



CHAPTER 12

AFTER THREE WEEKS AT SEA, the ship developed a specific smell — a combination of the cabbage and cured fish that we ate in rotation, and the odor of too many people crammed in a small space. The men spent most of their time on deck or at tables in gloomy corners, smoking and gambling and talking about China. They discussed the crops that wouldn't grow, the rain that wouldn't fall, the Japanese who would not compromise, the foreigners who would not leave. Mrs. Ying and I strolled around their hunched backs, learning new English words or practicing old ones.

In another week, the coast of America appeared. Sterling Promise, Father, and I stared at the land rising from the ocean. "What is it called again, the city we are going to?"

"San Francisco," Sterling Promise said. He pulled out the coaching book. "This is our last chance to study. Did our paper family have a garden?"

"Yes," Father said, starting to look around the deck.

"They had two gardens," I said. "One in front and another in the back."

"How many entrances are there?"

"Three," Father said.

"Four," I corrected.

Sterling Promise nodded. "How many times did Sung Feng Hao enter America?"

Father shrugged and walked away.

"Twice, once in 1907 and then again in 1916," I answered.

"And now a third time," Sterling Promise said.

"And now a third time," I repeated. Sterling Promise's eyes followed Father for a second before he tossed the book overboard.

"Why did you do that?" I cried out, the papers chewed up by the wake of the ship.

"The Americans can never know that we are a paper family. We are the Sung family now. You must only use this name," he said.

A tiny fracture in my heart opened when I let go of the Chan name. But it was a small crack, and I ignored it. I knew that one breath of the air in America, thick with its possibilities, would heal it.

When the boat docked, men in green uniforms, with pale, stern faces, boarded and started to move among us. They shouted directions in Chinese, their American tongues stumbling through the sounds. Those with certain papers were allowed to land. The rest of us were going to a place they called Angel Island to answer the Americans' questions and get the permission we needed to enter. Mrs. Ying picked up her bag and pressed a slip of paper into my hand. "My address. You will visit when you land."

"Yes, thank you."

"And you will not hesitate to come to me if you have any trouble."

I shook my head.

“Good. Then this is not good-bye,” she said, smiling through teary eyes. “Jade Moon, it would be wonderful if America could be all you are hoping for.”

“It will be,” I said.

Once the passengers in first class and those with papers had gone ashore, the rest of us were packed into the lower deck of a waiting ferry. It pulled away from the dock and sped through two arms of land that hugged the bay. By the time we reached the island, the coast of America had faded into a pale brushstroke bleeding into sea and sky.

After we docked on Angel Island, the guards sorted us again — men from women, Chinese from pale — before allowing us off the ferry. Father and Sterling Promise were led away. Sterling Promise blended into the crowd of men until I could see only the top of his cap bobbing down the walkway. Father, trailing him, looked back at me before stepping off the boat.

Once the men had disappeared into a large white building, the guards shouted for us five women to follow. My legs felt unsteady, like the legs of a newborn goat. They expected the movement of the sea. I stumbled down the wide, wooden pathway that led from the boat toward another big white building that stood in the distance.

It was a beautiful island — green grass, and trees with thick trunks and giant palms sprouting from the tops. Thinner, taller trees rose from the coast until they disappeared into a gentle fog that hovered high in the air. The cries of seagulls mixed with the fading whistles and bells of the bay behind us.

I could not see America from where we landed on the island. I could see only the ocean that we came from. I tried to picture what

America was like from my glimpse of the docks and the fragment I saw here. It was big; I could see that. The buildings looked effortless, like the Americans had decided to build there and the land agreed. In China, the houses and rice terraces wore the cuts and scars of the long battle it took to create them. Here, the earth was soft and the wood was new.

The women around me stared ahead silently, the cloth of our shoes patting along the boards. I smiled broadly, looking from one scared face to another. They had kept a polite but cool distance from Mrs. Ying and me during the voyage. "Don't worry, we are here. We have arrived," I said to the old woman who stood next to me. She just clutched her bundle to her chest.

"Follow me," shouted a guard as he turned to enter the door at the front of the building, his voice loud to fill the vast space around it.

One of the sisters gestured back to the trunks sitting at the end of the dock. "Our trunks?"

The guard pointed to the shed they were piled next to. "They go there."

"Yes. Good," I said to him, glad for the chance to share the shreds of English I learned from Mrs. Ying. He must be taking us to where they ask the questions. I ran through the locations of the well and the large trees in the Sung's village. I reviewed the aunts that lived in the house and the children they brought. I was ready. How long would the questioning take, an hour? Two?

The guard led our group down a hallway and into a large room. The white walls outlined a sparsely furnished space. A metal table stood in the center, next to a solitary wooden desk. A few smaller tables and screens lined the walls.

