

# BALI TIDE

## Introduction

Fangcheng Port, Southern China, Circa 1846

Wu Chung Lee was head of the largest merchant company of the South China Coast. He sat in his ornate office in Fangcheng Port, gazing at the oil paintings of his forefathers—the founders and past chairmen of Wu House. His bulbous head shimmered in a perpetual lather of sweat, generated by the strain of carrying his formidable bulk against the constant pull of gravity. A chubby right hand dipped ceaselessly into a bowl of steaming pork-filled dim sums as he admired the immaculate interior of his office.

His latest antique silk screen, purchased at auction for an absurd fee, was a lyrical depiction of a swan taking flight. He gazed at it fondly. Around it, his office was decorated with finest quality red and green silk paneling, the most expensive artwork and a superb assortment of antiques. All had been painstakingly collected from the furthest reaches of his burgeoning merchant empire, some his, others the property of previous chairmen. Over the last few months his entire office building had been renovated and professionally decorated by a renowned French interior designer at enormous expense.

Some said it was a masterful blend of Baroque and Rococo periods. Others were appalled. It was simply too much, a gross example of a clash of cultures that didn't work and lacked taste. However, Wu cared nothing for the opinions of those he considered beneath him. Almost everyone fell into this category. Wu was a law unto himself.

Located in the Guangxi province, Wu's offices occupied a prime position in the docklands region of China's Fangcheng seaport. As head of the largest Chinese trading company in China's southwest, Wu House, he was a powerful man and a dangerous adversary. He chaired the board of the Fangcheng Harbor Administration and almost none of the commodities that transited the port did so without his seal of approval.

He pored over a pile of ships' manifests that lay spread haphazardly across his desk. He shifted his massive weight on the chair to relieve the numbness that had begun creeping down his left leg. Placing a chubby arm on the desk for stability, he transferred his bulk onto the right buttock before sitting back once more. The oversized wooden chair creaked loudly with the strain.

His spacious offices had uninterrupted views across Qinzhou Bay. He smiled to himself as he flicked over the manifest of his favorite Chinese freighter, the Hung Sing. It was his newest cargo ship and had been specially refitted with extra space in the hold both fore and aft, to allow for smaller precious items. These compartments could also be used to hide contraband from the probing eyes of those customs officials who could not be bribed or threatened into acquiescence.

To protect this particular ship, Wu had placed a former English frigate captain at its helm. A worthwhile precaution, he thought, given the size and net worth of the cargo it carried. But he was in the export and import business for only one reason, and that was money.

Wu gloated as he scanned the pages, taking mental note of the estimated takings from the ship's current cargo. He was growing increasingly rich on the profits of these shipments. Cheap rice and porcelain from Bali and Borneo were becoming an increasingly profitable part of his trade. Each item could be sold in China for between three and seven times its purchase price, depending on whether or not there were floods or droughts in China.

The fact remained, there were simply far too many people in China. The Government could pay Wu his price or starve its people. The profits were filling the coffers of his company and gaining Wu significant influence. His trading was also enriching the Chinese and Dutch wholesalers in Indonesia who sourced the cheap commodities for his ships. One such associate, a particularly acquisitive man called Jang, had moved his entire family from China to Bali to better monopolize the rice market that supplied Wu's ships. A very profitable move this had proven to be, for Jang had just ordered Wu to ship four Ming Dynasty Dragon vases on his next boat to Bali. Wu had been only too happy to dispatch the four porcelain relics that had graced the entrance hall of Wu Corp's office for over one hundred years. He had never cared much for antique porcelain and was relieved when his interior decorator had been unable to find a place for them. Far better for Wu to cash them in and realize some profit.

Wu had of course gone to great pains to embellish an elaborate tale to Jang of how he had scoured the world to find the vases, purchased them on behalf of Jang from a struggling museum in central Asia, outbidding the Chinese Government representative with the help of a bribe to the official and a death threat to the vendor. He was satisfied his story was plausible: these were tactics that Wu employed ordinarily. In this case the bold lies served to justify an exorbitant asking price.

That the vases were priceless antiques justified the further extortion from Jang of exorbitant shipping costs for the privilege of having Wu Corp transport them to his new home. Knowing Wu personally as he did, at least Jang was confident that the most reliable merchant in China had been enlisted to do the job. Certainly, the risk of theft or sabotage would be at a minimum. Wu would make certain of that.

