PROLOGUE

It was the fifteenth day of the seventh moon. Early morning, and the traffic was grinding through Kowloon. Francine sat in the back of her Rolls-Royce, reading the South China Morning Post while her driver, Ka Tai, fidgeted and muttered impatiently at the congestion. Every street, every alley, every inch of sidewalk was choked. A city of five million souls was going to work in a brown murk of traffic fumes. The sun had risen, but was already turning to blood among the storm clouds that were sweeping in from China.

Ka Tai hammered the Rolls' horn, sending a blast of indignation into the general ocean of noise. Francine looked up from her paper. The car in front of them had stopped and the driver had darted out to buy spirit money from a roadside stall. The stall was piled with paper models of desirable possessions—houses, cars, horses, furniture—all exquisitely made..

"There's no hurry," Francine commanded. "Let him buy."

"Sorry, Mem," Ka Tai said, easing off the horn. Across half of Southeast Asia, her servants, her employees, even some of her many business partners, called her "Mem," as though she were a British lady from a time when the Pacific Rim was a colonial lake, and not an awesome generator of global wealth. And she suspected that, no matter what they said, that was what she would always be to them, a gwailo, a gaijin, a farang, a foreign devil.

Her mother had been Chinese, her father an Englishman. She used her British name, Francine Lawrence. Her Chinese name, Li Yu Fa, was no more than a vestige, a sad relic that could be neither used nor thrown away.

At fifty she was compact and energetic. Her dark hair was bobbed, so that only part of its natural wave showed. She had a distinctive face, oval, with a full mouth and cloudy green eyes. There had been no shortage of men

who had desired her for her beauty, although these days they sometimes couldn't see past her wealth and power.

The financial papers had christened her Nuhuang, the empress, a soubriquet she detested. She was still building her empire, and expected to keep building it for another forty years or so. She had no children. It sometimes occurred to her to wonder who would inherit it when she died. But that question did not usually trouble her for long. She was alone in this world, and she was not building her empire for anyone else. She was building it for herself. Her achievement, her refuge, her memorial.

The man in front of them was still haggling. It was the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, when the gates of the underworld opened to let out the spirits of those who had died far from their families, without comforts to take with them. They came begging, thronging the air, invisible and hungry.

She was struck by an impulse. "Ka Tai, buy me some spirit money."

"Yes, Mem," Ka Tai said without surprise. "What else shall I get?"

"An airplane. A horse. Toys. Food. Clothes."

"Yes, Mem." He got out of the Rolls and hurried over to the old man's stall.

The telephone set into the walnut panel beside her began to ring. Francine lifted it, pulling the spiral cord across her lap. "Yes?"

"Good morning, Mem."

Francine checked her wristwatch. The business day that was just beginning here in Hong Kong had already ended in Manhattan. "Good evening, Cecilia. Why are you still in the office? Is anything wrong?"

"Something came up at closing time."

"Yes?"

There was a brief pause. "A visitor. A young lady from Borneo."

"From Borneo?"

"She said you last met a long time ago. In Sarawak."

Francine's skin was suddenly cold. "Is she there now?"

"No. She left when I told her you were out of the office."

"But you talked to her?"

"We talked for a short while."

"What kind of young lady was this?"

"A young serani lady," Cecilia said. She had used the Malay word for a Eurasian. Cecilia Tan had been with Francine for more than fifteen years, since

the early days in Singapore, and there was a bond of trust and understanding between them.

"Can you describe her?"

"Very pretty. A good figure. She wore a miniskirt and a jacket. Not expensive, but nice."

"What colour eyes?"

Cecilia paused. "I don't remember. I'm sorry." Francine could hear the tension in Cecilia's voice. "She was only here a short while."

"What did she call herself?"

"She said her name was Sakura Ueda."

"That is a Japanese name."

"Yes. She said she had lived in Japan for a long time. But she said she once had another name."

"What name?" Francine whispered.

"She said she would tell you when she met you."

"Did she leave a card? An address?"

"No. She said she would call again when you were back in New York. I told her you would be here next Tuesday."

Francine felt that she had been robbed of breath. There was an aching, hollow place in her chest. At the periphery of her vision, the traffic of Hong Kong herded past her, silenced by the Rolls' insulation. But she was seeing another road, another time.

"Mem? Are you still there?"

She had been silent for so long that Cecilia was worried. It was an effort to speak. "Yes. I'm here." Mechanically, she checked her watch. "I'll call you later tonight. When I get home."

"Yes, Mem."

The line cut dead in her ear.

Her hands were shaking as she replaced the unit in its cradle. She felt numb. Could it be possible? Could such things happen? She had resigned away hope, in a deliberate act, some years ago. Before then, she had once had dreams something like this. The pain of awakening had been terrible, as terrible as the joy of the dreams. She did not want to awaken now. Yet she knew it was not a dream. She had come so far along the road of life, and had lost so much on the way, that she was no longer afraid of further loss. But she was afraid of the torturer, hope.

"Mem?"

She looked up blankly. Ka Tai had opened the door of the Rolls, wrinkles of distress extending from his forehead over his cropped scalp.

"Are you all right, Mem?"

She raised her hands to her face, and pressed her palms hard into her eyes. "Yes. I'm fine."

He had an armful of papier-mâché miniatures. "I got these things."

He passed the models back to her. He had bought what she'd asked for. Flimsy tokens of everything she would have given, everything she would have done. An airplane. A horse. Toys. Food. Clothes. Money. Everything.

She laid the things on the seat beside her. "Let's go now. Quickly."

The storm had raged all day, a monsoon tumult of driving rain. It ran in rivers down the plate-glass windows while she ate, alone in her lacquered dining room that evening.

She had first been based in Tsim Sha Tsui. The relentless pressure on housing had sent property prices spiralling upward in the early 1960s, and in 1966 she had relocated the factory to a new industrial estate at Tai Po, and sold the small original site to a hotel company for a five-million-dollar profit.

Much of that profit had gone straight back into the business. But she had also been lucky enough to buy herself the new apartment on Victoria Peak, using financial muscle to beat the influence-weighted bids from the colonial government and the hongs.

It was a nine-room eyrie with a spacious balcony commanding a sweeping view of the harbour. The building had a pool on the roof, and she had bought parking for five cars in the basement. But Francine loved it most for its natural setting. From the carefully tended communal garden, she could walk straight into forests of bamboo, fern, and wild hibiscus. She could watch kites and hawks gliding on the thermals two thousand feet above the harbour. But now her eyes saw nothing of the beauty around her. She had rehearsed Cecilia's few words so many times in her mind that they had started to lose their meaning, and she was almost afraid that she had misinterpreted them, heard in them some meaning that they'd never had.

A young serani lady.

During twenty years spent building her business, many people had tried to deceive her. But none had ever tried this particular prank before. Very few people, she supposed, even knew where and how she had passed the war. There had once been a colourful feature about her in the South China Morning Post; but like many who had suffered, she did not make a habit of broadcasting her experiences. She had buried them in her own memory, and she had hidden them from others. But those words unleashed a flood of pictures, hideous and gorgeous, terrible and sweet.

Very pretty. A good figure. She wore a miniskirt and a jacket. Not expensive, but nice. She said she had lived in Japan for a long time.

She could not stop thinking of that. Japan. The one explanation she had never considered. The one place she had never searched. Could that one word contain the truth?

It could not be. Such a thing was impossible. They had found some creature and had prepared her to repeat, parrot like, what they taught her. No doubt she looked right. No doubt they expected golden results, a rich harvest for the work they had put in.

Or perhaps the girl, whoever she was, had dreamed it up herself. Perhaps she was a cunning and skilled actress, prepared to risk eventual discovery for a brief admittance to the treasury.

The woman had not said that she was Ruth. Of course not. This was a preliminary move, a coat-trailing exercise to lay down the scent. Claim to be Ruth in front of Cecilia Tan? Of course not. She would save that dramatic moment for Francine, not waste it on a secretary.

But Ruth had been dead for nearly three decades. A Japanese bayonet had taken her life. Her body had disintegrated in the jungle, eaten by beasts or covered in a hasty, shallow grave. Nothing remained of her. Not even a photograph. Tears, for so long strangers to Francine, were perilously close. It was a lie. It must be a lie.

The housekeeper came in to clear the table, and Francine went to her study. The storm had quieted to a soft rain. She picked up the telephone and called Cecilia Tan. It would be midmorning in New York.

Cecilia had been waiting for her call. Her voice was excited, and she spoke quickly in Cantonese.

"After I spoke to you last night, I wrote down every single thing I could recall about this person's appearance. I also wrote down everything she said, as exactly as I can remember it. Do you want me to—"

"No," Francine cut in flatly. "I don't want to hear any more about her."

"Mem?" Cecilia said in astonishment.

"She is an impostor."

Cecilia's voice rose. "She did not give that impression."

"Would she have a placard around her neck saying Liar?" Francine retorted. "You told her I would be back in the office next week?"

"Yes."

"Good. Contact Clay Munro. If the woman comes back, I want him to follow her. I want him to find out who she is, who she speaks to, where she goes. I want to know everything about her. I want him to keep a daily updated dossier on her. With photographs. Naturally, I would prefer that she not be aware of any of this. But it doesn't really matter if she does find out."

"And—and what shall I tell her?"

"Tell her I'm not available."

"I think you should at least see this young lady," Cecilia said. Her voice had changed from that of an efficient secretary to that of someone advising an old friend who is going wrong. "Before you do any of this, you should see her and listen to her."

"No."

"She did not give the impression of being an impostor. She made no claims."

"That will come later."

"There is something about this person—"

"Cecilia, do as I ask you, and please do not presume to advise me on my private life." Francine had spoken calmly, but the words were meant to cut. "Tell Clay Munro I'll be in touch with him next week."

"Yes, Mem," Cecilia said without inflection.

"I know what I'm doing, Cecilia," Francine said, more gently. "Good-bye."

She hung up and rose from the desk. She had done the best thing she could have done. She believed that.

Something caught her eye: the pile of paper spirit possessions she had made Ka Tai buy earlier. She stared at them for a moment. Then she took them, beautifully crafted things that weighed nothing, and stacked them in the fireplace. She almost never lit fires, so she had to hunt for matches. She found a box in the kitchen.

She lit the pile. Yellow flames leaped up swiftly. The emblems twisted, shrivelled, leaped through ashes into the spirit world. Then they were gone.

Francine was aware, for the first time, of physical weariness. She went to her bedroom and opened the main alarm console, which was close to her bed. She turned the key to arm the system. As always, she stayed to watch the rows of little green lights wink on one by one, signalling that each door, each window, each entrance was secure. When she was sure that she was locked safe within her electronic stockade, she went to bed to face whatever dreams might come.

Chapter One
1941. BABE IN ARMS

Francine looked down into Ruth's face. The child was sleeping peacefully. The morning was sultry, threatening monsoon rain at any moment.

Her mother's sisters squatted on the bamboo mat in a circle, all talking at once. Francine was not listening properly because she was focused on Ruth; but one word kept exploding like a gunshot in the talk: Nippon. The Cantonese phrases rose and fell around it like flocks of birds, fluttering up in sudden fright, settling gingerly, fluttering again. Two nights ago, the Japanese had attacked the American base at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, doing extensive damage to the Pacific Fleet. America was now at war with Japan.

At the same time, the Japanese had struck much closer: at Kota Bharu, a town on the other side of the Malay Peninsula, a mere 150 miles away. The official British line was that the Japanese had been repulsed. But wild rumours, brought on the monsoon winds, were blowing around the kampong.

"Don't worry, Auntie," one of the younger women said, "the English will make sambal out of the Japanese." She mimed the way nonya women pounded chili paste. The others laughed.

But Aunt Yin-ho, who was the undisputed matriarch of the clan, cleared her throat and spat out of the door. "England's day is done."

"Auntie!" several of the women exclaimed in dismay. They were all peranakan: born in the Straits, educated in English, loyal to the English crown.

Yin-ho lifted a finger. "The Japanese are coming, Yu Fa." That was Francine's Chinese name. "They are the new lords of Asia. Tell your husband. You and he should go away. Tell him."

Francine nodded. The aunties were all much older than she was. And the details of her birth and marriage (English father, English husband) gave her a low status here, even though she was now mistress of the general manager's bungalow at the Imperial Tin Mine. "Yes, Auntie."

Francine came in to Ipoh every week, bringing little Ruth. She left with baskets of fruit and food prepared by the older women. For the past few weeks, she had also been entrusted with dire warnings to carry to Frank about the Japanese. Frank laughed and asked, what did a load of nonyas know about war and international politics? But Francine had been born in the kampong, and she knew the kampong voices were wise.

She touched the face of the child sleeping in her lap. Francine had married Frank at seventeen, and Ruth had been born nine months later. She was just four years old. Ruth was a baptized Methodist. But on all the important occasions of her life, Francine had taken Ruth to the Buddhist temple where the devout burned joss sticks and pasted gold leaf to statues already thick with gold. Frank disapproved of the idea of Ruth being taken into "heathen temples." If, when he took Ruth in his arms when he came home in the evening, he caught a snatch of incense in her dark hair, or found a flake of gold leaf on her little fingertips, he would be angry.

What hurt Francine most was when the aunts predicted that she was no more than a temporary wife, that one day Frank would marry a European woman and have European children and that they would never see him again.

That was what Francine's father had done to her mother. She remembered her father as an affectionate, generous man. Yet when his contract had ended, he had gone back to England, and apart from the twenty Straits dollars a month that always came, they had never seen or heard of him again. Once, when she had asked her mother for the thousandth time where her father was, her mother had banged her fist on the box where she kept the receipts, and had replied bitterly, "He is in here," and Francine had known that the twenty dollars a month was all she would ever know of him from then on.

And that was the unspoken theme that underlay almost all the aunts' nagging. Since the death of Francine's mother, they were her moral and spiritual guardians. Though Francine knew there could not possibly be any truth in what they said about Frank, it filled her with unease nonetheless.

The eyelids of the child in her arms fluttered. "Mama?"

"Mama's here," she said softly. Ruth was arrestingly beautiful. Her skin was pale gold. Her hair was thick and gleaming brown. She had inherited Francine's oval face and full mouth. Her eyes were almond-shaped and dark-lashed, set over high cheekbones, yet their colour was not brown but silver-gray. Even at her tender years, Ruth could pass neither as fully Chinese nor as fully European. Like Francine, Ruth would stand uneasily between two races, despised by the British, only tolerated by the Chinese. She would be enriched by two cultures and yet she would be excluded by both.

She heard a car engine and checked the pretty little gold wristwatch, Swiss and expensive, that Frank had bought her when Ruth had been born. It was time to go back. The taxi threaded its way through the trees toward the house. In its wake ran a throng of naked children, to whom a car was still a marvel.

The aunts came down the rickety steps to say good-bye, five middle-aged Chinese women in creased pantsuits, puffing on small metal pipes. The chatter did not cease. It was Chin Yin-ho's voice that rose above the others: "Yu Fa, tell your husband to send you away." She pinched Ruth's flushed cheek. "Let him take you and the child to England, to stay with his family." Her lined face took on a hard cast. "Unless of course, he is too ashamed to show you to them!"

For once, either because she was nervous or because she was exasperated, Francine was impatient with an older relative. "Frank isn't ashamed of anything!"

Yin-ho sniffed. "Then let him take you. You know what the Japanese do to Chinese women who marry white men?"

They crammed the baskets into the taxi and waved from the back window as it drove away. Ruth nestled up against her mother. "Are we going away, Mama?"

"Auntie sees bad people behind every bush," Francine said irritably.

"Are the Japanese bad people?"

"Don't worry, my darling. Mama will look after you. Perhaps we'll all take a holiday in England."

Frank came home early. The food was still on the stove, the table unlaid, the servants chattering. As soon as he got out of the car, and walked up the drive, she knew something was wrong. She knew his face. She hurried to meet him as he came in.

"Bad news, darling," he said, kissing her.

Frank Lawrence was a tall, rangy man in his late thirties. He looked older because his face was weather-beaten. His eyes were a deep blue, the whites slightly yellowed by the chronic malaria from which he, like so many other mining engineers, suffered. Squinting against the sun had etched deep crow's-feet at his temples and had bracketed his wide mouth with two curving lines.

"What's the bad news?" she asked in dread.

"The Prince of Wales and the Repulse are gone. Sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers."

Francine's hand went to her mouth. "It can't be." She felt a sinking in the heart. "It must be Japanese propaganda."

"Afraid not. It's been announced on the radio. Turn it on."

She obeyed. As the valves warmed up, announcers' voices faded in from the ether, drawling in that strange idiom known as MBC English, after the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation. Her eyes were wide and anxious as she tried to follow the commentary.

Ruth was clamouring for her father's attention, calling, "Daddy! Daddy!" Frank picked up the child and hugged her. Francine listened to the handsome teak-boxed radio, stunned. The announcers' voices sounded calm, but vibrated with tension. Two great ships, indeed, the whole Royal Navy presence in Malaya, had gone. The news had the impact of a vast natural disaster, a flood, a chasm opening in the earth. Francine could feel the pounding of her heart. "The aunties say the Japanese are coming."

"Yes," Frank said, looking at her over Ruth's shoulder. "We all know they can't wait to see the Japanese crowing on the dunghill."

"How can you say that, after what the Japanese have been doing in China?" she exclaimed.

The Malay kitchen staff had stopped clattering around the stove, and were standing in silence. Becoming aware of this, Frank took Francine's arm and led her away from the kitchen door. "Watch what you say, old girl," he said in a low voice. "Anyway, you and Ruth will go down to Singapore. Find an amah to help you there, of course."

"And you?"

"I have things to do here."

"What things?" she demanded.

"My job, darling. I can't just drop everything."

"You could shut down the mine," she said. "Give the workers a couple of weeks' wages and let them go to their homes for a while. That way, everybody would be out of danger."

"And what would the owners say about that?"

"The way things are going, the owners are going to lose the mine anyway," she said bluntly.

"Is that what your old nonyas are saying in the kampong?" he said scornfully. "I can't come down with you, and that's that. My first duty is to the owners."

"A bunch of fat businessmen in Manchester?"

"You haven't joined the Kuomintang, have you, old girl?" he said dryly. "You sound like a bloody Communist."

Little Ruth piped up, her face alarmed. "Don't say bad words, Daddy!"

"We won't leave you," Francine said quietly.

Frank patted her cheek. "Now, don't be silly. There's no danger at all. I just want you and Ruth out of the way of any panic. You'll be better off down there. As soon as the situation gets back to normal again, you can both come back home."

"And if the situation doesn't get back to normal?"

Frank paused, glancing at Ruth. "Then of course I'll join you in Singapore," he said. "But it won't come to that."

"It might well come to that, and it might well be too late by then! We have to go together, Frank. All three of us."

"Don't be silly," he repeated, trying to be patient.

"Don't we count for more than the mine and the owners?"

He cocked his head at her. "What's that old poem? 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more.' Know it?"

"There's no honour in a mine, Frank. Don't be a fool!"

Frank stiffened. He was not used to having her argue with him in this way: She had joined the mine at seventeen, as a humble clerk. Frank had been dazzled by her, and she had not worked for very long. But Frank had given up a lot for his infatuation with a Eurasian woman. Many of his former friends and colleagues regarded it as an unpardonable offense to marry what their terminology called a half-caste, and now they ostracized him. Even the ones he called his real friends had not accepted her. They had both had to

put up with slights, snubs, and worse. People said the marriage had crippled his career. "If it comes to the worst, I will need to disable the machinery so that the Japs can't use it for their own war effort. Tin is a strategic metal, you know, and—"

She interrupted angrily. "I know what tin is, Frank. And you can't disable the machinery badly enough so the Japanese can't repair it."

"If you'll pardon me for saying so," he retorted, "I think I know rather more about the subject than you do. You'll go on down to Singapore, Francine. And I will follow you if necessary."

"So Ruth and I come second to the mine?"

His gaze was frosty. "In this situation, yes."

Francine was wearing a blue cheongsam, high at the throat and clingy at the hips. Suddenly, it felt chokingly tight. "I have to change for dinner," she said. She hurried to her room to change into a skirt and blouse and change her little black slippers for leather shoes with a heel.

Her family upbringing had emphasized that a wife never contradicted her husband to his face. But she knew Frank was wrong now. When she came back, he was lying on the floor, playing with Ruth. "'And this little piggy went wee, wee, wee, all the way home!'"

"Daddy," Ruth squealed in delight, "stop tickling!"

Francine was trembling with nerves. Her voice trembled, too. "They point the wrong way," she said.

"What?"

"The guns of Singapore. I've seen them. They point out to sea, Frank. The Japanese are coming from the north. From the land."

He stared at her for a while, thinking. Then she saw the dismissal in his eyes. "The Japs have worn themselves out in China," he said. "They haven't the resources for an invasion of Malaya. They're just trying it on. It'll fizzle out soon. Then everything will be back to normal. They'll never get to Singapore. It's impossible."

"Then why must we go away?" she demanded, her voice rising.

"Keep your voice down, for God's sake," he commanded, nodding toward the servants.

"The servants know what's happening. Do you think it's a big secret?"

"I've never seen you like this before," he snapped, "and I don't like it much. What the hell has got into you?"

"I just want us all to stay together in the middle of a war, not split up!"

"Mohammed will drive you down in the Ford," he said. "You can stay at Raffles. You love Raffles. Remember our honeymoon?"

"We were together for our honeymoon!"

"Don't worry about going in on your own," he said. "Any trouble, refer them to me. All right?"

"I'm not going!"

"Don't argue," he said, raising his voice, taking on the tone he used at the mine, when he needed to get his way. "I know better than you, Francine. Get that into your thick Chinese head, for heaven's sake."

He had never spoken to her like that before, or in that tone. She looked from him to the child sprawled on the silk rug. Ruth's safety was more important than either of their wishes. She knew now that Frank would not go with them, in which case, she had to get Ruth out of the way of any harm. "Very well, Frank," she said quietly. "I'll do as you say."

"Well, thank God for that," he said, still cross with her. "Now go and pack."

Ruth chattered nonstop as Francine wept during the long drive down to Singapore.

"What will the Japanese do to Daddy?"

"They won't hurt Daddy. Daddy will run away before they arrive."

"Daddy says he won't run away from anybody," Ruth said proudly. "He said the Japanese are just silly. Why are you so frightened of them, Mama?"

Francine shook her head without replying. Frank had paid little attention to what the Japanese had done in Nanking. To him, it had been one bunch of Asiatics squabbling with another. But in the kampong, the ghastly tales of slaughter, rape, and looting had had a profound impact.

Frank had been wrong. The Japanese had reached Singapore even before Francine arrived. Or at least, their planes had. As the car crossed over the Strait of Johore at dawn, greasy pillars of smoke were climbing from the city, ominous in the humid air.

But the city wore an air of studied unconcern. No more than a handful of bombs had fallen. Impassive workers were sweeping rubble and

shattered glass off the pavement. The Europeans picked their way through the debris with the air of people determined to ignore a display of bad manners.

"Did the Japanese do that?" Ruth asked, staring at the bombed buildings with wide eyes.

"Yes, Ruth."

"That was bad," Ruth conceded thoughtfully.

Raffles Hotel, like the rest of Singapore, wore a slightly detached air. There was an unnatural quiet in the foyer, very different from the bustle she had enjoyed so much during their honeymoon five years earlier. On that occasion, with her British husband at her side, she had been too happy to pay much attention to the staring and muttering. This time, she was alone with her child, and it was evident that the staff were disagreeably surprised to discover that "Mrs. Frank Lawrence" was Eurasian. The old Sikh jaga, stiff in his white whiskers and cream turban, stood at her shoulder as though ready to throw her out at a word from the reception staff.

"I do hope there hasn't been any confusion," fluted the receptionist. She pretended to scrutinize the ledger. "I'll just check that your booking has in fact been made."

"If there is any confusion," Francine replied in a timid voice, "you may take it up with my husband." She placed the card on the polished mahogany desk. "This is his telephone number."

The receptionist's eyes slid away from Francine's, saw the words General Manager on the card. "Excuse me." She took the card and melted into a back office. Francine heard the rattle of a telephone handset being wound. Ruth was clinging to Francine's skirt, her head resting on her mother's hip, her silvery eyes wandering. The grand hotel seemed deserted.

She glanced over her shoulder. The bellboys had already brought in her trunk. Outside the portico, Mohammed stood beside Frank's big, mustard-yellow Ford, waiting patiently to see her installed before returning up-country.

"And there's worse." The voice was clipped, military. It belonged to an elderly, gray-moustached man in a white flannel suit and a panama hat. He was talking to a wattled woman in a floral print dress as they emerged from the elevator. "A damned sight worse."

They came up to the desk. The man smacked the brass bell sharply to summon attention. The receptionist's glossy head poked out of the back office. "Oh, good morning, Brigadier Napier."

"Key," the brigadier said, rapping the heavy steel thing on the desk. She glided out to take it from him. The old man reached out and chucked Ruth under the chin. "Hello there, young lady."

"Hello, Mr. Man," Ruth said. "You've got a nice hat."

"I like it, too." He smiled at the child with watery eyes that Francine assumed were too faded to see that she was Eurasian. His companion's elbow jabbed him briskly in the ribs. He ignored her, and tipped his hat to Francine. "Just come down from up-country?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, embarrassed at the attention. "That's right."

He nodded. "Good show. Get the small fry out of the way, what? Doesn't do to have them frightened."

"No."

"I'm not frightened," Ruth informed him.

"Good show." He rose and fell on his boot heels. "Damned outsiders, the Japs," he said, as though the invasion were a show of bad form, no more. "Soon teach them a lesson, don't worry about that." He glared at the receptionist. "Can't you see this lady is tired? Let her get up to her room with the child. Chop-chop!"

"Of course, Brigadier," the receptionist said.

The brigadier and his companion walked out, the old man swinging his cane grandly. "Devil of a show going on," Francine heard him saying. "Heard it from my nephew half an hour ago. Devil of a show." His companion glared over her floral-printed shoulder at Francine.

"They will show you up to your room, now," the receptionist said to Francine. "Fourth floor. I do hope everything is to your complete satisfaction."

Francine went out to say good-bye to Mohammed, the Malay driver. He gave her a smart salute before getting into the car. Watching the Ford drive away, Francine felt the tears perilously close to returning.

The room, for which she was paying the princely sum of twenty-two Straits dollars a day, had a balcony and a bathroom and two double beds. She walked to the balcony. The lush square below was quiet. Palm trees rustled in the humid breeze. Beyond, the sea sparkled. Overhead, the sky was sultry. There was a faint smell of burning on the wind, though that might have been her imagination.

"Let's go and swim!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Perhaps later." Despite her vivacity, there were shadows under Ruth's eyes. She had not slept well during the night drive. Francine carried her to the bed, where she was soon asleep.

She unpacked her trunk. She had brought all her smartest European clothes. Hanging the dresses in the wardrobe, she wondered how long she would be staying.

They went down for lunch at one. The cavernous dining room was almost empty, rows upon rows of vacant tables stretching out around them among the cream pillars. The Malay table "boy" brought her the menu. She ordered, and the food arrived shortly, gray in colour and taste and barely lukewarm. Her appetite disappeared. They both ate little, Ruth kicking her legs wearily against the rungs of her chair.

"I'm bored, Mama. There aren't any children here."

Francine had noticed that fact, too. "We'll find some children," she promised.

While she was sipping the brackish coffee that followed, the moustached brigadier marched into the dining room, his panama squarely on his head, swinging his cane. He was alone. He stopped by their table with a smart click of boot heels and peered down at them.

"Settling in all right?"

"Oh, yes, thank you," Francine said.

"We all have to put up with some inconveniences, I'm afraid. Brownouts and all that. Might be another raid. Just thought I'd warn you. Prepare the little one. In case she gets frightened."

"I'm not frightened," Ruth piped up. "I'm bored. There's nobody to play with me."

"Oh, there'll be some children, you'll see. No problems about getting your billet, I take it, Mrs. Lawrence?"

Francine met his eyes. She noted that he had learned her name. "No problems, thanks."

"Good. Last week, one of our chaps took a native woman onto the dance floor. Band stopped playing. Wouldn't start again till they left. Turned out she was an Indonesian princess on an official visit. Damned disgrace. I've been in this country forty years, and I never held with any of that rubbish."

Francine smiled awkwardly. "Everybody's being very kind."

"Good. Good. Got to stoke up the old boiler." He touched the brim of his hat and walked on as abruptly as he had stopped. Francine realized he had been showing his support for her as publicly as he could.

"Is there a real princess here?" Ruth asked in awe.

"So it seems."

"With a crown?"

"Perhaps."

"I want to see her!"

"We'll keep an eye out for her," Francine replied. She smiled at Ruth. But the brigadier's talk of further raids had made her queasy.

The people at reception obtained an amah to help her with Ruth. She was an experienced, fifty-year-old Malay woman, to whom Ruth took an immediate liking. They arranged that the amah would sleep in the servants' quarters on the same floor. Francine would have preferred to do without the amah, but she knew Frank would be outraged at the thought of her looking after Ruth on her own. There were certain standards, he had impressed on her. And having the amah would bolster her status as an honorary European, until Frank came. So she and the amah played with Ruth on the lawn, watching the hotel staff lugging sandbags to stack around the rather insubstantial-looking air-raid shelter in the garden.

When darkness fell, she understood the brigadier's warning. Lights in the hotel were turned so low that people blundered into one another in the corridors, cursing and apologizing. Ruth, who was afraid of the dark, complained unhappily about "monsters." Only in the dining room, where the windows had been shuttered, were the lights turned up.

The same listless couples were picking in the same lethargic way at the same gray dishes. There were only two newcomers, a preoccupied middle-aged man and his teenage daughter, who ate in complete silence a few tables away. Several times, Francine caught the girl's eyes on her or Ruth. She was a pretty girl, with curly, dark hair and a gentle smile. When the pair left, the father ignored them, but the girl waved to Ruth.

Francine went upstairs and lay in bed, listening to the dance band playing Victor Sylvester tunes on the veranda downstairs, Ruth sleeping at her side. She longed to telephone Frank, but he had forbidden it until the

weekend. She remembered her honeymoon. Ruth had probably been conceived in this hotel. She remembered the nights, Frank's body heavy on hers, the new rituals, so intimate, so strange.

In the early hours of the next morning, the alert began to moan like a large, wounded animal, waking her from confused dreams.

Clutching Ruth in her arms, Francine joined the panic in the corridors, which intensified when, after a moment, the dimmed lights went out completely. She was jostled and bruised on the way down the stairs. The shelter was already crammed when she got there, kitchen boys and waiters hunkering down beside European guests, the distinctions of race suddenly lost. She made herself a place as best she could, pressing the child's face to her breast. There was little talk.

They all knew, either from experience or from the news that had been coming out of Europe for two years, what to expect. In silence, they waited for the drone of planes and the thudding of antiaircraft guns. Neither came.

"Are the Japanese coming, Mama?" Ruth demanded in a stage whisper.

"I think so."

"I can't hear them," Ruth said practically.

And after a quarter of an hour had dragged by, the All Clear sounded to a chorus of groans and complaints.

They filed out tiredly. Brigadier Napier was in the foyer, imposing in a red silk dressing gown, speaking angrily to an assistant manager named Mr. Mankin.

"It's a damned bad show, I tell you," he barked. "In future, kindly leave the lights on until everyone is in the shelter. Then turn the bally things off. Otherwise you'll have more people killing themselves by falling down the stairs than will ever be hurt by Jap bombs. Understand?"

The other man, looking fretful, made some soothing reply.

A large crowd of irritable guests had already gathered at the elevator doors. The brownout made the machinery very slow. There was some jostling and arguing going on. Francine decided to use the stairs. Her arms were tired after holding Ruth for so long. She put the child down now, but Ruth cried to be picked up again, her face woebegone.

"Walk, Ruth," Francine commanded.

"No," the child wailed. "I'm tired, Mama!"

"Mama's tired, too."

"May I carry her for you?" It was the girl who had smiled at her in the dining room. She waited politely for an answer.

"Thank you, I can manage," Francine said, stooping to hoist Ruth in her arms.

"It's a long walk up to the fourth floor," the girl said. Francine guessed she was around fifteen or sixteen. "My father and I have a room just down the corridor from yours." She reached out. "Let me take her. It's no trouble."

She found herself passing Ruth to the girl, grateful for the assistance. "Thank you."

"You're awfully good," the girl said to Ruth as they began to climb the stairs. "You didn't cry once in the shelter."

"I'm brave," Ruth said complacently. "Only, my legs were tired."

"I'm Edwina Davenport. What's your name?"

"Ruth Lawrence."

"Hello, Ruth," she said gravely. Ruth, not normally sociable with strangers, was interested in the girl. "You've got curly hair," she announced.

"That's right. I wish I didn't have."

"Why not?"

"It's very hard to manage."

"What's 'manage'?"

"Get it to look right. You're very pretty. Like your mama."

"Yes," Ruth said, nodding, "we're very pretty."

"Where's your father?" Francine asked the girl.

"He stayed in his room. He didn't want to come down to the shelter."

They reached the fourth floor. The girl, who was a little plump, was slightly out of breath, her cheeks more flushed than ever. Her bare arms were mottled. She passed a dozing Ruth back to Francine. "There. She's almost asleep now."

"You're very kind," she said.

"Not at all. I can help you with her anytime, you know. I'm good with children."

Francine did not smile, though Edwina was little more than a child herself. She had a low, musical voice, like the note of a woodwind instrument, which pleased the ear. "Thank you," she said at her door. "Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Lawrence."

Francine's room looked dim and dingy. "Brownout" was a good name for this dirty-looking light. She undressed Ruth and lay down beside her. The child began to rock back and forth, humming. Francine felt desperately alone. She missed Frank terribly, and was worrying about him more and more. But she knew that Frank would do as he wished. As he always did.

She telephoned Frank on Saturday night. The line was bad, full of scratches and whistles. His voice sounded faint and remote. She had to shout.

"You have to come down, Frank. Soon."

"What's that?"

"They say the Japanese are moving very fast. You shouldn't delay in coming down to Singapore!"

His reply faded into the static. "Alarmist talk never did any . . ."

"Everybody says they're at Kalantan. That's only a few miles from you!"

"Don't worry about that."

"How can I not worry?"

"Everything's fine here. Perfectly normal. Even if I wanted to . . . couldn't suddenly close the mine without instructions. What would the owners say?"

"Damn the owners!" she yelled.

He did not seem to hear that. "Besides, no point in spreading despondency and alarm among the . . . so don't worry. How's Ruth?"

"She misses you. Every day she asks me when you'll come."

". . . all be together again soon. Hotel okay?"

"Fine."

"Staff treating you properly?"

"Yes, they treat me well. Frank, I'm so worried about you."

". . . don't be." Suddenly, his voice swelled on the line, close and reassuring. "I'm doing my job. Let the army do theirs. Damned if I'll run from a bunch of yellow monkeys." Just as abruptly, he faded away. "Take care. Got to go . . . awful line . . . waste of money."

"Please. It's so good to hear you!"

"Not worth it. Buck up, darling. Keep . . . very soon. Okay?"

"When will you come?" she shouted.

". . . no hurry . . ."

"I'll call you again tomorrow," she said wretchedly.

"No. Too expensive. Wait . . . weekend."

"Ruth wants to speak to you. Good night, darling. Please take care."

