



# **Some Called It Paradise**

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## PROLOGUE

# 1

### Shanghai, 1937

At dusk, the great wooden vessel crashed out of the choppy troughs of the East China Sea. It pushed through sea wrack, into calmer waters of the Whangpo Delta. It reached the muddy currents of the Yangtze, where tributaries spilled into broad basins, mingling warm outflows with unseasonably cool air; creating eddies of fog that enveloped the craft. Debris drifted past the ship in the gathering darkness as deckhands stood alert at the bow, watching for scuttled sampans.

Reaching shallow water, Captain MacDowell rang the ship's register Dead Slow. Mr. Quintano in the engine room rang his response. Near the prow, deckhands threw out depth lines, calling numbers back to where MacDowell stood at the helm. He strained his eyes, peering into grey nothingness, unable to even see the bow. The eerie stillness was a harbinger to a collision.

The ship's hull drew only six feet, but measured one hundred-thirty bow to stern. Its outriggers arched out high over the water, like a giant mantis, spanning a hundred feet. Agile in Philippine waters where she'd been built, in ports like Shanghai the width of the private ship, *Missouri*, was cumbersome.

Suddenly, breaking glass, feminine squeals, and Josephine Baker's tinny voice echod from the Victrola in the salon. But somehow, Smith's carefree shenanigans always worked a calming effect on Captain MacDowell. He relaxed his grip on the wheel. Shortly, the fog lifted into the night as the ship neared the harbor. MacDowell called for his First Mate, Chen, to relieve him.

The *Missouri* slid across glassy waters towards Woosung. Here, at the confluence of the Whangpo and Yangtze Rivers, was Shanghai's deep water port. Merchantmen and ocean liners waited their turn for a berth, raucous foghorns and the clanging metal concerting with rumbling engines and pier traffic. The *Missouri* glided beneath a giant President liner held in place by tugs, their honking klaxons raising hackles from the bored

passengers aboard the liner. They milled at her railings, some pointing down at the *Missouri*, remarked at her unusual configuration, her mast top level with the liner's promenade deck.

War reports were reaching ships arriving in Shanghai. The city had been bombed this afternoon. Bombs from Chinese Nationalist planes, intent on sinking Japanese ships in the inner harbor had missed, missed miserably, and two blocks of Shanghai's commercial district lay in rubble, scores killed and injured. War had erupted two days earlier between China and the Japanese Empire at the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking. The conflict was spreading fast. From Shanghai's outskirts, Japanese units were pushing into the Hongkew section opposite Chinese troops digging trenches in Chapei.

Customs officials boarded the *Missouri* in the slip stream near downtown. As they checked the ship's papers, the Customs officers recited the events as they'd heard over their radio throughout the day. But they had little first-hand information. Clearing formalities, MacDowell steered the *Missouri* towards the Bund where he secured his ship at the quay.

Mister Smith, in a white silk suit, stood smoking a cigar outside his stateroom, waiting for the gangplank to be rolled out onto the wharf. He instructed Tulapaga to assign extra men to security watch aboard ship, then to accompany him and Captain MacDowell into the city. He threw a mock salute to the girls in the saloon with a stern warning to behave themselves in his absence, or he'd strand them in Shanghai. They waved screaming goodbyes as he crossed the gangplank behind MacDowell.

On the wharf, ambulances and fire trucks wailing in the distance. A warm glow from burning buildings a mile off lit up all downtown. Aside from that, Shanghai was its usual, frenetic self. MacDowell gave a crewman last minute instructions, then joined Smith in the backseat of the sedan waiting to take them into the night.

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In their stateroom aboard the liner, Mary Riddle sat impatiently at the vanity, angrily brushing her hair. Robby, her four-year-old, sat on the bed, swinging his legs, and watching her in the mirror. She caught his reflection and stared back at him until he looked away. She had dressed him hours ago in his tiny sailor's jumper. It was now ten o'clock. Having finished the last of the books she'd brought from Baltimore, she'd never been more bored in all her twenty-three years. A foghorn moaned, reverberating down the steel bulkhead. She closed her eyes, just knowing a headache was on its way.

