

## Chapter 70

Two Scholars Guard a Precious Treasure  
There Is No Armor Against Fate

The thing Margaret most wanted to do was ride a bicycle in the park. Of all her time in New York, the moments that had fixed themselves most firmly in her mind were those she had spent cycling in the park with Johnny Liu—sailing through the dappled sunlight under the trees with the wind in her face and hair.

There was no question of riding a bicycle now, or at any time before the spring. Her leg still needed some weeks of healing before she would be able even to walk on it. By that time it would be winter; and with the baby due in February, her pregnancy would in any case be too far gone to risk on a bicycle. Spring, then. Margaret set her mind on early spring and Central Park—where now, in September, the leaves were just beginning to turn.

The park was all spread out for her within its neat low walls beneath the apartment window. Jake had settled the Fifth Avenue apartment on her along with the Southampton house—though whether from his new world-denying spirit, or simple generosity, or the skill of her attorneys, Margaret did not know.

The orthopedic specialist at Columbia Presbyterian did not agree with this plan of cycling in the spring. *Give it a year*, he said. *Your condition has slowed the healing process. The body is wise: it always gives first priority to new life. Give it a year.* Margaret had no intention

of giving it a year. After Memorial Day, she knew, the park filled up with rollerbladers and cyclists. At first, until she got used to using her leg properly, she would need all the space she could get. Margaret set herself this as a goal: to ride a bicycle in the park before Memorial Day 1990. After the baby was born, of course, but before the summer crowds. The second day home she went through all her leg exercises, and had Mrs Mo work with her at stretching and flexing.

Mrs Mo was the new help, or one half of it. Johnny Liu had installed help in the Fifth Avenue apartment before she returned. There had to be *someone* there to look after her, he pointed out over the telephone, her last week in Hong Kong, and the people he had found were decent sorts. Of course, if she couldn't get on with them, she could find someone else later.

In the event she got on with them very well. The Mos were a middle-aged couple from Hunan. Both had been high-school teachers—she in History, he Chinese. In the early eighties Mrs Mo had done a refresher course as a mature student at Changsha University. The University had hired an American to teach English Conversation, and Mrs Mo struck up a friendship with her. This woman went back to America after a year, but Mrs Mo persuaded her to act as sponsor for her on a one-semester English-language course at a state college in New Jersey. Then Mrs Mo had overstayed her visa, working illegally as a child-minder. She had saved enough to get her husband out on a tourist visa. He had got a driver's license somehow, and drove a gypsy cab for a year. Following the Beijing massacre the American President had issued a directive allowing all Chinese citizens resident in America to get work permits, including even illegals and people who had overstayed their visas. Once the Mos had their permits they began looking for regular work, just when Johnny Liu was casting around for housekeepers on Margaret's behalf. Old Shi, who had been working with Johnny to make everything smooth for Margaret's return, knew Mrs Mo from some music classes he had taught at the college. They had installed the Mos in the fourth bedroom, leaving the third for guests. The second bedroom, next to Margaret's, was to become a nursery, and Mrs Mo was already calling contractors to do the conversion.

It quickly became clear to Margaret, those first few days back, that it

was Mrs Mo who wore the pants. She was bright and forceful, with an infectious laugh and a way of clapping her hands together then holding them templed in front of her when something pleased her. Mr Mo was rather dreamy and taciturn. He said little and had a silent, careful way of moving around the apartment. He was one of the most bookish people Margaret had ever met, with a seamless knowledge of his country's literature, all the way from the cryptic authenticity-disputed fragments of the Bronze Age to current Taiwanese detective thrillers. He was also a fine poet in the classical styles. To celebrate Margaret's return he wrote a poem in the Ruled Meter format, all the tones precisely in place, and read it out to her, diffidently, in soft standard Mandarin with only a trace of his native Hunan brogue.

The tyrant stirs, the Temple of Heaven shakes—  
 Vermilion walls, bright red blood of youth.  
 From the smoke of battle emerges a voice  
 Singing of ancient glories, of new hope.

He was also a first-rate cook. Mrs Mo seemed not to be able to cook at all, but she took care of all the household chores and all the shopping, helped Margaret with dressing and bathing, and fielded telephone calls.

The Mos had two kids in China, old enough to take care of themselves, so they were carefree, probably for the first time in their lives. It was cheering and relaxing to be around them: Mrs Mo giggling and clapping, her husband smiling, very frequently at her. Watching the videos Mrs Mo brought back from her shopping expeditions in Chinatown, they would sit close together on the sofa holding hands, sometimes exchanging whispers. Margaret glimpsed them kissing once, in the kitchen. She felt sure they were doing *tongfang*, though both were much closer to fifty than forty.

