

Chapter One

The sharp pain in Mikhail's left side and the shock of what had just happened drifted upon the raging sea of his confusion.

The pain in his side did not allow him to walk upright. Neither could he see through the blood streaming from the wound above his eyes. Without the help of his uncle, he would be crawling on his hands and knees, or worse. Without his uncle, he would be dead.

"Here, my boy." His uncle braced Mikhail's hand against the side of their carriage and opened the door.

Their coachman jumped down and helped Mikhail into the carriage, no questions asked.

His uncle spoke to the coachman in Russian. "Take us to the waterfront with the utmost urgency." He climbed into the coach.

Mikhail winced in pain when his uncle pushed him across the front bench of the enclosed carriage and squeezed in next to him.

The heavy coach swayed as the coachman climbed up. The whip cracked in the crisp night air and the coach jolted painfully forward.

Steel rimmed wheels hummed their high-pitched song, hurtling down the brick paved road. Hooves from his uncle's four horses thundered, gaining vital separation from the wartime palace of the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich.

What had so angered the grand duke? Mikhail could not imagine.

“Ach!” Every tilted brick in Vladivostok seemed to target the steel-rimmed wheels of his uncle’s coach, heightening the pain in Mikhail’s left side.

His uncle turned up the wick of the interior lantern and opened the sable coat he had presented to Mikhail earlier that same evening, January 6, 1855, Mikhail's twenty-sixth birthday. By Eastern Orthodox tradition, it was Christmas Eve. Intended as an evening of celebration, it had become an evening of violence, confusion, and unsurmountable pain.

Mikhail’s uncle unbuttoned and spread Mikhail’s tunic. “Oh, my boy!” He spoke in English. “You need a doctor.”

Mikhail swiped tears, blood and stinging sweat away from his eyes and looked. His white blouse had been saturated with bright red blood, a dangerous sign.

His uncle opened the side curtain to shout instructions to the coachman.

Mikhail grabbed his arm and spun him back. "No! Do not stop. They will find us and kill us both." He knew this for certain. "I chopped off his hand."

"The grand duke? My God. Why?"

Blood oozed from Mikhail's left brow and upper cheek. His face felt hot where the grand duke's sword had slashed him. Mikhail had reflexively drawn his sword to defend himself and had disarmed the grand duke. "He shot me and would shoot again."

His uncle thought about this then shouted up to the coachman in Russian. "Take us to the Cha-Whay Dock." He spoke quietly to Mikhail in English. "Silent Mistress is an American clipper. She will sail with the tide." His uncle knew the tides. "It would have been better had you killed him. The grand duke will hunt you wherever you go." His face twisted. His brow wrinkled upward. "Did you . . ."

“He will survive.” Colonel Preslova had immediately thrust a burning log against the grand duke’s blood spurting wrist. That had stopped the bleeding and would certainly destroy any germs.

Nobody had been paying attention to Mikhail or his uncle. They could not otherwise have escaped.

The coach slowed just before the horses plodded onto the wood planks of Vladivostok’s waterfront docks. The coach jerked upward onto the dock, causing the pain in Mikhail’s side to shoot up his neck and pinch the top of his skull.

Major, the Count Mikhail Diebitsch-Zabalkansky sank into deep and dark unconsciousness.

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Air tasted fresh at the top of the ladder, so stuffy below deck, where Chiang SuLin and her father, Chiang Po, waited in the forward cargo hold with more than one hundred other Chinese. They’d been waiting anxiously for many hours, hoping Silent Mistress would untie from the dock and get underway. The tide was finally running out.

Pigs, goats, dogs, and chickens would serve as community food for their long voyage eastward to the new world, a far-off land called America. The animals left little room for Chinese slaves to move about. She and her father were the only two in the cargo hold who had paid for passage. The ship's passenger cabins had already been taken.

Chiang SuLin already missed their home, down Canton way; a place she knew, the place where she'd grown up.

From somewhere off the ship, a man shouted, "Captain Rawlings, I need help."

A different man shouted from the deck above, "Look, it's that chancellor, that Igor fella."

"Get a rope around that," said the gruff, unmistakable voice of the captain.

Chiang SuLin climbed the ladder high enough to see across the deck, something they had been told not to do without permission. Her curiosity overpowered the captain's orders.

Two crewmen helped a well-dressed man climb aboard at the portside rail. Two others pulled a rope and raised another well-dressed man, wearing a fur coat and cap. This one looked dead.

The first man to board turned back to untie the other, helping crew members take and hold him above the deck. He bent and looked closely into the unconscious man's face. He stood and faced the captain. "When do you sail?" He spoke in English but he sounded Russian.

"We're preparing to cast off now."

The Russian pulled a purse from his inside pocket and handed it to the captain. "This is my nephew, the Count Mikhail Diebitsch-Zabalkansky. This should more than pay for his passage."

Captain Rawlings hefted the purse, measuring its weight. "What's wrong with him? Is he drunk?"

The Russian pulled the captain away from the other men and closer to the hold, speaking quietly. "He's been shot. He needs a doctor."