Ruth grabbed the phone. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Francine got up and went to the window while the child chattered gaily into the instrument. The square outside was no livelier on a Saturday evening than it had been when she'd arrived. The usually languid air of the city seemed to have atrophied into something else, something stagnant. A gust of warm rain swept down, bringing a smell of the jungle, blotting out the elegant white buildings.

"Daddy's not there anymore," Ruth said, holding out the silent receiver with a stricken face.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Francine sighed. "We'll speak to him again soon."

She closed the shutters.

During the subdued dinner the next night, the unmistakable thud of guns began, though the air-raid sirens had not sounded. Heads lifted in the dining room, which was fuller than Francine had yet seen it.

"Ack-ack batteries," someone said in a clipped voice. "There's a raid on."

For a stiff moment, no one moved. Then there was a loud scraping of chairs as the diners rose. As she took Ruth out of the high chair the waiters had brought her, Francine saw that the brigadier had not moved. He continued eating, not even looking at the guests who were leaving. A few tables away, she saw that Edwina's father, too, was still seated, staring at his plate in a fixed way. The girl, however, was making her way toward them.

"We have to hurry," she said, her plump face pale. "Let's go!"

The child clung to Francine as they followed the throng hurrying out of the dining room. This time, perhaps because of the brigadier, the lights remained at brownout level until they were all crammed in the shelter. Once again, the hotel staff were cheek by jowl with the guests.

"I must say, it's a bit bloody thick," someone said angrily, though whether at the presence of the waiters and kitchen boys or at the interruption to the meal, Francine could not tell. The alert began to wail. "Bit bloody late," the same voice said. Several other voices burst into speech after that, as though to shut out what was happening.

Francine crouched beside Edwina.

"I don't like it here," Ruth whimpered. "I want Daddy!"

"Don't be frightened," Edwina said to her. "We'll be all right in here, Ruth."

The antiaircraft guns were firing continuously now, a barrage that was reassuring until deeper thuds began to shake the ground, the sound of bombs falling on the city. Francine had a sudden vision of the night sky filled with bombers, the eyes of the pilots focused greedily on the naked city below.

"Is that the Japanese?" Ruth asked in dread.

"Yes, little bird."

"What are they doing?"

"Dropping bombs."

"Why are they dropping bombs?"

"To break the buildings," Francine said.

"But if there are people in the buildings?" Ruth demanded, her face anxious.

There was no point in hiding the truth from Ruth. "Then the people will be killed."

Ruth digested that silently, clinging to her mother.

"Might have expected this." It was the brigadier, who had finally found his way into the shelter. "Bomber's moon, don't you know. Raids all this week, I should think."

"Won't your father come down?" Francine asked Edwina.

"No."

"Can't you persuade him?"

The girl shook her head slightly. "He won't listen to me." Ruth had started to cry. Edwina pressed her cheek to the child's glossy head. "Don't cry," she whispered. "Don't cry, Ruth."

The bombardment was swelling in a crescendo, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Perversely, the chatter grew louder, people talking animatedly; there was even some laughter.

"Where's your mother, Edwina?"

"She died. A couple of months ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. She'd been ill for a long time. Almost as long as I can remember. The climate didn't suit her."

"That's very sad."

"Father's a tea planter. He should have taken her back home. The doctors all said so. He couldn't. His work was here." She spoke detachedly, without rancour. "We moved up to the Cameron Highlands a few years ago to get away from the heat. It didn't make any difference to Mother. She died anyway."

"I'm sorry," Francine said again.

"We came down here when the Japanese landed. I don't know what's happening to the plantation. It's been rather dull, here." She glanced up. "I'm so happy you and Ruth came along."

"What about school?"

"I was at boarding school in Kuala Lumpur until the invasion," Edwina said. "Father tutors me now."

"He must be a very clever man."

"Oh, yes." There was something sad in the girl's voice. "He's a very clever man."

The bombs had ceased. The ack-ack batteries continued firing for a few minutes longer. Then they, too, fell silent. The conversation in the shelter stopped as people listened expectantly.

"Have they gone, Mama?" Ruth whispered.

The All Clear began to groan. People sat up stiffly, rubbing themselves. "Do you know," someone said, "those bally sirens sound just the same here as they did in London?"

"Why haven't we got any fighter cover?" someone else asked in an aggrieved tone. "It's shocking."

The raid had not been particularly dramatic, but Francine's stomach was in painful knots. She felt weak. They went back to the dining room, where their meals still lay, now congealed, on their plates. The waiters filed back to their stations along the wall, muttering inaudibly to each other. Some of the guests sat back down, as though to resume dinner.

She saw that Edwina's father had not moved from his place. He sat slightly slumped in his chair, staring at his plate. The bald spot on the top of his head gleamed in the dim light.

"He must be very brave," she said to Edwina.

"He doesn't care whether he lives or dies."

She was taken aback by the words. "And you?"

"I don't want to die." Edwina looked at Francine. There was an adult quality in the glance. Perhaps that came of having no mother and a father who did not care whether he lived or died.

"I think I'll take Ruth up to bed now," she said. "I don't want any more food."

"Shall I carry her for you?"

"It's all right. The elevators will be free. Thank you, Edwina."

"Tomorrow," Edwina said, "if you like, I'll play with Ruth for a while. You can take a break."

"Thank you," Francine said, "we'll do that."

At the door of the dining room she looked over her shoulder. Edwina had sat down opposite her motionless father. Neither was speaking. Perhaps Edwina had taken to her because, as a girl, she did not feel she was lowering herself in befriending a "native," as an adult would have done. Certainly, apart from Edwina and Brigadier Napier, the white residents of the hotel ignored her. They neither spoke to her nor looked at her as she passed. It was as if she were invisible to these tuans and memsahibs who donned full evening dress in the tropical heat, and sweated through the conventions of "home."

To fill the emptiness of her days, she found war work at a Red Cross centre in the town, winding bandages for several hours a day with a group of other women of all ages and races. It offered her company, as well as activity. They called themselves, cheerfully, the WWW, which stood for War Work Women. Though it was a mixed group, here there were no barriers of class or race; sitting at their long tables, deftly looping yards of lint and gauze that would soak up the blood of men, white women chatted with brown, shared the same jokes, the same fears, the same fragile hopes. The women were inquisitive about Francine, and once they knew her situation, were sympathetic.

The Red Cross organizer, an older woman named Lucy Conyngham, made something of a pet of her, and soon the others—Chinese, Indian, and Malay—followed suit. Their friendliness helped her deal with the studied rudeness of the guests at Raffles, which was making her stay increasingly wearisome.

The war work and Ruth filled her days. Her nights dragged interminably. The great dining room, which reminded her oddly of a Hindu temple that had been whitewashed and adorned with parlour palms, was a

special purgatory, in which she sometimes felt almost intolerably lonely and excluded.

She read Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind in great gulps, losing herself in that exotic world. It made her ache with longing for Frank. But the scenes of war were unsettling.

The hotel was starting to fill. Singapore was becoming congested with exiles; already there were few vacancies at Raffles or any of the other big hotels. The deserted air had gone. In its place was a feverish yet uneasy air of bustle. At least there were now several children for Ruth to play with. Under the guidance of amahs, the children of the hotel played all day on the lawns or along the shady verandas.

At night, Raffles became a different, much more glamorous place. Candles glimmered on the tables in the garden, where people ate in the darkness under the whispering palms. There was dancing on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Swirling fans created at least an illusion of coolness for the dancers.

She had been able to speak to Frank only twice more. On both occasions, the line had been wretched. The last call had been more than a week ago. Since then, the switchboard had been unable to get her a line. She worried, too, about the aunts in Perak. It was likely the Japanese would behave with particular viciousness toward the Chinese population, official enemies for four and a half years.

A few days before the end of the year, the receptionist waved to her as she crossed the lobby.

"Mrs. Lawrence! Mrs. Lawrence! Wire for you!"

Her heart palpitating, Francine hurried to snatch the little gray slip. She unfolded it with trembling fingers. It contained just two lines:

FINISHING UP HERE. COMING DOWN 3RD JAN. LOVE FRANK.

"Thank God," she whispered. She hoisted Ruth in her arms. "Daddy's coming at last, my little one!"

"Good news?"

It was Brigadier Napier, who had come up beside her. She beamed at him. "My husband, Brigadier. He'll be coming to join me after the New Year."

"Jolly good show. Had some news of my own about my nephew, Clive."

"Good, I hope?"

"Good and bad. Good news is he's coming home as well. Bad news is he's on the casualty list."

"Has he been wounded?" she asked in concern.

"Bit of a cut on the head." He cupped a hand around his lips and silently mouthed the word, "Machang." There had been rumours of a big engagement there, though the radio had been studiously silent about it. "Unconscious for a couple of days."

"Oh, my goodness."

"He says it's not too bad. But they're sending him back here. For observation. I'll be glad to see him. Fond of the boy. No children of my own, you see."

The receptionist, who had been listening, leaned forward to Francine. "So glad to hear about your husband, Mrs. Lawrence. As a matter of fact we were going to ask you if you'd mind terribly moving to a single room. To make way for some of the families. But that's all right now, isn't it?"

"Is Daddy really coming?" Ruth asked with a touch of scepticism.

Francine knelt and hugged Ruth. "Yes, Daddy's really coming," she whispered to the child.

"Will he bring me my other toys? And my teddies?"

"I hope so!" Her legs felt wobbly as she walked to the dining room for breakfast, Brigadier Napier at her side.

"Can anyone kindly tell me," she heard a woman's voice say loudly behind her, "why that bloody stengah and her brat have a room while Europeans are sleeping in cellars?"

Ruth turned, looking back in childish wonder. Burning anger rose in Francine. Stengah was the contemptuous British word for Eurasians. She, too, almost turned to face the venomous voice. The brigadier's hand closed around her arm, steadying her silently.

"Who's that woman?" Ruth asked.

"A silly woman," the brigadier said. "Never mind her. Come along."

Francine swallowed her anger and walked on without a backward glance, talking to the old man about his nephew. Frank was coming. That was all that mattered.

The next day, she allowed Edwina to talk her into going to the pictures, not for the feature film, a British comedy that had already been showing for weeks, but to see the newsreels. The first newsreel was American. It showed the results of the attack on Pearl Harbour three weeks earlier. The scenes of destruction were appalling: the Arizona blazing, the California wallowing brokenly, the Oklahoma bottom-up in the oily water; the wreckage of nearly two hundred aircraft destroyed on the ground. Francine felt that for the first time she was seeing the true power of the Japanese, the full violence of their intentions. It shook her badly.

Still stunned, they sat through the much more guarded British newsreel that followed, with its reassuring footage of His Majesty's troops filing through the jungle. There were even shots of Japanese prisoners of war, bewildered men in unflattering uniforms, many wearing the round spectacles familiar from the caricatures in the Straits Times. According to the commentator, the invaders were already being driven back.

They emerged from the darkness to find a heavy afternoon shower in progress. Taxis were becoming ever more elusive, disappearing completely during air raids. All private motorcars had been requisitioned by the authorities and it was becoming difficult to move around the crowded city.

As they huddled on the swarming pavement, a bedraggled group of European evacuees filed by, women herding children under umbrellas. Their faces wore expressions of bewildered resentment. Francine knew that the Asian eyes that observed these whites were seeing something new. The dignity, the supreme arrogance of the European in Malaya, was fading fast.

The Japanese bombers had now started coming during daylight, unafraid of the antiaircraft guns. A direct hit scored on an oil tank produced a cloud of smoke that hung in the sky like a gigantic black cauliflower before spreading over the city. Francine stared at go-downs charred to the foundations, Chinese shop-houses demolished, lives shattered. The continued raids prevented repair work. In the heat, the shattered sewers had started to stink.

By now, tales of Japanese atrocities were arriving with the daily flood of new evacuees: women raped, prisoners bayoneted, Chinese civilians publicly tortured and slaughtered. Malaya was receiving the same savage treatment meted out to Nanking. By now, everyone in Singapore suspected what was really happening to the British army—a rout followed by a chaotic retreat.

In the taxi back to Raffles, Edwina rubbed the condensation on the window and peered out. Teeming traffic of pedestrians and rickshaws swirled around the taxi. Beyond, the rain beat down on smashed roofs and blackened walls. She tried to sound cheerful. "It's New Year's Eve in two days. Nineteen forty-two!"

Raffles was crowded on the last night of 1941. The atmosphere in the ballroom, where a dinner-dance was in progress, was at once feverish and melancholy. Feverish because everyone wanted to forget the war, melancholy because almost everyone present was an evacuee, celebrating the New Year a long way from home and family.

Francine had intended to see in the New Year quietly in her room with Ruth; but something, perhaps a desire for human warmth, kept her sitting at the table after the meal was over, listening to the band. Dancers began to glide across the polished floor. She was wishing sadly that Frank were here.

"Excuse me."

She looked up. A man in the uniform of a major was standing at her table. A neat white bandage encircled his forehead. This, together with his aquiline nose and clipped moustache, lent him a piratical, almost Errol Flynn air. "We haven't been introduced," he said in a confident way, "but my uncle's told me about you. I'm Clive Napier, Brigadier Napier's nephew."

"Oh, yes! How do you do?" she said.

"Sorry to just introduce myself and all that. But I guessed who you were, of course. My card." He passed her a crisp little piece of pasteboard, on which was printed his name and address. She put it in her bag dutifully. He was studying her with the assessing eyes of a man used to success with women. "Uncle sends you his regards. He's lying down. Touch of malaria."

"I'm sorry to hear that. He's been very kind to me."

"May I have the pleasure?" he asked, holding out his hand.

She rose somewhat reluctantly and allowed him to lead her into a waltz. His arms were strong and confident, but she could not take her eyes off the bandage around his head. He was the first wounded soldier she had seen. He noticed her glance. "Don't mind the turban," he said. "I still have what little brain I was born with."

"Doesn't it hurt?" Francine asked.

"Japanese grenade. Killed the man next to me. My best friend, as it happens. It hurt when I woke up, I can tell you."

"Oh!" She was horrified. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize, for God's sake. The worst of it is, I'm missing the rest of the show. Six weeks' forced rest." His dark eyes were fixed on her face. "No wonder Uncle likes you. You're the only pretty girl in the hotel. Matter of fact, you're the prettiest girl in Singapore tonight. Do you like strawberries?"

"I've only had them once. Why?"

"I'll get you a couple of baskets. I know a chap who flies them in fresh every day from Australia."

"That sounds very extravagant," she commented.

"Strawberries, fresh oysters, sirloin steaks, grapes, whatever you want. All comes in from Sydney. We may as well have some fun before General Yamashita gets here. He's a clever little devil, our friend Yamashita. Cleverer than we gave him credit for. Taken to calling himself the Tiger of Malaya. Stylish, eh?"

"Do you think Singapore is going to fall?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Oh, no," he said, arching his brows in exaggerated surprise. "Oh, dear me, no. Singapore fall? Not bloody likely. I'm privy to our illustrious leaders' intimate plans for the defence of the island, my sweet." He was slurring his words. She realized he was very drunk. "They have a fool proof plan. Even if Yamashita drives every British soldier out of Malaya, when he gets to the causeway, we'll simply blow it up. That ought to do the trick, oughtn't it?"

"I suppose so," she said, troubled.

"Only one snag," he said. "The causeway's just four feet deep at low tide. The Japs will just wade across with their baggage on their heads. I've seen 'em do it. Saw 'em cross a raging river in about five minutes flat. Didn't even take their uniforms off. Just put their rifles on their heads and paddled over."

"Then Singapore can't be defended," she said, staring up at him.

"Our leaders have a final plan. Operation Jellyfish."

"Operation Jellyfish?" she repeated.

"It's top secret. Hush-hush, my sweet. May I call you Francine, by the way?"

"If you want."

"Beautiful name. Beautiful girl."

"But what is Operation Jellyfish?" she asked, insisting.

"It's an entirely new concept in modern warfare. The way it works is as follows. Yamashita lands on Singapore in force. He orders his men to fix bayonets, preparatory to disembowelling us all. We take one look at him and start shaking and wobbling. Just like jellyfish. Hence the name. We shake and wobble so violently that Yamashita gets alarmed. He turns around and runs all the way back to Tokyo. Brilliant, isn't it?"

"You're making fun of me," she said angrily.

"Nothing funny about the Japanese," he said. His eyes were glazed, his face set. "I know, my sweet. I've fought them. Seen their little tricks. When they get to a village, they round up all the women and rape them in front of the men. Children, too. If they're feeling jolly, they bayonet them afterward." His right hand, which held hers, suddenly gripped her fingers brutally tight. His eyes burned. "Look," he said, "I know a place where we can have a damned sight more fun than this morgue. Let's go."

"Of course I can't go anywhere with you," she retorted indignantly.

"Why not?"

"I'm a married woman. My little girl is asleep upstairs."

"There must be an amah with her?"

"I think I'd like to sit down now, Major Napier."

He ignored her request, holding her body tight against his. "Where's your husband? Safely out of the way, so I hear." He grinned. "I won't tell him if you don't."

"He's coming down from Ipoh," she said angrily. "He'll be here anytime!"

"Ipoh? Nobody's coming down from Ipoh, my sweet. As of this morning, it's in the tender hands of General Tomoyuki Yamashita."

Francine felt the room spin around her. "I didn't hear the announcement!"

"There won't be an announcement. Think the censors want us to know how badly we're doing?"

"My husband's disabling the mine," she heard herself say. "He'll be here soon. In three days."

"Whatever you say. The important thing is, he's not here now. But I am."

"I want to sit down!" she exclaimed.

"Good idea. We'll order a bottle of champers."

Desperate to shake the man off, she broke away from him and headed to the table where Edwina Davenport and her father were sitting.

"May I join you?" she asked.

Mr. Davenport raised his empty blue eyes to her, then rose slowly to his feet. "Of course."

But Clive Napier had followed her determinedly. He ushered Francine into her chair, snapped his fingers for the waiter, and ordered a magnum of Dom Perignon. Reluctantly, she introduced him to the Davenports. Edwina held out her hand and Clive Napier made a great show of kissing it, which delighted the girl. "It's true about Ipoh, my sweet," he said to Francine as he sat. "Quite true, I assure you."

"What about Ipoh?" Edwina wanted to know.

"Major Napier says Ipoh has fallen to the Japanese," Francine said tightly.

"I don't believe it," Edwina replied. But she looked stricken. If Ipoh had fallen, then her own beloved Cameron Highlands, and her father's tea plantation, were also in Japanese hands.

Clive Napier shrugged. "I'm afraid there's no doubt about it." He drank his champagne in one long swallow, then dug the heel of one hand into his left eye. "Oh, Christ, my head hurts."

"You shouldn't be drinking so much," Francine snapped.

"I should be drinking a lot more," he said. "Take some advice from me. Get the next boat home."

"She has to wait for her husband," Edwina said.

"Ah, but will he come, Sister Anne?"

"That is not funny," the girl replied sternly. "He's on his way to Singapore."

"The Japanese don't like Eurasians, you know." He laid his hand over Francine's. His palm was burning hot. "But I do."

"Major Napier!" She finally got her hand back.

He refilled their glasses. "Look, I'm drunk and obnoxious, I know. But I meant it about the strawberries and the oysters. Or anything else you want. Need any help, you come to me, my sweet. I'm a useful sort of chap."

The room was filling steadily now. Mingling with the Europeans was a sprinkling of Malays and Chinese, admitted for the New Year's Eve festivities. The Asian women, for the most part, wore dazzling jewels, far superior to

anything the European women boasted—a "native" had to be very rich to qualify for admittance. It was fiercely hot. Mess jackets were creasing and blotching with sweat, gowns were crumpling, powder had started to fade from shiny noses.

A Chinese photographer was doing the rounds, and the major summoned him with a snap of his fingers. "Here. Take a picture of the two of us. Handsomest couple in the room."

He put an arm around Francine's shoulders, pulling her close. Francine frowned, and the flashbulb exploded, dazzling her. "Handsomest couple for sure," the photographer chuckled. Disconcertingly, the hotel suddenly shook like a house of cards.

"Operation Jellyfish," the major said. "Told you, my sweet. It's started already." Over the syrupy music, the unearthly warbling of the air-raid sirens could be heard starting up. There were groans of dismay.

Francine had risen to her feet, uncertain whether to rouse Ruth and take her to the shelter. The child had been sleeping badly of late, suffering from a constant and debilitating diarrhoea that was making her lose weight. She decided that unless the bombs drew closer, it was better for Ruth to sleep on.

"Sit down, sweet one," Clive growled, pulling her back into her chair. "We have to see the New Year in together."

Francine realized that nobody was bothering to leave for the shelter. The table boys were hurrying to and fro with bottles of Scotch, champagne, and brandy. A lot of alcohol was being consumed. She thought of her own family's New Year's rituals, the little red envelopes of lai see for the children, the sweets, the branches of peach blossom, the dragon rampaging through the streets. The Chinese New Year was not for some time, yet, but she doubted whether her family or anyone else would be celebrating it this year.

A middle-aged Chinese couple approached their table, escorted by the maître d'hôtel. The man, who was short and rotund and whose face was puffy, bowed to them. "K.K. Cheung," he said. "Member of legislative council. This is my wife, Poppy."

"Room for all," Clive Napier said, rising. "Boy! More champagne and more glasses!"

The newcomers were towkays, both encrusted with precious stones. The woman's jacket was fastened with huge diamond buttons. The man

wore a gold watch set with diamonds, as well as diamonds on his fingers, his cuffs, fastening the points of his collar, even on the gold buckles of his shoes. On his left wrist Francine saw the triangular mark of a tong tattoo. He was even drunker than Clive Napier. He swayed in his chair, his mouth slack. "Member of legislative council," he repeated. "Defence of Singapore. Priority case. Confidence, resolution, enterprise, and devotion to the cause." His blurred eyes settled on Francine. "My concubine is dead," he said. Clive snorted loudly. The Chinese went on, oblivious. "Japanese bombed her house. House I made for her."

"Keep quiet, K.K.," his wife said briskly.

"Beautiful house," the man said, ignoring the command. "The best of everything. Silk sheets. Crystal chandelier. Thousands of dollars."

"Cheh!" His wife's feline eyes gleamed for a moment.

"Brilliant girl. Studying all day. Innocent. Why do they kill so many innocent people?"

"It's the very model of a modern war," Clive said, grinning hollowly. "She's better off, old boy. I've seen what the Japs do to Chinese girls."

K.K. Cheung reached out a stubby hand and touched Francine's wrist. He was not crying outwardly, but Francine saw that behind his puffy lids he was weeping without cease. "You have a pure and gentle face, child. Where are you from?" he asked in patois.

"From Perak, Ah Peh," she replied.

"You left your family?"

She nodded. "I left everyone."

"Your husband, too?"

"Yes."

"You should have stayed together. Man and wife should not be separated."

"I hope he will find me soon."

"Terrible things are coming, child."

"No Chinese, that's not fair," Clive protested. "Speak English!"

The hotel shook again, more violently, as another bomb landed a mile or so away. There were shrieks and laughter. Francine checked her little gold wristwatch. It was eleven-thirty. She rose. "I'd better go to my daughter," she said. "Excuse me. Good night, everyone."

"Don't go yet," Clive said. "There's only half an hour to 1942." He rose with her, but stumbled, clutching his head. Francine had to grab his arm to stop him from falling.

"Drunk," the towkay's wife said in disgust

But Francine was concerned for Clive Napier. His face had gone ashen, and he was leaning heavily on her for support.

"Sorry about this," he said to Francine, enunciating carefully. "Think I need a bit of fresh air. Could you help me outside? I'll sit on the veranda for a moment or two."

Neither Mr. Davenport nor K.K. Cheung made any move, but Edwina rose to help. Between them, they supported the major, and made their unsteady way out of the sweltering, overcrowded room to the veranda.

"Don't be upset by what he says," Edwina whispered to Francine. "He's a defeatist."

Together, they got Clive Napier onto a bench. He seemed in danger of slumping, so Francine sat beside him, propping him up. He sighed, resting his bandaged head on her shoulder. The veranda was deserted. Everybody was in the ballroom. "I think he's very drunk," Edwina said seriously, studying Clive. "He's not very nice, is he?"

"He's been wounded. He's probably a bit off his head."

"I'd better go back to Father," Edwina said. "Are you staying with him?"

"I'll just make sure he's all right," Francine said. "You go back and see the New Year in with your father."

"Are you sure?"

"Happy New Year, Edwina." She extracted an arm from behind the heavy body of the major, and they shook hands formally. Then Francine pulled her close on an impulse and kissed her plump cheek. She watched the girl hurry away.

"Sorry about this," Clive repeated, his mouth close to her ear. "Too much champagne on top of a fractured skull."

"You've got a fracture?" Francine said in horror.

"So they tell me."

"You're going to kill yourself like this!"

"No such luck."

"You should be in hospital."

"I'd rather be here, in your arms." She felt his lips touch her neck, hot and breathy.

"I think I'll go and find the jaga," she said firmly. "He'll call a taxi to take you home."

"Please don't leave me," he said quietly. "Christ, look at the sky. Quite a fireworks show for New Year's Eve." The bombers had moved farther away, in the direction of the naval dockyard. The explosions had dwindled to thuds, which floated ominously on the humid air, no louder than the rustle of palm trees along the veranda. But the night sky was brilliant with the deadly fireworks of war. A scarlet glow marked where go-downs had been set alight. Crimson tracer spiralled sluggishly upward from the ack-ack batteries, following the waving beams of the searchlights, disappearing into the darkness without any apparent effect.

Please come, Frank, she begged silently. Come on Saturday.

Clive straightened himself with an effort, and groped in his pocket. "Got it in here somewhere," he said. "Ah. Here it is." He produced a small silver flask, which he unscrewed. He held it out to her. "You first."

She was about to make some retort, but thought better of it. The world was on fire all around them, and common sense seemed a futile virtue right now. She took the flask, and drank. The whisky was smoky. She wiped her mouth and gave the flask back to Clive.

"You're special. I knew you would be, by the way my uncle described you." He swigged at the flask in turn. "Know why Uncle took such a shine to you? After my aunt died, he married a Eurasian. They were together for nearly twenty years. She looked a bit like you. He never rose above brigadier, though. Should have retired a full general."

"What happened to her?"

"She died. He's never got over it."

"He must have loved her very much."

"Career suicide for a soldier, of course. Worst thing you could do, short of shooting the C.O. But then, I don't need to tell you what nauseatingly hypocritical bastards we British are, do I?"

"My husband—" She broke off. She didn't know what to say.

He offered her the flask again, and she drank automatically. "You don't have to explain," Clive said dryly. "Shunned by the gang. Not invited to any

decent home. Children not allowed to play with clean white children. It's a hard road. I'm sure he doesn't give a toss, though. Marrying a girl like you is worth a hundred times all that."

She wondered if that was how Frank felt, how he would always feel. In the distance, she heard the sonorous drone of the bombers returning north. It reminded her of the drone of the lawnmower on the cricket pitch on a summer afternoon, before the horror began, before the gates of Eden had shut. "I'd better go to my little girl," she sighed.

"Wait," he said. Before she guessed what he meant to do, he was kissing her on the mouth. They grappled awkwardly on the bench. "Francine," he whispered huskily. "Francine, kiss me again."

She was burning with humiliation and self-reproach. "How dare you?" she gasped, knowing she sounded like the amateur heroine of a bad play. "You're not a gentleman," she said, trapped in the vein of cheap melodrama. She did not, however, know any other way of expressing her outrage.

"No," he agreed. "But I like you very much. I'm glad we're together for the New Year."

She became aware of the chorus of shouts and whistles from the ballroom that heralded midnight. Bells were ringing across the city. "Oh, God," she muttered. English voices were raised in a chorus of "Auld Lang Syne." Francine shuddered. The sentimental Scottish tune was almost identical to the music played at Chinese funerals. Without another word to Clive, she got to her feet and fled.

Upstairs, the raid had awakened Ruth and she was wailing. The amah was trying in vain to comfort her. Francine took her. "Hush, little bird," she crooned. "Hush, my little bird."

It was all falling apart. All order, all dignity, all morality, the whole thing crumbling into ruins. What if they're right? she asked herself. What if Frank is already dead, and the Japanese will soon be here, slaughtering and burning?

The next morning, she went to look in on Brigadier Napier. As Clive had told her, he was in the grip of a bout of malaria. She found him wrapped in a rug on the little balcony of his room, very sallow in the face and shivering despite the heat. She had brought him a basket of fruit, which he received gratefully.

"Sorry to miss New Year's Eve and all that," he said, his teeth chattering, "I do enjoy a good party. But not feeling quite the thing, you know."

"I'm so sorry. You didn't miss much. There was an air raid in the middle."

"So I heard. I hope my nephew behaved himself. He's rather a wild boy, but he has a heart of gold."

"He was drinking rather a lot," she replied.

The brigadier grimaced. "He's lonely. Got engaged to a girl back home. She settled him down a lot. They were due to marry a few days ago, matter of fact. But when war broke out, she decided not to wait. Married some businessman chap instead."

"I see."

"Clive was awfully cut up about it. He just needs the right girl. Not much chance of that, now. All the right sort are going home, what?" His hands trembled as he tried to drink his tea. She steadied them with her own. "You're a lovely girl, Francine. Don't mind what people say. Most people are fools."

When she got back to her room, there was a large bouquet of yellow roses on the table, together with a note from Clive:

I MADE AN ASS OF MYSELF LAST NIGHT.

PLEASE FORGIVE ME.

HAPPY 1942!

CLIVE.

The day of Frank's arrival was unbearably sultry. In the early hours of the morning, another group of Japanese bombers came and went, leaving parts of the city blazing once more, an ugly red glow in the sky, an ugly smell of burning rubber in the humid dawn. Frank had not come by lunchtime.

Infected by Francine's tension, Ruth grew increasingly boisterous, eventually breaking a jar of face cream. Francine slapped the child, something she almost never did. Ruth started to cry in shock. Heartbroken, Francine cradled the sobbing child, who eventually fell quiet. Then she set to work cleaning up the sticky mess with its treacherous, jagged blades of glass.

They stayed in their room all afternoon, waiting for Frank. Francine gazed out of her window at the endless stream of refugees in Raffles Square. Where were all these homeless thousands to go? There was hardly room in Singapore to hold today's arrivals, let alone tomorrow's, or the next day's.

By the evening, Frank had still not come. Nor had he sent any word. While she lay with Ruth on the bed, it occurred to her for the first time that "Coming down 3rd Jan." might mean he was leaving on the third and thus would not be here for a few more days yet. Nothing was certain. She had to control her emotions.

She was awakened in the early hours by the sound of a door slamming loudly. She roused herself, feeling dazed. It was past midnight. A restless monsoon wind was rattling the palm leaves, spattering rain in long shudders. He'll come tomorrow, she told herself. He'll come tomorrow. She felt almost cold. She rose to undress and get into her nightclothes.

When she heard the knock at her door, she thought it was Frank and joy surged in her, making her cry out. She ran to the door and flung it open. It was Edwina, wearing a dressing gown. The girl's round face was pale as ice. "It's Father," she said. "Please come."

Francine checked that Ruth was asleep, then followed the girl down the corridor. She was unprepared for what greeted her when Edwina opened the door of her room. The first thing she saw was the red spray across the wall and ceiling. The second was the crumpled figure that lay on the floor, a revolver clutched in one still hand. She almost fainted, but fought the giddiness. She knelt by the dead man, reaching out. Mr. Davenport had shot himself under the chin. The top of his head was gone.

"He's dead," she heard Edwina say. The girl was trembling violently, and yet in the unreal calm of deep shock. "I thought he was cleaning it."

Francine rose unsteadily and pulled Edwina away from the corpse. "Don't look at him," she pleaded, though it was far too late for that. "Come away. Don't touch anything." There was a dreadful amount of blood. It was still pouring slowly from the corpse, like an emptying bottle.

"I thought he was cleaning it. He often cleaned it late at night. I was in bed—" Francine grabbed Edwina as she sagged to the ground. Somehow she supported the half-unconscious girl.

The doorway was filled with guests in dressing gowns, peering in.

"He's shot himself!" a young man with blond hair and horn-rims called out. "It's Davenport. Blown his brains out!"

"Please," Francine said, holding Edwina to her breast. "Please call a doctor. Please."

She stayed with Edwina in her own room until the doctor arrived. The hotel staff could be heard disposing of Mr. Davenport. Once he'd glanced at the corpse, the doctor examined Edwina unemotionally.

"She'll be better off spending the night in hospital," he said, and took her away.

Francine could not imagine what would become of Edwina now. If Frank came, they would try to take her under their wing. Edwina had no one else now. She had once told Francine that her nearest relations were two maiden aunts in Cornwall. She would need help. If Frank didn't come – well, if Frank didn't come then they were all lost, anyway.

They were torn out of bed at dawn by the heaviest raids so far. The hotel was shaking as though giant fists were pounding into the belly of the city. The deep drone of the bombers was everywhere, a sound that vibrated below the sternum, drowning out the thin complaint of the alert sirens.

She got Ruth and hurried downstairs with her. A thick smell of burning was in the air. With each detonation, she felt the ground tremble beneath her feet. The clatter of a fire engine rushed by outside. She ran to the shelter, but it was crammed to capacity. As she tried to push her way in, a hand thrust her back with such force that she staggered.

"No more room," a man's voice said roughly. She had a blurred impression of hostile eyes glaring at her before she turned and ran back to the dining room, which was the second-best refuge, having been shuttered and sandbagged.

It, too, was crowded. Service of a sort was even being offered; a few harassed waiters were scurrying to and fro with trays of bacon and eggs, or bowls of congee. She found a table jammed up against a pillar and sat holding Ruth on her lap. The child stared around with wide eyes.

The bombs were louder and nearer than she had ever heard them; she watched, hypnotized, as the glasses shivered on the table, so fragile, so brittle. Abdul, the aged "boy" who always served her, came up to her table.

"Breakfast, Mem?"

"Just toast, please, Abdul. And some mee for the little one. Do you know what's happened to Mr. Davenport's daughter?"

"Queen Alexandra Hospital, Mem." The man looked at her from the corners of his eyes and lowered his voice. "Jaga baik-baik."

She was about to ask him what was wrong, why she should be careful, but he was already scurrying away, his headdress falling loose down his back.

The raid ended with the usual abruptness while she sat drinking her coffee. A flood of guests from the shelter started pouring into the dining room, demanding food. She left with Ruth. People were staring at her as she passed, not bothering to conceal the hostility in their eyes. "Bloody niggers," she heard someone mutter. She felt her skin crawl. She pulled Ruth close and hurried out.

She was stopped in the lobby by Mr. Mankin, a tall, obsequious man with a permanent smile stitched on his lipless mouth.

"Mrs. Lawrence, if I may—a word?"

She followed him unhappily into his office.

He sat with his thin legs elegantly crossed and gave her his wide, empty smile.

"Your husband, madam. He has not yet arrived?"

"No."

Mankin clicked his tongue sympathetically. "No message?"

"None. There are no communications with Perak anymore."

"Have you considered the possibility of alternative accommodation?"

"No, why should I?"

His smile widened a fraction. "Perhaps you have relations in Singapore."

"No. I have nobody."

"Friends, then. People of your own . . ."

He let the sentence trail off deliberately. She held Ruth tightly on her lap. "My own what?" she asked.

"Many of our guests are complaining."

"About what?"

"About having to share the hotel with a native woman."

"But my account is up-to-date," she stammered.