"I can't honestly tell you whether it's long-term employment or not," confessed Margaret to Mrs Mo once in those first days. "I really have no plan for the future. I don't know what I shall do, or where I shall be."

Mrs Mo waved these doubts aside with her cheerful laugh. "You're a decent person, Han Yuezhu, I can see that. We'll get on well together so

long as we're with you. After that—why, we shall find something else. You are not to worry about us. You have enough to worry about.”

Mrs Mo had, it was true, something of a bossy streak. However, this was all to the good, as they were plagued by callers those first few weeks back in New York, and Mrs Mo was deft and ruthless with them.

It had occurred to Margaret, of course, that she would be likely to attract attention on her return. Her presence in the Square was generally known. So, now, was her escape to Hong Kong. At any rate, she had seen small references to herself in the Hong Kong newspapers, though no-one ever knew exactly where she was staying. Margaret vaguely supposed that reporters had methods to find out who was leaving or entering America, and expected some sort of reception at the airport when she arrived. But in fact there was no-one. The only attention she got was from the immigration officer who scrutinized her passport and Green Card. He turned out to be an opera fan, and begged an autograph before wishing her well with utter and very touching sincerity. In the arrivals lounge there had only been Johnny Liu and the Mos. On the whole Margaret was relieved, although—human vanity is irrepressible—her relief was not altogether unmixed with disappointment.

Johnny Liu was rather scathing about it. The Americans had already forgotten about the massacre, he said. They were a fundamentally frivolous people, who could barely remember what happened last week, never mind three months ago. Now they were all concerned with East Europe and Mrs Helmsley. If you mentioned Tiananmen Square to them they wouldn't know what you were talking about. Margaret laughed at this, but thought there was probably something in it.

Three or four days later the calls began. Perhaps it was the immigration officer who put word out. More likely it was Jake's—now Margaret's—co-op board, who of course had had to be notified about the Mos. Margaret felt sure that at any rate it was not Johnny Liu. She had sworn him to secrecy, and trusted his word.

First off the mark was her old friend the *New York Post*, a female reporter calling one evening. Mrs Mo slapped her down energetically: “No questions! No interviews! Nothing to say! Goodnight!” Next day there were two calls from the *New York Times*, different

reporters as the story was winched up the ponderous hierarchy of that venerable institution. Mrs Mo dismissed them in similar fashion, with every evidence of hugely enjoying this component of her duties.

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After a week Margaret wanted to go out to the park. Her idea was to walk as much as she could once in the park, but to ride in the wheelchair to and from. Mrs Mo wheeled her into the elevator and they descended to the lobby. Coming out on to Fifth they were accosted by a young student-looking fellow with a hand-held cassette recorder.

“*Opera World*, Mrs Robbins. Welcome home. Can you say a few words?”

Margaret would have complied. It was, after all, the trade press. At least they wouldn’t call her a contralto, or confuse her with Yuki Nakayama. But Mrs Mo went into attack mode. “No questions! Nothing to say!” And wheeled Margaret off at a rattling pace leaving the *Opera World* man in their dust. The park was lovely, tranquil and unhurried on a work-day afternoon, and they spent two hours there, alternately walking and resting. But when they returned the *Opera World* man was still in place, and had been joined by half a dozen other reporters, including a two-man TV crew with a huge video camera. Margaret could sense that Mrs Mo was arming her torpedoes.

“Let me speak to them,” Margaret said in Chinese, to forestall Mrs Mo’s attack. “I really don’t mind.”

“It’s not good for you. Too stressful. You must heal, and develop your baby.”

“Just a few words. It won’t hurt me.”

When they got to the awning outside the door of her building the reporters all started shouting at her together. Margaret couldn’t understand any of it. She picked out the *Opera World* man, because she felt a little bad about snubbing him earlier.

“It’s Miss Han, please, not Mrs Robbins.”

“Were you very badly hurt, Miss Han?” This was the TV reporter, before *Opera World* could get a word in.

“No. Not at all. I shall soon be walking again. Many suffered much more than I. Many are still suffering. Many are dead. I hope you will report *them*.”

“Shall you be singing again soon?” asked *Opera World*.

“No. Not soon. I really have no plans. No bookings.”

