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NEVER AGAIN Book 3

RESET
NEVER AGAIN

R.J. RUMMEL



Llumina Press

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And foremost, always, is my wife Grace. She made this series and this novel possible. Without her, I could not have written it. Come here, sweetheart.

To be sure, this is a book of fiction. Although some characters may in name and position bear a striking resemblance to historical figures, they are fictional. Nonetheless, I must say again that whatever errors of fictional facts exist are mine, and wholly mine.

Chapter 1

Early Afternoon, Thursday
November 15, 1906, Fourth Universe
San Francisco

Joy Phim

No roar of automobile engines, no exhaust-heavy air; instead, the swish of leather and bridles, rattling chains, creaking wooden wagons and thumping wagon doors, and the clomping and sloshing of horses' hooves. Drivers shouted at their horses or each other. One yelled to another with a wave as they passed, "Yo, Fred! You still driving that old nag? Time to turn her into dog food."

Smiling, Fred shouted back, "Don't talk about my wife like that!"

Horses bearing riders, horse-drawn carriages, bicycles, trucks, and wagons of all descriptions passed continuously as Joy Phim and John Banks sauntered along San Francisco's Market Street. The stench of horse dung and urine permeated the air, and flies were everywhere; stop for a moment, and they attacked any bare flesh. The flounced hem of Joy's shoe-length walking skirt was muddy where it brushed the boards that passed for a sidewalk. The boardwalk dipped and rose, and was slick in places where mud had splashed up from the gutter. Here and there, broken boards created a hole that rivaled the potholes in the street, and an occasional broken board stuck up at an angle, waiting to catch the unwary dress or pants leg. But the boards were better than slipping and sliding on the puddled, potholed street.

Overhead, wires looped either singly or in bundles from pole to pole, and from poles to buildings. They cut the cloudless blue sky into sections that could have been pieces of a child's jigsaw puzzle. "There must be a million of these wires," John commented, eyes wide, as he looked up for the first time. Many of the wires had deteriorated; the insulation hung from some, and others curled dangerously close to the ground from leaning poles. "San Francisco still must be recovering from the earthquake and fire; the condition of the street and utility wires in this section of town show that there still is much to do."

Joy grunted in response, while her nose wrinkled and her upper lip curled as if drawing away from the smells assaulting her nose. All her senses were quivering antenna automatically cataloguing what was to

be ignored, remembered, or what demanded an instantaneous response in the form of a defensive move or offensive attack. This was a background to her thoughts.

She felt they were on their way. With the help of the three guys they met and hired soon after their arrival in this universe a couple of hours after midnight, she and John were able to get around San Francisco easily. They now had hotel rooms to live in. Actually, the Fairfax Hotel was theirs. John had bought it when its manager wouldn't give them rooms because Joy was Asian.

They had registered their new Tor Import and Export Company this morning. Just an hour ago, they had bought from the Bank of California the 8th Street warehouse in which their time machine had landed. And Joy had almost put behind her for a while the deep, heart-rending sadness she felt over leaving her mother behind, and the absolute horror of the message from the future of this new universe they were about to create that had awaited them on their arrival.

Their mission? To prevent war and democide—genocide and mass murder—by fostering democracy. The Survivor's Benevolent Society, of which Joy's adopted mother Tor was a leading member, had discovered the research that proved democracy is a method of nonviolence and a way to perpetual peace. They therefore sent volunteers Joy and John back in time to 1906 San Francisco to foster democracy, lobby for peace, and assassinate the warmongers and mass murderers, such as Hitler and Stalin. They staked their resources and the lives of Joy and John on preventing the horrible wars and democides of the twentieth century—the wars and murders that had so victimized members of the Society.

But within hours of Joy and John arriving in this time, their mission had changed. For they received a message from the future, impossibly, from far in the very future they were here to create—their new universe. It told of a nuclear attack on the democracies by the fundamentalist Islamic Abul Sabah, and his resulting victory and radical new world order. It was a horrible message. Although it told them that they did succeed in their mission to prevent the wars and democides that had happened in the world they left, they realized they'd created the conditions that made possible Sabah's nuclear attack, the defeat of the democracies, and the death of possibly two billion people.

Two billion loving, thinking, feeling human beings! Joy had been crushed by this toll. She had been shocked to her core by her responsibility for it. As she remembered this again for the hundredth time, her head lowered, and her eyes focused unseeingly on her moving feet. She

had failed her mother, who had given up her loving daughter to this mission. She had horribly bungled the Society's deepest hopes for peace, hopes that it had placed on her and John's shoulders.

Suicide. It was all that remained for the shamed and dishonored warrior.

And she had reached for that peace of death. Her knife had been but a second away from the carotid vein in her neck when John, no warrior, had done the perfect thing. At the last second, he had slapped her head away from the knife and yelled, "Kill Sabah! We'll kill him soon after he's born in 1914."

Yes, she had realized, touching her burning cheek. Yes. That was it. They could kill him and save the world from his nuclear attack and radical Islamic world totalitarianism. This challenge overcame her shame. It was worthy of a warrior.

Her thoughts kept returning to that nuclear war, to the sheer horror of some two billion people murdered for the sake of one religious sect, by the power of one man. The message they had received from the far future about Sabah played like a video loop in her mind, interrupted only with the repeated question, *How and when can we—I—assassinate him?*

This is no good, Joy finally chided herself. Let Sabah go. He will not be born until 1914 and what happened in the New Universe will happen. It is set. We can't do anything about it. We can only change this one—the Third Universe.

She visualized the whole question of Sabah, his nuclear attack, and his world victory over the democracies as wrapped up in solid ball. She imagined putting that ball in a metal strongbox, locking it, and putting it into a vault with a massive steel door, then closing and locking the ponderous door and walking away. It worked. She sighed with relief as her mind cleared. Now, face forward, head up, and shoulders squared, she was ready to meet head-on the overwhelming challenge they faced. She and John, alone, pitting their lives against the armies, secret services, and tyrants of the world.

The excitement of her new life and surroundings, awful smells and pesky flies notwithstanding, was invigorating. Joy now looked with fascination at this new world about her. They walked far behind the three guys—Sal Garcia, Dolphy Docker, and Hands Reeves—who had been squatting in the warehouse where their time machine came to rest. The drifters were now their first company employees.

She and John watched the horse traffic so new to their eyes and noses, and ogled the eye-catching store window displays. There was a

Graphophone Grand for \$25.00 that played music or voice from a cylinder, a precursor of the disk record player. Here was a Swiss Calendar pocket watch for \$4.95. And next to it a Delmar folding camera for \$3.75. At another store was a Kit Carson Cowboy saddle for \$20.00. John had to almost drag Joy past the gun shop displaying in its window the Marlin repeating rifle for \$10.00, the Winchester repeating rifle for \$12.50, and that which almost transfixed her, a 50-caliber Springfield government breech loading rifle with leaf sight and twenty rounds for \$2.90.

Now, with her mind clear, she enjoyed pointing out in mock horror the women's clothes displayed in some of the shop windows. There was a taffeteen silk waist with a tight blue collar, and three hemstitched straps down the front that ended in buckles; it had wide cuffs, and three rows of tucking in the back. In another window was a lady's wash suit, with waist and skirt made of percale and trimmed with white cord and strips of white braid; it had cording around a high standing collar. Then there were the capes, the current rage among middle-class women. Capes with bows, capes with buttons, capes that were decorated like mid-twentieth century modern art, and capes made of silk, mohair, brocaded satin, and wool.

Joy kept muttering, "I'll give up eating rice before I wear those stupid clothes."

John nodded toward a shop that displayed corsets and corset covers in its window and, apparently never tiring of the joke he'd been repeating since they arrived, told Joy in mock seriousness, brows deeply furrowed, "You're gonna have to get one of those things, the way your stomach bounces like Jell-O."

Slim but curvaceous and lithe from her daily martial arts practice, Joy raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes heavenward before looking down at his crotch. Waving her finger at it, she told him, "I'll wear one of those when you wear a jockstrap and cup, big boy, the way you allow yourself to bulge out."

John's face went red and he quickly glanced around, then joined her laughter with a breathy, "Ha-ha." He kissed his index finger, pointed it at her, and jiggled it for a moment, as they continued their stroll toward his newly purchased Hotel Fairfax, still a mile away.

Carla Akwal

From across the street, Hadad al Jaber watched Joy and John with wide eyes, raised brows, and gaping mouth. He could not seem to take

his eyes away from them, and had almost tripped or slipped on the boardwalk twice. He exclaimed to Carla Akwal, his time travel partner from 2013, "I cannot believe it. Here they are. I am actually seeing alive the most famous couple in history. Some countries even have set aside a day of remembrance in their honor. There are statues of them all over; paintings of them hang in many a government building." He sneered. "Stupid. Dumb." He eyed Joy. "But Joy Phim is even more beautiful than her paintings, even at this distance. No wonder Joy was able to spin webs around people."

"You mean *men*," Carla corrected, drawing away from him and crossing her arms. "She will spin no web around me."

She glared at him, then stepped toward him, grabbed his arm, and shook it. "Come on," she said, "have you become so mesmerized by that woman that you have forgotten why we are here? We are to kill them, not lick their feet."

"Okay," he replied, lifting his chin and trying to stand tall. He looked for a gap in the slow horse and wagon traffic, so they could cross the street. Impatient, he yelled to Carla, "Go!" and dashed forward.

Dodging a horse-drawn cart, he slithered across the street, his shoes making slurping noises in the puddles. Carla followed him, but he had cut too close to the cart, and she ran into the horse's nose. The horse reared up, screamed, and skittered at an angle, almost upsetting the cart it was pulling. Carla tripped over a pile of horse manure and slid to her knee. She hurriedly got to her feet, dodging the frightened horse. She waved her fist at the shouting, red-faced driver as she pulled up on the boardwalk next to Hadad, who was waiting, hands on hips.

He growled, "What took you so long?"

Without looking at him, Carla headed rapidly toward Joy and John. They were ambling down the boardwalk about fifty feet away, and seemed so entranced with what they were seeing that they had not heard the horse's scream.

A sudden clacking noise behind her made her turn. Hadad was kicking a broken board that stuck out of the boardwalk. "Damn thing caught my pants leg," he hissed.

Carla sneered, "What is taking you so long?"

Hadad gave her a steely stare when he caught up, and then both of them riveted their attention on Joy and John's backs as they hurried toward them.

Twenty feet.

Joy was giggling to John about something.

Fifteen feet.

John walked around a hole in the boardwalk and, pointing to it, said something to Joy.

Ten feet.

Hadad and Carla took out their Stahls.

Five feet.

Already exulting with triumph, Hadad aimed at Joy's head and Carla coolly did the same for John's.

Khoo Jy-ying

Her second day in this "primitive age," Khoo Jy-ying meandered down Market Street. She gazed here and there, at the people and their clothing, the small stores and their goods on display, and at the traffic, the incredible traffic of horse-drawn carts, wagons, carriages, surreys, and cabriolets, with an occasional rider on horseback or bicycle, and a rare automobile or truck, each adding its oily exhaust to the stench.

She twitched her nose and licked her lips, as though that could wash away the reeking air.

The unusually humid warmth of the air bore down on her; she could feel the sweat accumulating under her arms. When she had left 2002, it had been winter and below freezing in northeast China; here, the average high for November was in the sixties Fahrenheit, using that crazy American way of measuring temperature. A comfortable temperature, but the high relative humidity got her.

She sensed things around her as a warrior would, while a portion of her mind recorded and evaluated this new world. This was a different world to be sure, but she had not really appreciated how different and grimy it would be.

Now that she had succeeded in arriving here safely with all the supplies required for her one assassination, her thoughts kept skirting the whole purpose of her new life. *I will kill that time traveler when I find him. Me. Sabah Security Guard Captain Khoo will save a world. Alone.*

But, no hurry. I have so much time to relax and explore this primitive world and try to discover what is good about it. I have seven or eight years, maybe even nine years, before that time traveler will try to kill Abul Sabah, or his parents before he is born—that is plenty of time to save the world of Sabah and ensure his Great Victory over the infidel democracies and heathenism.

She looked ahead when she heard a horse scream, and saw that a short man had run into a horse. As the horse bolted, the man slid and

shuffled to the other side of the road, where another man, arms akimbo, waited for him. Jy-ying was about to look away when she saw them intently stare at the man and woman sauntering farther down the walk.

The two men suddenly rushed toward the unsuspecting couple.

I do not need my security training to know those two men are stalking that couple.

She had no intention of intervening. The stalkers could be undercover cops, as far as she knew. But then she saw them draw handguns and point them at the couple with the obvious intention of shooting them in the back. She scowled. *Not right.* She gave it not another thought. She dashed across the street to intervene.

Had the couple turned into dragons, she would not have been more surprised at what she saw next.

Joy

Out of the corner of her eye, Joy caught movement close by, and a glint reflected in the store window next to her. Absently, she turned her head to get a better look at the reflection. It was like having someone pass a photograph rapidly before one's eyes. In the first instant it didn't make sense—she just glimpsed lines, dark patches, and colors outlined against moving horses, wagons, and buildings on the other side of the street. Half a heartbeat later, it all clicked into place.

Men with guns pointed at us!

Trained since the age of four in karate and judo, Joy's body almost instantaneously reacted. As she screamed at John, "Gun behind you!" she hunched down to get the best center of gravity, and launched into a swinging back flip. The man behind her desperately tried to track her movements with his gun. Joy's feet whipped from within a blossoming mass of skirt ruffles and underskirt to smack his gun at an angle, knocking it painfully out of his hand. It twirled through the air, hit the edge of the boardwalk, and bounced into the street.

Responding reflexively, John ducked down and rotated his hips for a swift back kick, the sole of his boot knocking the second attacker's gun flying into a store window. Broken glass cascaded onto the boardwalk.

The attackers fled.

Carla Akwal

As Hadad and Carla fled down the boardwalk, Carla looked over her shoulder to see whether Joy and John were pursuing them, and almost tripped on a loose board.

Hadad grabbed her arm before she could fall. Eyes flashing, he rasped, "Damn it, Carla." He jerked her along with him, almost tugging her off her feet again before he released her.

Suddenly a woman jumped from the roadway and stopped in front of them, loosely pointing a gun at them. "Stop! Hands up," she shouted.

Even before the sound of her command died away, Hadad zigged to one side and front kicked the gun out of the woman's hand while Carla zagged to the other side and, twirling, swoop kicked her in the face with her boot heel. The blow knocked the woman onto her behind in the muddy gutter.

Hadad ran into a store entrance and tried to turn toward the door, but the mud on his shoes from the street made him slide past. Right behind him, Carla gripped his arm and held him up until he got his balance.

"Damn it, Hadad," she hissed with a smirk.

Hadad ignored her and darted into the store with Carla behind him.

Joy

After kicking the attacker's gun out of his hand, Joy slammed flat onto the boardwalk, her wide-brimmed hat slipping over her face, its decorative egret feather sticking straight up in the air. She brushed the hat away and tried to roll into her fighting stance, but her long skirt and underskirt had gathered completely around her and her cape had twisted up her shoulders. She ended in a flop. Pushing up to her knees, she down fisted her hands in front of her chest, ready to fight from the ground. As soon as she saw the attackers fleeing, she stood up as best she could and jerkily untwisted her clothes and pulled her skirt back down to her shoes.

John had remained on his feet. Reaching for her arm, he yelled, "You okay?"

"Yeah," she barked as he picked up her hat and moved to help further straighten out her clothes. Anger flared her nostrils and narrowed her eyes further. The words boiled out: "That does it. I'm never, ever again going to wear an underskirt, petticoat, or one of these circular skirts with all these stupid ruffles. It's like trying to fight while covered with a net. Damn it."

John seemed relieved, and mumbled, “I’m glad that look wasn’t directed at me.”

She stared in the direction the attackers had fled. They were gone, but Joy saw a woman—a Chinese woman!—just getting to her feet in the muddy gutter. She had obviously been pushed off the walk. Joy pointed her out to John, and they hurried down the boardwalk to help her.

Hadad

With Carla behind him, Hadad rushed toward the rear of the store, turning his head from side to side in search of a way out. A heavily bearded young man emerged from behind a counter, looking surprised, and seemed about to ask what they wanted. Hadad yelled at him, “Police. Where is your exit?”

They followed the pointing finger to a service entrance, and ran out into a walled alley filled with garbage cans and empty boxes. They ran down the alley, surprising a black cat that dashed before them in fright, until they emerged onto a muddy side street with no boardwalk. Hadad had to slow down in the mud. A glance at Carla showed a flushed face, drawn lips, and contracted eyebrows.

She sputtered at him, “Satan be damned, what were you doing? Why did you not shoot her?”

Stabbing at her with his finger, Hadad spit out, “Ha! You did not shoot *him*. What is your excuse?”

Not caring whether she followed, he stomped down the street for several minutes, splashing muddy water, until he cooled down. He stopped and turned; she had been right behind him and almost ran into him. He crossed his arms. “I wanted to be sure to get her in the head. Remember their damn armor. It is useless to take an easy body shot.”

Drawing her eyebrows down over narrowed eyes, Carla yelled, “You screwed this up. Now they know someone wants to kill them.”

“Yes, but they do not know us.” He looked down at the mud, studying it without really seeing it, and shrugged his shoulders. “I do not think they got a good look at our faces, just our backs.” He looked up. “And they must think you are a man.”

Hadad reached out, palm up, and touched her arm. “We have years, Carla, years—and they cannot protect themselves every minute of every day. I want to go back to our room to check some details in Hands’ *Mission Humanity* and John’s *Remembrance*.” He turned and

headed for the next intersection, glancing back once. Carla hung back for a few seconds, shook her head, and hurried to catch up.

At the intersection, Hadad got out his map to see where they were. Once he was oriented, he led the way to their room at the New California Resort on Montgomery Street, just off the Barbary Coast.

As they approached the three-story gray building that covered half a block, Carla wrinkled her nose and waved at the shabby building. "How nice to return to our 'resort,'" she commented sourly, "with its stinking saloon, whore's dance hall, talentless cabaret, and seedy hotel rooms." She grabbed Hadad's arm and made him stop. "I want to move," she railed, emphasizing the announcement by chopping the air with her free hand. "God, Hadad, we have all this money."

"I told you, Carla. This is our cover. We will live like rich capitalists—better, like monarchs with oil wells—after we kill them."

Joy

Sal, Dolphy, and Hands had been walking ahead of Joy and John, who constantly stopped or slowed down to look in store windows. The three men kept looking back at Joy and John, but they still missed seeing the attack. They did hear Joy yell, and then the noise of breaking glass. And suddenly turning around, they saw Joy in disarray rising angrily to her knees. They ran back to her and John while she was still on her knees, her back to them, pushing aside clumps of straight black hair that had fallen out of her bun.

John, crouched beside her holding her hat in one hand, straightened as Sal, boot knife in hand, and the others dashed up to them.

Hands asked John, "What happened?"

"Ah . . . somebody tried to . . . kill us," he stuttered, turning slightly pale.

The guys followed them to the Chinese woman getting up from the street. She had just picked up a gun and was trying to wipe the mud off its grip with her dress. Her nose was red and bleeding. Joy reached a firm hand out to her and helped her onto the walk.

The woman took a good look at Joy. Her slanted almond eyes widened and her eyebrows reached up for her hairline. She stared at Joy.

"What?" was all Joy could say, gaping in return. Even with her bloody and swelling red nose, the woman looked like her sister. Almost her twin, except slightly shorter. Joy knew people had doubles, but she'd never thought she would meet hers.

A stunned silence fell between them, which was finally broken by Sal. Idly holding his knife at his side, he waved at Joy and the other woman and asked nonchalantly, “Are you two sisters or something?”

Still wide-eyed, Joy shook her head.

John cleared his throat. The color was returning to his face. He asked the woman, “Are you okay? Your nose is bleeding.”

“Yes. It is nothing,” she said, using her white lace sleeve to wipe the blood from her nose and chin. Then she straightened, a stern, commanding look coming over her. “We must get their guns. They may help identify the attackers.”

Joy broke out of her paralysis, put her hand out to John for her hat, plopped it on, and self-consciously shoved her errant hair under it as they all watched. She flashed a little smile at John, and turned to lead them back to the spot where they’d been attacked.

There, ignoring the store clerk staring at her through the broken window, she reached into the glass-littered display and picked up the gun John had knocked into it. She gave it a quick glance, frowned, and put it into her purse. Then she waved on two horsemen and a wagon that had stopped to see what was going on. John nonchalantly leaned over the gutter, gripped the muddy gun Joy had knocked there, and shoved it deep into his worsted coat’s side pocket.

Sal half-turned his body to John, while keeping his distance. Waving a circle in the air with the point of his knife, Sal squinted at him and blurted in a tense voice, “Hey, boss. What the fu—what ya got us into?”

John held up his hand, and in a firm voice replied, “Wait until we get to my hotel room. Just be watchful until then. Okay?”

Sal mumbled something in Spanish, but nodded. He continued to hold his knife tightly, however, as he reached into his coat with his other hand for a half-smoked Abajo cigar, and after putting it his mouth, he lit it with a match he scratched on his boot.

John asked Hands, who was standing near Sal with his hands on his hips, one cheek puffed out by a wad of Red Man chewing tobacco, “How does one catch a cab here?”

“Wait,” Joy exclaimed. She turned to the other woman. She was now almost able to accept her double for what she was. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, her eyes narrowed, lips pursed. She seem to come to a decision. Pointing to Joy and then John, she said, “You two. You are martial arts experts, yes? That is the only way I can explain what you did to your attackers.”

Joy's eyebrows popped up, and her eyes widened. She hesitated. Then, gaining control, she pulled her shoulders back and nodded.

John beamed.

The woman straightened her back, looked squarely at Joy, and went on. "I am a former teacher of wing chun kung fu." When Joy nodded in understanding, she continued. "I had a gun on those two men, but they both attacked me unexpectedly. I think they are experts in some martial art, which, going by their movements, may be Western or Southern Chinese."

Taking a half step toward the woman and holding her gaze with her own, Joy smiled. "I would like to get to know you; maybe you would like to join John and me in sparring sometime. Anyway, if you don't have something you must do, would you like to come back to our hotel with us?"

The woman pinched her nose, frowned, and looked down at her bloody sleeve.

John took out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "Your nose is still bleeding."

Lips pursed, she wiped her face.

John said, "Hold it to your nose until the bleeding stops, but to return the handkerchief to me, you will have to come to our hotel with us."

The woman raised one eyebrow, then finally grinned. "Thank you. I will do that."

John turned to Hands and asked, "Cab?"

"Cab?" Hands asked in return.

Joy supplied, "We want to rent something to take us back to our hotel."

"Oh, you mean a Hansom. But we won't all fit into it. I'll find a coach."

Hands stepped into the street, spit out what remained of his chewing tobacco, and soon hailed a four-wheeled open coach with a yellow stripe on its side, what looked like a canvas automobile top, one driver, and two horses—one red chestnut and the other a dun. The six of them squeezed into it. Sal, seeing how confined they would be, glanced at the two women, cut off the glowing end of his cigar, and pocketed it.

With all the swaying that sent them bouncing against each other, no one tried to say anything on the way. Dolphy was sitting next to Joy and seemed embarrassed by constantly rubbing against her. He pressed himself against Sal on the other side, pushing him hard against the door. Lost for the moment in her thoughts about what had happened, Joy paid no attention.

Sitting across from them with Hands and the Chinese woman, John again looked distracted, probably still thinking of the attack, Joy guessed. He didn't even notice that the woman was bouncing against him. Joy did.

When they arrived at the Fairfax Hotel, John asked the driver, "How much for the ride?"

"Fifty cents."

"Fifty cents?" John repeated, brows knitted.

"Hey, look buddy," the cabby exclaimed, leaning down toward John from his wooden seat with narrowed eyes. He pointed his whip at him. "That's what I charge. You can't find anybody cheaper."

"No, no," John replied, waving his palms at the driver. "It's fine. Here, keep the change."

The cabbie looked at the dollar bill as though John were crazy, as did the three guys waiting close by.

The Chinese woman raised her eyebrows.

Chapter 2

Mid-Afternoon, Thursday

Joy

The Fairfax Hotel was a solid, square, three-story wooden building standing by itself amidst overgrown, rat-infested, vacant lots. The hotel's remoteness from the center of the San Francisco earthquake and the flexibility of its wooden structure had enabled it to survive the earthquake. This was not true of adjacent brick and hollow tile buildings that had been condemned by the city after the earthquake and torn down. One lot was the site of pre-earthquake redevelopment, but no work had been done on it since.

The hotel had a large marquee in front, and a vertical sign with "Fairfax" painted in large white letters outlined in black against a red background. Inside, the lobby was decorated in the typical Victorian style of middle-class, middle price range hotels in the western United States—plush blue velour sofas and chairs with curved armrests, here and there a Versailles chair, heavy blue and green drapes on the windows, three garish landscapes on the walls, numerous potted ferns, a Macarthur palm outgrowing an oxblood china bowl planter, and an imitation Persian rug, its convoluted colors and designs a mixture no Persian would confess to, even under torture, covering the floor. The place was stuffy, with an underlying odor that suggested someone's bad breath, perhaps emanating from the two spittoons.

As they entered the lobby, Joy sniffed the air and told herself again, "This place is so ugly and smelly it has to be on purpose. I bet it's so guests don't linger."

Once they were all packed into John's second floor hotel room, one of the largest in the hotel as befitted the owner, Joy turned to the woman, bowed slightly, and said, "I am sorry for being so rude. My name is Joy Phim." She introduced John as their boss and owner of an import-export company, and each of the three guys as fellow workers.

John said, "Nice meeting you."

Hands and Dolphy nodded and touched their cap rims; Sal waved his greeting with a grin, giving Jy-ying an open-eyed look.

Jy-ying bowed to each of them and then looked at Joy. “I am Khoo Jy-ying. I am from Tianjin, China. Where in China are you from?”

“I’m from Vietnam; no one knows my true ancestry, but by my looks it’s probably Sino-Vietnamese. My name comes from Tor Phim, who adopted me. More later. We have some things to do first.”

She turned to John and, eyes narrowed, hand out, asked, “Could I see the attacker’s gun that you have?”

He pulled it out of his pocket, saw that it was encrusted with mud, and turned to Jy-ying. “You no longer need my handkerchief for your nose. Could I have it back?”

“No, no,” she said, “I will wash it.”

“I’ll give it back after I wipe the gun. Okay?”

She nodded, took it out of her purse, and handed it to him. He started to wipe the gun.

Joy jerked her head close to his ear and hissed, “The safety, John!”

He looked up at her with a Charlie Brown smile, flipped up what must have been the safety, knowing Joy would tell him if it weren’t, and finished wiping the gun. He handed it to her.

She saw mud that John had missed, took the handkerchief out of his hand, shook her head, and wiped the remaining dried mud off the gun. She laid it on the bed next to the one she had recovered from the store window. Then she started to disassemble them.

The three guys watched what she was doing with huge eyes, as though she were performing a magic trick. Jy-ying stood off to the side, brows furrowed, and watched Joy easily disassemble the guns.

Sal asked in surprise, “You know about guns?”

“Sure. Ask me anything about guns and I’ll give you an answer.”

Hands responded, “I used to shoot with my uncle’s old Civil War rifle when I was a boy.” Smirking, he asked, “What was the rifle musket 1863 Type 1?”

Looking up from the guns on the bed, she replied, “Answer.”

“What?” Dolphy asked.

“Answer.”

“What kind of answer is that?” Hands asked.

Joy gave him a broad smile, and pointed out, “Well, I told you I would give you an ‘answer,’ and I did, didn’t I?”

Sal chuckled and Dolphy waved his finger at Hands.

Hands crossed his arms over his chest and chided Joy, “You don’t know, do you?”

Joy’s smile turned to a grin. “The 1863 was based on Colt’s Special Model 1861. Springfield modified it in four ways—made a flat S-

shaped hammer with faceted sides; shortened the flat-faced bolster without a clean out screw; included round clamping barrel bands; and eliminated the band springs—a ramrod spoon held the ramrod in the stock. Despite all that, it was still a musket.”

Good thing the guys had shoes on, or as their jaws fell open, they would have crushed their toes. Even John goggled.

Jy-ying’s eyes narrowed further. She began to look carefully around the room, and at John and Joy’s clothes. When they spoke, she was also unusually attentive, like a cat eyeing a bird on the ground.

As the guys tried to put their jaws back in place, Joy turned again to the guns on the bed. Accentuating her movements a little more than necessary, she ejected the magazine from each, took out a cartridge from one and looked at the bullet. Then she sat next to the gun pieces with a sigh and said, “These are good weapons. Our attackers are not cheap gangsters or thugs. They are professionals.”

Jy-ying stepped over to the bed, picked up the weapons, and carefully examined them, holding each of the parts in her hands and eyeing them closely. She put them down and looked Joy in the eye, a curious light in her own. “You are correct. You are a weapons expert also. Yes?”

“And so are you,” Joy said, surprised. She belatedly closed her sagging jaw. Jy-ying was not only her double, she also knew martial arts. And weapons. *Christ. This is beyond probability, she thought. Some god is playing with us.*

Hands looked from Joy to Jy-ying to John and back. “I can’t believe you people, especially the ladies. But even you, boss . . . can I be frank?”

John mumbled something incredulous about “another Joy” before focusing on Hands to jerk his head up and down in a nod.

Dolphy put his hand on Hands’ arm and whispered, “He’s the boss and we got jobs. Don’t ruin it.”

Hands ignored him. “I’ve never worked for someone like you. Although you’ve been our boss as of this morning, you are very relaxed with us. You’re more like a coworker than a boss. Same with Miss Phim. And although she’s a woman, you treat her like you do us. And forgive me Miss Phim, but Mr. Banks told us you are his assistant and translator. What do you assist Mr. Banks in doing? Beating up your competitors? Buying guns?”

Sal and Dolphy went stone still.

Jy-ying stood back, her face intent and eyes focused on Joy as though only she existed.

John combed his unruly, carrot-colored hair with his fingers and glanced at Joy, who just sat on the bed looking down at the guns beside her and rubbing her arm.

A door slammed down the hall, and voices passed by the room. Outside, a steam-powered automobile coughed its way down the street.

Just as Hands waved his hand as though to apologize, Joy began with, "I help—"

John interrupted with a cough and a wave in Joy's direction. "She's my Girl Friday." His smirk broke through his attempt to hide it.

"What's that mean?" Sal asked, winking at Hands. "Does she do something special on Friday?" His grin looked suspiciously like a leer.

"She does whatever needs to be done for me," John said, finally achieving a poker face.

Joy stared at him. *Doesn't he know what he is saying? Correction, with his stupid ego, maybe he does.*

John's face turned red, and he took sudden interest in the gun parts on the bed. He tugged at his earlobe as the three guys grinned at Joy. Joy had to stop it. She glowered at John for a moment and then fixed the three guys with her stare. "In *business*, you guys. Don't get any ideas." She flashed another cold look at John, and continued. "And as far as my knowledge of guns is concerned, I'm just your ordinary woman who took up weapons to protect herself. Goes to show you, you never know what you're getting into when you mess with a woman."

With a grin that created those dimples at the corner of his mouth that Joy hated so much, John looked up at her. Hiding his mouth from the guys with his hand, he silently mouthed, "Getting into," and raised an eyebrow.

Joy realized what she had said. *My God. My face feels so hot. I must be blushing. Me, who attended a Chinese school of the erotic arts when I was seventeen, blushing? John is going to have insufferable fun chiding me about this. The beast.*

Joy was speechless for a few moments before she insisted to the room, "Let's get back to these guns. As I was saying, this was an attempted professional hit."

Jy-ying looked amused, but not distracted. She seemed to listen especially to John's voice and study his gestures.

Hands and Dolphy looked at each other, and Sal took out his Abajo and put it in his mouth. He pulled a wooden match from another pocket and scratched it against a nearby ceramic pillow ashtray that had one

rough side for that purpose, and “Fairfax Hotel” stenciled on the opposite side. He applied the flame to his cigar, puffed, and put the match in the ashtray. When he looked back at Joy, he was startled by the black look she was giving him.

He gave her a “what did I do?” look, shrugged, put his foot on the room’s only chair, and leaned on his knee.

She turned away. *I’ve got to remember what age this is*, Joy reproved herself. *Almost twice as many cigars are sold as cigarettes, and John said that each day, eighty percent of all American men smoke one or more cigars. Still stinks no less.*

John again looked at the disassembled guns for several seconds, and that drew the guys’ attention back to them. Their demeanor changed and Hands loudly repeated the question Sal had asked on the street. “What have you gotten us into? You just hired us this morning, and now somebody wants to kill you two.”

Emboldened by Hands’ question, Dolphy went further. “I don’t know whether what you’re paying us is worth the risk. Why were you attacked . . . ah . . . boss?”

John sat down next to the guns. He rested his elbows on his knees and, leaning his chin on them, gazed at each of the guys in turn. When the guys began to fidget, John replied in a deep tone, “The why, we don’t know. These may be killers hired by crazy people. They may have been hired by someone out east who felt our business robbed or cheated them when it was there, or by competitors who have heard of our company’s success before coming here, and are afraid of our competition. This is still the wild frontier, you know. Anyway, I don’t think either of us got a look at their faces. Can you describe them, Jy-ying? You saw them head-on.”

As the guys turned their heads to look at Jy-ying, she answered, “They both are short and look a mixture of Caucasian and Oriental with strong, dark features. The shorter one looked almost effeminate, and may be a disguised woman. They might have seemed clumsy as they ran toward me, since one tripped and almost fell on the boardwalk, and the other held him up for a moment, but they actually moved well, almost gracefully. They were dressed in ordinary clothes, even to their hats, which they managed to keep on somehow. As I mentioned before, I think the way they attacked me indicates they are also trained in the martial arts.”

John looked impressed.

“What’s a martial arts?” Sal asked, taking his foot off the chair and standing up, shoulders back, to face Jy-ying.

Joy answered, "It's a form of person to person combat, either hand to hand, or weapon to weapon. There are many forms, such as judo, ka—"

"Yes," John interrupted, "I'm sure that Joy will teach you more about it some other time, but—"

Sal exhaled cigar smoke, smoothed down a tobacco leaf sticking out of the side of his cigar, and asked, "So, why are you and, ah . . . Jy-hing—"

"Jy-ying," Jy-ying corrected.

"—into martial arts?"

Joy looked at Jy-ying to answer first. Jy-ying gave Sal an intense look, then said, "My father was a teacher of wing chun, a form of kung fu martial arts, and when my mother was gang raped and killed when I was very young, he started to teach me wing chun so that I could protect myself when I grew up." She stopped and looked at Joy.

Joy's shoulders slumped. She swallowed several times, and gazed down at a finger that was fidgeting with one of the gun parts next to her. The memory of her mother was too fresh, too painful, and the question brought it all back—her leaving her mother forever, the last good-bye forever. Forever—less than a day ago. Her eyes moistened; she fought back tears. *I don't want to cry. Not here. Not now. Not with all these people around.* She felt her face flush.

John put his hand on her shoulder, and answered softly for her. "She was found alone and almost dead on a Vietnamese boat when she was four. She was taken to a hospital, and her story got into an American newspaper. Tor Phim, a Cambodian immigrant, saw the story and adopted her. She herself had suffered under a dictatorship—its thugs killed her husband, and she barely escaped alive. She adopted Joy, and had her trained in the martial arts so that she could always defend herself against the thugs of this world. Joy left her loving mother to come here with me. She died a couple of days ago."

Joy let out a quiet gasp and buried her face in her hand.

John quickly put his arm around Joy's shoulder and pulled her toward him. He whispered in her ear, "I'm sorry, baby."

Joy pushed gently away, shook her hair back from her face, tightly pressed her palms together on her lap, and looked up at nobody.

"Thank you, boss, for telling us," Hands said softly, with a slight bow of his head. Straightening up, he looked at Joy and then Jy-ying. Gesturing toward each, he said, "I think I speak for my friends, Sal and Dolphy. We're very sorry about what happened to you. If you need a shoulder to cry on, ours are free."

Dolphy and Sal nodded.

Joy finally focused her eyes on them and nodded in return.

Jy-ying moved to where the three guys could easily see her, and bowed to them from the waist.

John Banks

John was getting to like these guys. They were strong-willed and independently-minded, but sensitive. Just the kind of employees he wanted. He was also surprised by Hands' speech. Although he did not have much of an education, he had learned much as a professional baseball player.

John held up his hand to still further comments. Pointing to the guys, he said, "I want to see your muscles. Take off your shirts and whatever you have underneath."

"Hey," Dolphy responded immediately, "we're not into that stuff."

Leering at Jy-ying, Sal blurted, "Speak for yourself. Girls first."

Hands grinned and asked, "In front of the ladies?"

Joy looked at John with raised eyebrows. He chuckled, and said, "Nothing like that. Just take your shirts off, not your pants—although I don't think you have anything that would surprise them."

"John!" Joy exclaimed, giving him a look from which a tiger would slink. But she confounded the look with the giggle that followed. Finally shedding the look altogether, she playfully leered at the guys' chests, one after another.

John thought, *This was just the humor moment she needed.*

"Ah, shucks," one of the guys whispered under his breath. John guessed it was Sal, who at that moment was trying to put out his cigar in the ashtray so he could save it.

When the three guys had their shirts off, John walked around them looking at their physiques. There was no fat on any of them. Sal was lean but sinewy. Hands was the most muscular.

John then put his hand out to each in turn and said, "Grip my hand as tight as you can." Only Joy probably saw the pain in his eyes when Hands complied. "Very good," John said to Hands, his voice even. "Your baseball background is showing."

John then looked at each of them and said, "You guys have the physiques for what I have in mind. Do you know how to use hand-guns?"

"Yes," they responded together, as though John were asking them whether they knew how to pee.

“I will triple your pay if you will be our guards.”

“Wow,” Sal exclaimed, “that’s a lot of money. What do we do for it?”

“You go with us wherever we go, and you keep an eye out for the killers. I don’t want you jumping in the way of a bullet meant for us—no way. I want that understood now. Your job is more to scare the killers off than actually engage in a shoot-out. But you should be armed. Aside from Sal’s knife, do you have weapons?”

“We just don’t have the money to buy guns,” Dolphy replied.

John reached into his wallet, took out \$100, and gave it to Hands. “Use this money to buy the best guns. Not engraved grips and such, but the best mechanical ones. And a couple of boxes of cartridges. Now, go. And come back here when you’ve bought them.”

Just as he was about to leave, Sal turned at the door and asked John, “What do you need us for? You got Miss Phim to guard you, us, your company, San Francisco—”

“And the United States,” Dolphy interjected.

Joy laughed and replied, “Because I can’t protect the United States alone.”

Smiling, Sal pointed at Jy-ying. “You should hire her also.”

John shoed them out with his hands. After they left, he turned to Jy-ying, who had been standing all this time. He invited her to sit on the cushioned wicker chair by the side table, while he and Joy sat on the edge of the bed facing her.

John told her, “Thanks for trying to help us. I’m sorry your nose got bloodied as a result.”

Jy-ying looked for a second at the footprint Sal had made on the seat, glanced at the mud on her dress, and sat down. She leaned toward John. “Oh, excuse me. May I have your handkerchief back? I will wash it for you.”

While John handed it to her, Joy asked, “Where do you live?”

“I just came here from Oakland yesterday. I did not want to stay there after my father died. I’m living here temporarily at the All Nations Hotel.”

“Do you have a job?”

“Not yet.”

“Well,” John said, “I’m looking for good people. I just moved my company from the east coast, as you heard, and I’m hiring. Would you like to work for me?”

“Thank you, but what would I do?”

Joy held her hand up to John to stop him from answering. She turned to Jy-ying, and asked in Mandarin Chinese, "Do you know much about China?"

Jy-ying answered in the same major dialect, "Yes, I was born and grew up there, and I've traveled there often with my father. And I have studied China in college."

Joy tried Shanghainese. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I know that Chinese."

Joy tried Cantonese, and then two other Chinese language groups. Jy-ying knew them all.

Brows raised and eyes wide, Joy turned to John and announced, "Her Chinese is excellent. She can work under me. I'll need all the help I can get in our future business with China. As you told me, this will be our major business for a while."

"Okay," John said. He smiled at Jy-ying.

Jy-ying

She could not believe it. Her heart began to flutter, and she felt warm. Distracted, she did not hear the first words he said.

"... most useful skills, I will pay you a professional salary of" John hesitated, took a notepad out of his coat pocket, and did some quick calculations. Finally he asked, "How about an annual salary of \$1,100?"

She unconsciously licked her lips and leaned back, pushing out her chest. "I accept, John. Thank you. You treat this humble person with such honor."

"Very good. I am in the process of getting organized. When I am ready to start work, I will give you a call at your hotel the day before. In the meantime, your salary starts now. Do you need an advance?"

"You are too kind, but no," Jy-ying said, smiling into his eyes and holding them before looking away. Then she looked back. "I must go now."

She sprang up, faced Joy, and bowed. Joy stood, looked at her with raised brows and tight lips, bowed, and said nothing. Jy-ying turned at the door, smiled at John again, and left.

Jy-ying walked thoughtfully down the hallway to the stairs. When she reached the stairs, she pursed her lips and looked back at the closed door to John's room. Warmth rushed through her. She fluffed her hair and almost bounced down the stairs wearing a happy, satisfied smile.

She stopped at the reception desk and registered for a room. “I’m a friend of John Banks,” she told the clerk. She got the room she wanted.

She returned to John’s room and knocked on the door. John answered it; before he could say anything, she informed him that this hotel was so much better than the shabby one that she was staying in that she had decided to get a room here. “I will move into it by evening.”

“Oh, good. Convenient. I should have thought of that,” John said, as Joy nodded—too abruptly.

As John was about to close the door, Jy-ying announced with a smile she could not help, “I will be right across the hall from Joy.”

Joy

John had to use the bathroom on their floor; when he returned, he found Joy frowning as she studied the pieces of the disassembled guns. He sat down next to her on the bed, turned her head toward him with his fingers, and asked, “How did you know about that 1863 musket?”

Just the right question. Her frown turned into a grin that felt as though it had split her face in two. She asked in return, “Why dearest, am I not a weapons expert?”

John made beckoning motions with both hands while giving her a “who are you kidding?” look.

“Oh, okay, spoilsport. One of my weapons teachers collected Civil War weapons, and would occasionally bring several of them to the weapons range so that his students could handle and shoot them. The 1863 was among the last line of muskets. It was one of my favorites. I learned to take it apart and put it together again. Young boys tinkered with cars; I tinkered with guns.”

“I thought young girls played with dolls and doll houses.”

Joy’s face turned dark, and she glowered. “Not when my parents had been murdered by pirates. Not when my dear adopted mother’s husband had been murdered by the Khmer Rouge, and my godmother had her loving husband murdered in Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Not when they barely escaped with their own lives. Not when most of the other adults I loved in my youth had suffered similar horrors in the Holocaust, Stalin’s forced Ukrainian famine, Rwanda’s Great Genocide, and World War One. John, you were almost killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Towers; your cousin was. You should understand.”

John held his palms up toward her and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, sweetheart." He sat down next to her and rubbed her back. "Okay, Miss Weapons Expert," he said, changing the subject, "tell me about the attackers' guns."

Joy just looked down at her lap, at her clenched hands. The mention of her mother had flooded her with the emotional pain of their separation. Again. It overwhelmed her and this time she didn't fight the tears. They coursed down her cheeks and dripped onto her lap.

John saw them. He put his arms around her, held her close. "I'm really sorry, baby. I'm so stupid, causing you to think about your mother again."

Joy soon disengaged herself, leaned over, and picked up an edge of the bed cover. She wiped her face and dabbed at her wet eyes. She sighed, put her hands back in her lap and kept her eyes on them as she said softly, "Not your fault. I'm still just too close to our good-byes." She put her head in her hand and waved John away. "Give me a moment," she whispered.

Nearby was the inevitable porcelain water pitcher of the era on the universal hotel chest of drawers. John poured Joy a glass of water from the pitcher and gave it to her. She took a few sips, then shook her head as if to clear it. "I'm okay now. On to the guns," she murmured. She cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes. "Ah . . ." She made herself speak normally. "I've never seen this kind of gun before."

John's eyebrows jerked up.

Getting into one of her favorite subjects gave Joy the focus she needed. She looked up at John and noted his astonishment. "I'm not saying I don't know anything about the guns, only that I've never seen them before."

"Oh, stupid me," John replied, shaking his head.

Joy was now into it. "I can tell that they are both 9mm double action, each with an ambidextrous manual safety, automatic firing pin block, combat-style trigger guard, and loaded-chamber indicator. They have a strange, but clever, rackable slide and firing mechanism. The plaque on the bottom of the grip says 'Shultz 703 Hanover.' The magazine carries sixteen rounds." Her voice now firm, she added, "The bullets are a type of hollow point I haven't seen before, either. But, I know they would leave a hole larger than a fist where they exit a human body. If they had shot us in the head or body, no matter. We would be dead."

John turned to look at the gun parts. Suddenly, his voice a mixture of amazement and fear, he asked, "The guns were produced . . . when?"

Her almond eyes widened as what she was going to say finally hit home. She gulped, turned her head to look at John directly, put her hand on her cheek and, enunciating each word, announced, “They were made in the 1990s, or thereabouts.”

“Thereabouts?” John nearly shouted. “You don’t know the date of manufacture or more specifics about the gun?”

“No. I don’t need to be more specific, damn it. They are from the future, John.”

John

It was automatic with John. No matter whether his attempted humor was atrocious or ill timed, it was his cigarette or drink in time of stress. “Good thing the guys aren’t here,” John said, raising an eyebrow. “With your confession of ignorance on such an important matter, they would think less highly of you, Miss Phim.”

“John. I’m not amused.”

What Joy said electrified his mind. It was impossible. No, he realized, it wasn’t. The hair on his arms bristled, and he was surprised his voice didn’t waver as he repeated, “The future?”

“Certainly. The far future.”

“No chance of being wrong.”

“No! John, this is serious.”

“Jesus Christ.” John took a moment to control his voice and draw out the implications of what Joy had said. He put both his hands on his head, and groaned, “They are from our time. They followed us here. They are trying to kill us. And they have modern weapons, and who knows what else, to use against us.” He lifted his hands from his head and shook them at the ceiling. “Holy shit!”

Joy

Joy glanced behind her at the disassembled guns on the bed before again looking at her hands on her lap. She called on her training to calm herself so that she could think this through. She took several deep breaths and visualized her muscles relaxing, beginning with her toes.

After a few minutes, she looked up at John’s pale, sweaty face. “First,” she said, “they could not have happened on us accidentally. They had to know where we would be at a certain time. That place was the bank. Second, they had to have some kind of road map of our ac-

tivities after we arrived. Third, there is only one way the attackers could have gotten that, which is from the Survivor's Benevolent Society that sent us here."

John jumped up. Hands clasped behind him and head down, he began pacing around the room. Joy knew he needed this, and waited. Minutes later, and now much calmer, John pointed out, "But the attackers wouldn't know that we were going to Bank of California today to buy the warehouse."

"Still," Joy said, "the Society has to be the key. With a knowledge of the time and place to which we were sent, and the name of the Tor Import and Export Company we were to set up, someone who had access to information about our mission through the Society could reason that we would soon visit the bank to buy the warehouse."

John shook his head. "No one in the Society would talk."

Joy shook her head as well. "You're forgetting how our time travel happened. That FBI SWAT team that rushed into the Society's headquarters to search for the time machine forced us to leave months before schedule."

John nodded. Joy knew he was remembering the circumstances of their departure. The SWAT team had just reached the lab when her mom had hustled them into the machine, and they'd been sent off with barely enough time to say good-bye.

"Supposedly, the equipment and notes were to be destroyed right after our machine left," Joy continued. "Perhaps the scientists were prevented from doing that. Maybe notes were found. Somebody down the line talked. I don't know who, but the Society has to be the only source."

Scowling, John replied, "I don't believe it. But okay, let's assume that, as distasteful as it is." He waved his finger at her. "But then, they can't know about this hotel, because we didn't know we were going to be here until it was suggested by one of the guys. And the attackers couldn't know the details of any of our other movements. They will know in general, however, that we probably want to prevent the bloodbath of the Mexican Revolution, the First and Second World Wars, and so on. They will know the timing of these interventions."

"And that raises the big question," Joy said, too involved to really notice his hated finger shaking. "Why are they trying to stop us ending war and democide, and promoting democracy? I would think any sane person would be for this."

John shook his head as he waved his finger again. "You know better, baby. Think fanatics. Think Nazis, communists, radical Is-

lamic terrorists. Think what power it would give any of them to be able to go back into the past and, with their knowledge of events and historically critical people, promote their ism, and assassinate those in the way.”

“Yes,” Joy said, unthinkingly waving her finger in return. “Just the opposite of our mission. Well, we’re safe here, and they don’t know about our warehouse or the precise time of our arrival. Otherwise, they would have killed us as we stepped out of our time machine. I thought we wouldn’t have to arm ourselves until we traveled to Mexico for our first intervention, but we’d better do so now.”

John put his finger on his chin, brows knitted. “There is an error in our reasoning. If it’s through the Society that they knew we were going to buy the warehouse, then they should have known the time and place of our arrival. And if they knew that, it doesn’t make sense for them to have waited until we went to the bank, as public a place as that is, to kill us.”

“You’re right. We need more information. Meanwhile, dearest, time for our weapons.” She froze for a couple of seconds. “By the way, Jy-ying likes you.”

“What healthy young woman wouldn’t?” he replied, seeming relieved at the chance to make a joke.

I should’ve known better, Joy chided herself.

Hadad

At the New California Resort, in their small room above the bar, Hadad and Carla sat on the double bed with Hands’ *Mission Humanity*, a biography of Joy and John, and John’s *Remembrance* between them. They had just gone through a printed summary of the details in both books, to refresh their memory.

Carla gripped the *Remembrance* so tightly, her knuckles were white. Her eyes flashed at Hadad, and she snarled, “How could you forget? We memorized this stuff. Did that woman also hypnotize you? It is clear in printout—they did not start wearing armor until the thugs from that stupid anti-Oriental league attacked them. I should have shot John in the back instead of listening to you.”

“If you are so smart, Carla, how come *you* did not remember they wore no armor? Huh? Why did you listen to me?”

As Carla’s eyes glinted steel and the corners of her mouth headed toward the floor, Hadad shrugged his shoulders, looked down to avoid

her eyes, and waved it away. “Nothing lost, anyway,” he muttered. “We know where they are staying, and they don’t know we know that. We also know about the three guys, as they call them.”

He tilted his head back, raised his eyebrows, and met her eyes. “So, Carla,” he declared, “I have a plan.”

Chapter 3

Late Afternoon, Thursday

John

John left a message at the reception desk for the guys to wait for them in their rooms when they came back with their new weapons. Then he and Joy cautiously left the hotel, keeping close to buildings and walking one behind the other on the way to their warehouse on 8th Street. They unlocked the side entrance and entered, John with a sigh of relief.

The warehouse was large and dark, with a strongly supported floor meant for heavy equipment, and a high ceiling. With the dust, dirt, and debris scattered about, it looked more like the floor of a barn in heavy use. The owner had gone bankrupt because of the San Francisco earthquake and fire, and had sold off all the equipment and boxes that he had stored there.

Not far from the entrance, clustered together along one wall, were the supply time capsules that the Society had sent to be here when Joy and John arrived from 2002. Next to the capsules were broken boxes, cots, and other items the three homeless guys had accumulated while they squatted in the warehouse. It was here, upon entering the warehouse from whatever part-time jobs that they'd found, that the guys had discovered Joy and John soon after their arrival from the future.

Joy walked over to the weapons capsule, identified by a small W painted on its side, and opened an almost invisible lid to access the keypad. She keyed in the code, opened the capsule door, then reached around the door and switched off the automatic destruct switch—she had ten seconds to do so. She started looking around inside.

“Here,” Joy said as she pulled out two armored vests, “let’s put these on first.” She handed John’s vest to him. The armor had been molded to their torsos—there was no doubt which was Joy’s.

She reached up and removed the pins holding on her hat, then took it off and held it out in front of her. Shaking her head, she stared at the fashionable wide-brimmed monstrosity of folded lace, imitation flowers, and white egret feathers sticking out at the side. She did not look at

John, obviously to avoid seeing his face red from the laughter he had learned to squelch when it came to these ridiculous clothes. She tossed the hat into the capsule.

She took off her cloth cape, pulled the shirt this era called a lady's white satin waist out of her long walking skirt, and unbuttoned the waist and its collar held tight at her throat. She let her stomach out with a sigh. She refused to wear a corset, but all these waists were cut as though she did wear one. And she unhooked her modern brassiere—she refused to give it up for what was available in this age.

Holding his armor loose in one hand, head tilted to the side, John watched her in a mood that invited no humor. When she was topless, he reached out, breathing rapidly, to touch her nipple with a finger.

Joy gently pulled away. "Darling, this is not the time for that."

He withdrew his finger, shrugged, and took off his fedora. He tossed it on Joy's hat, smoothing back his carrot-colored hair with his hand. Then he removed his blue, diagonally-worsted suit coat, maroon bow tie, and separate linen collar. As he started to take off his madras shirt, his brow furrowed, and he said wistfully, "It's just . . . sometimes I have to assure myself that you're real and not some glorious image or dream. I can't believe . . ."

His voice quavered, and then he choked altogether. It was the nipple. Touching it brought home to him that he'd almost lost her—twice. And that he'd almost lost his own life just a little more than an hour ago. He stood by the capsule and started to shake. The stark fact that two attackers from the future had tried to kill them struck him with an emotional sledgehammer. He was like a man walking away from his trashed car after an accident and calmly telling those that come to help that he is okay. He tells the police what happened. And then maybe ten, maybe thirty minutes later, with perhaps another look at his wrecked car, he begins to shudder with the realization that he somehow escaped death or critical injury, and he suddenly has to sit on the curb.

Although John had studied violence as a graduate student and did his dissertation on war and democide, that violence was abstract, not personal. He was an innocent. Now though, he would actually carry guns. He was not a pacifist, but he had been a professor and had never shot a gun until Joy started training him. He had never killed an animal. He had never seen a dead body until the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Since the age of twelve, he hadn't been in a fight. His combat had always been with words, the weapon of choice in his profession.

Now, it was all as real as Joy's nipple. They had been seconds from violent death, and only the luck of Joy's glancing in a store window had saved them. And they had yet to be in this primitive age for even a full day. Fear washed over him and swamped his mind. He was terrified by his commitment to the mission; terrified by the risks he would take; terrified by his likely violent death; terrified by the probable agony he would suffer. Most of all, he was terrified by the possibility, even the likelihood, that Joy would be killed before him.

Although he was sweating, he felt chilled.

Looking over the weapons in the capsule, Joy started to say, "Did you see that ugly carving knife—" She glanced up at John and saw his flashbulb-wide eyes. "What's the matter, dearest?"

Now shaking all over, John dropped his armor, reached for support from the capsule, and crouched down to lean his back against it. He cleared his throat but couldn't speak. He patted the floor next to him for Joy to join him.

Lips pursed, she raised her dress around her waist and sat next to him. She lifted the flounced hem of her dress and wiped his face with it. Seeing his shaking, she put one arm around him and pulled him close, then put her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers, squeezing it tightly. No words. She just held him to her.

John slowly emerged from the shock and gradually stopped shaking. He pulled away from Joy and shook his head to clear his mind. He ran his finger along her cheek, and then kissed her lightly. Holding up his index finger and thumb so that their tips were barely separated, he whispered, "This close. We came this close, you know. To death."

His voice gained strength. "How can you remain so calm? Have you come so close to being killed before?"

"No. I've not even seen death before in person. But I'm trained to kill and to accept death." She tousled his hair and smiled. "Twenty-one of my twenty-five years in judo, karate, and weapons training did have an effect. If it didn't, my mother should ask for her money back."

She kissed him on the forehead, on the cheek, brushed his lips with hers. "I'm proud of you, my man. I've been trained through a lifetime to react suddenly to danger. You have only my training of about five weeks. Yet, you did what a highly skilled specialist would have done. I really didn't know you had that back kick down pat like that. Had you missed or been a second slower, we both might be dead. After kicking the gun out of the hand of that killer behind me, I could not have righted myself in time to prevent the other one from shooting us."

Joy hesitated a moment, turned to rest on her knees in front of him, and leaned forward to take his head in both her hands. Their heads were inches apart. Her black eyes were now his universe; unblinking, they stared deep into his, and he could see and feel her sincerity. She whispered, "I would have been worried about you if you had not been shaken by what happened. But, my dearest, we worked as a team when we had to."

His brows rose. He murmured, "Aren't you afraid of anything?"

Joy sat back and nodded. "Plenty of things."

"What's your worst fear? I mean, besides big spiders and a lack of rice."

"That we will fail. That I will let down my mother and the Society. You know that. You saved my life when I couldn't stand the awful, awful thought that we'd caused the mass death of two billion people, and tried to commit suicide. You slapped my mind into working, and persuaded me we could kill Sabah and prevent the horror from happening."

She tilted her head, and ran her finger down his cheek. "You were very frightened after the attempt on our lives, although at the time you acted fearlessly. For me, fear is a constant. It's not fear of death or physical pain. I've been trained to be fearless—calm, centered—when so threatened. I carry with me the fear of what Asians call loss of face. It's the fear of shame."

Joy leaned forward and pulled his face to hers for a long, gentle kiss. Then she stood and held her hand out to pull him up.

John took her hand and rose. "Thanks, baby, for the hand and everything else." Smiling—really smiling—he asked, "Weren't you about to say something before I began to shake with utter happiness and joy at our being together?" Then he looked down at her bare breasts and added, "And seeing your boobs."

Joy giggled, waved her hand as though fanning noxious fumes away from her face, and asked in return, "What was I talking about?"

"Something about a knife."

"Oh, yeah. That awful knife that Sal carries. I wouldn't fight a chicken with it." She looked around in the capsule and pulled out a seven-inch combat knife with a double-edged, bead blasted blade, stainless steel guard, and linen micarda handle. She held it up to the light and looked at it with a little smile as she turned it one way and the other, feeling its balance in her hand. "This is better," she said, and put it into a holster purse that she'd taken out of the capsule.

They put their armor vests on and then pulled their clothes back on over them. Joy reached into the capsule and got her leg and hip knife

sheaths, and slid her six-inch throwing knife and five-inch tactical knife into them. She slung the leather straps of her holster purse over her shoulder, with her prized Ruger SP101 .357 Magnum five-shot inside. She handed John his shoulder holster, the H&K USP .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol for it, and the .40 caliber S&W double-action and its pocket holster.

“I feel better,” Joy exclaimed.

“So do I,” John replied, holding a gun in each hand and trying to narrow his eyes in John Wayne’s image. “I’m not a gun man. I favored gun control. But there’s nothing like someone trying to kill you to make these babies look like bars of gold.”

Joy

Joy and John had no sooner returned to the hotel and entered John’s room, than there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” John yelled, and their three new guards came into the room.

“We bought them,” Hands announced gleefully, as though they had found a ten-dollar bill.

Joy put out her hand. “Let me see them.”

Hands looked from Joy to John and back.

With a smile, John told him, “She wants to show off again.”

The guys pulled their new guns out of their coat pockets and put them on the bed next to Joy.

“You bought them, just like that?”

“I don’t understand,” Hands said.

John replied, “She means, you walked in, picked out your guns, bought them, and walked out with them in your pocket?”

“Of course.”

John looked at Joy, and said with a shrug, “The good old days. No background check. No waiting period. Nothing to sign.”

“Anyway,” Joy said with emphasis, “these are Colt’s pocket hammerless, .32 caliber, 1903 models.” She picked up one, checked the safety, and as the guys watched in amazement, hefted it, opened it, looked at the chamber, closed it, and nodded. She handed all three guns back to the guys. “Good guns,” she said.

Then she and John showed them their own weapons, and the guys were even more amazed. Joy also lifted her dress and showed them her leg sheath, and then dropped her dress, sucked in her stomach, and took out her five-inch tactical knife.

“Why are you so well armed?” Sal asked.

John answered, “Our business. We’ve been threatened. Some people want us out of business. And now you see that two men tried to kill us. Now, as to your guns, we want to make sure that you can shoot those things. Meet us here at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow, and we’ll rent a car, buggy, whatever, and find a place along the shore where we can see how good you can shoot.” He waved his hand toward the door. “Have a good sleep.”

As they were leaving, Joy asked Sal to stay for a moment. “Can I see that thing you call a knife?” she asked. Sal reached down and pulled it out of his boot, and handed it to her. She looked at it, and then handed it back. “Imagine I’m going to attack you. How would you defend yourself with that knife?”

“I can’t do that, Miss Phim.”

“Yes you can.” Joy reached into her purse, pulled out the knife she’d brought for him, and assumed a knife-fighting stance. She narrowed her eyes, thrust her jaw toward him, and growled, “I’m going to cut your arm if you don’t protect yourself.”

John’s brows shot up. “Joy!” he exclaimed.

Sal ignored him and went into crouch, blocking hand forward of his chest, and knife hand behind it. He slowly circled the tip of his knife through the air, keeping it pointed toward Joy.

Joy waved John away with her free hand. Then she looked at Sal’s position, straightened, turned the knife around in her hand, and said, “Time out.”

When she was sure that Sal understood, she tossed her knife, grip first, to John, stepped toward Sal, and took his knife hand in hers. “No Sal, with that ice-pick grip, you open your chest to attack, at the very least. Here, grip the knife tightly, as though it were a hammer, and put your thumb here.” She showed him with her own thumb. “And loosen your wrist. When you grip the knife in this way, it won’t be knocked out of your hand, and you also can attack with its butt.

“As to your stance, are you trying to commit suicide? Did you see my fencer’s stance—right foot forward, left behind, and torso slightly angled, knife way out in front? And you keep it out there between you and your opponent, and always pointed at him. Your free hand is held to shield your heart or throat, top part of your arm facing your opponent so that he doesn’t cut a vein. Anyway, you should be willing to sacrifice your arm to save your vitals.

“When you go on the offensive—”

John put his hand on Joy's shoulder, and shook his head at Sal. "This is her favorite weapon, as you may be able to tell. There will be a lot of opportunity for this once we get settled."

Joy shrugged John's hand off and gave him a sour look. She turned back to Sal. "One more thing." She raised her voice on the last word. "Practice my stance until it becomes automatic. When you have done that—"

"You are getting into two things," John pointed out.

"Judging by your stance, I don't think you know that knife fighting is a matter of split seconds. A lunge here, a leap there, a kick in the groin, dirt thrown in your face, a couple of feints from one side to the other, a different level of attack, a twisting thrust, and you're dead, faster than it took for me to say that. After you get the stance down, I'll show you some tricks."

Next, she drew a two-inch diameter circle with her lipstick on the room's door, and locked and tested it to make sure nobody would open it from the hallway. Standing fifteen feet back, she held out her hand to John for the knife.

"Three things," he said, grinning as he tossed the knife to her.

In one flowing motion, she caught it, turned toward the door, and cocked her arm back as though she were going to throw a baseball, automatically adjusting her grip so that her thumb was along the back edge of the knife, and the handle rested gently between her fingertips and the uppermost part of her palm. When her arm was fully cocked back with the knife blade level with her eyes and wrist and the tip pointed at the circle, she uncocked her arm toward the target and gently released the knife when her arm was fully extended. No wrist snap, no whirling rotations. Only a half-rotation, and the knife stuck perpendicular to the door and solidly within the circle, although a touch off-center.

"You missed the center," John observed dryly.

She stuck out her tongue at him, and with an angled jerk, pulled the still quivering knife out of the door. Giving it to Sal, she said, "Your turn. That's a combat knife, and not the best for throwing, but I want to see what you can do."

He took the knife and his eyes widened; he was obviously impressed by the feel and heft. Then he faced the target, gripped the tip between thumb and forefinger, and flipped it in a rotation and a half through the air. It stuck in the door at an angle, missing the circle by a fraction of an inch.

