

## CHAPTER FOUR

West Point, NY

July 28, 1912

“So how is it really going, David?” Mei-yin spoke the language of their childhood, Mandarin, while they strolled toward Battle Monument, two hundred yards from the hotel. She wanted to hold his hand, but something warned her that would be out of place: look but don’t touch.

“It’s been an exhausting six weeks. Captain Hart’s right. It isn’t simply the demand for physical endurance. It’s emotionally draining to try to do five things at once while Yearlings look over your shoulder and remind you how hopelessly incompetent you are.”

*Incompetent?* Her heart went out to him. He was one of the most competent people she knew. In June, 1908, when he had just turned thirteen, hadn’t Glenn Curtiss trusted him to fly *June Bug*? Hadn’t he helped his father and Curtiss build engines and aeroplanes for four years? Hadn’t he flown the *Rheims Racer* at Dominguez Field in Los Angeles in January, 1910, when he was only fifteen? Mei-yin knew that some physicist named George Walsh had tutored him in physics and mathematics so well that he had been valedictorian of his high school class just two months ago. Did that record count for nothing here? “You must hate this place!” she said.

David smiled. “No. In fact, I enjoy it. It’s such a parody of military courtesy and spit and polish that you have to work hard to take it seriously. Pat and I stifle laughter so much that we wonder if we’re losing our minds.” He didn’t think she would understand his belief that his disciplined detachment was the best insulation against taking hazing seriously.

They stopped at Battle Monument. Despite the suffocating humidity, David was pleased to show Mei-yin the breathtaking vista. To the north lay the deepest fresh water fjord in the world where the Hudson River had carved its path between two tall mountains. To the east, he pointed to the white tents of summer camp beyond the hotel. “The key buildings are strung like beads around the fringe of the Plain.”

She didn't want to talk about buildings, but why be picky? Better to learn about his world. "Tell me what they are so I don't get lost some day when I'm supposed to meet you God knows where."

"OK. Beyond our camp overlooking the Hudson, you can see the Bachelor Officers' Quarters, Cullum Hall and the Officers Mess, designed by Stanford White and completed ten years ago. Clockwise from there, you'll glimpse the ramparts of the new riding hall, completed last year. Then you come to the library, built over seventy years ago. Then you see two academic buildings on either side of what we call Tenth Avenue. Directly south you see the battlements of South Barracks, then North Barracks...."

**West Point—1912 (From a Painting by Richard Rummel)**

"Wait a minute," she interrupted. "Those barracks look different. Did some architect change his mind?"

"Sort of. The two wings of South Barracks are the oldest with a Tudor design. For a long time, the entire cadet battalion lived there. Two years ago, they built the two wings of North Barracks along Gothic lines. Next to North Barracks, behind the Superintendent's Quarters, you can see the gymnasium."

“The Cadet Chapel is really quite beautiful.” She thought the magnificent new Gothic pile was a reminder that Divinity had cast its grace over the whole picture postcard scene of gray granite and green parade field.

“Yeah. It was completed two years ago, when they moved the Old Chapel from where East Academic building is now. But enough of architecture; the monument we’re standing on is a prime example of West Point humor.”

A cool breeze wrapped Mei-yin’s summer dress around her to outline her small figure. Everything about her was petite: her feet, her hands, her ears, her bosom. If she had not worn long hair, she might have been mistaken for a lovely boy. “What do you mean? I see nothing amusing about it.”

“Consider this.” David pointed to brass plates at the base of the pillar, the largest piece of granite ever turned in the Western Hemisphere. “The monument is dedicated to Yankee officers and men who died in the Civil War. Two thousand, two hundred and thirty names are inscribed here.”

“And you think that’s funny?” Mei-yin looked perplexed. “Maybe you *are* losing your mind.”

David grinned. “What’s funny is that Cadets also call the monument a tribute to Southern marksmanship. Irony and parody; that’s Cadet humor in Beast Barracks and I love it. But things will change in September.”

“What happens then?”

“We’ll be officially inducted into the Corps of Cadets, start classes and settle down to a more civilized routine. Captain Hart said I should have no trouble with the system after that.”

“Why don’t they feed you more?” Mei-yin asked with a worried frown. “You’re too thin. At the hotel, you gobbled like you were starved.”

“That’s ‘cause I *feel* starved most of the time. Generally the food is adequate in quantity and passable in quality, except maybe for Sammy.”

“Who’s that?”

“Sammy was a cat. We were told that he died in the molasses barrel in the mess.” Still amused at the novelty of Cadet slang and humor, David watched Mei-yin for a horrified reaction.

Instead, she had to restrain her disgust. She thought the hazing and slang and rules were a pitiful combination of gallows humor and sophomoric posturing. Worse, he seemed to enjoy it. She sensed that she must be patient. He was bursting with the novelties of those first six weeks and must talk about them. She wanted him to feel her concern and to be conscious of the love behind it. “Are you getting enough sleep?”

