



CHAPTER 2

HE STOOD AT THE EDGE of the bank and looked down at me, not with the hard eyes of my father or Auntie Wu, just observant. His face was gentle — even skin, with lips that turned up at their corners, holding a ready smile. It was an easy face to look at. Too bad it was attached to such an impossible person.

“Can I help you?” he said again, taking an unsteady step onto the slick bank.

“No, stay where you are,” I answered, looking for something to pull myself up with. My voice shook with the chill.

“I can get someone. Your husband? Brother? Father?”

“No, just leave me alone. This happens all the time.” *This happens all the time?* Nushi was right — I should think before I speak.

His face tightened. He was trying not to laugh. “How did you fall in?” he asked.

“The shock of your rudeness sent me flying into the river,” I mumbled to the water, wrenching one leg, then the other, from the muck.

"Did you say something?" he called down.

"No," I called up.

"I would like to help you," he said, peering over the edge.

"I would like to be left alone." My feet had sunk into new holes and were starting to go numb with cold. When I tried to pull them up, I slipped and fell in the water again with a loud splash.

The stranger let one loud "Ha" escape before beginning a coughing fit to cover his laughter. "Perhaps I can fetch the woman from the Wu home. I was just talking to her."

"No!" I sputtered, managing to stand and yank my feet free from the mud all at once. I stumbled out of the river to a flat spot on the bank. "See, I am fine. You can go about your business."

He opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it and turned back to the road. His shoulders shook with laughter as he shrank into the distance.

When he disappeared behind the curve, I struggled up the side of the bank. Tears of frustration and embarrassment threatened to fall down the islands of heat on my cheeks. I wrung a stream of muddy water from my slippers, then slid them back on my feet. Plucking a few of the flowers I had promised Nushi from the mud, I slipped back home along the edge of the river, cursing the stranger for my situation.

When I entered the kitchen, Nushi's eyes widened, and she gasped.

"I fell into the river," I announced.

"What were you doing by the river?"

I held out the flowers. She stared at the limp tangle of torn petals, bent stems, and mud. When she did not take them, I flung them on the table.

Nushi touched the strands of hair plastered to my face — the same hair she had carefully cut that morning for the New Year. “It will take until tomorrow to get you clean. Think of the bad luck! You could not use the road?” She pushed me outside.

“Where are we going?”

“We will have to clean you up at the well. You can’t walk through the house like this.”

Nushi was brutal, pouring bucket after bucket of cold water onto my head. Every time I opened my mouth to speak, she shut it again with another wave of water. When she had squeezed out as much of the dirt as she could, she marched me to my room, yanked my rough tunic over my head, and handed me a bowl of water.

“Again?” I protested.

She gathered my clothes, pointed to the washbasin as her answer, and left. After she returned with two more jars of water, she snatched the towel away from me and scrubbed my skin, making it sting and itch. Basin after basin of muddy water pooled on the ground outside my window. As soon as my blood warmed my skin, Nushi would pour cold water over me again.

“It wasn’t my fault.”

She continued to scrub.

“There was a stranger asking where our house was. Auntie Wu told him all of this horrible gossip about our family. I had to hide down by the river to hear.”

“You were spying on them.”

“Yes . . . No . . . Nushi, it was cruel what she said.”

She stood up, her jaw tight. “Did she mention the disobedient daughter who covers herself in mud and listens to other people’s gossip?”

"Yes, but she added it was no wonder she is so wild, since their servant tortures her with cleaning all the time." I tried to smile, but it faded as I remembered something else Auntie Wu had brought up. "She said there might be a match in the future of this tortured, disobedient daughter. With the brickmaker — Fourth Brother Gou."

Nushi's voice softened. "Nothing is decided for certain, Jade Moon. And they did not start with the brickmaker. They started with the sons of wealthy farmers and your father's friends, but it is difficult when . . ."

Her voice trailed off, but I knew the rest. It was difficult when you had a father and grandfather doing what a mother should do. It was difficult when we were trapped in this remote village. It was difficult when the most appropriate matches for me were Auntie Wu's sons and she saw daily reminders of the kind of daughter-in-law I would be. It was difficult when you must find a match for a Fire Horse.

"Why did no one tell *me*?" I asked. But I knew that too. I was the daughter of the house, far beneath Nushi in importance. I had no right to demand even a single grain of rice, but somehow I forgot that two or even three times a day.

"Bricks are useful," Nushi tried.

"For knocking people senseless who talk of bricks too much," I muttered. "Maybe I won't marry."