Joy withdrew the knife from the door and handed it back to Sal. "Give that primitive thing you call a knife a decent burial and keep this," she told him. "As my bodyguard, I want you to practice throwing it from this distance until you get it in a circle that size nine out of ten times. Then do twenty feet. Then thirty. You never know when throwing it is the only alternative you'll have to death."

She said the last for John's benefit. He still couldn't throw a knife into a circle that size from fifteen feet more than a quarter of the time.

Sal stood for a moment, staring at Joy with large eyes, lifted brows, and drooping jaw. He finally shook his head as if to clear it, then nodded and thanked her. He tossed his old knife into the room's garbage pot, and slid the new knife into his boot.

He stopped at the door on the way out and looked back at John with raised eyebrows. "Can I have my own . . . assistant and . . . translator?"



That evening, as they lay naked under the heavy blankets, wrapped in each other's arms, Joy mused, "You know, dearest, history is a series of contingencies. A little thing here or something missed there, and the whole world is changed. When I was four and my parents apparently tried to escape from Vietnam and were probably killed by pirates, the pirates must have just happened to overlook me on the boat. And the boat just happened to drift to the Philippines. A fisherman just happened to see it. A journalist just happened to be around writing a story. *The New York Times* just happened to pick up the story of this child lost on the ocean. My future mom just happened to read the newspaper on the day the story came out, and just happened to see the story. If any of these things happened just a little differently, I wouldn't be here and neither would you. Perhaps those who would have been here in our place, if anyone, would have been killed by the attack this afternoon.

"And I just happened to glance in the store window when I did. The billions of lives we are trying to save hung on just a glance. Just a little, fleeting, random glance. So much, hanging on so little."

The old building creaked quietly. "Hmmm," John finally murmured, cuddling close to her.

She felt his warm body on hers and thought, *It was so close, so close. My dearest would be dead. His body cold.* Joy caressed the orange hair on his chest. "John, now is the time."

"Time for what?" he mumbled.

"You remember while we were standing by the weapons capsule, you touched my nipple and I said that it wasn't the time?"

“Hmmm.”

“Now’s the time. You can touch my nipple.”

Deep breathing.

He’s asleep. I can’t believe it.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin and in moments was about to fall sleep herself, when he suddenly rolled on top of her, laughing.

“Where’s my foreplay?” she whispered huskily, tightening her legs together.

“This is the appetizer,” John said softly, nibbling the lobe of her ear.

As she later opened her legs for him, she murmured, “Should’ve known better.”

Chapter 4

Past Midnight, Friday

Carla

Heads up, eyes front, Hadad and Carla strode into the deserted lobby of the Fairfax Hotel as though going to their room. Hadad carried a large, battered suitcase. It was after midnight and no one was at the reception desk. The night clerk was likely in the office behind the desk, doing the day's bookkeeping.

As they nonchalantly climbed the worn carpeted stairs, Hadad looked back over his shoulder and mentioned to Carla, "Nice lobby."

When they reached the second floor, they checked the floor's bathroom to make sure no one was using it. Then, in the dim hallway light, Hadad checked his notepad to make sure of the room number, although he had memorized it. Returning the pad to his pocket, he motioned Carla to get behind him. Holding the suitcase across his chest, he sidled along the hallway's wall to avoid creaking floorboards and stopped at Room 205.

The previous afternoon, Hadad had boldly ambled up to the hotel reception desk, leaned on the counter and, looking unwaveringly at the receptionist, announced loud enough to be heard half the lobby, "I am a friend of Mr. John Banks and Miss Joy Phim. What rooms are they in?" After he got the room numbers, he acted as though he had forgotten something, and left the hotel.

Soon after, Carla entered the hotel and asked to see a room. When a surly bellhop showed her one, she looked around, memorized the location of the bed and window and especially the light switch near the door, and asked, "Are all the rooms like this?"

"More or less," the bellhop replied, crossing his arms and looking away.

"Well," she said, her face glacial, "this is less," and she stomped out without another word.

Now, by John's door, Hadad gently put down the suitcase and quietly unlatched and opened it. He took out a Raducha OT-15 submachine gun and slowly inserted a modified magazine with sixty

rounds. Eyes bright enough to light the hallway, he grinned at Carla as he handed the gun to her. She pulled it to her, kissed the barrel, and gave Hadad a grin in return.

Nothing can go wrong now, she thought. They are dead.

Hadad pulled out another OT-15 for himself, put in the magazine, and leaned it against the wall. He lifted a little toolbox out of the suitcase and flipped it open. He took out what looked like half a chopstick, but with a small, bent metal prong at one end. He got down on one knee and inserted it in the lock, put his ear right next to it, and silently picked the door's lock. It was a standard hotel lock of the era and only slightly more difficult to pick than a child's piggy bank. Nonetheless, Carla guessed that his hand was sweating in the chill air since he had to rub it on his denim pants several times.

There was a slight click as the lock's final tumbler fell into place. He turned to Carla, nodded, and for some reason put his finger to his lips as though she were going to say something. She looked skyward, shaking her head.

The hotel creaked.

Hadad grabbed his OT-15, whirled, and pointed it up and down the hallway.

Nothing. Only his heavy breathing.

Carla raised her chin to look down her nose at him, clutched her OT, and signaled "let us do it" with her hand.

Hadad put down his OT and tried the doorknob, twisting it very gently. It turned. He slowly turned it all the way, and ever so gently pushed in on the door. It quietly opened a crack.

Hadad grinned and pumped the air with his fist. Then he rose, took three deep breaths, and picked up his OT-15. Holding it in his right hand with its butt against his side, he put his left shoulder against the door. He nodded at Carla.

Again, she made a "get on with it" gesture with her free hand.

In one swift motion he swung the door open, swept his hand over the adjacent wall to hit the light switch by the door, and rushed into the room with the OT pointed at the bed, his finger firm on the trigger, gun set on automatic fire.

"*Bokg—shit!*" Hadad and Carla hissed in Turkmen.

The bed was empty. The room was empty.

Joy

Joy had asked John to sleep in her room. She didn't know why, she just wanted him to sleep in her room. It was November, getting

cold at night—good cuddling weather. Maybe she needed that in her own bed for a change.

As soon as Joy heard the door in John's room slam against its stop, she was wide awake, swiftly rolling out of bed to her feet, and reaching for her magnum. John, as naked as she, was only a second behind her with his .45. She leapt to the door and pressed her back against the wall, holding her magnum in front of her. She motioned for John to do the same. Then she opened the door a crack.

No one she could see.

She squatted down, motioned for John to get down on the floor next to the wall, and opened the door wide. Even as the door was swinging open, she jerked her gun and head through the doorway and swept the hallway with her magnum in both directions.

Empty.

She stood. Magnum held out in front of her in both hands and traversing the hallway, she rushed out and sidled rapidly along the wall to the open door to John's room. John followed close behind. She pointed to him to get down on the floor. She pointed to herself and then to the open door. He shook his head vigorously.

She didn't pause to argue. She threw herself through the door opening, landing hard on her stomach with her magnum in both hands, pointed forward.

The room was empty.

The window was open, with the white lace curtain blowing into the room. John turned out the light and rushed past Joy to the wall next to the window while she covered him. He reached out, pushed the window sash down, locked it, and pulled the blind down.

Joy lifted a pillow from the bed. Holding it in her left hand, gun ready in her right, she cautiously moved into the hallway again and along the wall. She stopped just before the open door to her room and dropped down onto the floor without showing herself in the doorway. She looked behind her and motioned John down.

Just then, Jy-ying emerged from her room across the hall. She wore azure silk panties and a black kung fu top with loose white fastenings down its length. She held her .38 in front of her. A swift glance at their naked bodies sent her eyebrows first up, then down; then, after a quick look up and down the hallway, she leapt across the hall and pressed herself against the wall beside the door to Joy's room.

Joy nodded up at her, and put a finger on her lips. Bracing herself on her right elbow, she threw the pillow around the doorframe and into her room.

Automatic fire shredded the pillow apart, tore splinters from the doorframe, and studded the wall opposite the door. Joy immediately shifted the gun to her left hand; when the shooting stopped, she pointed her gun around the doorjamb only a second ahead of Jy-ying and they both fired two rapid shots into the room, toward the window.

Another long burst of automatic fire shredded more of the doorjamb and wall.

Joy immediately lowered her head to the floor and peeked around the doorjamb. Squinting against the dust, smoke, and floating goose feathers, she fired three more times through the open window. Then she held her gun behind her and whispered, "Take my gun and give me your .45."

From her standing position, Jy-ying also peeked around the doorjamb and fired two more shots through the window. Almost before the sounds died away, Joy yelled at her, "Watch the window." She stood, got a tight combat grip on John's gun, and ran past the open door and down the hallway.

People were just beginning to open doors to find out what was happening. Hands gaped as he opened his and glimpsed the light olive-colored skin of her naked body as she darted past. She sprang down the stairs and ran past the night clerk, who dropped the receiver of the wall phone he was using to call the police. She burst out the front door in a crouch, .45 held in two hands in front of her.

She was about to run across the street so she could see her room's window and the top of the hotel marquee below it, when a black Buick roared out of the hotel service alley, skidded around the corner, and almost rolled over when it hit a deep rut. It regained its balance, skidded again, and, backfiring, fled down the street in a cloud of fumes.

Joy made sure she could see all the windows, two of which had people looking out at her, and then she ran down the alley with John's gun still held at the ready. In the light coming from a nearby window, she saw the dark spot left by the car's leaking radiator where it had been parked. Just to be sure that the killers had not set up an ambush, she moved along the wall from dark area to dark area behind the hotel, looking for any possible hiding place.

John came running down the alley with her magnum in his hand, and joined Joy in searching around the rear of the hotel. Not far behind followed Hands, Dolphy, and Sal in various states of undress, clutching their Colts. Jy-ying remained behind to be sure the attackers did not try to escape through Joy's room, or lie in wait there.

The three guys stopped dead when they saw that Joy was naked. “Holy shit,” Sal exclaimed, and he and Dolphy looked away. Hands turned around and ran back into the hotel.

He returned moments later with one of the hotel lobby curtains billowing behind him, and almost ran into Sal and Dolphy. Behind them, John was walking close in front of Joy, obviously to shield her nakedness. Hands threw the curtain to John, who used it to cover Joy and himself as they walked into the lobby.

By this time, a number of hastily dressed quests had gathered near the receptionist’s desk. They all turned as one and gaped as Hands, holding a gun in one hand, came through the front door in his long underwear. He was followed by Sal and Dolphy, equally undressed and armed. Finally, Joy and John appeared, moving in lockstep, hip to hip, holding up the curtain wound around their torsos with one hand and gripping guns at the ready with their other.

John yelled at the guys to join him in his room. Then as shocked quests made way for them, he shouted at the night clerk, “I’ll be down to explain after I’m dressed.”



For the rest of their lives, those who witnessed this scene would tell the story at every bar, at every dinner party, to every new acquaintance; each time, it would get a little more embellished. Even if the facts were told straight, the story was just too absurd to believe.

Only the night clerk never told the tale. He was well aware of how crazy it would sound, were he to admit that he’d seen a beautiful, naked Asian woman running through the lobby with breasts bouncing and guns in both hands, to disappear out the front door in a flash of perfectly rounded buttocks and long legs, and how much crazier it would sound if he added that she’d been followed seconds later by a gun-toting, orange-haired man, equally naked, and then three more men dressed in only their underwear. In years to follow, he would come to question what he’d seen, and discount it as a dream experienced after falling asleep at the desk.

But then, there was Ryan, the detective.

Hadad

When Hadad looked back and could no longer see the hotel, he let the Buick slow down. With a grimace, then a scowl, he looked at Carla.

She was slumped down in her seat, head bowed, clutching the OT-15. “What the hell made you think they would be in John’s room?” he snapped.

It was minutes before she responded, and then she did so haltingly. “He always screws her in his room; they do that all the time—you should know. You get hot pants every time you read about it.”

“Now, wait a minute,” he barked. “I remember John mentioning in his *Remembrance* that they used her room so that her bed would look used for the Puritan prudes.”

Carla slammed the dashboard, her face red, eyes slitted. “That was later.”

“We will see,” Hadad shouted, jutting his chin at her.

They coldly ignored each other until they got to their room at the Resort. Without delay, Carla unlocked their metal case, took out John’s *Remembrance*, and almost ripped out the pages as she whipped by one page after another. “Goddam it, there is nothing here about the Fairfax or their rooms at a hotel, those first days.”

“You have the wrong book,” Hadad exclaimed, grabbing for Hands’ *Mission Humanity*. While Carla’s eyes bored a hole through him, he turned and scanned pages until he found the reference.

He read a few paragraphs, looked up at Carla with raised eyebrows, and with more than a hint of triumph in his voice, said, “All it really says here is that John joined Joy in her room and they exchanged vows of love. It does not say they screwed, or if they did, that they slept together in her room. They might have gone to his room.”

Carla responded with a smirk, “Yeah, sure.”

“After all, Carla, he is the man. If we had separate rooms, we would always sleep in mine.”

“Oh yes, why of course,” she muttered.

She drew a deep breath and folded her hands in her lap. She tilted her head at Hadad and, in a level tone, told him, “It does no good to argue about it. Already history is being changed, and we are in another universe. Think about it. Joy and John were transported in time from the Old Universe to 1906 with a mission to prevent war and democide by imposing on the world their Godless democracy.”

Hadad was about to respond, when Carla held up her palm. “We have got to think this through carefully, from the beginning. John and Joy were not so clever after all. Hands’ biography describes the New Universe they created, which ultimately led to the brilliant nuclear strike of Abul Sabah, and Sabah’s great Islamization of the world. But, some of his clerics controlling the former democracies were stupid, and

their security services incompetent. They allowed enemy scientists to construct a small time machine and send a message back in time to warn Joy and John about Sabah and his Great Victory. As Hands described it in his biography, they got the message when they arrived yesterday. As a result, they added another goal to their mission: killing Sabah.”

“Carla! I know—”

She went on. “That message, their new mission, and associated actions created a Third Universe. In 1915, rather than kill the child Sabah born the previous year, they decided to adopt him. But Joy, John, and Sabah were killed in a bombing of their room by the heroic Fadi Mohammed Habib. Hands found this out from those at the guest house where the bombing took place and through a team of Uighur investigators he hired.”

“God be praised. But Carla—”

Carla ignored him, apparently thinking aloud. “But Joy and John had done so much to foster democracy before their deaths that by then they had largely succeeded. With no Sabah, there was no Islamic takeover of China, and no Islamic League.” She stopped for breath, and steepled her fingers.

Hadad spoke quickly into the void. “I am happy to say that there was also no nuclear attack, and no killing of so many people, even though they were infidels.” Frowning, he pointed his finger at her. “But, I know all this. It is engraved on my brain. Why—”

She continued. “With our being here, and with our attempt to kill them yesterday and today, we have initiated a Fourth Universe.” She scratched her chin, and looked into the middle distance. “A universe with an unknown future. We are now facing an unknown universe; one we must shape. And there’s no better way to do that than by killing—”

“It’s so incredible,” Hadad broke in. “I have often wondered how those heathen scientists could build a time machine to send a message back to Joy and John about Sabah.” His shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes and shook his head. “It had to be done under the very noses of security. They had electronic sniffers, satellite surveillance, hidden video cameras everywhere, and spies under every bed. I don’t understand it.”

“Will you listen?” Carla said, rolling her eyes. “A new universe! We are now in a new universe. Got that, Hadad? So, we cannot depend on either John’s *Remembrance* of the New Universe or Hands’ biography of the Third for detailed predictions of their behavior.”

Hadad idly turned a few pages of Hands' biography, then fingered his earlobe. "Okay," he responded after a few moments, "you are right. Since we don't know anymore what they are going to do, I have a plan"



After Carla agreed to the plan, Hadad reached for the buttons on the top of her new silk and lace blouse. They had dressed in black, Ninja-like outfits for the assassination attempt, and had changed into street clothes afterwards in the Buick before coming into the Resort. "This talk of them making love has made me horny," he said.

"Well, I am not," Carla snapped, shoving his hand away.

Chapter 5

Predawn, Friday

Joy

Three policemen and an older black man with graying hair arrived at the hotel in two Stanley Steamers and one horse-drawn police wagon. John and Joy, now decently dressed for the age, met them in the lobby with Jy-ying. John informed them that he owned the hotel and introduced Joy as his assistant and translator, and Jy-ying as her assistant.

With a Philip Morris cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, the older man introduced himself as Police Lieutenant Gary Ryan and showed John his badge. Removing his cigarette, he tipped his derby to Joy and Jy-ying. His bushy eyebrows rose, creating deep wrinkles in his narrow forehead, as he looked back and forth from Joy to Jy-ying. Waving the hand holding the cigarette to encompass them, he asked, "Are you two sisters, or twins?"

Both waved the smoke away from their faces and shook their heads.

It burst out of her before Joy could bite her tongue: "She's my double, present so my attackers will go for her first."

"No, no," Jy-ying jumped in. "She is *my* double, present so that they will shoot her and not me."

Ryan looked at Jy-ying and back to Joy. He stared at her for a long moment, stroking his salt and pepper beard.

John looked away and put his hand over his mouth. Around it, his face reddened and bulged.

"I see," Ryan finally said. He shrugged and tapped his cigarette ash into a spittoon at the end of the reception counter.

A murmuring crowd of wide-eyed hotel guests had gathered at a distance, so John, his face still slightly red, motioned the police, Joy, Jy-ying, and the night clerk into his hotel office. He unbuttoned his gray corduroy suit coat and sat in his leather office chair behind his flattop desk, indicating to Ryan the cushioned armchair in front of it. Ryan sat down. John tilted his chair back and pointed his chin at Ryan, waiting.

Joy wanted to sit on the corner of the desk with one foot on the floor, but her floor-length percale skirt would not let her. Grimacing,

she plopped onto a hard-backed reception chair nearby. With a little smile at Joy, Jy-ying took the remaining reception chair next to her. The policemen leaned against the walls or door frame, looking idly around the office. One lit a Flor Fina cigar, another British Derby cigarette. The night clerk stood off by himself, his hands fluttering at his side; finally he shoved them in his pants pockets.

Joy was immediately struck by how much this seemed like a scene in the conclusion of a theater mystery. *A brilliant private eye gathers everyone, including a stupid police detective, one or two beautiful women—she laughed at herself at that thought—and a few policemen for safety, together in his office. After a logical summation of the evidence and an insightful description of how the murderer did it, he points to the one among them who is the dastardly perpetrator.*

Still amused by the image, Joy crossed one arm over her stomach, rested her other elbow on it, and supported her chin in her hand. She tapped her foot, waiting for Ryan to say something. *For the fun of it, I hope I look guilty.*

Ryan squashed his cigarette in an onyx stone ashtray at the edge of the desk, crossed his legs, and put his derby on his knee. He pulled a worn notepad from a deep pocket inside his wrinkled double-breasted sack suit coat, and bent over it. After flipping a few pages, he stopped to study one. Intent on the page, he said, “I was told there was a lot of gunfire here, and people were running around with guns.”

John nodded, and drew both his lips and brows together for a couple of seconds, looking as though he was reflecting on the state of the universe. “Yes, lots of gunfire.”

Still looking at the note page, Ryan asked, “Do you have a gun?”

“Yes, we three have guns to protect ourselves.”

He looked up at Joy. “Do you carry a gun?”

“Yes,” Joy answered.

He narrowed his eyes and turned them on Jy-ying. “Miss . . . Khoo, is it? You carry a gun?”

She nodded.

The policemen around the office straightened up, and one unconsciously rested his hand on his holstered pistol.

Ryan waved his pad at John and both women. “Did you run through the lobby without any clothes on, carrying guns?”

The policemen perked up even more.

While Jy-ying put her hand on her chest and raised her eyebrows at Ryan, John answered, “No, Miss Phim and I were partly dressed. And yes, we were carrying guns. Miss Khoo was not involved.”

“The receptionist said you two were . . . nude.”

John reared back and tapped the desktop with his knuckles. “Absurd. Nobody was nude. Obviously, Detective, that is somebody’s overactive imagination, stimulated by all the excitement.” He lowered his voice, tilted his head toward Joy, and winked. “Or, their lust.”

“I see. Okay. Tell me about the shooting.”

John leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. “I just moved my Tor Export and Import Company here from the northeast. Yesterday, I bought this hotel as a place where traveling businessmen visiting my company can stay. I paid cash. Word of this must have gotten around, and someone thought I had tons of money secreted in my room. They came in to hold me up, but I wasn’t there. I was going over company plans with my assistant, Miss Phim, in her room. We just arrived here yesterday, and after long naps to recover from the trip, we wanted to start preparations for getting our company up and running—”

Ryan raised his hand to stop him. “In her room?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” Ryan responded too evenly, looking askance at Joy and then staring at her as though really seeing her for the first time. He shifted his eyes to stare at Jy-ying. After several seconds, he stared again at Joy.

Standing at Ryan’s back as they were, the policemen did not try to hide their smirks. John glanced at them, covered a grin with his hand, and barked the world’s—universe’s—worst fake cough into it.

Joy returned Ryan’s stare with what she thought was a look of innocence. The policemen behind Ryan shifted; one leered. Apparently her attempt at innocence had conjured the opposite effect.

Finally, Ryan asked Joy, “You and Khoo are Chinese?”

“No, American.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “You are of the Chinese race?”

Joy narrowed her eyes to slits. “No.”

Jutting his chin at her, Ryan asked loudly, “You are Oriental?”

Joy’s nostrils flared. “Yes,” she answered softly. “You’re black?”

Ryan drew himself up and huffed, “What does my skin color have to do with anything?”

Joy tossed her head and answered, “Okay, you’re Negro.”

Ryan leaned back in his chair. “Don’t get smart with me,” he replied gruffly. Then he leaned toward her and pointed his notepad at her face. “The mayor is still having some of you people collected in the Presidio camp, and if you are going to smart off, I’ll have one of my boys take you there now.”

Okay, fun time's over, Joy thought.

She was just about to let him have it when John waved toward her as though he was her protector, and said, "Miss Phim came with me from New York because she always wanted to live in San Francisco. She has long worked for me as a trusted employee. Miss Khoo started to work for me yesterday. I need both of them if I'm going to set up my company here, since I will be doing much trade with Asia. I'm sure the mayor approves of new businesses coming into San Francisco. If I'm going to have a hard time because of who works for me, I'm going to take my business to Seattle or Los Angeles."

"I see," Ryan said. He fingered his notepad; his Adam's apple bobbed—he understood the politics of the threat. He scratched his nose, seemed to look for another page in his notepad, and then replied, "You had better be careful here. There is a powerful labor organization and an Oriental exclusion league that won't be happy that you have Orientals working for you, even if they are lovely . . . assistants."

Ryan hesitated, and then shifted in his chair to directly face John. "So, you were in Miss Phim's room, and what?"

John clasped his hands on the desk again. "I heard burglars go into my room. It must have been around 3:00 a.m. I can't believe how fast time flew, with our work and all."

Beside Joy, Jy-ying squeezed her eyes shut, and seemed to have trouble breathing. She coughed into her hand. Joy found something intensely interesting under a fingernail; she felt her face get hot when she heard a few barely suppressed chuckles from the policemen.

"I see," Ryan responded again. "I understand from your clerk that there were an awful lot of shots."

The night clerk broke in. "Yeah, it was like bangbangbangban—"

Ryan stopped him with his hand, saying, "Thank you, we get the idea."

"Yes," John said, "I think there were five or six of them, a real gang. It's a wonder they didn't shoot each other. Once we left Miss Phim's room to find out about the noise in my room, they escaped through the window and then tried to enter Miss Phim's room. We heard them and had a firefight there. They all escaped."

"I see," Ryan repeated. "By 'firefight,' you mean that they threw burning wood or something at you?"

"No. I invented that word. It means we exchanged shots."

"I see. Did they take anything of yours?"

"No."

Looking sidelong at Joy, Ryan reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a Philip Morris and put it in his mouth. Still looking at Joy, he reached into another pocket for a wooden match, and lit it on the bottom of his shoe. He took his eyes off Joy for a moment to apply the flame to the cigarette and toss the match into the ashtray. Then he turned his head to look more directly at Joy.

His tone incredulous, he summarized what he had heard. "Let's see, Mr. Banks. There were five or six armed men in your room, who left it when you got there and went to Miss Phim's room. When you returned there, you had a . . . fire—nice word—in this one room. They all escaped out the window. And there were only two of you? And neither of you was wounded?"

"Yes," John replied, lowering his brows and making it sound as if he were asking, "How could you even question it?"

"I see." Ryan turned his eyes on John. Two of the policemen leaning against the back wall grinned at each other and shook their heads. "And in this fire in your room against five or six men shooting at you, you shot at them?"

"Yes." John looked down at his folded hands.

Ryan tipped his head back, puffed on the cigarette, and blew a huge cloud of smoke up into the air. "And you didn't hit any of them?"

John looked at a long scratch on the desktop and traced it with his eyes while responding. "I don't know. I didn't see any blood in our room, however. But, their clothing initially could have soaked up the blood from their wounds. After all, they left by the window as soon as the fire began."

Ryan straightened and leaned forward. "Let me get this straight. You mean that as five or six men squeezed through your window to escape, one after the other, you didn't wound one enough to leave blood in the room or on the sill, and you weren't wounded yourselves as they returned shots on the way out. Is that right, Mr. Banks?"

"Right." John crossed his arms on his chest and looked Ryan in the eye.

Ryan tapped ashes into the ashtray. "I see."

The three policemen put their heads together. They started whispering, gesturing toward John, and snickering.

Stone-faced, Ryan leaned over the arm of his chair and stared back at the policemen until they stopped. He returned to his questioning of John. "How do you explain this?"

John tilted his head, raised his brows, and asked, "What?"

“That you two were not hit, and apparently none of the five or six in the gang was, either.”

“Well now, it was completely dark and I was blinded, as the burglars probably were, by the gun flashes. Anyway, Miss Phim is a woman, you know, and of course, a rotten shot. And she was taking cover behind me.”

Joy felt her face grow hot as she went into a sudden coughing fit, struggling to choke down what she wanted to yell at John.

Jy-ying put her hand up to her mouth to hide a big grin. “It is all this cigarette smoke,” she muttered to those staring.

Ryan took out a handkerchief and handed it to Joy. Still unable to speak, Joy nodded her thanks, took it, and covered her mouth. She gave John a look over the edge of the handkerchief that should have turned him into an ice statue.

Putting out his cigarette, Ryan grumped as though talking to himself, “The night man at headquarters got me out of bed saying several people had been shot in a gang battle here. Now I understand it was you two, and the burglars. And it seems no one was hurt.”

Ryan slammed his notebook closed with a sigh. He stood, his suit wrinkling into place around him, and told John, “I want to take a look at your rooms.”

Everyone except the hotel night clerk followed John, Joy, and Jy-ying up the stairs to John’s room, where the three guys were waiting. John introduced them as his new company employees, who were also living in the hotel. Ryan shook their hands, looked at Hispanic Sal closely, and then ignored them.

Ryan looked around, studied the window area, and peered at the door lock. Done, he said, “I want to look at Miss Phim’s room.”

There, he looked at all the bullet holes, especially in the wall across from the room. He picked up some of the remains of the pillow and let the feathers and shredded material sift through his fingers. He kicked around the slivers from the doorjamb with his toe. He took out his notepad and made notes. Turning to one of the policemen, he ordered, “Make a count of all the bullet holes.” Turning to another, he demanded, “Make an independent count.”

Then Ryan turned to John and Joy, and with a flourish of his hand, commanded, “Show me your guns.”

John led them back to his room and pulled Hands’ and Dolphy’s Colt automatics from under the bed’s mattress. Ryan looked at the guns and took out their magazines, which were fully loaded with eight car-

tridges. He sniffed the barrel of each then, putting the guns down slowly and carefully on the chest of drawers, he looked John directly in the eyes. "These haven't been fired."

John swept both hands expansively toward Ryan. "Of course! That just shows that Miss Phim and I did a good job in cleaning them before you came. Then we reloaded them because I didn't know whether the burglars would be back or not. I wasn't going to take a chance. And we didn't want the guns to jam on us. You know," John added, as though stating that water flows downhill.

"I see. Could I see your cleaning equipment?" Fortunately, John had brought the 1906 cleaning kit with him after they'd armed themselves. Joy had taught him about the danger of the loading slide sticking when one needed the gun most. John went to his bureau, opened a drawer, took out his kit of brushes, rush fibers, woolen mops, and gun oil, and handed it to Ryan.

Ryan took the cap off the oil, sniffed it, and sniffed the gun barrels again. He nodded at John. He turned to Joy. Holding the Colt out to her, he asked, "You shot this?"

"Yes."

Ryan took the magazine out of the gun, checked to make sure there wasn't a cartridge in its chamber and that the safety was on, then tossed the gun to Joy, saying, "Here, catch."

Joy easily caught it in one hand.

Ryan's request sounded more like an order. "Show me how you shot this."

Joy took up a two-handed shooting stance, partly crouched with legs apart.

"Here's the magazine." Ryan tossed that to her also. "Take a bullet—"

"Don't you mean a cartridge, Lieutenant?" Joy asked sweetly.

"A cartridge out of the magazine."

Joy did so.

"Okay, put it back in, and load the gun."

Joy complied, slamming the magazine into the grip with a sharp click, and taking up a two-handed shooting stance again.

"Is that a woman's stance?" Ryan asked. "I've never seen a gun held with two hands like that before."

"Right. We weak women can only hold this heavy iron thingie with two hands, not with one hand like you strong men. And there is that terrible recoil. Why, even if I could hold it with one hand, the recoil might break—"

"I understand," Ryan said, seeming to believe her.

That's it! Joy silently exclaimed. She strode to the window, pulled up the blind, unlocked and opened the sash, and looked out into the unusually clear light of emerging dawn to make sure there was no one in the vacant lot across the street, and no buildings within range of the Colt.

The remaining policeman was on the verge of grabbing her, thinking she was going to jump out and try to run away, but the gun in her hand made him hesitate. She returned to face Ryan. In the most feminine voice she could muster, she asked him, "Do you see the little pull cord hanging from the blind?"

"You're not going to—"

"Oh yes, I am," Joy said, motioning everyone to the side of the room. When she was sure they were all clear, she looked at John and said, "Mr. Banks, please count to three."

John shook his head.

Joy arched her eyebrows and gave him a hard look. "Only another San Francisco earthquake will prevent me from doing this, Mr. Banks." That hung in the air surrounded by little ice crystals.

Probably realizing an earthquake was unlikely at this moment, John shrugged his shoulders and counted, "One, two, thre—"

Bangbangbang.

Joy couldn't help it. As she came out of her two-handed crouch, she put the muzzle to her lips, blew the smoke away, and smugly tucked the gun under the waistband of her dress. She folded her arms across her chest and stood smiling at the gaping policeman and Ryan. John gazed at the ceiling, lips pursed as if whistling silently to himself.

She had cut off successive one-inch segments of the cord. Joy glanced at John and knew from his expression that he was thinking, *Your damn ego again.*

The two policemen who had been counting bullet holes in the hallway and in Joy's room rushed in with their guns drawn. Ryan waved them back to their counting. He took out a Philip Morris, lit it, walked over to the ceramic ashtray by the bed, and dropped the glowing match into it. "I see," he said as he turned to Joy.

Then he looked at John, eyebrows raised. "I thought you said she was a poor shot."

At first, John flashed a "see what you did?" look at Joy, but that changed almost immediately to dimples on either side of his mouth. He peered at Ryan through the smoke surrounding his face. The dimples turned into a smirk. "Next to me," he replied. "Didn't I say that?"

Joy looked down, crossed one arm over her chest to support her other elbow, and covered her face with her hand. She struggled not to say anything, but couldn't contain a muffled, "Hmhuumm."

Jy-ying

Standing behind the policeman through all this, and all but forgotten by everyone, Jy-ying had at first watched Joy and John's behavior as would a biologist that of a new animal species. But soon, she alternated between rapt attention to John and admiring nods at what Joy was doing to the condescending detective—although, as a former captain in the Sabah Security Guard, she had a certain sympathy for him. At John's latest quip, she turned to lean one palm against the wall, rested her forehead against the wall beneath it, and shook with repressed laughter.

Joy

His smirk even deeper, John stared off into the distance as though occupied with solving some deep mathematical puzzle.

Ryan stared at John and then at Joy as she regained her self-control. He shook his head, frowned, put his hands thumbs forward on his hips, and stared at John. "Mr. Banks," he asked, "you believe there were five or six intruders and neither of you hit any of them in the . . . firefight?"

"Well," John said, straightening out his face, "there was no blood we could see. Anyway, times are hard and we're sympathetic to the desperation that people feel without a job. We just wanted to shoot the guns out of their hands and scare them off."

Jy-ying suddenly banged her head against the wall twice and covered her mouth. Joy bent over to adjust her shoe. An inner force seemed to bulge John's cheeks.

That brought a longer silence, while Ryan turned his stare on Joy and puffed deeply on his cigarette. His eyebrows had come to rest by the time he repeated to her, "You were trying to shoot the guns out of their hands?"

Joy exhaled sharply, gave John a quick, decapitating look, and applied her warrior training to calm herself. In seconds, she was able respond to Ryan. "Yes," she said breathlessly, as though answering an intimate question for her lover.

Ryan put his cigarette in his mouth and let it hang there while he reached a finger under his derby and scratched his head. He tilted his head to the side to keep the smoke out of his eyes as he tried to write something in his notepad, but he dropped his blunt pencil. He bent over to pick it up, but Joy beat him to it, and handed it to him with a slight nod of her head and a beautiful smile.

"I see," Ryan finally replied.

The policeman was silently laughing into his hand, the movement making his ears seem to dance up and down.

In a moment, Ryan called out to the policemen who had returned to their bullet hole inventory, "Pete, Al, are you done counting?"

"All done," the one named Pete replied as they came into the room. "I got eighty-three holes, nicks, and grazings, Al got eighty-six."

Ryan asked, "Any around the window?"

"Three."

Ryan nodded his thanks, flipped to a new page on his notepad, and did the arithmetic. He put the pad down, glanced at Joy, and then gazed unblinking at John, his bushy eyebrows almost hiding his eyes. Waving his pad, he noted evenly, with a hint of gruffness, "Six intruders. You two make eight shooters altogether. And at least eighty-three bullets were fired. Since the three bullet holes around the window had to come from your guns, each of the burglars must have fired thirteen bullets."

"Thirteen point three-three," Joy corrected, straight-faced. "Some must have fired thirteen, some fourteen bullets. Probabilistically, four of them fired thirteen and two fired fourteen."

Ryan took a puff on his cigarette without even glancing her way. He waved his pad vigorously at John and said, his voice rising, "No guns do that without reloading. How do you explain this?"

John answered, "They each must have had two guns, or were able to rapidly reload or change magazines."

One of the policemen behind Ryan lip-synched him as he said, "I see."

Ryan stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. Then, brows pinched, he added, "That could do it. Barely."

Ryan turned to the policemen behind him and told them, "Go outside, check for blood and anything odd that you can find. I was told there was an automobile speeding away, and it was parked in the alley. See whether you can get tire tracks from that."

He turned to John and straightened to his full five feet, eight-inch height. *The same as me*, Joy realized. "We'll be looking around for a couple of days, and asking questions of your clerk and guests. We don't

often have these Wild West shootouts anymore. We are now a civilized city, you understand. If I need more information, would you mind coming down to the station?"

John answered, "Not at all, Detective, and thank you for digging into this for us."

Ryan nodded at John, gave Joy a lingering look as he tipped his derby to her, glanced at Jy-ying, who still looked as though she had just been tickled, and started to leave the room. He stopped at the doorway, turned with one finger in the air to look at Joy, and asked, "How do you explain, Miss Phim, that five people, including the desk clerk, claim they saw you run through the lobby without any clothes on?"

Before Joy could respond, Jy-ying answered, "Men! Wishful thinking."

"Two women witnessed it."

"Well," Joy said, "this *is* San Francisco."

"I—"

Ryan got no more out before Joy preempted him by shouting, "—see."

"See what?" Ryan asked, forehead constricted into a question mark.

Joy lifted the hem of her skirt and curtsied with a huge smile. John, his face red again and his cheeks twitching, swept his hand toward Joy as if to say, "Here she is," and bowed.

Shaking his head, Ryan left.

Ryan

Ryan had been so distracted on his arrival that he'd turned off his Stanley Steamer. He had to reheat his steam and oil valves and turn the Steamer's water to steam. Since the eighteen-inch boiler had not completely cooled, it took him only about fifteen minutes to get the steam up. Now the ten horsepower engine had enough power to overtake virtually any other automobile on the road. That, to him, was worth the bother.

Deep in thought, he automatically pulled a Philip Morris and wooden match from his pockets and scratched the match across the dashboard to light it. Once he got his cigarette glowing, he puffed on it and smiled at the swirling smoke cloud it made. He was again thankful for the technique his white grandfather, the great San Francisco detective James Q. Ryan, had taught him. Make people laugh at you, make them think you are befuddled, and they will throw clues at you. *Banks is fucking Phim, and they both are involved in something secret and*

illegal. They are lying from A to Z. So is Khoo, although I bet she is involved in something different. And they all have an odd strangeness about them, as well. Something big here.

“Well, Pa, as you always used to say,” Ryan spoke to the empty seat beside him, exhaling smoke away from it, “now that I have it in my teeth, I will enjoy unraveling this yarn.”

Then he yelled, “I see,” and laughed uproariously.

Chapter 6

Dawn, Friday

John

Joy held up a finger as if to say “wait,” and looked down the hallway to see Ryan just starting down the stairs behind his policemen. She closed the door to the room and nodded to a snickering Jy-ying and a still red-faced John, who was bent over, holding his sides, in the room’s only chair. Joy staggered over and dropped onto the bed, then doubled up with body-shaking howls. By that time, John was rolling on the floor, and Jy-ying had slid down the wall and was laughing into her hands.

Many minutes later, when they were down to bubbling giggles and chuckles, John said, “I see,” and they were off again.

John finally crawled onto the bed, still laughing, and tried to put his arm around Joy, but he had to hold his sides. Tears were streaming from their eyes by the time the three of them gradually wound down and tried to catch their breath.

“Oh my,” John managed to chortle, “we’ve got to talk to the guys.” Holding his stomach, he left the room, walked down the hallway to Hands’ room, and knocked.

When Hands answered, he looked at John’s watery eyes and red face and put his hand on John’s shoulder. “Are you okay, boss?”

John waved away Hands’ concern and replied in a voice weak from laughter, “I’m all right. I’ve just been laughing.”

Dolphy and Sal were also in the room. Sal squinted at John through his cigar smoke and rubbed his hands together. “A gang tries to kill you with a million bullets, and you’re laughing.”

John almost started laughing again. He gestured for them to follow him. Then he turned back, pointed at Sal’s cigar, and explained with a smile, “I have an allergy to cigar and cigarette smoke.”

Sal nodded, went to the room’s ashtray, and cut the glowing end off with his new combat knife. He put the cigar in his mouth and cleaned the edge of his knife on his denim pants.

When they all entered John’s room, they saw Joy on the bed holding her sides, still chuckling, and Jy-ying sitting on the floor wearing a

huge smile. The three guys stopped, jaws drooping, and stared. Their expressions broke Joy and Jy-ying up again, and that started John going, as well.

Finally, seeing that the three men were beginning to look insulted, John calmed enough to say, “I’m sorry, guys, but Ryan—the whole exchange with him—was so funny. Give us a few minutes. Sit down on the bed . . . chair . . . or whatever.”

After a few minutes, Joy was able to look at the guys and tell them in a reasonably steady voice, “Thank you Hands, Dolphy, and Sal, our bodyguards, for running out with your guns and helping us.” She looked at Jy-ying. “And thank you for helping us. It could have been very dangerous. You didn’t know how many armed intruders were out there, and any of you could have been killed. We owe the four of you.”

She pointed to the guys’ guns still resting on the bed and added, “You can take your guns back, and thanks.”

John shook each of their hands in turn, and gave Jy-ying a hand up, then hugged her. Jy-ying gave him a glowing smile that Joy did not miss. He said to them all, “Thanks, folks, for your help. Now, no work today. Try to catch up on your sleep, and let’s get together for supper in the hotel restaurant at 6:00. We’ll talk about what happened then. Okay?”

After agreeing, the guys left. Jy-ying turned at the door and looked from John to Joy. “Which one of you actually *is* the best shot?” she asked.

“I am,” they both answered.

Joy tilted her head, looked askance at John, and said, “We will see, won’t we?”

Lips pursed, John glanced up at the ceiling and shrugged as though tolerating the absurd.

Laughing once more, Jy-ying left, shutting the door behind her.

Hands

Dolphy and Sal joined Hands in his room again. Dolphy was the first to speak. “All this isn’t right. Somebody tried to kill them twice today, and there must have been a lot of armed gunmen, to have shot up Joy’s room like that.”

Hands took a bite out of his Red Man and rolled it around in his mouth, shaking his head. “I know the boss has big ideas for the com-

pany. And he seems to have tons of money; he spends dollar bills as if they were pennies. I couldn't believe he bought this hotel. And just because it wouldn't give Orientals—Joy—a room."

Sal smirked while he relit his cigar. "And she is only his assistant, you know."

Hands rubbed his hand through his thin brown hair. "I cannot believe Joy. Who ever heard of a babe being able to fight like that? My God, I wouldn't want to get in a fight with either one of them. Not even arm wrestling."

"Yeah," Sal agreed, glancing down at his knife and fingering the sharp edge. "She could slice me into little pieces with her knife. *Mierda*—shit, what a woman. I can't get out of my mind her naked body, and that long black hair of hers, blowing around her. It was like one of those dirty French postcards. Except for the gun."

Hands jerked his head around to stare at Sal with narrowed eyes. "Haven't you seen a naked woman before? For Christ's sake, Sal, she was running after those killers, not trying to show off her body. Anyway, don't get any ideas. She belongs to the boss," he warned, wagging his finger at the other man.

"You'd have to be blind not to see how close they are," Dolphy added as he took one of his Non Plus Ultra cigars out of his pocket. "I like her a lot, and our boss also. They've been good to us, and honest, so far as I can tell. And they're paying us a hell of a lot more than we can ever get elsewhere." His voice grew stern, and he pointed at each of the others with his cigar. "I don't want any of us—*any of us*," he glared at Sal, "to ruin it."

Hands gave Sal a long look. Sal worried him. *He's a good friend, but trouble with women and girls.* He couldn't help remembering how many times he and Dolphy had saved Sal from angry brothers or fathers.

Sal nodded at Dolphy. "I wish I could find someone like that. But I know what you're saying. No problem."

I'll be watching, Hands thought, spitting tobacco juice into the room's water bowl.

Unaware of Hands' concern, Sal brightened. "I'm going to ask Jy-ying out. I get first try. Don't you guys ruin it for me, okay?" He rose and headed for the door, saying, "I'm going to get some sleep, and hope I don't have a wet dream."

"Yes," Hands replied, covering his thoughts, "you don't want to embarrass the hotel maid when she makes up the bed, do you."

Dolphy chuckled, took a puff on his cigar, and exclaimed through the resulting smoke, “Man’s curse.” He got up to leave as well.

Jy-ying

Her gun under her pillow in case of another attack, Jy-ying lay in bed and reviewed what had happened, and what she had learned. She was surprised by her strong attraction to John. Only two men had ever evoked this sudden feeling in her. One was Shu Kuo, the director of the time machine project that sent her here. The other man was a Sabah intelligence agent killed by democratic guerrillas soon after she had fallen in love with him, and he had proposed.

It is John’s masculine good looks, his male charisma, and especially his sense of humor that get me, Jy-ying mused. I also like the way he treats Joy, and it is as obvious as a pimple on a nose that they are intimate. I would like to get to know him better—better than better—but I do not want to alienate Joy.

I like Joy; I like the way she handles herself. I felt close to her immediately. We have much in common, including emotionally. She could be my good friend, I am sure.

What more have I learned? Joy and John are calm under fire. They are bold and fearless. They can joke about the lethal danger they face. And the police do not intimate them.

And whoever tried to kill them last night must be the same gang that tried to shoot them on the street. This time they had submachine guns or automatic rifles. Those could only come from the future. Are the killers friends or enemies? she wondered again. Could they help me find and kill that time traveler who will try to assassinate Sabah? Or would they try to stop me? Maybe they are the ones who received the message.

And who, really, are Joy and John? Maybe they are just what they appear to be—a rich businessman and his Asian mistress. No, no. That is not right. Not with the martial arts and weapons skills they have. Only their being secret agents would explain that. But then, for whom? Why their cover? What is their mission? Well, I will help defend them, at least until I get some answers. Now, if Joy were killed She shook her head, imagined drawing a red line through that thought, and chided herself, “Do not think that way.”

She sighed, put her hand under the pillow, and grasped the cool grip of her Taiyang .38. *Okay, Captain Jy-ying Khoo, formerly of the Sabah Security Guard of 2001, you are trained to answer such questions.*

Joy

Joy, with John behind her, descended the hotel stairs like a cat entering a strange building. She had her gun concealed under the cape draped over her arm, and she kept her eyes moving, examining each person in the lobby and seeking possible ambush sites. John tried several times to get in front of her, but she used her elbows to keep him back.

When they reached the lobby, they ignored the sudden silence and the rude stares from the little knots of guests. Joy also ignored John's scowl as she let him move in front of her. She kept glancing over her shoulder.

At the reception desk, John asked the still bug-eyed night clerk for a list of vacant rooms. One of his eyes seemed to have developed a nervous tic. Stepping back from the counter until his back was against the mail slots, the clerk pointed a shaking hand over his shoulder and haltingly responded, "Yes sir, all those with keys in the slots are vacant."

John waved the clerk aside and perused the keys on the third shelf. "Give me the keys to the two best third-floor rooms in the back," he requested. "Also, tell the manager when he arrives later this morning that I will speak with him about the damage, but not to disturb me before then. Also keep the maids out of the rooms we had on the second floor."

The clerk emitted a tremulous, "Yes sir."

John turned and stood waiting for Joy to move toward the stairs so that he could guard their rear. She took three small steps toward the stairs, moving so slowly that John, returning the stare of two guests nearby, almost ran into her. She sidestepped quickly to the right and slipped in behind him. John looked back at the gawking guests, circled his finger at his temple, shrugged, and then headed for his second-floor room, ignoring Joy as she guarded their backs.

Inside, he turned on her, shaking his finger. "I am the man. I am your protector. I go first. It's like me walking on your street side to protect you against runaway horses and cars, and being splashed. Got that?"

Joy purred, "Fair's fair. We split fifty-fifty. I went first going down. You went first coming back."

Chuckling together, they gathered their belongings in two sheets. John had clearly planned ahead. Holding his loaded sheet over his shoulder with his left hand, right hand close to his holstered .45, he exited Joy's room first. Joy glared at his back.

They slipped notes under Jy-ying's and Hands' doors to inform them of the room changes, trusting Hands to tell Sal and Dolphy. Then they cautiously climbed the stairs to their third-floor rooms. The first thing they did in each room was lock the window, pull down the blind, and close the white lace and cotton curtains. Then Joy joined John in his room, and he propped the room's hard-backed chair against the doorknob to prevent the door from being easily opened.

Feeling as though she'd be safe for the rest of the night, Joy plopped down on the bed. She rolled onto her back and waved her hand in front of her face, wrinkling her nose. "God, this room also stinks of cigarette and cigar smoke. And body odor."

"Well," John pointed out as he sat next to her on the bed, "our noses will get used to it and we won't smell it after a while. I worked on a farm one summer vacation, and one of my chores was pitching horse and cow manure around and cleaning the chicken coop. Eventually I didn't smell a thing."

"That may be so," Joy replied, "but you had better take a bath every day anyway, if you are going to sleep with me."

John grinned. "You mean after my joy ride. Right?"

Joy rolled her eyes as John laughed, never seeming to tire of that pun. "Try me and see," she warned.

After a moment of silence, she said, "I'm too hyped up to sleep. Let's talk about what happened."

John

John had started to relax in the heavy quiet and growing warmth of the stuffy room, but now Joy's mention of "what happened" began to get to him. No threat now focused his mind; no Ryan distracted his emotions; nothing needed to be done immediately; and no guys required his response. His mind was finally free to face what had happened to them. Fear settled on him like a wet woolen blanket.

Again, they had been close to death. Again, he or Joy could have been killed. Again, his body reacted.

He leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, and looked down at his boots. His heart beat loudly in his inner ears as his body shook in harmony. "We only arrived here . . . yesterday . . . morning," he stammered. *God, that sounded awful*, he realized.

He rubbed his hands together and blurted, trying to clear his throat, "Testing—one, two, three." He actually felt his voice get stronger. Still hunched forward, he looked at Joy as she sat up, leaned toward him, and put her hand on his arm.

He tried again. "We've now been here for just over one day." Thankful that he now could speak clearly, he went on. "And we've already been attacked twice. Jesus! The second time was with submachine guns, or something like that. And we don't even know if it was the same people. There might be a large gang out to kill us."

"I know," Joy murmured. She gently caressed his back.

John gave a final shudder, and that was it. His heart calmed its wild dance within his body. Yesterday, at their weapons capsule, he'd remained frightened by what was happening, by the potential of Joy's and his deaths. Today he felt more in control. He was grateful. Surprised.

He sat up straighter. "Thanks, baby. I'm okay. I guess there is such a thing as getting used to people trying to kill you."

Joy nodded, smiling, and caressed his cheek with the backs of her fingers. "Maybe it's like shoveling manure. As you said, one gets used to it."

He was now able to put together the semblance of a smile. Adopting an accusing tone, he said, "Speaking of what happened, I've been waiting to bring up your display of your charms to the world. You could have at least covered your breasts with the arm holding the gun, and used your other hand to cover your crotch, but no. You let everything hang out. Perverted woman."

Joy gaped just for a moment, and her eyes glinted, but then she realized the expression on his face was a lopsided smile. The corners of her mouth turned up as her full lips parted in a grin. "You! You, with your joystick swinging all over the place. It's a wonder . . . that . . . it didn't knock . . . the gun out of your . . . hand." She collapsed into body-shaking belly laughs.

This was just what John needed. He managed to get out amidst his own laughter, "Good thing . . . they didn't shoot at me. . . they couldn't have missed it. You poor thing—to almost be so deprived."

Joy laughed louder. "Don't get carried way."

After a few minutes, Joy lay back on the bed and put her hands under her head. She asked, "Ah, why were you chasing after me outside with my empty gun?"

"Empty?"

"How many shots did I fire into my room?"

John leaned over and tugged off his boots, grunting and grimacing with the effort. “Stupid things,” he exclaimed. With less speed than a slug slithering across a street, he rolled off his cotton half-hose socks, held them with two fingers for a second while he smelled them, and tossed them away from the bed. He glanced sideways at Joy, and could tell by her raised brows and steady stare that she was still waiting for an answer. Releasing a quiet sigh, he half turned toward her while keeping his feet as far away from her as possible. He scratched his chin. “I don’t know. Four or five? Six?”

“Six, dearest? What’s the load of my magnum?”

“Six, baby,” John replied, nodding emphatically.

“Damn it, John, it’s five. How many times have I told you to count your shots, and those being shot at you? Jesus, what were you going to do if you came up on the attackers? Throw my gun at them?”

“Shucks. My secret is out. I’m more accurate that way.”

Under Drill Sergeant Phim’s steely look, he silently gazed over the edge of the bed at the worn carpet, which looked like a satellite photograph of the Sahara Desert. From experience, he knew what was going to happen when they got their weapons practice range built. *She’s going to fire off a thousand bullets and make me count each one.*

After some seconds, he looked up at her from under his brows, waved his hand, and tried to change the subject. “Okay, now that we’ve had another humor moment, down to business. Let’s see.” He watched her face from the corner of his eye, as a meteorologist watches for a coming hurricane. “We know two things about our attackers. They have brought a supply of weapons from the future. That machine gun or machine pistol they used could not have been produced in this era. More importantly, they knew we were in this hotel. Now, how the hell could they have known that, since we didn’t know ourselves we would be here until this hotel was suggested by Hands?”

Joy’s stern face fell into gloom. She curled her hands on her chest. “One of the guys must be in on this.”

A new face, thought John. I haven’t seen this dark face of hers before. This must be the hundredth in her repertoire. She has more faces than all the characters in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. But—

“No,” he exclaimed. “Any of them could have killed us many times since we arrived. But, maybe the killers got the information from one of the guys. After all, our staying in this hotel is not a secret, and sure—”

Her shoulders slumping further, Joy interrupted with, “Yes, one of them might have told other people about his new job and boss and your

buying this hotel—we are kind of odd for this era—and the information got to our attackers. But I can't believe that would happen so fast. Anyway, how would our attackers from the future know about our hiring the guys? We just did that yesterday morning, and we didn't know anything about them before we arrived in this time."

She flipped onto her side and leaned on her elbow toward him. "Strange, isn't it. Our attackers knew this hotel. They knew we were going to the bank—if they're the same ones who attacked us near there, which I'm sure they are. But they didn't know about the warehouse we would arrive in from the future."

John added, "Also, their handguns are from our future time, you say, but they are new types of weapons that you—you—can't identify."

She pushed up to a sitting position facing him, and gave him a long look that almost frosted his eyebrows and lashes. Her icy voice did. "Are you trying to irritate me?"

My mistake, John admitted to himself. Tapping his chest, he asked, "Me? Why should a nice, sensitive man like me try to irritate such a beautiful, loving woman like you? Anyway, don't be so uptight. You should learn to take jests about your superior weapons knowledge, and a few other things. I mean, as I do about my own incredible and vast knowledge. Use me as a model." John ended with a toothy smile that would have melted an iceberg. He hoped.

Joy glared at him at first, and then tossed her head, threw both hands up in the air, and fell back onto her pillow. "You're impossible," she exclaimed.

Secretly savoring his victory, John asked, "Where were we? Oh, yes." He clasped his hands around one knee and mused, "Given what we now know or don't know about our attackers, I bet they're from the future of this new universe we are creating. Even if we are somewhat successful in our mission, technology will be changed. Not at its roots, but in terms of major companies, brands, and products."

Relaxed again, Joy looked thoughtful before adding, "Well, they know all about our movements. We are very vulnerable, love. Especially with the warehouse tying us down to a location around which they can have lookouts, and set ambushes. We're fortunate that they don't know about it yet."

John held up a finger, brow furrowed, lips pursed in thought. After a few seconds he waved his finger at the ceiling. "We both like to write. I remember your excellent term papers for my class. And I completed a Ph.D. dissertation and was working on a book when you vamped me into this mission—"

“I did no such thing, John.”

Oops, she’s used my name again. He had learned that when she did that instead of addressing him with an endearment, he had better change the subject, or prepare for combat. “I’m sorry.” He knocked on his head. “I misspoke. I meant your *allure* got me into this mission.”

He rubbed the end of his nose to hide an invading grin. Joy gave him a “Who are you kidding?” squint.

He hastened on. “Anyway, baby, we both can write well, and I wonder if, toward the end of our mission here, we wrote some kind of history of what we did. That would make sense, you know. Especially for me, the wordsmith of our partnership.” He ignored the pink tongue she stuck out at him. “I’m a historian. I believe in history as the guide to the future. If we succeeded, I might have felt that people of this new universe should know about the how and why of their peaceful and prosperous world. And I could believe that this would assure their continued support of democratic freedom.”

Joy swept her long black hair forward over her shoulders and started looking for split ends. “Well, I don’t think you should ever write such a history. I wouldn’t. The mere thought that I’d be informing scientists that a workable time machine existed would freeze my fingers. All the scientists would need to know is that it’s possible, and those men would work like mad to build it. Just think of a time machine in the hands of someone like Hitler or Stalin.”

“People!”

“Huh?”

“People.” John emphasized with his finger. “You said ‘men.’ Many scientists are women, you know.” He tipped his head back and favored her with a smug expression.

Joy’s eyebrows vanished under her bangs as her eyes grew round. She stared at him. The ends of her hair now lay forgotten across her fingers. Neither of them drew breath. The only sound was the air molecules rubbing against each other.

He finally raised his eyebrows as if to ask, “What? Did I say something?” Then he nodded and said, “Yes, I agree, we shouldn’t write anything. But then, how do our attackers know the details about us that they do? You know, whatever future they come from is now being changed by our actions—”

“And theirs,” Joy interjected, her eyebrows visible again.

“Which already must be a different universe from the one we created before, the one from which our attackers came. I’ve got to think about this.”

John laid back on the bed and put his hands behind his head, unconsciously mirroring Joy's posture of moments before. "Now, we originally came from what we call the old—first—universe. We created the second universe, where we succeeded in eliminating major international wars and democide, but that gave Abul Sabah a chance to seize power over his country of Uighuristan, and eventually, China. After years of preparations, he launched a nuclear attack on the democracies, and forced them to concede to his power. But the president of the Joy Phim Democratic Peace Institute, Hands' granddaughter, caught on the fringe of the nuclear destruction of New York, survived radiation poisoning long enough to have a message sent back in time to warn us about Sabah on our arrival yesterday. That message and our response created a third universe. And our attackers have come from this universe's future. They had to. They can't cross universes. If they could, so could we—we'd be able to return to our old universe. But the best scientists in our universe assured us that is impossible, that time travel is a one-way trip."

Joy nodded, her face expressionless. "While toddling along in this third universe, we have been attacked twice by two or more people from upstream in time. This means . . . dearest, we now are in a fourth universe created by their changes and our reaction to those changes."

John rubbed his forehead and left his hand there, letting his mouth hang open for a moment. He lifted his other hand and circled a finger through the air. "So we've been here from the old universe only one day, and in that time we've slid through two universes of which we know nothing, other than what was in the message we received about our success in the second universe, followed by Sabah and his nuclear attacks and the message back to us that led to our creating a third universe. And attackers from that third universe have come back in time to do us in and, as a result, we are in the beginning of a fourth universe. Wow!"

Joy frowned. "Okay. We are in the fourth universe. So?"

John put his hand on her shoulder. "So, I'm getting a headache from this, baby. Let's move on. And here's what I suggest regarding the danger we're now in."

Chapter 7

8:00 a.m. Friday

Hadad

When the Bank of California on California Street at Sansome was about to open, cold, wind-driven rain had forced all but the hardiest pedestrians off the street. The number of horse-drawn wagons seemed hardly diminished, however; their drivers huddled beneath black umbrellas that all but covered them.

Well dressed in a gray Hockmeyer corduroy suit and narrow-brimmed Dakota hat, Hadad waited under the bank portico, dry and out of the wind. When the bank guard unlocked and opened the high doors, Hadad strode into the bank carrying a newly purchased leather briefcase, his shoulders back, his chin thrust forward. He stopped at a large oak desk near the back, across the aisle from a counter running below barred cashier windows. A polished walnut block at the front of the desk bore the stenciled announcement “Kenneth Dole, Assistant Manager.” Except for a report that Dole hunched over, reading, the desk was surprising bare, inhabited only by the invariable green banker’s desk lamp, a desk calendar, a pen and ink stand, and a green blotter mat.

Hadad did not hesitate. He knocked on the desktop with his blue sapphire ring. The skinny man behind the desk jumped in his seat, then jerked his head up and scowled at Hadad. Unfortunately for Dole, his wire-framed glasses slowly slid down to the end of his narrow nose, making him appear more comical than threatening. Hadad had to stifle a laugh as he tipped his head back to glower down his nose at Dole.

The chatter of customers and clerks echoing against the marble walls and columns paused for a moment, and a clerk walking by Dole’s desk glanced with raised eyebrows at the two men staring at each other. Hadad jutted his chin at Dole and promised himself, *I will convert to Christianity before I will speak first.*

Finally, holding the edge of his desk with both hands, Dole growled, “You Orientals have your own ban—”

“Tell your manager that someone wishes to speak with him privately,” Hadad demanded.

Dole sat rigidly erect; he clenched the paper he had been reading in one hand while he looked Hadad up and down over the top of his narrow glasses. Finally he grunted, “Who are you?”

“Just say, ‘A very rich man.’”

Dole glared at Hadad for a moment, then pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger, shoved his swivel chair back, and in one motion stood and turned his back on Hadad. He marched to the office at the back of the bank and knocked on its ornate koa wood door.

Hadad heard a muffled “Come in.” He watched Dole enter and pause to bow slightly before he closed the door behind him.

I was taught well about this stupid culture, Hadad thought, thanking his teachers, as he often had since arriving in this time. *It is so dependent on artifacts for judging people—a briefcase, an expensive suit, a clipboard, a long white coat, a lineup of pencils and pens in the shirt pocket . . .*

Dole emerged and motioned with a jerk of his hand for Hadad to go into the office. Hadad strode straight-backed and proud to the half-open door. Without waiting to be asked, he pushed the door farther open, stepped through, and shut it behind him vigorously enough to qualify as an ambiguous slam.

The office was large and ornate, with blue velvet drapes and a thick, interlaced mohair rug, and paintings of cowboys herding cattle and shooting buffalo on the walls. A couch rested against the wall opposite the manager’s desk, and two light blue cushioned armchairs faced the desk. A little statue of a naked female reaching for the sky rested on a side table; on the desk, another small statue of a naked woman, this one on her knees, held her arms outstretched to support a gold letter opener. The desk itself was made of rosewood, and its strong reddish hue clashed with the many blues in the room. The decor displayed well the tension between new wealth and old elegance.

It is a wonder that he does not have incense burning somewhere, Hadad thought.

Without even looking at the man behind it, he advanced to the bank manager’s desk, and pulled out of his inner suit pocket a thick roll of bills held together by a jeweled clip. Unhurriedly, he removed the clip and counted out five ten-dollar bills. He laid each on the desktop, overlapping them so that the “10” showed on each.

Hadad mentally shook his head. *I almost cannot believe this is worth \$1,800 in 2013*. He had yet to make eye contact with the manager, but from the teak name block he had glanced at, he knew the man’s name was Skinner. Hadad clipped his roll, put it away, and smiled to himself. *The scene is set. I am so good at this. Could have been an actor.*

He stood straight, clasped his hands behind his back, and at last looked down at Skinner, who was leaning back in a high backed captain's chair behind the desk. He had yet to utter a sound.

Hadad's brows shot up for a moment. He had expected someone fat—or at least stout—and well groomed. Instead, Skinner was thin to the point of being emaciated—his checked cheviot suit hung off his shoulders as though draped on a wire hanger. He had combed his few gray hairs over a bald pate; they resembled the horizontal dividing lines on shiny graph paper.

He crossed his arms over his sunken chest and peered at the money on the desk through sunken eyes. Sensing that Hadad was looking at him, he looked back with one narrow eyebrow lifted. He didn't seem to know whether to be haughty or subservient. He decided on neither. He reached into a desk drawer—Hadad immediately grabbed for the Stahl in his shoulder holster—pulled out two Havana cigars, looked up at Hadad, and held one out to him in bony fingers.

Hadad dropped his hand and shook his head. Skinner dropped his eyes to look at Hadad's hand for a moment, and then down at the cigar. He frowned as he bit off the end, put the cigar in his mouth, and took a match from his Diamond Matchbook. Warily striking it on the scratch plate—too many of the clusters of matches in these matchbooks had caught fire, since the scratch plate was on the inside—he lit the cigar, then tossed the match into his white marble ashtray. He leaned back in his chair, puffed on his cigar, and studied the smoke with half-lidded eyes. Then he looked up at Hadad again, now with a wisp of a conspiratorial smile.

Expressionless, Hadad tilted his head back a little. He said nothing.

Skinner leaned forward and waved his cigar at him, creating a faint cloud of gray smoke between them. "My good man, who do you want me to kill?" he asked in a gravelly voice, then showed his nicotine-stained teeth in a grin.

