



CHAPTER 9

STERLING PROMISE MANEUVERED us through the crowds until the streets narrowed and the shadows deepened. When we came to a shop at one of the countless corners where one street joined another, he stopped. The shop's windows were dark, covered in a thick layer of black dust followed by a layer of paper. It had no sign, and trash had gathered at the bottom corners of the door.

"We will go around back," he said. We followed him into an alley. He knocked on a door along the back wall. After a few moments, invisible hands opened the door. Sterling Promise disappeared inside, and Father and I followed.

Inside, the air was sharp. It stung my throat. The room was dark and crammed with bodies. Children knelt on bamboo mats, surrounded by wooden bowls filled with black powder, pearl-sized balls, string, and bits of paper. Their hands flew from one bowl to another — assembling lines and containers of fireworks, I realized, like those Sterling Promise had brought.

A large man stomped impatiently down the rows, leaning over the children's shoulders. His face and hands had a grimy tint to

them, and half-moons of shadowy skin hung under his eyes. A fragile-looking woman stood silently against the wall. The man was raising a hand over a cowering boy when Sterling Promise stepped toward him and cleared his throat.

The man dropped his hand. "Ah, you are back," he said. "And you have been successful, I assume."

Sterling Promise bowed. "I want to present Chan Jan Wai and his daughter." He turned to us, a thick mask over his features. "I present my teacher and business partner, Master Yue."

Master Yue bowed his head. "You resemble your brother. That's good."

Father frowned.

The children at our feet continued working, their heads bent over the hollow shells in front of them. One raised his face to peer up at us, but Master Yue smacked him on the back of the head. The pop echoed off the empty walls. "Get back to work!"

"You didn't have to hit him!" I said.

"Daughter," my father hissed. "We are guests."

Wrinkles formed on Sterling Promise's brow. I lifted my chin, my anger burning under my skin. The boy wiped his eyes with the cuff of a black-stained sleeve. I put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"This one, my wife spoiled when he was sick." Master Yue glared at the small woman leaning into a corner. She lowered her head. "Now he is completely worthless." He smiled at Sterling Promise. "He is even more trouble than you were when you first arrived."

Sterling Promise was once one of these children? I tried to picture him, kneeling on a dingy mat. I couldn't see his clear eyes, the ones that took in every detail, on these blank, sad faces. But, as

the boy jerked his shoulder from under my hand and returned to work, I noticed Sterling Promise kept his gaze above the children's heads.

"We will get you settled in your rooms now," Master Yue continued. We followed him to the stairs at the back of the room. On the way up, I saw Sterling Promise slip the last mango into the tiny, wrinkled hand of Yue's wife. She gave him a sad smile and tucked it under her apron.

When I looked closely, the Yue home told a story of fortunes won and lost. Fine vases sat on plain tables. A beautiful screen was folded in the corner because one of the panels was cut out and, maybe, sold. Enameled boxes had their handles of ivory or gold removed. After placing our bags in our rooms, we sat down at a table in the dining room while Yue's wife and a servant bustled in and out of the kitchen with plates of food. Master Yue took up most of the small room with his long, heavy limbs and his loud voice. The rest of us fit in around him. Master Yue and Sterling Promise discussed business — or, at least, a vague sort of business.

"The man I spoke of is expecting you," Yue said. "You will see to my affairs."

Sterling Promise nodded.

"I lose more money every month, and Lo does nothing but make excuses. You will write to me with what you discover there. Then I will give you further instructions, and you will carry them out. That is what Chan did. You understand?"

"Yes, of course," Sterling Promise replied, looking at the table.

"My uncle worked for you?" I said.

"Yes, he came to me when he was a young man, fresh from the country. He worked for me for . . . let's see . . ."

"Almost twenty years," Father said.

"That's right. How did you know?"

"That is how long I have been home, running the fields."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He watched over my investments in America," Master Yue said. "He found new markets for my fireworks. He was a very clever businessman. He could fight like a tiger when necessary."

"That's enough questions about your uncle, Daughter," Father said.

Sterling Promise coughed. Master Yue's wife brought out another tray of vegetables. I looked at it and remembered a question I had that was not about Uncle.

"When do the children eat?" I asked.

Master Yue stared at me like I was a fly stuck on his rice.

"Where do they sleep? Do they ever go outside?"

"Daughter, you must remember your place," Father said.

Master Yue waved away my father's concerns, but his face hardened. "It is very kind of you to be concerned for the children, but I assure you, they are taken care of. You would not wish to accuse me of mistreating them?"

"I did not mean to accuse you of anything," I said.

"Of course you didn't. What would you know of business?" His eyes were as black as the powder I saw downstairs. "They are making the finest fireworks in Hong Kong."

"Like Sterling Promise used to?"

"Yes, exactly like Sterling Promise used to. And look how well I cared for him." He leaned back in his chair.

I had not meant to insult Sterling Promise, but the tightness of his lips told me that I had. I sat silently through the rest of dinner,

wondering how he had come from this place to be my adopted cousin — the young man with so much ambition to spend in America.

The next day, I woke up in the corner of the room I had shared with Master Yue's wife and started down the stairs. Halfway down, I heard voices.

"It is a difficult business. You will have to be very clever," Master Yue said.

"Yes," Sterling Promise said.

"It is a bargain, five hundred dollars. A paper son would have cost three times that. And you may not even have to use it. But if you do, I expect to be paid back."

I peered around the corner and saw them sitting across from each other at a small table, a stack of paper money between them. Yue reached for a sticky bun and jammed it in his mouth. "Just remember, you have nothing if you cannot get into America. Nothing! You will rot in the gutters I pulled you from for the rest of your life." He leaned back in his chair. "You were clever to get the brother to replace Chan, but the daughter, she is trouble."

"She is not as difficult as she seems," Sterling Promise said, tapping his finger against his leg.

It was only a splinter of a compliment, but it kept my tongue still when I heard Master Yue's curses rain down on the children in the workroom that afternoon. It helped me to turn away when Master Yue stared at me a little too long, though I wished to meet his dark gaze with one of my own. It stilled my questions at the Yues' dinner table for two weeks while Father and Sterling Promise

went back and forth to the steamship offices to make the final arrangements.

I discovered Master Yue's wife knew her husband's comings and goings well enough to avoid him. I followed her out of our room late at night to help her wrap the children's tender hands and wash out eyes, red from the powder. I scooped cups of water from a bucket that she brought down and put it to their lips.

One night Sterling Promise caught me going down the stairs with strips of cloth for bandages. He grabbed my arm. "Don't get involved. You're not doing them any good. He will only beat them more if he finds out."

I lifted my chin. "It's a little water and a few bandages."

"It's not your place."

"You were one of those children. You should understand."

"I do understand. I understand that Master Yue is the only thing keeping them and maybe their families from starvation."

I shook my head. "I wish I knew how you got from here to the door of our home in Jinjiu. Why do you come back to this man's house when he was as cruel to you as he is to them?"

Sterling Promise walked past me. "Why should I tell you? So you can make me look bad to your father?" He stomped up the stairs.