“I guess I sleep around five hours a night.”

“That’s not enough. You must drag yourself through the day.”

“Yeah. I could sure use more sack time. I tell you, it’s nerve-shattering to be awakened by the reveille gun. As soon as that roar jerks you awake and sets your nerves on edge, the ‘Hell Cats,’ the fife and drum corps, play ditties from the Revolutionary War to warn you minute by minute how much time you have left before you have to be standing at attention in formation.”

“Do you like your classmates?”

“Most of them. They come from all over the United States. You wouldn’t believe the accents.”

“Like Pat Coyle?”

“Not like Pat; he’s something special. He got his appointment as a political payoff for his father’s work for Tammany with immigrants in New York. It’s an irony that we’re such good friends already.”

“An irony?”

“Yeah. We learned just the other day that my father knew Pat’s father right after the war with Spain. My father tried to design a special aircraft engine. A thug in New York began to interfere. So Teddy Roosevelt sent my father to see Pat’s father for help.”

“Did he help?”

“Not really. Some powerful businessmen ordered Tammany to stay out of it; I guess the Wall Street moguls wanted to support the Wright brothers instead of Mr. Langley at the Smithsonian. Anyway, Pat’s father’s hands were tied. But our fathers became good friends. Someday, I hope to meet Pat’s old man. He must be swell!”

“You sound like you admire both the Coyles.”

“I do. You should hear Pat kick around the gutter lingo of the East Side. He’s an encyclopaedia of immigrant attitudes. He knows all kinds of Japs, sheenies, polacks, bohunks, wops, greasers and dagoes who do all the dirty jobs in New York.”

“But he seems so sensitive! He doesn’t act like he’s from the East Side.”

David smiled. “Don’t let his tenor voice and his quotes from Shakespeare deceive you. Under that slender frame, he’s tough as nails: a fighter, even a brawler when necessary. I like him and respect him enormously.”

Slightly envious of anyone whom David admired, she looked across the Plain to the distant barracks and conceded, “This setting makes me feel like we’ve gone back to the Middle Ages.”

“Yeah. The place catches at something in me, too. I feel... at home here, like maybe I was a monk in another life. I can almost hear Gregorian chants in the distance. There’s a seductive veneer of order to it all.”

Mei-yin caught a glimpse of what he was trying to say. The granite buildings seemed to grow out of the ground, mute witnesses to ideals and traditions grounded in an ancient mystery. “Why ‘seductive’?”

“Well, it’s like you said; a tenth century medieval cloister almost seems the reality. It tempts me to pretend I’m on some divine quest totally detached from worldly cares, hopes, fears and ambitions.”

This didn’t sound like the Davey she remembered. What had they *done* to him? “Even if everything disappeared conveniently so that you *could* discard your worldly cares, would you want to?”

David smiled. “The idea is strangely appealing. Selflessness and... knightly service; Camelot; King Arthur’s grand vision of unity against the Saxons; the mystical Holy Grail. This place makes me think of all that.”

“I’d *like* to understand,” Mei-yin said wistfully as if it were a dream beyond her practical sense. “But I don’t want to withdraw from life. Anyway, isn’t your *inner* battle what counts?”

“Sure. Most of us came here with pretty inflated opinions of ourselves.”

Mei-yin giggled. “Has Beast Barracks beaten that out of you?”

“It sure has forced us to ask who we think we are and where we think we’re going.”

“Is *that* why you like it?” Mei-yin persisted.

Her “why” question challenged David. On the one hand, he wanted to honor the five years when they had played brother and sister in Carmel, California. He had protected her, had shared his astonishing psychic gifts with her, had even taught her how to communicate telepathically and had brought all his crises and anxieties to her, almost like a real sister. On the other hand, if he told her the real reason he tolerated West Point’s monastic discipline, he would have to talk about Mary Walsh. And if he talked about her, Mei-yin would learn that he was in love with Mary. And that would hurt Mei-yin’s feelings. Better to keep this discussion abstract. “Yeah. I guess I like the way this place is forcing me to discover the best that’s in me.”

Mei-yin understood now why “Davey” no longer seemed right for this man she loved. This pressure cooker had challenged him to face himself, warts and all, to seek the core of his own integrity.

He tried to explain, “The system forces my mind to go to a far country. I... I really like it there because... because ideals are supreme.”

It occurred to Mei-yin that her future with David depended on her ability to welcome, not criticize his “far country.” “What is it like there?”

David felt awkward talking about this with Mei-yin. It had been a long time since he had shared himself with her. “It’s hard to describe. It’s like... like everyone here is... a member of my family.”

“How extraordinary!” He had opened a door to intimacy and she wanted it to stay open. “Tell me more.”

