



CHAPTER 7

GRANDFATHER CONSULTED FORTUNE-TELLERS to find an appropriate day for our departure. Once a lucky day for travel was found during the second moon, he whistled as he made lists of supplies and went with his purse to seek out the merchants in the market town up the road. His high spirits were a strange contrast to Father's low ones. Father confined himself to his study. He was distant at dinner and unsociable with Sterling Promise, avoiding him when it was possible and ignoring him when it was not.

Sterling Promise spent his time cultivating his popularity in the village. He brought news to the men and compliments to the women. Auntie Wu declared through her brightly painted lips that he "must have been sent by the Chan ancestors to save them."

I let Father, Grandfather, and Sterling Promise ignore me, not wanting to remind them of the burden my presence could be. I busied myself dreaming of the freedom I would have once I'd left the tight expectations, suffocating rules, and disapproving looks behind me.

Nushi prepared the trunk that Father and I would take to America — one trunk for both of us, our two lives in one box. On her path through a room, she would pick up a bowl or a book or a cake of ink, look at it, and stomp out with it, her straw sandals smacking against the floor. Any interference was met with deaf ears and angry stares. But what did I know about packing for America anyway, when I had never left our village?

The day before our departure, I found Nushi in the kitchen, slicing thin circles from the pepper in front of her, the wrinkles gathering on her forehead. I stood in front of her, but she did not look up or stop cutting. "Can I hide here with you?"

"Why are you hiding?"

"I think Father wants to send me on an errand to Auntie Wu's."

"So go."

I widened my eyes, pleading.

"Fine, stay here. But I have too much to do to have you bothering me."

"What is left? You packed the trunk, although I can't imagine with what."

"Don't worry about what I'm packing. You'll have exactly what you need when you leave."

Sterling Promise walked through the doorway. "I was sent for more tea," he said, holding up the pot.

"Leave it. I will bring it up."

"I can take it, Nushi," he said.

"I said leave it," she barked at him.

He straightened. "I apologize if I have offended —"

"I don't have time for your apologies. Go!"

Sterling Promise set the pot gently on the table and left. Nushi turned her back on it, so I picked it up, scooped the old leaves out, and dropped new ones inside before passing it to Nushi to be filled with hot water.

“Father said Sterling Promise is the reason I am going to America.” I had been thinking about this, puzzling over it, since his announcement.

“And you think that is something to thank him for?”

“Haven’t you heard him talk about it? So open . . . so free . . . so full of everything. This is a good chance for me. To find my place.”

“You are leaving your home, your family. It is irresponsible.”

“What do I have here? A family who thinks I am a burden. A village that thinks I am a curse. Oh . . . and if I am very lucky, a lifetime of conversations about bricks.”

“You have a good life here.”

“If only I could fit myself within the boundaries of it,” I said, stepping closer to her. “Oh, Nushi, you know I will miss you terribly.”

“You will not. You will be happy in the new country, America. You will forget me. You *should* forget me.”

“I could never forget you,” I said. “Father says we will come back in a year or two. To visit.”

She tightened her lips and went back to chopping. “No, you’re right. It is a new start. Don’t come back.”

A tense feeling grew in my throat. She attacked an onion with the knife, then stopped and glared at me. “Get out! Get out!” she said with the same sudden venom she’d unleashed on Sterling Promise.

I stared at her, frozen.

"Get out!"
I left the kitchen with tears stinging my eyes.

That night, the house was quiet except for the singing of the night birds and the low voices of Father, Grandfather, and Sterling Promise going over the last details of our trip. I lay on my bed, staring into the dark. When Nushi slipped through the door, I pretended to sleep.

"You know I can always tell when you are pretending to sleep." I shifted to face the wall. I would not speak. My heart was still sore. I heard the stool scrape across the floor.

"I am sorry about this afternoon," she said. "I should not have scolded you." Nushi reached into the pocket on her apron. "I have a present for you, not that you deserve it." The light of the moon showed a tiny red pouch tied with a long silk string in the palm of her hand.

I took it from her and peeked inside. In the corner of the pouch was a fragment of uncut, unpolished jade, smaller than my smallest fingernail.

"It is beautiful!"

"It will bring you good fortune and ward off evil spirits," she said, her voice unsteady. "And you don't have to tell me I'm being superstitious," she added quickly. "You are going to need all the good luck you can get."

"Thank you." I closed my eyes, trapping the tears burning inside them.

"It will also remind you of who you are. Jade is sharp, but not cutting. It is beautiful even though you can see its flaws."

"Nushi . . ."

"You need to sleep," she said, getting up.

"Nushi." I stood and took her hands. "How will I survive without you?" It had seemed so easy to go before that moment.

She looked at me and shook her head slowly. "I don't know anything about this country, America. I asked the peddlers who had been to Hong Kong about the foreigners there. They said that Americans would rather break their skin making a new path than follow an old one."

"That sounds like me."

"I thought so too. I like the old path, but if you don't mind breaking apart what you have, I suppose a new path can get you there," she said. "I don't have any stories to help you."

"You've given me enough stories. I will take all of them."

"I hope you will find your own story. Remember, if America is everything you hope it is, you should stay there. Forget China. If you want a new life, you have to turn your back on the old one. Good-bye, worthless girl," she cried out, trying to convince any evil spirits that I was beneath their notice. Then she leaned close and whispered, "Good-bye, daughter of my heart."

"Good-bye, Nushi."

I breathed in the smells that had hovered around me my entire life. The smell of hair being brushed and tears being dried. The smell of mornings in the kitchen and evenings in the garden. And with that, Nushi slipped away.

The next day, I stood outside the door, shielding my eyes against the sun. I bowed a respectful good-bye to Grandfather under

Father's supervision. "Don't dishonor your family," Grandfather said as I settled onto a cushion of hay and quilts in the back of the cart packed with our trunk and bags. Sterling Promise and Father sat up front with the driver.

The cart bumped along the path until I could not see Grandfather. It rolled past where I could see the house, the terraces. In a moment, a breath, we passed the rock in the road that until that moment had served as the border of my life.