Hadad hesitated. *Is the man serious?* he wondered. *This is the American Old West. No, it just must be one of their crazy expressions.* He finally pointed to the money and said authoritatively, "That is for your pocket in return for simple information. Yesterday, a man named John Banks bought from you a deserted warehouse formerly owned by a company that had gone bankrupt. Provide me with the address of the warehouse, and that money is yours."

Skinner's brow jumped up down, and his eyes widened for just a second; he shoved his cigar in his mouth when it fell open. "That's all? May I ask why?"

Hadad squared his shoulders and gave Skinner an unblinking look. After a pause of several seconds, he responded sternly, "No you may not." He paused again for effect, then narrowed his eyes, and said in a lower and harsher tone, "But, I will tell you anyway, if you promise that it will remain in this office."

"Of course," Skinner responded in a puff of smoke. His gravelly voice made Hadad want to wince.

"Very well. This is secret government business. You understand?"

Skinner rose from his chair to stand at round-shouldered attention, his suit coat flapping open. "I do," he said in a low voice that sounded like paper ripping. "I will get you the address. You can trust me." He charged out of the office.

While he waited, Hadad looked around. There were chocolate candy squares neatly stacked in a crystal bowl on the desk; he put half of them in his pants pocket. He leaned over the desk and opened the drawer containing the humidior and took a handful of the cigars, which he dropped into his larger coat pocket. After a quick glance at the door, he caressed the naked statue on the desk with a finger, his lips pursed. Then he shook his head. With a shrug, he lifted the gold letter opener from the statue's hands and shoved it into his inner coat pocket.

Hadad was about to go through the other drawers in the desk when the manager returned. With his cigar clenched between his teeth, he held out a slip of paper to Hadad. Gazing down at it as though it were the only thing in the room, he whispered confidentially, "Here's the address. The warehouse is at 8th and Hooper Streets." He sounded like a hand rubbing across a blackboard. Hadad's nerve endings twitched.

Hadad put the paper in his pants pocket, saying, "The money is yours."

He strode briskly out of the office, then through the bank as though he owned it. With a vigorous shove, he pushed open the bank's large double doors, ignoring the guard who was reaching to push them open for him. He knew the assistant manager watched him all the way, his mind one huge question mark. He was sure the manager would leave it that way.

Carla

The rain had stopped, and fog was moving in. Carla, wearing a black Melton automobile coat with a heavily ruffled, lawn hat, waited down Sansome Street in their Buick. She looked at Hadad expectantly as he approached, her raised eyebrows disappearing underneath the

hat's low brim. Smiling broadly, he tossed his briefcase on the rear seat, pulled open the wet driver's side door, climbed slowly into the high seat, and nonchalantly pulled the door closed.

She wondered for a moment what the strange sound was, and then realized he was humming. It spiked to a stop when Hadad saw his door had not latched. He pushed it open and jerked it closed with a slam, spraying drops of water onto his lap. It still did not latch. This time he used two hands and pulled it hard. It shut, spraying more drops, and shaking the Buick. *That ruined his moment*, she thought. Nonetheless, he gave her a smirk, and seemed to be waiting for her inevitable question.

"Well, did you get it?" Carla asked, not hiding her impatience.

"Of course," he replied, as though she had asked if San Francisco was in California.

It was just the tone to irritate Carla. "It is about time you did something right," she replied coolly.

Hadad reached into the glove compartment for the map of post-1906 earthquake San Francisco they had brought with them from the future. As he unfolded it, Carla reached into her purse, pulled out *The Official Map of the San Francisco Police Department* that she had bought locally, and opened it on her lap. "What is the address?" she asked.

"I have it on a piece of paper." Sitting as he was behind the steering wheel, he had to squirm around to get his hand into his tight pants pocket, and when he did, he stopped abruptly. Something between distaste and dismay crossed his face. He withdrew his hand, holding something covered in brown goo between two fingers.

"What is that?" Carla asked.

After a long pause, Hadad replied, "Chocolate candy." He held the chocolate-coated paper up to let the sunlight fall on it, and tried to read the address. Carla leaned closer to peer at it too. Not only had the chocolate oozed over the address, the ink had become blotched and smeared.

Hadad gritted his teeth. "This is Satan's work. I cannot read the goddam address."

Carla looked heavenward for help, and then demanded, "Here, give it to me." She snatched it from his hand. She squinted at it, then shook her head. "I cannot believe this." She leaned toward him, rubbed the sticky paper across his nose, and dropped it onto his lap. She licked her fingers clean.

Refusing to look at him, she told the windshield, "You will just have to go back and get the address again."

“I cannot do that. What am I going to say? ‘I am very sorry. The address you gave me got smeared by your candy I took.’ Anyway, I remember it well enough. It was . . . ah . . . 8th and Cooper.”

Carla looked at him, head tilted. She scowled. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Hadad said emphatically, removing the paper from his lap with two fingers. He threw it out of the car and wiped his fingers on the outside of the wet door.

They both started looking at their maps. Hadad traced with his fingers the various intersections and streets. Carla watched him, knowing there was no street index on his map. After a few minutes of searching, he looked sideways at Carla. He looked at his map again. “So many streets. Where the hell is it?” he muttered.

“Cannot find it?” Carla finally asked.

“I suppose you found it.”

“Certainly,” she answered. “Look for the intersection of Kearny and Jackson, then run your finger east on Jackson and it is the first alley on the south side of the street.”

“How did you find that?”

“My map has an index. Throw that stupid thing of yours away. It must have been made by one of your many girlfriends.”

Ignoring her, Hadad pulled a red pencil out of his inside suit pocket and circled the street. He studied the map a moment, then said, “Let us go look at it.”

“That is dumb,” Carla said. “They might have seen this car last night, and there are not many Buicks in the city. We should find a cab and tell them to take us past the warehouse and return us here.”

“Good idea,” Hadad said, getting out of the car. Carla followed.

They stood on the sidewalk trying to stop a cab. Eventually, a two-wheeled Hansom cabriolet sloshed through the puddles, damp harness fittings thumping, and stopped in front of them. Hadad and Carla climbed in.

The wet seats were upholstered with machine buffed something-or-other, and apparently captured body odor like an old towel. The driver sat on a high seat behind them, the reins running over a partial black canvas top to a sorrowful, swaybacked, chestnut horse. The front of the Hansom was open, except for a high footboard, giving them a magnificent view of the horse’s behind. Even as open as it was, the cab stank like a football locker room. They sat down. Reluctantly.

Carla wrinkled her nose and exclaimed, “What a stench.” Then she grinned and looked at Hadad, and asked in mock disgust, “Is that you? Did you change your underwear?”

Hadad knitted his brows together and suddenly inhaled. "What? Of course I did. It is the seats. Can you not tell?"

Carla sighed and did not respond.

The driver leaned around the top to glare at Hadad for a moment. As though making a decision, he asked gruffly, "Where to?"

Hadad gave him the address and added, "We just want to look at the place and return here."

The cabby's bushy eyebrows flew up as he put out his hand. "You pay first. Thirty-five cents."

Hadad took out his change purse and gave the cabby a half-dollar, "Here, and keep the change."

The cabby looked closely at them again, turned around, and yelled, "Hiiyaa" as he whipped his horse's flank.

Hadad

The driver made the horse pull the cab along at more than a trot. It was almost running, bouncing Hadad and Carla against each other, forcing them to hold onto the sides as the horse's hooves splashed muddy water on them. After what seemed a rather long ride with many turns, they came to a camp of some sort, with police standing by a gate. The cabby pulled up in front and leaned out to yell, "Got two more for ya, Alex."

Alex had graying hair curling from under his helmet, and what little remained of an Abajo cigar clamped in the side of his mouth. He came over to the side of the Hansom, put his hands on his hips, and stared up at Carla and Hadad. After scrutinizing them as though they were for sale, he demanded, "Get out."

Mystified, Hadad asked, "What is the problem, officer?"

Alex pointed to the ground and barked, "Down. Now." He leaned toward them and stabbed his finger at the ground again while he put his other hand on the grip of his holstered police Colt .45 automatic.

Sitting up straight and puffing out his chest, the driver loudly announced, "I picked them up near Sansome; they wanted to go past somewhere on that Chink Cooper Alley and then return."

As he spoke, Hadad and Carla stepped down onto a much-rutted, black dirt entrance area by the police post. Their heads swiveled around, their eyes flitting from police, to guard shack, to tents, to those around them. Two other policemen joined Alex and stood warily, holding their billy clubs. They ignored Hadad and leered at Carla.

Alex whispered to one of the policemen, who went into the guard shack and came out with something in his hand, which he handed to the driver. The driver glanced at what he got, then lightly whipped his horse and drove off. Hadad scowled at the back of the retreating Hansom, his nostrils flaring and his mouth a thin line.

Meanwhile, Alex had turned to directly stare at Carla and Hadad. Clenching his fists, Hadad, growled, "Who do you think—"

Alex ignored him and demanded in a gruff tone that seemed to shoot from the cigar close to burning his lips, "What are you people doing in that white man's section of town? And who'd you steal those clothes from?"

"We have business in the city," Hadad responded, narrowing his eyes. He could feel his ears heating with anger. "You dare to—"

Alex tightened his hand on his holster. "You people have no business anywhere but in this camp."

Hadad compressed his lips and clenched his jaw. He stared back at Alex.

Carla eyed the large, gray and brown canvas tents beyond the post. She nudged Hadad, and he followed her gaze. As far as he could see from this distance, there were only Orientals walking around. Smoke hung in the air over the camp; he smelled a disgusting mixture of cooking, unwashed people, and their waste.

Almost gagging, Carla asked, "What camp is this?"

One of the policemen answered, spitting out Bull Durham tobacco, "It's for you people."

"Us? Who do you think we are?"

The policemen laughed, and Alex answered, "Chinese, Japanese, some kind of bloodsucking Oriental."

Hadad hissed through his teeth, "Satan damn you. I am not going to—"

Carla raised her voice above his. "We are not Oriental. We are Kazakhs from Kazakhstan."

"Where's that?" Alex demanded.

Confident his reply would settle whatever the problem was, Hadad tilted his head back, pointed his chin at Alex, and responded, "Middle Asia. We are not Oriental. Our ancestors were Mongols."

Alex smirked. "I thought so. You're Asian. I don't care whether you're Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, Somethingese, or Whateverese." He glanced at the two policemen. "Take them in, men. You know where to take *her*."

One of the policemen pointed to Hadad with his billy club and then to a large, dirty canvas tent to the left of the lane on the other side of the gate. “You see it?”

“Yes, but you do not think—”

“You follow me,” a second policeman yelled, pulling on Carla’s sleeve, expecting only mild resistance.

“XX,” Carla whispered to Hadad through the communicator implanted in her throat. “Remember Joy’s experience—the tent, the old Chinese woman, drugged tea, sex slave ring?”

Hadad heard her through the shortwave receiver anchored in the bone behind his ear. *Satan be damned*, he thought. He whipped his Stahl out of his shoulder holster to point it at the policemen, barking, “Get your—”

Another policeman in the guard shack just behind him brought down his billy club on Hadad’s wrist. Hadad’s gun corkscrewed through the air as he bellowed, “Ouwwww!” He grabbed his paralyzed hand with the other and bent over it, starting a little jig of pain.

The pain instantly evaporated into nothingness as one of the other policemen clubbed him on the head.

Carla

Hearing Hadad’s agonized cry behind her, Carla thrust her hand into her purse for her own Stahl as she flung herself to the side. She expected to land on her shoulder and roll to her feet out of reach of the policeman, with her gun pointed at him. But the toe of her pointed shoe caught in the glazed flounce lining at the bottom of her dress, and she tripped stomach first into the muddy gravel, her dress collecting in a swirl high on her back and exposing her translucent silk panties—she’d worn no petticoat or slip. Her hat flew off in a spray of lace, feathers, and imitation flower buds; her purse was pinned painfully under her breasts; and her hair tumbled out of its fashionable bun. Before she could move her body to get her gun out of her muddied purse, the policeman had his heavy boot on her back and one hand gripping her hair, pulling her head back.

“Behave, you fucking Chink, or I’ll drag you by your stinking hair.”

Carla was shocked more by his comment than her fall. *Stinking hair? The stinking idiot! I will get—*

Sharp pain cut her reaction short as the policeman twisted one of her arms behind her and pulled her up by her hair and the arm.

Without releasing her, he pushed her in front of him toward the brown tent and through the flap. "I got another one for you," he told the old Chinese woman inside. "She put up a fight. Force the tea down her throat."

No way, Carla thought, and went limp, dropping her full weight on the policeman. She reached back with her free arm and got it around the policeman's head then, getting both feet under her for balance, she flipped the shocked policeman over her shoulder onto the ground. Just as he landed and she was about to jump on him and hand chop him unconscious, a smothering, reeking blanket enveloped her head. A second later, the world disappeared into blackness.

Alex

Alex spit out his cigar butt and yelled, "That son of a bitch pulled a gun on me. Did you see that?" He kicked the unconscious Asian in the side several times. Then he stopped and raised his eyebrows. "Damn, this Chink has a hard body."

The man's suit coat was wide open, and two top buttons on his shirt had popped, exposing a dull gray surface underneath.

"What's this?" Alex asked, bending over and ripping the shirt further open, popping more buttons. He tapped his fingers on what he saw, and told the two policemen who were watching, "Take off his coat and shirt; I want to see what this is."

Minutes later, they had the still unconscious Oriental leaning against the guard shack, stripped of his coat, shirt, collar, and bow tie, but with what appeared a tight vest covering his upper torso. Alex looked at it carefully and noted, "It's some kind of vest, and hard. But I don't know how he gets it on. I don't see any buttons."

One of the policemen took his billy club and lightly smacked the vest. There was a mild thump. He hit it harder, causing only a slightly louder thump. "Never seen anything like it," he said.

Alex looked for buttons and couldn't find any. "This is too tight for him to put it on over his head. But that's the only way he can get it on. Here, help me," he asked the other policeman bending over to look at the vest. "Raise his arms and I'll try to pull this over them."

As Alex tugged on the vest, the top front of it opened a couple of inches. "Ah, what's this?" Alex shouted, widening his eyes. "It's opening." He put his hands into the opening and pulled in opposite directions. The vest came apart with a ripping sound. "I'll be god-damned," Alex exclaimed.

He now easily removed the vest from the man's torso. Then he played with pushing the front edges together and taking them apart. "What the hell is this, anyway?"

Finally, Alex turned to one of the policemen and said, "Call the station to send a wagon for the Chink. He pulled a gun and assaulted me. He's going to jail. And be sure to take his gun and this crazy vest to the station."

Chapter 8

Mid-Morning, Friday

Carla

Carla abruptly regained consciousness. She felt a chilly draft. Her head hurt. From having studied Hands' biography, she instantly knew her danger. She still felt drugged, but knew that would soon pass. *Timing is now everything. Be patient*, she warned herself. She relaxed to let her five senses fully explore.

That draft on my breasts and thighs—Satan be damned, I am naked.

She could feel a soft, lumpy mattress under her back—*It stinks*—and there was something soft lifting up her behind.

And then, she realized that the draft was reaching between her legs. *Shit! My legs are spread*. She tried to move her arms, but they were tied behind her.

With her keen hearing, she caught the sounds of breathing and movement. *A small room, with no more than two other people in it*. She had almost recovered from the drug, and could ignore the headache caused by the blow she had received. She waited unmoving for what she knew was going to be said and attempted.

Within minutes, a man with a low, heavy voice spoke. "What a beauty. Look at those tits. Too bad that thick black bush hides her cunt. We're going to have to shave it off later. But then, look at that spread of black hair on her head. Have you ever seen hair that full and black before? You know, she doesn't look like a Chink or a Jap. Maybe she's Eurasian. Doesn't matter. She's made me hot as hell, and I'm going to enjoy this. You're next, Tim."

An even heavier voice responded, "Yeah, Ben, you always go first."

She opened her eyes just enough to see who was talking. Ben was a portly, middle-aged man who was just taking down his pants. Beside him stood a huge, heavyset man with a large head and no neck. His small eyes were focused on her body, and his lustful grin looked as if it were painted on his round, flat face. *Oh shit, Tim must be the enforcer that Hands described when Joy was in this position*.

Before she could move, Ben had his pants off, had knelt down, and was on the verge of entering her. *Oh Great Allah, I am going to be screwed*.

Ben entered her with a powerful thrust, causing sudden pain. She was too dry. Ignoring it, she slitted her eyes and moaned in seeming pleasure. She thrust her hips back at Ben and tightened the muscles around her vagina. “Harder, harder,” she murmured, moving her head back and forth, swishing her hair around, all the while checking out the room. It looked like a hotel room, with one window, a closet, a chest of drawers, a water pitcher and bowl, and a hard-backed chair with her clothes piled on it. On the chest, she could see her armor—*armor? How did they get that off me?* She also saw her purse, and beside it her Stahl. She was ready.

She moaned, “Yes, yes. That is it. I want to feel your balls when you come.” She squirmed against Ben’s thrusting and whined, “My hands are tied. I want to have fun too. Let me at it.”

Ben was so shocked he stopped his thrusting for a moment. Then, supporting himself on one arm, swaying with sexual heat, he motioned Tim to untie her. Ben jiggled around inside her while the enforcer took out his knife and turned her shoulders sideways to reveal her wrists. He cut the rope around them.

Hands free, she put her legs around Ben’s back and held him tightly inside her so that he could hardly move. She pretended to embrace him with her arms until she saw Tim put his knife away. Then she pulled her right hand back as though for support, flattened it, and put all her anger behind it as she gave Ben a death chop on the neck.

Air gushed out through his gaping mouth in a loud whoosh as his body shuddered a last time. Dead, his body dropped over onto its side, pulling his still erect penis out of her.

Tim stood paralyzed, shocked by what he saw. She leaped up into a crouching position and in the same motion did a front jump kick at Tim’s face. As he tried to grab her, she caught him on the nose and forehead with her heel, snapping his head sharply back and knocking him backwards.

Before he could regain his balance, she rushed to the chest and grabbed her Stahl. She whirled into a crouch and, with two hands and a mirthless grin, she aimed the gun at Tim as he tried to lumber to his feet. She spit at him, “Rape this,” and shot him three times in the chest with her hollow points, exploding his insides like little bombs and blasting blood from his mouth, nose, and eyes. He was dead before his body dropped onto the floor like a pile of wet clothes.

Quickly, Carla locked the door to the room and opened the window. She saw that she was on the second floor, facing a yard and a fence. She threw on her wool dress, leaving it unbuttoned to hurry into her

automobile coat. She tossed her hat and armor out the window. Then she put her gun in her holster purse, swung it by its strap across her back, and climbed out the window to hang from the windowsill by her hands.

Fists started pounding on the door to the room. Under her she saw garbage cans and, to one side, an untended, weedy area. Swinging back and forth, she got the momentum and angle she wanted, and let go. She arched eleven feet into the weeds, and managed to roll in them to soften her fall.

She jumped up, grabbed her armor and hat, ran to the side of the house out of sight of the window, and climbed the fence to the empty yard next door. She ran around the neighbor's house and into the street.

She found herself on 11th Avenue. The area was mixed industrial and residential. It had not been touched by the 1906 fire and showed no damage from the earthquake. Horse-drawn carts and wagons and a dark green Model B Ford waited in front of a nearby store.

She shoved her hat onto her head and buttoned her dress underneath her coat. Brushing the leaves and twigs out of her hair, she sauntered down the street and crossed it to stop by the Ford. Two elderly women passing by gave her a dirty look, and a well-dressed man ogled her, but she paid no attention to them. The Ford was unlocked, so she climbed in and hunkered down on the capacious floor so she could not be seen while looking for the starter.

"Damn," she hissed. There was no starter. *I forgot. It has not been invented yet.*

The crank was in a fixture on the inside sidewall. Remembering what she had been taught about primitive autos in preparation for her time travel, she advanced the throttle and spark levers on opposite sides of the steering post, but not too much. Then, looking as though she owned the car, she walked around to the front, inserted the crank and, in two revolutions, got the Ford's four cylinders working. They shook the body back and forth, and *put-putting*, donut-shaped rings of black smoke popped out of the exhaust pipe.

As she was about to climb up into the Ford, it backfired with a sound like a gun shot. She immediately reached for her Stahl, and sent her hat flying off as she dropped into a spread-legged crouch. When she realized what the sound was, she laughed at herself, picked up her ruined hat, shrugged, and got into the auto.

She adjusted the throttle and spark and pressed one foot onto the reverse pedal, causing the Ford to jackrabbit and almost stall. She immediately raised both feet and let the auto coast backward as she

carefully readjusted the throttle. Then she pressed the reverse pedal again, and gradually opened the throttle two-thirds. Just missing a wagon, she was able to circle backwards until she faced the street. She stomped on the brake pedal to the right of reverse, pulling the gearshift out of neutral and drawing it toward her into low gear even before the Ford stopped. Two teeth-rattling jerks, and she had it heading for the street.

The owner came running out of the store to chase after her. He ran almost as fast as the Ford at first, until she shifted full forward into high gear, pushed the throttle to its stop, upped the spark, and engaged the full twenty horsepower of the engine. She left the control alone and just clung to the steering wheel as she skidded around into a side street, almost tipping over and losing control, and then did a sliding turn into another, using the sidewalk to give her a wider angle and grazing a street sign.

When she was sure that the owner had lost sight of the car, she slowed the Ford to a respectable ten miles per hour, and smiled to herself. *I will accept even these small victories.*

The Ford's top was down and even with her coat on and the sun out, she began to shiver in the wind. She looked for street signs and finally saw that she was on Geary Street. Gauging direction by the sun, she drove east to Gough, north to Pacific, and then east again. Almost a half-hour later, she drove past the New California Resort and parked on a side street three blocks away.

Allah be praised, she thought as she walked toward the Resort. *The first thing I am going to do is take a bath. The second thing I am going to do is take another bath.*

Hadad

Hadad opened his eyes inside a horse-drawn wagon and winced at a roaring headache and a pain in his right wrist. He was bouncing on the floor with each movement of the swaying wagon, and each bump felt like a hammer hitting his skull. He looked around and saw the tightly screened windows on the back door and the cab wall, and guessed that this was a police wagon. He looked down at himself. His shirt was unbuttoned under his open coat. No armor. He tried to move his hands from behind him and felt the handcuffs. They made the throbbing in his bruised wrist worse. But his feet were free. And he was alone in the back.

God be praised; they are so dumb in this age.

Squirming, ignoring the pain, he drew his legs tightly up to his chest and slid his handcuffed hands under his buttocks and over his feet. With his hands now in front, he searched the littered floor, finding a bent nail with a quarter-inch head under the bench. He was bouncing around too much to even insert the head into the keyhole on the cuffs. Finally, the wagon hit a much smoother stretch of road, and he could insert the head. With a few deft wiggles of the nail, he had the cuffs loose. He fixed them around his wrists so that they still looked locked, but he could easily shake them off.

The good stretch of road ended. Hadad's bottom was getting sore from all the bumping when the wagon finally stopped in front of a squat, red brick building with "Police Headquarters" painted on an obviously temporary cloth banner stretched over the front entrance. Two policemen came to the door in the back of the wagon; one unbolted it and motioned Hadad to get out.

As he did so, Hadad noted that they were on the cracked and broken concrete in a delivery area near the front entrance. He looked around. *No others nearby. No one watching. Good.*

He front kicked the closest policeman in the groin; as the man screamed and bent over grabbing at his crotch, Hadad threw off the cuffs and kned him in the face. Shocked motionless at first, the other policeman tried to swing his billy club at Hadad's head, but Hadad ducked, rotated, and side kicked his boot heel into the policeman's chin.

Hadad again quickly scanned the area to make sure no one was approaching. *Still safe.*

He propped the unconscious policemen against the wagon's back, then lifted and flopped first one, then the other into the back of the wagon. He bolted the door. "Enjoy," he told them.

Hadad turned and walked to the sorrel draft horse patiently standing in its traces at the front of the wagon. He looked at the old concord truck harness with which it was hitched to the wagon. The ill-fitting bridle had worn the horse's skin raw. Hadad shook his head. Stroking the horse's nose, he murmured, "Poor guy. I will let you out of this as soon as I can." The horse tossed his head and nickered in response, sensing a friend.

Hadad climbed onto the cracked driver's seat, lifted the worn leather reins in one hand, and lightly tapped the horse with the whip—the best he could do, with his painful wrist. The horse started forward at a slow trot. Hadad guided the wagon around other police wagons and a Stanley Steamer. Two policemen talking to each other as they walked nearby gave him no attention as he slowly drove past.

He saw from the street signs that he was at the corner of Pine and Larkin Streets. Not knowing where this was, he headed up Larkin. When he hit Pacific, a name he recognized, he sighed with relief. He headed east, toward the taller buildings. Good choice. After traveling about three-quarters of a mile, he recognized Montgomery Street, and knew how to reach the Resort.

When he saw the Resort in the distance, he directed the horse into a side street, and then into an alley alongside a boarded-up store of some sort. He stopped the horse, climbed down, and unharnessed and unstrapped him, including removing his blinders. He threw a blanket he found in the wagon's cab over the horse's bare back, then backed up several feet. A running jump landed him on the horse's back, and he righted himself. He had not ridden a horse like this since he was a boy, happily riding his favorite Mongolian horse bareback across his family's farm.

The horse neighed when he felt Hadad's weight, and stomped a few steps with his head up, but he settled down when Hadad patted his neck and talked softly to him. Hadad slapped him gently on the rear, dug his heels into his sides, and gripped the reins, yelling, "Ya, ya!" The horse started at a trot.

Hadad was just one of many horse riders, although he was the only one he could see without a saddle. Despite his headache and the pain in his wrist, this was the happiest he had been since he and Carla had arrived in this stupid country in this awful age. Knowing he couldn't reproduce the unique Mongol throat-singing style, he hummed the Mongol warrior's song that expressed his happiness in returning safely from battle . . . until he noticed some people staring at him, and he suddenly realized that a policeman had better not see him—he might recognize the horse.

He sought out the narrow side streets, walking the horse down them until he spied the back of the Resort. He launched into a rendition of "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain," an American song he just learned from Carla.

Carla? Carla! What happened to her? His mood crashed as he remembered her being taken to that tent. *I cannot believe that they would be able to subdue her. Not Carla. She is either free, or dead, or unconscious somewhere.* He knew he had to seriously think of the alternatives, unpleasant though they were. *If she is dead, I am alone on this mission, and I had better plan on that right away. If she is unconscious, she will be killed trying to escape or succeed in escaping when*

she comes to. No way would she accept sexual slavery, not for a moment. Not Carla. So, if I do not see her in a couple of days, that is it. I am alone.

Maybe it will be easier with just me.

He felt his face sag. He stared down at the blanket and let his shoulders droop and his mouth turn down at the corners. *I would miss her.*

Then, realizing he would really be pursuing their mission alone, he gulped. His heartbeat speeded up, and he blinked rapidly. *No Carla? Never to see her again? No!*

He urged the horse into a canter, riding several more blocks and turning into narrow Gold Street. He dismounted and patted the horse on the head. "Good boy. Now you are free. At least for a while," he said in a rush, and rapidly removed the horse's bridle and reins and draped them over his shoulder with the blanket. A good thump on its rear got the horse to move a short distance away.

His head still hurting from the blow of the policeman's club, his wrist now only aching, Hadad hastened onto Montgomery and headed toward the nearby Resort.

"It is about time," Carla said from the bed as Hadad entered their room. She had a damp cloth across her forehead. "Did you have fun while I was knocked unconscious, kidnapped, raped, and had to kill two fucking rapists to get away?"

Hadad momentarily froze with his hand still on the doorknob, his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. Then he smiled and was about to rush to her with open arms when her irritated tone registered. He stood straighter and narrowed his eyes. "I guess you are one up on me," he responded brusquely. "I only got knocked out and had my armor and gun taken. Then I was handcuffed and hauled to the police station in a wagon, where I had to knock two policemen out to get away. I rode a police horse here. My misfortune. I was not raped, and I did not kill anyone. You lucky woman."

He gaped when Carla's irritated look collapsed into tears. *Carla! Tears!* Then it hit him. *Rape?* "You were really raped?" he gasped. "I thought you said that no man alive would ever be able to rape you, my master of White Crane kung fu."

He stood looking at her while she wiped at her tears with the damp rag. He shuffled his feet and did not know what to do with his hands, which he finally rubbed together.

"I was unconscious, you ass," Carla finally whispered.

Hadad straightened up and rubbed his chin. "Was it your fertile time? I do not want to think of you getting pregnant."

“It does not matter. I killed the rapist before he could come.”

Hadad took a step back and grimaced at the thought. He said softly, “Well, I am happy you are okay, and I’m glad you killed the *Bokshil*—shithead.”

Carla sat up and motioned for Hadad to sit on the bed next to her. She put an arm around him and rested her head on his shoulder. In a voice he had heard rarely since they arrived, she told him tenderly, “I am happy you are okay, too.”

She lifted her head and, with a little more of the usual firmness in her voice, said, “We could have contacted each other with our communicators. What is the use of having them implanted if we do not use them?”

Hadad was adamant. “No, it is not wise, as we agreed. When we try to communicate in combat situations, when we are out of sight of each other, we cannot know what the other is doing. We may inadvertently distract the other at a dangerous moment.”

“Okay, I guess I agree,” Carla responded. “Now what do we do to kill those two?” No names were necessary.

Hadad thought for a moment. “We have to go to our supply capsule to replace my lost Stahl again, and get more ammunition for our OT-15s. Then we are going to buy another car so we are not dependent on these cabs if we do not want the Buick to be seen. Never again will we take another cab. And we are finally going to kill them.”

“Ah, one thing.”

“What?”

“We have to change our looks somehow. Mongoloid-Asian is out, white is in.”

Chapter 9

Late Morning, Friday

John

John woke up disoriented. At first he thought he'd been dreaming about the night attack on Joy and him, but then he looked around the room and realized it was not the second floor one he had been in. He remembered they had moved to safer rooms. No dream.

He looked at Joy, sleeping on her back next to him with the covers pulled up to her shoulders in the chilly room. Her head was turned toward him, her jet-black hair spread across the pillow behind her. He saw the outline of her hands under the covers, resting on her stomach. She looked so peaceful, so feminine, so sweet, so fresh. A sleeping beauty.

Seeing her sleeping like this, who would ever guess she was a warrior in the old Asian tradition? he reflected. He shook his head. *I can't believe my life now, with its narrow escapes, and the mission to which I have committed myself.*

He looked more closely at Joy's closed eyes, at their unlidded Asian slant he found so attractive; at the pert, slightly off-center nose—broken and repaired twice—and the tilt of her strong chin; at her full lips, open as though in a pout; at the off-white scar running from her cheek to her chin, contrasting with her otherwise unblemished, light olive-colored skin; and at the way her waist-long hair always seemed to open like a curtain on her beauty, whether escaping in tendrils from a bun on her head, in a pigtail in martial arts practice, or flowing free and wild in sleep or lovemaking.

I would die to save this woman. She is all that love means to me. And I know with equal certainty that she would die for me. I would also die for the mission, but I could not, would not, will not sacrifice her for the mission. I will not lie to myself about this, no matter what my mind says. My heart dictates otherwise.

He knew this to be absolute truth. His eyes moistened as he rested on one elbow and just let his eyes and heart wallow in her presence.

My God, what is it now? Almost two months, I think, since I was a new professor of history. She was just one of the students in my class—

or so she pretended, while she checked me out for this mission. Almost two months. That was a lifetime ago; a world away—a universe! Now three universes. Has anyone in world history every undergone such a mammoth change in one lifetime?

Well, doesn't matter. I'm here. And she is here next to me. I love you, baby. He leaned over and lightly brushed her lips with his.

She meowed and, still asleep, put her arms around his head. He kissed her harder, waking her. She purred, "I love you, my dearest."

He drew back the covers and pulled her into his arms and held her body tightly to his. He buried his face in her hair, luxuriating in the heavenly smell of her hair and body. He wet her face and her hair with his happy tears. When he leaned back, tilted his head, and melted into her teary eyes, he knew that she understood. With gentle passion and unhurried caressing and play, they made delicious love. It was neither wild nor complicated, acrobatic or physically trying. It was sweet and loving. And tender—the lovemaking of lovers who realize they are lucky to be alive, and there may be no tomorrow.

Later in the morning, John went to Hands' room and woke him up. "Change in plans," he said. "Please wake up Sal and Dolphy and come to my room."

He knocked on Jy-ying's door and when she answered with a blanket over her shoulders and a welcome smile, he also invited her to his room. She nodded, eyes wide, and was about to say something when, preoccupied, John turned away and started down the hallway.

Dolphy entered the room yawning, and Sal looked sleepy—but wide awake enough to spot Jy-ying and stand near her. When they'd all arrived, John didn't waste time. "Killers are after us, and we have to hurry, so this is what I want to do . . ."



Afterwards, looking John in the eye, Hands pointed out, "We have agreed to be your guards. We are putting our lives on the line for you, and we're well paid for it. But, since one of us might get killed, shouldn't you tell us what's going on?"

"I agree," Jy-ying said. "I am now involved also, and want to help you all I can. But I should know what is involved. The full story."

John smiled and replied, "Now it's a matter of urgency. Let's do what we have to, and then when we have time for a long discussion tonight, I'll explain as best I can. I owe it to all of you. Okay?"

Hands gave a mock salute and smiled in return, saying, "To work."



John finished his phone call and turned to Joy, who had set up her Mac laptop to type the document they planned. Grinning, he told her what she'd expected. "It's a go. Good thing the telephone company has the system up and running for most of San Francisco. If they didn't, we'd be having a tough time doing all this." He stepped around behind her and leaned over her shoulder to read what she had started typing.

"Now, to get that letter out," he said. "When you finish typing and printing it, I'll have it hand delivered."

John started packing what little they had in the room into his suitcase and a shopping bag. When he finished, he left them on the bed and walked down to the manager's office, his eyes flicking from side to side, looking for anyone suspicious, and his hand close to his holstered gun. He felt like a parody of a spy in a trench coat, collar turned up, eyes swiveling back and forth as if he were watching a tennis match.

Foster, the previous owner of the hotel and John's new manager, was standing with the day receptionist, talking excitedly about what the night clerk had told them. When they saw John, they stared at him as if he had on a cowboy hat and two smoking pistols strapped to his hips.

John greeted both of them with a pleasant "Good morning." Then, looking at Foster, he asked, "Can I see you in your office?"

Without a word, acting more frightened by John than curious, Foster opened the varnished door to his office, motioned John in, and nervously followed him. John suspected he did not want a crazy gunman at his back. Foster waited for John to sit at the desk, and then seated himself in the armchair. Blinking rapidly, he clasped his hands in front of his chest as though they would protect him.

Twenty minutes later, John and Foster emerged from the office. A grin split Foster's shining face. He looked as though he had won a tax-free, million-dollar lottery.

John tucked a roll of bills into his pocket, tipped his fedora to the receptionist, and navigated the lobby, again carefully watching for anyone suspicious as he climbed the stairs. When he got to the third floor, he exhaled with a whoosh of breath, relaxed, and headed for his room.

"All set?" he asked Joy after he'd closed the door behind him.

"Okay," she said, "I've got everything."

They gathered up their suitcases and bags. Carrying them in their left hands to leave their right hands free for defense, they left the room. When they got to the stairs, Joy squirmed in front of John and slowly descended with him muttering behind her, keeping as close to the wall

as possible. When they reached the lobby, John caught up to her and, side by side, they headed for the doors, their eyes studying every hiding place and every guest present. Even more watchful, John exited the front entrance first before Joy could preempt him, and then they strode together down the street without saying a word.

Joy

After two blocks, John went into the street and waved down a horse-drawn farm wagon loaded with vegetables.

“Hey, mister,” he yelled at the driver in duck overalls and straw hat. “I’ll give you one dollar to take us to this address.” He pulled out a slip of paper and held it up so that the driver sitting high on the wagon’s spring seat could read it.

“Holy cow,” the driver exclaimed, “you could buy a lot of my vegetables for that.”

John responded, “Good, just take us to this address and you can keep the vegetables.”

The driver pushed the address aside. “I can’t read it.”

John stepped up on the front wheel hub to give the driver a closer look at the address.

The driver’s face changed from cheer to gloom. “I can’t read it, I said.” Then, perking up a little, he added, “I can read the names of my vegetables, and I can write my name and address.”

John quickly responded, “Good for you,” and read off the address. “You know how to get there?”

“You bet,” the driver replied, nodding, the gloom over his illiteracy again submerged for a while.

Joy and John slung their suitcases and bags on top of the vegetables, and the driver made room for them on the narrow seat beside him. It was not made for more than two people, and Joy had to squeeze against John. The driver pulled out of his overalls pocket a thick, hand-rolled cigarette and lit it with a wooden match. He took a deep puff before picking up the reins.

Joy hated cigarette smoke, but knew, as she had when Sal first lit his cigar, that if she said anything she would be thought rude, even strange. She again resigned herself to the smoke. *Maybe the wind will keep the smoke away.*

The driver snapped the reins and his Belgian workhorse started pulling the wagon at a walk. The seat’s springs were not designed for the weight of three people. Pushed down to their base, they provided no

relief from the road's ruts and potholes, some of which Joy recognized from her own age as universal in time and space. The wooden seat hated strangers. By the time Joy and John got to their destination, they would not have been able to persuade their bruised bottoms that there was a difference between a glide, a jolt, a bump, or a jerk.

John asked the driver to wait and, for another dollar, take them to the address of their warehouse. Just before he jumped down, Joy whispered, "Glutton for punishment, eh?" She stayed with the driver while John dropped off the letter at the address and signed some documents.

While John was gone, the driver took out a blanket and told Joy, "Shame to hide you, pretty girl, but you had better cover yourself with this. All Chinatown burned down, you know. The mayor didn't want it rebuilt, but couldn't stop it. It's far from finished yet. So the mayor is still rounding up Chin . . . Chinese—Orientals—appearing in white man's neighborhoods, and putting them in the Presidio camp."

"Thanks for telling me that. I'll use the blanket. You're a nice man."

The driver was still blushing a little when John returned, and they headed for the warehouse. About a block away, John asked the man to let them off and gave him the two dollars, receiving an effusive thanks in return. Joy also returned the blanket.

As they walked toward the warehouse, Joy asked, "You didn't give him counterfeit money, did you?"

"No, those were real bucks."

"Good. He was so nice I wouldn't feel right otherwise, even though the bogus money is undetectable in this age."

They approached the warehouse from the rear, warily, keeping a good distance between themselves. John tried to go first, but Joy skipped past him and led in a shuffling semicrouch, her free hand holding her magnum at the ready. She noted that John tried to follow in the same way with his .45, although he looked uncomfortable.

They put their suitcases and bags next to the warehouse side door, and Joy motioned John against the wall. Making sure he'd be out of the line of sight once she opened the door, she quietly released the corroded outdoor catch and turned the doorknob slowly until she could open the door a fraction. Then, with a final look at John, she shoved the door with her shoulder, jumped inside, and immediately backed against the adjacent wall, rapidly panning her gun from left to right across the warehouse floor. Then John rushed in and backed to the wall on the other side of the door, also sweeping his gun back and forth before him. Joy looked at him with approval. Then they carefully checked all possible hiding places.

When they were sure they were alone, John exploded with, “Whew! What a relief. So far, I haven’t wet my pants. I won’t even ask how you’re doing. I assume you’re having a ball.”

“Don’t be fooled,” she responded with a little asperity. “I’m human too, you know.”

They brought in their suitcases and bags; John closed and barred the door. Now they both could let their guard down. Joy took John’s hand, and they strolled to the capsules filled with supplies and equipment the Society had sent them. They finally could talk, an opportunity for which Joy had been waiting. “How much did you get for the hotel?” she asked.

“I sold it back to Foster for \$60,000.”

“Sixty thousand?”

“Yes.”

“One day ago you bought it from him for about \$69,000. If the gun damage is no more than \$500, you lost over \$8,500 in one day. If I were training you to shoot the way you’re handling our finances, you still wouldn’t know where the trigger is. I hope your stock transactions will be better.”

John averted his eyes. “No choice about the hotel. Our attackers knew we were there, and we couldn’t even have our business visitors stay there, for the killers might connect them to us.” He changed the subject. “We need a good defensive weapon and a good long-distance rifle, besides our handguns and your crazy knives.”

He walked over to the weapons capsule, punched in the code, opened its door, and turned off the self-destruct mechanism. “Do we have such weapons among these rifle cases, if that’s what they are?”

Joy responded without looking. “Those are rifle cases, and they’re sealed against moisture. For more protection, each case contains only one new rifle in a vapor corrosion inhibiting bag, and the rifle has been thoroughly treated with a top grade, very long-lasting, polarizing oil. Also, there—”

“Why such care?”

“It’s very humid in San Francisco, and it might be many years before we need a particular rifle. Moisture is the enemy of guns, as I’ve told you a thousand times.”

John just puckered his lips.

“Anyway, we have the Mossberg 590 12-gauge shotgun, with shortened barrel, extended magazine, and mounted halogen beam—”

“You sound like you’re trying to sell it to me.”

Joy ignored him. “I would use the birdshot load for our purposes, since we will be defending ourselves inside a building in the city. For the rifle, I suggest the AK-47 assault rifle for short or medium range combat, and the combat M16A2 5.56mm rifle for longer range. It’s automatic and semiautomatic, and has a point accuracy up to 853 yards.”

John’s eyebrows were going up and his jaw dropping, but she continued mercilessly. “But for real distance and accuracy, we also have the British Accuracy International sniper rifle, Model PM, bolt-action 7.62 with telescopic sight, flash hider, and silencing suppressor. I’m going to pull out each of these for us. That will exhaust our supply of these weapons, but no sense saving them. Our lives are endangered now. The guys should buy what is currently available.”

John asked in amazement, “How can you know and remember all these weapons?”

“Dearest. How can you remember all the words and grammar for French, German, and Spanish, as you do? And all the names and dates in history that pepper your constant lectures.”

“What? You don’t like my lectures?”

Joy ignored him again. “I bet if I ask you who was the foreign minister of Russia in 1914, you’d know. You’re trained as a historian, with all that to remember plus the languages you had to learn. And I’m trained in weapons.” She turned full face to him, gave him the glorious smile she knew always turned his insides to mush, and added, “Among other things.”

Even though he was now as soft as an ice cream cone in July, ever the professional, he started to say, “The foreign minister was—”

A horn sounded outside. Joy rushed to the side door, unbarred it, and with her magnum at the ready, she peeked out. “It’s our guys and Jy-ying,” she told John.

He ran over to the large cargo doors and forced them open. They were just in time.

Chapter 10

Early Afternoon, Friday

Carla

"Damn it, Carla, I can do it. If the motor kicks back on you, the crank could injure, even kill you. This is a man's job."
"Hadad! This is a Model F Buick, not some Ford. It has a safety-something that eliminates the possibility of a kickback on cranking. Do you not remember anything of what we were taught?"

Hadad hissed back, "I do not trust it."

That did it. Carla threw up her hands, shook her head, and stepped back from the front of the Buick to let Hadad insert the crank in the crank hole beneath the radiator. He then clenched the crank handle in his left hand and put his black and blue right wrist behind his back to keep it out of the way.

Before he could start cranking, Carla moved in, put both hands over his on the handle, and began the cranking. Hadad had no choice but to let her help. Together they pushed down and pulled up and down and up and down on the crank. The engine finally caught with a pop and a clank and the smell of gasoline. While the whole automobile shook to life, Carla rushed ahead of Hadad to jump on the right running board and adjust the spark and throttle. When the Buick settled down to a mild jerking, Carla yelled at him, "You cannot drive with that wrist."

Rather than answer, Hadad quickly stepped onto the running board and climbed up to sit on the high, tufted leather driver's seat before she could stop him. Realizing that there was no way she was going to get him out of that seat to drive herself, she simply said, "Dumb! With the driver's seat, gearshift, and high speed clutch side lever on the *right*, you are going to have to use your right hand and bad wrist to shift." With a little curl of her lip, she added, "I cannot do it for you."

Hadad's fashionable green golf cap almost fell off as he shook his head. "Satan take the wrist. I do not need you to shift, Carla."

With a smirk, Carla nodded and said, "Of course, you could just keep your foot on the low speed pedal."

Carla climbed onto the passenger seat, and Hadad hit the low speed pedal with his foot. He almost stalled the car when it jerked forward. He let up on the pedal, moved both the spark and throttle up, then, as

the car gained speed, he flipped the clutch lever, gripped the head of the rod sticking out of the floor with his right hand, and gasped from the pain when he had to wrestle the bulky gear forward into high speed.

“See!” Carla shouted. Under her breath she added, “*Kot*—asshole.”

Eyes watering, Hadad gritted his teeth and steered the Buick away from the boardwalk and into the horse and wagon traffic. Several times, he had to shift down into neutral and use the low speed pedal and then shift back up to high speed, and each time the grinding of the gears and jerking of the Buick got worse. By the time they arrived at the downtown office building where they had hidden their supply capsules, Hadad had to use his left hand to lift his right off the gear handle.

Inside the condemned, partially burned building, Carla breathed through her mouth as she opened their blue supply capsule and took out their cosmetics. “I will never get used to the stench of whatever was burned here. Our planners should have known and picked a deserted, unburned building, like the one found for Joy and John.”

Hadad did not respond. He tenderly held his wrist and focused on avoiding bumping it against the capsule, his side, or Carla’s body as she moved about.

She picked out a vanity mirror and used shadow and skin coloring to heighten her low forehead, and to make her black eyebrows appear rounder. She also widened her eyes and made their double lids more prominent. Some rouge and eye shadow helped make her high cheekbones look lower and less prominent, and her chin less round. She had worn her hair in the standard bun, loose enough so that it rounded around the back and sides of her head. That had to change. While Hadad held the mirror up for her, she pulled her hair tightly back into a bun packed behind her head, which made her face look narrower.

“Hey, this is fun,” Carla said as she put a big black mark on the end of Hadad’s nose with her eye shadow brush.

Hadad stepped back, pressed his lips together, and arched his eyebrows, wrinkling his forehead. “You are childish.”

Her smile disappeared.

He stepped toward her and took the rouge pad out of the box she was holding. He patted it heavily against her nose. “Ha. So.”

She grabbed her lipstick and drew a thick, pale red line from his cheek across his lips to his chin. She then whisked the mirror out of his hand and held it up to him. He looked, preened, and they both laughed. He seemed to forget about his wrist.

Carla cleaned their faces. After again making up her face, she did Hadad’s. She stood back, inspected his face and then her own in the

mirror, and sighed. "Well, it will not fool someone looking closely, but they have to be looking at us in a good light." She looked at his face again, and was surprised at the emotion that suddenly stirred her insides. She turned her head slightly and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "You are a handsome man, Hadad."

"What brought that on?"

"Does it matter?"

Hadad looked into the capsule, scratched his nose with his good hand, and after several empty seconds, he commented nonchalantly, "You are a beautiful woman, Carla. But, you know that."

The moment exploded like a pricked soap bubble. Her insides suddenly felt empty. Carla went to their green clothing capsule, unlocked it, and pulled out two hats. One was a Texas Steer sombrero for Hadad, and for herself a misses' lawn hat fully stacked with tasseled fine lace. She put the sombrero on Hadad's head and swallowed the laugh that struggled to escape. Quickly she put her own hat on, and looked in the mirror. She guffawed.

Hadad joined her in laughing. "God preserve us. That looks awful. But if you wear it low over your forehead, it will help hide your forehead and eyes."

Carla grabbed the rim of Hadad's sombrero and pulled it down until it reached his thick eyelashes. "You are right," she exclaimed, exploding in another laugh.

With a tolerant grin, Hadad went back to their supply capsule and took out a huge roll of counterfeit hundred-dollar bills. "These are our fake ones. No one will know in this age. Here, split these with me."

As she counted out the bills, he moved over to their red weapons capsule, unlocked it, and retrieved his backup armored vest. He also withdrew another Stahl 9mm and its shoulder holster, a Bashirova 613 sniper rifle and case, night scope, and sniper day and night binoculars, and replaced their empty OT-15 magazines.

Carla helped him put his vest on, and in doing so bumped his swollen wrist.

"Ouch. Careful, damn it," he growled.

She also helped him put on his shoulder holster, but with less care. *Too bad*, she thought as she got it on him without touching his bad wrist.

He leaned down, picked up his Stahl, and put it in his holster. Then Carla helped him into his coat. "What would your life be like without me?" she murmured.

"What?"

“Nothing.”

With one eyebrow raised, Hadad eyed her for a moment, and then picked up the ammunition and weapons next to the capsule and shoved them into her arms. After he locked the three capsules, he led the way out.

When they got to the Buick, Carla skipped around Hadad, tossed everything up into the back seat, and jumped into the driver’s seat before he could say anything. He quietly and carefully climbed into the front passenger seat, and then asked with a smirk, “How are you going to start the car?”

“*Bokg*,” she exclaimed. She took the crank off its inside hook, climbed down from her seat, and went to the front of the car. She inserted the crank and cranked two revolutions; after a pause, she cranked another two; quickly tiring, she tried another revolution. Finally, breathing hard, she yelled, “Are the damn throttle and spark advanced?”

“No. You should have looked.”

“Well, did you adjust them now, Hadad?”

“Yes.”

Muttering, “The drip-drip-drip water torture is too good for him,” she again cranked. The Buick’s engine almost caught several times, but with only a half-hearted shake and a rattle.

“Have you adjusted the spark lever?” she hollered.

“No. Now I have.”

“Did you do that on purpose?” she roared, the crank in her hand trembling from her desire to throw it at him.

“Grow up, Carla. I cannot help it if you do not have the muscle to start a car.”

No, I am going to boil him in oil. Slowly. Very slowly. A half-a-degree increase per minute, she snarled to herself. Face hot with rage, knuckles white on the crank, she jerked the crank another revolution, jolting the Buick and Hadad; then the engine caught with its usual clanking, shaking, and stench, and settled down when Hadad adjusted the controls.

Her lips a thin line, Carla clambered back up into the driver’s seat. Her arms felt ready to fall off.

Hadad did not even try to hide his smirk. “Have you forgotten? The Buick might have been seen at the Fairfax Hotel by Joy or John, and these automobiles are not yet common here.”

“I know, Hadad,” she barked.

“We should just leave it on the street somewhere,” he said. “While you were busy doing something else, I used the telephone to ask an op-

erator about the number of companies selling new cars. One of the numbers she gave me was Hughson & Merton. I called them and found out that they have the franchise for the Ford, and have just gotten in the new Ford Model K. I told them I will be coming in to buy one.”

She pushed the low speed pedal, and as they got moving, she flipped the clutch and engaged the planetary transmission. When the Buick settled down to fifteen miles per hour, she glanced at Hadad and responded, “Wow, Hadad. You did that all by yourself.” She kept her grin to herself.

He sat up, pushed the sombrero higher on his forehead with his finger, and looked down his nose at her. “Somebody has to be in charge,” he informed her.

Hadad

Carla drove the Buick past Hughson & Merton on Golden Gate Avenue and parked about half a mile beyond, on a dead end street. As they walked back to the dealer, they stayed in the shadows and kept their faces averted from passersby. An hour later, they owned a new, royal blue, six cylinder, forty horsepower Ford Model K with top and gas lamps, for \$3,200.

Hadad beat Carla to the driver’s seat, and sat there wearing a pleased grin at his little victory. As their salesman cranked up the car, Carla leaned over to look at the throttle and spark levers. Hadad grinned again—he had properly adjusted them. The Ford started easily with one rotation of the new engine, and the exhaust blew a perfect smoke ring before idling.

Hadad used two hands to shift the gear while trying to ignore the pain in his wrist. He drove in low gear the short distance to where they had parked the Buick. They transferred everything they had in the Buick into the Ford, making sure they left nothing behind.

Seated again in the Ford, Carla double-checked the city map for the location of Joy and John’s warehouse, as Hadad remembered it. She looked up at him. “You said 8th and Cooper, right?”

Hadad nodded.

“There is no 8th and Cooper. You must mean 8 Cooper.”

Hadad nodded.

When they drove off Jackson onto Cooper, they found it was a dead end dirt alley full of stinking tin garbage cans and litter from the nearby buildings undergoing reconstruction after the earthquake. There was no

number 8. Hadad stopped the car at the end of the alley and held his throbbing wrist in one hand. He stared down at it while Carla glowered at him.

Then he brightened. "Of course! I remember it now. It is 8 Hooker."

Frowning, Carla found the street in the index and located it on the map. "Looks like another dead end alley," she observed. "You sure?"

"Of course."

When they got there, the alley was cleaner than Cooper, but again there was no number 8. Hadad parked and again held his bad wrist, and stared out the side of the Ford at a red brick wall. "I know I am close," he insisted. "The address must be something like what I said."

Carla shook her head, wrinkled her nose, and refused to look at Hadad. She unfolded her map and ran her finger slowly down the index, occasionally checking a street name against the map.

Hadad shrugged his shoulders and told the brick wall, "Okay, I will go back to the damn ban—"

"Maybe this is it," Carla said. She frowned and shook her head, then cleared her throat. "Ah, there is an intersection of 8th and Hooper Streets."

"That is it!" Hadad exclaimed, waving his good arm. "I am sure. I would bet my life on it."

Carla kept her eyes on the map. "Yes, well, we will see. And do not bet your life. By now you would not have survived even a cat's nine lives." She sighed. "Okay. Start driving. I have my finger on the location and will direct you. Again." Then, apparently obeying some strange urge Hadad did not understand, she reached over and pushed his sombrero down to his eyebrows. And smiled.

What a strange woman, he thought, seeing her smile. He gave her a small grin in return. He left his sombrero as it was, although he had to tilt his head back to see the road.

A half-hour later, they reached the intersection of 8th and Hooper. It was occupied by a large warehouse.

Hadad jubilantly slammed his left hand on the steering wheel. "There it is! That is it! God is great."

Face brightened by a broad smile, Carla nodded.

Hadad drove southeast past the warehouse. A large cab-over Manhattan truck was parked at the warehouse loading door. Carla suddenly whooped, "We have them, Hadad," and pointed at the backs of two men just going inside.

Well past the warehouse, Hadad angled right onto Wisconsin Street and parked. He left the engine running. “Now,” he said, leaning back in his seat with his head tipped high, “I will plan our moves. I took a good look at the warehouse as I drove by. I could see only one other entrance besides the loading doors, which is a side door next to it. Take the OT-15 and hide it under your dress—”

“Hadad, do you see how tight this dress is? I could not hide a der-ringer.”

“Okay, hide it wherever you can. I will hide mine under my coat. First we have to reload the magazines.”

As they did so, Hadad chortled. “They must be loading things onto the truck to hide elsewhere. They will not be expecting us,” he said as they clicked in the magazines. He looked at Carla. “Did you see the side door?”

“Yes.” She bit off the word as if wanting to say more.

Hadad suspected it would have been laden with unwarranted sarcasm anyway, and chose to ignore her sour look. “Very good,” he said, grinning with gleeful anticipation. “Now, I am going to drive up to the loading doors. I will enter through those, ready to shoot. At the same time, you go in through the other door. Do not show your OT-15 until you spot where they are. They do not know what we look like, so just walk toward them as though you belong there, and when you are within automatic fire range, let them have it. I will be doing the same thing from a different angle. One of us should get them.”

“What about the others in there?”

Hadad shook his head. “I do not want to kill anyone unnecessarily, but if they get in the way, I cannot help it. We must kill Joy and John. After all, we cannot carry on our own mission without killing them.”

He put his left hand on her shoulder and said, “Good luck, Carla. I do not want anything to happen to you.”

Carla’s eyes opened wide, and her mouth fell open. She answered reflexively, “Same to you, Hadad.”

Hadad shifted the Ford into low gear with two hands, removed his left to push the throttle lever forward, and started turning the steering wheel to make a U-turn and drive back to the warehouse. Nothing happened. The engine had stopped.

He pulled the crank away from the sidewall and was about to get out of the Ford when Carla jumped from her side, ran around the front of the car, and held out her hand for the crank. Halfway out of the Ford, he stopped and looked into her eyes. Her mouth was set in a firm line. He nodded and handed the crank to her.

She made sure the throttle and spark levers were set properly, inserted the crank, and tried to crank the motor into starting. The engine backfired and kicked back the crank. Hadad leaned forward, concerned that she had forgotten not to hold the crank with her thumbs, but she bent to try another crank, uninjured. There was a sputter, a *put-put* or so, and nothing else. Panting, she tried again. Nothing more. She straightened, holding her back.

Muttering in Turkmen, Hadad slowly climbed from the driver's seat, removed the lid of the gas tank situated under the seat, and pulled out the gas stick. He wiped it on his suit trousers, dipped it back into the tank, and withdrew it. "*Bokg*," he exclaimed to Carla, who was watching him. "That *Bokshil* dealer did not put any gas in it." He threw the stick on the street and bellowed, "Walk. We will goddam walk."

Carla stared at him, the crank still hanging from her hand.

He calmed down. "Let's walk now. I will drive their truck back here after we kill them."

Carla threw the crank into the Ford while Hadad retrieved the OT-15s and handed Carla's to her. As he tucked his gun under his coat, he thought, *We got them. In an hour, we can concentrate on just our mission.* His heart beat faster and his body tingled as he realized, *In an hour, I will have killed the most famous lovers in history. Me.*

Hadad turned to walk across the street. In his rapture, he forgot that Americans drove on the right side of the road. He automatically looked the wrong way.

"Watch out!" Carla and the driver of a farm wagon shrieked simultaneously.

Hadad walked into the side of a horse. It whinnied with fright and reared up on its hind legs to strike out with its front hoofs at the attacking animal its blinders hid. Hadad bounced backwards into Carla, then sideways onto the ground, his sombrero flying. He had been holding the OT-15 under his coat with his left hand, finger on the trigger. When the stock of the gun hit the street, the sudden jar caused him to pull the trigger.

A stream of bullets drilled the horse in the chest and side. With a shudder that ran the length of its body and a shrill scream, the horse collapsed on its side, dead. Its falling weight twisted the wagon tongue to which it was hitched, flipping the wagon on its side, and throwing three squealing pigs onto the street. The 250-pound animals heaved themselves to their feet and tried to escape these crazy humans with all the speed their pumping legs could give them.

Hadad saw none of this. His mind filled with shock and pain as the odd angle of the gun's recoil and its jolt against the street twisted his trigger finger back, dislocating and breaking it. He instinctively looked down at the injury and gripped his painfully throbbing left hand with his right, hardly conscious of the added pain in his right wrist—he had instinctively used that hand to break his fall.

Agony made his eyes water and his mouth gape wide. He gasped air in short breaths. He was barely able to see, let alone register in his mind, the grunting and snorting pigs lumbering past him. He did see through his watery eyes the driver and his helper rising from the street where they had jumped. The pair rushed toward him.

“What the fuck are you doing, you fucking Jap?” the driver screamed at him. “You idiot. You shot my Lucy.”

Hadad tried to get up, but the driver, a heavysset, bearded young man in heavy woolen work pants, suspenders, and a straw hat, kicked him in the side and knocked him over again. Red-faced and scowling, he picked up Hadad's OT-15 from the street where its recoil had thrown it, gripped it by the barrel, and took two big steps over to the Ford. He wound up like a Major League batter and swung the OT-15 twice at the Ford's dashboard. Hadad heard the glass over the instruments breaking. Just warming up, the driver turned from the dented dashboard to batter the motor cover and the canvas top and its struts until the OT-15's stock broke in two. He threw them into the Ford.

Not even winded, he bounded back to Hadad, who had gingerly stood and was holding his left hand in his right, with his injured finger sticking out. The farmer wrapped one muscular hand in Hadad's coat and lifted Hadad's face up to his. Hadad's agony had diminished to pulsing pain, but now he screamed in renewed agony. Eye to eye, the driver spit into Hadad's face, “You killed Lucy, my fucking horse.”

“Yeough!” Hadad yelped, still hanging from the driver's large fist, still holding his right hand in his left. “My finger is broken. Be careful.”

“Fuck your finger—you owe me,” the driver growled.

Carla had just moved into an offensive stance facing the driver, her fists ready, when Hadad cried, “I will pay you. Let me go, damn it.”

The driver tightened his hold on Hadad instead. “You better have \$300, or I'm going to flatten your fucking face,” he bellowed, spewing spit. The driver's helper stepped close behind Hadad to back up the threat.

Carla still held her position a few feet away, obviously ready to take care of both men, if necessary. Even with a broken finger and bruised wrist, Hadad felt he could handle these two in spite of the pain,

but he also was aware of the crowd that was gathering—a truck and several horse-drawn wagons and carts had stopped in the street to see what was going on, and pedestrians were collecting. He saw Carla get ready to attack. She was looking at him as though she had a peeled lemon stuck in her mouth. He hollered at her, “Give him the money, Carla.”

Carla relaxed, unfisted her hands, and brushed the dirt off her dress. She shook and rubbed her holster purse to knock the dirt off it, and stomped a few steps to pick up her hat. She straightened out the stacked lace and fluffed up the artificial flower buds, then carefully put it on her head, making sure it was straight.

“Damn it, Carla, hurry up,” Hadad hollered as the farmer adjusted his tight grip on Hadad’s coat.

Apparently now satisfied with her hat, she stood straight, her head held high and her chin out. She gave Hadad an “I will kill you later” look, then slowly reached into her holster purse. Her hand paused briefly at some bulky object, then moved past and pulled out her roll of bills.

When the driver saw the money, he loosened his grip on Hadad. Spraying more spittle in Hadad’s face, he yelled, “I forgot the fucking pigs. You owe me \$400.”

As Carla ambled the few steps to the farmer, Hadad misinterpreted her face. “Do not do anything, Carla,” he warned. “Just give him the money.”

Carla scowled. “What did you think I was going to do? I’m saving it for you.” She took out five one hundred-dollar bills and handed them to the farmer when he released Hadad.

The farmer’s eyes grew large as he counted the money. His mouth sagged and he stood still for a moment, simply holding the money. Then he turned and motioned to his helper to unhitch the dead horse from the wagon. He turned and gave Hadad a final foul look, shoved the money deep into his pants pocket, and ran down the street after the pigs.

Hadad’s broken, dislocated finger now just ached. He picked up the battered OT-15 magazine and tossed it into the Ford with the other pieces, then turned to Carla. He could feel the blood surging into his face. “Where’s your OT?” he growled. “Let me have it.”

Carla looked at him, her hand on her hip, and told him through her teeth, “I would like nothing more.” She pointed to her OT-15. It was stuck barrel first in the dirt and horse manure alongside the street, where it had fallen when he fell into her.

Hadad put out his right hand. Carla hesitated, then picked up the gun and handed it to him. Grimacing at the renewed pain in his right wrist, he turned the weapon around with one hand, looked at the dirty barrel, and then tried to look down it. "It is plugged with dirt."

He cursed for several moments in Turkmen and rolled his eyes upward as though asking God, "Why me?" Finally he tossed the weapon into the Ford and hissed, "Come on. We still have our Stahls. They are not going to escape."

Hadad picked up his sombrero, put it on with a flourish, and tilted it forward to almost cover his eyes. With two sharp nods, he motioned Carla to follow him, and walked around the dead horse.

Carla advised, "Look both ways, Hadad."

He ignored her, and looked both ways.

Traffic had resumed, albeit slowly, as people still rubbernecked over the dead horse and upset wagon in the street. When there was a long break in traffic, Hadad, still cradling his left hand in his right, stalked across the street. When he stood safely on the boardwalk, he waited for Carla to hurry across.

She looked him over. "You're a mess."

Hadad stood with his back to the street. "I do not care what I look like as long as we get them," he said, and added gruffly, "With my busted finger, I cannot get my gun out of my holster, and I cannot turn my wrist to take it out with my right. Reach into my holster and get it for me."