Her husband, Lieutenant Robert Riddle, United States Navy, dressed in civilian attire, had gone in search of shipboard acquaintances. Finding none, he went in search of an open bar to give Mary she often needed

privacy. Bars on the promenade deck had closed, then reopened with successive announcements that docking would be delayed for two hours. That was four hours ago.

He was concerned for the safety of his family. Developments in the ‘Japanese Situation’ were occurring swifter than anyone could have predicted. But they had no option aside from sticking to their itinerary since the liner would be returning via Yokohama to Honolulu. He doubted they could catch another ship to Manila earlier than next week’s sailing. He nursed his highball, pondered alternatives he suspected didn’t exist.

Two hours later, passengers were advised that they could begin debarking. Robert hadn’t even felt the ship nudge against the pier. He drained his glass, went down to their cabin.

Mary sat with folded arms, didn’t look when he entered. Robby lay sprawled asleep on the bed, the collar of his navy blue jumper pushed half way up over his head.

“We’ve docked.”

“What time is it?” she asked coolly.

She was wearing her wristwatch, but he checked his own anyway. “Nearly midnight, I’m afraid.”

Mary stood, tossed her hairbrush into her purse, picked up her overnight case and stepped out of the cabin. “Bring the Admiral,” she ordered, nodding to Robby.

Robert sat on the bed next to his son, shook the boy gently. “Up and at ‘em, Skipper. ”

Robby opened his eyes. He smiled up at his father who sat him up, straightened his jumper and pulled up his socks. Robert turned to assure Mary that they’d be settled in their hotel room shortly, but she’d disappeared into the corridor. Debarking passengers filed by their cabin, looking in.

Father protested wide-eyed to son. “Well, it’s not *my* fault. If it were my ship, I’d brought her in on schedule.”

Robby giggled at the silly face his father made and slid off the bed.

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Mary’s first impressions of China were not good. She stood on deck overlooking thousand; coolies, passengers, shipping agents and drivers jammed the pier. Stinging odors of kerosene mixed with garbage wafted up, assailing her nostrils. She held a handkerchief to her nose, waited impatiently for her husband and son, and then joined the passengers snailing down one of the forward gangplanks.

A sleepy driver awaited them, sign in hand. It was another hour listening to his complaints before their trunks and suitcases were secured on his sedan's roof rack.

On the drive into Shanghai, foul smells permeated the car's interior. It was the stench of China with her unwashed, uncounted millions living in squalor and despair, her dead lying harmoniously with offal in the streets. The steamy weather brought odors so nauseating that Mary, her hanky faithfully pressed to her nose, insisted on keeping the windows up, so they sweltered in the back seat of the darkened limousine for the long drive into the city. Their driver, a fat, ingratiating Indian reeking of garlic, lurched the car along the way, swore at rickshaws and bumper-bullied those in his path. He seemed to enjoy Mary's discomfort. His resentful eyes caught hers in the rearview mirror whenever he braked or swerved suddenly. He'd waited all evening for the ship to dock, forfeiting plans to visit his favorite twelve year-old bonded prostitute.

The Swan Jiang Hotel was a first-class establishment boasting three hundred rooms and luxury suites, but when their car pulled beneath the porte cochere, people were ominously milling about outside. Bellmen ran down the steps to unload their luggage as Robert walked up into the lobby. Into a madhouse. The typically quiet, respectable Swan Jiang was under siege by armies of journalists, military officers, and businessmen refugeeing from the north, its lobby packed with hopefuls cued at the registration stations, turn-aways camped throughout the lobby and anterooms, ever inch of floor space taken.

Decorum in the hotel had met a swift end since this afternoon. Pimps hustled their merchandise into the lobby for quick briefings by the concierge. Money changed hands, and the girls were herded onto elevators as the procurers rushed out to fill new orders. They were having a banner night, knowing that there is always cash in chaos.

