

CHAPTER 5

"WHAT HAPPENED?" my father barked.

A curtain fell back over Sterling Promise's eyes. He rose and addressed himself to my grandfather, who was staring at the scene.

"I apologize a thousand times, sir. I should have been more careful."

"You could have killed us!" Father yelled.

Sterling Promise hung his head.

Grandfather put a hand on Father's arm. "I think we should go inside." Sterling Promise stood still, head bent, until Grandfather turned back to him. "We need to talk about your offer."

He nodded and followed them.

Nushi helped me up off the ground. My head was still spinning as I settled next to her on the bench. So far today, I had fallen in a river, learned I was practically engaged to the town brickmaker, and discovered a disowned uncle, and now, a firework had almost exploded in my face. "I need to hear the story," I said to Nushi.

"Cowherd and Weaver Girl?" She pressed her lips together. "Your father doesn't like me filling your head with love stories."

"Think of the bad luck we will have if I am in a sour mood all day tomorrow."

"You know every word. You should tell it," she said.

"No, Nushi. You tell it much better than I could." I slid to the damp grass, folded my legs under me, and faced her.

She spread her hands in front of her as she always did when she began a story. They would carve the air into mountains and streams, heroes and barbarians.

"In a small village tucked between two hills, there once was a boy who herded cattle. No one paid much attention to him. Everyone just called the boy Cowherd."

"He was poor, remember?" I said.

"Yes, the holes in his coat grew bigger every winter. Straw escaped the weaving of his hat. Despite his poverty, Cowherd was happy with his life. Every morning, he whistled as he rode a beautiful golden ox out to the field to drive the animals toward fresh tufts of grass."

"And he slept in the barn with the ox," I said.

"Would you like to tell the story?" she snapped.

I shook my head.

"Cowherd told the most wonderful tales, and he would talk with the ox late into the night. The ox was happy to share his stall and straw with him, and Cowherd was glad to have the ox as a friend, for he was a clever ox."

"I think a clever ox would be very helpful," I said.

"If you would listen to him," Nushi said. "One day, the golden ox said to Cowherd, 'Today, the daughters of the Jade Emperor of the Sky come to swim in the lake.'

"That must be a wonderful sight,' Cowherd sighed, imagining the beauty of the Jade Emperor's nine daughters reflected in the glittering waters.

"I can take you there if you like,' the ox said.

"Cowherd grinned, and off they went, deep into the forest. It was spring, and bright green leaves trimmed the banyan trees that edged their path, cutting the light into latticework. When they got close to the lake, they could hear the sweet voices and gentle laughter of maidens, ringing like bells in the wind. The golden ox followed their sweet song until he reached a crystal lake where the nine girls bathed.

"Cowherd admired the sight for a moment from behind the trunk of a thick tree."

"And that is when he fell in love," I said.

"First, the ox had to push him a little. 'You could marry one of them, young master,' the ox said.

"Cowherd shook his head. 'A poor cowherd like me? This beauty belongs in the Jade Emperor's palace.'

"But the ox thought his friend deserved a beautiful, gentle wife, so he continued to prod. 'Why shouldn't you have happiness?' the ox asked. He did not understand the barriers to love."

"Maybe love should not be so difficult," I said.

Nushi frowned. "Do you want to hear the story, or do you want to share your ignorant opinions on love?" I squeezed my lips together. "The ox made a suggestion. 'Steal one maiden's clothes and refuse to give them back until she agrees to marry you.'

"Cowherd hesitated, but when the maidens' gentle laughter brushed against his ears a second time, he decided that he would like nothing more than a small house with tamped earth walls

where he could hear that laughter in every room. He slipped down from the ox and crept to where the maidens' robes were draped over a branch in a silky rainbow.

"'Take the red robe,' the golden ox whispered. 'It belongs to the seventh daughter — Weaver Girl. She weaves the blues of a clear day and the grays of a rainy morning, the reds, oranges, and yellows of a sunrise, and the pinks and purples of a sunset.'