“How did you get out of China?” Someone shouted. Then they all started shouting together again. Mrs Mo spun her round, the centrifugal force nearly throwing Margaret on to the royal-blue rubber mat that covered the sidewalk beneath the awning, and they went in through the doors. As the outer door closed she heard the *Opera World* man calling: “Sing for us, Margaret! Sing for us again!”

The doorman went in to press the elevator button for them. He was a tall, well-built man, an ex-fireman, with silver hair and a florid Goidelic face.

“Don’t worry, Miss Han. I’ll keep ’em out. ’Cept the Irish. You can’t keep *them* out.”

This was by way of introducing Colman O’Toole, who had risen from a couch in the lobby and come forward to greet them.

“Dear girl.” Colman bowed courteously, taking Margaret’s hand. His eyes were caught for an instant by her belly, which was beginning to show. He said nothing to this point, however, only beaming at her pinkly.

“My dear Margaret. We didn’t know if you were alive or dead.”

“I am entirely alive, Colman. They shot me, but not very accurately.”

“Dear child! Thank God they did not injure your diaphragm!”

She introduced Mrs Mo as they rode up in the elevator. Colman was solicitous and gently inquisitive; but as he settled in one of Jake’s big deep armchairs with a shot of Jake’s whisky and water supplied by Mr Mo, Margaret placed a small bet with herself that he would be talking bookings before he had finished half the drink. Sure enough, when the outlines of her participation in the student movement had been aired, her wound described, and her pregnancy announced, Colman cleared his throat and pulled the inevitable multifold leather contraption from a side pocket.

“Well, young lady. And when should I put you down as available for performance?”

Margaret laughed at his audacity,

“I don’t know. I really haven’t given any thought to singing. Since that business . . . Oh, you know, Colman.”

“The clagues? That was our chum William Leung, as you suspected yourself?”

“Of course. I knew it all along.”

“You need have no further worries about clagues, dear girl, I do assure you. Mr Leung has his hands full with the Federal Prosecutor’s office. He was not cooperating with their investigation, or not cooperating enthusiastically enough, so they have been perfectly merciless with him. He has had to pay an enormous fine, and there are new charges just announced. The government . . .”

“I hope they smash him to pieces,” said Margaret. “I hope they destroy him and make him suffer.”

Colman seemed nonplused by this. He lowered his eyes.

“Well . . .” he said, then paused to clear his throat. “Herm—well, well. There is no armor against fate, to be sure. Indeed there is not.”

Apparently much embarrassed, he cleared his throat again, and bent over his galactic diary, flicking absently at the pages. Mrs Mo, who knew nothing about William, was moved to protest.

“You are very cruel to say that, whoever he is,” said Mrs Mo to Margaret, speaking in Chinese. “I am sure nobody could deserve such malice.”

“Well,” said Colman brightly, having recovered himself, slapping the diary against his palm now to clear the air. “Let us talk of bookings. Of course I know you cannot sing in this condition, Margaret. But you have to think forward. You know how things are nowadays. The big fixtures are all booked far ahead. Why, here’s Katie Folescu, who can’t even act worth a damn—I’ve got her booked three years ahead. Three years! She’s blind as a bat, can’t wear contacts for some reason, everybody on stage is terrified she’s going to knock over the scenery.”

Margaret knew Katie, had shared a stage with her in L.A. the year before, for the Mozart recital. Katie was constructed on the Balkan peasant model: pasty and fat, with a mustache you could hide paper-clips in,

but was blessed with one of the most exquisite spinto-soprano voices currently in performance.

Colman got up out of his seat and executed an imitation of the myopic diva; eyes squinted up, making him look more porcine than ever, and arms stretched out in front to feel his way.

“So there she is, this Carpathian tub of lard, stumbling around the stage, her colleagues diving out of the way—here she is, kissing Scarpia and stabbing Cavaradossi, and don’t the punters love her! Can’t get enough of her!” (Colman wobbled and staggered, bumping into the furniture.) “Doing *Manon* last season in Chicago, she wandered up to stage front trying to follow the conductor and would have done a header into the orchestra pit if Des Grieux hadn’t run forward and grabbed her dress. Now the managements are talking about Folescu insurance.”

It was not done well, Colman having no talent for physical comedy; but Margaret laughed anyway, from appreciation of his attempt to lighten the conversation, and the natural sympathy we feel for a feeble performance. Colman reseated himself and took a sip from his shot glass.

“To cap it all it appears her marriage is on the rocks,” he added. “That should be good for another hundred pounds of cellulite. When a diva’s depressed, she eats.”

“You’re a fine one to talk about weight problems, Colman. You certainly haven’t lost any since I last saw you.”

