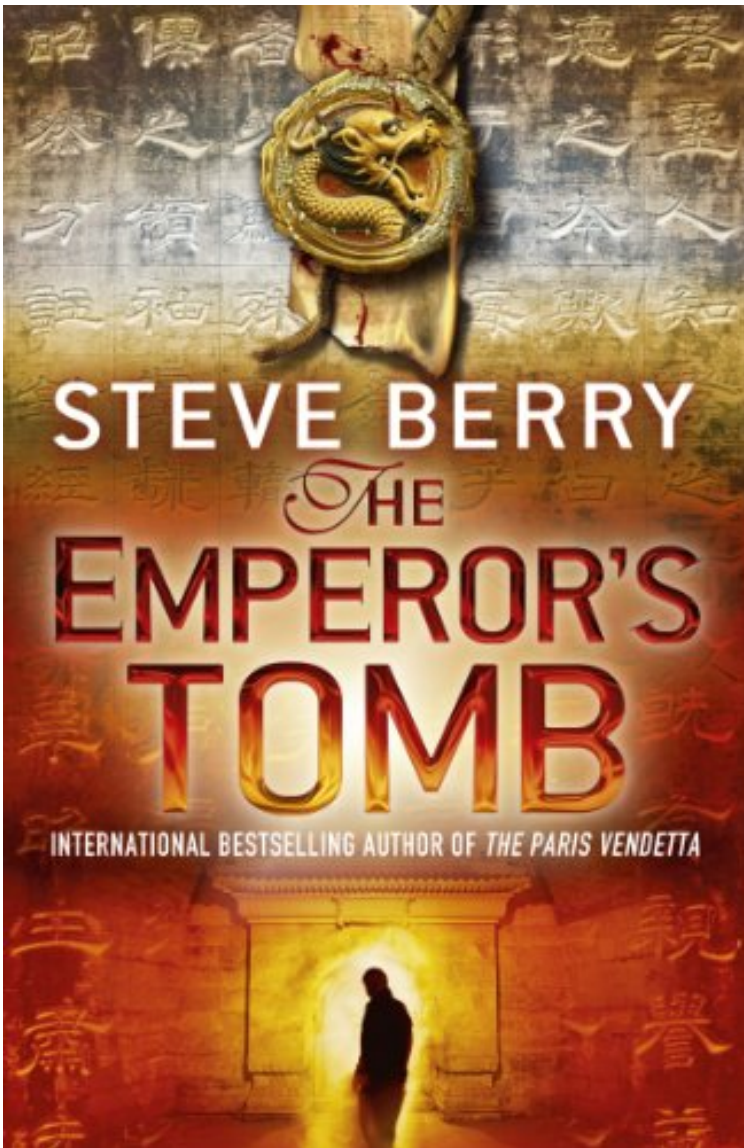


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# The Emperor's Tomb: Book 6



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA new Cotton Malone adventure that takes our hero from Europe to the Far East in a race to unlock the mystery of an ancient tomb.Hearing that his old friend Cassiopeia Vitt is in trouble, Malone follows the few clues he has and realises that they are in the middle of something huge, involving Russian and US oil interests and a centuries-old secret.After stumbling across two dead bodies and into the crosshairs of his former boss, Malone finds himself in a race to unravel the mystery of an emperor's tomb, a sinister society, and a deadly battle between two ruthless men for supremacy in China - and the world.ExtraitONEcopenhagen, denmarktuesday, may 1512:40 pmCotton Malone typed the Web address with trembling fingers. Like a phone that rings in the middle of the night, nothing about an anonymous