Carla scowled at him for a long moment. She put her hand on her hip. "Say please," she demanded. Then she seemed to feel remorse for what he had gone through. Opening her hand to him, she softly said, "Let me see your left hand."

He released the throbbing finger from his right hand and held his hand out to her. She took it gently in hers and studied the finger. It was bent back on itself at a right angle, with the fingertip beyond the last digit hanging sideways. She sighed. "We need to go to our medical capsule so that I can fix it. But you have to pack it in ice first to take the swelling down."

"No. Screw it. We have to get those two. Take my gun out of its holster . . . please."

Carla released his hand and reached into his suit coat and took his Stahl from his shoulder holster. She put it in his right hand. "Can you shoot with that bruised wrist?"

"I'll try to get close enough so that I can't miss. You have your Stahl, right?"

“Yes.”

“Here we go,” he said, holding his gun under his coat and starting to walk toward the warehouse.

As they approached the building, Hadad was praying to God that the truck was still there, with everyone inside. When he saw the truck and nobody around it, he told Carla with a grin, “I did not think they could hear the shots from inside the building, not this far away.” Almost skipping along the boardwalk, he added, “We got them.”

Calming his happy feet, Hadad did his best to look casual as he sauntered up to the wall next to the loading entrance. When Carla got into position next to him, he gave her a final toothful smile. He pointed to the entrance and whispered, “Ready?”

When she nodded, he entered the warehouse nonchalantly, still holding the gun hidden under his coat. Carla was right behind him. *I cannot believe this*, he thought. *It is the end for them, and the beginning for us. No way can they escape!*

Inside, Hadad kept watch on Carla out of the corner of his eye so that they would attack as a team. Like her, he tried to look as though they had important business there, and walked straight toward the center of the warehouse. He took a quick glance around to see what everyone was doing. Several men were working on some boxes close to the loading doors. On the other side of the warehouse, a man and woman stood by a table, their attention focused on a paper lying on its surface. Their backs were toward the doors; they had not seen Carla and Hadad enter.

Carla and Hadad exchanged looks and Hadad nodded toward the man and woman. They walked briskly toward the pair. Carla put her hand in her purse as Hadad tightened his grip on his Stahl. Even if Hadad’s wrist had erupted in agony, he would not have felt it. Or anything else. He heard nothing. He smelled nothing. He saw nothing but those two who would soon be dead.

We have them. We have them, Hadad thought. *God is great.*

Chapter 11

Mid-Afternoon, Friday

Martha Clark

Martha thought about it for a moment, feeling the wrinkles deepening across her forehead, and then drew another line one third of the way down the right side of the paper. “I think the second partition should go about here,” she said to Keith, the stocky, plainly dressed man standing next to her.

He looked at the drawing for a moment and suggested, “Then my desk should go somewhere around here.” He drew a small box at the appropriate point on the paper.

At that moment, Martha heard a board squeak behind her. She turned around to see a man and woman approaching. Keith also turned to see who was there. “Hello,” she said, not recognizing them. “You must be the volunteers.”

The man had his hand inside his suit coat; the woman’s was thrust into her purse. They both stopped dead, their eyes wide. Martha and Keith looked at them, eyebrows raised. Finally the man jerked his eyes from Martha to Keith and back to Martha, then looked at the woman with him and seemed to squeak something to her. Martha could not catch the words.

The strange woman stared at Keith, spread the fingers of her free hand across her chest, and moaned something to the man.

Martha tried to make sense out of their expressions. Unable to hear what they said, she decided Orientals were strange anyway, and the two must be greeting her. She nodded her head at them, bouncing her short-cut, graying red hair around her lined face, smiled, and walked over to them with her hands out. “Hello. My name is Martha Clark. And this is my assistant, Keith Tyson. I’m glad that Jimmy sent you over to help us. We have a lot to do.”

Then she looked closely at both of them. “Oh, you poor things. Did someone feed you before sending you here? We have some food in the truck, if you’re hungry.”

His right hand still stuck in his suit coat, the man waved dismissal of the idea with his left hand.

Martha put her hand to her mouth and exclaimed, “Oh my good-

ness. You broke your finger. Did you do that here? I'm terribly sorry. We didn't mean to work you so hard. Poor man. Let me look at it. I was a nurse in the war against Spain, and know what to do. Are you injured elsewhere? Why are you holding your hand inside your coat like that? Is it injured too?"

Looking bewildered, the man looked at the equally confused-looking woman and exclaimed loud enough for Martha to hear something in a foreign language. He turned to leave. The woman followed.

"My dear," Martha said, watching them rapidly walk out of the building, "those poor people are in need of help. Did I insult them or something, Keith?"

Keith shook his head. "I don't know what's the matter with them. They come in to help, you offer food, the fellow has a broken finger you offer to treat, and they leave in a huff. I don't understand these Chinamen."

Carla

Hadad and Carla rushed out the loading doors and over to the truck, which was angled backwards to the loading doors, with the cab out of sight of those inside. The truck's four cylinders had been left idling, and as Hadad and Carla approached the cab, they could hear the engine cover chattering. Hadad hurried to climb into the driver's seat, beating Carla to it. Shrugging her shoulders, knowing what had to happen, she scampered around the front of the truck and clambered into the passenger seat.

Hadad just sat grimacing, staring down at the steering wheel, thumping his thigh with his right fist, seeming not to feel the pain of his badly bruised wrist.

"Hadad! Come out of it. We have to go," Carla yelled, poking his side.

"*Bokg. Bokg,*" he swore in Turkmen. "How did they do that?"

Carla needed no explanation as to his meaning.

Hadad shook his head and glared around the cab as though wondering how he got there. He gazed down at the gearshift and cupped his broken finger in his right hand. "*Bokg,*" he swore again. "Can you drive this?" he asked Carla, his voice seeming to emerge lifeless from his sunken chest.

She has waited for this. "Why not? Let me over there."

As they shimmied across each other, Hadad yelled, "Be careful, damn it," when she bumped his wrist.

Giving in to her disappointment over their failure, she screeched back, “Keep your damn wrist out of the way and it will not get hurt!” She did not even try to get comfortable in the seat before snapping, “How many gears does this stupid truck have?”

“Oh no,” Hadad groaned, “you do not know how to drive this?”

She put both hands in her lap, steepled her fingers, closed her eyes, and took two deep breaths. Calmer, she opened her eyes and studied the levers on the steering column, the foot pedals, and the dashboard. Fortunately, in front of the gearshift there was a little diagram of the gearshift locations for the truck’s three speeds. “I can drive this for sure,” she answered.

Since the truck was backed into the loading area, she needed only to drive forward. With the gears presently in neutral, she inched the throttle forward, stepped on the odd cone-shaped pedal that must be the clutch, and pulled the gearshift straight toward her into low gear. The truck bucked and almost stalled when she released the clutch. Quickly, she shifted into neutral, fingered the throttle back a little, then shifted back to low gear with two hands. With several teeth-rattling jerks, she finally got the truck turning down the warehouse alley just as two men emerged from the warehouse.

“Stop!” they shouted, running after the truck.

“Go, Carla. Go. Go,” Hadad roared.

She pushed the throttle up, flipped the spark lever forward, and held on as the massive seven and a half-ton truck rolled toward the street. She tried to turn into the southbound right lane of 8th Street, crossing the northbound lane to do so, but the street was too narrow for the truck’s large turning radius so that she drove over the boardwalk on the opposite side, tearing it up with the truck’s weight and coming off it onto the street still in a turn. Before Carla could reverse the steering wheel and straighten out the truck, it had crossed into the northbound lane and headed for an oncoming milk wagon.

Hadad screamed, “Watch out!” as the milk wagon driver jerked his horse across lanes. The truck’s fender collided with the rear wheel of the wagon, knocking it off, and its axle dug into the street. The horse suddenly panicked, jerking the wagon onto its side. Milk bottles flew onto the street, spraying milk and broken glass in all directions.

Two horses pulling a carriage bucked at the disaster at their feet and tried to escape, wrenching the carriage from one side of the street to the other as its driver hauled back as much as he could on the reins to stop them; two frightened men stuck their heads out of the carriage windows, while another man had its door half open, ready to jump.

The street turned dirty white as milk continued to pour from broken glass milk bottles. Unbroken bottles of various sizes rolled in different directions, causing more pandemonium among horse riders, bicyclists, and cart and wagon drivers, all of whom were already doing their best to avoid the wild horses, the skittering milk truck, and the careening carriage.

Carla clashed gears loudly, smelling gasoline and hot grease as she forcibly shifted into second gear by pushing the shift with her foot. *Ah, got it*, she thought, but when she looked up from the gearshift, she was still in the wrong lane and headed for a large farm wagon pulled by two mules. She pulled hard on the heavy steering wheel, and the truck lumbered into the right lane, just missing the mules.

Terrorized by the monstrous shape that had almost hit them, they reared up, cried frightfully, and turned and headed for the lane next to the warehouse entrance, pulling the wagon behind them. The wagon driver was half-standing, heaving back on the reins as the mules almost trampled the two men who had run into the street after the truck; the mules veered off at an angle at the last moment to avoid them, and broke free from the wagon. It freewheeled into a cart loaded with chickens, whose driver had been meticulously avoiding the milk bottles. The much smaller cart overturned, throwing its caged chickens into the street amidst a cacophony of loud screeches and screaming cackles. Some of the cages broke open, and scared chickens started running all over the street, adding to the awful confusion.

Finally in the right lane and in control, Carla shifted into the final third gear. She leaned back and relaxed her grip on the steering wheel, allowing blood to again flow to her white knuckles. "I told you I could drive this," she informed the windshield.

Seconds later she added, "There it is," and pointed at their damaged Ford along Wisconsin Street. "But we can't stop. Those men chasing us will catch up."

Hadad held the corner of his coat around his left hand and tried to cushion his oddly angled, dislocated finger against the cab's bouncing and jerking. Every line and corner of his face was turned down, even the corners of his eyes, as he replied in a monotone Carla could barely hear above the roar of the truck, "We will come back late tonight with a can of gas." He kicked his foot into the side of the cab, again and again.

In a flat tone, Carla counseled, "Be careful you do not injure your foot, also."



Hadad's injured finger was easy to fix. First, Carla packed the hand in ice chipped from a twenty-five pound block she had bought. When the wrapped ice had almost frozen Hadad's hand fifteen minutes later, she gave him a local anesthetic from the modern medical kit they kept in their room. When she was sure that his hand was numbed, she asked him to sit on the edge of the bed, and then told him, "Put your right arm straight out."

He did so, clearly trying to look blasé.

Carefully avoiding the broken digit, Carla firmly gripped his dislocated finger beneath the knuckle, put her foot on his chest, and jerked the knuckle back into place.

"Yeohhhh!" He pulled his straightened finger out of her hand. "I thought you deadened it."

Irritated, she replied, "No, I left it alive enough to purposely cause you pain."

Next, she put a small splint on the broken fingertip and wrapped a bandage around the splint and finger just tight enough to hold the splint in place. She again packed his hand in ice to keep down the swelling, and did the same for his swollen and purple right wrist.

Then she took a half-step back, pushed her hand through her loose hair, and told him, "I don't know how you could walk into the side of a horse, and then end up shooting it." Her brows shot up and her eyes widened in sudden realization. "You could have shot *me*."

Hadad took back his ice-packed right wrist and used that hand to hold his left. He glared up at her as she stood over him. She glared back. Then his face softened and he said lamely, "I am sorry, Carla. I do not want anything to happen to you." On an upbeat note, he finished, "You are my partner."

She looked at him coldly and sat down in the wooden chair near the bed. She avoided touching him with her knees. "Yes," she said sarcastically, "you do not want to lose a . . . partner, do you." She stared at him, waiting for a response.

Hadad seemed not to hear her. He looked thoughtful for a few minutes, then he said, "We have to pick up our Ford, or at least see whether it still runs. We have to get our weapons. And then dump the truck."

"Whatever." Carla waved her hand as though swatting at flies. Thinking, *He is hopeless*, she changed the subject. "I am hungry, but I am not going to eat with you until you take a bath. You stink. And we have to get out of these dirty clothes. I am glad that they have a side entrance to this hotel. They would have never let us in through the

lobby, the way we look. And it is a good thing this resort has a bathtub, even if it is the only one, and it has no hot running water. We should be even more grateful it is on this floor.”

“I am paying enough for it.”

“*We* are paying enough for it.”

“Okay, Carla. You are so prickly. What is the matter with you, anyway?”

She refused to answer.

No one else in the Resort seemed to use the nickel and white enamel-plated iron bathtub; it seemed still clean from the last time Carla and Hadad had used it and she had scrubbed it, although in places where the enamel had worn off, it was hard to tell. This time Carla bathed first.

When she was through, she unbandaged Hadad, removed the half-melted ice chips so they would not freeze his skin, and rebandaged his finger. While Carla sat on an upside-down bucket nearby to make sure nothing happened to him—again—Hadad lowered himself slowly into the foot of cold water.

“*Bokg*, this water is cold,” he whined, his teeth almost chattering.

Carla smirked. “Remember our Mongol ancestors, in whom you take such great pride. If they ever washed themselves, it was in ice water, I am sure.”

Finally sitting in the bathtub, Hadad started lathering himself with the witch hazel soap supplied by the Resort. After a few moments, he called to Carla, “I am having a hard time reaching part of me with this bad wrist.”

Carla sighed. *Yes, my master.* “Stand up,” she commanded.

When he stood in the bathwater, she started to wash him. As she worked around his thigh, his erection seemed to jump out of the soapy tangle of black pubic hairs. She stood back, looked at his pleased expression, and shook her head. She flicked his erection with her fingertips. It disappeared back into the soap bubbles at nearly the speed of light.

“Hey, what’s the matter with you? That hurt.”

“Life’s hard,” she replied acidly, and resumed her washing.

When she was done, she pulled the plug and, after the tub emptied, she grinned as she slowly poured several buckets of cold water over Hadad to rinse away the dirty bath water. When he stepped out of the tub, she dried him with a towel, warning him, “If that thing comes up again, I am going to take my knife to it.”

“But we often screw after a bath.”

“You screw. I usually provide the asshole.”

His eyes downcast, he protested in a low, almost pleading voice, “I do not know what has gotten into you, Carla. You have never been like this before.”

She looked at his sagging shoulders, his purple wrist, his swollen left knuckle, and his broken finger, and she started to melt. In seconds, her lower lip trembled, and a tear rolled from her eye. She turned away and waved a hand in dismissal. Speaking to the room, she said softly, “Forget it, Hadad. I am tired. Let us put on clean clothes and get something to eat. I am hungry.”

At Carla’s insistence, they again tried to use cosmetics to look less Asian before leaving their room. On the way to the restaurant, Carla put her hand through Hadad’s arm and tried to fight her depression. *Hadad is Hadad. I knew that from the start. We have a mission. And we will succeed in ridding the world of that pair, and then the universe will be ours—Hadad’s and mine. Then he will see me for the woman I am. Then it all will be worth it.*

They went to the Resort’s restaurant to eat. During the meal, Hadad tried to discuss what to do next about John and Joy. “They clearly have moved out of their warehouse and must have left their hotel permanently. There is still the Tor Import and Export Company that they will set up. However, since they know somebody is after them, they may change its name. To carry out their mission, they have to create some company that will enable them to set up foreign offices or subsidiaries. Right?”

Still in a pout she couldn’t shake, Carla answered, “I guess so . . . partner.”

He seemed oblivious to her mood. He poked his knife into the rare top sirloin on his plate and watched the blood ooze out as he continued. “We have two choices. One is to wait the two years until they carry out their first intervention in Mexico. We know whom they will see, and in what order. We should then be able to ambush them.

“Or there is the second choice.” He almost looked at Carla directly. “We know several things that can help us. One is that they had to get a truck to move everything out of their warehouse so fast. Another is that they must set up their company store sometime soon, and it has to be oriented to foreign trade. And John is connected more than at the hip to that beautiful Oriental doll Joy, which certainly should attract attention.”

“Oh boy,” Carla responded in a monotone, “you must have a thrilling plan.”

“Is something still bothering you, Carla?”

“No, nothing.”

“Good. I have a plan.”

Chapter 12

Late Afternoon, Friday

John

“Is this it?” Hands asked as he brought the five-ton Sampson truck to a stop in front of an apartment building.

“It looks like it,” John said. “It’s supposed to be three stories with two apartments to a floor, but I don’t see the address. Let me out and I’ll check.” He got out of the cab, opened the entrance gate, and looked around. The building was so new that there was only a small cardboard sign nailed to a wooden post. Written in pen, the address had been smeared by rain, but it was still legible. “Back it in here,” John yelled to Hands, motioning to the driveway next to the building that led to a back entrance and yard.

The apartment building was box shaped, built out of cement blocks, with a flat tarred roof and a front and a rear entrance. No porches or balconies. Each apartment had two bedrooms, a living room and dining room, a kitchen, and what was becoming customary in homes, a separate bathroom with toilet, wash sink, and enamel-plated steel bathtub. A basement contained the newly marketed gas hot water heater and a storage cage for each apartment. A large area in the basement had been set aside for recreational activities and parties.

John hadn’t believed his luck when he saw the for sale advertisement in *The San Francisco Courier*. He had immediately phoned the real estate agent about it, liked what he heard, and told him he would be there later in the day to buy it. After loading the truck with the time capsules, they had driven to the agent’s office and bought the apartment on the spot for \$53,000— a little more than one million in 2002 dollars. A businessman had built it so that his family, the families of his children, and other relatives could all live in the same building as an extended family. But after the earthquake and fire, they wanted to escape San Francisco, and had moved to Seattle.

The building was on Haight Street, and far enough away from adjacent property to enable John to build a good security system. Moreover, because the previous owner had been about to move in before the earthquake, it was already equipped with all utilities. All John had to do

was ask the real estate agent to have the electricity and water turned on, and the telephones connected—all of which would be done by the next day, thanks to the ten dollar “tip” he’d offered the agent.

Hands backed up the truck to the rear of the building so they could unload the time capsules, one of which, unbeknownst to the guys, was actually a time machine. Hands had rented the truck from Central Builders for two days. Its most important feature was the chain hoist that enabled them to lift the capsules on and off the truck. With the aid of a wheeled mover’s pallet they’d borrowed from the builders, they’d easily move the capsules into the basement.

“Isn’t money wonderful?” Sal had asked John rhetorically when the three guys and Jy-ying showed up at the warehouse with the truck. “The Central Builders people said no when we asked to rent their truck, and kept staring at Miss Khoo. Hands offered fifty-dollars of the money you gave him for two days’ use, with the mover’s pallet thrown in. The foreman didn’t even crack a smile when he said, ‘Yes, why didn’t you say so?’”

The group entered the apartment building and looked around. It had the fresh smell of a newly constructed building—of mortar, concrete, new wood, and fresh paint. Joy wiggled her nose and sniffed. “We’re going to have to burn incense to get rid of that smell. Even here, there is still a slightly burnt wood smell from the great fire, even though that was way back in April. It’s competing with that awful street stench.”

Once they’d all had a look at the ground floor apartments, John told them, “Joy and I will take the two apartments on the third floor.” He turned to Jy-ying, who had been strangely silent, and asked her, “Would you like one of the second floor apartments? Free, as part of your job?”

Joy looked startled for a moment, then unconsciously swallowed, and clasped and unclasped her holster purse.

Jy-ying answered, “You are too kind. Yes, thank you. I cannot believe how lucky I was when I happened to be on the street to aid you when you were about to be attacked.”

“Okay,” John said, looking from one to another of the three guys. “That leaves three apartments. Agree among yourselves who gets which one—also for free, of course. This is now our company building, and as our guards, you pay no rent.”

“Is Miss Khoo a guard?” Sal asked, grinning.

Jy-ying smiled, looked from one to the other, and told them, “Please, all of you. Call me Jy-ying.” She looked at Joy, and then let

her eyes linger on John. “Like Joy, I know martial arts and guns, and have my own. I will be happy to be a guard, among my other dut—jobs.”

John glanced at Joy and saw her frown. He hesitated, but then quickly nodded at Jy-ying and pointed out, “You already have acted as our guard, twice.”

John turned to smile at the guys, wagging his finger at them. “Now, you must live by company rules. All lights out at 10 p.m., and no visitors after that time. And no unchaperoned women in your closed apartments—if they’re unchaperoned, the apartment door must be open. Yes, I know what you’re going to ask. Two or three or more women are okay, since they will be chaperoning each other.”

They gaped at him. Sal was first to break the silence. “That goes for Jy-ying?”

“Yes, no unchaperoned women in her room, either.” John fought and lost the battle; he broke down and convulsed with laughter.

Joy punched him in the shoulder. “You’re a cruel man,” she said, giggling.

When the guys realized John was joking, they chuckled. Dolphy, his face slightly flushed, said, “It wouldn’t have been too bad. I like especially the last part about women chaperoning each other.”

Sal had to add, “And you know, that rule about lights out would have given me an excuse to turn out the lights. Boss said nothing about having to be alone then.”

Joy motioned to Sal and observed with a wide smile, “There is always someone who will take advantage of the small print. John, you should think of making Sal your official contact man when you want to break a contract.”

Sal bowed, and Dolphy patted him on the back.

John’s eyes touched on Jy-ying as he turned away. She seemed distracted, looking sidelong at John with half-lidded eyes instead of sharing in the laughter.

With waves to the others, Joy and John headed up the stairs with their bags and suitcases. They paused at the top of the third floor stairs. The door to one apartment was on their immediate left, and the door to the other apartment was farther down the hallway, on the right. John pointed to that door and told Joy in a matter-of-fact tone, “You get the end apartment. I’ll take the one next to the stairs.”

Joy put down what she was carrying, put her hands on her hips, and stared at him with arched eyebrows, her lips in a slight pout and her

head at what John had learned was a dangerous angle. "Oh no, you don't. I'm going to guard this hallway, and I have to be next to the stairs to do that."

"Is that right?" John said, putting down his luggage. He put both hands on his hips, leaned toward her, and tried to imitate the tilt of her head and her expression. "Jy-ying is on the lower floor to guard us."

Oops. John immediately regretted saying that as Joy's eyes narrowed. Thinking fast, he looked down the hallway, pointed, and exclaimed, "Who's that?"

Joy turned to look, and John quickly lifted all 125 pounds of her off her feet. Holding her in his arms, he strode down the hallway.

With a scowl, she blurted, "John, what do you think you—" Then she must have realized what he was doing. She put her arm around his neck as he opened the end apartment's door with one hand and carried her across the threshold.

"Hmmm," she murmured, "you know how to soften me up. This is so romantic. You know, this is our first, really *our* first, home. I forgot. The other apartment is for appearances." She caressed his cheek with the backs of her fingers and purred, "I love you, my dearest." Then she looked at the empty apartment. "But where's the bed?"

John kicked the door closed and looked around at the bare walls. He stood Joy up, and said huskily, "I love you more than anything, baby. Don't you dare move."

He undressed and, ignoring the chilly air, put his armor and holstered .45 aside and laid out his clothes on the dusty floor underneath the living room window. She let down her hair and tossed the pins against the wall. Bending over, she shook her hair out, and ran her hands through it until it fell around her in a lush black curtain. She put her armor and weapons on top of his armor, and spread her clothes on top of his. Brushing her hair back from her head and body with a graceful motion so feminine and sexy it charged John with sexual heat, she lay down on top of their clothes.

About a half-hour later, John caressed the end of her nose with his index finger and said, "Now we've suitably inaugurated our first home."

Her smile was radiant, her cheeks flushed. "You surely know how to deal with my objections."

John put on a knowing smile. "Always."

He got up and put on his baggy shorts, then cracked open the apartment door and looked out to make sure none of the guys had come upstairs for some reason. He squeezed through the door, crept down the hall, and brought their bags and suitcases back into the end apartment.

John donned his comfortable, at-home denim jeans and Norwegian wool pullover sweater, and waited while Joy dressed.

“I miss these clothes,” she said with a smile as she gracefully jiggled up and down to slide her favorite pair of tight denims over her white cotton panties. She wiggled her bottom and shook her bare breasts with unconscious sexuality.

John just stood near the window, mesmerized by the soft play of light on her body as she dressed. *I've got to grip this image*, he told himself, *and secure it in a special place in my memory. I've got to pull this image out when I'm scared, when I'm down on her, when I wonder about accepting this mission.*

Finally in her denims, Joy put on her fitted armor and over that, what had been her inevitable gray sweatshirt in the Old Universe. She pulled her blue and white Nike jogging shoes out of her suitcase and put them on. Humming to herself, she pulled her hair tightly back and tied it in a ponytail. Suddenly she stopped and looked from under her lashes at John. “Did you forget, my man?”

That broke his trance. “What?”

“Your armor. You forgot to put it on, didn't you?”

He tried to cover his chagrin. “Well, a man would forget his name with you lying bare ass naked on the floor, or doing your reverse strip tease.”

“John!”

“Okay, okay.” As Joy watched, John took off his pullover and put on his armor, then donned his pullover again, slipped on his shoulder holster with his .45 in it, and pulled his coat on over that, with his S&W in a pocket holster. Then, bringing his hand up to his mouth and gasping melodramatically, he asked in mock horror, “My God, where are your knives? You don't have them on.”

She smiled. “How could you notice? Actually, I can't wear the hip knife; these denims are too tight. And I was about to strap on my lower leg sheath when you mentioned it. I will have my holster purse with me; one knife less around here doesn't concern me. Anyway,” and she looked at him from under her lashes again, “I've always got my hands and feet. They're enough to take care of you, big man.”

As she put on her sheath, John grinned. “Watch it, little woman, or I'm going to have to put you in your place.”

They both laughed, Joy more than John, as they left the apartment. Joy let John go first as they walked downstairs, but shook her head when he started play-act the caution necessary to descend

into a room full of armed thugs. On the first floor, John grinned as he walked in front of her to the truck, to help the guys move the capsules.

Jy-ying

Having learned all that she needed to know by studying the capsules, Jy-ying was standing aside, trying to direct the work, when Joy and John reappeared. When the guys saw Joy, they stopped work and followed her with large eyes as she climbed into the truck.

Joy noticed the work stoppage, looked at the men, curtsied, and said to John loud enough for them all to hear, “One would think these guys had never seen a woman in pants before.”

John looked up from the chain he was connecting to a capsule, and answered, “I don’t think they have. At least, not the way you look in them.”

All Jy-ying needed was to glance at Joy’s clothes, and she nodded to herself.

With a wide grin, his eyes still on Joy, Sal asked John, “Where did you get this long-haired Chinese boy? He has curves in strange places, if you know what I mean.”

The guys laughed.

Jy-ying’s mind now was beyond humor of any kind.

Still chuckling, John answered Sal, “He’s my personal bodyguard. Don’t mess with him, or he’ll break your leg.” That brought more laughter, and they went back to working a capsule off the truck and onto the mover’s pallet.

Joy

As they struggled with one especially heavy capsule, Hands asked, “What do you have in this? Gold?”

Actually, it *was* the capsule containing their gold bars. “Of course,” John replied. “I’ve got to have enough to pay you guys and Jy-ying.”

When they finally had all the capsules in a corner of the basement, John said, “We’ll buy the basic furniture we need tomorrow. Let’s find a hotel for the night that also has a restaurant. It has to be far from both the hotel we left and our warehouse. Any suggestions?”

Dolphy offered, “I used to pass by a place called Colby’s Inn. Looked good, and there’s a restaurant I always wanted to go to within walking distance. It’s Forda Italy—”

“Fior d’Italia,” Hands corrected. “I’ve heard about it from my baseball buddies.”

Dolphy continued. “It’s on Union Street. They are supposed to have the greatest Italian food.”

“Fancy, fancy,” Sal commented, shaking his finger in the air.

Dolphy ignored him, but not without giving John a quick glance. “I know the way to the Inn. But they are expensive, I think.”

“No problem,” John responded. To all of them he said, “I suggest you leave your bags and suitcases in the truck, since we’ll be staying at least overnight at the Inn. Okay, let’s go.”

As they moved toward the truck, John told Joy and Jy-ying to get in the cab with Hands. Jy-ying refused. Bowing to John, she told him, “Boss and Number One Assistant sit in front.”

“Thanks, but you—” John started to say, but Joy kicked him in the ankle. He unnecessarily added, his voice running out at the end, “I meant Number One Translator and I—you know, Number One Assistant and Translator.” He turned slightly red.

“But, of course.” Jy-ying replied, nodding, her full lips slightly parted.

Already, Sal was leaning over from the truck bed to give her a hand up. “Come on, Jy-ying, you can sit next to me.”

As Hands drove off, everyone in place, John suddenly realized how out of time Joy’s clothes were. “You can’t go to the restaurant dressed like that. This is 1906. No woman wears tight pants—no woman even wears pants. We’ve got to go back so you can change.”

“No. I’m not changing.”

“Baby!”

“Maybe I’ll start a revolution, and women will start dressing more sensibly and independently.”

“You just want to show off.”

“So?”

“Okay, I’m going to buy a codpiece for my jewels.”

“Is that right? Well, you’ll have to stuff it with tissue.”

Hands guffawed and continued to laugh so hard, he almost drove into a wagon. “Do we go back?” he sputtered.

“No.” Joy got out between laughs.

“Yes,” John barked, apparently still smarting from Joy’s comment.

“I’m sorry, Miss Phim, but he’s the boss.”

“Yes, but I’ll pull your arm out of its socket and beat you over the head with it if you turn around.”

“Sorry boss, she’s the muscle.” And he roared, hardly able to steer.

John leaned to whisper in Joy's ear, "Joy, you are being stupid. The way you look in this age will be the talk of the restaurant, and then perhaps the talk of the town. Those trying to kill us may hear about it, and realize it must be you. Then they may stake out the restaurant. Dumb, dumb, dumb. Why not send up a flare with our names on it?"

Joy crossed her arms and turned toward him. She tried to simulate his lecture tone. "One. Nobody would know these are clothes from the future. Two. Even the killers may not know, if they are from a time or place where women do not wear pants. Three. The gossip about what I wear will be," and she twisted her voice into an old woman's cackle, "'Oh, she wore pants. How brazen.'" Back in the lecture tone, she continued with, "Then some woman will try to find out where she can buy such pants. Four. The killers would not believe I would so exhibit myself, and thus will ignore such gossip. It's like leaving something you want to conceal out in the open, the least expected place. Five. My dear John, I'm most comfortable in these clothes, I'm tired, I'm homesick, and right now, I don't want to get into one of those stupid, neck-choking, chest-smothering, waist-crushing, leg-binding dresses women are forced to wear."

She hesitated, uncrossed her arms, and touched the end of his nose with her forefinger. She softened her voice. "And six. You said one 'stupid' and three 'dumbs,' which makes four negatives. Four negatives equal one positive, so I'm glad you agree."

John's jaw dropped and he gawked at her, then shook his head and finally shrugged and laughed. He leaned over close to her ear again and whispered, "Stuff it with tissue, eh? I'll get you for that."

Joy sat back and gave him a big grin. She put her hand on John's leg and gently squeezed it.

An hour later, they had found a place to park the truck, and had checked into the Inn, John and Joy in different rooms. Unlike the Fairfax Hotel, which John had bought as a result, the Inn had no prejudice against Orientals. They gave Joy and Jy-ying rooms without raising an eyebrow or twitching a nose. But the male reservation clerk was all eyes at the way Joy was dressed.

Each room had a hot water bath, one of the reasons for the cost of the rooms, and Joy luxuriated in the steaming water for such a long time that John had to remind her that they were going to meet the others in the Italian restaurant for supper.

When they entered the restaurant, the guys were waiting by the cashier's counter. The cashier, who also acted as headwaiter—he was probably an assistant manager who would not trust the cash handling to

anyone else—came from behind his counter and stepped in front of them. With Joy standing on one side and Sal and Jy-ying slightly behind John on the other, he asked the man for a table for six. The cashier looked at Joy, glanced at Jy-ying, then swung his gaze back to stare at Joy and her jeans. He frowned, looked down his nose at John, and told him, “I’m sorry, sir. I cannot seat the Oriental . . . lady . . . the way she is . . . dressed.”

Immediately, Joy whispered in John’s ear, “Don’t you dare buy this restaurant.”

Hands reached out to grab the cashier by his coat, but John pushed down Hands’ arm while reaching with his other hand for his wallet. John took out a dollar and tried to hand it to the cashier.

The man shook his hand and refused to take the money. “We have a dress code, and I would be fired if anybody complained.”

John added another dollar.

After a noticeable hesitation, the man said, “I’m sorry.”

Sal exclaimed, “You shit!”

John added still another dollar.

The cashier looked out of the corner of his eye at the guys, who appeared ready to dismember him. His hand shook visibly as he reached for the pile of menus on the counter. He simpered, “Well, if you don’t mind where I seat you.”

Holding the menus across his chest, he led them to a large table located in the corner of the restaurant, just to the left of the swinging kitchen door. He pulled out a chair for Joy, and motioned her into it. She was now seated right in the corner, her denims hidden from other tables.

The cashier walked over to a waiter nearby and whispered something to him. The waiter served them immediately. Obviously, the cashier wanted to get them out of the restaurant as soon as possible.

During the meal, John told the guys and Jy-ying, “I want you to come to my room after we’re through eating. It’s time to give you background on Joy and me. You no doubt are curious about us.”

“Of course not,” Hands said with mock seriousness. “You are just ordinary people.”

Sal added, “So ordinary—really boring people.”

Dolphy appeared thoughtful. “There is this one small thing.”

John looked at him. “Yeah?”

“It’s Miss Phim.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it’s her behavior.”

“Yeah?” John’s voice now held a slight edge.

“She treats us as though she’s equal to us men. She doesn’t know her place as a woman. She even tries to wear men’s pants,” Dolphy replied, emphasizing the last word.

For a moment, John looked as if he was about to explode. Then he saw Dolphy’s grin. He sat back and grinned himself. “No,” he responded, “she thinks she’s better than any man but one.”

“Oh? Who is that?” Sal asked with raised eyebrows.

“Your humble boss,” John replied. “Isn’t that right, Joy?”

“Oh yes,” Joy said. “I am your humble assistant and translator and bow to your great superiority as a man.” She punched him in the shoulder. “You men never know your place,” she added, laughing.

When the laughter died down, Joy glanced at Jy-ying, who was studying her menu, and didn’t seem to be amused. Indeed, Joy realized, she had been too quiet, too aloof. *I wonder if we insulted her in some way. Well, I’m looking forward to our first conversation alone together, so I can understand her better.*

Sal turned serious and asked John, “What are you going to do with the warehouse, now that you’ve moved out?”

“I gifted it to the American Red Cross. They’ve been doing a great job of helping people here after the earthquake and fire. I thought they could use the warehouse as another office and distribution center. I called them, and they said they could use it immediately. So, on the way to the warehouse I stopped at their local headquarters and gave them a signed transfer of ownership from me to them.”

Dolphy’s eyes sprang wide as he blurted, “You can afford to give away the warehouse? Just like that? And buy a new apartment building? Did you rob a bank, or something?”

John looked amused, and answered, “Later. In my room. All will become clear.”

When they’d finished their meal and were about to leave, Joy said sweetly, “I have to go to the rest room. Be back shortly.” She nodded at Jy-ying, inviting her along.

As both of them were getting up, Sal advised, “Jy-ying, make sure she doesn’t go into the wrong room, now.”

Hands added, “We’ll wait to hear the women scream when you walk into their rest room.”

With Jy-ying leading the way, Joy slowly and gracefully walked across the restaurant to the rest rooms.

John

John knew what Joy was doing. *She no more has to use the rest room than I need to go to the North Pole. She loves showing it off. She's got it and she knows it. Pure female.*

Then he noticed how similar her figure was to Jy-ying's—a similarity not lost on everyone else in the restaurant. People stopped in mid-conversation to watch what none of them had seen before, a vision the men would hug in their dreams from then on—a long-legged, beautiful, and curvaceous Asian woman with a long pigtail, dressed in pants that hugged her tush like a second skin. And preceding her, an equally beautiful Asian with curves emphasized by a hip-hugging, taffeta silk skirt. Many a woman at the tables followed the pair with envious eyes, or gazed insulted at her boyfriend or husband, who sat with a forkful of food frozen halfway to his mouth and lust shining in his eyes.

Finally Hands said, "If I had a store selling pants like that, they would be sold out tomorrow."

Grinning, Dolphy offered, "If I had a store selling that, I would close up and keep it all to myself."

"What's the 'that'?" Sal asked in mock innocence.

John frowned; he'd let this go on too long. He looked at the guys, then waved his hand to get their attention. He wagged his finger at them as, articulating each word, he admonished, "'That' is hands off, you guys. Joy is *my* translator and assistant. Understand?"

They all nodded, and Dolphy said hastily, "We're joking, boss. But you can't deny us the pleasure of looking at her. What a tootsie wootsie. And her twin is a knockout, also. I bet she'd look like Joy, in those pants."

Sal looked sideways at John, his face serious. "Is Jy-ying now your . . . assistant and translator . . . too?"

This was getting out of bounds; it was reaching a dangerous point, and John knew he had been contributing to it. "Okay, enough. Listen up, guys. I want to be clear about this. You all work for me. What any of you and Jy-ying do on your off time is not my business. What you do while you are working for me is my business. But, our work is too important to me to let your personal lives interfere with your jobs. Keep them separate. Okay?"

Hands asked quietly, "What about Joy?"

John fixed Hands with his eyes. He whispered, "Back off. She is *my* business." He thrust his jaw out. "Do I need to say more?"

A pretty young woman stood up at a nearby table, catching their attention. They watched as she bent over the fellow with her; she seemed to be arguing with him. It looked as though they were finished with their meal, but he seemed to want to drink more coffee and kept motioning with his hand for her to sit down. She finally did so, but not without slamming her hand on the table.

What the woman's companion and many an eye in the restaurant was waiting for finally occurred—Joy and Jy-ying emerged from the rest room and sashayed back to the table. They said nothing. John and the guys said nothing. They all returned to eating their food.

Soon, idle chatter resumed, and they discussed life in post-earthquake San Francisco before the fire, and the alleged corruption in Mayor Schmitz's administration. When they finished their meal and got up to leave, John purposely walked closely behind Joy.

Why am I doing this? he wondered. *She wouldn't care if she were naked. Correction. She'd probably like that better.*

Jy-ying

When they returned to the apartment building, John asked the guys and Jy-ying to come up to his apartment, and retrieved a tarpaulin from the truck. He spread the tarp on the floor for all of them to sit on. None of the guys commented—not even Sal—on seeing Joy's bags and suitcases alongside John's.

Jy-ying now gave it no thought. Everything was clear to her; it seemed her heart had been thumping over her discovery for hours, leaving her so distracted, she'd hardly been able to speak with Joy when they had gone to the ladies' room together at the restaurant.

Joy opened her suitcase and took out a laptop computer. She also took out a plastic case containing two disks. Jy-ying glanced around. The guys had their eyes riveted on Joy and the strange things she was bringing out, their expressions one huge question mark.

Eyes intent, face severe, one hand ready to punctuate each sentence with a sharp gesture, John began. "You are now our guards; all of you have put your lives on the line to protect us. We pay you very well for this. But that is irrelevant. Although we have known you guys and Jy-ying for only two days, we have come to trust and respect you."

He stopped to see what impact he was having. The guys were intent on his words. Joy nodded approval. He continued. "You deserve an ex-

planation of what is going on with us, but before we tell you, we want your pledge to keep what we say a secret. Only if you get married will you be free to tell someone—your wife.” He looked at Jy-ying. “Or your husband.”

She met his gaze unblinkingly, but before she could raise her eyebrow, Hands, not hiding his irritation, asked John, “Does that mean you will stop giving us the poison—”

In the same tone of voice, Dolphy interjected, “For which we need an antidote once a month—”

“An antidote that only you have, boss,” Sal finished.

Jy-ying had overheard the guys talking enough to know the history of their relationship with Joy and John. When John and Joy had first hired the three guys, they were homeless and living off odd jobs and, she suspected, what they could steal. To assure their security and that of the goods of their new import and export company, John had given them a poison that required an antidote once a month, an antidote that would also contain a fresh infusion of poison. Jy-ying wondered what the poison was. Until today, she had doubted the story altogether, but with her new knowledge. . . .

John held up both hands. “Let’s wait on that,” he replied. He smiled and added lightly, “If you run screaming from the room after you’ve heard what I have to say, only the need for the antidote may keep you from telling people about your crazy boss.”

“To be sure,” Joy seconded. Her comment seemed to carry more weight with the guys than what John had said. They leaned forward, eager to hear more.

Jy-ying looked from one guy to another, let her eyes rest on John for a time, and then looked around the room. She caught Joy looking at her and smoothed the sour expression her thoughts had no doubt put on her face before nodding at Joy. *I know who you are, Joy. You no longer fool me. But there is a war raging inside of me, tearing me up, and the winner of that will determine whether you or I will die.*

She turned her gaze to John. He looked at the guys one by one, then at Jy-ying. Then his voice settled into lecture mode. “Okay, here’s why we’re here.”

Joy

Two hours later, the guys sat looking overwhelmed, wide-eyed, and convinced. Apparently, wasn’t the video about the wars and democide of the twentieth century that did it. It wasn’t images of Sabah’s nuclear

attack on New York. It wasn't even the incredible laptop, with such clear images flowing across its screen. What seemed to convince them was Joy's sobs when John read aloud to them Lora Reeves' letter from 1994. In it, Lora, the president of the Joy Phim Democratic Peace Institute, described in detail the nuclear attack. The letter ended with a note from the director of her affiliate scientific institute in Santa Barbara, stating that Lora and her husband Mark had chosen suicide when near death with terminal radiation poisoning. The guys had looked on Joy as the iron lady, and to see her in tears for the first time meant it all had to be true.

Jy-ying had turned white, and vomited over her dress. She excused herself with, "I'll catch up later," and almost ran out of the room with tears in her eyes. Joy tried to help her, but she shook her head vigorously and motioned Joy back; she fled to her room at the Inn.

When Joy returned to her seat, Dolphy leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and looked from Joy to John. "I'm speaking for us all. We want to help. I don't know what we can do—we don't have much of an education; we don't know much of the world; we don't understand a lot of what we saw in the moving pictures you showed us. But whatever we can do, you can count on us to do it."

Blinking back new tears, Joy went to each of the guys and kissed them on their cheeks. Then she wiped her eyes and said, "Thanks, guys. No more poison pills."

Chapter 13

Early Evening, Friday

Jy-ying

Her eyes still filled with tears, Jy-ying slammed the door of her hotel room behind her. She sagged backwards against the door, then slid down it, her face in her hands.

She was mentally exhausted. Not even what she now had confirmed made her feel triumphant. From the time she had seen Joy and John's capsules, she had no longer suspected; she had known. The capsules were not too different from the one sent down time to her by Shu Kuo, the director of China's time travel-assassination project.

Half crawling, half staggering, she moved over to the bed and threw herself across it. She writhed on the bed, struggling with the knowledge she now did not want to have. Since arriving in this time, her whole purpose had been to find and kill the time traveler who would assassinate God's Prophet, Abul Sabah. *Yes, I have found the time traveler I must kill—except, it is two travelers. Still, I must kill both of them. That is my mission. As a dedicated Sabahist, that is what I should do.* Her mind lingered on the "should do." *The only question should be when and how.*

Since seeing the capsules in the warehouse and realizing what they were, she had tried to get her mind around that truth. She still could not absorb it; she still could not digest that those she should now kill were people with whom she already shared so much—everything except religion. It would have been so easy if they had been only names, people she could hate in the abstract until the assassination, people whose faces she might not even see as she walked up behind them and shot them in the back of the head.

But John, for whom I feel more than a growing attraction? But Joy, almost my double in appearance and—yes, I will admit it—a future soul mate with whom I have so much to share? Kill both of them?

She still could have done it. She was a captain of the Sabah Security Guards; she was a teacher of martial arts, a warrior; she had seen her parents and sister murdered at the hands of the anti-Sabahs; she had killed pro-democracy revolutionaries to protect Sabah. *Yes, I still could*

have done it. My mind would have been clear. Yes, were it not for that documentary of Sabah's nuclear attack on the democracies. It is as though they showed that on purpose, to destroy my mission.

The horror of it, the sheer, awful monstrosity of so many human beings murdered . . . She'd loathed it when, as a new lieutenant in the Security Guards back in China, she first found out about Sabah's nuclear attack. She had planned to resign and, while keeping her Islamic faith, have nothing more to do with Sabah's rule. But she had been counseled by an Imam, a friend, to keep her faith and position, and to concentrate on all those many billions of souls then and in the future who would be saved for God and Paradise.

It was bad enough to know about the nuclear attacks in the abstract. The government had allowed no pictures of the destruction, no description of what happened in the major cities that were destroyed. Now, to see the images of the dead, burned and disfigured, along with only pieces of bodies, all stacked like cordwood or strewn with the debris on streets; to see the twisted and scorched remains of what had been thriving cities, and to know that her mission was to kill the two who would try to prevent all that by assassinating Sabah . . . Jy-ying no longer could square this circle.

She was sick, nauseated by the ambivalence wracking her emotions and turning her dedication to mush. She cried with the awful frustration of it all. She pounded on the mattress with her fists. She screamed into her hands. She wished she was dead.

Without a thought, she took off her clothes to commit *wudu*—ritual washing for spiritual purity. She sat in the bathtub and poured water over herself, soaped her body thoroughly, and rinsed the soap off, not even feeling the cold water. She towed herself dry, then took her Makka-Madina prayer rug from her suitcase and unfolded it on the floor. She covered her head and made the *shahada*—the profession of belief: “Ash-Hadu Allaa Elaaha Ellaa Allah, Wahdahu Laa Shareeka Lah—I bear witness that there is no other god beside God. He *alone* is God; He has no partner.”

Shoulders drooping, she faced eastward toward Mecca, and made the required *raka'at*—symbolic movements—along with the appropriate invocations and Koranic recitations. In the end, she said, “Allahu Akbar—God is Great.”

She bowed her head and softly, humbly, added in a low voice, “I believe in your Prophet Abul Sabah, but I cannot accept his murder of as many as two billion people. Nor can I kill two good people, although heathens, who trust me, and have told me the truth about themselves,

without knowing that my mission is to kill them. But if I do not kill them, they will kill Your Prophet and I will be a traitor to Sabah, a traitor to Islam, a traitor to my country, and a traitor to my profession. More billions will then not learn your truth, and Paradise will not be for them.”

She vomited on the floor beside her knees and sobbed, her whole body shaking; she vomited again. “I cannot stand this,” she cried. “Oh my God, Oh Sabah, please forgive me.”

She could no longer think, only do what her heart and soul dictated. She reached into her mouth with the forefingers of each hand and pried up the false gold cap on her right rear molar with her fingernails. She plugged it with her finger as she withdrew it from her mouth, and then let the cyanide pill that Sabah Security had inserted there fall into her hand.

Deliverance. She released a shuddering sigh.

She did not need the cap anymore; she just left it on the sink. She wrapped the pill in tissue and put it gently in her purse. She cleaned up the vomit, then sat in the bathtub and poured water as hot as she could stand over her body and hair. She washed both and rinsed herself off, refilling the tub until the rinse water was clear. She toweled, being especially careful to dry her hair, and dressed in the captain’s Security uniform she had secreted in a false bottom of her suitcase; she put aside her brimless captain’s hat until she was ready.

She was proud of her uniform; it was the mark of a rare achievement for a woman in her China. She had intended to wear it when she assassinated the time traveler, but it was appropriate for this occasion—she would die clothed in her highest honor.

Again, she went into the bathroom and checked the sink for scum. She felt the bottom of the bathtub with her finger. She looked at the toilet and, to make sure it was clean, she pulled the long chain hanging from the high tank to flush it. Then she looked for the slightest suggestion of a toilet ring; seeing none, she folded her towel and washrag and neatly laid out her toiletries and cosmetics on the counter next to the sink. Lastly, she studied the bed, removed the few wrinkles from the blanket, and then put her suitcases by the bedroom door.

She put on her officer’s hat, put the pill still wrapped in tissue into her pocket, put her holster purse next to her suitcases. Her emotions had yet to allow coherent thought. She fixed her hair in the approved Sabah Security fashion for women: braided and wound into a cup on the back of her neck. She turned the one chair in the room to face the side table, took hotel stationery out of its lone drawer. Her back was

now stiff, her tears gone forever; there were no more decisions to be made, only two more things to be done. Utterly calm, her mind now channeled only in one direction by her will, the warrior on the verge of death wrote her death letter.

Dear Joy and John:

When you read this, I will be dead. Please do not search for my worthless body. I will have disposed of it.

She stopped, sighed, and decided to tell the whole truth. What did it matter now?

She told them about her background in the Sabah Security Guards and her faith in Islam and Sabah; she revealed how she had maneuvered to be the one sent back in time to prevent the assassination of Sabah, and that, with her new knowledge of their mission, she now realized it was they she would have to kill. She told them that, after seeing the documentary of Sabah's nuclear destruction, she no longer could do what she had been willing to give up her life to do—cause their deaths. She ended with:

I cannot choose between the horror of killing both of you and enabling that nuclear holocaust, or the horror of letting you live and thus letting you kill Sabah and my religion. There is only one choice left to me, and that is death.

I have attached information about my equipment capsule, its door code, and its location. All I have is now yours. I do wish you success in your democratic peace efforts.

Cry not for me. I have been successful beyond my dreams and have experienced a life, including this time travel, beyond that of the richest person.

A final wish: spare Sabah and educate him. He will be a Great Prophet of God, and with your good advice, he might well avoid the horrors he inflicted on the world in his zeal.

*With the greatest respect,
Most Sincerely,
Khoo Jy-ying*

She had no envelope, but she folded the papers once, and placed them in the center of her chest of drawers, next to the water pitcher and bowl, for the time being.

She stretched out on the bed, closed her eyes and, finally at peace, she let the memories of the happy times with her family, her youthful joys, her successes in martial arts and the Security Guards, and her love affairs flow into her mind until it was time.

Chapter 14

Past Midnight, Saturday

Jy-ying

Jy-ying sensed it was very late. How early or late, she did not know, nor did she care. Her core psyche, the center of her emotions and feeling, told her it was time. She gave what she was doing and what she was going to do no thought.

Colby's Inn was quiet. Not a sound came from outside. She walked out of her room, quietly shut the door, leaving it unlocked, and strode briskly along the hallway and down the stairs. There was no night clerk; she assumed he was in the office behind the registration desk, probably balancing the day's accounts. She walked behind the registration counter and put her folded death letter in the mail slot for John's room.

Union Street was empty when she walked out of the Inn. She looked up at the stars she could see between the few clouds, and guided herself by them. At the first intersection, she turned north toward San Francisco Bay.

It was all automatic. Her body knew what her mind had planned many hours ago—find a pier, jetty, or dock, walk to the end, swallow the pill as she jumped into the water. The tide would take her dead body away. No one would be bothered. She would disappear from this world and time as if she had never come.

It was dark, the sky slightly clouded; she walked from one dim bubble of light cast by the street's gas lamps to another. A drunken man on horseback went by, holding a bottle of liquor and singing happily to himself. Two intersections closer to the bay, she heard loud yelling and the thumping of horses' hooves as two young men raced their horses on the asphalt street. None of it registered—mentally, she was already dead. It was only a matter of time, only a while longer doing its duty, before her body was physically dead to match.

But then a special sound burst into her mind and awakened it—a loud yelp, a scream of pain. Her head jerked around. She saw a ball of fur, barely discernable on the dark street, rolling in the wake of the two racing horses as they clattered off into the night. She stopped. A small animal lay on its side in the street—a dog. It whimpered, and started licking its front paw.

She shuffled forward a step, continuing her death walk. The dog heard her. It stopped its frantic licking and looked at her. She stopped again. She stared at the dog, and it stared back. On a level of communication that has always existed between humans and dogs, defying scientific understanding, something passed between them. For Jy-ying, it was a subconscious recognition of some sort.

Unthinkingly, she turned and stepped into the street and walked up to the dog. In the dark, she could not tell how badly it was injured, so she gently picked it up and carried it to a nearby gas lamp. She felt the animal shivering in her arms. She sat down with her back to the lamp-post and carefully checked the dog for injuries. There was blood only on its front paw; the bleeding had stopped, but it looked like the paw was beginning to swell. As the dog tried to get out of the way of the racing horses, its paw must have been clipped by one of their hooves.

The dog—a male—was filthy; his long hair was matted in clumps, and she saw the effects of mange on his rear and one leg. She patted his head and rubbed his back for several moments, feeling his ribs and noting how thin he was. She finally put him on the sidewalk. He wobbled on three legs at first, then steadied himself and licked her arm. She stood, gave him one last sympathetic look, and continued down the street, as mindless as before.

At the next corner, two men sat on the curb smoking and a third leaned against a lamppost with a bottle in his hand. He spotted Jy-ying when she came out of the dark, walking toward their cone of light. He leaned over to the other two and said something. They stood and all three started toward Jy-ying, spreading out to prevent her from getting by them. They were bearded and stocky, dressed in gray and black work clothes; one wore a military cap, and another had one of the very popular golf caps tilted back on his head.

The one who had been standing paused to put down the bottle. “Hey buddy, you got money for us, eh?” he yelled and, pulling a three-inch jackknife from his pocket, he brandished it at her.

One of other men took a folding razor from his pocket, opened it, and held out the blade so she could see it.

For the first time in hours, she had thoughts. *God be merciful, it is a mugging. I could let them kill me, but I intend to die on my terms, not theirs. A good thing I am wearing my uniform. Its pants are made for this.*

“Come. You want money. See if you take,” she said sweetly, purposely using pidgin English. She wanted them to know she was a woman, and Chinese.

“Hey, it’s a woman, a Chink.” The knife-man snarled menacingly, “Down on your knees, bitch. We’ll take all you got when we’re done with you.”

As the man reached out to knock off her cap and grab her hair, loud barking and growling suddenly erupted at Jy-ying’s feet. The man jumped back, his brows shooting up, and jerked his head down to look at Jy-ying’s feet.

Jy-ying looked too. A snarling little dog stood in front of her, balancing on three feet and holding his injured paw off the ground as he threatened the man.

Jy-ying yelled, “No boy, back.”

The dog ignored her. Ears tight against his head, tail bristling, he alternated barking, snarling, and growling at the knife-man.

“Fucking dog,” knife-man yelled, and tried to kick him.

The dog avoided the foot, seized the man’s pants leg in his teeth, and violently shook his head as though trying to tear off the leg inside. The man tried unsuccessfully to shake him off. The man with the razor swiped at the struggling dog. Yelping in pain, the dog released the leg.

That was it. Jy-ying launched her attack with a straight-arm finger punch to the knife-man’s eyes, then grabbed the arm of razor-man and yanked his elbow down on her lifting knee, breaking it. Twirling, she side kicked the unarmed man in the throat with the toe of her boot.

Five seconds had passed. She was still wearing her cap.

Amidst the screams and gurgles of the injured men, she heard the renewed growling of the little dog. She glanced down at him. Blood flowed freely from his back. He was trying to get to his feet to attack the man who was bent over, nursing a broken arm. The knife-man had dropped his knife to cover his eyes, and was jumping up and down in a circle, groaning. The third man thrashed on the ground clutching his throat, trying to breathe.

She picked up the knife in her right hand and the little dog in her left. She held him tight against her to prevent him from hurting himself further, and hoped that the cut was not mortal. She stood over the three helpless men with the knife in her hand, looking at them. They would have raped her, mugged her, and possibly killed her afterwards.

The little dog tried to get free to protect her again. She glanced down at him. She glanced at the men. She glanced at the knife. Her mind was working again. She gazed down at the little dog in wonder, marveling at what had happened.

As he recognized that the men were no longer a danger, he seemed calm and content, as if he had won the day for his mistress.

She laid him gently on the sidewalk. When he tried to struggle to his three feet, she held him down and said gently, “Stay, my protector. Please stay.”

She stepped over to the men and knocked each of them unconscious with a neck chop to the carotid vein switch. Then she cut into each of their foreheads a shallow crescent and star, the battle symbols of Sabah. The cuts would heal into livid scars.

She went back to her little protector. Eyes wet, she picked him up and hurried back to the Inn. He needed her care. She ran the last two blocks, and dashed into the Inn, only stopping to take the death letter out of John’s mail slot.

Holding the dog to her side with her arm, her hand under his chest for support, Jy-ying rushed around her room and threw open her suitcases, getting what she needed to treat his injuries, including a first aid kit. Finally ready, she gently put him down on the hotel towel she had placed on the bed. He lay unmoving, panting and looking at her. She cut the dirty hair around his injured paw and the bloody hair around the slice on his back. Wrapping the towel around him, she took him into the bathroom, where she ran the bathtub’s water until it was hot, letting it drain, and then put him in the tub. Tenderly, she washed his injuries with hot water and soap, ignoring his whimpering.

She gently toweled his injuries dry, and smeared an antibiotic on the top of the paw where skin had been scraped off. The cut on his back was not deep, but it still dribbled blood. She rubbed an antibiotic into it out of her tube, placed an antibacterial bandage over it, and held it in place by wrapping a gauze bandage around his body. She had no ice yet to put around his paw, but she wound sterile gauze tightly around it in spite of his resistance, and hoped that would keep the swelling from injuring adjacent tissue.

Done, she petted his head and bent over to look closely into his black eyes. No longer panting, he licked her nose and stared back. “You honor me with your *Yinghao*—brave heroism, my little one. You were so courageous,” she cooed. “I am going to honor you with your new name, Little Ying—little brave one.”

She poured some water from the ever-present, half-full pitcher into the water bowl and brought it to him. He was clearly thirsty. There was no food in the room, but she promised, “Tomorrow, Little Ying, you will have a feast. I hope you can wait.”

She wrapped a dry towel around Little Ying and placed him on the bedcovers next to her pillow. She knew he would probably urinate on

the towel or elsewhere on the bed, but she did not care. She would leave a generous tip for the maid. And she did not think he had eaten enough to poop, not that it made any difference, either.

She did not take off her clothes or pull back the blanket; she just laid down next to him. She saw that his eyes were closed and he seemed to be breathing evenly. She put one hand on his good leg, whispered, "I owe you my life, Little Ying," and was instantly asleep.

Chapter 15

Early Morning, Saturday

Ryan

At the Pine and Larkin police headquarters, Captain James O'Reilly lifted his tall body from the chair behind his antique Manchester desk and stalked around it to confront Lieutenant Gary Ryan, stopping no more than a foot from where the shorter lieutenant stood and leaning down to stare into his face. Gesturing so violently he almost hit Ryan in the face, he complained, "We've got to do something about this." The words rode into Ryan's face on a guttural blast of air. "That goddamn General Frederick Funston is still here, even though the army pulled out months ago when it completed its job of keeping order and assisting in relief after the earthquake. He's hot on my ass. He yelled—yelled, goddam it!—that he is not going to stand for this fucking cowboy crap going on here. He threatened to bring the goddam army back in."

Captain O'Reilly paused for breath, and then emphasized his words by speaking even louder. "In two days, we have had an attack on two civilians walking on the street, a gun thrown through a store window, a wild shoot-out between gangs at a hotel, the killing of a police officer and undercover policemen at a whorehouse while they were doing their duty, a gun drawn on a policeman, two policemen beaten up, a police wagon and horse—and the goddam horse!—stolen, a horse killed with a ton of bullets, a new Ford destroyed, a Red Cross truck stolen, two old ladies murdered, three burglaries, a holdup at City Bank, two drunken brawls, a race riot in the Presidio, and a naked oriental woman being chased by a naked man with a gun through a respectable hotel. Need I mention that incredible vest and the guns we took from a fugitive? Then there are those crazy rifles, if that's what they are, that we found in the Ford that someone attacked.

"Now, first thing this morning, I get a report of three men in the hospital after a street beating last night. Whoever sliced tattoos into their foreheads—"

When the captain paused again for breath, the lieutenant added, "You forgot about the three house fires, the five auto on auto accidents, and the two auto on horse accidents."

“Are you trying to be a smart-ass?” the captain asked, leaning even closer to the lieutenant’s face.

“No, sir.”

The captain shook his head, looking as if he were trying to shake out a bug stuck in his nose, and pounded his fist into his other hand. Then he was off again, like a runaway steam engine. “All this in less than forty-eight hours. We’ve got to do something about this crime wave; otherwise, General Funston said he has the authority to declare another goddam emergency and take over all policing. The bast—general—has already been sticking his nose in where it goddam-well doesn’t belong, and the chief has gone to Washington to complain about it.”

“I see,” the lieutenant replied.

“Don’t give me that ‘I see’ crap,” the captain yelled, moving inches closer. “This has got to stop. Period. Do you understand what ‘stop’ means, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir.”

O’Reilly backed up a step and gave the lieutenant a long look, barbecuing him with his eyes. After what seemed like long seconds, he came to a decision; the fire in his eyes cooled, and his voice calmed. “I’m putting you in charge of a detail of six men. Get to the bottom of this.”

“Yes, sir.”

O’Reilly started back to his antique Mexican desk chair, but stopped halfway around his desk, turned, and jabbed a finger in the lieutenant’s direction. “And don’t come back to me in a week and say that all this ‘just happened.’ Nothing like this just happens. Only shit happens. There’s a goddam gang at work out there, and I want them stopped. Stopped as though a safe dropped on them.” He paused. “One of public safe-ty.” Pleased with his pun, he let his voice return to its normal harsh timbre. “You understand me, Gary?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you don’t get to the bottom of this, you will be underneath it all.”

“Underneath what, sir?”

“The shit that will happen,” O’Reilly bellowed.

“I se—yes, sir,” Gary acknowledged.

O’Reilly returned to his plush chair. “Pick your men,” he said wearily, “and inform Sergeant Simpson who they are. You have a reasonably open expense account, but don’t get goddam carried away.” Waving a dismissal, he concluded with, “One week, Gary, no more. I want this gang in jail.”

Joy

Joy knocked on the door to Jy-ying's room.

No answer.

She knocked again, a little harder.

No answer. She debated whether to knock again.

After Jy-ying had fled the discussion in distress, Joy had waited until they finished explaining their mission and the guys had left before coming to Jy-ying's room to commiserate with her. It took a while for Jy-ying to answer, and then her red and swollen eyes had made her look even sicker. But she had dismissed Joy's compassion and, without inviting her in, had told Joy that what she had seen had been a shock, but she would have to deal with it herself. With, "I will be all right," and, "Good night," she had softly closed her door.

Even more concerned now, Joy knocked again, harder.

This time Jy-ying answered the door. She opened it halfway, to help conceal the blanket wrapped around her. Joy's brows went up when she saw how tired Jy-ying's face looked, and especially how lackluster her eyes seemed.

Seeing Joy, Jy-ying invited her in.

Joy did not need to go into the apartment. She told Jy-ying, "We're all going shopping for furniture, kitchenware, food, and all else we'll need for our new apartments. Would you like to come along? It's at company expen—"

She stopped and jerked back, almost going into a defensive stance, when she felt something ruffling the hem of her long, German linen skirt. She snapped her eyes down and saw a little dog sniffing her. One bandaged paw was held off the floor, and the ends of a compress on its back stuck out from under a gauze bandage wrapped around its midsection.

Joy stepped back farther and put her hand up to her mouth. "What is this? A little dog, I think? But he's all bandaged. What happened?"

"I found him last night. I will tell you all about it later. You go shopping while I take the dog to a veterinarian for his injuries and get food for him." Jy-ying didn't immediately close the door. She hesitated for several seconds, staring at Joy with contemplative eyes. Then she nodded to herself as though she had made a very important decision. Looking at Joy with a face and eyes suddenly turned deadly serious, she repeated, "Later, Joy, later."

She picked up the little dog, nodded at Joy, and closed her door.

Hadad

Refusing to trust taking a cab again, Hadad insisted they walk the whole distance. After over half an hour, they reached Wisconsin Street, where they had left the Ford.

“Where is it?” Carla looked up and down the street. “Is this the right street?”

