

CHAPTER 15

THE NEXT DAY, when the guard came to get us for breakfast, I pointed to my stomach and made a face of pain.

“Hospital,” he said indifferently, steering the other women through the door, then locking it behind him. My stomach *was* feeling unsettled. Not because of the gray meat they served us, but because I was going to see Sterling Promise again. A few minutes later, the guard returned, motioning for me to come with him.

I rose from my bed and trailed behind him to another of the island’s endless wooden buildings. I followed him up the steps and through the door. Sun poured into the room through a line of windows and settled on a row of beds with white sheets tucked neatly over mattresses. I could smell a wisp of the sharp odor from that first day they examined us.

The guard guided me to a woman in the same white, crisp dress those women had worn the day of my arrival. “Nurses,” the woman who taught us English called them. My heartbeat sped up, and I wrapped my arms around my waist. Was Sterling Promise leading me into that ordeal again? After the guard and the woman

exchanged a few words, the guard left, and the nurse sat me in a chair before leaving the room.

She came back with a bottle of thick liquid. She passed me a thumb-sized cup of it and went through the motions of drinking the liquid. I was shaking my head at her when Sterling Promise appeared at the door.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw him again. After almost three moons, his hair looked longer, his clothes more threadbare, but his brown eyes still held the same intensity they'd always had.

Sterling Promise did a much better job of having a sore stomach. He held his hands over his middle, his forehead crossed with lines of suffering. The nurse brought him the same medicine, which he took immediately.

Sterling Promise ran through a series of English words with the nurse, ending with "Thank you." She widened her smile. He indicated the beds, and she nodded.

He lay down on a bed. The nurse pointed me to one a little farther down, then left the room. As soon as she disappeared through the door, Sterling Promise rolled on his side to face me.

"What was the medicine?" I twisted the white sheet around my finger. I felt unsteady next to him, like when I first stepped off the boat.

"It won't hurt you. It does nothing." He looked over his shoulder at the door, then continued, "They started my interrogation yesterday. They will probably ask more questions today."

"Oh" was all I could say.

"It is very difficult. They ask questions that are not in the book too." He smiled. It was his real smile, and the warmth from it made

me melt. "You were right. I wanted to tell you my answers so that yours will match. If they don't, they will never let me" — I lifted my head to stare at him — "us in."

Sterling Promise went through the additional questions and his answers in a low voice. When he finished, we lay there quietly for a minute.

"Are you doing well?" he asked.

"Yes."

The nurse stepped into the room. Sterling Promise rolled onto his back again, and we went silent. She turned down the sheets on one of the beds and left again.

He turned his head and studied me. "You look well."

My chest tightened again. "How is Father?"

"They questioned him last month. I don't think his answers match mine or the paper family. He is why this is taking so long." Sterling Promise sighed. "I have heard that it is more difficult for women. They do not want to let women into America."

"What?" I shot up.

"Quiet! We aren't supposed to be talking," he hissed. "This is what I mean. If you want us to get in, you have to follow the rules."

I felt tears pushing at the corners of my eyes. "What rules? Where are the rules? I would like to see them. They make up the rules as they go along." The funny feeling in my chest was gone, replaced by the familiar fire.

"Of course, they make them up. They are *their* rules. The Americans' rules. And we are in America now. If they make up rules, we have to figure them out and follow them."

I lay back down.

"I am just warning you," he said gently. "They are looking for a reason to send you back."

I stared at the ceiling.

"Jade Moon, if you don't get in . . ."

I didn't want him to say it. "I'm getting in. I *have* to get in."

The nurse walked in again. Sterling Promise hastened to look away from me, but she wasn't interested in us. She was leading Snow Lily to the bed across from me. Snow Lily shuffled slowly across the floor. Her ghost had hung over the women's quarters since the night she had been carried out. It was strange seeing her here, flesh and blood. The distance that used to be in her eyes was gone, but it was replaced with a deep, real pain. The nurse helped her lie down, then tucked the sheets and blankets around her.

Snow Lily started to wail. I could hear in her cries every fear I had of getting my own letter. Her sorrow sat on my chest like a stone, making it hard to breathe. The nurse spoke to her in the soothing tone people use with children. I squeezed my eyes shut, but her cries echoed inside me. I wanted to be anywhere but here.

"I can't stay in this room another second," I said.

"We have to stay until a guard comes."

"Please," I said, pressing my hands to my face.

Sterling Promise was silent. When I lowered my hands, he was staring at me, his forehead wrinkled. "I will get you out of here," he said. He rose and walked over to the nurse. "I feel better," he said to her in English.

"Good, good," the nurse said. Snow Lily released another long wail.

