



CHAPTER 3

STERLING PROMISE STRAIGHTENED his back. "I bring papers to enter Gold Mountain."

"Gold Mountain." I breathed out the words.

"Why would we want these papers?" Grandfather said.

"Your son could use them to get into America." He pulled some yellowed papers from his waistband. "There is great prosperity, great opportunity there. People leave from Hong Kong every week. They send back such wealth. And the Americans who live in Hong Kong have everything." He slid the papers across the desk. They were covered with foreign words and a picture of a man that looked like Father. "Sir, your brother went to America for the first time seven years ago. He wanted you to have this chance at fortune, to repay your sacrifices for the family." Sterling Promise's words dripped off his tongue, like oil meant to soften thick skin.

"A world of white ghosts," Father said. "Cheaters and thieves."

"So my son went to America," Grandfather said. "He was always bold."

Father studied the papers, then lifted his eyes to Sterling Promise.
“What do you gain from this?”

“Since the papers have your brother’s picture on them, only you can use them.” Sterling Promise looked at his hands in his lap. “I would like to go as your son.”

Father threw the papers down on the desk. “I will not pretend to be my brother.”

“It would not be —” Sterling Promise began.

“We can talk this over later tonight,” Grandfather said, rising from his chair.

Sterling Promise stood. Grandfather walked to him, patted him on the shoulder, and shuffled out the door. Father followed.

What a day of news! Auntie Wu would give five of her ten remaining teeth and one of her daughters-in-law to know what was said today. I did not know of any sacrifices that my father had made. Of course, I also did not know of any uncle—much less an uncle who went past the half-buried rock and all the way to America. It was a good thing that we were a small family; we had no room for children with all of the secrets we stored.

Sterling Promise slumped back into his chair. He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

“My father won’t change his mind,” I said, settling onto the wide wooden chair my grandfather had left.

His forehead wrinkled for a second before his easy smile resurfaced. “We’ll see. I know many in Hong Kong who would give a fortune for a chance to go to Gold Mountain.”

“You should ask *them* to join you.”

His smile tightened. “It is no concern of yours. *You* will not be going to America.”

It sounded like a fact I should have known, so I tried to hide my disappointment. I spent more time in Father's study than anyone realized, and I had traced the outlines of places I would never see on his maps. Only one showed the whole world, with America at its edge, almost falling off the unrolled linen paper. I had heard Father talk about the Americans — their new land, their readiness to change — with the mix of awe and fear that vast differences inspire. "Why can't I go to America?"

Sterling Promise shrugged. "You can't start a business like I will. You can't make money to send home like your father can. You would be useless there."

"You don't know that," I said, lifting my chin.

"A person does not have to be in the village long to hear about the Fire Horse living in the Chan home." The slow rumble of boiling anger began in my chest. "But it isn't just you, Little Sister. Any woman would be a waste. The opportunities there are for men."

The spikes that Nushi said covered my tongue emerged.

"Perhaps, but without women like Auntie Wu, who would feed you the gossip you listen to so faithfully?" I watched with satisfaction as Sterling Promise's face reddened. "I don't think my father would want to help you if he knew what little wisdom you thought he had."

"That wasn't your conversation to hear." He gripped the arms of the chair. "You were spying."

"I was stuck!" I cried, standing.

Sterling Promise stood as well. "You are everything their gossip promised," he said. "Wild, with a quick temper. Thoughtless. Dangerous."

My heart throbbed with indignation. People should not let the truth through their teeth so easily. "You should not talk of things you know nothing about."

"You should not give people so many opportunities to talk about you."

"Perhaps you should behave less like an old woman."

"And you should behave more like a young lady."

Disgust flowed thick between us. His presence pricked at my skin like Nushi's scrubbing from earlier. Grandfather had smiled at him. He had a seat during talks. He knew secrets about my family that I didn't know. He was the son that I could never be. What stung most: He had traveled far down the road, past the rock, and he would go past it again when he had gotten what he wanted. And I would still be here.

My jaw tightened and my hands formed fists as I marched out of the room. Nushi appeared and blocked my way down the hall. "You know better than to insult our guest," she hissed.

"But —"

"Little One, you said you would try."

But it is hard when you are a Fire Horse.

On the way to my room, I approached Grandfather's doorway. His voice spilled into the hallway, so I softened my footsteps.

"We don't know anything about him. He may bring disgrace," Father argued. I could hear him pacing back and forth. "Remember, he is the son of my brother."

"I don't want to see my family wither away like a useless branch on a tree. If he brings disgrace, we will have to swallow it." My

father's steps stopped, and my grandfather continued, "We don't have any more options. Let's hope he will do anything to get to America."

A chair creaked and scratched against the floor.

"You will go with Sterling Promise if he agrees," Grandfather said.

"And what will *I* do in America?"

"You will ensure that this family survives."

"Father . . ."

"You must. You accuse your brother of selfishness. Would you be guilty of the same?"

"I have always put this family first," my father said, defeat threaded through the word.

"I think your brother has saved us."

Father was silent.

"I will tell him that you will go," Grandfather said. "And explain our terms."

"And Jade Moon?"

"Should know nothing."

Tears burned in my eyes. Father was going to America, and, just like when Sterling Promise found me in the river, I was stuck.