

FIRST DAY OF THE YEAR OF THE WATER PIG
FEBRUARY 16, 1923



CHAPTER 6

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I put on the new linen jacket and loose skirt Nushi had sewn for me and walked toward the rice terraces, hoping to avoid the string of people who would visit the house this morning for the New Year. Auntie Wu would come to make sure her sweets were better than ours. Villagers would come to meet Sterling Promise and bask in his charms. Even Fourth Brother Gou might come to measure the worth of the house and land against the risk of marrying a Fire Horse girl.

I preferred the terraces. For centuries, generations of men in our family had stacked the terraces into the side of the hills. Stones packed one on top of another, old hands replaced by young hands, again and again until the steps wound to the sky. The terraces would be empty today, as the villagers who worked them were home with their families for the New Year.

The rice fields had taught my grandfather his brutal, practical version of love. In his younger days, he had worked tirelessly to buy enough land and hire enough laborers to secure a comfortable life for the family.

Father was supposed to be a scholar. Grandfather had even found him tutors, anticipating great wealth and respect. But in our family, good luck comes only if chased by bad luck. The civil service exams were abolished before Father could take them and earn a valuable government position. Instead he gained another sad story of disappointed dreams for the Chan family.

I slipped through the wisps of fog that had wandered into our yard from the river, my footprints making a bright path in the dew-covered grass. My head swam with the events of yesterday — Sterling Promise's arrival, his and Father's trip to America, his infuriating presence in general. Between those thoughts kept intruding the closeness of his breath on my face when the firework exploded, and the gentle touch on the back of my head.

As the outline of the sun tipped over the horizon, Sterling Promise appeared. Only a moment of surprise washed over his face before he veiled it with the calm, pleasant mask he always wore.

I forced my tongue into the traditional greeting. "Congratulations. Blessings and happiness in the New Year," I said.

His brow relaxed with the relief of finding familiar social footing. "Congratulations and prosperity." We stood face-to-face for another second before he turned to the field. Some of the fog had dissolved, uncovering the pools of watery sky held inside the terraces. His mouth softened in appreciation. "Your grandfather said I should come see the rice fields. They are beautiful," he whispered.

"You have never seen a rice farm?" I asked.

"I saw some along the riverbanks outside of Hong Kong, but nothing like this. I had never left Hong Kong until now."

"You act like you have seen a lot of the world." The words were sour on my tongue.

"The world is a big place." He scanned the fields. "Your grandfather owns all of this?"

"Yes."

"And then your father will inherit it?"

"I suppose." Sterling Promise could probably have it if he wanted it. He could have anything.

As if he saw my thoughts, he said, "I would be proud to own something like this."

"Yes, but it is also a burden," I added, trying to disrupt the easy flow of his good fortune. "Father will be here early tomorrow to oversee the workers. If the rice isn't grown properly, my grandfather can't keep his land and the workers can't feed their families."

"Having something of your own gives you value in the world. People treat you with respect."

"I am more likely to be the property than the owner," I said, acid in every word.

His gaze rested on me again. "As you say, there is great burden in ownership." Was there a sting in his words too?

"Is that why you will go to America? To own something?" I asked.

His eyes stared past the field in front of us. "Partly," he said. "The Americans in Hong Kong, they move with this freedom, like they have shrugged off any burdens from the past, like the world will mold itself around them." Pulling himself back into the moment, he turned to me. "You would not understand."

The knowledge that I would never see such a place tore at me. "You think I understand very little."

"I think you *try* to understand very little. Like the fields." He looked out over the pattern of mounds and water spotted with

green. "It would be ungrateful of anyone not to want to spend the rest of their lives here."

"You don't want to, and you don't think Father should. Why am I ungrateful?"

His jaw tightened. "This is what you can do. Your father and I can do more. Going to America is a duty, a responsibility, much like the fields."

"So I should be content to stay behind?" My chest felt tight, like a string pulled to its breaking point.

"The sun does not try to water the fields. The moon does not try to light the day. You belong in China. *That* is your duty." His voice rose to a satisfying near-shout. A man from the village stared at us as he walked by. Sterling Promise bowed to the man and waited while he passed. "Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"You push and poke. You bring out the worst in people."

"It isn't my fault you lost your temper," I said. There was something hard in his eyes, in the hollow center of their pleasantness, something that wasn't there yesterday.

