

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BARBARA HAMBLY

**BRIDE OF
THE
RAT GOD**



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Dedicated, with all my love, to
Whiskey,
Smudge,
Nicholas,
and the Eternally Beautiful Kismet,
without whose love and company
it would never even have occurred to me
to write this book.

Special thanks are due to Dawn Jacobsen and Marc and Elaine Zicree, for the use of their libraries; to Doug Heyes, for indulging my questions about old times and his father's career; to Bob Birchardt, for letting me pick his brains about antique cinematography; to the staff of the Hollywood Studio Museum; to Margaret Carey, for starting it all; and especially to Laurie Perry, for all her help in shaping this book into what it is. All quotes below chapter headings are from the I Ching.

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A BIOGRAPHY OF BARBARA HAMBLY

AFTERWORD

ONE

WATER OVER THUNDER

Sign of Great Sacrifice
Do not go anywhere...
Find a local guide...
Stopped amid much confusion and milling about—
it is best to form a partnership...
Marriage for the Maiden is not yet in the signs—
it will come...

IT WAS NOT that there were no warnings.

But for a long time no one believed.

Exhausted, the girl stumbled to a halt. Though clouds were gathering fast over the ebony sky, sufficient moonlight lingered to transform the low ground fog into a chill silver lake that dampened the dark silk of her dress and made it cling with the clammy grip of a spider's web. Her black hair lay in a disheveled cloak about shoulders blanched chalky by the dead light. The blood on her hands showed black as well.

She swung around, startled, enormous eyes straining to pierce fog and darkness, and one hand stole to her throat. In the heavy necklace she wore a jewel flashed, an enormous opal white as the fog. When she took her hand away, the blood on her fingers left three streaks on her alabaster skin.

She began to run again, desperately now, like one who realized there was nowhere to run, no hope of escape.

At the cliff's edge she could run no farther. Dark gaped before her suddenly, and she staggered in the tangle of dead vines, staring into the abyss. Her hand fluttered to her mouth; she turned again as if to run back, but a broken branch underfoot gripped the torn silk of her gown like the hand of death. She tugged, sobbing, and in that moment dark forms materialized behind her from the ghostly scrim of mist. They were the men who had pursued her from the cluttered brightness of her lover's bedroom, where lamplight gleamed on a dead man's pooling blood. They were retribution.

The girl sprang back, hands thrust out in wordless terror and denial. Under one high satin heel the cliff edge gave. She grabbed as she fell at the gnarled knots of an old tree root, and for an eternal moment her body dangled like a glimmering pendant above the tossing lake of vapor. The men waded through the ferns, but the black vines clung to their feet, pulling them back as

they reached for the bloodied white hands.

Her grip slithered from the wet roots as their fingers brushed hers.

Later they found her in the black jumble of rock, shattered branches, and steel-cold water, the white gem of her necklace shining eerily, like a fragment of alien moon.

“Where on earth did you film that?” Norah Blackstone reached for the curved Cubist rainbow of the brazen door handle, and her sister-in-law put a small, staying hand on her wrist.

“Darling, don’t! You can’t go out ahead of me or even *with* me. We filmed it up at Big Bear Lake, except that first part near the house—that’s the Burbank golf course. I thought I’d *freeze* to death in that awful stream, but Campbell insisted. He’s a fiend for authenticity. Thank *God* Charlie had a flask on him, but I swear they should arrest that bootlegger of his for poisoning. Stand over there and wait just one minute, darling.”

Norah stepped obediently back. Her diminutive companion drew a deep breath, shook back her torrent of dark hair—augmented for the occasion to match the film—and flung wide the door into an explosion of flash powder and journalistic Hollywood adjectives. “Stupendous!” “Chrysanda, you’ve never been more stunning!” “Gorgeous...” “Ravishing!” “Fatal beauty at its most devastating!” “*Kiss of Darkness* is a picture that shakes you to the soul!”

Norah, reflecting that her soul hadn’t been shaken in the least, waited until the voices had drawn away a little from the door, then stepped forth herself with what discretion was possible. Chrysanda Flamande, raven coiffure a splendor of suggested disarray and the cold white gems of her necklace glistening on a breast like Carrara marble, had taken up a position in front of a gleaming bronze warrior, carefully chosen so no photograph would include a door bearing the inscription LADIES LOUNGE. Her kohl-dark eyelids lowered, her red lips curved in her famous enigmatic smile, and she stood with one hand on her black silk hip and the other raised as if to support her back-tilted head. Flash powder coruscated once more, leaving a haze in the air like a battlefield and calling echoes from the diamonds that thickly adorned the white wrists, the prisoned midnight of her hair.

“Miss Flamande, is it true your next picture is going to be with Valentino?” “Miss Flamande, how did you feel to be playing a scene so similar to the actual death of your fiancéé the Count d’Este?”

Chrysanda Flamande’s dark eyes widened, seeming to burn with emotion under the hundred minuscule electric bulbs concealed in the arched ceiling. “An artist uses everything that befalls her,” she said, her deep, husky throb quite different from the child-sweet tones in which she’d spoken to Norah moments before. “Grief as well as ecstasy. Lucien was killed in a tragic and

terrible accident rather than taking his life like the man in the film, yet it was I who found his poor body sprawled in a pool of blood. And yes, the horror, the despair I felt then was in my mind as I enacted that scene. It is always in my mind. Sometimes I think I shall never be free of it.”

She passed a bejeweled hand across a brow suddenly twisted with pain. “The director did not know, naturally; the scenarists did not know. I could not tell them, knowing that any change would lessen the impact of the film. But I knew. And I felt. Yet unless one is able to devour life in all its glory, to radiate it forth again as art, no matter how great the pain, one is nothing but a sham.”

From a respectful distance—namely, out of camera range—Norah shook her head at the aptness of that final phrase. “Nothing but a sham” accurately summed up the mythical Lucien d’Este’s existence and, in fact, most of the studio-written biography of Chrysanda Flamande. With her soul-devouring eyes and nightshade hair, her slender body and restless, ethereal movements, she certainly looked as if she could have been born of a Greek concubine and a French soldier in the harem of the Grand Turk of Constantinople a solid nine years later than her actual birth date. There were still times when Norah didn’t know whether to be appalled or to laugh.

Mostly she found herself laughing.

Two months earlier she had not thought she would ever laugh again.

Sixty days ago, almost to the day, she had seriously considered stealing a razor from her then-employer’s son, filling the upstairs bathtub with hot water, lying down in it, and cutting her wrists. According to classical authors, it would not have taken long to bleed to death and would not have hurt much.

That had been on her twenty-sixth birthday. She hadn’t known then how she was going to endure another gray Manchester winter, another year of pain. Another year of Mrs. Pendergast’s hypocrisy, pettiness, and spite.

Whatever else could be said of her, her beautiful sister-in-law—vain, selfish, and apt to float through life on a sea of pink gin and discarded lovers—had rescued her from that, and the gift of renewed laughter was among the most precious she’d ever received.

“One owes it to oneself, as the poet says...” The throbbing voice broke into her reverie once more, “...to drink life’s wine to the very lees, to grasp life’s roses, never heeding the thorns...”

Chrysanda—whom Norah couldn’t think of by any other name than Christine, which was how she’d first known her—passed under the baroque arch and down the stairs toward the lobby, barely to be seen among the mob of reporters. Norah smiled a little and followed, admiring in passing the Grauman Million Dollar Theater’s very un-Manchesterian decor of Shakespearean murals, gilded arabesques, and curlicued niches containing

statues of warriors, cowboys, and what looked like dance hall girls.

Her aunts would have told her the gratitude she felt toward Christine was perfectly proper... but ought not go further than that. One shouldn't, of course, actually *like* THAT kind of woman...

Norah shook her head again, this time at her own weakness of character.

Mrs. Pendergast had not approved of the cinema; thus Norah, when she came down into the lobby in her sister-in-law's wake, recognized almost none of the faces in the crowd that jostled for position around the staggering buffet at the far end.

Mary Pickford she did recognize, though her ringlets were upswept this night to alter the girlish sweetness into adult and shining intelligence. *Pollyanna*—the last film Norah had seen—had been made four years earlier and even then the actress couldn't have been as young as she had appeared on the screen. Douglas Fairbanks, too, she identified immediately, mostly by the way he moved. Norah smiled again at herself—she was probably the only person in the civilized world who hadn't heard of their marriage.

And that extraordinarily handsome young man with the brilliantined black hair had to be Rudolph Valentino, judging by the fuss the reporters were making over him.

"I must speak to Miss Flamande!"

The voice was soft but came only a few feet from Norah's side; turning, she saw a fan who had somehow gotten through the police lines. Fans were an aspect of Hollywood life for which she had been unprepared. Two ushers were already conducting him to the wall of plate-glass doors that formed one side of the theater's lobby. A tall old man, Chinese, Norah thought, certainly very different from most of the mob who pressed so close to the velvet ropes and the barrier of police and uniformed ushers under the blaze of the marquee lights.

"It is a matter of life and death!"

"Yeah, sure, they all say that, Grandpa."

The old man tried to pull his arm free of the usher's grip. Thin and tall—taller than Norah, who was taller than most men—he wore his long ash-white hair unqueued, hanging loose around a face hollowed like ancient ivory and down over bony shoulders. In one twisted hand he clutched a walking staff as tall as him with a carved dragon on its head; with the other, he tried to shake the ushers thrusting him inexorably toward the doors. In his baggy Western-style suit he had the air of a dilapidated scarecrow, but his eyes were those of a displaced god.

"Look, you want to tell Miss Flamande something, you write her a letter care of Colossus Studios."

“I tell you it will be too late!” The old man half twisted in their grip, looking back at Christine, who had been joined by an enormously fat man with a coarse, pouchy face framed in badly cut black hair.

More flash powder, more tugging of reportorial forelocks: “Mr. Brown, can you tell us about the rumor that you’re planning to take over Enterprise Studios?” “Mr. Brown, what’s Miss Flamande’s next project going to be?” “Mr. Brown, is it true you’re bringing D. W. Griffith out from the East to direct Charlie Sandringham’s next picture?” Three or four stunningly beautiful girls hovered in the background, gazing at the black-suited behemoth with expressions of adoring fascination while Christine put one arm most of the way around his back and leaned into him with every graceful line of her saying “love and trust.”

A. F. Brown owned Colossus Studios.

In a way, Norah supposed, she, too, ought to be expressing worship, or at least gratitude, since it was ultimately his money that not only paid for Christine’s house but had enabled Christine to bring her here to this bizarre world in the first place.

She glanced at her wristwatch. It was precisely nine-fifty and twenty seconds.

Curious, she thought, looking around the lobby, how thin they all looked in real life, Pickford and Chaplin and Mix. Thin and tired and just a little fragile. They were probably all anxious to get to bed. Most of the players she *had* met in the past six weeks, she had never seen on the screen until tonight. Like Flindy McColl, Christine’s best friend, red-haired and giggling on the arm of a studio Adonis named Dale Wilmer, or Roberto Calderone, the handsome Mexican who’d emerged from the fog like a vengeful specter and caused Christine to step back and plummet to her death over the cliff.

Or, more accurately, Norah revised, had caused Christine to step back and that good-looking stuntman—Kenneth? Kevin? she’d never heard his last name—to plummet over the cliff wearing Christine’s black silk dress and eerie opal necklace.

Kevin or Kenneth was near the refreshment table, helping himself to beluga caviar and lobster patties beneath a glittering life-sized ice sculpture of Rameses II. The young man, slender and athletic even in a tuxedo, talked animatedly to Charles Sandringham, last seen lying in a pool of blood on the floor of Christine’s—*Chrysanda’s*—boudoir. Sandringham was sneaking nips from a silver hip flask, and Norah guessed he’d done so all through the premiere. Sober, he’d never have put his hand on the young stuntman’s arm that way in public.

She checked her watch again. Three minutes had elapsed.

“If you’re waiting on Miss Flamande for something, I warn you they’ll stand there gassing to the press for half an hour at least.”

Norah turned in surprise. A pair of very bright brown eyes, slightly below the level of her own, blinked at her behind a pair of very thick spectacles. Perhaps, she thought later, her aunts were right and Christine *was* a bad influence on her, because instead of the retreat proper to a young woman of her station, she said frankly, “Oh, I’m not waiting. I’m just checking to see how long it is before Christine comes over to me and says, breathlessly, ‘Darling, we’re all going over to Frank’s house, so could you possibly take a cab home?’”

He considered the little group. “How long have they been at it?”

“Three and a half minutes.”

“I’ll say eight, total.”

“You don’t know Chris. I make it six and a half.”

He produced a pocket watch from his much-worn tweed jacket and compared it with the plain, brushed-steel Elgin on her wrist. “I’ll still say eight. That’s Doug Fairbanks talking to Brown now, and Brown doesn’t know him well enough to ask him to his party in less than five. And what makes you think I don’t know Chris?”

He snapped the watch shut. Norah noted how soft and uncallused his hands were, though by no means weak or unworked. They were also covered with small nicks and cuts, chemical stains, and abrasions. He bit his fingernails and evidently kept a cat.

“I’m sorry.” Norah smiled ruefully. “Of course you might.” Her mind snagged on his voice, realizing that she *did* know him from somewhere... “I’ve only been here six weeks, and she must know other people besides actors.”

He drew himself up with great dignity, fully four inches, she guessed, under her own loose-boned five foot eleven. “And what makes you think *I* am not an actor?”

“Your beard,” she replied promptly. “And your hands. And the fact that you’re speaking to me and not hovering around the producers.”

“*Darling.*” Chrysanda Flamande broke momentarily from the group in question, casting a glance of soulful longing over her shoulder at Brown that would have shamed Duse playing Juliet. “Darling, listen, Frank’s asked us all over to his place after this *dreadful* affair is over and I haven’t the *faintest* when I’m going to be home, so do you think you could get a cab?”

Norah automatically checked her watch, and the little man with the beard and glasses turned quite gallantly away to examine the mural of King Lear and Cordelia on the wall behind him lest Chrysanda Flamande see how hard

he was working not to laugh.

“Of course, darling,” Norah began, but as usual, her sister-in-law was already babbling, “I knew I could count on you... I’ll see you in the morning...” as she flitted back in a firestorm of diamonds to couple herself once more to the studio head’s massive arm.

“Have you tried saying, ‘I’m so sorry but I’ve suddenly developed a morbid psychological complex about cab drivers?’ That was seven by my watch.”

“Curse you, Mr. Fairbanks. I’m still closer by thirty seconds.”

“So you are.”

A scrimmage of red uniforms caught her eye. It was the Chinese gentleman, who had tried to reenter the lobby through a small door in a gilded wall niche, arguing, gesturing with his twisted, crippled hands. Norah’s companion said, “Ah, another life-or-death,” and Norah regarded him in surprise.

“You heard what he said?”

“Lot of them say that.” He pushed his glasses more firmly up onto the bridge of his nose. “You came in with Chris. You saw the fans. Cleopatra rolling herself up in a carpet to see Caesar is like an appointment with a social secretary compared to some of the tricks they’ve pulled.”

“Hmm,” said Norah. Masses of men and women—dressed with a casualness that she found unnerving—had lined the sidewalk eight and ten deep beneath the garish posters in front of the theater as Christine had docked her enormous yellow Nash roadster at the curb with her usual lack of accuracy, shouting her name, reaching through the police lines to touch her as she walked through them with that slight, seductive sway, her enormous coat of sables half drooping from alabaster shoulders and the lights of the marquee sparking the white opals of her necklace. Norah had followed, feeling invisible as usual, clothed also in black—though far less fashionably—and leading the small string of Pekingese without which, these days, Christine was never seen in public.

The Pokes—Christine’s latest affectation—currently resided in the theater manager’s office, Chang Ming doubtless sprawled on his back waiting for someone—anyone—to come play with him, Black Jasmine jealously guarding all three of the toys Norah had left to amuse them, and Buttercreme hiding in the darkest corner under the desk, her tongue lying like a little pink welcome mat on the floor before her flat nose.

Her companion’s voice drew her attention again. “So, listen. I’ll pay for the cab and buy you a cup of coffee at Enyart’s Grille on La Brea if you’re willing to stop. I’m Alec Mindelbaum.” And as if he sensed her proper

upbringing withdrawing from the undocumented introduction, added, “I did the camera work on that epic that just—ah—shook us to the soul.”

“Ah.” Norah remembered him now. He looked very different in a suit. “Of course. And I’m the—I believe you used the phrase ‘butterfingere nitwit’—who let Miss Flamande’s Pekingese get away on the set yesterday with such enlivening results.”

It was his turn to blush, which he did rather readily behind the close-clipped rufous beard. “I know,” he said a little shyly. “I feel I owe you a cab ride and a cup of coffee just for that.”

The crowd in the lobby was thinning, changing color and composition as sotto voce invitations to Mr. Brown’s party circulated. The press still surrounded the buffet like sharks feeding on a dying whale, but the flutter of beaded dresses and the black of formal evening clothes were bleeding away, leaving only a muddy suit-brown.

“Nonsense,” said Norah. “I haven’t been in Los Angeles long, but I saw how long it took Mr. Hraldy to rehearse everyone and set the lights. I don’t wonder you were furious. I think Chang Ming saw a mouse under the queen of Persia’s divan.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. That shooting stage must have started life as a mule barn.”

“And, of course, Black Jasmine would die before he’d let himself be outdone. I suspect he’s still under the impression he’s going to grow up to be a wolf. Your offer of a cab must include them, you know.”

“I know.” Mindelbaum grinned and held out his arm to her with an old-fashioned courtliness that took her by surprise. No man had treated her with such consideration since she’d left London. “I’ll cherish to my grave the look on the manager’s face when Chris said she’d leave them in his office during the show.”

“Which was quite unjust of him, since they’re the most fastidious animals you could hope to meet. On the boat from England and later on the train crossing the country, they always waited for their promenades on the deck or down the station platforms, for which I was *infinitely* thankful, since, of course, I was the one looking after them and Christine wouldn’t have so much as scolded if they’d killed and eaten the conductor.”

Mindelbaum left her beneath a poster of Christine and Charles Sandringham—like moths to a candle’s DEVOURING FLAME, it said—and went in quest of their coats. Outside the glass the crowd still milled, striving for one last glimpse of cinema godhood. Norah could almost feel them glance at, and dismiss, Mindelbaum’s threadbare tweed and her dowdy black crepe.

It was a dismissal she’d grown used to long before she’d come here to

the ends of the civilized world. The Manchester version of it took in the outdated shirtwaists and mended shoes, the heavy stockings and hands chapped from washing Mrs. Pendergast's underwear, and said, *Oh. Poor relation.* The Hollywood version was, in a way, more democratic. *Oh. Not a star.*

A younger Chinese, clothed in the baggy black quilting common to Chinese from the Limehouse to the Barbary Coast, had appeared through the same discreet doorway and stood talking to the ushers and the old man. "You must forgive my grandfather," he said, bowing to the usher. "He has not long been in your country."

And the old man gestured, furious, at the poster of Chrysenda Flamande smoldering in the doomed and noble Charles Sandringham's arms.

There was a surge of movement from the direction of the buffet. Sandringham, after thirty-five years of ruling the stages of the West End and Broadway, still possessed of exquisite hands and patrician bones, proceeded to the doors in company with his beautiful stuntman. They paused so that Sandringham, clearly in his cups, could light the young man's cigarette. *The Dick's Hatband Brigade*, Jim would have said with a raised eyebrow. Norah was reflecting that her mother would never have credited such a thing of her idol when Alec Mindelbaum's voice asked in her ear, "That bother you?"

"So long as he doesn't light up at a table where I'm eating, no." She caught the appreciative twinkle in Mr. Mindelbaum's eye as he helped her with the worn black coat she had bought for Jim's funeral.

The manager appeared, bowing and trying to keep two very lively little dogs and one extremely unwilling one from tripping every departing reporter in the room. Norah took pity on Buttercreme and picked her up, carrying her across the lobby to the doors.

Nothing about Los Angeles had so convinced her that she had come to an alien world—an alien universe—as the weather. All week it had been as warm as an English summer, and even tonight's flickers of rain had done no more than dampen the streets, yielding a breath of asphalt and a confusion of yellow reflections from the multiglobed streetlights on the Los Angeles version of Broadway.

An usher summoned a cab, which edged from the porridge-thick traffic while everyone crowded around Mr. Sandringham's silver Dusenbergs. Across the street and up a block, the Pantages and Palace theaters emptied hordes of casually dressed men and smoke-trailing women: Mrs. Pendergast would have retired to bed for a week in a fit of scandalized modesty at the sight. Motorcars wove in front of yellow streetcars and hopelessly impeded their progress. Against the glow of the sky, feather duster tufts of palm trees spread

their spiky fans; Norah noticed that a good portion of the people passing before the otherworldly office building opposite were brown-skinned Mexicans and Chinese in their traditional black pajamas and queues, many more than she had seen in Hollywood. She had heard someone mention that Chinatown lay nearby.

As Mr. Mindelbaum helped her into the cab amid much tangling of leashes and a good deal of “*Down, Chang! Sit, Jazz! Off, Chang! No, Chang! Down, Jazz!*” something caused Norah to look back at the theater.

The ancient Chinese gentleman had halted there despite the tugging of his grandson and now gazed worriedly back into the lobby, as if debating the possibility of returning for another bout with the ushers.

On both sides of the entry, Sandringham and Chrysanda gazed and smoldered; the poster artist had flattered the actor by a good fifteen years and had made Chrysanda’s gown far more revealing than it was in the actual final sequences of the film, though God knew, Norah reflected, it was scanty enough. The old man gestured at the poster again, saying something; then he made a quick and universal sign, slashing his hand across his throat.

The grandson shook his head as if to say, *There is nothing to be done.*

As her cab pulled from the curb, Norah saw the pair of them cross through the lights and crowds around the Pantages before they vanished into the dark of Fergusson Alley.

TWO

FIRE OVER LAKE

The working together of opposites—two
women dwelling together of opposite temperaments,
or a man and a woman...

Regrets disappear—do not chase a lost horse,
it will return. No danger in seeing an evil person...
Alone and abandoned, you will meet friends...
Alone and abandoned, you see pigs wallowing
in mud and demons riding in carts.

“I WILL SAY this for her, Christine’s a trooper.” Alec Mindelbaum removed his glasses and polished them with a paper napkin from the cheap tin holder at one end of the much-stained and cigarette-burned pine table. “I must have shot fourteen takes of her running across the golf course that night while Campbell tried to figure out which way he wanted to light the ground fog. If it hadn’t been for the fog, he could have just shot day for night with a red filter and tinted the stock blue, though you have to be careful about shadows.”

“It was a beautiful sequence,” said Norah, meaning it. “The sense of isolation was stunning.”

“Considering we had Doc LaRousse and his portable generator just outside the frame line, and Gus Campbell tripping over the cables on the ground, and Mary DeNoux tearing the wardrobe tent apart looking for the spare copies of the dress, and the musicians trying to drown it all out with Mussorgsky,” Alec said, “I was pretty proud of how isolated it *did* look. But Gus is a genius at setting shots. It’s a shame Chris can’t act.”

Norah whooped, and he looked stricken.

“I’m sorry. I forgot—”

“Don’t be, because of course it’s quite true.”

He still looked like a flustered teddy bear, and Norah had to smile. He was, she judged, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, the age her husband would have been now if he and a hundred other men had not tried to charge a machine-gun nest in Belgium five years earlier with nothing but rifles in their hands. His dilapidated tweed jacket was on economic par with her too-long frock of black crepe, unfashionable without quite bordering on the antique. Evidently cameramen didn’t earn anything near the salary of a leading lady. Nor, she reflected, did they have the option of sleeping with the head of the

studio. Not at Colossus Pictures International, anyway.

Enyart's Grille, on La Brea Avenue a few blocks south of Chaplin Studios' row of toy box bungalows, was a simple wooden building with an open kitchen and an L-shaped counter with a polished brass foot rail that hinted trenchantly at what the place had been before Prohibition. It appeared to be the gathering place of cameramen, of men with paint and plaster daubed on rough work clothes, of scenarists with sheaves of paper under their arms—and it seemed to Norah that an awful lot of those people bypassed the makeshift tables and went straight through to a discreet door in the back. A far cry, she thought, from the papier-mâché palms and stuffed monkeys of the Coconut Grove or the Baroque Spanish splendors of the Biltmore.

"I forgot you were Christine's... sister?" He regarded her doubtfully, clearly comparing her height and Irish complexion—not to mention her accent—with the raven-haired pocket Venus who had thus far sent a dozen desperate cinematic fools to love-struck graves.

"Sister-in-law." Norah looked up as the waiter appeared, a shirtsleeved individual who looked as if he'd been strung together from random lengths of bamboo. "Tea, if you please." Chang Ming and Black Jasmine emerged from beneath the table to sniff the waiter's shoes. Buttercreme retreated still farther, as far back as her leash would permit.

"You have to have tea in the place somewhere, Jack," pointed out the cameraman. "The usual for me. They make an apple cobbler here that brings tears to strong men's eyes."

"Well, I haven't had a good cry in—" The words tripped her as she recalled the circumstances of the last time she had shed tears. She went on quickly. "—in at least a year and a half. Cobbler for me, too."

Jack winked a bright green eye at her and vanished in the direction of the kitchen.

A year and a half? Norah had made up the number. She couldn't remember how long ago she'd stopped crying. There had been a long period—years—of numbness, a feeling of having something broken inside that hurt her beyond bearing every time she moved. She had drawn quiet around her as she would have padded herself in quilts, not moving or wanting to move, waiting stoically to heal. Perhaps that was why it had been so easy to remain in Mrs. Pendergast's house in spite of the old lady's tyranny, in spite of Lawrence Pendergast and his boorish friends. She might have had to clean up slop jars and fend off the attentions of men who felt that a woman in service was fair game, but at least she didn't have to look for a way to live on her own. For a reason to live at all. The pain had eroded her until she wasn't sure she *could* be or do anything else.

That was when she'd found herself thinking about suicide on her birthday. She didn't know what she would have done if Christine had not flounced through the door trailing a confusion of mink, cigarette ash, and beads.

She raised her head with a start as the waiter set a white, thick-handled mug in front of her with the air of one disowning all responsibility. The tea was nearly the same color as Mr. Mindelbaum's coffee. Across the table he was looking at her with concerned eyes.

"Sorry." She reached for the milk.

He pushed it to her. "That bad?"

"Not really." She shook her head. "I married Christine's brother when he was in England on his way to the front. He was killed eight months later. Of course, my family were horrified, but my parents at least didn't disown me. My grandparents did after my parents and brother died of flu the following year. I nearly died myself. At the time I thought it would have saved me and everyone else a lot of trouble."

His thick red brows bent together. "They were that set against you marrying an American?"

"They were that set against me marrying a Jew," Norah replied calmly. "Blackstone started out as, I think, Blechstein." Her jaw tightened as she remembered what Jim's parents had called her in the letter she'd received when, in desperation, she'd written to them for help. True, she thought, they were still grieving over his death. But it no longer surprised her that Christine had changed her name from Chava and left home at fifteen years of age.

"Some of my aunts might have helped me—the Anglo-Irish side of the family was all suffragists and socialists and didn't mind Jim so much—but all but one of them died as well. Our part of London was hit very hard. Mother was desperately overworked—we didn't have servants by that time—and we simply couldn't afford a doctor. Father's money had been invested in Russia, and when their government collapsed, we lost, quite literally, everything. There was no question of my going back to Oxford. I had worked as a VAD, but that was over, too, and I ended up as a companion-cum-maid to a woman in Manchester named Cecily Pendergast: rich, ill, and demanding. I just... shut down."

She held her hands over the steaming tea, turning them over for warmth. It was a habit she'd acquired in those years, though the yellow-lit restaurant was warm and friendly compared to the cold of the servants' kitchen where she'd sat all those nights with nothing but tea for either heat or company.

"It's easy to do when you can't see a way out." He carefully turned his coffee cup so that the handle lined up with the grain of the table. "The three

years I spent working in a paint factory, I don't think I said more than 'Hi, how are you?' to anybody for months at a time. I had to talk myself into not quitting every night, because what the hell were my mother and sister going to do if I tried to make a living taking pictures?"

The corner of Norah's lips tugged slightly. "And what *did* they do?"

Mindelbaum blushed at how easily she'd read him. "Well, I had a sort of *deus ex machina*."

"As did I. What was yours?"

He shook his head, hesitated a long time, and then said, "The war."

All those fresh-faced boys wandering in uniform around the London streets, staring at the soot-black Georgian shops and twisting alleyways as if they'd never seen anything so old before... A tall young man with curly black hair gazing around an expensive lingerie shop in the Burlington Arcade as she came through its doors: *Could you maybe help me find something for my sister?*

"You enlisted?"

"I left New York so I wouldn't be drafted." He pushed his glasses more firmly onto the bridge of his nose. "Friend of ours who ran a tailoring business married my sister for the same reason and took Mama into his household to make double sure they wouldn't get him. I felt like a heel, but damned if I was going to die at twenty-two because the Kaiser wanted to see if his army could beat the French."

The brown eyes met hers with a kind of calm defiance, as if he expected her to slap him with her gloves or pull a white feather out of her handbag and give it to him. Instead she poured a dollop of cream into her tea and an even larger dollop over the steaming plate of caramelized fruit that had appeared in front of her at some point during her narrative. "What did you do? I mean, did the draft board trace you?"

Alec shook his head, and his shoulders relaxed. He went back to turning his cup. "I was just one name, and I never stayed in one place very long. I took pictures. Portraits of kids, wedding pictures, church groups, that kind of thing—and, in my spare time, pictures of the things I wanted to take. Old buildings. Dead trees. Empty towns. People's dogs. I spent months in Louisiana taking pictures of old plantation houses—the ones that got burned out by the Yankees—and what happened to the ones that were left, crumbling back into weeds and ruin. Just seeing what time will do to wood and brick and people's faces." He looked up at her again. "What was your *deus ex*?"

"Dea, in my case," Norah said, toying with the cobbler. "This past September Christine was vacationing in the south of France and came to England to buy dogs, of all things." She leaned her head around to look

beneath the table. The dogs returned her gaze with big, round, solemn eyes. Five eyes, to be precise—Black Jasmine, like many Pekes, had suffered eye damage as a puppy and had had one eye removed. Indeed, Christine’s willingness to take in a half-blind dog was one of the first signs of kindness Norah had seen in her sister-in-law. When they saw Norah looking down at them, their ostrich-plume tails curled up a little tighter over their backs and they licked their flat noses in anticipation.

“Forget it, children.” She returned her attention to the pie. “I will *not* have Christine feed them from the table, by the way; it makes them into completely intolerable pests, besides being not at all good for them. She bought them in England, you know. She’s a fiend for anything Chinese.”

Mindelbaum grinned and leaned down to ruffle Chang Ming’s lion-colored mane. “Oh, yes. I’ve watched her trying to out-Chinese Flindy McColl for eighteen months now. Flindy got some kind of antique mah-jongg set just before Chris left for France—in retaliation, I think, for the ‘ancient Chinese necklace from the Forbidden City’ that Frank Brown gave Chris. Which read surprisingly well on film, I thought. I wasn’t surprised to see Chris come back with Pekingese.”

Norah rolled her eyes. “I thought there was something behind that. Anyway, the woman who bred these dogs lives outside of Birmingham. Someone told Christine I was in Manchester, but not under what circumstances. Mrs. Pendergast called her a ‘film person’ and insisted that she only be admitted into the kitchen, and the servants’ kitchen at that.”

“Why?” He leaned his chin on his hands, fascinated. “I would have thought a respectable Midlands matron would have fallen all over herself to have a film star in her living room.”

“Not Mrs. Pendergast.” Norah smiled. “She said that Christine was no better than she should be and would probably steal the furniture. She and Christine had a quarrel you could have heard in Blackpool, and the upshot was that Christine said she was taking me out of there. I suspect the fact that the breeder wasn’t about to let her dogs go to someone who hadn’t made provisions for feeding and brushing and caring for them played a part. It occurred to Christine that I would be ideal. Prior to that afternoon,” Norah added with a kind of wonder, “I would no more have considered living in Hollywood than I would have considered relocating to the South Pole. Then, the next morning, I was getting on a boat. It was...very odd.”

Under the table Buttercreme stood on her hind legs and put delicate forepaws on Norah’s shin, gazing up at her with melting eyes. Norah sighed. “All right, princess, up you come. But don’t presume on it.” She hoisted the ivory-pale bitch to her lap.

“You glad you did?”

She thought for a moment. *God, am I!* seemed the appropriate reply. Yet she remembered the nights of anxiety in her tiny servant-class stateroom, her exhaustion and misery as she rebelled against the never-ending stench of Christine’s cigarettes in her clothes and hair, the other woman’s nonstop brainless blithering, and those occasions when she’d had to help her—incapably drunk or giggling helplessly on cocaine—to bed. How many nights, she wondered, had she sat on the floor with Black Jasmine or Buttercreme in her arms, wishing with all her heart she was back in her dreary but familiar attic in Manchester?

All those things still bothered her—more, in fact, since she’d come to care about her sister-in-law’s health and sanity—but looking back, she was beginning to see how much of her reaction had been the holdover of the pain that had driven her almost to suicide: loneliness, change, and the desperate craving for things she would never have again.

Her parents’ love. The quiet studiousness and sense of purpose of her years at Oxford. Jim.

Jim.

Slowly she said, “I’m more surprised at myself than anything else, really. I was raised very properly. When you grow up in London and go to Oxford, even Manchester seems like the antipodes. California is like... like Oz or Barsoom. And speaking of Barsoom, who on *earth* designed that train station?”

Mr. Mindelbaum threw back his head and laughed at the comparison. “God, the pink peanut stand! I don’t know, but I think he’s working in the prop department at Famous Players-Lassky by this time. Have you seen Grauman’s Egyptian yet?”

“No, but I’ve been to Frank Brown’s estate in Beverly Hills, and I’m told it’s much of a muchness. I must admit—”

“My dear Mrs. Blackstone!”

Byron’s Corsair, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and Rupert of Hentzau rolled into one, her mother had said with a twinkle in her brown eyes. Even several sheets to the wind, his coin-perfect profile attached to a face badly lined, Charlie Sandringham still moved like a prince and spoke like Zeus from Olympus. It was more than a pity that motion pictures were silent, Norah thought. In his case it was a tragedy.

“A pleasure indeed to see you about. Did you enjoy the premiere?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. Chang,” she added warningly as the golden dog began an intensive sniff of Sandringham’s trouser leg. “The scene in the lobby afterward was a bit unnerving. Are all fans that persistent?”

“What, Johnny Chinaman? He was quite mild and polite, talk of life and death notwithstanding. You should see what some of the women do around poor Rudy Valentino. Be off, you pestiferous little brute,” he added good-naturedly to Chang Ming, and thought about it a moment, gazing hazily into the middle distance. “A remarkable face,” he said. “Not at all the type you’d expect to be making a fool of himself over a star’s autograph. Certainly not a Chinese gentleman that old, over, as they say in the Celestial Empire, a mere woman. But nothing to worry about.”

He glanced back over his shoulder at Mindelbaum, who had excused himself at a sign from the waiter and gone to the bar, where he stood talking with a big man in a sailor’s pea jacket whose bushy white hair and beard gave a general impression of a demented Father Christmas. Kevin—or Kenneth—was there, too, beautiful as daylight in his immaculate evening clothes, deep in conversation with Doc LaRousse—Colossus’s red-haired electrician—and Hank Silver, an extremely handsome, scar-faced cowboy star whose name was actually Hans Schweibler and who could barely speak a word of English. For a moment the older man’s brows pinched together, and a look of hurt longing crossed the back of his eyes; then he turned to Norah and went on. “I was delighted to see you at the premiere at all, Mrs. Blackstone, since you always seem to be relegated to the corners with those wretched little beasts while our girl makes a disgrace of herself over the saxophone players at the Grove.”

Norah laughed but at the same time was touched. “Having been a genuine companion, I can assure you, Mr. Sandringham, I’m not ill treated. Occasionally, when Flindy’s maid has a day off, I get press-ganged into playing mah-jongg, but they all treat me very kindly and help me arrange my tiles and don’t make me play for money.”

“Like nursery cribbage.” He smiled.

“*Exactly* like nursery cribbage.” She chuckled at the comparison, though she felt an odd little stab of nostalgia. Alone of those she’d met in Hollywood, this aging god had played cards in her own childhood milieu of younger cousins in starched white dresses under some nanny’s watchful eye: scorched toast, drying shoes, oatmeal soap, and rain. The memory warmed even as it hurt.

“And a good thing, too,” she added, “considering the sums that maid of Flindy’s takes off Christine. It’s kind of you to think of me.” She held up her hand to him, and his fingers touched hers. The blue eyes, looking down into hers, were gentle and concerned. “I simply don’t shine in company. Mostly I prefer to retreat with a book.”

“Perfectly sensible of you, my dear Mrs. Blackstone. Faced with the

prospect of one of Mr. Brown's parties, I wish I, too, could retreat with a book. I feel rather in need of sustenance before the ordeal."

"The cobbler's excellent."

Sandringham drew himself up like King Lear in the first act. "My dear Mrs. Blackstone, I was not referring to *food*." He produced a silver hip flask. "Mr. Enyart is famous throughout the cinematic community for the excellence of his—er—libations. Though why any country should have passed such a barbarous law in the first place..."

"Which brings up the fact that we ought to be pushing on." Kevin—or Kenneth—lounged over from the counter where he had been exchanging good-natured jibes with the obese and clever Ned Bergen, chief prop man of Colossus, and his assistant, the pale and willowy Ned Divine. Both Neds wore rather shabby Sunday bests and had clearly not been invited to rub elbows with Griffith and Gish at Frank Brown's. Neither, apparently, had Flindy McColl's beau, Dale Wilmer; he was arguing furiously with Hank Silver and a group of studio musicians with the rapid-fire, incoherent decisiveness that Norah had quickly learned to identify as one of the effects of cocaine.

"You remember Fairbanks said he couldn't stay long, and you did promise me an introduction."

"To be sure I did, and it's a dreadful long drive out to Beverly Hills. Have you been to Karnak Estate, my dear? It really does have to be seen to be believed. Mrs. Blackstone, Keith Pelletier, the gentleman who actually had to hang over that cliff and fall thirty-five feet to the bottom when Christine raised objections to doing so."

"I didn't mind that so much as being hauled out to Big Bear for retakes because some dumb cluck of a cameraman didn't have the lens cap off or something." He gave her a smile slightly too dazzling for first acquaintance.

"I'd heard it was because Gus Campbell had some different ideas for camera angles, which I admit were quite stunning," Sandringham said tactfully.

The young man shrugged. "They all say that." He studied Norah for a moment more, taking in not her face—which was to be expected, since she was well aware that beyond containing a small straight nose, small straight mouth, passable cheekbones, and quite pretty gray eyes, her face never stood a chance in Hollywood—but her clothing with an air of mildly impatient contempt. *Not worth my time.*

"You aren't coming out to Frank's?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't invited."

He laughed, displaying very white teeth. "Jesus, honey, if you wait to be invited in this town, you'll never get anywhere! Let's go, Charlie. I don't

want to be so late we'll miss the people who count."

He led the way in the direction of the back room, arrogant in his beauty, as if in a velvet cloak. Sandringham stood still a moment, gazing after him; Norah touched his hand and said softly, "'Being your slave, what should I do but tend / upon the hours and times of your desire? / I have no precious time at all to spend, / Nor services to do, till you require.'"

"True." Sandringham sighed. "True. But you know what love is." He followed then.

"Poor Charlie." Mindelbaum slipped back into the booth and tucked into his cobbler like a starving man. Father Christmas was now nowhere to be seen. "His last flame took him for enough gold cigarette cases and pinkie rings to stock Nieman Marcus and then went off with a Mexican bootlegger and a couple thousand dollars of Charlie's money. I'm afraid this kid's going to do the same. Though he is a hell of a stunter. Just once I wish Charlie would find somebody who'll treat him as well as he deserves. And no, you can't have any," he added to Chang Ming's ardent gaze. "I don't care if Christine hasn't fed you in three years and your Aunt Norah beats you every day."

"Mrs. Pendergast's son was like that," remarked Norah, sipping her tea and watching the two elegant black backs disappear through the speakeasy door. "Except with him, it was girls. And he was just as much a predator as they. But he had neither taste nor judgment—nor kindness. It used to drive his mother frantic when he'd bring home these... these doxies. They all had voices like parrots and awful Scouse accents. I think one of them stole my engagement ring—it disappeared when I'd had it off to polish glasses, because the diamond scratched. But of course I hadn't any proof."

She paused, keeping the quake of anger out of her voice with an effort, then bent her head quickly down over Buttercreme's sleeping form so that her companion wouldn't see the sudden quiver of her mouth. Why she should still be angry nearly three years later, she didn't know; it hadn't been the worst indignity of those years by a long shot.

"You can take comfort in the fact that if she was keeping company with this toad Pendergast, she probably got what she deserved somewhere down the line."

Keith Pelletier and Charlie Sandringham emerged from the back room, each laden with two big green bottles. Norah watched them through the wide plate glass window as they got into the Dusenbergs.

"Thank God," she murmured. "At least that boy's driving."

"Any sane person would if they'd ever ridden in a car with Charlie." The waiter refreshed Mr. Mindelbaum's coffee, but he only cast a doubtful glance

at Norah's rapidly cooling tea. "Even stone-cold sober he forgets which side of the street Americans drive on, not that he's been stone-cold sober since the McKinley administration. A lot of the older stunters can't stand the kid—the old barnstormers and the Gower Street cowboys—but I won't be surprised if he parlays himself into leading roles if he meets the right people." He shrugged. "That's Hollywood for you."

Sitting like a king in the passenger side of the car, Sandringham turned his head and saw Norah through the lighted window. He blew her a theatrical kiss and raised one of the champagne bottles in a gesture midway between a wave and a toast. Norah smiled in return and lifted her mug.

"Drink to me only with thine eyes," quoted Mindelbaum. "It's safer, with bootlegged liquor supplies."

The lights of Pickford Studios flashed across the Dusenbergs' silver-gray bonnet as the car pulled into the thin traffic on La Brea, gleaming on the young stuntman's dark hair. That was how Norah always remembered Keith Pelletier afterward, graceful as a young prince, deft and sure and arrogant as he gunned away from the curb.

Certainly it was how she described him to the police when they showed up on Christine's doorstep the following afternoon to ask her questions about his murder.

THREE

LAKE OVER HEAVEN

Cries of warning—it is auspicious to
go somewhere...
A warning of danger in the night...
Dogs barking...

THE WIND ROSE as the night deepened, blowing gusts of rain. Dozing on the divan in the parlor, Norah heard it even in her dreams.

They were not easy dreams. She saw Christine running again through the rocks and darkness of that cinematic landscape, stumbling in her diamond-heeled shoes and slithery dress, the pale jewels of her necklace gleaming in ghostly eldritch light that seemed to come from nowhere.

But there was no fog in this film. Wind lashed wildly at the trees and branches, tore at her dark skirts, snatched wild handfuls of her hair as she fled. In spite of the rain, the night smelled somehow of deserts, of dust, underlain with a half-familiar sweetish stink. Somewhere dogs were barking like the gruff coughing of lions. Dimly Norah could see their eyes shining like amber moons in the dark.

They are lions, she thought. Wild-maned and terrible.

But there was something else in her dream. Something worse. Something moving in the wind, scuttling half-seen in the corner of her vision, something waiting in the darkness beneath the thrashing boughs of eucalyptus and oak that covered the hillside that rose so steeply on the other side of Ivarene Street. Something whose silent, greedy patience could be felt in the darkness, more terrible than the snarls of the dog-lions. Something that wanted Christine.

With a jolt Norah came awake, gasping in the dim light of the single tasseled lamp. The long parlor of Christine's house, with its creamy plastered walls and dark wood floors, was thick with shadow: the archways into the hall, the breakfast room, the stairway framed blackest night. Wind screamed over the tile roof and threw desiccated leaves against the three tall front windows with the thin clattering of clawed fingers.

The dogs clustered in the vestibule in front of the door, barking furiously. Their hackles lifted so that their little puffball bodies seemed to bounce like cats with electricity; their huge, round eyes did indeed flash in the lamp's muted glow like the eyes of the lions in Norah's dream.

“What is it?” She got to her feet and pulled her threadbare pink wrapper close. She had braided her hair, long and old-fashioned and the color of brown sugar, in the expectation of going to bed; it lay in a rope the thickness of her wrist down over her back. “What’s got into you?”

They turned their heads at the sound of her voice, three flat-nosed faces weirdly human, like enchanted children deformed by fairy malice. Norah frowned, for she had never heard them bark this way. Like Mr. Sandringham, she had thought Pekingese were yappy until she had met them, but in fact they were very silent little dogs, seldom barking except in their roughest play. Now—and Norah was not sure what had triggered it—the dogs began to bark again, Black Jasmine throwing himself at the door like a furious little gentleman in a tuxedo, his sharp, quacking voice sounding almost like a duck.

Concerned, Norah started toward the vestibule. Chang Ming spun and bounded toward her, bracing himself in her path and barking an unmistakable warning that if she took another step forward, he would snap at her. She halted, disconcerted. It was not that Chang Ming could do any damage with his teeth on the best day he ever had, but in the two months she had taken care of him, he had shown himself to be the friendliest and most loving of creatures.

She took another doubtful step, and he bounced on his short legs, barking wildly, urgently, while Buttercreme and Black Jasmine scratched in a frenzy at the door. As far as Norah knew, Chang Ming would no more have tried to bite her than he’d have stolen a car. *This is silly*, she thought, an echo of her aunts’ voices. *One shouldn’t allow oneself to be intimidated by something that can be picked up and tucked under one’s arm.*

Yet she backed up and sat on the black silk cushions of the divan once again. And not because she feared Chang Ming. She could not have said exactly what it was she did fear.

The golden dog’s trembling stopped. Enormous tail raised like a triumphal banner, he trotted to the door where the other two sniffed intently at the panels.

Outside, the wind screamed in the darkness.

For a moment all was still. The room looked strange in the dim light, as rooms did late at night when one had been wakened from uneasy sleep. The house Frank Brown had bought for Christine was in the Spanish style, backed against the sharp rise of the hill and climbing up it, a minor fairy tale of pink-washed turrets, pocket-handkerchief terraces, and balconies no broader than a lace table runner. Among its Mediterranean arches and heavy, darkly carved beams the furniture looked wildly incongruous, a combination of modernist enameled sinuosity—purchased by Frank Brown—and a gaudy clutter of

Chinese lamps, vases, lacquered Oriental cabinets that lent primitive splashes of cinnabar, gold, and blue to the smooth scheme of black and cream silk.

Norah found herself thinking how isolated the house was, far up Ivarene Street in the wooded Cahuenga Hills that overlooked Hollywood from the north. Brown had chosen it as a love nest precisely because it was isolated, though in the six weeks Norah had been there he had never spent the night; also, it was cheaper than the more prestigious neighborhood of Whitley Heights immediately to the south. The closest neighbors were a good half mile up the road, a religious cult whose members Norah sometimes saw dancing in what they probably considered to be Grecian dress among the eucalyptus and chaparral. Felipe, the gardener, had warned her never to let the dogs out at night for fear of coyotes lurking in the darkness.

But in her heart Norah knew that whatever was out there, it wasn't a coyote.

Buttercreme and Chang Ming left the door and trotted swiftly into the hall, moving with that peculiarly businesslike Pekingese toddle, fur flouncing, as if to say, *Places to go. Things to do.* It would have been comical if not for the way they had barked, the way Chang Ming had turned upon her... the way Black Jasmine still stood, ears raised and hackles erect, before the outer door. The aureate light caught in his single eye, reflecting there a curious and terrible concentration, more like a cat than a dog. One of the lion creatures in her dream, Norah recalled, had been one-eyed. Had it been black as well?

She shook her head. Usually her dreams were utterly prosaic: feeding the dogs, mending stockings, wrestling with the primal chaos of Christine's checkbook. Sometimes she dreamed about Oxford, about sitting in a lecture or walking briskly over the gray stone of Magdalene Bridge, turning to look upstream at the green aisle of willows, or about herself in that dim and barely recalled pre-Oxford, prewar world, practicing piano in her white dress and pink sash. She hadn't been at all surprised to find herself dreaming about the ending scenes of *Kiss of Darkness*.

This is silly, thought Norah again, and rose from the divan. Black Jasmine, yakking sharply, flung himself at her, and she sat quickly. He turned immediately back to his vigil at the door. Though his tail was up, she could see him quiver with tiny unheard growls. Dimly, but with curious clarity, she could hear the toenails of the other two tapping the wooden floors of the dining room, breakfast room, study, and hall; the tiles of the kitchen and bath; up and down the short flights of steps that joined the myriad levels of the lower floor. They would pause, then go on. In her mind she saw them sniffing busily with their little flat noses, looking for... what?

In time they trotted back to sniff once more at the front door. Then, with

an air of having settled something to their own satisfaction, the three of them scurried to her feet and licked apologetically at her ankles, her hands, and their own noses, three flat, anxious faces gazing up at her, begging to be forgiven, hoping she understood.

She didn't and wasn't certain she wanted to. She picked them up, cuddled them each by each on her lap—she had firm opinions about whom couches were intended for, and it did not include even the cutest or most loyal of dogs—stroked the little grapefruit heads, and had her fingers thoroughly licked and chewed. She lay down on the couch again but did not go back to sleep, for her mind clung uneasily to the fast-fading fragments of her dreams. She could not rid her mind of the image of something huge and terrible scuttling back and forth along the walls in the rainy darkness, waiting for the yellow roadster to swing through the shadow of the cluster of trees where the drive plunged steeply down off the road and around the side of the house to the garage.

The wind died down. It began to rain again. Every now and then one or two of the dogs would make another brisk patrol of the house. Eventually, feeling a complete fool, Norah searched the house herself, armed with a broom from the kitchen and accompanied by Buttercreme and Chang Ming, switching on lights all the way. She found nothing, but she did not go to sleep, did not even ascend the stairs to her bedroom.

She was still awake at four when car lights flashed across the front windows, and the dogs bounded to the door, tightly-curved tails wagging eagerly, to meet Christine as she came tipsily in, as if they had sensed nothing more amiss in the night than some neighbor's stray cat.

"Murdered?" Norah's hand groped for the back of the gleaming black chair that graced the telephone niche in the hall. She felt stunned, knowing that she should produce some appropriate emotion but not sure what it should be.

"Cut to pieces. We're over here now," said A. F. Brown's deep, slightly drawling voice through the tinny speaker of the receiver. "Is Chris awake yet? She talked to them both at my place last night. Fishbein—that's my publicity man; don't know if you've met him—says we've got to call the police pretty soon, and I want to make sure everybody's story is straight."

"I'll wake her." Down six steps at the end of the hall, Norah could hear the faint clatter of porcelain as Dominga the cook whipped up scrambled eggs and talked to the dogs in Spanish. Visible through two archways and up two steps, like a Vermeer painting, wan sunlight gleamed briefly on the highly polished breakfast table, then faded as she watched from the tulip goblets and the pink and green chinoiserie plates. Outside the bow window rain began to

patter on the dark thickets of oleander that half masked the myriad panes of beveled glass. A gust of wind stirred them, scratching fretfully at the casements. Norah shivered. "Shall I have her ring you back?"

"Yeah." Some regional American inflection made the affirmative come out as *yowp*. "She has the number."

"Is Mr. Sandringham there?" Something inside her twisted with anxiety for that charming, kindly sot. Very few people in Hollywood would have taken the trouble to make sure she was happy in her position as lady-in-waiting to a star. "What happened?"

Brown's voice was guarded. "We don't know. He doesn't have a regular houseboy these days; the woman who cleans the place called us when she arrived this morning. We're having a look around now. Just tell Chris to call us here. And don't let anyone know we called you until we've talked to you again. If the press calls, or the police, you're surprised as hell. Got that?"

"Mr. Brown," Norah said quickly, recovering her wits as she heard the dismissal in his voice, "I saw Mr. Sandringham last night, too. He and Mr. Pelletier came into Enyart's."

"Shit! Pardon my French. Look...". He hesitated. In the background Norah heard another masculine voice, a light tenor, ask something, and through a beefy hand laid over the mouthpiece she heard Brown say, "Norah says Charlie and the kid were at Enyart's. That means whoever else was in the place saw them, too."

She heard, quite clearly, the other voice say, "Shit."

"Look, Norah, I'm coming up there. Did you talk to Charlie at Enyart's? And was anybody with you?"

"I was with Mr. Mindelbaum."

"She was with Mindelbaum," she heard Brown relay.

"Good, he's under contract."

"Norah?" The hand was removed from the mouthpiece. "Conrad and I are coming. Can you get Chris rolled out of bed and get some coffee in her before we get there?"

"I can but try. Mr. Brown," she added, forestalling another hanging up. "What happened?"

Another very long pause. From the kitchen a flurry and skitter of toenails. The swinging door fell open, admitting a rolling fur ball like three wigs fighting, rufous, ivory, and black. Consonant with their determination to be wolves, the Pokes felt obliged to fight for their lightly buttered toast and sautéed chicken livers every morning. The dogs bounded up the steps and into the hallway, Chang Ming dragging the protesting Buttercreme across the polished floor by one ear.

“Like I said, we don’t know.” Brown’s voice was dry. “Charlie’s disappeared, and somebody carved the kid up with a champagne bottle. Find anything in those drawers, Fishy?”

“Just some letters. Jesus, how many kids did Sandringham take up with?”

“Burn ‘em. We’re on our way.”

“Keith Pelletier *murdered*?” Christine stared aghast from the lace fantasia of pillow shams and convent-embroidered sheets. Though the bed, with its gilded cupids and outspread swan wings, was pure DeMille, its hangings had been replaced with rich and glossy Chinese silks upon which dragons cavorted with flamingos. A brass Buddha meditated in a curtained niche, gold and crimson tassels dangled like immense fuchsias from rafters painted with more dragons, and a sort of pagoda of black lacquer and gold-embroidered scarlet silk transformed what had been the ceiling fixture into an opium-den dream. Amid all this Christine sat, clutching her fragile batiste nightgown to her bosom. “And Frank and Fishy coming *here*? That only gives me thirty minutes to get some makeup on!”

She bolted out of bed with the mightiest turn of prebreakfast speed Norah had yet seen her sister-in-law produce and flung herself into the *en suite* bathroom to dash handfuls of cold water on her face. “Darling, would you save my *life* and go get me some coffee? Oh, I’m sorry, my little sweetnesses, Mother doesn’t have time to say good morning to her angel muffins today.” With a great clatter of toenails on the cream and violet bathroom tiles—the Celestial Empire did not extend beyond the connecting door—the three Pekes, which had followed Norah up the stairs, orbited Christine’s ankles, staring up at her with concern in their dark, childlike eyes.

The telephone was ringing again as Norah descended the stairs to the hall. Feeling as if she were moving with the preternatural slowness of dreams, she answered it. The voice on the other end brought, curiously, a rush of relief.

“Mrs. Blackstone? This is Alec Mindelbaum.”

“Oh, Mr. Mindelbaum!” Why on earth, she wondered, should she feel rescued? Not exactly rescued—upheld. “I take it Mr. Brown reached you.”

“Just now. He told me to come up there. Is this all right with you and Christine?”

“Well, we’re about to be invaded by Mr. Brown and Mr. Fishbein and then, in all probability, the police, so I suppose the more the merrier. Christine is putting on her makeup now.”

“The woman never disappoints me. How are you?”

He asked as if it meant something to him, so Norah gave it a few moments thought. “I think I’m having trouble believing it really happened, though another part of me feels quite shocked.” That arrogant hand on Mr. Sandringham’s arm kept coming back to her mind, and the look of genuine, hopeless adoration in Mr. Sandringham’s eyes. *You know what love is...* “I—I think I would welcome a little sane support.”

“You’re not going to get any from Chris. It’ll take me maybe half an hour to get there. I live clear down in Venice. Don’t let Brown and Fishy bully you—and don’t sign anything.”

He rang off. As she put the receiver back into its hooks, Norah glimpsed something gray moving outside the breakfast room’s bay window. A man, poking among the thick oleanders that masked the stone foundation. The reporters who had crowded the lobby of the Million Dollar Theater sprang at once to mind, and with a refined oath, Norah crossed to the front door and let herself out onto the high concrete porch.

“May I help you?” she inquired in her most freezing voice.

A moment later, seeing that the man was climbing the hillside to investigate the masses of foliage, she thought, *Police*.

He turned. It was the ancient Chinese gentleman from the theater.

“Indeed you may, good lady.” The soft voice was unmistakable. The bartered blue coat and the faded gray shirt were flecked with rain and far too big for his long, thin frame. One arthritic hand gripped the staff he’d carried the previous night; with the other, he brushed aside the water dripping into his eyes.

“It is the lady with the lion-dogs,” he said, and smiled. “This, then, is the house of the cinema actress Miss Chrysanda Flamande?”

Norah was about to speak when the caw of a Klaxon drew her attention. A huge black Ford edged its way off Ivarene Street. At the wheel she glimpsed the sleek, fair head of Conrad Fishbein, publicist for Colossus Studios. In the back, like an obese black lion, rode A. F. Brown.

She wondered if Christine had finished making up yet.

When she turned her eyes back to where the old man had been standing, he was gone.

FOUR

HEAVEN OVER MOUNTAIN

Know when to withdraw...
You are unable to help yourself—hire servants.

“HE WAS CUT to pieces,” Frank Brown said again, and shifted his bulk against the black silk cushions of the divan. Shrewd green eyes studied Norah’s face for a reaction. “Almost literally. There was blood all over the front room and the bedroom—it’s one of those little bungalow courts over on Highland. Neither of the neighbors on either side were home. Why should they be? Thursday was Thanksgiving; a lot of people had yesterday off. The woman directly across the court says she had the gramophone on and heard nothing.”

“Good God.” Norah pressed her hand automatically to her lips. “The champagne bottle, you said. He bought four at Enyart’s.”

Brown sniffed. “He only brought two into my place. Charlie must have drunk the rest on the way over.”

Frank Brown hadn’t, Norah knew, been particularly thrilled when his mistress had brought an unscheduled sister-in-law home from her vacation in France, and for some weeks, whenever he arrived in his studio limousine to take Christine to the Cocanut Grove or the Victor Hugo, he’d determinedly ignored the new housemate, as he’d ignored the dogs. This was the first time he’d spoken to her beyond a polite “Mrs. Blackstone” and a touch of his hat, though Mr. Fishbein had written a little squib for the fan magazines about Miss Flamande’s generosity in taking in her widowed—and highly respectable—sister-in-law.

“That’s right. There wasn’t any champagne mixed with the blood on the floor.” Fair, bespectacled, and nearly as obese as his boss, Conrad Fishbein had an engaging baby face and great charm. Perched on one of the sleek, modern chairs, strategically close to the black-lacquered coffee table with its ersatz Ming bowl of candy and nuts, he was alternately downing nuts and patting Chang Ming, who had barreled down the stairs at the first sound of the intruders’ voices and had promptly decided that they were his long-lost parents. Buttercreme, after a long stare of horrified indignation, had taken refuge in the kitchen.

Some watchdogs, Norah thought wryly.

But in that case, what had they barked at the previous night?

There was a pause in which she guessed Brown was wondering how

much she knew—or had deduced—about Mr. Sandringham’s relationship with Mr. Pelletier. Perhaps alone in Mrs. Pendergast’s household, she had been aware of the Pendergast butler’s proclivities in that direction, and poor Arbuthnot’s loneliness and fear had left her with nothing but pity for the impossibility of such a situation for any man. In consequence of that—and of Christine’s blasé letters concerning one of her early husbands and his assorted boyfriends—she had not been nearly as shocked as she knew she should have been when she’d seen Sandringham and Keith Pelletier together on the set of *She-Devil of Babylon*, Chrysanda Flamande’s newest opus.

At length she said, “And Mr. Sandringham has... disappeared?”

Brown’s bulging eyes narrowed for a moment; Fishbein glanced over at him, as if asking for advice on how to proceed. Then the producer gave himself a little shake, looked suitably indignant, and said, “Of course not! As I told you over the phone, Charlie’s left town. He was called out of town for a family emergency. I took him to the station myself from the party.”

“What?” Norah said.

“Huh?” said Fishbein. Then, making a lightning recovery, “Oh—oh, yes! Yes, of course!”

“You said on the phone he’d disappeared.”

“I said on the phone he’d left town,” Brown replied steadily. “You asked me if Charlie was there, and I said, ‘No, he’s left town.’”

Norah opened her mouth to protest, but from the archway that led to the stairs came a low, husky whisper. “Oh, my God, is it true?” Framed in the dimness behind her and glowing like a flame in a crimson kimono, Chrysanda Flamande stood with her raven hair flowing down over her shoulders and a black Pekingese clutched in her arms.

The Peke is a nice touch, thought Norah. Too small to negotiate the steps by himself, Black Jasmine would have stood at the top quacking indignantly until someone went up and bore him down, a piece of business that would have completely upstaged Christine’s lines.

“Let me know all!” Christine swept forward in a single graceful billow of ruby silk, handing off Black Jasmine to Norah like Red Grange passing the ball without a glance, and sank partially onto the divan and partially onto Frank Brown’s bulgy shoulder. “I was sick with shock when I heard!”

“Was she?”

Turning at the soft sound of the voice from the hallway arch, Norah saw Alec Mindelbaum slip in through the kitchen door. Chang Ming, plumed tail thrashing furiously, realized that here was yet another long-lost parent and dashed to his feet, bouncing slightly in his eagerness to be patted and admired, which Mr. Mindelbaum obligingly hunkered down to do; Black

Jasmine, still in Norah's arms, attempted to leap down to lick the newcomer's face.

"Not nearly as sick with shock as Mr. Fishbein was when Mr. Brown said he'd taken Charlie Sandringham to the station last night," murmured Norah. "You just missed that part."

Mr. Mindelbaum's eyebrows shot up until they nearly lost themselves in his curly hair. He straightened up even as Fishbein said, "There's nothing to be shocked about, Christine. Charlie got an emergency telephone call at Mr. Brown's party, sent Keith Pelletier home with his car, and Frank took him to the train station. His mother was taken ill, you see."

Christine raised her head from Frank Brown's shoulder, where Brown had been self-consciously comforting her. "I thought Charlie's mother was dead."

Brown cupped a hand over her artfully disarrayed hair. "His father," he said, and glared at Fishbein. "His father was taken ill at his farm in Vermont. The call reached him at my party."

"How did they know he was *at* your party?" inquired Christine, sitting up and reaching confidently into Brown's jacket for a cigarette, which she carefully fitted into the amber and diamond holder she withdrew from her kimono pocket and permitted him to light.

"Oh, come, Christine, his father's housekeeper would have known he'd be at the premiere," Norah pointed out helpfully. "Of course she'd have deduced there'd be a party at Mr. Brown's house afterward."

"Oh...oh, of course." She exhaled a long stream of smoke. "God, and *what* a party, Frank, simply too divine for words." Her voice slipped out of the throaty, Chrysanda Flamande tones into her usual breathless baby coo. "Though I thought it terribly unfair that you'd have all those dancing girls from the Cocoanut Grove for the men to look at and not one single dancing boy for us girls. Tell me, darling, does that seem right to you?"

She turned to Norah, gesturing with her cigarette. There was a nervous brightness to her eyes, a restlessness to her movements that told Norah she'd resorted to the little ivory box of white "pick-me-up" powder that lived in her top right-hand dresser drawer. "All those girls in pink tights and not *one* pair of masculine thighs upon which to feast my attention."

"And Charlie sent Keith back to *his* house with the car?" Mr. Mindelbaum, standing behind Norah's chair, reached down to scratch Black Jasmine's head. His brown eyes rested on Brown with a sharp, calculating watchfulness.

"Keith's apartment is only around the corner on Redondo," Fishbein said. "He must have gone into Charlie's house to leave the car keys and empty

champagne bottles. From the looks of it, Ch...er...someone attacked him in the living room with a broken bottle, probably cut his throat there. Keith stumbled or crawled down the hallway to the bedroom, the attacker cutting him all the way. The body was on the bed. Most of it, anyway.”

Norah shut her eyes and put her hand over her mouth again, trying not to think about the scene.

“Charlie’s cleaning woman called us,” Brown went on after a moment, his eyes on Mindelbaum’s. “We told her to wait for us in the foyer and not go farther into the house for fear of mixing up her prints and having the police think she knew something about it but not to stir outside, either.”

“Oh, my God,” whispered Christine again, and passed a theatrical hand over her forehead. “Frank! How dreadful!” She was, Norah could see, sincerely shocked, but Christine was never one to let even genuine horror interfere with a chance to show how sensitive she was. “I will never, never get over this! Oh, my God.”

“What a lucky thing Charlie was called out of town,” murmured Mr. Mindelbaum.

“Has anyone telegraphed him?” Christine turned immense brown eyes on the studio head. “He’ll be destroyed by the news! He was so fond of Keith; they were so happy together!”

“It *was* lucky Charlie was called out of town,” Brown replied heavily, continuing to glare at Mindelbaum. “Because in two weeks *The Midnight Cavalier* comes out, and we don’t want another Arbuckle scandal on our hands.”

“Not to mention the fact that he himself might have been killed by the unknown assailant,” added Norah.

Fishbein nodded eagerly. “That’s good. We’ll put that in the press release, SCREEN IDOL’S NARROW ESCAPE...”

“I guess we’ll never know *how* narrow,” Mindelbaum remarked cynically.

“No,” said Brown, “we won’t. Now, he didn’t happen to say anything to you, Alec, about plans for the evening other than coming to my place? Just so we can find anyone he was intending to meet and let them know what happened to him.”