Robert shrugged, hoping that Mary wouldn't recognize the pandering flesh trade. The merchandise was, at least, well-coifed, and fashionably attired. He held a reservation arranged by the American Consulate here in Shanghai, but they were a day late since midnight had passed. The ship's purser had tried in vain to get messages ashore and Robert recognized several shipboard acquaintances in line ahead of him.

Mary, carrying Robby, was pushed through the revolving door by bellmen who dragged their luggage, ignoring verbal abuse by the tall, aristocratic Russian doorman. Robby was wide awake, bewildered by the crowd of anxious people, and he giggled at Mary's hat comically mashed down over her face. Robert stifled his laugh, grimaced sympathetically

instead. Maybe she'd laugh at it later, but now she was unreasonably angry with him for a long day of inconveniences. He hoped for one of her unpredictable mood swings, a wish quickly dashed when she was knocked aside as a bellboy dragging in the last of their trunks. Robert snapped curtly at the boy, took command from the harried head bellman. He instructed the boys where stack their luggage by the concierge stand, already surrounded like a fortress with luggage. White-gloved opened for tips and he meted out a few bills, leaving them to sort out the undeserving.

He surveyed the lobby. Not one available seat in sight. He suggested to Mary that she take Robby to the restaurant, then took his place at the end of the line, counting fourteen people ahead of him.

Mary put Robby down, shot Robert a frosty glare. She straightened her hat, her suit jacket, picked up her overnight case and started for the far end of the lobby, pulling Robby in her wake. A swell of drunken businessmen trailing cigar smoke forced her to nearly trip over a flight bag whose owner lay sprawled across a chair. The young Chinese pilot jerked awake, peered up accusingly. She continued on, wishing she'd worn flats. But at five foot nothing, she always wanted height, especially when traveling.

She was tired, hungry, and her feet throbbed,. But even under the best of circumstances, she'd hate China. She hadn't wanted to include Shanghai in their itinerary, and Robert's insistence irritated her anew; everything that was happening served to prove his decision was a mistake. And a heathen war greeted their arrival, for god's sake!

Two prostitutes flanked a tipsy customer, coaxing him the across the lobby. They bumped into Robby, almost knocking him down. They were pushed off course, but clutched to their prey. One looked back and cursed Mary in Chinese. Turning back to her customer, she smiled sweetly as they steered him towards the elevators.

Next was a lounge where drinkers were three deep at the bar, waiting for rooms that might not be available for days. They passed that, reached a restaurant. It was large and elegant, but overcrowded, loud, and smoke-filled, reduced by circumstances to an extension of the bar next door. Most people were only drinking and many tables were rowdy. The host had abandoned his station as groups stampeded in and out, pushing, shoving, elbowing, congregating in aisles. Mary queezed aside, yanking Robby to her skirt.

There were a hundred booths and tables, none empty. Luggage spilled into the aisles, forming a gauntlet to negotiate. A few waiters hustled about with orders, worrying those who lingered for sanctuary rather than

fighting for space back out in the lobby. Faced with shortages, many of the waiters had disappeared for long breaks, leaving their more enterprising colleagues to boldly haggle over gratuities.

Mary pulled Robby through the press of bodies, squeezed further into the room. She stood off to the side, adjusted her hat again, searching for a seat. Her feet were aching and she decided to humble herself by sitting at an occupied table, provided, of course, its occupant was a westerner. But she saw no candidates, so her feet decided that she could tolerate a Chinese, after all. She sat Robby down on her overnight case where he watched people rush by, spellbound by this sudden bonanza of fascinating oriental faces.

Mary spotted an elderly, well-dressed Chinese woman sitting alone in a booth for two against a partition. She approached and asked if she might sit down, but the woman ignored her except for a brusque wave-off with a nasty burst of Chinese. Stunned at this rudeness, Mary backed off, needlessly embarrassed since no one paid the slightest attention.