"You're doing it again," he said. "You force people to bicker and fight with you. You will bring nothing but misery to the man you marry."

I turned my face away only to see Fourth Brother Gou walking toward us from the house. His short legs carried his round body with quick, rhythmic steps. He stopped in front of us, his breath coming out in puffs, red patches on his forehead and cheeks.

"Congratulations and happy New Year, Jade Moon. I was at the Wu house, and they mentioned your guest from Hong Kong." His speech was like his steps — steady, rhythmic, flat. Sterling Promise

began to reply, but Fourth Brother Gou was already moving on to his favorite subject. "I hear Hong Kong is a wonderful place for brickmaking. Have you seen the new homes and businesses being built? Many men have gone to the city. They say there is much work there."

"We do have a lot of buildings," Sterling Promise said.

"Are they using bricks of quality? I wonder, with the speed of construction, if they are inspecting the bricks properly." He tapped a finger against his puffy lips. "Bad bricks can bring down an entire city."

"Yes, that would be terrible," Sterling Promise managed to reply. He brought his two fingers to his chin.

"You should look at the buildings when you return," Fourth Brother Gou said. "Especially new buildings. If I were going into a structure in Hong Kong, I would walk around first to see the quality of the bricks. Do you know what to look for? I will tell you." He gave Sterling Promise a detailed lecture about what a quality brick looked like — its texture, weight, coloring, shape. He counted off the warning signs of unstable brickwork on his thick fingers. Sterling Promise nodded along.

Maybe Nushi was right about bricks being useful. I could think of several uses for one right now. The longer Fourth Brother Gou spoke, the more they left me out of the conversation, the angrier I became. The muscles in my legs started to twitch, aching to escape, to run. Next to me, Sterling Promise stood still and calm.

"You are welcome to visit my poor home while you are here," Fourth Brother Gou concluded. "I have not yet told you how to check the mortar. We can save that for your visit."

Sterling Promise thanked him, and they exchanged good-byes.

As Fourth Brother Gou disappeared over the hill, Sterling Promise turned toward the house.

I took a few quick steps and spun to face him. He came to an abrupt halt, his face inches from mine. I could see the gold outline around the dark brown of his eyes, and I had to concentrate to steady myself.

"That is what I have here," I said. "A marriage to him. A *lifetime* with him. That is why I cannot stay in China."

"You would be lucky to be matched with him. He is the only person I've met here who makes you seem sensible," he said, his words fast and unmeasured.

"Did my ancestors send you to torture me?" I growled.

"They sent me to bring your father to America." The hard core of anger in his eyes spread. "It is very simple. It is a chance for him to escape the curse of a Fire Horse."

"There's no curse!" I yelled. It was getting harder to breathe.

"I think your mother would disagree."

Before I knew what I was doing, I pushed him with both hands, knocking him off balance. He tipped over into the terrace, breaking the smooth glass of the water with a satisfying splash. I spun around and stomped toward the house. When I got to the door, it swung open.

"Father!"

"Daughter." He stood in the doorway, feet planted, his arms crossed. "Where have you been?"

A rhythmic squishing came from behind me. I watched Father's eyes shift from mine and narrow as Sterling Promise walked toward us. Muddy water dripped from his sleeves and down his fingers. More mud dotted his neck and cheeks.

"What has happened?" Father said, his glare bouncing from me to Sterling Promise and back.

I would be beaten for what I had done to our guest. Beaten, then locked in my room. Beaten, locked in my room, then married to a brickmaker. "Father . . .," I began.

"I apologize," Sterling Promise said. "I grew up in the city. I am not skilled at walking along the terrace walls." I turned and stared at him. He bent his face toward the ground. "I am ashamed that you must see my ignorance, but I fell in."

The familiar disgust settled into Father's features. I tried to catch Sterling Promise's eye. He looked at me for a moment, then shifted his glance over my shoulder.

"Daughter, it has been decided. You are going to America with me." Father turned his back and started into the house. "It is where you will finally be useful."

My mouth dropped open, then slammed shut. I would get to see the place where people shrugged off their pasts. A place that would mold around me instead of closing in on me.

"Thank our guest, not me." He looked over his shoulder at Sterling Promise, whose face lifted for a second before dropping again. Father sniffed and turned back to me. "Guard your joy. Your happiness only proves what a fool you are."

I barely heard him over the singing in my heart.