



CHAPTER 19

FIRE HORSES AREN'T DESIGNED to bend rules. They're designed to break them.

The next morning, I stared through the crisscrossed metal of the window to where the ferry pulled into the dock. It melted through the fog, more like a dream than metal and wood. What would happen to me? Would I end up on the floor of some shop making fireworks, or living in a slum crowded with sickness and death? How many tricky grocers were on the streets of America, waiting to have me arrested?

Before the guard called us to breakfast, I went over the plan with Spring Blossom.

"It is risky," she said.

"Maybe impossible," I replied.

"You could lose everything."

"Luckily, my 'everything' doesn't amount to much," I said. "Ah, but it does include one thing." I lifted the wedding handkerchief from under my pillow. "This is for you."

"I can't."

"You must. There is no wedding for me, so you should have it for yours. Otherwise I will just have to leave it here." She took it from my hand and held it to her heart. "Don't worry. I will be fine."

She nodded, and her thin arms wrapped around me, squeezing me with surprising strength. Then she turned and fell in line with the other women on their way to breakfast.

Sterling Promise had taught me how to get to the hospital, something he would soon regret. I lay down in my bunk and held my stomach. When the guard leaned over my bed, I murmured weakly, "Sick," hoping that my English would help me as it had Sterling Promise.

A wave of surprise crossed the guard's face, then he nodded and left me behind in the barracks. I was hoping he would trust me enough to leave the door open, but he did not. Language only goes so far. When he returned, he walked me to the hospital, where a different nurse with the same wide smile sat at the desk.

"Sick," I repeated.

Her face lit up with pleased surprise, then softened with concern. She rattled off some words, but most went beyond my vocabulary. I shook my head.

"New," she said, pointing to herself. "No Chinese."

I nodded.

"Fe-ver?" She touched her hand to her forehead. It was a word I didn't recognize. "Pain?" She wrinkled her forehead and made a hurt look.

I put my hand over my stomach. "Here."

"Good, good." She seemed thrilled with the whole exchange. "Bay-bi?" she asked, cradling her arms in each other and rocking them back and forth.

I looked at her a moment, trying to decipher her actions. "Oh, baby! No. No," I said, eyes wide.

"Okay." She sat me in a chair against the wall. "Medicine," she said.

I nodded.

Now, I just had to ask for the right thing at the right time. I sat still and stared forward. I could not leave too soon . . . or too late.

The woman moved to a cabinet and rummaged around the bottles and boxes. After a minute, a man came in, the one in the white coat. "Doctor," the Americans called him. He held out his hand and said something to her. The nurse returned to the desk, shuffled some papers, and handed him a stack. He shook his head. She flipped through the papers and handed him a different stack.

I sat up a little.

The man pointed to four men coming up the path to the hospital, followed by a guard. The nurse nodded and dug through a drawer. The doctor fired a few more words at the nurse, then stomped past the desk to one of the rooms. The nurse frowned, staring after him.

I shifted, and my chair squeaked. She looked up and hurried back to the cabinet. When she found the medicine, she brought it over and I drank it immediately. "Thank you," I said, mimicking her sympathetic smile.

The doctor poked his head out of the doorway and yelled something. The four men from the path came in the front door and

gathered around the desk. The next few minutes were a rush of broken English and frustrated Chinese. The nurse handed out a set of papers, then took them back and gave the men different ones. After a few more minutes, their guard waved to the nurse, turned around, and walked down the path. The men continued to speak all at once and in rapid Chinese to the nurse, who just shook her head.

I stood, hoping this was the right time. When the guard was far enough down the path, I pushed myself back in front of the nurse. "Better," I said, smiling. "I go with guard?"

"Oh, yes," the nurse said. She waved her hand at the door, then went back to dealing with the men. I took a breath and walked out the door of the hospital without a guard, just as Sterling Promise had taught me.

Once on the path, I had to focus. I listened for the chatter of the women returning from breakfast or the rumble of men's voices going there. I wished that I had paid more attention to the dictated rhythm of our movements. I could see shadows in the front windows of the women's barracks. They were gathering their sewing for the day.

