



Part Two

I did not tell half of what I saw, for no one would have believed me.

MARCO POLO, 1324

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Rachel and Nick
TYERSALL PARK

As Peik Lin’s car approached the porte cochere of Tyersall Park, Nick bounded down the front steps toward them. “I was worried you’d gotten lost,” he said, opening the car door.

“We did get a bit lost, actually,” Rachel replied, getting out of the car and staring up at the majestic façade before her. Her stomach felt like it had been twisted in a vise, and she smoothed out the creases on her dress nervously. “Am I really late?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sorry, were my directions confusing?” Nick asked, peering into the car and smiling at Peik Lin. “Peik Lin—thanks so much for giving Rachel a lift.”

“Of course,” Peik Lin murmured, still rather stunned by her surroundings. She longed

to get out of the car and explore this colossal estate, but something told her to remain in her seat. She paused for a moment, thinking Nick might invite her in for a drink, but no invitation seemed to be forthcoming. Finally she said as nonchalantly as possible, “This is quite a place—is it your grandmother’s?”

“Yes,” Nick replied.

“Has she lived here a long time?” Peik Lin couldn’t resist trying to find out more as she craned her neck, trying to get a better look.

“Since she was a young girl,” Nick said.

Nick’s answer surprised Peik Lin, as she assumed that the house would have belonged to his grandfather. Now what she really wanted to ask was, *Who on earth is your grandmother?* But she didn’t want to risk seeming too nosy. “Well, you two have a great time,” Peik Lin said, winking at Rachel and mouthing the words *Call me later!* Rachel gave her friend a quick smile.

“Good night, and get home safe,” Nick said, patting the roof of the car.

As Peik Lin’s car drove off, Nick turned to Rachel, looking a little sheepish. “I hope it’s okay . . . but it’s not just the family. My grandmother decided to have a small party, all arranged at the last minute, apparently, because her *tan hua* flowers are going to bloom tonight.”

“She’s throwing a party because her flowers are in bloom?” Rachel asked, not quite following.

“Well, these are very rare flowers that bloom extremely infrequently, sometimes once every decade, sometimes even longer than that. They only bloom at night, and the whole thing only lasts for a few hours. It’s quite something to witness.”

“Sounds cool, but now I’m feeling *really* underdressed for the occasion,” Rachel said pensively, eyeing the fleet of limousines that lined the driveway.

“Not at all—you look absolutely perfect,” Nick told her. He could sense her trepidation and tried to reassure her, placing his hand on the small of her back and guiding her toward the front doors. Rachel felt the warm, radiating energy from his muscled arm and instantly felt better. Her knight in shining armor was at her side, and everything would be just fine.

As they entered the house, the first thing that caught Rachel's eye was the dazzling mosaic tiles in the grand foyer. She stood transfixed for a few moments by the intricate black, blue, and coral pattern before realizing that they were not alone. A tall, spindly Indian man stood silently in the middle of the foyer next to a circular stone table clustered with pots of enormous white-and-purple phalaenopsis orchids. The man bowed ceremoniously to Rachel and presented her with a hammered silver bowl filled with water and pale pink rose petals. "For your refreshment, miss," he said.

"Do I drink this?" Rachel whispered to Nick.

"No, no, it's for washing your hands," Nick instructed. Rachel dipped her fingers into the cool scented water before wiping them on the soft terry cloth that was proffered, feeling awed (and a little silly) by the ritual.

"Everyone's upstairs in the living room," Nick said, leading her toward the carved stone staircase. Rachel saw something out of the corner of her eye and let out a quick gasp. By the side of the staircase lurked a huge tiger.

"It's stuffed, Rachel." Nick laughed. The tiger stood as if about to pounce, mouth open in a ferocious growl.

"I'm sorry, it looked so real," Rachel said, recovering herself.

"It *was* real. It's a native Singaporean tiger. They used to roam this area until the late nineteenth century, but they were hunted into extinction. My great-grandfather shot this one when it ran into the house and hid under the billiard table, or so the story goes."

"Poor guy," Rachel said, reaching out to stroke the tiger's head gingerly. Its fur felt surprisingly brittle, as if a patch might fall off at any minute.

"It used to scare the hell out of me when I was little. I never dared go near the foyer at night, and I had dreams that it would come alive and attack me while I was sleeping," Nick said.

"You grew up here?" Rachel asked in surprise.

"Yes, until I was about seven."

"You never told me you lived in a palace."

“This isn’t a palace. It’s just a big house.”