"Cowherd peeked between the leaves of the willow trees. He spotted the seventh daughter, and his heart left him. What could he do but slip her robe under his tattered coat? When the nine daughters came out of the water, they picked up their robes. But Weaver Girl could not find hers.

"Cowherd stepped out from his hiding place and cleared his throat, his words hanging in his chest as he stood in awe of Weaver Girl's beauty. Her sisters surrounded her and tried to persuade Cowherd to give her clothes back.

"'I will gladly return your clothes to you,' he said gently, 'if you promise to be my wife.'

"Weaver Girl blushed at being approached by this stranger.

"'You don't want Weaver Girl for a wife. She works at her loom all day,' declared one sister.

"'She will never remember to bring you tea,' announced a second.

"'She laughs the loudest,' said a third. 'It will give you headaches.'

"But Cowherd had already given his heart to Weaver Girl. And Weaver Girl, who saw his kindness and love, agreed to marry him.

"They loved each other more every day. But where Weaver Girl used to work at her loom hour after hour, weaving the silk that

would drape the skies, now she preferred to talk with Cowherd. She sat next to him and told him stories of her sisters or described her father's palace. Cowherd entertained her with stories of the animals he cared for. The golden ox was glad to see his friend so happy.

"But it wasn't long before the Emperor of the Sky noticed the disorder of colors in the heavens — purple streaks in the middle of the day, yellow horizons at night, rain clouds in the dry season and none in the wet season. No one knew when to wake up and begin work in the rice fields. The women would put the laundry out to dry just before rain fell from a clear sky. Cowherd and Weaver Girl were too blissful to notice the chaos their love had caused.

"The Emperor of the Sky decided that the two lovers must part. While they lay sleeping, he plucked a silver pin from Weaver Girl's hair and drew a line across the black sky. A canyon of bright stars yawned open between the couple. When they woke, Cowherd tried to cross the starry sky to reach Weaver Girl, but he could not. Weaver Girl reached out to Cowherd, but she could not span the divide either. Realizing that she would be separated from her Cowherd forever, she started to sob. Buckets of tears rained down from the sky."

"Fathers can be so cruel," I said.

"Jade Moon, you know he did not want to make his daughter sad. If the world is to live in harmony, everyone must fulfill his role," Nushi said. "You tell the ending, since you are determined to open your mouth and let absurdity spill from it."

"Nushi . . ."

She rested one hand over the other in her lap and stared at me,

waiting. The wind made strands of gray hair brush across her still face. I thought for a moment, and then continued the story.

“The Emperor was sorry to see his daughter so sad,” I said, pursing my lips. “He told Weaver Girl, ‘I cannot have chaos in the skies throughout the year, but you and your love can meet once every year, on the Seventh Night of the Seventh Month.’ He kept his promise. On that night, the Emperor orders every bird who roams the skies to line up wing to wing and make a bridge for the lovers.”

“What happens the day after they meet?” Nushi asked.

“It rains — the tears of Cowherd and Weaver Girl when they must part.”

Nushi always said that it was no surprise that I loved this story; after all, I had all the wisdom one could expect from youth. I *did* have trouble understanding love. I had studied and studied the handful of love stories that Nushi told me, but every story said something different — the meaning of love shrinking and growing in a moment. Most of them spoke of the duty of love. I knew plenty about that, but I had a feeling there was more. Was it built on a sturdy, strong friendship? Was it woven together with a thousand kindnesses? Was it born with a breath, a look? How would I ever know? It was frightening to want something that I didn’t understand.

“I wish I knew what love was made of,” I said, moving to sit next to her on the bench.

Nushi’s eyes met mine. They were worried eyes, with the beginning of tears in them. “It is made of the same stuff as life — tears, joy, hurt, healing . . . betrayal.”

“Do people give it to you? Do you stumble on it? Do you trade something of yourself for it?”

“I suppose the best love is grown inside you.” She wiped the tears away before they could fall. But new pools formed.

“What is wrong?” It frightened me to see her crying.

She gazed at the river, where the moon sent drops of light over its surface. “It’s nothing. It is just a strange beginning to the New Year.”