The cameraman smiled a little and shook his head. “As far as I know, we were the only ones he talked to at Enyart’s, but all the regulars were there and saw him. Doc LaRousse, the two Neds, Hans Schweibler, Alice and the Rothstein boys, Dale Wilmer, a couple of stunters, I think, from Universal, and Jack himself. Doc and Hans talked to Keith; God knows who they ran into in the back room.”

“Damn,” Fishbein muttered, and shot Brown an anguished glance.

Brown shook his head regretfully. “Well, when they read in the paper about his mother—father—they’ll know it was an emergency. How was he acting?”

“Drunk,” Norah replied, a little surprised at the question.

“Not that it has any bearing...”

“At the party he was so gay, so devil-may-care, laughing and telling jokes,” Christine provided, languishing once again and drawing on her cigarette as if only nicotine stood between her and collapse from grief.

“Hadn’t drunk himself melancholy yet,” Mindelbaum said.

“You can’t drink yourself melancholy on champagne,” said Norah. “You fall asleep first.”

“Well, God knows what was in that champagne, darling.” Christine raised her head and picked aside a stray thread of Pekingese fur that had adhered itself to her crimson, pouting lips.

“It was Enyart’s champagne,” Mindelbaum said, “so it probably actually *was* champagne. Oleson ran it in last night. I think he talked to Wilmer, but Wilmer was so coked, he probably doesn’t remember anything about it. Like Chris says, Charlie seemed pretty chipper, but considering how much he’d had to drink, if he hadn’t been chipper, he should sue his bootlegger. So if they had a quarrel, it would have been on the way over to your place or on the way back.”

“Who said anything about a quarrel?” Brown demanded fiercely. “Charlie walked Keith out to the car, Keith drove off, then I took Charlie to the train station. I was with him the whole time.”

“And he didn’t go home to pack a toothbrush?” the cameraman asked. “When did all this take place? The police are gonna want to know. It’s...how far from your place down to the station? Fifteen miles? Seventeen miles?”

“At a guess,” Norah said firmly, “it took place within fifteen minutes of Mr. Fairbanks leaving the party. He left early, didn’t he? Before midnight?”

“Before the dancing girls came out, and that was midnight, wasn’t it, Frank, dearest?” Christine sat up and pushed straight the egret-feathered bandeau that bound the dark cascades of her hair. “Of course, if you’re married to Mary Pickford, I suppose you *have* to leave early.”

Brown and Fishbein both glanced inquiringly at Norah.

“It stands to reason,” she said innocently. “Meeting Mr. Fairbanks was the main attraction for Mr. Pelletier at the party, so of course he wouldn’t have consented to leave if Mr. Fairbanks were still there, would he?”

“Yes, it was just a few minutes after that when I got the phone call,” Brown said thoughtfully. “In fact,” he expanded, “I was called away from

seeing Doug and Mary out the door.”

“Yes, but you and I were together in the library while the dancing girls were still doing their act,” protested Christine, grinding out her cigarette in a gleaming brass ashtray.

“That was later,” Brown said firmly.

“It wasn’t, because you came right in from the foyer and pulled me down off the table just as I was showing that skinny redhead how to—”

“It was later,” Brown said again. “It was after I got back. And *you*” he added, turning suddenly. “All of you. Since Charlie’s going to be in Vermont for the indefinite future, I’m moving up the location shooting. Day after tomorrow, Santa Fe station, seven-thirty—”

“Oh, no!” wailed Christine, sitting up in horror and forgetting all about who had been where when. “Seven-thirty! Isn’t there a train that leaves later than that?”

“Not if we want to get ourselves out to Red Bluff in time to get set up. If Hearst or the *Times* can get reporters out *there* for questions, they’ll be doing better than I think they can. Is Norah coming with you?”

“Of course!” Christine shifted her position on the couch to lean across and grasp Norah’s hand protectively. Like all her gestures, the movement combined glowing theatricality with genuine warmth. Everything Christine did was fifty percent sham, but the other fifty percent, Norah reflected, was pure gold.

“I wouldn’t stick poor Norah here all by herself, and besides,” she added, reaching up to stroke Black Jasmine’s little round head and have her fingers chewed, “I couldn’t be without my celestial cream cakes for ten days, could I, Jazz darling?”

“Good,” grunted Brown. “We’ll shoot the courtyard and balcony scenes between you and Blake Fallon in Edendale Monday night. We’d do it tomorrow if I could locate Blake, but God knows which of those gold diggers he’s spending the weekend with. So in the meantime, all of you—not a word to anyone.” He glared around with pale eyes. “Reporters are going to be phoning you, so you tell them the police have forbidden you to disclose anything. Did you remember to call the police, Conrad? Just tell them what you know.” He ticked off the points on fingers like Polish sausages. “Charlie was Keith’s mentor in acting, they were friends, Charlie was happy and cheerful earlier that evening—before, of course, he got that terrible news about his mother—”

“Father,” Fishbein corrected in an undertone.

“Father, and had to leave town.”

“Oh, of course.” Christine clasped her hands before her breast. “Such a

terrible, terrible tragedy, and then for news of an even greater horror to pursue him...". Norah could see her rehearsing poses for interview pictures. There were even tears in her eyes.

"Enough to break your heart," remarked Mr. Mindelbaum.

Brown glared at him. "And if I hear one word beyond that," he added, "you're going to be back taking pictures of kids on ponies in Lubbock. I'll see you all in the station at seven."

"I can't believe Mr. Sandringham did such a thing." Norah settled her back against one of the pillars that supported the roof of the porch, from which a flight of brick steps dropped precipitously to the few feet of grass and ivy that bordered the road. Frank Brown's car was making its careful way up the drive to Ivarene Street again, rocking a little with the uneven surface; the producer had catechized Christine on the subject of who was in the library with whom when and why she shouldn't mention her recollections of just when Brown had hauled her away from dance competitions with the girls from the Coconut Grove. From the living room behind her Norah could hear that breathless voice: "*Murdered*, Flindy darling! Absolutely horrible! Frank's just been up here, and Charlie Sandringham's left town."

She rolled her eyes. Rain still pattered on the eucalyptus trees that grew on the hillside above and below the rough shoulder on which the house was perched, and in the gray afternoon light the tangles of Spanish dagger, stunted oak, and other bizarre growths she could not identify blended into a somber mottling of dark and light greens. Even more amazing than the indoor plumbing—wonderful to Norah after a lifetime of chamber pots and "backhouses" in her parents' and Mrs. Pendergast's old-fashioned establishments—were the green grass of the California December, the geraniums and the roses. Another world indeed.

The pink stucco house, like a miniature Mediterranean castle, was the only visible dwelling in this part of the hills, though Norah knew other lots had been sold. Hollywood—in fact, the entire Los Angeles basin—was a patchwork of real estate developments. A few hills over, some enterprising salesman had erected enormous white letters spelling out HOLLYWOODLAND above a housing development of that name; it was plastered with lightbulbs and could be seen for miles.

"Is that why you gave them the time Charlie must have left the party?" Mr. Mindelbaum perched himself next to her on the low parapet and plucked a long, narrow leaf from the oleander that grew almost up to the level of their elbows. In spite of the rain, the day was not cold, at least not compared to Manchester. Though the cameraman wore a rather worse for wear brown

cardigan over a turtleneck sweater, Norah was completely comfortable in her cotton shirtwaist and long wool skirt.

“It won’t do any harm. And I think wherever he is, poor Mr. Sandringham needs all the help he can get.”

She smoothed the dark fabric of her skirt across her knee. After a moment she added, “Thank you, by the way, Mr. Mindelbaum, for... for the moral support, I suppose.” She raised her eyes to his with a fleeting half smile. They’d talked at Enyart’s until almost one, the kind of lazy, gliding talk that she hadn’t engaged in for years, not since those nights she’d lain pillowed on Jim’s shoulder in a London boardinghouse speaking of everything and anything that came to mind. She barely recalled the content of it now: music and technique for developing photographs, Lawrence Pendergast’s worthless friends, and the things one saw on Basin Street in New Orleans late at night. “It really *is* like being in Oz, you know.”

He grinned. “Then if we’re in Oz, you don’t need to go on calling me Mr. Mindelbaum,” he said. “Alec will do. And I’m pleased to come to your rescue. But the fact that Charlie was concerned that Chris might be bullying you doesn’t mean he couldn’t have killed Keith, you know.”

“No, of course not.” She regarded him with slight surprise. “But Mr. Sandringham must be sixty at least, and not in very good shape. Besides, he was almost too drunk to stand when we saw him, and that was before the two bottles of champagne. I don’t think he *could* have killed a twenty-two-year-old athlete.”

Alec sighed, twirling the leaf in those soft, deft fingers. “You ever spend a night in a flophouse when one of the alkie goes off his head from Jamaica ginger and decides the guy next to him is a seven-foot warthog who raped his sister?”

“Hmnn,” said Norah. At length she asked, “What makes you think he did it?”

He hesitated. “I never said I thought that.”

He slipped down from the porch wall and straightened the kinks from his shoulders. “But it’s just like Brown to get everybody out of town. Do you mind going to the desert? Red Bluff’s a ghost town three hours drive from Berdoo—some nice rocks near there and one of the best battlefields in the business, but you’ll be shaking scorpions out of your shoes the whole time. They shot the cattle drive scenes of *Sawdust Rose* there. If you don’t think you can...”

His voice trailed off as he saw her attention leave him; Norah was staring up Ivarene Street at three white-robed figures that had appeared from the shadows of the trees.

As they came closer, Norah saw that they were women clothed in diaphanous veils designed for a somewhat more classical climate than even California's. The veils hung limp with the rain; presumably umbrellas were not known in the Arcadian lands. But even that did not diminish the serene dignity of the tall, graceful woman who led, her dark hair hanging loose about her shoulders and her pale blue, piercing eyes made paler yet by the same heavy *mascara* that Christine favored. "We have come to warn you!" cried the tall woman, raising a hand upon which gleamed ancient gold. "The shadow of evil lies upon this house!"

They picked their way over the rough ground to the brick steps and collected their veils for the climb. The other two women did not wear damp cheesecloth nearly as gracefully as their leader did. One of them was a short, elderly, rather pudgy type who looked as if her name should be Aunt Edna; the other, tall, thin, and flaxen fair, had a restless, hungry gaze.

They stopped a few steps short of the porch itself, and the dark-haired leader lifted her hand again. "Hail, fellow sojourners in this lifetime! A warning has come to us, a warning of disaster. Your life, and Miss Flamande's, may be in deadly danger."

Alec propped his glasses more firmly onto the bridge of his nose and turned to Norah. "You going to introduce us?"

FIVE

MOUNTAIN OVER WATER

Sign of sacrifice
I did not seek out the innocent ones; rather,
it was they who sought me out...
The first omen was correct,
the second and third were incorrect...

“I AM NADI NEFERU-ATEN, counselor of the Sabsung Institute for the Well-Being of Souls.”

“So pleased,” murmured Christine, holding out one hand. By the gleam in her dark eyes Norah could tell she was anything but pleased by the incursion into her house of a woman who was not only taller and more elegant than she but clearly had a backstory that beat even being the illegitimate daughter of a French adventurer in the Grand Turk’s harem. “Norah, darling, could you fetch us all some coffee—I’m absolutely *dying*—and *please* rip that phone out of the wall!”

It was ringing again, jaggedly and insistently. Alec went to get it.

“We of the institute do not drink coffee,” intoned Nadi Neferu-Aten. “Caffeine is a drug, clouding not only the senses in this life but the sight of the inner eye in its quest for the vistas of eternity.” She folded her long hands with their seal rings and cartouches.

“Well, caffeine may be a drug for you, but for me it’s the stuff of life, right up there with chocolate and gin and that adorable saxophone player at the Grove. Frank really does serve excellent booze at his parties, except for the gin, and God knows what possessed me to drink *three glasses* of it last night...Cigarette?” She batted eyelashes like enameled wire.

Nadi Neferu-Aten looked thoroughly affronted. Norah sighed as she slipped through the swinging door to the kitchen. At least the only drugs Christine had proffered so far were tobacco and caffeine.

When she came back bearing a tray of coffee things, a small teapot for herself, and three glasses of iced mineral water—at a guess, the only thing the Sabsung Institute considered pure enough for the well-being of its attendant souls—Alec was saying into the telephone, “...police have requested that we not discuss it. No. Yes. Yes, I’m familiar with the First Amendment to the Constitution.”

In the front room Christine was curled up on the divan, looking slightly

sulky with Black Jasmine in her arms; Chang Ming had made fast friends with the elder of the two attendant Graces and was grinning happily in the enamored woman's lap. On her way through the kitchen Norah had glimpsed Buttercreme's little face peering reproachfully around the corner of the stove.

"...transmission of souls down through the ages," Nadi Neferu-Aten was explaining. "This was why we selected the house at the top of San Marcos Avenue in the first place, not only for the calm of its setting but because it is mystically impregnated with esoteric vibrations necessary to meditation and the clearing of the mind."

Norah had already surmised that Neferu-Aten and her retinue were members of the cult up the street. Not only were the Grecian draperies unmistakable—although she had heard such things were by no means uncommon in southern California—but the three women had appeared on foot, and the fragile sandals they wore would never have made the climb up from Highland Avenue.

She set the tray down and poured herself some tea as Neferu-Aten continued. "I, for instance, so clearly remember my incarnation as the high priestess of Isis in the days of the ancient pharaohs that I have retaken the name for my own, feeling far more comfortable with it, as if I had come home. With experience in the clarifying procedures of the institute, Precious Peony here and Kama Shakti have come to feel the same."

The two attendant Graces nodded eagerly. The younger—the fair one—left off twisting her fingers nervously and picked up the water glass in two hands, those strange, hungry eyes not quite seeming to see anything but her leader. Norah wondered what Nadi Neferu-Aten had been called before she'd remembered her days as a priestess of Isis.

"But this process of purification, this physical and spiritual freeing, has made many of us—myself included—sensitive to emanations from the astral plane." The counselor leaned forward, her blue eyes grave. "Last night Kama Shakti had a terrible premonition in the form of a dream about this house. I, too, slept uneasily, feeling something was severely amiss. There is some danger here, Miss Flamande, some evil..." She paused, looking around at the long room with its black and cream silk furniture, its gaily colored Chinese bric-a-brac and brass-inlaid gramophone, frowning as if trying to identify something that troubled her. "Scoff if you like, but—"

"I wouldn't *dream* of scoffing, darling," Christine said airily, starting to sit up. "Only in about half an hour we're going to have reporters and police all *over* us like ants at a picnic, so I really can't—"

"What danger?" Norah asked quietly.

Christine looked at her in surprise.

Kama Shakti, the plump and elderly one, frowned for a moment, then replied slowly. “It was something about... about the dogs barking. Something trying to get in. Something waiting, crouched in the dark. Something...old...”.

Nadi Neferu-Aten raised one long-fingered hand to her temple in a gesture worthy of Pavlova; Norah could see Christine’s eyes follow and knew that particular manner of leading with the wrist was going to show up on screen very soon. “The answer lies upon the astral plane,” the counselor said in a hollow voice indicative of deep meditation. “We must ascend to that plane to seek it.”

“Better not get your ladders set up yet,” remarked Alec, coming back in from the porch. “The *Trib*’s just parked on the other side of the road, and I think the car that just pulled up is the *Times*.”

Christine sprang to her feet with a squeak, clutching Black Jasmine to her bosom, “Shit! And me not dressed!” She bolted up the stairs. From the kitchen Buttercreme emitted a few small, disapproving *ruhs* to indicate her opinion of the entire proceedings, and Chang Ming dashed eagerly to the door to greet his newest set of long-lost parents.

“We shall return,” Neferu-Aten promised, and swept past the reporters on the porch with the cold aplomb of a priestess ignoring supplicants upon the temple steps. But then, thought Norah, she’d probably done that kind of thing through several lifetimes and was good at it.

“You’re never going to get rid of them, you know,” Alec warned her later as Norah walked him to his car. Christine was still in the house, reclining artistically on the sofa, hand pressed to her brow, breathing a low and husky account of Frank Brown’s party. Every now and then a bright burst of light in the windows indicated a photographer’s interest. Knowing Christine, even in the grip of such a mind-searing shock to her sensibilities, the titles *Kiss of Darkness* and *She-Devil of Babylon* were going to figure prominently in interviews, plus accurate reviews of last night’s premiere. “I should have warned you earlier, California’s the breeding ground for table tappers and Ouija readers...”

“Oh, I knew that,” Norah said slowly, folding her arms as he climbed into the rickety Model T that was parked in front of the press cars on the other side of the street. The rain had ceased, but the sky still lowered above the hills; the world breathed of wet spiciness and damp stone. “In fact, I’m sure they’ll be back for a séance tonight. Cecily Pendergast went in for it—spiritualism, that is—and had half a dozen regulars, and *all* of them were reincarnated priestesses of Isis or Mayan temple virgins who’d got themselves chucked down sacred wells. I kept wanting to ask them if there was some rule about it—that priestesses and temple virgins and the like were required to

come back as spiritualists, or whether fishwives or charladies ever got considered for the job after *they* died.”

He advanced the spark lever, got out again, and walked around to the front of the car. “And did you?”

“No.” She chuckled a little. “I’m sure they’d have explained that it did happen, but they were perfectly sure *they’d* been priestesses, and cite all the things they recalled from former lives to prove it. One of them—Oneida Majesta, she called herself—once discovered an ill omen in the way the smoke curled around the candles, and on the strength of it Mrs. Pendergast refused to leave her room or to let me leave *my* room for twenty-four hours, until the stars had jiggered themselves into a more favorable position.”

“I hope you counted the silverware once the stars got realigned.” He put his shoulder to the radiator, grasped the crank in one hand and the choke wire in the other, and turned the engine twice, then released the choke wire and, gritting his teeth, spun the crank with all his strength. Norah stepped back. After three or four spins the engine exploded into life with a roar, and he bolted around to leap back into the seat and advance the spark. The engine settled down into a dull, steady roar that shook the little car’s bones, and he half turned, one foot on the accelerator and the other resting on the running board. “So why give them a handhold if you knew they’d jump on it?”

Norah frowned, looking back toward the house. She barely recalled what she had dreamed the previous night, before the dogs’ barking had wakened her. About *Kiss of Darkness*, she thought, though why it should have troubled her she didn’t know. Aside from being beautifully photographed, it had struck her as the most incredible nonsense she’d ever seen. “Maybe because of Mr. Pelletier’s death,” she said. “Or because I had nightmares, too, last night.”

“It might have been the tea,” he pointed out. “It keeps some people awake, like coffee does.”

“I suppose.”

“I *will* bet you,” he added with a wry quirk to his mouth under the reddish beard, “that when those ladies show up tonight with their ouija boards, they’re going to discover that Christine’s problem stems from somebody she was married to in a previous incarnation—my guess is an Italian count in the Renaissance, with a saver on an Egyptian pharaoh—who isn’t resting easy on the astral plane because of Christine’s current impure life. And I’ll also bet that the condition can be corrected by cold baths and meditation at the Sabsung Institute for the Weil-Being of Souls. Yikes,” he added, glancing back over his shoulder at the road. “Here comes the second wave.”

Black cars bearing the lettering LAPD slowed and—their drivers

apparently getting a look at the driveway—began to park on the narrow dirt strips on either side of the road or in the small bays of more or less level land among the slopes.

“No bets.” Norah grinned. “Though it might very well be an Indian sachem. I shall see you Monday at the studio.”

“I’ll expect a full report.” He slammed the car door, gave her a brisk thumbs-up, and put the little car into gear.

Unlike the reporters, the police did not regard Norah as invisible, and for nearly an hour, while Christine spun contradictory accounts of Frank Brown’s premiere party—a narrative not improved by the fact that she’d been well and truly drunk during all the operative events—Norah answered questions about Sandringham’s brief visit to Enyart’s. Chang Ming did his best to assist the police and reporters in the execution of their duties, Black Jasmine supervised, and Buttercreme hid in the kitchen. No sooner had they departed than Flindy McColl appeared, an energetic redhead wearing the longest scarf and the shortest skirt Norah had ever seen. She insisted on giving her own press conference for the few reporters left: “Ya know, Frank can’t kick, ‘cause if he buys out Enterprise Pictures from old Jespersion, you and me’ll be just like sisters!”

She also approved heartily of the idea of a seance that night. “What a scream! Can I stick around? Madame Ayshaya—that’s my astrologer—says I had this one lifetime where I was a nobleman’s daughter, and I got kidnapped by pirates and sold to a harem in Algiers.” She cracked her gum. “Maybe you’ll find out the same thing happened to you, huh?” She produced a small gold flask from her extravagantly fringed bag, took a hefty swig, and offered it to Christine, who took the hint and—the reporters being gone by then—produced an unmarked bottle from one of the brass and lacquer allegedly Chinese cabinets.

“If it did, why can’t I remember it?” countered Christine. “And why can they? And how does dancing around in the moonlight to those *awful* flutes they play and bathing outdoors in cold water—you know, they have a *marble* shower stall the size of my *bedroom*. I’ve *seen* it, darling—how does all that make them remember? The least they could do is hire a decent musician, like that *gorgeous* boy we’ve got working at Colossus, or buy a gramophone. And if Frank buys out Enterprise, we’ll not only be sisters, but you’ll get to have the Rothstein boys playing on your sets as well instead of that awful old German fiddler you’ve got now.”

Norah had visited Enterprise Studios and heard Herr Hertler, formerly a soloist for the Berlin Philharmonic. Only Christine, she thought resignedly, would speak of that elderly maestro as an “awful old German fiddler.” She

walked out onto the porch, overcome once more by the sense of the utter alienness of this world. In fairly short order, she supposed, she'd be dragooned into a mah-jongg game.

Like nursery cribbage.

White-painted walls, shabby volumes of King Arthur and Robin Hood... her brother Sean and the Whittaker cousins, Clive and Edward. Another world. Eleven, Trenton Gardens, prior to 1914, the year she went up to Oxford. The year Clive died in Belgium. She wondered what Charles Sandringham had been playing in, in 1914. He'd been at the height of his powers, she calculated, traveling between London and the New York film studios; she remembered her mother going to see some costume epic because he was in it.

The Fugitive King, that was it. A little short for Charles II, but that perfect profile amid raven lovelocks drove historical considerations from any sane woman's mind.

That was when they'd still had money. When they had still had servants. Before her mother had turned, almost overnight, it seemed, from an active, intellectual suffragist to an overworked, exhausted drudge, fighting desperately to keep a household together on less and less money, less and less food. Even before Sean had returned, or the little that was left of Sean.

Norah closed her eyes, putting the past third of her life aside with the firmness of long and bitter practice. Like skipping chapters in a novel... *If I don't read past page ninety, it won't have happened to them. Black Beauty will still live with all his friends at Birtwick Park... the knights will be able to go on having jolly adventures without Lancelot meeting Guinevere and bringing the whole Round Table crashing down into ruin on their heads. Sean and Mother and Papa will still be alive, and I'll still be that tall skinny girl in the pink sash, practicing my piano and reading the socialist papers in the sunlight of the breakfast room. I won't have to know what happened to them—what happened to us all.*

Behind her in the house she could hear Christine's voice, breathy and sweet as a child's. "...Ambrose Conklin, the most *darling* millionaire, and he followed me all around the party, getting me drinks and telling me how much he adored the film—not, between you and me, darling, that he could remember whether Charlie was supposed to be my husband or my father or what."

Norah almost laughed out loud, since Christine, even while *Kiss of Darkness* was being made, had had a good deal of difficulty remembering whether she was actually supposed to have married her final victim.

"D'ja think that spiritualist'll find out Ambrose Conklin and I were

connected in a previous life?”

In time Flindy dashed down the front steps and sprang into her red and silver Studebaker like Tom Mix leaping into the saddle, bound, Norah guessed, for Ah Lum's down on Hollywood Boulevard for take-out. Chinese food, which she'd eaten for the first time upon their arrival in New York, had been a revelation to her after a lifetime of roast beef and puddings with jam; six weeks in and out of Colossus Studios had convinced her that half the film industry lived on egg foo yung.

Curious, she thought, watching Flindy roar away with even less regard for the correct side of the pavement than Christine customarily demonstrated. In her little stateroom aboard the *Ruritania*, when she'd thought about the fact that she was actually going to Hollywood, she'd thought in terms of things she would see, not of new foods. Certainly not about the fact that she could sit on her sister-in-law's porch on the first day of December without so much as a sweater on. That the grass by the pavement would be green. The air smelled like rain again, and wind was starting up, an angry gust that whined over the red roof tiles, then died with a sinister scratching of branches on walls and glass.

What was it, she wondered, about the dream that had troubled her the night before?

Why *had* she encouraged the return of a group of patent crackpots to the house that evening to inquire about some problematic danger threatening them from the astral plane?

On impulse, she stepped lightly down from the porch and descended the steps, circling the house sunwise to climb the steep rise of the ground where the oleanders grew thick. She realized that Felipe, who usually appeared even before Dominga in the mornings, hadn't shown up at all that day, and that was odd, too. In the house Black Jasmine barked, one or two flat, quacking yaks, probably in defense of one of his toys. Like an echo, the barking in her dreams floated through her mind.

Coyotes? Merely cries of the wind, that had given nightmares to humans and perhaps to dogs as well?

For some time she studied the dark foliage that masked the stone of the foundation. Bare, turned-up earth was just visible beneath the sweeping green-black petticoats of the shrubs' lowest leaves. Cautiously, she grasped a large branch and pulled it aside to reveal the stucco of the wall.

“Norah, darling!” Christine leaned over the porch rim above her, the white and black egret feathers of her bandeau flicking in the breeze and the jet beading that scaled the bosom of her crimson charmeuse dress glittering. Behind her in the shadows stood a tall form, and a moment later it stepped

into the archway beside Christine, revealing the ancient Chinese gentleman from the lobby of the Million Dollar Theater.

“Norah, this is Shang Ko.” Long facility with mah-jongg and Cantonese appetizers had given Christine great adept-ness with the pronunciation of Chinese names. “He’s a friend of Felipe’s. He says Felipe is no longer able to come up and work here, so he’s taking his place. Wasn’t that nice of him?” And she smiled her most dazzling smile.

Before Norah could speak—and she felt it was going to be quite some time before she could find the right thing to say—the old gentleman bowed and said, “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Blackstone. Miss Flamande has been so good as to offer me room in the cottage behind the garage, as I have no family and it is a long walk back to Los Angeles each evening.”

“Indeed,” said Norah, completely nonplussed. She released the branch rather numbly. Had he, standing in this spot this morning, come to see what she saw on the stucco of the house’s foundations?

“And isn’t it wonderful, Norah?” Christine babbled. “With him here, the house won’t be empty when we go off to the desert, and you know I was worried, since Dominga lives in town, too. Oh, good-bye, Dominga, thank you.”

Beaming, the housekeeper bustled down the front steps and away to catch the streetcar down on Highland Avenue.

“Won’t you show him the cottage and give him the keys and everything? I’m *dying* of exhaustion, and Flindy will be back any minute with dinner, and those spiritualist people are coming at seven to tell me all about the astral plane, and—good heavens, Mr. Shang, you don’t happen to play mah-jongg, do you?”

The dark eyes, with their strange greenish lights, which had gazed so somberly down at Norah, changed and took on a deeply hidden flicker of amusement. “It is many years since I played *manchang*, Miss Flamande, and then I never pursued it as others did.” He bowed as he spoke. “But to oblige you, between the performance of my duties in the garden, I would make the attempt.”

“That would be *fabulous!*” She glowed with delight, beautiful in the last of the sunshine. No wonder, thought Norah, elderly millionaires followed her from room to room in Frank Brown’s mansion and directors who knew she couldn’t act to save her life still struggled to make her look good on the screen. “Maybe we’ll have time for a game this evening before those spiritualist people show up. I wonder if I knew Frank in a previous incarnation. Or that *lovely* young croupier at the Dome casino. Darling, do

you think you could possibly make up some fresh coffee? Those reporters left me absolutely *prostrate*, and I was wakened *far* too early this morning, and come to think of it, I'm *starving*..."

She trailed away in a swirl of dogs. Curious, thought Norah, coming back around to the porch steps in time to see her disappear into the house. The presence of strangers had had Buttercreme hiding in the kitchen all day in a state of mortified offense, yet now, in spite of Mr. Shang, all three Pekes were trotting happily at her heels.

"Mr. Shang," she said, holding out her hand, which the old man took in one of his twisted ones. "I think perhaps you owe us an explanation of your behavior at the theater last night."

The old man hesitated, and she saw the crippled hand flinch slightly on the polished wood of his staff. "Please forgive an old man's unfamiliarity with the customs of your land, Mrs. Blackstone. I have explained to Miss Flamande already that it was necessary that I speak with her about replacing your gardener Felipe so that I might not startle or upset her when I arrived today instead of he."

His throat-cutting gesture flashed briefly through her mind, but somehow she knew he'd only deny it. "And why has Felipe been obliged to quit his job with us?"

"He is ill." He spoke calmly, as Brown had spoken his lies, but she felt for one instant that he was afraid. "If you wish, you may telephone him."

Christine's wailing voice could be heard from the hall within: "...honestly, Emily, it's just left me *prostrate*." Emily Violet was her female costar in the new picture, a sweet-faced would-be Pickford. "Will you be at Flindy's party tomorrow night? Oh, screw your mother. Darling, I can't *tell* you. Police, and reporters, and me without hardly any makeup on at *all* and the gardener quitting and my head just *splitting* from Frank's gin last night. What? Well, you can get away from her on the set Monday..."

It was a good bet, thought Norah, that nobody was going to have access to that phone until Flindy returned, and men Christine would have other things on her mind.

Mr. Shang bowed again and descended the steps. Norah remained where she was for a moment, then turned abruptly and strode into the shadows of the house. Christine was just hanging up the phone, her hands shaky with exhaustion but her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Christine, are you aware that Mr. Shang was the man who tried to...?"

"Of course, darling, of course, he's already explained that to me." Earpiece in hand, she was already dialing again. "God *knows* how I'm going to get through the rest of the evening; I'm absolutely *pillaged*. Be a dear and

get me my gin, will you. I left it around here somewhere.”

The glass—which smelled like no gin Norah had ever encountered—stood on the edge of a side table enameled with gaudily colored dragons. Norah picked it up but, instead of carrying it immediately to Christine in the hall, walked instead to the breakfast room windows once more.

Below her she saw Shang Ko holding aside the dark branches of the oleanders as she had done. He released them, and as he stepped back, Norah could almost swear that it was fear that she saw in his face. He hurried away down the hill toward the drive and the semidetached rooms behind the garage that were to be his, and though he leaned on his staff, he moved swiftly, as if in haste to put distance between himself and some dreadful thing.

What was it? she wondered. *What could have made those marks?* For although there had been no tracks in the crusty earth beneath the oleanders, the stones of the house’s foundation and the stucco above them had been marked everywhere with fresh scratches, pale on the stone and deep enough to chip and tear the stucco. Huge scratches, ten or twelve inches long, as if the corner of the house had been gnawed in the night by impossible teeth.

SIX

MOUNTAIN OVER HEAVEN

It is auspicious not to dine at home...
Where there is danger, it is better to stop
before you get into trouble...

“HE STAND WITHIN arch of balcony, beholding you as if you were first woman created, and he, first man, in your presence for very first time. You look up from pomegranate you are eating—you see him—you know he is yours, body and soul.”

“You want to hit that with a baby?” Alec put an eye to the range finder on the side of his camera and adjusted the focal length of the lens. Above swags of shimmering silk, gilded bull faces with their wise eyes and curly beards, and slender pilasters festooned with white chrysanthemums like slightly wilted eiderdown puffs, illusion ended abruptly in a mangle of rafters, catwalks, wiring, and spiderwebs; Los Angeles had more spiders than anyplace Norah had ever seen. Below that line, sharp as if cut with a rule, the queen of Babylon’s bedroom was if not perfect, at least impressive, thick with plaster copies of items Norah recognized from the Assyrian collections of the British Museum and glittering with iridescent paints.

While the cameraman directed a single lance of moonlight from the smallest spotlight to fall on the curtained bed, Chrysanda Flamande disposed herself languidly among the cushions and drew up one flawless thigh and dimpled knee. “Like this?”

“Wonderful, wonderful, *mon ange*.” Mikos Hraldy bustled into the shot line, a prissy, balding man with a smug expression and a receding hairline, clothed in baggy knickerbockers and a very expensive sweater. “Foot a little further forward... *comme ça!* And hair so, to lie upon shoulder.” Amid the augmented curls, raven flowers cascading over alabaster, the three white moons of her necklace reflected the ersatz limmerance. Hraldy sculpted with his fingers the shadows of the draperies and checked the results with Alec as they shifted the emphasis of the lights with reflecters and screens until the result had the intricate, oddly formal sensuality of a Doré engraving.

The director turned to look about for Blake Fallon, the square-chinned, blue-eyed hero/victim of the seduction, and Alec went back to adjusting the play of the film in the shutter. A dark backdrop of flat house tops and stars could be glimpsed past a screen of artistically placed palmetto and banana

leaves. The lesser Ned—Ned Divine, in suspenders and shirtsleeves—continued to pick chrysanthemums out of a bucket at his side and tie them to every column in sight, incongruous as a janitor at a society wedding.

Oiled body naked to the waist, Blake Fallon stepped through the archway like a farmer entering a dry-goods store and did a double take that would have embarrassed Snub Pollard.

Norah winced and returned to watching Alec.

Filming motion pictures, she had learned in her first week as Christine's dog minder and lady-in-waiting, was rather like writing a book: it took a great deal of time to produce something that was all over in an hour and a half. In many ways it reminded her of Jim's description of life on the front; long periods of utter tedium broken by brief flurries of activity. Except, of course, one wasn't knee-deep in mud, tormented by rats, or picking maggots out of one's tea sandwiches. Where the hissing klieg lights didn't raise the temperature to oven proportions, the vast stage was freezing cold, smelling of hot metal and dust; on the other side of Queen Vashti's bedroom wall a voice could be heard saying, "Come on, Larry, for Chrissakes! You guys just found out that thing you're locked in the cellar with is a bomb! You and Jerry just gonna sit there lookin' at it?" In a quiet corner between an Assyrian bull and a spare throne, the three musicians—piano, flute, and violin—warmed up with snatches of *Swan Lake*.

It was Monday morning in Hollywood.

Christine, gamely vamping and pouting under the glare of the lights, looked surprisingly well, considering how suddenly she had been taken ill the previous night. Norah tried to believe that it was a fortuitous bout of fever, a last fillip of Saturday's hangover compounded by the shock of hearing the news about young Mr. Pelletier, and the late hour to which Saturday night's séance had run.

Yet something about it bothered her. What, she could not precisely say, except that Mr. Shang had told Christine two or three times in the course of Sunday she should not go to Flindy's party Sunday night, an opinion with which Norah, familiar with the red-haired star's habit of mixing bootleg gin, fast cars, and cocaine, heartily concurred.

"Good heavens, Mr. Shang, you sound like my mother!" Christine had exclaimed finally, still smiling but with a dangerous glint in her eye. "Or like that dreadful Never-Never woman with all her nonsense about reincarnation and bean sprouts."

True to Alec's prediction, the seance Saturday night—which had concluded with a "metaphysical dance to pacify the spirits"—had resulted in a diagnosis of an unhappy spirit in the astral plane, in this case the spirit of

Chrysanda Flamande's deceased fiancé, the Comte d'Este. Since the unfortunate comte was wholly the creation of Mr. Fishbein and Colossus Studios' publicity department, Norah had been less than impressed with Nadi Nefuru-Aten's divinatory skills. Sitting at the top of the porch steps, watching the clumsy trippings and swirlings of the three adepts to the wheezings of a double flute—Christine's offer of the gramophone having been refused—and smelling the smoke of the cigarettes Christine and Flindy passed back and forth between them, Norah had been highly aware of the raw-boned shadow of Mr. Shang half-hidden in the oleanders, the moonlight glimmering on the carved dragon of his staff.

"Although I was interested to hear I'd been a Chinese princess in a former incarnation," Christine went on, Sunday afternoon. "You know, I've always *felt* that I should have been born in the imperial palaces of China."

Shang Ko had moved his flat shoulder beneath a sackful of leaves. "I think you would find it different than you believe," he said gravely, but his eyes twinkled.

"I suppose, but I do like Chinese food. Though I don't imagine they'd let princesses have gin, and they didn't have chocolate, did they? And the one time I tried opium, all I got was a headache. But Flindy was so sweet yesterday, and she says she's inviting that *darling* old millionaire Mr. Conklin to her party, and everybody's *dying* to hear about Charlie, so I'm going to go. I'm a big girl, and I can take care of myself, you know."

Privately, Norah had her doubts. The conversation had taken place in midafternoon in the garden between rain showers, and despite nearly two hours of work on her makeup and hair, Christine still looked exhausted. Her interview had made the second page of the *Times* ("I know Mr. Brown told me whether it was Charlie's mother or father who's ill, but I've been so shocked, so horrified by this dreadful event, I can't even recall which it was!"), and the photo was a masterpiece of soul-seared sensuality. *Kiss of Darkness*, *Sawdust Rose*, and *She-Devil of Babylon* were all duly mentioned.

The arrival of Frank Brown and a second contingent of reporters later Sunday afternoon had forstalled a proposed expedition to view the site of the murder. By the time Brown had eaten lunch, kissed Christine, severely vetoed the party at Flindy's, and gone, Christine had had quite enough of being told what she could and could not do.

"Now, I'm going to change clothes and get ready," Christine said to Shang, who had come to the kitchen door to try once more to talk her out of Flindy's. "Frank canceled our dinner for tonight to talk to some more awful reporters, and I don't care if the moon's about to fall out of the sky, I'm going. And don't think you can pull the magneto out of my car, because I learned all

about that with Nicky—that was my first husband. I'll just call a cab. And that goes for you, too, Norah," she added with edged playfulness, and swept from the room, trailing the three Pokes.

The ancient Chinese sighed, exasperated, leaning on one shoulder in the open back door. "Perhaps she is right," he said. "I think she must have been a princess or some favored concubine. Either that or a milkweed fairy whom not even the August Personage of Jade could command."

When Norah walked out with the dogs in the early-falling dark Sunday night, through the uncurtained windows of the cottage she could see the old man sitting in the middle of a chalked circle on the bare floor, surrounded by what looked like glass bottles and sticks of incense, doing something with a handful of thin ivory wands.

Christine developed a headache immediately after supper and went upstairs to lie down "for a few minutes before I get ready."

Norah checked on her at nine and covered her with a Chinese silk quilt. At midnight she checked again and found her curled up like a child with one small white fist balled under her cheek, the thick crepe de chine of her lemon-colored gown creased and flattened and flecked all over with Pekingese hair. Chang Ming, at the foot of the bed, raised his head and studied Norah with solemn dark eyes, then lowered his flat muzzle once more between his paws. Outside the wind groaned through the trees and drove away the clouds, though the moon had not yet risen and the darkness was profound. Norah descended the stairs to find Buttercreme and Black Jasmine in the living room, heads up and ears alert at a time when they would ordinarily be asleep, Black Jasmine with all the toys he could collect arranged in a neat semicircle an inch from his nose.

When she walked to the window, they rose and followed her. Pushing aside the tapestry curtains, she could just barely see something moving along the front of the house, a blur of colorless smoke she recognized as Shang Ko's hair.

"No, no, no!" Hraldy insisted. "You walk like man wearing boots for army! Is this how Laban the Splendid, pride of tents of Israel, enter chamber of woman who is to be his downfall?"

"You said come in," Fallon protested, baffled. "I stopped where you put the X, didn't I?"

"That is something," murmured Alec, strolling over to where Norah sat amid tubs of water and chrysanthemums. Black Jasmine and Chang Ming, lying sprawled on their stomachs, lifted their ears, and their tails curled expectantly over their backs.

On the other side of the wall a voice bellowed, “Look out, boys, it’s a bomb!” and there was a frenzy of feet as the studio’s two top slapstickers did one of their getting-through-the-door routines.

“To think that two months ago in New York I actually had dreams of being carried away by that man.”

“What’d you see him in?” Alec asked, correctly interpreting the remark.

“*Guns in the Sunset*, God help me. We had only a day or so in New York before getting on the train. I hadn’t seen a film in four years, and Christine said if I was coming to Hollywood, I jolly well should. I blush now even to think of it.”

“No, *Guns* was a good film. Campbell tailored that role very carefully for Blake. If you think about it, all he does in that picture is stand, sit, and get on and off horses. Brooks did all the acting, and she can make you think a *tree* is making love to her by her reactions.”

Norah thought back on the film and laughed. “You’re right, at that. In this film he actually has to do something.” She considered the sullen Adonis between the pillars, nodding impatiently at Hraldy’s thickly accented instructions—though the director was less than halfway through with them—with the air of one who felt he was being picked on. Christine, at least, listened intently and tried to the best of her nonexistent ability to do what she conceived the director wanted, an attitude that made her complete failure to perform it much easier to take.

Hraldy strode through the doorway into the boudoir, beheld the she-devil upon her golden bed, and gave a credible imitation of a man suffering heart failure from the sheer erotic impact of the sight.

“Although I must admit,” Norah went on, “the last time I read the Book of Esther, I completely missed the part about Esther’s former lover Laban being seduced and driven to his death by Queen Vashti.”

“The cantor in our synagogue seems to have skipped that at Purim, too,” Alec remarked, chewing thoughtfully on a hangnail. “Also the part where Vashti and Haman lead an army in revenge for the slight upon her. Maybe that was in the New Testament version. Are we ready?”

“We are ready.” Hraldy threw a glance toward the pillars, behind which Laban the Splendid had retreated. Ned the lesser and his tubs of flowers had vanished, leaving climbing galaxies of blossom behind. Alec cranked a few feet and made a last check of the viewing aperture.

“Now, Chrysanda, *amore mia*, caress that pomegranate,” crooned the director, rolling his every “r” like a regimental drum.

“Look out, boys, it’s a bomb!” whooped Larry—or Jerry—on the other side of the boudoir wall.

Hraldy ignored the commotion as if he and the queen of Babylon were indeed alone in the darkness of the stage's artificial night. "You are woman capable of devouring men even as you devour that fruit. Let us see it in your face, in your body, in your *ravissante* eyes. Lights..."

Alec stepped back from the camera and hit the switches. With a sudden hissing of kliegs, the boudoir was bathed in a chiaroscuro of white and black, dramatic highlights reveling in every fold of drapery and curl of Christine's hair. Norah automatically checked her watch—the longest take time so far was an hour and forty-three minutes with Hraldy directing, and the shortest was seventeen minutes for Gus Campbell—caught up the clapper board, and stepped forward as the director said, "Music..."

Like sweet poison the notes of the overture from *Swan Lake* threaded into the air ("Look out, boys, it's a bomb!"). "Camera!"

Norah held the clapper board in front of the scene for an instant, then removed it as Hraldy shouted, "Action!"

Laban the Splendid, eyes bulging and lips pulled back in an expression Norah found typical of film actors, clumped through the archway as if, beneath his hawk-embroidered charioteer's tunic, his undershorts were too tight. Queen Vashti, in a gesture of surprising, if overdone, sensuality, rolled the pomegranate she held against her breast, raised it to her dark red lips, and bit.

Crimson juice exploded down her chin. Christine reared back with a loud "Eeuh!" and tried to spit out the bitter yellow membrane that had been hidden under the fruit's skin. Hraldy flung up his hands and cried, "Cut! Cut!" quite unnecessarily, as Alec had already stopped cranking and was expiring with laughter.

"Apple, he say." Mikos Hraldy flung up his hands in despair. "As if it is small matter to alter symbolism upon which entire scene is fulcrum! Apple! He is Philistine, that Brown! Philistine!"

Christine, with Black Jasmine's childlike face poking out below hers from the swaddling ocean of chinchilla, frowned. "Are the Philistines in this movie, too?" The big saloon rocked as it turned off Santa Monica Boulevard and onto Vermont, the first of a little procession of studio cars wending their way through the gathering dusk. "And I don't see what's wrong with using an apple instead of those messy old pomegranates. Look, I got juice all over my hands and it's stained everything in sight. It would have stained the costume if there'd been more costume to stain."

"After all," Norah pointed out good-humoredly, "Eve tempted Adam with an apple."

“Bah!” Hraldy swept back his three long strands of top-cover hair. Buttercreme, already hiding in the folds of Norah’s cardigan, shrank back still farther in profoundest disapproval. “It is pomegranate, not apple, is metaphysical symbol of woman’s power over man! Ask any translator what is fruit of knowledge of good and evil.” He turned a dissatisfied brown gaze out the window, contemplating the luminous windows of the bungalows perched high on the hills above them. Except for the ubiquitous palm trees, this stretch of Vermont Avenue, rising steeply into the more exclusive precincts of Edendale, could have been lifted wholesale from some small midwestern town. The palm trees; and the HOLLYWOODLAND sign that blazed behind them in the blue dimming of the light like some garish Great Wall of China.

“But is typical,” he went on bitterly. “That Brown, he has soul of... of *producer!*”

Christine, leaning to readjust her makeup over the driver’s shoulder in the rearview mirror, regarded the director with surprise. “But Frank *is* a producer,” she pointed out.

“*Hélas!*” Hraldy retorted, and turned back to Norah, in whose relative silence he read sympathy for his woes. “Listen to me, Madame Blackstone. I make greatest biblical epic ever produce in this country, in any country. Not some shallow and facile love tale of indiscretions of kings, but story of all spectacle of *Intolerance*, couple with deepest, most moving of all stories. I pour my heart, my soul into it, I make it as it should be make, as surely ancient prophets would make. Twenty-six reels *Trials of Job* was, six and a half hours of greatest, most moving, most heroic story of human passion and human struggle ever wrote. It is story which encompass deepest question of human life, most pro-found search of foundation of man’s relation with Almighty, and what does your Mr. Brown do to it?”

“Cut it, I hope!” exclaimed Christine, lipstick in hand.

“You see!” Hraldy made a gesture that nearly put his hand through the roof of the car. “Philistine!”

“I thought it says in the script Vashti is a Persian. In fact I’m sure it does.” She dug around for her script in the carpetbag of cosmetics that inevitably accompanied her to the set, while Black Jasmine licked her chin.

“Eighty-five minutes!” mourned the director. “*Eighty-five minutes* he cut it to! Six and a half hours of pathos, of struggle! Scenes with Job’s sons at wedding of their sister, and when Job bid them farewell on their sea voyage, he cut—only did he leave in shipwreck in which they are devoured by the Leviathan, when no one has any small idea who these two men are!”

“I don’t remember a shipwreck in Job,” Norah commented, unheard.

“Job mourning upon his dung heap, covered in sores, while his worthless

friends mock at and scorn him, his long wrestlings of soul, his conversations with Satan and with God... gone! Only scene where evil woman whom once he love come in zebra-drawn chariot to sneer at him... *bien sur!* And what does he give me instead?" He caught the edge of the seat in front of him as the car turned up the steep hills of Edendale, carefully negotiating the narrow, erratic streets. "A marital squabble, a domestic spat."

"With battles," Norah pointed out helpfully.

"Pah!"

"There!" Christine looked up in triumph from her script. "'Oh, my little dove of Persia.' Asu-What's-His-Name says that, and he's her husband, so he ought to know. She wasn't a Philistine, after all... Unless the Philistines were Persians?"

"Is this the place?" Norah craned her neck to look up the steep hillside as the little procession drew to a stop. All she could gather was an impression of overgrown greenery draping the shoulders of rock for some twenty-five feet, surmounted by a stucco wall.

The driver got out and opened the door. Christine stepped grandly forth, the dogs bounding happily before her and rushing off to sniff everything in sight. "Up there," she said as Norah and Hraldy climbed out on her heels. "All the studios rent it because it's got the most *gorgeous* courtyard, straight out of the Arabian Nights. In fact, I thought Frank ought to use it for a movie about the Arabian Nights. I mean, after *Robin Hood*, he could make a big picture about the Arabian Knights meeting the Knights of the Round Table..."

She drew her furs more closely about her, though the evening, by Manchester standards, was mild.

"Isn't that terribly inconvenient for the owners?" asked Norah, going back to the second car and taking the awkward bundle of light stands Alec handed out to her. Blake Fallon, likewise bundled in fur, had already disembarked and now went to catch up with Christine on the long stone stairway, followed by Zena Franklin, Christine's autocratic hairdresser. Hraldy and Mary DeNoux, the wardrobe mistress, each took a magazine of spare film; the flute and cello players—the celloist had switched from piano—handed their instruments to Alice, the violinist, and lent a hand with the reflectors. Mindlebaum himself carried his camera as if it were a fragile and cranky baby, which was exactly what it was.

"The owners are glad to get money for it," he said as they climbed innumerable steps to the squat gate at the top. "They can't rent it and won't live in it. It's supposed to be haunted."

"Rubbish," Hraldy declared. "We film here for Job, film wedding feast of his daughter—which your Mr. Brown cut out also—and where is ghost, eh?"

Show the ghost on film, and I will believe ghost.”

Chang Ming, after solemnly balancing on three short legs to baptize the base of the steps, bounded after the procession. Over the walls, Norah could see lights and hear the faint exchange of voices from those who had been sent ahead to properly deck the set with chrysanthemums and hangings suitable to the queen of Babylon’s gardens. Black Jasmine, dashing back from an investigation of another driveway, added his mite to Chang Ming’s efforts, then tried unsuccessfully to follow the party up the stairs. Norah deposited her burden beside the gate and went down to get him.

“There may not be a ghost,” remarked Alec, who waited for her at the top, “but every time I shoot here—and I’ve shot seven pictures in this courtyard—I make sure I get at least five extra takes, because something’s going to go wrong with at least half of what I do. Other cameramen say the same. I know two major stars who refuse to film here at all, and at least six stuntmen.”

“Why?”

The gate was opened from within. As the lights from the house fell upon it, Norah gasped, realizing that what she had thought was wood was in fact solid bronze, embossed with intricate arabesques. Beyond, instead of the Grand Guignol of cobwebs and horror called to mind by the talk of ghosts and haunting, the courtyard lay like a dream of Omar Khayam’s, its tiles embossed with flowers and its walls decorated with exquisite bas-reliefs of bulls and winged gods, priests and maidens bearing tribute, all half-hidden behind stands of bamboo and banana, trailing roses and bougainvillea. Every vine and tree in sight, of course, sported the ubiquitous chrysanthemums, and the tall stands of the lights with their trailing cables running back into the house somewhat marred the magic of the place. Still, Norah could see why every epic of ancient passion was filmed here.

Beyond the door—a scaled-down replica of one in the British Museum’s Persian collection—she could hear Christine’s voice. “My *God*, can’t we get some *heat* in here? I swear if I put on *all thirty* of my costumes for this film one on top of the other, I’d *still* freeze to death....Oh, Butterpie, Mama’s going to take care of you, don’t be nervous, princess...” Buttercreme, Norah deduced, had as usual made a beeline for Christine’s chinchilla the moment her mistress had shed it and would stay in its familiar-smelling safety until filming was done. Chang Ming and Black Jasmine, by contrast, trotted busily around the court, clearly intent on assisting and supervising, respectively, with the lights. In a corner the musicians set up, the pianist/cellist muttering to his brother about the effect of cold on the strings.

Truly, thought Norah, gazing around her, like the intrepid Dorothy Gale,

she had managed to stumble into another world.

Through that exquisite Sassanian door she could see a very long, empty room in which Mary laid out makeup and Zena unpacked costumes. Viewing them by the line of 100-watt bulbs jury-rigged from the solitary overhead fixture, Norah had to admit that her sister-in-law had a point. Neither the fragile black serpent-pattern creation she was currently wearing nor the ensemble of gold tissue and peacock eyes to be donned later was designed to do anything but display the maximum of the wearer's charms. An arch at the far end of the room revealed a stairway; two other arches showed only another room, long and dark and empty of furniture, breathing a cold, strange smell Norah put down to neglect.

"You are on balcony, taking night air..."

She stepped back outside at the sound of Mikos Hraldy's light, prissy voice. Illuminated by the reflected glow of the courtyard arcs, he stood, prosaic in his knickerbockers and sweater, beside the enchanted form of Vashti, queen of Babylon. In the artificial lighting the strange, slightly greenish tint of camera makeup was far less obvious, creating only a kind of deathly pallor against which Christine's dark eyes seemed enormous. She leaned on the railing and shook her hair down over the space below; Alec, moving about the courtyard like a good-natured brown djinni, aimed a baby spot into the waters of the fountain, and Christine was suddenly bathed in a moiré of reflections, as if seen through a jewel.

Her necklace—the same one she had worn in *Kiss of Darkness*—actually looked more natural in this setting than it had with the sleek, modern evening dress she had worn to take her plunge over the cliff. Whatever Frank Brown had told Christine about it when he'd given it to her, Norah guessed that it was undoubtedly old, though whether it had actually been looted from the Forbidden City was a moot point. It was Chinese, which was what counted for Christine, and probably extremely valuable, which also counted: an intricately worked double strand of bronze leaves, vines, and chains in which small, Baroque freshwater pearls and cabochon garnets had been set as if they'd grown there like fruit. Two of the three round plaques that lay crosswise on the wearer's breast were definitely opals. The center gem, the largest, Norah thought might be opal as well or some kind of jade, white and cold and shining now with a moony radiance in the flickering reflections from below.

Hollywood, Norah thought again, watching Alec setting up reflectors on that fairy-tale balcony beside the exquisite queen. In the courtyard that might have belonged to Cyrus the Great, Blake Fallon in his charioteer's tunic was rolling a golf ball for Chang Ming to chase, although Chang Ming, in typical Pekingese fashion, could not bring himself to actually give it up for another

throw once he'd caught it. The clapper board rested against the base of the fountain. Ned the lesser, in his baggy corduroys and suspenders, made sure no cables showed within the camera lines.

Nobody gave any sign that they'd already worked twelve hours that day and would probably be there till midnight. Norah was well aware that this wasn't the first time—she'd watched Christine doing retakes until ten on several occasions during the filming of *Sawdust Rose*—and found it rather curious that film stars routinely worked hours that would have had factory hands striking in England.

For six thousand dollars a week, she supposed one would do whatever the producer asked.

Behind her, Norah heard Black Jasmine bark. There was no mistaking that flat little quack. She reentered the house, passed through the long makeup room, and looked into the chamber beyond.

Black Jasmine and—surprisingly—Buttercreme were engaged in furious pursuit of something Norah couldn't quite make out in the shadows. Probably a mouse or a stray golf ball from Mr. Fallon's game with Chang Ming. Norah smiled, leaning in the doorway to watch them: ostrich-plume tails curled tightly up over their backs, fur flouncing in all directions like a couple of sixteenth-century children running about in farthingales and trains, they darted among the shadows of the far wall, eyes gleaming in the stray light that leaked through from the courtyard. Their toenails clattered on the terra-cotta tiles, and now and then one of them would bark, the curious barks of Pekingese, small and fierce and the farthest sound possible from the nervous yapping of most toy dogs. The noise echoed queerly in the low-raftered chamber.

They filmed until after midnight. Part of this was due to Alec's determination to shoot nearly twice as much film as usual, and part to Blake Fallon's absolute inability to rise above the level of an extremely comely department store mannequin. Faced with the most gut-wrenching moral dilemma of his life in the garden of the queen, he paced up and down beneath her balcony with the brow-clutching hyperventilation of a high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In a later scene—for which Christine changed from shimmering and abbreviated black into shimmering and abbreviated gold—he received the news of his banishment from his cruel goddess's favors with the spastic jerks of a string-activated wooden toy.

"I can see why Mr. Brown teamed them up," Norah remarked to Alec during one of Hraldy's impassioned demonstrations of alternately spurning himself and falling at his own feet in despair. She hugged her cardigan closer about her; the night air was definitely turning cold.

Alec nodded wisely. “He does make her look good, doesn’t he? Part of it’s the coke—that’s why he keeps flubbing. But even sober he comes in second to the scenery.”

“Do they *all* dope?” demanded Norah, exasperated as much as horrified. “I know Christine does; I see Flindy McColl and Wilmer and Calderone...”

“Christine’s not as bad as some, but she’s playing with fire,” Alec said bluntly. “Studio doctors prescribe it like cough drops; they have to if the stars are shooting fourteen, sixteen hours a day, six days a week sometimes. About a third of the crew uses it, too; I don’t, but I have a standing prescription for as much as I want. And the stars who don’t use it to stay awake use it to stay skinny. The camera puts about ten pounds on a person. And that,” he finished with a grim glitter in his eye, “is Hollywood, too.”

At ten Frank Brown showed up, and Norah and the lesser Ned walked down to T’ang’s on Hollywood Boulevard for food for the crew. It was of a piece with the night, she thought, to sit in the royal gardens of Babylon watching Queen Vashti, her godlike young lover, and the two shining-muscled Nubian guardsmen downing fried rice and sweet and sour pork out of paper cartons.

“I want you to keep an eye on her out in the desert,” said Brown, hunkering clumsily down at Norah’s side. Norah felt startled, gratified at this evidence of his care, until he added, “I don’t expect Hearst’ll get reporters out that far, but he might.”

She looked across at the big man. The doughy face looked even heavier with fatigue, sleeplessness bloating the flesh around the cold celadon eyes. She recalled his arrival at Christine’s house the previous day, minutes before the reporters, and how he had remained, a traffic cop to the interview, until the last had gone. “So they’re not accepting your story?”

The pale eyes flashed irritably. “Damn vultures don’t care for what’s true, only for their goddamn stories,” he snapped. “I drove Charlie Sandringham straight from my place to the train station, and that’s that. We both saw that barnstorming pansy drive off, and I was with Charlie every minute after that.”

Norah was silent.

Brown sighed and shook his leonine head. “Wolfman on the *Trib* tells me they got a call saying Sandringham was the kid’s sugar daddy. That’s what got them out there for seconds yesterday. It’s got to be Jesperson from Enterprise Studios. He knows if *Midnight Cavalier* goes under, not only do I not buy him out, he buys me.” He straightened up and looked down at Norah on her marble bench. “So you keep her clear of anyone you don’t know when you’re out there, okay?”

With a fat man's heavy roll he strode to the bench where Fallon and Christine sat. Fallon had been flirting earlier with Christine in a manner that reminded Norah strongly of Lawrence Pendergast's self-confident attentions, but he moved aside quickly for the producer. At the sight of Brown, Christine fairly sparkled with animation and delight.

After fifteen hours of hard work under the dehydrating blaze of the lights, it was pretty good. Watching her, Norah thought about what Alec had said. Between takes the crew at least had the option of looking tired and grumpy as they went about their chores. Christine didn't, in the presence of the man who expected his mistress to be as vivacious as she always appeared on camera. Norah's own exhaustion weighed like lead in her bones—she dreaded having to get up and catch the train in the morning—and she had only looked after the dogs, fetched and carried for Christine, and held the boards for test footage and shot headers.

“We're not doing badly tonight,” Alec remarked, coming over with steaming cups of coffee and tea in hand and Chang Ming trotting hopefully at his heels. Norah had issued strict orders to the entire crew not to feed the Pekes, and to her surprise they'd been obeyed, even by Fallon, whose idea of a roaring joke was to get the studio cat drunk on the contents of his flask. “Only two lights have gone out, and that rope Blake was climbing broke when he was only a foot or so above the pavement. Not bad for this place.”

Norah lowered her chopsticks and regarded him curiously. “Do you really believe the place is haunted?”

“Not exactly,” he said after a long hesitation. Like everyone else, he looked like ten miles of bad road, his hair pointy with sweat and his brow marked with small lines that spoke of a headache he probably hadn't had time to notice. He sipped his coffee gingerly. It was the color of tar and smelled like it, too. “I'm doing some faking, telling Mikos I've got doubts about the exposure or that the gate was acting up. Which is all nuts to him; he loves extra takes. And Blake and Christine are sure helping me in that department with both hands.” He reached down and scratched Chang Ming's head.

Across the court the greater Ned dropped a bean sprout; the little dog bolted in instant pursuit. For the next five minutes he lay, holding the vegetable upright between his paws and licking it perplexedly, before giving up. Norah had set down plates of food for the dogs in the wardrobe room, and as usual Chang Ming and Black Jasmine had ignored their own, tried to steal bites out of each other's, and waited with scant patience until the fussy Buttercreme had eaten a few mouthfuls, after which they had engaged in the obligatory yapping battle over what she'd left. Contrary to Norah's expectations, the Pekes ate like cats: they would nibble for the rest of the

evening.

“The thing is,” Alec went on, “I know the lights that went out will work just fine when I get them back to the studio. When I was filming *Salamis* here with Campbell, we had a whole light tree come down on top of Dick Scott, and I’d double-checked the braces on the thing myself. He *still* can’t use his right arm properly; he’s lucky he wasn’t killed.” He shrugged. “I wouldn’t call it superstition. I’m just a little more careful when I’m here, that’s all.”

In time Norah went into the house again, curled up in the chinchilla coat with her head on a silken heap of spare draperies, and drifted off to sleep to the dim strains of Ketelby’s *In a Persian Market* and snatches of Saint-Saens. But, perhaps because of the sweet and sour pork, she did not sleep well. She woke two or three times or dreamed that she woke, wondering why the room seemed so dark, wondering why she felt the clutch of terror at her throat, the sense that there was something moving in the room beyond the dark archway. From that she woke in earnest to hear the scurrying rattle of claws on the tiled floor in that farther room as the Pekes scampered to and fro, hunting mice or whatever it was they were hunting with savage enthusiasm. After that she slept better. When Alec woke her, she found all three Pekingese lying like little sentinels, one in each door of the long room that led to the rest of the house.

SEVEN

THUNDER OVER HEAVEN

Avoid doing what is improper—a warning...
An expedition is ill advised...
An omen of peril...
A ram butting its head upon a fence—
unable to withdraw or to go ahead...

FOR THE FOURTH time that evening the old man unwrapped the sandalwood box he kept at the head of his mattress and took from it a bronze vessel green with time and wrought in the shape of a bird. The metal was still warm to his touch.

He shook his head, knowing that what he did was as useless as digging up a planted seed to make sure it was sprouting. But there was little else he could do.

It was dark out on the narrow porch of the cottage and very cold. The night was filled with the scents of the alien, arid hills. Above and behind the cottage, the house loomed, garage and kitchen, the main bulk of the first floor, and, rising above that like a watchtower, the second story with its little balconies and tiled decorations and ornamental niches and figures beneath the eaves, dark as the hills themselves. The moon would not clear the hills for some hours yet. He had walked the circumference of the house twice already, seeing that the only lighted lamps were on the tall porch and in the living room beyond so that Chrysanda Flamande would not return to a dark house.

So far she had not returned at all. Shang Ko sighed, weary and driven and wondering what on earth he could do. He feared for her—that surprising, vivid lady, wild and beautiful as a milkweed fairy—feared for her tall and quiet-voiced sister. He had marked both the main house and the cottage, marked the motorcar and the trees at the end of the drive, with signs of protection, but he feared—in his heart he knew—this would not be enough.

He sank cross-legged onto the worn boards. From another compartment in the sandalwood box he took three coins he had been given many years earlier in another land, two bronze incense burners no larger than a child's palm, and five sticks of the incense he had purchased several days before on Marchessault Street. Last of all he withdrew a small white stone, like the bird vessel warm and marked with fire, which he put into the bronze vessel again; the incense he arranged in the burners and in three small glass bottles that, by

their smell, had once contained perfume.

He threw the coins, observing both the static and the moving implications of the hexagrams they formed, shuffling with the adeptness of long practice the signs that would need to be drawn to counteract the evils of which they spoke, to take into account the *lung* of the surrounding hills and the *xue* and *xiang* of the house itself. Against Fire in the East, Water must be written. Against Thunder over Heaven—the sign of great power—Mountain over Heaven to increase the buildup of resources, though he knew that no matter how he built up his own resources, they would not prevail. They had not in the past.

At least, he thought, the moon was waning. There would be some protection in that.

His hand trembled a little as he marked the sign Chu, and he took a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed it out again. Clearing his mind of those memories, he redrew the marks—Da Chu, “Big Cattle”—perfectly. As perfectly as a man could whose hands more nearly resembled the claws of a dried vulture than the fingers of a human being.

When he had marked each of the six directions and drawn a protective sign around himself, he placed the incense, staring steadily at the tip of each joss stick until the flame glowed and then shrank in on itself in a frail ribbon of scented smoke. Likewise he placed twigs and papery chips of eucalyptus bark in the vessel of bronze around the white stone and called forth fire by speaking its secret name. The leaping light turned his face to a crazy quilt of shadow and amber, gleamed in the haunted depths of his eyes.

He had seen too much, he thought wearily. When he had been young he had been a fighter, willing to risk his honor, his friends, his family, and his life that injustice might be stemmed, corruption banished, the land of his birth—the most beautiful land under heaven—freed of the conquerors who had held it prisoner for generations, freed to take its true place in the world. And he had been defeated, broken by those who served the emperor. Those he trusted had betrayed him, so with nothing more than his bare life he had fled at last from the land he had loved, to fetch up like a storm-beaten mariner in this land. A different world, he thought, with its pale-eyed silent people, its smoke-belching motorcars and food that had no taste, and its cement buildings slapped down any which way, with no regard for *lung* and *xue* and *shui*, the energies that moved across the earth.

Now the emperors themselves were gone. When his sons had told him this, they had spoken as if they found it impossible to believe. Perhaps they did. His sons had always been a bit of a disappointment to him.

In the brazier the fire strengthened. From the crowding hills came the

long yikking sob of the coyote, as the Mexicans called the gray wolflet that prowled this land. By the stars it was just past midnight, midway through the Hour of the Rat, the tenth moon month ending. The Year of the Pig, but now that the emperors were gone, except for that poor boy trapped in the rose-pink walls of Peking, how would the cycles of years be marked?

He sank his mind into the veiled core of the flames, swimming down into it as if into glowing water.

