

CHAPTER 16

I TOOK ONE BREATH, then another, and finally opened my eyes and stood up. "You were right about Sterling Promise," I announced.

"Of course we were," First Wife said. The other women continued their sewing.

"He agreed to an arranged marriage so Father would bring him to America. And I am sure Father only brought him to America because he agreed to marry his worthless daughter."

"You are acting like marriage is a bad thing. Everyone wants to be married," First Wife said, turning back to the other women.

"He could be doing this just to get to America, or to inherit the farm, or to gain a family," I said to Spring Blossom.

"Or he could love you," Spring Blossom said softly, taking my hand and leading me to a corner of the sleeping quarters. We sat on one of the empty beds.

"I always hoped for love, fool that I am." I lifted my head and gave her a sad smile. "Do you remember the story of Cowherd and Weaver Girl?" I asked.

"Of course."

“That is what I always thought love would be. A kind of understanding.”

“You are very romantic for a Fire Horse,” Spring Blossom said.

“Maybe. I also like the story of the kitchen god who throws himself into the fire.” We sat silently for a few minutes. “Were you ever in love?”

Spring Blossom’s body stiffened. She turned her head away. I knew I was not supposed to ask, but it is difficult to find out about important things when you can’t speak of them. I started to get up, to avoid offending her further.

She whispered, “Yes, I was in love.”

I sat back down next to her and waited. I did not know if I should continue asking questions.

Spring Blossom looked at her sleeves. I could feel the beginning of the story gathering in her throat. Stories are that way, like storms. If you pay attention, you can sense them in the air.

“My husband was chosen for me almost as soon as I was born. My father’s best friend, our neighbor, had a son several years older than me. The two of us played at our mothers’ feet. He would bring me leaves and flowers from the fields around us. He had a quick smile and an easy laugh. He would squeeze my hand when our mothers were not looking, and I would bury my face in my other hand and giggle. I remember watching bright orange-and-white fish swim in the stream that ran between our homes. He convinced me to stick my toes in the icy water and try to touch their shiny scales.”

“And that is why you loved him?”

“Partly. He was adventurous and daring. I was cautious and shy. But when we were older, our parents kept us apart. It was no longer

proper for us to watch the leaves rustle in the wind or lie on our stomachs next to the stream.

“I spent my days with my mother and grandmother. I learned to sew and cook. I learned to listen politely and speak quietly. I learned to sit still so that I would disappear into the background of my father’s home. My husband was sent to school. Sometimes his mother would visit us, and she would bring a photograph of her son. When she passed it to my mother, I could catch a glimpse of what he looked like. The pictures showed a much more serious face than the one I knew as a child, but his eyes held the same mischief. It was a relief that I knew some part of him.”

“Do you think he saw a picture of you?”

“I wondered. If he did, I hoped they made his heart jump into his throat like the pictures of him did for me.”

I knew that feeling, but I kept my mouth shut. This was Spring Blossom’s story.

“He was the third son, so after a few years, his parents sent him to study at a military academy. His pictures from that time looked different, his eyes harder, his face lined with ruthless determination. But I thought I could still see my childhood friend. I thought the darkness was only a veil.”

“Were you ever married?”

Spring Blossom paused. I waited. When she did not continue, I was afraid that she would not finish the story. She gave a tiny nod.

“His mother visited less and less. I heard my mother and grandmother whispering about the sorrows of having a soldier for a husband, but letters and gifts were still exchanged. The fortune-teller found an auspicious date. My parents sent my dowry to his home to wait for me. I cried at my mother’s feet just as I should,

and worried that she saw the joy I felt through my tears. I was dressed in red, put in a sedan chair, and carried to my new home. I looked forward to all of the happiness I thought our marriage would bring. I would make his mother tea; I would prepare all his favorite sweets; I would sit with him by the river and watch the fish go by.

“But dreams are fragile things. I wish I had been told that very little from your childhood survives the strain of growing up. The moment I stepped out of the sedan chair at the threshold of my new home and saw him, I knew he did not want to marry me. He did not love me.”

“Oh, Spring Blossom.”

She grabbed my hand, lines forming at the center of her forehead. “But that I could have borne. I could have loved him and been happy, except that he had become like the clay ground that dries in years of drought and has to be broken before anything can grow there. I was taught how to be soft and gentle, not how to break up the rocky soil of my husband’s heart. He rarely spoke to me, and nothing I did pleased him. He sent back the tea I made. He didn’t eat the dumplings I cooked. He tossed aside the slippers I embroidered. I watched him bury himself deeper and deeper in his own darkness. He left in the middle of the night, sometimes for weeks. When he came back, he would not tell anyone, even his father, where he had been.”