David searched for words to clarify his feelings. “We’re like privileged prisoners here. The price of membership is conformity-- on the surface at least. What counts most for me are the people, especially a few classmates who don’t have much time left. I want to help *them* get through this ordeal.”

“Who don’t have...?” This was the Davey Mei-yin remembered, full of mysterious insights. He must have had a pre-vision of some of his friends. She asked gently, “By ‘much time left,’ do you mean... time to live?”

Embarrassed for letting that slip out, David frowned at her. “Yes, but you can’t tell a soul; anyway, no one can ever be sure.”

“Did you see them... dying?”

“Not exactly. I only need to look at them for an instant. Their faces just... disappear behind the numbers ‘1917’ and ‘1918’.”

“Are there many?”

“No, thank God: two in 1917 and five in 1918.” David wasn’t about to admit that one would certainly kill himself. He was learning to control precognition; but signals like disappearing faces still could knock him off balance.

Mei-yin shivered. This was vintage David Harrison, who had always acted as if *his* reality resided in a realm of mystery from which he emerged moment by moment to play “life” with a mix of wisdom and compassion. Until she left him when they were ten, he had seemed a creature of fearless faith. “So you don’t really mind all the ritual here?”

“I don’t mind it because I don’t take *any* ritual very seriously. But too many classmates have bought it lock, stock and barrel. When we get together and fall out after a hard day, some of them can’t relax.”

“How terrible...to carry all that stress day and night!”

“It’s as if they expect to charge off in the next minute to do something death-defying to prove themselves. Some guys act like West Point’s pomp counts more than ideals when it comes to leadership and people.”

“And you think people *do* count?”

“Of course they do! I guess that’s why I’m a little edgy about this place. It’s too ... orderly and ... consistent. I *know* the army isn’t that way. So I worry about adjusting to the army after I graduate. Will the army force me to give up my conscience, give up that far country where honor counts the most?”

“Why would the army do that?”

“Because like West Point, the army also enshrines *Duty*, a duty to great causes. In that country, people *don’t* count-- or not as much as duty. Only the cause counts. Cold professionalism counts. Killing counts. A high school classmate, Dale Harner, is like that.”

“So the routine and pressure aren’t necessarily good for everyone?”

“Absolutely not. Many people lose more than their sense of humor. They lose their sense of humanity. They get so infatuated with duty that they become caricatures of leaders. Mind you, I can pretend that I’ve gone to *that* country, too. But it takes all my strength to control my laughter then ’cause it isn’t real. It’s just a stage set, more like a Viennese opera.”

Mei-yin suddenly felt reassured... and frustrated because the afternoon had slipped away and he had eluded her somehow. How could she revive his memories of the way they had shared almost every moment of the day in Carmel at breakfast and school and art classes with Julie Simmons and long rides around the ranch and birthdays and lovely evenings? Only now she was a grown woman and wanted to marry him. “This reminds me of skits we used to put on at the ranch. Remember how Juan Cisneros could never snap back from his character when the skit was over? Is that what you’re saying? Do you think some people get lost in the character they play here?”

“Yes. Remember how Juan seemed to disappear when his character suddenly materialized right in front of us. He made himself-- and us-- believe that the act was reality.”

“I’m always suspicious of duty. It’s... it’s too easy to use it as a substitute for conscience. But I don’t trust honor either. Most of the time, unless it’s routine like brushing my teeth, I guess I hover somewhere between them.”

It startled David that she had put her finger so precisely on his dilemma: duty versus honor or conscience, which he thought were synonymous. After an exhausting day of drill and hazing on the spirit of the bayonet, he often reflected on dualities like duty versus honor, vengeance versus forgiveness, masculine versus feminine, body versus spirit. His father, an engineer, rancher and veteran of San Juan Hill in Cuba, had taught him to see beauty in the rational structure of aeroplanes, engines and mathematics. However, his mother had encouraged him to appreciate the beauty of his wondrous, sometimes dismaying connection with the non-rational dimension. Indeed, since the death of Tom Selfridge in 1908, Tom’s voice had become a metaphor for David’s spiritual identity.

He was suddenly struck by a new insight. The struggle to mediate the physical/metaphysical duality of his nature wasn’t new. In fact, his parents’ competing values had thrown the issue in his face day by day, moment by moment, challenging his childhood with choices. Now Greg Hart had revealed that it was the central issue of the curriculum at West Point, using time to force each Cadet to find his own conscious balance between the non-rational beauty of conscience and the rational beauty of logic.

Would the struggle ever end? As Captain Hart suggested, was a man’s character the product of a *lifetime* confrontation between spirit and body? What would he do, perhaps on a battlefield, if duty ordered him to do something personally dishonorable? “You’re right, Mei-yin. Maybe I’ll need more than four years here to learn how to reconcile duty with honor.”