Mrs. Norah and Christine had left the house. The old man saw this with some relief. Even through the silent medium of fire he had felt the evil of that place, rotted sorrows clinging like dust-filled cobwebs, unseen things scuttling in the corners. Under the incredible blaze of those tall white lamps, she had enacted again and again those tiny fragments of a story—like a ghost herself, he thought as he watched, forever condemned to pace the same corridor, to weep for the same sorrow in the same place. That which stalked her would not manifest itself under those lights or come near those swirling mobs of people, not with the moon already past its last quarter, its power dwindled to a thread. Still, such things could use the sort of evil that lurked in the corners of that house. He was glad she had taken her guardian dogs.

The dogs were sleeping now as the big open motorcar made its way along dark streets where tall wooden houses with peaked roofs slumbered between tropical pepper and palm. Chang Ming was curled on the floor at Mrs. Norah's feet, snoring gently, no doubt, as was the way of such dogs. Black Jasmine and Buttercreme shared Norah's lap, though Black Jasmine seemed to believe it necessary to assist Christine in her piloting of the vehicle and made repeated attempts to climb into her lap to do so. Then Christine slowed the car and turned the wheel, and the old man sat up straighter in consternation. Those were the movements of bringing the car to a halt. But he did not hear the automobile's engine or see the yellow flash of its lights down the driveway.

They had stopped somewhere else.

His fist clenched in irritation, a ball of bones and calcined pain, but fear shrank and chilled his heart.

"Do not do this!" he whispered, as if she could hear.

Nowhere in the city was safe. He knew it, sensed it, as clearly as he had sensed it two nights earlier, the night he had been to the theater, where on film she—and others—had enacted their own deaths.

"Come home! It is out there, and it seeks you!"

But they were miles away, he knew not where, stopping for a purpose he could only guess. At night, outdoors, unprotected. And they were getting out of the car.

“Christine, have you got *any idea* what time it is?” Norah transferred the slumbering Buttercreme to the seat she had just vacated and climbed rather stiffly from the big roadster, pulling her cardigan more closely around her for warmth. The night had gone chilly in earnest, and she could see her breath in the yellow glow of the streetlamp.

“Not the tiniest bit, darling.” Christine, snug in her softly shimmering mound of chinchilla, with Black Jasmine trotting self-importantly at her heels, clicked her way up the walk. The diamonds in her big hat buckle flashed, and even out of costume she retained her slightly disarrayed look, a crazy and tousled temptress whose flamelike hunger for life would draw any man, mothlike, to folly.

As it drew her, Norah thought, annoyed but following in spite of herself.

The eight bungalows built around the narrow court were typically fake Spanish, their pink or white stucco fronts nearly hidden behind a fashionable jungle of bougainvillea and banana plants. Every window was dark.

“When I drag you out of bed at six o’clock tomorrow morning—*this* morning, and may I remind you that’s less than five hours from now—you’re going to demand to know why I permitted you to do this.” She caught up with that ruffle of fur and diamonds, flicking on the flashlight she’d taken from the glove box and aiming its yellow beam at the ground.

“Darling, you *know* I’d never say anything that unfair!” Christine’s brown eyes were wide with reproach. “Besides, if it’s only five hours, it’s probably better that we just—” She started guiltily as Norah signaled her to lower her voice with a gesture at the other bungalows. “—stay up.” Though her voice sank to a whisper, it didn’t slow down one whit. “In fact, we’ll need to if we’re going to finish packing. And if these people weren’t woken up by a full-blown murder, I don’t see that my voice would have much effect.” But she whispered anyway and elevated herself to the toes of her satin heels, which did nothing to improve her balance.

Other than a certain smudginess under her eyes, Christine seemed none the worse for a sixteen-hour workday. She had, of course, insisted on renewing her regular makeup once the greasepaint was removed. After a few passionate embraces in the stairway, Frank Brown had departed with the rest of the crew. “Now you get on home and get some sleep,” he’d ordered, a command that Norah, even at the time, considered to be singularly ill judged.

By then Hans Schweibler—the Hun of the Purple Sage, as Doc LaRousse called him—had shown up with three or four extremely brightly clothed and giggling young ladies in a golden Studebaker to pick up Blake Fallon. “You are stuck into the desert for ein week,” the cowboy star said cheerily. “We must fill you up so you do not die.” Fallon, who had visibly

faltered during the last hours of filming, promptly disappeared into another part of the house and returned a few moments later, bright-eyed and talking fast, to pile into the jumble of rouged knees and cigarette smoke in the car and swoop off down the hill.

And in a way, thought Norah, she couldn't really blame them. The day after their arrival in Los Angeles Christine had been in the studio, starting on *Sawdust Rose*. Usually there was a gap of a week between pictures, but because of the prospective buyout of Enterprise, Brown had stepped up production. They'd "wrapped" the Western on Saturday, the twenty-fourth of November—at ten-thirty at night—and Monday morning had started on *She-Devil of Babylon*. Charlie Sandringham and Emily Violet—who was the heroine to Christine's villainess—had been filming for a week already. Wednesday night Christine had stayed after *She-Devil's* filming was done to do retakes of a saloon scene from the earlier picture.

Given that kind of schedule, Norah reflected, it was hardly surprising that Christine took what relaxation she could, though all-night drinking bouts at the Café Montmartre, backroom flings with jazz musicians, and drunken auto races along Sunset Boulevard to the sea were scarcely her idea of rest. But she recognized that Christine was of an entirely different nature from herself, and the time and the energy had to come from somewhere, if only from a little ivory box.

"I *have* finished packing." She edged after Christine down the straitened path choked with calla lilies, tropicals, and castor plants that led to the tiny porch and kitchen door of bungalow three.

"You haven't *really*?" Christine stared at her, awe in her face in the dim glow of the flashlight beam. "I don't believe it. It takes me *days* to pack."

"Nonsense," Norah retorted briskly. "It never takes you days to pack because I've yet to see you start packing until the morning of your departure. Now, let's get this over with so *I* can get a little sleep, anyway."

Not, she knew, that it was at all likely she would.

"You'll regret it," Christine promised. "I mean, *I* always do if I go to sleep knowing I'll just have to get up again. We'll stop for coffee at the Grove instead, how's that? They have the most *marvelous* bar.. Now, where did Charlie put that hideout key?" She tiptoed to reach the struts that supported the roof sheltering the side door. Norah shone the flashlight upward, metal gleaming just above her feckless sister-in-law's fingers where two beams joined. She reached in easily and drew forth a key.

"I think you're taller than me on purpose. Besides, you wouldn't let me come down here yesterday—"

"To be exact," Norah said, "you were stopped by Mr. Brown showing up

and the reporters. And they'd have been all over here yesterday.”

“They were,” said Christine, unlocking the door while Black Jasmine desecrated the step. “Flindy tried—she came down yesterday morning, and the place was just *teeming* with them. She and I were going to sneak down after her party, and I think it was unfair of you not to wake me. By now Charlie’s landlord will have cleaned everything up, and there won’t be anything to see. I bet the police let *Frank* in.”

“Mr. Brown,” Norah said in a voice like picked bone, “had already *been* in.”

Christine stopped a step into the kitchen, her throat closing in a sudden small gagging noise. Norah realized that Christine hadn’t known there would be a smell.

He was cut to pieces, Mr. Brown had said.

Norah had not realized at the time that he’d been speaking literally.

Foul and overpowering, the stench was not only the stink of two-day-old blood. It was the stink of death, the smell a reminder of the fact that a man had been gutted there, his flesh ripped from his bones and scattered broadcast, the contents of his organs spilled obscenely along the floor of the hall.

Her jaw tightened hard. She remembered the smell from her days with the VAD and later, during the influenza, from the endless day of drifting in and out of delirium alone, smelling death in her parents’ room next door and wondering with what strength was left to her if she, too, would die before anyone came to see how they were doing. Uncle Sher and Aunt Francy—Clive’s parents and by then her father’s only surviving relatives—were supposed to, but they’d been as worn down with overwork and malnutrition as her parents. Weeks later Aunt Francy had come to the charity ward and told her Sher had died, too.

But that had been nothing like this.

Black Jasmine shrank back with a deep, rattly little growl, his silky ears flattening. After a moment Christine straightened her shoulders, remarked in a shaky voice that tried to be jaunty, “Phew! It really stinks in here,” and dug a cigarette from her very small and fashionable beaded bag. Her hand trembled so badly that she could barely light it; she didn’t even try to fit it to the holder. Nevertheless, she took the flashlight from Norah and preceded her into the living room.

The landlord had in fact cleaned up after a fashion. But it would take refinishing to get the blood out of the floorboards, and looking at the brown ghosts of those dreadful spatters on the pale plaster walls, Norah was reminded—“The Canterville Ghost” notwithstanding—of a hundred tales of blood spots no coat of paint could ever hide.

The furniture had all been hauled to one side of the small living room, the crusted rug rolled up and lying like a corpse across the couch. The smell, Norah realized, must be coming chiefly from that.

“Looks like Attila the Hun’s been through,” said Christine, still attempting to show that she was a tough little flapper whom nothing could faze. She drew heavily on her cigarette and flashed the torch across the walls. Norah saw how the brown stains on the walls had been interrupted, as if handprints—at that height they had to be handprints—had been sponged out, and it came to her for the first time that Mr. Brown and Mr. Fishbein had come to Ivarene Street Saturday *from here*, that they’d been sitting there in their business suits, eating nuts and patting the dogs and comforting Christine twenty minutes after mopping up a dead man’s blood while his disemboweled corpse lay in the next room.

She had heard Frank Brown described as ruthless. She hadn’t understood that until now.

Hollywood. She bent quickly and picked up Black Jasmine, who had begun to shiver.

“How much does Mr. Brown have riding on *The Midnight Cavalier*?” she asked softly.

“Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.” The torchlight moved slowly over the polished red burlwood of the bar and the few broken shards that were all that remained of a circular mirror on the wall behind it. It looked as if something had been hurled at it deliberately, with enough force to dent the wall. Norah wondered what and why. “It premieres in two weeks. Sennett Studios nearly went under last year when all Fatty’s pictures got boycotted, and he wasn’t even *convicted* of killing that woman. I mean, they couldn’t even prove that she’d died of... well, of what the *Examiner* said she died of.”

Norah was silent. It was scarcely the first time studio executives had engaged in a little art direction at a murder scene, to save an investment. *It has to have been Jespersion from Enterprise*, Brown had said. She wondered what he planned to do about the footage Sandringham had already shot. No wonder he was nervous: “Movie Idol Slays Lover” made far better copy than “Stuntman Slain Mysteriously,” accompanied by a minor note in the entertainment column that Charlie Sandringham had retired to Vermont to nurse an ailing parent.

Like nursery cribbage. Mr. Sandringham’s velvety voice returned to her, sharing reminiscences of exile. And, *I’m glad to see you out.* No one, not even Alec, had thought to make sure that as Christine’s dependent she was not being taken advantage of.

She wondered where Charlie Sandringham was tonight.

“Have you seen enough?” she asked very gently.

Christine paused, indecisive, in the arch that led into the hall. The yellow circle of the flashlight beam could not seem to penetrate the utter blackness at the corridor’s end. Horrible lines of rusty brown trailed along the plaster of the walls, wavered across the bare floor, drew the eye back into the gullet of shadows. Had they removed the mattress from the bed? Norah wondered. Or the bed from the room? By the smell of the hall, she didn’t think it likely.

“I guess.” Christine let fall her cigarette stub and crushed it out under one glittering heel. Norah removed the flashlight from her unsteady hand and led the way back through the kitchen, the still-trembling Black Jasmine under her other arm. Behind her she was aware of Christine fumbling in her handbag again, this time for the silver flask she always carried. In a small voice unlike her usual blithe tones Christine said, “I guess this wasn’t such a hot idea, after all.”

“It’s all right.” Norah answered the apology her sister-in-law intended rather than the words themselves. After the first rush of pick-me-up, she knew, the crash, exhaustion, and depression long held at bay closed in to claim their own.

The air outside was like a brisk dose of smelling salts, wiping away the stain of the gore-haunted darkness as surely as A. F. Brown and Conrad Fishbein had wiped whatever handprints and footmarks they might have found. At the end of the walk, through the dense jungle of banana leaves, Norah could make out the long yellow roadster at the curb. Chang Ming and Buttercreme were standing up in the driver’s seat, paws on the top of the door and round faces peering worriedly over, ears up, eyes grave, Buttercreme’s tongue hanging down like a raspberry-pink window shade in the streetlight’s gleam. It became suddenly possible to think again about the Canterville Ghost, grumpily obliged to renew the traditional family bloodstains with stolen paints and about Mr. Fishbein’s hasty editing of Frank Brown’s account and to wonder what they’d done with the cleanup rags.

Even in the light of the torch Christine looked very pale.

“We can stop by the Grove if you like,” Norah said, and her sister-in-law gave her a look of such gratitude that she realized how desperate the other woman’s tough facade had been. “Even if I don’t want a drink, I’m certainly not going to want to go to sleep for quite a while after this. And as you said, five hours really isn’t enough.”

I’ll regret this.

“Thank you.” Christine turned to lock the door behind them, but manipulating both the gin flask and the key with hands that were far from steady was beyond her abilities. Norah heard the key ring sharply as it struck

the cement of the step; then it vanished with a soft, leathery rustle into the calla lilies. “Oh, damn.”

“I’ll get it.” Norah set Black Jasmine down and crouched to flash the torch into the darkness of the plants. Metal flashed in the dirt—two snails waved their eyestalks at her protestingly—as Norah pushed aside the extravagant, spade-shaped leaves.

She stood up so quickly that she almost knocked Christine off the step, so quickly that she felt dizzy. Lips, hands, feet were suddenly cold as ice. “Let’s go,” she managed to say, catching at the massive puff of gray fur that was her sister-in-law’s arm.

“Darling, what’s the matter?” Christine was trying to screw the cap back onto her flask and light a cigarette at the same time, her black hair trailing down from under her hat and tangling in the huge collar of the coat.

“Nothing. It’s just... let’s get going. I’m—I’m cold.”

“Oh, darling, I’m so sorry! You poor thing, wearing just that sweater, you must be freezing!” Christine moved to surrender her fur, although her own dress of thin peacock georgette was sleeveless and far wispier than Norah’s sensible shirtwaist and tweed skirt.

Norah only shook her head and led the way at a rapid walk through the clutching fronds of the jungle to where Black Jasmine waited impatiently beside the car.

Past the quiet bungalows of Oregon Avenue on the way to the Ambassador Hotel, Norah stared blankly at the forest of oil derricks that reared in the darkness almost to the edge of that establishment’s pool table-perfect lawn, nearly oblivious to Christine’s chatter.

“...I’ve been an absolute *pig*, darling, because I do have *just* the coat for you—*gorgeous* fuchsia with the most wonderful monkey-fur collar—so selfish of me not to have thought of it before! Walter gave it to me—or was it Vernon?—anyway, I never liked him, but it’ll be *just* the thing for you.”

Hollywood, she thought again. A world that became more alien the more one got used to it. An Emerald City of winter flowers and unlimited money, of crude mechanical monsters with their gas-flame eyes sprouting within a stone’s throw of the Ambassador’s pink Spanish walls, of booze and cocaine and men who could go through that slaughterhouse on Highland Avenue removing evidence because it might cost them a half-million-dollar investment.

And what else?

It was only a few miles from the rough country of the Cahuenga Hills to those little stucco bungalows. The bean and barley fields, the waste ground of abandoned housing developments, and the jungles of oil derricks were closer

still. There might be some completely rational explanation for what she had seen.

She had, she reminded herself, been in California for only two months. It was probable there were forms of wildlife unfamiliar to her. What had happened the night before last might be a common occurrence for all she knew.

But her assurances rang hollow in her own ears. Whatever it was that had gnawed the stone foundations of the house on Ivarene had teeth the length of a man's thumb. If Felipe had remembered to warn her about coyotes, this was not something he would forget.

And whatever it was, it had left the same huge scratches, fresh and raw, on the foundations of Charles Sandringham's bungalow as well.

EIGHT

FIRE OVER MOUNTAIN

The traveler is exhausted,
it leads to calamity...
The traveler is in danger,
and the loyal servants must be looked after...

IF CHRISTINE WAS right—that staying up was easier than getting up—she had neglected to mention the fact that from three-thirty on things began to take on an extremely surreal cast that only increased as the day advanced.

But perhaps, Norah reflected, Christine’s life was sufficiently surreal that she had never noticed this phenomenon.

Certainly Norah was powerfully aware of it toward nine, seated in the Santa Fe first-class club car, watching Christine flirt with a good-looking waiter and catching snippets of the argument between Emily Violet and Mary DeNoux over whether Four Blessings Hovering Round the Door constituted a no-limit hand or merely a double if it was completed by Catching the Moon from the Bottom of the Sea, while Mikos Hraldy, sitting at her side, held forth about *She-Devil of Babylon*. “Action! All he is interest in is action! Not in human drama of love and temptation and passion, not in *psychologie* that underneaths those so-great stories.”

“Shucks, Miss Flamande, you wouldn’t hardly believe how some folks behave on a cross-country run! Why, there was this rich feller ‘bout a year ago, traveling on the same train as the Shubert vaudeville tour with these four singing bearded ladies...”

“I’m sure that if I’m west, autumn is included in an all-symbols hand and doesn’t count separately, because anyone who gets it...”

“Now, is spring doubled if I’m east for the game even if this round I’m west?” asked Emily Violet, her rosebud mouth puckered with doubt. The three ladies occupied an inlaid rosewood table beneath a lamp of frosted glass shaped like one of the calla lilies by Charles Sandringham’s back door. The fourth place—east at the moment, Norah deduced—was taken by Emily’s mother, an equally fragile-looking lady absorbed in the pages of the *Hollywood News* while waiting for Christine to return her attention to the game.

Beyond the club car’s windows flashed a magical landscape of winter grass like bright green velvet, rust-dark bushes, and occasional water cuts

bright with the glassy threads of streams, punctuated now and then by barbed-wire fences and small bunches of white-faced cattle. Six weeks earlier, when Norah was coming across Texas and Oklahoma on her way to Los Angeles, these hills had been uniformly muffin-colored with the dry season; it was still a wonder to her to see the ripening gold of early oranges in the dark orchards and the bright cloak of color on the land. Hawks perched hump-shouldered on fence posts, sour and cold in the rain.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Alec remarked judiciously, shifting his feet to avoid kicking the wicker basket under the table in which Buttercreme napped like a retired dowager. “Frank’s pretty interested in taking over Enterprise Films.”

“So I am saying!” cried Hraldy with a furious gesture. “He only see what—how you say? What fat ladies in front stalls in Petoria—”

“Peoria—”

“—Petoria will think about film and not about it is strength, it is breadth, it is artistic merit or message it is try to convey unto ages!”

Norah blinked, trying to draw her attention back to the prim and impassioned Hungarian seated across the table from herself and Alec. She wasn’t sleepy exactly; numerous cups of coffee, a beverage she usually avoided, had taken care of that. But she was having a dreadful time concentrating. Her mind kept slipping to other conversations, other events.

To the queen of Babylon eating egg foo yung out of a paper carton, the glare of makeshift lights—the kliegs were down unless required for a shot—catching in the white jewels of her necklace, her Pekingese panting contentedly around her feet.

To Nadi Neferu-Aten pressing her hand dramatically to her forehead and saying, “Yes—I see—a nobleman, whose love has followed you down the corridors of time,” while a single candle flickered before her on the table.

To the trail of brown splashes in the yellow circle of flashlight leading down the hall to darkness.

To the gnawed marks on the foundation of the bungalow, though she could not recall any track, any mark in the soft earth of the planted border.

“How very extraordinary,” Mrs. Violet said to no one in particular as she turned a page. “It says here that reporters from the *Herald* have been searching Vermont for Mr. Sandringham’s father—hoping to interview Sandringham, of course, about this terrible murder—and say that so far he doesn’t seem to exist.”

Emily and DeNoux looked up from their study of the rule book, the actress blinking her lovely sapphire eyes with surprise and the wardrobe mistress’s brow descending speculatively.

“I expect they haven’t spelled it right,” Norah said calmly over Hraldy’s

tirade. “If that’s his real name and *if* his father goes by it, considering the son’s fame.”

“God knows *I* never can spell it,” added Christine with a certain lack of generosity considering her own nom de guerre. The handsome young waiter departed with his trayful of empty glasses and an enormous tip. “Now, why don’t they have boys like that waiting tables at the Cocoanut Grove? I could forgive them the absence of dancing boys—did you see his *eyelashes*, Emily? And those beautiful lips? Frank should star *him* in this picture, not Blake. Have we built the Great Wall yet, darlings? Oh, that’s right, it’s time to Charleston.”

Mrs. Violet set aside her newspaper, and the four ladies proceeded to solemnly pass three tiles right and three tiles left. “Doing the Charleston,” it was called, a piece of nomenclature Norah strongly suspected of being not original to the game. “Frank may *have* to star him if Blake doesn’t show up once we’re out in Red Bluff,” Alec remarked.

“*Hélas! Exactement!*” Hraldy flung up his hands. “Your Mr. Brown, he inflict upon us this boneheaded *soi-disant* box office star to be feature role, and for why? Only because he is popular with silly women who frequent cinemas in this country.”

He did, thought Norah, have a point.

To nobody’s surprise but Christine’s, the Cocoanut Grove had been closed at two in the morning when the big yellow Nash pulled up the circular drive of the Ambassador Hotel. They had proceeded in due course to the Cafe Montmartre, where Christine had consumed three silver fizzes in the upstairs ballroom and flirted extensively with a slim, dark extra at the next table and Norah had been privileged to watch Blake Fallon and Hans Schweibler getting progressively drunker and rowdier with their little bevy of tarts. At another time the spectacle of the girls laying their cheeks on Fallon’s broad shoulders—leaving huge swatches of white powder on his coat—and their hands upon his thighs would have disgusted her, but tired as she was, she found herself only observing their technique and wondering if it would work on anyone who hadn’t been responsible for the staggering number of empty champagne glasses littering the table.

“Oh, darling, I don’t think they could be professionals,” Christine said when Norah remarked on it. She peered across the room, trying to distinguish the Laocoön of sequins and tweed in the fashionable gloom. “For one thing, I don’t think professionals would get that drunk with a trick.”

There was an explosion of drunken laughter as Fallon poured his latest drink—no longer champagne but something stronger and less identifiable—over the head of the waiter, then performed an exaggerated mime of what

could have been either a shuffling blackface minstrel show comedian or a chimpanzee behind the man's retreating back. Hans and the girls screamed with laughter.

"They're probably just doing it for the drinks and the cocaine. Coke does let you drink just *gallons* without any bad effects."

Norah felt inclined to take issue with the statement but couldn't seem to put her words together at that point. It certainly seemed to have an adverse effect upon one's sense of social appropriateness, if nothing else.

In any case, when she and Christine arrived at the station with two minutes to spare before the train's scheduled departure, Blake Fallon had not yet put in an appearance.

Norah sighed at the memory, trying to return her attention to Hraldy's monologue. "...sensitivity, passion, élan of true hero... These little dogs of Christine's have more ability to act and, *bien sur*, more brains!"

Christine looked up from her teakwood rail of assorted dots, cracks, bams, and birds in bamboo trees and sipped her lemonade. "You're right, Mikos," she said. Beyond a slight pallor and a bruised look about the eyelids, she appeared as lively and beautiful as she had in the queen of Babylon's bedroom at seven o'clock yesterday morning. "Couldn't we put Changums or my adorable Jazz in a couple of scenes with me? I know they'd be a hit."

"I don't think they had Pekingese in ancient Babylon," Alec pointed out with a grin.

"Well, they had them in ancient China." She made a face at the lemonade, nudged aside Black Jasmine to get to the pocket of the fur piled up at her side, and flashed out a silver flask. "I'm sure no one would notice the difference. You want some of this, Mary? Emily?"

"There!" cried Hraldy, flinging up his hands. "You see?"

They'd reached home at four-thirty—two and a half hours before they had to depart for the station in Los Angeles—and Christine, true to her word, had proceeded immediately to bathe, change, and renew her makeup while Norah, invigorated by two more cups of coffee, made omelettes in the kitchen. Even so, they had nearly been late, Christine wailing as Norah bundled her ruthlessly into the car that she looked *terrible* and hadn't even *started* on her hair. Not, reflected Norah, with the way Christine wore her hair, that it made much difference.

She and Shang Ko had loaded the luggage into the car, including a wicker box for Buttercreme, who did not like to travel unprotected, and a carpetbag bulging with the fashion magazines, hand lotion, pillows, veiled hats, chocolates, Russian cigarettes, and flasks of toilet water and gin that Christine considered indispensable to her comfort in the desert. Christine also

did not like to travel unprotected. Shang had accompanied them to the station, Christine promising to ask Frank to have someone from the studio drive the car—and Shang—back home when all was safely on the train. Privately, Norah had provided herself with a map of southern California, and as they'd slogged their way south through the truly appalling downtown morning traffic, where gridlocked intersections and trapped streetcars added to the confusion, she had laboriously worked out a route to San Bernardino, to be driven if they missed the train.

They'd pulled into the Santa Fe station on Broadway to find that echoing sandstone mosque mobbed with reporters, all shouting questions about Keith Pelletier's murder and Charles Sandringham's disappearance. As Norah breasted through the press with one hand gripping the carpetbag and the other clutching Christine's wrist, she repeated over and over, "I'm sorry, we're going to miss our train. I'm sorry, we have to catch our train now." She had by this time developed a throbbing headache that the flash powder going off all around her did nothing to improve; nor did the fact that Chang Ming and Black Jasmine kept crossing up their leashes and running under her feet. Everything blended into a bizarre kaleidoscope of jostling faces and shouted words through which her mind fastened with a strange lucidity on the pink sandstone frieze with its inscription, EAST OR WEST, SANTA FE IS BEST. "Darling, can't I pose for just one teensy picture? I can't let them take a picture of me being dragged along like this. Surely they'll hold the train for us."

Alec was waiting for them on the platform. So was A. F. Brown, stalking up and down in a cloud of cigar smoke, watch in hand and face purpling toward apoplexy, while Conrad Fishbein gave yet another measured account of Charles Sandringham's movements on Saturday night, elaborated with a hair-raising tale of racing along Wilshire Boulevard at ninety miles per hour to catch the midnight Flier and buying a toothbrush in one of the lobby shops. "Of course he didn't take the train under his own name, gentlemen. If you were as famous as Mr. Sandringham and laboring under such a burden of grief and anxiety, would you have wanted to risk the possible delays that revealing your true identity might have incurred? As he got on the train, he told Mr. Brown that he hoped to return to Hollywood in time for the premiere of his newest adventure film, *The Midnight Cavalier*, a stirring drama of..."

"I'm gonna kill that Fallon," Brown growled as Christine dashed up to give him a quick embrace.

"I phoned Suzanne." Ned Bergen came up beside them as Brown and Christine—and Black Jasmine—posed momentarily for a burst of flash powder and Alec, Shang, and Ned Divine manhandled the four trunks from Shang's hand truck into the baggage car. "And that redhead over at Vitagraph

he's been seeing..."

"Oh, he was at the Montmartre last night," Christine said, turning to pose with Black Jasmine and Chang Ming for another shot. "See, darling," she added over her shoulder to Norah. "We made it here in just *oodles* of time, like I said we would."

A blue-uniformed station official tugged despairingly at Brown's sleeve. There was a deep chugging and a burst of steam from the engine.

"He was with Hans—Hank—" She corrected herself with a quick glance toward the reporters. "—and those girls who came up to the Edendale shoot last night. I think one of them's an extra over at Jasper . . ."

"Miss Norah." Shang Ko's hand, like a bundle of dried vines, stayed her as she passed Buttercreme's box up to Alec. The old Chinese was stronger than Norah had at first imagined—of course Christine hadn't even thought to ask if he was physically able to perform the burly Felipe's tasks—but his touch was as tight as a cat's inquiring paw. The previous morning before first light she'd seen him through the kitchen windows, performing what looked like a very slow and elaborate series of exercises in the small space of level ground at the bottom of the driveway in front of the garage. She wondered how old he actually was.

Her mind was dragged from its exhausted drifting by the anxiety under the calm softness of his voice. "This place that you went to last night with Miss Flamande, this house..."

"The one in Edendale?" She flinched at some undercurrent of memory connected with the house, like a half-recalled nightmare obliterated by the variegated avalanche of subsequent events. Fear and the scurry of tiny claws in the dark...

"No. The other house, the house where the blood was. The house where the young man was killed."

"How on earth do you...?"

He shook his head violently, waving the question away. Conductors were herding Christine toward the train, and she lit a cigarette and posed for one final picture, every line of her body implying that she crushed the life from male hearts every day and twice on Sundays instead of spending most of her time playing mah-jongg.

"It is not important," said Shang. "Who was this young man? He was the same one of whom Mr. Brown came to speak to you and Miss Flamande. What was he to Miss Flamande? It is important that I know," he added, seeing the doubt and distaste on her face. "I would not ask were it not desperately important. Please."

Norah shook her head. "He was just a stunt performer on the last picture

she did,” she said, mindful of a star’s reputation and the baying throng of reporters just outside the platform gate. “Mr. Sandringham—another actor, whose house it... it happened at—was helping him get his start in pictures. But how you knew—”

“It is not important how I knew,” Shang repeated, glancing worriedly along the platform, where a uniformed official was telling Brown something the producer didn’t wish to hear.

“If that worthless playboy isn’t here inside of two minutes...” Brown’s voice carried clearly to them over the reportorial clamor that echoed off the high ceiling. “Fishy—FISHY!”

“He was an actor with her?” pressed Shang.

“No, a—a stuntman.” Norah passed a hand over her face. Her headache was getting worse by the moment, exhaustion making her shake. She knew she should press the issue of how he knew where she and Christine had been the previous night. Had he followed them? He couldn’t have; he couldn’t drive a car. And what of Christine’s mysterious illness Sunday night and the disparity between the grandson who had been with him at the Million Dollar premiere and his claim to have no family? But someone seemed to have poured cold treacle over her brains.

“If the script calls for Christine to do something dangerous—like that scene where she hung by her hands over the cliff—she doesn’t really do it. The stuntman—Mr. Pelletier—put on her dress and jewelry and a wig, and did the fall, with the camera far off enough so that it looked like Christine falling.”

“So.” The word was little more than an indrawn breath, and his black eyes widened, shocked, as if he had seen some dreadful thing. “I see. In the opera—the Chinese opera, you understand—it is often so. A tumbler dons the mask and costume of an actor who cannot spring and tumble. And, of course, in the opera all of the women are in fact men.”

“How do you know we went there?” pleaded Norah, trying desperately to collect her fatigue-sodden thoughts. “What were the marks on that house? I saw the same ones—”

“*All aboard!*”

The old man put a quick hand on her elbow and guided her to the door of the car. “Miss Norah, you must remain close to her in the desert. You must watch her. The desert...” He hesitated, as if stopping himself from saying something, then changed it to, “Her stars are in a very poor aspect right now, very poor. Her life is in danger.”

“What makes you say so?” she demanded, clinging to the railing in the door as the train gave a starting lurch. “You said that on the night of the

premiere—why? Why did you lie about it later?”

“If you love her, Miss Norah, watch out for her.” Like a desiccated walking stick he followed along the platform, steam blowing his white hair in long wisps around his face. “Do not let her be alone with strangers. She is too trusting; she loves life too much and does not think. *Do not let her be alone.*”

“Who on earth would want to hurt her?” Shock and confusion as well as exhaustion clouded her thoughts; her mind kept flitting back to the darkness in the bungalow with its brown-stained walls and stench of blood, back to the way the flashlight beam glanced off the shards of broken mirror above the bar. They passed Frank Brown like a puffing monument, glaring furiously out across the still Fallonless platform; Shang almost had to run to keep up now. Flash powder coruscated, and Norah turned to see Christine leaning far out the doorway at the other end of the carriage, Black Jasmine cradled in her arms, her head thrown back as she blew a languid kiss at the gentlemen of the press.

“Protect her, Miss Norah,” Shang called out. “Stay by her side.”

Clouds of steam veiled him; he was backlit by a final blaze of flash powder as he raised one scarred and crooked hand. The next instant—though, tired as she was, Norah wasn’t sure how long her eyes might have been shut in a blink—he was gone.

She rubbed her forehead now, trying to recall whether it had actually happened that way. It all seemed to blend into the events of the night and of the day before, with the memory of blood trailing away into darkness and of clouded, suffocating dreams of old griefs, while the Pokes scratched furiously in the corners, hunting something she was never able to see. Mikos Hraldy’s voice came to her from what seemed like an enormous distance away.

“...new drama, modern drama, with heart and soul and meaning as great as timeless stories of Old Testament. But your Mr. Brown, he say, ‘How can make a film about a man who awaken up to find he has transform in night into giant cockroach? What will ladies in Pretoria—’

“Peoria.”

“—Petoria say to that? And what can you do with attitude like that, eh?”

And like the scent of flowers in the background, soft twittering voices, “...that’s a pung, two kongs, and a pillow, and doubled because they’re all ones and nines, and doubled again because I’m south and that’s summer and another double because...”

“...danced around the house in these veil sort of things. But they *did* say my mystical attraction for Chinese tilings is because I was a Chinese princess in my previous incarnation—Flindy was, too—though if I wanted to remember it like they do, I’d have to give up gin and saxophone players and

take cold showers outside at the absolute *crack* of dawn...”

The jogging of the train car was like the rocking of a ship, the steady throb of the wheels over the rails like the beating of some curiously benevolent metal heart. She forced her eyes open and regarded without comprehension the emerald landscape with its spidery windmills and slowly-circling hawks. Beneath the table, Chang Ming barked in his dreams so vigorously that his plump body bounced.

Did he dream about chasing unseen things in the darkness of an empty house in Edendale? Norah wondered. Or about guarding the doors against something huge and invisible, scuttling along the house wall in the screaming wind?

It is old, Kama Shakti had said.

Do not let her be alone.

Her head sank back onto the sturdy corduroy shoulder that had lately been supporting it, and she drifted again to sleep.

NINE

HEAVEN

A sign of great sacrifice.
A time of preparation, not action...
Cultivated persons work hard in the daytime,
are alert by night, and thus are safe
in a situation of danger...
Good omens for the true of heart...

“DID YOU TELL Christine?” Alec lifted the end of a three-foot strip of film from the vat of developing fluid, his glasses catching the weak, bloody glow of the safe-light like an insect’s eyes. “Thanks,” he added as she took the strip from him.

“It only happened at the station. She was asleep by the time I finished helping you set up here, and I haven’t had time to talk to her alone today.”

“I mean about Shang being the old man at the premiere.” He went back to washing the next test-strip as Norah carried the film to the spiderweb of wires at the back of the blacked-out cabin, a shabby structure that had started life as the Red Bluff barbershop. The interior had been thoroughly tar papered the first time a film company had used the town as a base; Alec and Norah had spent an hour Tuesday evening rechecking the paper and adding more where it had shrunk or cracked. Then they’d swept the place before and after setting up the tanks, hoses, and slatted drum-shaped racks, with the result that today Norah felt as if she’d been beating carpets.

“How does that look, by the way?”

Norah hesitated, holding up the strip to the red light. It was difficult to judge the black for white of a negative, but her eye was improving. “I think it looks a little washed-out. Is that something you can fix when the scene is printed?”

“Not really. Too dark you can fix, though it’ll look fixed even if you tint the stock. Washed-out is washed-out. What was the next take?”

“Eight.” During Monday’s shooting at Colossus Norah had frequently looked over Alec’s shoulder at his notebook of shots, which listed, among other things, the exposures of each to be matched against the test strips he ran at the end of every take. Today, Norah had taken over the notebook and the running log of the action, recording close-ups of Queen Vashti’s exhortation to her currently nonexistent troops and scenes of Emily Violet staggering

through the desert in search of Blake Fallon. She had learned a good deal about changing film in a bag as well.

“She said just what Shang did, that he had to speak to her about taking over Felipe’s job. He denies that he said it was life or death, and I can’t swear to his exact words, but I know he said *something* of the kind.” She hesitated, wondering if she should tell Alec about the throat-cutting gesture he had made, but decided that it was too inconclusive. “She says he isn’t acting like a fan.”

While Alec held another strip under the thin trickle of wash water, Norah walked back to the rack where the finished test films hung drying. Canisters of exposed, undeveloped film made a small stack on the plank trestle table, draped in sheets to protect against the all-pervading dust. They would be sent to Los Angeles in the morning, though they would not be processed until Alec returned with his tests. All the cans were carefully marked in his neat block printing.

No wonder, she thought, studying a discarded leader, savages thought one’s soul would be trapped forever on a piece of film if one allowed one’s picture to be taken. As she peered through the negative at the red tight, it gave her an odd feeling to see herself in clear-etched miniature, clapper board in hand, all elbows and knees with her snuff-brown hair pulled back under her wide-brimmed felt hat.

Immortality of a sort, though she herself would end up, as they said in Hollywood, on the cutting room floor. But fifty years from now people could run this film and know how Christine had looked at thirty (her claims of twenty-one notwithstanding), posturing and pouting and then sitting up with an indignant shriek as pomegranate juice exploded all over her chin.

The later takes of that particular scene had been done with a silver knife, as sensuous an exhibition of fruit carving as Norah had ever seen, though Christine had been in serious danger of cutting off a finger. It had taken four tries before they got a take where the juice didn’t drip, and that had occurred only because Norah, on her second trip down to the grocery on Franklin Avenue, had had the wit to purchase a grossly unripe specimen that was then painted with Christine’s nail polish.

“But he is behaving like a fan,” Alec said. “His protectiveness of her is very... proprietary. Which is what fans are all about. The marks you saw him making the night he circled the house that way were probably to put a protective joss on the place. He probably marked the car, too.”

“Joss?”

“Magic. Gris-gris. If his magic coins tell him she’s in danger, he’s doing what he can to keep her safe. They tell fortunes by throwing coins,” he added.

“Heads or tails, but they use three coins tossed twice and have sixty-four ways of interpreting the results, and they’ll stick by their coin toss till hell freezes.”

The grainy strains of “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,” which had filled the red-lit darkness, died away. Alec turned to the gramophone he’d brought to Red Bluff with great trouble, along with his light stands, reflectors, and vats. “I’ve got Rossini—Berlin Phil with Nikisch conducting—Paderewski doing the Brandenburgs, or Fats Waller.”

“Who?”

“Blues singer. I happen to love him, but blues isn’t for everybody.”

“Is that like jazz?” She’d heard the terms used in the same breath.

“Sort of. It’s not as popular, but you’ll hear both in the clubs along Basin Street. It’s hard as hell to get recordings, and most of the race labels have rotten sound quality, but it’s the best I can do.” He cranked up the motor and set the needle down on the brittle shellac. The recording itself sounded no worse than the Mozart, the deep voice filled with gritty, unrepining alien grief. After Mozart the contrast was jarring, but there was a haunting quality to it, too.

“As for the marks on the house...” Alec shook his head. “Could have been a puma. A mountain cat they call them in Texas. They still spot them in the San Fernando Valley if it’s been a dry winter and the deer come down out of the hills. Tell me if you can’t stand this, by the way. I’ve never heard of one going down as far as Hollywood, but it’s possible.”

“Maybe,” Norah said slowly. But the marks she had seen had been gnawed, not scratched; she was willing to swear to it. And if Brown and Fishbein had found animal tracks in Sandringham’s bungalow, they would have trumpeted the fact. Outside in the bitter-cold darkness a coyote raised its voice in a drawn-out howl; closer, and clearly audible through the shack’s thin walls, came the stride of a man crossing to the privies that ranged behind Red Bluff’s dozen or so surviving buildings, the last outposts of civilization on the verge of a wasteland of ocotillo, sand, and moonlight.

They had reached the town at two in the afternoon after a jolting drive across the desert from the dusty cattle-town of San Bernardino. Rather to Norah’s surprise, it hadn’t been hot at all but sunny and clear, the air like crystal and the “high desert,” as Alec termed it, a rolling expanse of lizard-colored dust and scrub punctuated by ridges of reddish rock hills. Hraldy had intended to film that first evening, when the light acquired an exquisite molten beauty, but in the absence of Blake Fallon he had been forced to be content with numerous takes of desert scenery, two or three scenes of Queen Vashti in

form-fitting silver armor exhorting the hordes of extras who wouldn't put in their appearance until later in the week, and the gauzy-veiled and demure Emily Violet stumbling through the sand dunes in quest of her vanished lover, staring into the sunset with yearning eyes and stretching out to faint with thirst upon artistic patches of sand from which the rocks and bull thorns had been carefully removed.

When the light began to fail, Alec set up the darkroom while Mikos and Ned Bergen scouted likely spots for army encampments and Queen Vashti's pavilion. Lucky Kallipolis, the camp cook, organized the kitchen. The three Pekingese went exploring and found every patch of thorns, weeds, and stickers in the vicinity to bring home in their trailing fur.

Blake Fallon showed up just after dinner, driving a studio Ford and filled with suave apologies and convincing accounts of the misfortunes that had prevented his making it to the station on time. "Honestly, I don't know which was worse, the police or the reporters," he said, sipping the wine he'd brought with him. By that time very few people were left in the long building—Frenchy's Saloon, said the faded sign above the door that Lucky had taken over for the mess hall. Alec had already retired to the tent he was sharing with Doc, and Norah had just come across to fetch a glass of milk for Christine, who reposed amid a pile of dogs in the one-room offices of the former *Red Bluff Sentinel*, claiming she was on the point of dying of sunstroke from the afternoon's exertions. What was likelier, thought Norah, was that she was simply exhausted. The effects of repeated pick-me-ups had finally worn off, leaving her to deal with forty sleepless hours, of which nearly half had been spent on camera.

"They seem to think anyone connected with Colossus Films knows everything about that little pansy's murder," Fallon went on. "When Frank and Fishy ran them off the lot, they hunted around for anyone else they could catch. You're lucky you got Chris out of your place on time, Norah," he added, turning toward her with a dazzling flash of smile. "You probably beat them down Highland Avenue by minutes. Would you like some of this?"

He hefted the wine bottle and moved to put his arm around her. Norah stepped clear and shook her head politely. On the set he'd seemed merely cloddish, a good-natured and incredibly vain man who spent his time surreptitiously looking for reflective surfaces in which to check his appearance. Why she felt an active distaste for him tonight she could not have said. Perhaps it was the way he followed her, making a second try at taking her arm. Perhaps, she added to herself, it was her own overtiredness. Christine wasn't the only one who'd been up for a day and a half.

"You have inconvenience everyone by stopping to talk to these people,"

Mikos Hraldy said crisply from the table where he was sipping a small cup of black Turkish coffee. “You have put us behind schedule already, and extras all coming to film great battle Saturday, and all else must be done by then. Days are short, and soon will begin rain. So you will obligate me by beginning to film at dawn, as soon as he is light enough to work. This way we may catch ourselves. Good night.”

He set down his little cup of curdled mud and stalked out. Mrs. Violet calmly turned a page of the trade section of the *Hollywood News*, which she had arranged to have brought out by courier to Red Bluff for the duration of her stay.

“Gee, I’m sorry,” Fallon apologized to the room at large. “Say, Christine isn’t mad at me, is she?” he added, rising to intercept Norah at the doorway. “Maybe I can come over to her cabin with this—” He gestured with the wine bottle. “—and make it up to her.” He widened his flag-blue eyes with an attempt at boyishness, but Norah felt only annoyance. She thought for a moment that his clothes had a vaguely musty smell, sweetish and unpleasant, as if he had spent the night sleeping in a cellar where mice had made their nests.

“I think she’d be likelier to appreciate a good night’s sleep.” Norah evaded his hand again. “Particularly since we are all going to begin filming at dawn.”

She pulled her cardigan more firmly about her and stepped through the door; glancing back, she saw him turn away, back to the tables, and there was something odd in his movement that it took her a moment to identify.

The big mirror over the bar, dingy, flyspecked, discolored with age and the smoke of forgotten cigars, was almost the only portion of the old saloon’s decor that had survived the years. She had almost subconsciously expected Fallon to turn and admire himself in it out of the side of his eye.

But he didn’t.

He avoided the sight of it completely.

The peculiar thing was, she thought, returning to the hanging forest of test strips, that, perhaps in contrition, Fallon had given an absolutely stunning performance that day. It might have been only the effect of the open air or the largeness of the wasteland around him, but his movements lost their contrived jerkiness and took on a kind of animal strength. His formerly stagy gestures now combined the sweep of power with a spare grace precisely suited to the intimacy of film. She held up a strip of tiny, progressive images of Fallon enfolding a fainting Christine in his arms and asked, “Was it my imagination, or was he really good today? I thought he made poor Christine look terrible.”

“He did.” Alec came over to the table, wiping his fingers on the towel hanging at his belt, and carefully used the back of his wrist to rub his eyes. “I didn’t think he had it in him.” He checked the magazine of exposed film on the table and made a note in his book, only smiling when he noticed that in addition to scene number, take number, and exposure and shot description, Norah had jotted down the time it had taken from the moment Hraldy had started trying to explain to Christine what he wanted to the command “Camera.”

“Well, he did look wonderful in *Guns of the Sunset*, and that was an outdoor picture,” she pointed out. “That might have something to do with it. He was a cowboy, wasn’t he?”

“In that he spent six months repairing fences in the Chicago stockyards when he was fifteen, you could say so.” Alec stretched his cramped shoulders, then took her by the hand, led her to the other end of the table, and lifted a long strip of film to hold to the red light. “The same definition would qualify me for the title on the strength of my stint in chaps and a ten-gallon hat taking pictures of kids in Scratch Ankle, Alabama. Here. Take a look at these.”

Norah obeyed. “What are they?” She could make out Christine’s hip and shoulder in one and something that might have been Fallon behind a curious cloud that blotted most of the shot. They seemed to be standing in front of a vine-covered wall.

“The film we took Monday night in Edendale. I tested exposures last night since I didn’t have time to look at the stock before we left.”

Norah ran the sprocketed edges doubtfully through her fingers, then picked up another shot. Strange blurs and fogs obscured shot after shot, as if lights had been shining into the camera from odd angles. Half a dozen takes were simply white, as if the film had been exposed in the magazine. Others were scored with long marks like scratches. In one an animal seemed to be running along the wall, though Norah knew the dogs had not been in the courtyard during the shooting.

She looked at Alec, puzzled.

“Could those lights have been reflected off the fountain? Or from the windows beneath the balcony?”

“Could have.” He shrugged. “But then they would have showed up to some degree on all takes.”

“A problem with the camera? There’s a lot of scratching.

“There’s ten times more scratching than I usually get. There’s really not a lot that can go wrong inside a camera, Norah. It’s just a dark box; artists and philosophers were making them in the Middle Ages. They just didn’t have the film. The modern parts of a camera are the lenses, the shutter, and the

mechanism that moves the film through the gate.”

The music had ceased. Alec walked over to the gramophone, wound it again, and put on more blues, a woman singing this time, gay and sad at once, like a stranded angel who had traded holiness for humanity but remembered what it used to be like to know God.

“This kind of thing always happens, shooting in that house.” He shrugged and set the film aside. “I just didn’t want you to think I was superstitious.”

“I didn’t,” said Norah. “Well, not as such.” She smiled a little, and their eyes met.

For a moment she thought, with a pang of hurt so intense that it was almost physical, about Jim, about waking up in the morning and reaching across to touch his arm, not wanting to wake him, only wanting that contact with his skin. She’d known every mole and freckle and vertebra of his back. She didn’t know for how many months of long nights in Mrs. Pendergast’s unheated attic she’d conjured him, building the memory of weight and warmth and smell, of every square inch of his skin, in the bed beside her.

Alec’s skin would be completely different.

She looked away, and if it hadn’t been for the crimson light of the safe-lamp, he would have seen the scald of color that heated her from collarbone to hairline. But he must have seen her eyes, for he turned back to the table and said, “Not that I wasn’t brought up to it, of course. My Aunt Vera didn’t enter my mom’s apartment for four years after a pigeon knocked up against the window one day while she was having tea there. She did her damndest to take us three kids away as well, swearing somebody in the place was going to die.”

Norah burst into laughter that stemmed in part from relief. “I see she and Mrs. Pendergast would have become bosom friends, provided Mrs. Pendergast could have been brought to exchange three words with someone of your mother’s faith whose husband hadn’t made a fortune and changed his name to Smith. I don’t know how much she paid that Oneida Majesta woman to come every Tuesday night and communicate on the astral plane... Certainly more than she paid me,” she added ruefully, and stood for a moment, running the film strips through her hands.

“The trouble is, I keep wondering if Mr. Shang is another Oneida Majesta.” She set the film down and rubbed her hands against the dry desert cold. Their breath was beginning to show as glowing ruby vapor in the light, and Alec bent to turn on the small electric heater that would keep the water in the vats from freezing overnight. That morning, when he’d come in to collect his cameras, he’d found two scorpions and a very young rattlesnake next to

the heater and had trapped and disposed of them without much evidence of surprise.

“They have an expression in the Los Angeles Police Department,” he said after a long minute’s thought. “If something’s completely incomprehensible, they say, ‘That’s Chinatown.’ ‘Chinatown’ meaning something that you can’t figure out by logical means and probably shouldn’t be messing with, anyway.”

He made a final check of the drying test strips and guided her to the door, shrugging into his war-weary brown leather jacket and switching off the red safe-light as they went out. The railing of the barbershop’s wooden porch had long since perished; two planks of desiccated gray wood formed steps to the level of the unpaved street. Tumbleweed crouched all around like monster hedgehogs, colorless in the dark.

“I’d like to think I’m not one of those people who won’t let a Chinaman in the front door,” he went on, double locking the door behind him and settling himself on the edge of the porch. “But the Chinese are different. They come from a different world: different religion, different beliefs about how people are supposed to deal with each other, different ways of thinking about why things happen. So it’s hard to tell what he’s after, why he attached himself to Chris the way he did.”

He broke a dry stick of some coarse, dark pricklebush that grew next to the steps as Norah settled down beside him, gazing for a moment into the eviscerated shells of the few buildings across the street, the thin glaze of starlight alternating with shadows like cut slabs of infinity. To their right a few squares of sulfur light marked the mess hall and the brick assay office that was Hraldy’s headquarters; Doc LaRousse had wired a portable generator in the back of the old saloon, from which cable snaked to every building. At the far end of the pale trace of street the half-raised walls of a brick opera house stood like something undertaken by children and abandoned at the prospect of supper.

“Film’s a tricky thing,” he went on softly. “It drags you into it. You’ve seen that. You forget there’s a screen between you and those folks up there. Like you saying you wanted Blake Fallon to carry you off, when what you really meant was that you wanted to be carried off by Cliff Ironjaw or whatever his character was called.”

She chuckled ruefully. “Well, particularly after meeting the man in the flesh, yes. *And* that little show he put on at the Montmartre. But yes. Those silly twits Lawrence Pendergast used to bring to the house... they really did think poor Mr. Valentino lives in a tent and ravishes a different woman every night. I’m sure he’s nothing like that in real life.”

“Exactly,” said Alec. “He’s actually a nut for motors and gadgets. Valerie von Stroheim told me some fans asked her recently if her husband dragged her around the house by her hair.”

“So you think Mr. Shang may have fallen in love with Christine?”

“Either that,” said Alec quietly, “or he showed up hoping to—”

From down the street, among the dense shadows of the broken houses, came a furious tirade of barking.

Norah stiffened. “That’s Chang.”

It wasn’t the staccato *yap-yap-yap* of a small dog whiffing coyote and rabbit. Wild and harsh, it was a danger bark, a rage bark.

It was barking, Norah realized, such as she’d heard the night of the windstorm after the premiere of *Kiss of Darkness*, the night when, elsewhere in Los Angeles, Keith Pelletier was being carved up with a champagne bottle.

Beneath it, gruff and surprisingly deep, sounded Buttercreme’s voice and Black Jasmine’s, louder and stronger than she’d ever heard them.

“Something’s wrong.” Together they almost ran down the weed-grown street and into the black gulf of shadow that hid the peeling gray newspaper office Christine and Norah shared.

The moon had set before the sun that afternoon. Above the buildings’ inky silhouettes a breathtaking rainbow of stars drenched the desert with a weird, blanched glow that did not quite seem to be light. The air, pungent with dust, was a knife in the lungs, glittering with each exhaled breath. Norah sought Alec’s hand in the darkness, fearful that he might stride ahead of her and leave her alone in this huge stillness. If something else moved in the darkness, it was impossible to see, and the scrunch of their own footsteps and the wild barking of the dogs drowned whatever stealthy tread might have been heard.

Then a patch of wavery orange light flared in the *Sentinel*’s swaybacked wall. Norah quickened her stride and all but sprang up the step, calling, “Christine? It’s me, Norah,” while Alec ducked away from her to walk around the cabin itself.

Within, she could hear Christine saying, “All right, all right, my little sweetnesses, what’s all this? Do Mama’s preciouses smell a nasty old coyote?” She pronounced it the way the stuntmen did, *kai-yoat*. By her voice Norah could tell she was scared.

“Are you all right?” Norah opened the door and stepped inside just as Christine, her hands shaking, put a match flame to the candle beside her bed. All three dogs, Norah noted uneasily, had gone from wrathful barking to the purposeful patrol-and-sniff routine they had performed at the house that night—not the darting movements of cat hunting but quick, thorough scans of

every wall, every hole in the floorboards, every corner, tails like curled banners, hackles raised, petticoats flouncing.

“What a start they gave me!” Christine sank back into her bed as Norah crossed to the makeup table and switched on Doc LaRousse’s lights. Sufficient wattage to let Christine make a good, even application of her makeup in the predawn darkness was more than lavish for the small, unpainted room. Amid the shrunken plank walls, unceiled rafters, and bare floors, the lace-edged pillows and satin comforters of Christine’s bed were glaringly incongruous. The smell of old dust and of sagebrush growing under the floor was almost completely concealed now by the odors of *Nuit d’Amour*, dusting powder, and Russian cigarettes. A feathered slipper lay like a killed bird in the middle of the floor—Chang Ming would transport slippers, though he never chewed them—and soft heaps of silken underclothes gleamed on the tops of the trunks ranged along the wall.

Footsteps mumped hollowly on the boards of the porch. Christine was startled, but Alec’s voice inquired, “All right in there?” accompanied by a light tap at the door. Christine hastily drew the comforter over her flimsily protected bosom as Norah let him in.

“Fine.” The dogs charged out around Alec’s feet, fluffed with rage and indignation. Norah stepped quickly after them. In the reflected glow of the windows she could see the three little fluff balls make a rapid patrol around the outside of the walls, sniffing everything in sight.

“Chang, Jazz,” she called out, mindful of creatures that could make two mouthfuls of any Pekingese, let alone one as tiny as Black Jasmine. After a moment they came trotting back, tails high, pausing only to ceremoniously urinate on the corner of the steps. Norah had to pick up Black Jasmine, who was too small to get up onto the porch again.

“I didn’t find anything,” Alec reported softly, leaning in the half-open doorway through which Christine could be seen, still sitting up in bed with the covers drawn to her chin, her black hair a smoke cloud around a face that was both much older and more childlike without its accustomed artistry of paint. There were lines of weariness in the corners of those huge dark eyes; in its natural coloration, her mouth was softer and more generous than its film version, and the hollows under her cheekbones looked less dramatic and far more fragile.

“Could have been a coyote,” he went on after a moment, using the California pronunciation, *kai-yotey*. “You hear anything, Chris?”

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, the gesture of a sleepy child. “Hear anything? After all that hiking around we did today? All I heard was Valentino’s voice, whispering to me to ride away with him as he gathered

me to his chest... and for that matter I'm not sure whether I *heard* his voice or only saw a title card. But there was a *whole* lot of barking, you terrible little fussbudgets, you." She held out her arms to receive Black Jasmine, whom Norah, at the tiny dog's fierce insistence, handed to her. Norah had early on resigned herself to the fact that Christine *would* sleep with her dogs despite everything she, Norah, had to say. At least they were too tiny to jump up on the bed by themselves.

"I'll have a look around in the morning for tracks," Alec said quietly. "But with everybody coming and going yesterday, I don't know what finding tracks would prove. I checked around between the cabins and out as far as the privies, but it's so dark in the shadows, I could have missed the Russian Army if they'd kept quiet. Whatever it was—a raccoon or coyote or whatever—it's probably in Barstow by this time."

"Thank you," said Norah.

"And I'm going to *be* dead in the morning," Christine continued in her high, despairing wail, "waking up this way. Did you set the alarm, Norah, darling? And did you remember to ask Mrs. Violet to order cucumbers from town with her newspapers? This dust is *so* bad for my complexion... You don't mind slicing them for me, do you, darling? Oh, Alec," she added, making her dark eyes wide, "please, *please* don't tell anyone you saw me without makeup. I look awful."

He kissed his hand to her, smiling. "You're always beautiful to me, Chrysanda."

She smiled amid the lace, her black dog cradled against her chin, far more breakable-looking than she had been as the queen of Babylon and infinitely sweeter. "It's darling of you to say so, Alec, but it's your camera I have to impress. I wonder if Lucky would part with some ice tomorrow morning before I get my makeup on. My eyelids are going to be balloons. Could you do that, Norah, when you get me my coffee?"

She cuddled down into the blankets again, rolled over with her back to the candle, and settled in for sleep. Norah flicked out the lights above the vanity, shadows bellying in from every corner like dark hands reaching for the delicate bundle of white lace and black fur on the bed in the gold aureole of the candle's light.

Leaving the door open a few inches behind her, she went out to sit for a time on the edge of the porch at Alec's side, Chang Ming lying between them. Buttercreme, offended by the cameraman's presence, had retreated under Norah's bed. They spoke in soft voices about the desert fauna and about taking pictures of cowboy children in small towns across west Texas, about Zane Grey and stuntmen, about the dark shapes of the watching hills and the

extravagant jeweled pennons of Stardust overhead. In time Alec took his leave. As quietly as she could, Norah dragged a trunk in front of the door, and when she lay down to sleep, she did not blow out the candle. There was still an inch or so of it burning in a yellow pool of puddled wax when the alarm clock wakened her an hour before dawn.

TEN

HEAVEN OVER FIRE

Sign of sacrifice.
A good omen for gathering together in the wilds...
An ambush awaits—take a high outlook upon it,
but remain calm; nothing will happen yet...
The defenses are breached, but the city is not yet taken...

“FOR THREE DAYS the shooting of *She-Devil of Babylon* proceeded without incident. Norah, though plagued with a sense of some dark presence moving behind the sparkling winter sunlight, could find nothing to confirm her fears. The marks on the foundation of Christine’s house and on the house in which Keith Pelletier was murdered, the curious appearance and even more curious assertions of the old gardener Shang Ko... these seemed to form a web of some kind. But every time Norah stopped in her headlong rush of keeping track of scenes and exposures, of looking after Christine, and of trying to unravel the strange knots that seemed to keep tying themselves in her own half-healed emotions, the pattern she thought she might be seeing dissolved into nothing.

She continued to dream, as she always had, about the utter commonplaces of her life: about developing test films or cutting up Christine’s cucumbers or going to lectures in Oxford. If in her dreams the dogs were always present, sniffing busily at doors and windows or watching her even from the corners of Sommerville College lecture halls with dark, shining eyes, it was insufficient cause for distress.

Perhaps, she concluded, the stars simply *were* ill aspected.

In any case, she did not have much time for introspection. Her mornings began an hour before dawn, less a hardship now than it might have been in the summer, for the sun didn’t truly come up until shortly after seven. Five minutes before the alarm was due to sound at five Norah woke, switched off the alarm button on her big tin clock, bundled herself in her robe, lit a candle, and took the freezing walk along what once had been the rear alley of the town, a thorn-grown pathway that led to the showers, followed by at least two and sometimes three enthusiastic dogs. Bred for the north of China, the Pokes reveled in the desert’s dry, piercing cold, pursuing lizards and starting birds with wild abandon and picking up whole botanical gardens of burrs and sticks and thorns in their long fur.

The women's shower was a small one but had been rigged with a string of lights from Doc LaRousse's generator. As she washed in the narrow confines of the corrugated-iron coffin, Norah could see across the wide strip of dirt to the glow of lights from the men's shower and hear the voices of the electrician, the two Neds, Alec, and the few extras joking and talking shop. By the time Norah was dressed, usually in a neat wool skirt, plain white shirtwaist, heavy shoes, and thick cardigan—neither of the hand-me-down fur jackets Christine had pressed upon her before departure was even remotely suitable for desert wear—the men would be in Frenchy's Saloon, sleek, wet-haired, and drinking coffee. Alec, bundled in sweaters and looking cold and sleepy, would glance up from his coffee cup and the previous night's *Daily News* and grin at her as Lucky loaded a cup of strong tea and two cups of coffee, a pitcher of cream, some sugar, and two small dishes of ice onto a tray. This Norah would bear off to the most difficult portion of her day's work: rousting Christine and Emily Violet from their beds.

Emily and her mother shared the modest frame house that had once sheltered the family of the town's grocer. Getting Emily out of bed was easier for the simple reason that Mrs. Violet insisted that her daughter retire at eighty-three, though Mrs. Violet herself frequently sat up reading the trade sections of all five Los Angeles papers and discussing studio politics with Mr. Hraldy and Ned Bergen. "Emily needs her rest," Mrs. Violet would declare, and Emily, though she was making \$5,000 a week and, Norah privately suspected, was probably of age despite her mother's assertions to the contrary, would meekly go. At least she got out of bed without cries, curses, and piteous moans of protest.

"What did Christine do before?" asked Alec, stopping by with a few slices of toast for each of the stars and a much more substantial plate of pancakes and eggs for Norah, after she had succeeded in forcing her sister-in-law into a quilted velvet dressing gown and frog-marched her to her vanity, where she now sat holding ice to her eyes and feeling sorry for herself while Black Jasmine sat at her feet and supervised.

"I mean, I know she had a maid before you came to live with her, but how did she get along in life before she came out to Hollywood without someone to get her out of bed in the morning and pick up her stockings?"

"What any sensible girl would do," Norah replied, rolling a pancake into a cylinder and dabbing the end into the syrup. "She married men who were rich enough to provide her with maids."

"I can just hear her saying that." Alec grinned. "With those big eyes she makes... What, don't you ever feed these dogs? Or pet them?" Chang Ming jiggled a little, staring up into his face with shining hope.

Norah shook her head. “Never. Just ask them.” The three dishes of dog food sat, largely untouched, in three corners of the cabin, though once Buttercreme, the pickiest eater, had finished her first go at her plate, the two males had dutifully consumed a few mouthfuls of hers and one another’s breakfasts, in keeping with the fixed canine belief that the contents of anybody else’s dish were superior to one’s own. It had taken Norah weeks to train the males not to touch Buttercreme’s food until the delicate little bitch had eaten as much as she wanted; it seemed to be the principle rather than the quantity of the food that mattered. In fact, Buttercreme sometimes refused to eat at all and appeared upon occasion to decide that she was afraid of her dish.

In the blazing electric glare that surrounded the dressing table, Christine had begun to apply “motion picture yellow” greasepaint and rouge with her usual absorbed attention.

“I take it her family wasn’t rich.”

Norah smiled, recalling the wartime letters Christine had written to her brother’s bride. One, in response to a photo of the couple, had read: “No wonder Jim likes you! You’re as tall as he is!”

“Their father—hers and Jim’s—was part owner of a hardware store in Pittsburgh,” said Norah. “He’d been one of the chief men of the congregation back in Lodz and a respected Talmudic scholar. He was furious when Jim announced he wanted to learn design rather than be a rabbi. Jim worked to put himself through college. He was within a year of getting his degree in architecture when he... when he joined the army.” She still couldn’t say *when he was killed*. Quickly she went on. “Christine had already left home. I think Jim was the only one who still called her Chavaleh. She told her parents she was working in New York, but she managed to convey the impression she’d gotten some kind of genteel employment in a dress shop rather than that she was a chorus girl on Broadway. Good morning, Zena,” she added as the hairdresser, balancing her own cup of coffee and buttered toast, appeared from the direction of the mess hall and mounted the *Sentinel’s* steps, to be ecstatically greeted by Black Jasmine.

“God knows what she told them about how she met her first husband. He was an actor, but he never seemed to have any roles and supported himself through gambling.”

Alec laughed again, his breath showing white in the reflected makeup lights filtering out through the doorway. The starry black of the sky had diluted to a luminous navy blue, grading paler in the east. Clouds had piled above the remote crags of the Granite Mountains, but here the dry air was as sharp and bitter as alum. Ice rimmed the puddles where the hose to the darkroom shed had leaked.

“So she ended up supporting him? She must have been awfully young.” He tossed Chang Ming a scrap of egg and immediately stuck his hands back in his jacket pockets.

“Christine? She’s two years older than Jim was, four years older than me.” She smiled at his startled look. “But yes, she was about seventeen then. According to her, sometimes they made enough to afford an apartment on Fifth Avenue and a couple of maids. But they were always pawning things, and sometimes she’ll forget and talk about her ‘gentlemen friends’ who were nice enough to buy her things. One of them ended up as her second husband—Clayton Flint, who was very young and very silly and had just inherited a couple of mills or something in Charleston. She’s still great friends with his mother.”

Chang Ming, who had settled down at Alec’s feet, sprang up suddenly, a tenor growl stirring deep in his throat. Norah turned quickly, and even Alec started. But all she saw was Blake Fallon striding lithely along the path to the showers as if he owned the desert and everything that stirred beneath its parched khaki sands.

As the days progressed, it became increasingly clear that all three of the Pokes had conceived an intense hatred for Christine’s leading man. Curious, Norah thought, for Chang Ming and Black Jasmine had played quite happily with him back in the studio and Buttercreme had suffered him to stroke her while she was held by either Norah or Christine.

