scramble into his clothes before the mate had rapped on the door of his cabin.

It had been a bad stroke of JOSS, the capture of Wu Shih-li and his band of pirates, but Wu Hung-li had other lines in the river. He was a most resourceful man. Still — he ground his teeth and cursed the colossal stupidity of his half-brother for keeping the woman alive. Wu Shih-li had always had a taste for exotic females. No doubt he'd had her in his bed. But the American sailor — why hadn't Wu Shih-li killed him? Wu Shih-li, that great, fat, lusty, dead fool!

The woman, if she still lived, was a danger. So was the sailor. He could not afford to let them be released or rescued. Wu Hung-li scratched his temple with one long, pointed nail. There was a way. He knew a man who worked at the prison in Amoy. For a price, the son of a turtle would do anything he was asked. The man's doltish stupidity made him a risk, it was true, but there was no one else. And surely the gods would not fail him now, Wu Hung-li assured himself. Not when they had placed Cheng's letter right in his hand; not when everything else was going so well. Every coolie and shroff who worked for Bellamy & Company was his man; and his two nieces, Ch'iu Ming and Choy Ling, had worked themselves well into the *taipan's* favor. They could watch him when no one else could. Already they had been most useful.

But the letter — the letter would have ruined everything. Glancing around to make sure the mate had gone, Wu Hung-li took it out of his robe and unfolded it again.

Instead of his usual flowing Chinese characters, Cheng Lo had laboriously brushed out his message in the English letters he had learned from the *fan kwei* preacher. Wu Hung-li read only a little English, but he knew enough to make out their meaning. Cheng Lo would have to be watched, he told himself. Watched and avoided at all cost — or eliminated.

Once more Wu read the letter. It was short and simply worded. "*Mister Bellamy: Foreign woman and sailor are prisoners in Amoy. Wu Hung-li knows this. If he has not told you, beware of him. Cheng Lo.*"

The mate was busy checking the anchor on the other side of the deck. Slowly, Wu tore the paper into pieces and watched each small shred float away on the waves.

Hong Kong
July 1840

Kathleen pulled Dougal MacKenna's hand as she danced ahead of him up the last few yards of the path. "Oh, hurry," she laughed. "It's so lovely from up here! Wait till you see it!" She was flushed and out of breath, her curls tumbling about her face.

Although he was in superb physical condition and the climb had not been a long one for him, Dougal feigned exhaustion. "By thunder, it better be worth it!" he grumbled teasingly.

"It is! Come on, Dougal, just a few more steps!" She pushed and dragged and coaxed him until at last they were standing on the summit of the peak she had once climbed with Vincent Stanton.

"See!" she breathed, flinging her arms wide, wanting to embrace the sea and the sky from horizon to horizon. "Look at it, Dougal! There's Lantau . . . that big one off there's Lamma . . . the others . . . Oh! I'm so happy, Dougal!" She began to whirl, her yellow dress flying out around her, her red hair whipping in the breeze. "Oh, and so tired!" She flung herself down on the warmth of the big flat rock, where she lay looking up at the cloud-dotted sky, one arm beneath her head. Dougal towered above her, his fists on his hips, his hair golden in the sunlight.

With a little smile, she gazed up at him. "Kiss me, Dougal," she said.

He knelt beside her and slipped one hand under her shoulders. Her arms twined around his neck as he bent to kiss her gently, softly, with a restraint that he'd shown none of that first night at the dance.

"Again," she whispered, pulling his head down hard as his lips closed with hers once more. His constraint puzzled her. That night at the ball, Dougal had been all impetuosity, all passion. In the time they'd spent together since, whenever his duties could spare him, he'd treated her like some porcelain doll who might shatter at his touch.

Still, she felt glorious with him. He was so courtly with her, so protective. And there was an easy humor about him that brought out the laughter in her. Perhaps he really cared for her, she told herself. Maybe that was why his manner toward her had become so gentle. Sometimes, when she looked at Dougal, the words that Chengqua had spoken sang in her mind: *Someday he will come, this man you speak of, the man you would choose for yourself . . . And when he does, you will thank me ten thousand times for refusing you.*

Chengqua had been so right. Dougal was here at last. He was the one, she was sure of it. And every time he held her in his arms, her heart whispered silent thanks to the man who had not taken her virtue.

She sat up and leaned against Dougal's shoulder. "Out there," she said, pointing southward, "that's where I first saw the smoke from the *Madagascar*. We — I ran all the way down to the beach."

He chuckled. "Aye, and you weren't alone, I'll wager."

She flashed him a roguish glance. "What do you think?"

He slipped an arm about her waist and gave her a squeeze that was almost brotherly. "Kathleen," he said after a silence, "what's your father like?"

"My father?" She sat and thought for a moment. The words of the hymn Martin Luther had penned almost three centuries earlier drifted into her mind. "A mighty fortress . . ." she said. "A tower of strength ne'er failing. Oh, Dougal, my father's so good he's almost terrifying! Like — like some spotless angel swinging a lightning bolt above his head!" She brushed a hand through her shoulder-length hair. "Do you know what he did to me last summer? See my hair?"

"Lovely hair . . ." He rubbed his cheek against it.

"But so short! I could sit on it before."

"Before what?"

"Before he cut it off."

"What?"

"I was wearing it in two long braids. He grabbed them and held them up high — and he's tall, Dougal, taller than you — Then he snipped them right off with Mother's scissors!"

"Lord!" Dougal breathed, genuinely horrified. "But why on earth —"

"Just for flirting a little," she folded her hands demurely in her lap, "with a Portuguese boy."

She watched the tightening of his jaw as he mulled over her revelation. "And your mother?" he asked in an oddly strained voice. "Is that the way he treats her, too?"

"Oh, I've never seen him touch her, if that's what you mean. But then, she knows her place and keeps to it. She won't stand up to him, Dougal. Neither will Morgan. Nobody ever does —" she gave a bitter laugh, "except me."

"Do you think . . ." He gazed down at the harbor where the *Condor* floated peacefully among the other ships. "Does she love him?"

"Why —" she caught her breath, "I suppose so. Funny, I've never really thought about it, their being in love." She picked up his hand where it lay on his knee and stretched the length of it against her own.

The tips of her nails barely came to the middle joints of his heavy-boned fingers. "She does everything he tells her to without arguing. Maybe that's what love is." Kathleen dismissed the matter with a shrug. "You have big hands."

"Aye." He took her own hand and examined it, measuring it, turning it over. "And you have . . . very strong hands."

"Oh?" It was not quite what she'd expected to hear.

"You're a strong person, Kathleen. Stronger than your mother, I think."

"Oh, no!" she protested. "Mother's the one who's always taking care of everyone else — even Father! You don't know her."

"Perhaps not," he said slowly. "But I think she needs you, Kathleen. Be kind to her. Help her."

Kathleen did not answer. She only rubbed her ear against his fine, broad shoulder and mused that it was a surprising thing for him to say.

Rose Bellamy stood on the deck of the *Condor* and gazed intently through the twilight toward Hong Kong Island. Already the sky was deepening to indigo and the evening stars hung like distant jewels on blue velvet. The fishing junks from Kowloon had turned tail and headed homeward, their lanterns gleaming like fireflies in faraway clusters.

Quietly, she paced the creaking planks, an indefinable anxiety gnawing at her heart. Soon it would be dark, and Dougal MacKenna had not brought Kathleen back to the ship.

It was only concern for their safety that moved her to this restlessness, she told herself. The harbor could be dangerous at night. Thieves and cutthroats slipped about on the water in sampans — and there was always the peril of a sudden storm or the chance of a collision with some large vessel in the darkness.

Yes, Rose reassured herself, it was only a mother's fear that drove her to pacing the deck like a caged animal. It was the fear of appearances, of what people would say if they knew Kathleen Bellamy was out alone after dark with a young man she'd known little more than a week.

The fog was moving in, a thick, silent blanket pulling itself over the harbor. Rose leaned forward over the rail and tried to cut through the

blackening mist with her eyes. "Oh, damn," she whispered, the strongest language she had ever used. "Oh, damn, damn, damn!" Of all the men in the world, why did it have to be Dougal MacKenna?

Rose was no fool about men. With a few stubborn exceptions like Archer, not many of them were virtuous, especially soldiers. She'd not set eyes on Dougal for ten years. Without doubt, he'd had other women since then. That was not what bothered her.

No, it was Kathleen. It was that he was so tender with her, so gallant. It was that she was so obviously in love with him. It was the fear that the girl would be hurt, that Dougal would not be able to hide the secret of the past from her.

Rose had kept herself out of sight as much as possible when Dougal had come to call during the past week. She could not bear it — seeing them there together in the cabin she'd converted to a sitting room, Kathleen's hand on his arm, his eyes smiling at her. She could not look at him without remembering.

The dark mist swirled about the ship, so thick that Rose could no longer see the water. Huge lanterns had been hung out along the sides of the *Condor*, their glow reflecting against the fog. She put her face on her arms and felt the tears wetting her sleeves. What a miserable wretch she was! In the final analysis, it was not Archer, not Dougal, not even Kathleen who was in danger of hellfire. It was Rose herself.

The harbor waves lapped against the hull. A ship's bell clanged forlornly, its sound muffled by fog and distance. A breeze stole out of the black mist to stir her hair and kiss her damp face.

Rose shut her eyes and for a moment pretended she was back in England, in a country meadow, and that the bell was tied to the neck of an old ewe who led her woolly flock among the flower-speckled hills. She saw the Thames, broad and serene, gliding below the majesty of Tower Bridge, and she saw London, London in winter, horses with frosty breath and jingling bells on their harnesses . . . red-cheeked faces nestled into mufflers . . . snow . . .

The breeze became an eager hand, touching, caressing her, pulling the pins from her long, golden hair . . . Dougal . . . Rose pressed her hands to her hot cheeks as the force of the memory hit her like a tidal wave. She fought it at first, as she had fought it for years, but this time it caught her and swept her away, back to that night when his strong arms had carried her down the hallway to the bedroom in her moth-

er's house. She remembered his hands, those huge, boyish hands, trembling as they unfastened her buttons and laces, trembling so much that she had needed to help him. One candle had been left burning, and by its flickering light she had watched him undress — clumsily, almost shyly, until he stood like a young god, bending over her, the golden light dancing on his skin. How beautiful he was.

His hair was still cool and damp from the snow. She tangled her fingers in it as his mouth devoured her breasts, both of them whimpering softly with the intensity of their longing. There was wonder in his fingers, awe in their every discovery of her. Even Rose, with her narrow knowledge of men, realized that he had never had a woman until this night.

Whispering his name, she drew him down to her. Tenderness sprang up in her like a flood. His desire was hers. Her aching, throbbing need was his. Oh, Dougal . . . Dougal . . . How did I live so long without knowing what it was to be a woman . . . ? Without knowing you? She sobbed with joy as he took her. She laughed and cried and lived for a whole lifetime in the warm, clean, surging power of him, until their passion reached its dizzying heights and he lay quivering in her arms.

For a time, he held her quietly, kissing her, stroking her until he had regained his strength. Then — again, the madness and the magic returned to possess them both. Again . . . and again . . .

Rose opened her eyes. She was alone, the rail of the *Condor* cool against her cheek. She had relived that night for the last time, she vowed. Even the memory of it left her trembling and exhausted. She clung to the rail, letting the cold, damp air fill her lungs. She must never think of Dougal again. Even if he stayed; even if he married her daughter, she must — she *would* — find the strength to forget what he had been to her. Out of the roots of her love for Kathleen and her loyalty to Archer, that strength would grow.

The ripple of a single pair of oars in the water caught her ears. She raised her head and they were coming, thank heaven, moving out of the fog with a lantern in the bow of the small boat. Rose heard Kathleen laughing as they tied up alongside the *Condor*, heard Dougal calling for a man to lower the gangway.

A few moments later, they were on the deck. Kathleen was glowing. Her mist-dampened hair clung to her face. "Mother, we walked," she

said, "clear to the other side of Hong Kong and back! Oh, I'm exhausted!" She collapsed against the rail.

"Well, come have some tea, then, dear, and then we'll get you to bed!" soothed Rose. "Major, surely you're not going back to your ship in this fog! Not when we've half a dozen spare cabins! Come in and drink some tea, and I'll go make sure the bunk is made up." She did not look at Dougal as she talked to him. She only took Kathleen's cool hands and rubbed them in hers to warm them.

"We're going to Peng Chau tomorrow, if it doesn't rain, Mother," Kathleen chattered gaily. "It — " her voice quivered, "it's Dougal's last day here, you know. Could you have the cook make us a lunch?"

"I'll make it myself. Now off with you! Both of you!" She shooed them to the sitting room where the China teapot was still hot under its quilted tea cozy. Then, with a cheerfulness born of desperation, she went to the big linen chest, got out a set of clean sheets and a pillow-case, and took them to the best of the spare cabins to make up Dougal's bed. From there she bustled to the galley to check on the supply of flour, baking powder and lard for tomorrow's biscuits.

The sitting room was empty when she returned. Rose was relieved. Kathleen and Dougal had been tired and she'd given them ample time to say their good nights. She would just sit down at the small escritoire, have a cup of tea and write an overdue letter to Archer in Macao. As long as she was writing to her husband, perhaps she would not be thinking about Dougal. She pulled out the straight-backed wooden chair. The day after tomorrow he would be gone. The pain would ease a bit. Tonight she would pray for the strength to get through it and for the wisdom to guide her daughter. God willing, it would be only a passing thing with Kathleen and Dougal. Surely, under the circumstances, he would not ask her to marry him. Not — she twisted her fingers — not unless both of them loved Kathleen enough to erase the past from their minds.

She got the paper out from its special pigeonhole. Archer's letters, a small bundle of them, for he did not write often, protruded from the opening above. He did not miss her a good deal, she surmised, or at least if he did, he was not inclined to show it. Archer Bellamy was a man to himself, like some great, time-weathered tree standing alone in a meadow, dependent upon nothing save earth and sky for survival. His solitary strength was a source of pride to him. Yet he needed her,

and Rose knew it. If the church was his sky, then she was his earth, her support so much a part of him that he was no longer aware of it. He had not told her he loved her since the days of their courtship. Still, she knew his love, a love that was manifested in his taking her so much for granted that she was like a hand or a foot to him. She would write him a long letter, she resolved. Long and cheerful and affectionate.

Rose stared at the blank page until the words began to form in her mind. Then she took up the pen. As she was dipping it into the inkwell, she heard the door of the sitting room open and close.

"Rose?"

She stiffened at the sound of his voice. "Your room's made up, Dougal," she said softly without turning around. "Maybe you'd best go to it."

The floor creaked lightly as he walked toward her. "Rose," he said, "why are you afraid of me?"

Her heart was galloping. She could not bring herself to turn and face him. "Dougal, it's myself I'm afraid of," she whispered.

"Why?" He was standing behind her now, his fingers just brushing her shoulder. She knew she should move away. She could not.

"For Kathleen," she said softly. "I think she loves you."

"Kathleen's a beautiful girl."

"Dougal, I don't want her hurt."

"Neither do I." His hand was bolder now, lightly stroking the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, steeling herself.

"She needs to be happy, Dougal. Before you came into her life, there was a young man who was willing to do anything for her, who'd offered her everything he had." She swung around in the chair, whipping herself away from his touch. "If you aren't ready to give her that much, then get out of her life!"

"I intend to, Rose," he said quietly.

"Then — " she whispered, "you don't love her?"

"I didn't say that." He walked away from her, over to a window, and peered out at the black fog. Then he turned back to face her again. "When I saw Kathleen for the first time, I had a feeling about her. Oh, she was lovely — the loveliest thing I'd ever seen, but there was more to it than that. It was as if — " he faltered while he felt about for the right words, "as if something of her already belonged to me . . . as if, perhaps I'd known her once." He put his hands into his pockets and

paced across the braided rug to stand in front of Rose, looking down at her. "Then I found out she was your daughter," he said.

She gazed up at him, wanting to see him through the eyes of a mother measuring her daughter's swain, knowing she could no longer look at him the way a woman looks at a man who has been her lover. He was not the same Dougal MacKenna she had known that night in long-ago England. Ten years in the Indian sun had aged him, even as China had aged her. The hair at his temples was touched with early gray. There was a scar across his cheek that she had not noticed before. His green eyes, bloodshot in the light of the whale-oil lamp, were creased at the corners, and there was a hardness in them that had not been there when she had first met him. He was a soldier, she told herself. A man who, for ten years, had likely fought, drunk, killed and fornicated with the worst of them. The Dougal she had loved in London was gone forever.

"When you found out Kathleen was my daughter, that should have been the end of it," she said.

He shook his head. "By then I'd already committed myself to seeing her again . . . And I wanted to. I wanted to know her . . . to know you once more, Rose." His eyes had softened, warmed. She began to tremble.

"Why?" she murmured, knowing that she should not have asked.

He reached out, took her arms and gently raised her to her feet. "Because," he said in a husky, intense whisper, "even after all these years, I haven't forgotten how it was between us." His hands moved across her back, drawing her close to him.

"No, Dougal!" She pushed feebly against his chest, but her resistance was no more than a transient bird that had taken flight at the first touch of him. She wanted his arms around her, wanted the silken roughness of his chin against her forehead.

"Did you know," he breathed, "that that night with you was the first time for me, Rose?"

"Don't, Dougal . . ." She felt tears overflowing in her closed eyes as his lips brushed the edge of her hair and stole downward to her forehead. "There've been others since, I'll wager."

"Aye."

"Many?"

"In ten years? Aye, Rose. All of them you, in a way."

She pulled back and stared up at him suddenly. "And Kathleen?" she whispered with the fierceness of a mother tiger.

He shook his head and drew her against him once more. "You know I'd never hurt your daughter. I've been a perfect gentleman with her." He sighed and ran his hands up and down her back. "That's why I'm going to say good-bye to her tomorrow and sail away for good. I could never be your son-in-law, Rose. Could I?"

"Not . . . not easily."

"She'll get over me. Maybe she'll marry that Stanton fellow. Seems like a nice chap."

"Yes." For a few moments, she let him hold her in silence. His white shirt smelled of the sun and of the sea. With her ear against his chest, she could hear the loud, even beating of his heart. One hand lifted her chin. "No — " she murmured, and he stopped her words with his lips. His kiss crushed her, devoured her, drained her of all will to resist. Her arms found their way around his neck and she melted against him just as she had on that faraway night in her mother's house in London. Oh, sweet heaven, nothing had changed! Ten years and half a world lay behind them, but nothing had changed!

"Rose . . ." His strong mouth moved over her throat, her cheeks, her eyes. "In a few months . . . when this China business is settled, maybe when you've seen Kathleen married . . . come to me in India, or wherever they've sent me by then . . . Come to me. I'll give you your passage . . . I want you with me — "

She stiffened in his arms. "Dougal, I've a husband."

"Aye. And you had a husband then." He pressed her head against his chest and stroked her hair, which had come unpinned and was hanging down her back. "Kathleen's told me about him; how he treats you . . . how he cut off her braids . . . Rose, love, you've only one life! Spend the rest of it with me! I'll make you happy — "

He broke off at the muffled sound behind him. They spun around to find Kathleen standing in the doorway in her blue wrapper, both hands pressed against her mouth.

"Kathleen! Oh, my dear — " Horror-stricken, Rose took a step toward her daughter. "How long — ?"

"Long enough!" Kathleen braced herself in the door frame, her fingernails digging into the wood. "Long enough," she hissed, "to know that you're wicked and dirty and deceitful! Both of you!" She drew in

her breath in a racking sob. "Long enough to know that I never want to see either one of you again!"

Dougal reached out to her, a futile gesture. "Kathleen, your mother and I . . . "

"Stop it!" Her voice was choked, her eyes wide with pain and shock. "I don't have a mother! By hell, I lost her ten years ago!" White with fury, she whirled away from the door. Her running footsteps echoed across the deck like the drum roll at an execution, until the door of her cabin slammed shut.

Twenty-One

Kathleen lay face-up on her bunk behind the locked door of her cabin. It was past midnight by now, she was sure, but she had not moved. She had not spoken or even cried.

Her mother had stood outside the door more than an hour, pleading for forgiveness, sobbing as she tried to explain. Kathleen had willed herself not to hear. Even when Dougal had spoken to her with his treacherous mouth against the door, she had refused to listen to him. They could not help what had happened, he insisted; they loved her, both of them, and they needed her understanding. She had shut her ears to his words. Now they had gone and the ship was quiet except for the tread of the watch overhead. It was the simple craving for one more cup of hot tea that had brought her back to the sitting room. She had heard most of the fateful exchange — enough to know for certain that Dougal, Dougal MacKenna and her own mother had been lovers.

There was only one time it could have happened, she reflected painfully: that week Rose had gone up to London to bury her mother. Dougal would have been very young then. She had even heard him tell her mother it had been the first time for him. Oh, Dougal!

Dry-eyed, she lay there in the darkness, devastated beyond the point of tears. Just one thing was certain. She could not stay on this ship. She could not get up in the morning and look in their faces.

She thought of her father. Through the haze of her anguish, what she had once seen as harshness in him she now saw as strength; what she had once called sanctimoniousness now shone through as virtue, as goodness. All at once, she felt a sharp longing for him, for the familiar drabness of the house, for the clean, white church, the sun dancing

through the banyans in the little cemetery, the thrushes piping in the grotto. For Macao.

She would go to him. The skiff that had carried her and Dougal back from Hong Kong still lay moored alongside the *Condor*. Macao was forty miles away and she was not a strong rower, but the little boat had a mast that could be raised and a sail that was not much larger than a bedsheet. She was determined to manage.

Stealthily, she rose and dressed. Then she took her clothing, her nightgown and wrapper, her hairbrush and pins and an assortment of ribbons and silk flowers, and rolled them all into a bundle. There was only one man, a Lascar, on watch. It would be easy enough to make her escape when he was on the far side of the deck. With her bundle clutched beneath one arm, she crept down the stairs and out into the dampness of the night fog that lay over the harbor like a shroud. Neither of the watches was in sight. The receiving ship's massive superstructure would keep them from seeing her unless one of them came around the corner at the wrong moment.

A rope ladder lay in a sloppy heap next to the raised gangway. What luck! She had only to lower it over the side and climb down to the skiff. She tied her bundle to the bottom-most rung to free her hands. It was going to be easy.

The ladder tumbled into the murk and tightened with a twang as the weight of the bundle pulled it taut. She'd gotten one foot over the rail before she remembered that she didn't have any food or water. That would be just like her, she scolded herself wryly. A boatload of silks and ribbons, and nothing to eat! Kathleen cursed under her breath. She would have to sneak back to the galley.

The boards of the deck creaked under the footsteps of the watch. He was approaching the corner. Kathleen glanced up and down the length of the walkway. She thought of bluffing, of staying where she was and greeting the fellow as if she were out for a midnight stroll. But he would see the ladder. If he pulled up her bundle . . . No, she decided, she had no place to go but down. Quickly, she mounted the ladder and began to descend, her feet tangling in her skirt. Below her, the skiff was almost invisible in the mist.

She gained the bottom of the ladder and stepped into the boat. It rocked beneath her feet while she fought for balance, sending waves against the hull of the *Condor*. Looking up, she could see nothing of the

watch except the red tip of the cheroot he was smoking. He had stopped, she could tell, and was looking downward. She froze in the boat, praying the fog and the darkness would hide her. When he moved away from the rail, she hurriedly disengaged her bundle. It was not a moment too soon, for he had noticed the dangling rope ladder. He looked down over the rail once more, then began to pull the ladder up. Kathleen's heart sank. She had hoped to make another trip back for provisions. Now she would have to go hungry and thirsty until she reached Macao. She thought of abandoning her plan, of calling to him. Then she remembered Dougal and her mother, the way they had looked standing there in each other's arms, and she kept her silence. She would go to Macao.

When the red dot had disappeared, she untied the skiff, pushed away from the ship and then very stealthily began to row.

Dawn crept over the fogbound estuary, turning the mist from black to chalky gray. The fog was so thick that the sea birds kept to their rocky nests. The fishermen, whose families would go hungry without the money from the daily catch, eased their junks out of the bays and inlets, trusting to the sea spirits and to the painted eyes on the prows of their boats to keep them safe. Their voices echoed ghostlike through the dense whiteness as they called to their neighbors.

Kathleen stirred, shivered and opened her eyes. She was lying in the bottom of the skiff, the sail flapping limply above her. She had raised the mast and hoisted it, she remembered, late last night after her palms had become so blistered that she could no longer handle the oars. Sometime after that, sleep and exhaustion had overtaken her. She had collapsed into oblivion, the boat still drifting with the gentle southeast wind.

Her arms ached. The palms of her hands were raw, and her healthy, young appetite had become a raging monster in her stomach. She was damp and cold; worse, she realized as she peered into fog so dense that it hid even the sun, she had no idea where she was.

For the first time, the thought that had buzzed about her brain during the night, unacknowledged and only half-formed, stood out so clearly that it demanded her full attention; she had done a foolish, impulsive, dangerous thing.

She'd brought no compass with her. In the first place, she'd not had one available, and in the second she'd counted on her own sense of direction at night and the sight of the sun and the familiar islands in the morning to guide her. She had not realized that this fog would be so thick, so widespread, or that it would linger into morning.

She had no idea how far she'd rowed in the night, or even whether she'd stayed on course. For all she knew, she could have turned completely around. The wind, however, generally came from the south-east this time of year, so hopefully the slight breeze would have blown her out of the harbor and in the direction of Macao. The river current, on the other hand, ran south. She buried her face in her hands, dizzy with the confusion of it all. There was nothing to do but let herself drift until the fog cleared. Then, at least, she'd be able to see the sun or some island she knew and regain her bearings.

From the skiff, she could see perhaps twenty or thirty feet before the fog closed off her vision. She could hear nothing at first except the lap of the small waves against the sides of the skiff. Then her ears caught a faint metallic sound like the distant clatter of pots and pans. The aroma of steaming fish wafted through the cold, wet smell of the fog. She inhaled ravenously, as if the fragrance alone could give her nourishment. She almost called out — then caught herself in time. Steamed fish and rice. A typical breakfast aboard a Chinese boat.

Perhaps they were only simple fishermen, her hunger argued. Surely they would take pity on her. But reason, weighted with fear, won out. She kept her silence as she peered anxiously through the drifting whiteness. The fog seemed to be clearing a bit. She could see a few yards farther than she'd been able to see earlier. Glancing behind her, she could make out a faint yellow glow. The sun.

A towering sail loomed out of the mist so suddenly that she gasped in alarm. This was no fishing boat. Nothing except a Chinese war junk could be so huge; and it was moving, bearing down on a collision course with the little skiff. Kathleen seized the oars and began to row for her life, the stinging pain of her hands bringing the tears to her eyes.

The war junk came swooping down like some enormous seagoing dragon. The white-painted eyes on its prow glowered at her above the waves. She pulled back hard, gasping with the strain. The handles of the oars were slick with blood and fluid from her broken blisters. Furiously, she stroked. The junk glided past her, missing the skiff by

no more than a few feet. Charged by panic, she kept on rowing. She was well clear of the junk, but now a new fear gripped her. Some keen ear aboard the Chinese vessel could have heard the sound of the oars. She kept on rowing, wanting only to get away.

A voice sang out through the fog, a Chinese voice shouting the Cantonese equivalent of "Who goes there?"

Kathleen did not answer. Even though she spoke Cantonese, her voice would betray her as a foreigner. And what could she say in any case? She pressed her lips together to suppress the pain and kept on rowing.

The question rang out again, a note of menace in its tone this time. Kathleen wondered about the presence of the junk. Had it slipped south, past the blockade in the fog? Or was it that the breeze had carried the skiff north into Chinese-controlled waters?

There was no time to speculate. She heard the voice again, bearing some kind of military order this time. Seconds later, a rocket whistled into the air, descended and burst above the skiff. Sparks showed downward. Again, the voice called out its original question, demanding an answer. Kathleen kept rowing. The junk could not turn about fast enough to catch her easily, she knew, and she was too low in the water for its guns. If the mist held, she could still get away. She put all the strength of her tortured arms and back into the oars and pulled . . . pulled . . .

With a chorus of whistles, a whole cluster of rockets shot skyward, made an arc and came singing downward exploding all around her. The shock of their bursting shattered her ears, singed her face and hair, filled her eyes with a dazzling, excruciatingly white light, a light so bright that she could see nothing else. A single lucky cannon shot ripped off the top of the mast. It splintered and toppled downward, striking her hard on the back of the head. She slumped into the bottom of the skiff, where she lay without moving.

The next day, a fisherman from Macao spied the drifting boat and recognized the red-haired daughter of the *fan kwei* minister. She was only semiconscious, moaning and crying in her delirium. With the help of his crew, the good man got her aboard his fishing junk. Then he tied the skiff on behind, pulled in his nets and made straight for Macao's Inner Harbor.

Archer Bellamy was walking alone in the graveyard when the boy who'd been sent as a messenger found him. The Reverend ran all the way to the harbor, his long legs eating up the distance in a matter of minutes. The junk had tied up alongside one of the piers. Its gang-plank groaned under the weight of his pounding steps.

Kathleen was lying on a heap of nets, her own bundled possessions pillowing her head. The skin of her face was reddened, which was strange, because she never sunburned. Then he saw that her hair was singed. Her yellow dress was peppered with tiny burnt boles. She was rolling her head back and forth, whimpering incoherently.

"Kathleen!" He fell to his knees beside her and put his hands on her shoulder. "Kathleen! It's your father, girl!"

"Father . . ." Her hands crept up to clutch his arms so hard that he could feel her nails through the thickness of his coatsleeve. "My . . . head . . ." she whispered.

"Aye. You've been 'urt." He noticed that there was dried blood in her hair. He eased his fingers around behind her head and felt a four-inch-long, blood-encrusted welt. The pupils of her eyes were huge, in spite of the glare of the afternoon sun. That bothered him. He resolved to send someone for the doctor as soon as he got her back to the house. The London Missionary Society had sent a new man named Hobson.

"Kathleen, we'll be taking you 'ome now. Can you walk?"

"I — don't know . . ." She rolled her head with the pain. "Father . . . don't you have a light? A candle?"

"'ush, girl. You're babbling now. You'll be all right once we get you 'ome."

Kathleen moaned. "But it's so dark . . . so dark . . ."

He looked at her, at the sun shining into her wide-open eyes. Oh, God, he thought. Oh, dear, sweet God! He moved his hand back and forth in front of her face. She did not blink, did not follow the movement. A cold knifeblade of horror thrust its way into his soul.

"Aye, 'tis dark all right," he lied. "And there's no light to be 'ad. But I know the way. 'old onto my neck. I'll carry you. It's not far."

Obediently, she twined her arms around his neck. When he lifted her, she felt almost as light as a child. Too long in the sun, he reflected, without water. When he got home, he'd have to get some tea down her at once, or some broth. There'd be time later to find out what had happened to her.

He carried her down the gangplank and through the crowd that opened to make a way for them along the wharf. Then he struck out uphill toward the house.

She clung to him limply, her head against his chest. Her eyes were closed now, and she was silent except for her jerky breathing. The streets were crowded and noisy. A fan-seller brushed past them, hawking his wares in a shrill voice. A cart loaded with pigs that were trussed up in baskets hit a bump in the street, setting its cargo to squealing wildly. Kathleen said nothing until they had mounted above the babble of the lower streets to the comparative quiet of the hill neighborhood where the grotto, the chapel, the cemetery and the Bellamy residence were located.

"Father . . ." she murmured.

"'ush, Kathleen, we're almost 'ome. Then we'll get you to bed. You'll be all right, girl."

"Are we near the chapel?"

"Aye. It's just across the square."

"Take me inside," she said. "Please."

"Very well," he answered, thinking it odd that she'd want such a thing. In the past, a firm hand had been required to get Kathleen into a church. He carried her across the square to the wall of the churchyard and bumped the gate open with his shoulder.

The doors of the chapel itself were open, as he liked to keep them. The afternoon sun shone in through the tall, simple windows. Archer Bellamy loved the starkness of the little church — the whitewashed walls, the dark wood of the benches and pulpit, the touches of red velvet on the altar and the wall behind it. He walked inside, bearing his daughter in his arms as if he were bringing her to her own christening. His throat was tight with dread. Kathleen had always been the strong one in the family. It had been Morgan, as a boy, who'd had to be nursed through fevers and sniffles and catarrh, who'd been shy of strangers and afraid of the dark. Never Kathleen. She'd always stood up to anything that came her way — even her father. Now, suddenly, she was so frail, so broken.

"'ow's your 'ead?" he asked her in a strained voice.

" . . . Hurts. Are we inside, Father?" she whispered, pressing her face against the front of his shirt.

"Aye."