The man's eyes were hard. "Besides which, you are occupying a room in which we can fit a whole family." He did not need to add a white family. "The situation is not one I or my staff enjoy, Mrs. Lawrence. If your husband does not join you by tonight, I am afraid we will no longer have a vacancy for you here."

"But where will we go? I have a child! There's hardly a room in Singapore!"

"I'm sure you'll find somewhere more suitable." Mankin rose and bowed. "Good morning, Mrs. Lawrence."

She walked out into the lobby in a daze. The angry, hostile eyes followed her. She saw mouths muttering, but she shut out the words.

Where was she to go? If she had to leave Raffles, how would Frank ever find her? Her privileged little bubble had been ruptured. Somewhere within herself a Cantonese voice taunted her: You've played the memsahib long enough, Yu Fa. Now you have to face the real world, as what you really are.

Her first thought was to try another hotel. She called in the amah to look after Ruth and hurried out. She tried the Goodwood Park, the Cathay, the Hotel de l'Europe, and then a round of lesser hotels. All rejected her instantly, whether because they were truly full or not she could not tell. The bombers came again at eleven o'clock, pounding the city mercilessly, forcing her into a crowded shelter on Bukit Timah Road, where she crouched with two hundred others, deafened by the destruction. When she emerged, Indiatown was burning, yellow-brown smoke billowing up over the rooftops. She continued searching, by taxi when she could find one, but mostly on foot.

The bombers came again at noon. This time she was over on Cavenagh Road. A man dragged her down to the cellar of a shop-house where his family was preparing a meal. They offered her food and she ate a little with them. The bombs were like a giant stamping around the city, making the earth shake, crushing whatever was in his path.

As she continued searching, the sky darkened with the smoke of burning buildings. The reply was an endless, "No vacancy." She was exhausted and starting to despair by afternoon, when the bombers returned for the fourth time. Such a rapid turnaround could mean only one thing: The Japanese now had bases only an hour's flying time from Singapore. Soon the city would be within the range of guns as well as planes. And then it would be in range of tanks. Of bullets and swords, rape and bayonets.

She went back to Raffles and rested in her room with Ruth, eating fruit and drinking jasmine tea. Through her window, she could see a column of smoke rising from the island of Blakang Mati, where the bombers were blasting the batteries of naval guns. She had never yet seen a bomber shot down, or even hit, by the antiaircraft fire. Nor had she ever seen British aircraft oppose the bombers. She had heard that the RAF Wildebeests, capable

of ninety knots against the Zeros' three hundred, had been destroyed in the first days of the war, with the loss of all the brave, helpless pilots.

There was a knock at the door. She went to open it, without any real hope that it could be news of Frank. Edwina Davenport, very pale, with shadows under her eyes, stood in the doorway. Behind her was a smiling, snub-nosed nurse with a broad hand on her shoulder.

"Edwina!" she exclaimed, drawing them in. "How are you?"

"I'm all right," the girl said tonelessly.

Francine put her arms around Edwina. She stood passively, her cheek resting on Francine's shoulder.

"She's been discharged," the nurse said in a cheerful Australian accent, "but she needs someone to keep an eye on her." She gave Francine a piece of paper. "Here's our number. Alexandra Hospital, Ward Fifty-three. Call Dr. Wilkes or Sister Carter. They're usually there. We don't go off-duty much these days." Without giving Francine time to reply, she passed over a little parcel. "Doctor's put her on these powders to help her sleep. Just mix one in a glass of water at bedtime. All righty?" She patted Edwina's arm. "Try not to think about it," she urged, not without compassion. "It wasn't your fault, dear."

She left with a cheerful wave. As soon as she was gone, Francine turned to Edwina. "I'm so sorry, Edwina," Francine said uselessly, "but I have to leave Raffles tomorrow."

"Why?"

"The management won't let me stay here any longer unless Frank comes. And I don't know when he'll come."

Edwina looked up, her face haggard. "They're kicking you out?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not white." Francine picked up the telephone and called the number the nurse had left her. Dr. Wilkes answered in a tired, hoarse voice.

"The girl's had a severe shock," he told her. "She needs a maternal presence."

"What will happen to her now?"

"It's all in hand. Her name has been passed to the evacuation committee. She'll be sent back home on the next available boat."

"Oh," Francine said. It was the first she had heard of an evacuation committee. "When will that be?"

"It might take a week or two to arrange. Three weeks at the most. They're giving priority to the women and children, of course."

"I have a child of my own," she said.

"Then get your name on the list as soon as possible."

"But I'm waiting for my husband!"

The man grew impatient. "Look, I have patients to attend to. Make sure she takes the powders. They'll stop any nightmares." She thought he would hang up, but then he grunted. "Ah, yes. One more thing. The burial."

"I'm sorry?"

"The girl's father. The body. The sooner it's buried, the better. Will you take care of it?"

"But I've no idea—"

"It's in the morgue, here. I had to perform an autopsy, of course. As if I didn't have better things to do. The police have released it now. I've prepared the death certificate. Pick it up as soon as you can, please, we're very full." This time, he did hang up.

Francine put the telephone down and looked at Edwina, who seemed calmer now. "It's all right," Edwina said quietly. "I'm coming with you."

"Edwina," Francine said tiredly, "that's impossible."

"I haven't anyone else," Edwina said matter-of-factly. "I've got all Father's cash. And I can help with Ruth. With everything. We're better off together."

She stared at Edwina. "They've asked me to arrange the burial. I don't even know where to start."

"Ask Brigadier Napier," Edwina said in a low voice.

"He's sick in bed with malaria."

"Then ask his nephew, that major. He's probably used to doing things like this."

Francine suddenly remembered that Clive Napier had given her his card. She searched in her bag, and found the thing. She called the number.

"Clive Napier," she heard his voice crackle.

She took a deep breath. "Major Napier? It's Francine Lawrence."

"Hello, my sweet," he said, his voice changing. "This is a delightful surprise."

"I need your help," she said brusquely. "There's been a tragedy here. Mr. Davenport is dead."

"Davenport?" he asked.

"He was at our table on New Year's Eve."

"The gloomy old bird with the rosy daughter?"

"Yes."

"Shot himself, has he?" Clive asked crisply.

She had no idea how Clive had guessed that, but she was grateful that his brutal assessment meant she didn't need to go into details with Edwina present. "Yes," she said simply.

"He looked the type," Clive said calmly. "What can I do for you? Bury the old chap?"

"Yes," she said again. "Edwina, his daughter, is staying with me for the time being, and—"

"You don't need to explain," Clive cut in. "Where's the stiff?"

"At the Alexandra Hospital."

"Good. Buddhist, Christian, Jew?"

Francine turned to Edwina. "I'm sorry, Edwina. What religion do you belong to?"

"Church of England," Edwina replied, eyes reddening.

Francine relayed the information to Clive. "I'll get onto it straightaway," Clive promised. "Be in touch tonight."

"You're very kind," Francine said awkwardly.

"Not at all," Clive replied briskly. "I told you, anything you want, my sweet. Strawberries, oysters, funerals. All part of the service."

"If you need any funds—"

"We'll work out the payment later," he said. He rang off.

Francine looked at Edwina. "He says he'll do it. Right now, I have to keep on looking for somewhere to stay. I need to go out."

Edwina nodded. "If you like, I'll look after Ruth. You can send the amah away."

That was true. She was going to have to dispense with the amah, in any case. She made up her mind. "All right. There isn't much chance of finding another hotel room, Edwina. We may have to go to a very different area."

"You mean Chinatown."

"Or Indiatown. Or a Malay kampong."

The girl smiled slightly. "I don't have any prejudices. As long as I'm with you."

Francine nodded and started getting ready to go out.

She boarded a tiny yellow eight-horsepower taxi, whose driver had promised to take her to see a flat in Popiah Street, in Chinatown. They were just entering the maze of Chinese shops when the taxi suddenly lurched to a halt. The driver flung open his door, screamed, "Get under the car!" and vanished.

Tired and confused, Francine got out. The driver was scrambling under his car, but the ground was filthy, and she couldn't possibly get down beside him in her smart clothes. The street was crowded with running people, their faces distorted with fear. A street vendor on a tricycle was careering down the pavement, bananas and mangosteens spilling from his baskets. She tried to see where people were running to, but each seemed to have his own hiding place, in shop doorways or down alleys.

Then she saw the Zero, silvery-gray like a shark, diving out of the sky toward the street. A line of bullets whipped through the street. The fruit seller exploded in a crimson shower. A woman near him was swept away like a dried leaf, the same crimson stuff spooling from holes in her body, and a man arched with arms flung high, shrieking. Francine ran wildly down the street, her feet slipping in blood.

The noise of the Zero's engine exploded overhead, rolling from one corner of heaven to the other, like a boulder on the roof of a house. It disappeared from view, and she thought it must have gone away. Then the noise was descending, growing, coming again.

She turned on her heel and ran the other way, down another street. It was still crowded with men, women, and children. Incredibly, despite the repeated raids, fruit stalls were still set up, lacquered ducks glistening in shop windows, racks of clothes fluttering; a man crouched behind his sewing machine, a half-finished pair of trousers clutched in his hands.

She heard the machine guns start firing, the bullets making a shrill whipping sound, like bamboo in a gale. Her foot hooked on something and she went sprawling in the street, her hands bruising on the tarmac. She rolled into the gutter and curled up among the filth, covering her head with her arms.

The Zero howled overhead. She felt the bullets tearing into the structures around her. Her soul cringed in fear, not just for herself, but for Ruth. Who will look after her if I'm killed? she thought in panic.

Then she was lifted in the air and tossed against a wall with casual, brutal force. Her head cracked cement so sharply she almost passed out. At first she thought she had been hit. Her ears were ringing. She opened her eyes and saw the fireball rising from the rooftops. The Zero had launched a torpedo directly into the crowded, swarming tenements. For a moment she had a hellish vision of flimsy wooden roofs sinking into matchwood, walls toppling outward, human figures spilling from dollhouse rooms. Then black smoke billowed around the ruined buildings, obliterating everything.

A stink of explosives and brick dust choked the air. All around her were scenes of carnage. The street was painted red, as if for the New Year. Blood had spattered, poured, splashed. Figures lay broken among scattered cabbages and melons, human beings turned into bundles of bloodstained rags in the matter of a few seconds. The tailor lay dead by his overturned machine. Beyond him, a child was spread-eagled among the rubbish. His mother had sunk to her knees beside the corpse, plucking at his clothes.

As her ears cleared, she could hear a gramophone still playing a popular Chinese song in some shop-front, the singer's shrill voice mingling with the screams of the wounded.

"Come! Come!" It was her taxi driver, tugging her sleeve. He had reappeared, astonishingly, out of the smoke and dust. "Come this way!"

The All Clear was wailing. The Japanese had gone as suddenly as they had come. Her mind still paralyzed, she allowed him to drag her down an alley and into the next street. The little yellow Ford was where they had left it, doors still open like a butterfly poised for flight. The driver thrust Francine into the car, hands heaving at her buttocks as though she were a reluctant cow. He jumped behind the wheel and started up.

"We go to Popiah Street now," he said.

"What?" she asked stupidly.

"Popiah Street." He pointed with a brown finger at the dash. "Meter still running. We go see flat now?"

Francine burst into tears. "Yes, Popiah Street," she managed to say.

"Okay." He set off, steering briskly around the wreckage of a shop that had been blown into the street. "You hurt?"

"No." She curled up on the back seat, her body beginning to tremble in reaction. The Japanese fighter had turned her from a human being with dignity into an abject animal, cowering in the slime. She saw the limp figure of the dead child in her mind's eye. What if that had been Ruth? What if that mother had been her?

A few minutes later, the driver pulled up outside a small block of flats. "This is it," he told her. "Second floor. Mrs. D'Oliveira. I'll wait."

Somehow, she was sitting up and looking around. Popiah Street ran parallel to Hongkong Street, near the river. The area lay on the edge of Chinatown, forming a triangle with the slums of Boat Quay and the imposing white complex of government buildings. The air stank of raw sewage from broken drains, but the building, grandly called Union Mansions, was pretty, the street tidy.

She found herself checking her face in her pocket mirror, wiping away the tears, brushing her hair, dabbing powder on the dark shadows under her eyes. She wanted to make a good impression. The strafing had blended into the unreality of all the other unreal things that had happened to her this day. A weird calm possessed her as she got out of the taxi. There was blood in her hair and exploration revealed an exquisitely painful lump on the back of her head. She examined her dress. It was covered with filth. She brushed herself clean as best she could and walked up the stairs.

From one of the flats drifted the sound of jazz. Glossy potted palms flourished on the landings. Her heart lifted. Mrs. D'Oliveira was an olive-skinned, birdlike woman who rubbed her hands together in distress when she saw Francine.

"Oh! I was expecting a European person! We only have Europeans here!"

"I'm married to an Englishman," Francine said, not knowing what else to say. "He's a mine manager. He's coming down from Perak to join me soon. We have a little girl, aged four."

"Eurasian?" the woman said, peering closer at Francine.

"Yes."

"My father-in-law was Portuguese, you know. I might take a Eurasian."

Francine gestured at her dress. "I'm sorry about this. I got caught in the street."

"Poor thing! You can clean yourself up in the bathroom."

She let Francine into the flat. Like the rest of the building, it was clean and neat. There were three tiny rooms and a kitchenette. It was fully furnished; indeed, the whole place gave off a strange impression that the inhabitants had just popped out to do some shopping. The living room had a variety of easy chairs, a gleaming gramophone with records, a cabinet full of the brass-and-silver "Eastern curios" that European tourists liked to buy. Plants flowered on the window sills.

"It was a Captain Edmondson," the woman said, rubbing her thin hands with the sound of dry paper. "Lovely man. Bachelor. Killed in a raid. I miss him so much!" She wiped a sudden tear from her cheek. "You can use his things. He had no family. Ten dollars a week. Two weeks in advance, two weeks' notice."

Francine walked to the back window. There was a lush little back garden with a handsome pipal tree. A perfect place for Ruth to play. But she could see why this outwardly desirable flat had not been rented in two weeks. Three blocks away, the Chinese quarter was billowing smoke from the recent attack. A little farther on, a deeper, denser cloud marked where go-downs were burning on the pier. Less than half a mile across the river, which was still packed with sampans, there were more pillars of smoke. The bombing had come frighteningly close to Popiah Street. Between the green hill of Fort Canning and the crowded alleys of Chinatown, it was not in a good spot.

As though divining her thoughts, the woman spoke with sudden sharpness. "You could search Singapore and not find a better flat! Furnished! We don't usually consider non-Europeans!"

"Where is the nearest shelter?" Francine asked.

"Oh, we have such a safe shelter, Mrs. Lawrence! Built by Mr. Carmody. Just at the end of the street. Room for everybody. You may inspect it yourself."

The woman was right. She could search the whole of Singapore and not find a better place. Her mind was made up.

"Five dollars," Francine heard herself say. "Ten is far too much."

"Eight."

"I'll go as high as seven. No higher."

"Yes," the other woman said. "Yes, yes. All right. Seven-fifty."

"All right. We'll move in tomorrow." She tore her eyes away from the burning buildings of Chinatown and turned to Mrs. D'Oliveira, who was beaming at her. She took the purse out of her bag and counted out fifteen dollars. "There are three of us. I'm taking care of a girl who's lost her father. She's fifteen."

"A European girl?" the woman asked, reaching for the money.

"A European girl."

"She is most welcome," Mrs. D'Oliveira said graciously, folding the money into her pocket. She hopped forward in her birdlike way and clasped Francine's wrists in her little claws. "Welcome to Popiah Street, my dear!"

They buried Edwina's father at noon the next day, in the Protestant cemetery on Monk's Hill. Several other funerals were in progress; theirs was the smallest. The only mourner apart from Francine and Edwina was Clive Napier. He was in uniform, looking very smart.

"Wish you'd told us about those swine at Raffles," he said to Francine, watching the Tamil gravediggers still busy in the grave. "I'd have talked the management around. At gunpoint, if necessary."

"It's done, now. How is Brigadier Napier?"

"Not very well. Wanted to come, but he's too weak, of course. He's shipping out on the Narkunda in a few days. They'll take care of him at home."

"Please give him my best wishes."

"I will. Is your new place all right? Clean and all that, I mean?"

They had spent the morning moving into Union Mansions. Edwina had helped tirelessly. They had just had time to get their bags unpacked before Clive's car arrived to take them to the cemetery. "Oh, yes, thank you. I should have done it weeks ago. Not waited to be thrown out like a dog."

"You're going to be a lot closer to the bombing."

"I know. There's a good shelter nearby. Better than the shelter at Raffles. We'll be all right."

"I'll drop in on you," he promised. "Bring you some of those strawberries and oysters." He winked at her. It was difficult to ignore the memory of their feverish grapple on New Year's Eve, but Francine tried hard.

The Tamil gravediggers clambered out, dusting the red earth from their clothes. They hauled the coffin into place, securing it with straps over the raw hole. The coffin was a handsome thing with silver handles.

"Was the devil of a job to get hold of it," Clive said out of the corner of his mouth to Francine. "Coffins are getting scarce in Singapore."

"Bless you," she whispered. "Bless you for everything." The vicar had been talking in a low voice to Edwina. Now he stepped to the edge of the grave and opened his prayer book. His voice was thin and reedy on the wind.

"'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give the praise: for thy loving mercy and for thy truth's sake.'"

Francine felt Clive stiffen beside her. "Hold on a moment, Padre," he said. "You've got the wrong service, I think."

The vicar looked at him irritably. "There is a different service for suicides, Major."

"You mean you won't read the pukka service?" Clive demanded in disgust. At the same time, the air-raid sirens started to wail, rising up from the city below, momentarily submerging the faint words of the psalm.

The labourers immediately let the straps slip through their fingers, and took to their heels. Francine flinched as the coffin crashed down into the grave, wedging with one square wooden shoulder upward. People were streaming from other gravesides, heading for the Roman Catholic chapel, which was the nearest building.

A neat row of black dots had appeared on the horizon, surrounded by a halo of exhaust fumes. The dots swiftly became crosses.

"We'll have to adjourn until later, I'm afraid," the priest said, closing his prayer book. "Their path lies directly over the burial ground. They have shot at funerals before now. I'm sorry." He gathered his skirts and hurried off toward the chapel.

Francine looked at Clive helplessly. He shrugged. "Think they'll waste a bomb or a bullet on us three?" He took Francine's prayer book from her. He began to read, this time from the orthodox service. "'I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall live.'"

He kept reading, even when the roar drowned out his words. Strangely unafraid despite the terrors of yesterday, Francine looked up. The formation, perhaps fifty Mitsubishi bombers, was no more than a few thousand feet up. She could see the bomb-bay doors already gaping open in their bellies. The crimson disk of the rising sun was bold against the paintwork. She could even see the silhouettes of some of the crew peering down at them through the glass canopies. The sustained thunder of the engines was overwhelming, shaking the ground, hurting the ears. Puffs of ack-ack fire opened around the airplanes, looking like thistledown and seeming to do about as much damage.

The terrible procession passed overhead and began banking over the city, heading toward Tanjong Ru. Clive nodded toward a shovel abandoned by the gravediggers. "You ought to do the honours, old girl," he said to Edwina.

Edwina stooped, sobbing, and scraped up a handful of red earth. It thudded onto the coffin. Francine knelt to pick up a few clods and let them fall into the grave. Then she took Edwina in her arms. A barrage of explosions rolled over them. The bombers were attacking the gasoline-storage depots on Tanjong Ru.

"This place hasn't long to go," Clive said.

"I'd better get Edwina home," Francine said. Edwina was crying as though her heart would break.

They started to walk toward Cemetery Road, where their car was parked, a dignified black Humber that Clive had somehow managed to obtain for the occasion. None of them looked back at the abandoned, unfinished grave.

"How much is all this going to cost?" Francine murmured to Clive.

"Forget about that."

"What do you mean?"

"It's all been taken care of."

"Who's taken care of it?"

"I have, of course."

Francine was dismayed. "Oh, no! Edwina has money, and so do I."

"I don't think we'll make the kid pay for burying her father," Clive said dryly. "And it's nothing to do with you."

"It's nothing to do with you, either! I wouldn't have asked you to help if I'd thought you were going to pay for it!"

"Forget about it," he repeated. "I'm not exactly poor. Glad to help."

"Thank you, Major."

"Oh, please. Clive."

On the way back along Orchard Road, they passed a stream of several hundred wounded troops making their way into the city.

"Just arrived from the ulu," Clive commented briefly. "They look about done in."

Francine stared at them as the Humber edged past. They were men shattered both mentally and physically. The image of the unshakeable British soldier had been part of her life. Now it was gone. Something was happening to Francine. It must have begun a long time ago, but she had first become aware of it yesterday, when she had conquered her hysteria to go and inspect Mrs. D'Oliveira's flat. She was becoming a different person. It was as if the softness of her former life was being burned away by the horrors she was going through, leaving something enduring in its place, some core of strength.

She wondered how Frank was going to like her new self. He would have to live with it. The terrible misjudgement of not coming down to Singapore with them had forever dented her esteem for him. She no longer worshiped unthinkingly at the shrine of Frank's male, British superiority. She would not let him bully her again, not ever again, no matter what he said about her thick Chinese head.

When they reached Popiah Street, she felt obliged to invite Clive Napier in for a cup of tea. He accepted readily.

Ruth, who had been in the care of an amah all morning, was delighted to see them. She was also much taken with Clive, his officer's uniform, and the bandage around his head.

"Did the Japanese do that to you?" she demanded immediately on meeting him.

"They did, the brutes," Clive said, smiling.

"With a sword?"

"Hush, Ruth," Francine warned sternly.

"It's only a scratch," Clive assured Ruth. He was carrying a briefcase of the type officers used, and now he opened it and started looking inside. "Now, I believe I've got something for you, young lady, if I can only find it."

"What is it?" Ruth demanded, excited.

"Ah. Here it is." He produced a package, and presented it to Ruth. Francine, watching from the kitchen door, saw Ruth tear off the paper to reveal a wooden model of a fighter plane, proudly painted with RAF roundels.

"A Spitfire!" Ruth squealed in delight.

"That'll look after you when the Japanese bombers come around next time."

Francine was touched that he had thought of a present for Ruth. The child had few toys in Singapore. It was not exactly what she would have chosen herself, but Ruth was captivated with the thing.

"Look, Edwina!" Ruth crooned, waving the Spitfire and imitating the noise of airplane engines.

"I suppose I should have got her a doll," Clive said, catching Francine's eye. "But I thought that might be more in vogue these days."

"It was very thoughtful of you. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

"I think I'll go and lie down," Edwina said tiredly.

"I'll bring some tea to you in bed," Francine promised.

"Thanks." The girl reached out to Clive. "Thanks, Clive. You've been marvellous."

Clive kissed her hand gently. "No problem, old girl. I'm always here."

Francine made the tea and took a cup into Edwina's room. The girl was crying quietly, propped up on pillows.

"I'm so sorry," Francine said, stroking Edwina's curly hair.

"How could he do it?" Edwina raised her face, which was haggard. "How could he?"

"I don't know," Francine replied helplessly. "I suppose he just couldn't face it anymore, Edwina."

"I'm facing it! Everyone else is facing it!"

"We're not all the same, dear. We all have different capacities to suffer and endure. Some less than others. Your father's inability to endure has meant that you have to endure more. But you have that capacity."

"It's all right," Edwina replied, after a silence. "I'll be all right. When the war's over, I'll go back and take over the plantation. I'll go to agricultural college, and learn how to do it properly."

Francine was touched by the firm declaration. "Good for you."

"He's nice, isn't he? Clive, I mean. I thought he was awful at first, but he's been a pillar of strength."

Francine nodded. "He certainly has."

"You need a man like that, Francine," Edwina said. "You should grab on to him."

She laughed, despite herself. "Men aren't like buses. You don't just relinquish one and catch another."

"Your husband's relinquished you," Edwina said meaningfully.

"He'll be along, by and by," Francine replied lightly.

"Like a bus?" Edwina sipped tea, the cup quivering in her shaky fingers. "Just promise you won't chase Clive away, that's all. He's too good to lose."

"I promise." Francine smiled.

When she was sure Edwina was composed, she went back to Clive and Ruth. The child was by now nestled in Clive's lap, looking very much at home there. She was interrogating him minutely, evidently relying on Clive's army rank and experience of fighting the Japanese to give the answers nobody else could.

"But why doesn't God just stop the Japanese?" Ruth demanded. She looked up at Clive. "God could stop the Japanese, couldn't he, Clive?"

"Yes," Clive said, "but I rather think God's relying on us to stop them on our own. To show what we're made of, if you see what I mean."

"To show how brave we are?"

"That's it."

"What if God's wrong, and they beat us?"

"They won't beat us."

Francine poured the tea while Ruth studied her Spitfire, lying comfortably on Clive's strong chest. "I think she likes the Spitfire better than any doll," she said to Clive.

"I'm quite good at choosing presents for children."

"So I see. You should get married." Too late, she remembered what the Brigadier had said about Clive's fiancée.

"No such plans at the moment. I'm footloose and fancy free." There was an unmistakable message in his laughing eyes.

They drank their tea. Francine rose, smoothing her dress nervously over her thighs. "Well, it's getting toward lunchtime," she said. "I'd better get busy."

Clive could not ignore the broad hint. He kissed Ruth and put her down. "Good-bye, Ruthie. Next time I come, I'll bring you another present."

"When will you come?" Ruth demanded eagerly.

"Soon," Clive promised. At the door she offered him a cool hand, but he leaned forward and kissed her quickly on the mouth, leaving her with an impression of warm lips. "I'm in love with your daughter, Francine. I'll try and find a doll for her."

As she lay in the narrow, sagging bed that night, her new, hardened self asked her whether she really had any hope of seeing her husband ever again. The remains of her old soft self began to cry. And in the next room, despite the powder she had mixed in the girl's bedtime drink, she heard Edwina Davenport's quiet sobbing.

The mood among the war-work women had changed since the end of the year. There was less laughter around the long tables, less gossip, more frightened whispering. Everyone complained bitterly about the rains that had begun, and the impossibility of keeping clothing dry. As yet, there did not seem to have been any exodus of memsahibs; indeed, as Lucy Conyngham said at the Red Cross, nobody had yet told them to go.

"The Narkunda sailed yesterday morning," she said, snipping through gauze and deftly turning the dressing around her fingers. "Half-empty, so they say."

"But that's terrible," Francine said, looking up. Her first thought had been of Edwina. "They should at least have sent the children."

"Of course, she's bound for Australia," Mrs. Conyngham said. "Most people would rather go straight home, wouldn't they? What's the use of being stuck in Australia for the duration?"

"Wish I'd known she was half-empty," one of the younger European women, Violet Maudling, said bitterly. "I'd have got out." She leaned forward, lowering her voice and widening her big blue eyes. "Have you heard what the Japanese do to any white woman they capture?"

A Chinese woman named Mrs. Chen retorted grimly, "Thousands of Chinese women have already suffered that fate."

"Oh, but it's not so bad for you," the Englishwoman retorted, bridling.

"Of course it's as bad," Mrs. Conyngham said fiercely. "It's the same for any woman, Mrs. Maudling."

"It depends how you've been brought up," Mrs. Maudling said, snapping thread briskly.

"Chinese ladies are not brought up to be violated with indifference," the woman named Chen said dryly.

"Nor Tamil ladies," piped up a little wizened woman in a gold sari.

"It's different," Mrs. Maudling sniffed obstinately. "They're more your own kind, aren't they?"

A squabble broke out, several women talking at once, some very angry. Francine herself was aware of a burning indignation inside; not at the crassness of Violet Maudling, but that the Narkunda had sailed without Edwina.

She was glad of Edwina's company. The girl seemed to have endless patience to amuse Ruth, who would otherwise have been driven mad by being enclosed all day. Edwina seemed to have grown to love the child, bestowing on her the tenderness of her fifteen short years. Her devotion to Ruth had freed Francine to do so much. But it was her duty to get Edwina out of Singapore as soon as possible.

Without telling Edwina where she was going, she left Popiah Street after lunch and found a taxi to take her to the offices of the Director General of Civil Defence, who she knew was responsible for the evacuation of civilians.

She was seen at once by a tall, spare major named King, with weary blue eyes and a thin mouth, who heard her out with his hands clasped on the blotter in front of him. The walls of his office were covered in lists and maps on which someone had pinned hundreds of red and blue thumbtacks.

"It's perfectly true, I'm afraid," he said apologetically when she had finished. "The Narkunda sailed yesterday morning, with only half her berths taken up."

"But that's disgraceful," Francine said. "They should at least have sent the children."

"Oh, yes. Your young friend should certainly have been on her. But you know, Mrs. Lawrence, liners have been leaving Singapore half-empty since October. You see, we have rather a delicate situation on our hands. Sir Shelton has already decreed that anyone who wants to leave may do so, regardless of colour. But we've stopped short of a compulsory evacuation order. We can't order people to go, d'you see?"

"Edwina Davenport is a child," she said. "She was promised a berth on the next boat!"

"There's been an unforgivable mistake," he said soothingly, making a note. "You may rest assured that Edwina will be evacuated as soon as possible. I'll be in touch shortly." The tired blue eyes surveyed her. "May I ask what plans you have for your own good self?"

"I'm waiting for my husband. He's coming down from Perak." She had repeated the phrase so many times that it had begun to sound wooden and unconvincing even to herself. "He's general manager of the Imperial Tin Mine."

"Ah." She saw the inevitable change taking place in the major's expression. "He's left it a little late. You say you have a daughter?"

"Yes. She's with me in Singapore." He drummed his blunt fingertips momentarily on his blotter, running his tongue round the inside of his cheeks. She could smell the man's starched uniform, his skin, the coppery smell so many ginger-haired Englishmen seemed to give off. "Non-Europeans who have been associated with Europeans in any way are one of our priorities, Mrs. Lawrence. My advice to you is to start making plans for your own evacuation and that of your child. Do you hold a British passport?"

"Yes."

"Got it with you?"

"Yes."

"And the child is inscribed on it?"

"Yes."

"Excellent," he said, brightening. "Then we can get you a place on one of the P & O boats without any problem at all."

"I can't think of going without my husband," she said. "Or at least," she amended, "without having news of him."

"You know," he said gently, "he may not be allowed to leave. Our orders are to facilitate the evacuation of women and children. Not able-bodied men. At the moment, they're all being ordered to stay. Civilians as well as soldiers."

"I didn't know that," she said, feeling cold.

He studied her for a while. "The situation may change," he said at last. "We're always here. Just don't leave it too late. There might be a stampede at—" She was certain he was about to say at the last minute, but he did not finish the sentence. "As for young Edwina, we'll sort her out in no time. Leave it to me."

She left the DGCD offices with turbulent emotions. What am I to do? she asked Frank angrily in her mind. Go without you? Wait for you until the Japanese are wading across the Strait of Johore, even though you may never come? She cried a little, tears more of frustration than grief, in the glaring heat of the street. Then the sky began to cloud over and the shattering thunder of a squall drove her to hunt for a taxi. She went to the offices of the Tribune and put an ad in the "Personals" asking for news of her husband. Surely somebody somewhere would know something?

She returned home to find that Clive Napier had arrived while she was out. He was sprawled on the floor beside Ruth, in shirtsleeves, strong brown arms bare. A pile of children's books were spread out around them.

"Look, Mama," Ruth squealed. "Look what Clive brought me. Picture books!"

Francine could not but bless him for the thoughtful gift. God knew how he had procured them; books of all kinds had vanished from the shops for some reason, and Ruth had been stuck in the flat, unable to play outside because of the monsoon.

"That was very kind of you," she said sincerely.

He grinned up at her. "No tea this time, for God's sake. I brought something better."

Edwina, who had spread his soaked jacket on a chair to dry, was wide-eyed as she took Francine to the kitchen and showed her the princely gifts Clive had brought: fresh strawberries, juicy Australian sirloin steaks, a bottle of whisky.

"I really think he must fancy you," Edwina whispered excitedly.

"At least somebody's still living in luxury," Francine commented wryly. "Does he expect us to cook these for him?"

"Don't be like that," Edwina pleaded. "No, he doesn't want to eat here. He has to take somebody out for lunch."

"Some powdered memsahib, no doubt," Francine said tartly.

"You're jealous!"

"Of course I am not jealous," Francine retorted. But it was too late. Her unwise remark had set off Edwina. "He fancies you, and you fancy him!"

Francine walked out of the kitchen with the bottle, and poured Clive a drink. He was reading Ruth a story about a character called Chicken-Licken, and she was entranced. They ignored her completely, wrapped up in each

other and the books. Clive knew how to make the simple tales come alive, putting on funny voices and screwing up his handsome face. She had long since decided that he was a scoundrel, but his vividness was what made him attractive. His uniform fitted him perfectly, evidently made by the best tailor in Singapore, and all his leather gleamed as brightly as his batman could shine it. The bandage on his head only emphasized his piratical air. His brown eyes were perpetually alight with ironic merriment, as though everything around him were a wry joke.

She passed him the whisky. "Have you been discharged fit yet?"

He nodded, looking up at her. "I've been seconded to the censor's office. We get all the bad news first. Our job is to turn it into musical comedy for mass consumption. Funny sort of job, but ours not to question why. Any news from your husband?"

"None," she said flatly.

He grunted, and rose. "Not having any whisky?"

"No, thanks," she replied.

Edwina came in with a tray on which she had carefully set out a bowl of stuffed olives and another of pickled onions.

"My word," Clive exclaimed gratefully. "This is service. Much as I adore you, young Edwina, may I ask why you haven't been sent home yet?"

"She's on the list," Francine said, explaining what she had found out that morning. "We're just waiting for them to call her."

"Good." Clive put an arm around Edwina and hugged her. "I say," he said, lifting one eyebrow suggestively, "you'll be breaking hearts back in Blighty, old girl. You're like June, bursting out all over."

Edwina flushed, squirming. "Please don't pinch me, Clive. I'm not a farm animal."

"No, you're an English pippin."

"What's that?" Edwina asked suspiciously. "Some breed of prize pig, I suppose?"

"If you hadn't been born in the savage jungles, you'd know that an English pippin is a crisp and juicy apple."

"Thank you for the steaks," Francine said. "Meat is so rare now. I don't know how you got them," she couldn't help adding suspiciously.

"Luxury is still to be had at a price," he said. "People are still raking in fortunes. Profiteers, hard headed businessmen, merchants, squeezing gold from the panic of others. So why shouldn't you three have a steak? Besides, it'll put some colour in Ruth's cheeks. She's looking peaky."

Francine had noticed Ruth's pallor, too. "Yes, she is."

"Well," Clive said, finishing the whisky, "I'd better be trotting along. Got a luncheon date." He pulled on his jacket. "A powdered memsahib, as a matter of fact."

Damn his sharp hearing, Francine thought. "Do have fun."

"She won't be very pleased. She thinks I'm going to bring her those steaks. But I've donated them to a worthier cause. Aren't you going to invite me for a meal one of these days, my sweet?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I'll just drop in, shall I? So long, Chicken-Licken," Clive said, sweeping up Ruth and kissing her.

"Will you come again?" she pleaded.

"Soon," he promised.

"And bring more presents."

"Ruth!" Francine exclaimed.

"Don't scold her. She's got the right idea. Ask and ye shall receive." He landed a good kiss on Edwina's mouth, too, but Francine managed to keep out of range. His kisses on the lips were a lot too casual for her liking. As he left, the heavens opened again, and the monsoon rain thundered down on him, drenching him. She closed the door with satisfaction.