"You need help?" Sterling Promise said, reaching for the glass of water sitting by Snow Lily's bed. "I stay and help." He rattled through a long string of English, moving around the bed, picking

up one thing and then another while Snow Lily cried and the nurse shook her head. As she was tucking in a corner of the blanket Sterling Promise had pulled loose, he looked out the window. "Oh, guard. Go or stay? I can stay."

"Go, go," the nurse said without looking up from Snow Lily. Sterling Promise signaled me to come with him. I stood up silently and followed him out of the building. There was no guard in sight.

When we got outside, I took deep breaths and let the sun dry the tears on my face. It felt strange to be on the island without a guard or the other women. I looked over my shoulder. "How did you do that?"

"It was mostly luck. And asking for the right thing at the right time. She wanted us to leave, so it was easy to convince her we could." Sterling Promise seemed to expand in this wider environment. His arms swayed when he walked. His chin lifted higher.

"You look different," I said, watching his long strides. "You look . . . American."

Another wide smile broke across his face. "Yes, I have been watching the guards and the men in the administration building," he said. "I am practicing for when we cross to San Francisco."

We walked down the path to the women's and men's barracks. "The men are still at breakfast. I want to show you something." He opened the men's door.

"I can't go in there," I said. "I have been trying *very* hard to stay out of trouble."

"We are just going into the front room. No one is here right now. They are eating breakfast. You will want to see this."

I looked over my shoulder. "Why isn't the door locked?"

"They aren't as careful if there isn't anyone here to lock up. Remember, they are trying to keep us in, not out." I hesitated.

Sterling Promise held the door open. "I told you, we won't get caught. If you don't want to go inside . . ." He started to close the door.

I put my hand out to stop it. "No," I said. "I want to." I might not want to go inside, but I also wasn't ready for our time together to end.

I slipped into the dimly lit room. The air was thick with the earthy smell that men wear in their skin. Wooden planks lined the walls. Sterling Promise took me down the hall to a small room in the front. It was empty, but the walls were covered with writing in ink or carved into the wooden planks. I walked around the space, running my hands over the characters, reading them.

There are tens of thousands of poems composed on these walls.

They are all cries of complaint and sadness.

*The day I am rid of this prison and attain success,
I must remember that this chapter once existed.*

"They are *tibishi* — poems of travelers." I could feel Sterling Promise's eyes following me from the doorway. "They are all over the walls of this barracks, but this room has some of the best ones."

I bent to read another.

In the quiet of night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind.

The forms and shadows saddened me; upon seeing the landscape, I composed a poem.

*The floating clouds, the fog, darkened the sky.
The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp.
Grief and bitterness entwined are heaven sent.
The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window.*

And then I understood. The room was a burial ground for dreams. The people in this room had broken hearts like mine.

*My parents are old; my family is poor.
Cold weather comes; hot weather goes.
Heartless white devils,
Sadness and anger fill my heart.*

“Your father has written one.”

“Where?” At home, when the days were long and light tumbled in from the windows, Father and Grandfather often entertained themselves composing poetry at the dinner table. Nushi and I would listen from behind the spirit screen that stood at the door. I used to hold my breath, praying that they would invite me to join them. I composed poem after poem for the moment when my father would call, “Daughter, come recite something for us.” In the story I created in my head, when they called me into the room, I recited a poem that left them speechless. I guarded this story, never telling Nushi, because I knew she would tell me that it was impossible, that I should stop reaching for the clouds when I was thirsty.

Sterling Promise took my elbow and led me to the side wall. He pointed to a corner, and when I knelt down, he settled next to me, his leg pressed against mine. I recognized my father’s poem written in ink in his neat, exact calligraphy.

*I am a thousand li from home,
In a cruel country, where hatred hides behind blue skies
I am the honored guest of tyranny. Trapped in
his white, wooden buildings,
Dreams here are nothing but wind and fog.*

It made me sad to see my father's pain in ink on the wall. "He is so miserable. I don't understand why he came," I said.

Sterling Promise gave me that patient look that I often found myself receiving. "It was his duty. He did it to save his family."

"How much of himself should he have to sacrifice for duty?"

"However much is necessary," he said, tilting his head.

I nodded. I agreed only because I should agree, because everyone had always agreed. But I often wondered why people invoked duty as the reason to keep doing what was destroying them.

"There is one more you need to see." He pointed to a small carving —

*It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met
the Cowherd*

That I took passage on the President Lincoln.

I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.

Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.

I thought I could land in a few days.

*How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering
in the wooden building?*

The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take.

*When my family's circumstances stir my emotions,
a double stream of tears flow.*

*I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon,
Thus sparing me this additional sorrow here.*

“It is perfect,” I said. Someone had stood in this room, touching this wall, feeling the same turmoil that I was feeling.