“Nick, where I come from, this is a palace,” Rachel said, gazing up at the cast-iron and glass cupola soaring above them. As they climbed the stairs, the murmur of party chatter and piano keys wafted down toward them. When they reached the landing to the second floor, Rachel almost had to rub her eyes in disbelief. *Sweet Jesus*. She felt momentarily giddy, as if she had been transported back in time to another era, to the grand lounge of a twenties ocean liner en route from Venice to Istanbul, perhaps.

The “living room,” as Nick so modestly called it, was a gallery that ran along the entire northern end of the house, with art deco divans, wicker club chairs, and ottomans casually grouped into intimate seating areas. A row of tall plantation doors opened onto the wraparound veranda, inviting the view of verdant parklands and the scent of night-blooming jasmine into the room, while at the far end a young man in a tuxedo played on the Bösendorfer grand piano. As Nick led her into the space, Rachel found herself reflexively trying to ignore her surroundings, even though all she wanted to do was study every exquisite detail: the exotic potted palms in massive *Qianlong* dragon jardinières that anchored the space, the scarlet-shaded opaline glass lamps that cast an amber glow over the lacquered teak surfaces, the silver- and lapis lazuli-filigreed walls that shimmered as she moved about the room. Every single object seemed imbued with a patina of timeless elegance, as if it had been there for more than a hundred years, and Rachel didn’t dare to touch anything. The glamorous guests, however, appeared completely at ease lounging on the shantung silk ottomans or mingling on the veranda while a retinue of white-gloved servants in deep-olive batik uniforms circulated with trays of cocktails.

“Here comes Astrid’s mother,” Nick muttered. Before Rachel had a moment to collect herself, a stately-looking lady approached them, wagging a finger at Nick.

“Nicky, you naughty boy, why didn’t you tell us you were back? We thought you weren’t coming till next week, and you just missed Uncle Harry’s birthday dinner at Command House!” The woman looked like a middle-aged Chinese matron, but she spoke in the sort of clipped English accent straight out of a Merchant Ivory film. Rachel couldn’t help but notice how her tightly permed black hair fittingly resembled the Queen of England’s.

“So sorry, I thought you and Uncle Harry would be in London at this time of the year. *Dai gu cheh*, this is my girlfriend Rachel Chu. Rachel, this is my auntie Felicity Leong.”

Felicity nodded at Rachel, boldly scanning her up and down.

“So nice to meet you,” Rachel said, trying not to be unnerved by her hawklike gaze.

“Yes of course,” Felicity said, turning quickly to Nick and asking, almost sternly, “Do you know when your daddy gets in?”

“Not a clue,” he replied. “Is Astrid here yet?”

“Aiyah, you know that girl is always late!” At that moment, his aunt noticed an elderly Indian woman in a gold and peacock-blue sari being helped up the stairs. “Dear Mrs. Singh, when did you get back from Udaipur?” she screeched, pouncing on the woman as Nick guided Rachel out of the way.

“Who is that lady?” Rachel asked.

“That’s Mrs. Singh, a family friend who used to live down the street. She’s the daughter of a maharaja, and one of the most fascinating people I know. She was great friends with Nehru. I’ll introduce you later, when my aunt isn’t breathing down our necks.”

“Her sari is absolutely stunning,” Rachel remarked, gazing at the elaborate gold stitching.

“Yes, isn’t it? I hear she flies all her saris back to New Delhi to be specially cleaned,” Nick said as he tried to escort Rachel toward the bar, unwittingly steering straight into the path of a very posh-looking middle-aged couple. The man had a pompadour of Brylcreemed black hair and thick, oversize tortoiseshell glasses, while his wife wore a classic gold-buttoned red-and-white Chanel suit.

“Uncle Dickie, Auntie Nancy, meet my girlfriend Rachel Chu,” Nick said. “Rachel, this is my uncle and his wife, from the T’sien side of the family,” he explained.

“Ah Rachel, I’ve met your grandfather in Taipei . . . Chu Yang Chung, isn’t it?” Uncle Dickie asked.

“Er . . . actually, no. My family isn’t from Taipei,” Rachel stammered.

“Oh. Where are they from, then?”

“Guangdong originally, and nowadays California.”

Uncle Dickie looked a bit taken aback, while his well-coiffed wife grasped his arm tightly and continued. “Oh, we know California very well. Northern California, actually.”

“Yes, that’s where I’m from,” Rachel replied politely.

“Ah, well then, you must know the Gettys? Ann is a great friend of mine,” Nancy effused.