They ate the steaks and the strawberries, but Francine traded the nearly full bottle of whiskey for a sack of rice. And the raids resumed, despite the monsoon.

By now, the people who used Mr. Carmody's shelter had formed a sort of community and Francine knew the names of most of them, who they were, and what they did. It was a group of prostitutes from Lower Shanghai Street who were the dominant characters, with their raucous laughter and gaudy clothes. They were of all races, including a trio of Hakka Chinese, their cheeks and lips bright with paint at any hour of the day, and four or five Eurasians who were more discreet.

One of the Eurasians had taken a particular interest in Ruth. Francine had heard the soldiers call her Battling Bertha. She was in her mid-thirties, a

big woman with slab hips, her bosom straining her embroidered cheongsam, her fingers sparkling with cheap rings.

During one of the heaviest raids, she left her card game and sauntered over, arms akimbo.

"You not getting much sleep these days, hmmm?" she said to Ruth, who was fretful in the arms of a suspicious-looking Edwina. "Give her to me, girl." She gathered the child to her bosom and settled down at Francine's side with Ruth in her enveloping arms, bringing a wave of perfume. "I got four kids of my own," she said in a singsong lilt. "Sent them all off to the Dutch East Indies when the Japs invaded. You should do the same. Don't wait until they get here."

"I have nowhere else to go."

"They'll rape you and then kill you," Bertha said unemotionally. "Get out now, while the going is good." She stroked Ruth's cheek with a red-nailed forefinger. "So you brought another little stengah into the world."

"Yes."

"Good. Bring more." She laughed. "Bring plenty stengahs into the world. The world needs more. Where's your man, honey?"

"Coming down from Perak," she said for what felt like the thousandth time.

"He stayed there?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To take care of business."

"Stupid British tuan, eh?"

"Yes." Francine nodded. "A stupid British tuan."

"Life's hard without a man, even a stupid one." Bombs shook the shelter violently. Dust and talcum showered down on them. Bertha casually cupped her broad hand over Ruth's face to keep the dirt off. "Who's the other girl?" she asked.

"The daughter of a man who was killed in the bombing," Francine replied.

Bertha peered at Edwina with tawny-green cat's eyes. "You got a lot of responsibilities, honey. Too many, ah?"

"Maybe." Francine sighed.

"You take my advice," Bertha said. "Get yourself a man. You understand me? Never mind your husband. Get a flesh-and-blood man, not a man made out of smoke."

The All Clear was sounding. People rose to make their weary way back to bed. One grew almost accustomed to the fear, but Francine thought it was impossible to grow used to the sheer inconvenience of the raids, of having to tear oneself out of bed in one's nightclothes, or leave food to spoil on the stove, or washing in the sink, or any one of a thousand jobs unfinished.

Ruth was asleep in Battling Bertha's arms now. She passed the child over to Francine. "I miss my kids," she said. "Any time you feel like a drink, come over to our club. The Golden Slipper, on Shanghai Street. We have a good time there."

"Thank you," Francine said.

"It's not as bad as you think," Bertha said. "Might fill in some gaps in your education."

"Is she a prostitute?" Edwina asked, watching Bertha's rolling buttocks.

"What do you think?" Francine smiled. Edwina was certainly getting an education very different from her sheltered upbringing thus far in life.

Bertha's brutal advice about getting herself a "flesh-and-blood man" echoed in her mind. She was talking to Frank in her mind less and less these days, even to berate him. There had been a time when she had consulted "what Frank would want" before almost every action. Now, for good or for bad, that point of reference was gone. Though Battling Bertha was everything her own upbringing had taught her to fear and despise, Francine envied her. She envied Bertha her street wisdom, her courage and strength. Francine wanted to be more like Bertha, with her driving will to survive, less like the well-brought-up Eurasian lady she had always tried to be.

Ruth seemed unable to shake off her diarrhoea and she often vomited during or just after raids. She was losing weight; the little bones of her hips were beginning to show. She was growing listless. When Francine took her to Robinson's to be weighed one morning, she found to her dismay that the child had lost over ten pounds since leaving Perak. She showed her to the chemist, who probed the thin stomach gently with his fingertips.

"It's dysentery," he said, and Francine's heart sank painfully at the dread word.

"Dysentery!"

"The organisms usually die out of their own accord after a week or so. Watch out for any blood in the stools. If you see any, bring her in at once. I haven't got any drugs for you, I'm afraid. Keep her rested and make sure she gets plenty of fluids. And of course, be scrupulous about hygiene. Boil everything. Keep her hands clean. Yours, too. Don't worry too much."

How could she not worry? As she dressed Ruth, she thought seriously for the first time about the possibility of leaving Singapore without Frank. If it came to a choice between Frank and Ruth, she would have to choose Ruth. Frank could, at least, fend for himself. Ruth could not.

She got home just in time for another raid, and had to run down to the shelter with Edwina and Ruth. Mr. Carmody's shelter looked less impressive now. The go-down had been ripped to shreds, and hung raggedly around the inner structure. Blasts had shifted some of the bales of rubber; shrapnel had ripped many of the sandbags, which had been soaked by the monsoon rains.

The shelter was crowded with new faces from the outlying streets, every inch of space crammed. The Shanghai Street prostitutes were crowded around a Chinese woman in labour who was clinging to one of the iron pillars that supported the roof. What hope could there be for new life brought into this? Someone had produced the shelter first-aid kit. It stood next to the pregnant woman, its lid opened, its rows of bottles and bandages looking pathetically ineffective.

She and Edwina settled themselves where they could. Ruth fell instantly back to sleep in Edwina's arms. The heavy thudding of bombs began somewhere to the south. Edwina was watching the pregnant woman in fascination, her eyes wide. Bertha seemed to have taken charge, now and then wiping the woman's face with a bandage, murmuring into her ear. Francine had never seen anyone endure labour with so little complaint.

Three huge explosions shook the shelter in quick succession. Everything seemed to become jelly, a brief and dreadful sensation that the world was dissolving. A shower of filth rained down. The pregnant woman clung to the swaying iron pillar, still completely silent.

A fourth explosion, even closer, caused mutters of dismay. The blast crushed the air momentarily, squeezing Francine's chest, hurting her ears despite her protecting fingers. She looked at Ruth in concern. The child's

eyes were open now. She looked dazed. A gout of thin vomit spilled from her lips over Edwina's chest. Francine reached for the child anxiously.

Another explosion turned the air and the solid world into a palpitating mass. Francine found herself wondering whether they would have a home to return to when this was over. One thing she had learned, at least, was to take things as they came. For the moment, she needed to concentrate on survival, nothing else.

"Push," Francine heard Bertha urge the woman in labour. "Push!"

The woman's body convulsed. She cried out something in a hoarse voice. She pulled her skirt up and peered down. The baby's head had emerged. Bertha reached down in a businesslike way and cleared mucus from the baby's mouth. Then she nodded to the mother.

The maroon body of the infant exploded from her. Bertha's big, sure palms were ready to catch it. Suddenly, the shelter, which had been tensely silent, was full of voices, people laughing, crying, calling congratulations. Francine was choking back tears.

"It's a boy," Bertha said cheerfully, holding it up. The crumpled face emitted a scratchy wail from a huge mouth, tiny fists waving. Francine glanced at Edwina. She was staring in awe. It was a brutal but effective education, she thought.

More explosions shook the shelter, but nobody seemed to care. Bertha wrapped the child and put it into the mother's arms. Weakly, the woman produced a swollen breast. The seeking mouth found the nipple, fumbled blindly, then began to suck.

Francine closed her eyes, feeling the warm tears trickle down her cheeks. Damn Frank. Damn him for what he had done to them. He had chosen some sterile sense of duty above his wife and child. She remembered the words he had quoted, a lifetime ago: "I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more." What stupid, empty words!

For the sake of those Manchester businessmen, those greedy white towkays who never even came to see where their money was earned in sweat and mud, Frank had sacrificed her and Ruth. He had abandoned them to face this horror alone. And he had probably sentenced himself to death or capture by the army he'd contemptuously referred to as a bunch of yellow monkeys.

She was angry and despairing. Why had she let herself be overruled? If she'd had her own way, they would all have been safe in England by now. From now on, she vowed, she was going to do things her own way.

A man made out of smoke, Bertha had said. That was what Frank had turned out to be. A man made of smoke, who had been blown away with the wind. She would never forgive him for that, she realized suddenly. Even if he came, she would never forgive him. And she would never again let him make her do something she knew to be wrong. Her little plea for news of Frank had appeared in the Tribune each morning that week, without response. She was certain now that there would never be a response. I can't wait forever, she told him silently. Come, or I will live my life without you.

Clive Napier arrived at Union Mansions the next evening. Francine opened the door to his knock, and he stood there with a package under one arm, looking smart in his uniform. He grinned at her. "Hello, my sweet. I thought I'd drop in for dinner."

Francine was flustered. "You'll have to take potluck, I'm afraid," she said awkwardly.

He came in, closing the door behind him. He unwrapped the parcel, revealing a tray of strawberries, three dozen oysters in a wicker basket, and two bottles of French champagne. "Got any glasses?" he asked. "All alcohol has to be destroyed before the Japs get here. Let's do our bit."

She went to get glasses and ice to pack the bottles in. He picked up Ruth and tossed her in the air, making her squeal with pleasure. "How's my Chicken-Licken?" he growled, tickling her. Ruth wriggled with delight.

"Are you going to read to me?" she begged.

"Yes, darling," he said. "You and I will look at books after we've eaten Mama's potluck."

"What's potluck?" Ruth wanted to know.

Edwina was listening to the radio. "Churchill hasn't given up Singapore," she said stoutly.

"Everyone else has, old girl."

"You're a defeatist, Clive," Edwina said sternly. "You're spreading despondency and gloom."

"That will be enough impertinence from one of your youthful years, child."

"Child? I'm nearly sixteen," Edwina said indignantly.

"In which case, Francine, make that three glasses of champagne. Young Edwina is joining us in a tipple. I'm not a defeatist, Edwina, I'm a realist," he explained. "Your very good health, ladies." He raised his glass. Francine and Edwina, to whom Francine had given a small glass of champagne, raised theirs in return. Clive gulped most of his down in one go. "Your best bet's the Wakefield, Edwina. She sails next week. Or the Duchess of Bedford." Clive emptied the glass in a second gulp. "Ah. That's better. Being a realist, I need more alcohol than others. It dulls the discomfort. Let's have another." He took the bottle and filled all their glasses generously.

"I've never had so much champagne before," Edwina said, sipping cautiously at the bubbling liquid.

"Well, go steady," Clive advised, "or you might become a realist, too."

"I think that's enough champagne for Edwina," Francine said. "I'll go and cook."

"I'll open the oysters," Clive offered.

They went into the kitchen. While Clive, with considerable expertise, opened the oysters using a screwdriver, she set rice to boil. Then she chopped ginger, onion, and garlic and fried them in an iron pan, the closest thing to a wok she could find in Captain Edmondson's kitchen. She had bought a fish on Boat Quay, a nonya favourite. She filleted it, dressed it with taucheong paste and some sticks of lemongrass. She put the fragrant parcel in the hot oven to bake. The rich smell flooded the flat.

"I say." Edwina was laying the table. "That smells good."

"I hope you like Chinese cooking."

They ate around the table, the windows thrown open to let in the cool evening air. The oysters were delicious with Tabasco and lemon juice. They vanished swiftly, after which they started on the fish. Ruth ate with a spoon, pushing the succulent flakes into her mouth, humming with pleasure. Francine ate with chopsticks, a habit she had fallen back into recently. Clive watched her handle the slender sticks with unthinking dexterity.

"Did your husband like Chinese food?"

"Not at all."

"Foolish fellow," Clive said. His eyes were on Francine constantly. "You're a wonderful cook."

They finished the meal with the strawberries Clive had brought. Then Clive, as he had promised, read to Ruth for half an hour, including the Chicken-Licken book, which she adored. It got late, and became time for Francine to put Ruth to bed. Clive offered to help Edwina with the dishes. While she put Ruth into her pajamas and rocked her to sleep, Francine heard Edwina's high-pitched squeal of laughter from the kitchen. She had not heard her laugh like that for days.

When Ruth was asleep, Francine slipped silently out of Ruth's room, closing the door. Edwina was kneeling on the floor beside Clive, sorting through Captain Edmondson's collection of records. "We're going to dance," she told Francine eagerly. Her plump face was flushed and pretty, the way it had used to be. Clive Napier certainly had his uses, Francine thought. "Come and choose some records!"

Luckily, the late captain had been a dance fan, and they managed to find a sheaf of suitable records. The tunes had been specially recorded for dancing in the tropics; that was to say, at three-quarter tempo, the sedate pace that the heat dictated.

They put them on the gramophone. Edwina only knew how to waltz, so Clive taught her to foxtrot. Her adolescent body moved eagerly in Clive's arms. The dance tunes were already sickly-sweet with repetition—"The Way You Look Tonight," "I Only Have Eyes for You" and, "Have You Ever Been Lonely?" in melancholy succession. Francine felt her throat swelling with tears as she remembered other times, other places.

"Your turn," Edwina panted. "I'll put on the records."

She did not feel like dancing, but she rose, and let Clive take her. Her head was swimming. The first bottle of champagne was already empty and the second had somehow been half-emptied, and Clive had not been responsible for all of it. Francine knew that Edwina had been taking surreptitious gulps. So what? Francine thought. Poor child, if it cheers her up, then let her.

Clive was a good dancer, smooth and fluid. He was very strong. "Come here often?" he asked, looking down at her.

"Only during invasions," she replied.

"Speaking of which," he said in a low voice, so Edwina could not overhear, "we're getting reports that the Japs are torpedoing passenger boats.

I didn't want Edwina to hear that. But it's becoming harder and harder to get out."

"I understand," she said quietly. She was floating in his arms, serene in the movement, not wanting her blissful bubble to be punctured. "There isn't much hope that your husband will arrive, now," he went on. She was silent. "The whole of Malaya is in Japanese hands, my sweet. The causeway will be blown up any day. If he's not dead, he's in a prison camp. The best you can hope for is that you'll see him again when the war's over. If you don't get yourself and Ruth out, you'll be captured by the Japanese. You're going to be a target, not just because you're a despised Eurasian, but also because you're married to an even-worse-despised European. You can expect to be summarily beheaded. Ruth, too."

"Stop," Francine said, feeling physically sick. Her bubble was punctured now, and she was falling to earth.

"All right. I hope you've understood me. Our little friend is out for the count." She looked. He was right. Edwina was sprawled on the chair, fast asleep, her rosy mouth open. The champagne and the dancing had proved too much for her.

"Shall I carry her to her bed?" Clive suggested.

Francine nodded. He picked up Edwina without effort and followed Francine to the girl's room. They laid her on her bed. She snored softly as Francine covered her. Then they went back to the gramophone, where "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" was just coming to an end. In the silence, Clive walked to the open window. "The monsoon's coming tomorrow," he remarked.

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it. I can always feel it." He emptied the champagne bottle into their glasses. She felt she had long since had enough, but she took the glass nonetheless.

"Thank you for tonight," Francine said quietly.

"My pleasure, Francine." He smiled. "One more dance?"

"All right, if you want."

"This one's especially for you." He put "Sophisticated Lady" on the turntable, and they danced to the amorous, elegant melody. "How did you come by a name like Francine?" he asked.

"Don't you like it?"

"It suits you. It's just unusual."

"My mother chose it. After France, the country. My elder cousin is called Sidney, after the city in Australia. My younger cousin is called Frank, after San Francisco in America."

He smiled. "Really? And Ruth? Was she named after a city, too?"

"No. Frank chose Ruth. It was his mother's name."

"And your father? British, I take it?"

"He was Welsh." The champagne had loosened her tongue, or she would never have spoken about such things to Clive. "My mother called him her husband, but he wasn't, really. He always said he would marry her, but when his contract ended, he just went home and left us."

"Ah," Clive said gently. "That must have been rough on both of you."

"It broke my mother's heart," she said simply. "But that's the way it happens, isn't it, Clive? That's what native women are for. For the benefit of lonely white bachelors. It's a pity about the stengah children, but what can you expect? My father sent twenty dollars a month until I was married, and that was noble of him, wasn't it?"

Clive did not say anything for a while. He was holding her close, swinging her pleasantly in time to the music. "I don't feel that way about you, you know," he said at last.

"Of course not," she said mockingly.

"Do you have any idea how much I like you?" he asked.

"I hope you don't like me too much, Major Napier," she said. "I'm a married woman. Your uncle told me you were jilted by your fiancée."

"Did he now?"

"Yes. I wonder why she dropped you? Did you give her a hard time? Maybe she heard about all the little native girls you've got tucked away in Singapore."

"Don't be like that."

"What made her change her mind, then?"

"I think she just expected me to be killed."

"You'll have to do your best to disappoint her."

He grinned. "That's my ambition."

"And the little native girls? Which way do your tastes run? Stengah? Malay? Chinese?"

"I don't have a little native girl of any colour."

"Then what are you looking for here?"

"I'm just trying to help you, Francine."

"Yes, but what price will you want?"

"Just be nice to me."

"Be nice to you? How nice?"

"Don't make me feel foolish, for a start."

"Perhaps you make yourself foolish."

"Perhaps," he acknowledged. "What's your Chinese name?"

She hesitated. "Yu Fa."

"Yu Fa," he said. "I like that very much. Does it mean anything?"

"I suppose it means something like 'fragrant bud,'" she said.

"Oh, God. How perfect." He bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "You make those white women look like oxen. I've wanted you from the minute I set eyes on you."

"You were drunk on that occasion," she said tartly, "and you're drunk now."

"Drunk on your beauty."

"Do you always woo in clichés?"

"I'm sorry," he said, drawing her closer. "Clichés are what come to the hopelessly infatuated." The music was sensuous, dreamy, and the presence of his body was a rock in a twilight sea. His thighs pressed between hers in time with the rhythm. He stroked the tender skin of her cheek and neck with his lips, his breath warm and intoxicating against her ear. Honey seemed to be spreading through her veins. He cupped her breast in his palm. "I'm in love with you." She squirmed away from his embrace, went to the gramophone and took the record off.

"No more dancing. You'd better go home."

"You don't believe me."

"I believe that you're infatuated. You're not in love."

"The moment I saw you, I knew I was going to fell in love with you."

"Like Uncle and his stengah?"

"It's a family tradition." Clive took her gently in his arms and kissed her on the lips. Her body arched without her volition, betraying her. Clive caressed her slim shape under the light summer dress. Their tongues met, touched, caressed. "Is there a room we can lock?" he asked quietly.

"Clive, O told you. I'm a married woman."

"And where is your husband? For God's sake. The world's collapsing around our ears. I can take care of you, Francine, of you and little Ruth. Don't you understand? I love you. I love Ruth, too. I want to be a father to her. You can't live for a husband who isn't here!" He grasped her arms, staring into her face. "Do you want me to go away?"

"No." She felt her body relax. "My room has a lock," she heard herself say. Clive was pale, now. He nodded. She led him there, locking the door behind them.

He pulled the dress from her shoulders. Her breasts were exposed, neat and pale, with erect peaks. "You're beautiful," he said in a husky voice. He gave her a rough kiss that tasted of champagne.

Francine put her arms around him and drew him to her. "Be gentle," she said softly.

"Sorry."

They kissed, at first clumsily, then with an igniting passion. He pulled off her dress. They sank onto the bed together. She was a little drunk, but that was helping get this over. Everyone had been right and she had been wrong. She had to hold onto Clive. She could not expect him to stay without getting what he wanted from her.

He stripped, fingers tugging at the leather and brass that fastened his uniform. His body was unexpectedly athletic. Dark hair spread across his chest and down his lean belly, to his loins, where his desire was thrusting out, hard and ready. Her eyes were half-closed to slits. She had taken her lower lip between her teeth and was biting it hard. "Clive, Clive. Hurry."

She parted her thighs as he mounted her. He sank into her, and she lost all sense of herself. They did not speak anymore. Her own panting breaths became cries as her desire mounted. She watched Clive's eyes glaze. She, too, was possessed by something savage. It had been years since she had experienced anything like this. Perhaps she had never experienced it

The end came swiftly. She cried out, arching back in his arms, a pleasure so intense it was almost a pain rushing through her body. There was no regret or fear to spoil the moment, only a wild fulfilment.

Afterward, they clung together. "You're wonderful" he whispered, his mouth close to her ear. "Don't cry."

"I'm just happy," she said, pressing against him. But the truth was much more complicated than that. She was crying for many, many things. But happiness was among them.

It began to rain, a soft rattling that seemed to wash away everything that had been before. They made love again, without words, this time slowly. Clive was a considerate lover, more than considerate, tender. She had been aroused by Frank, but this was different. She was glad of the physical fulfilment their lovemaking brought her. Somehow, it cancelled out the shame and guilt that would otherwise have destroyed her. Had it been no more than a rough-and-tumble rutting, something hurried and trivial, she would never have forgiven herself. That it was something sublime made it, in some way, legitimate.

He left much later, at almost three o'clock in the morning. She kissed him at the top of the stairs, a long, lingering kiss, with lips that were soft and bruised. "I'll come back tomorrow night," he whispered. "Tell me you love me, then. All right?"

She watched him walk down the stairs. He did not look back. Then she went back inside. She closed the door and leaned back against it. She felt different. For a while she could not define what the difference was. Then it came to her. She felt safe.

Heavy rain woke her after no more than an hour or two of sleep. She cleaned the house silently while the two girls slept, and at eight o'clock, though the rain had not abated and it was barely light, she went out to shop for food. If you did not start early, you had no chance.

The northeast monsoon had arrived. It would last for days, perhaps weeks. Driven by the wind, the rain turned the narrow streets into torrents. Food was scarcer than ever, and she had to walk miles afield through the rain. The squalls were short-lived, followed by soaring heat as the wind hurled the clouds far out to sea. Steam rose from the flooded gutters. But the next downpour was close behind, disgorging thunder, wind, and water.

She got back to Popiah Street at midmorning, to find Edwina making scrambled egg for Ruth. Edwina looked up at her and grinned. "Hello! What happened last night?"

"You fell asleep," Francine said, taking over from Edwina, "so we put you to bed."

"I know that," Edwina said. "I mean, what happened with Clive? Did you kiss?"

"Edwina!" Francine said, looking quickly at Ruth.

The swift, guilty glance answered Edwina's question. "You did! You kissed him!"

"Why did you kiss Uncle Clive?" Ruth asked, eyes wide.

"He just kissed me good night," Francine said, aware that her face was hot.

"Is Clive going to be my new daddy?" Ruth asked innocently, with a child's instinctive grasp of the real meaning of things.

Francine stared at her for a long moment. "What about your real daddy?"

"He's dead," Ruth said matter-of-factly. "The Japanese have killed him. He would have come by now if he wasn't dead."

Francine felt short of breath. It was time to be honest with the child. She took Ruth's small hands in her own. "Listen to me, my darling," she said gravely. "It may be that your daddy is dead. If that is so, then we will never see him again. But it's possible that the Japanese have captured him, and put him in a prison."

"A prison for bad people?"

"No, a special prison for their enemies. If that has happened, then one day we might see him again. But for now, you don't have a daddy. And I don't have a husband."

"What about Clive?" Ruth demanded.

"Clive wants to take Daddy's place in our lives. He wants to be a daddy to you, and he wants to be a husband to me."

"That's good," Ruth exclaimed. "I love Clive!"

Francine knew that Ruth was not being callous about the fate of her real father. It was just a child's simple way of dealing with brutal necessity. "But sweetheart, one day Daddy might come back."

"And then what will we do?" the child asked, her forehead creasing at the possible dilemma.

"I don't know," Francine said tiredly, "and that's the truth."

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. D'Oliveira's sallow face peered in at them. "The Golden Slipper was hit last night," she said. "Did you hear?"

Francine's heart sank. She immediately thought of Bertha, and of the mother and her new baby.

"You stay here with Ruth," she commanded Edwina. "I'll go and see if I can help."

The air was thick with smoke in Shanghai Street. Francine made her way down the steep cobblestones, jostled by running figures, forced into doorways by the honking trucks that lumbered up from time to time, their wheels barely clearing the buildings on either side. Some of the close-packed side streets were blocked with fallen timber and piles of rubble.

One block seemed to have taken the brunt of the bombing. She headed toward it. Men were milling around furiously. She pushed her way among the crowds, squinting through the smoke. She saw something lying in the street: a yellow neon sign representing a woman's shoe. She looked up. The Golden Slipper had once been a three-story building consisting of a nightclub on the ground floor and a "short-stay" hotel above. The top two floors had now gone. Piles of rubble had disgorged into the street through the remaining doors and windows. Smoke poured upward from smouldering beams.

Khaki-clad figures worked in the smoke, dragging bodies out of the building. A row of corpses had already been laid on the pavement outside. All were women. Beneath the blood and filth, she recognized the faces of the Golden Slipper girls. Some were in their nightclothes, drab garments different from their garish work-wear. Among them lay Bertha, her battling over, her broad face peaceful. Someone had folded her hands on her breast. She stared at Francine with half-closed eyes, her gold teeth showing in a faint smile. Not far away lay the Chinese woman who had given birth in the shelter. A small bundle lay at her side. Despairing, Francine turned to go home.

Clive arrived at six. He, too, had been caught up in the bombing. His uniform was torn and singed, and he smelled of smoke. He held her close. "Sorry I'm late," he said in a husky voice. "Been pulling people out of the rubble all day. Seemed more to the point than censoring the news." He looked at her with red-rimmed eyes. "Francine, tell me you love me."

"I love you," she said automatically, not knowing whether it was the truth or not.

Ruth came running up to him, her arms outstretched. "You're going to be my new daddy," she informed him, radiant with happiness.

"Oh, my precious," he said, picking her up and holding her tight. "Yes, I'm going to try and be a good daddy to you, my own one."

"Will you look after us?"

"Your mama and I will look after you between us."

"Do I have to call you Daddy?" Ruth asked practically.

"What do you want to call me?"

"I like calling you Clive."

"Then Clive it is."

"Let's read books and play."

"In a little while," Francine said firmly, taking her from Clive's arms. "Clive has to get clean and rest." She led him to the bathroom and gave him a clean towel and soap. Leaving him to wash, Francine went to the kitchen to begin preparing a meal.

They ate in silence. After the meal, Francine and Clive went out onto the balcony, leaving Edwina playing with little Ruth. He took her arm. "There are two big ships preparing to leave, the Duchess of Bedford and the Empress of Japan. The Empress of Japan's bigger and more comfortable. Ghastly choice of name, I know. Nobody can say whether there'll be any more departures after then. I think we should try and get berths on one of them."

"Yes," Francine said quietly. She felt surprisingly little emotion now. Perhaps she was numb.

"We have to get you all out to the P & O agency house at Cluny. We'll go tomorrow."

"All right," she said.

"You don't need money. The government's paying. There'll be room for a single trunk between the three of you. Not more. I'll come round with a driver and pick you up at seven. There'll be queues."

She looked up at him. "And you, Clive?"

"I have to stay until demob," he said matter-of-factly.

"What!"

"It's women and children first."

"You've just promised to look after us!"

"And I meant it. Soldiers will all be taken home on troopships. We'll meet in England, before the summer."

The prospect of losing Clive, after already having lost Frank, was too much. She pushed him away. "I don't believe that!"

"You must believe it," he said.

"You did just want a quick tumble, after all," she said, in bitter tears. "You lied to me!"

"You know that isn't true," he said, taking her in his arms again. "I love you, Francine."

"Oh, God," she said, burying her face in his chest. "I love you, Clive," she managed to gasp, and this time it felt like the truth. "I can't lose you!"

He tried to comfort her, but she was inconsolable. Around her there was nothing but loss.

Nobody spoke during the drive out to Cluny Hill the next morning. It was another monsoon day, the rain lashing down pitilessly on the gangs of labourers struggling to repair the shell damage to Orchard Road. Ruth had had more diarrhoea and vomiting just before leaving. She sat, pale and listless, between Edwina and Francine on the backseat. Clive sat in front, beside the Malay driver, staring glumly out of the window.

Agency House was on a hill overlooking the Johore Road. The streets around were already jammed with traffic. Sweating policemen were directing the cars along alternative routes in the shimmering heat. A long procession of women and children wound up the drive, disappearing behind the lush shrubbery of the garden.

"Christ," Clive muttered. "The whole of Singapore's here."

"There won't be any places left for us," Francine said in despair, looking at the flood of cars that were streaming up from the town.

"Yes, there will," Clive vowed. "Abu-Bakr, drive round the back."

The Malay driver nodded. "Okay, tuan," he said.

They skirted the traffic jams, driving along the back roads. Others had had the same idea. They passed a group of workmen pushing cars off the road; Francine saw their windshields had been shattered, their bodywork punctured by bullet holes. The Zeros had been busy here already this morning.

"I've made such a mess of things," she said.

"Everything's a mess, darling," Clive said. "The important thing is—"

His words were cut off. The Humber had swerved violently to avoid a fountain of earth that erupted in front of them. Francine grabbed at the seat as the big car tumbled into a ditch, coming to rest at a wild angle. The driver flung the door open. "Take cover!"

"Come on!" Clive yelled. "Move!"

She could hear the howl of Japanese planes overhead. The cars were scattering off the road helter-skelter. There was a concrete culvert a little way down the ditch. Edwina had already reached it, and was calling to them to follow. Out of the chaos came the mounting scream of a dive-bomber overhead. She looked up, but could see nothing against the dazzling sun. She ran along the ditch, undergrowth tearing at her legs. When she stumbled, Clive clutched her hand and dragged her on. The scream of the Zero swelled to bursting point, splitting the eardrums. With a strange, calm certainty, she knew it was coming for her. She threw herself flat at the last minute. Then a huge hand plucked her off the earth and swatted her into the darkness.

Consciousness returned with a scream.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

It had come out as a wordless croak. Francine knew that a dreadful danger loomed, but could not remember what it was. Something cool brushed her face. "Ruth's all right," she heard Clive say.

The darkness swirled, a black river in flood, her mind rippling and dimpling like the surface of water. She tried to open her eyes, which seemed glued shut. Through a dim crack in the blackness, she saw Clive leaning over the bed. He sponged at her eyes. Water stung her lids cruelly, but freed the glue that cemented them. In little painful jerks, she turned her head on the pillow to face him.

"Ruth!" she whispered.

"She's all right," he repeated. "Not a scratch, I promise."

"Where?"

"I'll bring her to you. Wait."

"No!" She tried to grasp at him, prevent him from leaving her in this swirling terror, but her body would not obey. The darkness returned, rushing

around her, tumbling her body in its currents. Ruth's small hands drew her back, touching her face, pulling at her hair.

"Mama! Mama! Wake up, Mama!"

Francine clung to the little body with all the strength she could muster, too weak even to cry. When she slid into the dark waters again, she did not resist.

She awoke again, later, choking on her own vomit. Hands helped her roll over, held a cool metal basin to her chin for her to spew into. Her body was wet with sweat, some shroud-like garment dinging to her skin. She slid back wretchedly into the dark.

The third time she awoke, she was more curious about her surroundings. She turned her head, forcing her eyes open. Clive was asleep at her bedside, slumped in a chair with his chin on his chest. She was in a crowded hospital ward. An eerie silence hung over the dimly lit room. All the other patients were women, most of them Malay or Chinese. Bandaged or plastered limbs jutted from the motionless figures. Their relatives slept like Clive, in chairs, or sitting on the floor, propped against the lime-green walls. The heat was intense. The windows had all been shuttered, a lamp giving the only bleak light. She was soaked in sweat.

She must have made some sound, because Clive woke. He leaned forward. "Francine! How long have you been awake?"

"Not long. Where's Ruth?"

"She's sleeping in the nurses' room."

"I want to see her!"

"In a while," he said, sponging her face gently. "It's only five A.M."

Memory returned, for the first time, of the ditch at Cluny. "Where's Edwina?"

"Gone on the Wakefield."

"Clive, our berths! The boat!"

His face was weary. "The last boats sailed yesterday."

She was confused. "What do you mean?"

"They've gone."

"All the boats?"

"All of them," he said. "West Point and Wakefield left on Wednesday. Empress of Japan and Duchess of Bedford left on Thursday."

"How long have I been here?"

"A week. They didn't know if you would wake up. You're very badly concussed."

She touched her fingers to her heart, wondering if it had stopped beating. "Aren't there any boats left?"

"Not troopships or P & O ships. There might be smaller boats, if they haven't been requisitioned." She was too weak to take in the magnitude of the tragedy, the scale of the disaster. "Sleep," he said gently. "We'll work something out."

She was jarred out of the darkness by an explosion. It rumbled across the sky like monsoon thunder for a full minute before fading away. It sounded to her like the crack of doom. Other women had been awakened by the detonation. The ward was filled with whimpering and rustling as bodies stirred stiffly into consciousness.

Clive, too, had awakened. He rubbed his face and rose. "I'll go and see what that is." He went out. A Malay nurse came in, carrying Ruth in her arms. The child was half-asleep. The nurse laid her in Francine's arms and Francine clung to her, remembering with a sinking despair. The boats were gone. She and Ruth would never leave Singapore.

Clive returned, his face heavy. "It was the causeway," he said. "They've blown it up. You can see the column of smoke from here. We've lost the battle for Johore. We've lost the whole of Malaya. Now there's only Singapore left."

Francine was discharged the next day. The concussion had made her weak and confused. She had difficulty walking in a straight line, as though she were drunk. A blinding headache hovered behind her eyes. She tried to get her thoughts in order.

"There must be other boats," she said when they got to Union Mansions. "A prau. Even a sampan. Anything. You will come with us? You can leave now, can't you?"

"It would be desertion."

"Anybody who can leave is leaving. It's finished. There's nothing left to desert."

His lips twitched in a smile. "You're right. Of course I'll come with you. We'll find something, even a sampan."

Over the next days, they searched through the chaotic city for news of a reliable boat out of Singapore. The markets and quaysides were abuzz with

rumours of ships sailing or preparing to sail. But each time, they found that the vessel in question was already crammed to capacity, or had left the night before, or was no more than a figment of gossip.

As the Japanese closed in on Singapore, too, bleak news came in that thousands of those who had already left would never be seen again. The Japanese showed no mercy to even the smallest boat leaving the beleaguered city. Untold numbers of civilian boats and ships had been sunk by torpedo-bombers in the South China Sea. Others had been blown up in the minefield that the Japanese had sown around the harbour. The way out was perilous, and growing more perilous as the noose tightened.

A Japanese artillery-spotting balloon had been flown into place over the Strait. Guided by observers, the Japanese guns rained shells on the city at a range of under fifteen miles. Whole sections of the old town were now destroyed forever. Orchard Road, with its shops and lovely old houses, had been devastated. Chinatown was a smouldering ruin. The Elgin Bridge was hit and burned for days, making progress across the city more difficult than ever.

Clive was in a permanent state of exhaustion. The work of pulling the dead and mangled from the ruins was never-ending. There was barely enough water to drink, let alone to put out the flames. Electricity came and went erratically as the lines were cut, mended, cut again.

Thirty thousand more soldiers, the remnants of the British army in Malaya, had poured onto the island in the last hours before the breaching of the causeway. The city was now filled with troops, seemingly without leaders or orders. They were everywhere in Singapore, dirty and dishevelled, milling in the squares or wandering aimlessly down the streets. With the tacit agreement of the authorities, all who could find a way out of Singapore were taking it. Though the fact remained unspoken, imminent defeat by the Japanese was accepted by everyone.

