

Chapter 69

A Worldly Man Yearns for Tranquillity

A Kind Protector Bids a Warrior's Farewell

The next few days were rather pleasant. Margaret began eating: first rice gruel, then bean-curd and vegetables, at last fish, chicken and meat. It was all superbly cooked, finer than the best restaurant in New York.

They took her off the IV. Old Soldier installed a TV and VCR in her room. The TV programs were mostly in Cantonese and difficult for her to follow, but there seemed no limit to the movies he could get. She watched movies, favoring comedy or dramatic plots with little romantic interest and no blood: Mario Lanza in *The Great Caruso*, Meryl Streep in *Kramer v. Kramer*, Jennifer in a comedy about schoolteachers.

Each day the doctor came. He was surprisingly young, rather handsome, and immaculately dressed in an expensive Western suit. He tickled the sole of her right foot, and each of the toes individually, with the wrong end of a gold Waterford pen. He read her pulse against his gold Rolex. He drew samples of her blood. He explored her skull with manicured fingers. He told her she had suffered a bullet wound, concussion, serious loss of blood, and some mild infection of the circulatory system from fragments of shattered bone. Then he told her something else that had emerged from the various tests he had been giving her. It was a strange thing, a wonderful thing, that made Margaret cry out in a confusion of joy and despair.

She should build up her strength, said the doctor. Eat, do some

simple exercises. He showed her the exercises and coached her through a set. On the third day he came with two assistants in spotless white jackets, who undressed the pale green industrial equipment and took X-rays of her leg, a leaded blanket shielding her from knees to waist. This occupied an entire morning. It was all repeated on the sixth day.

On the eighth day, a Tuesday, Old Soldier came in at ten o'clock in the morning grinning from ear to ear. "Surprise visitor!" he announced. *Norbu*, thought Margaret wildly. *They have found him!* But it was Jake. He strode over to the bed and stood looking at her.

"You brave kids! You damn fool brave stupid goddam kids!"

Margaret felt embarrassed, and a little guilty at her disappointment. The only thing she could think of to say was: "Hello, Jake. How did you get here?"

Jake smiled, and shook his head as if at a wonder. He looked around for a chair, but there was none in the room. He sat on the bed.

"I hardly know. I was at the Malibu place. There was this voice yelling at me in the front gate speakerphone one evening. 'Meester Lobbin! Meester Lobbin! Important message from you wife!' It was a Chinese waiter, actually had a waiter's jacket on. Next thing I knew I was holding a first class ticket to Hong Kong, a visa ready printed—how did he *do* that?—a reservation at the Peninsula and an address in Mid Levels. This address. So I came right over. But who is this guy?"

"I don't know. He calls himself Old Soldier. I don't know his name. I think my half brother's commander is an old friend of his."

Jake grinned. "That figures. Very Chinese." He looked around the room. "Pretty well heeled, whoever he is. Got your own X-ray equipment, I see. The hell with taking you to a hospital for X-rays, he just bought the stuff. This guy is *seriously* rich. And did you see the main reception room? Holy shit, the guy must own half of Hong Kong."

"He's been very kind to me. Still I would rather be in Southampton."

Jake grimaced. "Don't talk to me about it. Rogelio and Maria left me, got poached by Benny Leftkovitch, that old Jew bastard. Andrew's doing exams, can't house-sit, so there's nobody in the house. Probably being looted as we speak by feral gangs of Long Island mall rats."

“Oh, Jake, don’t say that! Is the house all right, really?” Margaret was genuinely distressed to think of the house unguarded.

Jake laughed and patted her leg in reassurance. “It’s all right, sweetheart. Just the old Jakey sense of humor. The house is fine. The service people will take care of it. Don’t worry, honey, the house is yours, I already signed off on that.”

“Are we divorced yet?”

“Not yet. Few more weeks. I’ll make sure your attorneys send you the stuff to sign, if you’re still here.” Jake shook his head. “Damn! What a fool I’ve been! What a goddam fool! When I see you here now, Maggie, in all this white linen. All smashed up from trying to save your country. I feel . . . I dunno. I feel small and . . . frivolous.”

“Oh, never mind. Some of the fault is mine. Getting married like that so quickly, when my mind was unsettled.”

“Oh, yeah—your friend William Leung. He’s in deep doo-doo with Uncle Sam. They hit him with a whole raft of charges. Insider trading, securities violations, I don’t know. He’s fighting, though. They pulled in a lot of people. Everybody caved—copped a plea, ratted on their firms—except your old pal. He’s got guts, I have to say that. He brought Harry Stern over from the west coast to fight his corner, best defense attorney money can buy. Your Willie boy intends to go down punching.”