There was a crowded bar at the back of the restaurant where she spotted a young western officer with four bands on his sleeves. A captain. He stood a head taller than the others. He was drinking a beer, and watching her in that way westerners draw each other's attention in alien places. Unusual that he was in uniform. Robert wouldn't wear his uniform in Shanghai and when he'd been stationed here as an attaché only worn one for official functions. She couldn't discern the captain's uniform from this distance. He was perhaps American, maybe Canadian or British. Not German, she decided; his face was too friendly. Extremely handsome. She broke eye contact lest he got the wrong impression.

A Chinese man pushed past her and plopped down in the seat opposite the Chinese woman who ignored the intrusion, but merely denied his existence. With this revelation, Mary scanned the room with new determination. She backed against the wall for a better view of the room and snuck another look at the young officer at the bar. Captain's insignia, yet he was no older than thirty. Robert was nearly thirty, and only a lieutenant. The thought of her predicament returned in a flash: yes; Robert was a mere lieutenant traipsing his family around a strange city to a dingy saloon in the middle of the night instead of leading an entirely normal life back home, running one of Dad's businesses; a perfectly suited, well-paid position. He could have his pick of jobs, but no, he selfishly clung to his commission while a battery of lawyers and a few uncles ran things. Mary had contemplated a separation when Robert told her of this posting in the Philippines. She might still leave him, might just return to Maryland with

Robby if she didn't like their new home. That's what she told herself, anyway.

At the bar, Captain MacDowell sipped his beer, elbowed away no shortage of encroaching drinkers, shifted occasionally to watch the Mr. Smith's alcove in the corner of the restaurant. Mary's eyes followed his. The alcove was partitioned by ornate mahogany carvings, its privacy curtains tied back, allowing its occupant a clear view across the entire restaurant. There was a plush booth for six with only two men sitting in it, a middle-aged westerner opposite a Chinese businessman. The westerner was immaculately dressed in a white suit that seemed to glow under the dim lighting over the banquette. He was deeply tanned and covered with gold; wristwatch, bracelets and rings that glittered against his sunburnt skin. He sat with his back to the wall, a line of people waiting a discreet distance from the booth to speak with him. A massive Samoan standing behind the westerner was about to motion the next person forward.

Inspired by the boldness of strangers, Mary approached the booth, but hesitated for the man to extend an invitation. He didn't. The Samoan stood well over six feet tall and was half as wide at the shoulders. His arms were folded across his chest. His unfriendly eyes studied her purse, watched particularly for any movement of her hands. Then he scoured restaurant traffic dispassionately, giving her little regard.

If the guard, the gold, and the line of people waiting to see this man were any measure, he was important, and from the empty beer bottles on the serving cart, had occupied this alcove for hours. A waiter stood off to the side, ignoring others and tending only him. Mary stood there until Smith finally noticed her, his eyes lazily climbed up her body, deliberately and obviously contemplating her figure, minutely assessing her shape and feature, inspecting her hands, fingernails, then settling on her face which he held until he turned back to the rotund Chinese businessmen. Tulapaga was about to move Mary along as another Chinamen knocked past her and slid into the booth opposite Smith.

But Mary wouldn't sit there now, anyhow; even if she hadn't been insulted; his eyes were rude in his cold face which bore an ugly, jagged scar that ran from below his right eye down to his chin.

The new arrival at the booth was apparently was with the other Chinese. He began jabbering until Tulapaga sharply rapped the table with his knuckles. Then he removed a thick envelope and pushed in across the table. Tulapaga picked it up, thumbing through a stack of money with beefy hands. His summation was a grunt, then one of the Chinese began jabbering again. Smith listened dispassionately, glanced at the waiter who scooped a

beer from an ice bucket, opened it, placed it before him with near reverence.

Angered by her own docility, Mary turned on her heels back to Robby. The Chinese woman was readying to leave the table and Mary bolted for her seat, plopped down as she stood. The man sitting opposite, cigarette pinched between his thumb and forefinger, staring at the ceiling without acknowledging her existence. She called to Robby to bring her overnight bag to the table. He stood and struggled over with the case, sat down again at her feet. She managed after ten minutes to order tea and cakes.

