

HONG KONG  
APRIL 15, 1923



## CHAPTER 8

WE MOVED FROM THE CART to a small steamboat that twisted down country rivers. The landscape was dotted with workers I had never met, farming fields I had never seen, and women who had never scowled at me on the shores washing their laundry. Father did not appreciate my enthusiasm for each scene as we passed it, but I could not help myself. I leaned over the side of the boat, taking in every detail.

We traded the small steamboat for a larger one, thin ribbons of steam for thick puffs. Large trees lined the banks of the wide river, and I was left to imagine what lay beyond. The river emptied into the bay at Hong Kong, and that is when everything changed.

Hong Kong was a giant of a city. We left our trunks at the docks in the care of the steamship company, took up the bundles of clothes and essentials that we would use for the journey, and followed Sterling Promise through the streets. Buildings piled to dizzying heights. Banners waved from the windows, with black, red, and gold letters shouting from their surfaces. Lines weighted with scraps of clothing crisscrossed the sky — a sky that had shrunk

to a thick line of blue between the rooftops. Everything was tightly packed and in motion. Wide veins of humanity coursed through the streets. People tucked their hands into their sleeves and folded themselves into the city.

Dust flew up from beneath the parade of wheels and feet flowing along the road. Men harnessed to their carts and wheelbarrows stared at their feet as they twisted paths around one another. The stalls and shops were stuffed with crates of vegetables, fish, fabric, shining trinkets hanging beside red and gold lanterns, and woks piled halfway to the ceiling. Beneath canopies of faded red, people tossed numbers back and forth, hurling them at each other until they met in the middle; goods traded hands; lips spread in easy smiles, and the day moved forward. It only took a moment. In the village, these exchanges would have dragged through hours or even days, with thoughts tucked between words. Here, a frantic scrambling of merchants, shoppers, even beggars drove the energy of the city. It was exciting, breathtaking, the way a story should begin.

A cart rushed by me. I jumped to the side to avoid it and tumbled into another man, this one pale with a square face and wide eyes that flashed with anger. I stared. His tunic ended at the top of his legs, two hands shorter than the one Father wore.

A beggar lifted his broken body from a doorway. "A coin or two, sir. For a bowl of rice," he said, his head bent toward the ground. The foreigner tossed two coins into the filthy palms stretched out to him while his nose wrinkled with disgust. Sterling Promise dropped back to press me forward.

"They call it a suit."

"What?" I said, looking back at the beggar.

Sterling Promise followed my gaze. "No, the foreigner. His clothes. All the foreigners wear them. Your uncle brought one back from America. I will wear it when I am there," he said proudly. Then his face became serious. "Stay close. If you fall behind, you'll be lost."

But it was difficult not to fall behind when there was so much to see. Sterling Promise's pace had the purpose of someone who had soaked in these surroundings long ago. He slipped in and out of my sight. When I passed by a stand with crates of fruits and vegetables, a man held out an oval fruit the size of his palm with a swirl of green and yellow skin.

"Try it. It is a mango from Siam — very special, very rare." His smile spread across the bottom half of his face, pressing layers of wrinkles onto his cheeks.

I tasted the fruit. It was soft and dense. The sticky juice left a sweet coating on my teeth and tongue. I slurped the syrup from my lips. "Delicious," I said, smiling back.

The man nodded. "You want four or five — take them home to your husband. They bring love to a household." He raised his eyebrow higher on his forehead. "Guaranteed to please even the most demanding mother-in-law."

I shook my head. "No, thank you," I said, stepping back into the street.

"What about the one you ate? You must pay," the man called. His smile had disappeared.

"I only took one bite. You gave it to me!"

"I can't feed my family by giving fruit to spoiled empresses! You must pay for what you eat."

"You should have told me instead of trying to cheat me."

I started to walk away, but the man grabbed my arm. I jerked it back, but his small wrinkled hand held fast. "You are not going to steal from me!"

A crowd gathered, a sea of people. I had never had to blur so many faces before. My cheeks grew hot. "I am not a thief. I don't need to steal your bruised fruit. Better fruit grows in the garden behind our kitchen."

"Now you insult my fruit? I sell the best fruit in Hong Kong. I don't need insults from a thief. Police! Someone get the police!"

