



## CHAPTER 11

I DIDN'T SEE MUCH of Sterling Promise or Father for the next few days. Father spent his days on his cot, sleeping or trying to sleep. Sometimes he came to meals, but only to sit listlessly while Sterling Promise taught us the details of our paper family.

"Do you think Father is sick?" I asked Mrs. Ying one night after dinner.

She shook her head. "It will pass. Traveling on the sea doesn't agree with everyone right away."

Traveling agreed with Sterling Promise. He made as many friends on the ship as he had in the village. I had my usual luck with friendships too. The sisters who shared our room whispered to each other when my voice was too loud. The mother and daughter-in-law preferred to ignore me. I spent my time with Mrs. Ying, who, thankfully, found me less intolerable than Father expected.

One morning, I stood on the deck watching the sun cut a sparkling path through the water. I leaned over the railing to look out onto the watery landscape stretched before me. Waves of white slapped against the ship's side, then tumbled away as the ship

pushed through the water. The sky swept overhead, then poured into the vast horizon.

Two hands gripped the rail next to mine. "The sea is beautiful, isn't it?" Sterling Promise stood beside me. "Dangerous, but beautiful."

"True," I said, stepping onto the railing to feel the spray against my skin.

Sterling Promise shifted his gaze past me. "You shouldn't do that. People are staring."

I put my feet back on the deck. I had been making a study of the way Sterling Promise straightened his back around Father and Grandfather when he was at our house, versus the loose, swaying motions of his arms when he talked to the sailors at fan-tan in the evenings. He constantly molded himself to mirror the person he was speaking to, but I could not figure out the form he took with me.

When Mrs. Ying appeared beside me a moment later, he lifted his shoulders and pasted a wide smile onto his face. "Good morning, Mrs. Ying. Is your husband at breakfast? I wanted to speak to him."

"Good morning, Sterling Promise. Yes, I believe he is."

"I think I will go have breakfast too," I said, but Sterling Promise had already turned and walked toward the stairs.

"Sterling Promise," Mrs. Ying called. "I believe Jade Moon is going to breakfast. Could she join you?"

"She would not want to," he called back, his voice gentle but firm. "We are going to talk business."

"I don't mind," I said.

His feet pounded the stairs in answer.

Mrs. Ying looped her arm through mine and steered me toward the other end of the deck. "I wonder why he is in such a hurry to have breakfast with my husband. It certainly isn't the food."

Angry tears threatened my cheeks. "It's because I embarrass him. People stare at me. I don't think before I speak, and then I say too much. It is difficult to be what people want you to be." I wiped the tears away. "It will be different when I get to America. There will be more space and fewer lines."

"Jade Moon," Mrs. Ying said, "I know it is difficult to be a woman in China, but it is not easy to be a woman anywhere."

I looked away, running my fingers along the red thread that held Nushi's pouch around my neck. "Sterling Promise says America is a place of possibilities . . . hope. A story that isn't written to the end."

"Sterling Promise said that?"

"Actually, my uncle did."

"It is true. But there is something unsettling about a story that doesn't have its ending yet. The truth is that few Chinese women live freely in America," she continued. "Most stay locked in their houses. Others work in sweatshops like the lowest servants. Those are the lucky ones. Others are sold to men."

"Like concubines?"

"Like prostitutes."

"Oh." My cheeks reddened. "But your life is better."

"The first generation pays a heavy price for entry into America — men and women. My father paid it for me. America is not like China. If you are born in China, it is done. You are Chinese. No discussion. But in America, you earn being an American." We walked in and out of the hard shadows that divided the deck,

mirroring the ropes and planks towering above our heads. "Jade Moon." She stopped and waited for me to meet her gaze. "Do you know what your father has planned for you in the new country?"

I shook my head.

"I ask because fathers don't bring their daughters to America. Some men bring their wives."

"I think Sterling Promise convinced my father to bring me," I said. I was still examining this idea, trying to figure it out, so that I could push away the uneasiness of not knowing, not understanding. "Maybe he understood how much I needed to go."

Mrs. Ying narrowed her eyes. "My husband tells me that Sterling Promise has dreams of making his fortune in America."

"That is true."

"I don't think you can trust him with your dreams. He will have enough trouble with his own."

"What do you mean?"

"It is just that . . . it doesn't always seem like the Americans want us there. When my father worked on the railroads, the white men would attack their camps. They even killed some Chinese. My husband cannot deliver the laundry on foot outside of Chinatown. People throw stones at him or scream 'rat' inches from his face." It looked like it pained her to say these things. "Most of us stay within the boundaries of Chinatown. Many stay between the four walls of our rooms or businesses. It wasn't very long ago that the hatchet men were fighting wars on the streets."

"Hatchet men?"

"Yes, brutal men who terrorize Chinatown as they battle over the inches of space and crumbs of power." The wind pushed her skirts tight around her legs. Mrs. Ying straightened her shoulders.