Soon, the man vacated his seat. Mary deposited Robby on it and pushed her case under the table. Her tea came, but, 'solly, missy, no have cake. All finish.'

It didn't matter. She kicked off her heels, resolved to sit right here for Robert even if that meant she'd have to drink tea until she burst.

Robby watched his mother sip her tea. He was thirsty, but he didn't want to pester her by asking for a glass of water. She annoyed easily most of the time. He looked at her flaming red hair and then at those passing by and wondered why they all had black hair. He compared his mother's blue-green eyes against the oriental eyes. They were black. If their eyes were funny, their hair and eyes were black. Strange.

Mary wondered what was keeping Robert. They'd been waiting for an hour. She was already sick of China, yet their itinerary called for a week here in Shanghai before sailing for Manila, via Hong Kong. Robert wanted to visit old friends, wanted Mary to meet them. Well, she didn't care to meet them, so why couldn't he just write to them? Shanghai reeked with a desperate, nervous urgency, not to mention the hot, clammy weather. The the prospect of spending a week here was beyond depressing.

A reunion two weeks hence with Evelyn in Manila. She didn't look forward to that either, but compared to this, Manila sounded good. Evelyn wrote glowing letters about the Philippines. That is, after they'd gotten back to civil correspondence.

Right now, the early Maryland summer would be beautiful, a refreshing breeze off Chesapeake Bay cool and clean. There was no garbage in Edgewater's streets, no pushy, obnoxious foreigners, no war, no indescribable stench, no ugliness. She rested her head against the partition and closed her eyes, her mind turning back to Anne Arundel countryside. Shortly, she fell asleep, her finger motionless in the teacup ring.

In the lobby, Lieutenant Robert Riddle finished with the check-in desk that included a telephone call to the American Consulate. He walked back

to the restaurant to find his family. Naturally, their reservation had been canceled, but only the first day had been forfeited. The remainder of their week's reservation was confirmed, which meant that they could have their room by noon at the latest. Ten hours away. There would be early checkouts, of course, but there were many people reserved ahead of them. Were he alone, he wouldn't mind trading the inconveniences for the excitement of being back in Shanghai.

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He found Mary asleep at the table. Robby was wide awake, standing on the chair, peering over the partition at the strange-looking people in a booth on the other side. Robert gently shook Mary awake. She stirred reluctantly, snapped at Robby to sit down and stop pestering people. He sat, as she listened skeptically to Robert's ironclad assurances, personally guaranteed by Mister W.W. Wang, the first assistant night manager, that they'd have a room possibly as early as six o'clock and in no event later than noon. Robert was going to check at other hotels, and if necessary, they could go to the American Consulate nearby for at least a comfortable couch in the waiting room and freshen up in the staff toilets. The consulate maintained its offices in a hotel, and held rooms for visiting dignitaries and government employees. The duty officer had recognized Robert's name, apologized that nothing was available yet, but a room would be available by eight a.m. as a courier had to catch an early train. He'd wake the courier at six, and told Robert to either settle for a couch in the waiting room or check back then. But that left four hours, and Robert didn't want his family to remain in this loud, smoke-filled place any longer than necessary. He leaned over to kiss Mary's forehead but she pulled back, and as she did, caught Smith watching them. Those cold eyes; a knowing look that immediately understood Mary's relationship with her husband. She didn't care for a stranger's opinion. Robert shrugged, tossed Robby's hair, and told him to take care of his mother.

He left to check with a hotel a few blocks away, but even the budget hotels they'd passed had brimmed with businessmen who wouldn't normally have given those places a second look. As he bounced down the steps outside the hotel, he saw no taxis in the street, and decided to walk.

Robby watched his mother slide back into sleep, then stood up again on his chair and peered over the partition at the funny-eyed people in the next booth. A woman sitting there had skin as white as milk. And she had long, black, shiny hair and eyes like a cat. He decided that she was beautiful. He could barely see over the partition, but his unruly blond hair,

his wide, curious eyes attracted her. He caught her attention, and she winked at him, blew him a kiss. Robby eyes rounded and he smiled.