The nights were suffocating, presided over by a huge, golden moon. Francine and Clive took to lying in each other's arms on their little balcony in the evening, listening to the record player. They did not talk much, she and Clive, though they made love with tender passion under the stars. There seemed little to say.

For days the three of them had lived on rice flavoured with whatever scraps of fish they could find. One day, Francine returned from her wearying, largely futile shopping trip to find that Clive had news.

"They say there's a Chinese skipper at Telok Blangah," he told her. "Sailing for Batavia tomorrow with a group of civilians. He's charging eight hundred Straits dollars for each passenger."

"What's his name?" she demanded.

"I don't know. But the boat's called the Whampoa."

Francine turned wearily. "I'm the only one who speaks Chinese. We'll go down to Blangah now."

"The whole harbour's burning," Clive warned.

"What if he sails tonight?" Francine said. "We have to try. We'll leave Ruth with Mrs. D'Oliveira. Let's go."

They made their way along the railway line, walking because they could find no rickshaw willing to take them into the inferno of the harbour, still burning from yesterday's incendiaries. As they trudged past the go-downs that lined the railway on West Wharf, some of them burning violently with no one to douse the flames, a truck roared out of one of the excise sheds. Two or three dozen soldiers were mounted precariously on the back, shouting and singing. As it wheeled past her, the soldiers' attention was caught by the sight of Francine. A man began screaming obscenities at her. The others cheered and laughed. Something flew through the air toward them. It smashed in the road, a large beer bottle, spattering Francine with froth. She shrank against Clive. He put his arms around her tightly, covering her face as more bottles followed, splintering on the pavement.

The truck squealed to a halt. The cab door opened, and a soldier jumped out. Terrified that they would rape her, she grasped Clive's wrist. "Clive!"

"Don't worry," he said, his face tight. "I'll deal with this." He opened his holster and drew his pistol.

The soldier approached cautiously. "Blokes go' carried away, sir. Shouldn't have thrown bottles. Drunk and disorderly." He himself was very drunk, his eyes bloodshot, swaying on his feet. "Here." He waved a bottle of gin at Clive. "You have this."

"No, thanks," Clive said shortly.

He peered at them blearily. "Then take this." He unclipped a hand grenade from his belt and held it out to Clive. "Best thing a lady can carry. If the Japs catch you, miss, just pull the pin. Won't know a thing." He turned and staggered back to the truck. It drove off to a chorus of hoots and whistles.

"Throw it away," she begged Clive, who was holding the grenade.

"No. He's right. It might come in useful. You take it. If you need to, just pull the pin."

She stared at the bomb in his hand, a dull steel egg with a curving lever. It represented power, of a brutal and very final sort. It might do to end her life if that ever became necessary. She took the thing reluctantly.

"Let's go," Clive said.

Telok Blangah was covered by a pall of greasy black smoke. The naval installations on Sentosa Island opposite had been relentlessly targeted by the Japanese for weeks. In the little harbour at Blangah, an ancient Chinese riverboat had been struck by a bomb. It listed sullenly, somehow still afloat in a ring of fire that blazed on the surface of the water around it. Smaller wooden craft shrank away from the catastrophe, huddling at the outer edges of the harbour.

The wharf was almost deserted. They walked toward Jardine's Steps, the smoke burning her eyes and throat. At last, they found a knot of Chinese sailors and fishermen squatting in the doorway of a go-down, playing fantan. Francine went over to them.

"I'm looking for the skipper of the Whampoa," she said in Cantonese. "Can you tell me where to find him?"

One of the men looked up at her, squinting through the smoke that curled up from the cigarette in his mouth. "Who wants him?" he asked.

"I do."

"What for?"

"I want a passage for myself and two others out of Singapore."

The man threw down the cards in his hand with a slap. There was a roar from the others. Among a gabble of oaths, sinewy hands reached out to shuffle the piles of money that surrounded the cards and dice. The man swigged from a bottle and rose, thrusting his winnings into his pocket. His face bore the deep scars of smallpox. He studied them for a moment, then jerked his head at the riverboat that blazed in the harbour. "That's the Whampoa," he said tersely. Cruel disappointment made her sag as though she'd been punched in the stomach. The man was studying her and Clive, rubbing his tattoos thoughtfully. "Where do you want to go, missy?"

"Anywhere," she said wearily. "Anywhere safe." She stared at the burning riverboat.

"He was going to Batavia," the man said, following her eyes. "He would never have got there. That thing was too old. It would have sunk ten miles from land, if the Japanese hadn't bombed her first."

"Where is the captain?"

The man grinned and jerked his head at the Whampoa again. "Counting his money in hell. I have a boat that will get you to Batavia in one week."

Hope flickered in her. "Where is it?"

He pointed. A black junk with patched sails bobbed at anchor near the steps. As Francine stared at it, an old woman emerged from below and slung a bucket of slops over the side into the water. "That?"

"She's a good boat," he said, flicking his cigarette away. "I've taken her to Java and beyond hundreds of times. She's got a six-horsepower American diesel engine." He spoke Cantonese, but with a thick accent that placed him at once as a Tanka, one of the clannish fishing community who lived on board their junks and were known disparagingly as boat people. His eyes were gleaming as he watched her face. "Two thousand dollars each."

"Five hundred," she said, without thinking.

He laughed in derision. "Who would take the risk for so little? I'll knock off two hundred and fifty dollars each."

"I could buy a whole junk for less than that!"

"Go buy one," he said. "Then sail it to Java yourselves."

"What is he saying?" Clive demanded impatiently.

"He says he'll take us to Batavia for one thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars each."

Clive's face was flinty. "The Whampoa was charging only eight hundred," he said to the man.

"Eight hundred dollar to be eaten by shark," the man scoffed at Clive in English. "You want to get to Batavia alive?" He turned to Francine and went on in Cantonese. "Less, and I would be risking my life for nothing. I have a family too, missy."

It occurred to her in an ironic flash that they were haggling for their lives on this sordid quayside. But instinct made her keep arguing. If she did not, the man would perceive them as fools, and perhaps betray them. "Twelve hundred," she said. "No more than that."

He jerked his head at Clive. "He's a major, a rich man."

"I assure you he's not rich. None of us are. Twelve hundred dollars each and that's it. What's your name?"

"Lai Chong. And yours?"

"Yu Fa. Twelve hundred dollars for a one-week trip," she pressed. "It's almost four thousand dollars altogether."

Lai lit another cigarette, considering them. His eyes were like slits cut in the puffy flesh. "Okay. Twelve hundred dollar each, I take you to Batavia. But no cooking. You bring own food."

"Agreed." She glanced at the black junk. Its rigging was a ramshackle mess, yet its familiar outline was somehow reassuring, sturdy. It bobbed in the filthy water with something like jauntiness. She did not know whether hope or fear was uppermost in her mind.

"You know your way through the minefields?" Clive demanded.

Lai laughed. "Of course."

"We want to look around the boat," Clive said.

"Okay," Lai said, shrugging. "Come."

They followed him. He walked with the bandy-legged gait of the Tanka. His belly stuck out, but his back and arms were strong, and his calves bulged with muscle.

The junk bore the name Lotus Flower in tarnished gold characters on her bows. She had a tiny foredeck with a cooking stove lashed to the planks, and an even tinier afterdeck where the wheel stood in a sort of decaying shanty. The hold gaped open, covered by an attap roof, smelling of belacan, molasses, vinegar, excrement, urine, black-bean paste, and rot in equal proportions. A little old woman was squatting in a corner, sucking at a bowl of soup she held to her toothless lips.

"This my aunt," Lai said.

Francine peered down. Three or four chickens scratched around in a bamboo cage, pecking at insects between the planking. In one corner was a shabby little shrine to Tin Hau, the protective Tanka goddess. Francine paid silent respects to her, remembering the merciful Tin Hau's reputation for rescuing those in deadly peril.

"All of us in there?"

Lai chuckled. "All of us. In there."

"Show us the engine," Clive demanded.

"Engine is here." Lai hoisted up three planks. They crouched to look into the hole. A smell of diesel rushed out hotly. The pipes and engine block of a large motor gleamed in the dark, startlingly clean in contrast to die filth of the rest of the junk.

"It looks new," Clive said.

He winked at them. "New. And fast. Faster than coast guard, ah."

"Have you got fuel?" Clive demanded.

"Plenty."

"Show us."

The man's eyes creased. "You trust nobody, ah?" He showed Clive the filler pipe of the tank, lowering a graduated steel rod into it to prove that it was almost full. "Okay? We go?"

"We'll let you know."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Maybe I not be here."

"Tomorrow," Clive repeated.

They trudged back toward the railway line. "What do you think?" she asked Clive.

"I think he's a crook and a smuggler. But I also think his boat can make the voyage. I think we should accept, Francine. We'll pay him half up front, half when we get to Java."

"You really think we should go?"

"I think we should go as soon as we can," he said tersely.

She fell silent. Thoughts were tumbling through her head. The little black boat had filled her with excitement. But what did either of them know of boats? Could they trust their lives to the Lotus Flower? Could they trust Lai himself, with his tong tattoos and shifty eyes? There were a thousand Lais along the shoreline. But they could not interview each one of them until they found a face they liked. It was a way out, the only one that opened.

As if to underline that thought, a barrage of explosions came rolling down from Tanglin Hill. Bombers and fighters had returned after less than an hour's break to attack the barracks. From the more distant city centre came the scream and thunder of shells, followed by the boom of British artillery responding.

They made their way along the tracks, hoping they would find a rickshaw at Spottiswoode Park to take them back to Popiah Street. She had entered a strange state of mind. Sometime during the past days, she seemed to have begun a completely new life. Everything that had happened to her in the previous years seemed unreal, events that had taken place around another person in another world.

Her consciousness had focused with blazing clarity on this small, ever-decreasing space that surrounded her and Clive and Ruth. All her senses were heightened. She felt almost unwilling to leave this brilliant pocket; the thought of departing from Singapore gave her a kind of regret, as though she knew that nothing in her life could ever be quite as intense, quite as vivid, as these past weeks.

Here, days seemed to fill the space that years had filled in her previous life. Each was filled with momentous emotions, momentous events, birth, death, fire, beauty. She felt that she and Clive were living through history, riding on the crest of the huge wave that was changing the fate of peoples and nations.

"All right," she heard herself say. "Let's go."

They had their last sight of Singapore two nights later, on Friday the thirteenth of February. Lai had insisted on waiting until nightfall before weighing anchor, wanting to get at least a hundred miles from Singapore by the next dawn, to reduce the danger of being spotted by Japanese aircraft. The four of them huddled on the small, rocking foredeck of the Lotus Flower, waiting, watching the sun go down on Singapore. They had been unable to bear the stinking confines of the hold, even with the danger of shrapnel above. None of them spoke. There were no words, in any case. All had some idea of the bloodbath that awaited the doomed city.

Singapore was a terrible spectacle, bracketed in sheets of flame; dozens of huge fires poured columns of black smoke thousands of feet into the sky. The drone of enemy aircraft and the thudding of bombs were incessant now. In the past days, the Japanese army had reached the very outskirts of the city and hand-to-hand fighting had begun.

Out to sea, it was another exquisitely beautiful evening. As the light faded into purple and then indigo, an ocean of stars came out, icy-white against the velvet. A waning moon, the colour of Indian gold, rose out of the sea. High above the tortured land, millions of other worlds were indifferent, serene.

Darkness fell swiftly. Explosions drifted through the night air. The myriad conflagrations of the city glowed crimson in the darkness, illuminating the windows of dying buildings, running along the streets, so that Singapore seemed a city made of fire, peopled by fiery creatures with fiery limbs that writhed and fluttered.

Francine had changed into Chinese clothes for the first time since her arrival in Singapore. She wore a comfortable pantsuit called a sam fu, a scarf wrapped around her head.

She had brought little else for herself; all the rest was Ruth's. They had all reduced their clothing to fit the one trunk that Lai had permitted. Against their arrival in Batavia, she had only the little bag of gold sovereigns the aunts had given her in Perak. Her eyes were burning, her throat raw with the smoke she had inhaled. She and Clive clung to each other, Ruth's small body between them. She was unable to tear her eyes away from the flaming vision.

"We go," Lai said.

Francine nodded.

Clive rose and helped Lai cast off, pulling the gangplank aboard as the junk bobbed away from the quayside. The throbbing of the diesels accelerated. With a jerky thrust, the Lotus Flower was under way, ploughing through the dark water. Ruth started to cry weakly at the new motion. Clive held her close.

Lai steered the Lotus Flower through the minefields in the darkness. He had evidently done it many times before, and knew the way. Francine had no tears. The well had run dry long ago. She watched the fires of Singapore recede in the tropical night, saying her own silent farewells to this city of the living and the dying.

She thought of Frank. Perhaps she would meet him again, in some other life, in some other world. But she was Clive's woman now, and nothing could change that. I have the most important thing with me, she thought. I have Ruth. I have Clive. And I have myself. I have lost the past. I still have the future.

The next morning, when Francine awakened, they had left Singapore far behind. The horizon was almost completely clear; the only sign of land was a few small islands, which slipped beneath the horizon while Francine tied up her hair on the foredeck. Clive was already up on deck.

He kissed her. "Lai says we'll be at Bangka in two days. After Bangka, another week to Batavia."

"How far are we from Singapore?"

"Almost seventy miles."

"So the planes can't reach us?"

"I wouldn't count on that," he said.

She climbed up beside him and put her arms around his supple waist. "I want us to be safe, Clive."

"We will be, darling," he promised.

Cooling land breezes no longer blew. The sky became white-hot by midmorning and the boat turned into an oven. There was nowhere cool, no refuge from the dreadful sun. With Ruth exhausted and limp, and Clive steering patiently while Lai slept, Francine felt pressure crush her like a physical force. She felt she could jump into the choppy blue water, not just to escape the heat, but to break free of the cramped atmosphere on board.

By noon, Francine's face and body dripped with sweat. She sat cross-legged beside Ruth, pouring a little water onto the child's skin from time to time.

"I'm hot, Mama," Ruth whimpered. "Too hot!"

The throbbing of the engine seemed to be growing unnaturally loud, filling her head like the pounding of overheated blood. She realized that the diesel sounded so loud because all other noises had ceased. There was no whistle of wind through the ramshackle rigging. The lugsail with its wooden ribs hung limp, its flapping silenced. Even the interminable rush of waves against the hull had ceased. Raising her weary head, she saw that the sea had turned to molten glass, smooth and green as far as the eye could see. The Lotus Flower's brisk progress had become a tired stagger. The horizon all around them had vanished into a dark, hazy ring.

Lai came up from the hold. He hauled himself halfway up the mast and peered around, shading his eyes with his palm. When he came down, he was sucking his teeth.

"Maybe storm coming," he said to Clive. "You help me."

The heat seemed to intensify as the atmosphere grew steadily more oppressive. Francine sat cradling Ruth in her lap while Lai and Clive went about the junk, fastening anything loose.

A distant rumble of thunder drifted across the sea. The storm was coming from Sumatra; away to the west of them, the horizon had darkened to

black. Francine felt her heart sinking. The Lotus Flower was such a cockleshell, its mast so flimsy looking, despite the impressive new American engine. Lai himself did not look unduly worried. But the thought of cowering in the dark, stinking hold through a storm was not appetizing.

When the hatches were all battened, they settled down to wait for the coming storm. The sea remained glassy smooth, but darkened steadily. There were more rumbles of thunder, closer now. The sound spread out across the sea ominously, lingering on the air. Clive squatted beside her, sweat dripping from his forehead.

"Shall I take Ruth?" he asked.

She gave her to him. "I'm hot, Clive," the child moaned.

"You'll soon be cool, Chicken-Licken," Clive said tenderly, stroking her face. "It's always like this. After the storm passes, it'll be cool and fresh. You'll see."

"It's suffocating," Francine said. "Are we going to be safe?"

Clive nodded. "Of course. I've been through a storm in the Straits. We saw the most broken-down-looking junks ride out the worst gales."

"That's reassuring," she said dryly.

Another rattle of thunder rolled across the sea and the rigging gave a single sharp rap. "Time to go below," Clive said. The sound of the thunder lingered on the air, a hum that grew to a rumble. Abruptly, she recognized that the sound was not thunder but something else. It was the drone of approaching aircraft engines. She searched the darkening air, tasting the coppery fear in her mouth. Her eyes caught it at last, the all-too-familiar cross in the sky.

"It might be British or Dutch," Clive called to Lai, who was staring in the same direction. Lai turned from the wheel, his face taut.

"Not British," he shouted. "Japanese. Go below!"

Clive thrust Ruth into Francine's arms. She stumbled down the companionway, clutching the child. The old woman looked up from some chore she was doing, her wrinkled eyes widening. Clive came tumbling down after her into the darkness.

"I think they saw us!" he gasped.

"Perhaps they didn't," she said. It was a prayer. She shrank down beside Clive. Their arms went protectively around Ruth. The Japanese plane blasted

overhead, its shadow flitting across the attap awning. They heard it soar up into the sky, the note of its engine fading. For a moment she thought a miracle had happened and that it was flying on. Then she heard the sound of the plane turning.

They waited, listening to the engine note, trying to guess what the pilot was doing. The junk lurched violently, breaking their tight embrace. Her back thudded agonizingly into something sharp. A storm of machine-gun bullets drove through the ancient timbers. Splinters howled around them. The junk shuddered under the onslaught. The seaplane roared overhead.

Francine lifted herself on her elbows and looked down at Ruth. There was blood everywhere, but when Francine hunted frantically for wounds on Ruth, she could find none. Most of the blood seemed to be coming from cuts on her own body, though she could feel no pain. Clive had been thrown against the shrine of Tin Hau and lay motionless. Several of the heavy water-drums had broken loose and were rolling around. Seawater was swirling into the hold. The Lotus Flower was wallowing heavily. Francine realized that the engine was now silent. The throbbing heart of their existence had been stilled.

Lai's aunt lay in a crumpled heap, half-submerged. The water around her was dark red and rising fast. A panic at being drowned like a rat in a cage seized Francine. She grabbed Ruth and splashed over to Clive. "Get up!" she screamed at him. "Get up! We'll drown!"

He dragged himself slowly to his feet. Like her, he had been cut in dozens of places by flying splinters, and he was streaked with blood. Clinging to each other, they made their way toward the companionway. "How is she?" he asked, peering at Ruth from under his blood-matted fringe.

"All right." Ruth was dazed-looking, as she had been during raids in Singapore.

They pulled themselves up the steps, emerging cautiously into the harsh light. The drone of the seaplane was still audible. But it was far away now. It seemed to be circling the junk at a distance of a quarter of a mile.

"He's wondering whether it's worth coming back for another go," Francine said, her voice unnaturally calm.

"He probably won't bother. He'll want to get back to base before the storm comes. He'll reckon we'll sink anyway."

"Are we going to sink?"

"I don't know."

"We haven't got a lifeboat. Not even a raft."

The drone of the Japanese plane was starting to fade now. It was heading steadily west, away from them, climbing to avoid the black clouds of the storm.

"He's going!" she said.

Clive nodded grimly. "We have to find Lai."

Keeping a wary eye on the distant plane, they crept onto the deck. It had been devastated. The sail had collapsed in a heap like a huge, dilapidated accordion. The deck was strewn with debris and fallen rigging. The primitive wheel-house, where Lai had been standing, had been hit. There was a welter of blood in there, but no sign of Lai.

They ran from one side of the junk to the other, peering over, hunting the dark surface of the sea, searching for a waving arm, a bobbing head. The sea was as flat and empty as ink. "Nothing," Clive said hollowly, turning to her. "He's gone."

"Can we get the engine to start again?" she asked Clive.

"It's underwater. It would need to dry out for days before it had a chance of working. We've got the sails."

Francine looked down at the ruined things. "They're wrecked!"

"Doesn't matter. We haven't got a hope if we don't set some sail. We'll be bowled over in the first five minutes."

Thunder muttered, like a grim chuckle. An oppressive silence fell. The Lotus Flower hunkered deeper into the water, making no progress at all now.

Between them, they hoisted the sail, but it was a heavy task. The complex rigging, with its wooden blocks and tackles, was in a tangle. As she hauled on the coarse ropes, she became aware for the first time of the injuries she had suffered. Her whole body ached. The splinter cuts on her legs and back hurt sharply with the strain. But the thunder of the approaching storm was at her back, ever closer.

Clive shinned up the mast to untangle the rigging, slashing fiercely through the twisted ropes with his knife. The main sheet, with its huge treble block, was still intact. The sail rose by painful inches, slowly taking some kind of shape. As each batten filled out, the weight grew a little more, the task got a little heavier. By the time the sail was almost set, the first puffs of wind were making it snap and shudder. Francine was pouring sweat as she

ran to the remaining deck anchorages, pulling the sail as taut as she could. About half of the rigging was gone, but the sail towered over them protectively like a ragged brown wing. The sky had by now grown almost black.

"We don't seem to have sunk any more," she said.

Clive nodded. "Maybe we've reached level."

"I'm going below with Ruth."

"Are you all right?" he asked, reaching out his hand.

"Yes."

"I'll come down in a while." Their fingers knotted briefly. They were both probably filled with the same despair, she thought, neither wanting the other to know.

She gathered Ruth in her arms and clambered back down into the hold. The sea was rising, and the Lotus Flower was starting to roll heavily. The water in the hold slopped like soup in a huge basin, a soup made up of the shattered objects of their everyday life. There was a poisonous stink of diesel. The tanks must have been holed. The old woman's corpse floated in the scum.

"Is she dead?" Ruth asked.

"Hush, darling." Gingerly avoiding the rolling fifty-gallon drums, she reached the engine compartment. It was flooded with oily water. There was a narrow space, not much bigger than a cupboard, over the engine, where Lai had stored a jumble of things to do with the engine, boxes of tools and cans of oil. She raked out what she could and clambered into the relatively dry space with Ruth. She pulled the child close to her chest. "We'll be all right, now," she whispered.

Thunder boomed. The rolling was worse with each minute that passed. The wind had started to blow; she could hear the shrill whistle of the rigging, could feel the shuddering of the hull as the sail filled. She had a sudden strange, external vision of their position; hundreds of miles from their destination, their engine dead, their hull filled with water, facing a storm with their single ragged sail. She wondered whether they had the faintest hope of survival.

The first assault of the storm was furious. The filthy water in the hold crashed over them as the junk rocked, flooding their tiny compartment. Francine rolled out of the compartment and dragged Ruth after her. She could feel the child's thin body racked with coughs. "Can you breathe?" she

asked. It had become so dark that she could see almost nothing; nor could she hear whether Ruth answered her.

The ancient beams of the Lotus Flower thrummed. She snatched at Ruth, but Ruth slipped through her arms. Another surge of water swept her off her feet, bowling her among the wreckage. She felt herself swirling in the blackness, her head sometimes above water, sometimes below it. Inanimate things battered her. Choking, she clawed to find Ruth. A body swept into her arms and she clutched at it. But it was not her daughter's body. She was clutching the body of Lai's aunt.

Francine pushed herself to her feet, exhausted. Something soft swept against her shins and she groped down. Her fingers knotted around Ruth's long, wet hair. She drew the child up into her arms. She could scarcely tell whether Ruth was alive or dead. She only knew that they could not survive the storm down in the hold. She had to get back up on deck before the next descent.

She dragged herself and Ruth up the companionway. The wind battered them. It was as dark above as it had been below. There were no stars, only a swirling, inky blackness. She clung to the top rung of the ladder, buffeted one way and the other, hunched against the chaos. In her arms she felt the faint marvel of Ruth's survival, a movement, a weak clinging.

A sudden glare of lightning revealed the world to her; an apocalyptic world, changed beyond recognition. The image was burned on her mind as the darkness returned: the ragged sail straining the mast like a bow above her; higher than the mast, an incredible wall of water that towered, foam-flecked and glistening, with a jagged-toothed top fifty or sixty feet high; above that, a whirling mass of baleful cloud that discharged rain in driving sheets. There had been no trace of Clive in that glaring moment.

Then she felt strong hands grasp her arm. Clive's slippery, naked body tumbled down beside her. He had stripped to his skin. He dragged her close, thrusting his mouth against her ear. She heard the words faintly, as though across a great distance.

"Can't—stay—below," she screamed at him. "Full— of—water."

"Ruth?"

"Here."

She felt his hand grasp at Ruth, touching her face in the blackness. He pushed his mouth to her ear again. "Might— not—last—long."

The Lotus Flower was plummeting again, nose down, her stern rearing high. Another glare of lightning scurried across the sky, revealing that they were sliding down the back of a cataract into a well of darkness.

"Typhoon—I—think," she heard Clive's faint scream. "Wait—here—get—ropes."

He slithered away from her into the dark. She sensed, rather than saw, a wall of water rushing toward her across the deck. She hunched herself around Ruth, bowing her head. The weight of water crushed her, sweeping her back down into the hold again. She flailed helplessly, half-drowning, groping for the body of her child. Again, by some miracle, she found her once more. She hauled herself painfully back up the companionway. More water, this time sweet, lashed into her face. She stretched out her free hand and clutched at a cold, wet, muscular arm. She had found Clive.

"Lifeline!" he shouted. "Hold—on—tight!" Clive had pulled a rope taut from the column to a nearby stanchion. She grasped it.

"What—if—we—sink?"

"Won't—sink!" The rope jerked tight as the junk rolled. She clung to it, its roughness biting into her flesh. In the next blaze of lightning, she saw that he had vanished.

The junk bottomed out in a trough and staggered drunkenly. She turned Ruth's face to her breast and pressed her close. Another flood of water exploded over the wheel-house. Clinging to the rope, she could only bow her head and shelter Ruth. As the water departed, it dragged at her, trying to take her as it sank back into the dark.

The lightning leaped through the clouds. These seas were more than mountains; they were mountain ranges, endlessly sinking and rising as the wind lashed them; and the Lotus Flower was no more than a walnut shell. She hunched over Ruth, afraid to open her eyes again.

The storm blew with an unrelenting hostility that soon beat her into a daze. She retreated into some inner place. Her sense of herself, of being the mother of a little creature who clung to her for safety, was sublimated in the elemental fury of the weather. She lost all conception of time. It was a quite literal loss; she could not have told whether she had been roped to that post for three hours or thirty. She simply became aware, after a time, that the storm had changed character.

It was still pitch-black, and the wind and sea were still raging; but she sensed a note of weariness in the bellowing voices. The wind was no longer omnipotent. She could hear the crash of the sea. She could hear the flap of the sail; so their mast was still standing. And when she looked up, she even saw a few trembling stars. The extreme conditions of the typhoon had faded into a mere storm. To her, it was like an oasis of peace.

She lowered her head again to nuzzle Ruth. The child seemed to be asleep, or in a daze. Her hair was pasted in a dark, wet fan across Francine's arms.

Francine turned to look back, waiting for the next flash of lightning to show her Clive. It was a long time in coming. When at last it flickered, she saw that Clive's post at the deck anchorage was empty. He was gone, whether swept overboard hours or days ago, or somewhere else on the boat, she could not tell. Perhaps they were all alone in the midst of the sea.

Pain was everywhere. The salt had bitten into the multitude of cuts she had received. Her strength was spent. She let her head droop, and sank slowly back into the inner dark.

She awoke to feel a hand shaking her shoulder. She looked up stupidly. There was light, dim and lurid, but enough to see that Clive was crouching in front of her. "Oh, thank God you're alive!" she said, clutching at him. "Where have you been?"

"Down below. Stopping some of the leaks." His hair had been swept down to frame his face in two dark wings. She could feel the junk surging on a big swell. "Are you and Ruth all right?"

"Yes. Are we going to sink?"

"Not just yet. I got the hand-pump working." Clive lifted Ruth, who was as limp as a storm-battered sparrow. "It's all right, now," he crooned. "All right, Chicken-Licken."

Francine tried to roll out of her cramped position. Her body seemed to have frozen solid. It was an agonizing effort to get to her feet. Livid welts on her arms showed where the ropes had bitten into her, time and time again.

She emerged from the wheelhouse and looked up. Against a dim gray sky she could see that every panel of sailcloth had been shredded. The bamboo battens were splayed like the skeletal bones of a dead gull's wing.

Everything, including their own bodies, was coated in a rime of salt. It glittered dully on the deck, the rigging, their hair. The Lotus Flower looked

like a ship crewed by ghosts. Mountainous, drab waves rose and fell around them. The wind was still blowing hard.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Early evening, I think," he said.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. A long way from where we started."

"We could be halfway back to Singapore." He groaned and shook his head. White salt crystals matted his hair and streaked his body. Francine examined the child carefully. She was exhausted and almost certainly dehydrated. Her lips were cracked. There were livid bruises on the pale skin. No bones had been broken, but Francine knew with an inner note like a leaden bell that this frail sparrow's body could not take much more punishment. "Is there any fresh water?"

"Yes. I'll bring you some. There's nothing to eat, though. All the food's been ruined." He went below and came up shortly with a cooking-pot full of water, which he laid beside her. She began gently rinsing Ruth's face. The child stirred, opening dull eyes.

"Mama?"

"Mama's here, darling."

"Are we there, yet?"

"Almost," she promised. She heard the grating clank of the hand-pump start up. Clive was heaving at the ancient mechanism, his efforts rewarded by a stream of oily water that spewed across the decks and over the side. It began to rain again, a sudden, steady downpour. The rainwater was infinitely sweeter than the oil-contaminated stuff in the basin. "Drink, Ruth," she commanded. She lifted her own face and opened her mouth to it, gulping with her salt-parched throat. The relief was marvellous; she felt the salt sluicing from her body, releasing her skin as though from a straitjacket. She scrubbed Ruth's hair and then her own.

The wind had freshened, driving the rain in silvery sheets. She retreated back into the wheelhouse and watched Clive working the pump, the rain streaming down his back. He, too, had been washed clean. He had found an old rag that he had twisted, coolie-fashion, around his loins.

It rained and blew all through the night. From time to time she slept, to wake within a few minutes with vivid dreams of being back in Singapore or at

home in Perak. Ruth lay motionless in her arms. She did not know how many hours or days it had been since they had eaten. Were Lai's nets still on the junk? Could Clive, who had piloted them through a typhoon, conjure fish from the sea, somehow? The rain began to settle around dawn. The wind dropped. Aware of a dull gray rim of light to the world, Francine felt that the worst was over now.

When she awoke again, she felt like death. She dragged herself upright and crawled out of the wheelhouse. It was early morning. The sky overhead was a clear, milky blue. Away to the west, a long smudge of cloud, like the battlements of some fortress, showed the storm from which they had emerged. The sun was drawing mist from the smoothly rolling surface of the sea. Through the mist, she saw that they were passing between two islands, a large one to the north, round and domed, a smaller one to the south, low and flat.

"Land," she whispered in wonder, as though she had never expected to see rock and green jungle again. "Clive! Land!"

Clive had been sleeping. He crawled out from under the gunwale and followed her pointing finger with bloodshot eyes. "Oh my God, you're right. Land."

She threw her arms around him. They pressed their chapped lips together in the semblance of a kiss. "Steer toward the big island!" she commanded.

"We don't have a rudder," he said.

"There might be fresh water and food on the islands! There may even be people who'll help us!"

"We can't do anything. And there may also be Japanese," he pointed out.

The remains of their sail carried them forward in the breeze at a steady pace. But to where? If it was an onshore wind, it was taking them to land. If it was offshore, it was carrying them out to sea, to death. Ruth lay with her swollen eyes closed, her thin arms folded across her breast. For the first time, Francine felt a sharp hunger-pang gripe at her stomach. If they did not eat soon, they would begin to grow too weak to survive.

She curled up beside Ruth, hunching in on her own hunger, and drifted back into a kind of doze. She was summoned back to life, hours later, by Clive's call.

"There!"

She went to the mast. Dead ahead, a long rim of land had emerged over the horizon. She moved to stand beside Clive, staring at it in disbelief. "It's just cloud," she said, as if wanting reassurance.

"No." He laughed. "It's land, real land. Java. We've done it."

Over the next hour, the dark ripple grew, forming peaks and folds, revealing hills clothed in green jungle, spikes of gray rock emerging from the greenery. "I told you," he repeated. "We've done it" They clung to each other, lips too sore to kiss.

The sweltering heat had returned. As they neared land, the breeze faded, then dropped altogether. The Lotus Flower wallowed in the swell, made heavy by the water she had taken on board, a frustrating mile from the shore. They could even see the white line of the beach and the fringe of palm trees. There was no sign of humanity, but that did not matter to Francine. If she could just feel dry land beneath the soles of her feet, she would know they were going to live. She stared at the distant beach with hungry eyes.

"Too far to swim," Clive said laconically. "The current will probably pull us closer. As long as we don't sink, first."

"Sink?"

"The pump's broken. The thing was about a hundred years old. I can't fix it."

She sat down on the deck. To sink now, within sight of land! But the swell brought them steadily toward the land. By early afternoon, she felt they could almost wade to shore. She could see that mangroves lined the muddy beach, fantastical roots making arches and buttresses. Beyond, some ragged casuarinas marked the edge of the jungle. The Lotus Flower was taking on water constantly. She had by now sunk deep in the water. Soon, the sea would be slopping over the gunwales, or what was left of them.

"Can't we swim?" she begged Clive.

"We could. Ruth couldn't."

"I'll carry her in my arms!"

"You wouldn't make it. In another hour, we'll be a lot closer."

"But we're sinking!"

"Well, there's no point in jumping off the boat until it does sink," he said practically. "We'll leave it to the end. At least there's no coral. We've been lucky. I've got everything that's worth salvaging. Look." He unwrapped a strip of cloth and showed her his haul—a heavy parang, a few knives and cooking utensils, some rope. Incongruously, the hand grenade that the soldier had given her in Singapore lay among the domestic things. He touched

it with his forefinger. "That may save our lives if it still works." He wrapped the things up again.

They sat silently on the deck as the Lotus Flower floated sluggishly toward the shore. With every half hour that passed, the boat lay deeper. Muddy water gurgled and slapped in the hold. On it bobbed the few floating things that had been left by the storm. Ruth had emerged from her stupor enough to sit upright, gazing vacantly ahead. Francine stroked her dank hair mechanically. They could smell the land now, a rain-forest smell of decay and growth.

Three hundred yards from the beach, something thudded against the hull, jolting them. Then, with a prolonged shudder, the rocking motion ceased. Francine staggered a little, her legs adjusting to the strange fact that, after so many days at sea, the deck was still.

"We've run aground," Clive said. "We should be able to wade to shore from here."

She looked at the dark mass of jungle, searching for some sign of humanity, an attap hut, a wisp of smoke. There was nothing. The green jungle rolled over hills toward the hinterland. In the distance, heaps of cloud marked what might be a mountain range.

The Lotus Flower was tilting over on one beam. They hauled themselves over the lowest side, sliding down into the sea, Clive taking Ruth in his arms. The water was warm, brown and shallow. At first, Francine flailed for a footing. Then her feet touched firm sand on the bottom. The water was up to her chin. Half-paddling, half-wading, she made her way behind Clive, who had hoisted the child onto his shoulder.

Halfway to the beach, when the water was waist high, she turned and looked back at the Lotus Flower. The junk was on her side, her black hull exposed, her tattered sail drooping almost to the water. She looked like a dead thing.