"The Chinese make everything from bamboo. It bends without breaking because it is strong, but flexible. The Americans, they build everything from metal. That takes fire. We are learning to survive in their metal country, but not without sacrifices."

I did not want to hear this. Not from Mrs. Ying. I longed to be sitting with Sterling Promise instead, listening to his stories about Gold Mountain and all its possibilities. "If it is so bad, why do so many people leave their homes to go there?"

"You are right. It is wonderful. Opportunities hang over every doorway and wait around every corner. America will promise you everything you want, but it will also make you gamble all you have to get it. That is the tragedy of it. You will love America. It will break your heart, but you will still love it."

Mrs. Ying put her arm back through mine and started walking again. "And, Jade Moon, find out why they brought you before we land. Women are brought to America either to be wives or prostitutes. You may have dreams, but your father and Sterling Promise have plans." She looked at me for a moment. "Now, are you ready to begin?"

"Begin what?"

"Your English lessons. Someone who has so much to say will need to speak the language."

For the next two weeks, I spent most of the day wrestling with the foreign words, twisting my tongue and lips around their sounds. Mrs. Ying taught me how to change the rising and falling notes of Chinese into the steady beats of English sentences. I was useless at putting words together, but I loved them alone. Mrs. Ying fed me a ceaseless stream of them, as many as I could hold in my head. We started with the things around us. I learned "ship" with its quick

halt at the end, "chair" and "finger" that backed into the throat by the last letter. I learned "ocean" and "land" — their long sounds stretching at their middles. I let them all tumble through my lips.

But my favorite words were not always of objects I could touch. I loved words like "home" and "hope," "because" and "begin." I carried those more carefully, whispering them to myself, letting them sit on my tongue like candied ginger. They sounded like words used to cast a spell.

I was also good at learning the paper son story. We studied the coaching book night after night inside the swaying yellow cone of light from a lamp, while the boat creaked and groaned around us. Sterling Promise had been studying the book for months already. He taught Father and me generations of the Sung family. He taught us the rooms in their home and the homes in their village. The Sung's grandfather, Uncle's paper father, had worked on the American railroad. He traveled back to his home village of Xi San every three years to see his family. We kept our rice bin in the northwest corner of the kitchen, three or four chickens at all times, and a pig or two once my paper grandfather began sending money from America. Our paper grandmother was blind during her last seven years of life, then she died in her bed and was buried in an auspicious spot — east-facing, with a good breeze.

I thought my paper grandmother sounded kind, like someone who would visit a sick neighbor or send her husband to plow the field of a farmer whose ox had just died. I wondered if my paper uncles wrote to her often enough when they were in America. I was even a little sad that I would never meet her. When I said that to Father and Sterling Promise, Father frowned and Sterling Promise shook his head.

None of this distracted me enough from the worry of why I was going to America.

One night, I arrived in the dining room to see Father by himself, leaning against the wall behind our bench, his arms crossed.

"Sterling Promise is coming. He met a man who owns a grocery in Chinatown, and they have been talking business," he said.

"Yes, Father."

We waited silently. After I had twisted and untwisted a loose thread on my pants several times, he spoke. "Are you comfortable with Mrs. Ying? She is looking after you?"

"Yes, she is wonderful!" I said.

"We will land soon. Then you will have to say good-bye."

"I will find out where she lives. She said I could visit her."

"Don't impose your friendship on Mrs. Ying." His nostrils flared, but I knew that I would have Jell-O with Mrs. Ying in America.

I changed the subject before he could forbid me anything. "It is strange learning all of this about a family we will never meet," I said.

"Yes, what a foolish way to decide who gets into a country. My brother . . ." But his voice faded.

"Father, what sacrifices did you make?"

"What?" His face quickly hardened to stone.

"When Sterling Promise came, he said the paper son was to repay a debt, for the sacrifices made."

Father's forehead wrinkled. "My brother left to pursue his own dreams, but he did not consider how the rest of his family would suffer because of them. He was a son who should have had more sons. He was the one Father trained to manage the land.

Everyone in the family must do their duty for it to survive. My duty was to study. To bring honor to the family. I was to be a scholar. When my brother left, I had to return to take care of the fields.”

“But if he didn’t want to work the fields —”

“What does it matter? His first responsibility is to his family. He rebelled against virtue, against order. Remember that, Daughter.”

“Maybe it would have destroyed him, trying to be something he was not.”

“He risked the survival of countless generations to avoid a life that was unpleasant for him?”

It was a heavy burden — the burden of generations. I looked over my shoulder to see Sterling Promise moving toward us. “What am I going to do when I get to America?” I asked Father.

Sterling Promise arrived in time to hear my question. “What do you mean?”

“That is not your concern,” Father said to me.

“Father, please. I need to know.” I was not sure whether to be more scared of what my father might say if I pushed the question, or what he would do if I didn’t.