But later that day, watching from a minor wing of the queen of Babylon’s pleasure pavilion—a marvelous structure on the edge of the desert whose gilded plaster terraces and fluttering silk were surrounded by exotic foliage anchored to the dust with spikes—Norah was aware of the three dogs at her side, leaning into their leashes and staring at Fallon. Even Buttercreme was growling, a strange guttural little rattle in her throat.

Jealousy?

Norah considered the matter. Certainly, since coming to Red Bluff, Fallon had quite clearly been trying to seduce Christine. *All over her like a cheap suit* was how Alec had phrased it: bringing her champagne at dinner every night with a knowing wink at the rest of the cast; lighting her cigarette as she sat with Emily, Mrs. Violet, and Zena in their endless rounds of mah-jongg; offering to walk her back to her cabin. Always touching or trying to touch.

Having written down the scene and taken numbers both on the board and in the notebook and having made a record of the action—*CF & BF from tent rt, CF hits gong, DB from left, CF hands wine, DB dies, CF speech*—Norah watched them together now as Hraldy walked them through the lengthy

master shot. Vashti leads Laban the Splendid from the pavilion, strikes a silver bell to summon a Nubian slave, a big, good-natured bit player named Deacon Barnes. She hands the hapless Deacon a goblet full of poison and orders him to drink it. Barnes drinks it and dies, at considerable length. Vashti's triumphant gesture takes in the corpse at her feet, the splendor of the pavilion around them, the riches of the kingdom that is hers. "All of this is mine," she tells him. "What need have I for such as you, save to serve me for a night, until I weary of your savor?" Laban buries his face in his hands, crushed with despair, and departs into the desert to die.

It was the tenth walk-through so far. Christine, as usual, was overplaying wildly. Her dark eyes bulged and her red lips parted as though she were about to bite Hraldy through his crisp Arrow shirt, tossing her head so that her tempest of hair swept across her face to the swelling strains of Saint-Saens's *Route of Omphale* from the little coterie of musicians. At least nobody was taking pratfalls into tubs of water on the other side of the rocks.

Fallon, Norah was interested to note, still commanded a beautiful combination of power and restraint. Gone were the bugging eyes, the pulled-back lips, the jerky movements. The look on his face as he observed Deacon's operatic death struggle was the look of a man who saw not only another man's death but the true evil of one whom he had loved to folly *and continued to love*—horror, agony, hatred of self as much as hatred of her, grading into despair as he realized that for him there was no way out.

And yet his eyes followed Christine even when Hraldy gave directions to Alec, Doc, and the other extra who had been drafted to help with the reflector screens. His every movement was an angling to get closer to her. His every glance, his every touch, the way he grasped her arm to murmur comments into her ear, was seduction.

And Norah found that she was just as annoyed about it as the dogs were.

"Is it ready now that we make take?" shouted the director.

Norah picked up her notebook and the slate, ducked through the curtain of the pavilion, and wove among silk palmettos and orchids to the white string that marked the boundaries of the frame. Alec made a final check of the range finder and adjusted the Bell & Howell's front turret while the musicians flipped pages back to the beginning of the piece. From the other side of the rocks Ned Bergen shouted "You got that tent up?" to whoever was helping him assemble the campsite of Vashti's vengeful horde of desert warriors.

"Music—camera—ACTION!"

All three dogs went into a paroxysm of barking when Fallon and Christine stepped behind the gauze veils of the pavilion, ceasing only when Christine slashed the curtains aside and strode through. And perhaps they had

a point, Norah thought, standing just behind Alec. With his newfound acting talents, Fallon's arrogance had grown. In Hollywood he'd impressed Norah as a harmless enough fellow, vain, certainly, but nothing to worry about. In fact, his puzzlement when neither she nor Christine had fallen panting with love at his feet had been rather comic.

But the gleam in his eyes now was predatory. Predatory and something else.

Momentarily, a fragment of a dream unfurled itself in Norah's mind, like something glimpsed at a great distance. For one instant it was clear and whole, a terrifying realization, a scene that she did not understand but that she saw from beginning to end even as she saw the confrontation between Vashti and Laban, accompanied by the hideous understanding of how it related to...

And then it was gone. Maddeningly, like soap slipping through her fingers in bathwater, the memory seemed to fold in on itself, leaving only that adrenaline jolt of realization and a sense of... of what?

Music, she thought. But the wailing of the flute and the deep throb of the cello obliterated even the pseudo-recollection of whining, atonal notes. Darkness lit by candles. Incense reek covering...covering...?

Then all that remained was the thin, dry smell of desert wind and an impression of moonlight.

Late in the afternoon clouds began to gather. Hraldy—between close-ups of Deacon's indefatigable agonies and artistic angles of Laban the Splendid's reactions—started looking from the sky to the silk and plaster pavilion with wilder and wilder nervousness in his eyes. Finally Alec climbed the rocks that sheltered the pavilion in its magical glade and came back with the report: "They're thicker to the west, and that's where the wind is."

Everyone—including Norah, Christine, Fallon, Hraldy, and the musicians—spent the remainder of the short winter afternoon taking down and folding silk draperies and loading rustling fabric banana plants into Fallon's Ford, Hraldy's rented Studebaker, and the truck in which the crew had come up from Red Bluff. They made three trips back to the old livery stable (WAGGONS, BUGGIES, AND LADIES' HORSES A SPECIALTY, announced the faded paint on the facade, LEN A. WEIN, PROP.) where the equipment was stored. These journeys involved jolting over a rutted track, going down a precipitous grade into a dry wash and up an even more precipitous one on the other side, and crossing the very scenic stretch of sand where Emily had almost perished of thirst Tuesday evening. By the time the last giant urn and gilded tent pole were stacked in the old stalls, everyone was filthy, exhausted, and cross. It was getting dark, but most of the men, Fallon excepted, climbed up onto the roof to stretch tarpaulins over the areas that seemed, in the greater Ned's

opinion, to be questionable, an activity not helped by the gale-force winds.

“Already we are behind in schedule,” groaned Hraldy, shuffling pages of his script as gusts pounded the flimsy walls of Frenchy’s and made the string of bulbs overhead sway and flicker ominously. Lucky Kallipolis gathered the last of the trays and carried them to the little galley kitchen, checking in passing two oil lamps that stood, already lighted, on the side table where the steaks and biscuits and the potato salad and carrots had been. “Now we lose tomorrow, rebuilding sets, if he does not rain and wash us entirely away! And extras arrive Saturday for great battle between forces of Ahasuerus and those of Vashti’s father, Sheikh of Eastern Desert!”

“It’s not gonna take us anything like all day to put up that pavilion again,” pointed out Ned Bergen, raising his head a little from where he was slumped, almost asleep, over his coffee. “With the stills Alec shot before we tore it down, it should be up by noon, good as new. Meanwhile you and Alec can go over the battlefield and pick out where you want to have that Brit fella set his wrath-of-God charges.”

“Does that mean I actually get to *sleep*?” Christine looked brightly up from her rack of ivory tiles. Norah was amused to note that, having removed the layers of greasepaint and powder, Christine had carefully reapplied rouge, powder, Colura, and *mascaro* for the two hours of dinner and mah-jongg before bed. “Drat you, Emily, I just got *rid* of a three-bam! Can we eat breakfast at a decent hour and behave like civilized people for a change?”

“Sure can, honey.” Fallon seated himself on the bench beside her and lit a match for her cigarette instantly after she had lit one of her own. Though Christine had been speaking to Norah, she smiled her thanks and lit her own cigarette, something she rarely did or had to do; Norah hid an inward grin. Christine was a past master at the almost accidental-looking snub, the light air of having her mind on something else, as if Fallon—or any man—were a mere provider of her daily due of alcohol, tobacco, and admiration. The Pokes had been given their dinner and relegated to the cabin owing to their increasing tendency to growl at the star.

“You’re perfectly welcome to this.” Norah gestured with the nontrade sections of the *Daily News* she had received from Mrs. Violet. “Though there doesn’t seem to be much of interest, except a new plan to stem inflation in Germany—”

“That makes how many?” inquired the greater Ned sardonically.

“—and some fellow claiming he knows where the Russian crown jewels are hidden. I’ve done the crossword, but other than that it’s good as new.”

“Mah-jongg!” Zena announced triumphantly, and Christine, Emily, and Mary DeNoux squeaked and groaned and threw up their hands in protest.

“You did the *whole* crossword?” asked Christine, staring at her in disbelief as the others totted up their scores and began figuring out who had how many doubles and to what effect.

Norah merely nodded. After two years of dealing with the intricacies of British crosswords, which seemed largely composed by Oxford dons and Bloomsbury bluestockings determined to display their erudition via Latin distiches and trilingual puns, the American variety seemed laughably simple.

“All *today*?” She turned to Fallon, still beside her, with wide eyes. “She does them in *ink*, too. Sometimes I don’t think she’s quite human.”

“It says here that a woman has come forward claiming to have seen a man in a tuxedo staggering down Highland Avenue on the night of the Pelletier murder,” reported Mrs. Violet without looking up from the trade section of the *Mirror*. “She was on the opposite side of the street, but ‘her description fits the missing actor Charles Sandringham.’ “

“So does a description of Mikos.” Alec got up quickly and went over to the neat little gray-clothed matron at the far end of the table. “Let’s see that.”

Overhead the lights flickered, then blacked out completely for a moment, leaving the room with only the glow of the two oil lamps. Christine stubbed out her cigarette and said, “Saved by the bell, darlings. I’ve already lost two hundred and twenty dollars tonight, and I absolutely *can’t* seem to get more than a pung of *anything*. I think it’s time for this little girl to be in bed.”

Fallon was on his feet immediately. “I’ll walk you over.”

“You needn’t trouble,” said Norah, standing likewise. “I was just going over myself.”

“Oh, the night’s early yet,” began Fallon.

Christine smiled, enjoying his patent eagerness without reciprocating it in the slightest. “Truly, don’t bother, Blake. I’d be afraid Jazzykins would bite you.” She blew a kiss to the men around the table and flipped a final tile out of the newly made Great Wall of China in the center. “There, see? A five-crack, absolutely *useless*. Nighty-night, all. See you at breakfast, I don’t think.”

Norah met Alec’s eyes as he glanced up from the newspaper with reassurance or understanding, as if words had passed between them, though she would have been hard put to say which words. But, turning to follow Christine into the sand-blown darkness, she saw Fallon’s face. The hard line of his mouth was not the rueful grimace of a thwarted Lothario but had an almost beastlike expression of sheer rage.

She was, Norah thought, on the set of a movie. Though the barnlike stage was huge, undivided by the smaller walls that made up separate sets, it was nearly

pitch dark. High overhead she had the impression of a tangle of crisscrossed shadows, but the carbon arcs that surely hung there were unlit. Only candles illuminated the somber blackness, candles and a few curious antique lamps.

Alec, she heard herself thinking. Alec, we've got to stop it at f/12 at the lowest, and we still won't get anything. And those red walls—the Ortho film will turn them black.

But Alec was nowhere to be seen in the small group of extras—surely they were extras—filing through a narrow door, hands folded in the sleeves of voluminous black robes. Norah looked around for the cameras, for at least the notebook and slate so she could record the exposure and the action. But she found nothing. The floor, she noticed, was composed of slabs of stone. She felt a twinge of surprise, for it was clearly genuine, with the slight unevenness of wear that distinguished it from the excellent fakes produced by the greater Ned for palace scenes. Also, it was old, older than anything she had seen in this country.

A sharp, clinking rattle made her turn.

At one side of the hall, in the shadow of a low and much-stained altar, an old man sat tailor-fashion, throwing coins on the flagstoned floor. Three coins, their clear, hard ringing seeming to fill the darkened chamber. They'll stick by their coin toss till hell freezes...

The old man shifted his position and began to draw a pattern on the gray slabs in what looked like three colors of chalk. Though Norah stood at the far end of the hall, separated from him by nearly sixty feet, still it seemed to her that she could see his face clearly. It repelled her, his skin like a desiccated lizard's, flaccid, fallen, clinging like rotted cloth to features seamed with contemptuous and self-indulgent evil, the face of one who had lived to ruinous age at the expense of everyone and everything around him. Under heavy epicanthic folds, the corrupt eyes gleamed with drugs, and Norah wondered how they'd found an actor that vile-looking, Chinese or American, and how, in fact, the studio had chosen a Chinese for the role at all. Even if the character was Chinese, she knew most studios hired Americans and made them up, usually badly.

But this was no makeup. His clothing was outlandish; who on earth had come up with it? Though the hall was very Chinese, with rich red walls and the dull gleam of gold on the dark lattices of the rafters, the old man wore thick and clumsy furs and, on the strange rolls and braids of his snowy hair, a tall, conical hat crowned ridiculously with antelope horns. When he moved, the long brass tubes hanging from his belt jangled against one another and rolled noisily on the stone of the floor.

Outside, she heard the rising wail of the wind. Somewhere close beside

her, almost hidden under it, a voice spoke, the voice of someone she knew, familiar but hidden in shadow. But she could not remember who.

The lights are too low, she thought, trying to keep her mind on her business. The film will never take. They'll have to reshoot. God knows how much it will cost....

The pattern on the floor was almost complete. An intricate web of squares and circles and hexagrams spread out before the altar, and in the jumping lamp flame Norah saw now that the altar itself was heaped high with a confusion of trash: flat-faced rag dolls whose embroidered robes gleamed in the wavery light, scrolls bearing crude paintings of beasts and demons, tiger skins whose empty paws hung down like the barbed gloves of dead men, the images of Chinese deities painted on silk. Brocaded bags hung like foul barnacles from the walls all around the altar, smelling of mildew and rot; nearby a footed iron cauldron loomed on a square of charred bricks and sand.

In the half dark of a corner another fur-robed figure in a horned hat cracked a whip, the sound a flat, sickening slap in the silence. Somewhere, someone beat a deep-voiced drum. Music drifted on the air, though Norah could not see its source, queer and whining around the heavy heartbeat of the drum. There was something familiar about the rhythm... something from another dream? She couldn't recall. The wind moaned in the rafters. The lamp flames cringed.

Between the altar and the cauldron, a curtain moved. A man stepped out of an alcove of darkness there, tallish and clothed in a gleaming embroidered robe, leading by the hand a young Chinese girl whose hair hung in a single raven stroke to her knees. She tottered unsteadily, and, looking at her feet, Norah gasped. They were no more than curled and deformed stamps encased in jeweled red slippers scarcely bigger than a year-old baby's shoes.

Other men filed forth from the alcove, cold-faced and haughty—princes, Norah thought, their robes dark gardens of needlework. There were four, she thought, maybe five; among them was a woman of surpassing beauty in a towering headdress of ghostly pearls. Two of the princes reached forward to remove the Chinese girl's robe, and beneath it Norah could see she wore an undergown of crimson silk, like blood. That will photograph black, Norah thought automatically. It was already clear to her that none of them was wearing the pallid, greenish greasepaint of cinema makeup.

The girl's face remained a blank, her eyes hazy with opiates. Someone lit tinder and wood beneath the cauldron, and the new brightness of the fire winked on the fingernail guards the woman wore.

One of the princes bore a wooden box covered with brass and worked into strange designs. Opening it, the tall man lifted forth a necklace whose

three white gems flashed coldly in the semidark like evil planets coming to some baleful alignment at the world's end. In the central gem something seemed to shift like a live thing imprisoned within, or a shadow on the moon.

The princes stepped forward, surrounding the tottering girl. She stared uncomprehendingly before her, swaying on her tiny feet as they put the necklace around her throat.

The wailing music swirled and rose, a bizarre caterwauling like colored Maypole ribbon around the iron pulse of the drum. Smoke began to fill the hall from the flame beneath the cauldron and from a brick furnace built into one corner of the room. A witch-faced priestess with gray hair like a mare's filthy tail handed the tall man a beribboned tambourine of copper and iron. He and his princes and the woman who had come with the princes stepped away to a cushioned bench halfway along the far wall, leaving the Chinese girl alone in the middle of the chalked diagrams, the necklace gleaming like evil eyes. The extras down in the main part of the room had fallen to their knees, swaying and chanting; now and then a black robe would part to reveal the flash of jewels or the glint of silk.

The drugged priest spread out his arms before the drugged girl—acolyte, sacrifice, or bride, Norah could not tell which because like all films, except for the music, this one was silent—and began to dance.

Something in the air, redolent with dust, incense, and smoke, or something in the old man's gross and soulless face seemed to change. The drumbeat quickened, going faster and faster, until it was rolling like thunder. Norah wasn't sure what was going to happen next—she was still trying to figure out where they had gotten all those Chinese actors—but something in the old man's movements and in the way the girl swayed and giggled in the snaring nets of the chalked lines filled her with disgust and horror. One of the extras cried out, a woman's voice, and bowed forward to hide her head in her hands, as if she knew what was going to transpire; Norah felt her heart beating faster for no reason she could determine. More and more, she was sure she didn't want to be there at the ceremony's climax.

Her mind cloudy, she looked for a way out. She would, she thought, find Frank Brown and ask him if he knew what was going on in his studio, for this was like nothing she had ever seen or ever wanted to see. The music yowled and shrieked, with the tall man pounding on the tambourine and the old priest in his horned hat leaping and twisting to the cacophony of the brass tubes dangling amid fur and claws at his waist. Another extra, then two more hid their eyes.

Somewhere in the darkness near the curtained alcove—though surely, Norah thought, the curtain was still closed—red eyes reflected the smoky

light.

She turned and thrust open the doors behind her, stepping out into the night.

But instead of the familiar studio street, she saw only the stone paving of a high terrace separated from the court below by a line of square marble posts and a marble balustrade, colorless and sickly in the bleached light of the full moon. The moon stood resplendent above a crowding maze of walls, upturned eaves, and, in one place, naked, thrashing trees, but even as she watched, it was swallowed by clouds, leaving her in Stygian dark. Over the closely laid paving blocks of the courtyard below the groaning wind flicked long crescents of fine desert dust.

Alec! she called out. Christine! Where am I?

But no sound came from her throat. It was only a film, of course. Silent. Wind dragged her long hair loose and tore with icy fingers at her face.

ALEC! Behind her she could still hear the glakking yowl of the music, the panicky heart trip of the drum. Smoke swirled on the night, masking another smell, she didn't know what. From the corner of her eye she thought she glimpsed something scuttling along the wall behind her, but when she turned, there was nothing. It was very deep night, halfway between midnight and morning, winter and killingly cold. No one here knows what is being done, she thought, not knowing why she thought it or what she thought was going on in the hall behind her. Only these few. The rest would rather not know.

She turned back toward the doors, seeing only a slit of candlelight that framed the shining ruby figure of the girl with her necklace of evil gems, eclipsed and reeclipsed every time the whirling priest passed between them.

Then someone within closed the door, shutting Norah out into the howling dust of the night. The clouds parted briefly to reveal the full moon's cold eye, then closed again. Wind seared over the pavilion's double roof, its voice rising to a shriek. Distantly, among the maze of walls, came the frenzied barking of hundreds of tiny dogs. As she drifted toward wakefulness, Norah could not tell whether it was the wind that she heard just at the end, or whether, within the dark hall, the girl had begun to scream.

ELEVEN

THUNDER OVER LAKE

No advance.

Good fortune when a maiden marries
with her younger sister as consort...

The date of a marriage postponed—
patience is advised...

DESPITE HIS FLASH of temper the night before, Blake Fallon was all smiling affability in the morning, turning up at the pre-dawn breakfast with offers to assist the crew in loading the caravan of cars that would carry Queen Vashti's pavilion back to its location. Norah, enjoying a leisurely breakfast with Alec for once, tried to think better of the actor—it was certainly a change from his blithe refusal to even notice that help was needed back in Edendale—but found within herself a deeply lodged distaste at the mere sight of him. She wondered if the unrecalled ugly dreams that had troubled her had something to do with him.

"If we begin to film at noon, we can perhaps finish all pavilion scenes today," Hraldy said, picking up and putting down script pages and moving his tiny cup of Turkish coffee here and there around them on the battered pine table. "You and I, Alec, we must inspect battlefield while pavilion is raise." Outside, the wind had fallen to an occasional whisper in the sagebrush. "He goes more quickly than I thought him to yesterday."

The director glanced across to where Fallon lounged gracefully by the kitchen door, talking to the two Neds while Lucky loaded their plates with bacon and eggs.

"Well," Alec commented softly, "for one thing, you didn't have to walk old Laban through by the hand."

"*Exactement!*" Hraldy made a gesture that nearly overset his coffee. "Is splendid how his acting is change. It is different man! I am only sorry now more cannot be done with him in this film."

"Why can't it?" Norah sipped her tea, which was as usual execrable. Coffee, to Lucky, was more than a drink—it was a rite of manhood, and the Turkish variety Hraldy favored and everyone else choked on was the manliest of all. Tea was for old ladies and Englishmen, slapped together at random for those who insisted on making trouble for the cook.

"I mean, Laban isn't anywhere in the Book of Esther, anyway," she

pointed out. “Is it necessary that he die? Can’t you have him come thundering into battle at the head of a host of his tribesmen or something to save the day?”

“Is God of Israel, Lord of Battles, who save day!” the director said indignantly. “This is point of battle, reason we bring this pyro-whomever, this expert in blowing up of things, in with extras Friday, that he may create fiery wrath of Lord as He smite Vashti and all her host. Still...” His dark eyes grew thoughtful with the look of an artist who saw on blank canvas light, color, and passion, and he stirred his tiny cup of inky mud reflectively. “Still, he is spectacle, eh? For a moment, silhouette against stark of desert sky, Laban, whom we had thought dead standing upright in his chariot, brandish his mighty spear. Then behind him host arise, as it seem, from sterile sand.”

“Won’t that get a little embarrassing for Esther?” Alec pushed up his glasses to rub his eyes. He looked exhausted, and Norah felt a renewed pang of guilt for having left him to his own devices the previous night instead of giving him her usual help. Nonetheless, when he had made his appearance that morning, he had come straight over to sit beside her with his customary smile of greeting, so he appeared to have taken in stride her decision to spend the evening playing cards with Christine by lantern light.

He drew his coffee cup to him and looked around, and Norah wordlessly handed him the sugar he sought. “After all,” he went on, ladling it into his cup, “Esther’s already gone on to marry Ahasuerus, hasn’t she? What’s she going to do with Laban after that big dramatic scene where she puts off her mourning for him to enter the beauty contest? He can’t be the lover to two queens of Babylon running. I don’t think they’d take that even in the Old Testament.”

“Make him her brother,” Norah said promptly. “You can reshoot those scenes between him and Emily—it was only a day’s worth of shooting—and Bob’s your uncle. And there you have it,” she amended hastily as the director paused in the middle of an enthusiastic cry of triumph, puzzled by the unknown phrase.

“*Exactement!* It is precise!”

“Esther didn’t have a brother,” pointed out Alec.

“She didn’t have a former lover, anyway not one that made it into the Megillah,” Norah retorted mildly.

“He is what is need!” Hraldy cried, springing to his feet. “*Héylas!* You are genius, Madame Blackstone! Genius!”

Fallon, both Neds, Deacon Barnes, and Doc LaRousse turned in some surprise, since this last remark was shouted at the top of the director’s lungs. “Here!” He thrust half a dozen pages at her. “Write him, outline such scenes

for me, make them live, make them throb! Alexi! You and I, we must arrange for new charge, new onslaught! We will look for him today, now, immediately, as soon as cars can be brought! Ned... Ned..." He fluttered away in quest of the carpenter. "Ned, you must sent to studio for two hundred additional extras, clothe in armor of Israelites! Yes, and send your assistant now to town, by train; these things must arrive on Saturday."

"You coming out to have a look at the battlefield with us?"

Behind her, Norah was aware of slight movement. From the tail of her eye she caught Fallon turning ostentatiously away but still remaining within earshot. "I'm afraid not," she replied, at the same time touching Alec's wrist and signaling toward the door with her eyes: *Talk to me outside about this.*

She realized later there was no reason he should have understood, but his glance, too, idled over to the star, and he nodded imperceptibly.

In a lighter tone she went on, "I think I'll take advantage of the morning off to make the Book of Esther live and throb, per instructions. I'll come out with Christine this afternoon for the shooting, though. Besides, it's high time I gave those little ragamuffins a good brushing. Chang Ming seems to think his winter coat makes him Genghis Khan." She had left the three dogs sleeping like discarded slippers around Christine's bed, feeling curiously safe with their guardianship. Waking from some troubling dream she no longer remembered, she had seen the dark gleam of their eyes by the single candle she always left burning these nights, and that, too, had been comforting. By the time she had let them out and brought them back in again, even the sticky cobwebs of the dream had blown away except for a dim impression of wailing music and a smell of dust on the wind.

LaRousse came up behind Alec with some question. Norah rose, brushed the crumbs from her skirt, and made her way to the door. She couldn't define, even to herself, her urge to remain at Christine's side, her bone-deep disinclination to allow Fallon the chance he was so obviously angling for. Perhaps it was only the scene she had witnessed at the Montmartre; perhaps it was her dislike of the way the man walked these days, lithe and arrogant, like a stalking animal. Whatever the source of her distaste, it was cemented moments later by the sudden materialization of a powerful arm around her waist, steering her into a corner near the door.

She hadn't thought the man was so strong.

"You know, honey," Fallon said, smiling and displaying a lot of extremely white teeth, "they do say two's company and three's a crowd. What do you say? Don't be such a wet blanket."

Norah straightened her back and regarded him frostily. He was less than an inch taller than she, and it clearly discomfited him to be dealing with a

woman who could not readily be tucked under his arm. “I *beg* your pardon.”

He stepped back uneasily. An odd smell seemed to cling to his expensive sweater, one she could not place.

“You know what I mean, toots.” Truculence was barely concealed under the brisk tone of his voice. “Chris brought you along as a maid, not a chaperone. So what’s wrong with unsticking yourself from her for a few hours? You jealous or something?”

“Christine brought me along as a friend.” It was difficult to keep her voice cool under the surge of anger that swept over her not only at his words but at his assumption of his position and hers. “As a friend, I am quite willing to absent myself if she indicates that my absence is required. So far she has not.” She stepped around him and out through the door, hoping he had not been aware of her trembling. The conceited lout would probably construe it as maidenly modesty or fear.

As it was, it took all her self-control to keep from dropping the script pages as she threaded her way through the arc-lit confusion of men loading gilded tent poles, lacquered scarlet elephants, and dozens of yards of silk into cars preparatory to the long, lurching drive over the sands, through the wash, and around the rocks to the site of the pavilion.

After a glance through the door to make sure Christine was still asleep—she was, despite the tumbling furry tussle as all three dogs engaged in their morning rite of attempting to drag one another around the room by the tail—Norah wrapped shawl and sweater tightly around her arms and settled herself on the cabin’s small step, staring south across the barren rock and sand to the indigo mountains beyond. The first glimmering of tawny dawn stained the eastern sky. To the north, clouds heaped the mountains, but the day promised to be clear. When let out, the three Pokes dashed joyously away to indulge in an orgy of sniffing for whatever changes the wind had made. Black Jasmine trotted off in the direction of the cars to make sure the men loaded the pavilion properly. Buttercreme, after a few cautious whiffs, returned to the shelter of the cabin with the air of one whose worst suspicions about the outer world had once again been confirmed.

“There a reason you’ve decided to thwart the splendid one’s newest passion?” inquired Alec, appearing around the corner of the ruined grocery store ten minutes later, his satchel of spare lenses, notebooks, small screwdrivers, and black electrician’s tape over his shoulder, his peaked cap as usual perched backward on his head.

Norah grinned ruefully, grateful that he’d seen what she was doing and glad to see, by the tone of his voice and the way he leaned against the wall beside her, that he didn’t seem to have any objections.

“There is and there isn’t,” she said slowly, not certain how to explain what even to herself appeared perfectly irrational behavior. “It’s just that... something about him makes me uneasy. It isn’t only the dogs,” she added, watching Chang Ming inspect each sagebrush in turn, going from one to the other with his purposeful Pekingese trot. “And it isn’t that I don’t think Christine can look after herself, because I know full well that she can. It’s... I don’t know what it is, frankly.”

He nodded, folding his arms and shifting his shoulder against the old *Sentinel’s* battered clapboards. “Well, whatever it is, you bothered our boy so much, he came over to me just now and asked me, man to man, if I wouldn’t haul you off into the sagebrush for a little while so he could make some time with Christine. He seems to think you’re a soured old maid who wants to keep Christine from having any fun.”

Norah shot him a sidelong glance. “Do you really think he thinks that?”

“No.” Alec scratched a corner of his mustache. “I think he just said that to me—and, obviously, to you—as ammunition against you.” He shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, looked down at his boot toes, then went on carefully. “What he said to me was, *She ain’t so bad-looking, and she’ll probably be grateful*. I had to remind myself that if I broke his nose, I’d have to reshoot five thousand feet of film. But it’s slated to take place right after the final take’s in the can.” Above the tops of his rimless spectacles his brown eyes were very bright with anger. “What does Chris think about all this?”

“That he’s tedious.” Norah shrugged. “She wasn’t scratching at the windows to be let out last night. She can’t think why he’s suddenly developed an interest in her with all the lady friends he has back in town. *He’s acting like such a FAN, darling*.” She imitated Christine’s wailing voice, and Alec grinned. “She thinks he’s probably just bored out here in the wilds.”

“But you don’t.” It wasn’t a question.

“No,” Norah said softly and felt again a drift of uneasiness related to her dream, as if some unseen object had bumped against her legs under water. “I don’t know why, but I’m...concerned. Freud would say it’s my subconscious objecting to something or other that probably has nothing to do with Mr. Fallon. Maybe I *am* just a soured old maid.”

“Want to be hauled off into the sagebrush? Sorry,” he added immediately, before she had time to react. “Joking. I’m sorry...” His back was to the makeshift lights of Frenchy’s Saloon, and the quick duck of his head made it hard for her to see his face, but when he looked up again, his expression was earnest.

“Whatever Freud would see in your subconscious, I know what’s floating around in mine. I don’t have Blake’s kind of experience—or his kind

of looks, more's the pity—but trying to get me to run interference doesn't sound like a man flirting because he's bored. See you in Babylon.”

He gave her a cockeyed salute and turned from the porch, and as he did so, without quite knowing why, Norah stood up and reached impulsively to touch his shoulder. For a moment Alec stood looking up at her—he was a good four inches shorter—then he stepped close, put his hands very gently on her arms above the elbows, and brushed her lips with his.

Then quickly, with a slightly embarrassed air, he shifted his satchel on his shoulder and hurried away between the buildings, whose shadows swallowed him up.

During the morning Fallon made three or four attempts to catch Christine alone. Twice the dogs barked frenziedly, and when Norah rose from her seat at the vanity—where she was making the Book of Esther throb amid a clearing in the powder canisters and hairpins—she glimpsed those powerful shoulders in their pale blue sweater disappearing around the corner of Emily's cabin. On the second occasion Christine rolled over, sighed, and murmured, “What on *earth* are those dogs hunting?” Ten minutes later she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

It was by that time ten o'clock. Having clocked Christine making up and dressing before this, Norah felt serenely confident that Fallon would have no time for anything major in the way of seduction before they all had to be on the set at twelve. According to the lesser Ned, on his way through Red Bluff to the train station in San Bernardino to meet Roberto Calderone, both the pavilion and the army encampment sets were well under way.

“Good thing, too,” he added, brushing back his duck forelock of sand-colored hair. “The extras are arriving tomorrow afternoon, and Mikos is going to have to take 'em through their paces at least once when they get out here. That leaves just the morning for filming all King What's-his-name's scenes with Roberto and Emily, plus whatever setup the explosives man is going to need.”

While Christine put on powder and rouge, lipstick and eyepaint—not film makeup, but there was no question of crossing to the mess hall less than fully decorated and she had learned not to suggest it—Norah brushed the dogs and entertained her sister-in-law with an account of Fallon's attempts to get time alone with Christine to such effect that when he encountered them on their way back after breakfast, Christine was in her most minxish mood.

“Of course, Blake darling, I'd *adore* to ride out to the set with you.” She smiled, gazing up at him from beneath the shade of her broad-brimmed hat. “So kind of you. Emily,” she called out to the heavily veiled blonde just emerging from her cabin with mother in tow. “Emily, Blake's offered us all a

ride out to the set this afternoon. Wasn't that sweet of him? Do you think there'll be room for Zena as well? I mean, with Norah and the dogs, but you won't mind holding my little celestial Changums on your lap, will you? Norah's got a pot of coffee, Emily darling. Would you care to come over and have a cup with me while I put on my makeup?"

She smiled her leave of the actor, batting her long black lashes through a scrim of cigarette smoke, and Norah had to turn quickly away so as not to be seen laughing.

At quarter to one, which was good timing for Christine, the five ladies loaded themselves into Fallon's car, Norah and Christine sharing the backseat with Zena and the dogs—"Hush now! Uncle Blake's being very good about giving us all a ride out to the set, you naughty boy!"—leaving Mrs. Violet to sit like a whalebone sword blade between the admiring Emily and the seething star. There was further delay when they reached the dry wash, which had inexplicably ceased to be dry and was a good two feet deep in rushing brown water, necessitating some very careful driving.

"A flash flood?" Christine regarded Doc LaRousse with surprise-widened eyes upon her arrival at the pavilion among the rocks. "How could it flood? It didn't even rain last night!"

"It rained in the hills," the electrician explained. "We heard the water come roaring down round about ten after twelve, a huge wall of it, boulders, rocks, jackrabbits that couldn't get out of the wash... We were damn worried about you, Chris."

"I'm so sorry!" She drew about her shoulders the light wrapper of yellow silk she wore to keep any possibility of sun from her copiously exposed skin and looked up at him while Zena and Mary DeNoux fussed around behind her, repinning curls that the drive and her protective veiled hat had disarrayed. "You see, Norah? If we'd hurried up like you kept telling me to, we might have gotten caught in that flood, though I still don't see how you could *possibly* have a flood if it didn't rain!"

With barely two hours of daylight left, the filming proceeded apace. At Norah's suggestion, three key shots were shifted from day to night and a long sequence predicated on Laban's previous involvement with—and desertion of—Esther was dropped as no longer necessary. "It is possible that Laban's coming to tent could have been at night rather than at day," Hraldy agreed doubtfully, studying the yellow notebook pages covered with Norah's French-governess hand. "But these surely could be film Monday, after we have finish with battle."

"If you want to bank on the weather holding," remarked Alec, switching the turret over to a shorter lens. "Personally, at this season of the year, I

wouldn't."

So they sent Deacon Barnes and Mary DeNoux back to Red Bluff to bring out the portable generator, a myriad of lights, Lucky Kallipolis, and an enormous picnic dinner, while Norah and Hraldy discussed which scenes needed to be reshot to include a brother for Esther and Christine maddened her frustrated suitor by refusing to leave the wardrobe tent where she sat in her dragon-embroidered yellow kimono, playing mah-jongg with the musicians and smoking. The Pokes, which in Fallon's absence had spent their time hunting lizards and marking every bush, rock, and tripod as their personal property, remained stubbornly on guard around their mistress's feet, though they refrained from barking in his presence.

Stay close to her... watch her, Shang Ko had said as the steam of the departing train blew around him in a cloud. *Do not let her be alone.*

The thin, gawky figure walking around the house in the darkness, leaning on his staff, stooping now and then to draw signs on the gnawed foundations, signs of which, in the morning, Norah could find no trace. *Do not let her be alone.*

"Norah, darling, I'm thinking about seducing that *darling* cello player. What do you think?" Christine stepped out to the pavilion's entry, following the three musicians with her eyes as they took their places for the next scene. "His name is Stephen, and he has absolutely the most *gorgeous* nose, and it would drive Blake crazy, and besides, Jazzums likes him, don't you, my little celestial cupcake?" And the little black dog in her arms strained to lick her chin.

"Norah," Alec called over his shoulder as he was checking the camera loops, "we're going to take this at f/8..."

Her thoughts slipped away like a handful of sand in the running water of a flood.

In addition to Roberto Calderone, the afternoon train brought several stuntmen and Felix Worthington-Pontehart, a nimble and lanky Englishman who'd spent most of the war blowing up German entrenchments. The first of the horses arrived that evening from the ranches around San Bernardino. Red Bluff became a seething encampment of tents and corrals and property sheds where weapons and chariots were checked and touched up by the two Neds under Doc's ubiquitous strands of lights. That, too, comforted Norah when they returned very late from the night shoot. That morning the silence and emptiness of the ghost town had troubled her more than she had allowed herself to admit. Even without Mr. Shang's enigmatic warning, she had been obscurely glad for the presence of the dogs.

With the horses came a dozen hard-bitten veterans of the range who

accepted Black Jasmine as their mascot from the first moment he showed up at their campfire. They nicknamed him Skunk, and thereafter, if there was any question about the whereabouts of the tiny dog, Norah knew to search for him at the cowboy camp on the other side of the corrals.

Norah spent Friday doctoring the script in one of the white tents of Queen Vashti's troops, which did double duty as a dressing room and the home of the Red Bluff mah-jongg club. Christine and Emily kept looking over her shoulder and suggesting things they'd like to do: "Can't you *please* write in a scene for me with naked dancing boys, darling?" Periodically Hraldy would burst in, seize a handful of pages, and shout, "Yes! YES! *Bravissima!*" causing Buttercreme to retreat under one of the cots and challenge him in a voice like a trodden-upon rubber toy. Fallon tried once to insinuate himself into the game, but the dogs would have none of him.

"Besides," added Christine, meticulously assisting Roberto Calderone and Mrs. Violet in building the Great Wall of China on the plank table in their midst, "Blake never showed the slightest interest in playing before this, so he can just sit outside with the extras and talk about showgirls." She grinned wickedly at the thought of his frustration and lit another cigarette.

Because of the huge inconvenience of night location shooting, her hours were largely limited to daylight, which was short anyway because of the season. She looked better than she had in weeks and, Norah noticed, seemed to consume far less liquor and no cocaine.

If she walked around a great shoulder of red rock, Norah could see the stuntmen on the battlefield figuring out charges, troop maneuvers (including Laban the Splendid's miraculous reappearance with a previously unaccounted for battalion of vengeful Israelites), and chariot falls.

The men worked in baggy trousers and undershirts—to Christine's loudly expressed admiration—brown muscles standing out like braided leather as they flung themselves casually here and there or walked the courses they would ride, over and over, timing out exactly where the sand had been poured for a softer landing or precisely where a partner was going to wheel his horse aside. Christine seemed to have forgotten her ambitions of seducing the hapless cello player and had fallen violently in love with a shy youth named Monty.

Watching them, Norah thought again of Keith Pelletier. A good stunter, Alec had called him. She could not imagine a sedentary and elderly inebriate like Charles Sandringham being able to kill one of these men or even take one by surprise.

According to the paper, which still carried the story under the urging of "informants in Hollywood," nothing had been stolen from the house. Though,

of course, after Brown and Fishbein had been through the place, who could tell?

So, Shang had said, *I see...* And something about the look in his eyes, the quality of his voice, told her did he *did* see... something. Something when she had told him that the boy was a stuntman. Not just horror. Recognition. Pieces falling into place. But pieces of what, she could not tell.

Chinatown, Alec had said.

At Norah's feet Black Jasmine gave a gruff little yak, as if satisfied that the latest tumble—both horses going down and sideways, the chariot fishtailing, and the driver and the warrior rolling in a long, slapping dive—was up to his standards. The horses scrambled to their feet, obviously unhurt, shaking the dust indignantly from their manes, while the beautiful Monty and a leathery expert named Smoky Hill Dan, after a moment of motionless death, leaned up on their elbows and grinned.

Pelletier had done that, Norah thought. Pelletier, who had wanted to meet Mr. Fairbanks and become a star and had been willing to prostitute himself to do it. Pelletier who had grinned—*Jesus, honey, if you wait to be invited in this town, you'll never go anywhere!*—and steered his elderly *erastes* to the speakeasy in the back room. Pelletier who had ended up dead in the reeking shadows of that silent little house, the house with blood trailing down its hall and tooth marks on its foundations and a mirror smashed to oblivion on the wall.

What would leave marks like that?

Shang Ko knew. Of that Norah was positive. She had been too tired, too rushed, too confused at the train station, but upon their return she would force him to tell her something besides the fact that the stars were not in a good aspect for the women he seemed determined to take under his wing.

Shang Ko was still on her mind when they returned to Red Bluff at close to ten that night to find the place awash in extras. Most were unemployed from the streets of Los Angeles, unshaven and dirty and not caring much what they did or how well they did it. Others were Mexican farm workers out of jobs for the winter or unskilled laborers, men who'd come west looking for fortunes in the golden land. But there was a fair salting of men who knew what they were doing, Gower Gulch cowboys or soldiers who'd campaigned with Griffith and DeMille on a score of biblical battlefields, and these Hraldy enlisted as corps commanders and standard-bearers.

Everyone who knew anything about filming and could be trusted to follow orders was impressed to the colors as well. During a late conference in Frenchy's, while Lucky cleared up the ruins of a truly fearsome assault on the food supplies, Norah took notes on a battle plan that would require Deacon

Barnes (mysteriously revived from death), Doc LaRousse, Ned the lesser, and Jeffrey the flute player all to lead troops under the Persian king; when she left, they were debating whether the diminutive Mrs. Violet could be inconspicuously fitted into armor as well.

Wardrobe tents had been set up opposite Frenchy's, open-fronted, glowing like stage sets and swarming with men. Against the desert darkness the yellow glare had a brittle quality, fragile and inadequate on the faces of the extras: plain or craggy or soft, a da Vinci catalogue of noses, chins, warts, and hairlines. *Like soldiers before any battle*, Norah thought.

Something stabbed inside her, bitter pain that she had thought long laid.

Faces like that had surrounded Jim when he'd been assigned his uniform, his weapons, his place in the line of battle. Family men or loners, educated or laborers, artists or stockbrokers or would-be architects with one year of training yet to go...

They'd all crowded like that, she supposed, in a line to get what they needed for the following day, cracking jokes or smoking cigarettes. As men had done, she supposed, before every battle, even back in the days about which they were making this ridiculous epic.

Only Jim happened to be there the day they handed out bullets with the guns. Jim happened to stumble into one of the periods when the army wasn't just out for ten dollars and a couple of meals.

Norah stood still in the darkness, the sudden heat of tears searing her eyes. It was only time and chance, she thought despairingly, that had put him in that army in Belgium instead of this one in this silly desert full of cowboys and fake palaces and cheap tin swords. For a moment, as she watched the faces, she thought surely she would see him there, black hair falling over his eyes, laughing as he used to.

The crowd parted and moved, but it wasn't Jim's face she glimpsed in the jaundiced splintery light.

To her astonishment—astonishment that wiped from her mind all thought of the world's injustice—the face she thought she saw was Shang Ko's.

TWELVE

EARTH OVER WATER

An army on the march must be disciplined,
else disaster will strike even the strongest...

An army may have fatalities...

An omen for the taking of prisoners...

“DOESN'T IT HURT the horse?” Christine regarded the rigged chariot with some concern and reached out an assured hand to stroke the nearer of the glossy black team.

“Shucks, miss, not if it's done right.” Smoky Hill Dan finished rolling his cigarette and stowed the makings in a little washed-leather pouch hanging from his belt since the blue and crimson charioteer's kilt he wore had no pockets. With his hair hidden by a close-fitting leather helmet and with high boots laced to the knees, he still looked like nothing but a cowboy: big, competent brown hands, squint-lined gray eyes, and a light coat of body makeup to cover the fact that his chest, arms, and thighs were nearly as pale as Christine's, in contrast to his sunburned face.

“Lot of people claim a runnin' W is cruel on the horse. Hell, so's a curb bit if it's handled by someone who's got no business handling it.” He flicked a fragment of tobacco from his lip. “You time it right and have your fella undercrank the camera a little, and I can put that team down on the mark easy as a daddy flippin' a kid up onto his lap, and twice as gentle.”

“Personally,” said Emily, who was standing at the back of the small group gathered around the chariot, “I'd worry about myself, not the horse.” Unlike Christine, clothed in glittering silver armor whose form-fitting fragility could not possibly have protected her in anything like a real battle, Emily wore a girlish pink voile frock with a wide lace collar. She had finished her scenes with Roberto Calderone the previous day and was only along—complexion guarded by wide-brimmed hat, veils, and a very nineties parasol—to view the battle.

“Oh, pooh.” Christine made an airy gesture. “When I was—” She visibly bit back the words *married to Clayton*, a secret to which no one in Hollywood was privy. “When I was a little girl in South Carolina, my cousins took me hunting with them all the time. I fell off twice, and it never did me any harm.”

The charioteer grinned. “That's the spirit, miss. I bet after a day's work you fall into an easy chair harder'n you'll hit that sand.”

Norah glanced over at the target area. The previous night Ned the lesser had dug a pit some six feet in diameter by nearly two feet deep, which had been filled in with empty cardboard boxes and then covered with loose sand. Bits of weed and scrub had been transplanted to mask the join with hard ground. With some regret, Hraldy had been talked into allowing Christine's torso to be almost fully covered by silver armor: "I told them," said Mary DeNoux firmly, "that if she isn't covered when she hits the sand, she'll get scraped, and we can't hide it with makeup for later shots or retakes."

Hollywood logic, thought Norah. Despite Smoky Hill Dan's reassurances, she herself wouldn't have wanted to be spilled out of that chariot no matter how carefully rehearsed it was.

On the far side of a convenient rocky rise Felix Worthington-Pontchart had planted the charge that would simulate the lightning bolts of Jehovah's wrath.

"It's quite simple, really," explained the Englishman. "I push the plunger as you pass between those two rocks over there, and one-half second before you lay the horses down, there will be an explosion such as would do any man's heart good to hear." He pushed up his rimless spectacles and smiled with a child's delight.

Norah turned away. All yesterday, as she had watched the charge and countercharge of costumed extras—men waving swords and shouting as they fell upon other men with Western Costume spears, chariots falling, soldiers smiting one another, Ahasuerus and Esther gazing nobly down into the cauldron of fate, and finally Laban the Splendid's troops and Jehovah's lightning bolts arriving to save the day—she had been conscious of a horrible sense of split perspective, an emotion compounded of grief and indignation and anger stirring in her heart.

She knew it was irrational. What she was seeing was just a spectacle, and not a particularly original one. Why it should trouble her she wasn't certain. Only she knew that it did.

It wasn't Mikos Hraldy's fault, or A. F. Brown's, that Jim Blackstone had been involved in the hellish reality of which this was only a frilled and absurd shadow. It wasn't anybody's fault. Jim was dead. There was no reason for her to be angry.

And she hadn't been angry exactly. But she found it very, very difficult to listen to the director ordering Vashti's soldiers to charge the bowmen of Persia.

Considering the sheer chaos attendant upon filming a major battle sequence—maneuvers repeated over and over for different exposures and different angles, close-ups of men struggling and distant shots of wheeling

troops, rolling clouds of dust and constant awareness of the changing sunlight, of the position of the new moon's thin sliver among intermittent clouds of the daylight sky—it was astonishing that Alec had noticed. But as the previous night's darkness fell, he had come over to the small dressing and mah-jongg tent where she sat absently stroking Black Jasmine's fur and asked her, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." She looked up from the cot upon which she was sitting with her best *I'm fine, just tired* smile.

Alec, covered with sweat-runned dust, had raised her to her feet and led her gently but firmly away into the shadows of the towering rocks. The shouted commands of Ned the greater and his corps chiefs faded to flat echoes no louder than distant hammer blows, and the dove-colored light seemed to swallow the jingly chaos that surrounded Christine, Emily, the breakdown of the tents, and the retrieval of the spare greasepaint tubes, water tanks, cots and cushions, and stray mah-jongg tiles.

Small winds sniffed among the rocks. Dry shrubs and stalky weeds stirred and were still. Ground squirrels dashed for cover. Somewhere an insect rattled with a harsh, buzzing noise.

Alec sat her down on a rock. "What is it?" His glasses made two neat rings in the dust on his face. One of Norah's many jobs that day had been to fetch a cup of water and a clean handkerchief every few minutes to keep the lenses clean, his own and the camera's.

She shook her head again. "It's silly."

"Nothing's silly."

She sighed and brought it out as she would have brought out a tale of a burned dinner or a demolished car, all of a piece. "It's just—my husband was killed in battle. It's a bit hard for me to watch them playing at it."

There was a long silence. The shadows thickened from silk to velvet, purpling to black. The voices of the extras diminished as the desert took them back, but Alec made no move, as if this conversation, the thing that had been said and could be said, were of greater importance than their own or Christine's dinner.

At length he said, "I know. My sister's husband beat her nearly to death with a mop handle. It was a long time before I could watch a Punch and Judy show."

"It's just..." Her voice came out thin as thrice-ground glass, and she waved angrily, trying to get enough breath to speak. "It's just that I loved him so much."

For a moment she sat upright, tears streaming down her face, her hands in her lap. Then Alec sat down beside her, gathered the bony awkward height

of her against his shoulder, and held her like a brother... as Sean would have... the corner of his glasses poking her in the side of the head and their knees and shoulders bumping, not quite fitting.

And through it all, through the blinding hurt that she thought she'd left behind in a freezing attic in Manchester and the tears that she didn't think were left in her, some portion of her mind kept repeating, *What would Jim think? What would Jim think?*

But she knew quite well what Jim would think, because Jim had told her what he thought on his last furlough. "I hate to think about you lying in anybody else's arms," he had said, running his palm gently along her bare arm, cupping her shoulder, her elbow, her breast, as if he, like she, were memorizing a physical reality against the darkness to come. "But if something should happen to me, I don't want to think about you living your life alone."

He'd meant it, too. He hadn't realized how alone she would be when influenza finished the carnage the war had begun. He certainly couldn't have foreseen that she'd end up in this bright-colored Oz of palm trees, oil derricks, ersatz Spanish castles, and unlikely weather.

At some point, long after dark, she said, "I don't know how Christine can stand it."

"Chris hasn't got your imagination." He raised his head a little against the dusty mat of her hair. "The costumes help. They make it less real, disguise what it really is both for the actors and for the people who'll see it on the screen. It's like the people who read *Anna Karenina*, and because it's in Russia they can say, 'Oh, that's not my pain they're talking about.' And Chris is tough. She goes from one thing to the next and doesn't worry about the past. When a cat sits mere purring on your lap, you know for a fact she isn't thinking about her former owner; she's thinking about her dinner. That's Chris."

Norah laughed softly and owned that he had a point. What else she said to him that evening she didn't know: anger at Brown, at Hraldy, at the war that had brought her the most precious thing in her life and then had taken it away again. He did ask her if she was angry at him for not going. The question surprised her. "I was always against the war," she said. "My whole family was. It's just that we didn't really have a choice."

When they walked hand in hand back to the edge of the day's battlefield, all that remained there, like a spot of tar against the pale blur of sand amid the trash of vanquished armies, was one battered black Ford with COLOSSUS lettered on the door. Having told Christine of Fallon's subterfuges to get her alone, she knew she could count on her sister-in-law's sense of mischief to keep him at arm's length until she returned.

And today she felt better watching Hraldy line up the close-up shots, seeing them, as Alec had said, as a kind of Punch and Judy show in questionable taste.

Christine mounted the chariot. Smoky Hill Dan reined expertly around and cantered the horses across the desert to the stake that marked the farthest point of the camera's pickup, the light vehicle bouncing over ground that had been flattened and cleared for yesterday's battle.

The course of the charge would be east to west, along the foot of the uneven rock hills that ringed the battlefield. Outdoor scenes were invariably aligned with the camera pointing north or south to prevent glare, backlights, or the shadow of the cameraman intruding into the illusion that this really was 480 B.C. Norah suspected that part of the reason for this battlefield's popularity among film companies was the fact that it was a long oval oriented east-west, with sufficient roughness around the edges to make it interesting but smooth enough to permit impressive charges. She wondered if in some former era it had been the bed of a long-vanished lake.

Hraldy gave the signal. The black horses leapt against their old-fashioned breast straps and picked up speed, manes flying, hooves churning dust that the morning sunlight transformed into a shining curtain boiling out behind them, Christine clinging desperately to the rail and to her lanky escort. As they passed through the two unmarked rocks, Worthington-Pontchart squeezed his thumb down on nothing and made a kissing noise with his lips. Smoky Hill Dan drew rein as they approached the sandpit, and back by the cars, where Mrs. Violet sat in the shade of an awning reading *Photoplay*, Chang Ming strained on his leash and let out a wild salvo of barks.

"Too fast!" Hraldy waved his arms. "We get fast driving in another shot. Here we cannot see you for dust! Christine, Christine, you are Vashti, queen of Babylon, devourer of men, betrayer of kingdoms! Does Vashti cling to her charioteer for protection against a little speed?"

"Can't you put in a title that I'm checking to see how fat he is before I devour him?" Christine's breathing was unsteady, but now that the first rush was over, her eyes sparkled with excitement. Dust clung to her face and hair and dimmed the glory of her silver armor; Mary DeNoux bustled up with a soft whisk broom to brighten it again, and Zena applied fresh powder and very gently shook the dust from the Persian queen's disheveled locks.

"I'll undercrank it to about twelve," said Alec, turning the camera back toward its starting point. The chariot went back for another run.

"Aren't they going to rehearse the fall itself?" Emily asked wonderingly, stepping so close to Norah that her parasol made flower patterns over them both. Behind them, all three dogs began to bark, throwing themselves against

their leashes hysterically. Norah looked around almost subconsciously for Fallon but could see no sign of him.

“I should imagine it’s better if they don’t,” said Norah. “She has to look as if she’s surprised. After the first take, she’ll flinch.”

On this rehearsal Christine was ready. She reveled in speed, as Norah knew from heart-stopping expeditions in the yellow roadster, and once she’d learned to balance herself in the flimsy vehicle, Christine quite obviously enjoyed the chariot. “Do they still have chariot races at the Tournament of Roses in Pasadena?” she asked as the chariot slowed and turned away from the sandpit a second time. “Is it hard to learn to drive one of these things?” She was panting, her black hair a cloud of chaos.

The cowboy driver was grinning. “Shucks, miss, no harder than one of those jalopies. They don’t run them races anymore, but after we’re all done here, I’ll give you a lesson or two.”

Inwardly, Norah groaned as the team trotted back to position.

Up on the ridge above the sandpit Ned the lesser scouted to make sure nobody was near the explosive charge. Voices called out, “Stay clear! This’s the take!” Mary DeNoux tweaked Christine’s dark draperies into place and gave her armor a final brush; Smoky Hill Dan adjusted the lines of the running W that would trip the horses precisely on the spot required. Mr. Worthington-Pontchart checked the first foot or so of his buried wires, then settled back with the little squeeze box between his knees, pale, bright-eyed, and eager as a demented child. “Hush,” Norah heard Mrs. Violet say mildly, “hush, you silly doggies...”

Alec swabbed the lens with alcohol and double-checked the gate, snapped the camera shut, and pushed his cap back to put his eye to the aperture.

“Camera!” yelled Hraldy, and Norah stepped forward with the slate as, far behind her, Smoky Hill Dan flipped the reins. There was, obviously, no music to get the performers in the mood; Alice and the Rothstein brothers sat in the shade of Mrs. Violet’s awning sipping Coca-Cola and trying to quiet the hysterical Pekingese.

“Action!”

Slow and deliberate, the thunder of hooves began. Norah could see how precise the man’s control of the horses was, slower than the two rehearsal runs, every hoofbeat timed. There was another frenzy of barking, and then, leash trailing, Chang Ming flung himself into the shot like a golden comet, snapping at the flying black hooves and leaping at the soft noses far above him.

The nearer horse flung up its head with a wild snort, Christine screaming

“NO! STOP!” in the same instant that the cowboy driver hauled on the reins. The chariot swerved, throwing dust everywhere, Christine still calling Chang Ming’s name and Hraldy swearing in German and Hungarian as he ran forward, Norah at his heels.

The horses had stopped a good fifty feet short of the sandpit, snorting and rolling their eyes. Chang Ming darted to the pit, sniffed and pawed worriedly at it, raced back toward Norah, then ran away again. Christine sprang down from the chariot crying “No, no, darling, it’s all right, it’s only a movie!” while the little dog circled, bounced, and barked just out of Norah’s grasp.

“He’s gotten worse and worse since he’s been out here,” Norah said, trying to catch the leaping, skittering dog and nearly turning her ankle in the soft sand.

“Now, the woman at the kennels said Pekingese got protective,” argued Christine, kneeling and patting her chest in the sign all the dogs knew meant “come.” She was trembling with shock. “Come to Mother, Changums, it’s all right. It’s all right. I’m not hurt. Oh, darling, are you all right? He could have been killed!” She pressed the little dog to her, cradling the domed grapefruit skull against her cheek. Chang licked anxiously at her chin.

“He could have got *you* killed,” Norah said, and bent down to rub her ankle. She paused in midgesture, studying the sand underfoot.

There were wires under the sand, where no wires should be.

Wires like those connected to the plunger in Worthington-Pontchart’s hands.

Worthington-Pontchart ordered everyone from the area, as he had no idea how much, if any, of his guncotton might have been stowed among the cardboard boxes and loose sand of the pit into which the chariot would have slid. In the end he extracted pounds of it, buried just under the surface and rigged to a second set of wires spliced in from the explosives behind the hill.

“They’d have found you in pieces,” he said with unimpaired cheer to the silent and white-faced Christine back at Frenchy’s. “If they’d found you at all.”

To do her credit, Christine didn’t flinch or squeal, but her onyx eyes seemed to grow darker against the pallid makeup. She was cradling Chang Ming, whose tongue lolled with pleasure. Black Jasmine was so loud in his indignation at this favoritism that Smoky Hill Dan picked him up and held him against his chest, covering the black fur with “motion-picture orange” and dust. Almost blindly, Christine reached out, and Norah took her hand.

“Someone wanted to kill me.” Her voice was little more than a whisper,

and she shivered in her butterfly kimono. “Someone wanted... Who?” She looked up into Norah’s face, into Alec’s, into Hraldy’s. “Who would... would want to do something like that?”

Norah said quietly, “Mr. Hraldy, organize a search among the extras. One of them is an old Chinese gentleman with very long white hair; his name is Shang Ko. Have him brought here.”

THIRTEEN

WATER OVER MOUNTAIN

Good omen for seeking advice...
Those who give advice frequently
get into trouble for it...

“IT IS THE Rat-God.”

Shang Ko looked from Norah’s face to Alec’s and then to Christine’s, where she sat a little distance from him in the old assay office’s single straight-backed wooden chair, surrounded by her three dogs. The assay office was the only brick building still standing in Red Bluff, and Mikos Hraldy had moved his clothes and personal effects out of it and into the tent Alec shared with Doc to give the company a combined interview room and jail. Through the stout door Norah could dimly hear the director arguing with Ned the greater about the advisability of summoning the San Bernardino county sheriff, as opposed to waiting until Mr. Brown could be notified.

The old Chinese leaned forward on the lower bunk where he sat, broken hands clenched on his knobby knees. His eyes were deadly earnest. “Da Shu Ken, the Great Rat of the North, the Kara-Kudai. Bringer of plague, misfortune, and death. It is he who pursues you, who has been pursuing you since the full moon of autumn, the season which is his. It is to him that you have been pledged as a bride.”

“The hell I have!” Christine exclaimed, sitting up a little straighter and reaching automatically for her cigarettes. She was still wearing Queen Vashti’s silver armor, however; Norah automatically dug the required gold case, amber holder, and rather prosaic box of kitchen matches from her own pockets and handed them to her sister-in-law.

Alec asked, “Is that why you put the explosives in the sandpit?”

“I did not place those explosives there,” replied Shang, not appearing in the slightest surprised by the question. He had changed from his Persian armor before Hraldy had located him and, in his faded, too-large street clothes, looked frail and harmless except for the ageless darkness of his eyes. “The Rat-God is here. He is in this camp. He is trying to kill Miss Christine, to take her for his own, and she must be protected against him. At the very least she must be taken out of the desert, for in the desert his powers are great.”

Norah flinched as something—a strain of wailing music, the memory of

incense on dust-laden wind, the full moon over curving roofs—ghosted through her memory. A dream? She could not recall.

Alec leaned a hip against the side of Christine's chair, spectacles flashing in the burning knife of light that slanted from the window through the snuff-colored gloom. "And you came out here to save her?"

The old man hesitated, his face suddenly taut with pain. "I came to warn her," he said at last. "I do not know if anyone can save her, can defeat the Rat-God. Once, many years ago, I tried." He shook his head. "Yet I could not... stand aside. I could not know, and not warn her, not do what I can. And now..."

"And how did Chris get to be this Rat-God's bride?" asked Alec softly. "He see her outside the premiere like you did?"

Shang Ko looked surprised. "It is the necklace," he said. "The Moon of Rats, they call it, for the legends say it is a rat's shadow which can be seen on the moon."

An image sliced through Norah's mind: candles and three opals gleaming like evil moons in vast gulfs of dark. Music.

Her hand moved involuntarily to her throat, and Shang's dark eyes touched her, not asking but knowing. For a moment she had the impression that he had seen into her dream. Then he returned his gaze to his own hands, folded like a stack of broken oracle bones, and sat silently, as if debating how much he could tell them without being dismissed as a lunatic. As well he might debate, thought Norah. He, too, had watched Nadi Neferu-Aten and her lumber-footed Graces and had heard the comments Christine had traded on the porch with Flindy McColl.

But when he raised his head, his expression was flatly matter-of-fact, as if he knew that in the face of accusations of attempted murder, he really had little to lose.

"You realize," he began, "that the Manchu, the last imperial dynasty to rule over my homeland, were not Chinese at all."

"Yes, I knew that," said Alec, and Christine turned to him with indignant surprise.

"Then why does everybody call them Chinese? I mean, this is the first I've heard that the emperor of China isn't even *from* China."

Shang's mouth flinched under its long white mustaches, fighting a smile at her expression of cheated outrage. "They conquered China three centuries ago," he explained, "riding down out of the deserts of the barbarian north. They adopted the customs and the religion of my people, as they adopted the government which ruled the country, which kept the tax records and performed the civil service examinations."

“They have a *civil service* in China?” Christine stared at him, appalled and disillusioned. “You mean people typing up things in triplicate in offices?”

He bowed to her just slightly. “Even so, Miss Christine. China is a great country whose day-to-day business was far beyond the comprehension of the barbarians from the north. And so, to rule China, they must perforce become Chinese. But at heart there was always a streak of the northlands in the Manchu. There were things about their nomad life which they did not forget.

“In the imperial palace, the Forbidden City in Peking, there is a pavilion, the Hall of the Tranquil Earth. Among all the pagodas and shrines built by the Ming, the last of the Chinese dynasties, that pavilion was kept as a hall of worship for the older gods, the wild gods of Manchuria, the tribal gods of vengeance and war and the fertility of beasts. And behind those gods there lurked other gods still. Secret gods, demon gods, wild spirits all but forgotten except by those who handed their secrets along.”

Christine, who had made three unsuccessful tries at getting the cigarette into the holder, finally gave up and handed the whole business to Norah with a pleading look. Norah fitted them together and handed them back, lighting the cigarette when Christine’s hands proved still too unsteady to put flame to tobacco. Christine drew a long breath of smoke, but her trembling did not subside.

“Upon certain nights the old shamans, the Manchurian witches who knew nothing of K’ung Fu Tze, nothing of the Tao or the Book of Changes, nothing of the teachings of Buddha, would perform sacrifice to those old gods for the inner cult of the imperial family, the Manchu cult of the far north. Sometimes, when they worshiped the gods of the tribes, they sacrificed sheep, sometimes bullocks or a pig. The shamans would interpret their oracles from the squawking of sacred crows, and the emperor and his brothers and the high Manchu princes would feast upon the meat as they had feasted centuries ago in the black tents of the north.”

“Good heavens!” said Christine, startled. “I thought all the Chinese ever did was burn incense and quote those little sayings like you get in fortune cookies. I mean, people don’t sacrifice things anymore... do they? I mean, except in places like darkest Africa and cannibal islands and like that.”

“Go to Haiti sometime,” Alec said softly, but he did not take his eyes from Shang.

“Sometimes,” the old man went on, “if the danger was very great or times very troubled, in the last full moon before the coming of winter, they would worship the secret gods, the forbidden gods, and sacrifice a young girl.”

Alec was silent. Norah could see in Christine’s face the rapt attention she

had given Nadi Neferu-Aten's tales of reincarnation and tried to identify the strange sense of *déjà vu* she felt at the old man's words.

"They were civilized enough by then to realize that this was wrong." Shang Ko reached down to scratch Buttercreme's head, where the little dog lay beside his foot. "But they reasoned that if their victim was Chinese—to them an inferior race—it did not matter. Perhaps, in forgotten time, some princess of the royal house would volunteer for the good of all, for there is great magic in such things. But as the secret cult grew in power, they would select a girl from the lower part of town and dress her as a bride and put about her neck the Moon of Rats, the bridal necklace of Da Shu Ken. Sometimes the emperor himself performed the rite, or whichever prince of the family was the head of the cult, whose councils were the true power behind the Dragon Throne. But more often it was a priest into whose body Da Shu Ken would enter, and it was said that the priest never remembered doing the things that it was clear he had done."

The old man spread his crooked hands. "After that the Rat-God would owe a favor to the head of the cult. Being a demon, he could go anywhere, enter into anything to accomplish this favor, killing, maiming, or poisoning whomsoever he was bid."

"The necklace..." Christine's hand crept to her throat as if the white jewel she had worn in two films still rested there in its nest of bronze chains.

Shang Ko bowed his head again. "I saw the Moon of Rats in the advertisements for your film," he said. "I hoped—since I understand from the newspapers that films are made some months before they can be shown—that it had been made before the full moon of autumn and that all that was required of me was to warn you never to put the necklace on again. And I prayed that this was so. I know the Rat-God, Miss Flamande. I know his power. But even as I stood waiting in the crowd, I saw you wearing the jewel, and I knew that it was too late."