"Next high tide'll carry her off," Clive said unemotionally. He waded on. A wave slapped into Francine's back, as though urging her impatiently to shore. She staggered on. The sand squirmed between her toes. Exhaustion was making her head swim. She drove her weightless body onward, until she was plodding in the footmarks Clive had made in the sand, and could at last collapse to her knees on the shore of refuge.

Trees had been uprooted all along the shoreline. The palms had survived for the most part, but their coconuts lay strewn among the wreckage, manna from

heaven. While Francine rested on the beach with Ruth, Clive collected a dozen of the largest green coconuts, hacking the tops off with the parang. They gulped avidly at the sweet, slightly fizzy water the fruit contained. As soon as she had drunk enough, Ruth fell into a swift sleep, her head pillowed on her arms. Feeling bloated, Francine lifted her head and stared wearily at their landfall.

They had come to shore on a small crescent of beach, composed half of mud, half of sand, fringed with mangroves, whose leathery leaves glittered with salt crystals in the afternoon light. The beach was strewn with debris from the storm. Leaning forward, she saw what looked like the feathery fronds of a nipa palm, growing beyond some rocks at the far end of the beach.

"We're near the mouth of a river," she said. "Or at least a stream."

Clive looked up from the parang, which he had been sharpening on a stone. "How do you know?"

"I know this sort of place," she said simply. "Stay here with Ruth."

She took a small knife and walked down the beach toward the rocks. The sun was hot on her back. It was so strange to feel the earth beneath her feet that she wondered whether this was a dream from which she would soon awake to a reality of raging sea and howling gale. But the black hulk of the Lotus Flower told her it was no dream. Wherever their voyage had taken them, it was over, at least temporarily.

Her whole body was sore. Her legs, in particular, ached fiercely. Salt had chafed raw places at all her joints, making her walk with careful slowness so as not to inflame the furious pain. She longed hopelessly for a freshwater bath.

She looked down at herself for the first time in days.

She had been wearing a cotton sam fu and sandals when the storm had struck. The pantsuit had been reduced to tattered brown rags that clung to her body, barely preserving her modesty. The sandals had gone long ago. The clothing hardly mattered. The sandals were a serious loss.

She had made sure that Ruth, at least, had shorts and a stout shirt. Clive, with only his loincloth, was much worse off. He would be burned, bitten, and torn within hours unless he covered himself.

Her left wrist was bare. Her beloved gold watch, Frank's present to her on the day Ruth was born, had gone. It had become unclipped and had washed away, she had no recollection of where or when. It was like the last remnant of Frank being stripped away from her.

She clambered over the rocks, trying not to cut her bare feet. It had been a long time since she had walked barefoot over rocks. Shoes had softened her soles. Beyond the rocks, there was only mud, no more sand. A cluster of nipa palms grew almost at the water's edge. Carefully avoiding the dagger-like roots of the mangroves, she waded to the palms and peered into the rain forest beyond. As she had suspected, there was a small creek running inland, its brackish water motionless between the tides. She felt a prickle of hope.

The nipa were in flower, spectacular orange bracts emerging from the muddy water beneath the fringed leaves. She groped down, avoiding the razor-edged leaves, hoping to find the floating fruits. She was rewarded. She gathered several large, pineapple-sized fruits and waded back toward Clive and Ruth.

"Sand flies are stinging Ruth," he greeted her. Ruth's legs were covered in swollen red bites.

"We'll have to rub coconut water on them. Look. Nipa fruit."

"You're a genius," he said.

"There's a creek just past those rocks, Clive. Where there's fresh water there are always people. If we followed it up into the forest, we'd be sure to find a village, eventually. Or at least a fisherman."

He was squatting, breaking open one of the nipa fruits for Ruth. The child bit into the gelatinous flesh with delight. "We can't walk barefoot through the jungle. We'll have to make shoes of some kind. Out of bark or leaves. Is that good, Chicken-Licken?"

Francine searched through the bundle and rolled the hand grenade out. "I've seen fish being dynamited. We could pull the pin and throw this into the water."

"Good idea." He took the grenade and walked to the edge of the water. Almost casually, he pulled the pin and hurled the grenade out into the sea. After a moment, there was a muffled thump, and the water boiled up. Clive swam out to the place. When he came back, he was clutching three small, limp fish.

"Better than nothing," he said. "We'll have to eat them raw, I'm afraid."

They dined off the slimy, bony fish and jelly-sweet nipa flesh. The sun was now low, dipping toward the horizon in a flare of scarlet. They collected

fronds and pulled together a bed of sorts as high up on the beach as possible. Then they sat in silence, clinging together, watching the sun go down into the sea. As darkness settled, the murmur of the waves seemed to grow louder. The forest behind them, too, began to sing. A million insects, frogs, and birds were tuning up for the evening chorale. The sound soon swelled to a shrill roar. Some large creature crashed through the branches, making Ruth wail in fright.

"Just monkeys, Chicken-Licken," Clive said reassuringly. Francine imagined the bright round eyes peering at them through the dark, the simian fingers clutching, the sharp teeth bared. How long could they possibly survive without meeting other humans? Her only consolation was the thought of that creek, the hope that somewhere along it lay their salvation.

Francine awoke to a white, silent world. A heavy mist had closed in, blotting out the sea and the land. There was a rotting marine stench of low tide.

She dragged herself upright, running her fingers through her grit-clogged hair. Clive was cradling Ruth in his arms. He managed to smile at her tiredly. They were all coated in sand and covered in bites. She rose and walked to the water's edge. She stripped off her clothes and waded into the warm water. She floated for a while in the disorienting whiteness, rinsing her hair. Her body felt thin under her palms, her hipbones poking sharply through the skin, her breasts little more than hard nipples on bony ribs. The salt stung her raw places viciously, but it at least got rid of the sand, which would have made walking unbearable.

She washed her clothes. She must look like a wild woman, she thought wryly. She wrung out the things as best she could and put them on, still wet. She could not see the Lotus Flower through the mist. Perhaps she had already drifted away during the night.

Ruth was already breakfasting off nipa fruit, chattering quite cheerfully to Clive. She had moments of animation, for a while becoming the old Ruth, before she slipped back into apathy.

"I'm going to live in a big, big house with Clive," she told Francine.

"Can I come and stay?"

"Of course," Ruth said. "And we're going to buy a new car."

"What kind?"

"A fancy car," she said emphatically. "And Clive's going to be my daddy."

"Ah. That sounds like a good solution," Francine said solemnly. Clive's eyes were warm as they met hers. We're becoming a family, she thought. Please God, let us always be a family.

She showed Clive how to make an impromptu cloak out of dried attap leaves. Slung over his shoulders, the garment made him look like a human scarecrow.' Impatient, he wanted to throw it off. She persuaded him not to; it would make some kind of cover against sun, insects, and thorns.

She threaded a twist of attap through the "monkey eyes" of coconuts so they could be carried. Clive slung six of the large, green fruits over his shoulder. With that as their only provision, they set off to the creek.

The brackish water was now flowing sluggishly, following the tide. Scraps of foam and leaves drifted on the surface of the brown water. Further up, she hoped, it would become pure enough to drink. With Clive at the front and Ruth in the middle, they waded up the creek, into the rain forest.

The mist persisted, limiting their visibility severely. They could see no more than a few yards of brown water ahead, overhung with plants. As they penetrated deeper, the trees began to tower over them.

The creek was for the most part little more than knee deep. Underfoot, the soft mud of the creek bottom was kind on their soles. But the resistance of the mud and water was tiring, and Ruth's feeble strength soon gave out. She whimpered to be carried. Francine picked her up and walked for a painful half hour, until her arms could no longer bear the strain. Then Clive hoisted the child over his shoulders in a fireman's lift. She seemed to go to sleep at once, her long dark hair hanging down in a ribbon.

The heavy mist was somehow hypnotic. It obliterated all sensation of forward motion, so it seemed they were always trudging, never moving from the same spot. Before them always was the same creek, the same branches drooping from white nothingness.

From time to time, the fog thickened into drenching rain that lasted up to half an hour. She had promised Clive she could find food in the jungle. But how would she discern fruits in this impenetrable fog? It obliterated sound itself, so that they moved through a cathedral-like hush.

Slowly, however, the water grew a little colder and a little deeper. The squelching mud bottom began to give way to smooth pebbles and outcrops of stone. The mist thinned slightly as it grew hotter.

After four or five hours' walk, they reached a place of noisy water. Rapids spouted and rumbled. They had come to the main body of the river. From here, various creeks snaked in different directions toward the sea. Upstream, the river broadened and deepened.

"We have to follow the main branch," Francine said wearily.

The river was now so wide and deep that they had to wade along one of the banks. Past the rapids, gigantic trees overhung the river, their tops sometimes almost meeting over the wide stream, so that it was like wading through a cavern at times. A few birds had begun to sing. From time to time, brilliant kingfishers, disturbed by their progress, darted from holes in the bank and swept across their path. Huge butterflies flitted in the fog, sky-blue or butter-yellow.

They reached a sandy shoal where they rested and drank a coconut each and then scraped out the melting flesh. By now, their legs were covered in tiny black leeches, which had burrowed imperceptibly into the flesh, and were already starting to engorge with blood. Francine, shuddering, tried to scrape the parasites off, but Clive stopped her.

"You'll get a bad infection. Leave them. They'll fall off when we're dry again."

She made a face of disgust. Ruth, too, had the creatures embedded in her skinny legs. They dozed in the white silence for an hour, then set off again.

At first she thought it was a waking dream or hallucination. Then she caught it again: a sour smell composed of dung, decay, and wood smoke. The unmistakable smell of humanity.

"People!" she called.

Clive half-turned, his face weary. "Where?"

"I can smell people."

He sniffed the foggy air. "I can't smell anything."

"I can!" She was elated. "I told you! There must be a kampong up ahead."

He looked sceptical. But the scent grew stronger as they plodded upstream, until even Clive could smell it. Francine felt like singing. The smell of smoke predominated, made more acrid by the humid air.

At last they reached another shoal, this time at least fifty yards long. Dimly through the mist, she made out the shapes of three or four dugout

canoes drawn up out of the water. There was. also a pile of cut bamboo tubes. They had reached a settlement of some kind.

"We're here," she said joyfully. "Selamat!" she called in Malay into the mist. "Is anybody there?"

Her shouts brought only a more intense silence. Clive put down his bundle. "I'll go on ahead."

"No. Let me."

"Why?"

"Don't forget, I'm a native," she said with a smile. She was buoyed up by triumphant excitement. "I'm better at this than you are. You stay here and look after Ruth."

"All right," he said reluctantly. He stepped aside to let her pass. "Shout if you need help."

She walked into the mist, straining her eyes to make out shapes. The smell of burning was strong. It was a ghost world made out of infinitesimal shades of gray. She found she was walking through a cultivated patch; bananas and sago extended broad fronds out of the murk, dangling clusters of fruit. The sweet smell of the ripe bananas made saliva rush into her mouth. She fought down the impulse to reach up and pluck some. Stealing fruit would not be a good way to open relations. She reached an attap fence and clambered over, calling. There was no reply.

A grunt made her stop in her tracks. The bushes rustled. A small pig emerged from the undergrowth, rooting in the earth with its snout, pausing to glance at her with small, sad eyes.

Then she saw a human figure. But it was not on the ground; it floated impossibly in mid-air above the pig, as though by some sorcery. She walked closer, feeling the sweat freeze on her skin. The man had been hanged from a tree branch.

Farther ahead in the mist, more hanged men loomed, two of them strung from the same tree. Staked out on the ground was a fourth figure, barely recognizable as a naked woman. Francine could not bring herself to approach. The heavy smell of putrefaction was in the air. All she would find here would be more death, more savagery. There could be no question who had done this.

Francine turned and ran back blindly the way she had come. Wet leaves clutched at her face. She stumbled painfully over something and recoiled. It was only a heap of husked coconuts.

As she dragged herself to her feet, she saw a huge barnlike shape hulking in the mist. She knew what it was, though she had never seen one before. It was a longhouse, a primitive communal home raised on stilts. Its attap roof was blackened and gaping in one place. It had been set on fire and partially burned. She dared not investigate further. She reached Clive, gasping.

"What's wrong?" he said sharply.

"The Japanese have been here."

"When?"

"I don't know. There's a longhouse up ahead. It's been burned. They've hanged people from the trees. And I saw a dead woman on the ground—"

He put his arms around her as tears welled up, choking her. "No sign of any soldiers?" he asked. She shook her head dumbly. "We can't be in Java, then," he said heavily.

"Perhaps we were blown back to Sumatra."

"God knows where we are. We have to get out of here."

"Where are we going to go? We might walk straight into them." She drew back, wiping her wet eyes. "They might not come back here. The place is deserted. There's food here, Clive. Bananas and sago. Maybe rice, too. And the longhouse hasn't been completely burned. We should stay. There's no point going on."

He thought. "All right," he said at last. "Let's go and check it out."

Francine nodded at Ruth, who was listlessly throwing pebbles into the stream. "I don't want her to see what's up there, Clive. Can you do something before we come?"

"Don't worry about it. Wait here until I call." He set off cautiously into the mist, his parang in one hand. The mist now seemed threatening, full of invisible menace. She was so sickened of bloodshed. They had lost so much, travelled so much, been through so much. Had it all been to end in capture or death at the hands of the Japanese, after all?

She felt a kind of superstitious dread of them now, these implacable enemies who seemed to be everywhere, from the clouds to the heart of the jungle. How disastrously they had all underrated the Japanese. For years, they had laughed at the cheap glass bangles, the tinny cameras, the gimcrack imitations of real things, without ever realizing how ruthlessly efficient those "imitations" were. Even when they had invaded China, only

a partial recognition had dawned of their real power, their real intentions. And now that the shadow of their bombers and tanks had covered the world, it was too late.

"Are we going to stay here?" Ruth asked.

"Perhaps."

"Where's Clive gone?" Ruth asked.

"To get things ready for us."

"What's he doing?"

"Tidying up."

"Tidying up what?"

"It's dirty."

"How, dirty?"

"Hush!" The child had not been so alert or talkative for weeks. Francine touched her forehead. For once, it was cool and dry. She wondered whether the long fast had improved Ruth's condition somehow.

"Mama," Ruth whispered suddenly, clutching at Francine's clothing. "Look. A man."

She looked up. Across the stream, a naked savage was standing motionless, watching them. Shock froze her heart for a moment. She could not move. She had no idea how he had materialized so silently out of the mist without her noticing.

The word savage had entered her mind instantly and without qualification. A cloth was wrapped around his waist, a flap hanging before his loins. She glanced swiftly at his hands. They hung empty at his side. His face was as impassive as a mask. They stared at each other in a tense silence.

At last, she spoke in a shaky voice. "Is this your place?" she asked in Malay. He made no reply. "Is this your place?" she asked again. "We didn't mean to trespass." Ruth was hiding her face against Francine's side.

A shorter man materialized behind the first. He was dressed in the same kind of loincloth, but with a cloth headdress. Strips of the same red cloth were tied around his elbows and calves. They spoke to each other in a language she did not recognize. Then they waded across the river toward Francine and Ruth.

She sat, frozen. When they reached her, the taller man spoke in Malay. "What is the tuan doing?" he asked.

"He went to cut down the dead," she replied.

"Why?"

"I didn't want the child to see. She's very young." Francine's mouth was dry. "We were going to stay here for a while. We have nowhere to go."

He studied her. His naked skin was tattooed with black designs, ornate rosettes on each sinewy shoulder, another design on his throat. "Who are you running from?"

"The Japanese," she said, knowing that if it was the wrong answer, it would take nothing for him to pull the parang from his waist and cut her down with a blow.

Ruth was still hiding, her mouth muffled against her mother's skin. "My name is Nendak," he said. "Come with me."

Her knees were weak as she rose. They walked toward the longhouse in silence, Francine carrying Ruth. Chopping sounds came faintly through the mist. Taking her elbow in a firm grasp, the man guided her toward the sound. Beyond the sago patch, they came upon Clive, covered in sweat, digging a trench with a hoe he had found. Nearby, laid out in a neat row, lay five bodies. One of them, Francine saw, belonged to a child.

Clive turned as they approached, his eyes widening. He had already dug some way into the soggy earth and stood knee deep in the trench. He gave Francine a quick, interrogative look. She shook her head infinitesimally.

"What is he doing?" Nendak asked.

"He's digging a grave," she replied.

"That is not the place or the manner. Tell him to stop."

"He wants you to put down the hoe, Clive," she said quietly in English.

Clive laid the tool down and climbed out of the trench, his legs covered in red mud. "Are they hostile?" he asked Francine in a low voice.

"I don't know."

Nendak studied each corpse sombrely. When he came to the bodies of the woman and the child, he lifted them in his arms and pressed them to his chest, his head bowed silently. The second man, showing more emotion, covered his mouth with one hand and sobbed huskily.

Francine and Clive watched without speaking. These poor, murdered corpses had been their kin. They had, at least, a common enemy.

The tall man turned to look at them. "Wait there," he said grimly to Francine in Malay. "Do not move."

"He says to keep still," she told Clive.

"Ask him about the Japanese," Clive said. "Ask him where we are."

But the two men, ignoring Francine and Clive, began carrying the bodies up into the longhouse, one by one. A sense of resignation closed in on her. They had come this far. Here lay some kind of halt, at least, to the journey. Whether death or salvation lay here, their traveling was over for a while. She held Ruth against her breast, crooning to her softly, waiting to find out their fate.

The third man to arrive was older, his headdress decorated with hornbill feathers, which nodded as he moved. His silver hair hung down to his shoulders, framing a fierce, patriarchal face. After staring at the three of them, he took a basin of water and began to wash the dirt and blood off the corpses in silence. A shaft of sunlight slowly penetrated into the clearing. Francine saw the longhouse more clearly. It was a large structure, built on posts, walled and roofed with bamboo, across which attap matting had been stretched. It extended almost fifty yards. To one side was a row of rickety bamboo verandas. On the other side were several small huts raised on posts. Around the longhouse was a straggling plantation of papaya, sago, taro, and other jungle fruits. Somewhere nearby, she imagined, would be hillside paddy fields. It was a village more primitive than any kampong she had ever seen. She hadn't thought that people had lived this way for a hundred years or more.

More people began to arrive, men and women, old and young, a community returning to what had been their home. Each carried something precious that he or she had snatched up as they fled: women with babies and children in their arms, the elderly with baskets of rice on their backs, the young carrying piglets or chickens. Dogs and pigs followed at their heels.

Francine, Clive, and Ruth sat on the earth beside the half-dug grave, watching and waiting. The clearing began to ring with voices, though nobody spoke to them except the youngest children, who chattered at them inquisitively.

"We're still in the Malay States," she said quietly to Clive.

"How do you know?" he asked, staring at the tribesmen in fascination.

"Their language contains a lot of Malay words. And that tall man speaks good Malay."

"So where are we?"

"I don't know."

Each group of new arrivals climbed up into the long-house to see the row of corpses, which had been laid out on the veranda. A few screamed or sobbed, the rest stared gravely. The old man with the hornbill feathers presided silently, black eyes watching. Having paid their respects to the dead, nearly everyone came to stare in curiosity at the strangers, a curiosity that was somehow not intrusive.

All were bare from the waist up, the men wearing loincloths, the women skirts, their breasts exposed in a way that would never have been permitted in Muslim Malaya. The men were equally handsome and well made. Almost all of the men wore at least some tattoos on chest, arms, buttocks, and thighs.

Smoke began to wreathe among the banana and sago fronds. A party of women went down to the river's edge, and standing in line, began packing rice into cut bamboo tubes. The fog was lifting now, and the sun made dappled patterns on their honey-coloured skin. They laid the bamboo tubes on racks over the flames to steam. The smell of cooking rice filled the air. Francine felt saliva fill her mouth.

Dogs and pigs began to charge around, unchecked. Roosters, splendid creatures evidently more pets than livestock, crowed fiercely. The empty green jungle had been filled with chattering, smoky, untidy humanity. Four or five young men climbed into the roof beams of the longhouse. As if motivated by a single will, they began to repair the burned roof, hacking bamboo beams to fit, roping them in place, working in a concerted team.

The last of the fog melted away. As she had suspected, paddy fields were now visible, extending beyond the long-house. The forest had been cleared for several hundred yards around, after which it suddenly resumed, an almost impenetrable green barrier that protected this place. The shoal where the tall man had found them was littered with praus and canoes. The river provided the only easy access.

The women had started preparing a meal, shovelling the cooked rice into bowls with some fragments of small, grilled fish. Francine could feel her stomach twisting. Ruth was whimpering with hunger.

"Hush, darling," she murmured. "Perhaps they'll give us something to eat in a little while."

There must be, Francine estimated, at least 120 people in all. Nendak led them to a small group sitting cross-legged around a woven blanket on

which stood communal bowls of rice, eggs, fish, and vegetables. The family invited them to eat with gestures, offering the food. She thanked them, and filled the battered plate they offered.

None of Nendak's family, she noticed, had touched the food. Some of the women were crying bitterly, rocking with their hands pressed to their mouths. "Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, a handful of rice halfway to her mouth.

He shook his head slightly. "We cannot. The dead woman was my youngest sister. The child was hers. Two of the men were my brothers-in-law."

Francine lowered her eyes in compassion, astounded at his composure. "I didn't know." She turned to Clive and explained.

He winced. "Then we won't eat, either," he said, putting the rice back.

"You have no reason to grieve with us," Nendak said.

"I lost my husband to the Japanese," she said, trying to show him she understood the tragedy that had overtaken his family.

He indicated Clive. "And the tuan?"

"He is my new man."

"He was kind to try and bury our dead. He did not know that it was not the way." He pushed the food back toward them. "Eat. You're all weak. It gives us no consolation to see you starve."

She explained to Clive, and after a moment's consultation, they obeyed. The food was bland and simple, but it tasted like heaven.

"Ask him where we are," Clive said.

"What is this place called?" she asked the man.

He jerked his head. "This is Rumah Nendak."

That meant simply "Nendak's home," the name of the longhouse. He was the chief of the village then. "Thank you. We were caught in the storm," she added apologetically. "We don't know where we are."

"This is Sarawak."

She felt suddenly weary. She had half-suspected that. "And what people are you?"

"We are Iban."

"Who is your king?" she asked.

"King George the Sixth," he said proudly.

"I am called Yu Fa," she said, knowing that would be easier for them than Francine, "and the tuan is called Napier."

Nendak nodded his understanding.

She turned to Clive. "We're in Sarawak, Clive. Borneo. These people are Iban."

He groaned. "We've been blown more than a hundred miles off course."

"At least they're loyal to the crown," she said. "That means they probably won't eat us."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" he asked dryly.

The rest of the community were observing them with unabashed curiosity as they ate, making loud remarks that were almost certainly comments on the appearance of the three strangers.

Nendak, too, was staring at them. "Where do you come from?" he asked.

"Singapore. We were sailing in a boat, hoping to reach Java. A Japanese plane attacked us. Our captain died. Then the storm brought us here."

He nodded. "It was a sacred storm. It saved us. The Japanese tried to burn down our longhouse and our rice paddy. The rain put out the fires."

"Is there fighting in this land?"

"Much fighting. They came with many airplanes. All the tuans are in prison camp now."

"They've taken the whole of Sarawak?" she said in dismay.

"And Brunei," he said dryly, "and Sabah, and Kalimantan. Singapore is also theirs?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. We were going to Batavia, Nendak. Do you know what has happened there?"

He shook his head briefly. "Batavia is theirs, too."

Feeling sick, she explained to Clive. "The whole of Borneo has been captured. And he says Batavia has fallen to the Japanese, too."

"Right, then," Clive said, sounding unconcerned. But she knew he was hiding the same despair she felt. "Ask them why the Japs did this to them," he said, gesturing at the burned longhouse.

"To make us afraid of them," Nendak replied. "They know we hate them and are loyal to the British."

"Are the Japanese near here?"

He gestured. "In the town."

"How far?"

"One day's walk."

That sounded horribly close. "Will they come back?"

"Yes," he replied simply. "You and the tuan cannot stay here. You must go from here. I will take you."

"Where to?"

"We have to go from here into Kalimantan. Many days' walk through the forest. We know people there, friends of Dutch missionaries, who have a big prau. With the prau they will take you to the islands. From there, the guerrillas will take you to Australia. Tell the tuan this. And eat, Yu Fa."

As she ate, she translated tersely for Clive's benefit. "They say we can't stay here for long. Nendak says he'll help us get out."

Clive nodded. "If the Japs found us here, they would kill the whole community." He reached out his hand to Nendak. "Sama sama, Nendak."

Nendak smiled gravely as he shook Clive's hand.

"We have to keep going, then?" Francine asked.

Clive nodded. "We'll do what we have to," he said. He stroked Francine's face, knowing how weary she felt. For the moment, she was just glad of the gifts of food, companionship, and life.

"All right," she said.

Clive smiled at her. He took a glowing stick from the fire and began to burn off the leeches that still hung in their flesh.

It rained again in the night, beginning with a tremendous thunderstorm, then settling into a prolonged, steady downpour that rattled on the palm-matting roof and among the forest leaves. Everyone slept in the long, covered veranda called the ruai. Francine huddled with Ruth and Clive under a woven blanket that someone had given them. The darkness fell swiftly and was absolute; no light burned in the longhouse. People shuffled to their places, murmuring to one another. Within an hour of dark fall, the whole tribe was asleep.

Francine lay in Clive's arms. But sleep came slowly. Her mind filled with images of what they had been through. So much that was hideous; and yet, looking back over the past weeks, she was surprised, suddenly, by the terrible beauty of so much she had witnessed. She remembered the armada of Japanese bombers thundering over Mr. Davenport's grave on Monk's Hill. She remembered the child born in the air-raid shelter. She remembered making love with Clive that first time, the growing power of love in her heart. Even the red gout of exploding bombs, burned onto her memory forever, had its own dreadful brilliance. The anger of the sea and sky. The temple gloom

of the rain forest. Birth, love, death. The savage beauty of nature, the savage darkness of the human heart.

Beneath the longhouse, pigs rooted for the food scraps that fell through the gaps in the floor. Roosters crowed all night long, a triumphant screech that jangled the nerves.

All the dogs of the community had come up onto the ruai. They charged up and down the gallery in wild games, their paws drumming on the loose bamboo floor. Nobody seemed to be disturbed by the cacophony, nor by the ear-splitting thunderstorm that broke sometime after midnight. Francine lay with her eyes open, watching as the blue glare of lightning illuminated the ironwood posts, thinking of the strange fate that had brought her here, to this place called Rumah Nendak.

She was awakened by a hand shaking her shoulder. She dragged herself from the depths, scarcely knowing where she was. A dim gray light suffused the ruai. Clive was leaning over her. "The women want you to go with them," he said. She sat up. A woman was waiting, her face dimpling in a smile. She pointed to Ruth and beckoned.

Wearily, Francine rose, picking Ruth up in her arms. All the men were still sleeping, sprawled out on the floor among the finally recumbent dogs, but all the women were awake. She followed them as they quietly made their way down to the river with their children, each carrying three or four gourds. The river was swollen with the night's rain, rippling briskly toward the sea.

The early morning was both misty and smoky. The remains of yesterday's fires smouldered sulkily by the riverside. It was mercifully cool. The green gloom was silent but for the occasional squawk of a bird high up among the branches of the great trees.

Out of earshot of the sleeping men, they formed a chattering line in the shallows, washing themselves and their babies, then dressing for the day. The young woman who had woken her, and whom she now recognized as one of Nendak's family with whom she had eaten the day before, held out a dark blue sarong, smiling broadly.

At first Francine shook her head, but die woman nodded encouragingly. She pointed to Francine's clothes. "Finished," she said in Malay. "No good now."

She had to agree. Suddenly envying them their clean, bare-breasted decency, she made up her mind and took the gift.

"Thank you so much," she said gratefully.

"Sama sama," the women all replied, beaming. They watched with interest as Francine stripped off her clothes.

There were exclamations of sympathy at the injuries that covered her body. She had been cut by splinters, burned by ropes, battered and bruised by a hundred things. It looked as though every inch of her journey had been written on her skin. And while she had not yet reached the point of emaciation, she was thin. She immersed herself in the river water. It was cool and sweet. It enveloped her with a sense of peace.

She washed Ruth, then put on the sarong. It seemed foolish to cover her top when no other woman did, so she fastened the thing around her waist in the Iban way, leaving herself naked from the waist up. They nodded approval. One of them looped a string of shells around her neck, which provoked more approval and laughter. Now she was not only properly dressed, but even adorned. Francine laughed at herself and her abject poverty. Then sudden tears filled her eyes, tears at the simple kindness, tears at being in the sweet company of women after so much hardship. Her benefactor consoled her with little fluttering pats on the shoulder.

"Don't cry, Yu Fa."

"What is your name?" she asked the young woman.

"Segura," she replied. Segura took Ruth from Francine's arms. "Your daughter is weak, Yu Fa," she said, looking at the child's thin body. "She has dysentery."

"I know." Francine nodded. "Do you have any medicine that will cure her?"

"Yes," one of the older women said. "You must take her to the tuai burong."

"Who is the tuai burong?"

"The doctor. He will heal her."

The women had gathered round, examining Ruth.

"What is his name?" Francine asked.

"Jah," several of the women replied. "His name is Jah."

"But medicine is not enough," Segura said. "To cure the dysentery, the child needs rest, much rest, and good food."

There was a chorus of assent from the other women. The older woman patted Francine on the shoulder. "You must leave her here, or she will die, Yu Fa. We will take good care of the child until you come back."

"Until I come back?" she repeated stupidly.

"You cannot stay here," Segura said. "And you cannot take the child with you, or she will die. Your journey is a long and hard one. The little one cannot survive it."

Francine snatched Ruth from the woman's arms and clung to her in dread. The women clicked their tongues in sympathy.

"It is true, Yu Fa," Segura said, compassion softening her face. "The Japanese will come back at any time. If they find you and the tuan, they will kill you, and everyone in the village. We will all die."

"Nendak will take you and the tuan," the older woman said. "He knows the path through the forest to a place where the Dutch built a school. There you will find our friends with a prau. You will begin your journey to Australia."

"But it is a journey of many weeks," Segura said. "Much walking, much hunger, much hardship. Sleeping in the forest, swimming. The little one will die. You must leave her here. We will hide her from the Japanese. When the Japanese are gone from Sarawak, you will come back for her."

Francine was too stunned to reply. She clung tightly to Ruth and looked around for Clive.

The men had finally begun to emerge, stretching and yawning as they walked down the notched-log ladder from the longhouse. Clive was following them. Like her, he was wearing Iban dress. Someone had given him a woven cloth to wrap around his loins.

"Clive! They say we can't stay here. They say we have to go. They want me to leave Ruth here with them!"

He took her in his arms while she told him what the women had said. His dark eyes grew sad. "They're right, Francine. I didn't want to say it yet, but it's obvious. She would never survive a journey like that."

"No, Clive," she said. "I'm not leaving Ruth!"

"Look at her, darling," Clive said gently. Ruth was apathetic, so weak that she had not even understood what her mother and Clive were talking about. She lay in Francine's arms, light as a feather. "She needs to rest, and

to eat properly. She needs to be cared for. We have to keep going. We can't take her with us."

"I can't," she said, shaking her head. "Don't ask me to do this, Clive. I can't. This is what Frank did to us."

"They can hide Ruth. But they can't hide us. If we stay here, the Japs will soon get to hear of it, and they'll come. They will kill Ruth, my darling. They will kill you, they will kill me, they will kill everyone in this tribe." She turned blindly to watch the men of the village. Unlike the women, with their dainty morning toilet, the men threw themselves bodily into the river like otters, splashing and shouting. "We have no choice," Clive went on. "I love Ruth. I only want what's best for her. This way she will survive. If we try to take her with us, she will die. And if we try to stay here, either the Ibans will kill the three of us, or the Japanese will massacre the whole lot."

"How can we trust them?" she demanded.

"How can we not? We're going to have to trust them with our lives, darling. The moment we set off with Nendak, we're in his hands. Leaving Ruth with the women makes no difference."

She walked away from Clive, heartsick.

As soon as they had washed, the whole tribe began preparations for a feast of some kind. Segura came to Francine and knelt beside her.

"Are you sad, Yu Fa?"

"It is hard to leave my child, Segura," Francine said, looking up into the sweet face of the other woman.

"You cannot watch her die, Yu Fa," Segura replied simply. "You will understand, when you think about it." She pointed to the old man who had washed the corpses yesterday. "That is Jah, the tuai burong."

Francine glanced obliquely at the savage face, the tattooed hands and forearms. "Is he a doctor? He's frightening," she said.

"Yes," Segura agreed simply. "But he will cure your child."

There was no question the man radiated power. She glanced at Ruth's skinny body and knew she had no choice. "I'll take her to him," she decided.

"Not today, Yu Fa. After the gawai." She began plaiting flowers into Francine's hair. "You must be beautiful for the gawai."

"What is the gawai?"

"The festival to prepare the dead for the journey to Sabayon."

"Where is Sabayon?"

She smiled at Francine's ignorance. "Sabayon is the land of the dead, Yu Fa. Don't you know anything?"

"I'm ignorant," she said emptily.

The festival gathered pace over the day. Though they had not the remotest conception of what it all meant, Francine and Clive watched from the fringes. The old man led the ceremony, waving a live chicken in his hands, which squawked in protest. At length he slaughtered the fowl and spattered the blood over the offerings. Music and dancing began, at first slow and stately, becoming progressively more exuberant.

More food was prepared, this time for the community, including flasks of rice wine. The men downed ritual tumblers of the stuff, becoming more elated, dancing more energetically. The sweat streaked their bronzed bodies as they whirled in mock battle, swinging their parangs. Their smoothly muscled bodies were perfectly set off by the crimson cloth and by the silver bangles they carefully fitted to their arms and calves.

The women, too, knew how to accentuate their beauty, though their dress was simpler and more delicate than the men's, consisting mainly of intricately woven blankets wrapped tight around their slim waists. Almost all wore bright, clattering rows of silver dollars.

In the early part of the afternoon, the brilliant white clouds that were never far away gathered overhead and discharged a brief, drenching downpour. Shortly afterward the tribe gathered in a milling group.

The dead had lain in state on the ruai all this time, screened with woven hangings. Various things, perhaps their personal possessions, had been arranged around the corpses. Now the bodies were wrapped in blankets and brought ceremoniously out of the longhouse. Singing and clapping, the whole community set off along the riverbank, following the corpses.

"We're going to the graveyard," Segura told Francine, her eyes bright with the rice wine she had drunk. "You must wait here."

Francine nodded. The sound of voices faded into the jungle, along with the clanking of weapons and the tinkling of silver dollars. The whole tribe

had gone except for three old people too infirm to walk, who sat staring with filmy, unseeing eyes. Ruth had fallen asleep, curled up in Clive's arms.

"It's a terrible thing to ask a mother to do," Clive said, gazing into Ruth's sleeping face. "But less terrible than letting her die."

The Ibans returned from the burial in small groups. Some of them beat sticks on the ground as they came. Francine knew they were scaring away the spirits of the dead to stop them coming to haunt the longhouse; she had seen superstitious people do the same thing in the kampong as a child.

Nendak was among the first to return, his face sombre. Segura walked beside him, tears still streaking her plump cheeks. They came to squat beside her and Clive.

"You and the tuan are well, Yu Fa?" Nendak asked.

"Yes, thank you. I'm very sorry for your loss," she added formally.