"Ours is still ashore or we'd already be underway. He smokes the oriental pipe."

The captain shook his head, disappointed. "We've already waited till the last possible minute. We need to leave now, or wait until the morning tide."

The Russian said, "You must leave immediately. The less you know is better for you." He gripped the captain's shoulder. "He is very important to me. Do for him the best you can."

"There's a Chinese below deck, calls himself a pharmacist."

"This is a Chinese doctor." The Russian motioned to those holding up his nephew. "Hurry, we must carry him below."

Chiang SuLin backed down the steps quickly and cleared a path for the captain. She pointed to her father, Chiang Po, seated on his pad against the ship's sloping wooden ribs.

The captain shoved Chinese slaves with his knee. "Clear a way here."

Her father stood aside.

Two crewmen shoved and pulled Chinese slaves out of their places and laid the unconscious man on Chiang SuLin's mat.

Her father did not speak English. She told him the man had been shot. Her father looked at the cut on the man's face then opened his fur coat. Very much blood inside had

pooled on his military jacket. Speaking Cantonese, her father ordered one of the bonded slaves to boil some water.

The man ignored her father. He wanted to watch.

A woman picked up a clean pot and rushed up the ladder, sweeping past the captain and his Russian friend.

The Australian sailor SuLin did not like stood behind the captain. He had pressed into her when they boarded the day before. His eyes had shifted about, thinking of bad things. He smiled at her and licked his lips.

The captain turned and dragged the conscious Russian up the ladder. He shouted, "Mister Preston, cast off and take us out."

A voice from on deck shouted back, "You heard the captain. Get the chancellor off and cast off. Watkins, get that steering jib up."

Watkins, the Australian, rushed up the ladder past the captain.

The Russian chancellor departed and the captain stepped back down to watch her father.

Chiang Po told another woman to bring a bucket of clean seawater.

She carried an empty bucket up the ladder and disappeared onto the deck.

Chiang SuLin opened Po's satchel of powdered herbs, roots, and antitoxins. She set the open case near the unconscious Russian, a very handsome man.

Po selected a bottle of yellow powder and set it near the unconscious Russian's face.

The woman returned with a bucket of clean seawater and Chiang Po washed his hands, taking particular care with the very long fingernail on the fifth finger of his right hand. He rinsed a clean rag and dabbed blood from the Russian's eyes. He tore off a small piece of the rag, rinsed it, rung it out, and dusted it with yellow powder. He closed the deep cut over the eye and turned the dusted rag over it, smoothing it into a plaster. Hopefully, this would keep the wound closed.

She handed him one of the long bandages.

Her father wrapped the man's head quickly, keeping the plaster tight, keeping the wound closed. After three wraps, he tore the bandage down the center and tied it in place.

Satisfied with the head wound, Po opened the man's jacket wide, spread his blouse, and cleaned away the blood to expose a small hole over his lower ribs, still oozing bright red blood. The skin surrounding the wound had swollen purple.

The captain pulled two lanterns from over the ladder, handed them to nearby slaves, and motioned for them to hold the light close to Chiang Po's work.

They both leaned in with the lanterns. They both wanted to watch.

Chiang Po motioned and the woman went for more fresh seawater.

The first woman climbed down past the captain carrying a steaming pot of water.

Taking care not to burn his finger, Chiang Po stuck his long fingernail into the hot water and swished it, very clean. He pressed around the outside of the wound with his left hand, squeezing near the hole, pushing out more blood. He spread his fingers to open the wound wider, carefully dug his long fingernail into the wound, and probed.

He pulled out a round metal ball and let it fall to the inside of the handsome Russian's tunic. He stabbed his fingernail back in and probed deeper, dragged out a small piece of fabric and a chip of bone. He rinsed both in seawater and studied them.

The small piece of blood-soaked fabric had once been white.

He washed the whole area with the boiled fresh water, not steaming anymore, and placed a yellow plaster patch over the hole. The wrap around the man's head had already dried, no more blood.

Her father had been a very fine pharmacist, down Canton way. Many British officers had preferred him over their own military doctors. Had the Boxers not forced them to flee north, she and her father would still be living in comfort near the headquarters of the British bosses.

Chiang Po flooded the tunic with clean seawater and found the bullet hole. He placed the small piece from inside the wound against the tunic but the tunic was the wrong color and had no missing fabric. Po rinsed the bloodied area of the white blouse and found the hole. He placed the small piece against it and turned it to find a perfect fit.

Chiang Po smiled up at the captain and nodded.

The captain smiled, relieved and grateful. He turned up the ladder and stood on deck. "Mr. Preston, we've got wind. Get these main sails up. Set your course east, nor-east."

Sails slapped, the clipper heeled, and the wind pulled them toward the new land.

Chills rushed up SuLin's back, a magic moment.

SuLin and two older women undressed the handsome Russian, cleaned his body, and wrapped him in a warm blanket.

Her father placed his ear to the man's chest and listened. He looked at SuLin, not happy.

This man seemed important to the captain. What would happen if he died?

She could not see him breathing.