message was ever good. The note had arrived two hours ago, while he'd been out of his bookshop on an errand, but the employee who'd accepted the unmarked envelope forgot to give it to him until a few minutes ago. "The woman didn't say it was urgent," she said in her defense. "What woman?" "Chinese lady, dressed in a gorgeous Burberry skirt. She said to give it only to you." "She used my name?" "Twice." Inside had been a folded sheet of gray vellum upon which was printed a Web address with a dot-org suffix. He'd immediately climbed the four flights of stairs to his apartment above the bookshop and found his laptop. He finished typing and waited while the screen blackened, then a new image appeared. A video display console indicated that a live feed was about to engage. The communications link established. A body appeared, lying on its back, arms above the head, ankles and wrists bound tight to what looked like a sheet of plywood. The person was angled so that the head was slightly beneath the feet. A towel wrapped the face, but it was clear the bound form was a woman. "Mr. Malone." The voice was electronically altered, disguising every attribute of pitch and tone. "We've been waiting. Not in much of a hurry, are you? I have something for you to see." A hooded figure appeared on the screen, holding a plastic bucket. He watched as water was poured onto the towel that wrapped the bound woman's face. Her body writhed as she struggled with her restraints. He knew what was happening. The liquid penetrated the towel and flowed unrestricted into her mouth and nose. At first a few gulps of air could be stolen—the throat constricted, inhaling little of the water—but that could be maintained only for a few seconds. Then the body's natural gag reflex would kick in and all control would be lost. The head was angled downward so gravity could prolong the agony. It was like drowning without ever being submerged. The man stopped pouring. The woman continued to struggle with her restraints. The technique dated back to the Inquisition. Highly favored since it left no marks, its main drawback was harshness—so intense that the victim would immediately admit to anything. Malone had actually experienced it once, years ago, while training to become a Magellan Billet agent. All recruits had to take their turn as part of survival school. His agony had been amplified by his dislike of confinement. The bondage, combined with the soaked towel, had created an unbearable claustrophobia. He recalled the public debate a few years ago as to whether waterboarding was torture. Damn right it was. "Here's the purpose of my contact," the voice said. The camera zoomed tight on the towel wrapping the woman's face. A hand entered the frame and wrenched the soaked cloth away, revealing Cassiopeia Vitt. "Oh, no," Malone muttered. Darts of fear pierced his skin. A light-headedness overtook him. This can't be happening. No. She blinked water from her eyes, spit more from her mouth, and gained her breath. "Don't give them a damn thing, Cotton. Nothing." The soaked towel was slapped back across her face. "That would not be smart," the computerized voice said. "Certainly not for her." "Can you hear me?" he said into the laptop's microphone. "Of course." "Is this necessary?" "For you? I believe so. You're a man to be respected. Former Justice Department agent. Highly trained." "I'm a bookseller." The voice chuckled. "Don't insult my intelligence, or risk her life any further. I want you to clearly understand what's at stake." "And you need to understand that I can kill you." "By then, Ms. Vitt will be dead. So let's stop with the bravado. I want what she gave you." He saw Cassiopeia renew her struggle against the restraints, her head whipping from side to side beneath the towel. "Give him nothing, Cotton. I mean it. I gave that to you for safekeeping. Don't give it up." More water was poured. Her protests stopped as she fought to breathe. "Bring the item to Tivoli Gardens, at two pm, just outside the Chinese pagoda. You'll be contacted. If you don't show—" The voice paused. "—I think you can imagine the consequences." The connection was severed. He sat back in the chair. He hadn't seen Cassiopeia in more than a month. Hadn't spoken to her for two weeks. She'd said that she was headed out on a trip but, characteristically, offered no details. Their relationship was hardly one at all. Just an attraction that they both tacitly acknowledged. Strangely, Henrik Thorvaldsen's death had drawn them closer, and they'd spent a lot of time together in the weeks after their friend's funeral. She was tough, smart, and gutsy. But waterboarding? He doubted if she'd ever experienced anything like that. Seeing her on the screen tore at his gut. He suddenly realized that if anything happened to this woman his life would never be the same. He had to find her. But there was a problem. She'd obviously been forced to do whatever was necessary in order to survive. This time, however, she may have bitten off more than she could ever chew. She'd left nothing with him for safekeeping. He had no clue what she, or her captor, was talking about. TWOchongqing, china8:00 pm Karl Tang assumed an expression that conveyed not the slightest hint of what he was thinking. After nearly three decades of practice, he'd mastered the art. "And why have you come this time?" the doctor asked him. She was an iron-faced, stiff-bodied woman with straight black hair, cut short in a proletarian style. "Your anger toward me has not waned?" "I have no hostility, Minister. You made it quite clear during your last visit that you are in charge, regardless of the fact that this is my facility." He ignored her insulting tone. "And how is our