He nodded. "The Japanese are coming, Yu Fa."

Her heart seemed to stop. "How do you know?"

"They are coming to all the longhouses. They are looking for white people. They will come in two, three days. They will search everywhere. Tell the tuan."

She turned to Clive, pale-faced, and explained. "When will they be here?" Clive asked.

"They may come tomorrow," Nendak said. "You and the tuan must go tonight. I will take you."

She translated that, too. Clive nodded slowly.

"Well, my sweet," he said in a gentle voice, "looks like we're on the move again."

She got up without speaking and walked away from the men. She looked up. The sky was a deep blue overhead. Mountains of dazzling white cloud climbed high, a promised land in the sky.

Those are the hills of heaven, where I shall never reach.

After a while, she stopped her tears, and prepared for her own next journey, into Sabayon, the land of the dead.

Chapter Two
1972. A CHILD OF THE DUST

The young woman called Sakura Ueda was tense. Her mouth was so dry that she could hardly thank the driver. She paid him and got out of the taxi. Before going in, she stood in front of the building, nervously smoothing her dress over her thighs. The checked miniskirt was very short, and gave her long legs a coltish look that she did not like. She was over thirty, or so she believed, much too old to look like a gawky schoolgirl. But she had few clothes to choose from, and certainly no money to purchase a new wardrobe for this encounter.

In fact, she was wearing exactly the same clothes as the last time she had come here, the same tan pumps, the same beige blouse and light jacket. The light tropical clothes were too thin for the winter cold, and the bag slung over her shoulder contained little money. She was getting right down to zero. She would eat today and tomorrow. After that, she did not know. Taxis were expensive, but in case anybody was watching, she had chosen to arrive in style, rather than emerge from the subway entrance only fifty yards from the building, or get off the bus that stopped nearby.

She looked upward. Francine Lawrence's Manhattan office gave little outward indication of the woman's global wealth. The block was an old one on the outskirts of Chinatown. Sakura knew that when she was in town, Francine would lunch daily at one of the many cheap Cantonese or Szechuan restaurants farther down the street. That showed both a loyalty to her roots and a dislike of wasting money.

Francine's New York residence, farther uptown, on Park Avenue, was also unostentatious, but only on the outside. That building, too, was an older

one, but the apartment was filled with wonderful European antiques. Sakura had glimpsed something of it when she had delivered flowers there a week earlier. The housekeeper who had answered the door had been flustered by the sight of such a huge bouquet, and had allowed her in, telling her to put the flowers in the kitchen. It was obvious that large bouquets of flowers were not regular arrivals in Francine Lawrence's life, which had surprised Sakura, who had been counting on the reverse.

She had paid for the flowers herself, of course, another reason why her dollars had run out so frighteningly fast. She had tried to extend her visit by making the housekeeper sign a spurious receipt for the flowers. Her heart beating wildly, she had tried to drink in the atmosphere of the place while the old woman fumbled short-sightedly for a pen. The furniture had been like nothing she had seen before, gleaming masterpieces out of French and Italian palaces, glowing oil paintings, Persian carpets, all of it (as far as Sakura could tell) of considerable value.

Right now, on the sidewalk, her heart was beating even more wildly than on that occasion. She closed her eyes for a moment, reaching for inner calm. She had rehearsed this moment so many times, and in so many ways. Yet now, all her prepared words had vanished, and her mind was empty. Perhaps it was better that way. She always did her best at improvisation, rather than rehearsed pieces.

The stream of pedestrians passing around her paid her little attention, though she was a striking young woman. Her face, with its discernible Asian lines, was arresting. Her body was slender and graceful, so her clothes, cheap as they were, hung well on her. Her hair, a rich chestnut, tumbled down her back in shiny waves. With a little more skill, and when you got right down to it, a little more money, she would easily make the transition from striking to exquisite. Yet in her gaucheness there was also a kind of charm that the very beautiful seldom have, and that usually does not survive wealth.

She walked into the foyer and took the antiquated elevator up to the third floor, where she emerged to face a glass door bearing a plain sign reading Lawrence Enterprises. The thought that Francine Lawrence was behind that door made Sakura's legs turn to water. She tried to control her breathing, but she was panting as if she had run up the stairs.

Last time she had spoken to an elderly secretary. The memory of her kind manner helped steady Sakura's nerves now. She took a deep breath, and pushed the door open.

Last time, the reception area had been quiet. This time it was crowded. Sakura's tension increased. That must mean Francine Lawrence was in. There were seven or eight people waiting patiently on the row of chairs, some clutching bulky briefcases, others leafing through magazines. Nobody paid her very much attention as she walked to the desk. The gray-haired woman behind the sign reading MRS. TAN looked up.

"Hello," Sakura said, leaning on the counter.

"Oh, hello there," the woman answered. There was a vase with a few pink carnations on her desk. She had evidently been arranging the flowers, for now she picked up the vase and put it on the counter next to Sakura. She smiled at Sakura, but it was not the warm smile of the last interview. The eyes behind the horn rimmed glasses were watchful. "Miss Ueda, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sakura said. "Could I see Mrs. Lawrence this morning?"

"I'm afraid Mrs. Lawrence isn't interested in seeing you."

Sakura clung to the counter to keep upright. She felt she might fall, otherwise. "I don't understand. Did you tell her about me?"

"Of course. But she asked me to tell you she was not available."

"Why not?"

"I really cannot say."

Sakura stared at Mrs. Tan blindly, her gray eyes wide. "What am I going to do?" she asked quietly.

She must have looked so ghastly that there was a flicker of something like pity in the secretary's eyes for a moment. She lowered her voice. "You could try again some other time," she murmured. "Maybe in two or three weeks. But I cannot promise anything."

"It will be too late by then," Sakura said.

"Can I give Mrs. Lawrence any message from you?" Mrs. Tan asked.

Sakura was silent for a moment. "Tell her I—" She stopped to think. "Tell her I won't come again," she said in a flat voice. "Thanks for your time." She turned and walked out of the office.

Out in the street, the world was spinning around her dizzily. She did not know which way to walk. It hardly mattered. Her sense of failure was overwhelming. She needed time and space to consider what to do next. Yet that hardly mattered, either. Given her absolute poverty, she would be starving within a day or two. Panic caught her by the throat, and she had to fight it down.

She walked slowly toward the subway entrance. For now, she needed to go back where she had come from, and rest. She checked her purse, counting out the few coins she would need for her token. She found the New York subway system complex and difficult to understand, and down in the echoing concourse, she spent a long time staring at the map, figuring out the route she should take and where she should change trains.

She boarded her train, and sat staring at her reflection in the opposite window. Why? Why had Francine Lawrence rejected her like this? Had she done or said something wrong, made some tiny slip that had raised doubt? Did Francine think she was a fraud? But what could possibly have aroused her suspicions? Sakura could not imagine.

She felt stiflingly hot, barely able to breathe. Awkwardly, she shuffled out of her jacket and laid it on her lap. She pushed up her sleeves and closed her eyes, her body rocking passively to the beat of the train. Her mind searched for something to console the pain.

As always, she thought of Japan, of cherry-blossom time. That was what her name meant in Japanese, "cherry blossom." She had been called that because it was at that time that she had first been brought to Japan. She remembered it so clearly. Among the dark, turbulent, and sometimes wildly confused memories of her childhood, that stood out like a beacon: the wonder of those acres of pink-and-white froth, the way the petals had carpeted the ground. It was the first vision she'd been given of pure beauty, and it had stayed with her, just as her name had.

She was not Japanese, though she had been given a Japanese name, and had lived in Japan for a time; she could not say what nationality she belonged to. Concepts like nationality were alien to her way of thinking. But those syllables, Sakura Ueda, were among the very few things in this wide world that were truly hers, and she would cling to them until the day she died.

She opened her eyes with a jolt, feeling that she was drifting into sleep. She had to change trains here. She gathered up her jacket and her bag, and got off the train.

She pushed her way through the crowds, found the platform she needed, and got on the train. She picked listlessly at her nails as she rocked in her seat. The polish was chipped and flaking off. She could not even afford a bottle of polish remover to clean her nails. The car was half-empty. Opposite her, a tall black man was sitting. The plump white woman next to him had drawn herself, consciously or unconsciously, as far away from him as she could. He wore wraparound sunglasses. His clothes were all grey or black. He held a briefcase in his lap.

The buckle of the briefcase pointed at her like the muzzle of a gun. Then Sakura looked closer, struck by something. Within the brass of the buckle, something gleamed at her. Convex optical glass. Not the muzzle of a gun. The eye of a camera. The briefcase contained a camera. And the camera was filming her.

Sakura froze. Her apathy evaporated at once, to be replaced by the sharp, clear fright of a creature that had been hunted many times before. She looked away.

She thought back to the office in Chinatown. Why had so many people been lounging on the waiting-room chairs? One of them had even come down in the elevator with her, and she had not paused to ask herself why he might be leaving, without keeping his appointment.

Her eyes slid back to the tall black man. His lean body was relaxed. His face was like a mask, his head lolling to the beat of the train. But behind the wraparound dark glasses, she knew that his eyes were watching her.

Terror seized her. But she could not afford to panic now. The danger was far too imminent, far too urgent. She let her gaze drift away from the black man, to take in the others in the compartment. There would be more watchers, more followers. Professionals always carried out such work in teams, never alone. But if they were professionals, she knew it would be hard to detect them. The others in the team could be anybody, young or old, black, brown, or white.

She rose as the next station approached, and prepared to get off the train. As she waited by the doors, looking out, she sensed the black man get up behind her and join a handful of others waiting to get off. Her heart was pounding in her throat.

The train slowed to a halt. The doors rattled open. She stepped out onto the platform, and began walking toward the far exit. But she kept close to the train. The black man was behind her. He wore rubber-soled boots and his tread was silent. Beyond the black man was a young woman, looking in her shopping bag. Something about her too-relaxed gait told Sakura that she, too, was a member of the team.

The public-address system boomed out a warning to stay clear of the train doors. They started to hiss closed. When barely six inches of open space remained, Sakura unleashed the clenched muscles of her stomach and legs. She sprang to the nearest door, thrusting her hands between the rubber seals, and wrenching them apart. She had underestimated the strength it would take: It was almost impossible. Somehow, she forced herself frantically through the tiny opening, hearing her clothes catch and tear. A shoe was twisted off, and she lost it.

"Are you crazy?" a voice squawked irritably from within the train. An elderly man helped pull her in. "The endless foolishness of the young!"

Her purse was trapped outside the doors. She turned and saw it fall to the platform. The last of her money was in there. And her cigarettes. And she only had one shoe. She took it off and stood in her bare feet, panting.

The black man had run up to the doors, and was trying to pry them open from the outside. Sakura shrank back as the doors opened a few inches. He grimaced with the effort, his teeth gleaming. Then the train jolted, and began moving out of the station. The black man fell back, defeated. Sakura sagged weakly, all her strength gone now. She had done it. Nobody else had got on the train with her, and now nobody else could. Sakura peered out of the window. The last thing she saw before the tunnel blacked it all out was her pursuer, stooping to pick up her fallen bag.

"Why wasn't she picked up at the next stop?"

Clay Munro's face showed no emotion. "We got to the next stop in a couple of minutes and got straight on the first train that came in. But she wasn't on it."

"She vanished into thin air?"

"It was a busy time, Mrs. Lawrence. Lots of people, lots of trains. Maybe we got the wrong train."

"How did she discover she was being followed?"

"I think she made the camera in my briefcase. I was sitting opposite her."

Francine was grim. "You sat opposite her? Clay, are you under the impression that you're inconspicuous?"

Munro toyed with the wraparound dark glasses he had worn while following Sakura Ueda. "When Mrs. Tan gave me the brief, she told me it didn't really matter if the subject became aware she was being investigated. She said that came from you."

"I didn't mean that you should lose her in the first five minutes," Francine snapped.

Munro accepted the rebuke with the merest inclination of his head. "She's done this kind of thing before," he said in his deep voice. "The way she made our tail, the way she lost us. She's been around."

"Of course. She's a criminal." Francine was tired and irritable. She had arrived from Hong Kong the day before. That Sakura Ueda had actually penetrated her apartment had added insult to injury. Everyone who knew Francine knew that she disliked cut flowers. No friend would have sent them. And her housekeeper's description of the delivery girl coincided exactly with Cecilia Tan's description of Sakura. The insolence of that act was disturbing. Last night Francine had prowled her apartment uneasily, ostensibly checking that nothing was missing, but really casting about for some trace of the intruder's psychic scent. She had picked the bouquet apart, flower by flower. There had been nothing, just a heap of flowers and petals that she'd angrily thrown in the trash. "Don't underestimate her again."

"I won't." Clay Munro was a powerful man in his mid-thirties, with a taste for expensive clothes. His office was a stark place; all the man's many secrets were securely locked behind the impregnable gray steel cabinets that lined three walls. He had been providing security for Francine for two years. She had chosen his services over those of bigger, less personal agencies,. The fact that he was black had appealed to her. Like her, he belonged to a unique community. Like her, he was a formidable fighter. She had never been disappointed in him until today. "I wouldn't necessarily say she was a criminal. She could have fallen under the train, or busted her arms. It took courage to do that. Or desperation."

"What do you mean?"

"She ran like her life depended on it. Like all hell was behind her. She's a very frightened woman."

Francine was leafing through the file. If nothing else, Clay had taken some clear photographs. The young woman standing at the counter in the office, her short skirt revealing good legs, her clean profile set off by the long hair. The young woman out in the street, head down, the sunlight patterning her blouse. The young woman waiting in the subway, her shadowed and melancholy eyes gazing down the tunnel.

"She's five foot seven," Munro said. "A hundred and twelve pounds, brown hair midway down the back, gray eyes, fair complexion. Approximately thirty years old. Pretty. She's got some Asian features, but I'd guess at least one parent was white."

"Perhaps." Her throat tightened. Why was this young woman so familiar to her? Why did she keep seeing flashes of other faces in these images, of her own mother, her own father, her husband? Of course, a voice inside said angrily, that's why they chose her—because she looks as Ruth might have looked.

"Take a close look at the last photo," Munro said. In this picture, Sakura was on the subway train. She had taken off her jacket and laid it on her lap. She wore a simple blouse, and she had pushed the sleeves up to reveal slim, pretty arms. She was staring straight into the lens, her eyes wide. Her face was oval, with a full mouth and a short, slightly snub nose. The eyes were almond-shaped, and in this shot, at least, wore an expression of anxiety.

"What am I looking for?"

He passed a magnifying glass across the desk to her. "The left arm."

Francine held the picture closer, studying it through the glass. Then her heart seemed to stop inside her. Goose bumps washed across her skin. The sleeve almost covered it, but it was there in the grain of the print. A geometric pattern that circled the forearm, parallel zigzag lines.

"It looks like a tattoo," Munro said. "A tribal tattoo."

"Yes."

"Did your daughter get a tattoo like this in Borneo?"

"Not while I was with her."

"Could it have been done later, when she was older?"

"The Iban tattoo themselves like that. But only the men. Not the women. Certainly not a girl. In all the years I visited there, I never saw a woman or a girl tattooed in this way."

"So it's a fake?"

"It's probably a real tattoo. But that doesn't make it genuine. A person who was ignorant about the Iban might have a tattoo like that done, to try and fool me, if the stakes were high enough."

"Or it could be a rare exception."

"I'm not paying you to speculate," she said sharply.

"Okay." There was a yellow light in Munro's eyes. He did not enjoy failure, and he did not enjoy Francine's displeasure. "But she didn't have it the last time you saw her?"

She was silent for a long time before answering. When she spoke again, her voice was strained. "It's strange, but I don't remember the last time I saw Ruth. I don't remember saying goodbye to her or hugging her. I think we must have left without telling her, so she wouldn't be too distressed. Or perhaps I have just suppressed the memory. Not long after we left the village, the Japanese came. They slaughtered men, women, and children. Then they burned down the longhouses. Only a handful survived. Of that handful, the most reliable witness clearly remembered seeing Ruth bayoneted by a soldier. I don't believe my daughter is alive."

"But you still want this girl, right?"

"I don't care what it costs, or how you do it. But find her."

"I'll find her."

"I felt sure it was her, right from the start."

Cecilia Tan, not given to expressions of emotion, was trembling. They were sitting at the very back of The Dragon Pearl, a Cantonese restaurant down the street from the office. Its grimy facade put off all but its regular customers, mostly drawn from the people who lived or worked on the street. Francine nodded for the waiter to pull the carved screen farther across.

"Don't be a fool, Cecilia," she said. "You never knew her."

"I know this," Cecilia replied obstinately. "There is something about her. Some special quality."

The waiter adjusted the screen to shelter them, shielding their table from eavesdroppers or lip-readers. It also blocked off the light from the street, so she could take off her dark glasses. "Repeat what she said," she commanded Cecilia. Though Munro had placed recording equipment close to the reception desk, the young woman's voice had been unusually soft, and only a murmur had been recorded.

"I told her what you instructed me to say. She seemed very shocked. I hinted she might try again in a couple of weeks." Cecilia glanced at Francine. "She said, 'It will be too late by then.'"

Francine grunted. "You didn't ask why it would be too late?"

"You did not authorize me to interrogate her. Francine," Cecilia said, with a rare use of her first name. She had tried to advise Francine against this brutal and foolish course of action, and now her whole small, neat person radiated reproach. "She looked like you, exactly."

Francine was contemptuous. "Nonsense."

"Like you used to be. When I first knew you."

"How was that?"

"She was innocent."

Francine smiled ironically. "And now have I lost my innocence, Cecilia?"

Cecilia shot her a look. "We all lose certain qualities."

"I used to be a soft, yielding, frightened girl who did as I was told. I worshiped my husband. I believed that without a man to protect me, I was nothing. But the war changed me." The carved dragons of the screen cast baroque shadows on their faces, snarling fangs, grasping claws, twisting tails. "I learned to rely on myself and to trust nobody. I learned to survive alone." Francine arranged the chopsticks beside her bowl. "What else about the woman struck you?"

"She was pathetic."

"Then she played her part well."

Cecilia's cheeks coloured. "I'm too old to fall for hard-luck stories," she said. "I felt sorry for her because she was defenceless and unwell."

"She looked sick?"

"There was something about her."

Francine was exasperated. "That must be the hundredth time you've repeated, 'There was something about her.' Can't you think of something substantive?"

Cecilia turned back to her food sulkily. "You asked me to tell you in my own words."

Francine sighed. "Yes, I did." Beyond the dragon screen, the restaurant was bustling. No English was being spoken. For Francine, it was an indulgence to be here, wrapped in the sights, sounds, and tastes of the East, in the midst of Manhattan. Though half of her was Western, she always went for refuge to her Chinese side.

"You still don't believe it, do you?" Cecilia said. "Not even now!"

"Belief without proof is faith. I don't have very much faith anymore."

"What makes you think she's a fraud?"

"Cecilia," Francine said patiently, "I am a very rich woman. And I am not getting any younger. If some credible young person could persuade me that she was my long-lost daughter, what couldn't she get out of me? What do you think I would do, if Ruth were really alive, and came to me again? My joy would be without equal. She would live as a queen. She would take anything she wanted from me, have anything she desired."

The waiter eased the screen aside to put more bowls on their table, pork and shrimp dumplings, stir-fried clams, steamed scallops. He also brought fresh pots of green tea.

"She was deeply hurt when I told her you would not see her. I could see the pain in her eyes. And what's more," Cecilia went on firmly, "I can tell she's had a hard life. She has suffered. But she has survived. And now she has come to you."

"You could tell all this in thirty seconds?" Francine could not help saying, with mild irony.

"Remember that this woman got herself into my apartment under false pretences. No honest person, no person with good intentions, would have done that."

"She came to the office on the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts." Cecilia's eyes were sly, as though she'd made a telling point.

They ate in silence for a while. "Well," Francine said at last, "we'll just have to wait until Clay finds her again. Then we will see what this hungry ghost has to say for herself."

Clay Munro had woken up early on this winter morning. He sat by the window, picking through Sakura Ueda's possessions. He had already been through all her stuff a dozen times, but he couldn't stop going over it yet again.

She didn't have a thing worth more than five dollars. He picked up the tan leather shoe and studied it. It was old, but had been regularly polished, and it had a new heel. The shoe of a woman who didn't have much money, and who had to make her things last. Not exactly the profile of a master criminal. He tossed it aside.

He counted the money. Fifteen dollars and sixty cents. No checkbook. If this was all she had, she was going to be hungry when she woke up this morning. He raked through the other things. A pack of cigarettes, nearly empty. A book of matches. A map of New York, which he pulled open. There was a ballpoint circle around Francine Lawrence's office address, but no other notes. Impatiently, he held the bag upside down and shook it. A few loose items clattered onto his desk.

The woman in the bed stirred into wakefulness. She blinked at him over a smooth, naked shoulder. "What're you doing?" she asked drowsily.

"Nothing," Munro growled. He picked through Sakura Ueda's makeup, his powerful hands surprisingly precise. Cheap stuff. None of it revealed anything about the owner except her poverty. A compact with a cracked mirror. She didn't carry, probably couldn't afford, perfume; but a faint trace of something sweet lingered on the plastic brush. He inhaled, holding it to his nose. Jasmine, maybe. There were a couple of long, glossy hairs caught in the bristles. He pulled them loose and held them up to the wintry light. They glinted tantalizingly. He let them fall onto his desk.

He swivelled the lipstick out of its tube. Worn right down. He licked the pink button. It tasted the way lipstick always tasted, and he snorted the smell out of his nose with distaste.

The girl in the bed had rolled onto her side, and was watching him with her chin cupped in her hand. "Whose is all that skanky stuff?"

"It's work," Munro said tersely.

She laughed. "Boy, are you thorough in your work."

"Shit," he said quietly, tossing the bag away. He'd managed to get just about everything Sakura carried, and there wasn't even an address book in it.

"Come back to bed and I'll let you lick my lipstick, too."

He glanced at her. He'd wound up in a club late last night, where his search for Sakura Ueda had developed into three double bourbons. Although the girl's skin was cream coffee, she'd had her hair dyed blond. Last night,

while she'd flirted with him, that platinum hair had seemed awfully cute to him. This morning, it didn't anymore. "I have to go," he said, dropping a big hint. "Why don't you get dressed?"

"What about breakfast?" she asked.

"I don't eat breakfast." He went to shower.

Munro rented an enormous loft in a building near Chelsea Wharf that had yet to be zoned for residences because nobody had even thought of living in it, except Munro. He hadn't cluttered it up with too much furniture. He was a big man, and he liked space to move around in. He kept the place scrupulously clean and neat. Now and then he bought a sofa or a table he liked, and he had even bought one piece of art, an African mask. The rest of the furnishing was air. Nothing detracted from the spectacular view of the river.

He turned the shower as hot as he could take it. The water exploded off his scarred torso. He'd always worked on his fitness. Growing up in a Brooklyn neighbourhood filled mainly with Italians and Poles, he'd needed to be strong. He still needed to be strong.

As the army doctors had predicted, he didn't really miss the spleen that they had removed. After Vietnam his father had wanted him to join the force. Munro's younger brother, Lou, had already graduated from cop school near the top of his class. But Munro hadn't wanted to put on another uniform. Down the line, he could see himself swallowing the bottle, or a bullet. Winding up like his father. The way his brother was headed.

That was why he had started his own business, so that he would never become someone else's weapon again. He needed to be in control over the strange, dangerous animal that Clay Munro had become.

He dressed, meticulous about the fit of his clothes and the way they matched. He was itching to get back on the trail of Sakura Ueda. She had made a fool out of him, and he wanted to get his hands on her again, soon.

He'd been fully hoping that the girl would be dressed and gone, but she was in the kitchen, wearing one of his handmade shirts out of the closet, frying eggs and bacon. "You look good," she grinned.

"Why are you cooking in my goddamned shirt? Do you know how much those things cost?"

Her smile faded fast. "Hey. You don't have to yell at me like that. "

"Take it off." He picked up the frying pan and shook the eggs and bacon into the trash. "And get dressed. I'm in a hurry."

"You put out some really bad vibes, man," she said stiffly.

He tried to remember her name. It came to him hazily. "Get dressed, Chantal. I want to lock up."

"It's Chiffon, not Chantal!" She hauled off his shirt and flung it at him.

"Thank you." He put the shirt in the laundry basket, stripped the bed, then tidied the kitchen while she dressed, her eyes puffy.

"You're really fucked up, you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Did you manage to erase every trace of my presence?"

"How long you worked in that club, Chiffon?"

"Two months," she said sullenly.

"You have to learn something. You work in a club, guys take you home at closing time, chances are high they're not looking for a permanent relationship."

"Chances are high they'll remember my name next morning."

"I remember the fun we had," he said, trying to be kind.

"Screw you," she said. She walked out the door, her high heels snapping. At least he didn't have to offer her a ride anywhere. He shut his door and locked the two dead bolts carefully, by which time she was out of the building and out of his mind. He was ready to get back on the trail.

Sakura was shivering. She had lost her purse, her last few dollars, and one of her only two pairs of shoes. She felt the loss with the acute anguish that only people who own very few possessions can know. She mourned the shoe more than the purse. She could get by with a plastic bag, if it came to that, but her only other shoes were sneakers, unsuitable for walking in winter. And walking was what she did. She had walked a long way in those tan shoes, and she had relied on them to carry her a lot farther.

The loss of the money was also painful, even though it would have run out tomorrow, anyway. It brought hunger a day closer than necessary. She felt as though a huge chunk of her tight little world had been ripped away. She felt more helpless than ever. I hate you, she thought bitterly. I didn't ask you for anything, and you sold me to my enemies.

She huddled against the window, hugging herself tightly. All those people in the waiting room, stage extras. The vase of carnations lifted onto the counter as a signal.

They did not know that she had survived in cities beside which New York was a kindergarten. They could not imagine the places she had been, or the things she had done.

And she, for her part, had misjudged Francine. She had not expected open arms, but she had expected that the woman would at least let her in and give her a fair hearing. She recalled the face of the man on the train. Americans all looked the same to her, black or white, with their regular features and perfect teeth.

What had she done to merit this? She thought of the flowers she had taken to the apartment. Had the woman guessed that had been her? But she had stolen nothing, damaged nothing. She had simply left an anonymous gift. It had been a stupid, risky thing to do, but her nerves had been taut, and she had needed something to stop herself from going crazy. She had not deserved this.

She rested her head on the glass. She had to get out of New York City. She needed money urgently.

The tiny second floor room looked out at a vista of drab buildings just like this one. Between the buildings, she could see glimpses of the river and the George Washington Bridge. Planes roared overhead every few minutes. There was a railway line nearby, too, and trains rattled past all night long.

The man she rented it from, Stefan, was an Albanian, a street artist. He went out each morning, carrying his chalks and his portfolio. He had a pitch uptown, drawing the portraits of tourists for five dollars a throw. That was how she had met him. He'd had a little paper attached to his fold-up easel, reading ROOM TO LET.

She heard his footstep on the stairs, and pulled away from the window. She forced herself to stop shivering. That was not going to help. She went to the mirror to straighten herself out. She had lost comb, hair clips, and a lipstick in the satchel, and that did not help, either. Luckily, she had left a few things on the basin—her other lipstick, mascara, and a comb.

Everything else she had was in her duffel bag, which stood at the end of her bed. It was an old habit of hers to live out of a suitcase, never to put

anything in drawers or in cupboards. It took too long to pack, if you needed to leave quickly. This way, all she had to do was grab the bag and run.

She used the cosmetics to put some colour in her face. Then she combed her hair and pulled her clothes straight. She practiced some smiles in the mirror, memorizing the warmest one. She slipped on the sneakers, took a couple of deep breaths, and went out.

She knocked on Stefan's door. There was a long pause before she heard him call, "Qui est la?"

She prided herself on having learned excellent English—she was a gifted linguist—but they conversed in French. "Salut, c'est encore moi."

"Entrez."

His apartment had two rooms, both with large, north-facing windows, which she supposed was good for his work. The smell of oil paint and turpentine was intoxicating. Canvases were stacked everywhere. This was where Stefan did his real work, which was startlingly different from the photographic likenesses he churned out in the park. It was very hot. Stefan had stripped to his vest, and was brewing some coffee over a portable gas burner. He glanced at her with dark, opaque eyes. He was not a bad-looking man, though he was twenty years older than she was, and his face was scarred down one cheek. He was a taciturn, contained person who did not waste words.

"Hi," she said brightly, trying to remember the warm smile.

"Something is wrong," he said flatly.

She let the smile go. "Yes, something is wrong, Stefan. I lost my purse today, and I have no money."

"Ah," he said.

"I can't pay your rent," she said quietly. "I can't even buy any food. I was wondering if we could come to an arrangement."

"What kind of arrangement?"

"I could do some work around here. Cook for you. Wash your clothes. Clean the place up. It's pretty filthy. It could do with cleaning."

His sallow face did not change. "If the place is so dirty, why don't you leave?"

"I have nowhere to go," she said, anxiously aware that she had offended him. After Stefan lay the street. She had seen the beggars of New York, and she did not want that. They were what she had dreaded becoming all her life. "I don't mean to insult your house. I'm glad to be here, believe me."

"I don't want anything cleaned. I don't need my food cooked for me."

"I'm a very good cook. I know how to make terrific food really cheap. Oriental, Western, whatever you like."

"I'm not interested in food." He poured boiling water carefully over the coffee grounds, and the bitter smell mingled with the turpentine and linseed oil aroma. "But you could do something else for me."

She swallowed. "What?"

He studied the coffee without looking at her. "Take off your clothes."

She felt sick. She had been raped, and had survived that. But she had never willingly sold her body for money. She had probably done far worse things, in the eyes of whatever gods were watching her, but that was an inner barrier she had never wanted to cross. "I didn't mean that kind of arrangement," she said.

"What?" He was a strange man, and he seemed to have gotten what they were talking about.

"I said, I didn't mean that kind of arrangement. I'm not a prostitute."

He stared at her. "I'm not talking about sex, Sakura. I'm talking about painting you."

"You want me to model?"

"If you're right. Take your clothes off."

She did not trust him, any more than she trusted any human creature. But there was no other way, right now. If he came after her, there was a bunch of palette knives in a jar within reach. She undressed. Stefan stood swirling the coffee in the pot, watching her step out of her skirt.

"Turn around," he commanded. She obeyed, facing the peeling door. "Turn back to face me." Again, she obeyed. Stefan was studying her through half-dosed eyes, a man trying to decide whether a piece was real or forged. "Lift your arms." She did so, waiting for him to say something, do something. At last he nodded. "You can put your clothes back on, now," he said, and turned away.

"You don't want to paint me?" she asked, zipping up her dress.

"I'll pay you four dollars an hour to pose. Three hours at a time. It's not a permanent job," he said, as he saw the light in her eyes. "I can only paint

you so many times. Maybe for a week. After that, it's finished. I lose interest. But while you pose for me, you don't have to pay rent. Okay?"

"Okay."

"When you cease to interest me, you either start paying rent, or you get out of the room. Understood?"

"Understood, Stefan. Thank you."

He had made two cups of coffee, and he held one out to her now. "You want?"

"Yes, please." She took the coffee and drank gratefully. Stefan never seemed to smile. Perhaps, like her, he had suffered, because although she knew how to smile on the outside, on the inside she never smiled, either.

Francine studied the photographs of Sakura Ueda obsessively.

There was a dependable system, Clay Munro had informed her, that could determine whether photographs of an adult and a child were of the same person, by comparing the relative proportions of the faces. But she had no childhood pictures of Ruth. Everything she'd carried with her had been lost along the way. And when she'd finally gotten back to the house she'd shared with Frank in Perak, it was to find that it had been incinerated years before, the blackened wreckage already half-swallowed by the jungle. She had raked through the compacted ash, looking for something, anything, that might recall the life she had lost. All she had found were a few spoons twisted by the heat.

The years had not faded her memories. But her memories were of a child. The photograph she held in her hands was of a grown woman who, if she was who she claimed to be, would now be past thirty years old. There was a similarity, yes. But the Ueda woman wore some makeup, and even a little colour, skilfully applied, could emphasize or minimize a similarity.

Between this grainy black-and-white image and the one in her mind lay a void so great that she could not fill it with her imagination. So many stages had been lost: girlhood, adolescence, the flowering of womanhood. All had passed by without her seeing them.

Once she had Sakura Ueda in her possession, she would arrange blood tests. Those, at least, could give an "impossible" or "possible" verdict, though the technology could not go further. She would scrub the Ueda woman,

scour off her makeup, strip her, and see if the similarity stood up when she had nothing more to hide behind.

More importantly, she would find out whether the Ueda woman had photographs of herself as a child, or as a teenager, closer to the age Ruth had been. Such photographs, if they existed, could fill in the gaps in a way that nothing else could.

Whatever story the woman told of herself would be colourful and probably pathetic, but would count for little. Not, at least, until Francine had some harder evidence. Pathetic stories were easy to dream up. The girl had already twisted Cecilia Tan around her little finger. She was probably a consummate actress. In a sense, Francine did not want to meet the woman, or even see her, for fear she might get sucked in, too. Perhaps, once they got their hands on her, Francine would ask Clay Munro to hold her in some secure place, and get an intermediary to do the interrogation. That way, they could make decent progress before she had to face the woman in the flesh. Yes, that was probably best.

Francine got up and made herself a pot of jasmine tea. Her balcony doors were open, and the constant noise of Park Avenue traffic filtered in. Since the intrusion she had decided to get herself a dog. The result was diligently chewing one of her slippers on the balcony, a golden bundle of fluff she had christened Mr. Wu. He was a chow chow, a member of that breed the Chinese called Lion Dogs, famous for their devotion to their owners and their distrust of strangers. Francine expected Mr. Wu to have sharper instincts than Julia Lo, the elderly housekeeper who took care of the apartment for her.

She went out to check on him. At her arrival, the puppy rolled onto his back and beamed up at her adoringly, his blue-black tongue lolling. She bestowed on him one of her rare smiles.

Someone had once told her that dogs saw only in black and white. That had seemed logical to her. Dogs were not easy to fool. That was what she liked about them. Dogs knew by instinct whether people were good or bad. They were not taken in by charm or a sweet smile or a plausible story. They could give you an instant yes or no, and they did not change their minds.

She reached down and tickled the puppy's silky stomach. "Good boy," she murmured. She already felt fonder of him than she was of most people she knew. "Good boy."

Clay Munro walked into the public library. The place was swarming with kids from a neighbourhood school doing some project. For once, the building hummed with life, its echoing spaces filled with chattering voices.

He crossed the atrium and went to the counter. He leaned over. "Anybody home?"

His sister Vivian looked up from a filing cabinet and smiled. "Hi. I got your books."

"Great." Vivian was the closest of his sisters in age, only two years older than he, and maybe for that reason had been the only sister who hadn't routinely whacked him as a kid. Maybe that was also why she was now his favourite.

"I asked Central to send me everything they had, Clay. You probably won't need all of them. Pick the ones you want."

He hoisted the leaden pile onto the counter. Vivian had got him at least two dozen books on the Iban of Borneo, mostly heavyweight anthropology tomes. He flicked through them, looking for photographs. "You're an angel, Viv."

"How's it going?"

"Okay. You?"

"Yeah, never better." He looked up to smile at her. It was a smile Munro gave nobody else, warm and real. Vivian was going through a tough time. Her marriage had broken up, and she'd been left with three children to support on her own. She fiercely fought all his attempts at financial help, but he knew she was finding it hard to manage on a librarian's wage. "I mean it," she said. "I'm happy in the Lord."