It was the Hung Sing that had been trusted with the precious cargo. The vases were to adorn Jang's newly built mansion nestled in the hills of Sayan and be the centerpiece of his now legendary art collection.

Wu wasn't jealous. Jang could have his art collection. Wu preferred money. That he was profiteering from Jang's purchase through a web of hidden levies was satisfying. With Jang's money Wu could procure one of the coin-minting factories in his province. Only then could he be rid of those wretched coin wholesalers whose cut he had always resented paying and whose bribes were becoming steeper by the month. Coin minters as a rule were much too lenient on their workers. By exploiting them more efficiently, Wu would make his mint prosper.

Wu stuffed another pork bun into his mouth, smiling as chili plum sauce dribbled down his jowls. His hand reached for the next one. His new personal chef really was quite exceptional. Wu was content. As long as his Chinese and Dutch counterparts

continued to exploit the Balinese, Wu would prosper. How gullible the Balinese people were, so easily manipulated. They deserved to be exploited, just like the hapless workers on his opium farm and in his metal work factory.

‘They are pigs and will be treated accordingly.’ As he swallowed another pork bun Wu belched violently, sending a fine spray of chili oil smattering over the papers on his desk. He laughed and rang his bell. Servants came running into his office.

‘Hurry up now! Clean this mess up and fetch me a new gown.’

How they annoyed him, bowing and scraping about with their frail bodies so thin and so unclean. They wore their poverty like a brand. He loved the distinction his corpulence gave him.

‘Don’t touch me with your filthy hands, you beggars, or I’ll have you beaten until the skin is gone from your backs!’ Wu liked that they loathed and feared him.

A few months later in that same year, 1846, a monsoon storm struck in the Badong Strait off the coast of Bali, Indonesia. Captain Ralph Grace desperately hugged the wheel of his sinking ship, the Chinese freighter, Hung Sing. Rain fell in thick sheets. Wind shredded the sails and endless waves crashed over the bow.

Grace stood lashed to the wheel by his broken left arm. A shard of bone had pierced the cloth of his shirt at the wrist. His hand was useless. The stern of the Hung Sing disappeared under a monstrous flow of green sea. Through the dark haze of the storm he could see the faint outline of the coast. It was close, too close. Soon he would hear the shrill screeching of the hull being torn apart on the coral reef.

Grace cared little for the bulk of his cargo. There were tonnes more loads of rice, silk and steel utensils just waiting on the docks in China for export in ships the same as his. It was his precious cargo of priceless antique porcelain vases that would be the real loss. Grace was one of only a handful of trusted employees who were aware of the false bottoms that had been created in the vases. It was the bounty of solid gold ingots that each vase concealed in its base that he would regret losing the most. He was charged with breaking the false bottoms and removing the gold once they had reached port. His prize for doing so was four of the gold ingots. And Grace loved gold. He had offered to remove the gold before they left Fangcheng, but Wu had insisted on them being opened in Bali. Why? Grace had no idea but he wasn’t about to argue.

His mind wandered and he thought back over the events of the last few days, attempting to understand how he and his crew had come to find themselves in such perilous circumstances...

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A few days earlier there had been a stiff breeze and Captain Grace felt happy at last to be free of the torpid grip of the Doldrums. This permanent band of low pressure, created by the warm air rising off the ocean at the equator, had been depriving them of any really worthwhile wind. The last few weeks had been full of boredom for his crew. The stifling heat of the tropics as they sat becalmed had been enervating in the extreme.

Grace rued the lack of experience of the Chinese crew. In years gone by, he would have flogged several of them at least once by now. Having had no chance at all to drill them in rough seas or strong winds had made him nervous. He knew how unprepared they would be for the monsoon. Inexperienced freighter crews were notoriously bad in rough weather. Still, they came dirt-cheap.

That was the overriding concern of the agent from Wu House who had selected the crew. If that sniveling bean counter had joined the voyage he would soon be changing his mind about how to choose a ship's crew. Wu's agent had proved to be no judge of seamen. But for the gold offered him, Grace would have walked away from the deal right there on the dock.