patient?"The First Infectious Disease Hospital, located just outside Chongqing, cared for nearly two thousand people afflicted with either tuberculosis or hepatitis. It was one of eight facilities scattered throughout the country, each a forbidding complex of gray brick surrounded by green fences, places where the contagious could be safely quarantined. But the security these hospitals enjoyed also made them ideal for the housing of any sick prisoners from the Chinese penal system. Like Jin Zhao, who'd suffered a brain hemorrhage ten months ago. "He's lying in his bed, as he's done since the first day he was brought here," the doctor said. "He clings to life. The damage is enormous. But-again, per your order-no treatment has been administered." He knew she hated his usurpation of her authority. Gone were Mao's obedient "barefoot doctors," who, according to the official myth, had willingly lived among the masses and dutifully cared for the sick. And though she was the hospital's chief administrator, Tang was the national minister of science and technology, a member of the Central Committee, first vice premier of the Chinese Communist Party, and first vice president of the People's Republic of China-second in power only to the president and premier himself. "As I made clear last time, Doctor," he said, "that was not my order, but the directive of the Central Committee, to which I, and you, owe absolute allegiance." He voiced the words for the benefit of not only the foolish woman but also the three members of his staff and two captains from the People's Liberation Army who stood behind him. Each military man wore a crisp green uniform with the red star of the motherland emblazoned on his cap. One of them was surely an informant-reporting most likely to more than one benefactor-so he wanted any account to speak glowingly of him. "Take us to the patient," he calmly commanded. They walked down halls lined with lettuce-green plaster, cracked and lumpy, lighted by weak fluorescent fixtures. The floor was clean but yellowed from endless moppings. Nurses, their faces hidden by surgical masks, tended to patients clad in striped blue-and-white pajamas, some wearing brown robes, looking much like prisoners. They entered another ward through a set of swinging metal doors. The room beyond was spacious, enough for a dozen or more patients, yet only one lay in a single bed beneath dingy white sheets. The air stank. "I see you left the linen alone," he said. "You did order me to do so." Another mark in his favor for the informant to report. Jin Zhao had been arrested ten months ago, but had suffered a hemorrhage during questioning. He was subsequently charged with treason and espionage, tried in a Beijing court, and convicted, all in absentia since he'd remained here, in a coma. "He is just as you left him," the doctor said. Beijing lay nearly a thousand kilometers to the east and he supposed that distance bolstered this woman's nerve. You may rob the Three Armies of their commander in chief, but you cannot deprive the humblest peasant of his opinion. More of Confucius' nonsense. Actually the government could, and this insolent bitch should heed that fact. He motioned and one of the uniforms led her across the room. He approached the bed. The man lying prostrate was in his mid-sixties, his dirty hair long and unkempt, his emaciated frame and sunken cheeks reminiscent of those of a corpse. Bruises splotched his face and chest, while intravenous lines snaked from both arms. A ventilator fed air in and out of his lungs. "Jin Zhao, you have been found guilty of treason against the People's Republic of China. You were afforded a trial, from which you lodged an appeal. I regret to inform you that the Supreme People's Court has approved your execution and denied your appeal." "He can't hear a word you're saying," the doctor said from across the room. He kept his eyes down on the bed. "Perhaps not, but the words must be spoken." He turned and faced her. "It is the law, and he is entitled to proper process." "You tried him without him even being there," she blurted out. "You never heard a word he had to say." "His representative was afforded the opportunity to present evidence." The doctor shook her head in disgust, her face pale with hate. "Do you hear yourself? The representative never had the opportunity to even speak with Zhao. What evidence could possibly have been presented?" He couldn't decide if the informant's eyes and ears belonged to one of his staff or one of the army captains. Hard to know anything for sure anymore. All he knew was that his report to the Central Committee would not be the only retelling, so he decided to make clear, "Are you sure? Not once has Zhao communicated anything?" "He was beaten senseless. His brain is destroyed. He will never awaken from the coma. We keep him alive simply because you-no, excuse me, the Central Committee-ordered it." He caught the disgust in the woman's eyes, something else he'd seen more and more of lately. Especially from women. Nearly the entire hospital staff-doctors and nurses-were women. They'd made great strides since Mao's Revolution, yet Tang still adhered to the adage his father had taught him. A man does not talk about affairs inside the home, and a woman does not talk about affairs outside. This insignificant doctor, employed at a minor state-run hospital, was incapable of understanding the enormity of his challenge. Beijing ruled a land that stretched five thousand kilometers east to west and more than three thousand north to south. Much was uninhabitable mountains and desert, some of the most desolate regions in the world, only 10% of the country