“Did you ask him?”

“I knew,” she said, rubbing her wrists. “The warlords in our area struggled over territory, bickering with one another, playing games with our lives without telling us the rules. My husband was one of their weapons. He came home, his face spotted with mud, blood

on his knuckles, and that darkness in his eyes. They had turned the boy who lay next to me on his belly by the river into an assassin."

"Why would he join the warlords?" I asked.

"He went to military school with many who were fighting. He wanted a strong China. He would rage about it — the concessions to Western countries that made us foreigners in our own cities, Japan's threat to our safety, people's blindness."

I shook my head slowly. "Were you heartbroken?"

"Love is not the way you think, Jade Moon. Your heart is not full or broken all at once. Pieces heal and break and heal again. My husband was not always unkind. We had evenings when we would talk. He would tell me stories about his school days. I was in love and heartbroken, and everything between. My husband's heart was broken too, but not because of me. While I dreamed of love and marriage, he dreamed of a better China. While I prepared for my wedding, he prepared for revolution. While my marriage was not what I expected, his whole world was descending into the chaos of broken promises and betrayals. I bore my pain, and I would have borne his too if he had allowed me."

"Oh, my friend. I wish you had not had to bear any of it."

Spring Blossom nodded. I reached out and pulled her hand away from her wrist. A series of white scars ran down the inside of her arm. "Did he do that?"

"No. He sometimes beat me. He was angry, and if he was not fighting, he needed a place to put that anger. His blood already ran too thick with it. But what he did to me has long faded. This, his mother did."

"His mother?"

She closed her eyes, then opened them again. "When my husband had strayed too far from his true self, he hanged himself. One of the servants found him. I don't know if he realized it, but he chose one of the trees we sat under as children.

"I think my mother-in-law had thought I would bring peace to her son. He would settle at home with his wife and family. When I could not do that, she blamed me for what he was. I found out about his suicide when she tore into my room, wild with grief. She beat me and ripped at my skin until her screams brought the servants. They could not stop her. When her rage exhausted her, she collapsed next to me, and the servants carried her to her bed.

"I lay there, a bloody mess. The servants would not speak to me or even help me up from the floor for fear of upsetting my mother-in-law. One finally went to my family's house, and my brother came to take me back. I was a widowed woman back in her clan's house, steps away from the door of her husband's family, which was a daily reminder of my failure. My brother decided that a marriage in America would be the best way to push the tragedy and shame of it all away from the family."

"America must be where the cursed find a country," I said.

"I hope so." Spring Blossom looked down at her arms.

The sounds of the barracks trickled back. New arrivals listened while First Wife and Big Teeth passed on their wisdom. Thread whispered in and out of fabric. A child had arrived with one of the women. He was curled into the curve of his mother, who was crying softly.

"You are lucky to be a Fire Horse," Spring Blossom said.

A sharp laugh escaped. "No one has ever called me lucky before."

"I wish I had your strength."

I shook my head. "It is too destructive. Would you have the fierceness of your mother-in-law, only to scar people with it?"

She looked at her hands.

"Do you still love him?"

She nodded.

"How?" I said. My voice had a harsh note to it that made Spring Blossom press her lips together.

"You can love someone as many ways as water falls from the sky. Sometimes it falls with thunder and lightning; other times it falls silently. Sometimes it falls as cool snow, and other times hard balls of ice beat down. If you want the water, you don't get to choose how it falls."

"You don't get to choose?" I said.

"No," she said.

Two days later, the guard called my name. He led me to the administration building and through a winding series of hallways to a room where three men sat. One was older, with white hair, white skin, and a fleshy face. His lips peeked out from under a bushy mustache. The other was younger with dark hair and wire glasses framing serious eyes.

The third man was Chinese. He wore one of the suits that Sterling Promise admired. I tried to give him a smile, but he just stared. A woman sat in front of a small machine on a table, her fingers dancing across its buttons as we spoke.

"Sung Jade Moon," the Chinese man said. I nodded. "This is your interrogation to determine the status of your application for entry into America."

First the man with the mustache spoke in English, then the Chinese man echoed the question in my own language. Some English words were familiar, but I was grateful for the interpreter. When I spoke, he repeated what I said. He smoothed out the sharp notes of my Chinese, melting them into soft English.

But I didn't have to know the words to hear the suspicion in each question. "Did your father have brothers or sisters?"

"Yes, three brothers."

He raised an eyebrow. "No sisters. Don't you find that strange?"