"Then put me down . . . I want to stand."

Without questioning her, he lowered her feet to the floor. She straightened, swayed against the grip of his arms and nearly toppled. "Let go of me," she whispered. "Move back and let me stand."

"You'll fall —"

"No. I — I have to stand. Please let go of me, Father . . ." There was such a note of fierce determination in her voice that he obeyed, releasing her little by little and backing off very slowly.

Kathleen stood trembling before the altar, her feet braced wide for balance, her fists clenched at her sides. Her head, with its blood-matted red hair, was flung high, her eyes open. Her yellow dress was a tattered banner, streaked with dirt and blood. The chapel was as still as a tomb.

"Father," she said in a voice that was unexpectedly clear, like a crystal bell, "tell me the truth. I'm blind, aren't I?"

"Aye, child," he whispered, keeping his distance. "You're — You are." He could not bring himself to say the word. His courage, he thought, was not equal to hers.

"Permanently?"

"I don't know," he breathed, the tears streaming down his face.

"I have to say it," she muttered, "I have to make myself know it. I'm blind!" The words rang out and echoed against the ceiling. "I'm *blind*! Kathleen Bellamy is blind!"

She began to sway and stumble. He rushed forward to catch her and she fell against him, clawing at him for an instant like a terrified kitten. Then, knowing he had her securely, she crumpled in his arms and began to cry, deep, shuddering sobs. The tears flowed out of her sightless eyes and down onto the front of his coat.

After Hobson had come and given Kathleen a powder to make her sleep, Reverend Bellamy sat in the parlor for a long time with his head in his hands.

Was Kathleen's blindness the punishment of a just heaven? he asked himself again and again. He had warned her — warned her repeatedly — that she'd come to no good end if she did not change her ways. She hadn't listened, of course. She'd continued to be vain and rebellious, flirtatious and full of mischief. Yet Kathleen was not evil. There were whores and scoundrels of the worst sort walking

around in fine health, with strong limbs and good eyes. Where was their punishment?

Was it something he himself had done? "The sins of the fathers . . ." he remembered the old Scripture. Was it some hidden vanity, some secret sin of the soul, something he had thought or said? Archer Bellamy shook his head and stared down into his empty cup of tea. Maybe it was his own mother, red-haired Maggie Bellamy, who'd continued her liaison with the dark-eyed baron until he'd had the misfortune to be shot by some other jealous husband a few months later. Archer had never had the courage to tell her, and so she'd lived on, worshiped by her spouse and respected by her neighbors, unrepentant and unpunished. Remembering, he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

He would have to get a message to Rose in all haste. He got up and strode over to the desk, sat down and took the metal-nibbed quill pen out of the inkwell. Lord, what was he going to tell her? He wondered where she'd been when Kathleen had drifted or rowed away in the skiff. He wondered how much she knew about what had happened.

Resolutely, he poised the pen above the paper and began to write, a simple accounting of events as he knew them and an urgent plea for his wife to come at once.

There were times when Archer Bellamy wondered why he had not sent for his wife and daughter sooner. A number of British families had returned to Macao. Mary Gutzlaff had even come back from Manila with two of her young cousins. There was no real reason he could not have had Rose and Kathleen with him again, except — he put the pen back into the inkwell and stared into space — except that aloneness seemed a curiously natural state for him. After nearly twenty-five years of life in the bosom of his family, he had rediscovered the sweetness of solitude.

His physical needs, he could see to himself. He had acquired a taste for rough, simple foods that were easy to prepare, and though he'd become as thin as a saint, he did not feel deprived for want of Rose's pies, biscuits and stews with dumplings. His washing and mending he sent out to a Chinese neighbor who was glad for the extra pennies it brought in. With only himself to dirty the house, cleaning took no more than a few minutes of each day.

Without wife or offspring to make demands upon his time, he could spend hours in the study of the Scriptures or in working on his command of Chinese languages. He could walk and meditate undisturbed in the little cemetery, pray without interruption. Alone as he was, he had felt a new surge of spiritual growth, like an old tree shooting out new branches. He had wasted little time worrying about his family. Morgan had gone his way and was already lost to him. Rose and Kathleen were safe aboard the *Condor*, devil ship though it was.

Still, he'd had his moments of loneliness. Moments when he'd been on the verge of sitting down and penning the request for his women-folk to come back to Macao. The kitchen was quiet without the sound of Rose's voice singing a hymn. The young men no longer came to his parlor to drink tea and visit now that Kathleen was absent. Yes, a number of times he'd almost sent for them. As of late, however, he'd been grateful that he had not.

With tension between the Chinese and the English at its height, a Chinese edict had appeared, putting up bounties for the capture of Englishmen; five hundred dollars for a man-o'-war's captain; one hundred dollars for a plain soldier or merchant taken alive; twenty dollars for his head. As yet, no one had been captured, but a number of Englishmen had been attacked. Dr. Hobson himself had nearly had his arm broken one day while walking with some friends on the Lappa, across the inner harbor in Chinese territory. Another Englishman had been pulled from his horse and beaten up near the barrier gate. No sensible man ventured far alone. Kathleen, with her wanderlust, would have been a constant worry to her father.

The Reverend rubbed his eyes and wondered once more how his daughter had come to be in the skiff. Kathleen had been unwilling or unable to tell him. Now there was nothing to do but send for Rose. The girl would need care. She would need to be fed, dressed, bathed like a child, and he could not do it himself.

The enormity of Kathleen's tragedy had not fully dawned on him, he knew. He had thrown himself at once into the practical problems of it — preparing her bed, calling for the doctor, writing the letter to Rose. He wrote furiously, the realization growing that none of their lives would ever be the same again.

Within the hour, a small schooner had left Macao's outer harbor and was speeding for Hong Kong with Archer Bellamy's letter and orders to bring Rose back the next morning.

Twenty-Two

Amoy
July 1840

Rats were frequent visitors to Priscilla's cell; small rats that sometimes came up through the narrow pipe that served as a drain. They did her little harm, except to nibble at her face and hands as she slept, but they were bold creatures with mean, red eyes, and she hated them. They scurried about the cell in search of stray crumbs or kernels of rice from her meals, squealing and fighting among themselves. Their dirty gray coats crawled with fleas, which often stayed behind even after the rats had run back down the drain. For some prisoners, she supposed, the rats served as fresh meat, a change from the tasteless rice gruel and occasional fish. It was a morbid thought, a nauseating thought, but then, she had time to sit and think of all sorts of things. Of filth and hunger, of naked yellow bodies passing beneath her window on the little handcart. Of the tortures and beheadings she saw in the square, of Wu Shih-li and hairless Po and all the other men who had had her. She almost never thought of Morgan. She could no longer bear it. Morgan was behind her, forever gone. She had lost even the hope of yearning for him. Now she yearned only for her own death.

Priscilla had sat for hours, cross-legged on her flea-ridden mat, plotting intricate ways to take her own life — none of them practical. She had considered simple starvation, and had even tried it once for three days, scraping her rice down the rat hole so that the guards would think she had eaten it. But she could not face a lingering death. Her instinct for survival was yet too strong. She had begun to eat once

more — cursing her own weakness with each mouthful as she bolted down the foul rice. Her death would have to be something swift, she had decided — or at least irreversible once the act had begun. Time was growing shorter, and she had promised herself that she would die before she would give birth in this heaven-forsaken place and see her baby put out to perish from exposure.

Fate plays strange jokes. She awoke from an afternoon nap one day to find that the guard had already pushed the iron bowl containing her supper through its slot beneath the door. Two rats in the cell had beaten her to the meal and nibbled at the rice, which was smothered in a greasy-looking fish sauce. Both of the rats lay by the bowl, belly-up and stiff-legged. Dead.

Still drowsy from sleep, she stared at the bowl and the rats for several minutes before the full impact of what she was seeing dawned on her. Poison. Meant for her.

It was Wu Hung-li's doing. She did not doubt it for an instant. He must have learned of her imprisonment and was determined that she would not live to be rescued. It would have been an easy matter to bribe the guard to slip her poisoned food. Wu Hung-li's ugly face swam before her eyes, and she smiled. Little did he know that he had played right into her hands. He had given her a key to eternity — or at least to oblivion. She had only to eat. Eat and die.

She picked up the bowl with both hands and cradled it in the hollow of her lap. Roused by the change of position, the baby fluttered and kicked inside her. Priscilla laid an affectionate hand on the roundness of her body. "No, my little one," she whispered. "You will never see this terrible place. You will never be hungry . . . never be cold . . . never know cruelty or hatred or pain. I will take you with me. Now."

She spoke calmly, but her hands trembled as she raised the bowl and took up the simple wooden chopsticks. She wondered whether the poison was in the rice or in the sauce. In the sauce, most likely, as it would have been easier to conceal that way. Priscilla took a deep breath. The sauce had a rotten smell to it, as if it had already begun to spoil. It was made of mullet that had been dumped whole into the cooking pot. Bones, skins, meat, eyes and entrails blended in a gluey mass that flowed over the heap of cold rice like some vile fungus. In the hunger of these past months, she had eaten some repulsive dishes, but this was the worst she had ever seen.

It occurred to her that perhaps she should pray. But God had long since forsaken her, and suicide was a sin. If her death opened the gates of heaven, well and good. If not, any hell of simple darkness would be better than this unending purgatory. With the chopsticks, she took a few grains of rice and dipped them in the sauce to coat them. "Come, my little one," she whispered to her unborn child. "We are leaving this place, you and I." Closing her eyes, she thrust the rice into her mouth and swallowed determinedly, without chewing.

She was not foolish enough to think that one small bite would be enough. Resolutely, she thrust the chopsticks deep into the stinking mass and came up with a bigger lump of rice, this time with a chunk of fish skin in it. She shoved it down her throat before she had the chance to taste it and quickly followed it with another. Choking and gagging, she raised the cast-iron bowl to her lips and began pushing the rice and sauce into her mouth with the chopsticks. She shoveled frantically. If she took the time to taste, to smell, to feel the texture of the things that were sliding past her tongue, she would never be able to get enough down to accomplish the purpose of the poison.

When she finally lowered the bowl from her face, she saw that she had consumed about two-thirds of the food. Surely that was sufficient. She wiped her lips on her sleeve. The muscles of her throat still jerked spasmodically. The foul, fishy taste coated her tongue. She seized the small iron water jar that had come with the meal and drained it in one draught. Maybe the water was poisoned, too, she thought. All to the good.

She lay down on the mat and closed her eyes to wait for death. The taste of the fish lingered in her mouth. Horrible. The twitching of her throat became worse. Her stomach felt as if it were full of living creatures. Come . . . be swift . . . she pleaded silently.

There was a storm inside her. A seething tempest that bubbled like a witch's cauldron. Her body began to sweat, to jerk, and suddenly she was on her feet, stumbling to the slop bucket as the fish and rice churned its way upward. She leaned over the bucket and retched noisily, violently. Retched and retched until her body was empty of the poison, and even then she continued to heave helplessly.

The door of her cell crashed open. Two uniformed guards, both of them young, burst into the room. Their narrow eyes darted from Pris to the bowl of food and the dead rats. They began to speak rapidly in Fukienese, their words harsh and staccato, like pistol fire.

One of them helped her to the mat. The other dashed out and came back a moment later with a huge teapot and a cup. They forced the tea down her throat. It was bitter, but she swallowed it without protest. Anything, anything to wash away that sickening taste.

It was over. She had failed. No matter how much her mind had wanted to die, her body wanted to live. Was it the foul taste of the food on a stomach already made queasy by pregnancy, the nature of the poison itself or her own physical fear that, had made her so ill? She would never know, but she knew that she would not die. Her will was not strong enough. With the battle lost, there was nothing to do but give up.

When she had drunk all of the tea, the guards went out and left her, locking the door behind them. All night she lay on her mat without moving, clearing her mind of all resistance to her fate.

The next day, she only sat in the corner and stared at the wall. It was easy. She marveled at how simple life became when one gave in to circumstances and did nothing. All day she sat and stared and played small games with her fingers. When the fleas crawled into the tender places on her body, she let them bite her and did not even try to scratch at them or brush them away.

Canton
July 1840

The rain was falling steadily by the time Cheng Lo had taken his late-night leave of the messenger at the northeast gate. He turned away with a sigh and did not look back as the distant ring of hoofbeats blended with the tattoo of the raindrops on the tiles and cobblestones.

He had no wish to think of the memorial he had just sent off to the emperor. It was no different from the others — full of half-truths and vain assurances that Lin Tse-hsu had the situation well in hand and that the *fan kuei*, even with twenty ships sailing up the coast, constituted no serious threat to the security of the Celestial Empire.

He and Lin had already dug their own graves, he reflected, and it would be only a matter of time before they fell into them, together or separately. Each had woven his own net of deceit, justified only by the rightness of one cause: to stop the opium trade. Every day it became more clear that they had failed.

The weather had been threatening when Cheng left the house, but he had purposely neglected to bring an umbrella. He wanted to feel the rain. He wanted to be numbed by its slinging sweetness, to recall the strange, wild magic of that day when Kathleen Bellamy had walked at his side through the rainwashed streets of Macao.

The rain brought other memories, too, of small Hsu Yu who bore its name. She had passed through Cheng's life as a butterfly flits over a hillside, leaving little of herself behind except the tiny girl child that Jung Fei was raising as her own. He remembered her with tenderness, and with regret that in her short life she had not had someone who would have given her more love.

Cheng had bowed to Jung Fei's urging and taken a concubine for one reason: to forget a forbidden woman. He had not succeeded. Now he slept alone, as he had done since the night Hsu Yu had told him she was carrying his child. And still, after nearly a year, Kathleen was with him.

The streets of Canton were deserted and dark, but Cheng knew his way without a light. For three years, he had been the secret eyes and ears of the emperor here in Canton. He had carried his message many times, twice for every cycle of the moon, to the northeast gate or to the special junk waiting in Macao's Inner Harbor. Now, in the end, he had betrayed his imperial commission. He had done it knowingly and willfully. There would be a price to pay. When the time came, he resolved, he would pay it honorably.

He wondered once more about the message he had sent to Morgan Bellamy by way of the old fisherman from Kowloon. The man had reported later that he had indeed given the sealed letter to the *taipan* of Bellamy & Company, that he had seen it in his very hand. That same day, another of the Bellamy ships, the *Peregrine*, had come into the harbor. Morgan had boarded it and sailed north the next morning, giving Cheng ample reason to believe that he'd gotten the message. Still, Cheng could not suppress a feeling of uneasiness, particularly since Morgan had taken Wu Hung-li with him.

Sometimes Cheng asked himself why he should care about helping a man like Morgan Bellamy. Morgan was a *fan kwei*, an enemy of the Celestial Empire. Worse, he was a seller of opium, perhaps some of the very opium that had all but destroyed Cheng Shen-lan. Cheng owed him nothing. Still, the thought of Priscilla Bellamy in prison filled him

with pity. With his eyes lowered, Cheng walked on down the street that led toward his family home. The rain had soaked the light cotton robe he wore; raindrops ran down his face and dripped off the end of his long queue. He did not hurry.

It was for Archer Bellamy he had done it, Cheng assured himself. The tall English preacher had been his friend and was, like himself, an enemy of the opium trade. Besides, it had been only a small favor, the sending of the note.

A rat, fleeing the rain, scuttled down the street and disappeared through a crumbling hole in a wall. Cheng wondered whether he was right in calling any foreigner his friend. The Chinese had a name for what he had become: *han chi'en*, an epithet they applied to any son of the Celestial Empire who worked with the foreign devils, learned their languages, gave them maps and information or treated them as friends. Literally, it meant "Chinese evil-doer," and it was always used with contempt. No one had ever called Cheng *han chi'en* to his face, but he had no doubt that the words were spoken behind his back.

Not only had he made friends with an English family, but he had dared to take a foreign woman in his arms, to hold and caress her in a most unspeakable way — and he had no regrets for having done it. Cheng walked on, the rain lashing his face as he approached the plain wooden gate that marked the entrance to the House of Cheng. Yes, they would call him *han chi'en*, and they might call him worse. Now that England had become the enemy, they might call him traitor. Let them, he told himself. What would be would be. He had set his course. But as for Kathleen — he paused with his hand on the gate — no one could touch his memory of her. And there was no word for what she was to him.

So lost in thought was Cheng that he did not see the dark form that came hurtling at him out of the shadows until it was too late to step aside. The solid impact knocked the breath out of him, stunning him for an instant. Two wiry arms wrapped around his neck from behind, trying to pull him down. Cheng's was by far the greater height and weight. He could take the man. He braced his legs wide on the slippery stones and made a movement to fling his assailant off. At that moment, a second shape hurled itself out of the shadows, followed by a third. The combined force threw Cheng off his feet and down onto the rain-slicked street. The blade of a knife flashed in the darkness. He rolled,

trying to throw them off and to keep his body moving. They clung to him like a pack of dogs. He felt the point of the knife thrust its way between his ribs, felt it penetrate to the hilt and jerk out again. The pain was there, but not the bursting, not the sudden ebb of strength that he would have expected from such a wound. Luck was with him, he sensed. The short, razor-edged blade had struck cleanly, missing his heart. Through the hot throbbing in his head, he heard the sound of shuffling footsteps at the gate. His attackers stiffened in silence.

It would be only the old gateman, Cheng knew. A man feeble with years. They would kill him as well. The key was turning in the ancient brass lock. Cheng let his own body go slack over the stones.

"Run!" gasped one of the men. "Someone's coming!"

The second man hesitated. "Wu Hung-li said to make sure — "

"It's not Wu Hung-li's neck! Come on, you fool! Can't you see he's dead?"

The workings of the lock clicked into place. The gate groaned on its hinges and began to open. Cheng's attackers hesitated, then sprang to their feet and fled, splashing off into the darkness. Cheng was left lying face-down in the street. The rainwater, where it washed down off his body, made red puddles.

Macao

July 1840

Kathleen sat on her dressing stool in cold silence as her mother buttoned up the back of her gown. She knew that there was a tin-edged mirror on the wall in front of her. She had once spent long hours primping in front of that mirror, brushing her hair, admiring her own features. Now she would never need a mirror again.

Rose had come in on the schooner from Hong Kong the night before, after Kathleen had gone to sleep. All through the painful morning — the humiliation of the chamber pot, the washing of her hands and face, the breakfast porridge which she'd been spoon-fed like a baby, the bath, the dressing — Kathleen had not spoken one word to her mother. She'd only followed Rose's instructions like a puppet because she'd had no choice.

It was the third day of her blindness — not that the term "day" carried much meaning anymore. Day was no different from night, except

that during the day there were people around her, fussing over her, clucking their tongues behind her back as if she were deaf as well as blind. The first day, once her father had gotten her to the house, had been spent in sleeping. The second day she had awakened in a wild, terrified rage. She had cursed, wept, flung herself about like a madwoman, stumbling against the furniture, knocking things over and breaking them. Her father had called in Dr. Hobson to help calm her, but she had taken the glass he'd given her with a powdered sedative dissolved in water and thrown it across the room at the wall. Finally, exhaustion had replaced frenzy. Outrage had given way to the first stages of acceptance. Once more she had slept and awakened the next morning, calm now, and cold, to find that her mother was there.

As she sat, feeling Rose's hands tremble their way down the long row of buttons and loops, Kathleen wondered what she would find to be worst about her blindness. Would it be missing the sight of the sunset over the Lappa, the sweep of white sails against the blue sky, the yellow flash of a butterfly's wing? Would it be the mortification of helplessness, having to be dressed, bathed, fed and led about by others, the realization that she was a burden to them? Or would it be the simple tedium of hours, days, years spent in darkness, the thought that while she lived there would be nothing else?

Rose had finished with the buttons and was brushing her hair now. The whole procedure of getting her up, bathed, fed, dressed, had taken half the morning, Kathleen calculated, although without the sight of the sun she found that she had lost her ability to judge time accurately. Was this to be the pattern of her days? Of her mother's days?

Impatiently, she reached up with her hand and snatched the brush, feeling a little surge of victory when she succeeded in grabbing it away from her mother. "I can do it!" she snapped, and she began to brush her hair vigorously. Rose stood behind her. Kathleen could hear her breathing.

"Kathleen — " Rose put a hand on her daughter's shoulder.

Kathleen shook herself loose. "I know what you're wondering," she said. "The answer is no. I haven't told Father anything."

"Kathleen — "

"Don't worry, Mother. I'll never tell him. You can do that yourself, when you leave him to go with Dougal." Kathleen's voice was as sharp-edged and brittle as thin glass.

"Kathleen, my answer to Dougal was no," Rose said softly.

"When? After you found out you'd have a blind daughter to be taking care of?"

"No, child. It was that very night. Before you'd even left the ship. I never had any intention of going to Dougal." Rose took a deep breath. "You may not believe me, Kathleen, but my place is with your father. It always has been."

Kathleen brushed furiously away at her red hair, saying nothing.

"We spent all that next day searching for you," said Rose. "Dougal and I and half the men in the fleet. When we didn't find you, we thought the skiff had capsized or struck something and gone down. Dougal left the following morning — he had his orders to sail, you know. He was gone by the time the schooner got to Hong Kong with the letter from your father." Rose put her hands on Kathleen's shoulders again, Kathleen stiffened, but did not pull away.

"Then Dougal doesn't know?"

"Dougal thinks you're dead." Rose paused long enough to let the words penetrate. "Matheson had a clipper going north in a few days. I gave Reverend Gutzlaff a letter for Dougal and one for Morgan as well, but who knows whether he'll find them."

"You told them I was blind?"

"Just Morgan. I told Dougal only that you were alive. I — " Rose's fingers tightened on Kathleen's shoulders. "I won't have Dougal going into war with a burden like that — "

Kathleen put the brush down on the dresser and stood up, pulling abruptly away from her mother's grasp. She was glad Rose had not told Dougal she was blind. She would rather have him think her dead. She did not want his pity. She did not want anyone's pity. "And what about your own burden, Mother?" she said acidly. "Is my blindness the wages of your sin? That's what Father would say if he knew!" She found the bedpost with her hand and clutched it, her fingers gripping the wood's smooth texture. As she waited for her mother's retort, she held her breath. She wanted a battle. She wanted an excuse to scream, to swear, to cry.

Behind her, where Rose had been standing, there was only silence. Then Kathleen heard the light creak of the floorboards as her mother's footsteps moved toward the door.

"Someone's downstairs," Rose whispered. Kathleen could tell from the way her voice trembled that she'd been on the verge of tears. She'd hurt her mother. Well, dammit, that was what she'd wanted, wasn't it?"

Rose's footsteps faded down the stairs. A few moments later, Kathleen recognized the heavier tread of her father coming up. She turned toward the sound and tried to smile for him as he came into the room.

"Kathleen — " His speech was hesitant, awkward for a man as rich in words as Archer Bellamy. He never seemed quite sure of what to say to her anymore. "Kathleen, there's a little Chinese woman downstairs asking for you. Says she's a servant of Chengqua's . . . " His voice trailed off. "I can 'ave her come back another time if you're not — "

"Kao Ma!" Kathleen exclaimed, feeling the first surge of genuine pleasure she'd experienced since her accident.

"Aye. That's the name she gave. I can bring her upstairs if you like — "

"No! Help me down, Father!" She felt her way along the edge of the bed toward him, Kao Ma. She remembered the tiny woman who had mended her dress, who had let her wear the red silk wedding gown in Chengqua's garden. She stretched out her hand and felt her father's fingers close around it.

"I can carry you, girl."

"No — let me find the way. Just balance me . . . "

"The stairs are steep. You'll fall."

She shook her head stubbornly and moved out ahead of him, still clutching his hand. The stairs were not as difficult as she'd expected. She pretended it was night — eternal night — as she felt her way down one step at a time, her father keeping a painfully tight grip on her hand. One of Rose's braided rugs lay at the bottom, its texture familiar to her feet. "Kao Ma?" she spoke to the darkness.

"Here, my lady," Kathleen felt a small, bony hand grasping hers. "I heard from a friend who was at the harbor — I have brought a humble gift."

"Jasmine," Rose's voice came out of the black void. "A pretty little bush in a pot. It's blooming."

"Come closer." Kao Ma placed Kathleen's fingers on the glazed coolness of the pot, then moved them up to feel the foliage and the delicate softness of the flowers.

Flowers, when she could not see them. Something cried out inside Kathleen. She kept a pleased smile on her face, however, because she did not want to offend Kao Ma.

"Smell it, my lady. It has a fragrance . . . " Boldly, Kao Ma pulled Kathleen's head down to where her nose was within a finger's breadth of the plant. Kathleen inhaled. "Yes," she whispered. "It's lovely. Thank you, Kao Ma." She gulped in the sweet aroma. Flowers, after all, were more than form and color.

"Your pleasure thanks me enough, my lady." The little woman withdrew her hand, as if to take her leave.

"Kao Ma — " Kathleen reached out for her, not wanting to go until she had at least a chance to ask her about Cheng. "Kao Ma, will you walk outside with me? Will you take me to the grotto and sit with me for a time?"

"With the permission of your father."

"No," Archer Bellamy broke in. "She's blind — "

"Father," Kathleen said in English, "would you make a prisoner of me? Would you deny me the warmth of the sun and the songs of the birds just because I can't see? Kao Ma will guide me."

"Very well," he answered in Cantonese. "But let me go with you."

"No. I want to go with Kao Ma."

"Let her, Archer," Rose spoke softly. "For her and for yourself. Let her go."

"You won't be long?"

"No, Father." Kathleen gave her hand to Kao Ma, who placed it on her own thin shoulder. Kathleen followed her out of the house, stumbling a little as she crossed the threshold.

The grotto was not far. Kao Ma led Kathleen up a winding pathway to a stone bench and helped her to sit. They remained there in silence for a time, Kathleen straining her ears to catch the songs of the larks and thrushes that twitted and warbled in the ancient trees.

"My lady," Kao Ma spoke softly, "a daughter of mine was born without sight."

"Oh . . . " Kathleen felt a surge of sympathy for the little woman. "What happened to her, Kao Ma?"

"My husband put her outside the wall of our village to die."

Kathleen gasped.

"She was my first born," Kao Ma continued in a low voice. "I told him I could care for her, that I would teach her to live without her eyes, but he said it was best that she die. She could not work to help the family. No man would want her, because she could not care for him or their children. So he put her out to die. I wept for many days."

Kathleen clenched her hands in her lap. This was one aspect of her own blindness that she had yet to face squarely. What man, even Vincent Stanton, would want a blind wife?

"Kao Ma," she murmured, "why have you told me this?"

"Because . . ." Kao Ma clasped Kathleen's hand with her strong, spidery fingers. "If you so allow me, my lady, I wish to help you as I would have helped my own child."

A lump rose in Kathleen's throat. Impulsively, she pressed the old woman's hand to her cheek. "I would welcome you, Kao Ma," she whispered.

The summer sun lay warm on her skin. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the tamarinds and acacias, carrying their fragrance. The two women sat in comfortable silence, enjoying each other's presence and the peace of the morning. For the first time since her accident, Kathleen felt that contentment, or at least a form of it, did not lie so far beyond her reach. Serenity brought her the courage to ask the question that had long been on her mind. "Kao Ma," she said, "what news do you have of Chengqua?"

"My master? He has not been here for nearly a year. We keep the house ready for him, but he does not come." Kao Ma cleared her throat delicately. "I have a cousin who works for the House of Cheng in Canton. She visits from time to time. It seems he took a small wife."

Kathleen felt her heart stop.

"The poor girl died having his baby," Kao Ma continued blandly. "A female. A pretty child, my cousin says. Jung Fei has taken her." The old woman leaned closer to Kathleen. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "My cousin has heard that he refuses to take another concubine. For many moons now, he has slept without a woman. Aiee! That is not good for a man who is still young!"

Something warmed in Kathleen, a pain so sweet that for a moment she could barely bear it. Through the long months of the past year, though many barriers had kept them apart, the sense of Chengqua's love had never left her. She had felt it through the time of her involve-

ment with Vincent Stanton, even with Dougal. She felt it now, strong as ever, even though she knew that Cheng had gone his own way. He had taken a woman of his own race, had loved her and given her his child.

How strange, she mused, that she felt no jealousy. When she looked into her own heart, she saw nothing but compassion for his loss — the first she had felt for anyone or anything but herself since the descent of her blindness.

She had thought of him often, and in her thoughts he was always the same — wise, kind, strong and vaguely amused by her barbaric ways. Now she realized that time had no more stood still for him than it had for her. To see him again would be to see a different Chengqua, older, perhaps, his face shadowed by care and sorrow.

But of course she would not *see* him. Not even if he came to her. With a shudder, she remembered the black premonition that had stolen into her mind that day in the longboat when she had gazed on Chengqua's face for the last time. She had known even then that she would never look upon him again. But in God's mercy, she had not known the reason why.

"Are you ill?" Kao Ma put a hand on her arm.

"No. Only thinking." The desire to have him with her again had welled up in her with such sudden power that it made her gasp. She wanted to cry in his arms, to cling to his strength and to the quiet wisdom in his voice. Perhaps then she could learn to accept and live with this monstrous thing that had happened to her.

The old woman spoke again, as if she had read Kathleen's thoughts. "My master is fond of you. I will have a letter written to tell him of your accident. Then, perhaps, he will come to Macao to see you."

Kathleen let the words penetrate. Yes, unless some grave circumstance prevented it, he would come. He would fly to her on wings of pity. He would come like everyone else, to stare at her in dismay, to feel sorry for her. And he would not see the Kathleen Bellamy he remembered. He would see only this pathetic blind creature, groping and crying out in her darkness. He would pity her — and after what had passed between them, she could not bear the thought of it.

"No!" she whispered vehemently. "Kao Ma, he must not know! Promise — promise you won't tell him about me. Not even if he comes to Macao!"

"Then you do not wish to see — " Kao Ma corrected herself without embarrassment, "to have him come to you?"

"If it is only my blindness that brings him, no. Never."

Kao Ma mulled over Kathleen's answer in thoughtful silence. A lark trilled from its nearby cage. Kathleen turned her head to listen to the captive song, and for a moment even her darkness was filled with beauty. She coaxed herself to smile.

"The bird gives you pleasure, my child?" Kao Ma leaned close to her.

The change in the form of address from "my lady" to "my child" did not escape Kathleen. With a nod, she reached out, groped for Kao Ma's rough old hand, and squeezed the thin fingers.

The China Coast
August 1840

The *Peregrine* was headed for home under a sweeping wind, her sails billowing forward, her bow with its carved falcon figurehead, dancing up and down as it ploughed through the swells. The Bellamy ensign, a red eagle on a field of blue, stood stiffly out from atop the mainmast, snapping in the breeze. The Lascar crewmen sang in the rigging.

Wu Hung-li stood huddled in the lee of the quarterback and frowned at the sky. He was anxious to get back to Canton. Not only was the height of the typhoon season upon them, but he had left unfinished business at home, too much of it.

Earlier that morning he had checked the barometer in Morgan Bellamy's cabin. The pressure had been reassuringly high, but he did not like the look of the clouds that were thickening on the horizon behind them. He loved his life too much to risk a battle with the howling storm his people called *tai fung*, the supreme wind. Leaning over the rail, he spat down at the white-capped waves below. His spittle rode the air, flying forward in the wind before it dropped to the water. Wu followed it with his eyes, muttering a prayer to the gods of wind, sea and fortune that the weather, and his *joss*, would hold.

Morgan came down off the quarterdeck, his wheat-colored hair whipping about his face. "Fine weather, eh, Wu?" he said in passing as he headed below. Wu Hung-li merely grunted and stretched his mouth into its horse-toothed grin. He had not seen his *taipan* in such good spirits since the loss of his wife.

Wu's smile vanished as soon as Morgan had gone. His thoughts flew ahead to Canton and to the three men he had paid to kill Cheng Lo. He knew them well. They were accomplished cutthroats, all of them, and he'd hired them before with good results. Still, he would not feel truly safe until he knew that Cheng was dead.

A seagull flapped past, more blowing than flying in the stiff breeze. Wu Hung-li sat down on a coil of rope, wondering how many people besides Cheng knew that Priscilla Bellamy was a prisoner in Amoy. Lin would know, of course. He had given Cheng the dispatch. But the possibility that Lin would inform the *fan kuei* was so remote that Wu Hung-li did not consider him a danger. There was always the chance, however, that Cheng had told the other hong merchants, and some of them, like old Howqua, were still on friendly terms with the English.

Wu Hung-li twisted one end of his mustache with a long-nailed finger as he gazed out across the water in the direction of the unseen mainland. The *Peregrine* would soon be sailing through the Formosa Strait and would pass close to Amoy. Perhaps that was why he was so uneasy today.