I searched the windows of the men's barracks. With the bright sun, everything inside was buried in shadow. I walked slowly toward the covered porch, trying to copy the easy comfort I had seen Sterling Promise use. A part of me wanted to take the door that led to the women's barracks, lie down on my bed, and still my rushing heart. I toyed with the thought, enjoying its predictability, before brushing it aside. I put my hand on the door that Sterling Promise had taken me through, then listened and turned the handle.

It was open, just like last time. I slipped in, shutting the door behind me. I took two hesitant steps before I heard voices — deep,

low voices, speaking Chinese. The men had not left for breakfast yet. My heart plunged into my stomach. Leave or hide? I cursed myself for not taking more time in the hospital. I cursed the men for being so slow. What were they still doing here?

“Out! Out!” a voice boomed from down the hall. I could open the door and go back to the porch, but where would I hide there? A guard would take me back to the women’s side and lock me in. And even if I managed to conceal myself on the porch, they might lock the door behind the men. I had to stay inside.

Gathering my courage, I dashed into the small room across from the door — the room with the poems that Sterling Promise showed me. I pushed myself into the corner on the same wall as the door and held my breath. The men’s voices drew closer and closer. I could hear the men passing the doorway, their shoulders brushing against its frame. I squeezed my eyes shut.

A voice I recognized drifted into the room. “They gave me my papers last night. Finally, I can begin my life in America. There is nothing keeping me here.” The seeds of tears stung my eyes a little, but I smothered my hurt in anger, then wrapped it in desperation, so buried I could not reach it.

The line of men seemed to pass for hours. Then the voices faded, and no new ones took their place. I started toward the door of the room. The sleeve of a green uniform came into view — the guard. I gasped and jumped back to my corner. The footsteps stopped just past the doorway. I waited and waited, sure that his face would peer through the frame.

When the door snapped shut, I exhaled. Then I heard the click of the lock. I was stuck in the barracks until the men returned.

I was going to be caught. I was going to be sent back to China. Why was I so unlucky? I slid down the wall and put my head in my hands. What made me think I could get to America? I could not even get out of the building.

I sat in that room of broken dreams, my own crumbling around me. But something about the poems brought me solace. I was not the first to have my hopes crushed, and I would not be the last. I lifted my head and ran my fingers over the grooves made by the characters on the wall. On the women's side, there was not a room big enough to hold all of our hurt and disappointment. It is a good thing we women learned to swallow our sorrows. They would have spilled out into the world and drowned us all. I breathed in the hope of the people who had been in that room — people who had come to America with the same plans and illusions that I had, some of whom had gotten to land in Gold Mountain, some who had been sent home.

I took another deep breath. At least I knew the men were gone. I needed to get what I came for and find a way out. It was risky. I had not seen any of the men's barracks except this room. I did not know where their beds were or if they left a guard behind. After a few seconds, I forced myself forward and through the doorway.

A long hallway ran outside the door. I followed it until it opened into a sleeping quarters longer than the women's quarters and crowded with more beds. The whole place had the strong, sharp odor of men. The walls were dingy. It wasn't messy; it was temporary, less settled than the women's quarters. I scanned the room for Sterling Promise's bed. Clothes hung on lines stretched from the rafters of the ceiling and between the bars of the beds, but nothing

looked familiar. I crept down one row, searching the shoes and clothes. One man's belongings blended into another's. Just as I was beginning to despair, I came to a bed that was free of clotheslines, with a bundle sitting in its center, an American hat next to it. Sterling Promise was leaving today. His things would be packed.

This has to be it, I thought. I pulled at the corners of the bundle with trembling fingers. When it fell open, I saw papers — one with Sterling Promise's picture on it. I knew I had found what I needed.

Then I felt the hairs lift on the back of my neck. A shadow fell across me. I combed through my brain, searching for a logical reason that I was there in the men's barracks, rooting through Sterling Promise's things. There was none. I turned, ready to meet the scowl of a guard.