Hadad answered in a helpful tone, “Of course, Carla. There is 8th Street—I am sure you remember it—and here is Wisconsin, where we turned off.” He added with a tolerant grin, “You never know where you are.” Then he frowned and looked up and down the street. He walked to the spot where the Ford had been and turned a complete circle, arms out, staring down at the ground as though the Ford would materialize under him. “*Bokg*, somebody stole our damn Ford,” he yelled.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Carla added, “And our OT-15s.”

Hadad threw his sombrero on the ground, the sudden movement causing a stab of pain in his bruised wrist. He was barely able to stop himself from kicking the hat into the street. “*Bokg*. I am not walking back to the Resort. Let us steal a horse, car—whatever.”

He bent down, picked up his hat, and slapped it against his leg to knock off the dirt. He pushed his hat squarely onto his head and stomped briskly down the boardwalk. “Keep your eyes open,” he threw over his shoulder, and almost tripped over a rock.

“It is you who needs to keep his eyes open,” she threw at his back as she followed him.

They soon came to a small factory of some sort with a lot in front containing carts, wagons, horses hitched to posts, two trucks, and two automobiles. They walked into the lot to examine the autos. Hadad pointed out with glee, “That’s the American Mercedes. Look at it, will you? No American car could match it. I’ve always wanted to drive one of those antiques.”

Grinning, Carla deflated him immediately. “You cannot drive because of your broken finger and your swollen wrist. I guess the driving falls to poor me again.”

They walked up to the Mercedes and Hadad looked at it fondly and rubbed his hand along its hood. It’s the 1905 model,” he said. “It was assembled at Steinway Piano Company. Can you believe it? The engines are Daimler and were built in the U.S. But the body was imported from Germany. It has got four big cylinders producing forty-five horsepower. It is—”

“How do you know all this?” Carla asked, putting one hand on her hip and raising an eyebrow.

“I know many things you do not know, Carla. One of my many, many useful hobbies is antique cars. I often went to the antique car shows in the capital while preparing for this mission in the United States. I wanted to pick up a Mercedes when we first came here, but I did not think there would be a dealer yet in this primitive, backwater town. Did I not I tell you that?”

Hadad then reached in with his right hand and opened the door. He climbed inside and unhooked the crank. Grinning, he handed it to Carla.

Carla

She grabbed the crank out of his hand and, after a quick glance at the dashboard and levers to assure herself that the Mercedes was in the mood to be started, stomped to the front of the Mercedes. She was barely able to turn the crank, but the Mercedes engine was still warm and started in half a rotation with a roar and the smell of gasoline. She jumped up in the driver’s seat to readjust the levers and prevent the engine from being flooded, and it settled down to the usual body-shaking *put-put*.

Eyeing Hadad from the corner of her eye to make sure he was looking at her, she smirked as she shifted into the first of the Mercedes’ three forward gears, then suppressed a grunt when she had to muscle the hard-steering car around to drive it off the lot. This time there were no backfires, and she was careful to drive on the right side of the road.

The Mercedes had a flat canvas top without sides or windows, and cold wind blew around the windshield, threatening to blow off her “genteel turban” hat. She hunched her shoulders within her plush seal cape, although the current temperature of forty-five degrees was like summer compared to the freezing winters in Kazakhstan, where the temperature sometimes plunged to minus fifty degrees.

Glancing over at Hadad, she yelled into the wind, “Hey, this is fun to drive.”

Hadad sat in glum silence.

They eventually reached the Resort without incident, and she drove a block past it into a side street. Still smiling broadly, she parked the Mercedes. As they got out, Carla commented, “Pretty soon, I am going to know all these side streets.”

“Funny, Carla,” Hadad said. “I was going to say the same thing.”

Hadad called the telephone operator from their room. Flashing Carla a smile, he asked for the telephone number of the new Mercedes distributor or franchise. While waiting for the number, he whispered to Carla, "You see, I'm not entirely helpless."

"Hopeless?"

"*Helpless*," he enunciated loudly, swinging the receiver he held between the little finger and thumb of his right hand. He almost dropped it. And almost missed the number the operator gave him. "Excuse me," he said into the phone. Obviously keeping his whole right hand stiff to prevent pain from flaring through his wrist, he wrote the number the operator repeated. He hung up and held out his right hand toward Carla.

She looked at it carefully, studied it, took one of its fingers between two of hers and shook it, and looked up at Hadad's face, eyebrows raised.

"Map, Carla. Your damn map."

She formed her mouth into an O and pulled the map out of her purse and handed it to him.

After unfolding the map with some difficulty and laying it on the floor, Hadad searched the index. Running the tip of a finger all over the map, he finally stopped his finger at one location. After studying it, he looked up at Carla, who was standing with her arms crossed and her mouth a thin line. "It's not much of a walk from here," he said. "Let us go."

The California Wagon & Auto Company had a small sign out front and two Mercedes on a lot next to it. Apparently they were just newly opened for business. Two hours later, a visibly happy and surprised dealer had \$8,500 in new-looking greenbacks in his hand, as Carla drove off the lot in a new American Mercedes that had cost over six times as much as a new Buick.

Hadad was slumped down in his seat, looking disgusted that he could not drive. They bounced along on the potholed macadam street. Carla's eyes were wide with pleasure as she hummed "My Gal Sal" over the noise of the engine, the clatter caused by the ruts and potholes, and the flapping of the top. She hummed even more loudly after glancing at Hadad's downcast face.

"Okay cripple, you can be of some help," Carla said, rubbing it in further. "Look at the map so we can find the Bloodhound Detective Agency. You wrote down the address, did you not?"

Hadad felt through his pockets as best he could with his right hand, and finally admitted, "*Bokg*, I didn't bring it."

Carla pulled the Mercedes over to a concrete sidewalk. She turned and stared at Hadad, shook her head, and asked, “Can you piss by yourself?”

That hung there for a moment. As Hadad looked ready to send wisps of smoke out his ears, she said, “Okay, okay, back to the Resort for the address.”

When they approached the Resort, they saw three police automobiles and two mounted policemen nearby. They pulled their hats down low on their foreheads and tried to keep their faces averted as Carla drove past and parked a block away. Carla jumped down from the Mercedes and started to hurry to the Resort.

Hadad yelled, “Hey. Forget something?”

She turned to look back at him, threw up her hands, and returned to the Mercedes to help Hadad out of the car.

In their room, Hadad found the address he needed, Carla looked it up on the map, and then they left again. Carla drove in the opposite direction as they pulled away from the Resort, mindful of the parked police vehicles.

Hadad

The detective agency was at 463 Pacific Street. They walked into a closet-sized reception room where a thin, gray haired secretary sat at a small desk to one side of a large door. There was an opaque glass window set in the door, and below that was lettered “Detective C. E. Follet.”

Hadad pulled his shoulders back, tapped on the desk with the knuckles of his good hand, and looked down his nose at the secretary. He demanded, “I want to see the head detective.”

The secretary continued typing on his Underwood typewriter. Finally he flipped the carriage back with a clang and slowly raised his head to stare up at Hadad over the tops of his narrow glasses.

After a few seconds of the man’s challenging stare, Hadad appeared unsettled. He put one hand in his pants pocket and began to fidget with the coins there.

The man shoved his glasses up his nose, tilted his head back, and coolly asked, “You have an appointment?”

“No.”

In words slurred together as though pushed by a cold wind, the secretary asserted, “You cannot see Detective Follet without an appointment.” The last syllable climbed upward in tone.

“Tell him that someone is here with a lot of money to give him.”

Another stare. Then, “I’m sor—”

“*Kotakka ket*—fuck you,” Hadad exclaimed. Without knocking, he opened the door to the right of the desk and strode through. Carla shrugged a “What am I going to do with him?” at the secretary, and followed him.

Follet’s office was much bigger, and dimmer. Light was barely able to filter through two dusty looking curtains. A large desk lamp with a sealskin shade provided additional, though inadequate, light. The office contained two dull gray metal file cabinets within reach of a small desk, an overhead fan, and scattered piles of papers, newspapers, magazines, and folders. On one wall was a large framed poster advertising in French, “Moulin Rouge, 11 mai 1880.” Its banner headline was “Can Can” and in the middle of the poster in red calligraphy was “Comporteur Beau Colette Follet;” below that was a painting of the beau Colette with her leg kicking high in the air. She was almost naked, by the standards of the day.

The room was uncomfortably warm, and a quick glance told Hadad the reason why was the fire going in an Acme stove in the corner. Next to it sat a bucket containing coal, an ash bucket, a small shovel, a poker, and a brush. The air was heavy with cigar smoke, the odor of burning coal, and the stench of Follet’s unwashed body, which the overhead fan’s enforced circulation inflicted upon every inch of the office.

Hadad twitched his nose. He felt like gagging. *God almighty, I need a gas mask.* Then, halfway to the desk, he stopped and stared. Next to him, Carla stood agape.

Follet was a fleshy, middle-aged woman with small eyes, one whose lid drooped, and naturally arched eyebrows. Her pointed nose was off-center, as though it had been broken at one time. She had a tiny mouth with large, heart-shaped lips, from the corner of which a small white scar curved upward for an inch, making her mouth look fixed in a lopsided, toothless grin. A black cowboy hat perched on the back of her head; her shoulder-length hair was a burst of yellow in the dreary office. She wore a black Directoire coat with white guipure embroidery and a tight white lace collar.

She showed no surprise at the intrusion, or their gaping. She took a puff on her Flor Del Arte cigar as she looked up at them, and tried to blow a smoke ring. It came out looking like a ruptured balloon. She showed them a disquietingly blank face, waiting.

Carla recovered and gave Hadad a glance that said, "Of course you picked this place." She sat down on a cushioned, straight-backed chair in front of the desk without being asked. Hadad tried to decide whether the Follet behind the desk or the Follet on the poster behind her was more worthy of his stare. He finally took the other chair and, decision made, he frowned at Follet. He shrugged and said, "I have a job for you."

Carla glared at Hadad for a moment, and then looked at Follet. "Yes, we have a job for you."

"What might that be, sweetie?" Follet asked in a low, full, contralto voice.

Before Hadad had a chance to answer, Carla responded with, "Information. We are new to San Francisco, and we have to locate a person named John Banks which, I can tell you, will not be easy."

Follet took a puff, caressed Carla with her eyes, and then said, "One dollar an hour, fifty hours in advance, all expenses paid." Smoke mingled with her words.

As Follet again tried to blow a smoke ring at the ceiling, Hadad took out a thick roll of bills with a flourish to attract her attention. He flipped off a \$100 bill with a snap that made his wrist twitch in sudden pain, and threw it on top of the papers on the desk. "Keep whatever is left over if that is not exhausted by the time you get us the information."

Both Follet's eyebrows shot up as her eyes stroked the money. She put the cigar on the edge of her overflowing ceramic ashtray, picked up the greenback, and slid it inside her coat between the top two white buttons. She took a yellow writing tablet out of a squeaky drawer and shuffled papers around on her desk until she found a stubby pencil. Then she leaned forward, her bosom falling over the top of the desk, cocked her head, and looked up at Hadad from under her short eyelashes, pencil at the ready. "Okay, let me hear about him."

The cigar cutter Follet had uncovered on her desk mesmerized Hadad. It looked like a pair of scissors, except that one handle was crafted into a man with an erection, and the other a woman with a slot under her belly. When the cigar end was clipped and the scissors thus closed, the two figures were tummy to tummy, making love. Hadad could not take his eyes away.

Carla saw what he was looking at and kicked him.

Hadad cleared his throat, focused on Follet, and passed on all the information he knew about the Fairfax Hotel, the location of the ware-

house, and the possible formation of a Tor Import and Export Company; he described John Banks and “his mistress and supposed employee” Joy Phim as best he could from Hands’ biography. He concluded, “Banks has probably bought a new hotel or house or similar to live in, and has set up a new company. We want his new hotel or home address and his new company’s name and address.”

Follet asked, “Is he a white man?”

“Yes.”

“What if he’s not in San Francisco anymore?”

“Well, we are paying you to find out if he is.”

Follet picked up her cigar, took a puff on it, and slowly blew the smoke toward the ceiling fan. “How can I get in touch with you?”

“You can’t. Give me your phone number and we will call you every one or two days to find out how you are progressing. Okay?”

“Fine. You do that.”

When they got up to leave, Follet remained at her desk, puffing on her cigar, seeming to study the information she had written down. Hadad stood by the door for a moment looking at Follet, and then he turned and followed Carla out and to their new Mercedes.

On the way, Carla commented, “That thing was crude.”

“What thing?”

“The pair of scissors on Follet’s desk.”

Hadad tilted his head back and looked at her. “That was not a pair of scissors. It was a cigar cutter. Cigars are pointed at the mouth end, so the cutter is used to cut this end off so that one can smoke the cigar. I thought the little man and woman molded into the handles were well done. You have no taste.”

She knocked off his Dakota hat and strode to the Mercedes while he picked it up. “She never could take criticism,” he told himself.



As soon as Carla and Hadad left the building, the secretary entered Detective Follet’s office without knocking. “What was that about, honey?” he asked.

“*Merde*—shit, those Japs want me to find a white man for them. I am not about to help those Japs. But I got their money. And *zute*—damn it to hell, I’ll get more. I’ll drain them dry. Wait until my friend Tveitmoe—you must have heard of him, he’s head of the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League—wait until he hears about what I am doing. He will have a good laugh.”

Puffing more smoke out of her cigar, she added as cheerily as her voice allowed, “When they call from now on, tell them I’m out, and I left a note saying that I’m hot on the trail.”

Chapter 16

Late Morning, Saturday

Jy-ying

Jy-ying first stopped at a butcher store and bought a T-bone steak, which she asked the butcher to cut from the bone in little pieces, and include the bone when he wrapped them up. She carried Little Ying outside with the steak and found a grassy stretch near a Southern Magnolia tree, its large fragrant flowers white spots of delight in the dreary, foggy morning. She sat underneath it with her back to the trunk and Little Ying on her lap, and fed him one piece of steak after another. When he had gobbled up half the steak, she repackaged the rest in the wax paper and put it in her purse for later.

Now to find a veterinarian. The third store Jy-ying checked had a public phone. She should have realized that a drugstore would have one, so that customers could call their doctors for advice on the drugs they might buy. In minutes, the telephone operator gave her the address of a veterinarian nearby. Her arm was getting tired from carrying Little Ying, but he seemed content, and she refused to put him down.

A half-hour later she had a veterinarian, Doctor Waracka, looking at him. “My specialty is horses,” he told her, “but I also do dogs and cats occasionally.” He cut the bandages off the dog and looked closely at his injuries. “Bad cut there,” he remarked, shaking his head, and added, “I can see you took care of it. It’s clean, and I don’t see any reason it shouldn’t heal. Fortunately, it’s more on his side than his back, and it looks like the knife—knife, was it?”

“No, razor.”

Waracka took another look at the cut. “The razor only nicked his spine. Don’t see any problem in its healing, as long as you keep it bandaged.”

He glanced at Jy-ying, tilted his head, and asked, “By the way, where did you get these bandages? I’ve never seen this amazing quality before.”

“Oh, I picked them up in China. I do not know who makes them.”

“Well, I hope they’re available here soon,” he said as he put ointment on the wound and rebandaged it. Jy-ying knew that she would put her own bandage on it back at her apartment, after cleaning out the ointment and smearing her antibiotic in it again.

Waracka also put ointment on Little Ying's mangle and studied his injured paw from different angles. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Nothing I need to do there."

Jy-ying asked him, "What kind of dog is this?"

"Well," Waracka said, "I'm not sure. There are so many breeds running loose these days, it's hard to keep track. Hmm. Let me see. Is this your dog?"

"No. I found him yesterday. He had no collar."

"Well, since he is not yours, you won't mind my mentioning how dirty he is. He's full of fleas and ticks. If you keep him, you'll have to do something about that. I think his dirty hair is really white in places, with black spots. He has a nice configuration—pert ears, normal muzzle, clear eyes, legs in proportion, and bushy tail. I think he's a mutt."

"What is a mutt?"

"He seems a mixture of breeds, but mainly terrier. He's a good-looking mutt, and I think young yet. You don't want any pure breeds anyway. They often have problems."

Jy-ying paid him the \$1.30 for his services, then bought a leash and red collar, which she put on Little Ying before she left.

She decided to return to her apartment and make Little Ying comfortable there, then go shopping for food. She could get the furniture she needed later, or the next day. Walking back, she passed the Nickel Hardware store and spied a two-door, two-seater automobile out in front of its shop window. The sign on its windshield proclaimed "Like New, \$525." She liked the car immediately. "It is cute," she exclaimed to herself. "Just what I want."

A little bell above the door jingled as she entered the store, and an elderly man wearing a green visor emerged from a side door and approached her. He was startled at first. He looked at Little Ying and then returned his gaze to her and asked belligerently, "What ya want?"

She felt the rumble begin in Little Ying's chest, and heard his low growl.

Well, she thought, *game time*. She tilted her head back, narrowed her eyes, and looked down her nose at the man for a few seconds. Then she sniffed the air and exclaimed, "You stink! Have you been petting a skunk?"

The man jerked a step back, and gawked at her.

Pleased with the effect, she allowed several seconds of cold silence before saying, "I was going to buy your little automobile outside." She

motioned demurely at what she could see of it through the store window. "But you are a rude man. I will take my business elsewhere, thank you." She turned and started opening the front door.

"You got \$550, cash?"

The question sounded more like a challenge. When she turned back the man was regarding her with knitted brow and jutting chin. "I pay you \$500 cash, or no deal."

"Okay," the man said, clearly trying to make his voice sound normal. "What the sign says—\$525 cash, no less."

"No. I get a twenty-five dollar deduction for rudeness." She opened the door.

She was halfway out when the man said, "Sold, you Okay, you bought yourself a car. When I see the \$500."

She put Little Ying down, wound his leash around her wrist, and counted out from her holster purse five \$100 counterfeit bills. "Where is my title?" she asked, holding the money in one hand. The man disappeared into the back and returned minutes later with the title. She read it and saw that she was buying a 1905 Bebe Peugeot. Included with the title was an advertisement that described the Bebe as "A two-seater sports automobile" with a "safety four wheel braking system, a six horsepower, single cylinder engine," and a "contact breaker start and chain drive." It proudly announced that the Bebe would drive other automobiles off the road at forty kilometers an hour—twenty-five miles an hour.

She handed the man the \$500.

"You want gas?" he asked.

"Yes."

He went into the back and came out with a gas can that said "two gallons" on the side. "Thirty-two cents," he said.

She gave him one dollar and waited for the change, which she put along with her title in her holster purse. She swung her purse around to her back, picked up Little Ying in one hand and the gas can in the other, and waited at the door. The man stared at her, then finally stepped around her and opened the door. She strode out without a word.

She put Little Ying on the high seat of the Bebe, searched for and found the gas tank, and poured in the gas. She looked at the dash and guessed which were the magneto, throttle, and spark, set them, and then cranked the engine to start it, keeping her thumb back just in case a backfire made the crank kick back. The engine caught, shook, and

nicely *put-putted* within one revolution, and she got behind the wheel. It was perfect. Like most cars of this age, it had the steering wheel on the right side—just what she had grown used to in China.

Now that she had an automobile, she decided to do her shopping for her new apartment. She made sure that Little Ying was secure, shifted into low, and drove off. She now had her own snappy little auto. She had Little Ying beside her. She was the happiest she had been since arriving in this backward world.

Chapter 17

Late Afternoon, Saturday

Jy-ying

Having filled the Bebe with nonperishable food, tableware, dishes, and other immediate essentials, along with the supplies she needed for a big job she was looking forward to, she parked behind John's apartments. John had given her a key to the back entrance. With Little Ying in one arm, she gathered a load in her other arm and carried everything into her apartment. She released Little Ying from his leash and let him roam happily while she made a number of trips to the car to haul everything inside.

Good exercise, she thought. I am getting out of condition.

After storing and distributing what she had bought, she was ready. She filled a bucket with hot soapy water and undressed. She put the bucket in the empty bathtub along with Little Ying, put tweezers nearby on the toilet lid, and sat on the edge of the tub. She got to work.

She first took off all Little Ying's bandages, and then washed him with a washrag and the soapy water, making sure he got soaking wet. She let him try to shake the water off, and started to pull the ticks out of his skin with her tweezers. She also checked for fleas, and if she found any alive she did another wash cycle, tick disposal, and flea check. He did not like it and resisted, but she cooed her threats to dunk his head in the water, and after a while he just lowered his head and tail, and endured it.

Throughout each cycle of washing, during his attempts to shake the water off, and while she searched for fleas and ticks, she murmured to him her thoughts and decisions. "You got my mind working, my little one, and you and those bad men made me see that I have a God-given mission. There are millions like those men, who could be saved by God and his Prophet Sabah. Billions of infidels could be made to see the truth, their lives filled with the faith that will lead them to Paradise. Even so, the nuclear bomb attacks were . . . will be . . . wrong. I will prevent them. My way!"

Her vehemence frightened him, and he tried to jump out of the tub. She put him on her lap for a moment, stroked his head, and let him lick her face.

She sighed, and told him in a much softer tone, "I will save Sabah, little one. I will work with him. I will try to prove to him that patience and well-timed coups or revolutions, rather than nuclear mass murder, will also lead to world victory. No one else will have my knowledge of the future. No one else could advise him as effectively as I can. No one else will know the traps he would fall into and the mistakes he would make without me. With my power, he should succeed in globalizing Sabahism ten or twenty years earlier than he did. Right, Little Ying?" she murmured.

She put him back in the bathtub and checked again for fleas. Still more. She refilled the bucket with warm soapy water, and started another wash cycle.

"But, what should I do about Joy and John? Two things are certain. They are out to kill Sabah. And their democratic peace mission must be successful, for the resulting lack of international war, general disarmament, and the slumber of the democracies will be, under my guidance, the conditions that will assure Sabah's world victory."

She automatically pulled a bloody tick from Little Ying's jaw and crushed it in her tweezers. She asked him, "What to do? If I kill Joy and John, so much for their mission. I cannot do it alone. Then a global victory of Sabahism will be impossible in the teeth of the wary and well-armed democracies and the heathen nondemocracies. If I let them live, they will kill Sabah."

Little Ying shook the soapy water off, and Jy-ying had to wipe the soap out of her eyes. He was beginning to tremble and look at her with his ears flat and his tail between his legs. She could not find any more ticks, but she did find two live fleas. "Once more and no more," she promised him.

She was quite thorough with the final wash, and in drying him with her new towels. Her mind continued to work; she was quiet while she patted his cut with a sterile bandage and put an antibiotic into it. She decided to let the wound air until evening.

Now, time for him to learn what inside versus outside meant. She put on his collar and leash and took him outside. She walked him until he found the right smell to relieve himself, and then took him back to the apartment.

Leaving him there, she took bleach down to her Bebe and washed the seat and floor to kill any fleas and ticks left from Little Ying; she was especially concerned to get the bleach into cracks. Finished, she rushed back to her apartment; he greeted her at the door by jumping up and down on her dress in spite of the torture she had inflicted. She

picked him up and held him away from her with two hands. Looking into his questioning black eyes, she told him her decision.

“I will not kill John. Nor will I kill Joy, my double, either, unless all else fails. But she must die, Little Ying. If I can help it, she will die at the hands of the assassins. I must try to arrange it so, when they next attack, I appear to try to save Joy’s life, but fail; I will succeed in saving John’s life from them, killing them in the process.

“This will endear me to him. And I will eventually replace Joy in John’s heart. He is malleable, like all men, and I can get him to love me as much as he loves Joy, especially since I am so much like her. Together, John and I can continue the democratic peace mission, and I am certain I can persuade him to save Sabah—to educate him. I sense that Joy would never have gone along with this. She hates him too much.

“But how? I know nothing of the assassins, except one thing—they are tracking Joy and John and when they find them again, they will attack. Then I should be ready. But it must be sooner than later; I cannot wait long, or it will be harder to convert John, and harder for me to set up Joy to be killed. I like her now. As time goes on, I am sure I will like her more and more.

“Oh God, help me in this. It is your Prophet I want to save.”

She sat down on the floor, stiffened her back, crossed her legs, and rested the backs of both hands on her knees. This was her favorite position for deep thought. When Little Ying licked her legs, distracting her, she looked at him and asked, “Will you protect me against the assassins, my hero?”

Pink tongue lolling out, Little Ying tilted his head and looked at Jy-ying with eyes that seemed blacker within the clean white hair around them. She studied the black strip of hair running up from his muzzle to take over one perky ear, and realized she was falling in love with him.

Joy

“I’ve never done so much shopping in my life,” Joy exclaimed, slouching in her seat as John drove toward their apartment—their new home. “But we did it. We bought this ugly Model N Ford and now have our two apartments fully furnished. That is, we will when everything is delivered tomorrow. I love Victorian. It’s a good thing you didn’t care, darling, about what kind of furniture we bought. Otherwise, we might have had some fights over it. And those beautiful rings and necklaces I got! So cheap. I couldn’t believe it. A star sapphire as large as my thumb for only \$843.”

Eyes twinkling, John admitted, "It was a trade-off. I got the car; you got the furniture, clothes, kitchenware, food, and jewelry." With a little grin, he added, "That saved you from losing a fight to your man, my woman."

"Well, your ego will be secure, since it won't be tested," Joy quickly responded, looking up at him from under her long black lashes. "Will it?"

With a wider grin, he pointed at her with that finger she hated so much and warned, "Watch out, or I'll put you in your place."

Matching his grin and ignoring his finger for once, Joy murmured, "Yes, my man."

There was an alley alongside their apartment that led to a delivery and parking area and a horse stable in the rear, and John pulled into it. As they turned the corner into the back lot of the apartment building, they saw the Bebe.

"What's that?" Joy asked, pointing to the automobile. "Snazzy. Why didn't we get one like that?"

"It's only a two-seater," John said, frowning. "Not practical."

They got out, left their packages inside the Ford, and walked around the Bebe. "See?" John said. "Not practical. No top, no windshield, and we couldn't carry the guys—our guards, remember—with us."

Joy asked, "Are you naturally stingy? We have enough money to buy every car in San Francisco. I'm going to buy this one for me. That is, when I find out who owns it."

"Baby. Do we really need two cars?"

Joy turned to look at John, put her hand on one hip, juttied out the other hip, and tilted her head. She was about to say something when her tall, three-tiered hat with the red feather sticking up in the back started sliding off her head. She caught it, straightened up and, her pose ruined, she bopped John on the top of his golf cap with her hat. When that failed to dislodge the cap, she flipped its brim with her other hand. "Yes," she said as the cap fell backwards off his head.

"I see," John replied, mimicking Lieutenant Ryan's tone of voice. That got them laughing. John picked up his hat and they carried their packages into the apartment building.

When they stopped at Joy's apartment to drop off her packages, she said, "The guys should be done buying their furniture soon. I can't wait to see what they got. I bet Dolphy has the best taste among them. I also want to ask Hands about the woman he introduced us to in Oxford's

World Furniture. Just looking at her, I was turned off. I know—she has those sulky blue eyes, and she’s a blond beauty, but there has to be more to a woman than looks. When Hands introduced her, she was so shy and awkward . . . I think she’s missing a chopstick.”

John pursed his lips. “Hmm. Great figure, from what I could see beneath her loose dress.”

More tartly than she intended, she responded, “Chewed gum all the time.”

“Come on, baby, it’s not our business.”

“Hands deserves better.”

“Baby!”

“Well, he could do much better. I don’t mean to interfere. It’s just that the woman didn’t impress me.”

“No matchmaking or unmaking, sweetheart. Okay?”

“Okay.” She mixed sugar into her voice and put her hand over her heart. “Surely, dearest, you don’t think I would ever interfere in the guys’ love lives?”

John put his hand over his mouth in mock horror and exclaimed through his fingers, “How could you ever get that idea? Of course not.”

Joy changed the subject. “Oh, I want to see Jy-ying. I told you about her little dog. But something is wrong with her, and I fear that telling her about our travel through time from the future was too much for her. She may think we’re crazy, want to quit her new job with us, and flee. I’ll see her as soon as we take a bath.”

John frowned. “Take a bath?”

Joy hardened her voice. “Take a bath. B.A.T.H.”

John looked both ways as though checking that no one was around to hear, then cupped one hand to the side of his mouth and leaned toward her to whisper, “Have you become . . . incontinent?”

“Bastard,” she yelled and swung at his shoulder, but John stepped sideways and slapped her on the behind.

“Okay,” he laughed, “bath time. I know, we’re all sweaty from the overheated stores, and you’re going to haul me to the sewage disposal plant if I don’t bathe before we go to bed.”

Joy grinned. “Yes, smart man. Finally.”

As they undressed in John’s apartment, he said, “I almost forgot. We now have to discard the idea of a Tor Import and Export Company. Since our attackers knew about the Fairfax Hotel, they have to know about the company, as well. They’ll be looking for it. I know that naming the company after your beloved mother means a lot to you, but we

have no choice but to change the name. We should look for an existing company to buy that we can convert to do the same thing we intended anyway”

It had been almost three days since Joy had left her mother in such a rush, she'd been unable to say a real good-bye before never seeing her again. At the mention of her mother, Joy again experienced the heartrending loss, and silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

Half undressed, John put his arm around her and pulled her to him. He stroked her back as she grieved. “I know, baby, I know.”

Joy cried her anguish out, then pulled back and wiped her eyes. She managed to sigh, “I understand, darling.” She took a handkerchief out of her purse and blew her nose. She gave John a wintry smile. “Let's look in the classified ads later and see what we can find.”

Ryan

In their small headquarters squad room, Lieutenant Ryan met the six policemen he had selected to work with him. Two of them had been with him when he investigated the shoot-out at the Fairfax Hotel, one was Alex Reardon, who had been involved in the assault at the Presidio camp gate, and the rest of them had investigated the other attacks or crimes that had occurred recently.

Ryan led off with a brief overview of the crime wave, the possibility of army takeover of the police under their post-earthquake emergency mandate if nothing were done, and the captain's ultimatum that they have the perpetrators in jail within a week. He then appointed Alex as his second in command.

With that out of the way, he stretched his arm out to point to a corner table. “We have a handgun, rifles of some sort—one broken—and a strange vest. There is also the much beaten-on Ford in the lot outside, in which we found the rifles. As to the stuff in the corner, we haven't had time for real tests yet, but our weapons expert Steve has taken a preliminary look at them. When I'm done, I want each of you to look at these things carefully to see whether you can add to what we know about them.

“And that is this. The handgun may be of German make and is the most advanced handgun we have ever seen. It has ‘Shultz 703 Hanover’ engraved on the bottom of the grip. It fires a 9mm bullet that is

strange also, with an unusual construction in its head. Steve believes that it is similar to the illegal dum-dum bullets, but will cause much greater injury on entering and exiting a human body.”

One of the policeman asked, “You mean there is a law against them?”

“No,” Ryan answered. “It’s not our law. The Hague Convention of some years ago outlawed expanding or exploding bullets. Since we were using them in the Philippine War, we didn’t ratify the convention.”

The policeman who had asked puckered his lips and wagged his hand. “Oh-ho, a college man,” he said and laughed, as did the others.

Ryan grinned, and waited until he again had their attention. “I have sent a telegram to the German Mauser Company describing the handgun, the engravings, the cartridge, and the bullet. I assume that we will soon know more about the gun. I’ll tell you this: if I find out who produces it, I’m going to order one for myself, and recommend that it become the weapon of our police force.

“With the rifles, the mystery deepens. Steve took the unbroken one to the armory and had to clean out the barrel, which for some reason was plugged with dirt. Then he aimed it down range and pulled the trigger. When he told me what happened, he was almost gibbering with amazement. Now, some of you may know of the Maxim machine gun that the British Army loves to use. It’s a heavy son of a bitch, Steve tells me; it sits on a tripod, and has to be operated by several soldiers. You won’t believe it, but those two rifles on the table are like that machine gun in that they can rapidly fire a stream of bullets. The bullets are not in a belt, but in a curved metal contraption that fits into a slot in front of the trigger. It holds sixty rounds, and feeds them one by one into the firing chamber. From what I hear, all I need to do is pull the trigger and swing the rifle from side to side, and I will shoot you all dead in a second.”

Above the sudden murmurs, Alex exclaimed, “That’s impossible.”

Ryan tried to quiet them all down with his hands, and turned to Alex. “Tell Steve that. He says that a country could rule the world if every one of its soldiers had one. Anyway, it shoots 45-calibers, so it’s possible we could load it. But I don’t know if our cartridges will fit. We’ll see. Anyway, I also described this rifle to Mauser and will find out if they know anything about it. All I can say is that the gang that has it is going to be dangerous beyond anything we’ve experienced.

“Now for the vest. It is an armored vest, closed by some new fastening method. Where there would be buttons, it has filaments of

unknown material that mingle tightly together until force is applied to pull them apart. To join them, you need only press the two sides together. Never seen the likes of it. As to the stopping power of the vest—” Ryan let that echo around the squad room as he looked from one to another of his six men “—a .32-, .38-, or .45-caliber handgun bullet will not go through it. Nor will any of the high-powered rifle bullets we’ve tried so far. We have yet to try an elephant gun. Yet, gentlemen, it’s lightweight and fits beneath a shirt without being too bulky. It is made of unknown material. If Mexican soldiers all wore these vests and carried that machine gun-like rifle, Mexico could take over the United States.

“Anyway, just on an off chance the Germans know something about it, I also included a description of the vest in my telegram. I’ve also sent similar telegrams to Remington and Colt, with copies to General Funston.

“There you have it. The gang we are going to have to find within a week and put behind bars—” Ryan again hesitated for emphasis “—has these handguns, rifles, and vests. I only hope we don’t get in a firefight with them.”

One of the policemen asked, “What’s a firefight?”

“Oh, that’s a new word I learned. It means a shoot-out. Time to get to work, men.” Ryan assigned his men to conducting interviews and chasing leads. Then he advised, “You each are to see Steve and arm yourselves with a shotgun, Remington, knife, and two Colt 45s. This is not a billy club job. And you all will work in pairs, at a minimum.”

When he was done, he released them to handle and inspect the incredible weapons and vest on the table

Chapter 18

Saturday Evening

Joy

John and Joy had decided to sleep another night in Colby's Inn, since the furniture they bought would not be delivered until the next day, and they still had food and an icebox to buy. They had already arranged to meet the guys in the Fior d'Italia restaurant for supper, and Joy had gone to Jy-ying's room to invite her and her new dog to stay at the Inn at company expense. After knocking several times without an answer, she'd left a note to that effect on the door.

She told John, "Since you and the guys made such a big fuss over my attire last time, this time I'm going to dress in girlie clothes. Ones I bought myself," she added.

She opened a large bag she'd brought with her and took out what she had bought that afternoon from the Marie Antoinette dress shop while John had been studying women's undergarments, in some cases taking them off the hangers and holding them at arm's length to look at them and feel their fabric, sometimes puckering his lips or raising his eyebrows. The clerks were quite embarrassed and tried to hurry Joy and John out of the shop. When Joy realized what was going on, she took her time, and even modeled several bloomers for him, which, of course, she didn't buy.

She put on a waist—shirt—of fine French pink batiste, with baby Irish lace around the wrists and at the Gibson collar. It was tucked in the back and trimmed with a Val lace insertion. She slipped the waist into a shapely maroon taffeta silk skirt with a black velvet flounce. Not even her toe showed beneath it. She let her gold locket hang outside the high collar, donned pearl earrings, and pinned her hair up in the wide swirl look so popular among upper class ladies. When she was finished, she woke up John, who had fallen asleep on the bed.

Yawning, he glanced at her and grumbled, "I spend my life waiting for you." Just as Joy was about to respond appropriately, he added, "And it's worth it."

Smiling, she kissed her finger and touched his nose with it. When he stood, she put her arm in his and said, "Shall we, my man?"

Due to the time it took for Joy to dress, she and John were a little late arriving at the restaurant. As soon as they came in, the cashier stared at Joy, looked at John with raised eyebrows as though to ask if she was the same woman, and shrugged almost imperceptibly. He motioned for them to follow him. They ended up at the same table they'd had the day before, but this time Hands' gum-chewing, blond friend was sitting back to the corner.

When they approached the table, the guys rose in greeting; Sal and Dolphy smiled and said, "You look beautiful, Joy." John waved them down.

Hands spoke almost immediately to John. "I hope you don't mind that I brought my friend, Jill Halverson."

As John replied, "No not at—" Jill half rose as though to give a little bow in greeting, and spilled the glass of water in front of her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so clumsy. Oh my." She put her hand over her mouth in obvious distress.

John motioned over a waiter, while Joy went over to Jill. She put her hand on Jill's shoulder and said warmly, "Forget about it. It's only water, and who hasn't spilled a glass now and then?" The front of Jill's dress was wet, so Joy lifted a napkin, wiped off the chair next to Jill, and sat down to wipe the excess water off Jill's dress. The waiter reset the table with a new tablecloth.

Joy looked up at Jill's face and got her first good look at the woman's large blue eyes, flawless pink complexion, full lips, and the blond hair that curled to her shoulders from under her hat. She thought, *This girl could have an IQ of 65 and I don't think it would matter to Hands.*

Joy could not help herself. Out of the corner of her eye, she tried to get a measure of Jill's figure, and what she saw was enough for her to correct her thoughts. *Make that an IQ of 35.*

She also noticed that the girl wore no makeup and no jewelry, except for a tinny-looking ring on her right hand. It resembled a prize that one would get at the penny arcade. *That's what the crane must have plucked from the pile of trinkets and dropped into the slot for her penny.* Jill wore an inexpensive light brown walking skirt and a loose white blouse. On her head was a simple Mexican braid hat trimmed with a plaid scarf. *Poor thing,* Joy thought, *she must be barely living from day to day.*

While John talked to the guys about what he had in mind for the following day, Joy tried to engage Jill in conversation, but the poor girl

was apparently intimidated by eating at the same table with Hands' boss and assistant, about whom it appeared Hands had already told the girl too much. Jill could only look at her hands or her plate as Joy tried to kick start her into talking.

"Do you like it here?"

"Yes, I like San Francisco," Jill answered, fiddling with her napkin.

"Are you living with your parents?"

"No, my parents died when I was young," she replied, staring down at what her hands were doing.

"Do you have relatives here?"

"Ah . . . my aunt," she said in a low voice, as though being questioned in a court of law by the prosecutor.

"The earthquake must have been awful."

"Yes, it was awful." She nodded, still refusing to meet Joy's eyes.

"Are you working?"

"I was a waitress at the Fairfax restaurant," she answered, rubbing her nose.

"Is that where you met Hands?"

"Yes." She peeked at Hands. Then she took chewing gum out of her mouth and stuck it under the table.

Joy's eyes went wide as her eyebrows climbed up her forehead. She turned her head away from Jill to hide her disapproval. She also gave up trying to talk to Jill—the more she pressed, the more Jill looked ready to faint. She had hardly eaten anything on her plate, either. Besides, Hands was giving Joy sour looks.

So Joy turned to Hands and asked him if he thought the earthquake and fire would prevent the San Francisco Seals from playing a new season of baseball. He had been a catcher for them until he broke his right arm, and Joy had purposely asked him the big question. He commanded the conversation for the rest of the meal.

That night, as they settled into bed in John's room, Joy started to say, "I think Jill is beautiful and all that, but Hands can do—"

John interrupted her. "Hands off." He hesitated as he realized he'd made a pun. He looked sideways at her, waiting for her appreciative groan. Finding her looking heavenward sufficient reward, he went on. "Not your business. No interfering. No matchmaking. No match breaking. Okay?"

"Okay, boss." But she knew that the promise was only as good as the evening was long.

Hadad

Because of the ache in his finger and his preoccupation with finding John and Joy, Hadad was having a hard time getting to sleep. Finally he gently shook Carla and whispered, “Let us talk.”

Almost asleep, she muttered, “You talk, I will listen.”

“I have been thinking—”

Carla mumbled a barely audible, “Good to hear it.”

“I cannot wait for information from Follet,” he said, fingering his right earlobe. “I have got to start organizing our own mission. I will get John and Joy soon. If not this week, then the next. But I should not wait for that. I have an awful lot to do to create a fundamentalist Islamic world. Tomorrow I think I will start looking for a company to buy. You know, the biography that Hands wrote and John’s diary are so helpful as guidebooks.” He refocused on their primary mission. “I doubt that John will now set up the Tor Import and Export Company, since he knows someone is after them, and that we have inside information, what with our attack on his hotel.”

Hadad leaned out of bed and reached for his coat on a nearby chair. He pulled one of his purloined Havana cigars out of a pocket, bit off the end, and spit it across the room at the spittoon. He missed. Putting the cigar in his mouth, he settled back and steepled his hands on his stomach. The cigar helped him think, lit or not.

“Anyway,” Hadad resumed, “John surely will set up or buy some sort of company as a cover for their mission. And like him, I’ll pick a company that will enable me to create foreign subsidiaries or offices to provide me with a cover while organizing my foreign interventions on behalf of Islam.”

Hadad took a moment stick the cigar under his nose and sniff it. Smiling, he added, “Oh yes, and I also should set up a broker’s account so that I can start investing in the market and reaping the profits from those stocks I know will be winners. Then I can also buy majority stock interests in companies whose products I know will be successful, like the Edison Company, Ford Motors, and Westinghouse. I can become the richest and most influential person in the world. All I need to do is invest in the automobile, phonograph, and movie industry, and Carla, are you listening?”

He heard only the sound of deep breathing.

Chapter 19

Sunday

Ryan

With Captain O'Reilly yelling for action, Lieutenant Ryan had told his team they would have to work through Sunday. One of his team members, Sergeant Schubert, actually complained about missing church, and exploded, "My woman will make the rest of the week hell."

Ryan checked Schubert's records and telephoned the contact name—it was Elise—before church. He explained the rush his team was under, and promised that when they'd completed their task, he would give Schubert a week's vacation.

"You mean he'll be moping around here for a week," she replied with some irritation.

Ryan's eyebrows went up at that. "Well . . . how about a bonus in addition to his overtime pay, with no time off?"

"As long as he brings the money to me without stopping in some saloon to souse it away."

Ryan stood back from the wall phone's mouthpiece and frowned at it for a moment. He shook his head. Maintaining his distance from the phone, he asked, "Why don't you come down to police headquarters and pick up his pay and bonus from our paymaster? I can arrange it."

"I couldn't do that. What would people say?"

The blood fled from his knuckles as Ryan's grip tightened on the telephone receiver. He leaned his head against the wall. After taking two deep breaths, he said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I will put his pay in an iron box with a combination lock on it, and I will call and give you the combination of the lock when he's not around to overhear me."

There was silence at the other end, finally broken by a slow-spoken, "I don't know. Are you sure he won't be able to get in the box? He could shoot off the lock, you know."

Ryan rubbed his forehead and looked up at the ceiling. "We'll figure something out. Good-bye."

Later, when Schubert reported in, Ryan told him, "I called your wife Elise, and explained to her why I was keeping you on duty today. And—"

“Elise is not my wife.”

“Not your wife? She certainly sounded like it.”

“Gee, Lieutenant, I hope you didn’t say anything to upset her. She loves me and hates for us to be separated.”

Ryan exclaimed, “Who is she?”

“She is my . . . ah . . . girlfriend.”

Ryan hesitated, but he did have to ask. “You do have a wife?”

“Yes, a lovely woman. She takes good care of me.”

Ryan threw up his hands and changed the subject. “You have something to report?”

“Yes,” Schubert said with a sigh. “We obtained the name of the owner of the busted up Ford from the distributor. It is Joe Smith, residing at the Fairfax Hotel. I checked at the hotel, and no Joe Smith has registered there in the last month.”

“Clever,” Ryan responded. “How did this . . . Smith . . . pay for the auto?”

“With cash.”

“Yes, of course. Big bills? Small bills?”

“In hundred-dollar bills.”

“Okay. Sign out a C-note from our cashier and exchange that for one of those that Smith used to pay the distributor.”

The telephone rang; Ryan answered. One of his policemen at the Fairfax Hotel reported, “John Banks and Joy Phim have checked out of the hotel. They left no forwarding address. I got a strange story about Banks from the previous manager and new owner, Foster. Three days ago, Banks bought the hotel from Foster and made him manager. Then yesterday, the day after the shoot-out there, Banks sold it back to Foster. And get this. He sold it back for a \$9,000 loss. Jesus, in two days. I don’t think Rockefeller would do that.”

“That’s interesting,” Ryan said slowly and thoughtfully. “I want you to do two things. One, pry a bullet out of the wall across from the window. Two, I’m going to send three more men over to help you. I want you to interview everyone in the hotel who was there on the days Banks was, and ask them what they saw of Banks and his . . . assistant, Phim. And then, interview people who live or work within two blocks of the hotel. Class A interview all around.”

Ryan put down the phone just as Alex came into the office. He waited until Alex approached his desk, then stood up straight, crossed his arms across his chest, and coldly stared at Alex for several seconds. Uncrossing his arms, he pointed a finger at Alex and barked, “You

were involved in that fucking sex ring Ben was operating out of the Chinese camp, weren't you."

Alex paled; he stood, wide-eyed and paralyzed, for seconds. Then he broke contact with Ryan's accusing eyes, spread his hand on his chest, and let out a burst of strained laughter. "What? Me?" he replied in a high voice. "Not really. Ben just asked me to send the pretty ones to a certain tent. It was just to . . . protect them, Ben told me. You know, from the Chinese men. They are so sex crazed, you know. That's all."

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"What did Ben give you, besides free cunt?"

"Nothing. I thought I was helping the girls!"

"I'll tell you what. I'm gonna accept that, Alex. I need your expertise. But, God help you if I find out you're lying. Now, I want you to find out who was in that Red Cross building where the Mac truck was stolen. I want all the details. So, interview everyone who was there."

Alex almost bumped into the desk near the door in his haste to get out the office. Ryan plopped down on his stiff-backed chair and took a long deep breath. He let it out slowly. He closed his eyes, clasped his hands on his cluttered desk, and counted slowly to ten; he felt the tension deflate. He took out one of his Philip Morris cigarettes, lit it, and puffed on it reflectively.

Yes, he concluded.

He pulled his wrinkled notebook out of a suit pocket and wrote down what he had asked his detail to do, the exchange with Alex regarding the sex ring, and the time. He then called the homicide detective assigned to the case of the two policemen murdered in the whorehouse. After a long conversation with him, he left for the Presidio.

Jy-ying

Jy-ying stood back and looked at Little Ying. Clean, his short hair shiny, his white spots standing out against the black, and with his red collar, he was a handsome little dog. She had covered his cut with an antibacterial bandage just large enough to cover it and used just enough medical tape to hold that in place. The swelling in his paw had gone down slightly, but he still avoided putting his weight on it.

Mirroring the tilt of his head with her own, she told him, "Now it is time to show you off."

She carried him down the hallway to Joy's room, put him down, and knocked.

After a moment, John stuck his head out of his door one room farther down the hallway, and yelled, "She's here. Come join us."

Of course, Jy-ying thought as she approached John's room with a smile. *Stupid me.*

As John greeted her, Little Ying started smelling his feet and pants. John bent down and petted him. "So this is the little guy Joy told me about. Come in."

As soon as Joy saw Little Ying, she exclaimed, "Oh, how cute." Squatting down, she petted him and let him lick her face. "He looks so much better cleaned up."

Joy pointed to the Anchor Steam beer bottles on the side table and the ice bucket with two bottles left in it, and grinned. "Celebrating our new furniture. Take one."

"I thought you could not buy alcohol here on Sunday," Jy-ying said.

While uncapping the bottle for her, John replied, "This is San Francisco, you know."

John invited Jy-ying to sit in the one chair by the side table, while he and Joy took their beers and got comfortable on the bed. They all spent a few moments watching Little Ying smell their feet, explore their suitcases, and find other odoriferous things of interest.

Jy-ying cleared her throat and, assuming a downcast expression, she looked from John to Joy and then down at her hands, which she twisted in her lap. In a low, solemn voice, she told them, "I was so upset by the movie of the . . . what you call it? Nuker attack?"

"Nuclear attack," Joy answered.

Still staring at her hands, Jy-ying continued. "I could not sleep. I kept seeing in my mind all the bodies and the horrible destruction. So, I went for a walk. It was late, and the streets were almost empty."

She then mentioned the racing horses, the injured dog, and later the mugging and rape attempt by three men. She suddenly looked up at John and pointed at Little Ying. "That brave little one, injured as he was, tried to protect me against three men! That is how he got the razor cut on his back. He truly is my hero."

Joy nodded. "Ah, so that's why you named him in Chinese, Little 'brave one.'"

Jy-ying glanced at her. "Yes." Looking back at John, she added, "Then I disposed of the men and brought Little Ying back to the apartment for first aid and cuddling."

Joy's eyes were huge as she asked, "What did you do to the three men? Were they armed?"

"Yes, one of them had a knife, and another had a folding razor. I used some elementary defense moves—I would be too embarrassed to show them to you—and chopped them unconscious."

Joy blurted, "That's all you did to them?"

Jy-ying again looked at her. "I did carve my initials in their foreheads. What would you have done?"

Joy thought for a moment and replied, "If you hadn't been able to fight them, they would have robbed and raped you, and possibly afterwards they would have kidnapped you for future pleasure or killed you as a witness. Or carved you up with their knives because they didn't like Orientals. Also, I have no doubt there were other victims—or soon would be again."

John frowned at her.

Joy hesitated, looked at John, and said, "I don't know what I would have done. But they are wild animals preying on women, and I might have killed them."

John shook his head. "No, ba—" he remembered Jy-ying was there—"—Joy. You wouldn't. You might have done what Jy-ying did, or break each of their legs as a lesson, but I don't think you would have set yourself up as public executioner."

Joy's voice turned cold. "I hate rapists, John. I think they all should be castrated, at least, and when they do it to children, execution is too good for them."

John put up his hands and leaned back, shaking his head.

Noting that with a smile to herself, Jy-ying took a long, deliberate sip from the beer bottle, carefully put it down, and tilted her head at John as she asserted, "I don't agree with executing men just because they committed rape—or would have done so." She smiled to signal a change in subject. "Anyway, can we talk about your mission? I want to help you in any way I can. I want to democratize the world, and I want to prevent Sabah's . . . nuker attack. Sabah must have been brilliant to do what you said—gain control over China, and then the whole world. Maybe *we* need not kill him—need not execute a child," and she gave John a soft look, as though commiserating with a father whose child was ill, "but *we* can educate him instead."

Joy

Something is wrong here, Joy thought. She wanted to probe Jy-ying's eyes, but the other woman kept looking at John. *Maybe it's that.*

Frowning, putting her finger under her chin, and speaking louder than she realized, Joy pointed out, "That is far into the future. He will not be born until 1914. We have lots of time to discuss it. Now, however, we have a little problem with those trying to kill *us*."

Jy-ying asked, "You will build your new apartments into a fort. Yes?"

John nodded.

"Excuse me," Jy-ying said. "I am so ignorant of these things, but would it not be better for *us* to find and kill them rather than wait for their attack? Or, get them to come to *us* on our terms?"

Joy was quiet for a moment as her finger migrated to the tip of her nose. Still frowning, she finally asked, "But how? They come from nowhere and disappear into nowhere."

John leaned forward, put his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand, and thought aloud while gazing at Jy-ying. "I've been thinking too defensively. You've started me thinking about what we can do offensively. Hmm."

Joy looked at John. "This is a new kind of challenge, isn't it," she said. "First, we should think about what we know about these assassins. Let's see" She looked back at Jy-ying. "Well, first, they are out to kill John and me."

Jy-ying glanced again at Joy before returning her gaze to John. "They are short for men," she added. "One is maybe my height, the other maybe three inches shorter. And—"

John held up his finger. "And they are well armed and from the future."

Joy grabbed John's finger and forced it down onto his lap. "Most important, they know things about our activities that we don't know ourselves, until we do them, such as where we would be Thursday afternoon, and which room we got in the hotel John bought that day."

"That's it!" John exclaimed, leaning back and shaking his finger in the air. "They know what we had planned on doing. They must know our mission. Therefore, if we go ahead and do what we had planned before the assassination attempts, we can expect them to attack us again."

"And we ambush them," Jy-ying said, emphasizing the "we" again.

John still had his finger in the air, now waving it in a circle. "They surely must know about our setting up the Tor Import and Export Company—"

"And they must realize that we now know that they are from the fu-

ture and have information about our mission and activities,” Joy interrupted, putting her finger up and simulating a sword fight with John’s.

Jy-ying

Jy-ying watched the two, wondering, *How can they be so relaxed and joyful with each other? Oh! I think I punned in English.*

Joy looked from John to Jy-ying, and said, “You seem pleased about something. Have you got an idea?”

Jy-ying puckered her mouth for a second. Then, putting up her own finger and waving it with a little smile, she pointed out, “Since they must think that we will no longer go ahead with the Tor Company, but must believe that we need a company of some sort for our mission, especially one involved in international trade—that is correct, yes?”

“Yes,” John answered.

“Then they will expect us to buy or form a company with another name.”

“Good point,” John said, and Jy-ying couldn’t help but beam at that. “What else would they expect we will now do differently? We were going to buy enough acres close to San Francisco to set up a weapons range for practice and for a place where I can continue to train Joy—”

Joy looked at Jy-ying, tilted her head toward John, and raised her eyebrows, as though saying, “What do you expect from the crazy man?”

John ignored her. “Now they will think we won’t buy such property while they’re around. But, they might still expect us to buy an empty factory or warehouse, and convert it for martial arts sparring and weapons practice and training.”

“Ah-ha,” Joy responded, “that means that they’ll watch the classified For Sale ads in the newspapers for anything we might want, and probably hire a private detective firm.”

“I got it,” John said, thumping his fist into his hand. “Here’s what we should do today.”

Chapter 20

Monday Morning

Hadad

Hadad let Carla sleep while he picked up the morning *San Francisco Call* at the nearest kiosk. On the way back to the Resort he glanced at some of the news stories: *Roosevelt Makes History—Again: Trip To Panama First By A President To A Foreign Country; London Selected To Host 1908 Olympics; Steamer Dix Cut In Half—45 People Die; and Miles’ ‘Anchors Aweigh’ Deemed Most Popular Song.*

Trivial. All the news is trivial, Hadad thought. Just wait a couple of years after I take care of Satan’s two time travelers. As he entered his room at the Resort, he was still thinking of the future headlines for which he would be responsible. His favorite was *Second Pope Assassinated—Church In Disarray As Moslem Forces Enter Rome.*

He pulled the room’s old rickety chair up to the bed and noisily opened the paper across Carla’s sleeping body.

Carla stirred and sleepily asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking up the want ads.”

“About time you got a job,” Carla murmured as she rolled over onto her side with her back to him and tried to go back to sleep.

Hadad ignored the noise of the crackling, rustling, and swishing pages as he rapidly turned them to find the classified ads. Nor did he give any attention to Carla as she pulled the covers over her head, the movement shaking some of the sheets of newsprint onto the floor. All the papers could fall on the floor and be trampled, as far as Hadad was concerned. Except for the one page he now pinned to the bed with his pointed finger. He had found what he was searching for in the *Businesses For Sale* section. It was the only ad of its kind, and perfect. He wrote down the address and telephone number, planning to use the Resort’s public telephone to call after 8:00 a.m. and make an appointment.

Humming to himself, he brushed the newspapers off the bed, pulled his Svoik gun oil kit from his bag next to the bed, and prepared to clean and oil his Stahl again, even though he had done so the night before. He did not bother to look elsewhere in the classifieds, and missed the *Businesses Wanted* ad:

Sino-American partnership seeking to buy well established import and export business. Please mail queries to P.O. Box 327, San Francisco.

John

John drove to the Anderson Detective Agency and hired them to watch for any suspicious characters loitering around P.O. Box 327, to simulate opening the box and checking inside, and then to shadow and report on the particulars of anyone watching or trying to follow them. They were also to keep watch on John's apartment building and report immediately any suspicious characters or activities around the building. John offered a flat fee of \$100 a month plus expenses. The detective agency hiked that to \$150 when John warned that the job might involve men who were armed and dangerous.

Joy

The furniture Joy and the guys had bought arrived in the morning, thanks to large tips that John had spread around. Jy-ying's arrived about the same time, and for the same reason. The dozen or more trucks and wagons took hours to unload, and created a traffic jam on the street in front of the apartment building. A policeman happened along on his horse and, after hitching it to a tree, he tried to help unjam the traffic. Joy got so exasperated with how slow the unloading was going that she told the delivery men to just drop the furniture somewhere in John's and her apartments, and they would arrange it later—except for the beds. She made sure they were properly put together and placed in the bedrooms.

After the last truck left, Joy and John went down to the guys' apartments to see what they had done with their furniture. They had yet to visit any of the other apartments and did not know who was placed where, not even on which side of the hall Jy-ying's second floor apartment was. All the apartment doors were open on the second floor, so they just walked into the first apartment, and saw Sal and Dolphy arranging furniture in the living room.

"Whose apartment is this?" John asked.

"Mine," Sal responded in a puff of smoke, an Abajo stuck firmly in his mouth.

Dolphy supplied, "Mine is down below." He pointed toward the floor.

"Oh," John replied, "then Hands must have the other one." He pointed down at an angle, indicating the approximate location of the apartment on the other side of the first floor hallway.

Sal and Dolphy exchanged looks, and Sal replied, "Yep, that's what he wanted."

Cheerily, Joy suggested, "Let's all go out to eat in about a half-hour, okay?" She looked at John and added, "On me."

"Okay," Sal and Dolphy answered as Joy and John turned to leave the apartment.

Joy knocked on Jy-ying's door, and when she opened it, Joy smiled at her and Little Ying, standing near Jy-ying's feet. "Do you and your hero want to join us and the guys for lunch?"

Jy-ying bent down and asked Little Ying, "Do you want to eat with these nice people?" He looked at her with his ears thrust forward and his tail a blur. "He is a little shy, but I think his tail says, 'Yes.' Oh, have you seen my new car in the back?" she added. "It is a Bebe."

Joy's eyes widened and she arched her brows. "That cute car is yours? Can I drive it sometime?"

Jy-ying's face split into a grin. "Of course. I have room for one or two more persons. Then your horseless carriage will not be so crowded. Yes?"

That was the first time Joy had seen her grin like that, and she was happy to see it.

John finally said something. "No need for the cars. It's only a short walk."

"Shucks," Joy exclaimed.

On the first floor, they found Hands' apartment door closed. They knocked. No answer. John knocked harder, suggesting that Hands must be moving some new furniture and hadn't heard him. Finally, Hands opened the door. He held up his pants with one hand, and his shirt was open. His face was flushed, and he stammered something about sleeping.

Joy made her lunch invitation, and when Hands nodded, Joy motioned to John that they should leave. When they were on the stairs going up to their apartments, Joy smiled knowingly and said, "I bet Jill is in the apartment, helping him."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" John asked, the corners of his mouth turning into dimples.

"Men!" she replied with knowing grin.

John couldn't let that go. "You women always have one thing in mind."

"Yes," Joy responded with eyebrows raised, looking at John from the corner of her eye, "and who put it there?"

A short time later, they all met outside the apartments, including Hands, who was alone. John suggested that they eat at the U.S. Café, about two blocks down the street.

For a fifty cent tip and John's threat to eat elsewhere otherwise, Jy-ying was able to bring Little Ying into the Café on his leash. Sal pulled out Jy-ying's chair for her to sit down, sat next to her, and answered her shyly when she asked him what he would recommend to eat. He even kept his elbows off the table, put a napkin on his lap, and did not slurp his food or clean his teeth with his fingernail. As Joy watched him bend over his coffee to sip it, she wondered what had happened to the real Sal. Then she saw Dolphy acting much the same way.

Well, she is fair game, Joy thought, enjoying the show, and she can more than take care of herself.

John

After lunch, Hands wanted to have a word with John. So, as they walked back to the apartments, John and Hands hung back.

"I'm sorry about what happened when you knocked on my door before," Hands began. "Jill was with me, and I was in deep . . . conversation with her."

"No problem and not my business, as long as it doesn't interfere with your job."

"I would like Jill to move in with me."

"Oh; is that wise?"

"I know you will make our apartment building secure. I think it would be better if she lived inside, rather than always coming and going with or without me. I would in any case want to give her the keys to my apartment. You see boss, Jill really has nowhere to live. I saw her room above the Montana Saloon on Pacific Street. I wouldn't keep a dog there. And three times already, she's had to strongly discourage drunks who were propositioning her. I'm sure they'll soon gang rape her. She doesn't deserve that kind of life. I feel sorry for her. And beneath her shyness, she really is a nice person."

"Are you sure her beauty and sex aren't short-circuiting your good sense?"

Hands looked at John for a moment, puzzled. Then he burst out laughing. "Of course it is. Wouldn't it for you, if she were Joy?" Then he stopped laughing and looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. But I have to tell you, Jill has already taught me some things."

John put his hand on Hands' shoulder and said, "No. You're right. If she were Joy and I were you, I would be doing the same thing. Go ahead. But don't hide her. She is invited along with you to our non-work-related get-togethers."

"Thanks, boss."

"One more thing," John added. "Not a hint to her of where we came from and what we are doing here. Aside from frightening her, it's so incredible that she surely would tell others this great secret, and that would increase our danger. Yours, as well. You understand?"

Hands seemed to want to say something in response, and finally admitted, "I know that she isn't the brightest star in the sky and I don't think she would really understand if I told her about you two. But, I feel so sorry for her."

"And she is a beauty. Right, Hands?"

Hands smiled. "Yes, she surely is. You should see all of her."

When they reached their apartments and John was alone with Joy, he told her in general about the conversation. Joy's immediate response was, "I don't like it. I wonder if Jill is bright enough to live in these apartments with all of us. We have so many secrets here, and we will be making this place as secure as we can. Having a dumb lass here with us may be the chink in our armor."

"She's Caucasian."

"John! I can't believe you said that." She hit him on the head with a folded newspaper. Her scathing stare melted into a grin. "Anyway, I like Hands, so I'm going to make an effort to get to know her better. Maybe I can get more than two words out of her at a time. Not that it matters to Hands."

"Come on now, baby. Give her a chance."

"Yes, you're right, of course."

"Of course. Again."

For that, John got another whack with the newspaper.

Hadad

To give Follet more time to collect information, Hadad did not telephone her until after lunch.

“No, she’s not in,” her secretary told Hadad.

“Has she found anything?”

“No, nothing yet, but she’s working hard on it.”

Too soon anyway, Hadad thought as he hung up. “Are you ready, Carla? I have an appointment to check out this company that is for sale.”

“Why do you want me along if you are going to be doing all this yourself?”

“Okay, okay. God be blessed. *We* will check it out. I do not know what has gotten into you lately, Carla. You are so sensitive.”

Carla stared at him while one hand fiddled with the lacy sleeve of her blouse. The corners of her mouth turned down. Then she stood abruptly and said coldly, “Go. I will be in my place, two steps behind you.”

John

“Let’s go, baby.” Looking at the furniture scattered all over their apartment, John added, “We’ve got an awful lot to do today, but most important is getting the business started and our apartment building secured.”

“Okay.” Joy put on a hat shaped like a sailor’s cap and trimmed with white coque feathers and an embroidered band. “You know, sweetheart, I could grow to like the women’s hats of this age.”

John smiled at her appearance. “I couldn’t. Not on you. I like you without a hat—with your straight black hair free and cascading almost to your waist.”

“Yeah, but if I went out like that the police would pick me up as a prostitute. Okay, I’m ready. Let’s get the guys—that is, our bodyguards. What about Jy-ying?”

“I asked her earlier and she said if she weren’t needed, she wanted to do more shopping and later work on straightening out her apartment.” He sighed. “This stair-climbing communication system is ridiculous. I’m going to have to set up an intercommunication system between all our apartments. Anyway . . . are you armed?”

“Of course. You have the address for the company?”

“Got it. And you.” He took her hand as they left the apartment.