“Um, are you referring to the Getty Oil family?”

“Is there any other?” Nancy asked, perplexed.

“Rachel’s from Cupertino, not San Francisco, Auntie Nancy. And that’s why I need to introduce her to Francis Leong over there, who I hear is going to Stanford this fall,” Nick cut in, quickly moving Rachel along. The next thirty minutes became a blur of nonstop greetings, as Rachel was introduced to assorted family and friends. There were aunts and uncles and cousins aplenty, there was the distinguished though diminutive Thai ambassador, there was a man Nick introduced as the sultan of some unpronounceable Malay state, along with his two wives in elaborately bejeweled head scarves.

All this time, Rachel had noticed one woman who seemed to command the attention of the room. She was very slim and aristocratic-looking with snow-white hair and ramrod-straight posture, dressed in a long white silk cheongsam with deep purple piping along the collar, sleeves, and hemline. Most of the guests orbited around her paying tribute, and when she at last came toward them, Rachel noticed for the first time Nick’s resemblance to her. Nick had earlier informed Rachel that while his grandmother spoke English perfectly well, she preferred to speak in Chinese and was fluent in four dialects—Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew. Rachel decided to greet her in Mandarin, the only dialect she spoke, but before Nick could make proper introductions, she bowed her head nervously at the stately lady and said, “It is such a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home.”

The woman looked at her quizzically and replied slowly in Mandarin, “It is a pleasure to meet you too, but you are mistaken, this is not my house.”

“Rachel, this is my great-aunt Rosemary,” Nick explained hurriedly.

“And you’ll have to forgive me, my Mandarin is really quite rusty,” Great-aunt Rosemary added in her Vanessa Redgrave English.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Rachel said, her cheeks flushing bright red. She could feel all eyes in the room upon her, amused by her faux pas.

“No need to apologize.” Great-aunt Rosemary smiled graciously. “Nick has told me quite a bit about you, and I was so looking forward to meeting you.”

“He has?” Rachel said, still flustered.

Nick put his arm around Rachel and said, “Here, come meet my grandmother.” They walked across the room, and on the sofa closest to the veranda, flanked by a spectacled man smartly attired in a white linen suit and a strikingly beautiful lady, sat a shrunken woman. Shang Su Yi had steel-gray hair held in place by an ivory headband, and she was dressed simply in a rose-colored silk blouse, tailored cream trousers, and brown loafers. She was older and frailer than Rachel had expected, and though her features were partially obscured by a thick pair of tinted bifocals, her regal countenance was unmistakable. Standing completely still behind Nick’s grandmother were two ladies in immaculate matching gowns of iridescent silk.

Nick addressed his grandmother in Cantonese. “Ah Ma, I’d like you to meet my friend Rachel Chu, from America.”

“So nice to meet you!” Rachel blurted in English, completely forgetting her Mandarin.

Nick’s grandmother peered up at Rachel for a moment. “Thank you for coming,” she replied haltingly, in English, before turning swiftly to resume her conversation in Hokkien with the lady at her side. The man in the white linen suit smiled quickly at Rachel, but then he too turned away. The two ladies swathed in silk stared inscrutably at Rachel, and she smiled back at them tensely.

“Let’s get some punch,” Nick said, steering Rachel toward a table where a uniformed waiter wearing white cotton gloves was serving punch out of a huge Venetian glass punch bowl.

“Oh my God, that had to be the most awkward moment of my life! I think I really annoyed your grandmother,” Rachel whispered.

“Nonsense. She was just in the middle of another conversation, that’s all,” Nick said soothingly.

“Who were those two women in matching silk dresses standing like statues behind

her?” Rachel asked.

“Oh, those are her lady’s maids.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her lady’s maids. They never leave her side.”

“Like ladies-in-waiting? They look so elegant.”

“Yes, they’re from Thailand, and they were trained to serve in the royal court.”

“Is this a common thing in Singapore? Importing royal maids from Thailand?” Rachel asked incredulously.

“I don’t believe so. This service was a special lifetime gift to my grandmother.”

“A gift? From whom?”

“The King of Thailand. Though it was the last one, not Bhumibol the current king. Or was it the one before that? Anyway, he was apparently a great friend of my grandmother’s. He decreed that she must only be waited on by court-trained ladies. So there has been a constant rotation ever since my grandmother was a young woman.”