arable. Nearly one and a half billion people- more than America, Russia, and Europe combined. But only 60,000,000 were members of the Chinese Communist Party-less than 3% of the total. The doctor was a Party member, and had been for more than a decade. He'd checked. No way she could have risen to such a high managerial position otherwise. Only Party-membered, Han Chinese achieved such status. Hans were a huge majority of the population, the remaining small percentage spread across fifty-six minorities. The doctor's father was a prominent official in the local provincial government, a loyal Party member who'd participated in the 1949 Revolution and personally known both Mao and Deng Xiaoping. Still, Tang needed to make clear, "Jin Zhao owed his loyalty to the People's government. He decided to aid our enemies-""What could a sixty-three-year-old geochemist have done to harm the People's government? Tell me, Minister. I want to know. What could he possibly do to us now?" He checked his watch. A helicopter was waiting to fly him north. "He was no spy," she said. "No traitor. What did he really do, Minister? What justifies beating a man until his brain bleeds?" He had not the time to debate what had already been decided. The informant would seal this woman's fate. In a month she'd receive a transfer-despite her father's privileges-most likely sent thousands of kilometers west to the outer reaches, where problems were hidden away. He turned toward the other uniform and motioned. The captain removed his holstered sidearm, approached the bed, and fired one shot through Jin Zhao's forehead. The body lurched, then went still. The respirator continued to force air into dead lungs. "Sentence has been carried out," Tang declared. "Duly witnessed by representatives of the People's government, the military-" He paused. "-and this facility's chief administrator." He indicated that it was time to leave. The mess would be the doctor's to clean up. He walked toward the doors. "You just shot a helpless man," the doctor screamed. "Is this what our government has become?" "You should be grateful," he said. "For what?" "That the government does not debit this facility's operating budget for the cost of the bullet." And he left.

THREECopenhagen 1:20 pm Malone left his bookshop and stepped out into Hjbro Plads. The afternoon sky was cloudless, the Danish air comfortable. The Strget- a chain of traffic-free streets, most lined with shops, cafs, restaurants, and museums-surged with commerce. He'd solved the problem of what to bring by simply grabbing the first book off one of the shelves and stuffing it into an envelope. Cassiopeia had apparently opted to buy herself time by involving him. Not a bad play, except the ruse could only be stretched so far. He wished he knew what she was doing. Since last Christmas, between them, there'd been visits, a few meals here and there, phone calls, and e-mails. Most dealing with Thorvaldsen's death, which seemed to have hurt them both. He still couldn't believe his best friend was gone. Every day he expected the cagey old Dane to walk into the bookstore, ready for some lively conversation. He still harbored a deep regret that his friend had died thinking he'd been betrayed. "You did what you had to in Paris," Cassiopeia told him. "I would have done the same." "Henrik didn't see it that way." "He wasn't perfect, Cotton. He sent himself into a spiral. He wasn't thinking and wouldn't listen. There was more at stake there than just his revenge. You had no choice." From the Hardcover edition.

Revue de presse Praise for the novels of Steve Berry Sexy, illuminating . . . my kind of thriller. Dan Brown, on The Amber Room Steve Berry gets better and better with each new book. The Huffington Post, on The Paris Vendetta Pure intrigue, pure fun. Clive Cussler, on The Amber Room Controversial, shocking, explosive. Katherine Neville, on The Third Secret Perfect for thriller fans and history buffs alike. David Morrell, on The Romanov Prophecy [An] amazing blend of suspense and history . . . [Readers] cannot go wrong with Cotton Malone. Library Journal, on The Charlemagne Pursuit From the Hardcover edition.