“Possibly so, dear Margaret, but I’m not up on stage playing the part of a dainty little temptress having her hankies picked up by all the young bucks in Paris or Seville. It’s getting ludicrous, so it is.”

“But her voice, Colman, her voice. That’s what people want to hear. They’ll forgive everything else.”

“Yes, yes, her voice.” Colman sighed. “Still beautiful, no matter what she does. She could be as wide across as the great black rock of Kilkenny, and still sing like an angel.” He leaned forward and jabbed a fat finger at Margaret. “But her voice can’t compare with *yours*, young lady. I know you can out-sing Katie. You can certainly out-act her. Oh, come on now, Margaret my dear. Make an old Mick happy, won’t you? Let me arrange some bookings. You don’t have to go back to full performances right away. Some concert engagements, just to warm up. Guest

appearances, a few recitals. Let's say . . . when are you due?" He indicated her belly.

"February."

"February. All right, that puts the kibosh on this season. But then you have all summer to get in voice. Let's be thinking about '90-'91. A couple of pre-season concerts to jog their memories, get you some notices, then—let's see. Oh—Miami! I was talking with Avrom last week. They're going to do *Trovatore*, a new production by that Greek fellow . . ."

"Colman, Colman. I'm sorry. I can't . . . I just can't think about singing now. Too much . . . there have been too many things. I just can't. Not right now."

Colman contemplated her a moment with his small featureless eyes; then looked down, shaking his head.

"My dear girl, my dear dear girl, I am sorry. Forgive me, I have imposed upon you, yes I have. It's just . . . it's my business, you know? My life's blood, it is. I can never get my mind off it for long."

He stood up, came over to the sofa, lifted up her hands and bent to kiss them, and actually did kiss them—an astounding degree of intimacy by his standards.

"Don't you be worrying about anything, Margaret Han. I won't pester you. When you're ready to sing, call me. And if anybody, I mean anybody from the profession—no, make that anybody at all—if anybody bothers you, you let me know. I shall be your shield and defender, my dear, your ancient of days."

"Thank you, Colman." Margaret smiled up at him. "You know you are always welcome here. It's only that I can't think about the future just now. The past is too heavy." Margaret didn't think she had expressed this right, but Colman seemed to understand.

He crossed the room, stopping at the door. "Take things easy, dear sweet Margaret. Make a fine baby for us now—a little *Heldentenor*. The public wants Wagner and all the managements are begging for 'em. There's a dearth since Siggy retired."

"I'll call you, Colman."

"I shan't be happy till you do."

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When Colman had left, Margaret felt alone, so terribly alone. Then guilty: she had been sitting for weeks doing *nothing*, nothing to find out about Norbu, nothing to help him. She hobbled to the study, leaning on Mrs Mo, and at once started a letter to Old Soldier. But after the initial salutation the words would not come. She sat for a long time staring out of the window at the park, the leaves starting to fall now. What use to write? Norbu was dead, or in a camp. Nothing she could do would help him. It was hope again, the demon Hope; capering and chittering round her, filling her head with illusions.

At last Margaret fell into weeping. Mrs Mo had left her alone in the study; but now, hearing her sobs, she came back to stand with her as she wept, nursing Margaret's head against her own breast.

"You've suffered a lot, I know," said Mrs Mo in Chinese. "It's all right. It will pass. Everything passes."

Something in the way she said this pierced through Margaret's despair. This kindly woman was, what? forty-five, forty-seven years old. An intellectual, college-educated *circa* 1962. She must have been through all the movements: the Hundred Flowers, the Anti-Rightist, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, Criticize Confucius . . . How many had there been? Mrs Mo had revealed, by a chance remark a few days previously, that she knew how millet was harvested. That meant she had been sent to the countryside at some point. Who knew what her life had been like?

"I guess you have suffered, too," snuffled Margaret into Mrs Mo's blouse.

"We all have, little sister, we all have. It's our country, our poor country. There is a curse on it, from ancient times. But never mind. We're in America now. Here we can be safe. Here there's an answer for suffering. So don't weep, little sister, don't weep. The dawn will break again. It always does."

Margaret felt close to Mrs Mo after this. She began to talk to her, at first hesitantly, then more and more freely. She told her everything: about William, about Half Brother, about Father, about Mr

Powell, about Norbu. When Johnny Liu or Old Shi dropped in to see her, Mrs Mo would join them—occasionally even the taciturn Mr Mo, too—and they would all sit talking nonstop in the dear ancestral tongue, and the time fled away, until the darkness had fallen and everybody was suddenly hungry.