“Oh,” Rachel said, stupefied. She took the glass of punch from Nick and noticed that the fine etching on the Venetian glassware perfectly matched the intricate fretwork pattern on the ceiling. She leaned against the back of a sofa for support, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. There was too much for her to take in—the army of white-gloved servants hovering about, the confusion of new faces, the mind-blowing opulence. Who knew that Nick’s family would turn out to be these extremely grand people? And why didn’t he prepare her for all this a little more?

Rachel felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see Nick’s cousin holding a sleepy toddler. “Astrid!” she cried, delighted to see a friendly face at last. Astrid was adorned in the chicest outfit Rachel had ever seen, quite different from how she had remembered her in New York. So this was Astrid in her natural habitat.

“Hello, hello!” Astrid said cheerily. “Cassian, this is Auntie Rachel. Say hi to Auntie Rachel?” Astrid gestured. The child stared at Rachel for a moment, before burying his head shyly into his mother’s shoulder.

“Here, let me take this big boy out of your hands!” Nick grinned, lifting a squirming Cassian out of Astrid’s arms, and then deftly handing her a glass of punch.

“Thanks, Nicky,” Astrid said as she turned to Rachel. “How are you finding Singapore so far? Having a good time?”

“A great time! Although tonight’s been a bit . . . overwhelming.”

“I can only imagine,” Astrid said with a knowing glint in her eye.

“No, I’m not sure you can,” Rachel said.

A melodious peel rang through the room. Rachel turned to see an elderly woman in a white cheongsam top and black silk trousers playing a small silver xylophone by the stairs.*

“Ah, the dinner gong,” Astrid said. “Come, let’s eat.”

“Astrid, how is it that you always seem to arrive *just* when the food is ready?” Nick remarked.

“Choco-cake!” little Cassian muttered.

“No, Cassian, you already had your dessert,” Astrid replied firmly.

The crowd began to make a beeline for the stairs, passing the woman with the xylophone. As they approached her, Nick gave the woman a big bear hug and exchanged a few words in Cantonese. “This is Ling Cheh, the woman who pretty much raised me from birth,” he explained. “She has been with our family since 1948.”

“*Wah, nay gor nuay pang yau gum laeng, ah! Faai di git fun!*” Ling Cheh commented, grasping Rachel’s hand gently. Nick grinned, blushing a little. Rachel didn’t understand Cantonese, so she just smiled, while Astrid quickly translated. “Ling Cheh just teased Nick about how pretty his lady friend is.” As they proceeded down the stairs, she whispered to Rachel, “She also ordered him to marry you soon!” Rachel simply giggled.

A buffet supper had been set up in the conservatory, an elliptical-shaped room with dramatic frescoed walls of what appeared from a distance to be a dreamy, muted Oriental scene. On closer inspection, Rachel noticed that while the mural did evoke classical Chinese mountainscapes, the details seemed to be pure Hieronymus Bosch,

with strange, lurid flowers climbing up the walls and iridescent phoenixes and other fantastical creatures hiding in the shadows. Three enormous round tables gleamed with silver chafing dishes, and arched doorways opened onto a curved colonnaded terrace where white wrought-iron bistro tables lit with tall votives awaited the diners. Cassian continued to squirm in Nick's arms, wailing even louder, "I want chocolate!"

"I think what he really wants is S-L-E-E-P," his mother commented. She tried to take her son back from Nick, but the child began to whimper.

"I sense a crying fit on the way. Let's take him to the nursery," Nick offered. "Rachel, why don't you get started? We'll be back in a minute."

Rachel marveled at the sheer variety of food that had been laid out. One table was filled with Thai delicacies, another with Malaysian cuisine, and the last with classic Chinese dishes. As usual, she was a bit at a loss when confronted with a huge buffet. She decided to start one cuisine at a time and began at the Chinese table with a small helping of E-fu noodles and seared scallops in ginger sauce. She came upon a tray of exotic-looking golden wafers folded into little top hats. "What in the world are these?" she wondered aloud.

"That's *kueh pie tee*, a *nyonya* dish. Little tarts filled with jicama, carrots, and shrimp. Try one," a voice behind her said. Rachel looked around and saw the dapper man in the white linen suit who had been sitting next to Nick's grandmother. He bowed in a courtly manner and introduced himself. "We never met properly. I'm Oliver T'sien, Nick's cousin." Yet another Chinese relative with a British accent, but his sounded even plummier than the rest.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Rachel—"

"Yes, I know. Rachel Chu, of Cupertino, Palo Alto, Chicago, and Manhattan. You see, your reputation precedes you."