On the way up the coast he had received word that his attempt to poison Priscilla Bellamy and the American sailor had failed. The bungler he had paid to do the job, not wanting to waste good food on people who were about to die, had put the poison into a dish so repulsive that the woman became ill before it had a chance to take effect, and Japeth Pratt had not eaten it at all.

At least the son of a turtle had paid for his stupidity. He had been caught by the guards and beaten on the soles of his feet with a bamboo — so many strokes that it appeared he would be permanently crippled. And of course the fool would never be allowed to work at the prison again. He was of no more use to anyone. Worse, there was nobody to take his place. Wu Hung-Li did not know anyone else in Amoy who would have access to the prisoners. He could only pray that his *joss* would hold, and that Morgan Bellamy would remain ignorant of his wife's plight.

But even with the best of *joss*, he reflected, Priscilla Bellamy's captivity could not be kept secret much longer. Maybe it was time to cut loose and run, to take the considerable fortune he'd accumulated over the years and flee to some part of the Celestial Empire where the *fan kuei* would never find him — to Nanking perhaps, or to Chungking.

He had worked hard enough. It was time to rest and enjoy what he had. That would be the way of wisdom.

Feeling better, he went below to his cabin, selected a long, thin pipe from its stand and pressed a wad of tobacco into the bowl. As he sat and smoked on the edge of his bunk, his mind wound and twisted through mazes of its own making.

This concluding opium run had been the most successful of all. Every last chest had sold for a good price, and the *Peregrine's* coffers were overflowing with silver. Once more Wu Hung-li cursed his dead half-brother, Wu Shih-li, who'd met his miserable end in the cage at Amoy. Now there was no one to plunder the ship for him.

Not that he really needed the silver. He had silver enough for ten lifetimes hidden away in Canton. Still, it was there, shining in the darkness of the locked storeroom that lay next to Morgan Bellamy's cabin, singing its metallic song to him when he brushed his hands through it. It could be his, all of it, if only he could find a way . . .

In the past, he had robbed his masters most judiciously, always leaving them enough silver to run their businesses and make, at least, a satisfactory profit. To do otherwise would have been to cut off his own supply of wealth. The practice had worked well until Blake Robards had begun to act as if he might suspect him. That was why Robards had died.

Wu Hung-li had felt no love for Blake Robards, and he felt none for Morgan Bellamy. Again, he thought of the silver where it lay in the storeroom like a beautiful woman waiting in her bed. Perhaps, at last, it was time to use the poison.

It was Wu Shih-li who'd obtained the gray powder for him, from an old man on the island of Hainan. Wu Hung-li had kept it for years, just as it had come to him, in a hollowed-out bamboo stem sealed at both ends with brown tree sap. In quantity, the powder would not fill half a teacup. Yet the ancient one had assured Wu Shi-li that it was strong enough to kill fifty men. It had no taste and no odor, and thus it could not be detected in food or even in water.

Wu Hung-li had never used it. It had cost him a great deal, and when it was gone, he would have no way of getting more. Thus, he had kept it — always within reach — for the time of ultimate need.

As he puffed away at the pipe, filling the little cabin with a smoky haze, he counted the men on the ship. The six Chinese — three coolies,

two cooks and the shroff — were his men and could be counted on. The cooks would be especially important. In addition to Morgan Bellamy himself, he'd have Adam Peabody to deal with, the two English mates and twenty Lascar crewmen. Twenty-four in all.

Slowly, the plan began to take shape in his mind. Since he did not have enough of his own men to handle the ship — and in any case, he did not know how to sail such a complicated craft — he would have to wait until the *Peregrine* was within easy reach of Hong Kong. Then he and the poison would strike. In small enough doses, it was slow-acting, taking up to half a day to do its deadly work. All to the good, he reasoned, for that would ensure that those who were last to eat would not be warned by the deaths of the first ones. Excited now, he stood up and began to pace the length of the small cabin, sucking furiously at the silver stem of his pipe.

When the thing had been done, he would send the shroff for one of the junks he kept anchored off Kowloon, unload the silver and everything else of value, chop a gash in the hull of the *Peregrine* and send her to the bottom. If someone came along before the job was finished, it would be simple enough to claim that some foul plague had taken the lives of the *taipan* and the crew, and that he'd had to destroy the ship to keep it from spreading.

Then, swiftly but not with so much haste as to make his going conspicuous, he would return to Canton, gather his household and possessions and depart, a free and wealthy man. The silver from this voyage alone would be enough to buy a vast piece of land and a house fit for a great lord. He would find the right place and settle there in peace for the rest of his days, surrounded by the most beautiful concubines his fortune could buy.

The pipe had burned out. Wu Hung-li replaced it on its rack, opened a cabinet and withdrew the brassbound wooden dressing case in which he kept his toiletries — the silver comb with the tortoise-shell back, the razor of foreign steel, the toothbrush, the tongue-scrapers and the small jade vials of powdered herbs and animal parts that he took each day to preserve his virility. He removed everything from the case, then lifted out the false bottom. There, in its own compartment, lay the bamboo tube filled with poison. Reverently, he took it between his fingers and lifted it out of the box. For a long time, he held it in his hand, looking at it, sniffing it, weighing it.

Twenty-Three

Macao
August 1840

Vincent Stanton perched on the divan in the Bellamy parlor, his hands trembling as he went through the motions of drinking Rose Bellamy's delicate souchong tea with three lumps of sugar.

Kathleen sat opposite him in the armchair. She was not able to see him, but she had heard the three plops of the sugar lumps going into the tea and she could tell he was nervous from the way the cup clattered in the saucer as he put it down and picked it up.

It had taken him two weeks to work up the courage to come and see her. That two-week delay spoke more eloquently for him than any words he could have said. Whatever had existed between them was over.

"Vincent, you'll never taste the flavor of the tea that way, with so much sugar," she said sweetly, her words consciously echoing Cheng's. Then she smiled, because she realized he would be staring at her from behind his silver-rimmed spectacles and wondering how she knew. In truth, she was glad he had not come any sooner. It was easier this way, with her being able to make a great show of how much she'd learned, and how brave and self-sufficient she really was. She drank her own plain tea with grace and ease. Vincent Stanton would never know how many hours she had practiced the small journey of the cup from the saucer to her lips and back again, how many times she had spilled the tea or flung the cup down in despair.

He did not know what to say to her, she realized. Few people did. Even old George Chinnery, who was almost never at a loss for words, had stumbled into silence when he'd come to call on her family the

week before. Poor Chinnery had mentioned his portrait of her — that it was now completely finished, dried, varnished and still waiting for a buyer.

Then, remembering that she would not be able to see it, he had sat there stammering for something else to say. “Aye, me poor darlin’ girl!” he’d burst out at last, and had put his arms around her. She’d felt the wetness on his cheeks. To an artist like Chinnery, she realized, the loss of sight was a tragedy worse than death.

Kathleen supposed that Chinnery’d been hoping her father would buy the painting — a useless expectation, since the Reverend considered it mere wicked vanity. The portrait had lost its most likely owner when young Joaquin Silveira had been packed off to Portugal.

She wondered if Chinnery had tried to sell the painting to Vincent Stanton. Poor Vincent, sitting there slurping his tea and trying so hard to act as if her blindness made no difference to him. He had commented on the weather — cool for August, with less rain than usual — and on the news that the British fleet had taken the Island of Chusan early in July and was expected to be at the mouth of the Peiho, Peking’s outlet to the sea, at any time now. “That should put an end to this nonsense!” he’d exclaimed, slapping his knee with feigned vigor. “The emperor can’t ignore twenty ships in his own front yard, by thunder!”

“No,” Kathleen had said, thinking that Dougal MacKenna must be with them. She hadn’t quite sorted out her feelings about Dougal. She’d been so preoccupied with her own calamity. “Then you think this war won’t last long, Vincent?”

“Why should it? They’re no match for us. With twenty ships, we can bring them to their knees!” The spoon had clinked against the sides of the cup as he’d stirred his tea. “Think of it — China opened! No more Factories at Canton, no more Co-hong, no more smuggling! And God’s own work can go forward. Just imagine, Kathleen! Missions in China!”

After that outburst of fervor, he’d sat in silence, except for the drumming of a fingertip against the edge of the table. Then he’d poured himself another cup of tea.

Now Kathleen sat and listened to the sound of his sipping and breathing. Behind her, against the wall, the grandfather clock ticked

away the seconds. Strange how she'd never noticed the sound when she could see. Off toward the kitchen, she could hear the softened tread of her mother. Probably praying he'll marry me and take me off her hands, she thought angrily. Well, dammit, let her go to Dougal! I don't need her!

Vincent Stanton cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. She sensed what was coming. It had been hanging in the air since he'd first knocked on the door.

"Kathleen . . ." he said, his knuckles cracking as he clasped his hands. "I — I'd like you to know that I still want to marry you."

There it was, laid out like some dead animal on the table between them. Poor Vincent. In spite of everything, he was willing to do his duty. The tremor in his voice almost made her laugh.

"No you don't, Vincent. You don't really want to marry me."

"Kathleen — "

"Look at you, Vincent Stanton! You're shaking in your shoes for fear I'll say yes!"

"That's ridicu — "

"Listen to me! How would you support me? You'd have to hire someone to live in, some woman, just to take care of *me*, to say nothing of the cooking and the cleaning, and if we had children, you'd likely have to hire a nanny, too!"

"I could manage it," he said.

"And you'd soon get tired of a blind woman hanging on your arm, one who couldn't even read the Bible with you or darn your socks or make plum pudding! No, you don't want a blind wife!"

"That's not what I said." His voice wavered, as if she'd pushed him off-balance.

While she had the advantage, she thrust her rapier point in to a vital spot. "Even so," she said, "I'd marry you, and I'd try to make you a good wife . . . except for one thing."

He said nothing, but she could hear his shallow, rapid breathing.

"I don't love you," she said. "I never really did. I'm sorry, Vincent. You're a good man. You deserve better than what I could have given you, even with my sight."

"Kathleen — " The horsehair cushions swished lightly as he stood up. "I'm leaving to go back to England next week. I'm asking you one last time — "

She stretched out her hand and he took it. His palm was damp. "The answer is no," she insisted. "And one day you'll thank me for it."

He squeezed her hand awkwardly. "Well, then — " His voice mingled anguish and relief. "May I come back tomorrow, Kathleen? Just to say good-bye, I mean . . ."

"My dear Vincent. Wouldn't it be easier Just to say good-bye now? Farewells are so awful — why have another of them?"

"Very well," he said stiffly, dropping her hand. "Good-bye, Kathleen. I — I'll write you from England."

"Good-bye Vincent. And you needn't bother. I won't be able to read your letters myself and I can't write back."

She heard him catch his breath. Then his footsteps faded away to the front door. Swiftly, abruptly, the door opened and closed.

She'd been ghastly to him, she scolded herself. She'd hurt him, which was the last thing on earth he deserved. Well, God's blood, what else could she do, keep the poor fellow hanging on forever? She felt for the teacup, and the little china teapot. He would not be back again, she was sure. However much it pained him now, she had done Vincent Stanton a kindness. She had set him free.

There was only a little tea left in the pot. She'd just pour herself another cup. It would not be so difficult. She felt for the spout, then the handle, took the cup in her left hand. Carefully, she positioned the spout over the cup, tilted the pot and felt the movement and the hot weight of the liquid as it swirled into the cup's bottom. She smiled and kept on pouring. Small triumphs were better than none.

Then the cup filled and overflowed, sending the steaming tea down over her hand. She gasped with pain, dropped the cup into her lap, and spilled hot tea on her dress. In helpless rage, she sat and felt the wetness soak through her skirt and petticoat, all the way to her skin.

When Rose came in and found her a few minutes later, Kathleen was standing up, gripping the back of the chair and weeping furiously.

Kao Ma came to the house three days later, as she so often did, bringing with her this time a Mongolian lark in a beautifully woven bamboo cage. "For your ears, my child," she said in a voice that was fragile but vigorous, like Kao Ma herself. "When he is not so frightened, then he will sing. I have arranged for a boy to bring freshly caught grasshoppers to feed him each morning."

"You always know just what pleases me." Kathleen smiled and fingered the intricate scrollwork of the cage. The bird hopped nervously from its perch to the cage floor and back again. Kathleen welcomed Kao Ma's visits as she did no one else's, for there was no trace of pity, revulsion or guilt in the old woman's manner. Kao Ma came only to help, to cheer, to give her patience, her love. And from time to time, she brought news of Chengqua.

"I had a visit yesterday, from the daughter of my cousin in Canton, the one who works of the House of Cheng," she said, taking her time. The two of them had left the house and were seated on the low wall that ran along the eastern side of the Camoens Grotto, the birdcage between them. The lark, hearing the calls of its wild brothers, had begun to chirp and twitter.

"It seems," Kao Ma said, "that my poor master has been wounded."

Kathleen's hand flew to her mouth as talons of dread closed around her. "Wounded?" she whispered.

"Stabbed. By three men outside his gate at the hour of the tiger — although what he was doing outside at that time of night, I can't imagine, unless he was returning from a flower house." Kao Ma sniffed. "He never used to go to flower houses. Perhaps he has changed."

"But he's alive?" Kathleen fumbled for the old woman's hands, her whole inner world suddenly shaking. Chengqua, so strong and vital that he had always seemed invulnerable to harm — "Kao Ma, is he badly hurt?"

The spidery clasp reassured her, but Kao Ma's words did not. "My cousin says he should have been killed. But his *joss* was with him. The blade missed his heart. He bled a good deal . . ." The old woman's voice trailed off maddeningly. Kathleen gripped her hands, her heart pounding like a drum.

"But he's going to live? He's going to get well?"

Kao Ma laughed. "Yes, child! Already he is out of bed. My master Cheng Lo is a strong man and a lucky one." She fell silent, and Kathleen sensed that the old woman was studying her. "So," she murmured at last. Then she got up and walked a distance down the path, leaving Kathleen alone with her own thoughts for a few moments.

The lark danced and twittered in its cage. Still dizzy with relief, Kathleen clasped her hands together to keep them from trembling. The longing to be with Chengqua again became a warm ache inside

her that would not go away. To hear him, to touch him, to know that he was truly well — She twisted a bit of her skin in her hands. Yes, she *could* ask Kao Ma to have the letter written. Then, surely he would come to her!

A passing breeze carried the fragrance of roses and tickled her face with wisps of hair. Kathleen allowed herself to dream for a moment before she faced the sobering truth: She had no right to send for Chengqua. The brief moments she had spent in his arms did not give her claim to him. He belonged to his wife, to his children, to his own race. For her to command his presence would not only be presumptuous, it would be wrong.

Had Kao Ma mentioned something about a flower house? Kathleen shook her head, trying to reconcile the image of the man who had refused to take her virtue with one who would accept a concubine and seek out a prostitute. A flood of conflicting emotions rushed in upon her: bewilderment, sympathy, desire, a sense of betrayal, loneliness and envy, a strange, wistful envy for the unknown woman who had given him pleasure, for the wife who had tended his wounds, and even for the little concubine who had died giving life to his child. With all her reading, watching and pondering, she would never understand the Chinese! And she understood herself even less, for in spite of everything Chengqua might be, there was nothing she would not give to have him with her, even for a moment. She sighed and fingered the top of the bamboo cage. Perhaps, after all, that was the real nature of love — to accept without questioning, to care without judging . . .

The peace that descended upon Kathleen's spirit came as a total surprise. She felt as if some dark, turbulent storm in her had cleared, leaving behind it a sky that sparkled with the brilliance of a diamond, as if she had sailed into a tranquil harbor at the end of a long and perilous journey. As if she had suddenly discovered the reason for her own birth. She loved him. She had loved him all along. And even if she never touched him, never spoke with him again, hers was a love that would be warmth and light to her all the days of her life!

The sun was hot on her skin. She felt its rays so strongly that she almost fancied that she could see them, pouring down out of the sky like clear, golden honey. Kathleen laughed out loud — laughed at the

irony of life, that kept so much of its sweetness hidden, and laughed at herself for having been so slow to discover it.

Kao Ma returned to find her smiling. "Ah, that's better," she said, sitting down and thrusting a blossom under Kathleen's nose. "Now, smell, my child. Tell me what it is."

Kathleen sniffed deeply. This was one of the many learning games they played together. "Gardenia," she said confidently.

"Excellent. And this?"

Kathleen hesitated, frowning. "Hyacinth?"

"Correct . . ." Kao Ma's voice lowered a trifle. "And this . . . ?"

Kathleen inhaled deeply, paused, then smiled. "There is nothing at all in your hand, Kao Ma. But last night for the evening meal you prepared fish and onions."

"Aiee!" The old woman laughed deep in her chest. "What a sly one you are! You could find your way from one end of Macao to the other with your ears and nose!" That was another of Kao Ma's games. On pleasant days, she would sometimes lead her pupil through the winding streets to the inner harbor, which Kathleen could recognize by the odor of shellfish, the planks of the quay under her feet, the sound of crates and baskets falling into place, the babble of ducks, pigs and Chinese voices. The Praya was cleaner and less noisy, with more of the voices speaking in English, Portuguese and pidgin; the Monte Fort was easy to recognize because of the bracing wind and the length of the climb required to get there.

Kathleen was grateful beyond words for Kao Ma and the things she did for her. True, her own parents were concerned, but Archer and Rose Bellamy were shackled by their own grief. They babied her, fretted over her, did too many things for her that she should have been doing for herself. And Kathleen's relationship with her mother was as cold as ever. She and Rose had never been close, and the Dougal MacKenna affair had thrown up insurmountable barriers between them.

The lark, in its cage, had burst into full song, vibrant and trilling. Kathleen listened wistfully to the tiny captive, transfixed by the beauty of the notes . . .

The bird stopped singing. Someone was coming up the walk. The rhythm and interval of the footsteps spoke of Archer Bellamy's long-legged stride; and he was agitated. She could hear his harsh breathing. As he sat down beside her, she stiffened with apprehension.

"Kathleen," he said, "it's Vincent Stanton. 'e's — 'e's evidently been kidnapped by the Chinese."

Her lips parted unbelievably.

"Thursday morning . . ." he continued, "'e was supposed to meet Abeel and some of the others to go swimming at Casilhas Bay. They were late and when they got to the beach, he wasn't there . . . I've known 'e was missing for two days. Didn't want to worry you, girl, till we were sure. But a fisherman just got in who says 'e saw our Vincent aboard a junk at the Bogue . . . blood on his 'ead . . ."

Kathleen crumpled, her face in her hands. "Oh, Lord," she whispered, feeling monstrous, "it's my fault! Vincent came to Macao to see me!"

"Aye, girl. And you were 'ard with him. Your mother told me."

"But . . . why Vincent? God's blood, he never hurt anyone!"

"Don't curse, Kathleen! The reward, I suspect. An 'undred dollars for an Englishman — any Englishman, even young Vincent."

She was trembling now, the bewildered Kao Ma patting her shoulder. The Reverend used his Cantonese to explain to the old woman.

"Aiee!" she breathed. "Such a gentle young man. The enemy of no one!" Her trousers rustled as she stood up. "We must contact my master at once. He can help, perhaps, or at least inquire . . ."

"Chengqua!" Archer Bellamy seized on the thought. "Of course! Can you get word to him?"

"Easily. But . . ." Kao Ma's voice dropped slightly, "your servant, alas, is only a foolish woman who was not worth teaching to write. Can you help me with the letter?"

"With pleasure." Reverend Bellamy was proud of his ability to read and write Chinese. "Come, we'll go back to the house at once! If anyone can help us now, it's Chengqua!" Animated once more, he strode back down the path in the direction of the house, leaving Kao Ma and Kathleen to follow him at a slower pace.

Kathleen walked cautiously, her hand on Kao Ma's shoulder and her mind reeling. Vincent. Dear heaven, what would they do to him? What had *she* done to him? And Cheng — he was being drawn into the tragedy as well. She remembered her father's words, spoken on that long-ago day . . . "Chengqua is Chinese first, and our friend a very distant second . . ." In a strong sense, he was right. But she knew Chengqua. He would help them, even at the peril of his own safety.

Kathleen followed Kao Ma up the path, her emotions churning. It was her fault, Vincent getting caught like that. If she hadn't sent him away, he'd likely have been with her Thursday morning, not alone on an isolated beach, an easy target for some bounty-seeking Chinese.

And now Cheng would be drawn into the struggle as well, likely forced to choose between loyalty to his friends and to his kingdom. She walked on through her darkness, feeling frightened and worried and guilty. Only one thought lifted her heart — the anticipation of contacting Chengqua once more, and the hope, however distant, that he might come to Macao.

She stumbled over a rough stone in the path. Kao Ma's frail shoulder sustained her for a perilous moment before she regained her balance. "Remember your promise," she said softly as they moved on. "Don't tell your master I can't see!"

A week passed. The news of Vincent Stanton's capture had thrown all Macao into an uproar. Charles Elliot was gone, having sailed north with the British fleet. In his absence, pugnacious Captain Henry Smith of the *Druid* had rushed into Macao, insisting that Governor Pinto demand Stanton's immediate release. The Chinese, instead of complying, began to mass troops at the barrier gate. Eight war junks swept into the Inner Harbor, their guns trained on the shores of Macao. It was clear that Lin meant to drive the *fan kuei* from Chinese soil once and for all.

Kathleen was confined to the house by her father. Even in its choking isolation, she sensed fear charging the air like the electric stillness that precedes a Storm. The passers-by on the street were quiet, their steps hurried. Even the visits of Kao Ma had come to a temporary halt. Rose Bellamy bustled about the house, washing, packing, preparing for a repetition of last year's departure. Kathleen sat in the parlor darning her worn stockings — a task that Kao Ma had taught her. The lark's cage was beside her on the tea table, the bird fluttering from its perch on the floor of the cage and back again, twitting uneasily. Rose did not like having the bird in the house. It smelled, she claimed, and many birds had lice. Kathleen did not care. Blindness, like nobility and insanity, carried its privileges, and she kept her bird where she pleased. She was glad that, in spite of the commotion, the little Chinese boy had not neglected to bring the lark its breakfast of grasshoppers.

She finished one stocking, bit off the thread with her teeth and inserted the wooden darning egg into another, grateful for anything that would occupy her mind and her fingers today. Captain Smith, she knew, had moved the *Druid* and a number of smaller warships into the area of Casilhas Bay, which lay on the east side of Macao, south of the barrier gate. This would put them within firing range of the Chinese forces. Her father had been out of the house since dawn. Twice he had come running back with news of the movements of troops and vessels. Some of Macao's bolder residents, the Reverend among them, had massed on the shore and trotted along the beach, keeping pace with the north-moving British vessels until they got within range of the Chinese guns. Others, not so fearless, had climbed onto the roofs of their houses or ascended the heights of the Monte to get a view of the fighting.

Kathleen pricked her fingers again and again as she sewed, but she did not stop. The needle darted clumsily in and out of the fabric as she waited for the sound of the cannon. Her hands were cold.

There'd been no word from Chengqua. Perhaps the message about Vincent Stanton sent by special junk had never reached him. Perhaps it had; and Cheng had been unable — or unwilling — to answer.

She realized now how much she had wanted him to come to Macao. During the past week, she had blossomed with the anticipation of being with him again. But when the hostilities had begun to build at the barrier gate, she knew he would not be coming. The old blackness had descended upon her spirit, that oppressive sense that someone close to her was in danger. Was it Vincent? Yes, certainly, she assured herself. But in her mind she doubted. She'd had no dark premonition of Vincent's capture. Chengqua then, or Morgan, who'd been expected to arrive at Hong Kong more than a week ago. Surely he'd have come to see her in Macao — if nothing had happened to him . . .

The rumble of distant cannon fire shattered the afternoon stillness. Kathleen stiffened as if she'd been hit. The tangle of stockings and thread rolled out of her lap and onto the floor as she stood up and made her way to the front door. Her fingers found the latch; she shoved the door open and stood clinging to the frame, trembling as the sound of the guns rolled across Macao.

As expected, the Battle of the Barrier Gate was a rout, a total victory for the English. The *Druid's* huge cannons had methodically pounded the Chinese emplacements into rubble. Only then did the few squads of marines and sepoys go ashore to spike the Chinese artillery, put what was left of the troops to flight, and burn their encampment. The war junks, stranded on the mud flats with the tide out, had been all but useless.

With an almost audible sigh of relief, Macao settled back into its old tranquillity. Except that the *fan kuei* were treated with new deference by their Chinese neighbors, and except that Englishmen could now go anywhere in Macao, even beyond the barrier gate, without fear, little had changed. Captain Smith ordered his ships back to their posts in the Typa or out in the estuary. The war junks sailed with the tide, never to return to the inner harbor. The soldiers melted away like mist in the sun, and the Chinese and Europeans of Macao took up their strange symbiosis once more.

The day after the decisive battle, Kathleen sat in the sun-splotched coolness of the little cemetery, waiting for Kao Ma. It had been nearly a week since she'd seen the old woman, but the little boy who brought the grasshoppers had informed her that Kao Ma would be coming that afternoon at the hour of the monkey, and that Kathleen was to meet her in the graveyard.

Except for the lark, whose cage the Reverend had hung in an acacia tree, Kathleen was alone. The leaves rustled like new crinolines and the sun shone down upon her face and hands, giving her senses the feel, at least, of light. The lark had found its voice, trilling its heart-breaking sweetness into the afternoon sky.

She felt Chengqua's nearness, as she had constantly from the moment of her discovery that she loved him. The breeze in the banyans was his voice, the sun his touch upon her hair. His words sang in her mind . . . *In the true harmony of nature, everything has its place. Yin as well as yang . . . darkness as well as light . . . pain and adversity as well as joy, for without one, the other loses its meaning . . .*

She had not really listened to him that long-ago night in the garden, but she listened now. And in her dark world, those pleasures that remained — the fragrance and softness of a flower, the song of a bird, the memory of a much-loved face — had taken on new sweetness. She

found that her senses were sharpening, her patience and her capacity to understand growing with each day.

In the past week, with Kao Ma's visits curtailed, Kathleen had spent many long hours in thought. Her newly found love was a deep source of happiness, but alone, even that would not be enough to sustain her. The real strength and fortitude she would need to continue her life in darkness would have to come, she knew, from within herself. Dougal (she remembered him more gently now) had told her once that she was a strong person. Who could have known then how strong she would need to be? There had been times when helpless despair so crushed her that she had prayed for an end to her life. Somehow, each time, she had drawn from the well of her own faith and Chengqua's love the courage to live another day.

She was determined to be of value, at least to herself. *The truly happy man, the superior man, sees his own small place in the world for what it is and makes the best of it . . .* Those, too, were Chengqua's words. She would find her place, she resolved, and somehow make a life for herself.

The first step, she knew, was acceptance of herself as she was. She would never see again. True, it was not unknown for people to regain their sight. But that strange sixth sense that told her so many things had spoken again, telling her that there was no reason to hope. Her vision would not return in this life, not if she survived a hundred years. Somehow, she would have to learn to exist in perpetual darkness.

The lark was calling to another bird, some distant brother who was not bound by a cage of bamboo. The notes poured from its feathery throat to rise on the air chimes, crisp and pure, echoed by the distant song of the bird that was free. Wistfully, she listened and waited for Kao Ma to come to her.

Kathleen had discovered an intriguing pastime as she waited, perched on the stone slab that covered Robert Morrison's grave. Her long, blunt-ended fingers explored the incised letters of Morrison's epitaph. With concentration, it was possible for her to read them. Glowing with the newfound excitement of it, she traced each letter in the sun-warmed granite. R . . . O . . . B . . . For a moment, she had almost forgotten about Kao Ma. Why, if a way could be found for her to read like this, with her fingers . . . She remembered now, just a year or so back, someone had brought her father a stack of outdated newspapers from England. One of them had contained an article about the

work of a young Frenchman named Louis Braille . . . the story had meant nothing to her at the time, but now —

Suddenly, she realized that the bird had stopped singing.

She sat up, catching her breath, her senses straining to detect the new presence in the stillness of the graveyard. Her ears caught the faint brush of the footsteps — not the familiar, lively shuffle of Kao Ma's reed sandals on the cobblestones, but a slower, more powerful tread; quiet, like the padded paws of a cat . . . like the soft, thick felt soles of Chinese boots.

Then the subtly shifting breeze carried the fragrance of sandalwood to her nostrils and she knew — at least she wanted to know. Quivering, she waited for the sound of his voice, that deep, silken voice that would speak her name like a caress.

"Kathleen . . ."

As Cheng came down the sloping walkway, he filled his eyes with her, the slender figure clad in a full white gown, her hair glowing like amber in the flickering light-and-shade pattern of the trees. Her face — He studied her as he came closer, apprehension tugging at his mind. She was thinner than before, older. Her eyes were strangely shadowed. Perhaps she'd been ill. Kao Ma had told him she would be here in the cemetery, but the old woman had said nothing about her not having been well.

"Forgive me," he said, "I came as soon as I could." It was true, he reflected. Although he had been in Macao for the past three days, the battle and his duty to the Son of Heaven had kept him away from her.

Cheng had witnessed the fighting from just behind the front lines, so close to the guns that a man near him had been killed by a cannon shot. From the very beginning, he'd had no doubt as to the battle's outcome. The *fan kuei* had won, as they always did; won most devastatingly, their firepower putting the imperial troops and war junks to shame.

In the agony of the long evening hours that had stretched into night and then into dawn, he had written his report — a travesty of the true events, couched to protect Lin Tse-hsu and placate His Majesty. The task had sickened him. Today he needed the vision of Kathleen, sitting there in the dancing sunlight, her dress spread out around her like the petals of a flower, her hand stretching out to him.

He had resolved not to touch her, but that plaintive gesture shattered all his determination. Striding forward, he took her hand and pressed it between his palms.

Kathleen felt the strength of Cheng's fingers as she reached out into the dark void of her blindness. She wondered if he was smiling at her; she wondered whether Kao Ma had kept her word. "You've come, Chengqua," she said softly. "That's enough. Here, sit down beside me."

Slowly, self-consciously, their hands parted. She heard the rustle of his silk robe as he sat down on the edge of the granite slab, at a safe and proper distance. Chengqua. How she longed to see him! "I remember," he said, his voice warm and pleasant, "how your father used to scold you for sitting on the graves, Kathleen."

No, she concluded, her heart racing. He did not know she was blind. She cocked her head and laughed lightly, trying to fix her eyes in the direction of his voice. "My father no longer cares where I sit," she said. "Did Kao Ma send you here?"

"Kao Ma merely told me where to find you. I wanted to speak with you first, Kathleen, to tell you that I have seen your tall young friend, and he is well."

"Vincent!" Relief sang in her voice. "They haven't hurt him?"

"Only a small cut on his head from when the soldiers took him." He paused, and she sensed that he was studying her. "Governor-General Lin has found out that your friend is only a poor scholar, even as he himself once was. He has given his promise that the young man will be treated well. I have permission to collect his books and papers and take them to Canton, so that the time he spends in prison will not be wasted."

Something inside her went cold. "Wasted? Then they won't let him go?"

"I tried, Kathleen. I told Lin that your young man was no enemy, that he was a person of little consequence to us . . ." He fell silent again for a moment. She could feel his eyes on her. "I told him that this kidnapping would in no way help our efforts to end the opium smuggling," he continued. "But Lin was most adamant. He will not release your friend."

"But why? Vincent's only crime is being English."

"It's . . . a matter of saving face, Kathleen. Something the people of your race must learn to understand in dealing with us. Your ferocious Captain Smith — when he forced the Portuguese governor to demand Stanton's release, he set up a contest of wills. For Lin to back down now and let him go free would be to show weakness. That he will not do."

"And only for that, Chengqua?" Her indignation showed in her voice.

"It is our way, Kathleen. Force us to a confrontation, and honor demands that we stand fast. Provide us with a means to yield gracefully . . . Do you understand?"

"I think so. But it isn't fair to poor Vincent. How long will they keep him?"

"Until Lin feels that he has shown himself to be master. No longer, I think. Not unless your captain continues to make threats."

The lark twittered from its cage in the acacia. Kathleen pretended to look down at her clenched hands, sensing for the first time the enormity of the barrier that lay between herself and Cheng. She had never felt him to be more Chinese, herself to be more English. God's blood, they were at war, her people and his! The Chinese hated the English. They called them foreign devils and worse. And the English — they filled their daughters' heads with tales of poor, foolish Maude Pickett and her Chinese lover. How unthinkable it was, she told herself; how damned bloody ironic that Kathleen Bellamy from Portsmouth should be sitting here on old Morrison's grave with a man who was so totally Chinese . . . and loving him. Loving him so much that the days she had spent with Dougal MacKenna had become no more than a brief, distant thought; and even her own blindness seemed a small thing.