Once a proud Captain in Her Majesty's Navy, Grace had been as sharp and tough as any man at sea. However, in later years, he had been weakened by the excesses of drink and had fallen victim to his own greed. A conviction for smuggling brought a naval court martial which had caused him to be dishonorably discharged from the service. It had been the ultimate shame for a man from a proud naval heritage. The disgrace brought down upon his family had seen him ostracized from his village at home in England. He was shunned by family and friends alike, stripped of a modest inheritance and effectively exiled without a naval pension. He had almost lost his wife. In the end she stayed by him. Harriet was loyal, but a relentless nag. She was the one person he had not minded the thought of losing. She was just hanging around waiting for his untimely death at sea, merely to claim her share of the spoils from his smuggling excursions. Good luck to her, if she could locate his treasure chest.

Grace needed only a few more jobs like this one and he could retire. He would pension Harriet off in modest lodgings near her mother in Devon and disappear with his fortune to the Spice Islands, where tropical nights, women and rum were waiting. It was just as well this kind of job paid well, as it was all that was left open to him.

It was the cusp of the masan ujan, the wet season. Having successfully negotiated the treacherous passage through the Dutch East Indies Archipelago, with its myriad reefs and sandbanks, the ship's crew was eager to reach land at Bali.

The hold was packed to overflowing with Chinese-manufactured coin, opium and steel utensils—all to be traded for Balinese rice bound for China. Grace surveyed his ship. 'There's a monsoon coming!' he yelled at his crew. 'You hear that wind in the sails?'

The crew as usual looked up at him. He was used to their blank faces.

'You had all better be ready to move when it really blows! Right on schedule!' he thought out loud as the sails billowed under the freshening trade winds.

The trade winds brought heavy tropical rains to the islands of the Dutch East Indies. Bali's lush tropical forests and sacred mountain peaks stood sheathed in low white cloud. Grace hoped the ship could reach port before the more vicious cyclonic storms hit. Cyclones were more common farther south off the northwest coast of Australia than Bali and it was still early in the wet season. He lit his pipe and steered the ship through the oncoming swell. While there was still good wind, he shouted a barrage of orders to his first mate, who in turn babbled at the crew in Cantonese. Grace had them trimming and adjusting the sails. Soon it would really count.

The crew cheered as one when the lookout called from the crow's nest, 'Land ho!' The following evening at dusk, with the Balinese coast now in plain sight, most of the ship's crew was below, taking a leisurely evening meal of rice and dried fish with just a few measures of rice wine. They were now only a day's sailing from port and longing to touch dry land. Songs and stories of the joys and delights to be had were spreading around the ship. Nobody was keen to stay on board a minute longer than he had to.

Chin, the thirteen-year-old boy, whose sharp eyes had landed him in the crow's nest of the Hung Sing, called to alert the Captain of gathering storm clouds. Captain Grace was already on deck.

'All hands on deck! Get those lubbers out of the mess cabin right now, Boson!'

Sailors appeared, clutching at their shirttails.

'You men, there! Reef the mainsail for storm!'

They pulled on the sheets that began shortening the mainsail. Two men climbed into the rigging to place ties on the flapping canvas as it bunched up out of the wind. Another small group of men struggled frantically to gain control of the jib sail. It swung wildly in the wind, knocking men over and gouging the wooden deck.

'Men astern, furl the jib before it shreds itself! Use the gaffer hook for Christ's sake! Get up, you good for nothing lubbers! Batten down all the hatches so the hold doesn't fill with water!'

Riding out a fierce storm in an English frigate was a frightening task, but doing the same in a small, Chinese freighter with a crew of coolies was akin to suicide.

The ship listed sharply to port and the remaining sails filled with a loud crack in the face of the gale that was now blowing in from the sea. Grace spun the heavy wheel forty degrees to bring the ship on a starboard tack. He headed further out to sea and away from the jagged teeth of the coral reef.

The rain turned the deck into a slippery throng of frightened Chinese who clung onto shrouds, rails, anything, to avoid the waves crashing over the ship's bows. Grace leaned hard on the wheel struggling to keep the ship bearing offshore.

The sky was black and the storm in its full fury was thrashing the boat about like a cork in a barrel. Next came a sickening crack. The main mast snapped in two. A tangled mess of ropes and canvas came crashing to the deck, followed by the enormous weight of the upper portion of the mast. It cut a deadly swathe through the men, sending severed and bleeding bodies everywhere and killing all those directly in its path. Captain Grace swore at the remaining crew.

'Come on you useless blaggards! Heave to it, you men, and cut away that rigging!'