"Does it?" Rachel asked, trying not to sound too surprised.

"It certainly does, and I must say you're much more fetching than I was led to believe."

"Really, by whom?"

"Oh, you know, the whispering gallery. Don't you know how much the tongues have

been wagging since you've arrived?" he said mischievously.

"I had no clue," Rachel said a little uneasily, walking out onto the terrace with her plate, looking for Nick or Astrid but not seeing them anywhere. She noticed one of Nick's aunts—the lady in the Chanel suit—looking toward her expectantly.

"There's Dickie and Nancy," Oliver said. "Don't look now—I think they're waving to you. God help us. Let's start our own table, shall we?" Before Rachel could answer, Oliver grabbed her plate from her hand and walked it over to a table at the far end of the terrace.

"Why are you avoiding them?" Rachel asked.

"I'm not avoiding them. I'm helping *you* avoid them. You can thank me later."

"Why?" Rachel pressed on.

"Well, first of all, they are insufferable name-droppers, always going on and on about their latest cruise on Rupert and Wendi's yacht or their lunch with some deposed European royal, and second, they aren't exactly on your team."

"What team? I didn't realize I was on any team."

"Well, like it or not, you *are*, and Dickie and Nancy are here tonight precisely to spy for the opposition."

"Spying?"

"Yes. They mean to pick you apart like a rotting carcass and serve you up as an *amuse-bouche* the next time they're invited to dine in the Home Counties."

Rachel had no idea what to make of his outlandish statement. This Oliver seemed like a character straight out of an Oscar Wilde play. "I'm not sure I follow," she finally said.

"Don't worry, you will. Just give it another week—I'd peg you for a quick study."

Rachel assessed Oliver for a minute. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with short, meticulously combed hair and small round tortoiseshell glasses that only accentuated his longish face. "So how exactly are you related to Nick?" she asked. "There seem to be so many different branches of the family."

“It’s really quite simple, actually. There are three branches—the T’siens, the Youngs, and the Shangs. Nick’s grandfather James Young and my grandmother Rosemary T’sien are brother and sister. You met her earlier tonight, if you recall? You mistook her for Nick’s grandmother.”

“Yes, of course. But that would mean that you and Nick are second cousins.”

“Right. But here in Singapore, since extended families abound, we all just say we’re ‘cousins’ to avoid confusion. None of that ‘third cousins twice removed’ rubbish.”

“So Dickie and Nancy are your uncle and aunt.”

“Correct. Dickie is my father’s older brother. But you do know that in Singapore, anyone you’re introduced to who’s one generation older should be called ‘Uncle or Auntie,’ even though they might not be related at all. It’s considered the polite thing.”

“Well, shouldn’t you be calling your relatives ‘Uncle Dickie’ and ‘Auntie Nancy’ then?”

“Technically, yes, but I personally feel that the honorific should be earned. Dickie and Nancy have never given a flying fuck about me, so why should I bother?”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “Well, thanks for the crash course on the T’siens. Now, how about the third branch?”

“Ah yes, the Shangs.”

“I don’t think I’ve met any of them yet.”

“Well, none of them are here, of course. We’re not supposed to *ever* talk about them, but the imperial Shangs flee to their grand country estates in England every April and stay until September, to avoid the hottest months. But not to worry, I think my cousin Cassandra Shang will be back for the wedding next week, so you will get a chance to bask in her incandescence.”

Rachel grinned at his florid remark—this Oliver was such a trip. “And how are they related exactly?”

“Here’s where it gets interesting. Pay attention. So my grandmother’s eldest daughter, Aunt Mabel T’sien, was married off to Nick’s grandmother’s younger brother Alfred

Shang.”

“Married off? Does that mean it was an arranged marriage?”

“Yes, very much so, plotted by my grandfather T’sien Tsai Tay and Nick’s great-grandfather Shang Loong Ma. Good thing they actually liked each other. But it was quite a masterstroke, because it strategically bound together the T’siens, the Shangs, and the Youngs.”

“What for?” Rachel asked.

“Oh come on, Rachel, don’t play the naïf with me. For the *money*, of course. It joined together three family fortunes and kept everything neatly locked up.”

“Who’s getting locked up? Are they finally locking you up, Ollie?” Nick said, as he approached the table with Astrid.

“They haven’t been able to pin anything on me yet, Nicholas,” Oliver retorted. He turned to Astrid and his eyes widened. “Holy Mary Mother of Tilda Swinton, look at those earrings! Wherever did you get them?”

