



CHAPTER 22

WHEN I LOOKED over my shoulder, my pale-faced attackers were chasing us with lazy strides, waving their fists. The young Chinese man called Harry ran beside me, calling out, “Chin, let’s go. No more fighting with the Italians today.”

They led me on a twisted path through roads and alleys. Buildings loomed over us as we ran through their shadows. On a deserted street, Harry slowed down and looked around before taking the gun from Chin and dropping it down a sewer grate.

“That was a waste,” Chin grumbled.

“You know Father will replace it,” Harry said.

Chin’s face just darkened.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Neither one answered. Then, as we continued to walk, the smells that I had run to the edge of the world to escape found me. It was the raw, thick odor of freshly skinned meat that I detected first — heavier than it had ever been in our kitchen, but still familiar. Behind that was the smell of onions piled in straw baskets. Then

the clean scent of parsley wove its way between the two. Soon, fragments of Chinese conversation drifted in the air. When the final alley opened onto a busy street, I saw clusters of Chinese people peering into stalls framed with baskets of colorful fruit. Red lanterns dangled in front of stores, and Chinese characters painted boldly on windows announced laundries and groceries. Ducks hung from their necks in the windows while live chickens pecked at the floor in cages below. Merchants in white aprons covered with remnants of the day's chores leaned against door frames. My skin blended with the shades of others'.

"This is America?" I said.

A smile broke across the younger man's face. "This is Chinatown. I'm Harry Hon."

"Harry?"

His smile brightened. "An American name. This is Chin."

There was silence.

"Oh . . . yes . . . of course," I stammered. I opened my mouth to give my name and then realized that I didn't have one. I could not use my real name, not until I found Mrs. Ying. I could not use Sterling Promise's name either, not if the immigration guards knew what I had done. My mind was heavy with the lies I had told, so I named myself with the only bit of truth I could find. "My name is Sung Fo Ma."

"Sung Fire Horse," Chin repeated. "You owe me a gun."

"Chin, leave him alone. He just got here," Harry said.

"I bet all of your family is back in China thanking their ancestors that you are far away." He moved to block my path. "Let me guess. They probably sent you straight from the farm. What does

your farm grow?" I opened my mouth to respond, but he continued, "I know: poverty. Terrace after terrace of poverty. You are here to make money. Send it back like a good son."

I just stared at him. I did not know how to explain why I was here.

"You weren't two steps off the boat before you needed us. You see what it is like. You can't survive on your own," Chin said.

"He is trying to ask if you have a place to stay," Harry said, his voice free of the hard tones of Chin's.

"Or money?" Chin said. "You do know you'll need money?" An ugliness controlled his face that did not come from his features; it came from the expressions they settled into — the meanness in his eyes, the tension in his jaw, the snarl below the surface of his lips.

I pulled the slip of paper with Mrs. Ying's address from the pouch around my neck and handed it to Harry. "My friends, the Yings — I am staying with them. Mr. Ying owns a laundry."

"I can take you somewhere better," Chin said. "You would have a place to stay along with money, respect."

"Working for you?" I asked.

"Working for the tong."

"The tong? You want me to join an association? What kind of association?"

"One that provides protection. We're all like you. Sent here with nothing."

I shook my head.

"You need the tong. You've been through Angel Island. You know the Americans won't help you. They wish we would all go back to China. The police don't care what happens to us. In the tong, you would have brothers to keep you out of trouble. Watch your back."

I was familiar with trouble, and it was staring me in the face.
"No, thanks."

"Then I guess we helped you for nothing," Chin said. Harry held the paper out to me. Chin shrugged. "I'm sure you know exactly where this address is."

"Wait." I looked at Harry. "I don't have the slightest idea," I admitted.

Chin snatched Mrs. Ying's address from Harry. A grin crept over his lips as he studied it. "Harry can take you." He swung his arm over Harry's shoulder and said something in his ear. They muttered back and forth until Harry looked at the ground.

Chin looked at me. "I was just telling Harry to be extra careful. It's getting dark, and the streets can be dangerous. See you around, Fire Horse."

Harry was already walking the other direction. He was silent, so I kept my thoughts in my head as long as I could, imagining what Mrs. Ying's home would be like and how I would tell her what I had done to get here. "Have you ever eaten Jell-O?" I asked.

Harry shook his head, but didn't look up.

"Mrs. Ying told me about it. It is American food. It is supposed to be sweet and slippery."

Harry's only answer was the slow shuffle of his long strides. Eventually he turned out of the series of alleys we had followed to stop in front of an abandoned building. Boards crisscrossed over each other, blocking the door. A thick layer of gray grime and dust coated the windows, but not enough to hide the empty room behind them. White paint flaked from the glass, but I could still see the Chinese characters. They spelled YING LAUNDRY down the side in giant letters.

"I guess your friends left," Harry said flatly.

I pressed my hand to the window. My head twisted and spun with emotions. "She gave me this address less than four months ago. Where would they go? Why wouldn't she write to me?"

Harry kicked at a rock. My father must have been right. I had been just a bother to her. "What am I supposed to do?" I said to the empty room behind the filthy window. Father was right again; this love of America *could* destroy me. Why did I think I could escape my curse here?

Harry shrugged. "Chin wants you to stay with him. He has a house with some other guys."

Heat swelled in my face. "I can't." I was dressed in Sterling Promise's suit, but I knew the secret it hid.

"Why not? Where else do you have to go?"

I shook my head, struggling to hold an ocean of tears inside.