Terrified men scrambled all over the damaged mast, bracing against the wind. Fighting to the last, Grace urged his men on.

'Cut away the mast and rigging and heave it over the side!'

Men half-heartedly wielded the axes, clearly not up to the task. But Grace continued giving orders. The action came instinctively to him and would have saved his ship ordinarily had he been issuing orders to properly trained men.

'Put some sail back on the jib mast now men, a' fore we founder on the reef! Come on, move!'

The wind lashed the small wooden cargo ship as the rain fell in sheets, obscuring the view amidships from the wheel. Waves crashed over the stern, knocking the barely

seaworthy crew off their feet, scattering them about like ninepins. Grace had already lost his main mast and more than half the crew. The Hung Sing was out of control. The towering green waves were hungry for more of the half-drowned deckhands.

Despite the grim determination with which Grace stuck fast to the wheel, the ship moved closer to the coral reef and treacherous sandbars that dotted the coastline. Another massive wave lurched the ship heavily to portside. He lashed himself to the wheel by one arm.

Grace was losing the ship. His boat and his crew were no match for the storm. Exhausted, he no longer shouted orders at his crew. He just hung onto the wheel, pitting his will against the full force of nature. The remaining few sailors had now all been lost overboard. He knew that what they had encountered was no ordinary monsoon storm. They had sailed into the kind of storm that all sailors feared, a typhoon. Fighting against a typhoon was useless in this ship.

Another wave swamped the ship throwing Grace hard against the bulkheads and snapping his arm at the wrist. Grace groaned with pain. Offering a prayer to St Christopher just in case, he raised the neck of his rum flask to his salty lips for the last time. Its familiar warmth comforted him as it seared down his parched throat.

Grace could just make out the hazy shadow of Lombok on the port side and to the starboard lay the fast-approaching breakers of Bali's south central coast. The Badung Strait had been transformed into a seething, violent cauldron of death. No matter how he tried, Grace and his ship were powerless against it. He knew that he was to be its next victim.

Grace took another gulp of rum. He would never have to listen to another word from his belligerent wife. No more nagging about his drinking and cussing. But she would miss those intimate moments they shared with delight when he returned home each summer. Slumped over the wheel, he waited for the inevitable to come.

The jolt as the ship crashed into the coral threw Grace hard against the ship's rails splitting his skull.

Two Balinese rice farmers witnessed the cargo ship's dying throes, in silent awe. Quite accustomed to the monsoon storms that the wind God brought to the island each year, they had been planting the farthest paddies of their fields that fringed the coastline nearest the foundering ship. While the ship tore itself to pieces on the jagged teeth of the coral, they waited out the storm under the cover of the jungle canopy.

In the morning the farmers walked down to the beach. They stared at what remained of the shattered hulk of the ship and then they searched the coastline, but there were no bodies. The sharks that patrolled the waters around Bali in great numbers had seen to that.

They lit a small fire and began drying out thin logs that they had cut from the forest to build a rudimentary raft. Soon they had lashed together enough palm trunks to float them out to the ship and, as they paddled in the calm waters, they wondered what treasures the Wind God might have delivered to them this time.

## Chapter 1

City of Melbourne, Australia

Chad Handelmann's mood like the storm clouds looming over Melbourne was dirty. His most recent shipment of Balinese rice, silk cushions, paintings and teak furniture had been held up at the docks by yet another industrial dispute. Melbourne dockside workers had a reputation for being the world's second slowest workers after the Bangladeshis.

'Bloody unions,' Chad snarled.

The stock had been pre-sold and Chad was anxious to get it off the docks and distributed to his clients. He diverted the phone from his office to his mobile and slipped disgruntled out of the building.

He drove straight to the dojo for his usual workout. Speed and flexibility were the two vital requirements for Tae Kwon Do and Chad had lost none of either in the five years since he had won the Australian Championships. Master Cho pushed Chad with a series of jumping spinning heel kicks, and combination kicks and punches that looked lethal. He trained until the sweat poured from him like water. Then he showered, drank tea with the Master and climbed back into his car at peace.