“I don’t want to hear anything about that man.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I thought the bad news would please you. They’ll flatten him in the end, you can be sure. When Uncle Sam gets you in his sights, you’re dead. Okay, okay. What else? The whole thing in Tiananmen, of course. You kids hit the headlines all over the world.”

“I know. I’ve been watching TV.” Margaret indicated the set.

“Right. Jennifer and Joel and Bobby Cross and a whole bunch of the Southampton crowd went down to Washington to lobby Congress. No more aid to China, no more arms sales, no more most-favored nation status. Won’t do any good, of course. The limp dicks we’ve got in the White House and State, they’ll sweep it all under the carpet, like when the Russians went into Hungary. Jack Kennedy would’ve sent a carrier group steaming through the Taiwan Straits in full battle order, scared the shit out of them, but not this crowd.”

“China is hopeless,” said Margaret. “Will never change.”

Jake nodded. “In the States they think you’re dead or in jail.”

“Really? Yes, I suppose they do. I’d really rather nobody knew where I am. I mean, you can say I’m in Hong Kong, but nothing more precise than that. I couldn’t handle any fuss.”

“I’ll take care of it, baby. But listen. Were you actually in the Square? Did you see the whole thing?”

Jake leaned forward eagerly to hear what she had to say. This was news, this was current, this was the zeitgeist. He wanted to be with it, he wanted to have stories to tell, for the few weeks it held people’s attention, until the next celebrity divorce, the next high-society murder trial.

What to say? Thinking back to those terrible hours, everything was unclear except Norbu’s face, smiling down at her through the din and smoke. The rest was just a jumble. How to explain it?

“It was very . . . confused,” Margaret said at last. “People running forward and back. Soldiers. Very dark, very confused.”

“There’s a lot of argument about how many people were killed. Some say dozens, some say thousands. The Chinese government says none, of course. Did you see people killed?”

His face. *Get out of the Square quickly. We’ll go straight to the Xings’ apartment . . .* Oh, why had she let him go? Margaret tasted again, sharp and clear, the rage she had felt at herself, standing there in the Square alone, for having let him go. Rage and frustration at her own foolishness, standing there, the nurse in the white skull cap over by the first-aid tent, waving, dark figures emerging from the bushes by the History Museum. How could she, *how could she* have let him go? And what to say to this American, whose life was so smug, so secure, so shallow? How to describe the things that had happened? Language such a feeble tool. For the first time in years it seemed an effort to her to speak English. Or just to speak at all, perhaps.

“Please, I don’t want talking about it, Jake. Please.”

Jake nodded, not really understanding. He reached out and squeezed her hand. “All right, baby. Never mind. Look, is there anything you need? Anything I can get you?”

Margaret shook her head. It was kind of him to come, but she wished

he hadn't. So difficult to think of anything to say to him. Everything between them was all spent.

Jake seemed to sense this. He stood up. "I won't tire you. From the look of things, you're pretty well provided for here. I'll call in tomorrow. The old guy told me you'll be here at least another month. I may as well do a little shopping while I'm in Hong Kong."

"Ai, Jake, you're still so selfish! Never mind me, you just want to enjoy a vacation! You're the most selfish man I ever knew."

"I'm working on that, honey. Working on it. You know. But 'mountains and rivers change more easily than a person's nature'. See, I can still remember some of your Chinese proverbs."

Margaret laughed in spite of herself. Not such a bad guy, she thought.

"All right. Come tomorrow. You don't come, I'll never speak to you again."

He came every day for a week. On his last visit he was thoughtful. After five minutes' small talk about her progress, the house in Southampton, Jake's friends, he stood up abruptly and went to the window. He fiddled for a while with the wand that controlled the venetian blind, then just stood there motionless, looking out at the harbor.

"I've been thinking, Maggie. Thinking hard."

Margaret felt sure, from his manner, that he was going to try for a reconciliation, make her some promises, pledge vows of reformation. She determined to rebuff him, and had already begun forming the words when he spoke again. But Jake had other things on his mind.

"My life. I mean, it's a mess. I had a few shows that were successful thirty years ago. Since then, what? A couple of revivals, four screwed-up marriages—I'm not counting poor Marcy. Not much to show for my time on earth."

Jake turned to face her, frowning at the effort of speaking in a mode he was unused to.

"Well, like I said, Maggie, I've been thinking. Thinking hard, real hard. The Rinpoche has a retreat, you know, up in the hills in northern India. A lovely place, I saw a movie of it once. You can sit there and look at the Himalayas. Well, I'm heading up there."