"Chin isn't so bad."

"I can't!" I yelled.

Harry took a step back. I was losing my balance, emotions pushing up from the depths. Everything I planned had turned to dust between my fingers.

"Chin's right. You are going to need people here. A family."

I pressed my hands to my face and tipped my forehead to lean against the glass. "You don't have any idea what I need," I said. I could hear Harry's feet scrape against the pavement, but he did not walk away. I dropped my hands, my face burning. "Leave!" I shouted, spinning to face him.

He froze. I took a step toward him, fists by my side.

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it. It wasn't his fault. I

knew that. But all the fight I had boiled to the surface with my fear and despair. I took another step forward, and he backed into the alley and disappeared.

I peered again into the window of the laundry, searching. There were a few lines of dust along the wall, an abandoned cloth in the corner. I turned, slid down the wall, and put my head in my hands. The bitterness of it all swelled under my wrappings. I was hopelessly lost, a fugitive, friendless, alone. More alone than I had been as a Fire Horse and outcast of the village. More alone than living with Father and Grandfather. If Sterling Promise could see me now, he would have his revenge.

Cold crawled from the bricks that I leaned against, through the suit I wore, and below my skin. My stomach was knotted so tight that I could not breathe. Even with all my anger and fear, I couldn't ignore the realization swelling inside of me — *I had done this*. I had ignored the warnings about how difficult it would be. I had shoved Sterling Promise and Father away when they offered different paths. I had kicked down all the walls and found that there wasn't freedom behind them. There weren't possibilities. There was nothing.

I looked down the street. Harry's figure was fading into the darkness. I knew I couldn't live on dreams and stories. I had tried.

I pushed myself up and raced after Harry. Falling into step next to him, I sniffed. "You're right. I need help."

Harry nodded. "First, you need a place to stay."

"I don't think I can . . .," I started, trying to explain that I couldn't stay with Chin and his boys.

"You can stay with me. My father's house," he said, rescuing me from my discomfort. "Don't worry, Little Brother." He put his

hand on my shoulder and shook it gently. The easiness had returned to his voice. "There are opportunities for the men who come here. My father will help you."

"Your father can't help me," I said.

"Of course he can. He is a powerful man in Chinatown. He runs businesses. You can work . . ." Harry's voice trailed off. He stopped walking.

"What?" I followed the direction of his stare to a figure approaching us — a young man, shorter than me and Harry, but thicker, like Chin. His eyes were buried in a round face, set in dark circles, and perched above a crooked nose. He looked like a rat.

"Harry Hon. An unexpected honor," he said. "Not skulking around in alleys today?"

I scowled. He had a casual cruelty that I recognized, no different in men than it was in women. Auntie Wu had it. Some of the women on Angel Island had it. The Italians I had run into today had it.

"What do you want?" Harry asked.

Rat Face leaned in close to Harry. I took a step closer as well. "I have a message for Chin."

"What's the message?"

"That son of a pig and a dog can go die in the street if he thinks we will let him cheat at our fan-tan tables again," he said.

Harry shifted to the side to try to pass. Rat Face blocked him, his greasy nose inches from Harry's. Inside me, a slow boil of anger began. "He had to. You know why," Harry said, the faintest tremble in his voice.

"It doesn't sound like you're going to tell him. Maybe I'll give you a busted lip to remind you."

"You don't want to do that. My father —" Harry began.

“Your father? Why would you tell your father? Sure, he runs most of the gambling dens and lotteries in Chinatown, but don’t you think he feels enough shame already to have you as a son?”

“Let us pass,” I said.

Rat Face leaned close and sniffed. “I could smell the stink of the ship you came over on from a block away. Why don’t you crawl back to China and into the stalls where your ancestors raised you?”

How many people needed to tell me that I didn’t belong here? The corners of my vision shrunk until all I could see was his fat head, and I lunged at him and shoved him to the ground. My feet kicked wildly. Nothing hit him very hard, but the blows were fast and hard to escape. He scrambled up, only to be met by the wild flinging of my fists. I thought of the poems in the room in the men’s barracks, the ones that promised revenge, and I pounded at the new cage I had built for myself. If I had to fight for every inch of America I set my feet on, I would.

Hands gripped my arms and pulled me back. I yanked myself free and hurled myself toward Rat Face again. “I am not going back,” I shouted.

“People are staring. They will call the police,” Harry hissed in my ear.

Suddenly my vision expanded again. I was panting, breathing in with deep gulps. Harry still had a hold on my arms. I looked around at the people who had stopped to stare. Rat Face pushed his chest into mine. Harry tried to step between us. “We are going to get arrested,” he said.

“I don’t care,” Rat Face growled, shoving him out of the way.

“You will when they deport you,” Harry told him, squeezing between us again.

Rat Face stopped. "You better stay away from me," he said, sticking his finger in my face.

"That should not be difficult. The boat you smell on me doesn't drown out the gutter I smell on you," I said.

He jerked forward. Harry grabbed my arms again as I lunged toward Rat Face. "We *all* need to get out of here," Harry said.

"Let me go," I said. Fighting gave me a solid feeling, and anger was a familiar friend.

Harry's grip tightened. "I don't want to get picked up by the police after today, and I don't think you do either."

"I don't have anything to lose," I said, lurching at Rat Face, who stumbled before he plastered the smirk back on his face.

"Your friend is crazy," Rat Face said.

"Is this how you are going to repay me for my help?" Harry asked me.

He was right. "Fine," I said, letting him drag me away.