He sighed and looked down at his hands again, his brow laddered with the memory of pain. For a time there was no sound except for the thin humming of the wind through the tin stovepipe hole and an extra swearing in the street.

"How the Moon of Rats came into this country I do not know. It was kept with the other regalia—the iron hand drum and the antlered headdresses and the sacred bags of hair—in a great cupboard in the Hall of the Tranquil Earth. Perhaps a eunuch stole it, not knowing what it was. Since the emperors have declined and warlords struggled for control of the Middle Kingdom, much treasure from the imperial palaces has appeared in the markets of Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila, and San Francisco. Perhaps during the uprising of

the Society of Righteous Fists—the so-called Boxers—the troops which invaded the Forbidden City and drove forth the empress and her nephew looted it. I do not know.”

He leaned forward again, as if he spoke to Christine alone, willing her, at least, to believe.

“What I do know is that the first time you put that necklace on again after the full moon of autumn, you were given to the Rat-God. You became his chosen bride whether he who put the necklace upon you knows it or not. Now as the year wanes into winter, the power of Da Shu Ken grows with the weakening of the sun. By ancient reckoning it is the season of the Rat-God, the time of the north winds, the desert winds, the time of dust and darkness, the time of the dead.”

“How do you know?” asked Alec, folding his arms, his voice breaking into Norah’s troubled attempts to recollect why she knew about the iron tambourine and the fact that the Rat-God’s priests wore antlers on their hats, why she knew that the sacrifice was done under the full moon in the season of dust. “Who are you?”

“In China,” said Shang Ko, “I was called Liang Hao, the Shining Crane. I learned the arts of wizardry in the mountains of the Bayan Har Shan in the west. Afterward I traveled from the jungles of Annam to the valley of the Huang Ho to the Great Wall in the north, and beyond that into the deserts and to the great mountains of Tibet. When I was a young man, I marched with the armies of the rebels against the Manchus until it became clear to me that our leader was mad and most of the men who ruled through him more corrupt than the rulers he fought. After that I traveled only to learn.”

He frowned, his eyes changing their focus for a moment. Norah wondered what it was in that sketch of a life that he remembered and could not or would not speak of, as she would not speak of that letter from Jim’s parents, of the years spent emptying Mrs. Pendergast’s slops, or of the last eighteen months of her brother’s life.

“In time the princes and warlords who controlled the empress put a price on my head because I would not undertake magic for her against her enemies,” he went on after a long moment’s thought. “For that reason I had to flee. I tried to return to the mountains where I was raised, but this turned out to be not possible. The only thing that I could do was to flee across the sea to this country. Now with the fighting that is going on in my country, with the warlords and princes slaying all those they think may be a threat to their power, I do not know whether it would be possible for me to go back.”

“So you’re a wizard?” said Alec.

The old man’s gaze shifted from the shadowed expression of ancient

memories, ancient hurts, to a bright sharpness, not fooled in the slightest by the careful neutrality of Alec's voice. "I am, as you say, a wizard, a scholar of the Way. This is how I knew what the necklace of Da Shu Ken looked like. In the far north, beyond the Great Wall, there was a monastery which had a drawing of it, for such things no longer existed in China itself. In that same monastery I learned its history, how the emperors of the family of Nurhachu learned the secret of this forgotten cult and the uses to which they put it. There used to be many of these little animal gods, who could be summoned in their proper times by means of certain rites and certain gems. Most of those rites have been forgotten over the years, and those minor gods, those demons, sleep.

"Had it been possible, I would have accompanied Miss Christine here from the first. As I said, the Rat-God is strong in desert country, being a demon of earth. I did not know then that the Rat-God had already manifested itself on the night of the moon's last quarter. Da Shu Ken draws strength from the light of the moon. I thought that as the moon was waning and would reach its nadir last night, she would be safe. I placed marks of protection upon her luggage, as I had placed them upon her house, and wrought spells of aversion all about the household. These, I hoped, would keep him at bay until I could find a way to turn him aside for good. I searched the city for sign of him and found none. Then, too, I thought that her guardian dogs would be sufficient to protect her."

He smiled down at Buttercreme, like a pale muff on the floor at his feet, and at the two males, sitting like grave miniature lions on either side of Christine's chair. "And so it seems they were."

"The *dogs* know about the Rat-God?" asked Norah, startled.

"Of course." Shang smiled again. "What do you think such dogs are? What do you think the fu-dogs are that are portrayed outside of temple doors?"

"Well, I suppose," Christine agreed doubtfully. "Though it would take an awful lot of them to bring down... how big *is* the Rat-God, anyway?"

Shang shook his head. "He is a man; I have told you," he said. "In ancient times he entered into the body of a butcher-priest. Sometimes, they said, he took on the form of a ghost tiger or a demon; they said also he could enter inanimate things after the sacrifice of the girl had made him strong. But as for the fu-dogs, the guardian dogs..."

He rubbed his crippled hands, for the brick building guarded cold within it that even the afternoon sun could not warm.

"The emperor's palace is more than his dwelling place, you understand. It is the center of the land of China, which is in its turn the center of the

world. It is—as it must be—the image in little of all the universe, even as a man’s body repeats all the world in its pattern of veins and nerves. The moats, the waterways, the gates and pavilions and walls of the Forbidden City, all these are laid out in a harmony which resonates with the universe. It must be so, for the ceremonies the emperor performs reach out over all the lands. He must be centered in harmony to radiate harmony. A wheel whose hub is skewed cannot travel straight.

“For this reason no evil must be allowed to enter any palace of the emperor, lest it be magnified by the power concentrated there as light is magnified by a bowl of water. But in every place where power is exercised, as you well know, evil things are done. And as little evils accumulate in old houses, so the evils done in the Forbidden City over six centuries leave a residue—or, indeed, in any place where the emperor dwelled and his ministers and eunuchs and sons and concubines fought for power. Not precisely ghosts, but spirits without form, malevolent, like moving dust. And they in their turn could affect the emperor, his family, and through them, all the Middle Kingdom.”

He reached down again to touch Buttercreme’s head. She looked up quickly and dabbed his fingers with her protruding pink tongue.

“Thus it was that guardian dogs were bred whose task it was to hunt down these evils and kill them, as they hunted and killed mice and roaches and other small vermin. Centuries before the Forbidden City itself was built in Peking, when the Son of Heaven dwelled elsewhere, the greatest of the war dogs were selected and bred for loyalty, courage, and wisdom—and bred also for smallness of size, for the part of those evils which exists in this world is in most cases very small. These children—” He nodded toward Chang Ming and Black Jasmine and the little pale puffball at his feet. “—are their descendants, these tiny warriors, these demon catchers. Did you not know it, Miss Norah, the night you slept in the evil house in the hills, while Miss Christine performed in the courtyard and these children moused for devils in the darkness?”

Norah’s breath caught as she recalled the eyes of the Pekes flashing in the reflections of the courtyard kliegs, the scurrying sensation all through the house, and the ugly dreams that never broke the surface of her memory.

“These children heard the coming of the Rat-God in the first storm of winter. Their barking chased it from your house. But it left its mark there, as you know.”

“Yes,” said Norah softly. “Was that what you came looking for?”

“In part,” he said. “In truth, seeing the mark, I feared what I would find until I saw you on the porch, you who had been with her at the theater, with

her three enchanted guardians. But being driven off, Da Shu Ken went elsewhere that night. He sought another who had worn the Moon of Rats, one whom he could attack safely, in solitude and in darkness. After I left you at the train station, Miss Norah, I went to the house where the blood was, the house you and Miss Christine visited when I watched you through the fire. I saw Da Shu Ken's mark there where the young man was killed, the young man who wore the necklace in counterfeit of Miss Christine. The young man who counterfeited a woman in more ways than one."

Alec swore, surprised.

"Like Miss Christine, he was pledged by the wearing of the necklace. And he was taken as the Rat-God will seek to take her."

"Even though he'd worn the necklace—when? Last summer?" Norah looked to Christine, then back to Alec.

"They were doing retakes up through October, when Chris was on her way back from Europe," said Alec. "But anybody who reads the entertainment section of the *Times* or the *Examiner* would know that."

"I see that you think me mad," said Shang Ko. "After watching the women in the white robes dancing in the road to appease spirits who do not exist and telling you tales of things they could not possibly know, I do not blame you for doing so. Indeed, I wish that I were mad, for if I were mad, the Rat-God would not exist.

"But I am not mad," he whispered. "The Rat-God does exist. And as the year declines to its nadir and the moon waxes to its full, believe me, Miss Christine, it will kill again."

"A Rat-God?" Mikos Hraldy hooted with derision. "Your Madame King Tut's tale of reincarnate fiancé was better than that! A murderous spirit to whom our Christine is to be sacrifice?"

"I dunno, Norah, sounds like something you should write up, maybe." Doc grinned. "Unless Edgar Rice Burroughs got to it first."

"But Frank did tell me my necklace was looted from the Forbidden City." Christine looked protestingly from face to face around the table in Frenchy's and took a long drag from her cigarette. Reaction was setting in. Most of her blood-ruby lipstick had worn off, making her dark-painted eyes seem bruised and tired, and even under the stagy greasepaint, lines of weariness were evident around her mouth. She'd put on her yellow kimono over the silver armor and looked very young and shaky.

"Ah, my sister had a ring that used to belong to the Empress Josephine of France." Lucky grinned, refilling the coffee cup that sat on the table before him. He paused, the blue and white enameled pot in hand. "The assistant casting director at Vitagraph gave it to her when she was trying to get a

contract there.”

“Thus proving conclusively,” Worthington-Pontchart put in wisely, “the existence of Woolworth’s in Napoleonic France.”

Christine sniffed.

“Chris, I’ve seen that necklace,” Fallon added kindly. “Hong Kong, early Victorian at the most. Sure it’s old, and probably pretty valuable if those opals are as real as they look. But an ancient Manchu sacrificial necklace?”

“And when did *you* go to school to be an expert on ancient Chinese jewelry?” she retorted, more because Fallon had made unwanted passes at her than because she questioned his judgment. “There, Jazz thinks you’re wrong, too, don’t you, Jazz?” On the bench beside her the little dog turned his single eye malevolently on the man—still clothed in his bronzed leather armor with a huge Star of David embossed on its breast—and emitted a deep growl.

Fallon muttered something about “nasty little brutes” and retreated to the end of the table. From the street outside the stir and noise of the extras drifted dimly into the long room. Hraldy sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

Norah could only sympathize. Whatever concern the Hungarian might feel for his star in the aftermath of a murderous attack, he still had a film to make, and it was obvious to Norah—who in her short association with Colossus Studios had learned a great deal about the angles of light—that no further filming was going to be done that day. That meant decisions about whether the extras would remain or catch the last train out of San Bernardino, with all the concomitant wheels within wheels: dinner for nearly nine hundred men tonight, breakfast and lunch tomorrow, rental on costumes, scanty supplies of trucked-in water...

She found to her own horror that she was rewriting scenes in her head, scenes that would imply, rather than show, the presence of large bodies of troops. Christine had nearly been killed, and she, at least, was by no means certain that they had secured the murderer.

“And anyway, so he’s loopy,” Christine said after a moment, stubbing out her cigarette and taking a long pull at the coffee, though her hands had begun to tremble again. “So what? My first husband’s brother believed their parents’ house was built on an old Indian grave site and ancient medicine men came into his room at night and had powwows under the bed... That is,” she amended hastily, seeing the surprise on the faces of Hraldy, Fallon, Doc, and Worthington-Pontchart, “my *mother’s* first husband... So Del was sort of my...” She hastily calculated on her fingers. “... step-granduncle or something.”

Norah refrained from mentioning that according to the official studio biography, Chrysanda Flamande’s mother had been a member of the Grand

Turk's seraglio. Surely, in the face of Christine's residual Pittsburgh drawl, nobody believed that anyway.

"Well, it doesn't matter. He never did anybody any harm, except living miles and miles outside New York in a house completely surrounded by some kind of bush that was supposed to keep ghosts away. But he was a really sweet man."

She fished in her kimono pockets for another cigarette, but her hands still shook too badly to fit it into the holder. She simply stuck the paper end into her mouth and hunted around for a match. "So why can't Mr. Shang go on cutting the shrubs and watering the grass? Since Felipe got sick and can't do it anymore..."

"Well, since I haven't seen this guy, I don't know," Blake Fallon said slowly. "But about a year ago I had trouble with an old Chinaman who came around my place asking for work as a houseboy. I told him I already had a houseboy, and darned if my boy didn't come down sick within days, and the old man show up again."

He struck a match, keeping a wary eye on Black Jasmine, and leaned across to hold it to Christine's cigarette, though he kept his hands off her otherwise. The thick, dust-filled light that fell through the saloon's wide windows rippled on the heavy muscles, burnished the bronze of his armor.

"I didn't think anything of it at the time," he went on. "But this old man was always telling me how this was bad luck or that was bad luck, or if I did this or didn't do that, some evil spirit would get after me. Finally I got sick of it and paid him off. He refused to leave, saying I needed to be protected and only he could do it; he only left when I said I'd call the cops. Later I found that most of my gold cuff links, cigarette cases, and about two thousand dollars had disappeared at the same time."

"That's horrid." Christine stubbed out her cigarette and turned her face away from him. "I refuse to believe that of poor old Mr. Shang. I'm a very good judge of character, and that old man wouldn't hurt a flea. Besides, Buttercreme likes him, and she doesn't like *anybody*." She gathered Black Jasmine to her side. Buttercreme and Chang Ming lay under the bench, growling slightly, Norah noticed, every time Fallon came near or spoke.

The actor rolled his eyes. "Well, Shang's a pretty common name in China," he said after a moment. "Maybe it isn't the same guy. He claim he was a wizard?"

Norah and Alec traded a glance over Christine's head. Very gently Alec said, "Maybe Blake better take a look at Shang."

Doc added, "Maybe Chris ought to go through her jewel box when she gets back to town. I don't want to run the poor guy down or sound like

somebody out of a dime novel, but if that explosive had gone off, I don't think anybody would have been looking to see where this antique necklace was or counting up how many diamond bracelets were there for a long time afterward."

"Nonsense," Norah said. "It would be much easier for him to simply greet us on our return with some story about burglars than to blow Christine up in an 'accident.'"

"If the man's sane," Fallon said quietly.

"I think perhaps," the director said as Norah opened her mouth to snap back, "is best for all, do we simply call police of San Bernardino."

Thus it was that Deacon Barnes was sent to San Bernardino to the sheriff's office. But when the deputies arrived, though the door of the brick assay office was still locked and no evidence was found that any board of floor or roof had been dislodged, no sign was found within of the old man.

FOURTEEN

EARTH OVER THUNDER

Sign of sacrifice.
On the road there and back again, seven days—
it is good to travel...
Good luck lies in returning from a short trip...

“WHAT PUBLICITY, HUH?” Conrad Fishbein’s round blue eyes flicked avidly from Norah to Christine, and his plump hands rubbed as if hugging each other with joy. “STAR ESCAPES DEATH! MURDER CULT OF THE EAST! MYSTERIOUS CHINAMAN SOUGHT!”

“We still don’t know that Mr. Shang was the one who set those charges,” Norah protested, steadying her teacup as the three-ten from San Bernardino jostled over the points. A few spits of rain streaked the window as the dusty little town, nestled up against its hills, dropped behind.

“My dear Norah,” purred Fishbein, glancing around for the waiter and then opening his small briefcase to produce a bottle of champagne, “I only said the man’s being *sought*. Besides, the idea of a sinister Chinaman stalking Chrysanda Flamande will make every reporter in town forget that Charlie Sandringham ever existed!” He set the bottle on the table and produced fragile-stemmed glasses, each engraved with the seated Egyptian figure that was Colossus Studios’ emblem, filled two, and handed one to Christine. “To *She-Devil of Babylon*.”

“I refuse to let you say Mr. Shang had anything to do with it,” said Christine. “You can go on about how I worked yesterday surrounded by studio bodyguards, or how I received warnings and worked anyway, or anything you like, but don’t get everybody all stirred up against poor Mr. Shang.”

As she took the champagne glass, there was a glint in her dark eyes that showed she meant it. Fishy looked crestfallen. Norah didn’t see why. The fat publicist had already sent the *Times*, the *Mirror*, the *Daily News*, the *Herald*, and the *Examiner* pictures of Christine mounted in the speeding chariot, with at least two doughty cowboys skylined on the rocks with rifles in hand. Since Colossus Pictures boasted neither a special stills man nor more than one cameraman per picture, Alec had taken the shots—the cameraman whose back was visible in the picture was actually Doc LaRousse—though of course when the fall had been filmed, the cowboys had been out of sight. But they

had been there. LaRousse, who'd grown up in the desert, and Smoky Hill Dan had scoured the area for Mr. Shang before shooting had commenced and had patrolled several times during the day, though both agreed that such measures would be little use against someone who knew rough country.

The chariot charge and fall had gone like clockwork. Christine threw back her head and flung out one arm in a suggestion of abandoned laughter. The explosion, up in the rocks but far nearer than Norah personally felt would be safe, was shattering, ten times larger than she had expected, flinging rocks and dirt and sawdust—which made it appear larger still—everywhere. To her own annoyance Norah didn't even see the actual fall, for the shock made her flinch and close her eyes; when she looked around a moment later, Christine and Smoky Hill Dan lay sprawled on the kicked-up sand near the fallen wreck of the chariot and horses while Alec cranked a long test strip. When she saw the footage in the editing room some weeks later, she was more horrified still, because Alec had angled the camera for a forced perspective that made the explosion seem to take place under the horses' very hooves, and she would have sworn that neither Queen Vashti nor her charioteer could have survived.

But Christine's only comment, examining a skinned spot on her elbow as Norah and Smoky Hill Dan got her to her feet, had been, "Well, that's over, darlings. Now can we go home?"

"How about this?" suggested Fishbein. "This is hardly the first time in her colorful life Chrysanda Flamande has faced danger..."

"Hmm." Christine paused in the act of fitting a cigarette to her holder, the faraway gleam of her true *métier* shining in her eyes.

All the way back to Los Angeles, under overcast skies, Christine and Fishbein polished off his champagne and elaborated her adventures in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt while on expedition with a suddenly acquired archaeologist uncle, enthusiastically abetted by Alec. Norah would have helped also—she knew, for instance, that Bedouin raiders would not be found in the Valley of the Nile—if Hraldy had not insisted on sitting beside her and discussing the script revisions that changed Laban the Splendid from Esther's lover to Esther's brother, exclaiming over the scenes still to be shot, and praising the changes made.

"A stronger, a far stronger, film will come of it, you will see," he said, fixing Norah with his eager brown gaze. "Thus! These you have write, you give more to Laban, you make use of this newfound talent, this new power, in our Blake."

He glanced at the slim, vivid figure across from them, black beadwork panels flashing on the cream silk of her dress, toying with her long strands of

pearls and amber as she talked, and lowered his voice. “And I see you have tailor role of Vashti, that it will not show out her weaknesses. Thus is true writing, Madame Blackstone. Is both kind and profitable to studio. Now when they see, those Philistines who run Colossus, who think of nothing but spectacle and armies, eh? Now they will let me pursue my dream!”

“Dream?” asked Norah, distracted. Across from her, Christine was saying, “... and raising my head, I saw that I had been cast into a pit of vipers! They were coiled everywhere on the rocks around me, amid the bones of those who had perished there before...”

“Of course. Having see him as Laban, having see his scope and ability, I see my chance! I see my cockroach!”

Norah blinked, wondering if the director had misread his English and what word he actually meant.

“With him as star, I will be able at last to make Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*! I do him exactly, each scene by scene! It will be *succés fou* of Hollywood, opening of new vistas, new genres, new meaning for modern cinema! Can you not picture Blake Fallon as six-foot insect with soul of man?”

Norah bit her tongue to keep from saying *Quite the reverse*, but the director, enraptured by his topic, leaned closer to her, put his hand over hers, and lowered his voice still further. “Do not you think, perhaps, that this change, this renewal, this inner metamorphosis of Mr. Fallon’s powers might be due to love?”

“To what?”

“...seizing the camel’s bridle, he sprang into the saddle with a single bound and reached down, drawing me up into his powerful arms...”.

“You ever tried to get on a camel, Chris?”

Hraldy made a very European face and spread his hands. “One sees...”.

“What I saw,” Norah said frostily, “was a man trying to seduce a woman and growing as angry as a spoiled child when he was thwarted. I admit I haven’t much experience, but I should think that anger would come out of pride, not love.”

The director gave her a look that was intended to be worldly-wise but that succeeded only in being fatuous. “Ah, but that is a man, is he not? He have his pride, his pride in conquest of woman he love. May be that his pride fuel this newfound talent.”

“It may be,” she agreed. “But if that is the case, I fear both he and Mr. Brown are in for a disappointment. I suppose there are women who are flattered by that kind of insistent wooing, but Christine isn’t one of them.” And annoyed with herself for being goaded into replying for Christine—something she hated to do—she went on briskly. “My question is, What are

we going to do about the scenes with Mordecai? Have they located... I mean, has Mr. Sandringham returned?" She turned and raised a straight, dark brow inquiringly in the direction of Conrad Fishbein.

"From everything we've heard, Charlie is still in Vermont with his father," Fishbein replied in his soothing voice. "As we've told the press, we've had a telegram from him confirming that for reasons of privacy, his father has not used the name Sandringham for years. This dates back to Charlie's first successes in the West End. But his father is quite old..."

"He must be," Christine commented with one of her disconcerting flashes of practicality. "I mean, Charlie's sixty-three if he's a day, and he told me once he was a younger son."

"Very old and very frail," Fishbein said smoothly. "So you see, we won't be able to tell anything for quite some time."

"But we cannot let it go *comme ça!*" protested Hraldy. "Even without change now written by Madame Blackstone, there remain entire trial of Haman, torture sequence in dungeons..."

"My guess," said Alec, leaning back in the glove leather of the seat with a cynical glint in his eyes, "is that we'll have to find somebody else and reshoot the works."

"Reshoot!" The director's eyes bulged with horror. "Is not to be! Orgy alone is cost..."

Alec grinned. "Think of it as a chance to improve on what you've already done. Besides, you can't say Blake was any good in that first orgy, so you can kill two birds with one stone... *if* he's as good indoors as he was out."

Hraldy made a small, strangled noise of despair and retreated to pore over his pages of script; Alec took the opportunity to come around the table and take Norah's hand, leading her to the vacant table across the aisle. Beyond the windows, the brown hills humped up like ruched velvet under slaty skies, reddish tangles of vineyards, and dark orange groves lying like lap robes over their knees.

"Look," Alec said softly, "I know this isn't really any of my business, and 'no, thank you' is a completely appropriate answer, but I'm not thrilled about you two ladies staying in that house alone. We've got no idea where Shang is or if he's a crook or just a harmless nut case or... Well, somebody set those charges. Until we can talk to Brown and get the Los Angeles police onto it, I'd feel better if I thought you were staying someplace else."

"I admit the thought of going up there tonight isn't one I cherish," Norah said slowly, looking from the gathering gloom to his face. In spite of the fact that it was only four o'clock, the lamps in the club car had been kindled, and a beautiful youth with the features of an African prince asked if people wanted

coffee. “The Hollywood Hotel? They’d take dogs—or they’d take Chrysanda Flamande’s dogs, anyway, wouldn’t they? And... if Mr. Fishbein sent word of the attempt on Christine’s life to the papers, are we going to have to deal with a mob of reporters at the station?” The thought of it made her suddenly ill.

He chuckled. “They took Mae Busch’s leopard. The management would welcome three housebroken little dust mops with tears of joy. But my thought was that the three of us—six, counting the fu-dogs—could get off in Pasadena, take a cab all the way out to Venice, and check you two into the St. Mark’s. I could keep the dogs at my place overnight; it’s only a few blocks away. Then I could take you to dinner at the Breakers, and we could go visit the pier.”

Aside from Christine’s—and Fishbein’s—insistence on a Los Angeles arrival (“Darling, as long as I actually *was* almost killed, I might as well get some publicity out of it!”), the program met with unqualified approval. While Christine languished for the lightning storm of reportorial flash powder on the platform with Black Jasmine in her arms and *SAVED FROM DEATH* almost visibly written above her head, Alec, Norah, and a heavily tipped porter piled the lighter luggage, Alec’s precious gramophone, and twenty or thirty sealed magazines of exposed film into Alec’s disreputable Ford, along with Chang Ming and Buttercreme like a purdah empress in her wicker box. With the Bell & Howell cradled on Norah’s lap, they pattered westward through the clearing dusk along Venice Boulevard, red streetcars clattering past them among the bean fields, orchards, and long, marshy stretches of rank, head-high grass and startled waterfowl, making for the sea.

“It’s supposed to look like the real Venice,” Christine had told Norah some weeks earlier, when Venice of America had been mentioned during a break in filming *Sawdust Rose*. “They’ve even shot some costume stuff down there by the bridges and under those arcade things on Windward Avenue, but they have to film at night because of the streetcar tracks.”

It had sounded to Norah like a peculiar idea to begin with, but no description could do justice to the cockeyed charm of the place, even on a mizzly evening with the fog moving in. It was Hollywood’s bright fantasy skewed by earnestness into a truly otherworld absurdity: crenellated pseudo-Italian palaces of ornamental tilework and Moorish arches facing the beachfront boardwalk; winged lions and Cellinesque satyr faces decorating pillared walkways, cheek by jowl with the glaring ballyhoo of a carnival pier whose gateway blazed with lights spelling out *RACE THRU THE CLOUDS*; Oriental towers and Romanesque turrets capping establishments like the Owl Drug Store and assorted tattoo parlors and hot dog stands; streetcars clattering prosaically along the banks of silver canals whose waters reflected aisles of

colored lights and the fading winter sky.

Alec's house was on a sort of island reached by a decorative camelback bridge in a district a little removed from the noise and lights of the piers. Palmetto, eucalyptus, Spanish dagger, and elephant ear grew everywhere; ducks quacked and flapped in the canal that lay within feet of his front door; and a small electric passenger train, nearly empty on this dank evening, rumbled past them as they negotiated a turn up a narrow alley to the back. Chang Ming flung himself out of the car and dashed to the water's edge, getting his toes wet and barking wildly at the ducks.

"I got the place because it was cheap," Alec said, carrying magazines of film from the car to the sagging rear porch while Black Jasmine investigated the jungle around the house and Buttercreme huddled disapprovingly in her wicker box. "It's romantic as hell to have a canal instead of a street in front of your house, but not everybody wants to shlep through the alley and the backyard. Besides, the canal floods at high tide and stinks like a fish market the rest of the time."

Through the plaster arch that led from the small, hopelessly cluttered front room into the bedroom, Norah glimpsed a single bed half-hidden in the ghostly folds of an old-fashioned mosquito bar. "What's the neighborhood incidence of malaria?" she asked, and Alec grinned.

"Seven or eight cases per summer—why do you think all the speakeasies under the piers serve gin? It goes with the quinine. Not that the summers are all they're cracked up to be. We're in a fog belt here." He placed the gramophone carefully beneath an old bulb-legged table that was quite clearly its home and unpacked the shellac disks. A much larger electric cabinet phonograph occupied most of one wall, with a path to it cleared through a miscellaneous junk pile of light stands, reflectors, and a small electric generator radiating cables in all directions like an octopus.

"In Los Angeles it'll be clear and hot, but the fog'll hang on here until two in the afternoon some days, then retreat out to sea and come sneaking back around six. Drives me nuts when directors try to film down here. Well, hi, Rube," he added to an enormous golden tomcat that appeared on the back porch. "Long time, no see. Miss Hazel been feeding you decent? Miss Hazel lives next door," he added, carrying the cat—which must have weighed nineteen or twenty pounds and, as was the way of cats, was loudly proclaiming imminent death from starvation—into the kitchen.

Alec introduced the cat to the dogs, which came rushing in to see and rapidly discovered that cats were not to be played with, then put down food and water—on the floor for the dogs and on the tiled counter for Rhubarb. After that he led the two girls back out through the game trails of the

overgrown yard, down the alley, and to a small street that paralleled the canal.

“The problem is, the man who built Venice was a cigar manufacturer, not an engineer. You can’t get enough of a tidal scour to keep the canals fresh, and the breakwater they built to protect the pier plays hell with the currents around the beach. The real Venice is built the way it is for a purpose: to drain a series of low-lying islands. This is a movie set.”

“But you love it anyway,” Norah said quietly, almost subconsciously reaching out and taking his hand.

He looked at her, startled, and their eyes met with perfect understanding. Then he ducked his head, a little embarrassed, as he had been when she’d accused him of superstition at that queer Arabian Nights house in Edendale. “So sue me.”

At the end of the street they turned left, crossed another camelback bridge over glassy dark water (“It’s only about four feet deep,” reported Alec), and found themselves walking along what appeared to be a half-scale railroad track under the shadow of the most enormous roller coaster Norah had ever seen.

“The Race Thru the Clouds,” Alec explained, gesturing to the strings of lights that outlined the scaffolding to their left like illuminated dew. He raised his voice as a roller coaster car rocketed by in a terrifying rattle of wheels, trailing excited screams like banners of triumph in its wake. “And that,” he added with a sweep of his right arm, “is the Venice Lagoon.”

“I think we call such things ponds in England,” Norah said gravely, contemplating the modest expanse of water in whose surface the lights of a small hotel on the far side glinted mistily, like a half-size Avalon. Despite the roller coaster, the scene was oddly pastoral. The point of land opposite them was thick with trees through which gleamed the occasional lights of a cottage window. Norah scrunched her hands more deeply into the pockets of Christine’s hand-me-down fur jacket, which had turned out to be made of vivid petunia silk, paneled with vaguely Egyptian motifs on the back and sleeves and adorned with an enormous collar and cuffs of trailing black monkey fur. She could smell, against the sewery reek of the lagoon, the salt bite of the ocean. The roar of the Race Thru the Clouds behind them was answered by the sweeping bellow of another roller coaster, like unimaginable beasts yearning to mate.

She found herself wanting to rise up suddenly on her toes and dance. Christine was right, she thought, although Conrad Fishbein had actually written the lines. Sometimes one had to pick the rose and not worry about the thorns.

They bypassed Venice Pier and took the red trolley car up Electric

Avenue to the much more impressive Pickering/ Lick Pier, which stretched almost a thousand feet into the ocean on pilings and boasted nearly that much street frontage on Ocean Front Walk. The Breakers was situated about halfway along the midway, a plain white wooden building wedged between a billiards and bowling establishment and Finlay's Museum of Natural Wonders, whose marquees were plastered with posters advertising a special exhibit of monsters of the prehistoric world.

"I'd take you to the Ship down on Venice Pier," said Alec, "except that's where all the movie folks go. The reporters would be sure to look for you there. That all right?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Christine. "I mean, it's one thing to escape death and get your picture on the front page of every paper in town getting off the train, but *nobody* looks beautiful while they're chewing. Oh! Red liquorice! That stand over there has red liquorice...!" And she darted off with her borrowed mackintosh flapping and the diamonds on her hat sparkling, leaving Norah to stare around in wonder at the colored lights, the flamboyant posters, the freak shows, custard counters, and chop suey stands, and the crowds that even on a winter evening strolled along the dark and slightly splintery planks of that aisle of noisy glare.

It had been a long time, she thought, since she'd come to a place like this purely for a child's pleasure in carnival lights and saltwater taffy. Hawkers and shills yelled their dodges to the snap of the shooting galleries and the clank of Test Your Strength. Opposite them, glittering like an illuminated wedding cake in its domed pavilion, the most beautiful carousel Norah had ever seen circled serenely in a glowing lake of music. Behind that towered the scaffolding of something billed as the Blarney Racer Roller Coaster: It Will Scare You to Death.

"It's not bad," Alec agreed judiciously as Christine returned with her hands full of rubbery snakes of red candy. "But for my money, give me the Zip over on the other side of the pier."

Christine let out a squeal of delight; Norah rolled her eyes. For a vampire who lived on the heart's blood of discarded men, Christine was a sucker for roller coasters, and Norah resigned herself to an evening of comparing the merits of the two and quite possibly those of the Big Dipper and the Some Kick on Venice Pier as well. Her suggestion that supper be postponed until afterward was scornfully rejected as lily-livered, and as the Pacific fog closed in, Norah found herself, with a certain amount of amusement, standing next to the lighted posters advertising prehistoric monsters trapped in the tar pits of death and watching Alec and Christine wait for a chance in the Blarney Racer's cars.

When she'd first come to California, Norah had wondered how on earth people like Charlie Chaplin managed to go out of their houses without being mobbed, but it was apparently done frequently. And now, having seen Mr. Chaplin in street clothes without his mustache and Douglas Fairbanks in a suit, she understood. So much of being a star, she realized, was *being* a star. A way of walking, of posing, of standing that cried out, "Look at me! I'm Blake Fallon!"

Certainly nobody would associate the disheveled and giggling schoolgirl whom Alec escorted off the Blarney Racer with the She-Devil of Babylon.

"And *were* you indeed," inquired Norah, nodding toward the sign, "scared to death?"

Christine adjusted her hat with a haughty gesture. "Queen Vashti of Babylon fears *nothing*," she said in Chrysanda Flamande's deep, throbbing drawl. "Now let's try the Zip over on the other side of the pier."

Norah walked to the edge of the pier and gazed across the water at the lights of the Venice and Sunset piers, which were shining softly through thickening fog.

Like a swirl of brightly-colored petals, the music of the carousel's pipe organ floated around her, mingling with the delighted screams from the roller coaster and the Captive Aeroplanes on their little pierlet nearby and the *hroosh* of the dark waves among the pilings below. She could smell seaweed, popcorn, and a stray whiff of someone's cigar smoke. The last time she had been on a pier, she reflected, she hadn't been old enough to be permitted up this late at night. And with the rowdy laughter, the jangle of bells signaling somebody's win at something, and the good-natured squeals of brightly clothed girls who weren't any better than they should be, the place was a far cry from Brighton with Sean and her parents on a hot summer day.

She gathered her incongruous monkey-fur collar around her face and thought, *Sean*.

Sean would like this, she thought, as if her brother had not been brought back from Belgium a mute and twitching automaton with a metal lower jaw who had given no sign of recognizing anyone for the eighteen months he had lived. *Jim would like this*.

The thought came to her gently, a passing reflection, without the angry pain of wondering why he wasn't there to share it with her. *Jim would like California... Jim would love this silly Renaissance on the beach*.

And for the first time there was no resentment in her thoughts.

She would always love him, she knew, but something in that love had changed. She had clung to his ghost to get her through the wretchedness of those years in Manchester, years when she had been almost a ghost herself.

But almost imperceptibly, as life had stirred back into her—in the desert, in the studio, in the Baroque lobby of the Million Dollar Theater—the ghost had pressed her hand into the hand of a living man.

Had Jim been waiting to find someone he both liked and trusted?

Norah shook her head, impatient at this piece of silliness. It was just, she thought, that enough time had passed. And when enough time had passed, Alec had been there, in this place where she'd never in her wildest dreams expected to be. Possibly, she added, because her dreams had never been sufficiently wild.

No dream seemed too wild for Christine, and maybe, Norah thought, she had a point.

“Wonderful!” Christine gasped, wobbling a little on her diamante heels and hanging on to Alec’s arm. “Just *fabulous*, darling! Now we’ve got to go down to Venice Pier and try Some Kick!”

“Another night,” Alec said, smiling. “I have the suspicion that changes or no changes in the scenario, we’re all going to have to be at Colossus come morning.”

“Oh, pooh!” said Christine. She’d carefully schooled herself never to say *balls* in front of reporters or anyone who might talk to reporters. “Nobody needs sleep!”

“Besides,” Norah added grandly, “you two had your rides, and now it’s my turn. I want to go on the carousel. *And*,” she added as Christine’s face blossomed like a flower with delight at this evidence of her sister-in-law’s sudden descent into crass frivolity, “I want to ride properly on one of the horses that goes up and down and not sit in one of those dull little carts like a grown-up.”

They concluded the evening’s program with a visit to the Dome Theater at the end of the pier, where Christine led them on a quick descent of inconspicuous stairs that debouched into a network of sand-floored passageways and small, smoke-filled rooms. Games of baccarat, roulette, wheel of fortune, and what Norah assumed to be poker and blackjack were all going full swing, and ladies as colorfully dressed and as uninhibitedly behaved as Blake Fallon’s friends from the Montmartre giggled and glittered and adjusted their garters in public. Standing in the doorway of one red-lit *bolgia*, while a black trumpeter coaxed soaring despair from his instrument and Christine flirted with the good-looking bartender who mixed her a cocktail, Norah turned to Alec with a flicker of amusement in her eyes and said, “Whatever else can be said about her, Christine never disappoints me. Of course she’d know the location of every speakeasy in town.”

“Oh, everybody knows about this one,” said Alec. “I come here myself when I have time, for the music, but that’s usually only between pictures.” Reflections from the mirrored ball above the dance floor flashed across his glasses like sun thrown from the sea. “My brother has a speakeasy up the street, under the Pacific Sands Hotel. Awful house band, ukuleles, and rah-rah college songs, but then, Ira always did have a tin ear.”

“Hey, Alec, old *sadiq!*” A huge figure in sloppy tweeds appeared in the doorway behind them, seeming to fill the narrow hall. With a start, Norah recognized the white-bearded Father Christmas who’d spoken to Alec at Enyart’s on the night of the premiere, over a week earlier. Close up he smelled of cigar smoke and sweat. “Jack’s been telling me you’re looking for a man to—”

Alec held up a warning hand and glanced at Norah; Father Christmas paused, then took another look, and grinned. “You leading this innocent little girl astray, Ackey?” He held out an enormous, white-furred paw from whose creases the stains of engine grease would probably never be completely excised. “Captain Otto Oleson, at your service, miss.”

“Captain.” Norah smiled. “Norah Blackstone. And this,” she added as Christine wove her way expertly through the intervening crowd, “is my sister-in-law, Christine Flint.”

“*Alec!*” Christine laughed, holding out the hand unoccupied by a glass of gin for Captain Oleson to kiss at some length. “Don’t tell me you know bootleggers!”

“Bootlegger!” Oleson swept off his soft cap in indignation. “Never! Just a humble pilot of an excursion boat out to Catalina and down the coast to Mexico... Named her after my wife,” he added gravely to Norah. “After all five of ‘em, actually.”

“Good heavens,” said Norah, surprised. “What’s she called?”

“The *Whatsurname*,” Oleson replied serenely. “Fastest, most beautiful thing you’ll see on water from here to the Persian Gulf. You ask this boy to show you his photographs, you hear?” he added, slapping Alec on the shoulder and looking over at the two girls. “He may have to shoot movies for his living, but one day people are going to realize it’s the stills that’re the real art. You call me about—” He hesitated at Alec’s warning head shake, then concluded, “—about our business, you hear?”

“He used to run guns into Arabia and the Belgian Congo, back before the war,” Alex explained as, later on, cones of insubstantial pink cotton candy in hand, they sought the Electric Avenue streetcar once more. “I know him through Ira, my brother. When they passed the Volstead Act, he figured there

was more money here without getting his head blown off. And he was right.”

Norah glanced behind them as they climbed onto the crowded streetcar. She had heard Oleson’s voice again and, as she’d thought, saw him through the crowding backs on the rear platform of the car. He held the arm of a seedy, unshaven man, talking in a low voice.

“Didn’t anybody *think* what would happen if they outlawed liquor in this country?” she asked, leaning on Alec’s shoulder against the jostle of the uneven street. The general smell and presence of liquor all along the pier and the boardwalk that faced it had not escaped her.

“Surely the congressmen who passed the law didn’t believe that every man and woman in the country was going to fling up their hands and say, ‘Goodness, I’m so glad they’ve made it impossible for me to get drunk.’”

“Are you kidding?” Alec’s eyes glinted cynically behind his spectacles. “That’s exactly what they thought would happen. We’d just saved the world for democracy, remember—or *they* had, anyway. Of course people would quit doing what was bad for them if it was against the law. What do you think all these films are about? You think most people *don’t* believe deep down in their souls that a woman who lives for nothing but sex and money is eventually going to run from her house with a bad attack of guilty conscience and fall over a cliff like she deserves? Instead of living on to a riotous old age surrounded by diamonds, French chefs, and dancing boys?”

“Well, *I* intend to,” Christine said matter-of-factly. She plucked a huge feather of cotton candy from her cone and licked the residue from her fingers. “Not that either Nick or Clayton *ever* committed suicide over me, like Charlie did in that silly film. And it was *Clayton*, drat him, who ended up with the dancing boys in spite of everything I could do.”

Alec looked down at her, surprised. “You tried to take him away from his dancing boys?” The fact that Christine would have tried to change anyone, even a husband, was completely unexpected.

“No, silly, I tried to take the *boys*.”

The car lurched to a halt, with Norah catching herself on the rail to keep from falling and Alec bracing his feet and holding her by the waist. The front platform where they stood was nearly as crowded as the car; all along the street people were coming and going from the brightly lit hotels, dance halls, cafes, and establishments of shadier purpose as if it were midday. It was as if the Volstead Act had never been passed.

Norah saw Captain Oleson step from the streetcar with his disreputable friend still in tow and head for the lighted glass doors of a cheap hotel. He glimpsed Norah, Christine, and Alec on the car and raised a callused hand in greeting as they passed.

Norah returned the greeting, reflecting that one certainly did meet all kinds in California. Then her hand froze in midgesture as Captain Oleson's friend turned hastily toward the hotel's door.

With his hair unkempt and three days of beard on his jaw, with a defeated slump to his shoulders and white visibly streaking his dark hair, Norah almost didn't recognize him.

But the profile gave him away, the profile her mother had swooned for all those years before in the theaters of Leicester Square.

The man with Captain Oleson was definitely Charles Sandringham.

FIFTEEN

HEAVEN OVER WATER

In the face of a lost suit in court, hide...
In the face of a lost suit in court,
return and accept your fate...
All will be well...

“MY DEAR MRS. Blackstone.” Sandringham stood in the half-open door of his room, ravaged face a study in utter defeat. He shut his eyes for a moment, adjusting; then he sighed and stepped back to admit her. His hand shook a little as he closed the door behind her, but he managed a wry half smile as he added, “Welcome to Vermont.”

Norah looked around at the dingy room. A single window opened onto an alley smelling of sewage and ducks, and the morning light it admitted lay thin and unkind on the narrow bed and single threadbare towel, the rust trails down the porcelain of the sink, and the closet whose door didn’t close properly. Mentally she compared it with the quality of the furniture glimpsed in the corners of that bungalow on Highland and compared the man before her with the handsome and inebriated gentleman in evening clothes bowing to her at Enyart’s. She remembered her mother’s early love.

Her eyes met the actor’s. There didn’t seem to be a great deal to say.

“I take it,” he said gently, “that you really aren’t carrying a message from Captain Oleson?”

“No. I just told them that at the desk.” She wondered now why she had. Why she had intruded herself this way, taken on herself the burden of silence and guilt and that of being an accessory after the fact.

Sandringham sighed and brought up the room’s single chair. “Please excuse me for sitting on the bed. They seem to ration these things. God knows why. If anybody paid more than ten cents for it brand-new, they were cheated.” His palms and fingers were decorated with bandages and sticking plaster. He had not shaved since her glimpse of him last night, and his beard was thickly streaked with white.

“I hoped you hadn’t spotted me on the streetcar. I didn’t see you until I was on, because of the crowd, and then I hoped you’d get off before I did. I could have struck that old pirate for waving at you. Did Miss Flamande see me, too?”

Norah shook her head. Christine had gone early to the studio—early for

Christine, anyway—and had left instructions for Norah to get the luggage back to the house, which had been thoroughly checked by the Los Angeles police force. No sign of Mr. Shang had yet been found. “Nor did Mr. Mindelbaum.” Then she thought and said, “But he must know, mustn’t he? I mean, he knows Venice and knows Captain Oleson...” She fell silent again and sat looking at the graying man before her, seeing how soft and white his hands were under the bandages and how the fingers trembled despite his efforts to keep them still.

“What happened?” she asked.

He said softly, “Would to God I knew. I didn’t think I was drunk enough at Brown’s party to pass out. Good God, I’ve played Hamlet to rave reviews twice as drunk as that and even remember some of it! But I... I woke up on someone’s front lawn on Melrose Avenue, my clothes covered with blood. And sometimes when I sleep—which isn’t often—I think I see Keith in front of me, peering at me...” His face for a moment uncannily mimicked the younger man’s, his eyes narrowing in puzzlement, nervousness, growing fear. “And I think he’s saying, ‘Charlie? What’s the matter? Why are you looking like that?’”

A long shudder racked him; he quickly covered his mouth with one bandaged hand. Eyes closed, words half-stifled by his fingers, he went on. “Usually I wake up then. I’ve been living in terror that some night I... I’ll remember what happens next. It’s been either that or the rat—”

“The rat?” Norah’s stomach lurched.

“What?” He opened his eyes, startled, as if waking from half a dream.

“Do you dream about a rat?”

He swallowed hard, his eyes avoiding hers. “I... I...” For a long time his voice seemed to jam, as though his flesh were unwilling to cooperate with his mind.

Very gently, Norah asked, “What does the rat do? What does it say to you?”

“It says... I don’t know. It...” His voice thinned and clinched. “Its eyes. I saw its eyes reflected in the mirror above the bar.” He shook his head violently, his eyes squeezed shut again as if against a vision of those other eyes, red and watching. Norah saw tears leak from beneath the battered lids.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a time. “I don’t know what I’m saying. I haven’t touched alcohol since that night I... If it was me, it was the drink.” His voice stumbled, his words coming fast now, falling out of him with panic and despair.

“I swear it was the drink, but I don’t remember. Thank God I made that film; thank God Brown is a cheat and a crook and trying to take over

Enterprise Studios and can't afford to lose the money on that stupid piece of costumed drivel I cranked out this summer! When I read his moving account of my parent's illness and how he took me to the train station in his own car, I would have gone on my knees and kissed his shoes, I swear it, Mrs. Blackstone!"

He caught himself again, pressing his hands over his mouth, his whole body trembling as he fought for control. Wrung with pity, Norah leaned over and touched his knee. It felt like an ocean-smoothed rock under the worn and chemical-stained twill of his trousers.

The trousers were too short for him, showing bony ankles in lisle socks of a color she'd seen on Alec. *Of course*, she thought. *Alec must have lent him the clothes he's wearing and probably the money to pay for the room as well.*

Carefully, Sandringham said, "Mrs. Blackstone, please don't betray me. At the end of the week Captain Oleson is going to take me to Mexico. I have no idea how I'm going to make a living there, but I swear to you I'm never going to touch alcohol again. I don't know whether I killed Keith or not, but you see, it doesn't matter. I'll be convicted of murder, if it comes to trial."

"Well," Norah said thoughtfully, "after Mr. Brown and Mr. Fishbein got through with your place, there was certainly no evidence remaining to pin it on anybody else. On the other hand..."

She hesitated, struggling against the thoughts that persisted in surfacing in her mind. *I saw his mark there, where the young man was killed*, Shang had said. *The priest never remembered afterward doing the things that it was clear that he had done...*

A half-remembered glimpse of a crimson dress, a drugged girl giggling, the shine of evil jewels...

Slowly she said, "Mr. Sandringham, listen. In the desert someone tried to kill Christine."

His eyes widened with shock. "You mean that wasn't just Fishy hoping people won't notice Fallon's acting when the film comes out?"

"No," Norah said quietly. "That was genuine. Mr. Fallon's acting has been fabulous, by the way. He truly seems to have found himself. But the thing is, Mr. Fishbein has been thumping the drum over it in the hopes of getting people—especially the reporters at the *Examiner*—to forget Mr. Pelletier's murder. I'm wondering now if there isn't some way to... to tie the two together. To give the police the impression that's the direction they should look for the real killer."

Her eyes couldn't meet his as she said it. His own, she saw, turned aside also, and she heard the ragged draw of his breath.

"All I'd ask," she went on after a time, "is that you go to a psychiatrist

and get help.”

“Oh, God,” he whispered brokenly. “Yes, yes—I know I don’t have any other way of making a living, you see. Acting is all I know, all I’ve ever done. But the police, if they question me...” He looked up at her again, naked terror in his eyes. “If they hypnotize me, you see, I’m afraid of what I’ll say. Not so much because of what they’d learn, but because then I’d know.”

She reached out and took his hands, her own fingers shrinking involuntarily from the bandages that covered cuts inflicted by a broken champagne bottle. “Christine’s having dinner with Mr. Brown tonight,” she said. That had been one of the handful of messages waiting for them when they’d returned to the St. Mark’s the previous night. “I’ll ask her to find out how much the police know, how much of a chance we might have of bringing you through this. In the meantime, if you need money...” She hesitated again. “I don’t have much, but Mr. Hraldy is paying me as a scenarist for the rewrite I did on *She-Devil of Babylon*.” That had been another of the messages, and it had surprised her almost as much as the one that invited her, as well as Christine, to Frank Brown’s Christmas party in Beverly Hills a week from Friday night. A third missive was from Conrad Fishbein, reminding both girls that they’d just heard from Charlie Sandringham in Vermont, if anybody asked. “So I can give you a hundred dollars, if that will help.”

“A scenarist?” The tired lines blended into the wan illumination of a smile. “My dear girl, brava! You made sense out of that dreadful mishmash? Trust a woman who knows her Shakespeare! It’s really a woman’s picture, regardless of all that muscle flexing.”

“Well, I thought so.” Norah smiled, oddly pleased and relieved to see in the expression on his face the look of a man who had found, in pleasure for a friend’s sake, a few moments of respite from the iron jail of obsession and fear.

“Thank you.” He bowed his head to kiss her hands. “It is terribly good of you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet,” Norah said. “And if this is something a psychiatrist can help you with, better that you get help than... than disappear into Mexico with... with whatever it is still inside you. All right?”

His voice was barely audible. “All right.” As she drew her hands away, he looked up at her again, a fragile glint of humor returning to his haunted eyes. “Did her little dog really turn the chariot horses aside?”

Norah nodded. “The big red one. Chang Ming.”

He smiled wanly. “I thought that, of all things, had to be Fishy’s patented banana oil. Amazing.”

She smiled at him as she left, but as she descended the stairs and walked

along the trashiness of Electric Avenue in the thinning late-morning fog, she shivered at the recollection of that penitential room. He had been there a week, she thought, reading the newspapers, hoping things wouldn't go wrong, fearing every knock on the door and every time he closed his eyes in sleep. Dreaming of seeing a rat's eyes in the mirror just before darkness came.

As she took a cab back up to Ivarene Street with a great pile of carpetbags and dogs, Norah wondered again what the dogs had been hunting in the dark house in Edendale where her own sleep had been plagued by evil dreams.

"You are a cheat and the son of a Hakka whore! You turned that tile over once already...!" Like the gust of warmed air from the curtained door of a noodle factory, the words blew over the old man from a ramshackle balcony, then faded. Elsewhere, among ancient canyons of adobe and brick that seemed to bleed darkness, the sweet notes of a zither soared, men faded. Men's voices muttered behind a tightly closed door in a crumbling wall. A woman laughed with false charm.

Leaning on his staff, the old man called the Shining Crane moved on like the shadow of his own ghost, invisible in the dark.

Nestled around its few blocks of alleys and squares, Chinatown seethed with clandestine life. Lights shone from the windows of restaurants in upper stories ringed by gaily painted balconies, though it was very late indeed; bands of brightness lent color to the banners that hung down over the centuries-old walls. On either side of the street, steps led down to doors that had once been at street level or, here and there, to sunken patios where barrows were still set up, hawking *tunas*—red and yellow cactus fruit—or cheap toys of braided straw and feathers. Figures jostled in lightless and unpaved alleys, men released from the silent burden of jobs washing shirts or rolling cigarettes to seek what meaning life might have to offer in *pai-gow*, or opium, or a woman's arms. The sweetish breath of *patna* smoke wandered like incense above the stink of stale oil and cabbage leaves in the gutter. The Shining Crane stopped and turned his head, remembering his own years of respite in those quiet dens of sleep.

He shook his head and moved on. Even now the molten amber quality of those dreams seemed good to him, too good. He could sleep for a month or a year, and when he woke, for better or worse, the cause of his anxiety would be gone. It would be easy. It was, after all, they who had driven him away, they who had refused to believe. He owed them no more.

He paused on the corner of Alameda Street, where a small cinema stood, crowded between a hotel for single men only and a brick building that housed

a grocery store on its lower floor and a restaurant on its upper and, he knew, a house of prostitution in its cellar and an opium den in the cellar below that. Light still surrounded the ticket booth, for the films would be running all night. One of his grandnephews had for a time held a job there, translating the English titles into Chinese and in places reinterpreting the story so that it would make more sense, for instance, explaining to the audience that Rudolph Valentino had been condemned to be gored to death by bulls for ravishing one of the mayor's concubines rather than that he or anyone else would be so foolish as to fight them by choice.

Shang Ko had been asked to mark the building with signs of protection. He could still see them glimmering on the seedy brickwork on either side of the door, the green dragon's name on the left, the white tiger's on the right. The names of the door gods themselves were scribbled in Shang Ko's shaky scrawl on the cinema's doors: Shen Shu and Yu Lei. In fact, it was one of the few buildings in the street that had not been robbed.

Shang Ko sighed. His magic was strong. For human magic.

Above the buildings the moon rode high in the clear, desert-bright sky. It was waxing toward full, bright enough now to be surrounded by a ghostly ring of light in the cold.

The old man shivered. His heart and his flesh alike flinched from the recollection of red eyes taking shape in smoke before him, from the chisel glint of teeth and the pain of old scars that still ached outside and in. From the suffocating horror of the god's mindless rage.

He had marked the house in the hills, the house of the doomed lady Christine, with all the signs of power he could muster. Tiger and dragon, the door gods and words of warding on every window, and the eight trigrams on the eucalyptus trees that shadowed the drive. He had warned her. What more could he do?

What more *could* he do?

He gazed out across the street called Broadway into the bright lights of the American theaters; the moving glowworm brilliance of the lamps on automobiles, streetcars, taxicabs; the colored lights with which the Christians heralded the coming of their winter feast.

The police would be watching for him. Even if they did not put him in prison, they would send him out of the country, and there were men in China who had long memories. Detectives had come looking for him twice already, though his friends had told them that he had not been seen, that he had left town already. His grandsons had urged him to actually do so, to travel to New York or San Francisco, where he had nephews and grandnephews. This, he knew, would be best. All his life he had been a wanderer, though never so

alone as he had been since he had come to this country. He was used to the pain of losing family, home, pieces of his life.

But as the moon grew stronger night by night, as the sun weakened and the days grew shorter, he remained.

“Say what one will about California,” sighed Norah, stepping carefully out of the yellow Nash and wrapping her borrowed chinchilla around her, “under the circumstances, I am finding it very difficult to take Christmas seriously.”

A red-jacketed Filipino youth climbed behind the roadster’s wheel and drove it away between sycamores whose leafless condition was the only indication of the season. An ad hoc car park, as far as Norah could tell, had been established down the hill on the far side of the tennis court.

“That’s wonderful, darling,” Christine said sunnily, fishing in the pocket of her sables for cigarettes and her gold match case. “That there’s finally something you can’t take seriously.”

Norah laughed. Christine’s beautifully drawn black brows arched, but Norah couldn’t very well explain why she had laughed. How indeed could one take anything seriously standing in an aisle of lights shining from lotus-shaped sconces held by ten-foot granite colossi that led up to the facade of a house built to resemble something from the Valley of the Kings?

It was as if A. F. Brown had seen the exquisite Arabian Nights house in Edendale and decided to do it one better and on a far larger scale. Windows glowed in the winter darkness between pharaohic bas-reliefs of chariot-borne kings and stylized dancers. Two massive pylons flanked a doorway straight out of King Tut’s tomb; lotus-topped columns supported a frieze of hieroglyphs at the level of the second floor. For some reason it reminded Norah forcibly of the hot dog stand near Pershing Square that was actually shaped like a hot dog in a bun, and the wreaths of holly and ivy hanging from the massive bronze doors added the completing touch of silliness.

How wonderful it was, she thought with delight, to own a studio and be able to live on an estate in Beverly Hills that looked *exactly* the way one wanted it to! And she laughed again at the sheer ponderous absurdity of so much Luxorian splendor rising amid the palm trees from the acres of green California lawn.

“I mean,” Christine went on as they ascended the mighty sandstone steps to the lighted doors, “the way you frown and sigh and *consider* things with Alec, you’d think he was asking you to sign yourself into indentured servitude in a leper colony in Venezuela instead of jump into bed with him.”

“He hasn’t asked me to jump into bed with him.” Norah’s voice was cool, but something inside her flinched at Christine’s words. In the week and

a half of shooting that had followed their return from the desert, she had seen little of Alec alone. She was at the studio, looking after the dogs and working on scenarios in between acting as Alec's assistant with the camera from eight in the morning until nearly nine at night, and the fact that the police had yet to find any trace of old Mr. Shang made her unwilling to leave her sister-in-law's side. On two occasions when Frank Brown had taken Christine out for dinner, she had remained in the cutting room until after midnight, talking to Alec and listening to his gramophone before he drove her—dogs still in tow—back to Ivarene Street in time for her to tiptoe through the back door so that Christine would not be alone when Brown left.

Between Brown's jealous eye on his errant mistress and the continued animosity of the dogs, Blake Fallon kept his distance, but Norah was aware of his continued interest.

She wondered if he'd make a pass at Christine in the convivial chaos of Colossus Studios' Christmas party and what Christine would do about it if he did.

"Hasn't he?" Christine widened her kohl-fringed eyes. "Well, they never ask in so many words, you know, darling. But that's what they all want. Really, darling, you're going to turn into an old stick..."

"I turned into an old stick years ago," Norah replied calmly.

"Should I ask him his intentions? Merry Christmas, Bainbridge... Norah, darling, this is Bainbridge, Frank's butler. I think he's the one who gave Frank all his information about dinner parties and high society for *Kiss of Darkness*. Oh, my God, look at the booze! Is that real French champagne, Frank, darling?"

She trailed off in the direction of her stout and glowering host and the laden buffet table behind him, leaving the elderly black butler with an enormous armload of sable and chinchilla.

"Of course it's real French champagne." Alec stepped from between two ebony and gold copies of Rameses II's statues on the upper Nile. "The man out in Lankershim who brews it in his bathtub is named Pierre Thibideaux, and he's as French as they come. And that—" He took Norah's hand and held her out at arm's length to view her dress. "—is exquisite."

"Christine bought it for me Saturday." Her hands brushed the silk charmeuse of her dress, pale dust-beige and perfectly unornamented except that the great drapes of heavy fabric hanging at her back were lined with cardinal red that flashed like occasional fire when she moved. It was the first time in nine years she'd had a new evening gown—the styles had changed completely since the summer before the war. The first time in six years she'd worn an evening gown or anything new at all. Her hair, released from its

customary bun, cascaded from the top of her head in a somewhat Grecian fashion, though she had serious doubts that the curls would last the evening. At the moment when Bainbridge had opened the doors, Norah had experienced a qualm of dread at meeting Alec after Christine's casual words, but when she saw him, the feeling evaporated immediately.

That's what they all want.

Well, perhaps they all did, thought Norah. But for some of them there was more to it than that.

"That is to say, she dragged me down to I. Magnin and made me pick out something when she got hers, saying she couldn't very well have me coming to Mr. Brown's party looking like her duenna. That's a very elegant suit."

Alec ran a thumb along the satin lapel. "Western Costume is a wonderful institution. Lon Chaney wore this very suit in *Streets of London*. Can I get you some Chateau Van Nuys, vintage 1923?"

The interior of the mansion was just as much a set as the facade was. The massive hieroglyphed walls and lotus-columned doorways and the enormous reception room with its black and gold colossi and sarcophagus-pattern side tables bore a strong resemblance to something a Hollywood decorator would claim was the interior of the Great Pyramid, had King Khufu thought to furnish the place with Nile-green and white enameled chairs, crocodile-footed tables, and a grand piano with baboon-faced gods reproduced on its legs. The addition of ivy garlands, crimson bows, wreaths the size of tractor wheels, and a towering and lavishly decorated Christmas tree beside the basalt monolith of the great stairway made Norah fight desperately against the urge to giggle. Between yet another pair of Ramesean colossi a small dais had been set up for Alice and the Rothstein brothers, who played "Good King Wenceslas" and "Silent Night" between selections from "Chu Chin Chow." Since the basalt of the floor was relieved by polar bear rugs only in places, the voices of the five hundred well-lubricated guests rang loudly against the stone surfaces.

Norah shook her head. "I am speechless. I am also overwhelmed with curiosity: Does he sleep on one of those spindly-legged couches one sees in the British Museum?"

"Want to go up and look?"

Norah watched as Flindy McColl, clothed in a truly startling confection of rose-colored fringe, floated up the stairs with the air of one virtuously on her way to powder her nose. Roberto Calderone had ascended a few moments earlier with the casual calm of complete innocence. "I tremble to think what we might interrupt."

"Alec!" called a soft southern voice from behind them. "Alec, Billy's

been dying to meet you.”

Norah recognized the tall, slightly stooping form of D. W. Griffith, with a burly man at his side who had Alec’s way of angling his head to look at lights. While Alec was speaking to them, Blake Fallon appeared, fair hair smoothed back and blue eyes questing over the room in search of Christine, and introduced Norah to a handsome man whose name—Ken Vidal—she thought she recognized as that of a well-known director. “I’m so pleased to meet you,” she said, holding out her hand to him as Fallon was absorbed once more into the crowd. “I’ve admired your work.” A politic lie since, other than *Kiss of Darkness* and *Guns of the Sunset*, she hadn’t seen a movie in four years.

“Have you, my dear?” he purred, looking her up and down. Then he smiled graciously and took her by the arm and for the next half hour escorted her assiduously around the room, introducing her to men she recognized as the owners of studios or to somewhat more elderly and substantial gentlemen whom he described as “financial backers.” The only one she knew to talk to was the frail, gracious septuagenarian Ambrose Conklin, who had sent a thousand red roses to Chrysenda Flamande’s dressing room at Colossus three days earlier, to the profound annoyance of A. F. Brown.

Christine, naturally, had immediately telephoned the film columnists of all six major newspapers in Los Angeles to have photographs taken of herself and the Pokes reclining in a sea of crimson blossoms. “Darling, it’s absolutely *fabulous* publicity for the picture,” she’d reassured Brown, passing a hand over his beefy shoulder. “And fabulous publicity for me,” she’d added to Norah later as they packed up the flowers to be carried by the carload to Ivarene Street. “I mean, just between the two of us, I’m *not* getting any younger, so if I can get a really big contract from Triangle or Lassky out of this, I’ll do it.”

Conklin patted Norah’s hand and said, “Really, dear child, I didn’t know you knew Ken,” with a doubtful glance at the suave, dark man.

Only later, when Alec had finally extricated himself from conversation with an almost incoherent Dale Wilmer, did he ask, “Do you know who that is?”

Norah shook her head. “Vidal... isn’t he a director?”

“That’s *King Vidor*... Ken arranges meetings between wealthy producers and beautiful would-be stars for the mutual benefit of all three parties. I hope you didn’t give any of those financial backers your telephone number.”

Norah rolled her eyes. “What a childish piece of malice! Mr. Fallon introduced us—getting back at me for playing gooseberry, I suppose.” She looked quickly around but saw nothing of his fair head and broad black

shoulders. Christine, slightly drunk, was leaning on the piano, raptly engaged in conversation with a tuxedoed and extremely shy-looking Monty, the stuntman from Red Bluff. Even more than Alec, she seemed to have acquired her outfit at Western Costume instead of I. Magnin, with an eye toward Mr. Brown's decor: diaphanous silver tissue exquisitely pleated and caught together by a massive appliqué of Egyptian beadwork—turquoise, crimson, and bronze—on the left hip, trailing a cascade of bronze fringe almost to the floor. A similarly Egyptian jewel gleamed on her brow, supporting a tassel of peacock feathers, and the cold whiteness of the Chinese necklace shimmered on her half-bared breast.

“Don't be silly, darling,” she'd said earlier, when—only an hour late for the party, which for Christine was good—Norah had uneasily tried to talk her out of wearing the Moon of Rats. “Ambrose is going to be there, and what with him sending me all those roses and the way Blake has been following me around, I think Frank needs to see where my affections still lie.”

Short on sleep from dinner with Brown the previous night and weary from a day's filming, Christine had clearly dosed herself with “razzle-dazzle” and had the dangerously brittle brightness that brooked no argument. Watching her now, Norah guessed by her languid amorousness toward the young horse wrangler and her restless, flippant, provocative glances in Frank Brown's direction that she'd had another dose of the same at some point in the evening, on top of copious quantities of gin and champagne—far from the only person in the room to have done so. Dale Wilmer had already been escorted off the premises, stumbling into pillars as he went. In the harsh electric glare the shadow in the central jewel didn't seem to move at all until one took one's eyes off it.

Norah sighed. *I'm not her mother*, she thought wearily. *If she disappears upstairs for half the evening—Flindy McColl was on her third trip—it isn't any of my business.* She wondered if Alec would mind giving her a lift home.

Then Christine's voice cut into her consciousness over the din of the crowd, “Well, I always thought there was something fishy about it,” she said, now holding on to the boy's hand and gesturing with the other hand in a line of cigarette smoke. “I could swear I saw Charlie in Venice a week ago, getting off a streetcar...”

“My dear Norah,” a voice said behind her, and a small, bony hand closed like a shackle on her wrist just as she was heading in Christine's direction. Turning, she saw Mrs. Violet, severely robed in mauve and pearls and quite clearly not about to have a good time.

“Excuse me,” she began, but Mrs. Violet kept her grip.

“Now, my dear, I know you're from a foreign country and don't know all

the ins and outs of Hollywood, so surely you won't take it amiss that I warn you against men like that dreadful Ken Vidal..."