“I thought you would like it.”

“It makes me feel less lonely.”

Sterling Promise grinned. “I know you like the Cowherd and Weaver Girl story. A lot of the poems mention it. Would you like to see those too?”

He did not know that it was the emotions that echoed inside me, not the story. I opened my mouth to tell him, but the warmth of his eager smile stopped me. He was trying to show me something he thought I would like. And I did love the poems. Maybe why I loved them wasn't important for him to understand.

“How did you know I like that story?”

Sterling Promise blushed. “I heard you and Nushi talking about it.”

“You were spying on me.”

“I thought I could, since you spied on me first. I was sure you would spoil everything.”

“I was so angry!” I said, laughing.

“Yes, you made that clear at dinner that night, while you sat there with your nose scrunched up and your bottom lip pushing out. And then clearer when you pushed me in the terrace.”

“I behaved like a monster.” I sighed.

“I behaved badly too.” He took a step toward me.

My face felt hot. We stood staring at each other until my head grew so light I had to lean against the wall. Love seemed closer than it had ever been. I longed to reach out and touch it, to trace

the outline of it on Sterling Promise's face. I turned back to the poem. "It is a little bit of a love story. Coming to this country. The promises. The suffering," I said.

"I think it is more the story of heroes." He brushed his fingers against my hand. My heart started to pound. "Jade Moon, if you don't get in . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it." I had to get into America. It held every possibility, every story, even one where someone like Sterling Promise could love a Fire Horse. I was not going to let something this precious slide through my fingers.

"You were telling the truth on the ship. It is not just about leaving China anymore," he said. "You really do want to get into America, don't you?"

"Desperately," I said, thinking of Snow Lily wailing in the hospital.

He nodded. We should leave here before we were caught, but I had to know Father's plans for me. I had to know if this was all worth it. If I did not ask him now, I might not get another chance.

"I have a question for you," I said.

"That does not surprise me." His voice danced with gentle amusement.

"Has Father arranged a marriage between us?"

Sterling Promise hesitated, and his eyes began to calculate.

"Just tell me the truth."

We heard voices in the distance. The men were coming back from the dining hall.

"We better go," he said.

"I am not leaving until you answer my question."

He looked over his shoulder, stepped back, and began the familiar nervous tapping on his leg. "Jade Moon, we will be caught."

I crossed my arms.

"Stop being so stubborn," he said, his mouth tense.

I did not move.

Sterling Promise stared at me, and then he said, "Yes, he has arranged a marriage between us."

"He agreed to bring you to America if you would marry me?"

"Yes," he said impatiently.

I frowned at him. The next question was harder to voice, but I dug it from inside my heart. "Do you want to marry me?"

"Jade Moon, you aren't supposed to be here. They will think we are discussing answers for the interviews." He rubbed his hand on his forehead, but then his face softened. He reached down and held the tips of my fingers. "I would not have agreed if I did not want to."

My whole body warmed, melting with his touch. *Almost* making me forget his gift for saying exactly what people want to hear.

"I wish you had told me."

"Your father did not want you to know. He said you would make things difficult."

That sounded true. I frowned a little.

"Jade Moon, I had to get your father to bring me here. Remember, I was trapped too."

We could see the men coming toward the building with a guard. My heart was pounding. I did not want to be caught here either, but I needed to hear what he would say, to make sure I could live with it. "Is there anything else you are keeping from me?"

But Sterling Promise had his attention fixed on the men coming up the path. "You need to get out of here." He grabbed my elbow

and dragged me to the door. He listened for a second. "They are at the end of the walkway. The guard will let you in the women's side." He held my arm firmly, opened the door, and shoved me through it.

I stood staring at his closed door for a few seconds. The voices of the men behind me shook me out of my daze. I moved quickly across the porch to the door of the women's barracks. The guard was already yelling when he came up the steps. I didn't think he had seen me leave the men's quarters, but that didn't seem to lessen his outrage. He grabbed my arm, marched me through the women's door, and pushed me in front of the matron, who came running in to see the commotion.

"I left the infirmary," I told her in Chinese. "I had to."

"Why?"

"Snow Lily was there. The woman who . . ."

The matron nodded and then spoke to the guard. He scowled, but turned and slammed the door behind him.

The matron led me back to the sitting room, where the other women raised their eyebrows. As I collapsed into a chair in the corner, I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to escape the screaming guards, crying women, worried thoughts, and mountain of lies. Inside that darkness, I wrote my own poem.

Don't expect a new life to be easy.

Love comes as clouds

Dreams are mostly air

Hard to hold, harder to carry

Somehow impossible to let go.

There was no room to put it in, no wall to carve it on, nothing to carve with. So I tucked it into my crowded mind.