Chad returned home to his St Kilda Rd penthouse. He feathered the accelerator pedal on his black BMW coupe lightly to stay just shy of the 60km/hr speed limit of the city roads. Melbourne turned on one of its ubiquitous winter showers making the streetlights burn yellow in the misty rain. He followed their reflection on the shiny tram tracks then cursed under his breath. Up ahead loomed the flashing lights of a police car setting up a detour around yet another car crash. A young male probationary driver had slammed into the running board of a tram. Still what did a few moments' delay matter to Chad? He owned a successful import business. He loved the travel, loved the money and all the trappings that came with it.

Chad was unusual-looking for an Australian—the product of a mixed marriage between a Balinese waitress and a German-Australian importer. He was a strong, well-built man who moved with cat-like agility that seemed incongruous with his muscular frame. He was a dangerous opponent to underestimate, as so many had done, much to their detriment, in business over the years.

The last man to tangle with him had been Lim Quan, a director of the giant trading conglomerate that was his main competition in the South East Asian export business, Wu Corporation. Lim had come to Chad offering to help expand Handelmann Imports into hitherto hostile markets such as China and Taiwan. Unfortunately, Chad's trust in his new partner had proven naive. For no sooner than Lim had been elected to the board had he bought out one of Chad's other two directors and mounted a hostile takeover. The action had cost Chad hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight in the law courts and seen him split his company, losing one third of it to Lim and his backer Wu Corp.

Of course, Lim had failed in his attempt to destroy Handelsmann Imports by dissolving it into Wu Corp. Chad had survived and remained the chairman of Handelsmann Imports. Regrettably, Lim and Wu Corp remained an ongoing menace to all traders in South East Asia. Lim and Chad despised each other.

Despite his physical strength, Chad had his mother's soft brown eyes, full lips and gentle smile. Thick dark hair and broad black eyebrows framed his face. But it was his father, Stan, quite a successful amateur boxer in his day, who had passed on the Handelsmann solid, square jaw and hawkish nose. These features hinted at controlled aggression and a determined patience, lurking deceptively underneath Chad's outward look of congeniality.

'G'day, Bruce.' Chad smiled at the uniformed doorman of his apartment building. 'Bad luck about those Magpies, hey.'

'Oh mate, bloody umpire's fault, don't get me started,' the doorman barked back at Chad in a thick Aussie drawl.

'There's always next week, Bruce, aren't we playing the Fremantle Dockers? Shouldn't be too hard that one.'

'Yeah, yeah, piece of cake, mate. You wait.'

Chad rode the elevator to his twenty-third-floor penthouse apartment. Placing his hand on the front door of his apartment, he pulled back with a start. The door creaked open a crack. It was unlocked. He glanced quickly at the gaping hole where the deadlock had been and swore under his breath. He'd been burgled.

The hallway was a mess. Artwork had been torn off the walls and lay strewn about the floor. It was the same throughout the rest of the house. Cupboards had been trashed, furniture damaged and drawers upended. Everything had been turned inside out. Suddenly, Chad froze. A man wearing a balaclava held Chad's elderly Balinese grandmother up against a wall. Blood oozed from a wound on her forehead and she gasped with pain as she tried to breathe through broken ribs. With his back to Chad, the intruder hadn't seen him.

Since the death of Chad's parents, Narwi, his Balinese grandmother was his sole surviving relative. She had dealt with the grief of losing her last surviving child, Demi, by dedicating her life to Chad. She became his housekeeper, his cook and his advisor in the intricacies of Balinese Hinduism.

With a sudden movement Chad sprang at the man holding his grandmother. He leapt fully three feet into the air and landed with the point of his elbow outstretched and aimed at the back of the man's neck. He landed on the man with his full weight. The blow sent the attacker's body somersaulting forward onto the floor unconscious.

Chad caught his grandmother's body and gently eased her to the floor. He barely had time to assess her injuries when her eyes widened. Reflected in her glazed eyes, Chad saw the image of another man creeping up behind him. Bracing one arm against the wall, Chad whipped his right leg out behind him and landed a cracking blow to the legs of the second assailant. He swept the legs out from under the attacker and he landed heavily on the polished hardwood floor. The man sprang back up and began swinging his fist wildly at Chad.

Chad leapt to his feet and struck a classic fighting stance. The intruder attacked. Chad blocked each punch and hammered his fist into the man's head with the same fluid motion. The simultaneous block and punch technique was Chad's trademark and served

to ruin his opponent's rhythm. Chad knew that it was extremely disorienting to be hit hard in the head every time you swung a fist, especially when you weren't expecting it.