Jake made a little laugh, embarrassed at his revelation.

“I want to be near the Rinpoche. I want to be away from the Stateside scene. I want . . . I want *tranquillity*. Can you understand, Maggie?”

“Yes, I can. But you’ll be bored stiff in a month. You’re a social animal, Jake—told me so yourself. Sitting up there in the mountains with a bunch of Buddhists, chanting—a month? No, I’ll give you a week.” Margaret laughed.

“You’re wrong, sweetie. I know my mind on this. I’m going back to the States to clean up my affairs—see the divorce through, at least to the point where I can leave it with the attorneys—then I’m heading for Dharamsala.”

“You’re not doing that for me, Jake, are you? You don’t have to do that for me.”

“I’m not doing it for you, baby. Though you’re part of what’s lead me to it. Seeing you here like this, I mean. I didn’t really know . . . Well, I always thought there was more to you than met the eye. But I didn’t know what a heart I’d lost, what a heart I’d betrayed, till I heard from the old boy about what you’d done, and saw you here with your wounds and . . . and your *dignity*. And I’ve been saying to myself, walking around Hong Kong, I’ve been saying: Hey, Jakey, you never did anything like that. You never put yourself in harm’s way for anything or anybody. Your life’s just been a trail of gluttony and lust, Jakey my boy. And what do you amount to, when all is said and done? Is there really a Jake Robbins under all that moral flab? Is there anything inside there that isn’t just . . . *clay*?” Jake lowered his head, cupped his hands over his mouth, and addressed his navel. “IS ANYBODY HOME?”

“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself, Jake. You wrote some lovely songs. Gave pleasure to millions of people.”

Jake shrugged, still standing there facing her, his hands in his pockets now.

“That’s just accidental. Comes with the genes and some solitary hard work—like your singing. I’ve never stepped out front and center and said: Hey! Here I am! This is what I believe! Shoot me down if you don’t like it! That’s magnificent—the highest thing a human being can do. That’s what pushes history forward. That’s what we were created for, the thing that raises us above the beasts. I can’t tell you, I can’t tell you,

Maggie, how goddam worthless and shitty I feel, standing here in the same room with you. That's why I have to go and seek myself, find out if there's anything like that in me, find out if there's anything in me at all. No, I'm not doing it for you, sweet Maggie. I'm doing it for myself."

"Oh, Jake. When did you ever do anything that wasn't for yourself?" Margaret laughed, to show this was not meant too seriously.

"For myself? No, honey, I never did anything for myself. For my appetites, that's who I did things for. For my appetites, for my flesh, which has been my master all my life. But now I want to be the master—I, me, me myself." Jake banged his fist against his sternum. "Not my flesh, not my glands, *me*. I want to be master of my appetites, not them master of me."

"Mountains and rivers, Jake, mountains and rivers. You said it yourself."

Jake shook his head, lips pursed in conviction. "It's not impossible. Can't be. Anyway, I have to give it one really good try."

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Eight weeks later Margaret took her leave of Old Soldier. They drove in a vast air-conditioned limousine to the airport. Streets crammed with tiny stores teemed in silence beyond the car windows. Margaret was able to walk a little now, with support; but for the trip to the airport Old Soldier had provided a wheelchair, and a smiling servant boy in a starched white uniform to push it.

Old Soldier accompanied her to the departure area, where two airline people were waiting to take over, bowing and smiling towards her. He had dressed down for the occasion into a fairly featureless long gown of Prussian-blue silk with elaborately frogged buttons. Solemnly, he bent over the chair to shake Margaret's hand.

"Little Heroine, I wish you *yi lu ping'an*" [peace the whole journey]. "Don't worry about the future. You and your comrades have planted a beautiful seed, and nourished it with blood, as must always be done. One day this seed will have a flower."

He stepped back. Margaret was moved by his words. "Old Soldier, you have been so kind to me. I don't know how I can repay you."

The old man shook his head. “Never mind. We are all Chinese. We are the black-haired people: all one blood, all one soul, since the beginning of the world. We must do what we can for our country.” He stepped forward again and leaned over her, to speak softly. “So far as your . . . comrades are concerned, set your mind at rest. I will find out what I can. I have your address in New York. But you must be patient. Conditions will be very bad for a while. Be patient.”

He stepped back again, and made a signal to the airline people. One of them came to take command of the chair. “Good-bye, Little Heroine. *Hou hui you qi!*” He put his hands together in the *bai* gesture and bowed deep, and stayed bowed, bowed in honor and respect, as the attendant wheeled Margaret through to the departure area.