Even when lying, being called a liar stings like a smack across the face. "I believe there were two children who died before they were two years old. Both girls."

"Your father is the oldest child, yes?"

I nodded.

"You need to speak your answers so we can record them," the Chinese man barked at me.

"Yes, he is the oldest."

"He claims to be born in America, yet he knows no English."

"He was sent back to our village to live with his aunt and uncle, to learn the language and traditions of our country. He didn't return here until he was a young man. I think he learned some English then, but when he came back to China, he forgot much of it."

"Yes, why was he in China for two years on his last visit?"

"I believe business kept him there."

My palms were moist, and my tongue tripped and stumbled over the lies I'd memorized.

"And why is he coming here now? With you and your brother?"

For this question, the truth would do as well as any practiced lie.

"My father does not share his reasons with me."

"You and your brother were born in China and lived with your uncle and his family there."

I nodded. The translator lifted his head and frowned. "Yes," I said. I could feel the Fire Horse rearing up inside me as I met his stare.

"How many times a year were letters received from your father?"

This was one of the extra questions that Sterling Promise had told me about. "Three," I said.

"Your father says that he wrote two letters each year. How do you explain that?"

"Some years, two. Other years, three," I snapped. I must have used the voice that Grandfather said made him deaf, because both the Americans jerked their heads up. I cursed the knot in my stomach.

It was not a very auspicious beginning. Over the next three days, they asked me enough questions to fill ten coaching books. Sometimes I knew the story. Sometimes I had to make up parts to fill holes the coaching book had left. I told myself it was just a story I was telling to Nushi or Spring Blossom, not one that would determine the rest of my life.

"How many streets does your village have?"

"How many houses are in your village?"

"How is the front room of the house furnished?"

"And your father, who are his business associates in America?"

"Did your family have servants in China? How many?"

"Where is the rice bin kept in your house?"

"Which direction does the door face?"

"Is there a clock?"

“Where is your father’s business in Chinatown?”

“Does he belong to any associations?”

I answered question after question until Uncle’s and the Sung’s stories spun in my head. Lying made me thirsty for the truth. I wanted to touch the edges of my face and arms. Was I still myself, or were the Americans crafting me into someone else? Someone they would prefer to have in their country, someone with a big family, whose grandfather helped build the American railroads. Someone with small dreams that could squeeze between what the Americans wanted. Dreams that wouldn’t cause a fuss. The answers I gave brought me one step closer to America, but they also pulled me away from myself.

By the last day, they had unraveled and examined every thread of the story I had woven for them. I was lost and trapped inside the story at the same time. I wanted my own story. Why didn’t they believe that if I had left my home and traveled over the ocean, I needed to be here? Why couldn’t I tell them how hard it was to live in China, how people broke off pieces of you to make you fit? Why didn’t they want to know what it was like being a Fire Horse, full of a strength and power that only destroyed everything I touched?

“Do you have anything further to add before the hearing comes to a close?”

I looked around the room at the Americans. They stared back, their expressions blank and bored.

Before I could stop myself, I said, “Yes.”

Everyone waited.

“What is it?” the translator said, pushing his chair back to leave.

I hesitated. “I . . . I want . . . Don’t you want to ask anything

about me? Why *I* came to America?" I regretted the words as soon as I spoke them.

The translator passed my question to the men in suits.

"We know why you are here," the man with the mustache said as he opened a folder and read from the papers inside. "Your father is using his merchant status to bring his children to America."

"That is not why I came to America," I said softly.

The translator did nothing with my words, letting them hang, meaningless, in the air. The woman began stacking papers. I was preparing to stand when the younger, dark-haired American spoke. I recognized the English word "why."

The translator glanced at him, and then turned to me. "Why did you come to America?" he said in Chinese.

The man with the mustache shook his head and said a few words, but the younger man waved his hand and leaned forward, waiting.

"People tell me that America is full of possibilities. A place where you can dream a life for yourself and it forms around you. That will never be true for me in China." I paused and looked at the younger man's kind eyes. "I came to America because I want a place where I don't have to hold everything in so tightly," I said. "A place I can breathe."

"A place where you belong," the younger man said after my words had been translated.

"Yes."

"It may not be the way you imagine."

"I know. The people here expect so much from your country. It cannot be everything." I wanted to tell him about the poetry on the walls of the men's barracks and the tears on the pillows in the

women's, but those weren't my stories to tell. "But what other place makes such promises?"

"True," the young official said. "I hope you find your place, Sung Jade Moon." He rose and nodded toward the door, so I stood and followed the guard back to the women's barracks.