He nodded. She'd got hooked up with a local church and was going through a religious phase. Munro didn't care so long as they gave her support. He also hoped she would meet a decent man there. She was a sweet-faced woman with a heart as big as a house, and he hoped she wouldn't be alone for long.

"You dating anybody?" she asked. With the racket the school kids were making, for once they could talk in normal voices. He hated the creepy silence that hung over libraries.

"No."

"You prefer meaningless encounters with strangers."

"All I can get."

"You're wasting the best years of your life, Clay," she said earnestly. "You don't know what you're missing. There's no love in what you do."

"No complications, either."

"I could introduce you to some wonderful girls."

"No, thanks."

"You'd be very surprised," she said.

"So would they." He had picked the three books that contained the most illustrations. "I'll take these. The rest can go back."

She stacked the books. "It's Mom and Pop's golden wedding anniversary next month. The fourteenth."

"I hadn't forgotten," he lied.

"We're buying them a silver dinner service."

"You don't think Mom's cleaned enough forks in her life?" Their mother had worked in a restaurant kitchen for forty years, and had needed a double hip operation as a result. Vivian ignored him.

"It's really beautiful, in a velvet-lined box. It works out at fifty dollars each."

Munro took out his wallet and passed her a hundred-dollar bill over. "Here."

"I'll send you change," she said.

"Don't want change."

"I'll mail it to you."

"Vivian," he said firmly, "buy your kids a present from me. Please."

She put the money away reluctantly. "You're going to be there, aren't you?" she demanded.

"Sure."

"This is their golden wedding anniversary, Clay. I'll call you the day before," she said meaningfully. He had been known to miss family occasions before, preferring to field the furious comments of his sisters the next day than spend an evening with his father.

"Okay." He blew her a kiss. "Gotta go. Thanks for the books."

His office was not far away, and he walked there fast. The operation to find Sakura Ueda was becoming expensive. He had built a good team specifically for the job. But looking for a needle in a haystack was nothing compared to locating an individual in greater New York, especially an individual who had shown such a marked aversion to being located. Munro didn't even know if she was in the city. By now she could be in Chicago, for all anyone knew. Or in Tokyo.

His best immediate hope lay in the venal instincts of others. Munro had placed ads in the News, the Times, the Post, and The Village Voice. He had also put ads in a dozen smaller papers and publications. He was lucky enough to get the second or third page in some. The announcement was the same in all cases. It read, "SAKURA UEDA: Would she, or anyone knowing her whereabouts, please contact this number immediately." There was a photo, the clearest one. And the clincher, in bold characters, "LARGE REWARD."

If no helpful Judas turned up in the next couple of days, he was left with the prospect of a mass hunt, a costly operation that could last months and still fail. He went into his office and sat at his desk. He had some of the surveillance shots that showed Sakura's tattoo, and he spread them out to compare them with the photographs in the books Vivian had found him.

Borneo had always seemed a dreamlike place to him, somewhere that only existed in wild stories, so it was a surprise to see in the photographs that it was a real place that looked a lot like Vietnam.

The Ibans were, he learned, a warlike and aggressive tribe. The photographs showed handsome, healthy-looking people. In most cases, the women went bare-breasted, the men just about naked. Their perfect physiques had not been stunted or bloated by any modern disease. The men were often heavily tattooed, mainly on the chest, forearms, and thighs. He found a passage that explained how the tattoos were done, by piercing the skin with a bamboo punch and a hammer. Getting the tattoos was a manly ordeal, so he learned, as well as an adornment. It didn't sound like something that would be popular with women. And he could not find a single photograph showing a tattooed Iban woman. Francine Lawrence had been absolutely right about that.

He picked up one of the photographs of Sakura Ueda. The girl was beautiful. That was one incontrovertible fact. Francine Lawrence was a handsome woman, too. Could this really be her daughter, come back from the dead?

Francine was right to be sceptical. She was worth millions. She would be crazy to let some gutter kid fool her, live high on the hog at her expense for a couple of months, then clean out the wall-safe when her back was turned. Munro respected few people, but in the time he had worked for Francine, he had come to respect her. He liked her hardness, her courage. He liked the fact that she was half-Chinese. She didn't think the way white people thought. She could think in reverse, the way he could. She looked in the

shadows as well as the bright places. She could see the shapes of things that weren't there and hear what wasn't said. It was sometimes the most important observation of all.

He stared at Sakura Ueda's image now, wondering what he was missing, what he wasn't seeing, what wasn't there.

Sakura was tired. She felt pared to the bone. Her deep muscles had started to shake, and it was getting difficult to hold the pose Stefan had put her in. If only she didn't feel so weak inside, if only the coughing would stop. The stifling warmth of his room made her skin prickle. She had suffered equatorial heat without sweating, but now she could feel it beading her eyelids and her upper lip. Another bout of coughing shook her.

"Can I smoke?" she asked hoarsely.

"With that cough?" he said, concentrating on his canvas.

She swallowed, her tongue stiff as a piece of leather. "I need a break, Stefan."

"In a while." He changed brushes. "Don't move your arms."

"You haven't even looked up for the past half hour."

"Don't move."

She sometimes wondered why he wanted her at all. She thought his photographic stuff was remarkable, but his oil studies of her were very different, not recognizable at all. He cut her body into pieces, like a chicken carcass in a market, a breast here, a hip there. "I need to rest, Stefan."

He tossed his fistful of brushes down irritably. "Very well. Rest."

"Thanks." She had to stay polite, keep pleasing him. He was her bread and butter. She was in pain as she got off the chair. She stretched her arms upward, trying to get some air into her lungs. Stefan's eyes were on the rise of her breasts.

"You want to fuck?" he offered.

At once she was wary. "I told you. That was not the arrangement."

"It might help us both relax."

Sakura tried not to show her anger and disdain. After all, he could not see her suffering, or sense her spirit. "No. I want a cigarette, please."

Stefan walked toward her. Instantly, she tensed, her weight riding on her back foot. Stefan stopped short. Naked as she was, she looked as though she was ready to rip him open. The way she crouched made him think of

some dangerous animal with razor claws. He held up one hand in a placatory gesture. Then he drew the blue pack of Gauloises from his pocket and offered her one. Warily, she took it and lit up. "You want coffee?"

He meant the cold, black dregs of what he had brewed that morning, and she shook her head. "No."

"How long do you need?" he asked.

"Five minutes."

"Five minutes, no more."

Sakura pulled on the stained gown and wrapped it around her body. She walked to the window, sucking on the cigarette hungrily. The strong, acrid smoke sank into her lungs, making her cough. Tiny, luminous stars swam in front of her eyes. She waited for the dizziness to recede.

She smoked and coughed, her mind far away. Stefan was sitting with a cup of coffee, reading the New York Post. He never bought newspapers, usually managing to pick up a discarded one in the street. "Your French has a strange accent," he said laconically, flipping the pages. "Where did you learn it?"

"Vientiane," she replied absently.

"Vientiane?" He seemed unsurprised. "Is that an interesting place?"

It was his only term of judgment. Things were either interesting or not to Stefan. No other distinction seemed to matter. "Yes," she replied, "Vientiane is interesting."

"Really? I would have thought the opposite. It must be a poor and miserable country, Laos."

She did not bother to contradict him. "It's a poor country," she replied neutrally.

"Is that where you got those tattoos, in Vientiane?"

"No. They were done when I was a child."

"They are strange. But I don't paint them. I'm not interested in the skin. Only in the bone, the muscle. That is why I wanted you. You are very strong, very agile. You're a metisse, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So you are a child of the dust. There is no shame. At least you were conceived in pleasure. Are you ready to work again?"

"Not yet." Uninvited, she reached for the cigarettes, which he had left on a table, and lit a fresh one.

He grunted in annoyance, opening his mouth to argue or complain. Then something in the newspaper seemed to catch his attention. He bent forward to study it intently.

Sakura turned back to the window. A plane thundered overhead from La Guardia, its shadow momentarily throwing a huge black cross into the room. Her imagination snatched at it desperately, so that for a moment she was almost aboard the plane, surging up into the clear skies. If only she could fly out of here, back to Louis. She had been here too long already. The whole voyage, the whole idea of approaching Francine Lawrence, had been an insane gamble. She had ex-pended her last resources, material and spiritual, in doing it. She had failed, and now she was stranded, like a beached fish, gasping, dying.

"You can go."

She turned back to Stefan. "What?"

"You can go," he said. "I'm done."

"I thought you wanted to paint some more?"

"I just remembered that I have to go out." He rose, carefully folding the newspaper. He reached in his pocket, and pulled out some money. He peeled off twelve dollars and gave them to her. She had posed for no more than an hour, but she took the money, not about to argue with his sudden change of mood. "You're going to be here tonight?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Where else would I be?"

He peeled off another ten dollars and gave them to her. "You said you could make good food. Go buy something for tonight."

She took the money cautiously. He had changed in some indefinable way. "You want me to cook for you?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Well, okay. What do you want to eat? Fish? Chicken? Meat?"

"I don't care."

"Do you eat pork? Pork is cheap."

"Anything," he said. He opened the door for her, still clutching the newspaper under his arm. But his eyes did not meet hers. She knew that something was wrong, but she could not guess what. Her mind hunted for the hidden danger.

"Cooking a meal doesn't mean I'm ready to play house," she warned him bleakly.

"Be here by six," he said. "I don't like to eat late."

"Okay, Stefan."

As she left, she caught sight of the canvas he had been painting, parts of her body, butchered like a chicken on a market stall.

He reached Francine at her office. She ordered the clerk out, and gave the telephone call her full attention.

"I just had a contact," Clay Munro said. "His name is Stefan Georgiou. He says he's Sakura Ueda's landlord. He described her accurately. Right down to the tattoos on both arms. He also claims she has other tattoos. She's been posing in the nude for him. He's an artist."

She snorted audibly. "Where is he?"

"In the South Bronx. He wanted a thousand dollars. We settled on five hundred. That all right with you?"

"I'll bring the money," she said. If five hundred dollars was all she had to pay, then she would have got off cheaply. "Is the girl there now?"

"She'll be there at six o'clock tonight. I'm going to get her."

"Pick me up at the office, Clay. I want to come with you."

"I wouldn't advise that," he drawled.

"Why not?"

"She could put up a fight. I'm going to ask two off-duty cops to come along as backup."

"No police," she said bluntly. "You were too heavy-handed last time."

"I was, huh?"

"You scared her. That's why she ran. I'll bring Cecilia."

"You, me, and Cecilia Tan?"

"Yes. She has no reason to run away this time, Clay. If she does, you will stop her."

She hung up. She had brought Mr. Wu into the office with her. He was lying under her desk. When she had hung up the telephone, she reached down to touch his golden fur. "Now we'll see," she whispered to the dog. "Now we'll see what's real and what's not." She pressed the intercom and summoned Cecilia Tan.

Cecilia came in. "Mem?"

"Clay has found the girl. We're going to pick her up tonight."

It was raining heavily, thunder rolling around overhead. Munro got out of the car and popped his umbrella. He went to meet Francine Lawrence and Cecilia Tan, who were emerging from the building. He ushered them into the elegant new car he had just bought for the firm, a blue Cadillac.

"Have you spoken to Georgiou?"

"Yes. He lives in a second-floor apartment. He says she'll be cooking a meal when we get there. He'll leave the door unlatched. She doesn't suspect anything. All we have to do is go in quietly and confront her."

"Then let's go."

He lifted a large hand. "One thing. You let me go in first, Mrs. Lawrence. She might get excited when we first get there. I don't want you exposed to any danger. Okay?"

"There won't be any danger," Francine said. But his eyes stayed on hers like two yellow moons until she shrugged impatiently. "All right, Clay. Whatever you say."

They found Georgiou's address, a drab building on a shabby street, within sight of the skyscrapers of Manhattan, but in a different world. There was a railway bridge nearby, and a train crossed it as they cruised by, making a hellish din. Munro drove by the front without stopping, and went on around the block, investigating. The back of the row was a spider's maze of rusting fire escapes descending to a narrow alley that contained rows of overflowing, dented garbage cans, all but blocking the road. Munro had trouble squeezing the Cadillac past, inwardly cursing as one of the huge rear fins scraped on something.

He had been counting off houses, and he stopped the car. "This is the back of Georgiou's place," he said. Another train clattered across the bridge, making a rhythmic, melancholy tumult. Immediately afterward, an airliner thundered overhead, invisible above the clouds, rattling such garbage cans as still had lids. Rents here were low, and you could see why. He himself had grown up in an alley just like this one, on Jamaica Bay. In a backstreet like this one he had learned to fight and flee. The fire escapes looked as though nobody had inspected them for years. The sash windows were steamed up. Probably nailed shut against the hoodlums.

"Okay," he said, setting the car in motion again, "let's go in."

He parked the car out front, wondering if he would still have hubcaps when he returned. They walked two flights of stairs, nobody speaking. At

the door of Georgiou's apartment, he glanced at the women. Francine nodded briefly. He pushed the door open, and went in first, entering a steamy miasma of oil-paint fumes and cooking.

Georgiou's apartment was dingy, crowded with canvases. A sallow man wearing a vest was working at an easel. In the next room, a young woman was stirring a large pot on a portable gas burner. The young woman turned. Her long brown hair was hanging over her eyes, and Munro did not get a clear glimpse of her face. She wore jeans and a white shirt. Against the white material, her bare arms were golden.

Francine began to say something, but Munro did not catch the words. He saw Sakura's hands grab the handles of the big pot, and he was already jumping aside, knowing what she intended. The boiling contents of the pot hissed through the air, spattering one wall. Munro felt some of it scald his hands.

She threw the pot after the stew, aiming at Munro's head. As he ducked, Munro had time to admire the incredible speed with which she moved. Then she had vanished, and Munro heard a door opening and slamming.

Leaving Francine and Cecilia stunned, he took off after her. She had left through a tiny laundry area. He vaulted the ironing table she had overturned on her way out, and opened the door at the far end. He was in the corridor again. He hesitated, cursing. Then a door at the far end opened, and Sakura ran out. She was carrying a duffel bag. She gave him a quick look, then took off down the stairs.

He sprinted after her, calling her name. Christ, she moved fast! He took the stairs four at a time, but was only just in time to see her cross the hall, heading for the back exit. The heavy bag was slowing her down, but not much.

He ran after her into the alley. He was damning Francine Lawrence for having turned down his offer of police backup.

In the alley, with exultation, he saw that the girl had collided with some garbage cans, and was stumbling over her own bag. He could have brought her down with a football tackle, but he was afraid he might break that delicate back.

He grabbed her arms tightly. Her flesh was warm. "Hey," he said, "it's okay. Don't be frightened." Without letting her escape, he turned her to face him. "It's okay," he repeated. "Nobody wants to hurt you."

Then he was looking into her face. She was more beautiful than he'd realized. Her eyes were almond-shaped, but the irises were a clear gray. They stared into his, and he saw the naked terror in them.

"Sakura," he said, "relax, it's okay."

The duffel bag dropped from her nerveless fingers. She went limp in his arms, her eyes half-closing, her full mouth opening. Alarmed, Munro let one arm go to support her body, his hands going around her slim waist.

Under his palms, he felt the muscles tighten, and knew he had made a mistake. She wrenched herself free of him. Her hand lashed at his face. In the last millisecond, he saw the wide-bladed knife in her fist. The razor edge whipped past his eyes.

"Jesus," he said. "Take it easy!" As he grabbed for her again, she swung her hip and shoulder back. She kicked the way karate fighters did, using the whole weight of her body to drive her heel forward.

The blow landed square on the place where the shrapnel had gone in. He felt the air burst from his lips, saw the world go black. The pain was unbelievable. He went down backward. The wet sidewalk struck him in the back, cracking his head.

He knew she was gone, and he did not bother trying to get up in any hurry. How had she known? Clay Munro had not the slightest doubt that in the few seconds she had been in his arms, the woman had felt out his weak place, and had deliberately struck there. What intuition had guided her?

Coughing hollowly, he got onto all fours. Francine came running out and helped him to his feet. "Where is she?" she demanded, panting.

"Long gone."

"Clay, I'm sorry. So sorry. I should have listened to you."

"Yeah, you should," he said in a tight voice.

They made a sombre group. Somewhere out there, the girl was running, coatless and bareheaded, in the driving rain. Francine doubted she would ever see her again. Not in this life. And Clay Munro had rightly told her that she had interfered with his arrangements and directly contributed to the disaster.

They sat in Georgiou's stinking room, the rain beating at the window. The artist had demanded his five hundred dollars anyhow, saying he had done his part. It had been Francine's instinct to refuse, but she wanted him

to tell her everything he knew about the woman, and she needed Georgiou's cooperation.

Clay Munro was breathing raggedly, and holding his chest. But he was playing the hero, refusing to call a doctor, saying he would be fine in a while.

Cecilia Tan sat by the sink, periodically wetting the cloth she held to her cheek. Cecilia's thick overcoat had protected her, and the burn on her cheek was painful, but not serious. None of them had tried to chase the girl. Only Munro would have had a chance of catching her, and he had been lying stunned in the alley.

If they could only learn why this young woman kept running, why she wanted to meet, but only on her own terms, why she reacted so violently. By now, Francine knew that she had made a terrible mistake in not following Cecilia's advice, right at the beginning. She had underestimated Sakura Ueda in a hundred ways.

"Tell me about the tattoos," she commanded Georgiou. "Draw them for me, if you can."

The Albanian picked up a sketch pad and a stick of graphite. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and traced out the hourglass shape of a woman's body. "A bracelet on each arm, here and here. And here, on the point of each hipbone, a flaming star. All done with black dye." He sketched in the tattoos carefully.

"Did you ask her where she got them?"

"I asked her if she had got them in Laos, and she said no. That was all."

"Laos?"

"She said she lived in Vientiane." He was intent on his drawing, shading in the triangle of pubic hair. "Then one day she said she had lost her bag and all her money. She wanted to do some housework to pay the rent. I asked her to pose instead. She had an interesting body."

"Did she sleep with you?" Francine asked.

"Is she your daughter?" he asked, black eyes meeting Francine's.

"No," she said automatically.

"Then you have no right to ask this question." He finished the drawing, tore it off the pad, and passed it to Francine. "But I'll tell you anyhow. No. She did not pay me that compliment. But she was a good model."

Francine looked at the sketch. Georgiou had a quick, photographic skill. The body he had drawn was perfect, though he had not given it a head.

"What else?" she asked.

"What else?" Georgiou repeated. He looked at the chaos on the floor regretfully. "She said she was a good cook, and it looks like she was telling the truth. Also, she smoked a lot, and she had a bad cough."

They went to her room. Francine hadn't expected to find anything, and there was nothing to find. The shelves and drawers were empty. Apart from a comb and some cheap makeup in the sink, the room was as bare as if nobody had been living in it at all. The woman had been ready to leave at any moment. She had simply snatched up her duffel bag and taken off. Francine had to admire the fierce simplicity of that. She had once lived that way herself long ago.

As they left, Georgiou offered to sell her one of his canvases. She refused. "If you had done a portrait of her, I might have bought that," she told him. "These are just figure studies."

"I do portraits in the park," he said contemptuously. "Here I paint."

She shrugged. "You haven't tried to paint her face or her character, only her body. That doesn't interest me."

"Her body was exceptional."

"But there was more to her than that."

"Of course. The mixture of races is always interesting. That is what I told her." He laughed silently, looking her up and down. "You are two of a kind, you and Sakura. I wish you good hunting."

Munro stared at the paintings all around. Georgiou had seen Sakura as an arrangement of bone and flesh, not as a person. These were not portraits, but everywhere in them were to be seen Sakura's taut lines, Sakura's coiled strength, Sakura's animal beauty.

They walked out of the building. Cecilia Tan was crying." I told you," she threw at Francine. "Why won't you ever listen, Francine? Why are you so arrogant?"

That last look, just as she'd fled, plagued Francine like a ghost. Could it be possible? Could there be such things in the strange pattern of life? She could not bring herself to believe it. This girl with the haunting eyes, this stranger, this huckster: Could she be what had become of Ruth?

Munro groped for the telephone. He'd fallen asleep in his chair with a hand clasped to his side, like the gory print of Jesus with doubting Thomas that

his mother had chosen to hang over the supper table. He'd had people in the Bronx searching for a trace of Sakura for four days, and he was half-afraid they had tracked her down, beaten him to the kill. "Yeah?"

"Hey, man. It's me. Randolph."

"Yeah," he said, straightening in his chair. "Got something for me?"

"I sure have, baby."

He grunted. His snitches had been calling him for days. The scent of money was in the air, but not a single one of them had been able to describe Sakura accurately. "Well, don't keep me in suspense."

Randolph's soft giggle floated down the line. "What's it worth?"

He bit back his impatience. "Twenty bucks."

"What? Fifty, man. At least."

"We'll see," Munro said. "What have you got?"

"A half-Chinese girl, running wild, sleeping rough? Tattoos on her arms? That what you want to hear about?"

His heart jolted. "Yeah."

"You know where to find me," Randolph said. "I'll be waiting." He hung up.

Munro cursed and stared at Georgiou's drawing, which lay on his blotter. The two flaming stars framed the pubic triangle provocatively. Georgiou had drawn the breasts high and youthful. He recalled the feel of her body in his arms, the combination of suppleness and strength. Next time he held her, he promised himself again, there would be a different conclusion.

He unlocked the drawer of his desk, and stared down at the .38 automatic that lay inside. He looked at the gun for a long time. The scenario played through his head with a grim inevitability. If he drew on her, she would call his bluff. And then, he would have to either shoot her or toss the gun away.

He closed the drawer again and relocked it.

As he walked out, his secretary called after him. "What time are you coming back, Mr. Munro?"

He did not turn. "When I've found her."

Clay Munro looked up at the Vietcong flag. It was a full-size one, covering one wall of the shabby little shop. The whole place was dedicated to protesting against the war. Its stock-in-trade was posters of Ho Chi Minh,

books printed on cheap brown paper detailing American atrocities, NLF flags, cheap "Vietnamese" kites, and other artefacts, just about everything made in Thailand. He peered in the back. Randolph was drinking beer with half a dozen others, mostly blacks, with one or two white faces. He knew most of them from VA: the ones who had come back and organized marches, painted placards, made speeches. He felt ambivalent toward them, the way he'd felt toward civil-rights demonstrators in the sixties. He knew where they hurt, and he believed in what they were doing. But he felt as though he lived in a different world from them, and he knew he could never do what they did.

He edged in among the crowd, smelling the weed on the air, until he reached Randolph. He put his hand on Randolph's shoulder. "Hi, Randy."

Randolph swung on his crutches. "There you are."

"In person."

Randolph had lost a foot at Khe San. They'd made him an artificial one, but he'd never got the hang of it, and preferred the aluminium crutches. He was more than a little stoned, and his eyes were bloodshot. "Hey, there's a bong going around. You want some?"

Munro shook his head. "I'm working."

"We could go upstairs. I got a private supply. We could get a little high, talk about old times."

"I got no time, Randy. Tell me about the girl."

Randolph held out his hand, rubbing his finger and thumb together. "Cross my palm with silver."

Munro gave him a fifty. "What you got, Randolph?"

Weed and beer had got Randolph's brain cells working. "If you'll pay fifty, you'll pay a hundred. Right?"

Munro's patience ran out. His fingers closed around Randolph's arm. Randolph's body jolted. "Hey, man!" he gasped.

One or two people looked up. A silence fell, but nobody said anything. Munro forced himself to let go of Randolph's skinny arm. "Tell me what you heard."

"Under the Cross Bronx, at the Bruckner Interchange," Randolph said sullenly. "There are some condemned tenements where winos hang out. There's a girl hiding out from something. She's got tats on her arms."

"Can you be more precise?"

"That's all."

Randolph was rubbing his arm. Munro felt bad, but it was too late for apologies now. "Thanks, Randy."

He walked out of the place, but not before he heard Randolph mutter, "Fuck you, man," behind his back.

He got in his car and drove toward the East River. He could not stop running into that alleyway in his mind, recalling his own overconfidence, reliving the hard little heel that crunched into his chest. Clay Munro, Purple Heart, private dick—laid low in an alley by a hundred-pound girl with Chinese eyes.

Now he would flatten her like the alley cat she was. He thought of her, alone and penniless, fighting off winos. It was still raining hard. Good, he thought grimly. All of it would soften her up. He parked the car in front of a hardware store and walked.

Buildings were older here, windows broken or boarded up, razor wire or broken glass atop walls covered in graffiti. He reached the end of the street. Ahead of him lay an expanse of foggy marshland that went down to the Bronx River. The developers were at work here. Three blocks had been levelled and reduced to slag. A tall signboard explained, with illustrations, what they were doing, but he did not even glance at it. The first yellow machines had arrived, and were parked in a row, a lone watchman guarding them from inside a shed. Munro kept going, passing the first big square plain of rubble and wet earth.

She would have had a plan, he knew that. Someone who lived with her suitcase packed and ready to take off in three seconds flat would always have a plan telling her where to go next, even if the plan was a desperate one. Before she even moved into Georgiou's apartment, she would have marked down her next hideout.

The cold was biting into his chest. The next plot had a huge depression in the centre, which had filled with rainwater, like a bomb crater. Reflected from the far shore of the river, the city skyline quivered upside down.

On the third plot, a lone three-story building stood, looking as though it were ready to fall down at any moment, now that the support of its neighbours had been knocked away. The vandals had already been through it, and

not a window remained. But as Munro approached it, his nostrils caught the smell of human excrement. The Bruckner Expressway swept overhead. There was no question that this was the place.

He walked around the building, studying it. Where the buildings on either side had been demolished, pipes and beams spilled out, like organs from a ripped carcass. There were no signs of life. The tenants had long since been cleared out. But that smell was unmistakable. There was only one door, and when Munro tried it, he found it locked.

Munro rammed his shoulder against it. It splintered open at the first attempt and he stumbled inside. Unexpectedly, a wave of heat swept into his face, carrying the stink of unwashed, alcohol-sodden human bodies.

Though the original tenants had gone, others had populated this place. A woodstove was burning in the centre. Around it, a dozen or more vaguely human shapes were curled up in sleeping bags or piles of discarded garments. Human derelicts had drifted into the derelict building and had made it their home. On this cold day, all were sleeping. Two or three dishevelled figures raised their heads at his intrusion.

Munro passed into the next room. It was the communal kitchen. Food stolen or scavenged from Dumpsters lay rotting everywhere. Several large rats slunk off as Munro entered. He did not envy the cops who would soon be brought in here to evict this colony of vagrants.

He emerged into a hallway. Stairs led upward, littered with debris and thick with dust. But there were footprints in the dust. He stooped. Some of the footprints were small enough to be hers.

He started climbing the staircase, looking upward cautiously. He reached the next landing, which was piled high with broken toilets, basins, and baths. This level seemed deserted. It was icy-cold up here, rain sweeping in through the broken windows. The rest of the inhabitants had huddled downstairs for warmth.

"Devil," a mad voice suddenly screamed in his ear.

Munro sprang away, the shock clenching his heart.

"Git outta here, you devil!" the voice yelled.

Munro backed away from the mad voice. The man was crouching in a corner, bundled in rags. His eyes gleamed like coals above a snarl of black beard. He had drawn something like a star on his own forehead with charcoal. He pointed a skinny finger at Munro. "Black devil!"

"Is she up here? The girl? Is she here?"

"Git back to hell!" the man screamed.

Munro backed away slowly, not wanting to turn his back on the man. He explored the other rooms. All were empty but for rubbish. The madman kept screaming that he was a devil and telling him to go back to hell. There was no trace of Sakura. But when he checked the steps that led up to the next floor, he saw only one set of prints in the dust, small ones.

"Git outta here, you black devil," the madman shrieked.

"Will you shut up, for fuck's sake?" Munro snapped at him.

The man scuttled away, falling silent. He curled himself in a taut knot in the corner and buried his head under a pile of rags. Munro's breath was clouding around his face in the icy air. He started to ascend, very cautiously, aware that whoever was up there could easily crack his skull with a brick.

"Don't come up any farther."

He stopped dead, peering up. There was no sign of her. The voice had been low, but it had carried perfectly. He had no doubt it was her. "Come down, Sakura." He started climbing again, stealthily. "It's over. Don't make me hurt you."

There was no reply.

"You have nowhere else to run. You might as well realize that."

"Stop." She appeared at the top of the stairs. Her hair was streaked with dust, her cheeks gaunt. She must have been half-frozen up here. And half-starved. "Stop there, or I'll kill you." Her breath clouded at her mouth. Her accent had Asian intonations.

"You're not going to kill me, Sakura. You got me by surprise last time. That won't happen again. I know you have the knife there."

She had her hands behind her back, and now she brought them forward. She held the knife, point upward, in her left hand. It was wide-bladed, razor-edged. She held it in a way that told him, without any shadow of doubt, that she knew how to use it. He smiled bleakly. "Very scary." He kept on coming up, slowly and cautiously.

She didn't reply, melting away from him as he came up, the knife pointing toward him. He was probably strong enough and skilled enough to take it away from her, but she could open a couple of arteries first. He didn't want to bleed to death in this shit-hole.

He reached the top. Most of the partition walls up here had been broken down. It was colder than ever. She was wearing the same clothes as at Georgiou's place, with a couple of sweaters pulled over the shirt, not nearly enough to keep out the chill. She looked as dirty and deranged as the others in this place.

"Don't come any closer," she told him, crouching lower. The point of the knife traced restless circles in the air. He could not help noticing how graceful she was in her every movement. Every turn of her hands or limbs expressed a vibrant animal confidence. But he was afraid of her.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Did Jai Han send you?"

"Who the fuck's Jai Han? I'm the guy you knocked down in the alley behind Georgiou's place. My name is Clay Munro. I work for Francine Lawrence."

She hesitated. "You're lying."

He made an effort to soften his tone. "Look, why don't we get out of this dump? I'll take you somewhere to eat, freshen up. When you're ready, we'll go see Mrs. Lawrence. In your own time. Okay?"

"It was you in the subway."

"Sure, it was me in the subway."

"I will never let you take me back to them."

"Back to who? Listen, the only person I work for is Mrs. Lawrence. I'm here all alone. To tell you the truth, I was wounded in Vietnam, and you kicked me right in the wound. My chest hurts like hell. I don't mean you any harm. So put the blade away, okay?"

He heard a sound behind him, and turned quickly. The madman had crept up the stairs and was watching them, eyes gleaming from his thicket of hair.

"Go back where you came from," Munro commanded him, trapped between these two crazy people.

"You go back where you came from," the man hissed. He saw the knife in Sakura's hand, and cackled. "She's gonna stick you, devil!"

Munro scooped up a piece of rotten plaster and hurled it at the madman. It splattered on the man's chest, startling him. He scuttled back down the stairs, muttering to himself.

He whirled back to face Sakura, half-expecting to find the knife buried in his sternum at any moment. "Your neighbour's kind of eccentric, isn't he?" he said. He was as close to her as he dared go, almost within stab or slash range. Her lashes were thick, and very long. The skin of her mouth reminded him of some jungle flower, an orchid maybe. He had been pursuing her with grim determination for days, yet now he felt a strange sense of privilege in being permitted to get so close to her, as though he were in the presence of some rare animal. And, despite the knife, he was also starting to worry about her. He could see now that her whole body was shaking. "You can't keep running."

"Go."

The point of the knife stopped moving. In two seconds he would be fighting for his life. "Listen, Sakura," he said, "you haven't a dime, you have nowhere to go, and you're afraid of just about everything. You can't stay here. The bulldozers will be here anytime, if those good folk downstairs haven't eaten you alive before that. You really have no choice but to trust me. You look terrible. Give me the knife."

As though exhausted, she lowered the blade at last. She looked like she might fall. He took the knife out of her limp fingers. His hand touched her brow. "Jesus. You're burning up."

"I'm afraid."

"It's okay, Sakura," he said. "We're getting out of here."

But she could not walk any farther. Her mouth had filled with something warm and salty. She knew what it was. She choked and spat. Blood spooled out of her mouth in a brilliant scarlet ribbon that spattered on her chest.

Then her legs were crumbling, and she was falling into darkness, the light closing above her.

There was a knock at the door, and Julia Lo ushered Clay Munro into the apartment.

Francine rose to her feet. "Clay?"

"I found her," he said.

"Where is she?" she demanded. He looked exhausted. Her eyes suddenly dropped to the bloodstains all over his jacket. Her heart shrank into a hard ball. "Oh, my God, Clay—is she dead?"

"No," he said. "She's not hurt. She's sick. She has tuberculosis."

She touched her throat. "Tuberculosis?"

"She was coughing up blood when I found her. The doctor wants to put her in the hospital right away. I wanted you to see her first."

Francine drew a shaky breath. "Where is she?"

"Asleep at my apartment. The doctor gave her something to bring the fever down. It knocked her out cold. One of my sisters is with her. Mrs. Lawrence? Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yes. Can you take me to her?" she asked in a whisper.

"That's what I'm here for."

She sat in silence while Munro drove her through the rainy streets. He gave her a brief account of how he had looked for Sakura over four days, finally lucking out in a derelict building, where he'd found her half-frozen and delirious with fever. He told her how she had threatened him with a knife, then had suddenly begun to cough blood, and had collapsed at his feet.

By the time he'd gotten her to his apartment, she had been feverish. When the doctor had arrived, she had quieted. The doctor had questioned her, and she had told him what was wrong with her. Pulmonary tuberculosis.

"You've done an extraordinary job," Francine told him mechanically. "I won't forget this, Clay."

They arrived at Munro's apartment. He led her up. Munro's sister let them in.

"You don't have to be quiet," she told them. "The doc says she won't surface for hours."

But they all fell silent as they approached her bed.

A small light burned by the bed. Sakura Ueda lay on her back. Her tangled hair was spread out across the pillows. Her skin was covered with a sheen of sweat.

Slowly, Francine walked to the bed, and looked down into her face. Again, she felt that painful rush of emotions.

She had been nearly the same age as Sakura Ueda was now when she had discarded what was left of her emotions. The loss of Ruth, and the other suffering she had undergone, had left her remote from other people, disconnected from ordinary things. Her love for Clive, the last thing that had anchored her to a woman's feelings, had died and burned out during the exhausting post-war years.

The only hope had been of somehow finding Ruth alive again. But that hope had never borne fruit, and in the end, she had come to see that hope was a torturing disease that never let its victims go until they were gray ash. In order to protect herself, she had blotted out her feelings and relinquished hope. That meant accepting that Ruth was dead. It meant driving Clive away from her.

Since then, she had bestowed her attention on inanimate things—money, possessions, work. She was even prepared to cherish Mr. Wu the puppy, precisely because he was not a human being. She had become a Nuhuang, empress, a woman to be feared and obeyed, but never understood, never loved. She had doomed herself to live in a place the Ibans called Sabayon, the land of the dead.

Now she was being recalled from Sabayon. Maybe the question was not simply whether Sakura was really her daughter or not, but whether she could bear the reawakening.

She had felt guilty about Clive for all these years. Together, they had sailed from Singapore to Borneo. Together, they had crossed Borneo on foot. After the war, he had wanted to be at her side. In a sense, she had used him. When she'd needed him most, he'd been there. Without him, she would not have survived. Then she had discarded him. Had it just been cold practicality? Or had she always loved him? Just as she'd never stopped loving Ruth?