Lots to explore in this big, noisy place. He climbed down from his chair, glad that his mother was asleep, or he'd just have to sit here and count his fingers. That's what she always told him to do, but he never understood why since the number was always the same.

Large convex vases towering up to twice his height lined the wall near their table. One was black and shiny. As Robby walked past it, his reflection stretched up, way up, nearly to the top, and when he moved away, he became really tiny. He stepped back and forth several times, giggling at his reflection. Further along in his adventure, he came upon an enormous fish tank holding fat, puffy goldfish. His shadow chased the fish about the tank as he imitated their faces, until a golden glitter reflecting through the tank drew his attention to the corner booth, to a man with a scarred face. This alone demanded closer inspection, so Robby walked over and stood near Smith's table, watching him speak with two of the funny-eyed people. The man seemed unhappy with them, and shook his head slowly at what they were saying. Finally, he lifted a fist and thumbed for the funny-eyed men to get up and leave. They did, but they didn't look happy either, although they smiled like they still wanted the man to like them. They would have stumbled over Robby had not the big, dark giant standing by the table pull him aside.

The giant released him, and Robby inched closer as the man in the booth turned to reading some papers. He wore a moustache and was older than his father. Maybe he was a hundred years old. Robby's attention was taken by the scar which needed further investigation. He stepped closer, wondered if it made the man's mommy unhappy.

Smith snapped his attention to Robby, whose eyes widened at being discovered. Their eyes locked for seconds, then Smith looked back at his papers. "What's on your mind, Mister?" His voice was deep.

"My name's Wobby."

"All right, Mister Wobby. You got business with me?" Smith turned a page in his papers.

"Yeth."

"You do, huh?" Smith glanced over at Mary, asleep in the booth. He folded his papers and tucked them inside his coat. He ignored a young Chinese couple waiting to see him, and motioned Robby closer. "A fellow Yank, huh?"

Whatever the man said was okay with Robby. "Yeth."

“Okay, fella. Belly up for a cocktail.” Smith scooped him off the floor, deposited him on the opposite banquet seat vacated by the two Chinese. The flight from the floor to the cushion excited Robby and he giggled.

“The name’s Smith,” he held out his hand. Robby giggled and his hand disappeared in Smith’s big fist. Smith beckoned his waiter over to the table, ordered something in Chinese, and then turned back at Robby, whose eyes were barely visible above the table although he sat back in the seat, his legs straight out in front of his little body.

“Let’s get a few things straight before we talk,” Smith warned, leaning forward, elbows on the table. “First, I like to know who I’m *really* talking to.” He pointed an accusing finger at Robby. “I don’t think your name is ‘Wobby.’ Mind you, I’m not saying you’re untruthful. I think it’s your accent, understand?”

Robby nodded, although he didn’t understand. He giggled.

“My guess is that your name is Robby.” Smith’s eyebrows shot down, his face inquiring wisely. “Is that right?”

“Yeth.”

“Yeah,” Smith rubbed his jaw, thinking. “More probably Robert, right?”

Robby wasn’t sure, but his father’s name was Robert. “Yeth.”

“As I suspected,” Smith nodded sagely. “You have an alias? Another moniker? Something like ‘Bob?’”

Robby had also heard his father called Bob. He looked down at his shoes, tapped his toes together in thought. “I think so.”

Smith leaned closer, glanced around conspiratorially, then whispering: “And when you get bigger, it’ll be ‘Big Bob.’ ” Robby giggled. Smith held up his hands defensively. “I’m not saying you’re not a big guy already, Bob. I mean *bigger*.” Smith rolled his eyes fearfully. “No offense, Big Bob.”

Robby laughed, liking the way Smith spoke to him even if he didn’t understand much of it.

The waiter returned with a cup of hot chocolate, and placed it before Robby. Smith touched the cup, made sure it wasn’t too hot, then tapped his beer glass against it. “Knock that back, bucko.”

