

*This chapter appears about 1/3 of the way into the book. Li Ping is planning to use the foreigner, Blake, to escape from a the pathological gangster. This scene sets up the primary seduction in the novel. Li Ping was horribly defiled early on in the story. Her recollection alludes to earlier events in the novel. This scene shows her desperation to escape her circumstances.*

### Dungeon of Despair

Li Ping awoke that first dawn in May thinking of her home in Yunnan. And then that eerie sensation arose: It began gently. She pictured herself lying on the grass mat in her room listening to the monsoon drench the land. The rains passed and she opened the shuttered window to see the sun had burned off the mist to reveal twinkling reeds and grasses.

She climbed out of the window onto a pole and slid to the ground then bolted across the paddy dikes to where the tallest bamboo arched over the waters of the Langchang. She watched a group of fishermen casting their oval nets, an old man marching his ducks, and boatmen transporting villagers up and down the river. She saw her mother gathering herbs on the riverbank while singing the folk songs of Henan. Her mother's plaintive voice cracked from time to time from the longing to return to her ancestral home.

She began climbing the giant banyan tree by the river's edge. She climbed to its highest branch and inched out to its thinnest portion. She rode the limb as it arched upwards and downwards with mounting force. She saw her friends below. All were squealing with delight and marveling at her bravery. She took a deep breath then sprang into the air. With her arms spread wide like an eagle in glide, she formed into a spear and plunged into the river.

Everything blurred and when her vision had cleared she was resting in the giant banyan's lap. It had become the grandfather she'd never known. Its bark was his wrinkled skin; its branches, his kind embrace; its trunk, his weathered strength; its knots, his wise old eyes; its roots, his enduring sustenance. She asked him the question she always asked: Why doesn't father love me anymore? and her grandfather replied, He doesn't know you anymore. One day, he'll love you again. Just like before. Her grandfather faded away and she was in Sun Ho's arms. He was singing one of his love poems while she played with his yearning heart. They played all season long, until that warm, summer night when she surrendered.

Suddenly, her throat seized and she shut her eyes to drive away the dreaded spell. Nai Nai kept telling her get up, get up, the time has come, tonight you'll be the guest of a powerful man, get up, get up. She was terrified. No, no she said, I won't go, I won't go. Nai Nai kept soothing her with gentle persuasion and coaxing her along by saying everything's fine, believe me, everything is all right. Nai Nai had cared for her when she'd been terribly ill and she knew Nai Nai would always protect her. She let Nai Nai undress her and the servants bathed her in fragrant oils and dried her with fluffy towels and powdered her nose with flowery talc and rouged her cheeks and glossed her lips ruby-red and painted her eyes into sleek comets. Servants dressed her in silk and studded her hair with pearls and then Nai Nai handed her a cup of warm water along and two pink pills that she swallowed without hesitation.

The time had come for her to go and she was frightened to leave the place she'd been for longer than she could remember. Nai Nai cupped her elbow and coaxed her out the door and down the elevator onto the street where a black Mercedes waited with its engine idling. Nai Nai guided her into the back seat and closed the door and the car rolled into the night and down the neon streets to a gate guarded by armed soldiers who saluted as the Mercedes cruised into the compound without slowing down. The Mercedes glided past rows of barracks and came to a stop at the gate of a walled dwelling. An orderly emerged and lead her across a courtyard into the bungalow that reeked with oiled leather and polished brass. She was led down the hall into a sumptuous study with a fire crackling in the hearth and a painting above the mantel of a young Mao poised heroically atop the Great Wall. The orderly gestured for her to stand facing the door and when she'd done so, he left.

A few moments later, a man her father's age entered the study. His eyes consumed her body before he locked the door. He walked up close and put his hands upon her shoulders. Are you a virgin? he asked and she said no. He replied that Kung had assured him otherwise while unzipping the back of her dress and letting it drop to the floor. He led her into a bedroom, laid her upon the bed and stripped her naked. In her drugged state, she was powerless to resist as he probed her privates and fondled himself. When hard, he entered her with an animal grunt, then thrust away while she stared ahead with the eyes of a dead bird.

Her recollection passed and she stared at the ceiling, filled with dread and disgust. Her head aching, she got out bed, staggered into the bathroom, took an aspirin, then doused her face repeatedly with cold water. "The past is dead, let it go, let it go, the past is dead, let it go, let it go," she mumbled over and over.

She returned to the bedroom and opened the curtains wide. Sunshine flooded the room. She looked down upon the rose and pear blossoms gracing the center of Nanjing Road. She turned to her closet, selected a simple, white cotton dress and put it on. She sat down in front of her dresser mirror and brushed her hair into a ponytail, then tied it with a red ribbon. She applied a thin coat of lipstick, a light touch of rouge, and a mist of Chanel. She looked at her face in the mirror, then leaned in close, and said to herself, You must capture this foreigner's heart.