Chapter 21

Early Afternoon, Monday

Abraham Levy

World Trading Company on Townsend Street had barely survived the fire. It had been on the edge of the downtown fire, and only an empty lot next to it saved it from burning down. As it was, the side of the building facing uptown was scorched, and the inside still suggested the acrid odor of smoke. Abraham Levy had invested heavily in Lieberman's Furs, which had burnt to the ground, and without sufficient insurance to cover his losses, he was now badly in debt. World Trading was one of the companies he had to unload as soon as possible.

He had made a special trip to the company to see two prospective buyers, and he hoped that he could get them bidding against each other.

With a subdued grunt, Levy braced one hand on his office desk to help him push up from his executive chair to greet the first of his appointments. His round belly pushed out uncomfortably on his brown worsted pants and buttoned suit coat, despite his corset-like vest, which he wore one size too small. Standing as erect as he could, he held his hand out to the Oriental fellow that his secretary led into his office. "Hello," he said, "I am Abe Levy, the owner of this company."

Startled at first that one of the prospective buyers was Oriental, as was the woman with him, he didn't like the thought of *his* company being taken over by *them*. *But*, he sighed to himself, *if he has tons of money, so be it*.

"I am happy to meet you," the man said, taking his hand. "I am Hadad al Jaber."

After waiting a moment for Hadad to introduce her, the woman with him finally gave him a "You're hopeless" look, smiled at Levy, and said, "My name is Carla Akwal. I'm Mr. al Jaber's assistant and translator."

Hadad quickly glanced at Carla, brows raised in surprise. Levy bowed slightly and waved them to two cushioned chairs. He dropped heavily back into his own. Levy gave Carla a closed-mouth smile to hide his missing front tooth, and asked, "What do you translate?"

“Oh, besides my ancestral language, Chinese, Farsi, Arabic, and Turkish.”

Immediately, Levy asked in Arabic, “Where were you born?”

Surprised, Carla took a moment to answer. “I was born in Kazakhstan, which is now under Russian control. My parents moved to the United States when I was thirteen years old, but I returned there . . . I mean, I visited—”

Understanding the Arabic, Hadad interrupted in English, “Yes, she has had a very interesting—”

Carla interrupted in turn, still in Arabic, “And you, sir, how come you speak Arabic?”

“I’m a Jew from Jerusalem. Are you Jews from that part of the world?”

Hadad cut off Carla’s response with, “No, we’re both Muslims. Now, as to your company—”

Shifting to English, Levy raised his hand. “Ah, yes, that’s right. You are interested in buying my prosperous company. Aren’t you?”

“Yes. How much?”

“The price is \$235,000.”

Hadad was silent as he did a fast conversion. *God almighty. He wants almost five million uptime dollars.* He could not help his background. Even though he had the money and more in ten thousand dollar counterfeit bills in the case he carried, he just had to bargain. One never accepted a first offer. He tipped his head back and puffed up his chest. “You cannot be serious—”

There was a hard knock on the office door. The secretary partially opened it and put her head through. “The second gentleman is here, Mr. Levy. Should I have him wait?”

Couldn’t be better, Levy thought. “No,” he hastened to say, “send him in.”

The secretary opened the door farther for another man and woman.

Ryan

With a cup of Golden Santos coffee in one hand, Ryan leafed through the reports the department secretary had received from the men he’d sent out, along with Steve’s report regarding the bullet extracted from the wall at the Fairfax Hotel. Finished, he leaned back, put his kip-booted feet on the metal desktop, and tried to put together what he had learned. After a few minutes, he realized that his mind was twisting around too many things, and that he had to get mentally organized.

He got up and stepped to the small chalkboard against the wall. It had a cleaning rag hung nearby, and chalk hanging on a string from the board. After wiping the board clean, in different locations around its edges he chalked in, *Killed*, standing for the two murdered policemen; *Sex ring*; *Super weapons*; *Ford*; *Truck*, for the one stolen from the Red Cross; *Escapee*, for the man who beat up two policemen and escaped from the police wagon, stealing its horse; *Fairfax bullet*; *Fairfax fire-fight*; *Stolen*, for the stolen autos; *Attempt*, for the attempt to kill two pedestrians; and *Other*, for other questionable events of the last four days.

He put time estimates next to each event, and drew solid lines between those events or things undoubtedly connected, and dots between those whose connection he suspected. He returned to his chair, lit a Philip Morris, and put both his feet back on his desk. Puffing on his cigarette, he studied what he had done through the smoke.

How interesting, he thought minutes later, stubbing out his cigarette in a metal ashtray, *I've got something*.

Jill

Jill waited for a half-hour just to make sure that everyone was gone, and they would not return to the apartments to get something they forgot. She got out of Hands' bed, put on her old robe and slippers, picked up her ratty shoulder bag, and opened the apartment door. She listened carefully for several minutes before walking over to the basement stairs. She switched on the light and descended.

Eyes big, lips parted, she studied the capsules stored in a corner. She walked around them, tapped on them with her fingers, and then hit them a couple of times with the flat of her hand. She checked to see whether their doors were locked; they were. Then she found the time machine—its door was unlocked. It opened to reveal a compartment just large enough for two people to sit, or barely stand. She climbed inside, looked around at the dials and wire trunks, and then saw the time locator's digital reading in red: *San Francisco. November 14, 1906, 2:51 a.m.*

She stood stone still, her eyes locked on the digits. Finally, taking a deep breath, she reached out a trembling hand and touched the locator. Closing her eyes, she let what she had done and the meaning of this moment wash over her.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she realized she still had much to check on, and slowly removed her hand. With a last

glance at the locator, Jill looked down at the floor, seeing the manufacturing debris and dust—pockmarked with Joy’s tears—still strewn there. She shook her head sharply, left the machine, and climbed the stairs to the first floor and from there to the third.

She checked the door on the first apartment, which was unlocked; aside from scattered furniture, the apartment seemed vacant—this was clearly not the one John and Joy were staying in. The door to the end apartment was locked. She took a small pick with a digital window on it out of her bag, and had the door unlocked in seconds.

She went in and began to explore. She opened the bedroom closet and looked at the few clothes hanging there. Ignoring John’s clothes, she fingered Joy’s two dresses and her street suit and held them out to the light. On a top shelf of the closet, she found Joy’s top-of-the-line Mac PowerBook 17 inch G4. Her heart beat rapidly. She took it down, surprised by its weight, and carried it to the bed. She felt all around it, and it suddenly clicked partially open.

Jill lifted the lid up, then stood back and gazed down at the keyboard and dead screen. As she fingered some of the keys and rubbed the back of a finger on the screen, her eyes grew moist, and a tear wet her cheek. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe and gently closed the lid. She put the PowerBook back where she found it.

She looked through the rest of the apartment. On a shelf of their new bookcase, she found the box within which Joy kept the DVDs. One was labeled *Nuclear Horror*. She lifted the DVD and looked at it closely, and her tears started again. She put it back; she had to sit on a chair until she could collect herself.

More exploration turned up Joy and John’s new five-flange, fire-proof safe. They had yet to activate a combination for its lock, and its door was open a crack. She looked inside and saw some envelopes. They turned out to be John and Joy’s birth certificates dated 1881 and 1882, their university records, John’s Yale Ph.D. diploma dated 1903, and the registration certificate for the Tor Import and Export Company in New York. No money.

She carefully put everything back, then stood at the door before leaving, giving the apartment one last look. She threw a kiss to it, closed the door softly behind her, locked it, and returned to Hands’ apartment. She glanced at his new Parker alarm clock. It would probably be a half-hour before Hands returned. Chanting a strange melody, she started to rearrange the furniture and put the kitchenware away.

Ryan

Ryan searched first the squad room and then the check-in counter for Alex. He found him talking to a patrolman and motioned him to come to his office.

“There.” He pointed to his chalkboard as Alex entered. “You see that? It’s pretty clear.”

“What is? All I see is a bunch of lines and dots.”

“Okay, I’ll read it for you. The man you arrested and sent off to the station in the police wagon had one of the super guns. Super guns were found in the Ford. The man who bought the Ford matches the description of the one you arrested. The woman who was with him when he bought the Ford also matches the description of the one who was with the man you arrested, who escaped.”

Ryan sat back, put his hands behind his head, and put one foot on his desk. Wearing a self-satisfied expression, he continued. “And as to the firefight at the Fairfax Hotel, two of the super machineguns were involved, judging by the bullet taken out of a wall. And we know that two of those guns could have made all the bullet holes or marks.”

He stood and stepped up to the chalkboard. Pointing vigorously at the notation for the man Alex arrested and then at the one for the woman who was with him, he said, “And these two match the description of those who stole the truck from the Red Cross, and shot and killed that horse whose body was near that beaten-up Ford.”

Ryan remained at the board, gripping the piece of chalk, as though he were a teacher waiting for an especially dumb student to respond.

Alex stared at the board. Finally he pointed at it and said, “You are telling me that the lines connect the two Chinks that we briefly had in custody?”

Ryan frowned at Alex for a moment, and then replied carefully in a low voice, “Yes—well, they are some kind of Orientals.” *Yes*, the thought come unbidden to Ryan, *behind my back I am undoubtedly “that stupid nigger” to him*. He mentally shook the thought off. “And now, about the woman.” Ryan took out his note pad, rapidly ruffled through its pages, then paused at a page and asked, “Does the name Mei mean anything to you?”

“No,” Alex responded too quickly, his voice high.

Ryan stared at him. Alex stared at the chalkboard as though deciphering hieroglyphics.

Returning to his desk, Ryan sat on its edge and crossed his arms on his chest. Just as Alex pointed to something on the board and asked,

“Does that dead horse—” Ryan interrupted in a subterranean rumble, his pointing finger adding thrust to his words, “Some policemen have been sending pretty girls to the old Chinese woman Mei—a procurer. She would drug them so they could be kidnapped for a sex slave ring. As to that woman who was with the man you arrested, Mei confessed that she hit her over the head. She was dragged unconscious into a wagon by Tim, and taken to a *bagnios*—the whorehouse where Tim and Ben were killed. Nobody saw what happened there, but the woman disappeared after Tim and Ben were killed. The coroner’s report that just came in says that a blow to the neck killed Ben. And he had been engaged in sex at the time.” Ryan added as an afterthought, “His erection never went down.”

Alex gave a tense chuckle. “I bet they had to hammer it into the coffin to close the lid.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes even more, and raised his voice slightly. “I’ve had Mei jailed, and I suspect we will find out much from her.” He stared at Alex, tapping a finger on his desk, waiting for Alex to respond. When Alex neither responded nor looked him in the eye, he added, “The three bullets that killed Tim were extracted from his body; squashed as they were, they still could be identified as similar to those in the super handgun.”

Without releasing Alex from his stare, Ryan sat down and put a foot back on the desk. “In any case, the sex slave ring is not my problem. That’s under investigation by another detail. Regarding *our* investigation,” and he waved at the chalkboard, “this much is now clear. There is no gang. There are two Orientals—a man and a woman—who, I think, are responsible for much of the crime wave of the last four days. What we need to find out now is why they attacked the two at the Fairfax Hotel.”

Ryan looked at his notebook, still clutched in his left hand, and flipped some wrinkled pages. “The names of the two are John Banks and Joy Phim. I want to question them further. Go find them and bring them in, Alex.”

“Arrest them?”

“Heavens, no. Just ask them to come in to help us solve a case of murder related to the attack on them, that’s all. Tell them we think we know who did it.”

Chapter 22

Early Afternoon, Monday

Levy

"Mr. John Banks," the secretary announced as the second prospective buyer entered. Levy again heaved himself up from his chair to greet the second couple, but he was startled when Hadad rose from his chair so abruptly, he knocked it over. Carla was up almost as fast; she had her hand in her purse, but seemed to change her mind. She withdrew her hand and leaned over Hadad as though she were helping him pick up the chair. Levy heard her hiss to him, "Control yourself."

"I am sorry," Hadad said, looking apologetically at Levy, "I got a cramp in my leg as I stood." He then grimaced what he must have intended to be a smile of greeting to the other couple.

Levy gave a little chuckle and held his hand out as he introduced himself.

Banks took his hand and responded, "Glad to meet you, Mr. Levy." He gestured at the woman beside him. "This is my assistant and translator, Miss Joy Phim."

Joy seemed unable to take her narrowed eyes from Carla, but she finally turned to Levy, smiled, and said, "Hello."

Levy introduced Hadad and Carla to them; they all exchanged stiff greetings.

Looking at Joy quizzically, Levy tilted his head and said, "What a coincidence. Miss Akwal is Mr. al Jaber's assistant and translator, also. And what languages do you translate, Miss Phim?"

Smiling at Carla, Joy answered, "The major Chinese languages, Japanese, some Cambodian and Vietnamese."

"How interesting," Levy said. "Miss Akwal also speaks Chinese. I understand it's a beautiful language, but I've never heard anybody speak it. Could I hear you two speak Chinese, just to please an old man? Oh, but wait. You don't have chairs." Levy went to the door and yelled to his secretary to bring two more chairs.

Joy

While she waited for the chairs, Joy studied Carla. She smiled pleasantly and asked in Mandarin Chinese, “Are you from the western part of China or from Mongolia?”

Carla seemed to have a hard time finding her voice. She coughed into her hand, looked embarrassed, and finally replied in Chinese, “No, I am from Central Asia—from Kazakhstan. Do you know where that is?”

Crude Chinese, Joy thought automatically. *No wonder she looks embarrassed.* Still speaking Chinese while scrutinizing Carla from head to foot, Joy responded, “Roughly.”

John

Watching the exchange, John immediately saw an almost imperceptible change in Joy’s posture. Her relaxed and open demeanor now covered for a hard, supercharged calm; she seemed coiled, ready to spring. It was like her warrior’s ready stance, without the stance. *Jesus*, he thought, *something is going on here. There is danger in the air, and Joy smells it. But what is it?*

Joy’s eyes were still on Carla. She switched to English, and in a pleasant tone, she suggested, “Since these men have business to conduct, let’s you and I step into the reception room to talk about our similar jobs. There is our interest in China, also.” To John, her tone crackled with electricity.

Carla quickly glanced at Hadad, then looked back into Joy’s eyes. After a second she nodded, and Joy turned to John and gave the slightest nod of her head. Then she said in English, loud enough for Hadad to hear, “This is fun. I haven’t spoken Chinese for months. Carla and I have much in common, and we’re going outside to talk. Oh, Mr. Banks, don’t forget this. You can’t buy the company without it.”

She reached into her holster purse and took out a piece of paper and her pencil, and wrote a note. She handed the paper to John. It read *They are the killers—got guns—be careful.* He looked at it without a change in expression, then shoved it into his suit coat pocket alongside his S&W’s holster. His hand remained in his pocket, clutching the gun’s grip. He hoped that his pounding heart was not visibly shaking his body.

As the two women left, Levy thanked them for speaking Chinese. When the door closed behind them, he turned to John. “Well,” he said, “I understand you want to buy my company also.”

Joy

As soon as Joy and Carla were in the outer office, Joy introduced her to the guys. As Carla concentrated on each one to say hello, Joy stood slightly behind her and soundlessly mouthed, “Danger” to the guys. She toggled on her communicator to John with a subvocalized “KK.” Then she told a large-eyed Hands and Dolphy that, since they were his purchasing consultants, they should join John in the inner office. She knew John would hear that and act appropriately. She motioned Carla to sit next to Sal, and she sat down on the edge of the chair on the other side of her, her body almost squarely facing Carla.

Hoping that her exchange with this woman would not distract John too much, Joy said in English so Sal would understand, “You are carrying a holster purse with a gun in it. Don’t reach for it, or you are dead. Who are you and—”

Yelling, “XX. Run for it, Hadad!” Carla backhanded a knife chop to Joy’s nose that, had it hit, would have driven her septal cartilage into her brain, killing her instantly. The strike came so suddenly that Joy’s reflexive sweeping block with her arm was only able to deflect it into a glancing blow that knocked her off her chair.

Sal grabbed for his new knife, but Carla elbowed him in the nose, knocking him against the back of his chair; he slid slowly down to the floor.

Trying to regain her senses as she fell to the floor, Joy rolled on her shoulder, her skirt twisting around her. She reached for her own holster purse, but Carla’s boot kicked it out of the way. Then she hurled a death kick to Joy’s temple. Joy writhed sideways but, hampered by her clothes, she suffered a painful glancing blow. She coiled her feet under her, fists ready.

Carla shrugged off her holster purse. Her eyes fixed on Joy’s, she rapidly stripped down to her Persian lawn waist and lace briefs. She gave Joy a chilling grin. Bowing, she introduced herself, making each word seem a lethal threat in itself: “I am Carla Akwal from Astana, Kazakhstan. I am here to kill you. You are the enemy of my people and my God, Joy Phim.”

Joy’s head was recovering from the deflected blow, but she still needed more time. Seeing that Carla was now adhering to their warrior code, she took a step back and asked, “Why am I your enemy?”

“You destroyed the Prophet Abul Sabah and the holy and great Sabah faith. You created a world dominated by infidels. You killed the true faith and love of God.”

Joy responded, "I am here to save millions of lives and make the world free for people like you and your religion."

Carla's voice took on a chilling remoteness, as though she spoke at a great distance. "I am also here to save lives for God, and to enable the millions you would consign to an unholy and evil life to reach Paradise. I must stop you. I must kill you."

That was all Joy needed. "You can try," she said quietly.

Keeping watchful eyes on Carla, just in case, Joy also stripped down for combat, but before removing her chiffon Panama skirt, she reached into its pocket to pull out her red headband. Now, standing straight in white cotton panties and her French Batiste waist over her armor, she faced Carla, flipped her headband inside out, and put it around her forehead. It showed a white lightning bolt against a red background.

Joy bowed and made her own introduction, her voice reflecting her cold calm. "My real name I don't know. I am of the family of Tor Phim, who adopted me. It is my duty to warn you that I am of the secret Sensei Jigoro Ueshiba bushinota dojo. Since I am now telling you this, by the code of my dojo our fight must be to the death. If you do not accept this, leave and I will not follow you."

Carla showed by her smile that she knew about it, and was hardly intimidated.

It took a split second for Joy to move from her bow into the dojo's unique ready stance. She had already divided her inner self. Her mind had carried on the exchange while her core prepared for combat. Now, the mind could only be a hindrance, and before fleeing the field of battle, it allowed one last thought: *I love you, John. Help me, Mom.*

For Joy—and, she assumed, for Carla—her world now collapsed into the other's eyes, hands, elbows, and feet.

She did not feel the cold dampness in the air; she did not hear the sounds that came through the office door—a crashing chair, a muffled scream, a shot; she was unaware of the terrified secretary's high-pitched cry for help. She was under the command of her self-two, that part of her inner being—often mistakenly termed the unconscious—that centered her energy, her power, and her self through almost a lifetime of training. She was honed into death machine. As was Carla. Based on her initial strikes and her introduction, Joy's self-two knew this without thought, and it prepared her.

John

No sooner did Hadad hear Carla's muffled yell to him, than he grabbed his chair with his left hand and jumped up. He spun it at John, who deflected it with one arm while pulling his S&W out of his pocket holster. Hadad swiftly grabbed a confused Hands by his arm and flipped him over his left shoulder into John, sending him staggering back. John heard a loud crack just before Hands screamed.

Hadad grabbed another chair, hurled it through the office window, and jumped out through the hole.

John ran to the window and shot at the figure dodging through the fog and misty rain. He missed. He jumped out the window too, with Dolphy close behind him, his Colt drawn. "Spread out and be careful, Dolphy. He's got a gun."

"What about Joy?" Dolphy yelled.

"She can take care of herself," John yelled back, as they began a careful search along Townsend Street and its alleys.

Carla

Carla slowly assumed her Fukienese White Crane *chin na*—seizing and controlling—fighting stance; she pressed downward with her knees to root herself, straightened her back, held her head up, positioned her elbows inward and forward, absolutely relaxed her body, and put her weight on her heels; in all, she was perfectly balanced. She concentrated on Joy's eyes while feeling with her toes for her ideal center of gravity for attack.

Joy

Her eyes locked with Carla's in a deadly perceptual duel of their own, Joy let her trained peripheral vision watch Carla's hands and feet. She saw from Carla's stance, the slow moves of her fists and feet, and her center of gravity, that she was an expert in some esoteric version of the Eastern martial arts, perhaps some version of kung fu. Joy's self-two knew then that she was in deadly danger. Carla had apparently prepared for this battle with Joy and had the advantage of knowing everything about her techniques; the subtleties of Carla's would be largely unknown to Joy.

But this unconscious realization had no effect.

Five seconds.

Another five seconds. Their eyes remained locked, unblinking; their faces, calm and resolute. Carla swayed slightly, like a cobra.

Another five seconds.

In a soundless blur, Carla struck with her side kick, almost instantly followed by a series of high and low spear hands, fist punches, front and back elbow strikes, and high kicks, all whizzing at Joy like whip snaps; Joy reflexively parried, evaded, sidestepped, and blocked with two hands or by rapid sweeps of her arms. Her eyes missed nothing. They sought only one thing—the opening that would end the battle.

Joy moved swiftly to the attack with body chops meant to disable and open Carla's head to the kill, but they only caused Joy pain as her hands and elbows connected with Carla's own body armor. Joy went low and high, releasing her own series of knife chops, thrust punches, hammer-fist strikes, elbow punches, and then a side kick to Carla's inner knee to unbalance her. This was to be followed by a hammer fist strike to Carla's unbalanced side—Joy knew instinctively that as Carla shifted to protect that side, she would be further unbalanced, opening her head to a full, disabling forward jump kick.

But Carla recovered by doing a back flip and increasing the distance between them to absorb Joy's energy and momentum, and void her judo skill at grappling. She absorbed Joy's attack, countering, twirling, and sidestepping, then again drove into her with a flurry of swirling kicks, chops, fists, and elbows to drive Joy back one step at a time, until she backed into the desk.

Joy did a sideslip and tried to sweep her leg into Carla's, but she jumped above the sweep and came down on one foot, instantly pivoting to swing the other for Joy's exposed throat. Joy just managed to twist out of the way and grab Carla's kick with her left hand to throw her, but she misjudged the distance by a fraction of an inch and the full force of the kick struck Joy's index finger, dislocating it, and knocking her off balance against one of the office chairs. She collapsed with it to the floor.

With a loud "Hayaiiii!" Carla moved in for the kill.

John

Soaked by the rain, John and Dolphy gave up and returned to the building. Just as they reached the lot where the Ford was parked, a woman John suddenly recognized as Carla drove a Mercedes out of the

lot. It hurtled right at them. He and Dolphy both jumped out of the way, diving in opposite directions. John splash-landed in puddle, rolled onto his stomach, and emptied his gun at the Mercedes. The shots didn't stop it. Dolphy had smacked into the side of the building and was lying, dazed, in another puddle. By the time John got to him, he was shaking his head and muttering something about demanding a raise.

Joy. JOY. What happened to Joy? exploded in John's mind. He raced into the building and skidded to a stop in the outer office, almost falling over Joy. His heart beat wildly. Panting for breath, he tried get his words of utter relief out.

Joy was bending over Sal, who was sitting on the floor with his Colt in one hand, blood streaming from his nose. Sal uttered the first words after the battle. When he saw John and then Dolphy come in, he waved his free hand and gasped, "No woman messes with Sal Garcia."

Still out of breath herself, Joy looked up and, in a weak voice, said, "He only has a bloody and bruised nose. Nothing broken." She finished in a voice barely above a whisper, "He pointed his gun at Carla and shouted, 'Hands up or I'll shoot.'" Joy put her hand on Sal's, and smiled wanly at him. "She fled. He saved my life."

John hardly heard any of that. His mind was filled with one thought, which he finally got out in a happy blast. "You're alive. Thank God." Then her appearance broke through to him, and he whispered, "My God!"

One of her eyes was puffing up and turning black. She had an egg-sized purplish bruise on her temple; a sleeve of her waist was torn off, and the bare arm and her bare legs were splotched with large, spreading black and blue bruises. A long fingernail cut on her leg oozed blood. And she stood awkwardly, holding her hip as though in great pain. When he saw her finger bent at an odd angle, he broke free from his shock and covered the few steps to her in an instant. He gently took her in his arms, not knowing where or how to hold her to avoid her many bruises, kissed her tenderly, and told her, "I've told you a thousand times, baby. Pick on men, not women."

Already sagging with post-adrenaline let-down and combat fatigue, Joy was just able to squeak, "I'm okay. Really. Just a few bruises." She waved away his concerns with the hand possessing the dislocated finger.

Levy came out of his office with one arm around Hands and a gun in the other. Hands' arm hung at an odd angle, clearly broken. Levy looked at John and said, "I've called the police."

Dolphy helped Hands to a chair while Levy gave his thoroughly frightened secretary a hand up from the wall she'd been cowering

against. He guided her into her chair. Then he approached John and stared at Joy's face, arms, and finger. Rubbing his hand over his bald head, he looked at John, then Hands, then back to John. "Well," he said conversationally, with the slightest hint of a smile, "I didn't realize you two couples would be so competitive about buying my business."

John started to ask, "Where is a hospital—"

Joy interrupted in a voice barely above a sigh, "No. I'll fix Hands' arm . . . there is nothing wrong with me . . . I can't deal with." She put her head to John's as though to kiss him, and whispered in his ear, "Hospital . . . vulnerable."

She shrugged herself free from John's arms and stood, bent at an odd angle, slightly swaying. John immediately put his arm around her shoulders to hold her steady. She held onto his arm, looked at Levy, and said in a voice flat with exhaustion, "Thank you for the excitement. Now we must go. I hope you sell your business."

That was all John needed to come to his senses. He recognized Joy's skirt among the clothes on the floor, and while all the guys looked away, he opened it wide and held it near the floor so that she could put her feet into it. She did so, using his shoulders for support. He then pulled it up and buttoned it for her as best he could, then carried her out to their Ford.

Dolphy helped Hands out while Sal made sure they left nothing behind, including Joy and Carla's purses, and all the remaining clothes. They all squeezed into the Ford. Hands sat with his broken arm pillowed on Joy's lap. John hurriedly did all the monkey work to set up the Ford for starting, cranked it into a clattering start, then drove it out of the lot and down Townsend Street, in the direction opposite the one from which John assumed the police would come.

He could barely steer, he was shaking so much.

Chapter 23

Mid-Afternoon, Monday

Ryan

As soon as he heard about the call, Ryan just knew he had to check this out. He took two other policemen with him and directed his Stanley Steamer toward Townsend Street.

When they entered the outer office, they found Levy comforting his distraught secretary, still holding a gun in his hand. Ryan looked around. He saw the upturned chair, and the blood on the floor near another chair. In the inner office, he found a broken chair and a busted-out window. No bodies, no bullet holes anywhere, no reason for him to be there. That is, until he asked what happened.

When he heard about the two Oriental beauties, a Carla Akwal and a Joy Phim who both spoke Chinese, followed by the description of the Oriental man and John Banks, he knew that the trip here was worth it. He took out his notebook and tried to calm the secretary enough to get a description of what had happened in the outer office. Although her trembling never stopped, he found out enough from her to know that a hand-to-hand fight had taken place between Akwal and Phim, and that one of them was out to kill the other. The man who was there had been knocked to the floor, and his head was all bloody as he drew his gun and tried to shoot Akwal, who then ran away. As the man tried to help the remaining woman, other men came in from the outside; Levy and one of the men, now with a broken arm, came out of the inner office, and all the visitors left.

From Levy he found out about Hadad al Jaber, the Oriental man with Akwal, who for no reason suddenly launched an attack on John Banks, and broke the arm of another man there with Banks. After throwing a chair through the window, al Jaber jumped through as Banks shot at him. Banks and the second man with him also went through the window.

So, Ryan thought, *Joy Phim and John Banks were attacked here also.*

After asking a number of questions, Ryan was sure that al Jaber was the man who escaped from the police wagon, and Akwal was the woman implicated in the murder of the two policemen. Ryan did not

have the names of the three other men involved with Banks, but he was sure they were the same ones he met at the Fairfax after the . . . fire-fight. Their names were in his notebook.

After an hour and eight utterances of “I see,” Ryan felt he was making very good progress on this case. *If I find Phim and Banks, he thought, I should soon get Akwal and al Jaber. Funny names for Orientals.*

Carla

Carla soaked in the cold bath water, knowing it was just right for her bruised body, and she would feel better when she got out. She had a black eye, and her left cheek and half her forehead were black and blue. She laid her head back on rim of the bathtub dejectedly. *Joy is good and smart, but I had her in my hands. I should have known that man had a gun. Bokg. I could have easily put him away first. Dumb.*

She added more water to the bathtub, and lowered herself until only her knees and swelling nose were above water. A halo of black hair floated around her head. *I now know I can take her.* Aloud, she vowed, “Next time, Joy, you are dead.”

Ears underwater, she felt rather than heard the door to the room slam. She popped her head up to see Hadad slouched in the doorway, dripping water from his soaked, muddy clothes. He put one hand on the doorjamb, as though it alone held him up, and looked at her with his head cocked and his eyes wide.

“You look awful.” Then he smiled. “But you killed her. Very good.”

Carla thwacked the bath water with her flat palm, accidentally splashing Hadad, and breathed heavily for some seconds. “I had her! She was mine.”

“You didn’t kill her? But all those sounds I heard over the communicator—it sounded like you killed her ten times over.”

She then splashed water on her head, and as it ran off her sagging, mottled face, she looked down into the water and told him in a low voice, “I would have beat her, killed her, but for that *Pidaras*—dickhead Sal. You should remember him from the biography. He pulled a gun on me when I had her down. *Bokg.*”

Making a shooting gesture with his free hand, Hadad growled, “Why didn’t you shoot them, damn it?”

Carla raised her chin up. Helped by the cold water, she gave Hadad a lopsided, icy look. She tipped her head farther back to stare

down her nose at him. “If you had her weaponless,” she snapped, “you would have pumped fifty bullets into her with your OT-15. Right?”

She looked back down at the water and compressed her split lips for a moment. Then she looked directly at him and explained in a quiet voice, “When I had her face to face, no weapons, it had to be hand-to-hand, warrior to warrior—a match made in Paradise. I had trained for this; I had dreamed of it. I was ready. You do not understand, Hadad. I respect her. She is a great woman. But she is my enemy. I must, and will, kill her. But as a warrior; not your way.”

Frowning, Hadad sat on the edge of the bathtub. “I do not understand you. You were going to shoot her in the back on the street, or kill her in the hotel room with the OT. Now, you will not kill her unless it is with your own hands?”

Carla pushed herself upright in the water. “You are right; you do not understand.” She pulled the plug, and as the bathwater drained, she rinsed herself off with a small wooden bucket she kept nearby for that purpose.

Hadad had become distracted, watching her. Ignoring his growing arousal, she shoved him off the bathtub, and tried to step out of the tub. Her injured leg had stiffened and she could hardly raise it. As Hadad stood watching, she sat on the edge of the tub and, with a grunt, just managed to lift her legs over its rim. She pushed herself up to a standing position, picked up a towel, and started gingerly drying herself. “I do not expect you to understand, Hadad,” she said. “You would shoot her in the back of the head from ambush, if you could. And you tried, by the bank. Like a coward, you would give her no chance to fight, to confront you. And it was you who fired both our OTs at her, not me. I will only use my gun on her if she is similarly armed.”

“You *Kugan*—crazy bitch. Who do you think you are? You have forgotten why we are here. You have forgotten how important our mission is and what it means to our faith and God to stop those two. This warrior *bokg* cannot get in the way.”

Carla threw down the towel, put her battered hands on her bruised hips, and stepped forward until she stood a foot from Hadad. She glared up at him and hissed, “You *zhopoyeb*—ass fucker. You do not need to remind me. I know as well as you why we are here and how important it is. We will kill them. But we will do it right, and not as whimpering cowards. Or you will do it alone,” she spat. “Do I make myself clear?”

Hadad had not moved. His mouth hung open; he seemed speechless.

She stepped back and picked up the towel, but she had used what little energy remained. She just threw the towel around her shoulders and plopped down on the toilet seat. Her upper body sagged under the weight of the towel. She peered at her broken fingernail and sighed, “Since you are not already bragging, I guess you didn’t kill John.”

Hadad

Hadad sat down on the edge of the bathtub again, leaned his elbows on his knees, and found something interesting to stare at on the floor. He whined, “I would have, if you did not put the stu . . . ah . . . splint on my finger. I could not get my gun out in time. I barely escaped when he pulled his gun. I had to walk here in the goddam rain. Oh yes—why did not you drive around looking for me?”

Carla shook her head, pushed herself off the toilet with one hand, and staggered out of the bathroom. She lifted her cotton robe from the bed. Hadad followed her and looked more carefully at her in the light from the window. “Are you sure you can take her? You look a mess. Your lip is split and swollen, your cheek is raw, you have a black eye, and your arms and legs are all bruised. You also have big ones on your thigh.”

“Thanks for telling me. I would not have known, otherwise. You should see her. She must look worse. And I broke her finger.”

“Well, good for you. That will surely interfere with her changing the world.”

Carla put on her robe and gingerly sat down on the edge of the bed. A tear rolled down her cheek. She glanced up at Hadad and murmured, “Truce, Hadad. Come here and hold me. I hurt all over.”

That, more than anything she had said before; that, more than her battered and bruised body; that, more than Joy escaping again; that got to him. Compassion moved him. He sat down next to her and gingerly put his arm around her back.

She put her head on his damp shoulder and began to cry. “It was so close. I had her, Hadad. She was mine in a fair fight. I’ve prepared and waited years for that moment, and some fool with a gun saved her.” She sobbed.

He put his free hand on her head and ran it through her wet hair, hiding his amazement. *She is so tough. And yet, in some ways, so . . . so womanish.*

He rested his chin on her head and softly told her, “I am glad you’re alive, Carla. I would have missed you.” He hesitated, then added, “You should have another chance soon. I know what to do.”

Joy

The rain had stopped, the fog had retreated back to the bay, and the sun had found a hole in the heavy, gray clouds by the time they reached the apartment building. The slightest movement of Hands' broken arm was obviously painful as Dolphy helped him out of the Ford.

Joy just sat in the front seat, holding her dislocated finger away from her body with her other hand, and waited until John came around. As he lifted her out in his arms, she looked at Hands, smiled weakly, and said, "Sometimes it's great being a small and helpless woman." Then she whispered to John, "I'm okay, dearest. You can put me down."

When John did so she hailed bloody Sal, who was already walking toward the apartment. He turned and looked startled as she slowly shuffled over to him. She put her good hand on his neck and pulled his face down so she could kiss him on the cheek. Smiling, she said again, "You saved my life, Sal. I will never forget that. Thank you."

As she released him and started to walk slowly back to John, Sal turned a bright red. He tried several times to get a word out, and finally succeeded. "You're welcome, Joy," was all he could say, as he unconsciously puffed out his chest. His proud smile reached from ear to ear.

Joy put her hand on John's arm for support and held her other one away from her body. As they walked slowly toward the apartment building, she looked over at Hands and asked, "How ya doing, big man?"

Hands smiled grimly and replied, "Aside from the broken arm and bruises, it's a great day. How ya doing?"

"Well," Joy said, "you're right. Aside from the dislocated finger and bruises, it has been a nice day." *Just being alive is enough to make this day great.*

John and Dolphy looked at each other and shook their heads. John then told them all, "Let's discuss what happened when everyone is fixed up, and we have a chance to drink something."

John directed them to the apartment's basement and the capsule containing the medical equipment. Joy pointed to what she wanted, including the bandages, spray cast, anesthetic, antibiotic, and needles. John then turned to Dolphy and said, "Please take the Ford and get ice for all our iceboxes. I need to break off some ice chips for treatment. Also, pick up a case of beer for all of us—whatever you like. Can you drive?"

"I did once. I know how to start the car and shift."

“Okay. Here, take this.” John took some bills out of his wallet and gave them to him.

When Dolphy left, John carried the medical supplies upstairs behind Joy. Holding onto the railing, she slowly pulled herself up. Her abused muscles were stiffening. Finally John couldn’t stand watching her any longer. He handed the supplies to Sal, checked to make sure Hands was making it okay, and then picked up Joy. She didn’t protest as he carried her into Hands’ apartment on the first floor.

Jill

When they walked in, Jill was standing on a table trying to hang curtains on the living room window. She turned around, dropped the curtains, and jumped off the table to run over to them. Without a word, she looked at the finger Joy was protecting. She pointed to the couch, and John carried Joy over there and gently put her down.

By that time, Hands and Sal had come through the door. Jill stood for a moment, looking back and forth between Joy’s broken finger and Hands’ arm, thrust out at an odd angle. She took Hands by his good arm, led him to the kitchen table, and helped him sit down on it.

Meanwhile, Sal had dumped the medical supplies on the kitchen counter. He looked curiously at Jill, and she noticed the dried blood caked beneath his nose and on the front of his shirt and coat. His nose had swelled to nearly twice its normal size. She went to him, and held the top of his head with one hand while looking at his nose with the other. She got a little vanity mirror out of her purse and held it beneath his nose to reflect light up his nose so she could see better. Next, she checked his facial profile, and gently probed the bridge of his nose. Sal’s eyes turned watery from the pain, but he made no sound. Patting him on the shoulder, she smiled and assured him, “Yes, Sal, I am sure you will live.”

Returning to Hands, she said to John, “Help me remove his coat. Gently now, and only over the good arm.” Once the coat was off all but the broken arm, she held the coat’s shoulder above the break in one hand and slowly pulled the sleeve down and over the break. Hands clenched his eyes shut and pressed his lips together, but he could not completely suppress a groan.

Jill turned to Sal. “Let me have your knife.”

He reached down, took it out of his boot, and asked as he handed it over, “You’re not going to cut his arm off with it, are you?”

Silence, except for Hands’ sudden, heavy breathing.

Jill cut off Hands' shirtsleeve. She looked carefully at the break from every direction, and then helped him lie down on the kitchen table.

Joy finally seemed to cast off the spell Jill had created, and said, "I can handle—"

Jill gave Joy a stern look, and put a finger to her lips.

She kissed Hands lightly on the mouth, and then dragged over a high-backed kitchen chair and raised Hands' feet so that they rested on it about a foot higher than his body.

Joy was still holding her bad hand with the other. Jill walked over to her and got down on one knee to look the finger over.

After Joy was hushed, no one said anything. It was as though what Jill was doing mesmerized them all. With authority in her voice that seem to shock them even more, she said, "Okay, first, the local anesthetic." She lifted the bottle of Lidocaine Joy had picked out and partially filled a hypodermic with it. She tested it, and then injected it into Hands' arm near the break. She took out another hypodermic, partially filled it, and was going to inject it near the nerves to Joy's dislocated finger when Joy said, "No need."

Jill replied evenly, "You want to fight me too?" and gently inserted the needle.

Astonished, Joy gaped at Jill before realizing her mouth was hanging open. Then she watched Jill carefully, trying to look into her eyes, but Jill was entirely focused on what she was doing.

Jill felt Joy's forehead with the back of her hand and then checked her pulse, murmuring, "One-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand," all the way up to ten-thousand as she counted off the seconds. She did the same for Hands, and then for Sal, who was by now sitting in an easy chair.

Since about ten minutes had gone by, Jill went to Joy again, and softly tapped the back of the knuckle of her dislocated finger. "Is it numb?"

Joy tapped it harder with the fingers of her good hand, and nodded.

"Okay John, straddle Joy facing me and hold out the hand with the dislocated finger. Hold it tightly, now."

"I won't be able to see," Joy objected.

"Good," Jill answered. She put her foot on John's chest, gripped the dislocated finger, and pulled straight back along the axis of Joy's hand. With a crack, the finger joint clicked into place. Taking a close look at the result, Jill told John, "We need ice to put on it."

"It's coming," he said as he got off of Joy and released her hand. He turned to her and asked, "How you doing, baby?"

Joy tried to smile. "As I told Hands, it would otherwise be a nice day."

Jill tapped John on the shoulder. "Carry Miss Phim into the bedroom and help her undress down to her bloomers. She has some nasty bruises, and that's only on the arm that I can see. If she has on long bloomers, take those off as well. I need to check all over for bad contusions."

John blurted, "How do you—"

"Later," Jill responded.

Sal's eyes twinkled as he yelled out to John, "Need help?"

As John carried Joy to the bedroom, Jill began to work on setting Hands' broken arm, and asked Sal to help her. Then she began a continuous stream of instructions about what he should do.



John sat Joy on the edge of the mattress in the bedroom, and started to help her remove her clothes, including her armor. Joy's eyes had recovered some of their natural sparkle, but her voice was still weak as she asked, "Are you going to take advantage of me when I'm naked and helpless?"

His eyes grew moist. "You can only hope."

Chapter 24

Late Afternoon, Monday

Ryan

Ryan had called in everyone on his detail. They now stood or sat around his desk. Waving the Philip Morris stuck between his fingers, the nicotine stains invisible against his dark brown skin, he said, “Light up or chew, if you want to; here’s the spittoon.” He shoved it out from under his desk where the cleaning lady always left it.

When all were settled and a good cloud of tobacco smoke was lifting toward the stained ceiling, Ryan started briefing them on the battle at the World Trading Company, and what else he had found out. “I have one aim now,” he told them, taking a puff on his cigarette, “I want to find out where John Banks has gone. He and his Chinese assistant have moved out of the Fairfax Hotel. He is in this city. If you can’t find him, you don’t deserve your badges.

“We can suppose this. He is living in a hotel room, an apartment building, or a house. So, I’m going to split you guys up into three groups. One group will check out all hotels that are not fleabags, fire-traps, or whorehouses. The second group will check out all respectable homes that have been rented or sold and occupied in the last two days. The third group is to do the same for apartments.

“The key is that Banks is apparently rich and can buy a place outright. He might still use his own name. A second key is his gorgeous Chinese assistant; she would attract the attention of a eunuch. Her name is Joy Phim.”

One of the policemen laughed. “Assistant? Yeah, sure.” Several others laughed with him, and one of them commented, “I saw her at the hotel. She can assist me any day.” He made a pumping motion.

His buddy sitting next to him added, “If she could find it.”

More laughter.

Blowing a near perfect smoke ring, Ryan unsmilingly waited for the laughter and ribald comments to die down before he continued. “If their names are not recognized, follow up with their description as a white man and gorgeous Chinese woman, both in their twenties. They seem to do everything together.”

Ryan waited through more ribald jokes.

“I want all of you to use the police call boxes and call in your progress every hour. If you locate them, phone me directly and do nothing else. You are then free to go home. As to the rest of you, the next time you call in, the dispatcher will let you know that we found them, and you also are finished for the day. Okay. Questions?”

One of the policemen asked, “Do we work through the night?”

“Yes, for the whole night, if that’s what it takes. Don’t be afraid to wake up people.”

Alex leaned forward in his chair. “Do we also check on those two Orientals?”

Ryan stared at him for a moment, then looked down at his metal ashtray as he stubbed out his cigarette among the dozens of butts. He answered, “Use your head, Alex. Of course you do. Make best use of this opportunity to also ask those you are interviewing if they know of two Orientals, one a male, and the other a beautiful female. But, those two might have gotten a place to live well before this crime spree began.”

Waving his Mixed Pickles cigar, one of the policemen suggested, “We should check the Japanese and Korean—really Oriental—Exclusion League They might have received information on the location of these Orientals.”

“Good suggestion. If we don’t succeed in finding Banks today, we should also try that tomorrow. Now, go.”

Hadad

Hadad had bought a twenty-five pound block of ice, which was now melting in the tub. After chipping off suitably-sized chunks, he had put them in his socks and tied them around Carla’s worst bruises. She was sleeping out her exhaustion now. He used the time to go carefully back through the classified sections in the pile of newspapers that he had collected over the last week. Convinced by Hands’ biography that Banks would seek a permanent home rather than a temporary place to stay, Hadad was especially careful to look at each house and apartment complex for sale since their attack at the Fairfax. He even looked at whole apartment houses for sale.

In each case, he placed a telephone call and, when the operator connected him, he began with, “Hello, I am a lawyer for the legal firm of Wilson and Westervelt. I am trying to locate a John Banks, who has inherited a large estate. We have reason to believe that he might have

bought or rented the place you advertised. He might have carried out the (purchase, rental) attended by his lovely Chinese assistant. We are willing to give you a reward of \$100 for any information you have that leads to our finding him.”

Some of the calls were to banks, mortgage companies, or real estate firms. Most were closed for the day. Other calls brought no answer. So far, of those he could call, no one had sold or rented to someone named Banks, or to people who resembled the description he gave. In each case, he wrote a large X on their classified ads.

He had yet to look in the Business Wanted classifieds.

Finished with all those he had circled, he sighed and thought, *I am sure to find them this way.*

He joined Carla on the bed, removed the ice from around her body, emptied the remaining ice in the tub, and laid his socks to dry over every available edge in the room. He went back to the bed and lay down next to her. She opened her weary eyes briefly, took his hand in hers, and went back to sleep. He closed his eyes, thinking, *Soon, soon they will be no more, and nothing then will stand in my way.* He soon fell asleep himself.

Joy

“Oh, that was so good,” Dolphy said, finishing off his cold steak.

Discarding the pork chop he had been chewing on, Hands leaned his back against Jill and agreed. His arm was in a blown cast and hanging in a sling that Jill had cut and tied from a large towel.

Joy picked up her third large tomato and asked Sal, “Pass the salt please.” She was wearing Jill’s robe, and was managing fairly well to use the hand with the dislocated finger. She just didn’t try to move or bend the finger. Jill had wanted to put on a semi-cast just to protect it for a couple of days, but Joy had refused. The knuckle had throbbled for a while, but Joy periodically rubbed it with a large piece of ice covered by a thin cloth. This had reduced the swelling. Jill had also fixed three ice packs for the worst of Joy’s bruises, especially a huge one on her hip. Joy had removed them temporarily to eat.

“Anyone want more Michelob?” John asked as he rose from the floor and went into the kitchen. He opened the top door of Hands’ new Seroco icebox, where the beers were chilling on the partially chipped block of ice.

“Me,” Joy yelled, showing that she had recovered some of her energy.

“Me too,” Jill added, almost too softly for John to hear.

Hands took out his Red Man and was going to bite off a chunk when Jill put her hand on his arm and, looking askance at him, gently shook her head. He tilted his head and looked at her sparkling eyes for a couple of seconds, nodded, and put it away.

John brought out the beers, gave Joy and Jill theirs, and sat down with his back against the sofa. Stretching out his legs, he looked around at them, and began. “We’ve had an exciting day and hardly a thing to eat since breakfast. So, I wanted to hold off any serious talk until after we had a chance to rest and eat. But first,” John raised his bottle, “I want to toast our capable nurse. Jill, on behalf of all of us, thanks for what you did.”

“Yeah,” Sal said, the swelling of his nose a little reduced by the ice pack Jill had given him to apply to it. “I second that.” Then the Sal gleam came into his eyes, and he added, “Hands can thank you in his own way.”

Jill flushed. Hands wrapped his good arm around her head and brought it down to his to give her a kiss. “Me too,” he said.

Dolphy raised his half-full second bottle and exclaimed, “For the friends I saved from an awful fate and put into your hands, I thank you.”

Pushing with her good hand, Joy carefully slid over to Jill. She leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, and told her, “That was very well done. Thank you.”

She could not explain what followed. She didn’t know where it came from. Maybe it was because she missed her mother terribly. And Gu, her godmother. Maybe she needed friendship with another woman near her age. Since coming here, she had been surrounded for the most part by men, and although she loved John dearly, she suddenly felt a need for more female companionship. Jy-ying helped, but there was an inexplicable aloofness to her, as though Joy had some kind of disease she didn’t want to contract.

Jill had appeared as a dumb blond, not a woman she could easily share her thoughts and feelings with, but now, all that had changed. Jill was clearly smart and competent in what she chose to do. And Joy took a great and inexplicable liking to her.

John

Given all that Joy had said before about Jill, John was completely mystified when he saw her take Jill’s hand in her good one and hold it

on her lap as she sat next to her and Hands, who still leaned his back against Jill.

When Joy was thus settled, John went on. "It's hard to believe, but our fine nurse Jill has not asked, and we have not told her, what happened. We owe her an explanation. But, also, we have not asked, and Jill has not told us, how she knows so much about medicine and nursing. Jill, would you like to go first?"

As they had been eating, John had seen Jill's personality shift from a confident, in-control woman back into the shy, awkward young woman they had met before. She tried to answer, but appeared flustered. "I . . . ah . . . nothing, really. I volunteered to . . . ah . . . help the Red Cross. During the fire, I was given a nurse's uniform. There was not enough help. I ended up in the middle of the doctors and nurses. Everyone thought I was a nurse." Suddenly she looked concerned. "I didn't lie. Everyone was so busy, nobody asked. I worked with them for a month. I got all the free food I could eat. And I could sleep with the patients."

Hands asked, clearly to help her along, "So you learned on the job?"

"Yes; I pray that I didn't kill anyone. Sometimes . . ." For the first time, Jill's eyes seemed to grow moist. "They would . . . turn a patient over to me. I even may have . . . saved some lives." She suddenly smiled beautifully, lighting up her whole face.

Instinctively, John rose, went over, and kissed her on the forehead, just as Joy squeezed her hand. "I'm sure that you did, Jill," he said, "and thank you again. And I mean it not only for us here, but for all the people you helped during that awful disaster."

Jill nodded and stared at the floor, but the remnant of her smile remained.

John sat down next to Joy and said, "Okay, what happened to us?" He began to feel uncomfortable. He knew he had to lie to her, and in front of the others. Also, he did not want to scare her away from Hands. "Ah . . . you see . . ." he started, beginning to feel like Jill looked and sounded when she was asked about her nursing background.

Dolphy broke in. "Our boss doesn't want to embarrass modest Hands in front of you, but Hands is a hero. This is what happened. We were all walking down the street in this shopping district, but Hands and Joy were several steps behind us. Hands was telling her something. I think he was bragging about you, Jill. A truck pulled up, and four men jumped out and tried to drag Joy into the truck, yelling something about Chinks. She fought like a wild demon and

wouldn't even stop when they broke her finger. Hands tried to protect her and three of the men leaped on him and broke his arm, but he laid out two of them on the ground with his good one. Then our boss and Sal jumped in and fought the remaining two, and they fled to the truck. The two on the ground got up and ran to the truck as well, and it took off with a loud backfire."

John, Sal, Hands, and Joy stared at Dolphy. John recognized a special talent when he saw it.

Finally Joy turned to Hands and said sweetly, "Thank you, Hands. You saved me."

Hands waved a hand in dismissal and replied modestly, "It was nothing."

Jill looked impressed. She leaned down and kissed Hands on the cheek, and then asked Dolphy, "What did you do?"

Dolphy waved his hand, echoing Hands' gesture of dismissal, and replied, "I was the backup in case they needed help. But they took care of it themselves." He grinned broadly. "From what I saw, Jill, with these three guys and Joy, you would be safe anywhere, no matter how many hooligans attacked you. Why, I—"

John launched into a spurt of sudden coughing. He bent over and covered his mouth. Joy turned her face away from Jill, and looked as though she were going to explode. Sal continued to look dumbfoundedly at Dolphy, while Hands wore a smirk that cut his face in two.

John finally managed to sputter, "Now . . . you know, Jill. Well, thanks . . . again."

He threw a wave to the room. "Okay, people. It's been fun. Now, I have to go and start straightening out my apartment." John stood and looked at Joy. "You can't do much with your bad finger, so I'll help you with your apartment first." He helped her up, then went over and picked up her ice packs.

Joy looked at the leftover food and garbage and offered to Hands, "Let us help you clear up here first."

Jill was firm. "No, I'll do it. You have too much to do."

Joy nodded. "Thanks again, Jill. Let's get together real soon and gossip." She limped out with John.

Sal and Dolphy also stood to leave; Joy and John waited for them by the stairs. John patted Dolphy on the back and said, "You have a real skill there. I'm not going to believe another word you say unless it's verified by ten people."

Joy added, "I will want sworn and notarized statements from witnesses."

While Dolphy bowed an acknowledgment of the compliment, Sal smiled, pulled out one of his Abajos, bit off the end, and spit it into his hand. "It still can't beat what really happened."

Almost transfixed by what Sal did with the cigar, John nodded. "That's right. I want to get you three guys alone tonight with Jy-ying, if she returns in time, so we can go over all this and what we learned from it. Also, later this afternoon we've got to start making this place as much of a fortress as possible."

John glanced at Joy and saw that she was starting to climb the stairs by leaning on the railing and pulling her body up along it. "Oh no, you don't," John yelled at her. He told the two guys, "We'll see you later. Joy needs her beauty nap."

As John picked Joy up, she gave the guys a little wave. He carried her up the stairs but, breathing heavily, he had to put her down when he got to the third floor. With his arm around her, they walked slowly to John's apartment.

When they got inside, Joy simply said, "No more now. I'm too tired and want to sleep."

John nodded. "Me too. But icing you comes first."

Joy

The ice on her face and body temporarily stimulated her thoughts. As she lay on John's new bed, Joy thought back over what had happened since John carried her into Hands' apartment. "Dearest, you know, Jill's explanation for her nursing expertise was almost perfect. But it still raises some questions."

John lay down on his side next to her and caressed her hair. "I think so, too. I'm more interested in what happened at the company offices, but let's start with Jill."

"Okay," Joy replied. "The bottle of Lidocaine is not of this era. Lidocaine didn't come into use until the mid-1940s. But she handled it as though it were very familiar to her."

"Didn't the bottle say 'local' and 'anesthetic' among other things? That would clue her in."

"Maybe. But then there's the way she used the bottle of spray-cast. That was new in our age. In fact, I don't think spray bottles were invented during this age. Yet, although we weren't in the room to see it, she had to know how to use the spray to put the cast on Hands' arm."

"Baby. She could have experimented first. After all, didn't the bottle say 'spray cast'? What are you thinking, that she's a time traveler

from our time? If she were, why hasn't she told us? And if she were here to do us harm, to get into our safety net so to speak, she could have already killed us."

Joy thought about that for awhile, and finally responded, "I guess you're right. But, how did she know we were so intimate that she could ask you to help me take off my clothes? We're not married."

"Big Mouth."

"Big mouth?"

"Yeah, Hands. Surely you realize that the three guys must know we're intimate—we hardly hide it. He must have told Jill."

"Oh. Okay. Anyway, my mind is still awake, even though I'm so physically weary, I just want to lie here and never move again. Tell me what happened in Levy's office."

John

After John complied, Joy described what had happened in the outer office. Her voice grew weaker as she went along.

John responded, "I owe Sal for saving your life, and I'll tell him that. But why didn't he shoot that woman instead of warning her?"

Joy could barely smile as she murmured, "You forget. This is still the age of chivalry. He told me later, 'I can't shoot a woman.'"

"I'll be damned. In our age it would be 'Bang. You're dead, bitch.'" John thought for a moment. "That woman is that good, though—to beat you?"

No answer. Joy's eyes were closed, and she was breathing evenly.

John checked the ice around her and either moved some of the packs to new locations, or took them away temporarily, putting them on the ice block in his new Puritan Refrigerator ice box. He returned to the bed and sat on the edge, looking at Joy. It did not matter that one eye was almost completely black and puffed up, that her cheek was raw and bruised, that her facial scar was livid. He saw nothing but beauty, honesty, and courage. And love.

What are all the clichés? he asked himself. *"You fill my heart"; "My heart beats with my love for you"; "I would die for you"?* Yes, all of those and more are what I mean when I say simply, *"I love you."*

John had no idea how much time he spent beholding her before he leaned over, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and whispered, "I love you, baby." He slipped under the comforter himself, with a thankful sigh.

Chapter 25

Early Evening, Monday

John

John turned on his side and put his arm across Joy's chest, as he usually did. Then, subconsciously realizing that he may be hurting her injuries, he jerked his arm back, and woke up. She was staring at him.

In a much stronger voice, she told him, "I've been lying here for hours waiting for you to wake up. You sleep half your life away, you know. I kicked the ice packs off the bed. I think the ice all melted."

She slid closer to him on her back and lifted one leg over his. "I've been doing a lot of thinking while waiting for you to come out of your coma. I replayed over and over in my mind each of the moves in my duel with the woman, Carla. I still don't know if she is the stronger. In our practice clothes, which would provide something to grab, and with a lot of room for maneuvering, I don't know. She uses some kind of kung fu unknown to me. I'm as fast as she is. We both know the standard moves across the martial arts. What gave her a slight advantage, and I'm not sure she can dominate me with it, is a strange set of additional moves. I wish I knew a kung fu sensei here."

"Okay," John said, stretching his arms out of the comforter. He began doing rapid sit-ups on the bed to increase his circulation and transport him into the world of the living. Finally, he stretched his arms again, yawned, scratched his head, and smiled at Joy. "Hi, I'm John. Did you tell me your name last night, my pretty?"

Joy grinned, and that was all the encouragement he needed to get back on topic. "Let's see. Ah, we've learned this much from this boring day: the names of the killers after us are Hadad al Jaber and Carla Akwal. The woman is as strong as you are in martial arts, and I would assume from the way al Jaber handled himself in the inner office that he also is a martial arts specialist.

"Next, they are here not just to kill us; they have a world-changing mission, as we do. And, like us, they need a trading company as a cover. From what the woman told you, their mission is to create a fundamentalist Islamic world government and society, much like Abul Sabah achieved through his nuclear attack."

Eyes wide, Joy jumped on that thought. “That means one did not exist in their time. We must have been—rather, will be—successful in stopping Sabah. Yippee!”

“Yup,” John replied, smiling and clapping his hands.

“We now know that Carla is from Kazakhstan, and since Hadad’s ethnicity looks the same as Carla’s, we can assume he is from there also. This is a very remote Muslim country, and probably authoritarian as a result. Geographically, they would be well insulated from the democratization that we are—will be—introducing or creating.” John laughed. “Like you, I can’t get used to this time travel shift required in our tenses.”

He went on. “We also know that Hadad has a finger in a splint, which takes the one hand out of action.”

“Probably done by Carla,” Joy added, grinning.

“We know also that they drive a new Mercedes. That, also like us, they must have a huge supply of funds and an ability to get practically all the money they need through their knowledge of what the markets will do. They also have submachine guns, modern handguns, are well holstered, and wear armor similar to ours. Is that it?”

Joy thought for a moment. “No. One critical fact—Hadad will shoot me from ambush, as he tried to do outside the bank four days ago. Has it only been four days? My God Anyway, Hadad had the gun pointed at my head, not Carla. In the outer office, she had a gun and could have shot me when I was weaponless on the floor. Remember, she managed to kick my holster purse away. She still had hers, but she threw it aside.”

“Why did she do a crazy thing like that, when she’s out to kill you?”

“Sweetheart, now that I know her, I could not kill her from ambush, either. Nor could I kill her when she can’t defend herself.”

Surprise lifted his eyebrows. He swept his hand through the air and exclaimed, “Baby, she’s trying to kill you.”

Joy started to turn onto her side, but groaned and sat up instead. She turned slightly to look into John’s eyes. Softly, she told him, “Carla and I are warriors. We are trained to fight and kill with our hands. We respect anyone who is a warrior so trained. This is not just a matter of my self-esteem, dearest; it’s *me*. If I were to shoot her from behind without giving her a chance to defend herself, it would be such a shameful, cowardly, dishonorable act that I could not live with myself as a result. Do you understand?”

“No, and I’ll shoot her dead as soon as I can, including if you two are in battle. I will never allow that woman to kill you. No way.”

Joy drew in her breath sharply. With a grimace, she turned her body fully toward him and put his hand over her heart. “I want you to promise, dearest. If we are together, you must leave her to me unless you are personally in danger. And if she and I are in combat, you are to do nothing. Nothing! Promise me.”

“No. If you think I’m gong to stand by and let you be killed because of some stupid warrior code, you’re crazy.”

Joy

Joy dropped his hand and looked into his outraged eyes for a few moments. She ignored his words, understanding that they simply reflected his love for her. She wanted to gauge his resolve. It was unmistakable, and she finally asked rhetorically, “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes, damn serious. No one is going to kill you while I’m around. Period. Besides, aren’t you forgetting about our mission? Isn’t it more important to save the millions of lives that we can, and promote a democratic world, than throw it all away because of some warrior code? If we both get killed, that’s it, you know. Even if I survive alone, it makes the success of our mission more difficult and less probable.”

He didn’t state it, but she knew it intuitively—he could not live without her.

She shook her head and countered softly, “You made your point. Now, please tell me what you would do in this situation. You are captured, and your captors will only set you free if you rape and sodomize a thirteen-year-old girl in front of them, and then you must participate in slowly torturing her to death. Would you do this on behalf of our mission?”

John’s eyes opened wide and his mouth hung open; he sat frozen in place for many seconds. Finally, shaking himself, he answered, “I . . . don’t know.”

“Think, sweetheart. Your captors are holding the girl down for you. They have stripped her. She is terrorized and hysterical. I know you would die before harming the girl, but think of the mission. Believe that your captors are testing your credibility. What would you do to be set free to save the world? What would you really do?”

His anguish showed in his knotted brows, tightly clenched eyes, and drawn lips.

John

John agonized over this question. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the panicked girl and her captors holding her. He tried to frame it against the images of piles of burned and mutilated Japanese bodies in Hiroshima, the killing fields of Cambodia, the pits full of dead and dying Jews shot by the Nazis. His head began to ache as he strained for an answer.

What would I do?

Deep in his soul he could not accept the logical answer, the rational answer, the easy answer. He fought it. He would die first.

He could barely reply, "I couldn't. I just . . . could not. Not to save the world. All that I am would be . . . negated, destroyed. I . . . could not live with myself."

Joy leaned over and kissed him. "I know. I knew this about you when I sat in your class. It's one reason I fell in love with you, my dearest. Now do you understand my warrior code? We are who we are. We cannot be untrue to what our nature has become anymore than a cat could build a bird's nest."

"Okay." His voice was now back to normal, and deliberate. "But nothing is stopping me from killing Carla in any way I can before your warrior code lets her kill you."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"You're sweet."



John searched through a dozen boxes before he found what he sought. He helped Joy out of bed and then into her new Japanese chalice kimono. It had no belt, no constriction at the waist, no pleats, and huge sleeves that easily could be folded up—it was like a tent and thus, merciful to Joy's bruises.

Pouting, she lamented, "I guess I won't be wearing my denim jeans for a while."

"Oh gee," John exclaimed, hiding his grin. "Too bad. You'll just have to wear one of your fashionable dresses. Oh well, good things have to come to an end sometime." He smiled at his devilish cleverness.

Joy stared at him, her good eye and her swollen eye making the look seem lopsided.

John raised his eyebrows. “You know, your *tight* denims? Good things come to an *end*?”

Joy started to say, “Are you trying—”

But John hurried on with, “The guys are going to wonder if you’re still alive. Time to have our discussion about what happened. I’ll go get them.” He left without waiting for her response.

He checked the second- and first-floor apartments one by one, and found all the guys awake. Jy-ying had also returned. He invited them all to come to his apartment for a briefing, and apologized to Jill for taking Hands away from her, explaining that it was company business.

When she saw Hands’ sling, Jy-ying wanted to know what had happened to Hands. John told her all would be explained in his apartment.

They all trooped in with Little Ying tagging behind, and tail-waggingly happy to find all Jy-ying’s friends in one place to lick. John looked into the kitchen to see how Joy was doing, and saw her making her first pot of coffee in this new world—a Mandahling java she’d bought as soon as she saw it on display.

With John beside her, she limped into the living room and said, “I’m taking orders for Pepsi, Budweiser, java, or Oolong tea.” She unconsciously waved her swollen, formerly dislocated finger in the air and added, “There is also a jug of chilled California mountain red wine, if anyone is interested.”

As the guys shouted their orders, John realized he had forgotten the ice for Joy, and returned to the kitchen. He’d started chipping ice from the fifty-pound block in the top of the icebox when he found himself thrust aside.