Sterling Promise sighed and said to Father, “Tonight, we need to go over what your brother did in America in case they ask you where he lived or what associations he belonged to.”

Father whirled around to face him. “I know what my brother did in America. He brought shame to the family through his selfishness.”

After he stormed away, I turned to Sterling Promise. “You have to tell me what he plans to do with me when we get to America.”



"Your father *has* to learn this information. Everything depends on him." He flipped through a few pages in the coaching book. "I suppose we could study the layout of the town again."

I yanked the book out of his hand. "Mrs. Ying said that there are only two reasons to bring a woman to America, to marry her or make her a prostitute." He stared at me for a second, then started to tap at his leg with his middle finger. "Is Father going to sell me into prostitution?"

My voice must have been louder than I intended, because six sets of eyes snapped to us and then drifted politely away. Sterling Promise leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Is *that* what you are worried about? Don't be ridiculous, Jade Moon. Your father would never do that. Think of the shame."

I had. "But if he and Grandfather were desperate enough? They have been working to marry me off for years. Maybe this is their only chance to get rid of me."

He laughed. "You do have an imagination."

"This is serious."

"No, it is not. And we should not be discussing it."

I leaned back and crossed my arms. "Then, according to Mrs. Ying, they have arranged a marriage that could bring its own share of misery."

"I don't know your father's plans for you." He straightened. "But is marriage such a horrible fate?"

"It may be for me. What kind of man is desperate or foolish enough to marry me? I heard you tell Auntie Wu that you would never marry such a girl."

"I should never have said that."

"It doesn't matter. You can go where you wish, have any

opportunity within your reach. You have never had to hand your life over to fate, or had your hands tied with tradition.”

“You know nothing about my life.” He snatched back the coaching book.

“What have you not been able to find a way to get?” I said, the edge of my words sharp.

Sterling Promise looked up. He glanced at the people huddled around their own coaching books or gambling bets. “I will tell you if you stop asking why you were brought here too.”

I nodded.

“It’s the story of how I got from Master Yue’s to your house. The story you asked for before.” He paused. “And it’s a secret, Jade Moon. Your father and grandfather can’t know.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I said. People did not often share their secrets with me.

He set down the coaching book. “You saw the merchant center of Hong Kong, but I grew up in its slums. My family lived in a single room surrounded by more single rooms, with more people, more filth, more poverty. Fires and disease often ran through the slums, killing everything in their path. My parents and sister died in one of the fires. I went to work for Master Yue and took care of my two younger brothers. When I was ten, both of those brothers became sick and died. I could do nothing to help them. It happened so fast. One of the plagues.”

“So you had no family,” I said.

Sterling Promise nodded. “Do you know what it is like not to have a family? It is like being a branch fallen from a tree. It may look like freedom to you, but it is no different than the trapped feeling you have. It means you can get nowhere.

"Then your uncle came back to China to meet with Master Yue. He saw the trouble I caused Master Yue and the blows it gained me. He found out what happened to my parents and siblings. I think he knew what it was to be alone. He let me stay in the room he rented from the Yues.

"People told him that he should not adopt me, that death clung to me like wet leaves, but he did it anyway." He smiled a little. "When it was time for him to go back to America, he couldn't take me with him, because he didn't have his merchant papers yet. But he persuaded Master Yue to keep me in the house, learning as much of the business as I could. He said I would be his apprentice.

"When he returned to China last year to get me, he was already sick. He got weaker and weaker until he died. Just like my parents and siblings."

"His death is not your fault," I said.

"But people think it is. They smile and bow politely, but they keep me at a distance." He leaned forward. "If I stay in Hong Kong, I will always be the unlucky boy who carries death with him. No one will do business with me. Bad luck, good luck: It is all a game other people play with your life."

"You don't believe in luck?"

"What I believe isn't important. The foreigners don't care about it, and that is what matters."

"You don't have to carry those burdens in America," I said slowly, nodding. "It is a place where people don't care if you are cursed."

"Exactly," Sterling Promise said. "And that is a very valuable kind of freedom."

"The children at Master Yue's, they looked so hopeless. They looked like the empty firecracker shells scattered around them."

"That is why I am here. I can never go back to that life. I need a new life. The one I had in China was destroying me."

"I understand," I said. For all of his pleasing speeches and ready smiles, he was as unlucky as I was.

He picked up the coaching book, turning to the page we were studying. "You cannot tell anyone about my past, not your father, not Mrs. Ying. It is too shameful."

"I won't," I promised.

I did not tell Mrs. Ying about my conversation with Sterling Promise. I knew that there were more questions buried in his answers, and that my own questions had not received full replies. But now I saw why he was going, and that he had brought me for the same reason. Sterling Promise understood me, and I did not have to fight for that understanding. One of my layers of loneliness, one buried close to my center, melted away.