A breeze drifted through the cemetery, stirring her hair and bringing the fragrance of jasmine from some neighboring garden. The lark began to trill softly. Cheng had said nothing for several moments. Kathleen began to stir anxiously, her hands brushing the skirt of her white dress, her sightless eyes unable to find him. She listened for the silken rustle of his robe, the sound of his breathing. Her ears heard nothing.

She had begun to wonder if he had gone, when he spoke at last. "Kathleen . . . look up. There is a yellow butterfly just above your head."

Her pulse quickened in panic as her eyes shot upward into the blackness. "Yes," she smiled. "It's lovely, Chengqua, like a little piece of the sun."

He stood up. She heard him striding toward her, and in the next instant his hands were gripping her shoulders, hurting her. "Kathleen," he whispered hoarsely, his face very close to hers, "there was no butterfly!"

For a moment, she struggled in the iron grip of his fingers, sputtering at his trickery. Then she crumpled against him, clinging, sobbing like a terrified child.

"Kathleen . . . how . . . ?" The muscles of his chest and arms heaved with shock.

She pressed her face into the front of his robe. "An accident . . . last month . . ." Oh damn, she cursed inwardly. Damn! Now he would pity her like the others. And she was so sick of pity, sick of darkness, sick of being a burden . . .

Still dazed, he stroked her hair, his touch calming her. "Kao Ma . . . ?" he asked in a whisper.

"She knows. I made her promise . . ."

"But why?" His voice grated with helpless rage. "To deceive me, Kathleen . . . to make me find out this way . . ."

She took a deep breath, forcing the iron mask of composure to descend on her features once more. "They all feel sorry for me," she said. "My father — he thinks I've been punished for my sins . . . my mother, for hers —"

"You're speaking in riddles," he said, more gently.

"The others, all except Kao Ma . . . my friends, even poor Vincent, they all pity me. They come to the house and talk about useless things, about the weather, about the war . . . no one talks to me about being blind! They go away, and after a while they don't come back. They can't stand being with me, feeling guilty because they can see and I can't!" She reached up and touched his hands where they still grasped her shoulders, feeling the strangeness of his long Chinese nails. "To have you come to me like that, Chengqua . . . like the rest of them . . . I'd rather be dead!"

"But to think you could keep me from knowing — it was foolish, Kathleen. Your eyes — no matter how I stared at you, they did not look away from me."

The breath eased out of her as she relaxed against him. His hands slipped down her back to encircle her softly, drawing her closer to him. But he held her so cautiously, out of pity, she told herself, not the way she wanted him to hold her.

"But didn't it almost work, Chengqua?" she said, forcing a spark of life into her voice.

"Almost." He laid his cheek against the top of her head. She closed her eyes, drinking in the fragrance of sandalwood. "But only in the beginning . . ."

"And now you'll be like the others. You'll come to me out of pity. Or maybe you won't come at all."

"No, Kathleen."

"Yes," she whispered stubbornly. "I *know*."

Softly, he drew away from her, holding her once more by the shoulders. "Kathleen," he said, "when I come to you again, it will be for one reason: because I care for you as I always have." His hands released her, leaving her to stand alone in her darkness. "Now, before anyone comes and finds us here, we must go and look for your father. I will need his help in getting the books and clothing for your friend Stanton." He hesitated awkwardly, not knowing, she sensed, how to guide her.

She smiled. "Your arm, Chengqua. You'll find I'm quite good at walking."

She moved easily beside him as they went up the walk, past the church and out into the street. "Your parents are well?" he asked, his voice veiling something.

"The same as always."

"And your brother?" She sensed a growing tension in him.

"Up the coast. He was due back more than a week ago. Unless he's at Hong Kong — " She gave him a worried frown. "I saw him the morning he left, when he came out to the *Condor* to say good-bye. He expected to return by the tenth of August, and here it is the twenty-first — " She felt a sudden tightening of the muscles in his arm.

"Kathleen, did Morgan say anything to you about his wife?"

"No. He hardly ever talks about Pris. I think he's still grieving for her."

"And he took Wu Hung-Ii with him?"

"Yes . . . I think so. Wu is the best interpreter he has . . . Chengqua, what is it?" She'd stopped walking and was gripping his arm. The blackness, that awful foreboding that she felt when Morgan was in danger, came swirling in on her. She felt the cold dampness of her own hands.

He caught his breath. "Perhaps nothing, Kathleen. But we must find your father at once."

He strode ahead, pulling her along beside him. She tried to match his steps. Stumbling a little on the roughness of the stones. The blackness grew and pressed on her, and some alarm in her brain cried out . . . Morgan!

Twenty-Four

The China Coast
August 1840

The *Kestrel* left Hong Kong on the twenty-second of August in search of its sister vessel, the *Peregrine*. Archer Bellamy stood on the quarterdeck, his legs braced wide against the roll of the ship, his throat tight with apprehension.

Chengqua had kept nothing from him. He knew that Wu Hung-li was a thief and a murderer. And he knew that with the *Peregrine* already twelve days overdue, his chances of finding Morgan alive were perilously slim. Methodically, his mind ticked off the possible dangers — Wu Hung-li . . . the pirates . . . the imperial Chinese patrols . . . the typhoons . . . By holy heaven, why had Morgan ever taken up opium running? He clenched his powerful fist and brought it down on the rail.

At the sound, the American named Preston, who'd moved up from first mate to captain when his predecessor had died of fever at Hong Kong, turned away from the wheel long enough to flash him a glance of sympathy. "Don't fret yourself, Reverend. If he be out there, we'll find him." He was a stout man, friendly but quiet. His blunt, hairy hands adjusted the wheel with reassuring skill.

"Aye . . ." the Reverend breathed. "We'll find him if God wills it." Filling his chest with the stinging coolness of the dawn air, he struggled to buoy up his spirit, to divert his thoughts from what might lie ahead. But even the beauty of jewel-green islands on the misted horizon, the poetry of two frigate birds in synchronized flight, could not keep his mind from wandering its gloomy paths. And the gloomiest path of all led back to his beginnings . . .

The discovery of what his mother was had shaken young Archer to the roots of his soul. So tainted did her secret make him feel that he found he could no longer look into the eyes of his friends. Perhaps they would see some hidden thing in his gaze. Perhaps they would find out.

He grew up in self-imposed isolation, a lonely lad, skinny and freakishly tall, who spent most of his time reading. His father had tried to interest him in the smithy, but he wanted no part of its fire and iron and sweat. The place reminded him of hell. To young Archer, Benjamin Bellamy was a plodder, a hulk of a man who'd seldom cast his eyes beyond the world of forge and bellows. There was nothing of the burly smith in his lanky, ascetic son, and the day had come when Archer had taken a searching look at the man he called Father and had come to a shattering conclusion: The dashing Sir Alfred had not been the first of his mother's lovers.

With the stench of bastardy hanging about him, he'd become even more withdrawn. At school he had hunched over his too-small desk in one corner of the classroom, his glowering gaze defying the world. At home he had shut himself away from his mother, unable to bear the sight of her. Reading the Bible had become his consolation, then his obsession, and out of that obsession had grown the desire to dedicate himself to God.

Ironically, it was his mother who had come up with the money to send him to a theological seminary in London. Archer had accepted it because he had no choice. He did not ask her where it came from. He had no wish to know, but perhaps, he thought, the giving of it might bring her a degree of redemption. In any case, he had thrown himself into his studies with the fury of a zealot and graduated at the head of his class. Even this distinction, however, could not remove the secret stigma he had placed upon himself. Though he had never told anyone to this day, he knew who and what he was: Archer Bellamy, the son of a red-haired slut, a bastard who had let tainted money send him to divinity school.

He could have had his choice of a number of fine parishes, but he had chosen the most poverty-stricken section of Portsmouth, a parish among the docks and warehouses and taverns, peopled by the families of dock hands and sailors. Perhaps here he would not feel so lowly, so inferior to those around him. Perhaps here, among these humble, uneducated souls, he could gain a measure of worthiness.

But even in Portsmouth, though he had cared for his little flock most competently, he had failed himself. When he stood in the pulpit and looked down into the eyes of his congregation, he fancied that he saw his own vile beginnings gazing back at him. Somehow, he sensed, they knew. Something in the way he walked or spoke or smelled told them what he really was, and in their lowly hearts they spat upon him.

Still, he had done his best, living his life with the rectitude of an Old Testament prophet. Back in London, he had met the daughter of a milliner, fifteen-year-old Rose Morgan, who glowed with the radiant purity of an angel. With her mother's blessing, he'd married her, brought her to Portsmouth and set about obeying God's commandment to multiply and replenish the earth.

She had worshiped him at first. Only in Rose's wide blue eyes had he stood as high as other men. Like a king, he'd ruled his little family, setting them before his parishoners as an example of sanctity and himself as a model of what a father and patriarch should be. Still, he could not escape the eyes of his flock, sheep eyes, dull and placid, reflecting his own self-contempt back at him. For fourteen years, he had endured Portsmouth. Then he had heard from an old schoolmate that the London Missionary Society was accepting applications. They were looking for ministers who were willing to go to the ends of the earth, to one of the most godless, sin-ridden, idolatrous lands on the face of the globe — to China.

To Archer Bellamy, China was a new beginning, a chance to break free of his past and start over in a land that was one vast field, waiting for the harvest. England was behind him, and he would not look back.

As for his family, he'd resolved that they, too, would have a new beginning. Though he had never known the identity of his own father, he would stand like Abraham, the generations of his descendants looking to him as the fountain of their lineage. That would be his new dream.

In the name of heaven, he asked himself wretchedly, what had happened to his offspring? A blinded daughter, and a son who could be dead and in hell by now! If the worst had happened to Morgan, and if Kathleen remained a spinster — a distinct likelihood now — his line would be at an end. The earthly immortality that a man enjoyed through his descendants would not be his. Lord, what had he *done*?

He remembered then what Chengqua had told him last night as the two of them had walked down to the Praya, where a cutter was waiting to take him to Hong Kong. "I did not wish to upset the women at your house," the Chinaman had said, his alien face grave, "but I was informed in a letter from the head of the prison at Amoy that your son's wife is with child."

"How long?" Automatically, the Reverend had begun to count.

"I am sorry, but he did not tell me."

"Then — we must get her back at once! At any cost!"

"My friend," Chengqua had put a hand on his arm. "For the last time, I caution you against trying to free her by force. The people at Amoy will not give her up. They will kill her first."

"But what would you suggest?"

"Patience. It may take time. There's the possibility of a ransom, but it must be done discreetly. I can make some inquiries if you wish — "

"No. We'll find Morgan first. If he's alive, the decision must be his. We'll let you know if we need you."

"I have already spoken with Governor-General Lin, but he has no authority in Amoy. Worse, the governor of Fukien is an old rival of his. Lin says that if he were to intercede, the man would keep her out of spite. To petition the emperor directly would only call her to his attention and might well make the matter worse." The tall hong merchant had sighed wearily. "For the present, we can only wait and hope."

Wait and hope . . . The words echoed in Archer Bellamy's ears as he stared over the rail at the gray-green water and wondered what the chances were that Priscilla was carrying his grandchild. Not likely, he brooded. Rose had told him that she and Morgan were having difficulties. Probably some half-Chinese bastard. He could well imagine what a woman would suffer at the hands of Chinese pirates. He shuddered as he stared up at the wind-filled sails. High in the crow's nest, a brown Lascar crewman scanned the sea with a telescope, watching for anything — a sail, even a piece of drifting wreckage — that might prove to be *Peregrine*.

The Reverend had never liked the sea. He preferred life with God's own solid earth under his feet. If anyone had ever told him he would one day be standing on the deck of an opium clipper going up the China Coast, he would have dismissed the idea as rubbish.

They sighted a fleet of fishing junks off the port bow, their thick bat sails spread like elephant ears. The fishermen, accustomed to the sight of foreign vessels, scarcely looked at them. Archer Bellamy's thoughts returned to Priscilla and her child. By thunder, if Morgan had not survived, he would move heaven and earth to get her back! If even a remote chance existed that she was carrying his son's baby — he gripped the rail, wondering suddenly what he would do if Priscilla's child turned out to be Chinese.

Macao
August 1840

Cheng leaned forward in one of the ugly maroon chairs in the Bellamy parlor and studied the two women who sat across from him on the couch. Rose Bellamy was mending one of her husband's shirts. With nimble hands, she stitched nervously, her mouth tight, the silver thimble on her finger bobbing up and down. The lamp on the table flickered on her face, casting shadows under her eyes that made her look old and tired. She had aged in the year that had passed since he had last seen her, Cheng reflected. Little furrows of suffering had etched themselves across her forehead and around her eyes. An unhappy woman, he concluded, and with ample reason . . .

Kathleen sat at the far end of the sofa, fingering one of the crocheted doilies that had been pinned over the arm to save wear. The width of a cushion lay like a battlefield between her and her mother.

All that evening he had shared the waiting with them — a useless gesture, since there was little he could do, but it had given him an excuse, at least, to be with Kathleen. He had drunk cupfuls of Rose's souchong tea until he'd grown tired of the taste, conversing haltingly, in English, about his family in Canton and about the war. A strange war, he mused, watching the way the lamplight glowed on Kathleen's hair. A war in which a Chinese like himself could still come to an English house in Macao and be welcomed as a friend.

They had long since exhausted the subjects of Vincent Stanton, Priscilla and Morgan, but the two women, he knew, had thought of little else. Anxiety showed in the tight lines of their faces, in the nervous, fluttering movements of their hands. Strain echoed its discordant undertone in their voices.

He sat with his hands folded and watched Kathleen. She was shifting restlessly in her seat, her long, square-tipped fingers bunching and smoothing the skirt of her light blue gown. Cheng sensed a storm building up inside her.

With a little huff, she rose to her feet. "It's so hot in here," she declared. "I think I'll go and sit on the step." She moved toward the front door, brushing the furniture with her fingertips for guidance.

"Wait," said Rose. "I'll get your shawl . . ."

"The devil with my shawl! It's not cold!"

Cheng saw the pain that flashed across Rose Bellamy's face. "With your mother's permission," he said softly in English, "I will go with you, Kathleen. Perhaps if you wish to walk —"

"Yes, if you want to, Chengqua." Her voice had mellowed.

"And if you will get me her shawl, Mrs. Bellamy, I will carry it for her. If she —" He struggled with the English words. "If she becomes cold, she will have it."

"Thank you, Chengqua." Rose flitted over to a wooden rack where Kathleen's fawn-colored woolen shawl hung. She took it down and brought it to Cheng. As she handed the shawl to him, her fingers touched his arm. He felt their pressure, a small squeeze of gratitude and benediction. Her blue eyes met his — sorrowful eyes, full of mute pleading.

"Do not worry," he said gently. "I will — care for her."

The blue eyes misted with unshed tears. "Yes," Rose whispered softly. "Care for her, Chengqua."

The street was deserted. Cheng was grateful for that, since it was not entirely proper for Kathleen to be seen walking with him. Her hand rested lightly on his arm. She moved easily, confidently, beside him, needing little more than his touch to guide her.

The moonlight shimmered on the roof tiles and brushed the cobblestones, still wet from afternoon rain, with liquid silver. The full moon hung high, at the peak of the heavens. Cheng found himself wishing that he could give her his eyes.

"Kathleen," he said, "your mother is a good woman. You should not be so unkind to her."

"My mother is not a good woman, and I didn't come out here to have you lecture me." Kathleen's annoyance showed in her stride and in the imperious tilt of her head.

"Very well," he said. "We will talk about whatever you wish, Kathleen, or if you only want to walk — "

"No. Let me tell you what my mother did. Then you'll understand." Slowly, they moved up the street, toward the grotto. As they walked, she told him about the soldier named Dougal MacKenna, about her terrible discovery, the small boat, the fog and the war junk. He listened in dismayed silence, conscious of her anguished fingers gripping his arm.

"Kathleen," he said at last, "is there any person living on the earth who has not made a mistake? Is there one soul among us who has not hurt another?" He thought of Hsu Yu. Yes, he was among the guilty.

Kathleen's lips were taut and silent.

"The young major," he said, his throat tightening unexpectedly, "is he the man you would have chosen for yourself?"

"Perhaps once. Not now."

"And Vincent Stanton?" He wondered why he was asking her. What difference did it make? She was English. She could never be his.

"No. He's only a friend."

"Kathleen," he said, hardening himself against the warmth that radiated from the spot where her hand rested on his arm. "I'm leaving Macao in the morning. I have to go back to Canton."

"Oh!" She gave a small moan of disappointment.

He thought of Lin, of the reports to the emperor, of the British fleet that could even now be blocking Peking's gateway to the sea. Yes, it would be better to say good-bye now and make an end to it. "I may not be coming back," he said softly. "There are . . . difficulties."

"Chengqua — why?" Her hand tightened on his sleeve.

"You mustn't ask me to explain, Kathleen. But it may be that I won't be staying in Canton. When the time comes to leave — " he drew a deep, painful breath, "there might not be a chance for me to say good-bye or even to get word to you."

She turned toward him, her empty eyes huge in the moonlight, her lips parted. "Then tonight — "

He looked at her, torn between the part of him that was Chinese and the part that was merely human. "Let's walk, Kathleen," he said.

She moved quietly beside him in the darkness, her hand light on his arm, her steps matching his, as they had on the day she had walked with him through the rain. Cheng felt a growing sense of the

inevitable. He could not fight her, could no more turn away from her now than he had been able to turn away from her then . . .

She was a foreigner, he argued with himself, a *fan kuei*, despised by his race. There could be no coming together for them, no way to cross the vast chasm that lay between her world and his. He studied her profile against the moon, her swept-back hair dark as blood in the night. By Chinese standards, she was not even pretty. She was too tall, her features too sharp and strong, her mouth too wide, her skin too warm in tone, her feet disgracefully large. Chinese women bound their bosoms flat against their ribs. Kathleen's breasts stood high and proud, like two swelling waves upon the sea . . .

Cheng fought against the stirring of his own body. It was not her alien beauty that had caught and bound him. It was her spirit — that splendid, wild pride that showed in the tilt of her head, in her laughter, in her walk. It was her stubbornness he loved, her independence, her fearlessness and her insatiable curiosity. Now, walking beside her with her hand on his arm, he felt her frailty as well. She was as tender as a child, and her need for love cried out to him.

He had already broken his resolution not to touch her, there in the cemetery when he had held her in his arms. Could he give to her, he asked himself, without taking too much? Could he love her without doing her harm? He did not know, and suddenly he was frightened for both of them. Any day he would be summoned to Peking, a journey from which he did not expect to return. Few there were who had incurred the emperor's wrath and lived to tell about it. He did not fear death; it came to all men. But the thought of leaving Kathleen alone in her darkness with so many things unsaid and unfulfilled rent him with desolation.

If he could ask a boon of heaven, he told himself, he would ask for one day, one perfect day alone with her in the clean peace of the open countryside with nothing to do but ride and talk and be together. Then, perhaps, he could go willingly to face his emperor. But no, that would be too much to ask of a life that had already given him more than a man deserved. He could not delay his departure for Canton past tomorrow morning. These brief moments of tonight were all that were left to them.

The grotto loomed ahead, a silver fantasy in the moonlight, its banyans and acacias standing out like pale English lace against the

blackness of the sky. The night was deliciously warm, the breeze soft and silken as a kiss against his face. The musky perfume that was Kathleen filled his senses as he led her forward, his footsteps suddenly urgent, his pulse drumming. Beside him, her breathing had quickened. Her hand pressed warmly into his, moving, alive.

They reached the shadow of a massive banyan tree. He caught her against him and pulled her into its darkness. She came into his arms with a little cry, her hands bringing his head down to hers, her lips soft and wet, parting under the crush of his kisses.

He had meant to be gentle, but he had not anticipated the hunger in her. She welcomed him ravenously, her body melting into his, her mouth open and searching. The first thrust of her small tongue startled him, then by turns intrigued him, delighted him, inflamed him, as he answered with his own. His lips bruised her eager mouth; his arms pressed her close to him with such force that she whimpered. His hands ached to strip away her gown to touch and know the woman parts of her.

"Chengqua . . . Chengqua, love me," she whispered, her voice as soft as the night wind.

His own desire had become a swelling, throbbing pain. To make it bearable, he held her tight, clasping the length of her sweet body against him. "Kathleen, my heart . . . I never meant to — "

"Hush. I did." She stood trembling in his arms. Then, slowly, she began to sob. "Chengqua . . . I love you . . . I love you so — "

He stroked her hair, kissed her forehead and her beautiful, sightless eyes. "My dear one . . . my brave one . . . " he murmured. "I tried so hard to forget you."

"The concubine . . . ?"

He drew in his breath. "You knew?"

"Kao Ma told me. It doesn't matter. I tried to forget you, too . . . I thought I had — I was wrong."

For a time, he held her in silence, longing to possess her, knowing that for her own sake he must not. Tonight she wanted him, but tonight would pass. Tomorrow she would go back to her English world, a world of rules and social propriety, where any woman who had loved a man of another race would be an outcast, shamed and spat upon for the rest of her days. He could not bring such a thing upon Kathleen — and she knew he would not.

She raised her head. "Chengqua, where will you go," she asked, "if you must leave Canton?"

"To Peking. Very far away." He kissed a tear from her cheek.

"But why?"

"I'm not free to tell anyone why, Kathleen. When the time comes, I will try to get word to you, but it may not be possible."

With a little sigh of acceptance, she took his arm and they began to walk, down beside the wall that ran along the grotto's lower edge. "Do you know Peking well?" she asked in a determinedly cheerful voice.

"Very well, my heart. I lived there for years as a student."

She caught her breath. "And you've seen the imperial palace?"

"Many times."

"And the emperor?" she asked, half-jokingly.

The muscles tightened at the back of his neck as he hesitated. No, he would not lie to her. "I saw the emperor once, Kathleen," he said.

"Oh!" she gasped, spinning around to clasp his hands. Some of her elation was forced, he surmised. She seemed so determined to keep a brave face. "Would you tell me about it, Chengqua? I used to read, but now — "

He took her hand and pressed it hard against his lips to hide the sudden rush of compassion he felt. With one arm, he guided her toward the wall. "Sit beside me, Kathleen," he said.

She felt for the wall and lowered herself to its edge. He sat next to her, his arm touching hers. The full moon drifted among the clouds, a silver pearl in the sky. He wanted to weep for her because she could not see it. "Hold me," she whispered in a small, tear-filled voice. "Hold me, my love — "

With great tenderness, he wrapped her shawl around her and enfolded her in his arms. In the soft magic of the moonlight, he held her and spoke to her about his kingdom.

He began with Peking, with the crispness of the air, the snow in wintertime and the yellow sand that blew in from the northern desert in summer. His words recalled Ha-ta-men Road, wide and dusty, teeming with people, with mule carts, camel trains, sedan chairs and strings of shaggy Mongolian ponies; shops where one could buy fine copper and brassware, leather saddles, medicines, noodles, sweetmeats, candles and silks of a variety to stagger the imagination.

Sharing her wonder, he described the majesty of the Ch'ienmen Gate, the azure-tiled Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City itself, with its outer walls of rose-colored mortar, its myriad red-lacquered pillars, staircases of white marble and gold-tiled roofs. With his lips against her hair, he talked of the palace where the Son of Heaven lived, surrounded by his eunuchs and concubines, of the yawning vastness and cold tiles of the throne room, and even of the Tao Kuang emperor himself.

Kathleen interrupted him only once, but with a strange question. When he spoke of the emperor's harem, she brushed a hand against his cheek and said, "Chengqua, when a man, any man, takes a concubine, how is it done? Is there some sort of ceremony?"

"No," he replied, puzzled by her interest. "He has only to take her. The concubine is brought to his house and she is his. That is all."

"Ah." She nestled her head into the hollow of his shoulder and said no more as his words carried her to the foot of the Great Wall that wound for more than 4,500 *li*, from Kansu to Hupeh; took her across the broad plains of the north where a man could ride for days, sleeping in the open or in some quaint village inn where he might share a heated brick platform called a *k'ang* with his fellow wanderers . . .

Cheng spoke with infinite love, not only for the precious one in his arms but for that vast land that had given birth to his ancestors from the beginning of time, the earth where his bones would sleep when he was dead. The Celestial Empire. The Middle Kingdom. His words painted pictures for Kathleen's unseeing eyes — the Yangtse in flood, broad as a lake, its surface alive with bustling rivercraft . . . the terraced hills of the south, green with the seedlings of spring rice . . .

The moon was high when he made an end of his speaking. Softly, with great tenderness, he bent down and kissed Kathleen's face. "We must go," he whispered. "Your mother will be worried."

"Yes." Her fingers crept up his chin and came to rest on his lips. "Tonight you have been my eyes," she whispered, "and I have seen . . . things that I only dreamed of before."

He held her tightly for a moment. Then, without saying more, he stood with her and they began to walk back toward the house, her hand resting lightly on his arm. Kathleen did not speak, but he sensed a change in her, a hidden strength that she had not possessed

when they had left her house. Glancing down at her, he saw that she was smiling.

They reached the front step. The house was dark except for a faint glow from Rose Bellamy's bedroom in the rear. He turned and gathered her into his arms. "My heart, if there were any way for me to stay with you — " He pressed his face into her hair.

She drew back slightly and lifted her hands to his face. He trembled as her long, sensitive fingers traced the contour of his forehead, the arch of his brows, his nose, the curve of his mouth, then moved to his cheeks. He felt the ache rise in his throat.

"Chengqua — there are tears — "

"Yes, Kathleen," he whispered.

For a moment, she was silent, her hands resting against the sides of his face. Then she took a deep breath. Cheng was aware of a sudden radiance about her, a glowing serenity. "Chengqua," she said softly, "I am your woman . . . your concubine . . . your small wife. For as long as you want me — " Her voice quivered and broke. "For as long as we live together on this earth . . . I swear it before my God — and before whatever gods are yours . . . "

It was madness, Cheng told himself as he looked down at her beautiful face. The idea that it could be so simple, that just by saying she was his, she could cross the barriers that lay between them and make it so. It was unthinkable. Yet, as he gazed at her, he knew he could no more deny her than he could stop breathing.

He clasped her close, both of them trembling. "For your sweet gift," he whispered, "for this wonderful gift of yourself, my Kathleen, this one is grateful."

For a time, he held her in silence. At last she spoke, her voice small and timid. "Chengqua, whenever you want me — "

"I want you now."

"Then — "

He stroked her hair. "But not like a thief, stealing your virtue in the night. There is a right time, a right place for such things. If it comes for us one day — "

She stiffened. "And if it does not?"

He tried to make her understand. "If you do not see me again, it will have been best for you that we waited. Some day you may want to marry — "

"No!"

"Kathleen — " He cradled her once more, her head against his cheek. "We cannot see what lies ahead. No one can. For now, we must wait . . . and if our time never comes, just knowing that you have given yourself to me will be joy enough for the rest of my life." He lifted her chin with his fingers and kissed her very tenderly. "I must go now," he said.

She did not protest, but her arms tightened around him, and for one last moment she held him close. Then she released him and moved back into the doorway. "When you come to Macao again," she said, her voice serene and clear, "I will be waiting for you, and I will be yours."

Rose was sitting huddled near the top of the stairway with a candle when Kathleen slipped in through the front door and closed it stealthily behind her. Her curls were softly tousled; her face — Rose lifted the candle high to cast a stronger light on her daughter's features and caught her breath at the sudden flash of her beauty. Kathleen's face was as radiant as the moon, her sightless eyes glowing with the unmistakable joy of a woman who has loved and been loved.

No, Rose reflected, it came as no real surprise. From the beginning, whenever Cheng visited their house, she had sensed the subtle current of attraction between her daughter and the tall hong merchant. She had counted it as nothing. Kathleen had plenty of beaux, and like every other English girl in Macao, she knew the story of Maude Pickett by heart. Wild and adventurous as Kathleen might have been, she'd had more sense than to cast her eyes at a Chinese.

But suddenly the darkness had fallen upon her, changing everything. Kathleen was alone in a black void where no one could reach her — not Vincent Stanton, not her father . . . surely not Rose herself, although she had prayed for a way to heal the chasm that yawned between them. Kao Ma had been freely welcomed into Kathleen's world, but would the friendship of an old woman be enough to sustain a need as intense as Kathleen's? The question had tortured Rose as, day after day, she watched Kathleen struggle with her blindness, saw her progress and fall back, witnessed the small moments of triumph and the long hours of despair. She had wept

with a mother's desire to put her arms around her and rock her as she'd done when Kathleen was a baby. But Kathleen would have none of her comforting.

Then Chengqua, tall and strong and gentle, the best of men for all his Chinese looks and ways, had come back into their lives. There in the stillness of the parlor, Rose had gazed into his face and into Kathleen's and found her shattering answer.

It was a grave thing she'd done, Rose admonished herself, letting them go out into the night together like that. The burden was hers, and she would be blessed or damned for it in years to come. But looking into Kathleen's luminous face, she could at least say that for the moment she was not sorry.

Some small sound pricked Kathleen's ears and she stiffened like a doe. "Mother?"

"I'm here, Kathleen. On the stairs." Rose waited, wondering whether she should go down to her and whether she dared question her. "You were gone a long time," she said. "It's late."

Kathleen glided to the foot of the stairway, brushing the edges of the chairs with her fingertips. "I've been all the way to Peking and back," she said softly, a note of wonder in her voice. "It was Chengqua who took me, and I saw it all! The streets, the shops, the temples, the palaces . . . I even met the emperor!" She turned prettily and came to rest on the bottommost step, her dress spreading out on the rug. "It was so beautiful, and so — so — " She plunged her face into her cupped hands, trembling so hard that she could not speak.

"Kathleen — " Rose moved down the steps until she could reach out and touch her hair. Tentatively, she stroked the satiny curls. Kathleen did not flinch or move away. "Dearest, where has Chengqua gone?"

"He'll . . . be on his way to Canton in the morning. He may not be coming back."

Rose smoothed Kathleen's hair, her fingers feeling the warmth of her skin and the lovely, firm contours of her skull. She was afraid to speak, afraid of saying anything to break the tenuous bond that had spun itself between them. The only sounds in the darkened room were the ticking of the grandfather clock and the deep rush of Kathleen's breathing.

"I've learned something, Mother," she said at last, speaking slowly and painfully, "from you, and Dougal and Cheng-qu . . ." She sighed and swallowed hard. "I've learned that you don't fall in love with someone because it's right or because it's convenient. Poor Vincent was right and convenient, and nothing happened. You fall in love with someone because you can't help it." She moved upward on the steps and put her head against her mother's knees. Rose felt as if her own heart were bursting.

"I know," Kathleen said, "because *I* can't help it. Not anymore, I suppose, than two people as good as you and Dougal could."

Rose caught her breath. It was as near to a declaration of forgiveness as she could ever ask of her daughter. "I've not thought of myself as good in a long time, Kathleen," she murmured.

"I wish I'd known about you years ago," Kathleen said. "It would have made it so much easier to talk about my own feelings."

"Would you have understood?" Rose had begun to stroke her hair again, winding the curls tenderly around her fingers.

"No," Kathleen said after a long, thoughtful pause. "Not until now." She fell silent, her eyes closed, one hand fingering the soft percale of her mother's skirt the way a child would do. Rose wondered whether Cheng had made love to her. Surprisingly, she found that the answer to that question mattered very little.

The China Coast
August 1840

The typhoon had howled its way out of the Pacific, whipped across Formosa and struck the *Peregrine* off Pingtan Island at the north end of the Formosa Strait. Adam Peabody, knowing what was coming, had reefed the sails and tied things down as best he could, but the supreme wind had snatched the vessel half out of the water, and tossed it about like a toy, snapping off both the mainmast and the mizzen and tearing the rudder loose. By the grace of heaven and Peabody's skill as a captain, the *Peregrine* had stayed afloat. They'd been swept far off course, however, and it had taken the better part of a week to repair the damaged rudder and to rig the ship with the extra spars and canvas they'd brought along.

Morgan Bellamy had had his wrist broken when a splintered yard came crashing to the deck at the height of the storm. The old captain had set it for him. Even after ten days, it pained him fiercely, and it added to his impatience and irritation at the delay. He was anxious to be back in Hong Kong, safe in the harbor with his chests of silver.

Just his bloody luck, he cursed under his breath as he ran a finger of his good left hand down a column of figures in his big ledgerbook — all in the black, heaven be thanked. To have such a superb run marred by the storm and this fool accident — ! He closed the book awkwardly, with a slam. "The devil with it!" he muttered aloud. At least he still had the silver, lying safe in the darkness of the storeroom, enough to pay off all the bonds he'd signed for the purchase of the opium, with a nice fat profit left over. Why, if he wanted, he could even order another clipper built at Plymouth to replace the *Merlin*, a clipper as fine and swift as Jardine Matheson's new *Mor*.