"Not marry!" I winced. "What a stupid thing to say!" she hissed, moving her face close to mine. "Jade Moon, the Chan name is not what it used to be. If they do not find you a husband, the family will die out and you will all become hungry ghosts, wandering the spirit world with no ancestors to care for you. You should pray that

Fourth Brother Gou will agree to marry you. If he doesn't, then your grandfather and father will start to get desperate."

"And if they become desperate?" I asked.

"Desperate people are more dangerous than Fire Horses. They will break something beautiful to see what they can gain from it, forgetting what they lose as it crashes around them." Nushi bent down to wring the cloth out into the bowl, then reached for me again.

"I am clean," I said. "Cleaner than I was when I left."

"And you need to be," she said, attacking the dirt under my nails. "Your father has a guest."

My face hardened. "A tall guest with a smooth voice and a fondness for gossip?"

"A guest who has heard horrible things about the daughter who lives here. Who will now see either that she is as wild and willful as everyone claims, or that Auntie Wu should mind her own business."

I nodded. "I will try to be good."

My father narrowed his eyes when I stepped through the doorway, neatly dressed, clean, and silent. He and my grandfather stood with the stranger by one of the silk paintings my father had done, the guest decorating it with compliments as thick as the brush strokes. When he saw me, a small, amused smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Bitter saliva stung the inside of my cheeks.

Our guest's feet were planted firmly again, his back straight and his long arms resting at his sides. He wore his ease like a second skin, and I could barely swallow my resentment toward it. Many

people mistake confidence for comfort. Confidence was something I could provide for myself. Comfort was not. People around me offered or withheld it.

"This is my daughter, Jade Moon," Father said, gesturing vaguely in my direction. "Daughter, our guest, Sterling Promise."

I cupped one hand inside the other and bowed.

"It is an honor to meet your daughter. She is as full of grace and beauty as I would expect from the Chan family," this Sterling Promise said. He bowed to my father with a formality he had not shown by the river. I thought with a grain of satisfaction how his words would grate against Father's ear. He would prefer to ignore that he had a daughter. Unfortunately, I was difficult to ignore.

But as everyone's attention shifted back to our guest, I realized that my father would not insist that I leave. He had dismissed me from his world, and this made it unnecessary for him to dismiss me from the room.

Father sat in a chair behind the desk, inviting Sterling Promise to a chair across from him. Grandfather rested in the lone remaining chair against the wall. I shuffled my feet for a second and then backed into the corner.

"I have brought a gift for your family. To repay a debt," Sterling Promise said to Grandfather. "It is from your son."

"My son," Grandfather said.

"I am his son," my father said.

Sterling Promise tapped his fingers on the side of his leg. "Yes, of course. But did you once have a brother?" Father turned away. Sterling Promise looked at Grandfather. "Sir, did you have an younger son?"

Grandfather straightened, his head lifting slightly. "I do."

"I have an uncle?" I said.

Father whirled around. The anger he could not show Grandfather or our guest landed on me. "Silence," he hissed. "You *had* an uncle until he abandoned his family." He turned back to Sterling Promise. "We don't want anything from you or my disobedient brother."

Sterling Promise shifted his feet, looking less comfortable.

Grandfather spoke softly. "I will listen."

"But —" my father began.

Grandfather held up his hand and shook his head. "I am old, and my family shrinks with each generation." He glanced at me, and even the brush of his look stung. "It was irresponsible to ignore what little family I had."

"Your son often spoke of your wisdom," Sterling Promise said. "I have been sent with this letter from him."

"Give it to him to read." Grandfather nodded toward Father. "He is the scholar."

Father opened the letter and read silently, his lips pressed together as if he was tasting one of Nushi's sour teas.

"He died two months ago," Sterling Promise said softly.

The harshness on my father's face dissolved for a moment. Grandfather rubbed his hand along the lines of gray on his head. "More bad luck," he moaned.

"I hope not, sir. All the funeral rites were done properly. The body was prepared and buried, and you can bring it to your family's burial plot if you like." He turned to Father. "Sir, he knew the mistake he made leaving his family. The shame haunted him, and he asked me to repay his debt to you before the New Year. He spoke of you with respect."

Father looked up from the letter. "This Sterling Promise is his son."

Sterling Promise nodded. "His adopted son. He looked out for me after my own parents died."

Grandfather lifted his head. "An adopted grandson." His eyes looked past all of us. "Yes, I would like to hear about this gift you bring."