Robby stood up in the seat, pressed his belly against the table to reach his cup. He lifted it with his tiny hands, slurped a sip, his mouth dry from all the waiting he’d had to do.

“Something else, Big Bob, if I can call you that...?”

“Okay,” Robby concentrated on another sip.

“I don’t talk religion and I don’t talk politics.” Smith paused, cocking an eyebrow.

Robby tried to imitate that but could only widen his eyes.

Smith leaned forward, put his open hand next to his mouth, and his eyes shot surreptitiously around the room before he whispered: “But I *will* talk baseball with you.” Smith leaned back, satisfied with this pact, and winked at Robby. Robby tried that also, but could only squeeze both eyes shut. He opened them and giggled. Smith leaned forward again, his expression serious: “But there’s one thing that I gotta tell you, Bob; if you say anything in the wrong way about the St. Louis Cardinals, well, we’ll be taking a little trip to Knucklesville, you and me. Got it?” Smith nodded.

Robby nodded also, following Smith’s example, having not a clue nor a care what Smith was talking about.

“Okay, Bob. The floor is yours.”

Robby’s eyes fell on the richly carpeted floor and he guessed that it was all right with Mister Smith if he played on the floor. His mother always yelled at him when he did that. He craned his face up at the brown giant who stood with arms folded behind Smith. Tulapaga’s large eyeballs rolled down to take him in, his face as frozen as stone. Then, slowly, he crossed his eyes and made a terrifyingly grotesque mask, flaring his nostrils and baring large, sharp teeth between which his long tongue slithered out, nearly touching his chin. Robby trilled delightfully. Smith glanced up, but Tulapaga’s face had returned to granite, his cold eyes alert, scanning the restaurant.

Smith drained his glass, ordered another beer. He nodded to Tulapaga, who motioned the young Chinese couple to approach the table.

“Scoot over, Bob,” Smith waved his finger to Robby as a slender youth followed by a young girl hurried over. The waiter stepped in, slid the hot chocolate over and Robby followed it.

The Chinese, a skinny procurer named Yu Fong, was dressed flashily in a loud, baggy green suit over an orange shirt, fashionably accented with a yellow food-stained tie. He sat down, flashed a wide smile of crooked teeth, leaving the girl standing by the table, her eyes downcast.

Robby saw that Mister Smith looked darkly at this man also. Maybe he was always mean to funny-eyed people. But Robby didn’t care, because that wasn’t the face Mister Smith used with him.

Smith motioned for Yu Fong to stand up, and when he did, Smith fingered for the girl to sit down. She sat quickly and stared down at her hands folded in her lap. Yu Fong stood by the table looking hurt, then lied to himself that his position was superior since his head was higher than

Smith's. He harshly ordered the girl to look up so that Smith could inspect her. She lifted her chin, but her eyes remained downcast. She was about thirteen or fourteen, tall for a Chinese girl and thinly built. Her chest was almost flat, her face exquisite, and she had long, lustrous hair. Yu Fong barked an order for her to hold out her hands. She did, slowly turning them over for inspection. Her hands were small and delicate, well cared for.

"She name Ling-Tzu, but called Ling-Ting. Numba one bootiful gull," boasted Yu Fong. "Chelly gull, not open yet. Virgin. Eleven year ole, not more. Will no grow more, 'cep for titbress." He patted the girl's chest heavily with the back of his hand. "Titbress will grow fass 'an big as soon as she is opened. Fese velly smarr" He pointed down to Ling-Ting's feet, held up a thumb. "Numba one bootiful all. You betcha. Not eat much."

Smith studied Ling-Ting. "Does she speak English?"

"No. No Ingrish speakee," Yu Fong informed proudly, showing his broken teeth. He knew Ling-Ting's destiny, and English was an enlightening language, unnecessary for a bonded vassal to understand.

Smith fired rapid Chinese to the girl, asking her age. Before Yu Fong could interject, Smith warning him to say nothing.

Ling-Ting looked up at Yu Fong.

