

## CHAPTER 4

I HAD A SEAT at dinner, but only because we had many extra chairs at the table, left from the time when the family was larger.

Nushi bustled in and out of the kitchen carrying plate after plate of food. I helped until I tipped a pile of tangerines into a bowl of rice. Then she pushed me into a chair, thumped my shoulders to remind me to sit up properly, and left me at the table with the men.

It is surprising how distant three people who live in the same house can be. Father, Grandfather, and I saw one another little; we talked even less, haunting one another more than living together. Normally, dinner meant we would scoop food into our mouths in the shifting light of candles, pushing back from the table as we swallowed the last noodle. Father and Grandfather had nothing to say to me. I had much to say but nothing that would please them.

Sterling Promise ignored our tradition of determined silence.

"I have never seen a table so heavy with food," he said, smiling. Grandfather returned his smile. "I am glad you are pleased with our humble meal."

"Your son always said that it was the best-run estate in China."

"I have not seen every estate in China," Grandfather replied.

Father made a small coughing noise in the back of his throat, then lifted his tea when Grandfather looked at him.

This only caused Sterling Promise to turn his attention to Father. "Your good sense could make you very rich in America," he said.

Father did not look up from his cup of tea. "A man should be happy with the wealth he has when it is enough."

"America has opportunity," Sterling Promise continued.

Grandfather nodded.

"What kind of opportunity?" I asked.

"People make their fortunes there and send back trunks of money and treasure to their families," Sterling Promise said, keeping his focus on Father.

Father sent him a chilly look. "Yes, you mentioned that."

"An American fortune can make the next generation even richer and more successful."

"The next generation." Father spat the words like they stung his throat.

Grandfather slurped his soup. Sterling Promise continued with only a thread of nervousness in his voice, "Americans own vast pieces of land, the size of whole villages. 'As far as the eye can see' — that is what they say."

"Hmm," Grandfather said.

"Yes, I see that we are inferior to the great landowners of America," Father said.

"No, I just . . ."

I grinned into my bowl. Sterling Promise shoveled rice into his mouth.

The crickets started their evening songs.

"We hear little news here. What is happening in Hong Kong?" Grandfather asked.

"Things are changing fast. The foreigners bring much trade. People pour in from all over the world."

"When will they let China be?" Father said.

"What are they doing to China?" I asked.

"They bring wealth," Sterling Promise said to Father.

"The bribes of spies and thieves," said Father. "China is sliced up and served to the barbarians."

You would think I would get used to being ignored, like I grew accustomed to an ant bite on the inside of my foot or the collar of a tunic that is just a little too tight. But I never had.

"But if you saw . . .," Sterling Promise began.

"You are too young to know how change should occur," Father said, waving Sterling Promise's words away. "I can change the outline of a rock quickly by carving it, but the edges will be sharp. If I set it in a river, it will be carved slowly over one or two generations, and those changes can happen without harming anyone."

"I fell in the river today," I tried.

"China does not have time to wait for change," Sterling Promise said. "The world is carving us now. If we wait for the river to shape us, we will be left behind."

"Perhaps that would be best," Father said.

"You do not think that China needs to modernize?"

"So we can have deadlier armies? So our governments can take land that does not belong to them? So we can force people to worship as we do? The things done in the name of modernization seem backward to me."

"How are they backward?" I asked.

"China needs to honor what is here," Father continued.

I shook my head and blew breath on my fingers to make sure I was not a ghost.

"That is enough talk about politics." Grandfather leaned back in his seat. "I hope you will have a chance to look around the village."

"Yes, I would like that very much," Sterling Promise said.

And then it bubbled up in me, the irresistible urge to knock the veneer from Sterling Promise. "He has already met some of our neighbors," I said. "He was listening to Auntie Wu tell stories about us this afternoon."

Father's face darkened.

Tiny beads of sweat gathered on Sterling Promise's forehead. "I did ask for directions from your kind neighbor."

"She was helpful, I'm sure," said Grandfather.

"Certainly, she helped answer all of his questions about us," I said.

Grandfather rested his chopsticks next to his bowl and fixed me with an icy stare. "Whatever their conversation, it is none of our concern."

"He —"

"Granddaughter." Grandfather raised his voice. "Go help Nushi."

I slammed my chopsticks down. I was too filled with fury to squeeze in another bite anyway.

When I appeared in the kitchen, Nushi shook her head and shooed me outside. I pushed open the gate and stomped down the path in front of our house to a bench in the far corner of our yard.

Why were my words always silenced? Why was I always sent from the room? After a few minutes, Nushi came to sit beside me.

A round of fireworks for the New Year spiraled from the Wus' house. After the lights surrendered to the night sky, I asked, "Do we have enough luck to survive the year?"