Without saying a word, Jy-ying pulled out her knife and chipped several chunks out of the block. “Towels?” she directed at John.

He rushed over to the boxes of stuff that Joy and he had bought, searched through two of them, and brought several dish towels to Jy-ying. She wrapped the ice chunks in three of them, then took a handkerchief out of her purse and wrapped slivers in that. Joy came into the kitchen. Jy-ying looked at the violet bruises on her face and arms and yelled in apparent exasperation, “Will you stop serving those guys and lie down on the couch?”

John knew what Jy-ying was doing, and he was sure Joy did, too. But her instant appreciation of Joy’s injuries and her tone of voice surprised him.

Joy waved at Jy-ying, again displaying her bad finger. “No need. Jill put—”

“Joy! On the couch.” Jy-ying gently pushed her into the living room and nodded vigorously toward the couch. “Make room, Sal.”

Joy

Out of shock more than anything else, Joy laid down on the couch after Sal quickly moved to a chair.

Little Ying tried to jump on the couch, but Jy-ying grabbed him and gave him to Sal. “Keep him occupied,” she ordered. Then she explained to Sal and the others, “I have seen these sparring injuries many times. I know how to treat them.”

She bent over Joy and studied her bad finger. She wrapped around it the handkerchief filled with ice slivers, then turned Joy’s head to the side and put one towel-wrapped ice pack under her badly bruised cheek, another on her swollen eye, and the others on the worst of the bruises on her arm. Jy-ying yelled, “Look away, guys,” and lifted the bottom of Joy’s kimono up to her chest. She looked at Joy’s legs and hips, asked her to move from one side to another, and started putting ice on the worst of the bruises.

After pulling the robe back down, Jy-ying whispered, “You have not worked or used ointment enough to toughen up your skin, have you?”

“No,” Joy answered. “My various sensei were always critical of me for not doing sufficient skin and body conditioning. When I was very young, I sometimes came home from a dojo covered with bruises. My skin naturally toughened up over the years, but not enough, obviously. Anyway, I refused to go around hitting myself all over with a stick. This was my one feminine foible.”

“I know,” Jy-ying sympathized. “Me too.”

Jy-ying turned her head and looked at John, who had one ear stretched their way. “Do you have a watch?”

He went to their dresser in the bedroom and came back with his Hamilton pocket watch. He handed it to her.

“The ice has to be removed for an hour or so in about twenty minutes,” she explained. “I will watch the time.”

She looked intently at Hands’ sling and then at Sal’s bulbous nose. “Did you guys do this to Joy?” Joy knew she meant the question as a joke. Joy was too strong for them. But it came out sounding like an accusation.

Hands exploded, “Jesus Christ, no!”

Sal’s eyes turned into saucers. “No—you think I could?”

Joy tried to smile, but her face was starting to hurt too much, even with the ice packs.

“Of course not,” John exclaimed. “Let me explain what happened. I’m sure you guys have been talking about it among yourselves, but none of you may have the complete picture. I want to make sure it’s all clear. Here’s what happened.”

John

He proceeded to fall into his lecture mode, even to weighting different events by his gestures and standing to pace a little as his way of stirring up the right word.

Joy interrupted only once, to John’s surprise, but he put that down to her injuries. She pointed out that Carla had a gun and could have shot her, and explained the warrior code, getting the same incredulous responses that John had given her the night before. Joy then brought up Sal’s inability to shoot Carla because she was a woman. Dolphy and Hands said they understood this. Joy simply pointed out that they had their warrior code, and Carla had hers.

Jy-ying nodded, but said nothing. She looked at the watch and removed the ice packs from Joy, putting them on the block of ice in the icebox. When she returned, John summarized what they had learned from the previous day, and ended with two conclusions. “We now have to fortify this place, starting now. After supper, we will continue late into this evening. But we can’t just sit in our fort and wait for an attack. I believe the best defense is offense, and I intend to take the battle to this Hadad and Carla.”

Sal responded, “They don’t know about this place. Why worry?”

John answered, “By calling around, they’ll track us down. I bought this place from a real estate firm that had placed an ad in the newspaper. The killers must know when we moved out of the hotel, and they should expect that we are still in San Francisco, or close to it. All they need to do is check the ads, and call. They can describe Joy and me.” He paused. “And we can do the same thing to find them.”

“How?” Dolphy asked.

John described the classified ad he put in the newspapers and his hiring of a detective agency. “Remember that we were almost run down by a Mercedes,” he added. “It looked new. I don’t know what the model was, but we can call the distributor. We do have their description now. People in this town should remember Orientals—although not

truly Oriental, they look it enough—buying a Mercedes, and dealers are required by law to take down essential information.” He looked around. “Questions?”

There were none.

“Okay, let’s start planning how to turn this place into a fortress, and what to buy to do so. We have one car—”

“Two cars, with my Bebe,” Jy-ying interrupted.

Chapter 26

Early Morning, Tuesday

Ryan

Ryan was at his desk early, waiting for the calls from his units, reporting on what they had found so far. He passed the time by smoking, trying to read reports, or making a log cabin out of his matchsticks. He had hardly finished his second cup of thick, office-brewed, peaberry coffee when a call came in from those checking out apartments. He listened, said, “Very good,” and instructed the policemen to come in to the station. He had the day sergeant do the same when the other two units called in.

When they all had assembled around his desk later that morning, and sufficient smoke had gathered above them, he cut through the chitchat and explained to them what he wanted done. “For one, we have no reason to believe that Banks or his Chinese assistant has committed any crimes. We are not after them. For that reason, we simply can’t enter Banks’ apartments and search them or demand that he answer questions. But they are our bait for this Akwal and al Jaber that we are after.

“To remind you, Akwal is the prime suspect in the murder of two policemen found dead in a whorehouse. They were trafficking in sex . . .” he stared for a moment at Alex, who refused to look at him “. . . but regardless, they were murdered.

“Al Jaber was arrested by Alex for pulling his gun on a policeman. He was picked up by our police wagon, and at the station, he attacked the two policemen who brought him here, and stole the horse pulling the wagon.”

He leisurely puffed on his cigarette, then waved the hand holding the cigarette at his men, creating a smoky trail through the air. “I also believe that this al Jaber and Akwal are out to kill Banks and his Chinese assistant. They are probably heavily armed with weapons far more advanced than what we have. So, they are very dangerous and must be approached with the greatest caution. Also, they probably will be wearing that strange armor over their torsos, so if you must shoot to kill, aim for their heads. That is, only if your life is in danger. I want them alive, so otherwise go for their legs. I’m going

to station you all around the apartment building to watch for al Jaber and Akwal. Stay out of sight. I don't want to scare them off. This is a good chance to capture them."

Ryan softened his face and voice, and looked at each of his men in turn. "These two are the most dangerous criminals we have ever faced. Don't take unnecessary chances. Don't be heroes. I want each of you alive when this is over."

John

"I'm tired, and coffee and stale muffins no longer fill me," John complained after he and Dolphy carried a large iron gate into the apartment building, the last thing unloaded. "Let's eat. You get the guys and I'll round up the girls. We'll meet by the front entrance."

When they later gathered there, Joy limping and leaning on John for support, Little Ying on a long leash smelling everyone's shoes, Hands looked embarrassed. He asked, "Is it okay to invite Jill along? I don't want her to eat alone in my apartment."

Dolphy and Sal were about to make a bawdy comment, but Joy caught their eyes and shook her head, eyes narrowed. She turned to Hands and said, "You're a kind man, Hands." Suddenly realizing how that could be interpreted as sarcasm, she added, "Really. Yes, please invite her along to our social gatherings, as long as we won't be talking about our mission and your assignment to guard us. I like her, Hands. She's a good woman."

John saw the guys' surprise, and realized that they might be taken aback by Joy acting as though she were the boss. Their faces showed confusion when John turned to look at Joy with raised eyebrows—obviously questioning her stepping into his shoes—and she responded to John's look with a lopsided smile and a wink with her good eye. He smiled back. *They are just not used to a modern woman*, John thought.

He turned to Hands and said, "Well, as Joy said, go get her, Hands."

Hands hesitated and then said, "Jill hasn't asked, but I know she must be curious. What are we going to tell her about our turning this place into a fort?"

John and Joy automatically turned to look at Dolphy. John dipped his head and waved his hands as if to say, "Let's hear it."

Dolphy cleared his throat. Looking as if he had received an A on a quiz, he responded, "Ah, easy. Boss is going buy and run a big

company. And, ah, he doesn't trust banks. So he keeps the money here—like, you know, under his mattress. Of course, he must protect it.”

John nodded, clapped twice, and replied, “Excellent. Just add that I also have hidden here documents on available goods in China, Japan, England, and so on, that other trading companies would kill to get.”

Sal was chuckling to himself, loud enough for John to hear. He turned to him and commanded, “Out with it, Sal.”

“No, no.”

Come on,” Hands insisted, “let's hear it.”

“Okay,” Sal replied, clearly pleased that he now had an excuse, “I would have explained to Jill that the boss wants to fortify the apartments to protect Joy's virtue.”

Joy

They all broke out in laughter at that, except for Joy, who managed to keep a straight face. When the laughter died down, Joy frowned, started to put her bruised hands on her hips but thought better of it, and instead leaned toward Sal. “What's so funny about that?” she snapped. She couldn't hold the severe look and posture, and joined the outbreak of laughter at Sal's red face.

When Hands returned with Jill, Joy asked Jill to join her and Jy-ying, and they whispered among themselves for a few minutes. She turned to John with a grin and informed him, “We ladies have settled among ourselves how we are going to do this. Jy-ying will drive Jill and me in her Bebe to wherever we're going. You men get the ugly Ford.”

Sal pointed out, “Little Sing—”

Jy-ying looked at him as though she were his mother and he was a little boy who had wet his pants. “No, Sal. Listen: Y as in ‘yes’; ing as in ‘sing.’ Thus, *Y-ing—Ying.*”

“Little Ying,” Sal repeated with a grin, and Joy thought, *He mispronounced that on purpose.*

Several mynah birds were having an argument in a tree nearby, accompanied by a rustling of branches. A cold wind was picking up, and it looked like it might rain soon. It was blowing away the usual fog that had come in from the bay.

Showing her impatience, Jy-ying put one hand on her hip and stared at Sal. She asked, “What about my Little Ying?”

Sal grinned wider. “He is a male and should go with us males.”

Jy-ying leaned back, looked at Sal down her nose, and pointed at the little dog. Little Ying looked back, head cocked, tail wagging, knowing he was the center of attention. "He is the sweetest male I know, and deserves the best of female companionship."

Joy clapped her palms, avoiding her injured finger, as Jill picked Little Ying up and gave him a kiss on his black nose.

They had a late breakfast at the Doughnut House, a stopover restaurant and bakery for those seeking a fast breakfast on their way to work, or a quick lunch. John had seen the restaurant's advertisement in the *San Francisco Courier*.

The restaurant had five tables, no waitresses, and a server behind a long counter. It was a forerunner of the ubiquitous fast food restaurants of the future. Someone had written its menu in large print with chalk on a wooden board that was hung on the wall behind the server, about midway along the counter. Ordering was done at the counter, and when the food was ready, the server yelled out the customer's name.

John and the others pulled two empty tables together. Joy sat down next to Jill. She was dressed in the same walking skirt and white blouse she'd had on the day before, but clearly both had been washed and let dry overnight. She must have ironed them in the morning. Even her Mexican braid hat was the same.

As the others talked among themselves, and after some opening pleasantries with Jill, Joy got to the point. "Hands says you no longer are working at the Fairfax Hotel's restaurant."

Jill looked down at the table. In a voice so soft Joy could barely hear it, she replied, "I got fired."

"Why?"

Jill didn't look up. "My boss said I was clumsy and too slow waiting on tables. I dropped a plate of food."

From what she had seen of Jill's nursing, Joy couldn't believe she was so clumsy or slow. She responded, "I'm sorry to hear about that. But I don't think that matters. From what I've seen of you and heard from you about your work for the Red Cross, you are a competent and courageous woman. I think John would like to hire you for our new company here. What are you good at?"

Jill looked up with her narrow brows arched, large eyes wide. "I don't know, Miss Phim"

"Joy, please."

"I don't know . . . Joy. I didn't go to high school. My parents didn't teach me anything special, except women's work. You know."

“Think, Jill. It’s not what you learned, but what you are good at. Like singing, dancing, drawing, painting—things like that. Do you have a good memory?”

Jill sat up straight for the first time. “I’m good at numbers. My boss and the other waitresses at the hotel restaurant didn’t understand how I could rapidly calculate figures in my head. My mother always had me add up the numbers when she had to figure out how much she could spend for food.”

Joy brightened. “How much is twenty-three and forty-five?”

“Sixty-eight.”

What about 247 and 891?”

“That’s 1,138.”

“Okay: 3,311 plus 7,923 minus 145?”

“That would be 11,089.”

Joy added the numbers on napkin and got the same answer. She sat up in her chair, now excited, and asked Jill, “Do you know how to multiply and divide?”

“Yes, we got into that the year before I left school.”

Writing down the figures herself, she asked, “What’s 378 times 219, divided by 134?”

Without hesitation, Jill answered, “It’s 617 and some remainder.”

Joy took some time working out the multiplication and long division. *I’ve almost forgotten how do to this*, she thought. *Wish I could use my calculator*. When she was done, she looked up at Jill with large eyes and slightly parted lips. Jill was sitting quietly, taking bird-sized bites of her food. Joy exclaimed, “That’s right.”

Joy stared at Jill for a few seconds, as though seeing a strange animal for the first time. “You are a phenom.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a person who has a very special talent greater than that of norm—of other people. Some phenoms are able to remember and play a piece of music without missing a note, even though they have heard the music only once. Some, like you, can do mathematical operations in their head almost instantly. Others have an incredible memory.”

“Oh, I have a good memory.”

“Let’s see.” Joy looked around, and then saw the menu board. Pointing to the board, she told Jill, “Look at me. When I say ‘go,’ I want you to look at all the choices on the menu board until I count to five. Then I want you to look back at me and tell me everything that’s on it, starting at the top. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Go. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. Look at me. What is the menu for today?”

The others at the table must have heard by this time, for they were now all looking at Jill.

Without hesitation, Jill rattled off, “Menu. Breakfast. Sandwich and coffee or juice, twenty-five cents; croissant and coffee or juice, twenty cents; donut—” Jill stopped to spell it. “D.o.n.u.t.” Then she went on. “—and coffee or juice, eighteen cents; muffin and coffee or juice, fifteen cents. Sandwich choices: sausage and egg; bacon, egg and cheese; ham, egg, and cheese.

Bakery: doughnuts, each five cents; bagel, five cents; bagel with cream cheese, nine cents; croissants, eight cents. Drinks: coffee, five cents; cold milk, eight cents; juice—orange or tomato—seven cents.

American cash only. No gold accepted. Indians welcome. Below that is a painting of an American flag, and the words, ‘Remember the Maine.’”

Finished, Jill sat back and looked at Joy as though she had only given her the time of day.

No one said anything. They all stared at Jill. Slowly, a beatific smile spread over Hands’ face. “Of course,” he said, waving a hand in her direction as if to say, “What do you expect from *my* girlfriend?”

Joy could hardly believe it. Finally she said, “No wonder you were so good at nursing after only a month with the Red Cross.” She looked at John. “Do you think you can find a place for this incredible woman in your company? Besides having a photographic memory, she also is a mathematical phenom.”

“We will need an accountant. Would you like to be an accountant for our new company, Jill?”

“I don’t know what an accountant is,” Jill responded.

Joy told her, “You keep track of what the company sells and buys, the money owed to the company, company debts, and how everything balances out.”

“I would be happy to try, if someone can show me what to do.”

John smiled. “Good; you’re hired, as of today. I will pay somebody to show you how to set up the books.” Then he turned to Hands and said with a solemn expression, “However, I cannot allow dating between my employees. Not good for business.”

Hands’ face fell, and he looked as though he were going to choke on what he was eating. He was about to protest when John yelled out, “Joke, joke, Hands.”

Joy frowned at John. "You shouldn't tease a good man like that." Then she hinted, "Jill will need to buy some suitable clothes."

John pulled a roll of money from his pocket and, holding it below the tabletop, slipped off a hundred dollar bill. He passed it over to Jill. "Go shopping," he commanded. He looked around the table. "Let's finish eating. We have much to do."



An elderly man sitting at the counter had been eyeing the unusual sight of three good-looking women together, two of them Chinese, one obviously having been beaten up by one of the men. When he saw the transfer of money, he took a pocket secretary from his inner suit pocket, tore off a piece of paper, and wrote something on it. Then he paid his bill and approached Jill on his way out. Tipping his black planter hat to her, he nodded in the general direction of the others at the table, then silently dropped the slip of paper into Jill's lap.

Hands was about to get up and confront the man, but Jill shook her head at him. As the man strode out the door without a look back, Jill opened the note and read it aloud: "I can set you chicks up pretty. No rough stuff. Guaranteed \$20.00 a day. Tell the telephone operator you want Leo at #54." Eyes sparkling, she bubbled, "Oh my, gracious! Somebody else wants to hire me as an accountant."

Their loud laughter attracted everyone's attention.

Carla

"I got them," Hadad yelled to Carla, who was in the bathtub soaking in the cold water. "Banks bought an apartment building, and I have the address. Stay in the tub. I am going to take a drive to see what Banks' apartment looks like, so I can plan what to do."

Carla cautiously stepped out of the bathtub, wrapped a towel around her for warmth, and limped out of the tiny bathroom. "Have you forgotten? You cannot drive with that broken finger and sore wrist."

"*Bokg*, I forgot about the shifting and cranking. You'll have to drive, damn it."

"God be praised; you find me useful for something."

Chapter 27

Late Morning, Tuesday

John

As they left the Doughnut House, Joy put her hand on John's arm and told him, "We females want to do some shopping for female things. It shouldn't take us more than an hour or so. We'll take Little Ying with us for protection."

With that, Jy-ying and Jill walked off toward Jy-ying's Bebe, moving slowly enough for Joy to keep up.

"Wait," Sal yelled. "What about me?"

To John's surprise, Jy-ying turned and threw him a kiss.

When they reached their building, John left Dolphy and Sal to guard it while he and Hands drove to Central Builders Supply. There, John bought heavy window bars with inside latches for each of the apartment windows, another reinforced bar gate for the back entrance, heavy inside door bars for each apartment, an extension ladder, and ropes. His major concern was fire. The building was made of brick, but still, not knowing what arms the killers had, John couldn't rule out the possibility of phosphorus grenades being tossed through the window bars. So, he also bought all the water hoses they had, and a heavy canvas for each apartment, for smothering fires. He bought tools, wood, and plaster to install new connecting doors between neighboring apartments, to serve as alternate escape routes. Finally, he bought collapsible rope ladders for the apartments on the second and third floors. There was no way John could carry this stuff in the Ford, so he rented one of Central Builders Supply's Mack trucks at an exorbitant fee, which also covered loading it.

With the help of Dolphy and Sal, John and one-handed Hands got everything unloaded and stacked inside the apartment building along with what they had bought the previous day. John noted that the women had been gone for more than a couple of hours. He was considering a search for them in the Ford with Hands, when a Stanley Steamer pulled up next to the truck with a hiss and cough. Ryan climbed out, and John recognized him immediately.

Trying not to reveal his surprise, John tipped his new Trebor hat to him and asked, "How are you today, Lieutenant?"

Ryan

“Hello, Mr. Banks.” Ryan looked at the Central Builders sign on the side of the truck, and said, “You must be doing some remodeling. Can we talk?”

John nodded and indicated the entrance with an outstretched hand. “Sure. But I hope this won’t take too long. Let’s go inside.”

John took Ryan past piles of material they’d unloaded from the truck, which now cluttered the first-floor hallway and entrance foyer. The doors to the first-floor apartments were open, and Ryan glimpsed more supplies piled inside. Two of John’s employees were working on one of the windows. John led Ryan to his apartment on the third floor. He apologized for its disorganization as he offered Ryan a chair at the kitchen table still standing in the middle of the living room.

“Would you like a beer or ice water?” he asked.

“No, thank you. You seem to be turning this apartment building into some sort of fort.”

John shrugged. “Yes. I will have a lot of money, some very expensive jewelry and Chinese landscape paintings, and antique ivory and jade objects here. We’ve got to protect this place against burglars. You remember the attempt to burglarize me at the Fairfax Hotel?”

“Yes.” Ryan next asked what he already knew. “What business are you in?”

“International import and exports. I’m shifting operations from the east coast to here; since I do much of my trade with the Orient, this is a more efficient location.”

Ryan turned directly toward John, clasped his hands on the table, and snapped, “Who are you really, Mr. Banks?”

John jerked up straight, his eyebrows flicking upwards. He pulled them down, crossed his arms on his chest, and returned Ryan’s narrow-eyed stare. Then he firmed his jaw, and responded forcefully, “My name is John Banks, and I am a businessman here to set up a trading company.”

Too pat, said too mechanically, Ryan thought. He resorted to one of his favorite techniques. He took his notebook out of his inner pocket, flipped the pages, then stopped at one and appeared to read it. He raised his eyes to John’s, held them for a moment, then lifted one bushy eyebrow and charged, “You lie.”

Carla

Carla hurt. She ached. Even turning the Mercedes' steering wheel enough to turn a corner sent pain shooting down her arm. Yet, she was happy to be driving; it was just what she needed to distract her from her failure to kill Joy.

She gritted her teeth at the number of turns she had to make, but now she headed straight down Haight Street. Hadad watched the addresses.

"There it is," he yelled, "half a block away—that three-story apartment building. It matches the description given to me. We got them this time. Drive by."

Carla muttered, "What else am I going to do, stop in the middle of the street?"

"Slowly, damn it," Hadad barked.

As they passed the building, Hadad shouted, "I see a truck in the alley next to it. There is one of those crazy steam-driven cars parked next to that."

His announcement was greeted with the sound of the Mercedes' engine and its rattling body. Then Hadad shouted, "I have looked over the building, and made a mental map of the location of windows and doors, and possible hiding places."

"Will it all fit?" Carla asked without humor.

Hadad glanced at her. "Turn at the next street. I have to see what the other side looks like."

Carla did so, grunting at the pain in her arms as she completed the turn. Distracted by her discomfort, she did not turn her head to look behind. As they started toward the apartment building, a police Buick pulled up along the left side of the Mercedes, surprising her. With the driver's seat on the right side of the auto, she had difficulty seeing around Hadad.

Hadad saw something else and screamed, "Brake! Brake!"

Carla slammed her foot on the brake a second before a flash and smoke preceded the sound of a gunshot. It was immediately followed by a voice bellowing, "Police. Pull over. Now."

"*Bokg*, he shot at me," Hadad cried as the Buick pulled ahead before coming to a stop.

As the Mercedes clattered and slid to a sideways stop, Carla yelled at Hadad, "Were you hit?"

"No. Quick. Turn around."

She shifted into low gear, thrust the throttle forward, and skidded and tilted through a U-turn, hissing at the sudden pain in her arms. She hit part of the sidewalk, then clipped the wheel of a donkey-drawn cart carrying caged chickens. The cart flipped, and the donkey bolted in fright; several of the cages broke open. Feathers flying, liberated chickens ran down the road, screeching and cackling.

The Buick tried to make the same turn, but the broken cart was now in the way. It had to stop, back up, and cut around the cart to chase the Mercedes now a full block ahead. But two policemen in a second Buick that had been watching the apartments from the other side of Haight Street saw the action and tried to pull in front of the Mercedes to block it.

A horse-drawn carriage on one side and a freshly planted flowerbed and picket fence on the other prevented Carla from going around the Buick. She swung the car to the right, sending it up over the sidewalk and almost losing Hadad, who wrapped his arm around a strut supporting the Mercedes' top.

She drove straight along the fence, exploding slats, wire, and flowers over and into the Mercedes. One slat cracked through the windshield. Carla just kept the throttle at full open. The Daimler motor's groans of protest were louder than her pain-filled groans. Now past the Buick, she pulled back across the sidewalk, almost hitting two pedestrians who jumped out of the way in opposite directions.

She hit a deep pothole that angled across the asphalt road and almost swung the Mercedes around; she shrieked, clipped a liquor wagon, barely missed two bicycles, and finally straightened it out. She headed straight down the street with two police Buicks a block behind her, in pursuit.

Her lawn hat had blown away and her thick black hair had worked loose from its bun. Ignoring her fluttering locks, she yelled above the screeching noise of the motor and the rattle of the Mercedes, "Hey, I think I got this thing up to its forty-five miles per hour max. They'll never catch us with those antiques—"

The Mercedes hit a deep pothole, kicked out of it at a sharp angle, and landed with a crashing thump, its back wheels spinning. The top on Hadad's side collapsed. Her scream blended with Hadad's, as the strut he had been hanging onto jackknifed and twisted around his arm. The Mercedes almost tipped over, but righted itself and headed straight for a wagon team of horses coming their way. Carla just managed to gain control, and missed one of the rearing and screaming animals by inches. She slowed down enough to straighten out the Mercedes with a groan, and again pushed the throttle to its maximum.

The top had collapsed at an angle to cover the left side of the Mercedes and hide Hadad from her. Above the awful grinding and banging noises coming from the Mercedes, she heard Hadad cry out in a voice high with pain, “Get this *urgashi*—fucking thing off me. It is crushing my arm.”

Carla tried to glance behind her, but the collapsed top was in the way. She leaned out of her seat for a quick look back, and could not see the Buicks beyond the running people, the stomping and running horses and mules, the tipped wagon, and the carriage abandoned in the middle of the road. She slowed and took the next side street on the right, then turned left at the next intersection, and stopped the car.

She put her head on the steering wheel and called on her training to control the pain blazing from her newly abused bruises and strained muscles. Her fatigue also returned. Feeling bone weary, she took several deep breaths. In moments she had reduced the pain to an overall ache.

“What are you doing, damn it, going to sleep?” Hadad screamed at her. “Help me.”

She took two more deep breaths to suppress the urge to kill him, then she carefully and slowly moved over to where Hadad, alternatively groaning and cussing in Kazakh, was pinned. She tried to pull the top away from his body, but its bent and twisted struts held it down. She took a folding knife from her purse and cut away the canvas top until she was able to see the strut that had trapped Hadad’s left arm. The upper strut had twisted against his wrist while the lower strut held his arm at an angle, preventing movement. His captured wrist was bent back, clearly broken.

Hadad yelled again at her, “Help me get my goddam *urgashi* arm out of this!” He tried to use his right hand to push against the strut and release his left arm, but the pain that flared up in his right wrist was too much. Carla dragged herself out of the Mercedes, limped to the other side, and hiked up her long dress to her waist. She climbed onto the hood, reached far over the broken windshield, and grabbed the strut trapping Hadad’s arm, trying not to put her weight on it. Stifling a groan as her own pain flared up, she pulled on the strut. Hadad screamed as it gave way and released his arm.

Sliding off the hood, she climbed wearily back into her seat. She gently touched Hadad on the shoulder and said softly, “Let me see your arm.”

Pale, gritting his teeth, he twisted so that she could see it. The wrist was cleanly broken, no bone protruding; above the wrist was a deep gouge on the outside of his arm that had fortunately missed the major veins. Still, blood from it had soaked his ripped coat and shirtsleeves.

Then she saw his finger. The splint was gone, and the last digit was again hanging loose. In the pain created by his trapped and broken wrist and his attempts to free it, he had not felt the splint tear off his finger and the digit break again.

Carla's shoulders slumped, and she bowed her head into her hand. In a trembling voice, she said through her fingers, "How awful. I am sorry about what happened, Hadad. I have to get you to our medical supplies." Letting out a deep sigh, she promised, "But I will bandage what I can first."

Trying to keep from again bumping the worst of her bruises, she cut several large swaths from her skirt. She folded one and placed it on his bleeding arm as a compress, and wrapped another strip around it. She then made a primitive sling. Her eyes grew moist as she studied his re-broken finger. She extended the sling to go beyond his finger, and folded a ribbon she cut from her dress and put it in the sling under his finger, to cushion it.

Then she cut away the remaining top, bent the struts so that Hadad would not bounce into them, and helped him get comfortable in his seat. She could barely wave away the pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers who had stopped to watch. Getting back into the driver's seat, she slowly drove off. Five miles per hour now seemed almost too fast as she drove through the side streets. When she reached the location of their time capsules, she loaded up with medical supplies, then, ignoring Hadad's growls that she hurry up, she put her head on the steering wheel and took a short rest. It just made her feel worse.

She drove to the Resort and parked in an alley next door. She was stiffening up, and had difficulty getting out of the car. She slid out backwards, limped to Hadad's side, and helped him out. With Carla leaning on Hadad almost as much as he leaned on her, they entered through a side door.

Inside, two men stopped on seeing them, and offered to help. Carla shook her head, scowled at them with narrowed eyes, and snarled, "No thanks. The bastard's been fighting with me again and deserves what he got."

When they got to their room, she closed the door and slumped her back against it.

Hadad turned and glared at her. "*Bokg. Bokg!* You busted up my *urgashi* Mercedes and you broke my *urgashi* arm."

Carla jerked upright and threw the medical supplies on the bed. Seething, she took two fast steps toward him, grabbed his coat, yanked him yelling to the bed, and jostled him down into a sitting position. As

she started roughly taking off his sling, she hissed, “You forgot to mention your finger, *mudak*—asshole.”

Joy

Jy-ying and Jill were loaded with boxes and bags of clothes the three women had bought—they would not let Joy carry more than a hat box. Done shopping, and with Little Ying’s nose to the walkway as he constantly pulled on the leash tied around Jy-ying’s loaded arm, they headed for the Bebe a block away. They did not realize that this area was considered the white man’s section of town, and that any pretty Chinese or Japanese woman—and any pretty white woman with her—was considered a prostitute from Chinatown and the Barbary Coast, out spending her night’s earnings.

As they waited for a break in the traffic to cross Market Street, three men in their middle twenties walked up behind them. One yelled, “Hey Chinks, five dollars for your cunt.” Another yelled even louder, “Blondie, I got something for you to sit on.”

When Joy glanced back at them for a second, revealing her black eye and bruised face, one of them shook his finger at her. “You whores should listen to your pimps.” The three of them laughed.

Then Joy felt a hand rubbing her buttocks through her skirt. She jerked, turned around, and faced the three thugs just as Little Ying, now able to put weight on his bad paw, started jumping up and down, barking and growling at them. The men were scruffy looking; they wore plain broadcloth hats in the popular golf cap style of the age, heavy wool pants whose knees puffed out from constant sitting, heavy western belts, and wool shirts unbuttoned at the top. Their sleeves were rolled up to their elbows in workman’s fashion. The only thing that differentiated them from one another was the color of their clothes. The biggest of them liked black.

Joy asked them, “Does your mother know you’re out?”

The thugs stopped laughing and sneered at her. Black Clothes threw at her in a husky voice, “Fuck you, Chink.”

Glancing at Jill, Joy saw that she showed no sign of fear. Jy-ying looked bored as she put down her parcels and tried to hand Little Ying’s leash to Jill. Jill was paying no attention to her, however; she was tightly focused on the men. Jy-ying then tried to hand the leash to Joy and step in front of her, but Joy would not take it either. Jy-ying shrugged, and tightened the lease around her wrist.

To protect her injured finger and the worst of her bruises, Joy took a slightly angled step toward the thugs to present her good side. She locked eyes with Black Clothes and, as though instructing a child, she told him, "Go home and play with your dolls."

Jill

Unnoticed by Joy and Jy-ying, Jill had also set her packages down on the sidewalk. As the other two thugs laughed at what Joy had said, Black Clothes got red in the face and moved toward her. Jill stepped around Jy-ying and stood in front of Joy; posture straight, head tilted back, she unblinkingly looked up into Black Clothes' small, slitted eyes. He stood a foot from her with his fists balled up, his face thrust down at her, and his scowl momentarily frozen in surprise.

A bicyclist rode by, jingling his bell to warn a horse rider that he was passing. People nearby had overheard the verbal assaults, and had become rooted to the walkway as they watched the attack. Two men, one the size of a sumo wrestler, looked like they were about to rush the thugs from behind.

Finally, with her hands hanging loosely at her sides, Jill calmly commanded in a voice loud enough to be heard above Little Ying's barking and the traffic noise, "Enough now. Go away."

Jill blocked Joy's view of the man, and she couldn't see the other two behind him. She was about to push Jill aside to save her from an inevitable punch, when Black Clothes replied, "Yes, ma'am," and turned and walked away. His two friends stared at his back, confused. They looked back at Jill, then, shoulders slouched, they turned and followed him.

Little Ying gave a few more barks and then stared after them, obviously pleased that he had scared them away.

Joy's mouth fell open as she stepped to the side and saw the men walking away. She put her hand up to her good cheek, and turned to look at Jill. Jy-ying did also, her eyebrows almost touching the rim of her flowery hat, her slanted eyes wide.

Just as Jy-ying was about to say something, Jill asked as she started picking up her parcels, "Shall we cross? There's a hole in the traffic."

Still looking dazed, Jy-ying picked up Joy's hatbox, handed it to her, and loaded herself up again. They crossed to the other side of the street with Jill. Neither Joy nor Jy-ying said anything until they reached the Bebe. Then, Jy-ying turned to look wide-eyed at Jill. "How did you do that?"

Turning slightly pink, Jill answered slowly, "It was nothing."

Joy responded, "You're going to have to teach us your 'nothing.'"

"Really. I grew up on farm in a mountain valley populated with wild animals such as grizzly bears, wolves, and mountain lions. And lots and lots of snakes. Everywhere. One had to learn how to live in peace with them all."

Lips parted, Joy and Jy-ying stared at her and waited.

Joy finally asked, "And?"

"Well, those young men were like wild animals."

"Jill, I got that much," Joy replied, "but what did you do?"

Jill gave them her beautiful smile and, eyes sparkling, she answered, "Oh, simple. I looked at Black Clothes with fearless confidence, as though I were the top dog in his pack. I also hinted with my eyes that if he didn't submit, I would tear him into little pieces with my teeth."

Joy burst out laughing.

Jy-ying said solemnly, "Okay, Jill. How about my teaching you my worthless martial arts while you teach me that astonishing . . . look. Have you tried that on Hands?"

"No. He's not susceptible."

"Why not, Jill?" Joy asked.

"He's not a wild animal."

Ryan

Ryan watched John's eyes, and saw the momentary uncertainty, almost immediately masked by feigned anger. He saw what he'd expected. *Banks did in fact lie to me.*

"What?" John blurted.

Ryan looked apologetic. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it that way. I've been working under tremendous strain, and that slipped out. But you're something more than a businessman, right? Why else are al Jaber and Akwal trying to kill you and your assistant? They don't have an insurance policy on you both, do they?"

John looked rattled. "No. And we don't do drugs. We don't do dirty pictures or prostitution. Nothing illegal."

"I see. What do you do?"

"I told you, Lieutenant Ryan—I'm a businessman."

Ryan suddenly leaned over and tapped John on the chest with stiff fingers. "You're wearing some kind of armored vest, aren't you?"

“No, it just my shirt and underwear. I have my Chinese laundry put a lot of starch in them.”

Ryan slowly rubbed his jaw. “I see. I can tell you have a holster and gun under your coat. May I see it?”

“No. I’m willing to help all I can, but you now are crossing the line. Surely you don’t suspect me of any crime?”

Ryan took out his pack of Philip Morris and started thumping one cigarette against the table to firm up the tobacco, when John held up his palm toward him. “Please don’t smoke here; I don’t want the apartment to pick up the . . . odor.”

Ryan leaned back and looked at John; seeing that he was serious, he put the cigarette back in the pack. He took off his cap and ran his hand through his wooly hair as though he’d had a revelation. After feigning a few moments of thought, he flipped through several more pages, and studied one in particular. He asked, “Why do you think those two are out to kill you?”

“I don’t know that they are. Why do you think so?”

“The attack on you at the Fairfax. Too many bullets to be a plain burglary. When burglars are discovered they don’t engage in a firefight, they run. Second, that woman Akwal told your assistant, Miss Phim, that she was going to kill her. Yes, and she surely tried.”

“Come now, Lieutenant, that was a hen fight. You know how women are. They say all kinds of things when they get into a hair-puller.”

Ryan replied, “I see,” and made to get up. He suddenly reached over and tried to insert his hand into John’s coat to pull out his gun. John automatically deflected Ryan’s hand away with a sweeping motion as he pushed backwards out of his chair, knocking it over. In no more than a second, he was standing between its legs in a ready position.

Ryan stood up, satisfied with what he had just found out. *Banks is covering up something he is doing, which is probably the reason the two killers are after him. He probably has a weapon that matches what Hadad was carrying. He has on something like that new armor. And he is a trained fighter. No businessman is a trained fighter and wears armor unless his business is a front.*

“Relax,” Ryan said, smiling. “I’m here to protect you from killers. It would be easier if you leveled with me. But, if you see them again or suspect they are around this building, give me a call. They are wanted for criminal activity other than their attack on you. Akwal, you know, may have murdered two policemen.

“Good day, Mr. Banks. I’ll find my way out.”

Ryan went down the stairs and outside. The Central Builders truck was still there. He'd remembered to leave the Stanley Steamer boiler cooking, and with steam billowing from under the hood, he checked the boiler water level indicator, the dual gauge showing the main burner kerosene pressure and the pilot burner pressure, the steam gauge, and the valve controlling the flow of kerosene to the main burner. All were as they should be, so he pressed the pedal to the left of the brake in until it latched, moved the throttle on the steering wheel to pass the steam to the engine, and headed into the street. He looked both ways, and hit the brake. He could hardly believe what he saw.

In a haze of dust that still hovered up and down Haight Street, there were two horses down, and two others and a mule that had broken free from their harnesses, standing alone. Two wagons were overturned, and a cart lay on its side, with someone sitting on top of it, head in his hands. A carriage with a broken wheel was skewed across the road, and a dozen people were wandering among chickens, broken crates, suitcases, spilled lumber, and unidentifiable debris.

They were here, his mind shouted at him.

Chapter 28

Mid-Afternoon, Tuesday

Hadad

Hadad was still in a sour mood about his broken wrist and finger. They no longer pained him, but his wrist had a dull ache that seemed to burrow right into his brain. After numbing his injuries, Carla had stitched the gouge on his lower left arm and covered it with a medicinal bandage; after setting his broken wrist, she sprayed a cast on it that left the stitched wound free for daily treatment. This time, once she set his broken finger again, she also sprayed a cast around it. He now had his left arm tucked into a nice sling she had made, and his right wrist encased in an ice pack.

Carla tried to get him to eat something, but he nibbled only the cold chicken and could barely stomach the lukewarm pan-fried potatoes she brought him. He grouched, “Doesn’t anybody cook rice or lamb in this *bokshil* town?”

He put aside the plate of food, took another sip of green tea, and sighed. It was nothing like mint-flavored Arab tea, but Carla said she could not find a store that sold it. *Oh well, this is a bokshil time, a bokshil country.*

Carla’s lips were compressed, the corners of her mouth drooping, as she looked at his injuries. She put her hand gently on his shoulder. “Hadad, there is a new Indian—India Indian—restaurant that has an ad in the newspaper. I will go there late this afternoon and see if I can pick up nam bread and lamb for you.”

“Get me my OT-15.”

Carla jerked up. Stood looking at him for a moment. Then she got out their padlocked suitcase, unlocked it, and took out the OT-15. She made sure the safety was on and carefully held it so that Hadad could take it with his free right hand.

He tried to hold it, but the weight was too much for his deeply bruised right wrist, and it fell out of his fingers onto the bed. So, he took his left arm out of the sling and then picked up the OT again, with his middle finger through the trigger guard, and rested it in the hollow of his right arm. He now could hold and trigger it with his good fingers.

“Bang, bang. Take that, John.” He smiled for the first time that day. Looking at Carla, he exclaimed, “I can do it. I’ll back you up.”

Carla stared at him with a tight grin, and asked, “Do you have a plan?”

“Not yet.”

“God be praised. Well, I have one.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I’m going to kill them both. All I need to do is get one or another of them alone, which I will do tonight. I am going to concentrate on Joy first. Since she is beholden to the warrior code, I can use that to get her alone. After I kill her in hand-to-hand, John will be easy.”

“You’ll just get yourself killed and leave me with the mission to carry out myself.”

“Let me understand this, Hadad. You mean you actually would find it difficult to do the mission without me?”

“Of course. I can use you.”

“You can . . . use me?” Carla looked at him out of the corner of her eye, head tilted.

Hadad turned his attention back to the OT-15.

“Okay, Hadad. I am leaving, and I am not coming back until at least Joy is dead. I am stopping at our weapons capsule, and then I will be on my way. Don’t injure yourself again.” She left, slamming the door behind her hard enough to shake the wall.

“Carla,” Hadad yelled.

Nothing. Only noise from the downstairs saloon.

“Carlaaaa!” Hadad shouted, staring at the slammed door.

Joy

With everyone working but Joy, they had secured the two entrances to John’s apartment building with the iron-barred doors, and barred the first-floor windows. He also had them set up motion detectors from the equipment capsules and place them at each corner of the building, with a receiver connected to a siren in his apartment and the first-floor hallway.

That finished, John had all of them but Jill gather in his apartment, and told them, “I think we’ve now got some security, and there is more to do, but I don’t want to wait. As I mentioned, the best defense is offense, and I want to take it to the killers. We shouldn’t wait until this is a fully secured fort, for that will give them time to organize their attack

on us. And who knows what resources they have? So, I want to take Dolphy and Sal with me to check at the Mercedes place for any information we can get on the killers. There is no such thing yet as California automobile registration, license plates, or taxes, but still, the distributor might know something.

“We have enough security with what we have done so far, and with Jy-ying and especially Little Ying here, that the walking wounded . . . ” he smiled at Joy “ . . . can feel secure.”

As much as she hated his doing this without her, Joy felt it made sense. But out of concern, she asked, “What are you going to do if you find out where they are staying?”

“Probably scout the place.”

Joy looked at him for a long moment. A man would have to be dumb and blind not to know a storm was brewing. John was neither, and waited for what would happen.

Tossing her head, Joy held up a finger and said sweetly, “Excuse me a moment.” She hobbled into the kitchen and took out the rolling pin she had bought, and came back with it in her hands. She bowed before Dolphy, holding the pin out stiff-armed for him to take. Solemnly, she intoned, “This is my sacred rolling pin. At the heavy touch of pin to head, a man is rendered unconscious. If your boss shows any desire to do more than just peek out of the Ford at where the killers live, you are to use the sacred power of this pin and heavily touch his head with it. And then bring him back to me so I can use my holy power to put sense back into his head.”

Dolphy took the pin, bowed in return, and answered, “I will obey.”

Sal complained, “What about me?”

“Ah, yes. You are Dolphy’s backup. If he should fail in his sacred duty, you are to wrest the pin from him and perform the deed yourself.”

Jy-ying

Jy-ying was worried about John’s safety, but she had to do something that would not warn Joy about her feelings for him. She picked up some wrapping string from Joy’s morning purchases, and moved to stand regally in front of Sal. She tilted her head back and commanded, “Kneel to your queen, my servant.”

Eyes huge, he stared at her. With a grin, Jy-ying motioned him down on one knee. Seeing the grin, Sal obeyed. She then laid the string across his shoulder and uttered, “I hereby deem you Jy-

ying's Knight of the String. As my faithful knight, Sir Sal, in the event that Sir Dolphy gives your boss a touch on the head with Joy's holy pin, or fails in his sacred duty, you are hereby commissioned to use this string to tie his hands behind him and drag him back here. Oh good Jy-ying's knight, do you accept this duty?"

Sal bowed his head. "I do."

Hands and Dolphy howled with laughter. Chuckling, John added, "I bet that Sal would be Jy-ying's good night, all right."

"John!" Joy exclaimed as he laughed uproariously. "That's crude." She held her serious expression for only a few seconds before laughing herself.

Jy-ying stood there, perplexed, then she nodded. "Oh, I get it." She blushed, but joined the laughter.

Sal looked at John with wide eyes. "You think so?" he asked before joining the hilarity.

Dolphy, the first to recover, assumed a serious air. He slowly slapped the palm of his left hand with the rolling pin. With string in hand, Sal smirked.

Hands finally got out a "Yeah." Then he looked from John to Dolphy and Sal, and pleaded, "Don't take dangerous risks, now. I don't want be left alone with three women."

No one was fooled, Jy-ying knew. *But they all realize that they could be dead today or tomorrow. As do I.*

Ryan

Ryan drove around the neighborhood, then called from a corner police box to leave word for those who called in. When his detail finally assembled in a vacant lot two blocks from Banks' apartments, he asked them for their version of what had happened in the street to create the chaos he'd seen.

"You guys goofed," he said when the six men had reported. "If Alex is right, you had the killers boxed in and let them get away." Turning to Alex, he asked, "Are you absolutely positive that it was al Jaber and Akwal in the Mercedes?"

"No doubt about it."

"How far away from the auto were you when you yelled for them to pull over?"

Alex looked unhappy. "About four or five feet."

"You had your gun pointed at Akwal?"

“She was driving, and partly hidden by al Jaber.”

Ryan lowered his voice. “Still, you shot at her?”

Alex licked his lips, rubbed his nose, and glanced at his partner, who had been driving the Buick. He tried to stand tall when he looked back at Ryan, and unconsciously rested his hand on his holster as he answered, “Of course, Lieutenant. She killed two policemen and may have one of those incredible machine guns. I couldn’t take a chance.”

“Neither she nor al Jaber had a gun pointed at you, right?”

“Ah, I didn’t see any.”

“You shot at her before you told her to pull over. Right?”

Alex crossed his arms on his chest. His voice rose slightly as he replied, “I couldn’t take a chance on her having that machine gun.”

Ryan stared stone-faced at Alex. “She is only a suspect in a murder investigation. She has not been charged or convicted. Right?”

Tightening his arms, Alex barely nodded.

There was the sound of scraping feet, coughing, and some whispering as the others on the detail shuffled uncomfortably.

In an even a lower voice, Ryan continued. “She probably has information on the sex ring. Right?”

With his arms so tightly locked around him that his elbows pointed at Ryan, Alex looked like a man whose chest was being crushed by a boa constrictor. As he nodded again, a tic twitched the skin beneath his right eye.

Jabbing both his jaw and his finger at him, Ryan shouted, “You goddam son of a bitch! She was a woman, hands on the steering wheel, no gun in her hand, and you goddam tried to kill her without warning.”

Alex backed up a step, and turned pale. The rest of the men seemed frozen in time and movement.

Ryan growled, “Alex, you are on report. I’m going to have you investigated by internal security. I want them to report you even if you only piss on a tree. Now, give me your gun. I don’t want to see your ass around the station until the investigation is over.” Ryan thrust his hand out. “Gun!”

Alex looked around at the other policemen. No one would meet his eyes. Nostrils flaring, he ground his teeth as he eyed Ryan. He hesitated, as though calculating the odds, then finally reached for his Colt Browning. Ryan kept his hand close to his own gun and watched Alex carefully. Released from their paralysis, two other members of the detail also rested their hands on their gun grips.

Alex took his gun out and handed it over grip first. He then headed for one of the police Buicks, but Ryan yelled out, “No, you walk.”

Ryan watched him until he was past the motorcars, then turned to the others. He could feel the heat in his face as he barked out his orders. “I want you to surround the apartment building, about half a block away and out of sight. Remain outside of the your motorcars but close to them, in case another chase becomes necessary.”

Pointing at the driver of the Buick Alex had been in, Ryan pointed out, “If you had rammed the Mercedes when you had a chance, we might not be having this friendly get-together.” He looked around. “Okay, this is a twenty-four hour deal. Twelve on, twelve off, with overtime. I will send replacements tonight. Questions?”

One of the policemen asked, “What do we do if we see al Jaber or Akwal?”

“Approach them with the greatest caution, and arrest them. But if they have weapons in hand, find cover and demand that they drop their weapons or you will shoot.”

“And if they don’t drop them?”

“Shoot—the man first. And if the woman does not throw down her weapon? Yes, then even shoot the woman.”

Chapter 29

Late Afternoon, Tuesday

Carla

Carla felt she had disguised herself sufficiently. She had changed the lines of her face to look more aged and Caucasian. She wore a cheap-looking flowery lawn hat with a large bow in front that, when she pulled the hat down over her forehead, helped hide her face. She had dragged her percale and white braid dress on the floor, stomped on it several times to add wrinkles and smudges from her boots, and rubbed some charcoal on the bottom. She left the dress unbuttoned at the top when she put it on, and stuffed two feather pillows inside to make her look about eight months pregnant. Over that she donned a cape blouse that covered the dress opening, and for insurance she also put on a knitted circular cape that fell to her waist and added to her broad-girthed appearance. Carrying a basket of long-stemmed flowers she had bought, she practiced a waddle.

I am ready.

She threw the strap of her replacement holster purse hiding her replacement Stahl over her shoulder, checked to make sure her knife was secure in her leg sheath, and hid the OT-15, its stock folded, under the flowers. On the way out of the burned-out building where their capsules were hidden, she remembered something. She returned to the capsules, took out a pair of high-powered binoculars, and put them in her purse.

She smiled to herself. *Now I am really ready.*

A Hansom or some other kind of cab was out of the question—too great a risk. She walked to where she had parked the Mercedes and looked underneath to see if there was any oil or water leaking. After removing what remained of the canvas top, she bent down the two struts that still stuck up until they were out of sight. Then she cranked the motor to life. The car shook violently and screeched every few seconds.

Her body protested her renewed activity with pain, but she was so intent, so sure she had Joy now, so engaged in imaging the precise kicks and punches she would make, that her mind hardly registered it. She climbed into the driver's seat. As the Mercedes shuddered beneath

her and the steering wheel shook in her hands, she patted the dash board. "Good girl," she told the running wreck, "all you need to do is get me there."

She drove no more than the speed maintained by the horse riders, bicyclists, wagons, and carts on the side streets, and stopped three blocks away from Banks' apartments. She parked the Mercedes and took a last look at it. Remembering a good vantage point she'd seen before—a banyan tree almost covering a lot catercorner to the apartment building's front entrance—she waddled a block, passed a police Buick, and then spied the policemen watching the apartment building from the shade of a tree. Increasing the sway and clumsiness of her walk and holding her pillows in place with one hand, she shuffled past them and around the corner to the banyan tree, out of sight of the policemen. She merged herself among the many huge roots descending from the branches, and found a comfortable position sitting among them with her OT-15 close at hand. With her binoculars, she scanned the building and the entrance.

Not knowing that Joy had bought a new gas stove, Carla thought, *They have got to leave sometime this afternoon. Joy and John are not going to cook over the woodstoves of this age if they can help it. They will go somewhere to eat.*

A half-hour later, she saw a Ford come out of the alley next to the apartments and head past her up Haight Street. At first, she swore at her luck: "*Bokg*, they went out the back entrance." Then she saw that John was driving, and there were two other men with him. No Joy.

Carla could not help it. In her excitement, she yelled aloud. "She's alone! God be praised." She hid her OT in the basket again, stood, edged out of the banyan's roots, and waddled toward the apartments.

Officer Kelly

"Look at her," Kelly said, pointing nonchalantly at the woman walking down the street in the direction of the apartment building.

His police partner watched her for a moment, then said, shaking his head, "Yeah, the flower girl got herself knocked up. Poor thing. Looks like some bastard has roughed her up, too."

Kelly shook his head. "I would have bought a few flowers from her if she had come this way," he confessed.

Carla

Carla looked at the iron gate across the building's entrance. It was secured with a chain and padlock. She raised the heavy lion's head door knocker and brought it down several times on the bronze striker plate, creating a loud, metallic gong that must have carried throughout the building. No one answered, so she yelled, "Hello," and tried knocking again.

"Hello," she heard, "be right there."

In a moment, a man with his arm in a sling appeared. He tipped his golf cap and asked, "Can I help you?"

Carla recognized him as one of the men in the outer office at the World Trading Company that Joy had sent into the inner office to join Banks. She smiled and said, "Tell Joy that she has a visitor."

"Your name is?"

"Carla."

He nodded, touched the brim of his hat again, and said, "I'll pass it on, ma'am." He turned and went up the stairs.

Joy

Joy was sitting at the kitchen table looking over the ads for another trading company they were considering buying when Hands knocked on the door. When she invited him in, he said, "A Carla is downstairs at the gate to see you."

"Carla? Are you sure of the name?"

"Yes. But it's not the same Carla. This one is a poor flower lady. She's pregnant."

Joy did not doubt who it was, and her heartbeat jumped before she could calm it. *So*, she thought, *this is it*. "Thanks. Tell her I'll be down in a minute."

There was no reason to hesitate. That she would accept the coming battle had been determined by her lifelong training, by the spirit it infused into her bones—she was neither man nor woman, old nor young, injured nor whole, but a warrior. And a warrior is what a warrior does, absolutely. She walked into the bedroom and almost mechanically changed into her sweatshirt and her loose practice pants while her mind prepared her. She reversed her headband to show the white lightning bolt against the vivid red of the bushinota dojo, and put it on. She reached for her black belt, but stopped. *No need*, she thought as she pulled her hand back.

She pulled a piece of paper from her printer and, her hand firm, her mind clear and ready to disappear when ready, she wrote:

My Dearest John,

If you are reading this, I didn't survive my fight with Carla. I am what I am, my love, and this was a warrior's fight, and I died as a warrior should.

Please, don't ever think this was suicide. Since my last fight with Carla, I have been studying what I remember of her moves. I believe I have a counter to them. I intend to use my bad finger as bait for a decisive counterattack. If it turns out I am wrong in some way, it does not mean that I went into this fight believing I would lose.

I go with a love for you that consumes all my being, all my soul. Wherever you go, whatever you do, my love and spirit will always be with you. When a breeze brushes your cheeks, it will be my gentle kiss. When you hear the swirl of leaves, it will be me walking toward you with my arms open. And when you hear the songbirds, it will be me singing to you.

Please do not grieve for me. You have given me more fulfillment than I could ever have hoped for, and I now go with the greatest trust that you will succeed in our mission.

A temporary good-bye kiss, sweetheart, for I know that our souls will eventually be together again.

Live well.

All my love,

Joy

Chapter 30

Late Afternoon, Tuesday

Joy

Wiping her eyes, Joy stood and dropped the note to John on the kitchen table, which still sat in the living room. She imagined wrapping her heart with its burning emotions in flameproof plastic and putting it in a refrigerator for safekeeping, and closing the refrigerator door. She now stood tall, head high, hand on her locket, her resolve hard as steel. She was ready.

She slung her holster purse over her shoulder, picked up her Mossberg 590 12-gauge shotgun, and carried it in one hand as she slowly descended the stairs, holding onto the rail until she was near the first floor. She paused on the stairs and peeked around the corner at the apartment entrance to make sure Carla was not trapping her.

Seeing Hands standing by the entrance and Carla on the other side of the gate, her hands hanging empty, Joy clicked the safety off on her shotgun and descended the few remaining steps rapidly without touching the rail. Holding the gun pointed at the entrance, she told Hands, "This Carla is the assassin I fought. Let her in, please."

Hands couldn't move. He stood, mouth hanging open, seeming not to know what to do or say.

"Hands! Pull yourself together and let her in," Joy commanded.

Hands hit his head several times with the heel of his hand to clear it, then moved quickly. He took the key from the box on the inside wall, unlocked the padlock, and then noisily pulled the chain off the barred gate with his good hand. He pushed it open and stood aside, at the same time reaching into his pocket and pulling out his Colt.

Carla stepped inside and smiled at Joy. The air seemed to crackle with electricity. "We meet again, Joy. What a pleasure."

She removed her hat and pulled the pillows from within her dress, then slowly began to disarm herself. While Joy kept her Mossberg pointed at her, Carla put the flower basket on the floor and kicked off the layer of flowers to show the OT-15. She dropped the holster purse strap off her shoulder, let the purse fall, and kicked it away. Then she bent over, took the knife out of her leg sheath, and tossed it in the

flower basket with a flourish. She turned to face Joy directly and gestured at the basket. "I trust you will believe that I have no more weapons on me."

While watching Carla, Joy instructed Hands, "I'm going to take her down to the basement. While we are there, call Jill and have her hide all Carla's weapons in your apartment. Inform Jy-ying that Carla and I are in the basement, but that, as one warrior to another, she is to stay out of this. She will understand. Okay so far, Hands?" Joy asked.

His brow knitted together and his lips were drawn in a tight line. He barely nodded.

"Listen carefully," Joy continued. "Eventually, only one of us will come out of the basement. If it is Carla, you are to let her leave the building. If she tries to go up the stairs or into your apartment, shoot her with this shotgun." Keeping her distance from Carla, Joy handed it to him stock first, keeping the gun pointed in Carla's general direction.

He put his Colt back in his pocket. She waited until he started to put his finger on the trigger before removing her own. "The safety is off; all you need to do is point it at her and pull the trigger. You really don't have to aim—you can't miss."

"Yes." Hands' voice shook slightly. "Must you do this, Joy?"

Joy ignored the question and asked, "Are you sure you can shoot her, Hands? You must tell me now if you can't."

Hands looked at Carla, who waited by the basement door, head high, hands hanging loose at her sides. Hands' voice firmed. "Yes, I can. I will." He hesitated, and said almost as a cry, "We all love you, Joy. Good luck."

"Thank you, Hands; I love you, too."

Joy removed her holster purse and slippers and waved her hand toward the basement door. Carla opened it and started down the stairs. With a quick nod to Hands, Joy followed her. She closed the door behind her and flipped on two switches, one for the lights.

At the bottom of the stairs Joy toggled another switch as Carla looked around at the large clear space and the mats lined up against the wall. She said softly, "It looks as though you were ready for me."

"Yes," Joy agreed. "This also is meant to be our practice space, but it needs more work before it will be ready."

A small table and a bench rested against another wall. Carla walked over to the bench and began to disrobe. She took off her wool walking dress to reveal loose black shorts and her underlying armor. She removed the armor, leaving her clad in a baggy ribbed V-neck shirt. She pulled the bottom of the shirt out of her shorts and let it hang loose. She

took off her boots and socks and stood barefoot. “I assume you have no armor on under your shirt either,” she said, her tone making it a question.

“No. I have on only my training clothes.”

Joy stood on the bare concrete floor at a neutral distance from Carla, not wanting to engage her quite yet. “Only one of us will leave this room alive. I have already told you about my duty to my dojo, and you see I have shown its to-the-death battle symbol. So perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me what all this is about, and how you know so much about John and me.”

Carla

Carla answered, “I have waited most of my life for this moment: to see you before me now, to have you in my grasp, without fear of being disturbed . . . I still cannot believe it. You see, Joy, in the Muslim world, you and John are the most hated crusaders in history. You two are responsible for the world’s decline into godlessness and unholy barbarism. You two have created a world of powerful infidels, a satanic universe parallel to the Islamic one of Allah, led by his prophet Abul Sabah. You both are evildoers who destroyed Sabah and what might have been, in my universe.”

At another time, Joy would have smiled at that. Now she could only say, “Thanks for the great news. We succeeded, then.”

“Yes, in my universe. But you will not succeed in this one—that is why Hadad and I are here. Thanks to Hands’ biography, which described your abominable mission, and John’s self-righteous *Remembrance*, the world knows of your evil deeds.”

“Hands wrote a biography?”

“Yes, he did. And it describes how you bought the child Abul Sabah, and were later killed with him by a heroic Muslim freedom fighter who could not know that Sabah would be the Prophet of God. Almost every Friday sermon in my country ends with ‘Allah be praised; the Satans be damned through eternity.’ You and John are the Satans.

“The publication of the biography, discounted as science fiction and destined initially to obscurity, and the discovery of the *Remembrance*, also showed that a time machine was possible, and gave hints as to how it might be built. Within two years, however, the major democracies had outlawed any work on time machines, made the ownership of any such machines illegal, and had all countries sign an international treaty to that effect.”

“Don’t tell me,” Joy said, “your scientists developed one anyway.”

Carla smirked. “When Umirzak Suleimenov, the president of Kazakhstan, read a translation of the biography, even though he was a signatory to the international treaty banning time machines, he obtained the approval of our Islamic Council to set up a super-secret project called the Creation Project. It had one purpose—to duplicate the time machine that had sent you two back in time, to train two people to go back in time to stop you, and to do what you and John did, but as a mission to Islamatize the world. He put aside ten percent of all oil revenues for the project.

“I was then the five-year-old daughter of Yevgeniy Akwal, Professor of Physics at the Kazakhstan State University and cousin to Suleimenov. My father was made the head of the scientific work on the time machine. Over much opposition from the Council, he selected me to train as one of the future time travelers. Since no other Kazakh had the expertise to direct the Project, the Council reluctantly gave into his demand. Most important, I was accepted by Suleimenov.

“From then on, my life was planned. I was sent to the United States to live at first with a Kazakhstan diplomatic family in D.C., and then with naturalized Kazakhstan-Americans in San Francisco. Of course, I took all my schooling through to earning my BA in your country.”

Joy stated the obvious. “You were also trained in some version of kung fu.”

“Yes. This was a careful choice. The Project contracted with the leading White Crane Kung Fu master, Lo Yuechan, at the Shaolin Monastery. Given the promise that the equivalent of \$250 million would be provided to the monastery, Yuechan was sent to the United States to train me daily over the next eighteen years.”

Joy’s heart was starting to pound in spite of her effort at calmness. *Yes. Yes, of course, I should have known that style was being used against me.* Her self-two automatically went back through her calming routine.

“In 2013 my father informed me that their time machine had been tested, and that I should return for the final planning of the operation. And here I am, Joy.”

Joy’s body was completely relaxed again, and her voice was almost robotic. “You forgot something. Your partner—what about him?”

“He is the son of Imam Akezhan al Jaber of the great Almaty Mosque. The Islamic Council demanded that someone with the appropriate faith and background go back in time with me. Hadad was selected and sent to live with a molla of the Washington Mosque, and

then to the molla of the Muhammad Mosque in San Francisco. He was also trained in kung fu but, unbeknownst to the Project, he was a lazy student, a womanizer, and a nominal Muslim. His teachers kept this fact quiet for fear of punishment.”

“Didn’t you train together?”

“No, the Council demanded that we be kept apart. I was a woman, after all, and he was a Muslim male and, more important, the son of the molla of our greatest mosque. The Council was afraid I would subvert him with my charms. I had met him off and on during our kung fu sparring practice, but I had no idea who he was until we both returned to Kazakhstan for our final planning.”

“Are you two . . . close?”

“Like you and John? No.” She hesitated, and then, as though her words were wispy smoke drifting out of a chimney, she added, “But I think I could fall in love with him, if only he would treat me with the same respect John shows you.”

Carla seemed to shake herself, then stepped closer and bowed. “It’s time, Joy.”

John

John couldn’t believe it. They had what Carla and Hadad had given as their address. The dealer said he almost had refused to sell the car without it, since the parent Steinway Company demanded all addresses of Mercedes buyers for informational and advertising purposes.

“Yeah,” Sal said sardonically, “the dealer would refuse a sale of \$8,500 like I would refuse a free night in a whorehouse.”

They drove around the California Resort, and then John said, “I’m going to find a place to park.”

Dolphy laughed. “Joy isn’t going to like it. But, too bad. I forgot to bring her rolling pin.”

Sal held up the packing string Jy-ying had given him. “I’ve got the string, so be careful, John.”

“Yeah,” John replied, grinning, “she has you on a string.”

As Dolphy and Sal laughed, John found a parking place close to the Resort. He pulled into it, then turned to the guys, squared his shoulders, and lifted his brow. “I don’t want to put your lives at greater risk. You can stay here until I return, and I will understand. If you come with me, you may be killed. I want you to understand that.”

The corners of Sal's mouth lifted slightly. "I fear more what Joy will do to me if she finds out you got killed, and we weren't there to protect you."

Dolphy sighed. Trying to hide his grin, he lamented, "That's it, boss. We're more afraid of Joy. Let's go."