By tomorrow afternoon, Morgan calculated, they should make Hong Kong. He leaned back in his heavy oak chair and gazed absently out the window of his cabin at the afternoon sun where it shone on waves that were the color of cheap jade. Gray-white seagulls, mewling raucously, floated about the ship. The kitchen boys, he supposed, were dumping scraps of waste off the stern. Fish bones most likely. That would attract the gulls. He leaned farther back and raised his eyes to the dark-stained beams that crossed the ceiling of his cabin.

He'd had enough for a while, he mused. Enough of the trade and the storms and the danger. He'd spend a few days at Hong Kong, long enough to settle his affairs there and have a few tumbles with Ch'iu Ming or Choy Ling — he didn't give a damn which one — and head out to Manila or Singapore for a month. The change of scene would be good for him.

Once he'd thought of taking Kathleen along. She'd always wanted to get out of Macao. Then he'd gotten his mother's letter. Even now he found it hard to believe what he'd read. Kath blind, when she'd always been so strong, so full of life. He groaned out loud at the thought of her groping in her darkness. What hell it must be for her! He'd go to see her in Macao as soon as he got back, he resolved. Not that there was much he could do for her —

The soft rap on his cabin door startled him. Wu Hung-li, he guessed. No one else knocked so unobtrusively, like the tap of a coiled snake's head. A strange fellow, old Wu. Always sort of slinking about the edges of things. A damned good comprador, though, Morgan reminded himself. He was lucky to have him. "Come in, Wu," he rumbled, taking a sip of brandy from the goblet that sat at his elbow.

The Chinaman glided into the room with his hands in his sleeves. His horsey old face wore a smile. "You well, *taipan*?"

No, you old bastard. My head aches, my wrist hurts like hell and all I really want to do is get drunk. "Aye, I'm well, thank you, Wu," he said. "What is it?"

Wu Hung-li glanced up at the ceiling. "Cookee boy makee ver' big feas'. Thankee sea gods fo' save from *tai fung*. Allee boat come. Can?"

"Allee boat? Even the Lascars?" Morgan had never liked Chinese food, but a feast would be a diversion, even for him.

Wu Hung-li nodded. "Allee same boat. Allee same Lasca'. Can?"

"Can," said Morgan with a sigh.

Wu Hung-li brightened. His eyebrows went up, crinkling the parchmentlike skin of his forehead. "Hong Kong tomorrow?"

"Aye, with this good steady wind. Maybe even by morning."

The comprador bowed slightly from the waist. "Ver' good, *taipan*. My say cookee boy." He turned to go, then paused with his hand on the door frame as a cry from the watch in the crow's-nest echoed down through the passageway.

"Sa-a-a-ail ho!"

Morgan's head jerked upward. Maybe one of Dent's, he calculated, or Matheson's. With luck, they'd have fresh news from Hong Kong. He had to jostle Wu Hung-li aside as he strode through the doorway, up the steps and onto the quarterdeck. The fresh breeze struck his face. Adam Peabody was at the wheel, a telescope clasped in one sunburned hand.

Morgan scanned the horizon. "What's this about a sail?"

"Can't make 'er out from here yet. Watch says she be off the port bow. Have a look." Peabody chewed on the stem of his pipe and blew out a puff of smoke as he handed Morgan the glass.

Morgan put the piece against his eye, focused awkwardly with his left hand and squinted at the line where the sky met the water. At first he saw nothing. Then a speck of white appeared.

Wu Hung-li had followed him up onto the quarterdeck and was crowding close to his elbow. "*Taipan* see?"

"Aye. Right on the horizon. Look if you like, Wu."

The Chinaman grasped the scope and pressed it to his eye. For a few moments, he scanned furiously, screwing up his face with the effort. Finally, he thrust the scope back at Morgan in disgust. "My no can!" he grunted. "No boat come!"

Adam Peabody took the glass, holding it steadily in the direction Morgan indicated. "Aye!" he exclaimed. "I'll be hornswoggled, there she be! Purty as a white pigeon, an' headed this way! Can't make out 'er flag, though. Here — " He handed the scope to Morgan again. "Try your young eyes — "

The ship was moving closer. Now the speck of white that was her sails could be seen easily with the naked eye. Wu Hung-li glared pensively as Morgan raised the glass to his eye and strained to see the vessel's flag, his eyes throbbing with the effort.

Squinting, he focused on the tiny dot of color that danced atop the mainmast. "It's blue . . . and red . . . by damn! By damn, it's ours! It's the *Kestrel*! What the hell — I gave no orders — " He lowered the scope, puzzled and excited. "Make for her, Peabody! Fire a salute to make sure she's seen us!"

Adam Peabody bellowed the orders. Within moments, the salute roared out from the cannons. The *Kestrel* answered at once as the two clippers hurried toward one another like long-lost twin sisters. Peabody smiled and sucked the stem of his pipe. "Could be she's come out t' look for us," he mused.

"Aye. Makes sense." Morgan rubbed his chin as the *Kestrel* swept closer. He glanced over at Wu Hung-Li. The comprador was standing at the rail, fingering his necklace of amber beads with one dagger-nailed hand, his face expressionless. He looked ancient, Morgan thought, old and time-weathered like some ugly Chinese monument. He raised the scope again to watch the *Kestrel* cut through the white-capped waves, the ship's soaring beauty tugging at his heart. Within the black-edged circle of the glass, he could see the details of her rigging, the lean, brown Lascar in the crow's-nest, looking back at the *Peregrine* through a telescope of his own. Morgan lowered the glass a trifle, to the level of the deck. That would be Preston at the wheel, and there, just behind him — Morgan gasped and leaned forward, almost

jabbing himself with the eyepiece of the scope. "God's blood!" he exclaimed out loud. "Now there's a sight I never expected to see! It's my father!"

Morgan stood on the quarterdeck and watched Archer Bellamy come across in the jolly boat and mount the *Peregrine's* rope ladder. More than a year had passed since the two of them had seen one another. The old man hadn't changed much, Morgan reflected, looking down at him. The silver in his hair was a shade more pure, maybe, and his eyes looked as if they'd sunk deeper into his craggy face. He was thinner, too, but he towered as tall and straight as ever. His step had never been more vigorous. Watching him, Morgan tingled with a mixture of curiosity, anticipation and dread. What, under God's blue heaven, could have induced Archer Bellamy to put out to sea on an opium clipper?

The Reverend put a hand on the rail of the stairway that led to the quarterdeck, looked up and saw his son. He took the steps two at a time, and in the next instant he was clasping Morgan's shoulders in his big, bony hands, so hard that Morgan almost winced under his grip. The gesture was probably as close to an embrace as Archer Bellamy had ever come with his son.

"Aye, but you're safe! God be thanked for that! We feared for your life!"

"A typhoon — " Morgan forced himself to meet the intensity of those winter-blue eyes. "It blew us off course and did some damage — But a delay of a few days wouldn't bring you up here like this. I've been late coming into Hong Kong before."

"Nay. 'Twasn't the typhoon . . . " Archer Bellamy's eyes darted about the deck. "Where's Wu 'ung-li?"

Morgan glanced around in surprise. "Oh — right here, last time I looked. Must've gone below. What's the — "

Morgan's father's eyes silenced him. He leaned close, his voice a grating whisper. "It's your wife. Your Priscilla. She's a prisoner in Amoy — "

"Pris!" Morgan staggered with the impact of the shock. "Pris — alive — "

"Listen!" The Reverend hissed, his hands tightening like two vises on his son's shoulders. "Wu 'ung-li knows! 'e's known all along. When Chengqua tried to get word to you, Wu sent three cutthroats t' murder 'im! Lucky for us they failed!"

"Chengqua told you this?" Morgan remembered the old fisherman, the note from Chengqua that Wu Hung-li had read and never shown to him . . . The pieces began to fall into place. Droplets of sweat oozed out onto Morgan's forehead and dried in the wind. "Pris — we've got to go back and get her!"

Adam Peabody had heard everything. "Aye," he growled, "but we'd best get Wu Hung-li first, afore he murders the lot of us! Come on!"

Wu was not on deck. Peabody waited with the Reverend while Morgan went down and got the loaded Colt .45 out from under the mattress of his bunk. Then the three of them went on down the passageway to where the comprador had his cabin.

Morgan's mind was churning. Pris, alive and in prison! He was almost too overwhelmed to think of Wu Hung-li, or even to realize that the old comprador's guilt would solve the mystery of the attack that had killed Blake Robards; that he, Morgan Bellamy, would be vindicated in the eyes of all who had believed the whispers about his complicity. He could only think of Pris, his Pris. Already his brain was spinning with plans for her rescue.

Adam Peabody was in the lead. Reverend Bellamy touched Morgan's arm, slowing his step until the two of them had fallen behind a bit. "Morgan," he whispered. "There's one thing I didn't tell you up there on the deck."

"Yes?" Morgan turned to his father, apprehension suddenly gnawing at his throat.

"Your Priscilla . . . Son, she's with child."

Morgan swallowed hard and moved down the corridor after the captain. His child? By heaven, at least there was one chance of it. But God knows what she'd suffered since the night he'd lost her. He felt a growing lump of dread in the pit of his stomach. Oh, Pris! he moaned inwardly.

The thin pine door was locked. Adam Peabody rapped on it with his pipe. Only silence answered. "Aye, but he be in there, all right!" Peabody jangled a ring of keys, shuffled through them and found the one that fit the lock. The key slipped into the hole and turned. With his left hand, Morgan raised his Colt and pulled back the hammer . . .

The door swung slowly open. The cabin was empty. They entered cautiously, looked under the bed and in the wardrobe. Wu Hung-li

was gone. The room was undisturbed except for a brassbound wooden dressing case that lay open on its side on the bunk. Its contents — combs, brushes, razors, soap — had been dumped hastily onto the coverlet. A false bottom had been ripped out of the case, revealing a small, empty chamber underneath.

"Well, by thunder, 'e's not 'ere!" the Reverend exclaimed. "Let's get on with findin' 'im!"

They quickly searched the other cabins, the galley and the crews' quarters without finding a trace of Wu Hung-li. "Could be the bastard's jumped overboard," Adam Peabody mused.

"The hold!" Morgan growled. "Get a lamp!"

The three of them descended into the dark bowels of the ship, Archer Bellamy carrying the whale-oil lantern, Morgan with the Colt drawn and cocked and Adam Peabody bringing up the rear with a stout hickory club in his hands. The hold smelled of pitch, damp wood and rat droppings. It was nearly empty now, for the opium it had once held had been sold all the way up the coast from Kitchioh to Yuhwan. Spare sails and ropes were piled along one side. The rats scurried out of sight as Reverend Bellamy swung the light of the lantern over them. It was so quiet that Morgan could hear his own heart in his ears and hear the heavy, agitated breathing of the two older men beside him. "Wu Hung-li!" he shouted into the darkness. "Come on out! We've got you!" His voice bounced eerily off the planks and timbers. There was no answer, but the hair rose on the back of Morgan's neck. Every instinct told him that the comprador was nearby.

"We know it all, Wu!" he shouted. "How you let Pris be captured, how you almost killed Chengqua for trying to warn me — "

The timbers creaked softly as the *Peregrine* crossed a swell and rolled slightly to port. A pile of twenty empty opium chests lay at the far end of the silent hold, covered with a tarpaulin. "Down here — " Morgan beckoned his father. "Shine your light in this end."

A brown rat, its eyes blinking in the sudden brightness, sat on its hind legs atop the heaped-up chests. Morgan could see their square outlines under the canvas . . . He caught his breath. Along one side his eyes had spotted a rounded silhouette. "There — " he pointed. "Hold the lantern high! On the count of three, pull the canvas back, Peabody!" Perspiration trickled down the back of his neck as he aimed the Colt and counted. "One . . . two . . . three!"

Adam Peabody jerked away the canvas. In the yellow light of the lantern, Wu Hung-li lay on his back across one of the chests. His eyes were wide open, bulging horribly. His tongue, swollen and almost black, hung out of one side of his mouth, between his big horse teeth. Morgan lowered the pistol. He would not be needing it now. He leaned closer and touched the comprador face. The skin was still warm. He had not been dead long. One hand still clutched at his throat, blood showing where in his agony his pointed nails had torn the skin. The fingers of his other hand were locked around a six-inch-long piece of hollowed-out bamboo with a brown, sticky substance clinging to its ends. Morgan examined the ghastly face. On Wu Hung-li's puffed lips, he saw traces of silver-gray powder.

Twenty-Five

Amoy
September 1840

The island city of Amoy had caught only the edge of the typhoon that had so nearly brought the *Peregrine* to ruin, but even here the supreme wind and the rains that swept along in its wake had done their damage. Broken roof tiles were piled in the streets where they'd been swept up after the wind had torn them loose. The cobblestones were washed with a thick coating of mud carried by the torrent from the thin soil of the hills.

Morgan Bellamy stood on the quarterdeck of the *Kestrel* and gazed pensively across the little harbor at the frenzied cleaning and rebuilding activities on shore. His eyes followed the movements of the small, distant figures as they loaded mud and rubble into baskets and carried them off, slung and balanced on the ends of bamboo shoulder poles. His thoughts tried to penetrate the jumble of streets and buildings, to wind their way to the unseen cell where his Pris would be, lonely, frightened, desolate — and great with child.

A more cautious man would have waited. His father had told him of Chengqua's offer to arrange a ransom. But the thought of Pris, alive and in prison, had sent him flying straight to Amoy.

The baby would be his, he resolved. God only knew what had happened to Pris in the eight months that had passed since he'd last held her in his arms, but the baby would be his, by damn. Even if it had coal-black hair and slant eyes and didn't come till February, he swore by heaven, it would be a Bellamy. And if his father didn't like the idea,

he could go to blazes! He only wanted Pris, wanted her back, wanted her alive, under any terms!

His eyes swept the harbor. There were no other foreign ships in sight. He began to wonder uneasily if he should have kept the *Peregrine* with him instead of sending her on to Hong Kong with the silver. No, he resolved. He had made the right decision. He couldn't afford to risk his hard-won treasure to the brigands and pirates that slunk in and out of Amoy like jackals. Besides, he had a plan for getting Pris free, and if that plan worked he wouldn't need the *Peregrine* or the silver.

The *Kestrel* glided deeper into the harbor, skirting green-prowed fishing junks and setting sampans to bobbing in its wake as Preston edged it to within shouting range of the shore. Archer Bellamy stood beside Morgan, peering excitedly at this, his first close-up glimpse of a purely Chinese city. The Reverend was to be a vital part of Morgan's plan. With-Wu Hung-li dead, no one else on the ship could function as interpreter.

In exchange for his services, Archer Bellamy had exacted a painfully high price from his son. "I'll not be workin' on the side of the devil!" he'd declared stubbornly. "Morgan, either you promise me now that your ships 'ave made their last opium run, or I lock myself up in my cabin and don't come out till we're back in 'ong Kong!"

Morgan's jaw had dropped open. "Good Lord," he'd breathed, staring at the man who'd given him life. "You'd do it! Even if it means losing Pris, you'd blackmail me like that!"

The Reverend had met his gaze squarely. "Aye. If it's the only way to save my son from this devil's trade, I'll do it! I'll pull you out of 'ell by the seat of your stubborn britches if I 'ave to!"

"You'd sacrifice Pris for your damned principles!"

"Would you sacrifice 'er for your cursed opium?"

In the end, Morgan had been unable to stand up to him. He'd placed his thickly splinted right hand on his father's worn Morocco-leather Bible and, cursing inside himself the whole time, had spoken the words the Reverend put into his mouth. "I, Morgan Bellamy . . . do place my hand on this Holy Book . . . and swear that I will cease at once and forevermore . . . to traffic with the devil . . . in the selling of opium . . ."

Now, as the *Kestrel* dropped anchor, he glanced angrily up at Archer Bellamy's jutting profile. Once Pris was saved, he promised himself, he'd find a way to see that his father never got the best of him again!

Something was stirring on shore. Morgan felt his pulse pick up speed. The mandarin boat was coming out, red banners flying from the twin staffs on either side of the prow. A pompous-looking Chinaman sat under a silk canopy, hands folded over the roundness of his pot belly. Morgan licked his lips nervously. So far, at least, things were going as he had planned.

Morgan's father had passed on Chengqua's warning about trying to get Pris back by force. But this plan, if it worked, would not involve force. Only a bit of persuasion . . . He watched as the mandarin's boat slipped closer over the muddy brown water of the harbor. The fingers of his left hand fondled the hard outline of the Colt .45 which was thrust into his belt, concealed by his loose-fitting jacket. He swore under his breath at the accident that had broken his right wrist. It would only make what he had to do that much more difficult.

The ornately carved boat, its prow fashioned like the head of a dragon, had drawn alongside the *Kestrel*. The mandarin, his secretary and two attendants were coming up the lowered gangway. "Remember — " Morgan hissed in his father's ear. "You're only to translate what I tell you! You've never played this game before and I don't want anything to go wrong!"

A special chair had been brought up from Morgan's cabin for the mandarin to sit in. The elderly Chinaman smiled as he settled into it, smoothing the wrinkles from his peach-colored robe, its peacock insignia and worked gold clasp showing him to be an official of the third rank. He was as plump and pink-faced as a baby, Morgan observed, with a button of a nose and a receding chin that made him look mild and rather stupid in a rabbitlike way. So much the better, Morgan told himself as he offered the mandarin a cheroot. Not too bright and not too brave. Perfect.

The mandarin took the proffered cheroot and accepted a light from Morgan. He smoked expertly, studying the foreign devils through the haze of the smoke with his sharp, bright little eyes. Shrewd eyes . . . disturbing eyes. "You may not be aware," he began in a deep voice that belied his appearance, "that this port is forbid-

den to all foreigners. I must insist you depart at once." Although Amoy lay well within the province of Fukien, many of the port officials spoke Cantonese. Archer Bellamy had no trouble translating the mandarin's words into English.

"Your indulgence, noble one," said Morgan with a smile. "We were lost, blown off course by the *tai fung*. Allow us only to provision our ship, and, perhaps, lighten our cargo. Then we will be on our way."

"Very well . . ." The mandarin nodded curtly to his aide, who drew the emperor's well-worn proclamation from his sleeve and began to read from it in a loudly chanting voice. Morgan found his mind wandering. He glanced nervously back and forth from the mandarin to his towering father and back again. The Colt lay heavy and cold at his waist.

With the formalities concluded, the mandarin motioned for his aides to descend to the boat. Morgan held his breath as the secretary and the two attendants, in their grass-cloth robes and conical hats, shuffled back down the gangway and took their seats in the dragon-headed vessel.

The mandarin took a final puff on the butt of the cheroot and tossed it over the side of the *Kestrel*. His small eyes narrowed. "You mentioned the possibility of lightening your cargo . . ."

Morgan waited while his father translated. The Reverend's apprehension showed in the tautness of his voice and the throbbing of a vein in his temple. With a jerk of his head, Morgan motioned for the gangway to be raised. "Aye," he said slowly, "but in truth, what we have in mind is to take on something extra here . . ."

The gangway creaked into place. At the sound, the mandarin's head jerked around. When he turned his face back to Morgan, his eyes were wide with sudden fear. His hands, with their gold nail shields, clenched and unclenched like claws on the arms of the chair. Moving swiftly, Morgan whipped out the Colt and pressed the tip of its barrel against the mandarin's plump neck. "Send your men ashore — " he rasped. "Tell them that if the foreign woman and the sailor aren't on this ship in one hour, I'll blow your head off!"

Archer Bellamy, perspiring in the blaze of afternoon sun, translated into Cantonese. The mandarin's pink face paled. He rose from his chair and stepped to the rail, the Colt's steel barrel hard against the back of his skull. The three attendants and two boatmen stared help-

lessly up at him, mouths gaping. The little mandarin drew himself up and barked out orders in a stream of Fukienese. Damn, Morgan thought. He'd forgotten about the language problem. All he could do was pray the fat little bastard was telling his men the right thing.

Almost at once, the dragon boat pushed away from the ship and made for shore, the two boatmen sculling furiously at the stern. A crowd had begun to gather on the quay.

The mandarin settled back into his chair. "A glass of brandy if you please," he said in a calm, imperious voice that masked his fear. "Then we will wait."

Preston, sweating like a horse, brought the brandy. The mandarin sipped it delicately, his long, gold-shielded nails curling around the stem of the glass like talons.

The mandarin's men had landed and disappeared. Archer Bellamy fished out his turnip watch and looked at the time. "Twenty to three," he muttered, keeping the watch in his hand.

A scant fifty yards away, the crowd on the dock was growing. Silent watchers, mostly, afraid to endanger the life of their mandarin by shouting curses at the foreign devils. Many of them carried clubs, Morgan noticed, or shovels, or axes. Ten minutes ticked past. Twenty. The mandarin nursed his brandy, making it last. Morgan stood with the Colt's barrel pressed against the warm, plump neck. The rooftops and barren, gray hills of Amoy steamed under the heat of the sun. Morgan felt his head growing light, but he dared not move.

Toward the end of twenty-seven minutes, the crowd stirred and parted. A cluster of men dressed in the drab tunics and trousers of prison guards shouldered their way out onto the quay. Morgan strained forward, raising the scope with the fingertips of his splinted right hand. The left hand he kept firmly on the Colt. The guards shoved two bedraggled figures forward all the way to the end of the quay. They stood there, still blinking in the brightness of the sunlight. Japeth Pratt . . . and Pris.

Pris! Morgan's throat ached as he looked at her through the scope. Her face had grown thin and pale, the cheekbones standing out, the eyes huge and sunken in their sockets. She was staring at the ship without any sign of emotion or recognition. The awful thought crossed Morgan's mind that in the long months of her captivity she might have gone mad. A wide iron collar was locked about her neck

and a burly guard was holding the chain that was attached to it. God's blood, he had her just like a dog on a leash!

Morgan's eyes traveled reluctantly downward, half-afraid of what he would see. Under the ugly gray smock, Pris's body rose and bulged outward. He drew in his breath sharply. She was enormously pregnant. The mandarin shifted in his chair. Morgan glanced down and shoved the gun barrel harder against his neck. "No tricks now," he muttered in English.

His eyes flew back to Pris. Aye, he mused, counting the months, big as she was, the baby could well be his. And if he didn't get her out of here soon —

The mandarin boat was coming out again, the thin, middle-aged secretary sitting in the place of honor this time. A few yards from the *Kestrel* they stopped. The secretary rose to his feet, squinted up at the ship and called out something in Cantonese.

"What did he say?" Morgan asked his father.

Reverend Bellamy's brow creased with worry. "He says release the mandarin at once or the prisoners will be strangled before your eyes. Morgan, son, maybe we'd best — "

"No!" Morgan jabbed the end of the Colt harder against the mandarin's throat. "Tell him that if they touch those prisoners, their mandarin dies! And after that, we'll turn our cannons on them and level the whole damned town!"

As the dragon-headed boat glided back toward the dock, Morgan allowed himself his first real look at Japeth Pratt. The sight chilled his heart. The little seaman looked like a wild man, his sandy hair and beard long, unkempt and streaked with gray that had not been there the last time Morgan had seen him. His face was gaunt and skull-like; his eyes bulged wildly as he strained against the restricting collar and chain, clawing at the iron neckpiece with his hands. Morgan remembered how Pratt had wept after a week in the brig of the *Peregrine*. After months of being crammed into a Chinese prison cell, maybe poor Pratt was insane. Maybe both of them were. He swore at himself for even thinking it, and turned his attention back to the mandarin boat, which had now reached the quay. The Chinese on the pier crowded about it.

Reverend Bellamy twisted the chain of his watch with the long, square-tipped fingers that were so like Kathleen's. "What d'you think?" he muttered.

Morgan studied the mob of people on the quay. They were more restless now, noisier, angrier. Some of them had begun to shake their improvised weapons above their heads. Pris stood impassively in her chains. Pratt fought and struggled, jerking forward against the iron collar, then falling back. "I think it's a bloody stand-off," said Morgan. "We've got the mandarin and the guns, but they've got Pris and Pratt and they know we don't want them hurt. Hell, we could be here all day!"

The mandarin twirled his empty goblet in his hands, saying nothing. Preston lit a cheroot. The pungent smoke blended with the hot, steamy air. Morgan stood and looked at Pris. Her eyes were on him. Lord, why didn't she shout? Why didn't she give any sign that she knew him?

Pratt had been still for several minutes. Suddenly, he lurched forward with such force that the chain was jerked out of the hands of his guards. Then he was off the end of the pier and in the water, thrashing toward the ship. The guards tried to reach him with their pikes, but they were too late. Blast, Morgan thought, if he's put Pris in more danger — But he found himself cheering the little sailor on with the rest of the crew. "Come on, Pratt!" he roared. "Swim for it, man!"

In his excitement, he slackened the pressure of the gun against the mandarin's neck. All at once, the fat old fellow was out of his chair and clambering over the rail. With two good hands, Morgan could have stopped him, but the wretch was surprisingly agile for his age and build. He tore loose from Morgan's last futile grasp and hurled himself over the side, his robes flying like wings until he hit the water. Instinctively, Morgan cocked the Colt and aimed it at the bobbing head. No, he realized, he couldn't shoot the bastard. They'd kill Pris for sure if he did. Helplessly, he watched. The mandarin was swimming ably, striking out toward shore with confident strokes.

The dragon-headed boat left the dock and came gliding out to pick up the mandarin. Another smaller boat had headed to cut off Pratt.

Pratt was in trouble now. He'd covered perhaps a third of the distance from the quay to the *Kestrel*, but his weakened condition and the weight of the collar and chain were taking their toll. He was losing strength. His skinny arms flailed at the water. His head sank out of sight to emerge moments later, mouth gaping helplessly for air. The small, flat boat was closing in on him. One of the guards carried a long

pole with a hook on the end. Morgan groaned out loud as Japeth Pratt splashed and floundered in his efforts to elude the boat. The shaggy head sank beneath the surface of the brown water and appeared again just off the bow. The guard thrust out with the pole and caught nothing but air as Pratt vanished again. This time he did not come up.

The guard in the boat jabbed the stick down into the water and swept it the length of the boat on both sides. Morgan waited, his throat tight as a vise. "God rest his soul," he heard his father murmur in a choked voice.

Priscilla's hands were clasped to her face. Her body was hunched over, shaking with horror and grief, the first reaction Morgan had seen from her. He ached to go to her, to hold her.

The men in the dragon-headed boat had pulled the mandarin out of the water. They turned and started back for the dock, but the dripping mandarin, almost screaming with rage, ordered them back out to the *Kestrel*.

Morgan watched them come, the mandarin seated in soggy majesty on the chair, his cap missing, his peach-colored robe clinging wetly to his fat body. Morgan cursed himself. He had underestimated the little devil.

The boat had pulled up to within a few yards of the ship. The mandarin, water dripping off the ends of his gray mustache, glared up at the foreigners on deck. "You see," he announced haughtily, "your interference has killed the man. I advise you to leave this harbor at once, before the woman dies as well."

Morgan listened to his father's translation, the sweat running in rivulets down his face and back. "Touch her," he thundered, "touch one hair of her head, you bastard, and we turn our cannons on your town! We'll blast it into rubble, and you with it!" It was all bluster, Morgan knew. As long as Pris was in danger, he could not fire on Amoy. Looking down at the shrewd, plump face in the boat, he realized that the mandarin knew it, too. His heart sank.

"Very well," the mandarin snapped. "You came into our harbor; we welcomed you peacefully. Now you will pay for your treachery!" With a jerk of his head, he motioned the boatmen to turn. He did not even look up as the dragon-headed prow of the boat sliced through the water and headed back to the quay.

Sick with dread, Morgan put his hands on the rail and pressed his forehead down against them. If only he'd brought the silver! He

would have given it all to have Pris safe beside him — to hell with Bellamy & Company!

The Reverend put an awkward hand on his shoulder. "We've done all we can, son," he said softly. "Maybe we'd best pull out and leave before we cause her 'arm."

"Leave?" Morgan choked. "Leave my wife to those bastards, knowing what they might do? Not on your bloody life, Father!" He straightened and turned to Preston, who was waiting with one hand on the wheel. "Bring her in a bit and ready the cannons," he said quietly. "We'll aim high, away from Pris and the rest of them. Maybe we can scare the devils."

As the *Kestrel* pulled up anchor and moved in closer, Morgan studied the city. The buildings were gray granite, like the hills, most of them low, having only one or two stories. He didn't want to kill anyone, not with the first volley, at least. Finding a safe target wouldn't be easy.

Fifty yards or so down the waterfront, the square tower of a Chinese pawnshop rose above the stores and warehouses. Morgan had seen such pawnshops in Canton. He knew that the inside contained many floors, the lower ones reserved for furniture and other bulky items, the upper for smaller valuables such as jewelry. He rubbed his chin as he studied its distinctively rounded roof. Perfect, he assured himself. Preston followed his gaze and nodded.

"You're sure you won't be killin' anyone now?" The Reverend asked cautiously.

"Not likely." Morgan fumbled for a cheroot in his pocket, put it in his mouth with his left hand and let Preston light it for him. "Upper floors are just used for storage. Let's bring her in closer, Preston."

The *Kestrel* carried six cannons. Preston, in his low, tight voice, ordered the three on the port side of the ship trained on the pawnshop tower. "Ready . . ." he barked tersely, "aim . . . fire!"

The three fifteen-pounders roared in unison, their balls slamming into the tower. When the dust cleared, the watchers on the ship could see that one of the walls was caved in near the top; the roof was sagging, tile sliding and crashing down onto the street below. A gasp of dismay went up from the crowd on the dock.

Pris, he suddenly realized, was gone. Anxiously, he shaded his eyes and examined the crowd. He could see neither his wife nor her

guards. They had taken her away, perhaps, to hide her somewhere in the city, so that he would be reluctant to fire again for fear of harming her.

He waited for five minutes, for ten. The crowd was growing ugly. They'd begun to shout out their anger, brandishing their weapons and throwing stones at the ship, stones that struck the water far short of their target. The smoke from the cheroot burned hot and dry in Morgan's lungs, its taste nauseating him. He flung it over the side and poured himself some brandy in the mandarin's glass. A flock of gulls swept low over the harbor, skimming the coffee-brown water. His father had taken the little Morocco leather Bible out of his pocket and was ruffling the pages.

The mandarin, in a dry robe, was coming out in his boat again. Sick with apprehension, Morgan stood at the rail and waited.

"My guns are loaded and ready," he called out when the dragon boat had come close enough. "Bring the woman out at once, or we fire again!"

The mandarin glared up at him as the boat drew even closer. At a slight nod from him, one of the boatmen tossed something up onto the deck of the *Kestrel*. It landed with a light thud at Morgan's feet.

It was a small, carved teakwood box, of the size that might contain a bracelet or a necklace. It was closed securely with a brass fastener. Bewildered, Morgan picked it up, twisted the clasp open and raised the lid. All the fight went out of him.

There on the black satin lining of the box lay Priscilla's ear. He recognized it from the tiny brown mole just above the lobe, the small hole that had been pierced to hold her earrings. The blood on the cut edge was fresh . . . Morgan Stared at it, his eyes bulging in horror, until his father snatched it away and closed the lid.

The mandarin drew himself up and shouted something loudly in Cantonese. Morgan leaned on the rail, willing himself not to break down before his adversary.

"Father . . . what did he say?" he whispered hoarsely.

Still clutching the Bible, Archer Bellamy turned toward his son and put a hand on his arm. "The mandarin says," he began his voice hoarse with strain, "that if your ship is not on its way out of this harbor by the time his boat touches the dock, he will come out again and bring you her right hand."

Tinghai, Chusan
September 1840

The island of Chusan lay easternmost on the great bulging curve of the China Coast, about a hundred miles south of Shanghai. It was blessed with pagoda-crowned hills and rice paddies that lay like jewels in the valleys or climbed the slopes in graceful terraces. Its fields and marshes abounded with wild duck, woodcock and pheasant. The first sight of it was likely to set the hand of a wandering soldier to his pen and paper for the writing of a rhapsodic letter home. The entire British garrison on Chusan, however, agreed that Tinghai, the island's only large town, was a piece of hell's own pigsty.

Thinghai was a tightly packed maze of a place, its streets so narrow that a man with long arms could touch the drab buildings on either side at the same time. The covered sewers ran right down the middle of them, smelling nastily. There were no parks or squares. The only open spaces were the brownish pools where the sewers emptied.

Tinghai's Chinese inhabitants had fled after only token resistance to the British nine-pound field guns, and so the English had moved into the town. Already one of the larger houses, occupied by young Andrew Jardine, boasted a chalk-lettered wooden sign — *Jardine-Matheson*. Reverend Karl Gutzlaff, who'd gone north with the fleet, had taken another house, the interpreters Thom and Morrison yet another. The merchants lived well here, but as for the soldiers . . .

