



## CHAPTER 18

THE GUARD SHUT the door. Sterling Promise let a half smile waver on his lips. I crossed my arms and stared back.

His smile tightened as he crossed the room and sat down next to me. "This is for the best. You don't know how difficult it will be, what trying to survive in America will make you do."

"I guess it made you use the money Master Yue loaned you."

"What?"

"That's how you got in, isn't it? You bribed the official. I don't care. But I want you to find a way to get me in too."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"You don't understand —"

"Have you ever considered that it is *you* who doesn't understand?" My voice grew louder as I spoke. I had controlled my anger as much as I could for one day. "You, who know the way a person stands, the words they use, the things they want, the stories they love. How could you not see how much I need to escape China?"

And how could you not understand my curses? You know all about trying to escape curses.”

“Jade Moon, it is not me who is keeping you here. It is the Americans.”

“You are saying you can’t find a way to get me out of here. Like you did at the infirmary. Like you’ve found a way to get out of here yourself.”

“It would involve time and money.”

“So there are ways.”

“Of course, but —”

“But you won’t.”

The gentleness drained from his eyes, but his tone remained soft. “It isn’t practical. I am here to see to Master Yue’s business.”

“And I can be terribly inconvenient.”

“Yes, you can. I saw the way you interfered when you were at his house.”

“I brought bandages and water to children who had to work for a man who beat them, starved them.”

“You can’t control yourself. If you come to America, you will want to interfere again. It is too risky. Jade Moon . . .” He sighed.

“If you can just wait for a few years, I will have my fortune and my merchant papers. I will be respected and successful, and it will not be so impossible.”

“You know what is impossible? Fitting into the life I have in China,” I spat.

“You think that living in America is going to give you the freedom you long for,” he said, “that you will not have to kick at the walls of a prison anymore. Those walls may stretch and shrink, but they will always be there. You can never have the complete freedom

you imagine. So instead you will destroy yourself, trying to kick down one wall after another." He reached out to take my hands, but when his fingers brushed mine, I jerked away.

"Despite all that, Jade Moon, I will still marry you. That is what I have been trying to tell you. When I return to China in a year or two, we'll have the wedding ceremony and you can come to America with me then." I could see his face through my angry tears, and I wondered why I had ever let myself care. "You are so irresistibly stubborn," he chuckled. "I know you will give me no end of trouble, and I will spend half my life making up for your blunders, but I can't help that I love you."

His words cleared the tears in my eyes, but I had to breathe deeper into the hollow space they left in my chest.

"Marrying me would be too great a burden," I said. "Just get me across to America now. Then you will never have to see me again."

"What . . . Why would I do that?" he said.

"Because you know it is what I want. You know because it is the same new beginning that you are seeking."

Creases rippled across his brow. "You don't want to marry me? But I thought . . ."

"I won't have my father's lands. He considers me dead," I said. "Which releases you from your promise to him."

There was a flicker of surprise in his eyes, but his forehead smoothed again and he said, "Is that all?" He brushed a tear from my cheek. "It doesn't matter. I didn't want to be a farmer. You can wait for me in Hong Kong."

My father was right. Sterling Promise would let me rot here.

"So you will not help me find a way to get to America," I said, needing to hear it from him.

"No," he said. "But what does that matter? We will be like Cowherd and Weaver Girl. Separated except for once a year. That will be our love story." He lifted my hand and pressed it between his.

"Except you will be the only one in heaven," I snapped, jerking my hand away. I took another deep breath. "I know what you think of me. You are right that when people look at me, they see a wild woman, too sharp, with a touch of the ridiculous. You may think you love me now, but that will end, tomorrow or the next day, whenever the winds of fortunes change. I can already hear the resentment creeping into your voice."

I lifted my head. I wanted to hurt him, not with the wild bucking of a Fire Horse, but with a calculated cruelty, meant to push him as far away as I could. Far enough that he could not hurt me again. "But do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a shadow of a person, who shifts and changes to suit whoever he is standing in front of. If I am too much, you are too little — a kite without a string, a lantern without its own light. You are nothing but smoke and shadows. I would never marry such a man."

Sterling Promise swallowed. "That is what you think of me," he said. He bowed his head. "It would be difficult to have such a husband. The wife of such a man would be greatly burdened."

"Some might say cursed," I said.

A guard entered.

I stood. "Go to America. Make your fortune. You don't have to compromise this time. You can find a love that is more convenient."

Sterling Promise looked away. We did not say good-bye.

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I cried through my first evening on Angel Island, and I cried through my last. The women moved in wide circles around me. They weren't sure what had happened, but loss and devastation seeped from my pores, and it was too risky to be close to someone so unlucky.

Big Teeth put her heavy hand gently on mine. Her skin was as rough as a worker's in our fields and covered in the same dark patches. She read the pain in my face, and, after a moment, patted my hand and left to sit with the other women. Only Spring Blossom sat patiently by me while the tears ran like rivers down my cheeks. Soft, sad tears for my crushed heart. Angry tears that burned. Bitter tears that I could not live in America. Tears that I would not survive in China. Tears because I might love Sterling Promise; tears because part of me hated him. Tears because I had finally held love in my hand, only to discover how hollow it was. All the tears I had swallowed on this island spilled out of me this one night.