"Look at me," Smith commandfed firmly in Chinese. "And speak the truth." She looked at him, dropped her eyes. "I am fourteen years old."

"Ah, her family lie me," blustered Yu Fong. "Fatha her say she 'leven year ole. An' she speakee Engrish!" He raised his fist to backhand Ling-Ting, rage contorting his face. "Yu Fong fix huh for lying."

Ling-Ting covered her head with her arms, but Tulapaga quickly scooped up Yu Fong by his belt and the back of his collar, raising him to his tiptoes.

But Yu Fong had no intention of damaging his merchandise before a sale. If Smith didn't buy here, he'd beat her outside for telling the truth; he'd told her to say she was eleven years old if asked and he was prepared to lie that Ling-Ting had no house registration papers which would show her true age. But he hadn't expected Smith to speak Chinese. He smiled timidly back over his shoulder at Tulapaga, tried to look cheated.

"That changes things," Smith demanded; "Reconsider your price."

"Robby," Mary snapped, standing a few feet away. "Come here this instant and stop bothering people." She studied the scene; Smith, Tulapaga, the young girl, and the Chinese up on his tiptoes.

"Your boy is no bother," Smith motioned for Tulapaga to release Yu Fong. "And excuse my man; he likes to weigh people."

She ignored him, reached across the table for Robby who looked to Smith for salvation.

Smith's expression registered compassion, he whispered: "You'd better go peaceably, Bob."

Robby fell into his mother's arms and she lifted him out of the booth over Ling-Ting's head. She carried him back to their table, deposited him in his seat. She was shocked by what she'd heard; the actual sale of a human being, taking place right in the restaurant! She shivered. This was a chilling experience. There must be a law against that, even in this backward country.

There was less activity in the restaurant at this hour. Tables were emptying, people finding places to go as happens in the predawn netherworld. Mary watch had it at nearly four o'clock. She gazed around, saw the young captain still at the bar.

Where was Robert?

She kicked off her shoes again, massaged her feet, all the while scolding Robby for wandering off. "Oriental adventurer, aren't you? Just like your father, aren't you?" She stared at him, but he turned down, only daring to peek up whenever someone passed their table.

"Well, your wandering days are over, bub," she proclaimed. "Budge one more time and you're in for it." Satisfied by Robby's silence, grateful that the waiter didn't pester her to buy another tea, Mary stretched her legs to rest her feet on her overnight case, slumped down in her seat, crossed her arms, closed her eyes. A creaking ceiling fan prompted her lids open. She watched it circling hypnotically, lazily, until her heavy eyelids closed again and she fell back into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Robert Riddle walked briskly back to the Swan Jiang Hotel. He'd been unsuccessful at securing another hotel room and decided to camp his family on the couch in the consulate's office for the next few hours. They would leave their belongings in the hotel.

With the bombing in Shanghai yesterday, he intended to check with the Consulate General in the morning, perhaps offer his services as an observer. He stepped off the curb across the street from the hotel, avoided dog shit, walked towards the lighted entrance of the Swan Jiang Hotel. He planned a week in Shanghai anyhow and his government would welcome an on-the-scene observer. He'd done that six years ago, and...

...Dully, a sharp, nerve-tearing screeching of brakes cut into Mary's subconscious. The din in the restaurant became loud, then louder, and

reluctantly, she forced her eyes open, looked around wearily. People were going to the windows overlooking the street. A light rainfall had begun. She scanned the restaurant, then over at Smith's booth, and sharpened at him staring at her openly. The young Chinese girl he'd bought sat quietly next to him. The pimp was gone. She ignored them, glanced over at the bar. The captain was also gone. People at the windows were glancing back at her, talking in hushed tones.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind, startling her. She jerked around to see the captain who'd stood at the bar. His uniform was wet, rain drops splattered across his shoulders. MacDowell looked over at Smith, who nodded, then he spoke to Mary. "Ma'am, could you come with me, please?"

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Your husband has been in an accident."

"My husband? What? How do you know..." She studied his face curiously, blinking, and shook the sleep away.

And saw pity in his eyes.