Chad's fourth punch hit home and his assailant stood dazed, wavering unsteadily on his feet. Chad finished him off with a spinning heel kick to the temple. It was a knockout blow. The man dropped like a lead weight.

'Chad!' his grandmother screamed. Too late. A third man clad in black and also wearing a balaclava loomed behind Chad and pistol-whipped him across the back of the head.

Chad fell to one knee—his head stinging.

The man pressed the muzzle of his pistol to Chad's forehead. 'Lie down on your belly and put your hands behind your head.'

Chad did as he was told.

The man barked orders at his two accomplices, but only one staggered gingerly to his feet, the other was still out cold. 'We've got what we came for,' he said, shoving an old wooden Balinese mask in Chad's face.

*What's so special about that mask?* Chad wondered. 'Fine, take it,' he said.

'I didn't invite you to speak, pig!' the man spat, pistol-whipping Chad again.

This time Chad fell to the floor unconscious.

## Chapter 2

Kuta Beach, Bali, Indonesia

In the plush offices of Wu Corporation in Bali, Lim Quan thumped his hand on top of the desk. A flurry of papers and photo frames were scattered to the floor. ‘Get me Hong. Now!’ he ranted at his secretary.

‘Yes, Mr. Lim.’

Lim couldn’t believe the findings from the lab. The Balinese ceremonial mask his men had stolen from the Melbourne apartment of his former business partner and enemy Chad Handelsmann did not contain a map.

It was a worthless piece of junk!

It had been photographed, x-rayed, scanned with ultraviolet light and finally taken apart with the precision of a surgeon and still there was nothing.

Lim dreaded the response from Sonny Wu, his boss. A carefully formulated report, implying that this was only a temporary setback would be required to avoid the wrath of the avaricious chairman of Wu Corp.

Lim’s recent spectacular failure to wrestle Handelsmann Imports from its owner Chad meant that his reputation had been sullied. Lim needed to save face and purloining the mask would be his master-stroke. The power that the mask represented was intoxicating.

Fingering the gilt framed photo of his wife and two daughters Lim felt nothing but humiliation. What would they think of his failure? He shuddered, hating the sound of the word. His family must be proud of him. Shame was something he could not live with.

Once again, Lim was locked in a battle with Chad Handelsmann, Only now they were not tearing each other apart over ownership of an export company. This time the prize was more personal. Lim turned the photo of his family away not wishing to meet their gaze. He could not afford another embarrassing loss of face, especially at the hands of Chad Handelsmann.

This time Lim would win. He must win!

Lim stood and paced about his office. It had been carefully planned, and although only a few stories high, commanded sweeping views of the opalescent Jimbaran Bay out one side and the shopping district with its busy community toiling below out the other.

His mind raced.

Occasionally he paused and looked at the brightly painted fishing boats bobbing at their moorings in the harbor, but this time they provided no distraction. His mind was consumed by just one emotion—revenge.

He turned and tried to think. There was only one explanation. There must be more than one mask. The real mask must be in Bali. It was probably hanging in one of Handelsmann’s many houses or restaurants. He scratched the loose skin over his Adam’s apple solicitously. Another break and enter job was out of the question. Handelsmann would now be on the alert and Lim could not risk being caught up in such petty crime.

Anyway, he had no idea which premises to raid. Handelsmann may have figured out the significance of the earlier theft and hidden the real mask. Lim dared not contemplate this but he knew he had to move fast.

He needed to find another way.

Lim hit the intercom to his secretary. 'Ling, I'm going out. I need to get some air.'  
'Yes, Mr Lim.'

Grabbing his briefcase, he bolted down the stairs and walked out onto the street. A new question was gnawing at his mind like a worm in a rotting apple. Could he live with himself if he had Handelsmann murdered? Lim was afraid that he already knew the answer.

## Chapter 3

From a café on the other side of the street a tall woman, dressed in faded jeans, tan colored loafers and a white cotton shirt, watched the offices of Wu Corp. Sari sat perched on a bamboo stool in the window of the crowded coffee house. She sipped a latte from a paper cup, savoring the bittersweet Balinese coffee. It was her third for the morning. She lifted a small pair of high-powered binoculars to her eyes every few minutes to sneak a look through the large floor to ceiling window of Lim's office.

Human traffic clogged the bustling sidewalk outside. Kuta Beach was packed at this time of year. Swarms of tourists descended on Bali like locusts, baking in the sun, copulating with strangers and consuming all the delights the street vendors had to offer.