Dougal MacKenna clenched his teeth in suppressed rage as he strode up the narrow street toward the hillside on the town's edge where the men of the Twenty-sixth were camped in their tents. He was not looking forward to what he had to report to them after his interview with Lt. Colonel Burrell of the Eighteenth, commander of Her Majesty's expedition in China. His field boots crunched on the stones of the foul-smelling street as he approached the town gate, the words of his exchange with the old man still ringing in his ears.

"Come, Major, aren't you overreacting to the situation?" Burrell was sixty-three, too old to be commanding an active military force. "I realize we've had a bit of sickness — "

"Sickness! Damnit, sir, I buried three of my men yesterday! Twenty more of them are down with malaria this morning!"

"It's the night air, that's all, Major. If you'd just instruct them to close their tents after sundown — "

"We need netting against the mosquitoes as well, sir. They come up out of the swamps. Clouds of them. It's bad enough for us on the hill. The eighteenth has it even worse — "

"I'm sorry, Major, there's none to be spared. You'll just have to make do — "

And so it had gone. MacKenna had complained about the food. The flour from the ships was rotten and full of worms. The butts of salt beef and pork had had a bad smell when they were loaded in India, and now they were inedible. The soldiers had taken to looting rice from local granaries, to stealing pigs, ducks and fish from the Chinese. As for the water, which seven *bhistis* hauled up to the camp in goatskin bags, the only source of it was the canal into which the sewers emptied. Flux and dysentery were rampant.

"May I remind you, Major," Burrell had replied icily, "that your men are soldiers, not pampered-fops?"

"And we came to China to fight, sir, not to die off like flies." MacKenna checked his tongue. Arguing, he knew, would get him nowhere. "If you please, sir, the merchant ships have netting and good food aplenty. I've already spoken with young Jardine. They're willing to sell us some."

Burrell's rheumy blue eyes had twitched and lowered to the freckled hands that were clenched on the desk. "Can't afford it," he muttered. "And I'll have no more of your bypassing my authority to go to people like Jardine. It's insubordinate, Major. Bloody insubordinate, and I'm warning you — " He'd broken off into a fit of coughing, cleared his throat and spat into a brass cuspidor. "Your men will have to get along as best they can! And I'll have no more of this grumbling from the likes of you! Do I make myself clear?"

Dougal MacKenna had saluted and taken his leave, quivering with silent anger all the way back to Tinghai in the launch. Burrell had not even set foot on Chusan more than three or four times. He lived in comfort aboard the transport *Marion*, where he and his aides messed lavishly on the very merchant stores that he refused to purchase for his troops.

The major reached the city wall and sat down in a hollow where the masonry had been cut low by the nine pounders. The hill rose above

him, earth showing raw where the men of the Twenty-sixth had cut steps and terraces for their tents. The sun beat down on his shoulders, soaking his body with sweat under the scarlet tunic. With a sigh, he drew a well-thumbed letter out of his pocket, stared at the envelope for a moment, then pulled out the crackling paper and, for perhaps the hundredth time, began to read.

My Dear Dougal . . . Rose Bellamy's handwriting was delicate, curling like the tendrils of a morning glory vine.

You will be glad to know that Kathleen was found drifting off Macao and was brought safely home . . . Aye, he'd been glad. He'd all but wept with relief when he'd learned that he'd not brought about Kathleen's death, for she'd been more alive than any girl he'd known; wild and spirited as a young filly. Yet he would never love her. His first sight of Rose at the dance in her gray silk gown, her hand at her throat and her golden hair clinging softly around her face, had told him that much.

. . . Dougal, I have given a good deal of thought to what you asked me, but my answer must still be no. When you left me in England, I recommitted myself to my husband and my children. I will not break that commitment, even though I may never stop loving you . . . Dougal MacKenna read and reread the last part of the sentence, his throat tightening as it always did.

We have caused enough heartache, you and I . . .

Dougal glanced up to see one of his aides, a young lieutenant, striding down the hill toward him. Reluctantly, he folded the letter and put it back into his pocket.

The lieutenant hailed him. Craddock was his name, a stout fellow with a round, merry face. Puffing a little, he stopped and raised his hand in a wave that passed as a salute. In spite of their difference in rank, the two of them were good friends.

Dougal's return salute was more of a shrug. "Craddock. What's going on?"

"Just anxious to see how you came out with old Burrell."

Dougal sighed and shook his head. "Couldn't budge him."

"Burrell's an ass." Craddock spat into a mud puddle. "Should've been drummed out ten years ago! Any news from the fleet?"

"Aye. They reached the mouth of the Peiho over two weeks ago. I talked to the old man's adjutant while I was waiting to see him. Seems the emperor's sent one of his right-hand men, a chap named Chisan or

Kishen or something, out to negotiate with Elliot. Chisan's promised to go back to Canton to straighten out the mess."

Craddock scratched his ear. He had black hair and round cheeks that always looked windburned. "Shook the emperor up right well an' proper, I'll wager!"

"Aye," Dougal grinned. "And they say His Majesty's hopping mad at our friend Lin Tse-hsu. Old Lin will most likely be sacked as soon as word gets back to Canton."

"Sacked? From what I've seen of these blokes and their justice, he'll be lucky to keep his head!"

"Well, Craddock, I — " Dougal's left eyebrow lifted. "What the devil's that hanging out of your pocket?"

"This?" Craddock drew out a long, thin, braided length of graying hair. "Don't look at me, Major. I got it off Armbruster. He and some of the boys made a little raid on a village this morning — looking for meat and eggs, but that's not all they came back with . . ."

Dougal frowned. It was impossible to keep his restless troops from a certain amount of mischief, and foraging was almost a necessity. Still, there were excesses . . . "You'd best tell me about it, Craddock," he said.

Craddock sat down beside him on the wall. "Well . . ." he began slowly, "it was Armbruster and Hill — you know that bunch, about four or five of them. Anyway, it seems they came to a farmhouse. Some wealthy family who'd run away from the town evidently, from the looks of what they brought back. Jewelry . . . jade carvings . . . some really nice silk robes. Lawful loot, they claimed."

Craddock paused to wipe his face with a square of fine Chinese silk. "I hung around and listened to them talk for a few minutes. Seems there was an old man and a middle-aged woman who could've been his daughter-in-law. And there was a girl. Pretty thing, they said. They — they each took a turn at her. Hill was first. He was bragging that she was a virgin . . ."

"Lord!" Dougal picked up a loose stone from the wall and flung it against one of the buildings. It bounced off and skittered down the street. "Look, Craddock, the looting's one thing. But raping a girl — "

Craddock twirled the end of the long braid. "Armbruster cut this off the old man," he said. "He was swinging it about the camp, saying 'Oy promised me gel one o' them foki pigtails, an' 'ere it be!' I took it

away from him. Didn't want to start a run on pigtail hunting. Blimey, we'd have our own war right here!"

"Aye, you did right, Craddock." Dougal didn't know a great deal about the Chinese, but he'd read that the worst thing you could do to one of them was to cut off his queue. "By damn," he swore, "haven't we done enough? The old man, probably cut off from his ancestors or something, and the girl — most likely ruined for any kind of good marriage. Just like that, Craddock. And those blighters didn't think twice about it." He stood up and kicked the wall. In his ten years as a soldier, he'd seen his share of atrocities, even had a part in a few of them. But this meaningless attack on a respectable Chinese family — "Round up Armbruster and the others!" he barked. "We're going to take back every last thing they stole, including the pigtail! I just wish to God we could give the poor girl back her virginity as well!"

An hour later, Dougal, Craddock, Armbruster and two of the Indian *bhistis*, loaded down with silk robes, satin quilts and boxes of jewelry, were trotting down the trail toward the place where Armbruster had said he'd found the Chinese family. The grass was knee-high on both sides of the trail. It sang in the wind.

"I still think we should've brought more men," grumbled Craddock, brushing a mosquito off his cheek.

"And scare them out of their bloody wits again?" Dougal, who was in the lead, glanced back over his shoulder. "Maybe with only two of us and the *bhistis* loaded down with their goods, they'll know we've come peaceably. Once we've spotted the house, Armbruster, you're to stay behind and wait. No sense giving them the sight of your ugly face again."

Armbruster, a balding, blond hulk of a man, grunted his assent. They walked on in silence, the grass swishing against their pant legs, until they came to a top of a rise. Armbruster pointed down into a little clearing surrounded by brush and clusters of bamboo. "There she be!" he muttered, a note of sheepishness in his voice.

Armbruster watched from the hilltop as the others wound their way downward, the *bhistis* stumbling with their burdens. A small, pug-faced brindled dog that was tied by the stone house began to yap at them as they came nearer.

"Maybe they've gone," hissed Craddock, eyeing the hut distrustfully.

"No, look, there's smoke coming out of the chimney." Motioning the others to stop, Dougal approached the windowless house. "Don't

be afraid!" he called in a loud, cheerful voice. "We won't hurt you! Come on out!"

The door of the house was made of bamboo poles lashed together with some sort of vine. It did not move. The dog yapped and yipped hysterically, lunging against the end of its rope. Craddock took his pistol out of its holster. "Stay back with that thing! You'll only scare them," Dougal rasped. "It's two women and an old man, remember!"

"Look," said Craddock. "Why not just put the stuff down outside here and go?"

"If we don't make sure they're here, somebody else might get it." Dougal walked gingerly up to the door and rapped softly, the sound muffled by the thickness of the bamboos. "Who's in there?" he called. True, they'd not be able to understand a word of what he said, but they could tell from the tone of his voice that he meant them no harm. He pushed on the door. It swung inward.

The inside of the hut was dim, its only light coming from a small, high window in the back. Blinking, Dougal stepped across the threshold. The place smelled of wood smoke and singed feathers. A plucked goose hung from a rafter.

The old man was crouched in a ball on the floor, one hand clutching the spot on his head where his queue had been. A pretty girl, her face bruised and her hair disheveled, lay on the bed, her eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling, and her legs, in clean cotton trousers, pressed tightly together. Dougal took another step.

The other woman — he did not see her. She was behind the door on a stool, her hands gripping a sharp-edged, melon-sized rock. As Dougal moved inside, the woman raised the rock high and brought it down with all the strength of her terror on the back of his head. He fell without a sound, his skull shattered, its fragments driven into his brain.

Twenty-Six

Macao
September 1840

Rose cradled her son's face between her hands, feeling sorrier for him than she had ever felt in her life. His bloodshot blue eyes had sunk into the shadows of their sockets. His breath smelled of stale brandy. Even Archer had been unable to keep him from being drunk most of the way back from Amoy to Macao. They had come in late last night, and Morgan had stumbled into bed without saying a word to her. Now it was morning.

"We couldn't get her free, Mother," he whispered hoarsely. "We couldn't get Pris — "

"Hush. Your father told me all about it last night, Morgan." Rose bit back the tears. "We mustn't lose hope. Surely once we've won the war — "

"That could take months. Years. She's going to have her baby *now*!" He turned away from Rose and walked out of the parlor. "I'm going back. I'm taking all the silver we've got. To hell with the company!"

Kathleen, hearing his voice, had come partway down the stairs in her long white nightgown. "Morgan?" she called, her soft voice blending delight and concern. He strode up the stairs two at a time and gathered her in his arms. "Oh . . . Morgan!" she whispered, tracing the contours of his face with her fingertips. "I heard about Pris . . . "

"Kath . . . my poor, poor Kath — "

She stiffened. "Now I'll not be anyone's *poor* Kath! You'd best learn that right away!"

Morgan drew back from her. "Let me look at you, then!" He studied her with his eyes as she stood there on the stairs, her face still pink and white from sleep, the sun from the upstairs window shining down on her tousled hair. "Why, Kath, I don't know what I'd expected, but not this. . . . You look — wonderful!"

"Aye . . . " She flung herself back into his arms. "And I know it! Now come down to the kitchen. We'll have some tea if it's ready, and you can tell me about dear Pris. Oh, Morgan!" She slipped her hand about his waist and hugged him hard. "I'm so glad you're here — and so sorry . . . so sorry . . . "

Rose followed the two of them into the kitchen. Morgan was right, she mused. Kathleen had never looked lovelier. There had been a new softness about her in recent days, a quiet, pearl-like luster that could only come from within. And deny it though she might, Rose knew the reason why. She looked at her daughter's glowing face and at the same time she remembered the dismal legend of Maude Pickett.

Chengqua had gone. They had neither seen nor heard from him since the night he had left Kathleen in the doorway. But whatever he had given Kathleen, it had been enough to make her happy. Rose was grateful but apprehensive. Her daughter's contentment could not last forever.

She put three china cups and saucers on the table and laid a small teaspoon on each saucer. Either Chengqua would return or he would not, she reflected as she checked on the tea. If he never came back to Macao, Kathleen would surely grow bitter and disillusioned in time. And if he did return —

Rose guided Kathleen into her chair, letting her hands rest a moment longer than necessary on the slim, square shoulders. If Chengqua came to Macao once more, Kathleen would want to go to him. And she could not do it easily without help. To give that help — that was the agonizing decision Rose would have to face. But she could not make it until the time came. She could only pray for the wisdom to hold Kathleen back or to let her go.

Archer had come into the kitchen. He and Morgan were discussing the possibility of trying to ransom Pris.

"They'll not be lettin' you into the 'arbor again, Morgan. We'd best find ourselves a go between. Someone like Karl Gutzlaff — "

"He's with the fleet. So are Morrison and Thom for that matter."

"One of the Co-hong, then. Old 'owqua, or Cheng — "

"By heaven!" Morgan slammed his fist down on the kitchen table, the impact rattling the cups and spoons in their saucers. "After what they did to her — If you think I'd beg any damned bloody Chinaman for help —!"

Kathleen's face blanched. "Have you forgotten, Morgan, that it was Chengqua who let you know Pris was alive?"

Morgan put his teacup down. His eyes were hard. "I'm sorry, Kath. I know you won't understand. But he's Chinese, same as the rest of them. And I'll not be crawling to any Chinaman to ask a favor!"

Rose glanced from her son to her daughter, feeling the sudden, growing schism between them. Silence, awkward and oppressive, hung above the kitchen table. Archer poured himself some more tea, steam forming a cloud between the teapot and the cup.

Kathleen rose to her feet, trembling in her stark white nightgown. Her hair, still uncombed, hung in loose red-gold ringlets around her pale face. Her hands gripped the back of her chair. "This is as good a time as any," she said in a shaking voice, "to tell you that Kao Ma has invited me to spend a few days with her at Chengqua's house. I told her I would be delighted. She's coming for me with the sedan chair this afternoon." She thrust out her chin and waited for the onslaught.

Archer choked slightly on his tea. "Chengqua —?"

"Chengqua is in Canton, Father. He won't be there. Only Kao Ma and her old husband."

Morgan leaned forward, gripping his spoon like a weapon. "Kath, to have you throw this in my face — how could you?"

Something was moving Rose, compelling her to fly to Kathleen's side and put her arm about her daughter's waist. "Stop it!" she snapped. "Kao Ma's been a better friend to this girl than any of us have. She's had more compassion . . . more patience! I'm honored to have such a fine woman come to my house, and if Kathleen wants to visit her, I say well and good!"

The silence descended over the kitchen again. Archer took a napkin and dabbed at his mouth. Morgan stared at the pattern of the leaves in the bottom of his teacup. Rose stood there quivering, astounded by her own boldness and by the swiftness with which she had made the decision she'd so feared. With those few words, she had defied her menfolk and set her daughter free. Kathleen reached down and

squeezed her mother's hand. Rose felt a surge of tears. The warm pressure of those long, thin fingers — that was worth any price!

The knock at the front door was so loud in the midst of the stillness that it startled them all. "I'll go," said Rose.

A young seaman, a stranger, stood on the stoop. "Beggin' your pardon, m'um. I wus told I might find Mister Morgan Bellamy here."

"Yes, I'll get him," she said, turning to find that Morgan had come out of the kitchen with his father behind him.

"Aye, I'm Morgan Bellamy. What is it?"

"I'm frum the *Osprey*, sir. We jus' got in last night, all the way frum Bombay! She's alyin' off 'ong Kong now, sir, with fifteen 'undred chests o' prime Malwa in 'er 'old! Thought you'd like t' know!"

"Fifteen hundred, you say! Why, with Malwa going at five hundred fifty dollars a chest, that's — "

"Morgan!" Archer Bellamy clenched his son's arm. "Your promise — "

Morgan ignored his father. "I'll only be a moment," he said to the young seaman. "Wait for me."

"Morgan!" The Reverend's grip spun him around. "You promised!"

"A promise forced is no promise, Father." Morgan tried to brush past him.

"With your 'and on the 'oly Book!"

"You *forced* me to, dammit! You took advantage of me! What kind of man would do that to his own son?" His tone softened. "Look, Father, just this one shipment. Then . . . we'll talk about it at least. What's one more?" He held his breath. For an instant, it was so quiet that Rose could hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the parlor.

"You *promised*!" Archer Bellamy rumbled, planting himself between Morgan and the doorway. "Rose, 'e promised!"

"Leave her out of this, Father. She had nothing to do with it."

"You could sell the shipment Matheson would buy it, or Dent — "

"They'd not give me beans for it! I'm going, Father." Morgan tried to pass, but Archer barred his way. "Let me by. I'm going."

The Reverend drew himself up. He loomed over Morgan by the breadth of his hand. "Walk out that door, Morgan Bellamy," he thundered in his most strident hellfire and brimstone voice, "walk out that door and you walk out of my life!"

"Morgan — no!" Rose stumbled toward him. Archer held her back with one arm.

Morgan was pale. "Then it's good-bye, Father," he said quietly. "Mother, this wasn't your doing. I'll not be saying good-bye to you or to Kath. Don't fret. And don't fear for Pris. I'll get her back." He pushed past his father, who offered no resistance now, and turned to the young seaman who stood on the stoop with his mouth still gaping. "Let's go," he said. "I presume there's a cutter waiting for us."

"Aye, sir. Down on the Praya."

Morgan did not look back as he strode off down the street in the direction of the harbor. Rose stood in the doorway and followed him with her tear-filled eyes until he disappeared around the corner.

Amoy
September 1840

Cheng Lo stood in the shadow of the ruined pawn-shop tower, peering across the dark water of the harbor as the mandarin boat, lanterns dancing at either end, carried Priscilla Bellamy out to the Jardine Matheson schooner. Good fortune, he reflected, that the English ship had happened to be in the harbor, its captain willing to receive her. Otherwise he would have had to escort her back to Hong Kong himself aboard the junk that had brought him to Amoy, and she was in no condition for rough travel.

Disguised in the clothing of a prison guard, he had assisted her into the mandarin boat with his own hands. She had not recognized him in the darkness. He smiled to himself. Priscilla would not even know who had rescued her.

The news of Morgan Bellamy's disastrous attempt to free his wife had traveled fast. Cheng had received it with dismay, and yet he was not surprised. The *taipan* was young and impulsive, prone to sacrifice caution for the sake of pride. He had paid dearly for that pride at Amoy.

As for Cheng himself, he felt the urgent press of time. Junks coming down the coast had brought word to Canton that the English fleet had succeeded in blocking the mouth of the Peiho. Rumors of the emperor's displeasure with everyone involved in the matter of the opium dispute were rampant among the Co-hong. Fat Mowqua had whispered to him that Lin's dismissal and arrest were to be expected any

day. Cheng's own downfall was inevitable now, and he was resigned to it. His only wish was for enough days to finish the tasks that remained: to attend to the security of his family, to be of assistance in the release of Priscilla Bellamy and, if heaven willed it, to see Kathleen once more.

Morgan Bellamy's letter had reached him in the evening. The next morning, wearing peasant clothes, he had boarded a small fishing junk for the journey down the estuary to Hong Kong. He had sighted the anchored *Peregrine* at dusk, its masts standing like skeletons against the violet glow of the sky. With his spine tingling, Cheng had mounted the rope ladder that the gruff old captain had tossed him. He had never been aboard a foreign ship before, and he gazed at the sleek lines and towering masts with a mixture of interest and revulsion, for the *Peregrine*, after all, was an opium vessel.

He had found Morgan Bellamy seated behind his heavy oaken desk in the dimness of his cabin, a half-emptied glass of brandy in his hand. More than a year had passed since he had last seen Kathleen's brother, and the change in him was chilling. Morgan's blue eyes, sunken and bloodshot, gazed back at Cheng like two red holes in skull. His hair was combed and his face freshly shaven, but his clothes looked as if he had slept in them for two nights. The hand that clutched the stem of the glass trembled slightly.

"Through no fault of my own, I find myself in your debt, Chengqua." His toneless voice echoed in the dusky cabin. "I want you to know that I have made every effort to keep from being further obligated to you. Alas — " he took a sip of the brandy, "I have exhausted all possibilities. You're the only one left who can help me."

Cheng seated himself in the empty chair that faced Morgan's across the desk. "But you knew that I was willing to help you all along." He spoke slowly, choosing the English words with great care. "Why did you not send for me at once?"

Morgan snorted softly and picked up a small box made of crudely carved teakwood. His left hand balanced it, cradled it. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, his mouth oddly twisted.

Cheng felt himself pale slightly. "If what I have heard is true, then, yes, I can guess what it is."

"It's her ear!" hissed Morgan. "An' I've been drunk from the minute I set eyes on it. But I've been sober enough to swear on this

box that I'll never call a bloody Chinese my friend again, an' that includes you!" He drained the glass in one jerking motion. "But I've got t' get 'er back. Soon. I've failed 'er once, and I can't fail 'er again! I've half a million dollars in silver aboard. Take it all if you need it! I don't care anymore!"

Cheng studied him quietly. "So much?" he said at last, knowledge of the money's source coloring his voice with irony. "A tenth that sum will be enough, if your wife can be ransomed at all. I can only try." He leaned back in the chair and looked at Morgan, his eyes narrowed. "I can leave tomorrow morning. By junk. And you must remain here in Hong Kong. Even the rumor of your presence in Amoy might put her in danger."

Morgan nodded gloomily. "I will pay you whatever you ask."

"I ask nothing."

"You must ask something. There can be no friendship between us, Chengqua." Morgan's hand tightened around the teakwood box.

"While you sell opium, you need have no worry on that account," Cheng said coolly. "But I will do it out of pity for your wife and out of regard for your family."

Morgan clenched his teeth. "I will pay you. Anything you ask. But I won't be obligated, you understand? I'll go back to Amoy an' shoot that yellow-faced old bastard and take her myself before I let you do it for nothing! Name your price — or be damned!"

"Very well." Cheng rose to his feet. "But you must give me what I ask. Tonight. Before I leave this ship."

"Agreed." Morgan tilted backward in his chair, his face defiant. The thrust of his chin was poignantly like Kathleen's in her most stubborn moments.

Cheng inhaled, feeling the stale, tobacco-scented air of the cabin rush into his lungs. "That box in your hand," he said. "That is what I ask as my price for ransoming your wife."

Morgan's blue eyes widened with bewilderment in his white face. "But — it's worth nothing!"

"Is it? Then give it to me." Cheng extended a firm hand, palm upward. "Give it to me." When Morgan hesitated, he reached out and took it from him. "Now what is this box to you? What is its worth?"

Morgan gaped at him. "You know what it is to me!" he rasped. "It's all I have left of my wife!"

Cheng sat back down and spoke more gently. "Your wife is in Amoy. What you have here is no longer part of her." He shook his head. "There is nothing in this box but your own guilt and hate. Keep it, and its poison will make an old man of you." He held the box out again. "As long as you have it, your hate will never leave you. Allow me to take it from you. That is all I ask."

Morgan stared sullenly at the box.

"Do you want your wife to return and find you with it, like this?" Cheng asked softly. "Has she not seen enough hate to last ten lifetimes?"

Morgan's hands were clenched on the desk, his face twisted with suffering. "Take it?" came the tortured whisper. "Take it and go!" His face fell onto his arms and his shoulders began to shake with pent-up sobs . . .

Cheng had left at dawn by ocean-going junk for Amoy, the silver stashed in the hold under bags of rice. In the pearl gray of early morning, with no land in sight, he had weighted the little box with a piece of lead and dropped it quietly into the sea.

The fifty-thousand-dollar ransom he had brought had been sufficient, as he knew it would be. Cheng knew the old *taotai* who governed Amoy. He was a man who could be swayed more by logic than by money. Still, the persuasion had not been easy. Cheng had visited old Soong in his garden, and had spent a good part of the afternoon simply drinking tea and exchanging pleasantries with the man before he had dared to broach the real reason for his visit.

Old Soong had drummed the tips of his gold nail shields against his cheek. "How can you say, my friend Cheng, that I should give up the woman, when I endured such indignities to keep her? Held prisoner on a *fan kuei* ship with a gun at my neck! Forced to jump overboard and swim — at my venerable age! Pah! It was unthinkable!"

"Agreed, worthy Soong. But I have come to warn you that if you do not release her at once, much worse will befall you."

"From the English?" Soong spat into a bed of peonies. "We are not afraid of them! Early in the summer, one of their warships came into our harbor and tried to land men on our shore. Our guns drove them away."

Cheng sipped the fresh congou from a tiny round cup that was as thin as an eggshell and edged with gold. "That is just the point, my

friend. We are at war with the English, and if the woman were English, you would be well justified in keeping her." He put the cup down and looked boldly into the man's eyes. "But she is not English. She is an American, and the Celestial Empire is not at war with America."

The mandarin shrugged. "English or American. What difference does it make? The *fan kwei* are all the same!"

"Not so!" Cheng leaned forward, his voice intense. "The foreigners have shown me their maps. England is a small place, no bigger, I would say, than Korea. But America — on their maps it appears to be nearly as large as our own Middle Kingdom! You say you have no fear of the English and that is good. But bring the Americans into the war . . ." He paused dramatically and took another sip of tea.

"I see," said old Soong, weakening a bit.

"Surely you would not take it upon yourself to anger the Americans into joining their English brothers . . ."

The only sounds in the warm afternoon air were the distant call of a thrush and the drumming of Soong's gold-shielded nails on the top of the ebony table. "But my friend," he said at last, "the ransom you offer is very small for a woman who is wanted so much."

"Be wise and take it. It is all I have. The woman is not strong. She will die having the child and then you will get nothing."

The old man gazed up at the treetops and preened the tips of his gray mustache. "Very well," he murmured. "Tonight, at the hour of the rat. And I will take your money now. You can depend on me to keep my word."

An excited crowd had gathered at the rail of the schooner. Against the flash of the lanterns, Cheng saw the bulging silhouette of a pregnant woman being helped aboard. Old Soong had kept his promise. As for himself, he reflected, he had now fully earned the contemptuous epithet of *han chi'en*.

Cheng left for Canton on horseback that very night. The journey would have been easier by sea, but he had his reasons for choosing the rugged, hilly overland route. These few days were precious to him, for they could well be his last days of freedom. He wished to spend them under the open sky, in the peace of the mountains, with the warm, honest strength of a horse between his knees. He traveled alone, for he wished to think in solitude, to tie up the ends of his life as best he could.

The security of his family pressed upon his mind. At any cost to himself they must be protected from the emperor's punishment. He would lay their innocence at the feet of the Son of Heaven. He would offer his own life in exchange for their safety. Tao Kuang was known to be a just ruler. With his mercy Jung Fei could live on in the House of Cheng, surrounded by the children and grandchildren she loved.

A satisfactory marriage had been arranged for Shen-Lan, the last of his sons. A wife and children would lend purpose to the boy's life. They would give him an awareness of his responsibility toward others. As for the opium, more than half a year had gone by since he'd touched it. The boy was working contentedly in the shops of his uncles and was proving himself an able businessman. His health had returned. Cheng could only hope fervently that the nightmare was at an end.

The shaggy, short-legged Manchu horse snorted companionably in the darkness. Cheng reached out and patted the sturdy neck; his fingers gently removed a burr from the tangled mane. The pathway had begun to climb, to wind and twist. He knew of a mountain inn that lay six or seven *li* ahead. There he would rest himself and his horse.

The moonless sky was black and glorious with stars. Cheng rode along a ridge, surrounded by the shimmering darkness. A nighthawk cried out as it swooped above his head. Although he was alone, he felt a strange sense of comfort. Kathleen seemed to be with him, beside him in the night, seeing the heavens through his eyes.

The lights of the small inn twinkled in the distance. Cheng urged the horse to a trot. The memory of Kathleen surrounded him like a cloak, soft and full of warmth, and he knew that whatever the cost, he would see her again before he died.

He left the inn at dawn. Four days of riding lay ahead, from P'ingho to Ch'aoan, Chieh-yang, Shihlung and finally Canton. Cheng resolved not to hurry. He knew with an increasing certainty that when he arrived at his house in Canton a letter would be waiting for him — a letter carrying the imperial seal and written in vermilion ink.

Priscilla Bellamy stood at the rail of the schooner and watched the sun come up. She was dressed in nothing but the captain's longtailed nightshirt, the only garment that could be found for her after her own flea-infested Chinese clothes had been thrown over the side. Her hair

was freshly washed and combed over the circle of drying scabs that ringed the opening of her left ear. The baby was kicking vigorously.

One phase of the nightmare was over, she reflected. Another phase would begin when she reached Hong Kong. But for these short days she would rest. She would eat and replenish her strength, and she would begin to live again.

She remembered her last sight of Japeth Pratt, his grizzled head bobbing above the water of the harbor. A single tear slid down her cheek. It was Pratt's death that had finally shocked her out of the stupor of resignation into which she'd fallen after the poisoning. It was the little seaman's struggle for freedom that had rekindled her own burning desire to be free.

When the guards had taken her to cut off her ear, she had fought like a wildcat, kicking, biting and nail-gouging with such fury that it had taken three men to hold her. And she had screamed as the sharply honed razor sliced into her flesh. Feeling pain; feeling terror; feeling rage. Feeling. At last, feeling. They'd heated a knife blade to redness to cauterize the bleeding wound. She had shrieked once more and passed into unconsciousness.

Priscilla had spent the last days of her captivity pacing her cell and thinking. She *would* be freed. She could not doubt it. Now that Morgan knew she was here, his pride alone would demand that she be rescued. And afterward, there would be decisions to be made, not all of them hers. But with Morgan or without him, she would have to make a life for herself and her child.

Life without Morgan — that was the most painful reality she would have to face. That one distant glimpse of him, standing so helplessly on the deck of the *Kestrel*, had brought back a rush of the love that she thought had long since been beaten, starved and ravished out of her. But the chance that a new life had grown from that one last, angry coming together with Morgan was so remote that she could not even hope for it. Her baby would be Chinese. She would be a fool not to resign herself to that great probability.

She would not see him, she resolved. The anguish of it, the contempt in his eyes, would be too much to bear. Instead, she would go into seclusion until the birth of her child. Then, perhaps to Manila or Singapore or even back to America, to begin a new existence — without Morgan.

The sun rose out of the distant ocean, slowly, with heartbreaking beauty, changing the color of the sky from pewter to pearl and from pearl to rose-gold. A flock of terns circled the schooner and soared into the sunlight of the new day. An old Confucian proverb she had heard once drifted through Priscilla's mind . . . *If you can one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation . . .*

Yes, she promised herself, she would renovate herself with each rising of the sun until she became a renewed person, strong and whole. And after today, she would never look back again.

She turned her eyes one last time in the direction of Amoy, where Japeth Pratt's body slumbered at the bottom of the harbor. The debt she owed to that ugly little man was greater than she could express in words. For a moment, her eyes misted. "Good-bye," she whispered. "Good-bye, dear friend." Her words were answered by the cry of a lone seagull, gliding above the mizzen, its voice strangely melancholy in the glory of the dawn. Priscilla turned her face into the wind, her eyes staring ahead toward Hong Kong. Her fingers gripped the brass rail as she began to tremble. Oh, Morgan . . . Morgan . . .

Macao
September 1840

Kathleen stood in the curve of the moon gate in Cheng's garden, wearing a long robe of the softest silk. Kao Ma, whose skillful hands had fashioned it for her, had told her that it was a pale apricot in color. Indeed, it *felt* apricot. She fingered the delicate fabric and tried to imagine how it looked on her with its high collar, long, full sleeves and flowing lines. She tried to picture the garden as she remembered it — the stone table in the shelter of the wisteria vine, surrounded by four small, round stone stools, the clusters of palm and bamboo along the wall, the lotus pond where goldfish, bright as flames, darted among the reeds.