Two Americans stood behind the table — a man with a long white jacket over his clothes and a woman in a stiff white dress, her hair pulled into a knot at the base of her neck. A harsh smell stung the air.

“Medical exam,” the man announced. “To enter America.” The notes of his Chinese were flat and unpracticed, coming from the tip of his tongue.

I could feel a collective question form in the room, but we stayed still and silent. The woman in white passed out metal pans to each of us.

“We need stool samples,” the man said in Chinese, accompanied by a series of bizarre gestures.

“Stool?” I said.

“Surely not,” one of the sisters said.

The daughter-in-law shook her head and tried to hand the pan back. “Not necessary, thank you,” she said in Chinese.

The man frowned. “You will not be able to leave. It is the law,” he said in Chinese.

“This is humiliating,” the old woman said to her daughter-in-law.

The woman directed us to different corners of the room, providing space but no privacy. After a few minutes, one of the sisters, her face red, returned from behind a table and handed her pan to the nurse. We stared, our mouths open. What was this? The American women peered into it, then, holding it at arm’s length, paraded it over to the doctor. He disappeared with it through a door.

The American woman began to circulate around the room, scolding us. “You aren’t doing anything. You will not be able to enter America if you don’t do this.”

My heart started to pound. They had us squatting like animals as we filled the pans, which were taken out one by one. I had traveled across an ocean for this? Did they think we were diseased? Too dirty for their shiny America?

Once we had all performed to their satisfaction, we were lined up. One by one, they poked and prodded us, looking at our teeth, tugging at our skin with their metal instruments. When it was my turn, I focused on a brown patch of skin below the man's right ear, where the bottom of his earlobe joined his face. I stared at it, enduring every press of cold metal against my skin. When he lifted my eyelid, I jerked my head away, but he said some words in English, put one of his huge hands on the back of my head, and yanked my eyelid up again. Anger poured into the hole that joy had left in my heart.

"Jump," he said in Chinese.

"Excuse me?"

"To see if your limbs work," he said, grabbing my arm and shaking it. I twisted my arm from his grip and lifted my head, staring above him as I jumped.

When he was done with me, he moved to my neighbor in line — the older Chinese woman who had kept to her bed through our journey here. Now I could see the crooked stance that had kept her confined, one hip jutting awkwardly above the other. The man looked her up and down and then said something to the American woman, who began to pantomime undressing. Terror spread across the old woman's face. Her daughter-in-law whispered, "To undress in front of a stranger. A man!"

"The shame," one of the sisters said sadly.

My chest was as tight as the fists at the end of my wrists. "No. You cannot. Wrong," I said loudly, the English words flying out of my mouth before I could stop them. Every eye in the room turned to look at me, the Americans with confusion, the Chinese with horror and outrage.

"Shut your mouth. What did you say?" the sister next to me hissed. "Who are you to talk to them like that? Do you want to get us all sent back to the boat?"

"It isn't supposed to be this way," I said in Chinese, reaching into my mind for the English words that might make them stop.

"You are nobody to them," she said through her teeth. "If you forget that, they will remind all of us. Get back on the next boat to China if you can't swallow your complaints."

The old woman shook her head and tried to pull away, but the American woman led her behind the screen, speaking soft, meaningless words and showing her gleaming teeth behind painted red lips. From the other side of the screen, we could see the woman's ankles and hear her sobs.

A pile of clothing gathered on the floor — jacket, pants, under-shirt. The women around me gasped as the man stepped behind the screen.

I did not know what to think. The cruelty of it hammered inside me. Did the Americans know what they had made her do? We never undressed before strangers. Doctors in China came to a sick room to spread herbs over the bed, prescribe teas, or cut the bad air with knives. They looked at the patient, her skin, her hair. They did not put their hands on the body. The women in our village had children with the help of a female servant. If there was no servant,

they had the child alone. It was difficult to imagine why a doctor would need to see a woman naked, but given the choice, many women would rather die of the disease than live with the shame.

After an eternity, the man moved to the table and wrote a few marks on a piece of paper. The pile of clothes disappeared from the floor. The old woman dressed and stepped out from behind the screen. I only saw her red eyes for one second before she cast them to the floor, wringing her hands in front of her.

The rest of the day was the longest journey of all — longer than the trip from our farm to Hong Kong, longer than our trip across the ocean to America. The Americans herded us from room to room, exchanging one of our papers for another. They did not ask us any questions from our coaching books. I understood little of what we did. I did know that this was not the America I imagined. The Americans moved us from place to place with an automated reluctance. There were no easy smiles. There was no loud laughter or bright bowls of Jell-O. By the time they led us into a dining hall, all the hope had poured out of the broken vessel that was my heart.

Long tables stood in neat lines and smells soaked the walls. Bright, large lights hung from the ceiling, but they only illuminated the dinginess of the place — flat gray walls and rough wooden tables standing on scuffed floors. We five new women joined a handful of others crowded around two tables in a corner. Plates of rice and limp, pale vegetables were put in front of us.