John looked into their eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, and thanks. Check your weapons—make sure they're loose and won't catch on your pockets or holster, and take the safety off. We're going to walk into the Resort and, presuming room 207 is in on the second floor, walk up the stairs as though we belong there."

"What are you going to do at room 207?"

"I don't know."

John led the way into the Resort. Off on the right of the entrance was a bar and tables, and at the back was a small casino with gambling tables for poker, blackjack, and roulette. There were few people there at this time of day. To the left was a small reception and registration counter, and stairs leading up to the second and third floors. John tipped his fedora to a couple coming down the stairs as, with Sal and Dolphy behind him, he climbed to the second floor.

The hallway was dim. John took his H&K out and signaled the guys to do the same with their Colts. He then walked boldly down the hallway to room 207.

Once at the door, he stood there. He felt as though he were running on automatic, as though he had planned and rehearsed what he was going to do. He felt no fear; there was now no thought to what he was doing, only a cold determination to do what he must do. He signaled the guys to stand against the wall on one side of the door, and he did the same. He put one hand out and slowly turned the doorknob. He used his lips to silently tell the guys, "Unlocked. Ready?"

When the guys nodded, John thought, *I'm sorry, Joy. I've got to do this. I love you.* He suddenly twisted the knob, threw the door open, and rushed into the room, his gun pointed before him.

Joy and Carla

Carla's face looked relaxed, but her eyes gleamed. Beneath a bare overhead bulb, the only light other than the one by the stairs, Joy silently returned her bow. She discarded all thought, let her self-two orient her body to display her injured finger as a lure. Her legs and arms seemed to come completely alive. She adopted the straddle-

legged stance from which she could launch, among other attacks, her most effective *yolo-geri*—side kick. Her self-two gave no attention to her bruises—they were now as nothing.



As before, Carla stood ready, slowly balancing her body while feeling for the best offensive balance with her toes. Under the control of her own self-two, she also felt nothing of her bruises, and the stiffness and muscle strain of the day before were gone. She realized without thought that Joy did not know the killing weakness of the attack position she was adopting. Her self-two immediately grasped that in five moves—one swooping kick, a follow-up straight arm punch over Joy's block, a feint fist high left, then low right, and a straight three finger punch upward into the throat—it all would be over.

Her body now prepared, Carla took the appropriate offensive stance.



The basement was as silent and still as a tomb. Not even dust dared to fall. The eyes of the two young women locked together, unblinking. Neither seemed to take even the slightest breath. A visitor to the basement at this moment would swear that they were wax statues frozen in odd but graceful poses.

Clap!

The sudden sound hit the women like a blast of thunder, violating their lethal concentration, stunning them with its unexpectedness.

Then a commanding voice intruded. "Stand back, Joy."

Chapter 31

Near Supper Time, Tuesday

John

Hadad seemed completely surprised as John, Dolphy, and Sal rushed into his room with their guns pointed at him. He threw the book he was reading at John, then grabbed for the OT-15 lying on the bed near him with his good hand. John leaped for the OT-15 and whisked it out of Hadad's grasping fingers. He threw it behind him then, sticking his H&K into the other man's ribs, he wrapped one hand in Hadad's coat and hauled him to his feet. Hadad screamed in pain as the rough treatment jarred his injuries.

John ordered, "Get your damn hands up. I don't care how painful it is."

John kept his gun on him as Hadad took his left cast out of the sling and, with a grunt, raised it along with his right hand.

While Sal and Dolphy kept their Colts pointed at Hadad, John picked up the OT and gave it to Sal to hold in his free hand. He took the Stahl out of the holster lying on the dresser and handed that to Dolphy. He told Sal, "Cover the door with your gun so that Carla doesn't sneak up on us."

He then frisked Hadad, removed a combat knife from a leg sheath and a small, short-barreled pistol from his coat pocket, and passed them to Dolphy. Trying to ignore his shaking knees, John stood back and studied Hadad, who stared at the floor; his whole body was slumped, his face deathly pale. He seemed to be mumbling some prayer, perhaps a death prayer.

John heard one of the guys moving behind him, aiming for a better angle on Hadad.

Finally Hadad squeaked out, "Come on. Get it over with. Shoot me."

Fearing his voice now would be tremulous if he replied, John tried to calm himself as Joy had taught him. He took two slow, deep breaths, imagining the still, misty waters of a lake clearly reflecting the trees and mountains around it and the white clouds above. His knees stopped shaking. He felt calm enough to say, "No one will shoot you unless you try to escape. You're coming with us."

He pulled Hadad's coat over his head, then motioned to Sal, who took hold of Hadad's good arm, while John held him underneath the armpit of the one in a cast. With Dolphy following behind, covering them, they led Hadad out of the room, along the hallway and down the stairs, and through a throng of people in the lobby.

"Federal Marshall's business," John yelled several times as they hurried Hadad past the reception desk and out into the street. They pushed him into the back seat of the Ford and Sal and Dolphy got in on either side of him, each holding a gun to his side. John cranked and started the Ford, and they drove off toward his apartments.

Joy

Joy took a step back. Still maintaining her readiness, she risked a look at the source of the voice. It was Jill.

She had her blonde hair pulled tightly back and tucked under a tight-fitting blue skullcap with two horizontal gold bars braided on the front. She was dressed in a long-sleeved, skin-tight, iridescent blue outfit that well displayed her curves. A silver stripe ran down each leg and disappeared into her black boots; a golden holographic badge was fixed above her left breast. Around her waist was a metallic-looking belt with some kind of black device that resembled a large cell phone attached to it. She was unarmed.

Jill walked up and bowed to Joy. "You have a relocated finger that prevents you from fighting well. Since you are entering this fight already injured, under your warrior code I am allowed to ask your permission to be your stand-in. If I am defeated, you may then continue as you were."

Joy stared, speechless. No less amazed, Carla stood back.

Finally, Joy's mind emerged as her self-two momentarily relinquished control. "No, you can't intervene, Jill," she replied. "This is stupid. She will kill you."

Carefully watching Carla, Jill said simply, "I will be the judge of that. I'm coming in, Joy. I want to do this by your code. Your permission please, Joy."

Joy stared into her eyes, and then at her outfit, and her stance. This was unbelievable. She almost unconsciously sought evidence that this was a stupid joke or a ploy. But something about Jill implied the deadliness of a ticking bomb. Joy's well-honed warrior's intuition clicked in. She slowly backed up to be out of the way. She nodded.

Jill stepped forward and bowed to Carla. "I am Captain Jill Halverson of the International Time Police. I am from Montana; I was born in 2183. My job is to prevent the use of a time machine to interfere with Joy and John's mission or otherwise alter human history. You are under arrest for violating the law."

Carla

At first Carla could only stare at Jill. She had not seen this woman before. She looked her over, noting what looked like an untrained and overly relaxed stance, and the dumb outfit, and her surprise turned to amusement. She said almost cheerily, "Nice try, but the trick won't work. Step aside. I don't want to kill you also."

Jill watched her. She stood still, hands loose at her sides, head up, face calm. Her eyes seemed lit from within.

Carla waited until she sensed that Joy had moved away and could not attack from the side, although she knew that no warrior would do so. Then she slowly circled this strange woman, evaluating her muscles, how she held her hands and feet, and her center of gravity. Satisfied with what she saw, she thought, *This is baby shit.*

She sneered, disdaining the eye-to-eye, stance-to-stance preparation. Her movements a blur, Carla launched a disabling series of punches, chops, and kicks.

Ryan

Having also gotten the address from the Mercedes distributor soon after John, and hearing from the dealer that he was the second one to do so, Ryan rushed to his Stanley Steamer and drove to the California Resort. He looked around. Neither Banks nor the Ford were in sight. He walked into the Resort and up to room 207. The door was closed; all was quiet.

He stood for a few moments debating what to do. *This is stupid*, he thought. *I have no backup and only my .38 Police Special against the machine gun they might have. I would break any of my officers if they barged into this room under these circumstances.* He backed against the wall and tried to turn the doorknob slowly. *It's unlocked. Oh, hell—*

Ryan threw open the door, threw himself to the floor, and pointed his gun into the empty room.

Jill

Jill covered herself with a force field-like series of dazzling arm and leg blocks and then out of nowhere, an incredible kick.

Suddenly Carla was on her stomach on the concrete with Jill sitting on her back, twisting her right arm behind her with one hand while pulling her head painfully back with the other hand under her chin. Jill could break her neck with one quick twist. Carla tried to buck Jill off and slither out from under her, but Jill just locked her up more painfully.

Carla screamed, "Why do you not kill me?"

Jill answered calmly, "We don't go around killing prisoners or anyone else, for that matter. Relax now, and don't struggle. I don't want to hurt you." She pulled a strap from her body suit, then pulled Carla's other hand behind her and wrapped the strap once around her wrists.

She got off Carla and pulled her to her feet. She took off her belt and put it around Carla's waist, telling her, "I'm sending you to my future, where you will be tried for violating the law. Do you wish to say anything to Joy before you leave this age and Joy forever?"

Tears streamed down Carla's face. "I am sorry for my people and for God that I did not succeed." She tried to hold her head high as she looked at Joy, but every line of her face drooped, and her lips trembled as she said, "I would have beaten you. Me, Carla Akwal, would have defeated the world's most revered warrior and woman. I came so close, and you had to be saved by . . . the police."

She looked back to Jill. In a tremulous voice without energy or volume, she whispered, "Will I see Hadad again?"

"You will be tried together, if I can bring him in alive."

"What will happen to us?"

"If you are found guilty, your mind will be wiped of all related memories. Your personality, skills, and religious faith will remain unchanged. I suspect that you will probably become a teacher of martial arts or, if you return to Kazakhstan, of American culture and language."

Joy finally was able to speak. Face downcast, she said, "I don't feel this is any victory for me, but it is for our mission. You know, Carla, under different circumstances, we could have been friends. I respect your dedication and loyalty to your training and to your faith. In the World Trading office, you could have shot me dead and did not. And I would have enjoyed learning your White Crane kung fu. I wish you the best for your future." She walked up to Carla, then looked at Jill. "May I touch her?"

Jill nodded.

Joy put her hand on Carla's shoulder and said, "My injured finger aside, Carla, I think you may be the stronger. But without the final battle, there is no way of knowing for sure." She hesitated, looking Carla in the eyes for several seconds. Finally she said softly, "Good-bye, Carla."

Joy stepped back. Jill did something on the small device that had been on her belt; Carla's body shimmered and transformed into wavy lines, disconnected patches of blurred color, dim motes, and then nothing.

As Joy stared awestruck into the empty space where Carla had stood, a thunderous explosion near the cellar door shook the basement, and a body flew down the stairs, landing in a heap at the bottom.

"Oh my God!" Joy screamed.

Chapter 32

Supper Time, Tuesday

Joy

Jill and Joy rushed to the crumpled body lying amidst the debris, broken stairs, and smoke. Jill got there first. As she took an implement resembling a pocket calculator out of her waistband, Joy stood briefly transfixed by horror.

It was Jy-ying. She was missing her arm. Her leg was folded under her with the foot turned backwards, and her chest and side were all bloody. A pool of blood spread beneath her.

Jill leaned over her and pressed the implement against Jy-ying's bloody side. She pressed a button. Then she held the device up in the smoke-dimmed light to read several figures on its face. Quickly, she snatched from the back of her waistband what looked like a cell phone with a small lighted window and held it against Jy-ying's sternum. She read what appeared in the window, looked at Joy, and gently shook her head.

Joy fell to her knees next to Jy-ying. She coughed, and tried to fan the smoke from her face.

Jy-ying opened her eyes. There was no pain in them. They were wide open and clear; intelligence and purpose still shone in them. She looked around, and then into Joy's eyes. In a strained, almost tinny voice that sounded as though she were speaking through a voice amplifier, she said, "Hello, Joy."

Jill stood and went to a remote part of the basement, clearly to give the dying woman and Joy privacy. She showed no emotion, as though she knew something about the dying woman or these events that compromised any tears.

Joy leaned over and kissed Jy-ying's forehead. "Hello, Jy-ying."

Jy-ying was having more trouble getting the words out. "Carla would have killed you. I could not let that happen. But Jill got here before I did. I heard everything. I now . . . ah . . . must tell . . . truth. I am Jy-ying Khoo from your Second Universe. I . . . came here by time machine to kill you and John and save Sabah."

Jy-ying struggled to speak. "I could not let Carla kill you. For if she killed you and John to save Sabah . . . and made it her mission to pro-

mote Islam—” Jy-ying hesitated, then tried to rush the words out “—she would have also destroyed your mission to democratize the world. She did not know that this was necessary for the rise of the Prophet Sabah and his final Great Victory over the . . . world.”

Joy grabbed Jy-ying’s remaining hand and held it to her heart.

Jy-ying struggled for breath. “I invaded your apartments . . . all your personal things.” A small, tremulous smile appeared on her flushed face. It disappeared with the effort to talk. “I . . . I am . . . you. You are me from a different universe. Your parents . . . were my parents.” Her eyes seemed to grip Joy’s. “If I died before you, I wanted . . . you to know. I wrote about our . . . your . . . family for you.”

Her voice had almost disappeared. Joy fought down sobs as she leaned over to hear her.

“It is in the false bottom in my brown suitcase . . . along with the location of . . . my supply capsules . . . and the code to open them.” Jy-ying’s eyes were losing their focus and luster. “Joy! Save Sabah. Educate him.” She gripped Joy’s hand tightly. “Joy!”

Joy fought her rising sobs and put her ear to Jy-ying’s mouth.

“Take care . . . of . . . Little Ying for m”

Her eyes remained open, seeing nothing, as her last breath rattled out her open mouth.

Joy screamed.

Chapter 33

Early Evening, Tuesday

John

"The gate's open, " Dolphy yelled as they led Hadad to the apartments. When he entered, he saw Hands sitting on the stairs slumped over the Mossberg, and cried, "Oh my God, Hands has been shot."

John left Hadad in Sal's hands and dashed up behind Dolphy, then stepped around him when he didn't seem to know what to do. He gently laid Hands back on the stairs, then felt for Hands' heartbeat, lifted his head to look into his eyes, and gently moved his body looking for a wound or blood. There was none on the stairs. "Whew. He's simply unconscious," John blurted.

Released from his fearful focus on Hands, John suddenly heard loud keening sobs, and smelled smoke. He looked around and saw a cloud of black smoke obscuring the ceiling. Wisps of it floated from the opening between the cellar entrance and its door, which had been partially blown off its hinges. With Dolphy's help, he pulled it open enough to look down the cellar stairs.

The top portion had been blown away. John could barely make out Joy at the bottom, hugging a body. A strangely dressed Jill stood with her hand on Joy's shoulder. Joy was weeping hysterically.

John told Sal, "Tightly cover Hadad's head with his coat, and guard him with your gun while we deal with this." He pointed down the hallway to the heavy ladder resting against the wall near the rear entrance. Dolphy rushed to get it and lugged it back while John sought out the thick rope they had used in fortifying the apartments.

He ran back to the basement entrance with the rope wound loosely around his shoulder, and threw it down next to the cellar door. He lowered the ladder into the gap where the stairs had been, and Jill took hold of it, set it on the floor, and opened the ladder's legs. It was still dangerous to try to step on the top of the ladder, so John tied the rope around the top of the damaged door, tested whether it would hold him, then lowered himself to the top of the ladder. He held onto the rope while he descended the ladder to the floor.

Jill, her eyes wet, silently retreated again to a corner of the basement.

John hardly noticed her or her strange outfit. He rushed to Joy, who was holding the body's hand. When he got close, he recognized Jy-ying, obviously dead. He put his arm around Joy. On the verge of tears himself, he let her cry it out.

Joy gripped John's arm tightly. Her body shook with sobs as she stared wide-eyed at Jy-ying's sightless eyes. She tried to speak, but nothing would come. She shuddered as she struggled to gain control of herself. With a quivering finger, she pointed at Jy-ying's white face and stammered, "That's . . . me . . . She is . . . me . . . me, in a different universe."

The words now flew out. "I killed her. I killed me. I did it," she wailed.

Her whole body shaking convulsively with sobs, Joy buried her head in her hands. John put both arms around her. He just held her close and stroked her head and hair. He caressed her back and waited. Finally she took her head out of her hands and, putting her arms around him, she pressed her head against his chest.

Joy

Tears still flowed, but she no longer shook with sobs. Joy slowly raised her head from John's chest and took a last look at Jy-ying. *That's what I will look like when I die*, she thought.

In a quivering voice she told John, "I'm okay."

She moved to stand, and John helped her up with his arm still around her.

Jill strode over to her other side, put her arm around her also, and said, "I'm terribly sorry, Joy." In a firm voice, she told John, "Leave Jy-ying's body. You need not worry about what to do with it. I will explain everything to everyone upstairs."

John yelled up to Sal and Dolphy, "We are coming up, and we'll need your help."

Using the ladder, the rope, Dolphy's firm grip, and a boost on their bottoms from John, Jill and Joy made it out of the basement. Jill then turned around and, with Dolphy, helped John up.

Sal and Dolphy gaped at Jill and her revealing clothes, and Joy suddenly realized how strange and sensual they really were.

Sal started to ask, "Who—"

"Who was killed?" Dolphy yelled.

Jill held up her hand palm outward and said, “Later. I will tell you everything later. I must deal with Hadad first. You all can put your weapons away. I can take care of him.” She removed Hadad’s coat from his head while John, Sal, and Dolphy, their eyes like saucers, stood staring open-mouthed at her.

Hadad paid no attention to her. Holding his cast in his good hand, he just stared down at the floor, his chest sunken, his shoulders drooping. “Carla . . . ?” he mumbled. “She is . . . Oh, merciful God. Carla!”

Keeping her distance, Jill commanded Hadad, “Slowly put both your arms behind you, cast and all.” Then she stepped behind him, reached behind her and found another strap from somewhere in her clothes, overlapped his free wrist on his cast, and wound the strap once around them, pinning them together.

Trembling slightly and still tearful, Joy stood watching. Half her mind and all of her emotions were still with Jy-ying on the cellar floor. All her aches and pains had returned. Her bruises and relocated finger were now unrelenting in their revenge for being ignored so long. Then she heard the frantic barking from the second floor. The sound blasted her thoughts away from Jill, from Jy-ying’s death, and to the duty that now filled her mind.

Little Ying must have been asleep, and awakened to find his mistress gone, and many strange sounds below. *Wait, little one. I’m coming. I’ll take care of you.*

Joy stumbled up the stairs, almost falling at the top. She heard wild scratching, whimpering, and barking at Jy-ying’s door. She limped toward it, grabbing for the knob. Ignoring her injured finger, Joy opened the door and tried to grab Little Ying. But he ran around her hands and down the stairs. Joy tottered after him.

John

Jill pointed at Hands and said, “Carla and Joy were about to do battle, and I was afraid he would get involved and be injured further or killed. I rendered him unconscious with a nerve block. He’ll be okay soon.” Looking at Sal, she asked, “Could you and Dolphy carry him into his apartment and make him comfortable on the sofa? We’ll follow soon.”

At that moment, Little Ying ran around Jill and stopped at the still smoky entrance to the basement. Looking down at the corpse of Jy-ying, he frantically ran back and forth across the entrance, bounding off the partially open door. Finally he leaped over the gap onto the remain-

ing stairs and tumbled down them. He pulled his body to Jy-ying with his front legs and frantically licked her cooling face. He then let out a moaning howl that continued until he ran out of breath.

Joy had reached the entrance to the cellar just as Little Ying jumped. Aghast, she watched it all. His howl brought her out of it. Raising her hand to her cheek, she bawled, "He broke his legs!" She collapsed at the basement entrance in tears.

This broke John's concentration, and he stepped over to her. He joined her on the floor and held her tightly, rocking back and forth with her.

Keeping her eyes on Hadad, Jill shouted above Little Ying's wailing cries to John and Joy, "Let him howl out his misery. This soon will be over."

Jill

Jill waited until Joy's grief eased, and John helped her stand. Then she said, "I'm taking Hadad into Hands' apartment. Please join us."

She waited until they entered the apartment, then gripped Hadad by his good arm, led him into the apartment behind them, and shut the door to reduce the sound of Little Ying's mourning. Dolphy and Sal had lain Hands on his velour sofa and stood next to it. Joy plopped into his matching armchair, and put her head in her hands.

Leaving Hadad standing in the middle of the living room, Jill strode into the bedroom and pulled a ratty-looking case out of the closet. She unlocked and opened it and removed another metallic-looking belt, which she brought back to the living room.

As she approached Hadad, he suddenly came alive. Straightening, he tried to butt Jill with his head, following that immediately with a deadly kick toward her throat with the toe of his boot. In a blur, she swung backwards out of range of his head, twist-dodged his leg, caught it with her hands, and threw him onto his back. He twisted to land on his good shoulder and tried to roll to his feet, but she had her black boot on his throat. His whole body seemed to collapse in on itself. His face showed utter despair.

Sal and Dolphy had their Colts out. Jill asked them, "Please help me stand him up."

They held him up as she put the belt around him.

"Okay, you can stand back," she said, and did so herself.

In a voice dripping with authority, Jill explained to Hadad who she was and what she was doing here. She then told him, "I have already

arrested your partner Carla Akwal and sent her to my future for trial. You are also under arrest for violating the law against time travel. Do you have anything you want to say here before I send you to my future for trial?"

Breathing heavily, Hadad raised his head to look at John with half-lidded eyes and a tight, one-sided smile. In a tone containing a weird mixture of grief, confidence, and pride, Hadad told him, "Too bad, what the world will now lose. No, it would not have been a global Islamic dictatorship. I had already lost my Muslim faith before returning to my homeland for final planning of this time travel. But what a chance this was to change the future! And all the wealth at my disposal to do so. I would have tried to be a compassionate world leader. Oh, I would have done away with war and democide, as you did, but I also would have solved the problems of poverty and inequality. I would have been the world's most benevolent and magnificent ruler and, unlike Carla, I would have left all faiths to live in peace."

Then he gazed at Joy, who had raised her head to look at him with a frown and narrowed eyes. "It was Carla who was so determined to kill you. I think it was a personal thing with her, a contest over who was the better warrior. Anyway, she believed in creating a world ruled by the Imams. My father was an Imam, and I would not want him to rule a hen house. I think I would have brought her around to my way" He hesitated, then admitted in a whisper, "I had hoped so." Voice even lower, he added, "I will miss her."

Then he raised his head, stood tall, and loudly concluded with a grin, "At least Carla won't cause me any more injuries. Good-bye."

Jill activated the belt, and he shimmered and gradually disappeared. His grin seemed the last thing to vanish.

Little Ying's howling had stopped.

Chapter 34

Early Evening, Tuesday

Ryan

No one had heard the apartment door open slightly. “How interesting,” Ryan said as he came around the corner and into the room. “I heard most of that, and would believe you people were putting on a show, but,” and he nodded to where Hadad had stood, “I cannot deny what I saw. You actually made him disappear.”

Jill started to say, “I am a policewoman—”

“Yes, I heard that. Can I see your credentials?”

Jill took off the strange shiny badge that had somehow been connected to her uniform above her left breast and handed it to him. As soon as he took it, the badge opened like a small book, displaying a number of identifying documents: an unusual, almost three-dimensional picture of Jill, her formal police identification with its own picture, a time travel pass signed by the President of the Union of Democracies, and something labeled a time transfer chip, for any resources she might need. Ryan sat down on the arm of the sofa and looked through them.

At that point, Hands regained consciousness and dizzily looked around the room. He immediately saw Jill and asked, “What happened?” Noticing her clothes, he exclaimed, “Why are you dressed like that? Cover yourself!”

Jill looked at John and Joy and said, “Would you excuse us? I want to talk to him alone.” She took his hand and led him into the bedroom and closed the door.

While Ryan continued to look through Jill’s badge, a policeman stuck his head into the apartment and breathlessly asked, “Is everything okay, Lieutenant? You disappeared inside, and we didn’t know what happened.”

Ryan looked up from the badge and nodded.

His eyebrows raised, the policeman exclaimed, “There was an explosion; There’s a body in the basement.”

Ryan calmly answered, “I know.”

The policeman looked surprised. “What do you want us to do now?”

Ryan replied, "It's over. Tell everyone to go home. I'll explain it all tomorrow. Meet at my desk at eight in the morning."

For an hour, John and Joy explained to Ryan why they were there, and why Carla and Hadad had been trying to kill them. Ryan had many questions, and as he heard the answers, his expression alternated between frowns and narrowed eyes and wide eyes and raised brows. But he had seen Hadad disappear, and there were the extraordinary weapons and armor and Jill's incredible badge. By the time Jill led Hands out of the bedroom, Ryan was convinced.

Jill

Hands' eyes were red, his lips compressed, as he struggled to hold back his emotions. As did Jill, whose own eyes were wet. She now wore her old dress, and carried another of the metallic belts in one hand and the ratty brown case in the other, packed with her clothes, badge, and everything else she had brought from the future.

Emotion choked her voice as she said, "First, I want to compliment Lieutenant Ryan on his police work. Being a policewoman, I know the difficulties he faced." She gave him a slight bow. Her voice grew firmer as she went on. "I also know that, as a policeman, you will carry many secrets to your grave; I know I can trust that what you have learned today will be one of them."

She knew that might not be so. It was asking him to be superhuman, and there would be all those questions from his men about the body. But she saw no need for telling him or the others the real reason for such trust.

Ryan walked over to Jill and asked, "May I take your hand?"

Jill put down her case and held out her hand to him. Ryan took it in his, bent over it, and kissed it. Still partially bent over her hand, he looked up at her and said, "As one policeman to another, congratulations on your successful work."

Jill felt her shoulders square with pride, and heat rushed to her face. "Thank you, Lieutenant Ryan. From a colleague I respect so much, I appreciate that."

Ryan backed up and turned to John. He shook his hand, and then took Joy's hand and kissed it. He stood back and looked at them with a face full of pride. "If there is anything—anything—I can do to help in your mission, I will come running. My best wishes for your success."

He then shook hands with the three guys. "On behalf of the rest of us who are not part of their mission, thanks to the three of you for your devotion to it and your work on its behalf."

Ryan strode toward the door, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. Looking around at all of them, he said, "Good-bye and good luck." He firmly closed the door behind him.

Jill turned so she could also see Hands, Dolphy, and Sal. "I also want to thank you three for your honesty and loyalty in helping and supporting John and Joy. You will be famous in my age; holovision will make the three of you known to billions. Each of you will be the heartthrobs of millions of young ladies."

Dolphy and Sal beamed at that, and Sal said, "Take me with you. I want to make them all happy."

"I must leave soon, but I wish to speak with John and Joy alone first. Let me now say good-bye to you, Dolphy and Sal. And Hands, I want to give you one last kiss in your apartment just before I leave."

Dolphy and Sal nodded and left for their apartments with a final wave and a smile.

Picking up her case, Jill asked John, "Can we go to your apartment?"

On their way to the stairs, Joy had to look into the basement. The smoke had cleared. Little Ying was lying with his head on Jy-ying's shoulder. He was silent and unmoving. Joy put her hand to her mouth and cried out, "Oh no!"

Jill knew what she saw, and almost immediately put her arm around Joy's shoulders and gently pulled her back. "The horror of all this will soon be over, Joy. Try to let it go, at least for a while."

Then she pressed deep with her fingers into Joy's nerve stem at the base of her skull and massaged a particular cluster of nerves and muscles. Joy's face soon cleared; Jill realized that she'd also drawn on her own training to further relax herself and clear her emotions. Not even a minute went by before she stood straighter and looked at Jill with calm eyes.

"You've got to teach me that," Joy said. "Thanks." Then she glanced at John. "Well, what are you waiting for?"



As they climbed the stairs, Joy's limping was too much for John; he picked her up and carried her to the third floor. There, red-faced and breathing heavily from the exertion, he had to put her down. But he put his arm around her so she could lean on him.

“Hey, big boy,” Joy whispered in his ear, “you need more exercise. From now on, you should always carry me up the stairs.”

As they walked slowly to his apartment John whispered back, “It’s not me. It’s all the rice you eat. It’s all compressed in your stomach, making you fifty pounds overweight.”

Joy stuck out her tongue at him.

Jill followed quietly, smiling broadly at the chance to witness the famous banter that Hands had described so well in his biography of them.

Inside the apartment, Joy shrugged loose of John’s arm and hobbled to a piece of paper on the kitchen table. With her back to him, she slid it inside her sweatshirt, then invited Jill to sit down at the table.

When they were all seated around the table, with her blue eyes shining, Jill began. “First, I want to apologize for misleading you all about my identity. I came here for two reasons. One was to protect you against Hadad and Carla, whom I knew were out to kill you and create an Islamic-ruled world—regardless of Hadad’s proclaimed agnosticism, Carla would have prevailed, you know—and to arrest and return them to my future for trial. I had to disguise myself so they would never suspect someone from the future was after them. Otherwise, they might have gone underground and waited years before suddenly attacking you on one of your missions. Hands’ *Mission Humanity*, his biography of you two, and your *Remembrance*, John, were explicit about your interventions, and it would have been easy for them to ambush you during one of them.”

John looked at Jill with raised eyebrows. “My remembrance?”

“Yes, you wrote one of Joy and your mission, and it and Hands’ biography were leaked from the Banks Democratic Peace Institute that Hands and the others set up in your name.”

“He wrote about our mission, did he?” Joy said, a look of surprise gradually changing into an “I told you so” smirk.

Jill’s smile lit up her face. “Yes.”

She waited a moment as John looked down and pinched his lip between thumb and forefinger. Then his face cleared and he looked at Joy. He reached for her hand and told her, “Baby, I’m so proud of you now, and in the future I’m sure I’ll be so bursting with pride over your successes that I’ll just have to share them with the world—”

“Can it, John,” Joy exclaimed, but she clearly couldn’t help the grin as she looked from John to Jill and shook her head.

Jill reached across the table and pressed her hand over theirs. She felt she was living a moment she would always treasure, one she wished would never end.

She mentally shook herself, knowing the local time was closing in on her. She withdrew her hand and clasped it with her other. “That aside, I felt that if I stayed under cover as close to you two as I could, then I would get them when they tried to attack you.”

Joy frowned and her smile disappeared. “But did you have to lead Hands on?”

Jill knitted her brows, and the corners of her mouth turned down. She felt her lower lip begin to tremble.

Joy reached over and put her hand on Jill’s arm. “I’m sorry, Jill, I didn’t mean it that way.”

Jill responded softly, “I am a woman; in my job, falling in love is a risk we take. Yes, initially, I had to use him, but then I found that he is a wonderful man, and I began falling in love with him in spite of the vast differences between us. His goodness, tenderness, and open heart melt my insides, if you know what I mean, Joy.”

Joy nodded.

“Leaving him and you good people will not be easy.”

John interjected, “Does that mean you won’t be my accountant after all?”

Jill looked appreciatively at John. “I’m afraid not. As to Hands, you may tell him this if you wish, for it will make no difference because of what will soon happen: eventually he will meet a courageous and beautiful woman in Germany and marry her. They will make each other very happy.”

She shook her head and her face cleared. “Now I want to tell you one more thing that, more than anything else, you deserve to know. Since Carla has already told you, in effect, that you will succeed in your mission, I can also tell you about yourselves. Once Hands’ biography and John’s *Remembrance* were leaked to the public, really to a publisher, the editors thought no one would believe them. So they contracted a ghostwriter to turn them into science fiction tales. Once published, they didn’t get much attention, until actual records of the Tor Import and Export Company and John’s stock transactions were uncovered. With that, researchers found records in many countries of what you two did to prevent war and foster democracy.

“This became headline news. Because of the huge interest generated, the supposedly science fiction tales—which incidentally did not need to have much fiction added—became best-sellers. You became the most famous and beloved couple in history. I know that Carla told you how hated you were in her very small part of the world, but among free and democratic peoples, over ninety percent of the world in my

time, statues depicting you two standing arm in arm have been built in many a public square; an infinite number of paintings illustrate one or another of your interventions; streets have been named after you; and the most popular names for children are Joy and John, even in China. In Russia, the city of Kazan was recently renamed Banksgrad.”

John’s chest visibly inflated, and he could hardly sit still, he was so agitated with happiness. He looked at Joy, slid his chair closer to hers, and put his arm around her shoulders. “Congratulations, baby. I told you how proud of you I would be.”

Joy reached back with her hand, drew John’s head down to hers, and gave him a kiss. Her eyes were misty when she turned to Jill and asked, “Is there any way I can let my mother know we will—ah, have succeeded?”

Jill sat for a long moment, lips pursed, finger idly tracing the picture of a white rose on the waxed tablecloth. She finally responded, “Yes, I think I might be able to do something.”

Still flushed with happiness, John asked, “How can you cross over to another universe? I thought that was impossible.”

“We cross over where the universes are connected. Where one parallel universe is created from another, they are not completely disconnected in all parts. You have created new universes in only those aspects of the universe that are significantly affected by your actions and their ripples. There is not a parallel universe of stars, for example, since your actions had no causal influence on them. The same unchanged stars are part of the old and new parallel universes. Even some parts of the earth are unaffected, and therefore remain within the old universe while also being part of the new one. ‘Parallel’ is a misnomer for all these universes. ‘Intersecting’ is the appropriate term.”

Jill paused; Joy and John nodded. Jill continued. “Just to tie this down, imagine you lay two sheets of paper flat on each other. Ignore the thickness of the papers and just consider their two dimensions of length or width. Consider that when you go back in time and make changes in one universe, the effects of those changes are like lifting the corner of one sheet of paper. You now have a third dimension—an intersecting universe—added. While the corner is disconnected from the bottom sheet into the third dimension, the remainder of the paper lies flat and is still part of the initial two dimensions—the other universe. To move from one universe to another, one travels in space and time to the parts—dimensions—still connected, and then one is in both the old and new universes. Now all one needs to do is travel in time to the future of the old universe.”

Her face brightening, Joy asked, “Where is such a point of connection now?”

Jill answered, “Probably the world outside of San Francisco, and maybe to be cautious, outside of California. But as the years go by, the connecting unchanged parts of this universe—the bridge between universes—will become smaller for us humans. By the time you finish your missions only central Antarctica will remain in contact.”

“But you can cross this in space and time?”

“Yes, we have discovered how to do this.”

Joy tilted her head and folded her hands in front of her and thought for several seconds. Then, eyes gleaming, she tightened her hands together, leaned toward Jill, and breathily asked, “If possible, would you do me a favor?”

Jill put her elbows on the table and leaned toward Joy and John. “I want to tell you both—I am so overjoyed to have actually met you. You cannot know what it means to me to see you in the flesh and to talk to you. To have been chosen for this mission and to have possibly saved your lives leaves me feeling immense pride. I will die with a smile on my face no matter how many years in the future that is. My generation sees you two as heroes, and all of us have tried to emulate your lives in spirit. I can’t tell you how many romance novels are patterned after the love you two have for each other. We owe you. I owe you. What can I do?”

Joy’s eyes were wet. When she spoke, her words rushed together. “All that we did is due to my mother, Tor Phim, to my godmother, Gu, and to the rest of the Survivors Benevolent Society. I want them to know that we succeeded. I find it hard to bear the thought that they sacrificed so much, and my mother gave up her only daughter to the mission, and they never, never, will know what happened.” Her voice had fallen to a whisper. Tears flowed down her cheeks. “Please.”

Jill reached across the table and took Joy’s hand in hers. “I know how you feel, Joy. My whole world knows. I will have to seek the approval of higher authorities, and our chronologists will have to be involved, but I will support your wish. I’ll go now, make my report, and ask for approval of your wish. This may take a year or so of future time, and while the authorities are considering your wish, I will arrest the leaders who prepared and sent Carla and Hadad on their time travel. But that future time will not be your time. I, or someone in my place, will return in ten or fifteen minutes to give you the decision.”

She stood. “I’m going to say good-bye for maybe the last time to Hands, and then leave.”

Joy and John rose also. Jill stepped around the table and hugged John, then kissed him on the cheek. She turned to Joy, took both of her hands in her own, and let their souls commune through their eyes. Neither knew how much time passed. It no longer mattered.

Jill finally smiled. "May I call you my sister?"

"I would be honored," Joy responded. Her tears started up again.

Jill put her hands on both sides of Joy's head and kissed her. She said softly, "I will never forget this moment, my sister."

Jill gave John another hug, backed up, and gave him a little bow. "Many women of my world envy Joy for your love. If they only knew you personally, as I do now, they would envy her even more."

She turned briskly, picked up her case and belt, and walked to the door. She paused, head high, and turned and looked at John and Joy. Her eyes were full of tears, and her voice reached across the room like a caress as she said, "I love both of you. If I don't see you again, good-bye."

She left. The door quietly clicked shut behind her.

Chapter 35

Late Evening, Tuesday

For many minutes after Jill left, Joy and John hugged, kissed, danced, and cavorted around the living room with gleeful eyes and wide smiles. They had survived. They had succeeded in their mission. They were famous for what they'd done. They had been immortalized. They did not know the all of it.

Jill had not told them at what cost their success had come, nor about the ethical debate that John's *Remembrance* engendered, which would divide families, churches, academia, media, political parties, and some nations. She had not mentioned that Joy would become consumed by her power, and use it to rid the world of rapists and muggers, murdering hundreds of them; that by the late 1930s, when her and John's mission was clearly successful, Joy would attempt to assassinate the American presidential nominee, whom she perceived as a communist; that John would stop her at the last minute, and then, with her submission and help, kill her; that he then would commit suicide by fire after writing his *Remembrance* of Joy.

Although telling them these things would have no effect on the future, she had seen no reason to be so cruel. Let them enjoy their mission's success and their justifiable fame. Anyway, even their final horror achieved another success of its own. That the great power they had at their disposal to fight tyrannical power would itself destroy them taught a lesson in a very personal way that would come to dominate the sociology and political science textbooks of her day; that power kills was not only a lesson for governments, it was also true of individuals—even lovers.

Moreover, with the exception of the killing, Joy's campaign to eradicate muggers and rapists on the streets became a model for tens of thousands of young women, who formed an organization centered around a new street-wise martial arts to do just that—without the killing.

Joy

Once they settled down from the high, they lounged back on John's Victorian couch.

John asked, “Oh, by the way, what was on that paper you picked up off the table?”

Joy stared down at her lap, pulling absently on her earlobe. She realized that she really didn’t have to think about it. Honesty was one of the bonds between them. She took the note out of her sweatshirt and handed it to him.

He read it; aghast, he reread it. He choked up, and visibly struggled to say, “You thought you were going to die, didn’t you?”

“Yes, unless I was lucky.”

“Oh baby . . .” His voice broke completely. He stood and pulled Joy up from the couch to hold her tight, swaying back and forth with her. “But you’re alive and I’m so happy you didn’t die. I love you so much.”

Joy held him in return, and nestled her head on his shoulder. “Jill saved me at the last moment. What an incredible woman. Carla attacked her, and Jill did something with her hands and legs that finished with Carla on the floor and Jill in command on top of her. Jill then arrested her and, as she did to Hadad, sent her off to Jill’s future for trial.”

They sat down on the couch again, still in each other’s arms. John said in a husky voice, “Ah . . . Jesus, baby . . . If Jill had been the clumsy Jill of this time—not the policewoman from the future—she couldn’t have intervened. And Carla would have killed you . . . You would be dead now!”

“Probably.”

“And Carla would have been free, with Hadad, to kill the rest of us.”

“Ah, not likely,” she sighed. She frowned, and her mouth turned down. “You might have wondered what I was doing all the time I was in the basement while you and the guys were working around the apartments, installing the gates and such. I knew that if Carla could confront me here, she would not shoot me; she would challenge me to a fight. So . . .” She looked down at her hands and took a long, tremulous breath. “I set up a system of interconnected dead man’s switches, a motion detector, and C-6 plastique in a box under the top cellar steps. The first switch resembled a light switch, and I put that next to the light switch at the top of the stairs. Switching it on readied the system. I aimed the motion detector down the steps and put it above the cellar door. I set it for a range of five feet. The second switch I put at the bottom of the stairs, underneath the railing where it couldn’t be accidentally turned on. It switched on the sys-

tem. Now, if someone going up the stairs did not turn off that second switch, the motion detector in the box above the entrance would set off the explosive.

“I hit both switches on the way down the stairs with Carla. She did not know about the switches, of course. So, if she had killed me, she would have walked back up the stairs and triggered the plastique and the resulting explosion would have killed her. But . . . Oh John, I killed Jy-ying!”

John hurriedly interrupted with, “But when you two were in the basement and the system was activated, Jill went down the stairs without setting it off.”

“I put a little switch between the door and the door jamb. If the system were active, opening the door deactivated it for one minute. Jy-ying—me from another universe—would be alive if—”

John quickly held up his hand to stop her from dwelling on that. “Isn’t this against your warrior code? I thought you could only kill Carla in combat.”

“Although I’m a warrior, I’m not crazy. I was not going to let Carla live to kill you. Anyway, my code would have been satisfied when I fought her and lost. If I had used the dead man’s switches for revenge, that’s different. I used them only to save your life, and possibly the guys’ lives. If that is stretching my code, I can live with it.”

He knew how to respond to take her mind off Jy-ying’s death. “Yes,” he said with a slight grin. He wagged his finger. “But you know, the code is the code, and I don’t know whether I can live with the thou—”

She hit his shoulder hard with the flat of her hand, pushed him off the couch and onto his back with her foot, and jumped on him. She caught his finger in her fist and, laughing, put the forefinger of her other hand on his lips. “John, shut up,” she commanded.

Chapter 36

Late Evening, Tuesday

John

"How much time has passed?" Joy asked excitedly, her eyes shining at the possibility of seeing her mother.
"Maybe twenty—"

In the space left empty by Jill's departure, the air started shimmering again. The body of a tall, well-muscled black man took shape. He wore a uniform similar to Jill's. Next to his leg was a machine that resembled an upright air conditioner. In one hand he carried a case similar to the one that Jill had with her.

As soon as he was solid, he looked at them and saluted. In a deep, resonant voice, he greeted them. "Hello, I am Jomo Wamalwa, born in Marsarbit, Kenya, and a member of the time police. I greet you on behalf of the United Democracies." He stepped forward to shake John and Joy's hands. "Meeting you is indeed my greatest honor."

"What happened to Jill?" Joy blurted.

Jomo's smile collapsed as he frowned. He slumped and stared down at his machine for a moment, his lips compressed. Finally he looked up, shook his head, and said solemnly, "I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you this tragic news. She and her colleague were killed in Kazakhstan. Rather than allow himself to be arrested, President Suleimenov set off explosives hidden in the walls of his office. He had a remote control trigger built into the toe of his shoe."

Joy stared wide-eyed at him. Her mouth sagged open and one hand flew up to cup her cheek; the other spread over her heart. "Oh, no. No! I just saw her minutes ago. She was so alive." Joy buried her head in her hands and began crying.

John stood paralyzed for several seconds, and then his whole body slumped and he shook his head. "No—shit! Shit!" He stepped over to Joy and led her to the couch. She dropped onto it and buried her head in both hands. John sat next to her and held her close. Alternately scowling and grimacing, he continued to shake his head as he stared at Jomo.

Jomo's own eyes got shiny. "She was my colleague and friend. I loved her, as did both of you. If it is any help, she died an honorable

death in the service of freedom. It is the risk we all take.” He bowed his head and waited until Joy finally looked up at him.

Choking on the words, she said, “It’s so sad . . . so sad. It must not be easy for you to be the bearer of such bad news.”

John cleared his throat and asked, “Is there anything we can do?”

“No, except to remember her as the fine person and policewoman she was.” Jomo hesitated, obviously struggling to collect himself, and then added, “I brought three holos with me.”

He knelt and opened his case on the floor and lifted them out. Handing one to Joy, he said, “This one shows the presentation of the United Democracies Golden Medal of Freedom to Jill’s parents on her behalf by President Chat Mai.”

The holo pictured a white-haired man dressed in a white robe that stood out starkly against the richly veined marble of a large chamber. He was lifting a golden medal on a blue ribbon from a red cushion held by a serious-faced young girl. An elderly couple stood holding hands, waiting to receive the medal. Both had graying blonde hair. The woman’s profile resembled Jill’s; no one could doubt she was her mother.

Jomo suggested, “Press the little button on the upper right of the frame.”

Joy did so, and she and John saw a holographic movie of the presentation, listening as the president gave a short speech praising the courage of Jill Halverson, who saved the lives of Joy Phim and John Banks and thus, saved their democratic peace mission. He ended by saying, “Had Officer Halverson survived, she would have received this medal. It is only fitting that her parents receive it in her place.” The president bowed; the camera retreated to a wide-angle view of the immense auditorium as all the representatives of all the world’s democracies rose in a standing ovation. When the holograph reverted to the initial still picture, Joy hugged the picture to her chest. She was openly crying again. John had tears in his eyes.

John asked, “Were those bastards in Kazakhstan cleaned out?”

“Yes, those who survived the explosion were arrested by two other time policemen, tried, and mind-wiped. They are now leading productive lives in their country. I should also say that the country is on the way to becoming a democracy.”

Joy wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. “What happened to Carla and Hadad?”

“They were tried, found guilty, and mind-wiped of memories related to their crimes. Hadad is unmarried and has opened a Middle

Eastern restaurant in San Francisco. Carla has remained in Kazakhstan and has married a professor of American and European studies at the University of Kazakhstan. She teaches martial arts and is preparing to compete in the Olympics. Martial arts have . . . will have been part of the Olympics for forty years.

"I'm sure she will win the gold medal," Joy said, trying to smile through her tears.

"I have two more holos." Jomo handed one to Joy.

It was a picture of Jill in her old dress, smiling. Joy pressed the little button on the frame. Jill's smile broadened, and she blew them a kiss. "Thanks for sharing some of your great life with me," she said. "I will always remember our few hours together. I love you both."

Jomo waited through more of their tears. "The final holo is for Hands," he said, and showed it to them. It was a picture of a smiling Jill, similar to the one they'd just seen. "The message is personal and the button on the frame will only respond to Hands' fingerprint. Giving it to him comes later."

Jomo

"Now." Jomo shook himself, relieved to be past the grief, and looked at Joy. "The United Democracies has considered your request, and in honor of the life we all owe to you and John, it has been granted, with certain limitations."

Joy suddenly smiled through her tears. "It has?"

"Yes. Our chronologists were insistent that you cannot visit your mother or godmother until they are on their deathbeds. The reason is that the future of our time would be altered in unknown ways—a new unknown universe would be created—if you contacted them when they still were active. They are important people carrying out very influential scientific and commercial activities. Were you to make your success known to them while they could make important decisions, those decisions would probably be different than if they were to remain ignorant of your success. And that would change our future. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you still want to communicate with your mother and godmother when they are soon to die?"

"Yes. Yes. Oh, yes!"

John added, "They would die that much happier."

Jomo continued. "The communication has to be all verbal. You cannot give to them or leave for them any documents, or anything else that would tie into the past or future."

Joy was barely able to whisper, "Can I touch and kiss her?"

"No problem with that."

John asked, "But what about my *Remembrance* and *Hands*' biography that will be published in the future? They are documents. Don't they change the future?"

"Those have become part of my universe; they played a role in furthering freedom. Any document that Joy might leave in the time of her mother might change my world, and we don't know whether it would be for the better."

Jomo pointed to his case. "Okay, I have a time travel resonator here. This is what we have to do. First, I will take Joy into the hospital room where her mother is dying of an advanced disease that doctors of the time can't diagnose. We now know it was a mutated form of cystic fibrosis for which my age has developed a cure. Two years later, your godmother Gu will be close to death from complications incurred in a difficult heart disease operation. Neither will survive for long after you see them."

Jomo hesitated and asked with compassion, "Is this all right with you?"

Joy had stopped her tears, and with an uplifted chin she replied firmly, "Yes. Can I take John with me?"

"No. We could not overcome one problem in time travel. All human beings have an aura surrounding their body with a diameter of at most thirteen feet. This field is too weak to interfere with one person traveling in time. The combined fields of two people are still within the tolerance of our resonators, and as you experienced, doable. Three or more people can time travel, but their combined fields are beyond this tolerance and interfere with the space-time coordinates. Three time travelers could end up inside the earth or within a mountain, or in the air, miles above the surface. We cannot risk that. Thus, where Kazakhstan would have liked to send a well-equipped force into the past to Islamatize the world, they were limited to two well-trained, well-armed people."

John asked, "Why didn't they send back people at different times?"

"Fortunately, they miscalculated the power surge involved, and the resulting explosion and fire destroyed their time travel equipment and documentation. We caught them before they could rebuild."

“Ah, why didn’t you time travel back to stop them from sending Carla and Hadad to 1906?”

“My universe is the causal consequence of what Kazakhstan did and all the events flowing from it to the time I left for time travel here. Had we stopped their time travel, we would have created another universe with unknown consequences for democracy and peace. The action Jill took to stop their time travel ambition was contemporaneous, and thus, part of our universe.”

John admitted, “I’m confused. Would not what Jill did when she was here cause time ripples, as you say, down to your future time? And even your being here now?”

Jomo nodded. “True. Not only Jill, but also you, Joy and John, your three helpers, and Carla and Hadad have immensely changed the future that would have been. Just consider what you have done differently. You live in a different building and have moved from the hotel earlier than you would have. You have not set up your business in the warehouse, as you would have otherwise done. Two policemen have been killed, and so on. How all these changes will affect the future, we cannot say. You two might, for example, soon die in an automobile accident as a result—”

“Yes, the way Joy drives,” John interjected with a little grin.

“Or you might be killed in one of your first interventions. We cannot trust to what will happen, since your survival and interventions, as you would have carried them out, made my world.”

Jomo pointed down to the machine near his foot. “This is the answer to that. When I activate the machine, it will reverse this new universe to the time-space coordinates our chronologists have already set in the machine, which is to your landing here at 2:51 a.m., Thursday, November 15, 1906. Simply put, this time machine will in effect cancel the last six days. This is why you need not worry about Jying’s body or Little Ying’s broken legs.”

Jomo looked directly at Joy. “After you speak with your mother and godmother, I will return you here fifteen minutes after you left for this time travel. Then I will start the machine to reset this new universe you have created back to the time your capsule arrived. These six days will, for you and this world, never have existed.

“But it takes fourteen hours for the force to build up as of now, and this time is a function of the amount of the universe to be reset—the more time since your arrival, the more your new universe has expanded, and thus the longer it takes for the proper force to be created. The function is exponential.”

He watched as Joy nodded and John frowned, then went on. "This explains why Jill felt hurried in finding and arresting Carla and Hadad. Once built up and triggered, the force acts so fast it's like snapping your fingers, and you are reset back six days to when you arrive in your time machine. You will remember none of the last six days because none of it will have happened. Except, and our chronologists are still trying to determine why, you may have a feeling of déjà vu when you relive some events."

John scratched his head. "So when any of us has a déjà vu experience, we are remembering that from a reset universe?"

"Yes."

Joy looked perplexed. "I don't understand. More than two people can't time travel, but you can send the new universe we created over the last six days back in time?"

"It's a vastly different and more expensive technology than time travel. It has seldom been used before, and it requires the approval of three-fourths of the members of the United Democracies."

Joy's voice softened. "I won't know that we were successful or that I contacted my mother."

"That's right."

"But that won't change that I talked to my mother before she died and told her about our success."

"For your mother and godmother, nothing will change. They will die remembering your visit with them."

"But I will never know they know of our success?"

"I'm sorry, but that must be so."

"So I will go through my life in this age always regretting I could not tell her how we are, or about our successes."

"It must be so, Joy."

Joy sat back on the couch and nodded. "I'm happy anyway, as long as they know before they die that they and the Society didn't fail. But," and she leaned forward with a sudden realization, frowning, "I suppose, then, that we will never know about Jill. These holos of her and the one about her award will disappear from our possession when we are . . . reset?"

"That's right."

She crossed her arms. "There will be no Carla and Hadad?"

"Yes, that's what Jill achieved."

She hesitated, uncrossing her arms to rub her hand along her other arm as she studied her lap. Looking up suddenly, she asked softly, "And what about Jy-ying?"

“She will appear as she did in the universe of 1906 without Carla and Hadad. Her appearance and the time waves she created are part of the universe in which the time police were created, and Jill and I were born.”

Joy frowned, still struggling to get hold of the idea. “And Jy-ying and I will have no knowledge at first that we are one in the same person, but from different universes?”

Jomo tried hard to keep the sadness out of his face, for he knew about the final battle between the two in another universe, just before Joy had found out that she and Jy-ying were the same person from different universes, and just after Jy-ying had been shot and mortally wounded by John. “That’s right,” Jomo said, succeeding in keeping his voice flat. “This will be a complete reset. Your minds will not know any more than they knew when you and Jy-ying first arrived in this time.”

Joy nodded. “One last favor. I don’t know when John and I will die, but if possible, we want to be cremated and our ashes combined. We will have pictures of ourselves next to our burial urns, I’m sure. Can we give these holos to you just before we reset, and then have both of them placed along with our pictures next to our urns?”

“I will have to get approval for that, but I’m sure that will only be a formality. Let me say yes.”

John asked, “Can Joy and I take Jill’s holo to Hands before Joy goes to see her mother? I want to give Hands as much time as possible with the picture before his whole world is reset.”

Jomo replied, “Yes. Take it to him and when you come back, I’ll be ready to take Joy to the future. Take your time. Do you mind if I look around the apartment? As you can imagine, to me this is all the far past. Your furniture alone is interesting, just for that reason.”

As they rose, Joy said, “Thanks, Jomo. Feel free to look around.”

John

They went down the stairs, Joy limping along with the help of John. He saw Joy turn her head away from the black hole that was the entrance to the cellar, although he didn’t think she could close her senses to the acrid smell of smoke, or the intermittent whining of Little Ying. John pulled Joy close and kissed her on the cheek before he knocked on Hands’ door. It was opened by a red-eyed Hands, dressed only in his long underwear. Hands invited them in, then turned his back on Joy and put on his pants. He turned and looked with raised eyebrows at John.

Holding out the holo, John said, "This is from Jill to you."

"Is she back?" Hands asked, his face lighting up as he looked quickly from John to Joy and back.

Joy glanced at John. Looking back at Hands, she said, "No, Hands, duty calls and she couldn't make it. But her colleague came in her place and brought this for you." She took the picture from John and handed it to him. "The picture has a button in the upper right. When you press it, it activates a personal message. The message is keyed for you—we don't know what it says, and don't want to know."

Hands almost grabbed the holo out of Joy's hands and held it up to look at it. His hands trembled as he activated the button. As he watched and listened, his face was gradually transformed until, by the end, he wore a happy grin.

John took Joy's hand and said, "We have to go. Our time visitor is waiting in our apartment, and we have a few more things to do."

John didn't know whether Hands heard him, for he again had pressed the button to restart the holo. John patted Hands on the back without looking at the holo, and Joy squeezed his arm. They both left quietly and closed the door behind them.

Chapter 37

3:32 a.m. Friday, September 1, 2023

Joy

The hospital room was dim, lit only by the vitals holomonitor and a small light shining from under the wall mount over the back of the bed, which also contained medical equipment, medical outlets and tubing, and electronic outlets. Tor was connected to an intravenous bottle and had two tubes entering her nostrils from below the hospital bed. She wheezed slightly as she breathed. Her hair was completely gray, and she looked cadaverous, her eyes dark and sunken, her skin wrinkled and almost transparent.

Joy approached her and gathered her thin hand in both of hers. “Hello, Mom.”

Tor slowly opened her eyes and tried to focus them on Joy. “What a nice dream,” she whispered.

“I’m real, Mom. I’ve returned from the past.”

“Is that really you, Joy?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m really here.”

Tor reached over with the arm that had the intravenous tube in it, and put her hand on top of Joy’s. “You are as I remember you, my beautiful daughter. You have not aged at all. But how could that be, if you are real?”

“It’s been only six days since I left, Mom. But time travelers from the future of the new universe we will create contacted us, and told us how successful we will be. In the New Universe, Mom, we will have avoided both world wars, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and many others. And we will have prevented all the major democides. No Stalin. No Hitler. No Mao. Especially, Mom, no Pol Pot. You and the Society will have succeeded. You saved hundreds of millions of lives. Because of our—your—success, the time travelers have brought me here to tell you that.”

Tears flowed from the sides of Tor’s eyes. “You are back. How wonderful. We did it. I cannot believe we did it. I’m so happy at seeing you. I’m so happy that you told me. Kiss me, my daughter.”

Barely holding back her own tears for the sake of her mother, Joy bent over and kissed her on the lips, on the cheeks, and on her wet eye-

lids. She freed her hand and caressed her mother's cheek with it. "I love you, Mom. I will never forget you, and all humanity thanks you for what you've done. If you hear a chattering in your ears, it is the thank you from the souls you and the Society saved."

"Have you seen your godmother Gu? She will be so happy to see you, and proud to know how successful you were."

"I will see her next."

"How is John?"

"The limits of time travel prevented him from coming. He sends you his love, and thanks you with all his heart for what you have done. We deeply love each other, Mom. Next to your adopting me, he is the greatest thing that has happened in my life."

"So I chose well, did I?"

"Yes, Mom, you did."

"Give him my love, will you?"

Tor was clearly straining, and her monitor was flashing red. The nurse would rush in at any minute.

"I must go, Mom. I can finally give you a decent good-bye." Joy kissed her. "I love you. You will always be in my heart. I will never forget you. Sleep well, my dearest mother."

Tor tried to smile, and reached up to touch Joy's face. "Have a good life, my dear daughter."

Joy turned and nodded to Jomo, and they shimmered and disappeared. Only her teardrops remained to fall on the side of the bed, just as the night nurse rushed into the room.

Epilogue

Wednesday, November 13, 1906

It was the fourth restaurant garbage can the little black and white dog tried, and this time he was fortunate. The lid was not on tight, and he managed to push it up and partly off the can by leaping at it with his paws. He jumped into the can and found rotten beef and old vegetables and a veal bone with meat on it. He started gobbling the beef first, leaving the bone to take with him.

Suddenly, something distracted him, and he stopped eating to look around. It was dark in the alley, and he could see no reason for him to be disturbed. He stared up into the starry sky and saw what appeared to be a shooting star. For some strange reason, he wagged his tail vigorously before going back to eating.



The jackhammer of sound blasted her mind. Jy-ying put her hands over her ears and moaned from the pain. She pressed her palms into her ears as hard as she could, but they had no effect. The sound beat her whole body and rattled her bones. She thought she was dying.

It went on for hour-like minutes. Then, in an unbelievable instant, the sound ended. Jy-ying had a sudden falling sensation, and was jolted to her knees.

Silence. Absolute silence, except for the beating of her heart.

She leaned against the door, feeling helpless and deaf. She couldn't think. Was she dying?

As her senses returned, she had to be sure she was okay. She felt herself all over. She looked carefully at her hands in the dim capsule light, and pulled up her ordinary woman's surplice and percale jumper suit to look at her legs. She was not, however, going to take off the uncomfortable pointed shoes and look at her feet. She swallowed a few times, made a couple of coughs, and spoke out loud: "God be praised. Thank you. I'm in one piece and apparently healthy. But did I make it?"

She looked up at the digital reading: 3:18:02 p.m., November 13, 1906. "Success!" she exclaimed aloud. "The month is a little off, but that should not make any difference. Time to see the old world."

She opened the door of the time machine a crack to look out, and suddenly furrowed her brows. *How strange. Feels as though I have gone through this before.*

Thursday, June 14, 1906

They finally did arrive in San Francisco, precisely as their scientists had calculated: November 14, 1906, 2:51 a.m. But at that moment, Joy did not know it and did not care. She was sobbing while John, who had squirmed around inside the cramped capsule, tried to comfort her. She'd had to desert her loving mother, knowing that she would never see her again and that her mother would never know whether she was successful in their mission.

John hugged her, stroked her back, and waited until she cried it out.

Joy finally sat up and asked whether they had arrived in the past.

"Yes," he replied, and then saw a locket on the floor, and recalled seeing Joy's mother throw something into the capsule just before the door was slammed shut. He knew who it was for.

Joy took the locket in both hands, held it to her heart for a moment, and then opened it. On one side was a smiling picture of Tor, sending a kiss with her hand. On the other side was a group picture of the Society members, with Tor in the middle, and Gu, Joy's godmother from China, standing next to her. Joy kissed the pictures, closed the locket, and put its chain around her neck.

She was ready. She and John took up their lanterns, and exited the time machine. After surveying their surroundings and seeing where their supply capsules were, John suggested that they should test their implanted communicators. But when they toggled them on, they heard a strange beeping.

They followed the sound to a spot on the warehouse floor; it came from under the floorboards. While John waited there, Joy went to one of their supply capsules, punched in the proper code to unlock the door, turned off the self-destruct mechanism, and took out an axe. She carried it to John. He pried up the floorboards to reveal a small red capsule about the size of a hardcover book.

Eyebrows raised, Joy looked from the small capsule to John. "You know, I have a feeling of *déjà vu*."

John rubbed his hand through his blond hair and stared at her for a moment. "Strange. Me too. But one thing we know for sure is that we've never done this before. Now, let's see what we have here."

Afterword

The idea of a time machine, and even time travel, is moving out of disdained science fiction into that of respectable scientific theory and research. Just search the Internet using these terms, and you will find much scientific commentary and some mainline research on them. Now, look ahead a thousand years, or even ten thousand, or twenty thousand, and consider how advanced science, knowledge, and technology will be by then.

Of course, we know nothing about what will be discovered or invented by then, no more than the ancient Romans could have imagined movies, television, or the computer. But we can surmise this: If scientists today can say that time travel can no longer be considered impossible; if indeed, some experiments have shown today a very limited, split-second, reversal of time, then is it not reasonable to assume that in the very far future scientists, with all the scientific advances, inventions, and technologies developed between now and then, will perfect time travel sufficiently to send a human being back in time? That is, if at all possible.

If our far future does indeed entail time travel, then there may be amongst us time travelers like John and Joy, involved in making the world a more peaceful and freer place. Perhaps this might explain the sudden, in historical perspective, disappearance of monarchical tyrannies and dictatorships as the prevailing type of government, and the virtually inexplicably sudden appearance and growth of liberal (modern) democracies, with their emphasis on civil and political rights.

Think of this. At the beginning of the twentieth century, just 104 years ago, there were no liberal democracies in the world. Almost universal was the historically standard monarchy, with a few electoral democracies, such as the United States, Great Britain, and France. I trust I do not need to remind Americans that in 1900, women could not vote, blacks were denied the vote in many states, and many other civil rights now taken for granted were then denied.

Monarchs—caesars, caliphs, czars, emperors, kaisers, khans, kings, maharajahs, mikados, pashas, potentates, princes, queens, rajahs, shahs, and sultans—have ruled at least since the written word or ideograms were invented over eighty centuries ago. Now, in a few decades of just one century, monarchies have collapsed as a type of government, as though a granite mountain just disappeared, and what took their place was fascism, communism, and democracy. And in historical time, in

the breath of more decades of the *same* century, fascism and communism were defeated both as ideas and in practice by democracy. By the end of the century there were about 120 democracies, about 86 of them liberal. This takeover of half the world by democracies, and the rise and fall of fascism and communism, has all happened with the historical speed of a bullet.

Let me propose an idea, something for fun, for conjecture, and not as a truth, a probability, or even a theory. Maybe there are time travelers like John and Joy among us, promoting democracy. This would explain the inexplicable, historical speed with which monarchies collapsed and democracies have taken their place. Maybe, also, there are time travelers like Hadad and Carla who would fight to impose an Islamic fascism on the world, and this could explain the sudden growth of an anti-infidel, violent pan-national, Islamic fascism with which an American led coalition is now at war. Maybe also there are time police—Jills and Jomos—who are protecting us and the future from such time travelers who would return us to the horrors of totalitarian rule by monarchs, communists, or fascists of all flavors.

Maybe. But we won't know.

Will we?

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