After letting me empty my eyes, Spring Blossom asked, "What happened, Jade Moon? You are going back to China?"

I shook my head.

"You are allowed to land?"

I shook my head.

"You can appeal."

"And stay here another six months? Another year? Until every drop of hope is squeezed from me?" I glanced at the women's bathroom and shivered. "I can't let that happen. My father has to return, but Sterling Promise is allowed to land."

Spring Blossom nodded. "I have heard of that. Families separated."

"He bribed the official." I shook my head again. "Nothing is the way it should be."

"So Sterling Promise is breaking his engagement to you?"

"No, he will marry me. But he refuses to help me enter America." My laugh bit the air. "He does not love me after all." I paused. "Or if he does, he does not love me enough."

"Jade Moon, you are going to have to explain what happened."

I told Spring Blossom about the meeting. I told her about Father, how he had planned to fail the entire interrogation and take us all back to China. I told her about Sterling Promise, who agreed to marry me, but only if I would return to China, where he would visit when he could.

"He said we would live like Cowherd and Weaver Girl."

"Is that what you want?" Spring Blossom asked.

"It doesn't matter what I want. Everyone uses me to get what *they* want."

"It may not matter to them, but it matters to others. It matters to me. It matters to Nushi. Are you going to base your life on the fact that people care about you, or the fact that they don't?" Spring Blossom said. "Both are always true."

"Do you think Sterling Promise cares?" I did not want the words to come out, but they did.

Spring Blossom thought for a moment. "He loves you in the best way he can, but he thinks he can bargain down the cost of your love. If that is enough, then marry him."

I paused, trying to calm my tears. "I want love to be offered with an open palm. But I've never seen love like that before."

"Except in stories. And there is a magic to believing in something you have never seen." She held her hand out to me, and I laid

mine in hers. "Now, what will you do?" she asked in her steady voice.

My shoulders slumped again. "I don't know. I am only good at slamming my fists and making people's heads hurt." I looked at Spring Blossom. "I am just a Fire Horse."

She squeezed my hand. "Did you know that there is another ending to the Weaver Girl story?"

"I am sick of love stories."

"This one isn't a love story." Spring Blossom smiled. "In this story, Cowherd and Weaver Girl are not in love. He tricked her into marrying him, just like in the other story, but in this one she never forgave him for it."

"That sounds familiar," I said.

"He kept her magic robe so she could not return to heaven. Weaver Girl constantly plotted how she would get home. Every day, sometimes three or four times a day, she asked her husband, 'Where is my magic robe?' But he refused to tell her.

"One day, the faithful ox who helped Cowherd trick Weaver Girl grew ill. Before he died, he gave his master one last piece of wisdom. 'When I am dead, cut off a piece of my skin and fill it with sand. Then take the ring from my nose and slide it over the hole where you put the sand. Carry it with you at all times. One day, when you are in trouble, you will need it.'"

I leaned forward. This was not Nushi's story.

"A few years went by. Cowherd carried the ox skin with him everywhere. Weaver Girl continued to badger her husband to find out where he hid her robe. She asked him every day, even waking him up when the skies were dark and the rest of the world was asleep."

"She is persistent," I said, sniffing.

"Yes, and it worked. The constant questioning exhausted Cowherd. One night, as he was slipping into sleep, Weaver Girl whispered the question in his ear. She could not believe it when he mumbled the hiding place half to himself. Before he even realized what he had done, Weaver Girl jumped from the bed, snatched her robe from its hiding place, leapt onto a cloud, and flew away back to heaven where she belonged.

"Cowherd, cursing his weakness, chased after her. He flew up to heaven with the help of the magic ox hide. Weaver Girl saw her husband following her, the man who had kept her out of heaven for so long, and she took a hairpin from her hair and drew a river in the sky to cut off his pursuit. Cowherd used the sand in his bag to create a bank to cross over. When Weaver Girl drew another river, he could not go farther because the bag was empty. He flung the ox ring at her. She hurled her weaving shuttle at him."

"I like this Weaver Girl," I said. "I wonder why Nushi never told me this version of the story."

"The Emperor of the Sky heard all the commotion, so he sent a messenger to make peace. Now the couple stands on opposite sides of a river of stars."

"Do they still meet once a year?"

"Of course, because they are married. But here is what is important — Weaver Girl got to heaven on her own, even though Cowherd tried to stop her."

"That's right." I let this new story settle in my head. "I don't know. I don't have a magic robe."

"Ah . . . perhaps it is just hidden."



“Nushi said once that desperate people are dangerous.” I looked across the room at the group of women keeping their distance. “I wonder who brings more bad luck — an orphan or a desperate Fire Horse.”

Spring Blossom smiled. “I wonder.”

I spent the first half of the night dissecting every word Sterling Promise had let drop from his lips. I turned them this way and that in my mind, looking for the love I had imagined. The scent of it, the flavor was there, but nothing else.

Then I decided, if there was nothing to hold on to, there was nothing to lose. I spent the rest of the night building in my mind the steps I would have to climb. With each I became more terrified at my own daring, but there they were, laid out for me. And, if I was lucky, they would take me all the way to America.