The coolness of the air and the singing sound of the crickets told her it was evening. The steamy fragrance of rice and cabbage wafted from the kitchen where Kao Ma was preparing dinner. Kathleen let the brick path guide her feet as she strolled about the garden, inhaling the sweetness of flowering jasmine. In the six days she had passed in the peace of this house, a tranquillity she had never known before had descended upon her spirit. It was as if she had spent her life in wan-

dering and had, at last, come home. This was Chengqua's house and she had made up her mind to be Chengqua's woman.

Rose had helped her pack her things, saying little. Yet, in the silence, there had been an implicit understanding between the two women. Kathleen was leaving. She would return, as a young bird returns to its old nest, but she would never truly live in the house of her parents again. They had not been close for many years, these two. Rarely since Kathleen's early childhood had there been any show of open physical affection between them. When Kao Ma had come for her, Kathleen had simply taken her mother's hand and held it for a long moment, her fingers clasping tight in an effort to convey love, understanding and forgiveness. "Stay as long as you like, Kathleen," Rose had whispered, tears in her voice.

Kathleen circled the garden, stopping to kneel carefully beside the lotus pool. Leaning forward, she thrust a hand into the cold water, feeling a delightful chill when one of the fish brushed her fingers. She laughed, stood up and shook the water from her hand. The pool had been exactly where she'd calculated it was. She knew her way about the garden almost perfectly. As she turned to go toward the table, she heard the sound of the outer gate opening and closing and the shuffling feet of the old man, Kao Ma's husband, as he hurried into the kitchen. "Be quick, woman!" he gasped excitedly. "Our master has come!" He pattered off to the shed behind the kitchen where the bundles of dried fuel grass were stored. A few moments later, Kathleen heard the sound of his pouring the water to heat for Cheng's bath.

She stood beside the lotus pool, her heart pounding as she waited for Cheng to find her. She had known he would come — or perhaps her hope had been so intense that it had become a kind of knowing. She held her breath, tortured by the seconds that passed before she heard the brush of his felt-soled boots on the bricks of the pathway. Turning toward the sound, she opened her arms. In the next instant, he was holding her close, his body warm and strong beneath the silk of his robes.

"Kathleen . . ." he murmured against her hair.

"Were you surprised to see me?" she whispered.

"No. I dreamed that you would be here." Conscious, perhaps, that the old servants might be watching, he released her and began to guide her back up the path, his arm about her waist.

"How long can you stay?" she asked eagerly.

"Only tonight, Kathleen." The melancholy note in his voice sent a chill of foreboding up her spine. But you'll be back, she wanted to ask him . . . surely you'll be back soon? She held her tongue. She knew what his answer would be and she was afraid to hear it.

"Kao Ma has put a cloth on the table. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. Perhaps I was waiting for you." Her laughter came with effort at first, then more naturally. Chengqua was here; they had tonight. She loved him and she was determined to be happy.

They sat on the stone stools, facing each other across the circular table as Kao Ma brought out a simple meal of rice, minced duck and cabbage soup. Kathleen ate everything, including the rice, with a flat-bottomed porcelain spoon. "Next time you see me," she smiled at him through her blackness, "I will be using chopsticks. Kao Ma is teaching me."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Kathleen," he said softly, softly, "I am leaving tomorrow morning . . . for Peking." She caught her breath and tightened her grip on his hand.

"I wanted to keep it from you," he said. "I realize now that it would not be fair . . . nor would it be kind. I have been summoned by my emperor — " he stroked her fingers, "for trial."

"Chengqua — why?" Her voice rang with shock.

"I can explain only a little," he said, and he told her briefly about his commission, about Lin and about the letters. "Do you understand what I have done?"

"I think so." She laughed nervously. "But it doesn't seem so serious. "What . . . are they accusing you of?"

"Treason."

She went cold. "And . . . the penalty for treason?" she asked in a whisper.

Cheng did not answer her.

"No!" She pressed his hand to her face and began to sob. "Don't go! We can run away — to Singapore . . . to the Philippines . . . "

He touched her hair. "Then they would punish my family, Kathleen. Don't cry. Please. Not tonight."

She took a deep breath. "No," she said, forcing herself to be calm. "Not tonight. When you are gone, then I will cry."

"That's better." He squeezed her hand and released it. "Now finish your food and we'll have some tea." He paused, a note of amusement in his deep voice. "With no sugar!"

They continued the meal in silence, for it was not the usual Chinese custom to converse while eating. But even the silence was filled with hidden questions. Kathleen nibbled at the rice and the succulent, spicy bits of duck, savoring each moment of his presence, engraving it upon her memory. It could well be that this night was all she would ever know of him. If it was to be so, there would be no room in it for sadness.

When they had finished the soup, Kao Ma came again with steaming, scented cloths for their hands and faces. Afterward, she brought the tea, which Kathleen herself poured with great care, feeling Chengqua's smile of approval upon her.

They sipped the delicate green tea, their fingertips touching across the table. Tenderly, she explored the contours of his hand, such a broad hand and so finely made, the nails of the fourth and fifth fingers longer and more pointed than the others. And he still wore the small jade ring.

She had come to his house. All along she had known the decisive meaning of her act, but the true enormity of its consequences were only beginning to dawn on her. Beyond this night, if she chose to give herself to him, there could be no turning back.

Even if she never saw Chengqua again, she would be forever marked as his woman, her name whispered in horror and contempt among her own people. Even her blindness would not excuse her in their eyes. She would take her place alongside the wretched Maude Pickett — a step lower, perhaps, since Maude's coolie lover had at least been Christian and unmarried. Cheng was neither.

She would give up the shelter of her family and the respect of her friends to become the second concubine of a man old enough to be her father, a man whose culture and way of life were completely alien to her own. And she was not fool enough to believe that his people would welcome her. Except for the devotion of Kao Ma, she would be alone. If Chengqua did not return from Peking, she would have nothing but his memory to last her through years of darkness, unless — Her face flooded with sudden warmth. Her fingers involuntarily tightened around Chengqua's hand.

"Kathleen," he said softly, "the wisest, kindest thing I could do at this moment would be to summon my chair and have you taken home."

She felt the tension in him, the tautness of the tendons in his hand. "But you will not force me to go," she said.

"No, my heart. I will not."

The old man shuffled in to announce that the bath was ready. Cheng's robe swished as he stood up. "If you will excuse me, Kathleen . . ." His voice held an unanswered question.

"Yes," she murmured. "Of course." She listened to him go. Then she sat with her hands pressed to her face. In the moment before he had spoken, her mind had caught a glimpse of something, a flash of light that had vanished before she could see it clearly or grasp its meaning. Now she struggled to bring it back, clenching the muscles of her brow in a fury of concentration. Her gift, her strange sixth sense, had given her premonitions and warnings. But never before had she known it to give her sight. Her fingers clutched her face as she gasped with the strain of trying. Her head began to throb. Just when she feared she would faint from the effort, the vision burst upon her again, startling in its clarity.

A youth was running in the sunlight. Swift and graceful as an antelope, he came toward her, and she saw that he was tall, with fine, broad shoulders. His feet were bare. He was dressed simply, in the blue cotton tunic and knee-length trousers of a Chinese peasant, and his long, thick queue streamed out behind him in the wind. As he came closer, she saw that his hair, which had looked black at a distance, gleamed like copper where the sun shone on it. His strong features, fierce as an eagle's, blended courage and intelligence, stubbornness and humor. Kathleen looked into his narrow Oriental eyes and saw that their dark irises were flecked with green . . .

As the sight of him dissolved into blackness, Kathleen, trembling with joy, buried her face in her arms. "Oh, thank you . . ." she whispered into the night breeze.

Kao Ma came to the table a short time later. For a few moments, she worked at clearing away the food and the dishes, humming softly as she worked. At last she stood beside Kathleen. "And what do you wish now, my lady?" Her simple words contained a looming question and her own implicit answer. She had addressed Kathleen not as *my child*, which was usual with her, but as *my lady*, as if Kathleen had already become the mistress of Cheng's house.

Kathleen felt her own heart pounding as she gave her whispered reply. "Please prepare me for bed now, Kao Ma . . . and take me to the room of your master."

She felt the pressure of the little woman's hand on her arm. "I will prepare you," Kao Ma said, "as I would prepare my own beloved daughter for the night of her marriage. Come, child."

Washed, perfumed and dressed in a thin sleeping robe, Kathleen lay alone and trembling under the down-filled, satin quilts of Cheng's bed. Fleeting, she thought of Joaquin Silveira, who had wanted her like this . . . of poor, dear Vincent Stanton . . . of Dougal MacKenna. No, she mused, it would not have been right with any of them. Deep in her wild, misguided heart, she had always belonged to Cheng . . . only to Cheng.

The night was singing around her, the air in the room cool and fragrant with autumn flowers. The breeze stirred the ripening plum branches outside the window and tinkled the glass wind chime that hung by Kao Ma's door.

Kathleen stretched in the bed, feeling the delicious silkiness of the down-filled quilt against her legs. Now that she had made her decision, she was totally at peace. She would give herself to him without fear or regret; and after what she had seen in her mind, she knew that she would live happily with the consequences.

The old woman had perfumed Kathleen's skin with gardenia oil, smoothing the fragrance onto her breasts, thighs and buttocks. "*Hao!*" she had laughed when Kathleen blushed and showed signs of skittishness. "I put it where it will do the most good!"

Now she could smile at the memory. Kathleen stretched once more, closed her eyes and waited for Chengqua to come to her.

She heard his footsteps on the stones outside, heard the opening and closing of the door and, a moment later, felt his weight as he sat on the edge of the bed.

He reached out and smoothed her hair back from her face. "My Kathleen . . ." he said softly, "are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes!" she whispered, her voice fierce with joy and conviction.

His hand cradled her cheek. "I know a little of your customs. I know this is not an easy way for you, with no one to speak the words over us . . ." He paused and lifted her hand. She felt his jade ring slide onto her middle finger. "I want you to know, Kathleen, that in my eyes, in every way possible for me, you are my wife . . . and between us there is no dishonor . . ."

She lifted her hands and let her fingertips explore his face — the sleekness of his shaved head, the strong, straight brow — a Manchu trait — and the long, narrow eyes . . . the cheekbones, high and prominent, the nose somewhat broad, the nostrils slightly flared.

One finger traced the edge of his upper lip. The lines of his mouth were strong and clean, like the curve of a hunter's bow. "My husband . . ." she whispered. "My love, I have seen our son."

He did not question the strangeness of her words. "And is he like you, my heart?" he murmured, bending to find her in the night. His mouth moved against hers, his parted lips gently compelling. Desire tightened her throat and sent its tendrils curling downward into the deepest parts of her.

"He is . . . you," she said softly. "No — he is us . . . a blending of you and me. And he is beautiful. Tall and strong and swift . . . I saw him running . . ." Her hands found his shoulders, firm as marble beneath the silk of his robe. The web of her arms caught him and pulled him down to her until his head rested in the hollow of her neck. "Chengqua — " Her voice was husky with need.

"Wait — " He drew back for a moment. She heard the ripple of his robe where it slid to the floor, and then he was beside her in the satiny darkness of the bed, his skin cool from the night air and sweet with the fragrance of sandalwood. Kathleen was not afraid, but she shivered with excitement as he drew her close and enfolded her in his strong arms.

For a time he only held her, one slim knee pillowed warmly between the hard-muscled smoothness of his thighs. His hand caressed her hair, stroking the length of her back until her agitation had mellowed into glowing contentment, until that same contentment grew into an agony of yearning and she began to stir in his arms.

"Kathleen," his lips moved against her hair, "my heart . . . my life . . ." She lifted her face and let him kiss her, tenderly at first, his wonderfully virile mouth cupping hers, separating her lips. His hand loosened her robe and she felt it slip away to be lost beneath the quilts — one last, frail barrier between them gone. There would be no more barriers, she promised herself. No more secrets, no more fears. She was his. He clasped her close, his kisses suddenly fierce and his hands seeking, finding, touching . . . exquisitely touching . . .

Kathleen felt the fire in him, felt the urgent pulse of his body as strongly as she felt her own. Her whole being cried out for him to love her. "Yes — " she gasped. "Chengqua, yes — "

But Cheng did not hurry. He let their love unfold with the richness of rare tapestry, his fingers savoring each new discovery of her, his mouth searching, tasting, finding new places and new ways to give her pleasure until she moaned like a dove. Her own hands, bound for so long by old taboos of restraint, began a loving exploration of him — the broad, smooth chest, its nipples small and widely spaced, the supple curve of his back, the diamond-shaped hollow at the base of his spine. She felt a burning urge to know him, to know the essence of this man called Cheng Lo, so intimately and so completely that no part of him would remain a stranger to her. Her moist palms reached down, down to the very center of his manhood to touch and cradle him, and in the sheer beauty of that moment she felt the magnitude of his need for her. She knew his weakness, his fear, his great vulnerability. Love welled up in her, a surging as old, yet as new and fresh, as springtime itself. She felt her body opening like a flower to welcome him. "Now . . ." she pleaded.

She cried out in a small voice, like a night bird, as he became one with her, not in pain but in perfect joy. There was no holding back now. Rapture took them both, lifting them, forging them together with its heavenly fire. She knew him now. She knew the fury of his uncontained passion, the full strength of his love. "Chengqua . . . oh, Chengqua . . ." she whispered again and again as the sublime frenzy overcame her, as it rose, soared and erupted in one great, sweet bursting. "Oh, my love, my dearest, dearest love . . . "

They lay in each other's arms, still trembling. Wonderingly, he kissed her cheeks, her eyes, her lips . . . "That one could live so long and never feel such happiness," he murmured. "My Kathleen, I did not know . . . I did not know how it could be between a man and a woman . . . I am reborn."

Kathleen could not speak. She lay with her arms twined around his neck, exhausted and totally fulfilled. Nothing moved except her fingers where they toyed with the satiny plaits of his queue. His words were music to her, for she knew that in his life he must have performed this act of mating more than a thousand times (strange, how little it mattered to her). Yet this ecstasy, this utter giving of one to

another, was as new to him as it was to her. Had he been virgin, he could not have been more completely hers.

A nightingale trilled from a branch of the ancient plum tree, a solitary sound in the night. Cheng's breath was warm against her neck, its rhythm deep and even. She shifted her shoulder to cushion his head. She would not sleep, she resolved. She would lie beside him, her love surrounding him like a cloak until morning came to part them once more. Her every sense would memorize his touch, the sandalwood aroma of his skin, the rise and fall of his powerful chest, each curve and hollow of his body. She would etch every word he had ever spoken to her upon her mind, remember every detail of his face, his walk, the movements of his hands, so that when their son was old enough, she would be able to tell him . . .

His kisses roused her and she realized that she had slept after all. The twitter of the sparrows that nested in the eaves of the roof told her that it was dawn. "It's time . . ." he whispered.

"No!" she moaned, reaching out for him.

He gathered her close. "Be still, my heart, my brave one . . ." His lips brushed the curve of her brows. "I cannot delay beyond this morning. I must go . . ."

"Not yet — " Her arms bound him tight, welding his body to hers.

"No, not yet," he murmured against the corner of her mouth. "But soon, my love . . . too soon . . ."

In the night that had passed, they had come together joyfully. Their love had been a celebration, as rich in promise as the beginning of a long and blissful marriage. Now his loving of her was a farewell, aching and bittersweet, exquisitely tender. Each caress clung and lingered; each kiss, each whispered word, was hoarded like a jewel to adorn the memory that would remain with each of them when they parted.

Even the culmination of their passion was like one great, crushing sob of anguish. Afterward, she held him close, her tongue tasting the salty sweetness of his shoulder, her arms locked about him, refusing to let him go until they heard the stirring of the two old servants in the courtyard.

Kathleen felt him slip away from her, felt his weight leave the bed as he rose, to wash and dress himself. She moved into the hollow where he had slept, and for many long moments she lay there quietly,

her body still warm with his love, still cherishing, still treasuring that small, precious part of him he had left with her.

Later that morning, after he had gone, she sat on the bench in the garden, remembering how she had stood behind his chair and unbraided his long queue with her own hands. His hair was thick and glossy, tightly waved from the plaiting. She had brushed it for him, each long stroke a caress. Then she had divided it into three locks and braided it again, neatly, with infinite care, for it could well be the last thing she would ever do for him. When she had bound the end of it with silk thread, she lifted it for a moment and pressed it to her cheek.

He had stayed only long enough to drink a little tea and to draw up a document giving her the house and guaranteeing her the income from a piece of farmland he owned outside the barrier gate, calling in two sleepy neighbors to add their seals as witnesses.

At the gate, he had taken her in his arms and held her while her fingertips traced the contours of his face. "If I do not return, my Kathleen," he had murmured, "I will die in the joy of having known your love."

"No!" she had answered fiercely. "*You will* return. And I will be waiting!"

He had cupped her chin between his palms. "Do not wait too long, my precious one. You are young; you must have a life . . ."

"Perhaps our son will be my life."

"Then let it be so . . ." He had kissed her one last time, his arms molding her to the hardness of his body for a heart-rending moment. Then, before she could hold back, he had gone.

Kathleen had stood at the gate and listened as the footfalls of his chairbearers died away down the street, fighting off the waves of desolation that threatened to sweep her away. He would not want her to mourn him, she reminded herself as she gulped back her tears. But, the sense of his loss was more overwhelming than anything she had ever imagined. The years loomed ahead of her like a line of tombstones, black and unending. Without him. Oh, dear heaven, without him!

Yet she had made her choice. She had loved him totally, withholding nothing. She had been born to love him, and that one night of fulfillment was worth every lonely moment of her life to come. Catching her breath, she held his memory to her, clasping it close while its fresh-

ness remained. She could not hope that the emperor would be merciful. Life was cheap in China, a commonplace thing, to be snuffed out as casually as the random plucking of a flower. But such a life! Such a wise, gentle, passionate life! Oh, Chengqua! Her shoulders heaved with the agony of grief. But she would not cry. Not while she knew he lived.

The autumn sun warmed her face and hands. Her ears caught the sound of Kao Ma rattling dishes in the kitchen, the restless *twit* of the lark in its cage. The ripening plums were so subtly fragrant that she could taste them in the air. Kathleen *was* grateful. God had chosen to place her on earth within the lifetime of Cheng Lo; and though they had been born on opposite sides of the world, He had allowed them to find one another and to know the joy of one brief night. It was enough. And if heaven saw fit to bless her with Cheng's child —

The sound of footsteps snapped the thread of her thoughts. Familiarly heavy footsteps, striding, agitated, rounding the spirit gate to stop directly in front of where she sat.

"I've come t' take you 'ome, girl," said Archer Bellamy.

The words faltered and died in his throat as she felt his eyes on her, staring at her Chinese robe and slippers. She had known he would come, but she would never have wished it so soon. She would have wanted time, time to gather the strength she would need to face him. Instead, he had caught her unprepared, still reeling with the shock of her grief.

"I've come t' take you 'ome!" he repeated. "Get your things and get out of those 'eathen clothes!"

Kathleen groped for the scattered fragments of her courage. There was no sound in the garden except the harsh rasp of his breathing as he waited for her answer. She folded her hands in her lap, one on top of the other, the fingers relaxed and gracefully curved, displaying Cheng's ring of white Jade.

"These are my clothes, Father," she said softly, "and this is my home."

His breath stopped as the delicate force of her words hit him. For a long moment, there was absolute silence in the garden. "Rubbish!" he muttered at last. "Where's Kao Ma? I'll have 'er get your things! You're coming with me, Kathleen!"

She shook her head, wondering if he could tell what had happened just by looking at her. She pictured those cold blue eyes of his, eyes that had always seemed to stare into the recesses of her soul. Her heart was a fluttering bird against her ribs, but she let her voice speak calmly. "Didn't you hear me, Father? I'm not coming with you. This is my house."

"Don't talk nonsense, girl, it's Chengqua's — " He choked on the sudden realization, a deep, strangling sound like a bullock might make as the tiger's fangs close into its throat.

Neither of them spoke. The sun beat hotly down upon her head. Noises from the street outside, the bustling sounds of morning, drifted over the wall. Archer Bellamy's breathing was loud and hoarse, almost as if he might be weeping. Kathleen imagined his face, twisted in anguish, his huge hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. She reached out into the blackness, clutching at the air, only the air.

"Deny it, Kathleen," he rasped. "When I 'ear it from your own tongue that this . . . this *abomination* is only something I've imagined, then I'll believe it." He paused. She heard him lick his lips and swallow. "Say it's not so, girl. Get your clothes and come 'ome with me and I swear t' 'eaven we'll never speak of this day again!" His stentorian voice shook so much that the last few words were scarcely audible. Kathleen reached out again with her hands, searching for him.

"Father — " she pleaded, her voice a child's voice. "Father, please . . ." A tear slid between her lashes as she felt his big, hard hands close over her own, the square-tipped fingers so like hers, their grip warm and crushing. She had loved him all her life, she realized. Through all his anger, his coldness, his disapproval, she had loved him. But never more than now.

She kissed his hands, something she had never done before. They were salty with her own tears. "Father, I need you," she whispered. "You and Mother. I need your patience . . . your understanding . . . your love."

"Kathleen — " He tugged at her hands, trying to raise her to her feet.

"No, listen to me," she said. "I can't go home with you." She took a deep, searing breath. Her fingers were trembling in his. "I am Chengqua's concubine. His woman."

She felt his hands, jerking away from her as if they had suddenly touched something filthy. "Nay!" His voice echoed, as if it were com-

ing from some dark, hollow cavern. "By 'eaven, 'twould be better for you if you'd died on the day of your birth! A concubine! A Chinaman's whore! Why, I'd have seen you wed to that young Silveira whelp first! So this is what comes of your reading! Of your learning their devil tongue!"

She could argue with him, she told herself. She could remind him that Chengqua was their friend, that he'd been instrumental in getting Priscilla out of Amoy. And she could reason that while their union might be sinful in his eyes, it fell within the realm of acceptable Chinese custom for a man to take a concubine . . . But no, he would never listen. Reason could not make him accept the life she had chosen. Only love could do that.

Her fingers reached out to him once more, vainly, finding nothing.

"God in 'eaven," he rumbled, not cursing but praying. "I came to China t' do Thy work! 'Twas I who brought them 'ere, my own son and daughter, to this nest of vipers! But I kept faith with Thee! I put my trust in Thee! And they went t' the devil, the two of them! They joined the ranks of Satan against me and against Thee! Lord, what have I done? Show me my sin — "

"Father, no!" she broke in, unable to endure the torment of his words.

"Silence!" he thundered, turning on her. "You're not t' call me Father, you Jezebel! You whore in 'eathen's dress!" She heard the sound of him pacing, the turmoil of his breathing. "Aye," he hissed, low in his throat, "I know you, girl. From the first time I looked on you, lying there in your cradle, I knew who and what you were! And I knew what you'd become one day! God 'elp me, I fought t' save you from it, but I knew! And now, 'tis come to pass!"

Kathleen sat with her hands clenched on her knees, her lips parted in horror and her sightless eyes wide with bewilderment.

"Nay," he said, "I'll not speak of 'er, of the one who put the curse of evil upon me and mine! I took a vow of silence as a lad, and I'll not be breakin' it even for the likes of you! I wash my 'ands of you! You and your brother!"

A gasp of dismay escaped Kathleen's lips. Yet she was not surprised. She had known how he would feel and what he would do. She had chosen Chengqua with the full realization of it. Yet she sensed that she had come closer to him in the past moments than ever before in her life. He had given her a glimpse of the devil that drove him, a flash

of the fire that had tempered him to cold, hard steel. Through her childhood, she had often wondered why he never spoke of his family or his beginnings. Now, however vaguely, she knew and understood — and bound up in that understanding was the realization that he could not help what he was, or what she was to him.

"I'm leaving, Kathleen." His voice came from farther away now, near the gate. "I'll not be coming back."

Something twisted inside her. Her heart tasted the gall of sorrow, made sweet only by the peace of forgiveness. "My door will always be open to you, Father," she said softly. "Go if you must, but know that you go with my love!"

Only silence answered her. Silence and the slow opening and closing of the latch on the gate.

Twenty-Seven

Macao

Late September 1840

Morgan pounded on the gate of Chengqua's house with his left fist and waited, chewing his lip impatiently while the old servant fumbled with the latch on the other side. As the bolt slid back, he pushed the gate open himself, almost knocking the ancient fellow off his feet as he strode inside.

"Morgan?" Kathleen was sitting on a stone bench in the garden, a piece of embroidery work in her hands. She was dressed in a Chinese robe of emerald green silk brocade. Lord, but she was beautiful, he thought, in spite of his anger.

"How in the devil did you know it was me?"

She smiled. "No Chinese person would come in the way you just did."

"Including your bloody Chinese lover?"

"How did you know?" she asked calmly.

"I just saw Mother. She told me that Father came here to get you and you wouldn't go . . . that you claimed you were Chengqua's woman and this was your home — God's blood, Kath, have you gone daft?"

"No, and you're lucky. Father won't let *me* talk to mother at all."

"Blast it, Kath, is it true?"

"Yes, Morgan, it is."

He glanced uneasily around the garden. It was quiet except for the restless twittering of the lark, whose cage sat in the shadow of a gardenia bush. "Well, then," he asked cautiously, "where the hell is Chengqua?"

"On his way to Peking . . . " She completed a stitch and put the embroidery down beside her on the bench. "I know what you're wondering. The answer is yes. He *was* here; and I'm not ashamed."

Morgan's jaw dropped as the full impact of her words struck him. "Kath — !"

"The morning he left, he drew up a document giving me this house and guaranteeing me the income from a piece of farmland he owns north of the barrier. So you see, I'm well provided for. I've no reason to go back under Father's roof." She held out her arms to him. "Morgan, let's not quarrel. I can't bear it, not with you! Sit down!"

He lowered himself gingerly to the edge of the bench, keeping his distance from her as if she'd been contaminated. "Kath," he said, "it's a mad thing you've done."

"Perhaps," she replied thoughtfully. "But it's done, and I'm not sorry."

"And do you love him?"

"Aye," she breathed. "That I do, Morgan. As much as a proper wife could ever love her husband." She twisted the jade ring on her finger. "And you're a fine one to talk, Morgan Bellamy! I heard the gossip aboard the *Condor*!"

"That's done with!" he muttered. He had sent Chiu Ming and Choy Ling packing the day of his return from Amoy. He could no longer bear to look at their Chinese faces. "Peking, you say? When's he coming back?"

"I don't know." There was a catch in her voice. "But I'll wait."

"Kath . . . are you — " he spat out the word with effort, "are you pregnant?"

Her color deepened, making her more beautiful than ever. "I hope so . . . " she murmured. "I've prayed for it. But it's too soon to know."

"God's blood!" He sat and stared down at the paving stones, at Kathleen's feet, clad in black satin slippers, where the legs of her Chinese trousers peeped from beneath her green robe. This was a new Kathleen, he sensed; soft and serene, a fulfilled woman. He had not heard even a hint of a curse from her lips. There was a new strength in her, a quiet power that awed him.

"Morgan . . . how's Mother? What does she say about me?"

"Mother's the same as always. And she says she understands. She says as long as you're happy — "

Kathleen reached out and found his arm with her hand. He did not respond to her touch. "Tell her . . . yes. Tell her I'm happy." She took her hand away, hurt, perhaps, by his coldness. "How's your wrist?"

"Splint's off. But it still pains." Morgan leaned forward with his hands on his knees. His silence filled the garden, except for the distant clatter of dishes from the kitchen and the uneasy chirp of the lark in its cage.

"Kath," he said at last, "I came to tell you that Pris is back in Hong Kong."

"Yes, I thought she would be by now." She smiled serenely, unable to see the scowl on Morgan's features. Of course she would have known. Chengqua would have told her.

"Morgan, is she all right?"

"They say she is . . ." Morgan stared down at his shoes. "Kath, she won't let me see her. She's shut herself up aboard the *Hercules*. I think she's afraid I won't want her."

"The baby — ?"

"There's a chance it's mine. Only a chance. Lord knows what she's been through!" Morgan stood up and began to pace, his hands clenched into fists. "And then when I think of *you* with one of them — and *willingly!*"

"It's a bit ironic, isn't it, Morgan?" she asked innocently.

"If you're saying that I deserve it — "

"Maybe you do. Pris doesn't. I'm sorry for you both." Kathleen picked up her sewing again, her sensitive fingers feeling for the stitches.

"Look, Kath." He stopped pacing and sat down again, beside her this time. "I went through hell when I thought I'd lost Pris. I went through it all over again when I couldn't get her back. Don't you think I've served my time in purgatory?"

Kathleen pushed the needle into the square of black silk, trailing yellow thread. Her fingers guided the point in and out . . . in and out. "Morgan," she said slowly, "do you love her?"

"Of course I do," he snapped.

"How many times have you told her?"

"Why — " He stopped to think. He could not remember telling her even once. "It isn't easy for some men — "

"It wasn't easy for Father," she said. "Did you ever hear him tell Mother? Did he ever tell you? Heaven knows, he never told *me* he loved me! You're more like him than you care to admit, Morgan!"

"No, dammit! That cold, sanctimonious old — No, I'm not like him at all, Kath! I won't be!" Morgan's indignation had brought him to his feet again. He glared down at her, forgetting for the moment that she could not see him. He remembered his childhood, looking up — always looking up — at that towering, remote figure. Nothing he'd ever done had been good enough for Archer Bellamy. *Wash your face, Morgan, it's dirty! . . . Don't eat your porridge that way! . . . Only third place in the exam? And why not first! Why can't you apply yourself . . . ?*

"But he *must* have loved us! It was just his way, Kath! And I love Pris! I love her, dammit, and she knows it!"

"If she knew it, she wouldn't be hiding from you!" Kathleen stood up and put both her hands on his shoulders. She smelled of some warm, spicy Chinese fragrance — like Chengqua, now that he remembered. Lord, she really *was* his woman! "Morgan, go to her," she said softly. "Storm the *Hercules* like a pirate if you have to! Beat her door down if she won't open it! You've got to swallow your pride and let her know!"

He took a deep breath. "You're right," he said. "I'll try. I'll go back today and tell her!" He took Kathleen's hands and removed them from his shoulders. "I can't stay. Good-bye, Kath."

"Will I see you again?"

"I don't know. You must understand that I don't approve of what you've done."

"Well, then," her voice trembled slightly, like a small leaf in the wind, "if this is good-bye, I want to say it . . . I love you, Morgan. I'll love you forever . . . " She dabbed at her cheek with her little finger. "See, I've learned to say it!"

He stood looking at her for a moment. This red-haired sister who had followed, pestered and adored him for twenty years — who had grown up and gone her own way, to become a Chinaman's concubine. Something crumpled inside him. He took her in his arms and pressed his face against her hair. "Oh, Kath . . . Kath!" He felt the sweet relief of tears stinging his eyes. "Kath, I love you, too!" For an instant, he crushed her close. Then he tore himself away and fled wildly toward the gate. She did not try to stop him, but just as he reached the wall, she called out to him.

"Morgan — "

"I can't stay, Kath! Please understand!" He gripped the gatepost, half-afraid that she could draw him back to her by some magic power.

"I know. Just one thing more. Pris's baby — if you . . . you and Pris don't want him, Morgan, give him to me! I'll take him!"

Morgan could not answer her. He flung himself through the gateway and strode off the down the street, fleeing from his own emotions.

Hong Kong
Late September, 1840

James Matheson's floating warehouse, the *Hercules*, was a massive hulk, similar in construction to the *Condor*, but even larger in size. Above the hull of an old man-o'-war, a three-story superstructure had been built, honeycombed with cabins, hallways and storerooms, and crowned by a flat-topped, mansard-style roof that overhung the entire ship, giving the vessel a sort of brooding, beetle-browed appearance.

Aboard such a ship lived a veritable community of clerks, coolies, wash-boys, cooks, deckhands and shroffs, some of them with their women and children. Matheson himself maintained a comfortable suite of rooms on the top floor, inviolate as a fortress, insulated from the bustle of the rest of the ship. It was here that Priscilla had taken her refuge.

Morgan had already confronted James Matheson below on the main deck. "Look, old fellow," the fair-haired Scot had soothed him. "It was her idea to be here, not mine. I'll not be keepin' her prisoner from her own husband! Believe me, I'd face an army of murderin' Chinese before I'd come betwixt a man an' his wife! See her if you will! You'll not have to shoot me for that!"

Morgan had glanced sheepishly down at the Colt, which was thrust into his belt. It seemed silly now, the idea of forcing his way aboard the *Hercules* at gunpoint; yet he had been prepared to do it. *Storm her like a pirate . . .* that's what Kath had told him. He'd taken her advice literally.