A few mouths shouted for the police, but no one moved. Then I saw a ripple at the crowd's edge. I straightened my back, preparing to explain to the policeman the trick that the man had played on me. But instead, Sterling Promise stepped up beside me. He made a small bow and asked, "Sir, is something wrong?"

The man's face lit up with recognition, and he returned the bow. "Ah, my friend, you are back from the countryside! I am sorry that you have caught me completing an unfortunate task. I was just waiting for the police to arrest this thief."

"I did not steal anything," I said through my teeth. "This man tried to cheat me."

Sterling Promise gave me a look I had seen before. It said, "Keep your mouth shut." He turned to the grocer, mirrored the man's smile, and said, "She is my guest. Perhaps there was a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" I shouted. Sterling Promise stiffened next to me, but kept smiling at the grocer. "He tried to trick me," I said. "He offered me the fruit as a gift, and then he tried to get me to pay for it."



"Ah, I see," Sterling Promise said, nodding, his voice smooth and calm. "My young cousin arrived in Hong Kong today. She is unfamiliar with some of the customs of the city."

"I did not know that one of the customs was to cheat people!" Sterling Promise glared at me. "Quiet," he hissed. He turned back to the grocer and softened his voice. "I appreciate you telling her about your delicious fruits. They are truly one of the wonders of the city. Perhaps you would allow me to purchase three, along with the one my cousin ate. Now that she has tasted one, she will want another tomorrow."

"I will never put anything from this stall in my mouth again," I said.

"It is understandable that someone who comes from the country is ignorant of the rules of the city." The grocer frowned at me, but when he turned to Sterling Promise, his lips parted in his biggest smile, revealing another row of yellow teeth. "And who could expect her to appreciate the exotic fruits I sell?"

"Exactly," Sterling Promise agreed.

The crowd, robbed of further entertainment, bled back into the city. By the time Sterling Promise paid the grocer, only I saw their friendly good-byes.

When Sterling Promise and I stepped back onto the street, I stared forward, avoiding his glare. We walked in silence. As we paused to let a stream of carts pass in front of us, he said, "Your father is waiting at the corner of the next street." He bit his lip for a moment. "You cannot wander off in Hong Kong. It is dangerous."

His concern cooled my anger a few degrees. I shook my head. "That man would not hurt me. He was just a sneaky grocer trying to trick me."

"I don't mean dangerous for you. It is dangerous for me and my reputation. I can't have you angering my friends and neighbors, which seems to be your particular gift."

"You can't blame me for that! Just because I don't smile and say whatever someone wants to hear."

The stones in his eyes met the fire in mine. "We need to get rid of this fruit." Sterling Promise started walking again. I scrambled to follow a few paces behind him.

"I thought it was special."

"You can't trust everyone around here."

"But you defended him."

"You can't fight everyone either," he said.

Sterling Promise veered into a stall. The owner, almost buried in piles of paper lanterns, popped up from his stool and scurried over to greet him. "My friend, I have not seen you since before the New Year."

Sterling Promise softened his expression and bowed. "It is good to see you again. I was just in Mr. Lu's fruit stall, and he has a crate of the most delicious mangoes."

"Ah, how fortunate for you. My wife loves mangoes."

"Please, take one for yourself and your wife with my compliments."

"Oh, no. I could not."

"You must. My gift to you." They traded a few more pleas before a smile broke across the shopkeeper's face.

"Well, if you insist. Thank you."

"Once you have enjoyed those, you can get more at Mr. Lu's stand."

"Oh, yes, I will."

"Tell him I sent you," Sterling Promise said before we slipped out of the stall.

It was strange watching the give and take of the business world. "Is everything in your life an exchange?" I said. "This for that?"

"You never know when someone might be able to do you a favor."

"I don't need anyone to do me any favors."

"Ha! How many times have I had to rescue you? And I have known you for only two moons."

Father waited at the next corner, his arms folded. But then Sterling Promise handed him a mango. "Your daughter was just looking at the fruit and vegetable vendor's stall. She said you might like to taste this."

Father looked up at me. There was confusion on his face, but eventually his lips relaxed, and he peeled off a piece and bit into the fruit's yellow flesh. "I had forgotten about mangoes," he said. "I have not had one in so long." He sucked more of the fruit from the skin.

I looked at Sterling Promise. The corners of his eyes crinkled in a smile. He made it look so simple.