A copy of the *Bali Times* obscured the lower half of Sari's face allowing only her large dark eyes to peer over and scour the entrance to the offices of the brown brick building opposite. This was her fourth day on the stakeout.

'Can I buy you another coffee, pretty lady?' The voice was male and to her left. She turned around and raised one curved eyebrow. A man leaned on the counter leering at her. He looked sleazy.

'No thanks, I'm fine.'

'Come on now, sweet cheeks. It's just a cup of coffee.' He moved too close.

'Take a hike, pal, my boyfriend is a cop. Now leave me alone—I'm busy.'

'Hey, just being friendly, lady. I'm on holiday.' He left.

She was grateful to Jeff, her ex-boyfriend. He had taken a few days off from his private detective agency to bug the offices of the building across the street. A bribe to the janitor was all it took to get access to the entire building. Sitting in the coffee house, she had a good view of the van that Jeff had rented for her. It contained sensitive listening equipment, a high-powered receiver and amplifier, which allowed her to listen in. The intelligence she had gathered about the man who occupied the top office gave her the edge she needed. Now she knew exactly what he wanted.

The man she stalked, Lim Quan, was the head of the giant Chinese Export Company, Wu Corp's Southeast Asian branch. He was soft spoken and prone to obsequious flattery, affectations that belied his ruthlessness.

Sari disliked him intensely. But he had something she wanted and now she finally had the means to get it. Tossing her long brown hair from her face with a flick of her head, she checked the offices across the road once more and then she saw him.

A thin man in a charcoal suit strode quickly out of the automatic glass doors of the building carrying a black leather briefcase. It was Lim. He scurried down the street in the direction of the bank.

Sari slapped a note down on the counter and drained the last of her coffee before dashing out of the shop behind him. Melting into the crowd, she maintained her distance and followed him from the opposite side of the road. Lim entered the Hong Kong bank.

Sari waited a few meters away under the canopy of a street vendor's trolley. The smell of hot satay cooking on a grill made her mouth water—she loved Indonesian food.

*Typical*, Sari thought. *The man is so penurious that he won't trust his banking to anyone else.* She wasn't surprised by his obsessive behavior. She presumed he was banking laundered money.

When Lim re-emerged from the bank, he was less agitated, his walk almost casual. He headed in the opposite direction to his offices. Sari followed, but lost sight of him when a green bus pulled up next to her on the curb. The sound of its hydraulic brakes engaging was piercing and Sari squinted in pain at the sound.

A throng of Balinese alighted and blocked the sidewalk for almost a minute. In that time Lim disappeared.

*Shit!* She searched up and down the street. He couldn't have got far. Twenty feet ahead of her a cab pulled slowly into the traffic. There was a solitary passenger in the back seat. Ignoring toots from the oncoming traffic, Sari bolted across the road. She slammed her palm down on the roof and yelled, 'Hold it!' Jerking open the passenger side door, she thrust her head inside the cab and gave the man in the rear a hard look. It wasn't him. She ran back onto the sidewalk. Her fingers tingled and her legs felt strange. She cupped her hands over her nose and mouth. Focus! Breathe! She searched shop windows. No sign of him. Jumping onto a low stone wall, she stood a head taller than the crowd and scanned the busy street below.

Again, zilch!

She jumped down onto the sidewalk and stood with her hands folded across her chest staring into the crowd.

Suddenly Lim reappeared from the doorway of a jeweler. Sari dived across the street after him. He took a right down the next street and disappeared into a Chinese Restaurant.

Bingo! She had him!

Sari composed herself and entered the restaurant. Blood red carpet and black suede walls imparted a lavish feel. Standing at the bar she surveyed the diners. A long fish tank filled with lobsters and crabs occupied almost the entire length of one wall. Lim sat with his back to the door sipping green tea and gazing at a menu. It was an up-market establishment, expensive but well known for its excellent food. Sari strode up to his table and stood directly in front of him.

Lim, unsure of her intent, simply tried to ignore her. 'Mind if I sit down?' she asked.

Lim shot her a dismissive look, but when he saw her high cheekbones and full lips, he quickly changed his mind. 'Excuse me, madam, but of course. You look familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?' he asked.

