



## CHAPTER 20

THE EYES BURNED, and the mouth was drawn tight. But it was not a guard.

“Father,” I said.

We stared at each other, neither of us moving or speaking. I *had* grown taller than him since we left China.

“I can explain.” I held my hands out to him, pleading. They shook.

His eyes shifted. Now he was staring through me. “I must be seeing ghosts.” He turned his back to me.

He was not raising the alarm. He did not want to know what I was doing there. He was just going to ignore me.

Father lay down on the bunk below Sterling Promise’s. He was so thin. His clothes swallowed him. I knelt beside him. “Are you feeling well?”

Silence.

“You won’t tell anyone I was here, Father?”

Silence. It stung, but it was an old wound, so the pain was dull.

“I can’t go back to China.”

He turned away from me.

“I am sorry. For everything. But I have to do this.”

He lay there, his face to the wall, motionless.

“I know you are ashamed of me. I am ashamed of myself right now. I wish for once you would try to understand.”

He did not reply.

I stood up. I was truly dead to him. More tears stung, but this was no time for crying. I wanted to talk to him, convince him that I could not return to China, demand that he look at me. I wanted to shout until he did. But I didn't need another battle.

I returned to searching Sterling Promise's bag through blurry eyes. I looked at the papers, foreign letters creating foreign words, full of stamps and signatures. I did not know which papers I needed, so I took all of them. I knew that I was destroying his dream for my own. It was selfish, unfair, and everything I had accused him of doing to me. It was also the only way.

I needed just one more thing from Sterling Promise. I dug deeper into the bundle. My hands touched something soft. I pulled it out — pants, the kind the Americans wore and, folded neatly below them, a jacket and shirt. It was Sterling Promise's suit, the one Uncle had given him. The one he had brought all the way from Hong Kong to wear in America. I rummaged for something else to wear but found nothing. I sighed. I would have to harden my heart. Father still faced the wall. I pulled on the pants and shirt, fumbled with the buttons, and slid my arms into the sleeves of the jacket. I looked around for a place to hide my clothes. There was only Sterling Promise's bag, so I buried them in the bottom and retied his bundle. The sleeves of the jacket hung to the middle of

my hands. The extra length on the pants pooled onto the top of my slippers, but not by much. I tucked the papers into the waist of the pants, took his hat, and stepped back from the bed.

“Good-bye, Father.”

“At least I do not have to feel shame for such a daughter,” he said. I pulled the thin gray blanket of the barracks over his shoulders. “Or perhaps it is you who are ashamed of me.”

“Father, we are all doing what we must to keep ourselves as whole as possible.”

“Ah, you are hoping to find freedom for yourself. I should have known. Did you ever imagine that the walls you are so determined to destroy might be protecting you from even greater dangers?”

I could not think of that now. I had the papers. They were a heavy burden. For the first time it occurred to me that it might not have been easy for Sterling Promise to steal my dreams either.

I slipped into the bathroom. Spring Blossom’s scissors hung on a piece of thread around my neck, next to Nushi’s pouch, which held both my jade and the scrap of paper with Mrs. Ying’s address. I hacked at my thick braid of dark hair. When it fell into my hand, I tucked the clump of hair in the pants pocket and pulled Sterling Promise’s hat over my uneven locks. We all looked rough after months on this island.

I went back to the front door of the barracks and tried the handle. It did not move. I heard the jingle of keys. I froze, my stomach twisting. As the knob turned, I darted back into the poetry room and called on the people who had left the carvings there to protect me. I heard the door swing open.

The guard's footsteps clicked halfway down the hall. The door to the barracks was unlocked. If I could only see what direction the guard was looking, I would know if I could escape or not.

"Sung," he called. He must be looking for Father. A pair of feet shuffled from the barracks.

"Hospital," the guard said.

He led Father down the hall, past the room that I was in. They went through the door. I waited. There was no click. *They lock people in, not out*, I reminded myself.

