

## CHAPTER 21

THE BOAT PULSED FORWARD in uneven jerks, swaying and pitching as I gripped its side, staring into the misty air. Bells clanked blindly in the fog. Wind whipped the water. Drops of cold cut into my cheeks. I had done it. I was going to America.

A pattern of rooftops climbed through the mist. I pulled the clump of hair from my pocket and dropped it into the water, watching the dark strands scatter. Maybe some would make their way back to China — tiny travelers like the dandelion seeds that I used to send on journeys with my breath.

The fog drifted past us and broke apart on the land, its ghosts wafting onto the shore. The shoreline sharpened, became more real. As we got closer, I could see people scurrying around the docks. Chinese men in their American suits and a few pale-faces waited. Cars and carts eased themselves through the chaos. I did not want to blink for fear that I would lose sight of America and never find it again, like when you try to hang on to a beautiful dream. This would be the place, a place of possibilities, a place where I could look into people's eyes.

Blurred shadows anchored the boat to the dock and disappeared

into the fog. I could hear yelling from the shore, but the strong winds carried the shouts away before I could understand them. I followed the other passengers to the plank that poured us onto the dock. A line of guards was letting people off one by one.

“What are they doing?” I asked the man next to me, dropping my voice and trying to smooth the stutter of nervousness from it.

“Checking our papers,” the man said.

“Probably trying to cheat us,” another man mumbled.

“Or they think one of us did steal papers,” a third man said.

My throat tightened as I gripped Sterling Promise’s papers. I peered around hats and heads, stretching my neck to see what exactly the guards were doing, but the wall of men blinded me. I had never been in such a crowd of men — their low voices, their earthy smells, their rough movements. Bodies pressed against me, pushing me toward more bodies, the corners of suitcases knocking against my legs. The itch to run flared in the soles of my feet.

A layer of the crowd shifted. I could see two guards in the familiar uniforms carefully examining the men’s faces and documents before stepping aside to let people pass onto the dock. Would they read the tale of what I had done in the worried lines on my brow? They would not even need to do that. They could read it in the papers in my hand with Sterling Promise’s picture on them. With fewer than five men in front of me, I had to think of something.

“They *are* trying to cheat us,” I said to the closest men. They turned to look at me, listening. For a second, surprise stopped me, since I was just a worthless girl. But the wrappings Spring Blossom had helped tie around my chest cut into my skin, reminding me that they saw a young man standing before them. “We have followed their rules. We

tolerated their prison." My voice grew in strength. "We should not have to show these foreign devils our papers." I whirled around to face the man who had been complaining earlier. "You agree with me. Cheaters and thieves! All of them." My voice was loud enough now to attract the attention of the guards and a few people on the dock.

The men did not hush me. They did not laugh or taunt me. A boldness swelled inside me. Then, in the silence, their faces turned to stone. And I realized that dressing as a man did not make as much difference as I thought.

"I am proud to show my papers to the Americans," the complaining man announced, looking around nervously. "I have nothing to hide." And with that he pushed past the three men left in front of me, holding out his papers.

"Don't start trouble," the man behind me snarled. "If they take us all back to that prison, you will be sorry."

The rest stayed dangerously silent, scowls on their faces. Their anger was different from the anger of women — quieter, thicker, darker. As a woman, people had insisted I stay silent. These men dared me to speak again. One man now stood between me and the guard. My lungs took shallow, quick gulps of air. I looked around for an escape, but there was only the guard and man in front of me, the men behind me, and Sterling Promise's papers in my hand.

I spotted two Chinese men staring at me from the dock. One — shorter, older — leaned against one of the poles with the slack rope wrapped around it. The other, tall and closer to my age, stood next to him, black hair stuffed under a cap and hands deep in his pockets. He held my gaze. His face was friendly. It was the only face that matched the welcome that I hoped I would have in America.

The older man shouted at me, "The devil is after you. You better

run, Little Brother.” He turned to laugh with the younger one, who only nodded slowly.