'Sari Shadbolt and yes, you have seen me before. I work for Christie's Australasia. I am a specialist in antique Chinese porcelain. You have dealt with us before, Mr Lim, although your contact was with my boss, Brian Fisher.'

Lim nodded. He never took much notice of underlings. A man of his import dealt only with the top-level executives. She obviously wanted to sell him something. Did she realize that she wasn't in his league and he wasn't about to change his practices just because she was pushy and attractive? Not lifting his eyes from the menu, he asked perfunctorily, 'What can I do for you, Miss Shadbolt?'

‘I have a proposition for you, Mr Lim.’

‘Really, Miss Shadbolt? I’m afraid I’m not looking for any antique porcelain at the moment.’

‘I’m not offering antique porcelain, Mr Lim. What would you say to a certain antique Balinese ceremonial mask, say of a Hindu God?’

Lim eyed Sari suspiciously. ‘I would say that I am very curious, Miss Shadbolt. Let me pour you some tea.’

Sari took up a chair and regarded the eel-like man who sat opposite her. She had dealt with Lim before and she had been spying on him for almost a week. What she knew about his exploitation of the poor wretches who worked in his sweatshops repulsed her. He was an avid collector of antiques as was his boss, the head of Wu Corp, and he had been a major bidder at all Christie’s auctions when they had any seriously valuable pieces of Ming dynasty china for sale. She had witnessed several unpleasant confrontations with her boss at Christie’s during Lim’s forceful attempts to buy the pieces prior to auction. Some of these had been quite threatening. He made her skin crawl. She hated dealing with any of the representatives from Wu Corp and Lim was one of the worst.

Sari took a sip from her cup. ‘Nice tea.’

‘Of course, we own the plantation. Forgive my directness, Miss Shadbolt. You were saying about the mask?’ Lim voice was even, but inside he was barely able to contain himself.

‘Let’s just say that I am prepared to put myself in a compromising position to steal that certain mask for you.’

Lim smiled, and rubbed the lucky coin inside his pocket. Fortune was his again. ‘I assume, Miss Shadbolt, that you know who is currently in possession of the mask?’

‘I do, a Mr Chad Handelmann of Handelmann Imports. Although I don’t know him personally, I have had the pleasure of dealing with his import company and let’s just say that he has crossed me.’

Lim winced at the mention of his rival’s name. How he loathed the man.

‘All you have to do is to find me an excuse to bump into Handelmann and I’ll do the rest.’

‘And you would do that for me? Why exactly?’ Lim asked, waiting for the catch.

‘There is something that I want from you, Mr Lim, but I will tell you what that is when I am ready to deliver. And besides, I’d like the opportunity to even the score with Handelmann Imports.’

‘I like your attitude, Miss Shadbolt. Pity the fool who crosses you. You see revenge is a sentiment that I completely understand. And I assure you that if you get me that mask, I will grant you any favor that you wish, and I can be very generous with favors.’ Lim called to the waiter. ‘Bring us two glasses of champagne, please.’

The waiter hurried back with the drinks.

‘To the success of our venture, Miss Shadbolt.’

‘To success,’ she said, taking a sip of champagne. The champagne was French. It had a crisp fruity flavor with just a hint of yeast. ‘Excellent!’ Sari placed her glass back on the table. Lim was more refined than she had imagined.

A smug grin graced Lim’s face. ‘And I know just the right occasion to bring the two of you together. Have you read in the papers about the astonishing find of a four-hundred-year-old Ming dynasty vase buried on a farm here in Bali?’

Sari nodded. 'Of course, I was annoyed that it was sold at private auction by the museum and not through Christie's.'

'As was I, Miss Shadbolt, as was I.' He groaned, the grin disappearing suddenly from his face. 'Well, that very piece of porcelain is to go on public display for one night only at an extraordinary exhibition of antique porcelain at the Denpasar Museum, here in Bali. Handelsmann is a patron so he will undoubtedly be there. It's two weeks from now. I'll see that you are invited.'

'Good, but first I'll need to go shopping.' She held out her hand palm facing up.

Lim understood her request.

'What is it with woman and shopping? They only seem to enjoy it when somebody else is paying.' He reached for his checkbook and scribbled furiously. 'This ought to be enough to get you started, Miss Shadbolt.' He passed her the check. Sari smiled and left him to his lunch. She had taken the first step towards finding her mother. The next involved Mr Chad Handelsmann.