He'd been on the deck of the *Osprey* when the *Hellas* had sailed into the harbor. The schooner had swept right past him, within shouting range, and he'd had no idea at the time that Pris was aboard. It was not until two days later, when he'd been about to leave for another run up the coast, that one of Matheson's clerks had brought him the sealed note from Pris:

"Please understand, Morgan, I cannot make a decision about our future together until my child is born. Until then, it is best, I think, that we stay

apart . . . Mr. and Mrs. Matheson have been kind enough to extend their hospitality to me. Rest assured that I am as well and comfortable as can be expected . . . but do not, under any circumstances, attempt to see me . . . "

The note was still in his pocket. It crackled softly with the bending and straightening of his left leg as he climbed the flights of stairs that led to Matheson's rooms. The passageway was dim and full of stale cooking odors from the galley — fish, cabbage, onions and smoke. The timbers of the old hull creaked softly with the rise and fall of the waves. The distant babble of Chinese voices floated upward from the lower decks. The noises of the ship, however, were drowned out in Morgan's ears by the pounding of his own heart as he approached the polished mahogany door of Matheson's suite and rapped firmly with his right hand. The impact of his knuckles against the wood sent little daggers of pain shooting down into his tender wrist. It was Matheson's wife who opened the door, a pretty woman, but drained and faded by the years, like so many of the women who'd spent their married lives on the China Coast. As she recognized Morgan, her hand went to her throat. "Mr. Bellamy, you can't — !"

"My apologies, Mrs. Matheson — " Morgan stepped inside before she could stop him, "but I must see my wife. Will you tell me where she is, or must I make a scene?"

Her eyes darted to the Colt at Morgan's belt. "In there!" She indicated a half-closed door just off the parlor. "But you can't see her now, Mr. Bellamy, she's — she's — " Her voice trailed off into a huff of exasperation as Morgan brushed past her and strode toward the door, his momentum swinging it open as he lunged inside.

"Pris?" He closed the door behind him. The room was dim, its narrow windows heavily curtained in blue velvet. A frail, swollen figure lay propped up in the canopied bed. "Pris!"

She gasped and jerked the bedclothes upward so that nothing was showing above the blue counterpane except her huge, dark eyes and the top of her head. "Morgan — "

He glanced back at the door to satisfy himself that Matheson's wife had not followed him. "Pris, if you think you can keep me away from you — "

Slowly, she lowered the edge of the counterpane. Her face was pale and drawn, all eyes. Her cheeks were hollow. Her dark hair hung loose about her face, pulled forward to hide the spot where her ear

had been cut away. The round neck of her nightgown showed her jutting collarbone. "So you've come after all," she said tonelessly. "Very well, look all you want. When you can't stand to look anymore, you can go." She pushed the covers downward, exposing the enormous, rising mound of her body, covered only by the white nightgown. "Go ahead, Morgan! Look! Then I'll take wagers as to whether it's yours?"

Morgan's chest tightened. Her words confirmed what he'd feared all along. "Pris . . . dearest Prissy . . ." He walked slowly toward the bed.

She closed her eyes for a moment. A flicker of something that looked like pain passed across her face. Then she opened her eyes. "Keep your distance!" she hissed at him. "Now that I'm free, it's for *me* to say who'll be touching me!"

He froze where he was. "All right Pris, we'll do it your way," he said evenly. "I only came to tell you something. I'll speak my piece and go."

"I'm listening." She pulled the bedclothes back to her chest and stared past him, at the door.

Morgan cleared his throat and began awkwardly. "I . . . I just want to say that I'd like you back, Pris . . . I *want* you back . . ."

"With a Chinese baby? You're deceiving yourself, Morgan!"

"I don't give a *damn* about the baby! It's you I want! And the baby will be mine, whatever it looks like! As long as I've got you!"

"A pretty speech, Morgan." She smoothed the counterpane with one hand. The muscles of her forehead tightened; her jaw clenched, then relaxed. Morgan stood at the foot of the bed, twisting his hands like a schoolboy called upon to recite.

"I — I want you back, Pris. That's all." Dammit, he cursed himself, why couldn't he say it?

"Is it the company you want?" she asked cynically. "Never fear. I couldn't run it alone. I'm sure we can arrange something satisfactory to both of us."

Her tone sent him into a fury. He took a step toward her. "Pris, d'you want me to bleed? D'you want me to *crawl*?"

Her lips parted. She closed her eyes. Her hands twisted the edge of the counterpane. "We'll talk later, Morgan," she murmured. "Please go now. I'm . . . tired."

"Pris?" Suddenly, he was on his knees beside her. "Pris, you're having pains! The baby's coming, isn't it?"

"I — I'm afraid so."

"How long — ?"

"The pains? All morning. Mrs. Matheson's sent a boat for the doctor . . . there's one aboard the *Druid*, she says."

"Pris, why didn't you tell me?"

"It's too soon, Morgan. Too soon, even for yours."

"But. . . ." He glanced down at the huge mound of her body. "You're so —"

"So big. I know. But it's only been eight — Oh, Morgan!" She clawed at the covers as the new spasm of pain took her. He reached for her hands, felt her gripping him in her agony.

"Worse than the others?" He stroked her thin fingers as the contraction passed.

"Oh, yes . . . much, much worse . . . You'd best tell Mrs. Matheson . . ." She grimaced. "Maybe by the time this is over, you won't have anything more to worry about . . ."

The awful implication of her words hit him like a slap in the face. He sprang to his feet and bolted for the door. Matheson's wife was just outside. "The doctor's coming," she said. "The lookout's sighted the boat. Don't you think you'd best let me come in, Mr. Bellamy?"

"Aye. She's getting worse. But let me stay. Please."

He returned to Pris and took her hands. Her anguished fingers clung to his as she slid helplessly into another pain. "Oh — " she cried out.

"It's all right . . . it's all right, Prissy. I'm here. I won't go . . ." He kissed her hands. Mrs. Matheson sponged her sweating face. Half an hour passed. Morgan scarcely noticed when the doctor, a plump, bespectacled man, came into the room. He was conscious only of Pris, of her pain-twisted face, of her hands clutching his.

Mrs. Matheson touched his arm. "The doctor wants to have a look at her. We'll step out for a moment; I'll get you some tea." She led Morgan toward the door before he could protest. The doctor was already raising the sheet.

A few minutes later, Morgan was seated in the pastel-toned parlor, sipping tea with the sympathetic Mrs. Matheson when the doctor — Morgan had learned that his name was Rafferty — joined them. His ruddy face was grave. "I'll not keep it from you," he said. "Her chances don't look good. She's small; she's weak and undernourished

... Worse, there doesn't seem to be any fight in her. It's as if she doesn't care about the baby, or even about herself."

"And the size of her!" Mrs. Bellamy added, stirring her tea. "For such a little lass —"

Rafferty nodded, leaning against the wall as he gulped his tea without cream or sugar. "I'm hoping it's twins. If that great lump is all one baby, heaven help her!"

"Can't you tell?" Morgan strained forward.

"Sometimes. In this case, no."

Morgan stood up. "She's alone in there. We'd best —"

He was interrupted by a cry from behind the door, a sharp moan of pain. "Morgan!"

He raced to the door and flung it open. She was standing midway between the door and the bed, swaying. He caught her as she crumpled in his arms. "Pris, what the devil —?"

"I — I thought you'd gone!" She clung to him sobbing. "I was afraid — Oh, Morgan, don't leave me! Don't go!"

"Hush, Prissy . . ." He lifted her and carried her back to the bed. "I won't go . . . I'll never leave you. I love you . . ." How easy, how wonderful it was to say it. "I love you, Pris." He kissed her eyes, her forehead, her mouth, his tears wetting her own cheeks. "Now let's get you back into bed so you can get on with having our baby!"

"Our baby . . .?"

"Ours!" he said firmly, tucking the sheet around her.

He stayed beside her through the long afternoon, through the evening and into the night, holding her, feeling her pain as her nails dug into the palms of his hands, giving her sips of tea between contractions, wiping the sweat from her white face. The kitchen boys bustled in and out with clean towels and basins of hot water. As the agony became more intense, she grew weaker. The doctor hovered beside the bed, grave concern stamped on his homely features.

"She can't take much more of this," Morgan whispered, looking up at him.

"No. Go on, I'll check her again. Lord, if there was anything more I could do —"

Morgan nodded. Rafferty, he knew, was more accustomed to tending wounded men in battle than women in childbirth. "Pris." He stroked her cheek. "He wants to look again. I'll be just outside . . ."

She clutched his arm. "Morgan," she whispered, "the baby, it's coming now . . . I can feel — " Her words ended in a gasp that was almost a shriek. Mrs. Matheson took Morgan by the arm and pulled him away from the bed.

"Wait outside," she said firmly. "I think it's time — "

"There's nothing I can do?" Morgan protested.

"Yes. Pray for her!" The good woman pushed him forcibly out into the parlor.

He sank down into a needlepoint-covered armchair. From behind the door, Pris's moans could still be heard. He fumbled in his vest pocket for a cheroot, then gave up when he realized he'd already smoked the last of them. Pray, Mrs. Matheson had told him. Morgan hadn't prayed in years. It was not that he didn't believe. It was just that with the life he'd lived, his ambitions, his appetites, he doubted that heaven would bother to listen to him. And if God was anything like Archer Bellamy, which Morgan was sure He must be, he might as well pray to a plaster Buddha.

He got up and pressed his ear to the door. He could hear Pris, still gasping in her agony. Raising his head, he tried to see past the thick mahogany beams of the ceiling, up into the dawn sky. "Please . . ." he whispered. "If you can hear me up there, please help her . . . "

He sat down then, and buried his face in his palms. The seconds and minutes crawled past. Once he thought he heard a little cry. He watched the door eagerly, but no one opened it. He wondered if Pris was alive.

The wick in the lamp had burned so low that it began to sputter, Morgan watched the flickering light in silence, too exhausted to go and fix it. The next thing he knew, Mrs. Matheson was shaking his shoulder. He jumped. Incredibly, he had dozed. "Pris — is she — ?"

"She's fine. Just very tired. She's asking for you." Mrs. Matheson's face gleamed with perspiration, her hair hung down around her face in damp strings.

"And the baby — ?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Go and see for yourself."

Still blinking sleepily, Morgan got up and walked into the bedroom. Pris lay back on the pillows of the bed, her hair like wet ebony against the white linen. A small bundle lay tucked within the circle of each arm. Morgan rubbed his eyes. "Two of them?"

"They're very tiny," she said softly, "but they're strong, especially the little girl. The doctor thinks they're out of danger now."

"A little girl . . . and a boy?"

She nodded weakly. "Come and look, Morgan."

Fully awake now, Morgan leaned over the bed. The babies' heads were hidden by the folds of their blankets. "Pris, before I see them, I want you to know that they're mine —"

"Morgan, look at them!"

Holding his breath, he reached out and uncovered both little faces. Two tiny pairs of hands waved up at him, clasping at the air; two small pink mouths stretched and puckered hungrily. One of the twins had its eyes closed. "The boy," Pris smiled. The other baby, the girl, was staring up at Morgan with round, dark eyes. Her head, like that of her brother, was crowned with fine, golden fuzz. Morgan almost burst into tears of joy. He'd told himself it didn't matter whether the babies were his or not. But it did; oh, it did matter. He knelt and kissed his wife on the lips.

"What shall we call them?" he asked in an awed whisper.

"I've been thinking about it," she murmured happily. "Maybe Serena Rose for the girl . . . after my mother and yours."

"Perfect . . . and the boy?"

"Stephen — *Just* because I like it. Stephen Japeth Bellamy. What do you think?"

Morgan frowned. "Japeth?"

"To honor —" her voice broke, "to honor a very dear friend. Please, Morgan. I want to."

He kissed her again. "Whatever you wish, love. Stephen Japeth it is." He sat back on his heels and looked at his family. Then he put his arms around, the three of them, lay his head on Priscilla's shoulder and closed his eyes. Outside, over the harbor and the hills of the distant islands, the sun was coming up.

Macao

November, 1840

Kathleen awoke screaming in the night, the satin quilts of Cheng's bed twisted around her body. Kao Ma, who slept on a cot in one corner of the room, was at her side at once. "Don't be afraid, my child,"

she soothed, stroking Kathleen's hair. "It was only another dream. Go to sleep."

Kathleen's head rolled back and forth on the pillow. "I saw the sword . . ." she sobbed. "I saw it falling!"

"It was only a dream," Kao Ma repeated. "You know that we have heard nothing. We still have hope."

"But it's been two months since he left for Peking —"

"The journey alone would take nearly a month. Go to sleep. The night has only begun." There were times when the old woman was more like a mother to Kathleen than a servant.

With a sigh of assent, Kathleen lay back in the pillow and closed her eyes. She heard the creak of the cot as Kao Ma got back into bed. Soon the old woman had begun to snore softly, but Kathleen could not sleep. She lay there in the darkness, reliving again the poignancy of that last moment at the gate when Chengqua had clasped her in his arms. The bedding smelled lightly of sandalwood, as did her silk robe and her own skin. She surrounded herself with the fragrance. Somehow it brought him nearer.

For a time, while his memory was fresh and while she had the hope of their son to sustain her, Kathleen had kept her courage. Then, fifteen days after his going, her menstrual period had begun. For the first time, she had broken down and wept bitter tears. She felt betrayed, immeasurably cheated by her own body and by the power that had shown her the tall youth running in the wind. Desolation's black weight had moved in upon her spirit, and the first of the nightmares had come.

After some urging on Kathleen's part, the old man who was Kao Ma's husband had explained to her the Chinese system of justice. Minor offenses were punishable by beatings with the small end of the bamboo — usually no more than twenty strokes — or by the wearing of the *cangue*, a heavy square collar of wood, so broad that its wearer could neither lie down nor feed himself. Slightly more serious crimes were punished by more severe beatings with the large end of the bamboo. The third degree of punishment was exile for a period of time — no more than three years, and at a distance of no more than five hundred *li*, which Kathleen calculated, would be about one hundred sixty-six miles at three *li* to the mile.

The fourth degree of punishment — exile for life — and the fifth — death — were reserved for the worst of crimes: rebellion, destruction of

imperial property, the murder of a relative or of more than three people, sacrilege, incest, insubordination, impiety toward one's parents and treason. As in the other punishments, there were degrees of severity. A man of noble birth or high rank might be permitted to hang himself with a silken cord or to take poison. Strangulation — performed by twisting the cord around the back of a pole, was the most common form of execution. Beheading, while less painful, was thought to be worse because it mutilated and divided a man's body. The hideous cage in which men starved or strangled was traditionally reserved for thieves and pirates. The worst execution of all, in which the victim was methodically sliced into hundreds of pieces, was rare in these times, and usually took place only at the whim of the emperor himself.

As for perpetual exile, the old man explained, it was in some ways considered worse than death. The man in exile had no hope of being buried on the land of his ancestors. His spirit would be doomed to wander the earth forever.

Kao Ma had scolded her husband most severely when she learned that he had been telling Kathleen, for it only made the nightmares worse. Now she saw swords and knives in her dreams, blood and falling heads. In one nighttime adventure, she had found a red brocade box behind a tombstone. She had opened it to find not Blake Robard's head, but Chengqua's. It had taken the old woman the rest of the night to calm her.

Now, Kathleen lay staring into the darkness with her sightless eyes, afraid to go back to sleep. She had told herself that she would know it when he died, for something in her would surely die with him. But she had felt his death a dozen times before she realized that she was experiencing nothing but her own fear.

She turned over and wrapped her arms about the pillow. Perhaps Morgan and Pris would come tomorrow and bring their babies. They had visited her twice in the past month, and their presence had brought her the only true joy she had known since Cheng had gone.

A storm was blowing outside. She could hear it in the trees. Something on the gate had come loose as well, and was banging in the wind. Kathleen sighed. Being mistress of her own house was not easy. "Kao Ma," she whispered. The old woman stirred and grunted an answer. "The gate. Something's loose. Can you get your husband to stop it from beating about like that?"

"I will see," Kao Ma's bare feet shuffled across the floor of the bedroom and out into the garden. A few moments later, the banging stopped and Kathleen heard the opening of the gate.

She waited. The rhythm of the returning footsteps was different; not Kao Ma's . . . not the old man's . . .

"Chengqua!" She sprang out of bed and had run halfway to the door before he found her and gathered her in his arms. "Chengqua!" She covered his face with kisses, sobbing with happiness. "You're so thin . . . and you don't smell the same — Oh, Chengqua, they found you innocent . . . they let you come back . . ."

He held her tightly, his lips brushing the edge of her hair. "No, my Kathleen. The emperor pronounced me guilty."

"What?" She drew back from him.

"Guilty of treason . . . One hundred strokes of the bamboo — it's the ointment on my back you smell — and banishment for life."

"Where?" Her lips formed the word.

"A village called Taocheng, on the eastern border of Tibet. I'm on my way there now. My guards are good, greedy fellows. I paid them to let me come this way." He pressed her head against his chest. "I wanted to see you this one last time . . ."

"Your family — ?"

"I saw them yesterday. The emperor was merciful enough to spare them any punishment. They will remain in Canton, in the house of my brothers."

"Even Jung Fei?" Her fingers explored his face. His cheeks had grown thin and he was in need of a shave.

"I would not take from her the joy of growing old among the children she loves . . ." His hands moved down the length of Kathleen's body, warming her, stirring her through the sheerness of her sleeping robe. "And is there any happiness in you, my Kathleen?" he whispered, his voice suddenly husky with desire.

"Not yet . . ." She drew his head down and opened her lips. His kiss began gently, then suddenly grew fierce, hungry, as his hands molded her body against him. He tugged loose the sash of her robe. She shook her shoulders and the silken garment floated to the floor. "Come . . ." she whispered against his ear, "we'll try again . . ."

Cheng lay on his side with Kathleen in his arms, both of them warm and sleepy, their passion spent for the moment. Slowly, softly, he let his lips wander over her face, kissing her closed eyelids, her cheeks, the rip of her nose, marveling at the intensity of what he felt for her.

She had cried out when she'd discovered his back — a mass of welts and half-healed scars from the beating he'd endured in Peking. One hundred strokes — men had been known to die from such punishment. Yet, unless Kathleen offered to go to Taocheng with him (and he would not ask her; the desire would have to be her own) the worst of his sentence was only beginning.

He had entered Canton quietly and said a painful farewell to his family. Jung Fei had wept, but she had not wanted to come with him, which was as he had expected. His name had been inscribed upon the tablets of the dead in the House of Cheng. Already, she considered herself a widow. Cheng had embraced her and his children, from his eldest son to the tiny daughter of Hsu Yu. Then he had gone on his way.

He had paid one more visit in Canton, to the modest quarters of Lin Tse-hsu. Lin, himself in disgrace since the *fan kuei* ships had blockaded the Peiho, had moved from the luxurious governor's *yamen* to a small house on the next street. The arrival of his replacement, his old enemy Ch'i-shan, was expected any day.

Cheng had knocked on the great man's gate and been welcomed in by a single plainly dressed servant. Lin, pale and tired-looking, had been delighted to see him.

"So you kept your head, old friend?" Lin had risen from the chair in his garden and hurried forward to greet Cheng, something he would never have done in the days when he was *ch'in ch'ai*. He was dressed all in white, the color of mourning. "That's encouraging," he said. "If the Son of Heaven is not as angry as I'd feared, there's always the chance that I'll not lose my head either! Sit down, Cheng Lo! I'll order tea!" He settled down into his chair again and clapped his plump hands.

"I'd already received my own summons to Peking," he explained as they sipped their tea from unadorned white cups. "Then the Son of Heaven changed his mind. He sent word that I was to stay in Canton till spring, to assist Ch'i-shan here. Assist Ch'i-shan! Pah! Assist that peacock! Sometimes I think I'd rather go and be beheaded!"

"Now, that may be to your advantage," soothed Cheng. "The emperor will soften with time — especially if Ch'i-shan fails, too, and I've a feeling he'll be no more successful than you were. With good luck, you won't get anything worse than a few years in exile."

Lin had put down his cup and toyed with the assortment of inks, brushes and papers that cluttered the small table next to his seat. "So we've failed, Cheng Lo, and we've paid. Helping me has cost you most dearly, and I've never even thanked you. I want you to know that if ever you need a favor from me — " He paused, his eyes twinkling with some of their old zest. "Your face, friend Cheng! You never did learn to hide your thoughts. There *is* something! Name it!"

Cheng had finished his tea, taking his time. "Your seal," he said slowly, "on a document giving me permission to take a foreign woman to Wucheng with me."

Lin's slanting brows had shot upward. "You realize I no longer have the authority — " He shrugged. "But, ah, what does it matter? Where you're going, no one will know the difference! Of course! Consider it done!" With a flourish, he reached for a paper and a brush. In his matchless calligraphy, he formed a line of characters, then applied the bottom of his beautifully carved jade *chop* to make his seal.

"A foreign woman . . ." he mused, scratching his majestically hanging chins. "I'll confess I'm most curious, my friend, but discretion keeps me from asking . . ."

"Thank you," said Cheng, taking the document, folding it and putting it in his sleeve. "With your permission, I would also like to inquire about the young Englishman named Stanton. Is he still a prisoner?"

"He is." Lin cleared his throat. "I would order his return, but my authority is ended. "However," his small eyes danced mischievously, "I have done something else almost as good. I have left written instructions for Ch'i-shan at the prison, stating that under no conditions is the young man to be released. As soon as Ch'i-shan sees that order, you can be assured that your Mister Stanton will go free at once."

He reached out and clasped Cheng's hand, his face suddenly grave. "My turn is coming, old friend," he said. "Death, perhaps. Exile, at least. Who knows, maybe they'll even send me to join you in Taocheng — but we cannot hope for such good fortune, you and I, can we?"

"Perhaps not." Cheng rose to leave. "But I want you to know that what I did, I would do again for you nine times over."

"Thank you, Cheng Lo." Lin released his hand. "We've lost, you know," he said as he walked with Cheng to the front gate. "The *fan kuei*, those barbarian children, have beaten us. We will fight on, for years, perhaps, but in the end they will have their way." He blinked, and a single tear ran down his smooth, plump cheek. "And our great Celestial Empire, our Middle Kingdom, will be changed . . . forever."

The memory faded. With one finger, Cheng brushed a lock of Kathleen's hair out of her face. She smiled at him. "How far away is Taocheng?"

"Oh, perhaps three thousand *li*."

"And how long will it take us to get there?"

"Kathleen — " he said cautiously, his heart pounding.

"You know that I'm coming with you, don't you?"

"Kathleen," he said, "consider it most carefully. This is exile for life. We can never come back to Macao. You will never be with your family again. It's possible that you will never again speak with a person of your own race . . . or your own religion. And I can't promise you that I'll ever become a Christian."

"I know." She brushed his eyebrows with her fingertips. "I've thought about it."

"We won't be wealthy," he persisted. "Once I've learned the local dialect, perhaps I can make a living as a teacher. If not — "

"Hush. I've been poor all my life."

"I'm older than you by twenty years. This old man could die and leave you alone, in a strange land . . . "

"Chengqua, listen to me." She touched his lips with her hand. "There's something I want to say to you. When I was younger, my father made me memorize pages from our Bible. Mostly, I hated it, but there was one passage I learned with my heart." She smiled softly, the light of dawn playing on her lovely face. "I knew that one day I would want to say it to someone — someone like you. I must say it in English — as it was written . . . you may not understand . . . "

"I'll try, Kathleen," he whispered as she reached up and drew his head down to rest against the warmth of her breast.

"Chengqua . . . " she began with great tenderness. "Whither thou goest, I will go . . . Whither thou lodgest, I will lodge . . . Thy people shall be my people . . . " she hesitated, " . . . Thy God, my God . . . "

Epilogue

Macao

November 1840

Archer Bellamy stood in the graveyard he loved and stared up at Kathleen's lark, whose cage hung from the limb of a tree. It was the Chinese lad, the one who came every morning with the grasshoppers, who'd brought the bird to him five days ago.

"Where's my daughter?" Archer had asked him, not that it mattered, since she'd abandoned her family to become a Chinaman's whore.

"She's gone," he'd answered, squinting up at the towering Reverend with his little slanted eyes. "She and Cheng Lo and the two old servants. She told me to bring the bird here and paid me to go on feeding it."

"Gone? Where?"

"To China. And she told me to tell her mother that she was happy. May I go now?" The brat had scampered off without waiting for a reply.

Rose had taken the news calmly, almost as if she'd expected it — almost as if she'd been glad, Archer recalled, still puzzled. Even after nearly twenty-five years with Rose, he did not always understand her, and lately he seemed to understand her less and less.

And now, least of all did he understand the meaning of the letter and packet that a young officer from a passing British navy vessel had brought by the house just an hour ago, while Rose was away visiting Mary Gutzlaff.

The letter and the packet had been addressed to Rose, but after all, she was his wife. What was hers was his; they'd never kept secrets from one another. Archer had opened them at once.

The packet had been full of money — nearly two hundred English pounds of it, mostly five and ten-pound notes. Archer had counted it carefully, thinking excitedly what it could buy for the church, before he'd given much attention to the letter.

As the handwriting — large and not particularly well-formed — was unfamiliar, he'd flipped the page over and glanced at the signature: A Lieutenant James Craddock of Her Majesty's Twenty-sixth Cameronians. Bemused, he'd turned back to the beginning.

Tinghai, Chusan

September 12, 1840

Dear Mrs. Bellamy.

With deepest regrets, I write to inform you of the death of Major Dougal MacKenna. Your letter was found in his pocket. You need not fear for its contents. No eyes have seen it save my own, and none will.

I will not question what was between you and the major, who was my good and true friend. He never spoke of you to me. I only wish to assure you that he died bravely, in the performance of his duty.

As for the money in the packet, it was his. I understand that his parents are not living, and as I can find no evidence of other relatives, I am sending it to you in the hope that you will put it to some good and charitable use.

Your humble servant,

Lieut. James P. Craddock

Archer Bellamy laid the money out on Morrison's grave, in piles of five, ten and one-pound notes, and counted it again. Then he read and reread the letter, stunned. Perhaps there was some mistake. Rose had never known a Major MacKenna or a Lieutenant Craddock. He folded the letter, put it back into its envelope and thrust it into his

vest. Rose would be along soon. She would make things clear to him at once.

He stood and watched the caged bird as it hopped from the highest perch to the lowest, to the floor of the cage and back up again. It was a plain creature, dull brown in color, obscurely striped and mottled. Its only beauty lay in its song, and it had not sung since the boy had brought it to him.

"Archer?" Rose was coming down the walk, the full skirt of her pale blue India muslin dress swishing about her slim legs. A matching sun-bonnet swung by its strings from her hand. A few pale gold curls had come loose from her severely pulled-back hairstyle to dance around her pretty face. In spite of the long years since he had forsaken the lusts of the flesh, Archer's throat tightened as he watched her. Maybe it was because of the letter.

"Archer, what's this?" She stared at the money. "Where did it come from — look out, it's blowing away!" She sprang to rescue the notes as a passing breeze scattered them over the top of Morrison's grave. "Here!" She gathered them into a single stack, tapped the edges against the granite stone to even them, and handed them to her husband. "You'd best take better care of this. Where did it come from?"

"It came to the house while you were gone, along with a letter. A young officer from one of the warships brought it — " He drew himself up and stared down at her, stern as a father. "Rose, do you know a Lieutenant Craddock? James Craddock?"

"No, Archer. Do you?" Her blue eyes gazed up at him innocently. She looked no older now than the day he'd married her. It was hard to believe she was a grandmother now.

With his heart strangely high in his throat, he asked his second question. "And do you know a Major Dougal MacKenna?"

The color drained from her face. "Archer," she said in a small, tight voice, "give me the letter."

"Here, then. It's yours." He drew the letter out of his vest and handed it to her. She stared at the envelope.

"You opened this?"

"Certainly I did! What's wrong with that?"

"It's addressed to me! You've no right — "

"I've every right. You're my wife, Rose."

She did not answer him. Her slender fingers pulled the letter from its envelope and unfolded it. Her lips parted as she read. Her face grew deathly white. "Archer," she said, her voice lifeless, "give me the money. It's mine."

"It's ours. I'm keeping it for you." He swallowed hard. "Rose, who was Dougal MacKenna? What was he to you?"

She held out her hand. "Give me the money," she said dully. "It's the only thing of his I'll ever have."

"No. Rose, who was he?"

Rose stood and looked at him for a long time. She seemed to grow taller, her eyes widened, her chin rose to a defiant upthrust. "He was my lover!" she whispered.

He blinked at her in disbelief. "When?" he croaked.

"For one night. More than ten years ago, when I went up to London to bury my mother. I've been trying to make it up to you ever since."

He stared at her. No, she was playing some kind of cruel joke on him, he decided. It couldn't be true. Not Rose. "And that was the only time?" he asked her.

"Yes." Her blazing blue eyes met his. "I saw him at Hong Kong. He wanted me back. I told him I would not be untrue to you again, and that was all. I wrote the letter to tell him about Kathleen." The color had come back to her face now; her voice had regained its strength. "Archer," she said, "you know and God knows that I've been a good wife. I'm giving you one last chance to forgive me. Say yes, mean it, and you can use the money for the church. If your answer's no, then give the two hundred pounds to me. I'll use it to buy my passage to England."

He backed away from her, the money in his hand, and studied her where she stood, waiting. Rose. So lovely, he had always thought; so gentle and good. A perfect wife. A man would be a fool not to forgive her.

Then, as he gazed at her, she seemed to change, to grow sensual and voluptuous, her hair became thick and loose, red as fire, her eyes bold and laughing, her mouth temptingly soft. He rubbed his eyes, knowing that his mind was playing tricks on him — for when he looked at Rose, it was Maggie Bellamy he saw . . . his own mother.

"No — " he whispered, everything that was loving and Christ-like in him rebelling against it. Yet the vision did not change. He knew that

he would never be able to look at his wife again without seeing Maggie Bellamy. He fastened his eyes to the ground and held out the money. When she took it, he wiped his hand on his trousers, as if it had been sullied.

"Give me an hour," she said. "When you come back to the house, I'll be gone. I'll get a boat to Hong Kong and spend a few weeks with my grandchildren. Then I'm taking the next ship back to England."

Archer could not look at her. He knew he would only see Maggie Bellamy again.

She paused at the top of the walkway. "Good-bye, Archer," she said.

He did not answer her. When he looked up, she was gone.

Because he did not know what else to do, he walked. He walked back and forth between the rows of graves, around the walled perimeter of the cemetery to the upper level, pausing before the spot that George Chinnery had reserved for his own burial. Slowly, he backed away. The grave was not for him. Not yet. He was only fifty. He had at least twenty years of life to look forward to, God willing. Twenty years of undivided devotion, of wholehearted service.

His thoughts turned to the war. Already there was talk of a treaty, to be negotiated by Charles Elliot and the new Chinese plenipotentiary, Ch'i-shan, at Canton. Elliot, the Reverend had heard, planned to demand the cession of Hong Kong Island as a permanent British possession, along with the opening of several Chinese ports — most likely Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ningho and Shanghai — to free trade. Archer Bellamy had his doubts about the success of such a treaty — Hong Kong was little more than a steep, barren mass of rocks and brush, hardly the place for a settlement, and there were those who felt strongly that the Chinese themselves should pay for Lin's destruction of the twenty thousand chests of opium.

No, the Reverend reflected, the treaty was too simple a solution. The British would want more and the Chinese would not give it to them without a fight. The war could drag on for months, even years. Yet in the end, England would win. England always won. Archer Bellamy was confident of that, just as he was certain that China would one day be opened to the preaching of the Word of God. And if Heaven so willed, he would live to be a part of it!

He pulled the turnip watch out of his vest. The hour had not yet passed. Rose would still be in the house. For a moment, he was almost

overcome by the desire to run to her, to take her in his arms once more and beg her not to leave him. He clung to the trunk of a slender young banyan with one hand until his reason regained its power. No, he told himself, let her go. He had lost Morgan; he had lost Kathleen; and finally he had lost Rose. Now there would be no one to stand between him and his God.

His eyes wandered over his beloved graveyard and came to rest on Kathleen's birdcage, where it dangled from the limb of the acacia. The bird was still silent, dancing in its nerve-ending restlessness from one perch to the other. Squaring his shoulders, he strode back down the walkway to the cage, lifted it down and placed it on one corner of Morrison's grave. Slowly, deliberately, he opened the small door.

The lark, its eyes like two tiny jet beads, cocked its head and looked at him. Ever so timidly, it hopped to the opening and perched on the bamboo of the edge, teetering between the alternatives of security and freedom. Archer held his breath.

Suddenly, with a quickness that startled him, the bird fluttered upward, a brown blur, until it reached the limb of the tree. For a moment, it rested, preening, chirping. Then it spread its wings and took to the air. Higher and higher it rose, dipping, soaring, trilling with joy. Archer Bellamy watched it, shading his eyes with his hand as it circled once and then sped like an arrow to the north, toward China.

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.