

CHAPTER 1

How Come I Got Into This?

THE DAME behind the counter was pretty. In fact, she could have been a knockout in any other surroundings, despite the fact that she was wearing a Chinese kimono and had her hair scraped back off her forehead and treated with some thick musky-smelling grease that was kinda attractive in itself.

"Good morning," she said. "Can I help you?"

It was the stock greeting that you get in almost any store, but the way she said it surprised me. You don't expect that sort of approach in a small, dirty, strong-smelling Chinese *yuk choy*, halfway down Nob Hill and in the very heart of San Francisco's Chinatown.

"Maybe you can, at that, baby," I said. "I'm looking for Doctor Lum Din Choo. I was told I'd find him hereabouts."

The set smile on her face didn't change, though I thought her black eyes flickered slightly.

"What is it you require, sir?" she asked. "A special Oriental medicine? Or is it a fan-tan game, hooch or maybe a woman?"

"Baby," I said patiently. "I'm not sick; I never gamble at fan-tan, I get my liquor where I know I can rely on what's in the bottle being relatively near what's on the label, and as for my women, well, I seldom if ever pass 'em up—but right now I want to see Doctor Lum Din Choo. Savvy?"

Again the eyes flickered without disturbing the set smile.

"If you're from the Police Department," she said, "you should display your credentials. If you're just a private eye snooping around—good-day. Can I introduce to you a nice line in dragons' teeth or maybe you'd try our Tibetan bear claws, soaked in alcohol? These are very good for the gout."

"I don't have gout, lady," I said, getting a little ruffled at the thought that she was ribbing me. "I'm not a cop—I dislike