I was out of ideas, so I took that one. I exploded past the guard’s shoulder, slipping through hands that struggled for my arm. Shouts followed, words I did not understand, and they only made me run faster. I ran blindly, pushing past blurs of people through unfamiliar streets, turning down every path, twisting my way free of the hollers and footsteps behind me. Someone pulled at my jacket. I stumbled back for a moment, then shot forward again, through a crowd of people in front of a building, down one street, then onto another.

The wooden buildings by the waterfront grew into taller brick buildings. The odor of fish faded and the wind softened. My legs ached, but I could feel my old life at my heels. I kept running up roads that bent sharply to the sky, only to peak and dive back down. I slowed my steps, the fear draining from me. Panting, I sucked in the chill from the air.

That is when I realized how lost I was.

Stores with big square windows filled with signs I couldn’t read lined either side of the street for a block. In one shop, narrow links of sausage hung from hooks behind the glass. Waxy wheels of white and yellow sat below them, with slices cut out revealing their creamy insides. Another shop, its windows filled with bags of dark beans, smelled of earth and spices, a rich smell. Everything was wonderful . . . and terrifyingly unfamiliar. If I looked at too much, I got a dizzy feeling, like I would drown in the strangeness of it all.

A pale-faced woman hummed as she swept her front steps with a broom, clouds of dust swirling at her skirts, her face relaxed into faraway thoughts. I watched her for a few moments, wondering how I could show her the paper with Mrs. Ying’s address. The

English words it would require struggled to arrange themselves inside my head: *Hello, I find friend. You help?* I pulled out Nushi's pouch and took one hesitant step, then another.

When I got close to her, the woman stopped and stared at me. She placed one hand on her hip; the other still held the broom. Her mouth dipped into a frown. I quickened my steps, passing her, but I could still feel the heat of her suspicion pressing against my back, pushing me on my way.

Two doors down, a pale-faced boy about my age walked toward me, his chin and chest forward. He shook his fist in the air and started yelling at me. I did not know the words, but I understood the warning. Two more boys followed him — more pale-faces, more foreign words. My mind struggled to find something to say. I looked around for help, but the woman with the broom was nodding along with them. When I moved to run, one of the boys slid in front of me. Another blocked my next step. I froze, looking from one boy to another, watching them fill the space around me while my heart pounded against my chest.

One stuck his nose close to mine. I stumbled back into another of the boys, who pushed me forward. I caught myself before my chest flew into the boy in front of me. Then two more pale hands shoved me. Blood flooded my face, making it red and hot with rage.

"Stop it!" I shouted.

The boys laughed a low, sinister laugh. Then one said a few words, mimicking my Chinese, stretching his eyes into thin slits with his fingers.

I had escaped guards, my family, and an island of fog and tears. I was in America, as far from China as I could go, disguised, distant from my past and myself, and yet I was still ridiculed. The smirks of Auntie Wu and the frowns of my grandfather had followed me.

Saliva gathered in my mouth and I had to concentrate to keep from spitting it in the boy's face. I could not believe that this was America. It had to be the place I imagined, because I had nothing else.

As the boys caught the scent of anger welling up inside me, their fingers curled into fists. They stopped yelling and an eerie silence settled over us. Then I saw one of their arms twitch. I stood my ground, preparing myself. I had never fought with my fists before, and that made a small part of me a little scared. The rest of me was ready.

A hand grabbed my arm. I tried to snap it away, but I was yanked backward through the small circle. Someone else stepped behind me to allow my passage. *Two more*, I thought, and set my teeth and jerked my arm from the grasp. Surprise and then fear replaced my rage when I saw the young Chinese man from the docks.

"I'm not going back," I said.

"Run!" he said.

I took one step, but one of the pale-faced boys now gripped the top of my arm, and he was leaning back, holding me there.

The younger Chinese man called to the older one, "Do something."

"The police are coming," the other yelled. "Leave him here."

Fear shot through me. I gave my arm another jerk.

"I'm not leaving," the young man announced.

"The police are a block away, Harry. I'm not telling your father that I let you get arrested."

"The police!" I shouted. "They are coming for me?"

"Fool," the older one growled. "The police aren't interested in you." He glared at the cluster of boys in front of him. "I told you we should not follow him," he said, then calmly pulled out a gun and shot it in the air. I started to run.