Norah cast a despairing glance back at Christine, just in time to see her and the stuntman vanish, through a very tall bronze door into some other room. She thought she heard someone ask, "What would Charlie be doing in Venice, Chris?"

"Looking for a drink, darling, what else?"

That little idiot...

"...mansions on Adams Avenue and disgraceful carryings-on designed to turn the heads of good girls like yourself, let alone girls like Christine, and believe me, I hold nothing against Christine, but..."

Damn it, thought Norah. There was literally no telling who was here tonight. But if Aaron Jespersion had been telephoning the police as well as the newspapers—a logical assumption—it stood to reason that they would have sent some well-dressed informer to circulate at the Colossus Christmas party.

"Ah, my dearest Madame Blackstone!" cried Hraldy, edging his way through the crowd and completely ignoring the still-fulminating Mrs. Violet. He led a tall and extremely queenly woman in purple chiffon, irresistibly reminding Norah of an overly eager poodle dragging its mistress on a leash. "All evening I am look for you to introduce you to so-fabulous Miss Glyn."

Apparently the distractedness of her replies and her increasingly obvious efforts to conclude the conversations and leave went unperceived. Quite possibly, she reflected, neither Mrs. Violet, Elinor Glyn, nor Mikos Hraldy could conceive of anyone wanting to escape from their company. It was ten minutes before Alec cut ruthlessly into the little group, caught Norah by the arm and said, "Norah, Mr. Brown wants to see you right away," and steered her out of the nearest door—fortunately, the bronze monolith through which Christine and the stuntman had disappeared.

The room was a sort of study, its low ceiling painted dark blue and studded with stars a la early dynastic paintings. Monkey-faced gods peered out from between massive bookcases and lotus-headed columns flanking French windows whose curtains—printed with papyrus and more hieroglyphics—belled gently with the cold influx of the night wind.

"The idiot!" sighed Norah, flinging open the curtains and stepping out onto an expanse of granite terrace beyond. Sphinxes, their necks wreathed in ivy and mistletoe, guarded steps leading down into a darkness of grass still wet from two days of rain. The full moon hung cold in midheaven, flooding the lawn with a nacreous light and turning the grass to a carpet of quicksilver beads. Beyond a thin line of trees the parked autos gleamed like polished steel eggs.

Against those distant trees Christine's silvery dress glimmered fairylike, blending with the black shape of the young man upon whose shoulder she leaned.

"You going after her?" Alec perched on the back of a sphinx as Norah paused irresolutely. His glasses flashed as he turned his head to look across the acre of lawn, where the far-off shapes made their leisured way toward the darkness of the woods.

Then he said "What the...?" and sprang to his feet. Norah, following his eyes, saw the white gleam of Christine's dress as it wavered and fluttered with sudden movement like a lily in the wind. Against the dark of the trees it was hard to tell, but there was blurred movement; it was quite clear when Christine fell—or was thrown—to the ground.

Both she and Alec were halfway across the lawn when they heard her scream.

SIXTEEN

LAKE OVER MOUNTAIN

Sign of sacrifice.

Auspicious to take a bride...

Ill omens—it is better to stay home...

LATER, NORAH SUPPOSED that she or Alec should have run back into the house for help, though she suspected that Christine would have been dead before enough sober guests were found to undertake a rescue. Even while she and Alec were racing across the sodden grass, she guessed the scream wouldn't be heard over the din of the party.

It was only when Alec yelled "BLAKE!" that Norah realized who it was bending over Christine's body.

Norah had stopped to pull off her shoes. She had a blurred impression of Fallon straddling Christine and thought for one furious second that in a drunken rage he was trying to rape her. The next moment she realized his hands were around Christine's throat. Christine's body bucked and heaved, trying to twist free of him, and Norah, still running madly across what seemed dreamlike miles of lawn, saw a white arm snake up past the black one and rip at the down-bent face.

The next second Alec reached the two struggling figures and seized Fallon by the shoulders, heaving at him like a man trying to thrust over a great weight. Christine clawed at Fallon's hands, and Norah glimpsed blood, huge gouts of it splashing everywhere—she could smell the heavy stink of it—far more than fingernails could have drawn. Then Fallon turned his head.

Christine had gouged out his left eye.

And he didn't seem to notice.

Blood covered Christine's hand, ran down her arm, dribbled thickly onto her white dress; the whole side of Fallon's face was masked in it. He wore no expression of pain, no expression whatsoever.

Alec sprang back, unable to break the insane strength of the larger man's grip, and delivered a kick to the side of Fallon's head with all the strength in his body. Norah saw the head whip sideways and heard, small but very clear, a sound that had to be the spine snapping. At the same instant Christine wrenched her arm around and rolled with the whole of her weight against the hands upon her throat. Fallon fell sideways, Christine slithering from under him, up onto her hands and knees, long hair dragging down over her face,

stockings torn, and white gown a tangle of grass and mud and gore.

Head lolling like a half-decapitated doll's, Fallon lunged at her again.

By that time Norah was looking around for a weapon, cursing the fact that she'd left her high-heeled shoes somewhere behind. For the first time she saw the body of the boy Monty in the velvet shadows of the shrubbery, head covered with blood, the stubby glint of a tire iron nearby. Everything seemed to be taking place on film that had been cranked very high so that it moved cold-treacle slow when shown at normal camera speed: Christine's struggles against the hands that tore at her breasts, her face, her clothing, trying to reach her throat again; Alec on Fallon's back, ignored as if he weren't there. Norah caught up the tire iron and strode forward, raising it above her head like a navy driving a rail spike. "Alec!" she screamed, and Alec dropped aside as she brought the bar down with all the strength in her arms.

The skull caved like a split melon, the sound and smell hideous, blood, hair, and worse things splattering everywhere. Alec grabbed Christine, pulled her free, and held her while she hung on to him with her bloody hand, sobbing, and Norah stepped back, trembling, staring down at what she had done and feeling that she was about to be sick.

The tire iron dropped from hands that suddenly seemed to have no strength left. Absurdly, she remembered Jim's first letter to her from the front: *I never killed a man before. I didn't know if I could. And now I've killed two, three... And those only the ones I could see. I didn't even ask myself what I was doing. When some total stranger is coming at you with a bayonet, you don't ask.*

Archipelagoes of blood and matter strung the shimmer of her dress, soaking through like warm glue against her legs.

Alec started to gasp, "Are you all right?" but even that sentence wasn't finished.

Fallon rolled over and started to get up.

For one second Norah thought—probably they all thought, she reflected—that it was only some bizarre motor reflex. But when he gathered his hands under him and stood, brains and gore leaking down his tuxedo-clad shoulders, when he picked up the tire iron with a hand dark with his own blood, when he looked at them with his single remaining eye reflecting red in the glare of the parking lot lights on the other side of the tennis court, they knew.

He shouted something, Norah didn't know what. Tire iron in hand, he came at them, but she and Alec were already running, dragging the exhausted Christine between them. Fallon—Fallon's corpse, murder like the cold blaze of the moon in his face under the black striping of blood—was between them and the house. Trees scraped at Norah's bare arms as they crashed through the

woods toward the temporary parking lot, and Norah could hear the whip and hiss of the foliage around another body shambling just behind her. She could smell the blood and the waste his body had voided when life had left it. She wasn't even conscious of a sense of nightmare, only that she had to escape, whatever the cost, that she *must not* let the thing behind them touch her.

Alec flung himself into the nearest open touring car, jammed the starter pedal and hit the button on the dash, then stamped the accelerator as Norah shoved Christine in before her, scrambling over the running board as the vehicle sprang forward and the thing burst from the woods and hurled itself at the rear of the car. *Thank God the engine's still warm*, Norah thought blindly.

A moment later there was a surging roar, another engine firing up; those in the rear ranks of the lot would be the latest arrived. Norah turned, but they were jolting at top speed up the winding driveway and she could see nothing but the wink of occasional moonlight on metal only a few yards behind.

Christine was on her knees on the seat beside her, leaning, as Norah herself was doing, over the back. With one hand Christine held on to the tucked velvet upholstery; the other was pressed against her throat, hair swirling around her face in the slipstream. She was gasping "Oh, shit, oh shit..." in a ragged voice very unlike her own. Her silver-tissue dress reeked of blood and clung to her breasts.

The car behind them, a huge open Studebaker undoubtedly belonging, like their own, to some studio executive, was gaining. Norah got a brief, dissociated flash of a frosted-glass sculpture of two leaping gazelles on its hood as it drew opposite their rear quarter, then veered sharply to clip them nearly off the road. Norah and Christine grabbed hard at the seat, and Alec swore, fighting to keep from going into a skid. They flashed into moonlight as they passed the monolithic bulk of the house, and Norah saw Fallon's face behind the Studebaker's wheel, dark clots flying backward from the hollow socket, lips drawn in a fixed grimace of animal viciousness.

"Norah! Chris!" Alec yelled as they accelerated down the wide drive toward Benedict Canyon Drive. "Search the car; some of these guys carry guns."

"You think that's going to do any good?" Norah shouted back as she ran desperate hands over the lacquered rosewood of the interior sides, the delicate fluting of the hardwood flooring, and the inlaywork below the velvet seats. She found two silver flasks—full—four tubes of lipstick, and a small celluloid box whose contents she had neither the time nor the inclination to investigate and flung herself forward over the intervening seats to pull open the glove box, ill with terror that the next sharp turn or strike from the car behind them would hurl her out. The long wings of her gown dragged at her

shoulders, red and silver sails in the wind. The Studebaker was only feet behind them, slightly to the right and fighting to gain enough for another clip.

“Shoot the tires!” croaked Christine, still searching in the back.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’d have to be William S. Hart to bit them!”

“Radiator,” Alec said, and then, “Hang on!” as he whipped without slowing around the corner and onto the tree-lined blackness of Benedict Canyon Drive. Now and then Norah could glimpse the marble face of the full moon. Who had said, *He takes his strength from the moon...*? “Find anything?”

“No!” yelled Norah, and Christine added, “Fucking pacifist!”

Trees and darkness blurred around them. The car jarred with another hard blow to its rear quarter; Norah gasped, belly-down across the back of the seat, arms braced to keep herself from being flung out as she searched. Through the flapping back drapes of the dress that had seemed such a good idea on Saturday afternoon, she had a flying glimpse of lights through the trees to her right, the stumpy towers of the Beverly Hills Hotel isolated against the sky. Alec wove and dodged as the Studebaker, heedless of terrain, tried to cut them off by crossing Sunset. As they plunged down dark streets among the scattered, sleeping houses, Alec hit the horn, trailing noise like a desperate banner.

“Downtown!” he yelled over the blaring of the horn and the roar of the road as he eluded the pursuit by inches to swing onto Wilshire. The cars leapt like deer over the bare hills, pebbles flying from beneath the wheels, past orchards and bean fields. Then the spiky, alien derricks of the oil fields loomed against the glow of Los Angeles in the eastern sky. “Police have got to come...”

Evidently Fallon was aware of this as well. Weaving and swinging on the fast straightaway of Wilshire Boulevard, he managed to catch them sidelong, ramming them a third time as Alec tried to pull out of the skid. There was a hideous bump, and Norah felt one of the off-side tires blow. Alec braked hard, and the car fishtailed off the road and up onto a flat desolation of bare ground as the Studebaker flashed past, brakes squealing in the cold, moonlit night.

They were in bad ground, packed dirt and empty fields studded with oil derricks like H. G. Wells’s Martian machines, scattered with the ruins of abandoned housing developments and what had been orchards.

Pools of stagnant water gleamed slimily in the frost-cold light. Not more than a mile off, sprinkled gold showed where La Brea Avenue lay. Alec was already out of the car, dragging Norah and Christine. The Studebaker swung around and roared back toward them. Alec yelled, “High ground! Derricks—tools...”

“There might be tools in the boot!” Norah yelled back, turning against his pulling hand with some idea of going back to the car even as she stumbled barefoot after him.

Her mind registered *Too late* as she saw the Studebaker stop, the dark form rise in its driver’s seat, the white blur of a hand outstretched.

What happened then Norah could only put together in pieces afterward, as if her mind could not deal with the whole of it at the time. It was hard to tell in the latticed shadows of the derricks all around them, but it seemed to her that the ground moved, a hiccup or belch, a heave of the earth beneath her feet. Fissures split in the moon-blached dust. For an instant the air reeked of sulfur, shimmered behind them, around the car...

Then, with a thunderclap, the shimmer burst into flame. Alec and Christine fell to their knees with the impact. Oily heat rolled over Norah like a wave, and she heard someone—herself or Christine—scream. Fire tongued through the bare dirt. Behind them the car exploded with a shattering roar. Norah ducked, covering her face as burning fragments of shrapnel rained around them and the air filled with lung-rotting smoke, the stink of tar, burned rubber, and dust.

She didn’t remember falling, but somehow Alec was hauling her to her feet, yelling, “That way! Away from the derricks!” She had an impression of a black shape clambering out of the Studebaker in the road, hunched now, arms hanging, beastlike with its dripping face and lolling head. A single eye shone red in the reflections of the fire. More flame roared up around them, the earth heaving and jerking again, and the sulfurous smell of gas choked her. Foxtails and tufts of scrubby grass caught, flared, and burned with a smoky ferocity despite yesterday’s rain. What would have happened if the grass had been dry Norah dared not think. A ragged zone of intermittent flame surrounded them, fifty feet across. The gas flames on top of the derricks stretched, elongated, brightened against the abyss of the sky. *Dear God, if one of them goes up...*

And then, quite clearly in her mind, she heard the voice of old Mr. Shang, the Shining Crane: *I saw the necklace upon her throat... I knew it for what it was.*

In the firelight, still circling Christine’s neck, the opals had exactly the red gleam of the eyes of rats, the gleam of Blake’s eye as he sprang toward them, the tire iron that had killed him upraised in his hand. The shadow in the center jewel was definitely moving; it wasn’t just the wild light of the flames. Alec shoved them toward the higher ground, where part of a half-constructed house stood, but with a sudden wrench Norah pulled her arm free of his grip. She tore at Christine’s throat, breaking loose the catch on the Moon of Rats and pulling free the ancient chains of pearl and opal and bronze. Alec yelled

“NORAH!” in a voice she had never heard from him, but she dared not stop, dared not think about what she was doing. Holding the jewels high in her hand, she raced back to the burning car, toward the stooped, scuttling shape that ran toward them, its face twisted into nothing human. Flame was everywhere around her, framing the thing as it hesitated and turned toward her; the heat seared her face and bare arms, unbearable after the icy wind of the night.

She stopped within ten feet of Fallon—within ten feet of the burning wreck of the car, as close as she could get to the inferno—and flung the tangle of jewels and chains into the heart of the blaze.

Above the roar of the flames she heard Fallon scream. He—it—threw itself at her, past her, into the fire, but she was no longer looking. Rocks heated by the burning weeds and scrap lumber all around cut and scorched her feet as she clutched her skirts and ran as she had never run before, back to where Alec and Christine—*The idiots!* she thought frantically—waited for her by a half-constructed bungalow. It was only when she reached them that she dared to glance back and saw that Blake no longer pursued them.

From the shadows of the house frame and half-fallen roof where she clung grasping Alec’s shoulder, she saw the dark figure silhouetted against the fire, tearing and digging at the burning wreck.

Orange-yellow glare exploded off to their left. The derrick nearest the car was sheeted in a cone of flame. Suffocating heat poured into her lungs, beat on her like a physical force, so that she could barely draw breath. For the first time she felt pain in her feet. Somewhere sirens wailed.

Alec pulled them into the aborted ruin of the bungalow and out the back, collecting a yardlong chunk of two-by-four for himself and another for her. Christine, stumbling between them in her bloody gown, was barely on her feet.

“That’ll be the Gilmore Oil boys,” he said, leading the way through a dark jumble of dead trees and ankle-deep rustling leaves. Now and then Norah would bark her shins painfully on something iron and ash-smelly, as if the grove were scattered with rusty little stoves. Above the smoke the night smelled thickly of rotting oranges. “LA County wouldn’t get their engines out here this fast.”

His voice sounded quite normal. Norah wondered how on earth he could manage that until she heard herself say, “He’s trying to get the necklace.” The black figure could still be seen moving around the burning car, prying off pieces of flaming iron.

There was a long, long silence.

Then Alec breathed. “Jesus.”

“He made the ground catch fire,” whispered Christine. “Can he... can he follow us? Can he just burn us up where we sit?” She sank down onto a stump, shaking all over, her voice barely more than a rattle. Norah realized that here, away from the flames, it was surprisingly cold, and she was racked with wave after wave of uncontrollable trembling. Alec stripped off his suit jacket and put it around Christine’s shoulders, then cast a helpless look at Norah. Fumblingly, she pulled the wings of her dress forward around her own bare arms. Wounds from the shrapnel left trails of blood through the coating of filth. Somewhere in the back of her mind she thought, *There goes three hundred dollars of Christine’s money...*

“I don’t think so,” Alec answered Christine’s question after a time. “He may not be able to track us without the necklace. I think what he did was... was explode the underground methane or maybe the oil beneath the surface of the ground. Jesus,” he whispered again. He, too, had begun to shake.

“You killed him,” Christine said slowly. “Norah—Alec—I gouged his eye out. I knew he was going to kill me, I jammed my thumb in his eye, and it just... just...” She shook her head and bowed over suddenly, retching, holding her black and gummy hands to her mouth. After a moment she spoke again, her voice a broken wheeze, and Norah reflected that it must hurt her to speak at all. “He just kept... kept coming. Like he didn’t even feel it.” She pulled the tux jacket closer around her shoulders and hunched over again. She could not stop trembling.

“No,” Alec said softly. By the glare of the distant flames Norah could see how the sweat glittered in his beard. Soot and blood made a long, charred-looking V down the front of his marble-white shirt. His hand was unsteady as he pushed up his glasses, watching the first of the fire trucks arriving, the men swarming around the column of fire that spouted from the burning well. Overhead the resplendent full moon seemed to watch, indifferent in its halo of ice.

Nobody went near the flaming wreck of the car. There was no sign of Blake Fallon.

“Poor Blake,” whispered Christine after a time.

“Yes,” Norah said softly, hearing a broken voice whisper, *The rat... I saw its eyes reflected in the mirror above the bar...* “Poor Blake.”

Her mind went back to the giggling girls in the Cafe Montmartre, the drugged glitter of Fallon’s eyes and his roars of silly laughter as he dumped his drink over the waiter’s head.

It must have got him that night, she thought quite clearly, as if she were reading a title card in a film. *The way it got Charlie, drunk out of his mind on bootleg champagne...*

Christine looked up and pushed the thick hedgerow of her hair from her eyes. She had lost her jeweled bandeau with its peacock feathers, and under Alec's jacket her white throat was a mass of cuts where Blake's hands had driven the bronze links into the flesh. In her broken voice she whispered, "What happens now?"

"Now?" Norah looked out at the confusion of men and fire trucks in the red glare around the oil well. She took a deep breath. "Now we take the streetcar back to Hollywood and phone Mr. Brown to tell him that Blake Fallon went mad and tried to murder you—and may very well have murdered that poor boy you left the party with."

"Monty!" Christine pressed her bloodied hands to her mouth again. "Oh, poor Monty!"

"If they haven't found him by this time, they will when we call," Norah said firmly. "I'm sure Mr. Brown and Mr. Fishbein between them will figure out what to tell the police. Tonight we all get a good night's rest—preferably all in the same room—and tomorrow," she concluded, "I think we had best go to Chinatown and see if we can find Mr. Shang."

SEVENTEEN

THUNDER OVER FIRE

Auspicious time to meet the senior partner—
you will be upheld...
Omen of good to meet the hidden master...

CHINATOWN. ALEC HAD said it was the LAPD's word for any situation unknown and incomprehensible and better left that way.

"I am looking for the Shining Crane," Norah said, for perhaps the dozenth time, to the shopkeeper who came forward from the dark labyrinth of cheap bowls, brightly painted vases, racks of strange clothing, and bolts of fabric to which clung the unmistakable musty odor of silk. "I wish to ask him about a way to kill rats."

The little woman bowed. Never in her gawky and long-legged life had Norah felt so inordinately tall as she had that morning. "Ah, so sorry," she said. "I know not this name. But good poison here, killee rats all same." She produced a red cardboard box labeled MARTINSON'S PATENTED RAT-BAIT and decorated with a dramatic drawing of a very dead rodent lying on its back with its tongue lolling.

"I'm sorry." Norah inclined her head. "But it is the Shining Crane I am looking for. Thank you all the same."

The woman bowed and smiled again, that all-purpose, close-lipped Oriental smile that so completely concealed whatever might be going on behind it. "All same," she replied. She teetered back behind the counter on tiny deformed feet. Most of the women Norah had seen in Chinatown that afternoon had had what Alec said were called "lily feet," bound and crippled in childhood to increase a woman's charms, and though under the sensible stockings and Cuban-heeled shoes her own feet smarted in their bandages, Norah felt ashamed of her complaints about the pain.

In the rutted dirt of the street outside, Christine was gazing around her with a kind of indignant surprise while Black Jasmine sniffed at the boxes of cheap cooking utensils, straw baskets, and cloth shoes lined up against the store's adobe wall. "I must say, this doesn't look a bit like 'Chu Chin Chow.'"

Lines of laundry stretched overhead or aired from windowsills; men and women in faded black or blue cotton pajama suits filled the unpaved streets, though Norah very seldom caught the stench of unwashed humanity typical of, for instance, the London railway platforms where she had stood to meet

Jim. At least half the men still wore queues. Everyone seemed busy, shopping or taking care of children who were themselves taking care of still smaller children, carrying bundles of laundry or trays of fish on shoulder yokes; even the young men conversing with shopkeepers under doorstep awnings about the contents of unreadable newspapers had a purposive air. From the upper stories of the buildings drifted strange smells, sweet or tart or steamy against the itch of dust in the nostrils, and strange music that twinged oddly in her memory, punctuated by the incessant rattle of mah-jongg tiles.

“I mean,” Christine went on plaintively, “aren’t there supposed to be willow trees and those round gates?”

Clothed in a very stylish suit of green wool crepe, her black hair more or less pinned up under a heron-feather hat, and a green and lavender scarf hiding the ghastly abrasions on her throat, Christine looked remarkably well. Norah reflected, not for the first time, that there was considerably more to her sister-in-law than met the eye: Emily Violet would have been prostrated if she had survived the night at all; Norah certainly couldn’t imagine that sweet-faced ingenue having the nerve to gouge out an attacker’s eye or the wits to roll at the same time Alec had kicked in order to break Fallon’s hold. Flindy McColl would already have fled the country or would be in a stupor of drugs and alcohol to “get over the shock.”

“Perhaps the people who came over from China never attended Broadway plays,” Norah theorized, and Christine sniffed.

“Well, they ought to. It’s about their country, after all.” Her voice was little more than a croak. “Did he tell you anything?”

“She. And no.”

“That doesn’t mean she doesn’t know Shang.” Alec came back from a perusal of the announcements plastered all around the door of a nearby building. Short though he was, he stood taller than most of the crowd eddying on all sides.

“If we talk to enough people,” he went on, “word will get back to him. I left word with Ah Tom—Tom Gubbins—over at the F Sui One Company. He knows everybody in Chinatown. Right now I’d say food is in order.”

Shang’s grandson located them over lunch.

“Don’t ask what’s in it,” Alec advised Norah, scooping the characteristically Chinese concoction of unknown meat, unknown vegetables, and peanuts over the rice on her plate.

“Oh, no, darling, that would be *fatal*.” Christine delicately unwrapped a triangle of oiled paper and with expert chopsticks picked at the few bits of steamed chicken within. “That’s the *first* thing I learned.”

“Ah,” Norah said wisely. “More Chinatown.”

“Exactly.” Alec added a dollop of brown liquid from a delicately flowered porcelain pitcher on the table. “I’m told the Chinatown division of the Los Angeles police force is a world unto itself. They’re supposed to make about \$400,000 a year off bribes. They don’t bother the owners of the gambling clubs and fan-tan houses, and the tongs settle any little problems they have among themselves. There was a Flash of tong murders a few years ago. Nobody knew why they started, nobody knew why they stopped, but the heads of the Bing Kong and the Hop Sing called on the Chinatown beat and told them the problem had resolved itself.”

He shrugged. “So the police dropped it. They didn’t know what was going on, but they knew it had to be about either prostitution—which is everywhere in Chinatown—or gambling. Most of the big gambling in Los Angeles is done in places like this.”

He gestured with his chopsticks at the small, low-raftered room on the second floor of a building on Marchessault Street that smacked more of half-ruined Spanish missions than of the Celestial Empire. An attempt had evidently been made to display Christmas spirit, for incongruous garlands festooned the black rafters among the paper lanterns and a framed magazine illustration of Ebenezer Scrooge and Marley’s ghost hung above the mantel of the tiled fireplace. “Don’t eat that,” he added hastily as Norah picked up a short, hard-shelled red-black pepper from the aromatic gumbo on her plate.

“What is it?”

“Kung pao death pepper—mysterious poisons of the East. The Chinese like their food even hotter than the Mexicans do. Mostly, in the rest of Los Angeles and Hollywood, you get Americanized Chinese. I’m told at the Forbidden Palace you can get chow mein noodles fried Chicago-style. This is Chinese from China.”

“Pick them all out, darling,” advised Christine, doing so with the chopstick adeptness of a native. “And if you get a seed in your teeth, whatever you do, *don’t* bite it.”

Under her rouge and powder she looked exhausted, eyelids smudgy with fatigue and shock, lines of strain still faintly visible in the hollowed cheeks. She had looked far worse that morning when she and Norah had made their appearance, early, at Frank Brown’s office at Colossus Studios to talk to the police. But that, Norah knew, had been deliberate. She’d seen Christine darkening the hollows of her cheeks and the sockets of her eyes with judiciously applied Colura even as she doctored away the lines of strain around her pale unrouged mouth. “I want to look frail, darling, not hagged,” she’d explained.

She hadn’t had to do anything to the vicious bruises on her neck. Pulling

off the scarf to show the police detectives the white flesh blackened, the virulent red patterns where Blake's grip had driven the necklace's links into the skin, had been a stunning piece of theater and one calculated to divert anyone's mind from any question about gouged eyes, smashed skulls, appropriated vehicles, or two of the Gilmore Oil Company's wells still in flames. The smoke from them had been visible through Frank's office window.

"He was insane," Christine told Brown, drawing quietly on a cigarette before the police came, her dark eyes haunted-looking in their bruised rings. Norah, sitting on the blue velvet couch with Black Jasmine on the far side of the office, had to admire the underplaying. Christine had tried it on her, both hysterical and quiet, before leaving the house that morning. "I think he was going insane all the time at Red Bluff, when he was following me around like a demented wolf. Poor Monty had nothing to do with it."

The young stuntman was in a coma at the Methodist Hospital. Christine had telephoned while putting her makeup on.

"Nothing I did—nothing Alec did—would stop him. God knows where he went or what he did after he wrecked Miss Bow's car." When Alec heard who the owner was of the car in which they'd made their escape, his sole comment had been, "No wonder the thing went like a bat out of hell." They had agreed not to mention the fact that Fallon was already dead during the chase down Wilshire or talk about the explosions of subterranean gas. There were things, Norah said, that people would believe and things they would not. She was still having trouble believing them herself.

The early morning papers made no mention of anyone finding Blake Fallon's body.

"Damn." Brown rubbed his stubbled chins. In the outer office the typewriter clacked busily, and through the window Norah could see the comedians Larry and Jerry out in the studio quadrangle under the pepper trees, working out what appeared to be a new routine with the hot dogs they'd originally intended for their breakfast.

"Three-fourths of the hottest biblical in town in the can, and hands down the best acting I've ever seen out of Fallon..." The producer's intolerant green eyes shifted to Norah. "This is hell, coming on top of the Pelletier murder and with *Midnight Cavalier* just out. Jespersion's fighting me every step of the way on the Enterprise buyout." He picked up his cigar from the silver ash-tray and drew thickly on it, but mercifully it had gone out. "You think Blake set those guncotton charges in the desert last week?"

"He certainly had access to the guncotton." Norah looked back at him, while Black Jasmine chewed plaintively on her finger. "More access than the

extra he accused of doing it.”

“Damn.” He glanced up as a secretary tapped discreetly on the door to announce the arrival of the police.

“We’ll keep this as quiet as we can until we find out what they know,” he said, his cold glance going from Christine to Norah as he stubbed the cigar in the tray. “And nothing to the press, you understand? None of this calling them up to tell them some senile idiot’s filled your dressing room with flowers, all right? Let’s fade back and see what they know. If Fallon went as crazy as you think, he may have turned up.”

“He may,” Norah said quietly. “But I sincerely doubt he’s turned up alive.”

“Miss Blackstone?”

Norah looked up in surprise, broken from her reverie. A young Chinese man stood next to the table, bowing respectfully. He wore what she thought of as traditional Chinese garb: the black cotton pajamas sold in any of a dozen stores she had been in that day. His hair hung down in a traditional queue, and he had traces of a thin mustache. She thought he might be the young man who had led Shang out of the lobby of the Million Dollar Theater but could not be sure.

“I am Shang Feng, great-grandson to the Shining Crane,” he said. “He has asked that you come with me.”

As they rose, the proprietor of the restaurant hurried over, also bowing. Black Jasmine trotted out from under Norah’s chair to meet him in a ludicrous parody of his self-importance. Christine gestured grandly with her chopsticks and said, “If you’d box this all for us, we’ll pick it up on our way back.”

Shang Feng led them down age-blackened oak stairs barely wider than Alec’s shoulders to the market on the ground floor. In the gloom of the thick-walled adobe room, jars, tins, and wooden boxes, their lids pried off to reveal strange wares, sat on the uneven tile of the floor and fish stared mournfully at passersby from crates of ice. Instead of leading them through to the outer door and thence to the street, Shang Feng nodded to the grocer, turned, and opened the door to a small back room, where, amid more boxes labeled in scribbled ideograms, a trapdoor gaped in the floor. Christine gathered Black Jasmine into her arms.

In a cellar below that smelled of earth and cabbage, their guide opened a second trapdoor. Heat rolled up to meet them from darkness mitigated by the ochre smudge of a kerosene lamp: dirt, unwashed clothing, a musky whiff of incense. They descended a ladder to a subcellar containing three narrow, unoccupied bunks, where bright red half-pound tins labeled in yellow were

stacked floor to ceiling on the opposite wall. A door was set in a third wall—all the walls were built of aged brick almost completely black with smoke—and Shang Feng took up the kerosene lantern that burned beside it and led them through. Alec's hand slipped into his pocket for the brass knuckles he'd borrowed from Captain Oleson when they'd stopped at Enyart's for breakfast on their way to the studio. By the way he moved, Norah guessed he was wishing he'd borrowed a gun as well.

The tunnel through which they passed was very narrow, though its earth walls and floor, shored up with timbers, were not damp and the air was relatively fresh. Now and then they passed roughly curtained doorways through which voices could be heard, along with the rattle of *pai-gow* tiles or dice. Once Norah heard music, thin and nerve-racking and whiny, the sound of it touching something in her memory, a dream, perhaps.

She had dreamed, just before morning, something about Alec. Something about taking the dogs and locking them in the bathroom. Something about putting on her robe and walking down the stairs, across the parlor where he slept in a tangle of spare blankets on the divan, to open the front door. The dream had been so vivid that when she'd woken, she'd had to look at her feet to make sure they weren't wet from the dew on the rough California grass that grew along the edge of the pavement. Yes, she thought, she had dreamed of going down the porch steps and along the edge of the street to the eucalyptus that overhung the steep dip of the drive. Remembered how bright the full moon had been, riding in midheaven by then, ringed with halos of ice.

Unlike so many dreams, this one had been clear in all its senses, the changing textures of the concrete porch and brick steps and then the wet grass under her cut, smarting feet. The smell of predawn darkness in the hills and the deep silence of the birdless trees.

Somewhere she thought she had heard that caterwaul twang of Oriental music and smelled incense, as though the one who waited for her in the shade of the eucalyptus had been someplace where the smoke of it had permeated his clothes. For some reason she thought that the shadow unseen beneath those trees was Jim.

Shang Feng led them down three or four rough steps and around a corner, then opened another door and ducked low to enter. At the end of a long brick room the Shining Crane rose from his chair and came toward them, passing from the globe of candlelight that seemed to hang like a glowing bubble at that end of the room, through the intervening shadows, and into the zone of light shed by the lantern in his great-grandson's hand.

"Miss Christine, Miss Norah." The old man held out a crooked hand to

each of them in turn. Norah thought he was leaning more heavily on his staff than he had before, and his face bore the marks of sleepless nights, worry, and fatigue. “Forgive me for leaving you in the desert, for not remaining by you...”

“Remaining by me and ending up in the San Bernardino county pokey?” Christine cocked a slightly impish eye up at the figure towering over her, whose scarred and uneven fingers Black Jasmine was desperately trying to lick. “It was Blake,” she added after a moment, her voice suddenly very small. “He... that is...”

“I know,” the Shining Crane said somberly. “I saw all of it in the water bowl, though, as is the way of such things, I could not see the demon clearly or identify what body he wore.” He gestured toward the wooden table at the far end of the room, an old door mounted on sawhorses, stacked high with papers, scrolls, and crumbling black-bound volumes in Latin and strange, thick, wooden-covered Chinese books. In a cleared space around the candles Norah could see an eggshell-fragile celadon bowl filled with clear water that winked in the dim golden light.

“You defended yourself with a warrior’s spirit,” the old man added softly.

Christine looked away. “I didn’t have much choice.” Her voice was small, with breaks in it like shattered pottery. “One of the girls in the chorus at the Follies showed me... that. I thought it was horrible at the time. I never thought I’d ever really... really gouge out somebody’s eye. I mean, I just *wouldn’t*.” She looked up at him again, a steady, terrible knowledge in her dark gaze. “But you know, I didn’t even think. I knew he was going to kill me. I knew that from the first second. It’s as if I knew it wasn’t really Blake.” Her breath left her in a sigh. “Blake’s dead now, isn’t he?”

“Yes.” Shang turned to bow to Norah and Alec. “Last night you both played the warrior,” he said. “I honor you both. Your courage has made me ashamed.”

“It ain’t like we volunteered,” said Alec, but Norah saw the look that passed between him and Shang, a look of apology for his disbelief and acceptance of that apology. Norah realized that the young Chinese who had brought them to this place had departed, leaving the lantern on the floor beside the chamber’s shut door. “What he did—blowing up the gas underground...” He hesitated. “You really are a wizard, aren’t you?” Somehow in this underground room that was easier to believe. “And he really is a... a demon.”

The Shining Crane bowed his head. “I am. I was.” Leaning heavily on his staff, he led the way back toward his desk in its aureole of hazy gold.

“Once upon a time. Sometimes I do not know. When I was a young man—when all things were not only possible but glorious... I knew then. Now...” He brought up other chairs into the light, old and mended, and, from a jar in the corner, dipped a little water into a tin dish for Black Jasmine to drink.

His voice was infinitely weary. “I perform little magics. It has been more years than I care to count since I dared undertake the great. At first it was because I feared the warlords’ agents, for their power extended to this country and they had wizards of their own. Had I done great magic, they would have known and sought me out. Then it was because few people believed, and those who did not believe did not ask more than small spells. And then...”. He shook his head and settled himself stiffly into his chair again. “As I grow older, I question more and more the use of magic at all. Oh, there are always little magics, as there are always tricks which counterfeit magic, and you, I think, know that.” Eyes like ebony beads met Alec’s, as if they read the past in his skepticism. “But you know, too, there are things which are real.”

Slowly Alec said, “I know I saw a woman once raise three horse brasses and a couple of candlesticks from a tree stump in Congo Square without touching them and then throw them in all directions on the ground. I went and picked up one of the brasses. The metal was hot when I touched it. If it was faked, I don’t see how.”

“Even so.” Shang sighed, and there was silence for a time. Norah took note of the dried tortoise shell sitting atop one stack of books, the old-fashioned school slate with dozens of trigrams jotted on it amid evidence of hundreds written and rubbed out. A polished black instrument of disks within disks, each disk painted with tiny signs in red and gold, leaned against three scrolls brown with time. In an empty Coca-Cola bottle a stick of incense stood unlit.

“I have told you,” he said at last, “how years ago I followed the banners of the holy madman Hung Hsiu-Chuan, until I sickened of the killing and went away. But his cause against the Manchu might have succeeded, and his cousin, his adviser, might have restored peace and order to my country in Hung’s name. This adviser came to me in Soochow and told me that he had heard that the emperor had summoned up the Rat-God to destroy this upstart who threatened the Manchu throne.”

“I saw that,” Norah said suddenly. Alec and Christine looked at her with surprise; Shang, only with a grave curiosity, as if asking which streetcar line she had used to arrive in Chinatown or whether she had learned this information from the *Examiner* or the *Times*.

“They... There was a girl in a red dress,” said Norah, fumbling for fragments of half-forgotten memory. “I dreamed it. I don’t remember when.

Maybe in the desert. The girl had bound feet, lily feet. There was a man and a group of princes... there was a woman among them, wearing a high headdress with pearls hanging down. The priest started to dance..." She broke off and passed her hand across her face.

"I left then," she said. "I mean, in the dream I walked out of the hall. Dust was blowing, and I saw roofs and walls and pavements in the moonlight."

"They were the princes of the clan Aisin Gioro." The Shining Crane's voice was very low. "Tun, and Kung, and Chun, and the emperor's brothers, and with them the great warlords, Seng and Prince I... and the woman who became the empress dowager, the mother of the emperor's heir. Yes. They summoned the Rat-God, Da Shu Ken, the Kara-Kudai, in the Forbidden City at the full moon on the threshold of winter. He killed the bride they gave him and so devoured her strength. Then he owed them a favor, owed the one who had put the Moon of Rats upon the girl's throat. They sent him south against the rebels and their mystic, visionary chief."

"And you met him then?" said Alec.

The wizard once more inclined his head. "I was a fool," he said softly. "I agreed to fight. In my foolishness I thought that he could be destroyed. Some demons can." He sighed wearily and rubbed his broken hands. "I knew that he was powerful, like a minor god. And I knew that Hung Hsiu-Chuan was no longer my affair. But sometimes to do nothing against evil is not a neutral act. I put forth all my strength, and he swept me aside as I would sweep a roach from the wall. I was hurt inside. It was long before I could work magic again."

The silence lapped back like water swept aside with a broom that had nowhere else to go. Black Jasmine put his forepaws against the old man's calf, his single dark eye gazing up anxiously, and Shang Ko reached down to rub the silky black ears.

"I'm so sorry," whispered Christine. "If you met him before—if he hurt you before—it was doubly brave of you to... to come forward to help. Thank you."

His hand moved a little, but he did not look up.

Voices echoed dimly in the tunnel outside the door, speaking English. Norah recalled Alec telling her that half-pound tins of opium could be had for \$60 if one knew who to ask. All those little ivory snuffboxes and powder compacts of cocaine had to be coming from somewhere, she thought, and suddenly Captain Oleson, running in Mexican hooch in the *Whatsurname*, seemed no more than a harmless Long John Silver who lacked only a parrot and an eye patch.

After a long while she asked, "What can we do?"

"Very little." The wizard raised his head then, and the lines in his face were canyons of pain. "We do not know what shape he will take to come at you again, Miss Christine. The young man who was also pledged by the wearing of the necklace—the young man whom he killed—that death has given him even greater strength. From now until the beginning of the new year—the lunar year, not as they reckon years here—you will be in gravest danger and must live surrounded by such protection as I can give you. Since he is a god of the desert, a god whose fixed sign is earth, it is best that you remain near water, which will weaken his power. He has lost the body he held, so the moon may be waning again before he finds another. But at the next full moon, the last full moon of the lunar year, you will surely be in greatest peril. After the new moon of the new year, the stars will change and the Rat-God will lose his power until his season and his stars come again."

"And what happens then?" Christine squeaked protestingly. "Will he be back?"

Shang Ko shook his head. "I do not know. Never has his victim evaded him until the new year."

"Well, that's a fine thing!" She bristled like an affronted kitten, all her fear forgotten. "And what happens if you get run over by a streetcar on the Fourth of July? What if I decide to move to Miami?"

"It is folly," the wizard said quietly, "to look too far ahead. We can only do what we can..."

"What happens if you're wrong about him not showing up after New Year's Eve? Or Chinese New Year's Eve or whatever? Do I get to spend the rest of my life wondering about every cute young waiter or good-looking mechanic, wondering if *Norah* looks the way she did yesterday and locking myself in my room every time she starts messing around with a kitchen knife or a bottle of champagne?"

Her voice was indignant, but the glance that she cast from the old man to *Norah* and back was pleading.

After a moment *Norah* said, "You say that a demon can't be killed, but can it be... trapped? Sent back to where it came from? If water weakens it, can it be... I don't know. Locked up in a bottle and thrown in the sea?"

The wizard said nothing for a long while, only sat, *Black Jasmine* in his lap, stroking the sable fur with his crooked hands. *Norah* saw his fingers tremble and remembered the fear in his eyes on the platform of the station when he had urged her to guard *Christine* in the desert. Remembered, too, the terror she had felt building around her in her dream of the dark pavilion, the girl's screams and the trip-hammer heartbeat of the drum. *He swept me aside*

as I would sweep a roach from the wall...

She wondered if his time of hiding had dated from that battle, if what had been damaged within him had ever been completely repaired.

Still he did not look up. “There are ways. I have heard of means to imprison demons. To imprison gods.”

“That are within your power?” Alec asked gently.

The old man was silent for a very long time, thinking deeply, his hand moving automatically over the little dog’s head. Then he sighed, like the release of life from his bones, and nodded slowly. “I think so. Not my power alone, you understand, but working together with one of my grandsons, who is also a wizard. It may work. And it may hold him. And what was true before is true now: that not to fight evil is not neutral—it is an aid to the demon itself. And for this, I suppose, Buddha causes us to be born with the mark of his power in our souls. But you see...”. He turned to Christine, an emerald figure like a disheveled nymph in the candlelight, and there was concern for her as well as fear for himself in his face. “To trap the demon, he must be summoned. And to summon him, Miss Christine... he must be summoned to you.”

EIGHTEEN

HEAVEN OVER LAKE

Treading on the tiger's tail
without getting bitten...

An escape from darkness is possible
for the steadfast...

Treading on the tiger's tail
requires extreme caution...

"IN THE DAYS of the Han," said the Shining Crane, "lived Ku K'ai-Chih, the greatest painter ever to lay hand on brush. So real were his paintings that those who saw them swore he captured not only the faces but the souls of his subjects." The lantern in one crippled hand, he moved along the low-roofed passage, the swaying light making their shadows stagger across the smoke-stained two-by-fours that shored up the earthen walls. A bent nail glinted. Black Jasmine yakked gruffly and struggled against Christine's arms at the sight of a mouse fleeing into the darkness. "One day Ku K'ai-Chih painted a scroll of the seven gods of good fortune sailing in their treasure barge. That night he had a dream in which he heard their voices muttering and complaining how they were trapped in such a ridiculously small vessel—for the painting was not a large one—how the sea was too choppy and they feared they would fall overboard, and how Shou Hsing—the god of longevity—was getting seasick. The next day the painter woke to find that all good luck had vanished from the world."

"I suppose that's better than waking to find he'd turned into a cockroach, like that silly film Mikos wants to make," said Christine, picking her way carefully over the rough floor in her far from sensible green satin shoes. "But go on."

Shang Ko regarded her with grave surprise. "And here all Americans I have encountered laugh at the tales we tell of children being born out of peaches or of fish which speak." He shook his head. Now that he had reached a decision, some of his weariness seemed to have fallen away, and he did not lean so heavily on his dragon-carved staff as he walked. "In any case, so serious did the situation become that the emperor came to Ku K'ai-Chih and ordered him to lock up the painting of the seven gods of good fortune in a box where no one could look upon it and had the box placed in the imperial archives. Since no one beheld the painting, the gods were not obliged to

remain in it and were then free to go about the world again.”

“Bishop Berkeley would approve,” Norah remarked. A rough ladder at the end of the tunnel took them through a trapdoor and up to a walled chamber filled with collapsed paper lanterns, vases, kimonos, embroidered slippers, boxes of silk tassels, and white bales of coarse canvas lettered in strange calligraphy.

Shang Ko, the last to emerge, drew his staff up after him and closed the trapdoor again, shutting out the light of the lantern he had left below.

“Perhaps,” he assented. “Though I do not understand why, in that case, the emperor did not simply burn the scroll and so set the gods free permanently.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Christine. “He wanted to have them where he could get them whenever he chose.”

A door opened, and a stout, fair Irish-looking man in the black pajama suit of a Chinese appeared in it, brows raised. “I see you found Liang Hao,” he said to Alec, who grinned and gave him a kind of salute.

Shang Ko bowed. “Ah Tom,” he greeted the newcomer, who bowed to him in return and said something in Chinese.

“Ah Tom’s the unofficial mayor of Chinatown,” Alec explained as Shang and Ah Tom conducted them out through a dimly illuminated curio shop. “He’s from Shanghai and does everything from simple doctoring to running interference with the law to getting Chinese jobs as extras... which is probably how Shang ended up at Red Bluff.”

Ah Tom opened another door and bade them good day as the little party stepped out to find themselves in an unpaved alley off Main Street.

“So you’re telling us,” Alec said, “that what we need to trap the Rat-God is a painting?”

“A painting properly done, yes.” Shang guided them down twisting alleys, past Mexican groceries and jewelry shops and laundries from which steam breathed into the cooling air. “If an ink is prepared using silver and certain salts and powdered tortoiseshell over which the proper words have been spoken...if power can be raised and imbued into the silk and the ink and the lines of the drawing itself...Yes, I believe that such a painting would trap and hold the Rat-God.”

“So does this Ku K’ai-Chih work here in Chinatown?” asked Christine.

Shang Ko’s dark gaze lightened for just one moment, and he tucked his smile away behind his long mustache. “Alas, Ku K’ai-Chih has been dead for some years,” he replied gravely. About seventeen hundred years, Norah guessed from the little she had studied of Chinese history. “But my grandson Shang Hsu Kwan is an artist, perhaps one of the finest painters I have seen.

More, he is a wizard himself whose powers will one day surpass my own.”

They walked in silence for a time, passing a temple—or what Norah assumed was a temple—whose gaudy ostentation put Christine’s Chinese bedroom to shame and turning down another alley at whose end could be glimpsed a dusty square where a few old trees shaded a decrepit adobe church, the ancient Spanish heart of the city.

“You understand,” Shang Ko said after a time, “that not only must Da Shu Ken be summoned—with whip and drum and fire, as the old shamans summoned him—into his victim’s presence. He must be driven out of whatever body he takes to answer the summons. That in itself will not be easy, and when—if—that happens, the danger will be very great.”

Christine stopped before a door surrounded by triangular banners of green and yellow paper and surmounted by a somewhat tattered page bearing the emblems of what looked like bats. She swallowed, wincing at the pain in her throat. “How great?”

The old man looked down at her from his scarecrow height for a moment, then shook his head. “Very great,” he said softly, and opened the door.

Shang Hsu Kwan turned out to be a small, round-faced, self-effacing man in his thirties, the owner of an apothecary shop whose whitewashed back room was spotlessly clean and lined floor to ceiling with pine plank shelves. Dried herbs, roots, powders, and what looked like eggshells and bones filled hundreds of glass jars; colorful tins that had once held cocoa now brimmed with crystals, salts, and variously colored earths; covered bowls of terra-cotta and porcelain alternated with the familiar paper cartons available from Chinese restaurants, tied with brightly colored string.

Finches fluttered brainlessly in a bamboo cage. Charts and diagrams patched the walls between the shelves, some of the human body, some of the stars, one—rather startlingly—of what Norah realized was a map of the Los Angeles basin, marked in neat red lines in some kind of pattern resembling the inexplicable lines on ancient maps. Among them, drawings were tacked with long artists’ pins, clearly Chinese in tradition but heavily influenced by Western training in portraiture, still life, and perspective. There was one of Shang Ko himself, the old man with his long hair and crippled hands rendered un sentimentally in red chalk but with such accuracy that Norah felt she could almost reach into the paper and feel the crepey, silky texture of the skin on his wrists, the coarse weave of his too-large jacket, and the intricate roughness of the carved scales on the dragon that surmounted his staff.

“It’s beautiful,” Norah said softly when the apothecary, after an extensive dialogue with his grandfather in Chinese, came over to her while

Shang Ko disappeared into the main part of the shop.

“I wanted to do a portrait of Grandfather since first I began to draw,” said Hsu Kwan, folding his arms and regarding the work with quiet pride. “For years it was not possible, since the agents of the empress—and later some of the warlords—were looking for him in every enclave of our people in this country. Perhaps that was just as well,” he added with a shy grin. “In those days I was not very good.”

Norah considered the portrait for a time, seeing how the artist had captured the look of haunted gulfs of time in the dark eyes, the sense of weight and grief on the bony shoulders, the bitter lines of the mouth. Her eyes went to Christine, who was seated beneath the room’s single window, where a fairyland of tiny orchids grew in clay pots. Black Jasmine had followed Shang Ko into the shop—presumably to make sure he selected the right ingredients—and without the tiny dog to occupy her attention, Christine’s face seemed suddenly thin and desperately tired. Seeing her as if for the first time in weeks, Norah was shocked at how much weight her sister-in-law had lost.

She turned back to Hsu Kwan. “He told you what we plan to do?”

The apothecary nodded once.

“Can it be done?”

“It has been done in the past, yes. The story of the gods of good fortune is only a story, of course. It would take tremendous power to trap something like the Rat-God, particularly after he has taken one sacrifice—tremendous strength to keep from being overwhelmed and killed.”

“Does your grandfather have that kind of power?”

Hsu Kwan sighed and looked away for a moment. Then his eyes returned to the portrait of the old man above them. “My grandfather was at one time the greatest of the mages of China, the last of the line of sorcerers of the Bayan Har Shan. And it has been twenty-five years now since he has done more than cast horoscopes or charm caterpillars away from roses.”

Alec turned from an inspection of the shelves, shocked. “Why?”

Hsu Kwan shook his head. “Part of it has to do with his being driven out of China. The imperial princes who controlled the old empress had not only Manchurian shamans and the witches of the steppe around her; they had Chinese wizards as well, some of them very powerful. And the Society of Righteous Fists, with which she became involved, had a magic of their own, a strange magic born not of any single man’s power, but of their collective will, their collective rage, their collective hatred. These the wizards could—could focus, channel, as a fire hose channels water. Shortly before the Boxer uprising the old empress commanded that Grandfather join with her wizards against the *fan qui*—the foreigners—to destroy them.

“But she was a Manchu, you understand. To him, *she* was the foreigner. And the Manchu had killed his friend many years before. When he refused and fled his home in Soochow, the Boxer wizards pursued him and drew up the magic of all their followers to corner him in the hill country of the Huang Shan. Friends betrayed his whereabouts to them and led him into the trap. He was badly hurt not only in his body, as the Rat-God had hurt him, but in his spirit. As far as I know, all the other wizards of China who opposed the Manchus were put to death.”

“I do not think all.” The faint tick of Shang Ko’s staff sounded on the tile floor. Black Jasmine trotting at his heels, the old man limped back into the room, carrying in one hand a thick screw of paper, a small jar, and a strangely shaped root with a red thread tied around it. His bent fingers were not up to containing all those items, and he held them against his chest with one bent arm.

“I think the Mud Tortoise may have escaped, though like me, she must be deep in hiding. And I have heard rumor of a wizard in Manila who sounds like Han Tse Yan.” He hunched over his grandson’s worktable to let his tools gently slide to its top. “But you see,” he said, straightening once again and turning to face Norah and Hsu Kwan, “twice I opposed those who would use magic to do great evil, and twice I was defeated. My friends were killed or else went over to evil themselves. The magic of my childhood, the magic of the sorcerers of the Bayan Har Shan, is the magic of life, of the energy of the earth and stars. But the magic of death prevailed over it... as if it was not there. Since then...”

He sank into a wooden chair, leaning his staff against his shoulder with a sigh. “Since then it has been difficult for me to believe there is much that can be done against those powers which care nothing for life.”

Very softly, Christine said, “But still you came to warn me.”

Shang Ko turned to her, eyes filled with pain. “I could not keep from warning you, Miss Christine. I saw the advertisement for the film, and you with the Moon of Rats upon your throat, and I could not be silent. I only thought to tell you not to wear it again, to find out if you had worn it after the full moon of the ninth month, and to find out where it might be, that I might take it and hide it so that no woman would ever be put in that danger again.”

“But when you saw that it was too late,” said Christine, “when you saw me wearing the necklace—you still came out to protect me, when you knew this Da Shu Ken would be showing up. Thank you for that.” She got to her feet and came to his chair, standing before the old man, looking down into his anguished face.

She took a deep breath, then went on. “If you and your grandson were

both to keep guard on me at the house—if you were both to write your magic on the walls—would that really keep me safe?” Her rough, whispery voice deepened, and she squared her shoulders and tossed her head back a little with a kind of defiant challenge. “Because now that I think about it, I’d really rather... rather not be staked out like a goat at a tiger hunt and... and place my trust in a magical picture. Even though you really *are* one of the best artists I’ve even seen,” she added quickly, turning to Hsu Kwan. “It isn’t that.”

There was deep silence in the whitewashed room except for the small scratch and jingle of leash hardware as Black Jasmine scratched his ear.

Far back in Shang Ko’s eyes a small light began to dance, dispelling the weariness and grief.

“And you, if you forgive me for saying it, are one of the worst, Miss Christine,” he said softly. Reaching up, he took her hand in his. “A beautiful woman and brave as a tigress, but you must find some other means to earn your bread, for truly, truly, you cannot act.”

She snatched her hand back from his indignantly. “Well, of all the—”

“Miss Christine,” said the old wizard, his smile flickering beneath the corners of his trailing mustache, “tell me in truth. Were I and my grandson willing to create the trap, willing to summon the Rat-God in all his strength, would you be willing to put yourself in that danger in the hope of his defeat?”

Christine’s dark eyes filled with tears. “I can’t ask that,” she whispered. Quickly she plucked a small lawn handkerchief from her skirt pocket and, with the adeptness of long practice, touched her eyes dry before a single drop had marred the paint around them. “I shouldn’t have... have gone on about it the way I did earlier. I do *try* not to be selfish,” she added, casting a quick glance back to Norah, who hid a smile. “When I remember.”

She looked back to Shang Ko. “And you’re taking all the risk. You were good just to come out and write your little hoodoos all over the house, because you might have run smack into him—the Rat-God, I mean. So if you think you and Hsu Kwan can guard me until after Chinese New Year or whenever the Rat-God goes back to China or wherever it is he goes to...”

Shang Ko shook his head. “No,” he said. “You are right. It is I who was wrong to think that he could be hidden from or turned aside from his purpose. Do you want to meet him?” he asked. “To destroy him? Would you trust in our strength?”

Christine took another deep breath, and Norah saw the soft crepe of her skirt vibrate slightly with the trembling of her knees. She breathed, “Yes.”

After packing a simple carpetbag, Shang Ko guided them back through a tangle of muddy alleys and tiny courtyards to the Tuey Far Low restaurant,

where they collected a dozen little paper boxes of leftovers. From there they went to Alameda Street, where Alec had left his car. Climbing the steep hill of Grand Street with Shang sitting in the back of the rickety Ford, past the gray granite Bastille of the Hall of Justice on Temple, and thence up Vermont, they emerged into peaceful neighborhoods of wooden houses that all seemed to have been transported by cyclone from Kansas.

Upon their arrival once more at Ivarene Street, Shang Ko renewed the signs he had drawn on the doors and windows of Christine's house, with Chang Ming and Buttercreme scurrying busily around his feet. He marked the stones at the bottom of the hill with signs that he said would give him warning if the police passed by the place, then moved back into the shabby room below the garage as if he had never been gone.

That night Norah's dream returned with a crystalline clarity that frightened her upon awakening, for there were several minutes in which she wasn't entirely sure she hadn't actually been outside.

As she had the previous night, she shared the lace-and-cupids wonderland of Christine's bed with the frightened woman whose persona of flapper insouciance could not survive the turning out of the light. In her dream she rose and for a moment looked down at the pale, pointy face in its sea of dark hair, the two bundles of soft fur like muffs of sable and ivory sleeping in the hollow of her side. Norah put on her robe, bent down to gather up the sleeping dogs into her arms, and clucked softly to wake Chang Ming at the bed's foot. He trotted after her across the room, and Buttercreme sleepily licked her hand as she deposited the three of them in the bathroom and closed the door.

Dreaming still, she descended the stair to the living room, where Alec was little more than a tangle of rusty curls above his borrowed blanket on the divan, his glasses resting on the lacquered Chinese chest nearby. The gramophone he'd brought up from Venice was a solid square of oak on the table beside the chinoiserie bowl of nuts, and the dreaming Norah remembered listening to Mozart, Ellington, Berlin earlier in the evening.

She opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. It was colder than it had been the previous night, the grass along the edge of the pavement white and stiff with frost. A day past full, the moon was sinking toward the hills that concealed the Hollywood Bowl in Daisy Dell.

Jim was definitely waiting for her in the shadows of the eucalyptus at the turn of the drive.

She drew the robe around her, the cold sharp on her wrists and feet. It had been five years since they'd met. She wondered if he'd notice that she still wore the wedding-ring he'd placed on her finger.

It was the first thing he noticed, taking her hand in his. His grip was stronger than she remembered, his fingers less smooth and soft. He pressed his lips to the thick band of gold. The shadows beneath the trees were so deep, she could not see his face at all.

“This is going to sound strange, Norah,” he said softly, “but you have to trust me. Do you trust me?”

“With my life! Jim...”

He touched her lips with the side of one curved finger and smiled in the darkness, a glint of teeth. “I know,” he said. “I’ve always known. This is hard for me to say, Norah, and it’ll be harder yet for you to hear, but they’ve lied to you. Mr. Shang and his grandson, they’ve told you backward. It’s Chavaleh who’s been taken by the Rat-God, Chavaleh whose body he’s taken over now, Chavaleh who’s a prisoner in her own flesh.”

“What?” Norah stared at him, appalled, her eyes trying to pierce the shadows. It was so strange to hear him speaking his sister’s childhood nickname, which she had forbidden anyone to use from the age of five. Even the smell of him was the same, the smoky wool smell of his uniform, imbued like everything else with the cigarette smoke of trenches and waiting rooms and trains, and beneath that the dim, clean freshness of his flesh.

“Norah, we have to save her. I can’t do it because I’m dead; it has to be you. If you love her, take a knife from the kitchen... It’s in her blood, Norah. The demon’s in her blood. If you cut her throat, cut it deep so the blood runs out, it won’t be able to stay in her.”

Norah stepped back in horror. “No...”

“Norah, it’ll be all right,” insisted Jim’s voice. He reached out to her, his hand white where the moonlight fell. “I’ll stop the bleeding once the Rat-God leaves her. I have that power now, because I’m dead. She won’t die; she’ll be fine.”

“No!”

“Norah, it’ll be all right. It won’t be any worse than helping with those operations at London Hospital. We have to do it, Norah. If we save her—if *you* save her—they’ve told me I can come back.”

Norah stepped back still farther, straining her eyes to pierce the gloom, trying to see something besides the very faint metallic shine of Jim’s uniform buttons. From the corner of her eye she was peripherally aware of something glowing on the doors of the house, signs written in Chinese that seemed to conjure other images, the shapes of two armed men, like ghosts in strange helmets, axes in their hands.

“Norah, I can come back,” he pleaded. “I can be with you again. They’ve told me if you do this they’ll let me come back! Norah, please...”

“NO!”

She woke with a gasp, sitting up sharply in the dimly lighted room. On the bed beside her Buttercreme and Black Jasmine raised their heads and regarded her with solemn eyes.

Beside her, Christine slept still.

Soundlessly, Norah got to her feet, crossed unwillingly to the front window, and drew aside the dragon-brocaded curtains, though part of her shrank in fear that she would see a man's shape in the shadows of the trees beside the drive.

The moon had set, leaving denser night that crouched like a black wolf among the hills. She couldn't tell if there was anything there.

She was aware of the soft pressure of footsteps in the rooms below. Since none of the dogs barked, she knew it had to be Alec. A moment later came the characteristic clink of kettle on stove. Making cocoa, she thought.

He was. She found him in the kitchen, wrapped in a specimen from Christine's vast collection of kimonos, this one royal blue embroidered with bronze dragons and extravagant pink birds. His hair was rumpled, and the portions of his cheeks he usually shaved were flecked with dark hairs. He looked up, pushing up his glasses as she appeared in the door.

“Bad dream,” she explained with a grimace. She was aware that her hair hung in a tangle of brown-sugar waves down her back, showing through it the extravagant red and green flowers on her kimono. The clock on the wall ticked softly, its hands at three-thirty. The kitchen smelled of chocolate, of Buttercreme's half-eaten food, of heating milk.

Alec's eyes met hers for a time, then he nodded. He fetched another mug from the cupboard. “What did he offer you?” he asked.

Work on *She-Devil of Babylon* having come to a standstill owing to the disappearance of both Mordecai and Laban the Splendid—and with funding for his takeover of Enterprise Pictures hanging fire, A. F. Brown seemed a likely candidate for a stroke before the new year—Christine decreed that the next day, Sunday, might profitably be spent buying Christmas presents.

Profitably, Norah reflected, for the merchants along Broadway.

Trailing Pekingese and a faint odor of *Trésor de Jasmin*, Christine went through the jewelry shops and high-fashion department stores of the district like Sherman through Georgia. She picked out jade cuff links for Frank Brown and a pearl stickpin for Alec (“You go down the street to Silverwoods and look at shoes or something, Alec; I'm going to buy you a Christmas present”), a bias-cut silk nightgown of palest candy pink for Alexandra Flint back in Charleston (“Honestly, I've never given Clayton another thought, but

I really do miss his mother”), and an Ingersoll watch for Monty, who had regained consciousness late Saturday in the hospital and whose parents had come out from Bismarck to take him home. She bought the parents a box of California fruits.

“And I’m so glad nobody knows what happened to Nick,” added Christine, who seemed to have recovered her nerve or at least determined—with the assistance of a judicious swig of gin—to put her fears aside. She frowned, turning over in well-manicured fingers a pair of cloisonne earrings shaped like tiny diamond-studded bananas in Oscar Fresard’s in the Biltmore Hotel’s exclusive shopping arcade. “I mean, what *does* one get an ex-husband, and not even a recent ex-husband at that?”

With two hundred dollars from the scenario of *She-Devil* in her pocket—more money than she’d ever had in her life—Norah was acutely conscious of how few people remained in her life to buy Christmas presents for. “Not Mrs. Pendergast?” Christine inquired, as they waited for the clerk to open yet another jewelry case.

“In the four years I lived under that woman’s roof,” Norah said with quiet iciness, “I was never invited to eat at her table on Christmas day, much less given so much as a handkerchief. If I hadn’t chucked the Rat-God’s necklace into poor Miss Bow’s burning car, I should be strongly tempted to send it to *her*.” She was surprised at the anger she felt, surprised to feel her hands shake in their mended kid gloves where they rested on the glass top of the counter. Four years of anger, she realized. Four wretched Christmases when she’d been told, *Oh, who would you buy presents for, anyway, dear? They’re all passed to a greater world beyond the sun...* Four years of hurting throughout the dark winter season, not just on the eve and the day itself, when she-remembered, with killing poignance, crackers and her mother’s playing of carols and the taste of her father’s eggnog, but during the weeks before, when her every instinct told her to shop for a new murder mystery for Sean and a tie for her father, when she felt like a woman who had lost a hand and was reminded of the loss every time she forgot and reached for something with the stump.

Had Shang Ko gone through that, she wondered, those first years in America? Knowing he had been betrayed by friends and separated from every friend he once had possessed? All the other wizards were put to death, Hsu Kwan had said...

With some hesitancy, while Alec and Christine were in Robinson’s arguing whether to get Flindy McColl a half ounce of Maya perfume or ten pounds of imported Belgian chocolate (“But Flindy *loves* chocolate, Alec!” “Flindy’s got a potato clause in her contract with Enterprise. If you genuinely

care anything about her, get her the stinkum.”), Norah walked three doors down Seventh Street to a very small shop owned by an elderly German who’d been passing himself off as a Swiss for the past six years. After some discussion, she purchased a Zeiss fifty-millimeter close-up lens. Returning to Robinson’s to find her friends still in an intensive discussion of the proper gifts to get a woman while Black Jasmine and Chang Ming snored on the expensive red porphyry underfoot, she bought a scarf of bright green silk for Mr. Shang and two shirts—in Alec’s size but with longer sleeves—for Charles Sandringham.

There were worse things, she realized, thinking about the dreary room in the Pacific Sands where she knew he remained, than having no family and only a few close friends to buy presents for at Christmas.

They repaired to Fior d’Italia for a lunch of chicken cacciatore while the dogs played in the deserted courtyard. Coming out, Norah walked to the corner of Main to a newsstand and bought a copy of the *Daily News*. She’d done this the previous day in Chinatown and hadn’t found what she had sought. Today she did.

MOVIE STAR FOUND DEAD, the headline said.

“*Blake Fallon* murdered Keith Pelletier?” But A. F. Brown didn’t say it disbelievingly at all. He simply turned the words over on his tongue as he turned a sharp yellow pencil over and over in his hands while the bas-reliefs of ancient pharaohs and monkey-faced gods stared impassively down from the study walls behind his head. He was, Norah knew, fingering the idea in his mind to see whether the press, and the police, would buy it.

“Is there any reason why he couldn’t have?” she asked.

“God knows he was acting crazy when he got to Red Bluff,” put in Christine, gently stroking Black Jasmine’s ears where the little dog sat, panting happily, in her lap. “That was only a couple of days later. He might have already been having what do you call them—brainstorms.”