I left the men's barracks and flew past the dining hall, toward the administration building. If someone just glanced at me from a distance, I could be a translator in my American suit. Only my uneven hair and panicked expression gave me away.

Finally, I reached the long pathway that led from the administration building to the ferry. The ferry still sat at the dock, and I watched the new immigrants walk down the long ramp toward the island. Guards buzzed around the dock, separating the arrivals. The men were being hustled down the path to the hospital. Two women, clutching small bags and clinging to each other, continued along the pathway toward me.

I could hear the boots of a guard pounding behind me. "You. Not here," he said in broken Chinese.

I put my hand at my waist and pulled out my papers, ready to show them to the guard. But when I summoned the courage to look up, he was headed toward the two women, who answered him with confused faces. He gestured with his hands for them to go into the administration building. They looked at each other.

"We must," one said.

The other woman nodded. I still had the papers in my hand. In his picture, Sterling Promise stared straight at the camera. His mouth was flat and serious, but he could not keep the smile from his eyes. I pulled my hat low and hardened my expression.

The guard caught sight of me. He marched over, jerked the papers from my hand, and glanced at them. My heart sank as my legs tensed. I would run to the ship if I had to. I would jump in the ocean and swim to America.

“Dock,” the guard said, pointing down the path. “Boat.”

I nodded. I flew along the line of boards that led to the ferry. My blood was hot and pounding. I was steps away from the boat.

“Stop!” I picked up my pace. It was the guard’s voice. “Stop!” I walked faster. I might still be able to get lost among the passengers and crew.

I jerked back as a hand grabbed my shoulder. The guard spun me around.

“Your papers.” He held the papers so close to my face that they sent back my breath. Sterling Promise’s picture stared at me. I took them in my hand. As soon as I had, the guard turned and stomped back down the dock.

I handed my papers to the guard on the boat, who hurried me on with impatient American words. My legs wobbled under me. I had to sit. I thought I might faint. The boat’s horn vibrated through the thick air. The deck was not as crowded as before — five or six groups of men, some Chinese, some American.

The wind carried voices, men’s voices. The commotion grew until some men rounded the corner of the administration building.

Two guards were holding back a crowd of Chinese men. Two more guards ran from the path that led to the barracks. More poured from the administration building.

Still the group of Chinese men swarmed toward the dock. My chest burned, and I could barely swallow. This was it. They would drag me off the boat. The man leading the crowd was Sterling Promise.

"My papers were stolen," he shouted to a guard, whose face was washed with anger.

"Yes, my papers were stolen too," the other men echoed.

"There is a thief in the barracks!" Sterling Promise said.

"Yes, a thief, a thief!" The men kept repeating the complaints that Sterling Promise was making. There were at least twenty, maybe twenty-five of them echoing his pleas. They looked hopeful, waiting to see what trick he was trying to pull. Maybe the trick could work for them too.

Sterling Promise's mouth was drawn tight. The guards pushed the men back, yelling at them, their faces filled with frustrated confusion. I moved behind the line of men that had formed on the deck, ducking down slightly to peer between the brim of my hat and the shoulder of the man in front of me.

A guard waved his hand at the boat. One of the Americans on the ferry shouted something to another American in uniform, and the boat began to pull away from the dock.

Sterling Promise stopped and grabbed the arm of one of the guards. He shook the bundle from his bunk and pointed to the ship. Now that the boat had pulled away, the other men onshore lost hope that they could talk their way onto it and began to drift back toward the buildings. The guard jerked his arm away from Sterling Promise

and pointed to the barracks. Sterling Promise shook his head and continued to dig in his bag. I had never seen him so angry. I had finally knocked off the polish that coated his actions. It did not feel as good as I imagined it would.

The guards grabbed Sterling Promise and started to drag him down the path. Suddenly, he stopped fighting them. When his arm fell to his side, it was clutching the clothes I had left in his bag. Maybe now he understood.