Nushi smiled. "You don't need luck. You are a Fire Horse. The luck is for those of us who have to live with you."

I managed a small smile. "What do you think of our guest?"

Her smile faded. "I think he will need the most luck."

We watched the sky in silence. Before each firework, you could hear the whirl of its flight and the pop that announced its arrival.

"I wish we had some fireworks," I said.

"Why? We have never shot off our own. We have always watched the Wus'."

"I know, but this year, we have a monster to scare off, like in the New Year's stories you used to tell."

Nushi snorted a small laugh. "If the sight of you covered in mud didn't scare him, a few fireworks won't."

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to mock me?"

"You found *more* trouble today?"

"Why do you assume it is trouble?" Nushi frowned. I took a deep breath and rubbed my hands along the coarse fabric of my long skirt. "When I saw Sterling Promise talking to Auntie Wu, I thought he was coming to arrange a marriage with me."

"Oh, I see."

"I know. I am even more foolish than people say."

Nushi remained silent. She was good at silence.

After two more firecrackers pierced the sky, I said, "Did you know Uncle?"

"I did."

"Why didn't you ever tell me about him?"

She brushed some dust from between us on the bench. "You know that your grandfather would want nothing said about him."

"Why can't we ever talk about important things?"

"We don't have to dig up everything that gets buried, Little Sister."

"Then how do you understand it?"

"You watch and listen. And if you still don't understand, you choose courtesy over curiosity."

"What was his name? What was he like?"

"You are hopeless." Nushi smiled. "His name was Chan Jan Keung. He ran away when he was your age. At his best, he was strong, intelligent, and determined. At his worst, he was thoughtless and selfish."

I let loose a sharp laugh. "That sounds like me."

"Maybe he would have understood your wildness a little better than the rest of us. But truthfully, you are like all of the men in the family. You are clever like your father, driven like your grandfather, and willing to take risks like your uncle."

"What about my mother? Am I like my mother?" I had to force out the question, pushing my desire to hear yes through my fears of hearing no.

"The ghost of your mother haunts your every feature," she said. "Everyone can see it, especially your father."

The sky quieted and the darkness deepened. I heard steps behind me. A halo of lantern light guided Father, Grandfather, and Sterling Promise across the grass.

"Sterling Promise wanted to show us another gift he brought," Grandfather said, a rare grin on his face.

Sterling Promise trotted to the far end of the open area in front of our house, toward the river, carrying a large basket.

"I hope you enjoy my small gift from Hong Kong," he said as he passed us.

"Where is he going?" I asked Nushi.

"Be patient," she said.

"Do you know what he is doing?"

"I do. And if you watch, you might enjoy it."

We squinted through the darkness. I could just see Sterling Promise's outline bent low to the ground. After a flash at his feet, his figure retreated.

Then a pop broke the silence, and trails of light rained down from the sky. A second pop followed, then a whirling, and more light — red and green, white and purple, umbrellas of color and streaks of fire. Firecrackers spun into the night, exploded, and trickled into darkness. The sky over our house was brightened by the chaotic rainbow. I had never been so close to fireworks before. They were tiny promises that blossomed into tremendous things, like seeds that grew into trees, a drop of ink that birthed a poem, a dream nurtured into a life.

Nushi's and Grandfather's faces tipped toward the sky. Even Father's face softened. The display continued long past the Wus', and I knew Auntie Wu would tell her husband to increase their order of fireworks next year.

Eventually, the sky darkened again, and the sharp odor of burning pots hung in the air. I kept my face lifted, watching the stars appear from behind thin clouds of smoke. Sterling Promise strode over to his audience.

"Wonderful," Grandfather said.

"An impressive show," Father admitted.

"Jade Moon was wishing earlier that we had fireworks, weren't you?" Nushi said, amusement in her voice.

"I am glad my poor skills pleased you," Sterling Promise said.

I walked toward the shadows where dark cylinders littered the ground. Father and Grandfather followed me. "How did you get them to explode so quickly — one after another?" I asked.

"They are built that way. The fuse goes through many different containers of powder," Sterling Promise explained in a superior voice. "It is very difficult. You would not understand."

I snorted my disgust and bent to examine one of the containers. As I studied it, there was a popping sound. Before I could react, a weight knocked me backward.

The back of my head hit the ground. I looked up to see an explosion of light framing Sterling Promise's face. I could feel his breath on my cheeks. His eyes searched mine, hair falling over his forehead. With the weight of him pressed against me, I lost the rhythm of my heart.

He scrambled to his knees. "Are you hurt?"

"The firework. You pushed me out of the way." I sat up and looked at Sterling Promise. For a moment, he didn't look like a monster, but like a scared little boy.