“Stephen Chia’s . . . they’re VBH,” Astrid said, knowing he would want to know who the designer was.

“Of course they are. Only Bruce could have dreamed up something like that. They must have cost *at least* half a million dollars. I wouldn’t have thought they were quite your style, but they do look fabulous on you. Hmm . . . you still can surprise me after all these years.”

“You know I try, Ollie, I try.”

Rachel stared with renewed wonder at the earrings. Did Oliver really say half a million dollars? “How’s Cassian doing?” she asked.

“It was a bit of a struggle at first, but now he’ll sleep till dawn,” Astrid replied.

“And where is that errant husband of yours, Astrid? Mr. Bedroom Eyes?” Oliver asked.

“Michael’s working late tonight.”

“What a pity. That company of his really keeps him toiling away, don’t they? Seems like ages since I’ve seen Michael—I’m beginning to take it quite personally. Though the other day I could have *sworn* I saw him walking up Wyndham Street in Hong Kong with a little boy. At first I thought it was Michael and Cassian, but then the little boy turned around and he wasn’t nearly as cute as Cassian, so I knew I had to be hallucinating.”

“Obviously,” Astrid said as calmly as she could, feeling like she had just been punched in the gut. “Were you in Hong Kong before this, Ollie?” she asked, her brain furiously trying to ascertain whether Oliver had been in Hong Kong at the same time as Michael’s last “business trip.”

“I was there last week. I’ve been shuttling between Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing for the past month for work.”
Michael was supposedly in Shenzhen then. He could have easily taken a train to Hong Kong, Astrid thought.

“Oliver is the Asian art and antiquities expert for Christie’s in London,” Nick explained to Rachel.

“Yes, except that it’s no longer very efficient for me to be based in London. The Asian art market is heating up like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I hear that every new Chinese billionaire is trying to get their hands on a Warhol these days,” Nick remarked.

“Well, yes there are certainly quite a few wannabe Saatchis around, but I’m dealing more with the ones trying to buy back the great antiquities from European and American collectors. Or, as they like to say, stuff stolen by the foreign devils,” Oliver said.

“It wasn’t truly *stolen*, was it?” Nick asked.

“Stolen, smuggled, sold off by philistines, isn’t it all the same? Whether the Chinese want to admit it or not, the true connoisseurship of Asian art was outside of China for much of the last century, so that’s where a lot of the museum-quality pieces ended up—in Europe and America. The demand was there. The moneyed Chinese didn’t really appreciate what they had. With the exception of a few families, no one bothered to collect Chinese art and antiquities, not with any real discernment, anyway. They wanted to be modern and sophisticated, which meant emulating the Europeans. Why, even in this house there’s probably more French art deco than there are Chinese

pieces. Thank God there are some fabulous signed Ruhlmann pieces, but if you think about it, it's a pity that your great-grandfather went mad for art deco when he could have been snapping up all the imperial treasures coming out of China."

"You mean the antiques that were in the Forbidden City?" Rachel asked.

"Absolutely! Did you know that in 1913, the imperial family of China actually tried to *sell* their entire collection to the banker J. P. Morgan?" Oliver said.

"Come on!" Rachel was incredulous.

"It's true. The family was so hard up, they were willing to let all of it go for four million dollars. All the priceless treasures, collected over a span of five centuries. It's quite a sensational story—Morgan received the offer by telegram, but he died a few days later. Divine intervention was the only thing that prevented the most irreplaceable treasures of China from ending up in the Big Apple."

"Imagine if that had actually happened," Nick remarked, shaking his head.

"Yes indeed. It would be a loss greater than the Elgin Marbles going to the British Museum. But thankfully the tide has turned. The Mainland Chinese are finally interested in buying back their own heritage, and they only want the best," Oliver said. "Which reminds me, Astrid—are you still looking for more *Huanghuali*? Because I know of an important Han dynasty puzzle table coming up for auction next week in Hong Kong." Oliver turned to Astrid, noticing that she had a faraway look on her face. "Earth to Astrid?"

"Oh . . . sorry, I got distracted for a moment," Astrid said, suddenly flustered. "You were saying something about Hong Kong?"

* These "black and white amahs," nowadays a fast-disappearing group in Singapore, are professional domestic servants who hailed from China. They were usually confirmed spinsters who took vows of chastity and spent their entire lives caring for the families they served. (Quite often, they were the ones who actually raised the children.) They were known for their trademark uniform of white blouse and black pants, and their long hair that was always worn in a neat bun at the nape of the neck.

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