We newcomers listened as some of the other women offered advice.

“Now you just wait for your interrogation,” one said.

“I have been through two,” another said, sitting straighter. “They tried to send me home, but my husband has an expensive American

lawyer. I told him that this worthless self should go back to China, that I would be less of a bother to him. But he and my sons are here, and he says it is time for me to join them. So I obeyed, of course."

"The food is always this bad," a third woman said, picking up a green lump from her plate. "You can have people bring you food from the mainland. My husband sends food three times a week."

I turned to the woman to my left. "My name is Jade Moon," I said.

She was staring listlessly at the plate of food in front of her. It took her a moment to realize that I was speaking to her.

"Snow Lily," she said. Her voice was almost a whisper.

"How long have you been here?"

She shook her head. "Almost a year."

Impossible, I thought.

When the women had shared all of the advice they could think of, they questioned us. Where in China was your village? What does your husband do? Do you have children? One of the women turned to me and asked, "Is your husband here?"

I considered lying, but I had to lie about so many other things.

"No, my father." I stabbed at the rice on my plate.

"Ah, you are meeting your husband, then, in America. Spring Blossom is also meeting her new husband. It was all arranged in China." She nodded toward a wisp of a woman at the end of the table, only a little bit older than me, who gave me a weak smile. Her dark hair hung in a single braid down her back. With her hands resting in her lap, she seemed to curl into herself.

"I am not meeting my new husband," I said.

The woman sitting to my right studied me. "How old are you?"

“Seventeen.”

“Then your mother has begun to make arrangements.”

“No,” I said flatly.

“Of course she has. She just hasn’t spoken of it to you yet.”

“She died when I was born.”

The woman wrinkled her face, no doubt taking in the hair flying out of my braid, my fidgeting hands, my eyes, which were too wide to be called almond-shaped, and my cheeks that were too full and red from years spent by the terraces when I should have been inside embroidering seat cushions. Without a mother, husband, or sons, she knew I was worthless.

I returned her stare. “When I am American —”

The woman smirked. “Little Sister, you are not American. You are Chinese.”

“I will be American,” I snapped back. The anger strengthened me. I could feel it coursing through me, reminding me why I was here, on this island, in this country.

But most of the women covered their mouths as they laughed. Only two did not laugh — Spring Blossom, who looked at her hands in her lap, and Snow Lily, who seemed unaware of anything said at the table.

“You are not going to be American,” my challenger said. “You are going to live in America. Do you think they treat Americans like this?” She nodded toward the guards with their lines of buttons, pockets of keys, and cold faces.

“I am sure they have their reasons.” My voice skipped a little with the nervousness I was trying to hide.

The woman leaned forward. “The reason is that they don’t want you here.”

I was tired. My head hurt. I focused on the worn surface of the table.

“Oh, I see,” the woman continued. “You thought they would welcome you.” She turned to the other women at the table. “This one believes in her dreams so much that she will spend all of her life asleep.”

I rose to find another table where I could sit alone. As I swung my legs over the bench, my arm knocked against my plate. The plate of rice and vegetables slammed into the woman’s shoulder and chest and tumbled onto her lap before clattering onto the floor. Everyone in the dining hall stared. Even the guards and kitchen workers watched me with cool curiosity.

The woman stood and faced me. Bits of rice fell to the floor from her shirt. She gripped her fists at her sides, leaned forward, and hissed into my face, drops of saliva flying into my cheeks. “You don’t belong here. Don’t think I did not hear about the trouble you made at the medical examination,” she said, her words quiet but cutting. “You must be the shame of your family if they had to send you all the way to America. If your face comes within reach of my hands again, I will scratch at it until it matches your ugly manners.”

The women exchanged looks down the table. It was the same story I had tried to leave behind in China.

After dinner, the guards brought us to a long, narrow room with metal beds stacked along the walls. A stench crawled into the room from the bathroom. I pressed the pouch Nushi had given me close to my chest. The bent old woman had been taken away after the

medical exam, and her daughter-in-law, who had taken care of her throughout the journey, looked lost. She took a tattered shirt from her bag and held it to her face, inhaling its smell. One of the sisters from the boat burst into tears. The other sister put her arm around her, leading her away from the group. The strangeness of the place swirled around me. It crept inside of me. Nothing was right — the room too big, the smells too strong. There were too many voices, all high and soft.

Those of us who survived the ordeal of the first day cried that first night, foreign-smelling pillows soaked in tears, the metal beds squeaking between sobs. I wept as silently as I could, clutching close to my heart the red pouch Nushi had given me with the piece of jade inside. I thought of our rice terraces, their beauty and promise built over generations, and I tried to remember that dreams, like terraces, are built one stone at a time.