The studio head’s bulging gray-green eyes moved to her for a moment, studying her, then returned to Norah, who sat in a very deep and not at all Egyptian leather chair in front of his wide, scarred, and businesslike desk. Beyond the heavy curtains with their lines of hieroglyphics and papyrus buds, early winter evening was gathering over the sphinx-lined terrace, the acre of lawn. Christmas wreaths still decked the statues like absurd bowties. Norah couldn’t believe the party had been only the night before last.

Brown looked surly and tired, and no wonder, she thought. Reading between the lines of his terse statements in the columns of the Los Angeles papers, she could tell he was desperately trying to keep the lid on the second

tragedy to strike a picture on which he already had \$500,000 riding until he knew how it would affect his attempted takeover of Enterprise Pictures. A smaller article in the trade section had reported that Aaron Jesperson still refused to sell and was talking instead of buying Colossus out.

Reasonably, she said, "When did Mr. Fallon leave your party after the premiere?"

The big man shook his head. "We'll have to find that out."

"Well, I know he'd gone by two," piped up Christine ingenuously, "because that awful blonde he was seeing at Vitagraph was storming all around the house looking for him, drunk as a sailor and swearing." She dug in her purse for a cigarette. "I couldn't swear who he left with, though, but I know he was coked to the gills earlier and drinking like a fish."

Brown looked thoughtful.

"The thing is," added Alec, leaning back and chewing on a hangnail, "we've got most of Blake's scenes shot. With one more day's shooting in the desert—and the weather looks like it's going to hold—we can kill him off in a long shot in the battle and have a quick scene of Emily crying over a stand-in. And if Blake killed Keith," he went on, "that means we can bring back Charlie."

"I've talked to Mr. Sandringham," Norah said quietly. "He honestly has no recollection of that night, but he's sworn to see a psychiatrist—I know there are some good ones in New York, at least. And personally, I don't think a man as drunk as he was when I saw him at Enyart's *could* have killed a twenty-two-year-old stuntman. Mr. Fallon could have. Mr. Fallon certainly almost killed that boy Monty Perkins, and we *do* have a witness to that."

"Witness, hell," said Christine, and adjusted the black and white scarf around her neck.

"Come to think of it," Norah said, "the first attempt on Christine involved a stuntman, too. What I think happened," she went on with slow emphasis, "is that Mr. Sandringham fled because he saw that the killer was someone he knew, someone who would be after him, and because he was drunk, he knew he couldn't hope to be believed. Then he phoned you and begged you to come up with a cover story while he remained in hiding."

The head of the studio had begun to nod slowly, rubbing his hand across his chin, which was, for once, not covered with stubble. He'd evidently shaved for yesterday's harrowing by the press. "You think the papers'll buy that Blake got some kind of crazy fixation against *stuntmen*?"

"I don't know what the papers will buy," said Norah. "I'm only saying that the police will find the three incidents *extremely* similar. A star and a stuntman together, Mr. Fallon attacks the stuntman, then attacks the star. Or,

in the second attempt, tried to kill both together. In Christine's case, we were barely able to save her. Mr. Sandringham was so terrified after the attack, he went into hiding, and believe me, after being pursued by Mr. Fallon Friday night, I don't blame him."

"And I'll tell you what the papers will buy," Christine put in suddenly. "They'll buy a film with a curse on it, a film with a story behind it. No matter how good or bad that picture is, people will see it because they'll want to see Blake, and me, and Charlie. They'll want to see that chariot stunt because they know there was a bomb in the sandpit. They'll want to see Blake to see if *they* can tell that he was going insane while it was filming. And I'll bet it'll kick up receipts for that silly sword fight picture of Charlie's, too!"

The producer regarded them both for a time, turning the pencil over and over against the surface of his desk like a single piston while his mind shuffled, sorted, wrote, and rewrote scenarios almost visibly behind the glass-pale eyes. At length he put down the pencil, picked up a cigar, and said, "All right. We've got to finish shooting by the fifteenth of January if we're going to get the cutting done. That means we shoot through Christmas and New Year's. We'll keep Charlie under wraps and the set closed until we've squared the police, but tell Charlie to be here tomorrow morning. You know," he added as they stood to leave, "when they found Blake's body, he'd been burned, and his head was bashed in with a crowbar or something. That's what they think killed him."

"If it was the crowbar he was chasing us with," replied Alec, meeting the producer's gaze squarely, "I'm only glad somebody managed to take it away from him before he could use it on them. Where was he found?"

Brown rose to his feet. "They wouldn't say." He stepped across to Christine and, rather unexpectedly, took her hand and brought it to his lips. Then he raised his voice to a bellow. "FISHY!"

Conrad Fishbein popped like a pale, stuffed Pantaloon doll through the study's outer door.

"Fishy, get in here. We've found Charlie."

NINETEEN

THE WIND

Sign of small sacrifice...
Either advancing or retreating,
the soldier must be steadfast,
and all is well...
In hiding, he employs wizards and diviners,
and all is well...

“POOR BLAKE.” CHRISTINE turned her face from the daffodil lights visible through the dark trees and the occasional mosquelike turrets, medieval towers, and ornate Chinese rooflines against the clear, darkening lapis of the sky as they wound their way back down from Beverly Hills.

Sunset in Oz, thought Norah.

“He never really meant any harm, you know,” she went on.

“No,” Norah agreed. Neither, she supposed, had Lawrence Pendergast the night he’d come in drunk from a party and tried to rape her in her attic room. She still remembered his voice muttering thickly in her ear: *Be a sport*. She hadn’t dared tell his mother; she had had nowhere else to go. In some ways Fallon reminded her a good deal of Lawrence Pendergast.

Above them the lights of Beverly Hills twinkled like stars through the oak and pepper trees. Beyond the edge of those scattered shoals of spangles the sinister towers of the oil fields lifted under a pall of smoke from one still-burning rig. Norah glimpsed it as they passed the clump of trees that marked the tar pits where the bones of strange and fabulous monsters had been found.

Norah smiled a little, recalling Christine’s reaction to the skeletons on display in Finlay’s Museum on Lick Pier the night they’d gone roller-coaster riding with Alec. “I don’t believe a word of it, darling,” she’d announced, fitting cigarette to holder as she regarded the enormous brown-stained skeletons of dire wolves, impossibly huge sloths, and saber-tooths arranged on their platforms, with jungly “artist’s reconstructions” posted before them to show what those creatures had looked like in life. “I mean, I’ve been past those tar pits, and they stink to *heaven!* If you’re a megatherium or an anaconda or whatever those things were and you saw a lot of other megatheriums or whatever sticking in all this tar sinking out of sight, would you go wading right in?”

“Perhaps that’s why they’ve become extinct,” Norah had said.

In spite of the chill, the Shining Crane sat in the dense darkness of the cottage porch with Buttercreme in his lap, sheltered from the cold by a blanket wrapped around them both. He seemed to be expecting them as they picked their way down the path that curved around from the kitchen's rear door. Perhaps, Norah thought, he had heard their feet on the gravel. As he opened the door, the candles within—dozens of them, stuck on the corners of the table or protruding from the necks of Coke bottles—ignited into sudden, welcoming flame.

After the events of two nights ago, Norah didn't even blink.

Shang Ko's narrow mattress had been dragged over to one side of the room. The small table was heaped high with the same confusion of scrolls and books she had seen in the brick chamber deep below Chinatown, volumes in Latin and German as well as Chinese, plus blank paper, a brush and an inkstone, a tortoiseshell, chalk and slate, the brass web of an armillary sphere, an astrolabe, the intricate set of concentric black disks Shang referred to as a *luopan*, the ancient bird-shaped fire vessel, and the green porcelain bowl of water. The rear half of the room was occupied by a complex diagram chalked on the stained plank floor.

Shang Ko studied without a word the newspaper account of Blake Fallon's death.

"I take it that only means he's gone on to some other poor sap," Alec surmised, perching on a corner of the table. "If all he needs is a brain blown out on jake or dope, God knows skid row's full of candidates."

Very dimly, where the upper corner of the cottage shared a wall with the lower part of the kitchen, Dominga could be heard bustling about as she made supper. Chang Ming and Black Jasmine, their leashes removed, sniffed at everything in the front part of the cottage, though they avoided the diagram as if a wall stretched across the room. They stood up against Shang Ko's shins to receive their due of attention, then dashed up the path to the kitchen to get their dinners, Buttercreme trotting in their wake like an imperious dust mop.

"It may be," Shang Ko said softly, folding up the paper with his crooked hands. "But such a person would have trouble coming close to Miss Christine. He will take whom he can, use whom he can." The white brows flinched together, and Shang Ko passed a hand across his eyes, recalling, perhaps, others the Rat-God had used.

Then he straightened a little and handed the newspaper back to Norah. "I have taken readings of the sky, of the stars, of the moon and the wind." He gestured to the equipment on the table, the stone he used in his fire readings, and beside it, a neat stack of three bronze coins. "I have made calculations of... of *rightness of direction* all throughout these hills and as far as the sea.

“The season of the Rat-God’s strength lasts from the full moon of the ninth month until the coming of the new year, six weeks from now. Many years ago, when first I challenged his strength, I did so under the duress of time, going against him as quickly as I could, in the time of the moon’s waxing. The moon is waning now. Moreover the green star, the wizard’s star, is coming into the constellation you call the Bull, a configuration from which I am able to draw some power.”

His twisted fingers stroked the bronze circles of the armillary sphere, where strange beasts took the place of the more familiar stars.

“It will be difficult,” he said. “If you are still willing to do this thing, Miss Christine—if you are willing to trust me and my grandson and the strength of whatever power we can summon from the stars and the sea and the influences of the sky—it must be done in two weeks, when the moon is at its smallest. There is a magic which can be made from the new moon as well as the full. Not as strong, but effective. My old friend and partner Ni Kuei Nu, the Mud Tortoise—” His voice hesitated just fractionally on the name. “—was good at such magics.” He was silent a moment, white brows drawn down over eyes that gazed away into shadows of another time.

Then he shook his head. “Da Shu Ken’s greatest strength was at the solstice of the winter, when the moon was at its full. Now that is past. In two weeks it will be less yet. I have renewed the marks upon this house, so the dreams which visited you last night, Miss Norah, Alexander, should not return again.”

Norah shivered. The dark bulk of the house blocked any sight of the eucalyptus at the head of the drive. She found herself wishing that the trees could be cut down, rooted up, every spearhead leaf and scrap of curling bark burned.

“In the meantime,” said the old man, seating himself carefully in the hard kitchen chair, “I must have the date and year and hour, if possible, of your births—all three of you—that signs of strength may be drawn even from them. I will gather the power of the moon’s dark, the influences of the sea and the green star, and imbue them into the iron and silver of the inkstone I must make. With that ink I will mark the signs of imprisonment and time, the seals of the door gods and the August Personage of Jade himself, upon the silk where my grandson will paint. And there will be many sessions of dreaming, remembering, of calling back images into the silver mirror, before Hsu Kwan can begin to paint the Rat-God itself.”

He spoke haltingly, and Norah remembered the shattered mirror above Charles Sandringham’s bar. *Its eyes... I saw its eyes reflected...*

Impulsively, she said, “Would it help—would it go more quickly—if you

could speak to someone the Rat-God inhabited? Whose body it had taken over to kill Keith Pelletier? Would you—or Hsu Kwan—be able to take the image of the thing from his mind?”

“He is alive?”

Norah and Alec traded a glance, then Alec said, “The alcohol probably cushioned his mind.”

“He doesn’t remember what happened,” Norah explained. “But if he were hypnotized, or... or if you have some means of reading his dreams... You said the painting had to be not only of the Rat-God’s appearance but of its soul.”

“As such things have souls, yes,” Shang agreed, leaning forward eagerly. “They are not souls as humans know them. Yes, Hsu Kwan would be able to read down through the blurring of alcohol and horror to see what lies beneath, even as he would read past the clouding of shock and pain that has made it difficult, through all these years of nightmares, for me to see the Rat-God clearly. The shamans used certain drugs to open their minds to the Rat-God’s use, and I think these also protected them from awareness, though there are tales of those who suffered death or madness through shock.”

“I know the *hougans* in the voodoo cults are supposed to do the same thing through dancing,” Alec agreed, scratching at a corner of his beard. “I always figured their possession by their gods was some kind of psychological splitting of the personality, but now I’m not so sure. And anyway, I never saw it done. But I have to go down to Venice anyway to tell Charlie to report for work in the morning. I’ll see what he says about coming back with me tonight.”

Shang Hsu Kwan arrived before Alec returned with Charlie, bearing a drawing pad and pencils. He and the Shining Crane sat in the warm kitchen of the main house, drinking tea and talking with the girls while the younger wizard warmed up by making sketches of the dogs. Once Dominga left, Buttercreme emerged from her seclusion beneath the stairs and flirted with both wizards; Norah had noticed before that the little moonlight Peke was definitely a “man’s dog.” She would shy away from women and in fact had never approved of Dominga, but if a man was in the room, she frequently pattered out of hiding and approached almost, but not quite, within patting range, tongue protruding pinkly, then scurried away again, as if performing a coy little fan dance with her tail.

Charlie looked profoundly nervous when he arrived, but Norah took him gently by the arm and said, “It’s going to be all right. These are Shang Ko and Shang Hsu Kwan. They’re going to hypnotize you and get a description of Mr. Pelletier’s actual killer to help the police.”

Sandringham started to speak, then simply nodded. He squeezed Norah's hand, but not quickly enough to keep her from realizing that his hands were shaking. "Wonderful what they can do with hypnosis these days, isn't it, my dear?" As she walked with him behind the two Chinese down the half dozen wooden steps and through the tangle of shrubs around to the cottage by the garage, she saw his eyes dart to every shadow and felt the muscles of his arm beneath her hand rigid, like an animal's in a trap.

"I'll sit right here with you," she said as they entered the candlelit cottage. Hsu Kwan fetched wooden kitchen chairs for Norah and Sandringham, placing them beside the small table. "It really will be all right."

The Shining Crane drew another diagram—one smaller than that which filled three-quarters of the rear of the cottage—in chalk and wax and silver around the table, the chair, and Sandringham himself. Incense burned at the four corners of the diagram in the usual assortment of hand-smoothed bronze holders from the Han Dynasty and old Coke and perfume bottles; Norah realized Shang Ko must have lighted them, though not by striking a match. The table itself had been cleared of scrolls and implements. All that remained now were two candlesticks, Hsu Kwan's big sketch pad and pencils, and a mirror wrought of polished silver and another one, very ancient and turned facedown, of brass.

The Shining Crane drew up another chair and took Sandringham's hand.

Norah could never afterward remember whether Shang Ko spoke in English or Chinese. In any case, the old actor slipped almost at once into a profound sleep.

Her own words almost unvoiced, Norah breathed, "He did kill Mr. Pelletier, didn't he?"

Shang did not reply. Eyes closed, white hair hanging like a coarse curtain around his face and brushing the table before him, he sat with one hand on Charlie's, the other resting like a deformed spider on the edge of the mirror. It was Hsu Kwan who nodded.

"In that it was his body Da Shu Ken inhabited to do the killing, yes, he did. Before he returns to consciousness Grandfather will plant in his mind the memory of seeing some other man do this thing, a man whose face he cannot see. Dim and deeply buried, that memory, but enough to wipe out the still-deeper memory of his own hand covered with glass and blood."

"Thank you," said Norah, and Hsu Kwan shook his head.

"In coming here, in risking that the knowledge that he fears will rise to the surface of his mind, he has done a brave thing, perhaps the bravest thing he has ever done in his life," the younger wizard said. "That risk may well save Miss Flamande's life—perhaps mine and my grandfather's as well. To

help him sleep without fear of dreams is a small return.”

Shang Hsu Kwan leaned forward, frowning down into the silver mirror, though in it Norah could see nothing but the glow of candles and the misty images of the ceiling joists like a ship’s spars visible through murky water. From the main house a thread of voices could be just discerned, Alec and Christine talking in the kitchen, and still farther off, someone in the walled garden of the Sabsung Institute played a flute badly. Sweet incense mingled with the smell of wax. Then, loud in the silence, came the hissing of Hsu Kwan’s breath.

“It would probably be best, Mrs. Blackstone, if you did not look at what I am to draw.”

Even in his trance Sandringham still held to Norah’s hand, so she simply turned her face away. Through the window she could see the bright spot of the kitchen’s reflected light on the dark leaves of the laurel and oleander. Shadows passed across it. That would be Alec, she thought, doubtless instructing Christine in the mysteries of operating a coffee maker. And if she knew Christine, her sister-in-law would plead for Alec to do the task instead of her because she hadn’t the *faintest* idea how to make all that coffee come out of those beans.

Alec.

That afternoon, walking along Seventh Street from the jeweler’s to Maskey’s candy store, she had realized that they were holding hands and that it wasn’t the first time. When they had entered the Fior d’Italia for lunch, it had been natural to feel his hand at the small of her back, guiding her to her chair.

Two mornings now she’d sat across from him at breakfast while Dominga fussed with the eggs and Christine slept upstairs. It had seemed the most natural thing in the world.

What did he offer you? he had asked the previous night.

She hadn’t said, nor had he. Their eyes had met for one long moment across the table, then he’d gone back to making cocoa, and they had resolutely talked of other things: Oxford, her brief stint with the VAD, the two nights he’d slept in the attic of a west Texas whorehouse in exchange for taking pictures of the girls. The spirits that the Shining Crane called gods, and what names they had gone by in the strange back roads of the haunted Souidi, and what they really were or might be. Other dreams they had had—but none recent. Why people feared death and what might lie on its other side.

That stirred a thought in her, a sudden uneasiness, a remembrance of something she shook quickly away.

When she had gone upstairs at last, unwilling to leave Christine alone for

too long lest she wake up and be frightened, Norah had paused on the steps. In her dream she had seen Alec sleeping on the couch, his face very different without his glasses, and found herself wanting to go back down and see him so in fact. She was conscious of his presence and knew, to the marrow of her bones, him to be awake and conscious of hers. She had stood there in the dark for a long time before finally ascending to the dimly lit bedroom, but it had been long before she'd slept.

She shook her head. Two weeks seemed an incredibly long time to trust in marks scribbled in light on the house's foundation stones. To hope that nothing would come out of the darkness under those trees and speak her name. To hope that there wasn't something in store that neither she nor Alec nor the ancient Chinese who sat so silently, eyes shut and brow furrowed with pain, had yet thought of.

Afterward, there would be time to think about herself and Alec.

But four years of anxiety, four years of fretting when letters did not come—when the newspapers spoke of the next big push or the next excursion over the top—had cut the nerves in her mind that ran forward to “afterward” and cauterized the stumps. Part of her desperately wanted Alec, wanted to know there would be a future for them, but she could not free herself of the certainty that it would not be.

For her, there never could be afterward. Only a rushing forward into darkness without end.

Shang Ko opened his eyes. His hand was trembling as he took it from the rim of the silver mirror; Hsu Kwan continued with his sketching, tongue protruding slightly and eyes distant and yet steely alert. Shang Ko touched Sandringham's forehead and spoke softly to him, some words English, some Chinese. The actor sighed, and the look of horror and tension slipped from his features, leaving them only fallen-looking, immeasurably tired.

“He will be well now.” The Shining Crane raised his head to look across at Norah. He looked ill and very old, colorless around the mouth. “I have put in his heart the knowledge that someone else did the deed. He will still recall nothing consciously, but in his soul the memory is changed. His only guilt is that he was not sober enough to protect his friend.”

“Thank you.” Norah leaned a little to touch the wizard's sleeve, frightened at the exhaustion that seemed to have added a dozen years to his face. “I realize it's a terrible imposition to ask anything more of you, but can you do anything for him to keep him from going back to drinking? To help him with that?”

The wizard shook his head. “Even were I... stronger... right now I could not,” he said. “That is an illness whose roots lie deeper than any sorcerer's

power. I know. Magic can sometimes dig out the dreams that send a man reaching for the bottle or the pipe, but it cannot free the soul from the sleeping need. Only the soul itself can win that victory.” He hesitated, frowning, as if at some personal memory of pain. “Could wizards do such a thing, we would have no sleep ever again, curing those who would come to be cured. But we cannot. Sometimes we cannot even cure ourselves. I am sorry.”

She shook her head quickly. “I just thought I’d ask.”

He took up the second mirror, the ancient brass mirror that had lain on the table facedown, and held it up before Sandringham’s eyes. The actor blinked and shook his head, his breath coming in a deep draw, deeply released. Norah took his arm and led him toward the door.

Hsu Kwan rose and followed, stopping them before they left. “Miss Norah,” he said softly. “I can say for your friend that the pain and despair he has come through, the fear he has conquered in coming here, in allowing us to look into the darkness he feared to look into himself, may forge him a weapon sufficient to win him his victory. He will need your help.”

Norah met the young man’s eyes gratefully. “He’ll have it,” she said, and Hsu Kwan smiled.

Sandringham’s eyes were open now, but he seemed to see nothing. Only when the cold air of the garden touched his face did he come to himself, though he did not speak until Norah had guided him up the steps to the kitchen door. As she had suspected it would, the kitchen smelled of coffee. Christine sat on the table drinking a pink gin while Alec scrambled eggs, saying, “Well, honestly, Alec, I don’t think it’s so much to boast about. After all, it’s been *years* since I *touched* an egg; of course I’d lose the knack.” Quite a quantity of rubbery-looking scrambled eggs lay in the dogs’ dishes. Chang Ming and Black Jasmine, as usual, had picked at theirs and were eyeing Buttercreme’s; Buttercreme, secure in the knowledge that the males were forbidden to touch her food until she’d walked away from it, sat demurely beside her dish, looking from her anxious audience to Alec and back.

“What a dreadful little bitch you are, Butterpie,” observed Norah, leading Sandringham to a seat at the table. The moonlight dog took one look at the newcomer, lowered its tail and head, and scuttled away into the breakfast room. Black Jasmine and Chang Ming promptly began to bark at one another over the abandoned eggs.

“Oh, Charlie, darling,” Christine said, springing down, “how do you feel? Can I get you a drink?”

Sandringham shook his head. “Just coffee will do,” he said. “And if you would,” he added, raising his head and holding out one fine, trembling hand to her, “and please don’t take this the wrong way, I’d take it as a great

personal favor if you never said that to me again. Though God knows," he went on, shaking his head with a sigh as Alec brought over a plate of scrambled eggs and toast, "if I'm going to be able to act when I'm sober."

"Blake couldn't," Alec pointed out cheerily, "and he did just fine."

After the kitchen's warmth, the cold was sharp when Norah descended the back steps and made her way again to the cottage. She huddled Alec's leather jacket tightly around her arms and wondered if her blood was thinning. She felt weary beyond reckoning. It was not the somewhat dazed exhaustion that had characterized her departure for Red Bluff three weeks earlier, but a deep sense of having lived several days since she and Alec had sat over coffee that morning solemnly perusing the *Los Angeles Sunday Times' Farm and Tractor Magazine*.

Most of the candles in Shang's little house had been snuffed. The door stood half-open, and through it Norah could see the old man lying on his mattress, with Hsu Kwan kneeling beside him.

By the glow of the few wax lights remaining, the marks of exhaustion in the old man's face seemed even deeper. He held to Hsu Kwan's arm, shuddering, his face drawn in a stoic effort not to register pain.

I was hurt inside, he had said. It was long before I could work magic again.

Hsu Kwan whispered something to him in Chinese. The old wizard reached out, groping for something, and the younger took his hand stayingly and returned it to his chest. He touched the old man's temples and eyelids and ran his fingers lightly along the backs of the twisted, broken hands. Shang Ko's breathing deepened and slowed, then slowly, he relaxed.

He said something, a short sentence, wistful and sad, in Chinese. Hsu Kwan shook his head and murmured a reply. Shang Ko sighed, and his hand tightened briefly on his grandson's fingers, a gesture of reassurance or of thanks.

Norah looked down at the table beside her. The silver mirror still lay there, its iron rim decorated with twined dragons no larger than the baby lizards that basked in the autumn on the stone house foundations. The depths of the glass were dark, reflecting the darkness that seemed to be gathered under the rafters. The brass mirror lay beside it, facedown, shadows moving like tiny insects among the reliefs of bats, flowers, and animals on its back.

Beside it lay a pad of cheap yellow sketch paper. And on that paper was the sketch Hsu Kwan had made, the sketch from which he would do his painting, the sketch of what he had seen reflected in the mirror's quicksilver depths.

Norah's breath caught, and she turned her face quickly aside, but doing

so could not eradicate what she had seen. Not then and not later, lying next to Christine in the glow of the night-light, listening to the soft creakings of the house and the click of the dogs' toenails as they made their busy nightly patrol.

The face was not just a rat's; it somehow held the essence of the loathing Norah had felt every time she entered her attic room in the dark and smelled their droppings or saw their eyes. Filthy and ceaselessly hungry, it crouched, cunning with the cunning of darkness. The hairy body's massiveness spoke of dreadful and disproportionate size, while the iron incisors, the naked paws folded in hypocritical prayer, the naked tail, and the slumped, malevolent posture of the thing both disgusted and terrified her. But it was the eyes that held the horror, blank as the opals of the necklace yet eerily intelligent. A mindless thing capable of thought.

Da Shu Ken. The Rat-God.

The thing Charlie had seen for one hideous moment looking out at him from the mirror above the bar.

The thing that had gnawed furrows in the foundation of the house.

The thing that had stood in the shadows of the eucalyptus trees at the turn of the drive and had spoken to her with Jim's voice.

The thing they would meet in two weeks—if it did not find them first.

TWENTY

LAKE OVER THUNDER

Sign of sacrifice.

Favorable to the most ambitious of plans...

You cannot have both the boy and the man...

In pursuit of your goal
you will fall into a trap...

Imprisonment and sacrifice by the ruler...

NORAH THOUGHT LATER that she should have guessed that Da Shu Ken would not sit quietly, waiting to be trapped.

For all Frank Brown's dire assurances that everyone must be prepared to work through Christmas and New Year's, he had found that he simply could not get the crew to film on Christmas day. Ned Bergen and Doc LaRousse had families and children; Mary DeNoux told him placidly that she wasn't going to deprive her little girl of Christmas to save Colossus Studios from Brown's prophesied bankruptcy. They were all quite willing to work extra hours the rest of the week to make up, but they wanted their Christmas.

So Norah had her first joyful Christmas in seven or eight years, with California sunlight sparkling on the newly bought ornaments of the tree they'd put up the previous night while a cozy fire burned in the grate and Charles Sandringham dipped eggnog for everyone amid a colored maelstrom of Christmas wrapping. Chang Ming and Black Jasmine, brand-new collars of one- and two-carat diamonds glittering around their necks—Buttercreme hid in the kitchen—fought fierce battles with the paper, shaking it with the characteristic neck-breaking fury of born vermin catchers. Christine doctored her eggnog and passed the flask along to Alec, who sniffed it cautiously before adding a dollop to his own, and Norah and Alec scrambled eggs and sliced green-black, vile-looking alligator pears for a very late breakfast amid smells of pine and coffee.

"What *heaven* to have the day off!" Christine sighed. She fished in the pocket of her billowing lounging suit for her cigarettes, holder, lighter, and a dog biscuit, which she tossed to Chang Ming, who promptly ran away with it to a corner to guard, hotly pursued by Black Jasmine. "You know, I was almost forgetting what this place looked like in the daytime."

The words brought back a memory to Norah, a recollection of dream and fear.

The dogs weren't the only ones to have received diamonds for Christmas. Norah had been rendered just as speechless by Alec's gift of a green enameled pin of a rocket ship with a thin line of diamonds down its side—folded in a paper that said "Welcome to Barsoom"—as she had been by Christine's present, a Patou suit in ivory-colored raw silk ("I asked Mary Pickford about it, darling—she's got the best taste of anyone I know."). Christine, in her turn, had squeaked and bounced with delight over the astonishingly gaudy Chinese lantern Alec had given her and Norah's gift of a huge traveling cosmetics case of intricately woven Chinese willow slats, lacquered dark burgundy and labyrinthine with tiny drawers, secret compartments, and interlocking boxes and vials.

But the memory of her earlier dream, the glint of smiling teeth within the blackness of shadows among the eucalyptus, returned to Norah again and again. While Flindy and Christine quizzed Sandringham about what rules *he* played mah-jongg by ("...so, do you admit a sequence of one through nine in suit with a pair of winds and a set of dragons, all concealed except the last tile, as a no-limit hand or just a double?"), Norah slipped out through the front door and stood for a time on the porch. Christine had spent the previous day, from before sunrise until long after nightfall, in the studio, and nothing could have brought Norah to approach the eucalyptus trees in darkness. But now heatless sunlight winked on their yellowing leaves, and the wind that stirred down from the Cahuenga Hills called up a deep sighing in their branches. The shadows among them were not so dense, and she could see clearly that they were only trees.

Hugging her brown cardigan closer around her arms, Norah descended the steps, edged past Flindy's car, and approached the place where she had heard Jim's voice in the darkness of dreams.

She didn't know why she wanted to look more closely at the place. Perhaps to satisfy herself that no man's footprints marked the thin soil. The trees enfolded her like an embrace, trails of low-hanging branches brushing her shoulder as her mother's shawl fringe had when she was small.

Fragments of sunlight like threepenny bits flickered over the saffron carpet under her feet, and among the leaves something glinted. Before she even bent to confirm what it was—and it seemed to her that she knew instinctively—Norah felt her heart, her belly, her hands and feet turn to ice.

Her hands were shaking as she knelt and picked up what she had seen.

It was a gold ring, the half-carat solitaire diamond set off with two small topazes. Jim had put it on her finger the week after they had met.

She remembered Lawrence Pendergast's brassy-haired light-of-love admiring it shortly before it had disappeared.

She flung it from her as far as she could into the brush on the hillside across the road. Then she walked back to the house, trembling with shock, already wondering if what she had seen—what she thought she had touched—was a dream itself, a hallucination. Wondering if she should force herself to cross the road and look around on the hillside and see.

Wondering if she should tell Alec.

He would have known something was wrong immediately even if she hadn't gone on to play some of the worst mah-jongg in her life. To his concerned glance she returned a small gesture of talk later, but it wasn't until Frank Brown appeared bearing an ermine coat, several pairs of hundred-dollar stockings with lace insets, and an inordinate number of roses that Alec was able to draw her into the breakfast room. "What is it?"

Norah shook her head uncertainly. "I don't... it sounds insane." She wished now that she had kept the ring—if it actually *was* a ring—as evidence for herself as much as for anyone else. But the thought of putting it in her pocket, of having it on her person even for an hour, for some reason terrified her.

"More insane than Blake Fallon's corpse blowing up oil wells? What was it? Did you see something out there?" He nodded in the direction of the eucalyptus, and she guessed that whatever he had dreamed, it, too, had something to do with those trees.

He listened without a word to her account of the dream, glancing down into the living room now and again to where Christine, Flindy, Sandringham, and Brown were building the Great Wall of China; under his rusty mustache his mouth had settled hard. "And Shang's gone into Chinatown for the day," he said when she'd finished. Mr. Shang, knowing there would be company in the house all day, had departed quietly after raking up the leaves that had fallen the night before. "Got any idea when he'll be back?"

Norah shook her head.

"We'll just have to keep an eye on her, then. God knows what *that's* going to entail."

What it entailed eventually was joining Frank Brown, Flindy, and Christine for a lavish dinner at the Cocomat Grove and then proceeding to the Cafe Montmartre to listen to mediocre jazz and watch Christine flirt with every handsome man in sight and everyone else in the extremely crowded club behave very badly indeed. By sheer good luck Mr. Brown guessed that the watch of black enamel and diamonds Christine wore had been Ambrose Conklin's Christmas present to her and was in a possessive mood, so it didn't take more than a few words from Norah to convince him to bring Christine home fairly early for Christine: "Filming *does* start at eight tomorrow

morning, and frankly I think she's looking a little tired, don't you, Mr. Brown?"

Christine was at that moment engaged in a frenzied Charleston with Gary Cooper and didn't look a bit tired—certainly didn't look like a woman who'd been nearly strangled by a Manchurian demon four nights previously—but after a few token protests about the *fabulous* party that was supposed to be going on in the speakeasy under the Antler Hotel in Venice, she agreed to be taken home at around two.

Norah breathed a sigh of relief.

She left Alec making Christine a cup of cocoa in the kitchen and descended the steps to the dark little path that wound to the cottage. The note she'd left on the door was still there: Mr. Shang had evidently not returned. Hugging her ridiculous pink and black coat around her, she was starting back around toward the kitchen door again when she saw, among the trees at the top of the drive, a moving shred of white.

Her first thought was panic, horror—but the dogs, which had accompanied the little party to both restaurant and club, were not barking inside the house. Shang himself?

She stepped a few paces along the drive, trying to pierce the shadows.

Something pale billowed, fell—a veil? Norah's mind leapt back to the three Graces, circling one another to the breathless tootling of the flute... A moment later a tall, thin form emerged from the darkness, moving slowly down the driveway toward her. The moon was only a few days past full; its light slipped like quicksilver along the blade of the knife in the figure's hand.

It was the flaxen-haired girl, Norah realized, the one with the obsessed and hungry eyes. She walked haltingly, as if unsure of her balance, and as she came nearer, Norah saw that what she'd first taken for the gauzy veils of Grecian drapery was in fact the girl's nightgown, sensible flannel and buttoned to her chin. If it weren't for that, she supposed she would have frozen.

He was cut to pieces...

Her heart seemed to stop under her ribs. For a moment she saw the bloodied walls, the smashed mirror, and beyond them, behind them, seemed to hear the hammering of the iron drum and the scratchy whine of the dust wind off the desert...

But the dogs weren't barking.... *Take a knife from the kitchen*, she heard Jim's voice saying, *Cut her throat...*

She stepped forward out of the dark, trying desperately to remember the girl's name, and called out, "Wake up!"

The girl stopped, swaying in the moonlight; Norah could see the

colorless silver of her open eyes. Her heart pounding hard now, wondering what on earth she'd do if she guessed wrong, Norah came forward and grasped the girl by the knife wrist. "Wake up!" she commanded again, and the girl gasped and staggered, the knife falling from her hand. "You're all right!" she added, seeing panic flare in the pale eyes; the girl struggled for a moment, then all strength seemed to go out of her and she burst into wild tears.

"He raped me!" she sobbed frenziedly. "Killed my parents—burned the house—threw me down and... and..."

"Winnie!"

Norah swung around at the sound of the voice, the swift scrunch of footsteps on the gravel. It took her a moment to recognize in the plump, elderly matron running down the drive in bathrobe and slippers the adept Kama Shakti whose dream had originally brought the ladies of the Sabsung Institute to Christine's front door.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Mrs. Blackstone. Please do forgive her." Kama Shakti caught the tall girl in her arms and held her while she wept like a gangly, wretched child. "She's a good girl really, in spite of the sleepwalking, and she says she's felt so much better at the institute in spite of what her parents say... Her father is Felix Graham, of Pacific Slope Security Bank, you know... Why, after her last breakdown they wanted to have her put in a sanatorium! It's just that she has dreams, you know. There, there, Winnie," she added gently, brushing aside the straight, silvery curtain of hair from the girl's face. "It was only a dream, you know." She looked anxiously up at Norah. "Please don't think badly of her. She's really quite harmless."

"Quite harmless...?" began Norah, when Winnie twisted in her guardian's arms, pointed hysterically up the driveway, and began to scream.

"There he is! There he is! He killed them, he killed my parents..."

Shang Ko stood, his long hair like frost in the moonlight, halfway down the drive.

"I have to kill him! What he did to them... what he did to me..." She tried to bend down, reaching for the knife where it lay with its blade glinting in the dirt, and Norah kicked it swiftly behind her into the tangles of rhododendron that grew so thick around this side of the house. "I'll kill him!"

"What on *earth* is going on?" A bar of light from the porch lamp fell sidelong across the upper part of the drive; Chang Ming and Black Jasmine scampered around the corner of the house, heralding, a moment later, Christine like a little jeweled doll with Alec at her heels.

Kama Shakti tugged the sobbing Winnie gently but with surprising force up the drive; Shang Ko stepped aside as they passed, stroking his long mustaches in troubled speculation and thought. The fact that she couldn't get

to the knife didn't stop Winnie from slashing at the old man with her nails. "He killed me!" she screamed as she was led up the drive and into the denser shadows of the road and the hills, and her voice echoed back to them from the darkness. "He killed my parents, then he raped me and cut my throat!"

"It was in a former lifetime, you understand." Nadi Neferu-Aten cast an uneasy glance at the darkness pressing against the big French windows that opened onto the porch as if expecting to see an earlier and homicidal incarnation of Mr. Shang lurking outside. "He was an evil sachem of the Iroquois tribe, hating not only the white man but, in his heart, all of humankind. And in her dream last night this was revealed to Precious Peony—this and the man's continued blackness of heart, his continued hatred of her... and of you."

She leaned forward in her chair, her eyes burning like a cobalt flame. "He hates you, Miss Flamande. She told me this last night, after I got her back to the institute and put her in a trance again to try to exorcise the pain of her prophetic dreaming. He pretends to want to help you, but he is leading you into danger... perhaps to your death. Send him away. For your own good, you must send him away."

"You're quite wrong, darling." Christine stubbed out her cigarette, baffled at the intensity of this onslaught. It had been a long day at the studio—Queen Vashti hadn't successfully ordered her handmaidens flogged until nearly eight at night—and the promptness with which Neferu-Aten had appeared indicated to Norah at least that the former priestess of Isis had been watching for Christine's car. "He's done everything he can to help!"

"And surely," said Norah, "you're not going to hold a person liable for deeds done in a previous lifetime."

"For that matter," Christine pointed out, flipping back over her shoulder the trailing ends of the pink and bronze scarf that hid the yellowing bruises on her throat, "it isn't any of your business what people do in *this* lifetime as long as they don't go lying in wait for you or breaking your windows or anything, which I know Mr. Shang hasn't done."

"It *is* my business," the dark-haired woman insisted desperately. "That is... I mean, I am concerned for you. Send him away, Miss Flamande. No good will come to you if this evil man remains."

"You mean no good will come to the Sabsung Institute if Daddy Graham hauls his little girl out of that place and puts her in a rubber room for trying to carve up the neighbors with a bread knife," remarked Alec after the counselor of souls had gathered up her gauze veils and left.

"Would that even work if the Rat-God had taken her over?" Norah looked worriedly across at Shang Ko, who emerged from the shadows of the

hallway with Buttercreme in his arms.

“Not if he had taken her over, no.” The old Chinese shook his head. “But I doubt that is the case. This girl has taken neither drink nor drugs. My guess is rather that he spoke to her in a dream as he spoke to you, urging her to attack me so that he would then be freer to reach Miss Christine. From what I have seen in the quarter of town where my people live, even to raise my hand against an American woman in my own defense would cost me my freedom.”

“I’m afraid you’re right about that,” Alec said gloomily.

“Clearly Da Shu Ken knows that you are guarded, Miss Flamande. Now he will begin to take steps against the guards. Later tonight, when all sleep, I will go up to the walls of this institute and mark them as well as I can to keep him from entering again the dreams of those who sleep there.”

He frowned, stroking Buttercreme’s long fur with his crippled fingers. “He holds great power in dreams,” he went on in a low voice, “taking what form will most affect the dreamer and speaking in the voice they will best hear. Thus he has convinced them that although I have never done them harm, I am their enemy because I was so thousands of years ago, when they think humankind was different.

“But men and women were never different.” He smiled a little and shook his head. “They loved, and wanted, and behaved blindly and for reasons they did not understand; they sometimes crippled their children even when they were trying to love them, and sowed good fruit and evil without being able to tell which was which, and did foolish things to escape pain that in the end could not be escaped. And perhaps she does remember.” He set the little dog down and, turning, vanished through the kitchen door and out into the night.

“Well, whatever she does or doesn’t remember,” said Christine, getting to her feet, “I call it a lot of nerve. Now we’ll have to watch out for them, too.”

Norah shrugged. “What can they do?”

The police arrived at seven o’clock in the morning on the thirty-first of December to arrest Shang Ko.

“Mr. Shang?” Norah stared in disbelief at the police lieutenant standing on the porch in the dove-colored presunrise light. Her breath puffed white as she spoke. “There must be some mistake.”

She could hear men going around the side of the house to the cottage. In the kitchen Chang Ming barked challengingly, though Norah knew full well that if one of the officers came into the house, the sun-colored dog would be on his back in seconds, begging to have his tummy rubbed.

“If there is, it’ll get straightened out at the station.” The lieutenant

shrugged, a medium-sized man with a face as uncommunicative as shoe leather. "But we got a warrant for Shang Ko, employed and living at this address."

"He's gone, Dave." Two burly patrolmen appeared at the foot of the porch steps. "Looks like the captain was right about some kind of cult. There's candles and all kinds of crazy drawings all over the floor back there."

"What Mr. Shang does with his spare time, in his own room, is neither my concern nor yours," Norah said firmly. "What I want to know is, Who is responsible for this order and what caused them to decide that Mr. Shang was a menace to us instead of a help?"

"Ma'am," said the lieutenant, tipping his hat to the back of his head, "I was told to pick up this Shang person." He pronounced the "a" as in *bang*, not *khan*. "And that's all I know. You can go downtown and take it up with Captain Steckel if you got a question. Right now we got a fugitive from justice on our hands, and we're going to have to search the house and grounds for him."

"You're quite welcome to search the grounds," replied Norah coolly. "But since I'm a stranger in this country, I don't know whether I'm legally required to let you enter this house without a warrant. If you'll be so kind as to wait one minute, I shall find out." And she closed, and locked, the door in his face.

"Alec..."

He wasn't in the kitchen where she'd left him. With the filming of *She-Devil* under way again, she'd taken to rising early enough to dress, brush the dogs, and have breakfast with Alec before he left for the studio an hour before Christine and she herself would follow. He clattered downstairs as she went into the hall to look for him, crossing directly to his camera and the film magazines that were heaped in a corner of the living room beside the dark and dilapidated Christmas tree. Before he turned to speak to her, he flipped open the camera and put something inside, then shut and latched it again.

"I hope that's everything," he said in an undervoice, straightening up to kiss Norah quickly. "I heard. They can't give Christine grief about all the booze in this place because she can argue it was gifts, but I cleared all those little powders out of her vanity drawers, just in case."

"Can they search?"

"They need a warrant to search either the house or the grounds, but there's no point in not letting them in. Filming's only going on until four this afternoon because of the party at Brown's place tonight; I can go down to city hall afterward and try to find out who's behind this, though I may need a couple hundred from Chris to do it with."

“On New Year’s Eve there won’t be much point,” Norah said. “My guess is it’s our friends up the road.”

Alec nodded. “Since Da Shu Ken convinced them they’ve got the most to lose if Shang stays here, you may be right.” He wrapped the camera thickly in oilcloth against the rain and tucked it under his arm. “Any chance you can talk Chris out of going to the party... What am I saying?”

Norah laughed at his expression of comic resignation. “Bite your tongue, sir. On the other hand... Would you mind if she and I spent the night at your place in Venice? This whole thing’s making me very uneasy.”

“Good thought. If Shang was right about the Rat-God, at least we’ll be surrounded by water down there.” He put his hand on her waist, and reached up—just slightly—to kiss her lips. “Thank God we managed to talk Christine out of going to the Navy-Washington game in Pasadena tomorrow. Better go let Lieutenant Murphy in before he gets sore, but make him realize you’re doing him a favor. I’ll load this stuff in the car. See you in Babylon.”

The search was cursory. Chang Ming, as Norah had anticipated, promptly recognized in both officer and men long-lost but deeply beloved friends and ran to fetch assorted bits of rope and spit-covered rags in the hope they could be tempted to play. Buttercreme retreated at once to the cupboard under the stairs. None of the police took the slightest notice of Alec as he carried his equipment out to his Ford, cranked it to unwilling life, and sputtered away.

“You realize now that a warrant’s been sworn, if Shang returns and you don’t call us, you’ll be obstructing justice.” Murphy handed her a card with a telephone number scribbled in pencil on the back. “I’m leaving one of my men here in the cottage today in case he comes back.”

Norah smiled dazzlingly. “How very kind of you,” she said. “We were a little worried—Miss Flamande and I—for we’re spending the night with friends and the house is so isolated. But with a policeman here to guard it we shall feel quite safe. And I’ll certainly telephone if I should see Mr. Shang and your officer should not. Good morning.” And she closed the door behind him just as Dominga came up the walk.

Christine squawked with indignant protest (“I mean, *honestly*, darling, what do we pay our taxes for?”) at the news of Shang’s persecution and was all for calling in sick to the studio and proceeding immediately to Chinatown to warn Hsu Kwan—“immediately” meaning as soon as she put on her makeup. But if the police had come for the Shining Crane, thought Norah, it was a good bet they’d arrested, or at least driven into hiding, the younger wizard as well. As soon as Christine and two of her miniature guardians departed for the studio, she proceeded to Chinatown by cab to locate Shang’s

apothecary shop.

But though Chinatown itself was not many blocks in extent, nowhere in its tangled alleys could she locate either the shop itself or any familiar landmark. And though Chang Ming showed no signs of disquiet beyond his usual acute curiosity about new surroundings, Norah found herself deeply uneasy among the ancient walls and gaudy balconies.

The streets were too crowded, packed with hurrying men and women, unfamiliar voices speaking a language she did not know. Far too many doorways moved with curtains and strange damp-warm breezes from within. Fu Manchu and the mysteries of the Orient aside, Norah could not put from her mind the drawing she had seen, the image of the thing that stalked them, the bestial face with its fanged snout and eyes that were at once wise and mindless. She was conscious of a deep unwillingness to return to the bungalow on Ivarene and a still deeper sense that going to Mr. Brown's party that night would not be a good idea at all.

"Nonsense, darling," Christine protested that evening, craning her head to refresh her lipstick in the rearview mirror while speeding along Wilshire Boulevard full crack. "I'm not going to go out into the gardens with anybody, and you'll stay with me the whole time and everything will be fine. You'll see."

She dug in her handbag for a cigarette; Norah took it from her with a hasty "I'll get that," and Christine returned her vagrant attention to the road.

"I do hope this party's more fun than the last one," she went on. "I mean, murder and mayhem aside, *either* of my mothers-in-law could have thrown a better bash than that Christmas affair."

Whatever else could be said about it, Norah thought later that evening, Frank Brown's New Year's Eve party was certainly everything she had ever heard Hollywood parties were.

An ocean of booze, thanks to the good Captain Oleson; dancers from the studio chorus line performing maneuvers up and down the monumental stairs ("Not a pretty boy in the lot, dammit!"); Flindy McColl being chased squeaking around the bedrooms by Hans Schweibler while everyone sniffed cocaine in the corners. Mrs. Violet removed Emily—discreetly enshrouded in a red velvet dress Christine claimed came directly from Sears Roebuck via catalogue—early in the proceedings. Charlie Sandringham sipped mineral water and also left early: "It's rather embarrassing to be the only person in the room not in flagrant violation of the United States Constitution."

Norah, in a subdued dress of rose and caramel charmeuse, watched Christine weaving like a darkly glittering damselfly among crowds of tipsy admirers and felt profoundly out of place. Unlike the occasion of the

Christmas party, she had not been invited, nor had Alec, and she spent a good deal of her time avoiding Mr. Vidal. Ambrose Conklin, in a Savile Row suit with a small sprig of holly in his buttonhole, brought her what tasted like actual champagne and chatted for a time with her about cinema music. He asked about the necklace Christine was wearing, an Edwardian dog-collar affair of diamonds and pearls to cover the fading bruises—all her shots in *She-Devil* included similar pieces now—and spoke of how it became her; Norah was rather touched at the way his gentle gray eyes followed her sister-in-law from group to group.

In time, Frank Brown allowed himself to be disentangled from a herd of would-be Pickfords and Gishes for a conference in the library. He listened soberly to Norah's account of the hunt for the two Chinese wizards, chewing a cigar and turning his pencil over and over in his hand as he had a week earlier. "Mr. Shang's been using his connections in Chinatown to see if he can learn who really murdered Keith Pelletier," Norah explained, a tale that made considerably more sense than the truth. "I went up to the Sabsung Institute this evening while Christine was getting dressed, and the gates were closed and locked. I'm virtually certain the police are after Hsu Kwan as well as his grandfather, if they haven't arrested them already; you must help us get them out of jail if they have."

"I see what you mean." Brown's river-ice eyes fixed her for some moments with their odd, unnerving stare. "Of course, if there *is* a mysterious cult behind it in Chinatown, the police may have found out something about it that you girls don't know."

"I'm sure they have," Norah said coolly. "But that doesn't mean they have to keep Mr. Shang and his grandson behind bars."

"Of course not." Brown put a paternal arm around each of the girls and steered them toward the door. "I won't be able to do a thing tomorrow, of course—the whole town'll be closed—and I'm having another meeting with Jespersion and my lawyers Thursday. But if I can, I'll get in touch with Steckel and find out what's going on. You keep an eye on Chris until then."

He paused and removed his cigar to give Christine a moist and clumsy kiss. "By the way," he added as he opened the door, "I owe you thanks—big thanks—for locating Charlie. He's putting in a hell of a performance. I don't think he's been drunk once this week. With any luck we'll get the newspapers off our backs once and for all, and to hell with Jespersion and his rumors. *Midnight Cavalier's* doing solid box office, and since we fed the papers those stories about Chris, everybody's asking about *She-Devil*."

Outside, several minor actresses and the most statuesque of the dancers were loitering. Brown's appearance seemed to galvanize them, and they

immediately surrounded him, gazing at him with the dazzled worship that women outside Hollywood generally reserved for actors.

Watching Brown speak to them, flattering this one, noticing that one, exuding the peculiar charm that so far had eluded her analysis, Norah had a sudden thought and stepped very quietly back into the study.

The big desk was cleared of papers, its battered surface incongruous among the stiffly posed gods, crocodiles, and hieroglyphs. Its topmost drawer was locked, but the key was simply tucked beneath the blotter. Norah cast a nervous glance at the wide black back in the pillared doorway, one heavy arm around Christine's slim waist, then turned the key.

What she expected to find was a paper with the telephone number of the Chinatown section of the LAPD on it and the names of Shang Ko and his grandson. She did so almost at once; a quick comparison with the card in her purse confirmed her suspicion. "Apothecary" was written after Shang Hsu Kwan's name, and beneath that, among the doodlings a man made while on the telephone, "\$2,000."

She didn't, however, expect to find the other object that was in the drawer. So shocked was she at the implications of it, and so terrified, that she almost shut and locked the drawer at once.

But from the doorway she heard Christine's giggle and Flindy's husky drawl. Looking up, she saw them and two other girls, a blonde and a brunette, laughing and making themselves charming for the head of the studio, and something went through Norah like a heated spike of rage. Very softly she opened the drawer again, withdrew the thing she had found, and slipped it into the gold-mesh handbag Christine had lent her for the evening. Then she locked the drawer again and left by the long window onto the terrace. Brown was far too preoccupied even to remember whether she'd remained in the room or passed him in the doorway. She deposited the key inconspicuously between the paws of one of the crouching sphinxes, where it would eventually be discovered.

From the terrace she descended to the lawn and crossed it—not without a certain queasiness—to the tennis court where the cars were parked. She stowed her handbag carefully under the seat of the Nash. Having left her coat—actually Christine's chinchilla—up in the house, she was shivering in earnest by the time she climbed back up to another French door and slipped through. This one led into what was clearly a billiards room. She murmured "Excuse me" but doubted that the couple on the table even heard.

Christine was the center of a little group before the bar, which was situated between more columns and was carved and painted with what appeared to be scenes from the Book of the Dead, a pink gin in hand,

laughing loudly over one of Ken Vidal's jokes. Flindy, her feathers awry and the marabou straps of her gown slipping down over plump white shoulders, sagged frankly in the arms of Roberto Calderone, and Mikos Hraldy was holding forth to a costumed dancer on either elbow. "You see, he awake to discover that overnight he is turn into cockroach..."

"*Eeww!*" exclaimed one, and Flindy cracked her gum and said, "Sweetie, I'd hate to tell ya how many times I went to bed with a man and woke up with a cockroach beside me!"

"Let's go," Norah said quietly, touching Christine on the arm.

"Go? Darling, it isn't even eleven o'clock yet!"

"That doesn't matter. Let's go."

Christine pulled her arm away and took a long pull at her gin. Her eyes were bright with drugs. "For heaven's sake, darling, is a little drinking getting to you? You'd better watch out when midnight comes!"

"They can drink themselves insensible for all I care; we've got to get out of here."

"Oh, don't be such a stick! Just because Alec isn't here to play cuddle and coo with, you don't want *me* to enjoy myself either, that's it!"

"No, it isn't." Norah removed the glass from Christine's hand. "We can collect our coats and simply walk out through any French door, and I think we'd better do that as soon as possible."

"But *why?*"

Norah leaned closer, keeping her voice as low as she could. "Because I just found the Rat-God's necklace in Frank Brown's desk drawer. Now, let's go."

TWENTY-ONE

LAKE OVER WIND

The pillar which held up the house is unsafe...

It is better to leave.

The withered willow produces leaves,
an old man finds a young wife...

“FRANK.” CHRISTINE’S SMALL fists balled tight in terror and rage. “My God, it’s Frank.”

“I’d give him the benefit of the doubt, myself.” Alec perched on a corner of the worktable that took up most of the living room of the cottage by the canals, turning over in his hands the tangle of smoke-blackened bronze and carbonized pearls that had been the Moon of Rats. The heat of the burning car had shattered all three of the opals. Two of them had discolored completely to a dirty gray, but the third still stared like a demented, malicious eye in the prosaic glare of the overhead lamp. The shadow within had darkened and twisted, seeming to fill the cracked whiteness like a hole in a skull. “Frank isn’t a drinker, and he doesn’t dope. My guess is he’s just playing percentages.”

Norah looked up from stroking Buttercreme’s head. “How so?”

“Well, I don’t think Frank deliberately set out to give Chris the necklace and pledge either her or Keith to the Rat-God in the first place,” said Alec. Outside, fog lay thick on the banana trees and hid the canal beyond. Within, the overhead lamp threw sharp, rather dingy shadows on the ranks of light stands, reflectors, tripods, and boxes of equipment along the wall. Midnight had passed sometime during the drive down from Beverly Hills, but a blaze of light in the western sky showed where every amusement pier from Venice to Santa Monica roared full-blast. Alec, in Levi’s and a USC sweatshirt, had been awake when they phoned, sharing a postparty cup of coffee with Charlie Sandringham. After the actor had departed, he’d made a fresh pot for the girls and, Norah saw through the half-open bedroom door, had put clean sheets on the bed. Not bad, she thought, for a man who’d been at the studio twelve hours a day for the past week.

“I don’t think he knew anything about the Rat-God at all until just a few nights ago, probably right after Precious Peony’s attempt to put Shang out of the way fell through. What I think happened,” Alec went on, “is that Da Shu Ken showed up in one of Frank’s dreams.”

“I didn’t think Frank *had* dreams,” Christine marveled, and lit a cigarette.

“Well, I’m guessing it took the Rat-God a couple of tries. That’s why it was the thirtieth before Frank bribed the boys on the Chinatown beat to come down on Shang. Think about it. Somebody shows up in one of Frank’s dreams—we’ll probably never know what form he took. He says, ‘Get those two Chinks arrested and by next week Aaron Jesperson’s a corpse.’ The first time that happens Frank says, ‘What the hell did I have for dinner?’ Maybe the second time, too. But eventually the Rat-God says, ‘You want proof? Look. Here’s the necklace.’ And Frank wakes up and sees the necklace on the bedspread.”

Alec pulled his feet up so that he was sitting cross-legged on the table amid the spare magazines of film and the remains of the *Los Angeles Times*.

“So what does Frank do? He’s just lost one of his major stars and has a half million and more riding on a man he suspects is a murderer and knows is—or was—a drunk. He thinks, *What the hell? Can’t hurt. They’re only Chinamen, anyway.* The Rat-God may not even have mentioned that getting Shang in the pokey would mean Christine dies.”

“And even if he did,” said Norah softly, “even if Mr. Brown guessed what it might mean... *would he care?*”

Christine turned to stare at her, the fear in her eyes turning to something else.

“Mr. Brown has this dream,” said Norah, ticking the chronology off on her fingertips with her thumb. “He bribes the police to arrest Shang and his grandson. Christine dies. Jesperson dies. Mr. Brown takes over Enterprise Pictures.” Her thumb curled around the closed fingers of her fist. “How long is it going to be before Mr. Brown puts two and two together and gives the necklace to Flindy or Emily or some other eager little dancer when he needs another favor from the Rat-God?”

“Screw Flindy or Emily!” Christine got to her feet, setting Black Jasmine aside, her lips tight and her whole body fairly quivering with fury. “The fucking *nerve* of him, just *sitting* there this evening! What can we do? I mean, how can we get in touch with Mr. Shang? Go back to Chinatown?”

“I suspect,” Norah said, “that Mr. Shang will get in touch with us. He did before.”

“And until then?”

Alec walked over to the door and moved the curtain that covered its little window aside, looking out as far as fog and darkness would let him to the barely seen pewter gleam of the canal. Over his shoulder he said softly, “We wait.”

Toward four Norah woke to the sound of the dogs barking. She sat up, startled and disoriented and wondering why she felt so stiff, and discovered that she had fallen asleep on the couch leaning against Alec's shoulder. Every light in the little room still burned, showing her the half-familiar shabby furniture, the boxes of phonograph records stacked against the walls and the shelves of dog-eared paperback books, the big phonograph and the smaller portable gramophone, the camera equipment and the black, staring squares of the windows behind their cheap muslin curtains. Christmas cards were tacked to the mantel of the room's doll-sized fireplace, above the small gas heater. There was, of course, no tree. Chang Ming and Buttercreme pattered nervously around the room as they had on the night of wind, the night of Keith Pelletier's murder, sniffing and scratching at the door.

Norah felt as if her blood had stopped in her veins.

Alec sat up, ruffled and creased-looking, and fumbled his glasses from the lamp table beside the couch. In the bedroom Black Jasmine's sharp, staccato quacks could be heard. A moment later there was a scuffle of bare feet, and Christine, wrapped in her gaudy kimono, appeared in the doorway, her face like chalk.

"There's something outside," she whispered. "Something outside the window. I heard it scratching."

"Turn out the lights," Alec said promptly, and reached into the pile of equipment for a crowbar and a flashlight. "At least we won't be blinded looking out. Any suggestions about how to deal with demons?" By the glare of the flashlight his eyebrows stood out like black smudges against the sudden pallor of his face. Norah, who had changed earlier out of her filmy silks, felt her heart thud sickeningly under the sensible cotton of her shirtwaist.

"Would fire help?" Christine asked timidly. "It did against tigers in *Strongheart of Africa*."

"He can call fire," Norah said, looking around for a weapon. She crossed to the kitchen, where Buttercreme was fairly bouncing with rage, her usual timid, almost whispered barks transformed into a sharp and angry fusillade. But Norah stopped in the doorway, gasping, as something vast and formless scuttled past outside the window high above the sink. She shrank back against the door, cold to her marrow, wondering if in spite of the darkness it could see her. The drawer she sought was to the right of the sink, near that pitch-dark window. Her heart hammering so that it nearly sickened her, Norah backed out of the room again. She caught up the mop from behind the door with shaking hands. Nothing could have gotten her across the floor to the knives.

"It's outside." Her hand tightened hard around the futile weapon. "Alec, what are we going to do if it comes into one of our minds as it did to poor

Charlie?”

“Charlie was drunk,” Alec said briefly. “So was Blake. If it could have taken over someone sober, it would have gotten that institute girl rather than talking her into it through dreams.” He picked up the telephone from the table beside the couch, cursed in Yiddish, and set it down again. “Dead.”

“Can we run for it?” Christine whispered. The flashlight’s beam wavered dizzily in her trembling grip, making the shadows lurch and sway. “It can’t be thirty feet to the house next door.”

“I wouldn’t want to risk it.”

“Shall we scream?”

“They haven’t been home all night. It’s New Year’s Eve. The pier’s not closing down till dawn.” While he spoke, Alec was disentangling the small generator from the miscellaneous junk pile along the wall. He checked a cable, pulled a jackknife from his pocket, and cut and stripped one end. “Even if he cuts the electricity, he can’t get this,” he said quietly. “I’m going to fire her up. That should give us about a thousand volts on the bare end of this thing. With luck I should be able to zap whatever comes through that door before he can get his thoughts together to blow the donkey engine on the turbine.”

His free hand wrapped itself twice in the end of the starter cable. Around them, the dogs had ceased their barking and ran busily from room to room, fur flouncing, sniffing doorsills and outside walls with their flat little noses, their round eyes reflecting weirdly where they caught the flashlight’s beam. For a long time there was no sound but the tiny clatter of their toenails on the wooden floor. Then, apparently satisfied, they trotted back to the living room and sat in a group at Christine’s feet, ears up, wrinkled faces grave.

Alec glanced at Norah, the starter pull unused in his right hand, the cable end ready in his left.

After a few moments Chang Ming sprang to his feet again and toddled to the door. He did not bark but sat in prick-eared expectation, his extravagant tail curled. Presently it started to switch eagerly back and forth.

Footsteps creaked on the small porch. Black Jasmine’s and Buttercreme’s tails sprang up onto their backs as well, and they hastened to join the bigger dog. A moment later someone knocked. “Miss Flamande? Mrs. Blackstone? It is I, the Shining Crane.”

A great trail of mud and water glistened across the damp grass as though some vast, heavy thing had dragged itself from the canal. All around the house mud splotched the walls behind crushed and slime-dripping banana and castor plants. Alec’s flashlight beam picked out the chewed marks on the

foundations. The whole night smelled of rats, thick and foul. Norah shuddered, drawing Christine's chinchilla close around her, but could seem to find no relief from the cold. Christine said nothing, but Norah could sense her tension, wound to breaking point with the aftermath of liquor and drugs and fear.

"I have been afoot, walking and hiding in the orchards, for many hours," the Shining Crane said, poking in the broken and violated plants with his staff. "My grandson is in the hands of the police. They say he will be held in prison, perhaps deported. An irregularity, they say."

"An irregularity in the Chinatown beat," Alec remarked with a rubbing gesture of his fingertips.

Silently, they filed back into the house.

"I felt the thing's presence from afar." Shang Ko ran the deformed links of the necklace through his broken fingers. "It fled from me. Surrounded by water and with the moon on the wane, it had little strength, and I do not know what form it was able to take. But it will be back. It has had its taste of blood, the strength of the one life it has already taken. It feels the coming of the year's end. It will have its sacrifice."

He looked down at the deformed ghost trapped within the central gem, and the scarred, bent fingers became entangled in the chain.

"Can Kwan's sketches be used?" Norah asked after a time. "Could you, or one of us, maybe, use the prepared ink to draw over the sketch? Ink it in as they do magazine illustrations?"

Shang Ko shook his head without looking up. "I do not believe so. Yes, the paper could be treated with spells, and yes, the ink I have prepared could be used. But wizards see things in a way others do not. What my grandson would have drawn is not what he sketched. What you suggest, though it might work, might not hold the demon once it is driven forth from the body it will take to attack us."

He held up his hand, and Norah saw that only the thumb and two of the scarred fingers were mobile. "It is long since I could do the calligraphy necessary for spells of this kind. Ni Kuei Nu used to do my writing for me... and now my writing grows more and more like the patterns of grass blown by the wind. And to tell the truth," he added with a twitch of his mouth beneath the long mustaches, "it was never beautiful. Not like my grandson's or the Mud Tortoise's. I can see the Rat-God in my mind, but that image I cannot place on the silk. If the image is not perfect in all respects, it will not hold the Rat-God's soul."

There was momentary silence, during which a car could be heard roaring along some black alley of Venice and, distantly, the sound of music on one of

the piers.

Then Alec said, "What about a photograph?"

The Shining Crane regarded him for a moment in blank surprise.

"You mean take a photograph and copy it?" Norah asked doubtfully.

Alec shook his head. "I mean white man stealum soul in magic box." He nodded toward his camera equipment. "Hell, my Uncle Avram wouldn't let me take his picture because he was afraid it would steal his soul. I've run across dozens of old folks down on Delancey Street, and all through the bayou country, and in Chinatown here, who thought the same thing. That they'd get their soul trapped in the picture. Which is exactly what we're trying to do to Da Shu Ken."

"Yes," said the Shining Crane. "And one cannot do it to a human, because the body protects the soul." His dark eyes widened as if he contemplated some unthought-of light. "But the demon has neither soul, as we understand it, nor body—only a spirit of malice. And that could be trapped if the correct substances were used."

"We've got a whole range of possibilities," said Alec, perching on a corner of the table again. "The processes we use now were chosen mostly because they're cheap and they'll work on celluloid film. You can make a photographic emulsion out of dozens of things, depending on what effects you want. The only reason they don't use high-concentration silver these days is because of the expense. Old-time photographers used silver salts, in different proportions, on glass or paper of whatever. Original daguerreotypes were made on a film of silver iodine."

"Silver." The old man's voice sank to a whisper upon the word. "Silver is the element which will capture and hold the bodiless ones, the spirits of evil."

"And it's the easiest thing in the world to make a camera obscura. Just tell me what it needs to be made out of and how big it needs to be. You can put whatever spells you need on it, and we can put together a silver iodine plate. On the night of the new moon we set ourselves up at the end of Lick Pier, where we'll be surrounded on three sides by water. And then..." He looked from the old man's face, to Norah's, to Christine's in the grimy electric glare, his own features fired with enthusiasm and a kind of grim delight behind the flashing lenses of his glasses. "And then we've got ourselves a demon."

"Alec, I could kiss you!" cried Christine, and did. Norah could see she was shivering all over with the release of tension, with nerves and fear and hope. "This calls for champagne. What a pity all I've got is gin, but," she added, her face brightening again, "as long as we're all up and it's nearly morning anyway, let's all drive out to Pasadena and watch the game!"

They worked at night, mostly in the house in Venice. Shang Ko marked it with signs of protection, with the green tiger and the white dragon and the door gods Shen Shu and Yu Lei, on its cardinal points. Neither Norah nor Christine felt safe in either house, but Alec's was surrounded by water, and the neighbors were closer and not as likely to be influenced by strange visions or dreams.

It was an exhausting week. The filming ran late every night as Brown pushed to make up for lost time. Christine got by mostly on cocaine, drinking gin in the evenings to fall asleep, and, not surprisingly, slept badly. Norah still assisted Alec at the camera in between looking after the dogs on the set and organizing a cowboy epic for Dale Wilmer and Emily Violet and reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which made even less sense in print than it did in Hraldy's excited semi-English.

Time took on a strange, juggled quality, days seeming to last for weeks until they were suddenly over. Shang Ko made a series of cautious foot treks around the Venice sand hills, checking their orientation and that of the pier with his *luopan* or studying the tides; nights, he and Alec worked on the trap until long after midnight and sat up discussing magic and Tao and photography while the wizard worked spells that would render the trap impermeable to water or put the finishing touches on everyone's horoscopes.

"Light is the enemy of the demon," said Shang Ko one night when Christine had stumbled to bed and Norah sat at Alec's side, brushing her long hair while Alec tested the trip mechanism of the shutter. "If we can drive him forth from the body he will wear when he is summoned, light will force him into the trap and fix his image there forever."

Accordingly, Alec procured flash powder and spent the following evening out in the jungle of the yard making blinding explosions with batteries, cables, and electrical splitters until he could get three flashes to fire at once. Shang Ko seemed very pleased about the fact that Alec had been born in the Year of the Sheep under the influence of wood in the Month of the Sheep and the Hour of the Rabbit in the country whose fixed element was metal; Norah could only shake her head and brace herself as the dark future seemed to rush at her with terrifying speed.

Christine gave an interview that played for all it was worth on Blake's connection with mysterious Chinese murder cults: "I always feared some dark secret from my girlhood in the mystic Orient would return to haunt me," she said, pressing the backs of her fingers to her alabaster forehead and holding out her cigarette for six reporters to light, wrist leading the gesture, Norah noticed, in a copy of the way Nadi Neferu-Aten moved her hands. "The police are following every lead, every clue..." She cast a smoldering look in the

direction of Frank Brown, and whatever Frank Brown knew or guessed about his dreams, or Chinese cults, or the disappearance of the Moon of Rats on New Year's Eve, he kept to himself.

But sometimes Norah thought she saw him watching Christine with a look of speculation in his eye.

That might, of course, have been because on Thursday Ambrose Conklin had come to visit Christine on the set, courtly and anxious and bearing a large velvet-covered box. Thursday was also the day that Dale Wilmer had chosen to collapse in hysterics on the set of *The Gentlemen Clown* and be taken away to a sanatorium, and while Mr. Brown tried desperately to hush up the matter and find a replacement, Christine disappeared into her dressing room with the millionaire. Though she didn't really suspect Conklin of being Da Shu Ken's latest incarnation, Norah strolled by with the Pokes nevertheless and smelled through the thin plywood the scent of Conklin's pipe tobacco and heard Christine's voice, broken by low, delicate, and completely manufactured sobs.

She had never in her life actually heard Christine weep, but something told her those dovelike whimpers were no more genuine than her protestations of love for Mr. Brown. She would have wagered a week's salary—Christine had given her a salary rather than simply doling out cab fares, lunch money, and the cost of new stockings upon request—that those tears were unaccompanied by red eyes or a swollen nose and would leave her makeup miraculously intact as well.

On his way out of the studio, Conklin paused to grasp Norah's hand and say, "Mrs. Blackstone, your sister-in-law is a brave, brave woman."

To which Norah had the wits to respond, "I'm glad *someone* realizes that, Mr. Conklin. She has had so much to bear in this—this *tinsel factory*."

"Darling, these are *real diamonds*," Christine greeted her, dry-eyed, when she entered the dressing room. She held up a two-inch choker that flashed in the dressing-table lights like cold, colored fire. "They're *huge*. He said if he was too old to bring justice to the scoundrel who marked my neck—he *did* notice at Frank's party!—the least he could do was conceal them in a manner worthy of my beauty. I could live for a *year* on this. Only," she added, looking up with a sly smile under her painted lashes, "now it looks like I'll never have to."

"Did he propose?" Norah leaned interestedly against the door frame.

Christine's eyes sparkled like the jewels that filled her hand. "Darling, he owns *miles* of land up in the San Fernando Valley." She held up another jewel, a solitaire pink diamond the size of Norah's little fingernail, like an unspeakably vulgar star imprisoned on a golden ring. "I told him I just *couldn't* wear this until I'd finished my next picture—the last one in my

contract with Frank, and truthfully, dear, I want to see what kind of contract I might be able to get... Did I tell you Charlie got a simply *tremendous* offer from Lassky on the strength of some of the rushes from *She-Devil*? But really, Mr. Conklin is such a dear.” And she pressed the diamonds to her face like a glittering washrag and laughed.

But in the night Norah would wake in the dimness of the night-light to hear Christine’s breath drawing raggedly like a dull saw, and she would turn over and see the rigid body curled with her back to her and know she was not sleeping. One night she found Christine wrapped in her gaudy robe in the chair by the makeshift dressing table, hands clenched between her knees, shoulders bowed so that her black hair streamed down over her face, shivering as if with dreadful cold. Norah slipped quickly from beneath the covers, groping for her own robe, confused thoughts of dream visitations and the theft of souls flooding her mind.

All three Pokes were clustered around Christine’s feet. Black Jasmine stood on his hind legs, forepaws against her knee, looking up worriedly into her face.

Christine raised her head with a jerk at the creak of the springs and manufactured a ghastly smile. “I’m sorry, darling. I tried not to wake you.”

On the table—which had been brought in from the front room and covered with her pots of powder and skin food and creme aux marrons—sat the small ivory box she kept her cocaine in and a full glass of clear liquid whose metallic juniper-berry smell seemed to fill the small room.

“It’s silly.” Christine pushed both of them from her with hands that shook. “They’ll just make me feel awful, and the dope’ll give me worse dreams. I know that.” She looked up into Norah’s face, the flesh around her eyes braised-looking and traced all over with thin lines of fatigue and pain. In a small, very careful voice she went on. “I don’t... think I can keep this up much longer.”

“It’s just until Saturday night,” said Norah. She rested a hand on Christine’s shoulder. “Shang Ko says that’s the night of the new moon. If you’re still willing...”

“Not that.” Christine’s hand strayed to the bruises on her neck, then moved away quickly. She managed another firefly smile. “I mean, I’ll be glad to have that... over...” Her voice was so pinched, Norah could barely hear. “And I’ll do what I have to do.” From the darkness of the living room Alec’s breathing was deep and soft, and not even wind stirred the jungle of castor and banana around the little house.

“But I mean everything.” She drew a long breath, as if trying to make herself let go of the tension in her muscles, her bones. “All of it. I’m thirty,

you know. I don't feel like I've rested in years. I don't want to end up like Dale Wilmer, taking whatever horrid roles I can get and nobody willing to risk hiring me anymore, or poor Wally Reid, dying in a sanatorium... and anyway, you can only keep going so long on things like dope and gin and stuntmen with pretty eyelashes." She reached down and stroked Buttercreme's head, letting Black Jasmine lick her wrist and Chang Ming rub anxiously against her ankle. "Sometimes I see myself that way, and I get scared. I have to stop. What use is it to run away from the demon if I just kill myself with cocaine.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, and rose. "I didn't mean to wake you, dear, and I really do try not to be like that awful old lady who made you stay up to read to her." She blinked hard, her eyes swimming with tears, and shook her head, denying their existence, denying their power over her. "I'm just tired. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Of course you will." Norah took the unopened ivory box and replaced it in the dresser drawer, picked up the glass of gin, and started to carry it to the kitchen.

"Don't, darling. That cost ten dollars a bottle! Pour it back in the flask... and I don't see what's so funny," she added. Then she laughed herself, as Norah was laughing, and her face lost some of its haggard look as she returned to the sagging bed. But it was still some time before she slept, and for a long while Norah was aware of her nervous twitching and stifled moans as she wandered in some incomprehensible dream.

"I always thought it was all nonsense, like the crap Tante Rivke cooked up—Tante Rivke was supposed to be a witch." Alec leaned on the post of the porch and put his arm around Norah's waist as Shang Ko's thin form dissolved into the fog along the canal. "Don't put your hat on the bed because it means death, don't put your hat on the table because it means you'll lose money, don't put iron near the door or walk on the same side of the street as Mrs. Ginsberg because she'll give you the evil eye..."

He pushed up his glasses to rub his eyes. He looked dead tired. Norah had been awakened by the sound of the old sorcerer's departure and had no idea what time it was, but the silence was complete; no sound came from the direction of the pier. Fog drifted thick above the water at the foot of the brick steps. Inside the house, Chang Ming woofed at goblins in his sleep.

"And now I don't know what to think."

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Norah's arm tightened around his waist, and she shivered, not so much at the damp cold—it was less cold here than it was in the Cahuenga

Hills—as at the recollection of the sketch she had seen so briefly and the horror of the house with the broken mirror and the bloodstains on the walls.

“Sometimes I still think it’s bullshit, you know,” said Alec. “I see the little spell papers he makes, and I hear him talk about drawing power down from the new moon, and I think, *This is nuts*. Then I remember Blake getting up again after you hit him and the way the fire came out of the ground... and I think about meeting that thing again tomorrow night on the pier...”

He shook his head; his arm drew her closer to him. “And I think, *This had better work*.”

TWENTY-TWO

WATER

Go through danger without losing faith...
Constant pitfalls...
Trapped and helpless within the
deepest pit...

“ARE YOU SURE this’ll work?” Christine huddled deeper into her furs, her face a small white triangle against the sable cloud of collar. “I mean, if we’re laying down spells to summon the Rat-God, and we’re out here on a pier with water all around us, and we’ve got this box... Isn’t he going to—uh—smell a rat?”

Below their feet night-black water souged among rows of wooden pilings. Against the cold arch of stars the outstretched arm of the Malibu headland curved away to the northwest, its cliffs as sharply cut as a painted backdrop. Like a far lower line of cliffs the square brick buildings of the Santa Monica suburb of Ocean Park crouched, visible through the darkened gimcrack of the gate at the end of the aisle of shuttered concession stands.

Pickering / Lick Pier closed at two A.M. on Sunday mornings after a Saturday night of jangling revelry seemingly unaffected by the winter’s dense chill. It was now close to four, moonless and clear. The piers to the norm were dark, turreted silhouettes against the crystalline phosphorescence of the waves. Between the bowling alley and the Breakers Restaurant, between Finlay’s Museum of Natural Wonders and the pavilion where the carousel animals stared with frozen eyes into the darkness, shadow hung like curtains of black velvet, masking a terrible and living stillness.

The Shining Crane’s voice was soft against the muffled roar of incoming tide, the faint tinkle of collar hardware and leash buckles, the hollow tread of feet. “He is a demon,” he said, “a slave, in part, to the ritual of his summoning. He cannot stay away.” He shifted the burden of the camera tripods on his shoulders with a faint creaking of leather straps. “More, demons do not think like men. He is cunning, knowing what to offer those he believes he can use, knowing what forms to take, what illusions to hold forth. But it is instinct, and those illusions are taken from the dreams of those he would use, as the speech is taken from their hearts, their mouths, and the action from their minds. It is you, rather than he, who weaves the forms of his demands.”

“Sounds Freudian,” Alec remarked, panting a little, for the velvet-draped cube of the demon trap was heavy with its strappings of silver and lead. “Like dreaming about a car and it’s really your father.”

“Freud was correct in saying that the mind clothes what the heart does not wish to see naked.” Shang Ko turned his head constantly as he spoke, dark eyes seeming to pierce the black slots between the closed raree shows, custard booths, and shooting galleries. The end of his dragon-carved staff made barely a sound on the thick wood underfoot. “Yet his truth is not the whole of Truth. Da Shu Ken can robe himself in any form, can take any voice in a dream, and those he takes are always those closest and most beloved by the dreamer. Did you not find this so?”

Alec looked away quickly. “Yeah,” he said, not elaborating.

What did he offer you?

“Good heavens,” squeaked Christine. “You mean all this time I’ve been dreaming about that *gorgeous* croupier at the Montmartre, or that lovely violin player, or Rudy Valentino, or that darling waiter at the Chief, or those absolutely scrumptious stuntmen... and it might have been the Rat-God?”

In spite of the tension, the terror that underlay the night like the thin note of unheard music, Alec had to grin. “I think you’re safe so far, Chris.”

They reached the end of the pier. Past the sleeping mass of wings and struts that made up the Captive Aeroplanes, starlight prickled on the slow draw of the surf. Behind them the concession stands and locked halls had a look of waiting: blank-faced, expressionless animals making up their slow and stupid minds to pounce. The grinning clown faces on Puzzletown’s exaggeratedly ramshackle facade gaped and grimaced with stilled, obscene laughter; the garish posters promising saber-teeth and curve-tusked mammoths in the museum seemed, with the movement of their vague shadows, to stir with uneasy life. The elevated track of the Whip and the spiky, many-armed hydra of the Frolic appeared to have only seconds before lurched into stillness, mindless and tarantulate, and on either side of the long aisle of buildings the two roller coasters rose like dragon skeletons rotting in starlight, dreaming in the midst of their decay.

The cold air breathed ocean and sand, creosote tar, stale popcorn, and peril. Norah drew closer to Christine, the dogs trotting self-importantly around their feet.

“Remain here.” Shang set his burden down and turned slowly, studying the uneven wooden wall of Over the Top, the wooden railings, and the dark expanse of sea behind them, as Doc LaRousse had studied the desert skyline at Red Bluff. “Unleash the dogs. He must not come before the trap is set.”

Norah had private doubts about unleashing the three Pekes, which had

been busily sniffing and anointing every corner they passed along the night canyon of the midway. But when she obeyed, the three tiny animals sat in a row before the old wizard, tails curled, ears up, flat, solemn faces raised as he lifted his hand in a series of small gestures that drew the starry dark of their eyes.

“Guard us, my children,” Shang Ko said. “Anciently they turned you from what you were into the forms which now you wear, but your hearts are ever the same. Protect these ladies, as you protected all those ladies throughout the centuries, from the evils that have neither faces, nor bodies, nor names.”

They turned, ridiculous creatures, sun-gold, moon-pale, the black and white of starlight, and toddled with their businesslike Pekingese roll to the edge of the terrible velvet zone of shadow. Leaning heavily on his staff, Shang limped out into the open starlight at the end of the pier.

Alec was there already, quickly unfolding the cumbersome wooden tripods that ordinarily held cameras and reflectors. On one of them he had already set the demon trap, draped in the old mourning shawl of silk velvet that had been Norah’s mother’s. The other three held flash mechanisms rigged to a car battery, mechanisms whose light would serve, they hoped, to drive Da Shu Ken into the trap.

Taking the carpetbag from Christine, Shang Ko drew forth a number of small bronze incense burners and crystal perfume bottles, candles and incense, chalk and vials of powdered silver, and some dark fluid whose smell, even above the salt of the ocean, was a stinging, bitter blend of alcohol and blood. Last of all he took from the bag the set of flat black disks he called the *luopan*, the gold on it winking like jewels in the dark. Then from his pocket he drew three coins and knelt on the dirty wooden planks to throw them, reading the marks by starlight.

“Thunder over Heaven,” he said softly. “And here, the sign of fire. Fire over Wind—the sign of sacrifice... The omens are very bad. Lake over Heaven...”. He shook his head and with the chalk began to sketch the trigrams, small patterns of broken lines. “Against Lake over Heaven we must write Fire over Mountain, the sign of the traveler; against Fire we must write Water. Heaven over Fire, the City under Siege... it touches upon the stars in the constellation you call Lion and thus is strengthened by the auspices of Miss Christine’s birth.”

While he spoke, the Shining Crane drew a web of linked diagrams on the boards underfoot, now and then consulting the *luopan*, joining the sets of trigrams, and radiating strange small curls of power. “There, the dragon protects us from the northeast,” he said, gesturing back toward the rise of the

hills along whose ridge Fourth Street ran and making a mark at the diagram's edge. "This afternoon when the tide was low I came, I drew the dragon and the tiger upon the pilings, the *xue*, of the pier, and made sure that the *sha*, the sand of the beach, was as it should be..."

His crooked fingers flicked and spun at the concentric rings of the *luopan*, and he drew a few more signs. Norah shivered, half recalling the pattern from her dream in the desert, recognizing them as the signs sketched by the vile old priest in the horned hat.

It was like a mah-jongg game, she realized. If one happened to be east that round, it doubled one's score—one's existing power—and if east was one's proper direction, it was doubled again. And whatever was in one's hand—someone born in the Hour of the Monkey or under the sign of the snake, the new moon, the incoming tide—all of it counted, a few points here, a double there, to stand against the dreadful reality of the power that had blown up the oil wells, that had raped a kindly old drunk of his personality and will, that had caused to appear in the dry California grasses small bits of topaz and diamond that had vanished in Manchester two and a half years before.

Cold wind stirred Christine's furs and sent a crumpled newspaper scurrying like a colorless rodent across the pier. For an instant the movement drew Shang Ko's eyes, then he returned to his work. From the main octagon he drew a long aisle back toward the darkness of the midway, stretching into the shadow that lay like a dropped velvet stole beneath Over the Top's uneven wood and canvas walls. Huddled in her hand-me-down coat, Norah could barely see him in that darkness, a blur of white hair, pale face, hands like moving shreds of moonlight, clutching awkwardly at the chalk with stiff and crippled fingers while he murmured thin music in his throat.

In the great circle's center Alec measured out dollops of magnesium powder into the flash holders; he was quiet and serious, as if he were setting up lights to make an actress of dubious age look twenty-two again. His breath made puffs of diamond in the darkness. Over the sea, the stars seemed to bend close, like fairies fishing for their souls in the waves.

Only when Shang Ko stood up and started to walk back down that aisle of chalk did Alec remove the trap's velvet veil. The camera lens gleamed faintly silver, like a moving eye. On the dull strips of lead that sealed the black-painted wooden sides of the box, rounded, deliberate signs of archaic Chinese stalked like strange bird tracks. The signs, Norah knew, made the wood proof against decay by water in perpetuity, doubled the seal of the solder, made fast the closures around the shutter and on the small compartment on the back where the necklace would go.

From the carpetbag Christine took the necklace itself. The remaining

opal glared like a madman's eye, with its shadow of a prisoned devil; the charred buttons of the pearls were a grin filled with rotted teeth. When Christine fumbled with the deformed clasp, Alec stepped toward her, hands outstretched to help.

"No! Do not touch her!" Shang Ko cried.

Both hesitated, surprised. Then Christine tightened her lips and forced the clasp open, shook aside her hair, and worked the half-broken thing closed again. Shivering, she straightened up and shed her coat, the black furs falling around her to reveal the crimson dress she'd put on back at Alec's house, its color turned by the thready starlight to the blackness of old blood.

She looked, Norah thought, less like her dream and more like the ending sequences of *Kiss of Darkness*: the moon-white woman, the black gown, the gleaming jewels. Under-foot heavy swells beat the pilings as the tide moved in. Ashore, the city dreamed.

"Leash the dogs, Miss Norah."

Turning, Norah saw that Shang Ko had donned a necklace of heavy brass cones, the metal clashing softly as he moved. In one hand he held a whip, and in the other, an immense tambourine hung with spell-written ribbons. His face was calm, but she saw the tambourine's ribbons vibrate with the trembling of his hand.

"Take them to one side with you, but whatever happens, do not step outside the lines of the circle."

After a moment's hesitation Norah clucked her tongue, and the three Pekes trotted to her, none of them treading on the chalked spell lines. It seemed to her for a moment that above the scribbled marks of power a faint, shivering thread of light hung in the air.

It is real, she thought. The magic of the moon and tides, the power the old man sought to summon from the shape of the Venice hills, and the marks on the pilings underfoot.

The Rat-God—the thing she'd glimpsed that night in Hsu Kwan's sketch... That was real, too.

It was coming for them.

She fixed the leashes and drew the dogs clear to the far side of the ring, near a shuttered wooden shed whose face bore the words PEANUTS—COTTON CANDY. Only when she had done so did Shang Ko walk to the front of the circle, standing before the break in it from which the aisle extended away into darkness.

Norah found it suddenly difficult to breathe.

Then he swung the whip around his head, and Norah recalled the vile old shaman in the Hall of the Tranquil Earth, the whip crack that had begun the

rite of summons.

But before Shang Ko could move, Chang Ming sprang to his feet with a soft, deadly growl.

The old man was still, whip upraised in his hand.

Black Jasmine and Buttercreme were standing, too, straining at the ends of their leashes. Far off, in the darkness of the pier, Norah heard a confused jangling of sound, like a calliope raving in delirious dream. The noise died almost before she could be sure she had heard anything, but in the silence the rush of the ocean below their feet seemed eerily loud.

Shang's breath hissed. Christine said, "Norah..." in a tiny voice like a child.

Norah started to move toward her, but a vicious, sputtering clatter rose to their right, within the wooden walls of Over the Top. Machinery chattered, and small iron wheels stuttered over the sharp-cornered tracks, the fretful banging of a monstrous and demented baby. At the same moment, to their left, the spiky iron arms of the Double Whirl jerked into motion, swinging the cars on their ends like clubs, trapped around the central hubs but yanking and rattling, trying to get away. All three dogs began barking furiously, jerking on their leashes, hackles dark and ears up as they lunged.

Norah's hands and feet had grown utterly cold. Like the fitful roar of an infuriated dragon, the Zip came to life in the darkness, a long train of empty cars rushing over the rails, slashing around the curve as if they would spring from the track and leap on the small group of humans who dared to believe they could trap the Kara-Kudai, the Black Rat of the Steppes, dared to think they could summon him to his destruction.

Christine didn't scream, but she shrank, hands groping at her own bare arms and half-uncovered throat. Alec stepped forward, caught up the soft black mountain of sables, and threw its protective weight around her shoulders. She pressed back against him, staring with straining eyes down the spiderweb of signs toward the darkness of the midway that should have been empty.

The rush of the roller coaster died. Norah heard the cars rumble up a rise, then down when they could not quite crest the top, decreasing momentum penduluming to futile silence. With a grating moan, the Double Whirl grew still; the Over the Top cars yattered to the bottom of their artificial whirlpool and ground to a halt.

Silence lay over the pier except for the sigh of the waves and the faint groan of wind searching the stands.

It had been still a moment earlier. Impossibly, Norah thought she smelled desert dust and the feral, filthy sweetness of rats.

Then, far off in the dark chasm of the midway, she heard the shrill crashing of broken glass. All three dogs flung themselves against their leashes, barking wildly again. Above the shrill clamor could be made out the grating rip of nails tearing loose from wood, and far back in the darkness Norah thought she saw something pale flicker and move.

Not human, she thought. Her mind stalled on reality, took refuge, as it had all her life, in the calm practicalities of observation. She was aware, as if in reference to someone else, that she could hardly breathe. Turning her head, she scouted a shadow behind the shuttered peanut stand, but the faint flicker of the lines of light stayed her. She must not break the field of power. Starlight touched something far back in the darkness, something huge that moved with a disjointed, eerie bobbing, a bizarre lattice of dark and light moving in the stygian black like a living swarm of floating sticks.

Shang Ko stepped to the gateway of the sketched aisle. He had set aside the whip and the necklace of brass cones silently, realizing that there was no need of a summons. His white hair stirred in the offshore wind as he lifted his dragon-carved staff.

A moment before she saw clearly what the thing in the darkness was, Norah knew.

It might have been the sound that told her, the faint creak of wires and the hollow clicking, like Christine's bamboo wind chimes. The scratch of heavy claws on the wood without the creak of weight. It might have been the half-guessed shape of stained ashy gray, only a few shades lighter than the darkness. Empty eyeholes, the tulwar curve of fangs. Huge as it was, it scuttled like a rat—a smooth, steady rush, then stillness, waiting, a silence without breath, and she could see it sitting up, paws together like obscene hands.

Watching them. Seeing them with eyes blank and white, twins of the jewels in the Moon of Rats.

Knowing exactly who they were.

Still with the stillness of a thing that survived at any cost.

Then, suddenly, it moved, springing with a horrible speed. Norah pressed her fist to her mouth to keep from screaming as Shang swung his staff toward the thing, and in the blazing blue glare of lightning that streamed from the eyes of the carved dragon, Norah saw the nightmare springing out of the dark: the eyeless skull, the eight-foot xylophone of bones, the flashing claws and teeth of what had a hundred thousand years ago been a saber-tooth.

The skeleton skidded back before the lightning, jaws gaping in a soundless hiss. Shang Ko swung his staff again, the light streaming from it now a cold yellow banner of sparks that splattered through the skeleton and

glittered among the naked ribs. The saber-tooth rolled back as from a blow, gathered itself, and sprang again. One hooked fore-paw slashed out, and Shang, barely avoiding the main force of the blow, cried out in pain as the talons raked his back. His staff went skidding; nimble and vicious, the saber-tooth turned and leapt at Alec and Christine.

Shang shouted some word in Chinese as he caught up the nearest of the flash tripods, and the powder, as he flung it into the bone thing's face, burst into blinding white flame. The saber-tooth reared, clawing at the flame that seared the ancient film of tar covering the bones, and Shang struck with the tripod as with a clumsy spear. Above the furious barking of the dogs, Norah heard the crack as the metal met bone.

The skull split, but imbued with the Rat-God's will, it did not fall to pieces; nor did the robe of flame that now enveloped the skeleton seem to devour it or diminish its dreadful strength. Sheeted with rags of orange, yellow, blue flame like a garment of torn silk, the demon struck at Shang again, sending the tripod spinning from his hands, then whirled to snatch at the other two tripods, hurling them at the wizard even as the powder burst into blinding fire. Shang cried out, striking at his sleeve as it caught, and in that second the saber-tooth was on him, flinging him ten feet with a crushing swat and then leaping after the broken body where it lay among a sudden scatter of flame on the pier's tar-soaked boards.

Norah felt the thin leather of the leashes snap in her hands. Chang Ming, Black Jasmine, and Buttercreme threw themselves at the thing, the light of the spreading fire washing over them, blazing in their diamond collars, changing them as they ran.

Chang Ming changed first, though afterward Norah could not recall how this had happened, only that what had been a flat-faced, sturdy little dog of eleven pounds or so was suddenly huge, nearly hip-high, thick-muscled and sleek—a dog more like a lion, with a lion's heavy mane and broad, powerful muzzle, a lion's uncaring rage. By the time Norah realized what was happening, Buttercreme and Black Jasmine had already taken on their other forms, their true forms: fu-dogs, the hunters of demons, as they looked in the presence of the creatures that were their true prey.

The three lion dogs fell upon the bone thing, seizing ribs and forepaws and the great, spiny column of the neck, eyes reflecting the fire that ran along the creature's limbs and poured forth in streams from the sockets of the skull. It batted them free, blood streaming from saber gashes in their backs and splattering from their manes, and they sprang on it again, grabbing, holding, slowing its terrible rush toward Alec and Christine. Fire spread everywhere, running in trails down the tar between the pier's boards and spilling along the

railings. Norah bolted across the intervening space to grab Shang, dragging him back toward the gateway to the aisle, where at least there could be some refuge without violating the circle of power. The old man groaned, his hand fumbling for his staff; in the growing glare of the flames the blood on his face looked now ruby, now black as ink.

Christine screamed as the great skeletal form descended on her, dragged back by the dogs in a whirlwind of flame. The flames caught in the fur of her coat. Alec tore it from her, hurled it away, then ripped the Moon of Rats from her throat and flung it after the coat. Across the holocaust of fire Norah saw him shove Christine toward the railing and the sea. Above the roar she heard him yell, "Dive! Get in the water!"

White arms and shoulders flashing golden against the blood-colored silk, Christine stumbled toward the rail. The bone ghost turned to follow, and again the dogs dragged it down. Chang Ming's huge jaws crushed on the nose of that flaming skull; Buttercreme, like a pale moon demon, ripped away the thewless bones of the leg in a snapping tangle of broken wires. With a silent convulsion that was more terrible than any scream, the bone thing heaved, shuddered, and came apart, and from its midst billowed a burning entity of fire-shot smoke more terrible than the skeleton that moments before had been the armature of its greed.

Flame surrounded it, filled it, though no flame could penetrate its darkness. Norah, kneeling beside Shang Ko in the circle's gate, gasped at the sudden stench of filth, the musty, sweetish terrible stink of rats. Bigger than a man, though not so big as the saber-tooth, squat, smooth-furred, immeasurably powerful, it seemed no more than half-visible, glittering, terrible, burning, except for its opal eyes. It was the tiling of Hsu Kwan's drawing, infinitely more hideous, a half-seen shadow of pestilence and greed with eyes like nothing Norah had ever seen before. It opened its mouth and hissed, and Christine, one hand on the part of the railing that was not in flame, turned, body paralyzed and dark eyes stretched and blind with terror.

Later Norah realized she must have been moving before the thing made a noise. Even as it fell upon Christine, Norah lunged forward, scooped the Moon of Rats from the flaming boards where it had fallen, and clasped it around her neck. The hot metal burned her flesh; she screamed "HERE!" and the thing swung around. Then it was on her, growing as it reached, black smoke dripping flames that were colorless as moonlight, through which she dimly sensed the springing dogs.

Light, like a mountain of flash powder, exploded into the air from the Shining Crane's upflung hand. Blinded, Norah covered her face with her hands, praying dizzily that Alec had guessed what was happening, praying

that the next thing that happened wouldn't be those blue-steel claws tearing her as they had torn Keith Pelletier.

It was Alec who pulled her to her feet. She had no recollection of falling to her knees, though they were bruised and smarting. She raised her head, disoriented with shock; his face was a wash of sweat, sluiced in a sulfurous glare. The concession stand behind her was burning, the blaze racing along the tarred wood of the pier. To her left she saw the irregular mass of Over the Top, a sweeping torrent of flames that spread to the building opposite and crawled in wormlike trails up the towering, skeletal lattices of the Zip. The heat was suffocating, beating against her face like giant wings, and she was conscious of sweat matting her unwinding mass of hair.

"The whole pier's going!" Alec yelled, tearing the necklace from her throat and thrusting her toward the railing. "... dance hall... halfway down the midway..."

Looking back, Norah saw this was true. Every building from the pier's end down to the Breakers, on either side of the midway, was ablaze, and the fire had spread across the Zip from end to end, cutting off retreat. Alec pulled Shang Ko to his feet, and Norah put an arm under the old man's shoulder, dragging him along. "There's ten feet of water off the end," Alec shouted above the roaring of the fire. "We'll never get down the midway."

"What about the demon?" Norah shouted back. Christine ran forward to help them through the flaring darkness, stumbling as she kicked off her shoes, gasping for breath in the stifling smoke and heat.

"I tripped the shutter the minute Shang threw the light." Alec passed his share of Shang Ko's sagging weight to Christine, grabbed the handle of the trap, and dragged the heavy black box toward the burning rails. Color hammered around them, blinding hot, searing their lungs, their skin. Sick with shock and anoxia, Norah wondered if she was going to faint. Burning fragments of paper and wood spun through the air, hissed on the water below.

Alec kicked loose a section of burning rail and pitched the trap over the edge. Then he helped Christine through the open gap and, as she began her gingerly, perilous descent of pilings and struts, helped Norah, following at last himself, with Shang Ko clinging feebly to his back.

Even down there, in the blackness beneath the pier, the light of the fire had spread, reflected in glaring sheets on the heaving water. Christine saw something struggling in the tide below them and cried out, pointing: the tiny black head of a dog, bobbing and struggling vainly to paddle to shore. The next second Christine released her grip on the struts and threw herself outward, a momentary flash of flame-touched red silk and white arms against the darkness of streaming hair.

When Norah and Alec, after letting go and falling the last ten feet into the Pacific, managed to get the half-conscious wizard ashore, it was to find Christine sitting in the sand in the vast yellow glare of the fire, cradling three wet, bloody rags of sand-matted fur against her breast and crying while they licked her face.

TWENTY-THREE

FIRE OVER HEAVEN

Sign of great sacrifice.
You travel in a big carriage,
safely and in style...
All undertakings are blessed by heaven...

PICKERING/LICK PIER burned to the waterline. By noon nothing was left but the charred roof of the Dome Theater and the seaward end of the Big Dipper, and it was only luck that a considerable portion of Ocean Park didn't go up as well. By the time the demon hunters reached Alec's car, Ocean Front Walk was a chaos of fire trucks and pajama-clad spectators, the pier itself a mass of fifty- and sixty-foot flames, smoke pouring in a column hundreds of feet high to blot the sky.

"Will the trap be all right, lying in the water off the end of the pier that way?" Norah asked, as Alec guided the rattletrap Ford out of the traffic jam on Main Street, up the hill to Fourth, and southward to Venice.

"It's sealed tight." Alec glanced back at the Shining Crane, who was slumped unconscious in the backseat, face and hands blackened with soot and blood darkening the rags of his coat. Chang Ming, bleeding terribly and quietly licking his nose in pain, lay in the old man's lap; every now and then he gently nuzzled the scarred and broken hand. Christine sat beside him, her eyes open, but Norah wondered how much she actually saw. From time to time her hand would move over Black Jasmine's blood-matted head or Buttercreme's, but she looked stunned, as if barely conscious of anything but the nightmare through which they all had passed. Norah was aware that her own hands were blistered, her throat smarting from smoke and the burns left by the hot metal of the necklace. She ached in every muscle and felt an overwhelming desire to hide in a corner and cry.

Alec went on. "I'll take Shang up to St. Catherine's Hospital on Ocean Park. Tonight I'll get Captain Oleson to take me fishing through the wreckage for what we can find. Every businessman and half the bootleggers in Santa Monica'll be out there as soon as the pilings cool."

Through the morning, while Christine held the Pokes for Norah to snip hair and stitch cuts and apply dressings to their wounds, Norah was aware of the sickly yellow cast of the sky, and when she looked out through Alec's kitchen window, she could see the smoke like a black mountain to the north.

When Alec and Shang Ko returned from the hospital just after noon, the flames were out. Recalling her VAD training and the things Sean and Jim had told her about battlefield casualties, Norah gave the dogs first water, then milk and a little beef broth, all of which they drank thankfully, though unable to eat. Shrunken in size now, the claw marks on their sides and backs resembled nothing so much as the wounds inflicted by a gigantic rat.

“What about Frank Brown?” Norah asked late that afternoon. She and Alec were sitting in the kitchen, their voices low so as not to waken Christine, who slept like the dead on the living room couch. One of Shang Ko’s numerous grandsons had appeared a short while before in a Model T even more elderly and broken-down than Alec’s to remove the old man to the dark safety of the tunnels beneath Chinatown.

“You mean, will he still have the police out after Shang?” Alec shrugged. “I doubt it. I’d be surprised if they ran down the false name we gave at St. Catherine’s. My guess is, if Brown doesn’t push things with Hsu Kwan, they’ll let him go in a couple of days.”

“But Brown may very well have known, or guessed, that if he obeyed his dream and had Shang arrested, Christine was going to die.” Norah pushed aside her plate. She’d made French toast, of all things, there being little in Alec’s icebox besides milk and eggs, and had surprised herself by devouring it ravenously. *Lost bread*, Alec said they called it in the South. “He certainly knew Jesperson was going to die. And he gets off scot-free.”

“Producers do.” Alec shrugged and stirred his coffee. “That’s Hollywood. My guess is that Chris won’t even quit sleeping with him—not until she’s fulfilled her contract and has Conklin well and truly sewed up. But she’ll take old Frank for everything he’s got in the meantime and drop him like a hot potato when she’s done. With the offer Charlie just got from Lassky, that’ll be comeuppance enough for Brown, especially if he goes ahead and tries to buy out Enterprise on the assumption that he’s going to have a star for the next couple of years. Not to mention the assumption that he’s going to have a cameraman or a scenarist.”

Norah yawned hugely and worked her shoulders. Both the rush of adrenaline and the shock of the aftermath were wearing off. In addition to her multiple aches and pains, she found herself profoundly sleepy. Late golden sunlight streamed comfortingly through the kitchen windows, and she wondered how well she’d sleep that night.

Not well, she thought. Not until she had seen the trap brought up and the Moon of Rats—which now resided in the center of a chalked protective circle in a corner of the workroom floor—sealed into its own small compartment, and the whole thing taken far out to sea and dropped.

“By the way...” She looked up from her tea. “I think I stopped saying thank you a long time ago, and I’m not sure I should have. None of this was your fight at all, you know. And without you we would have been lost.”

He grinned at her and pushed up his glasses with one stubby forefinger. “Well, there were times, walking out onto that pier this morning, when I did think about that. It’s funny, when that... that thing came out of the darkness, a part of my mind was still thinking, *There’s got to be a rational explanation for this.*”

He shrugged again. “For the life of me I couldn’t come up with one. But what Shang said was right, you know.”

“What?”

His hands turned the coffee cup on the table before him, neat quarter turns, as he had at Enyart’s, keeping the handle pointed precisely, as if the matter absorbed all his attention. Norah noticed as if for the first time, that his hands had been burned and then had been bandaged neatly by the emergency room staff at St. Catherine’s. Scrapes and abrasions marked one side of his face, surrounded with the red stains of Mercurochrome, and his hair was crumpled and filthy with soot.

“That not to use whatever power you’ve been given is not a neutral act. It’s a blow struck for evil. No, I’m not a wizard like Shang, but... when it came down to it, that didn’t matter. I have my own power, for whatever that’s worth: knowledge and... self, I guess. Just the willingness to be there. Besides...” He shrugged, at a loss for words.

After a time he reached out with one bandaged hand and touched the half-fallen swag of her hair that she had not thought to do more with than pin carelessly out of the way. “One day I’ll take you out to the hills behind Moorpark, up in the valley where they film the Westerns. In September the grass turns exactly the color of your hair.”

Five or ten minutes later Norah drew back a little from the circle of his arms, yawned again, and said, “This sounds like the most unromantic thing in the world, but I’m absolutely torn between carrying on and falling asleep. I love you, Alec—” She realized obliquely that it was the first time she’d said so, but somehow it felt like something they’d both known for a long time, “—but if I don’t get to bed, I think I’m going to go facedown in the syrup.”

He yawned and picked up his glasses where he’d set them aside during the sudden frenzy of that first embrace. “I didn’t want to spoil things by saying so, but I think you’re right.” At some point in the past few minutes she’d transferred from her own chair to his lap; sunlight made a confusion of bright patterns over the blue plaid of his shirtsleeve, the white cotton of her blouse, the trailing river of her untangling hair. “You can have my bed.”

“You take half of it,” Norah said as they tiptoed softly through the living room where Christine lay sleeping, surrounded by the folded-up towels upon which slumbered her tiny guardians. “I’m certainly not going to turn you out of your own bed after last night, and I’m too exhausted to deal with the proprieties now. And I think,” she added as she took off her sensible shoes, “that we’re both *far* too tired to be in danger of disgracing ourselves.”

As it happened, she was wrong about that.

On Tuesday night, by the misty light of the waxing moon, the *Whatshername* put out from Santa Monica Harbor for Catalina Island. From the end of the Santa Monica pier Norah could see the lights of the boat, riding some distance out on the dark sea. Below her in the darkness she heard Captain Oleson saying, “Naw, it’s no trouble, Ackey me boy. Next shipment isn’t due from Canada for a week or more, and what the hell have I got to do around here?”

“So you just thought you’d do a little diving with me and every salvager and scrounge in Santa Monica yesterday, is that it?” asked Alec’s voice.

“Look, you arrogant little shutterbug, if I have my own idea of what’s fun...”

“You don’t think the police got him after all, do you?” Christine walked back to Norah through the clammy darkness. She carried Black Jasmine cuddled against her beneath the gray chinchilla of her coat, the diamonds on his collar twinkling, even as Norah held Buttercreme cradled in her arms, the long, singed cascade of her ivory-colored tail trailing down. Chang Ming, who was getting around quite well on a splinted leg, looked up from where he sat at Norah’s side, and his tail swept back and forth across his back. “He should have been here before this.”

Norah wondered if the dogs remembered anything about the fight, anything about their transformation into the fu-dogs of legend, anything about the blazing horror of bones and fire. They seemed not to. Beyond the clinginess of injured animals and stiffness when they moved, they seemed to be their usual lively, happy selves.

Perhaps they see no difference, she thought. *Perhaps, in their hearts, they are always fu-dogs, ready to take on any number of animate saber-tooth skeletons and evil demons for the sake of those they love.*

“More than the police,” she said quietly, “I’m worried that he was hurt worse than he let on. Alec said he refused to remain at the hospital longer than it took them to bandage his back and his arm. He might have had other injuries.”

I was hurt inside, Shang Ko had said. She remembered the torrent of fire and lightning striking the old man, remembered his cry of pain.

He had been young when he had met Da Shu Ken the first time. Now, when he was old and brittle and frightened, how badly had the Rat-God hurt him when it had swept aside not only his body but all the magic he could summon up? She wondered how she could even inquire if he did not make an appearance tonight.

In Christine's arms, Black Jasmine turned his head and let out a gruff little yak. Chang Ming's ears lifted, and he trotted a few clumsy steps down the pier, tail vibrating furiously. A moment later, in the thin moonlight among the rocking shadows of the fishing boat masts, Norah caught movement, the pale blur of faces, the gleam of moonlight on white hair.

The Shining Crane—or perhaps one of his grandsons—had somehow retrieved his staff, stained with smoke but still intact, from the wreck of the pier. If he moved a little more slowly and stiffly than before and leaned a little more heavily, it was hardly to be noticed. With his other arm he supported a very small and very ancient Chinese woman who swayed a little on her deformed feet but moved with surprising sureness for one so old. The hair piled on top of her head, held in place with a couple of chopsticks thrust through it, was as white as the moonlight, and her eyes were as bright and black as a hen's.

“Miss Christine, Miss Norah,” said Shang Ko, a note of joy in his voice that told Norah exactly who this woman was even before the old man spoke, “permit me to make known unto you my most honored colleague Ni Kuei Nu, the Mud Tortoise, the lady of the Bayan Har Shan, the greatest of the sorceresses of the Middle Kingdom.”

And other things as well, thought Norah, looking at them together, the tall old man and the fragile and beautiful woman on his arm. Other things as well.

“*Buen' noches*,” the Mud Tortoise said, holding out one brown-burned peasant hand. “Twenty years am I looking for this old *brujo*,” she went on in a strong Spanish accent. “Waiting and listening and reading the water and the fire, and does he use his power so I can find him? Does he work one single spell big enough to let me hear down in Ciudad Mexico? Pff!”

“You came here from *Mexico*!” Christine stared at her with wide eyes. “I didn't know they *had* Chinese in Mexico!”

The Mud Tortoise's eyes twinkled. “Everywhere there is a little money to be made, you find Chinese.”

“And everywhere there are Jews,” added Alec, climbing up the ladder from the boat and stretching out his hand. “If it weren't for Chinese restaurants, the Jews would starve to death. My lady.” He bowed awkwardly over her hand and turned to Shang Ko, who was regarding his colleague with

a combination of pride and happiness, as if, even though he lived another fifty years, he could never get enough of looking at her.

More quietly, Alec said to her, “You should have seen him the other night. Without him we’d all be dead—dead a dozen times, really.”

“And without you,” Shang Ko said quietly, “I would also have been dead. Alive-dead in hiding and in fear. I was a fool.”

“You were a fool not to have tried to reach me,” the Mud Tortoise said briskly. She stroked Black Jasmine’s head, nestled in Christine’s furs, and the little dog nibbled on her outstretched fingers.

Norah shook her head. “You can’t call a man who breaks his leg a fool for not being able to walk,” she said. “Some wounds go deep.”

The old wizard looked gravely across into her eyes, then at Alec by her side. “I am pleased to see,” he said softly, “that even the deepest wounds heal in time.”

They dropped the demon trap in the deep water on the far side of Catalina Island, a dry and rugged scarp of rock a few miles in circumference. Shang Ko and the Mud Tortoise marked the black box, on every strap and seal of lead, with spells of holding and power, signs that the Rat-God could never pass, power that would act with the power of the ocean to hold him forever prisoner. The Moon of Rats, sealed in another compartment of the trap, would always be his. No one else would use it to summon him.

“This is the place,” said Shang Ko, holding out his hands palm-down over the yacht’s rail while the Mud Tortoise knelt, drawing invisible signs on the box and now and then tossing her own three bronze coins or consulting her ivory *luopan* to fine-tune the magic and tie it to stars and tides and the currents of moving fate.

“Wind over Water,” she said quietly, jingling the coins in her hands. “The sign of flowing water that shall cover the Rat-God forever. Earth over Wind—ascendance and the triumph of steadfast work. The signs are good to hold the demon here for eternity. Thunder over Lake...” She smiled in secret delight “Not a sign for the demon, that one...” Her eyes twinkled, and she straightened up. “*Asi*. It is accomplished.”

Norah, Alec, and Shang Ko lifted the box to the rail. Shang Ko said softly, “Da Shu Ken, demon of the north, I consign you to lie between the farthest west and the farthest east. Spirit of fire and earth, I consign you to the deeps of the ocean forever. Come not forth ever again. Sleep quietly, knowing nothing, in the darkness of the deep.” They tipped the box over, and it was gone.

“That’s Avalon.” The bandages on Alec’s hands were a white blur in the

shadows of the deckhouse as he pointed to the lone sequin of light. "I'll take you out there some day."

Norah turned her head slightly against his shoulder, the phrase catching at her: *I'll take you...*

Jim had said that. *I'll take you to New York. I'll take you to Paris...* Never saying, *When the war is over.* Never saying, *If I live.* She hadn't let herself think about it, either. But neither had she entirely believed.

For the first time she felt that she would in fact be taken, that circumstance would not conspire to strike the future from her hands. Her arm tightened around his waist, but she found that she could not speak.

"Alec, don't you *dare* drag poor Norah to that *dreadful* dull island." A soft bulk of fur appeared around the corner of the deckhouse, punctuated by the occasional glitter of a diamond in the watery light of the moon. "The only thing out there is one casino and a dance hall, and they have only this sort of Hawaiian band with ukuleles, and they're all positively *ancient*. We filmed *Wolf of the Spanish Main* in the bay around the other side of the island," Christine added, "where all the bootleggers pick up their cargoes, and unless you like scenery and buffalo droppings, it's the most howlingly boring place on earth. But I did get to wear this wonderful purple silk thing with a million petticoats, only I don't see how women walked around in those days, and getting in and out of those silly rowboats was awful. No wonder they didn't allow women on ships."

"Buffalo." Norah shook her head. "Now I know I'm truly in the Wild West."

The tufted feathers on Christine's brow band tilted with the tip of her head. Against the furs, Norah could see the milky fleck of Black Jasmine's skunk streak and the star of his single eye. "California's not so *very* wild, darling. I mean, we've got the Beverly Hills Hotel. And during the filming Frank was absolutely dog-sick... *Norah...!*"

"Yes?"

"You're the scenarist for Colossus Studios now, aren't you? I mean officially? You did take that job Hraldy and Frank offered you?"

Norah nodded. She hadn't been comfortable about it and intended to leave as soon as she found another, but at the moment, in Hollywood, she was an unknown quantity.

Mr. Brown had questioned her fairly sharply about why Christine had not reported onto the set that morning or the morning before. When Norah had met his eyes and said, "They don't quite know. It's a rather mysterious illness," the producer's gaze had shifted, and again she'd had the impression that he was quickly sorting things in the back of his mind. Wondering,

perhaps, about his dream, if he'd had a dream instructing him to have Shang Hsu Kwan arrested. Wondering about the promises he'd thought had been made. Maybe wondering about the necklace that had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared.

He hadn't pressed her and had given her surprisingly good terms: a hundred and fifty dollars a week and a bonus if a film she wrote did exceptionally well. For the first time in her life Norah realized she had an actual job.

The house on Ivarene—to which she and Christine had returned the previous day, though Norah suspected she herself would be living in Venice soon—had smelled of Ambrose Conklin's pipe smoke and coffee when she'd reached it again, and there had been two unwashed cups on the low table in the living room; later that evening she'd seen Christine trying on the pink diamond ring in front of the bedroom mirror.

That diamond glittered now among the soft torrent of Black Jasmine's fur. "Well, why don't you write a story that takes place mostly on a ship, that will have to be filmed out here in Catalina? Frank's absolutely been following me around, trying to find out what happened with the Rat-God without asking, hoping I don't know he made a deal with that nasty thing to arrest Mr. Shang, and thinking all *kinds* of things about Ambrose and me. He'd be sure to follow me out here and get seasick and sunburned and get sand in his shoes and be miserable the whole time. And I do have *one* more film left in my contract with Colossus. Will you do that? And make it so good he *can't* not film it?"

Norah laughed, looking up at the tousled bundle of fur and precious stones and Pekingese at the rail beside her. "Of course. Anything will be better than trying to write a scenario about a six-foot specimen of the genus orthoptera for Hraldy's cinematic masterpiece."

"What? Oh, that thing about the cockroach. You know he's trying to get Hans to break his contract with Jasper Productions to come to Colossus and star in it? It'll serve him right if Hans does: Hans has a *terrible* temper and will probably try to organize a union on the set. He left Germany because he was a socialist or something. He's always going on about unions, and after working all day on one film and then going back and doing retakes for the last one all night, I'm not sure I don't agree with him... Or wouldn't if I was going to stay with Colossus."

There was a soft scrambling clatter of toenails on the decking. Raising her head, Norah saw the pale shapes of Buttercreme and Chang Ming trotting purposefully across to them from where Shang Ko and the Mud Tortoise stood by the aft rail. They had been there for nearly an hour, ever since

Captain Oleson had put about for home again, the tall shape and the small looking very much like their namesakes against the phosphorous chop of the waves. Now and then their voices could be heard, a soft murmur of Chinese against the voices of the sea; once the Mud Tortoise had raised her hand to lay it against Shang Ko's cheek.

"Can I get you anything to drink, darlings?" asked Christine, turning back toward the cabin. "Captain Oleson has the most *marvelous* liquors down there."

"They all come out of the same vat," warned Alec. He'd talked to Chaplin at United Artists that morning—Norah had the suspicion he wasn't long for Colossus, either.

"They do not, either," Christine retorted. "They're imported especially from Vancouver—he said so. Norah, that man has no sense of romance, and if I were you, I'd think twice about marrying him. We need to drink to the Rat-God's disappearance, at the very least, and to me *finally* being able to sleep at night without wondering what's going to be creeping up on me, completely aside from letting you two quit guarding me and get a little time to yourselves..."

She paused, turning in the doorway of the cabin, a dark silhouette with her flashing diamonds and her dogs about her feet. Her voice was suddenly shaky. "Thank you," she said softly and very quickly. Then, turning, she fled downstairs.

She could face danger, thought Norah, and the wild demands of make believe; she could face exhaustion and producers and any number of incomprehensible directors. She could face crazed fans and rough fate and the black Rat-God of eldritch legend. But she could not yet face love.

Perhaps, Norah thought, eventually the dogs would teach her that.

She hoped Ambrose Conklin would be kind to her.

She leaned against Alec's shoulder for a time, gazing out across the midnight ocean that seemed to stretch behind them to the farthest reach of the world. Moonlight sparkled like the froth on bootleg champagne. From the cabin, Captain Oleson's voice boomed out, "Don't get saucy with me, wench! Nor your little dogs, neither! I'll have you know I'm the captain of this boat!"

Something in his voice told Norah that he was utterly captivated.

"If he's the captain of this boat," Alec said thoughtfully, pushing up his glasses, "that means he can marry us, doesn't it?"

Norah glanced sidelong at him, small and comfortable and unprepossessing, solid as oak or bread or leather. A curious thing to find, she thought, in a place like Hollywood. She took his hand. "I suppose he can," she said.

A Biography of Barbara Hambly

Barbara Hambly (b. 1951) is a *New York Times* bestselling author of fantasy and science fiction, as well as historical novels set in the nineteenth century.

Born in San Diego and raised in the Los Angeles suburb of Montclair, Hambly attended college at the University of California, Riverside, where she majored in medieval history, earning a master's degree in the subject in 1975. Inspired by her childhood love of fantasy classics such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *The Lord of the Rings*, she decided to pursue writing as soon as she finished school. Her road was not so direct, however, and she spent time waitressing, modeling, working at a liquor store, and teaching karate before selling her first novel, *Time of the Dark*, in 1982. That was the birth of her Darwath series, which she expanded on in four more novels over the next two decades. More than simple sword-and-sorcery novels, they tell the story of nightmares come to life to terrorize the world. The series helped to establish Hambly's reputation as an author of intelligent fantasy fiction.

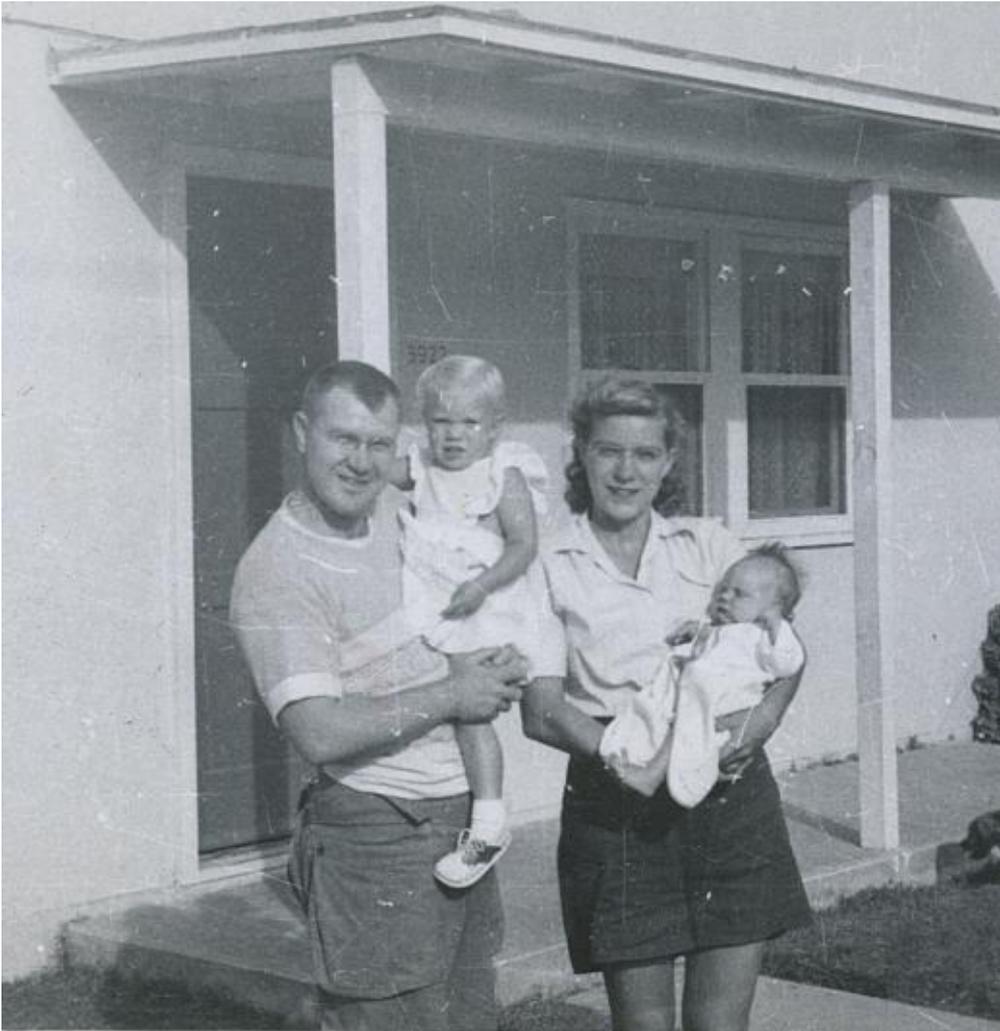
Since the early 1980s, when she made her living writing scripts for Saturday morning cartoons such as *Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors* and *He-Man*, Hambly has published dozens of books in several different series. Besides fantasy novels such as 1985's *Dragonsbane*, which she has called one of her favorite books, she has used her background in history to craft gripping historical fiction.

The inventor of many different fantasy universes, including those featured in the Windrose Chronicles, Sun Wolf and Starhawk series, and Sun-Cross novels, Hambly has also worked in universes created by others. In the 1990s she wrote two well-received Star Wars novels, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Children of the Jedi*, while in the eighties she dabbled in the world of Star Trek, producing several novels for that series.

In 1999 she published *A Free Man of Color*, the first Benjamin January novel. That mystery and its eight sequels follow a brilliant African-American surgeon who moves from Paris to New Orleans in the 1830s, where he must use his wits to navigate the prejudice and death that lurk around every corner of antebellum Louisiana. Hambly ventured into straight historical fiction with *The Emancipator's Wife*, a nuanced look at the private life of Mary Todd Lincoln, which was a finalist for the 2005 Michael Shaara Prize for Civil War writing.

From 1994 to 1996 Hambly was the president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Her James Asher vampire series won the Locus Award for best horror novel in 1989 and the Lord Ruthven Award in 1996.

She lives in Los Angeles with an assortment of cats and dogs.

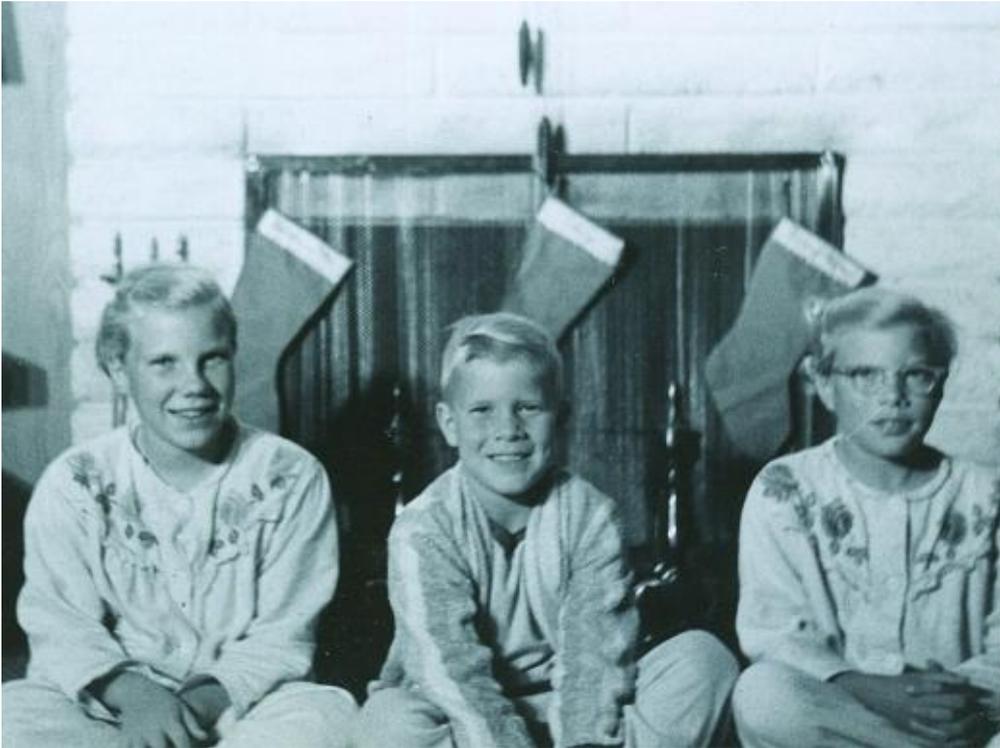


Hambly with her parents and older sister in San Diego, California, in September 1951.



Hambly (right) with her mother, sister, and brother in 1955. For three years, the family

lived in this thirty-foot trailer at China Lake, California, a Marine Base in the middle of the Mojave Desert.



Hambly (left), at the age of nine, with her brother and sister on Christmas in 1960.



Hambly's graduation from high school, June 1969.



A self-portrait that Hambly drew while studying abroad in France in 1971.



Hambly dressed up for a Renaissance fair.



Hambly at an event for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. She served as the association's president from 1994 to 1996.



The “official wedding picture” of Hambly and science-fiction writer George Alec Effinger, in 1998.



Hambly with her husband, George, in New Orleans around 1998. At the time, she was researching New Orleans cemeteries for her book *Graveyard Dust* (2002).



Hambly at her birthday party in 2005.



Hambly (right) with her sister, Mary, and brother, Eddy, at a family reunion in San Diego in 2009.

AFTERWORD

PEKINGESE

MY CONTENTION THAT Pekingese dogs were originally bred as demon catchers is, of course, entirely a fantasy of my own.

How far back the breed existed is not definitely known, but they are clearly identifiable in Chinese art of the fourteenth-century Ming Dynasty and possibly identifiable as early as the ninth. Some say the Pekingese was bred down from ancient Chinese war dogs; others point out resemblances to similar breeds of Oriental short-faced dogs, such as the Tibetan spaniel, Lhasa apso, and pug. They were definitely, by the Qing (Ch'ing) or Manchu Dynasty, specifically reserved for the imperial palaces, and it was a crime for commoners to own or injure such dogs. The notorious Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi was especially fond of them—her favorite was named Shadza, “Fool.”

In 1860, when British troops looted the imperial summer palaces in Peking at the end of the Second Opium War, four (some say five) Pekingese were taken back to England, one of which was presented to Queen Victoria (who is said to have nicknamed her “Looty”). Others went to the Duchess of Portland and the Duchess of Wellington. Through the remainder of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other Pekingese found their way to England from the imperial palaces, either as gifts or as a result of palace eunuchs being bribed. By 1906 the breed was sufficiently established to be given AKC registry, and the first specialty show for the breed was held in January 1911. A Pekingese named Sun Yat-Sen was one of the survivors of the sinking of the *Titanic*. During the late teens and early twenties Pekingese were immensely fashionable, appearing as essential accessories in the short stories of Saki, the paintings of Norman Rockwell, Dr. Seuss's newspaper columns, and fashion illustrations in *Vogue* magazine.

Modern Pekingese, if they are not hopelessly overbred and inbred by unscrupulous “puppy mills,” are for the most part calm, sunny-hearted souls whose leading characteristics (in my experience) seem to be possessiveness about their belongings (both human and material), friendliness (more common in males—the females I've met tend to be aloof), curiosity about almost everything, and personal fastidiousness. Other than a tendency toward respiratory ailments (undoubtedly arising from having only a quarter inch or so of sinuses), they are healthy, though their digestions are delicate and eye injuries must be guarded against. Of my own four, two have been one-eyed.

Personally, I believe that no breed is more charming, beautiful, and

lovable, but I must add that several of my friends disagree, one going so far as to refer to them as “one step above bunny slippers.”

In 1924, when the last Manchu emperor finally quit the Forbidden City and the imperial system came to an end in China, the eunuchs who were left killed all the remaining Pekingese, lest they fall into “unworthy hands.”

LOS ANGELES IN THE TWENTIES

OWING TO THE perishable nature of the film stock and the poor conditions of storage, only a small portion of the output of most silent-film stars remains. The work of many stars who were idols in their own times is not preserved at all or exists in one or two movies out of scores.

It is fairly well known now that early films should not be judged by the clouded and silent videos frequently available. Projected at their original speed of sixteen frames per second (rather than the twenty-four frames per second of sound film) and backed by the fully orchestrated scores that all the “picture palaces” played in accompaniment, they were frequently beautiful, powerful, and truly international works of art.

Surprisingly little of what is generally considered characteristic of “Los Angeles in the twenties” or “Hollywood in the twenties” existed as early as 1923. Hollywood itself was still very much a town of midwestern clapboard bungalows surrounded by orchards and barley fields. Photographs of the Pickford/Fairbanks studios show that a few blocks west of La Brea Avenue there was very little but bare ground, grading into the oil fields along Wilshire Boulevard, which had yet to be widened and turned into the extensive shopping thoroughfare it became only a few years later.

Grauman’s Chinese Theater was not built until 1926; the current Los Angeles city hall (known worldwide as the *Daily Planet* of Superman fame) came into being in 1928. Chinatown occupied ground now covered by Union Station, spreading over into the oldest adobes of the original Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles on Olvera Street, an area that has now been restored as it was (more or less) in the days of the town’s Hispanic beginnings. “Symphonies under the Stars” were held amid the weeds, trees, and foptails of Daisy Dell in the Cahuenga Hills, though the curved shell people associate with the Hollywood Bowl was not built until 1929; prior to 1926, the Philharmonic played under a canvas canopy. Scattered developments existed between Los Angeles and Hollywood on the east and the beach cities of Santa Monica and Venice on the west, but in 1923 it was mostly open land and far hillier than a current tour of the town would lead one to believe.

The Million Dollar Theater is still in existence on Broadway, showing Spanish-language films, but I do not advise going to that part of town alone. Most of the huge estates in Beverly Hills have been broken up into expansive lots with grand homes on them. Only one amusement pier remains—the Santa Monica Pier—and it is chiefly devoted to fishing, fortune-telling booths, and

hot dog stands. A number of rides remain there, including the exquisite carousel, most lately featured in the film *The Sting*. The last of the true amusement piers—pre-Disneyland Disneylands with roller coasters, skyway jaunts over the ocean, and simulated trips to Mars—was Pacific Ocean Park, which closed in the late sixties.

The city of Venice was incorporated into Los Angeles in 1925, partly as a result of financial damage sustained in the Pickering/Lick Pier fire. On Windward Avenue one can still see remaining fragments of the original columned arcades, but the St. Mark's Hotel is a vacant lot. Small bungalows surrounded by eucalyptus and banana plants face onto streets that were once canals. A few canals remain, south of Venice Boulevard, which the City of Los Angeles recently gave a long-overdue refurbishing as nesting places for waterfowl.

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