

CHINATOWN
SEPTEMBER 15, 1923



CHAPTER 23

AFTER A FEW BLOCKS of walking in silence, my heartbeat steadied. "You *are* a little crazy," Harry said.

"A little?" I said, my voice rough with the angry tears I had swallowed.

We stopped at a pair of thick, elaborately carved doors. When Harry opened them, a giant pale-faced man filled the gap. The face was rough and scarred. A combination of red, brown, and gray hair sprang from his head, and his mouth frowned over a broad, fleshy chin. I grabbed Harry and yanked him back.

Harry looked surprised, then a smile broke across his face. "It's Neil. He works for my father. Protection."

"Protection from what?" I asked as the man allowed us past him.

A voice boomed from a doorway at the other side of the room: "Protection from my enemies." A man wearing an American suit stepped forward, his gray hair slicked back. "Even you have been in America long enough to know how easy it is to make enemies."

"Hello, Father," Harry said. I heard Neil close the door behind us.

Mr. Hon continued to study me. "This must be the young man who caused the scene at the docks."

My head jerked in surprise, which made the corners of his lips curl into a smirk.

"I keep many eyes on the streets of Chinatown. There is little that happens here that I don't know about." I smoothed the front of Sterling Promise's suit nervously. "You have had an impressive beginning," he said. "You still have the flush of fighting on your cheeks. I remember that feeling. You are called Fire Horse, I believe."

I nodded. I hoped that was all he had heard about me.

"Many eyes, Fire Horse. Don't forget," he said.

"I won't," I said.

"You will bring good fortune. I see it in your face." He stepped aside but continued to study me. "You can clean up for dinner upstairs. There are clothes in the guest room. My son will show you."

I nodded again, and Harry led me across the entryway. He turned to the pale-faced man called Neil and spoke in English. Neil mumbled a string of English words I didn't recognize and lifted a newspaper to his face.

"Neil says you look like trouble," Harry explained. "But trouble for one can be luck for another."

Passing from the bare entryway into the Hons' house was like lifting the lid on a trunk of treasures. The home shone with riches. Ivory pieces rested on silk laid across thick, elaborately carved tables. Mirrors and paintings inside pearl-inlaid frames crowded the walls. A hallway led to a large room that still managed to be stuffed with lounges and chairs. Doors opened to still more rooms.

I caught only glimpses of them, but enough to see they boasted the same wealth of furnishings. "The second floor has the guest rooms," Harry said, starting up a flight of carpeted stairs. "The third floor is mostly for the servants."

"Will your mother be at dinner?" I asked. Meeting Mr. Hon had rattled me a little, and I wanted to know how many more people I had to fool.

"She died when I was younger."

"Oh, I'm sorry." And I was, because I knew the hole that left, but I was also a little relieved.

Harry pushed open a door to a room where a bed made of dark wood sat against the wall, heavy with thick, embroidered blankets. He opened a wardrobe standing next to the bed. Inside sat shirts, jackets, and pants neatly folded.

"You can take whatever clothes you need."

"Your father keeps piles of extra clothes around for people who escape guards and don't have anywhere to stay?"

"He likes to be prepared," Harry said.

"For what?"

"For everything. You'll see. He'll make plans for you too, soon." He left me to change.

When I stared at myself in a small mirror on the wall, I saw chopped hair, a thin face, and a deep exhaustion. I barely recognized myself. My name, my family, my clothes — I had left it all behind. I hoped that soon, I would have carved away enough of myself to fit . . . somewhere. Anywhere.

Once I had washed my hands and replaced Sterling Promise's suit with a fresh shirt, jacket, and pants, I went downstairs for dinner. Harry and his father were already seated. The Hons' dinner

table was large, too large after months of banging elbows against the women at Angel Island. A woman brought out several trays piled high with noodles and rice, as well as bowls with chunks of fish floating in warm broth. There was no Jell-O — nothing unfamiliar, in fact. I could still have been in China, except for the fact that people were speaking to me.

“You are from Guangdong province?” Mr. Hon asked, pushing a heavy plate of dumplings toward me. “I hear it in your speech. What does your father do?”

“He and my grandfather grow rice.”

“I grew up on a rice farm along the Pearl River Delta,” Mr. Hon said. “You have to be determined to farm rice properly. Every step is a battle — against time, against weather, against the land itself.”

“Yes, sir.”

He chewed a bite of pork as he studied me. “That is how America is too — a battle. You will be a good influence on my son, I think.”

My chest collapsed with relief. “I am grateful for your son’s help today. Without him, I would still be lost.”

Harry smiled, lifting his head for the first time since we sat down to eat. “Fire Horse was in North Beach, about to fight a group of Italians, when Chin and I found him.”

“My son was no help there, I’m sure,” Mr. Hon said, snorting. “What do you expect from a Rabbit, especially a Water Rabbit? Plenty of luck but no fight.”

Harry stared at his plate.

Mr. Hon returned his attention to me. “But you — a Fire Horse. A sign for bold, strong boys. You are young too. You still have plenty of time to make a name for yourself before you get married. What are your plans now that you are here?”

I opened my mouth, and for the first time, there was not a single syllable inside it. I just shook my head.

"We will find something for you to do," Mr. Hon said.

"What is your business?" I asked.

"I have many businesses." He leaned back. "Mostly I help the tong protect people."

"It seems that people need protection here," I agreed.

"I knew you would understand. You would fight if someone you cared about was in danger. You would have fought today for your own safety."

"It is very easy for me to find reasons to fight," I said.

"What else can you do when you are under attack? When I first arrived here, there were many Americans who wanted the Chinese to leave. We developed ways to achieve justice and protection in our community through the tongs. Those were great days for the tongs. The Chinese controlled Chinatown. The tongs could offer something the Americans could not — a place for the Chinese to go when they were in trouble, when everyone else had turned their backs. Now, the Americans want to take that away." He scrutinized me again. "I will tell you something else. The tongs can be great again, with the right leader. There are only two left to fight it out for control of Chinatown, ours and the Sen Suey Yings. I believe you met one of them tonight."

Rat Face? I didn't want him running Chinatown.

"It is a turning point. But I think I have a plan to get the better of them. Nothing I can talk about now, but perhaps when things are more decided."

I nodded. "So you run the tong?"

"I run the businesses of the tong. The gambling houses. The

lotteries. Among other things. And I handle the police when they try to get involved."

"Why would the police be involved? A lottery seems a harmless business."

"It is. The tong is only a threat to Americans who would cheat us, police who would bully us, and even some Chinese who would betray us." Mr. Hon leaned toward me. My strength had never been measured as he seemed to be measuring it now, calculating its quantity and quality, then weighing it against his own. "But the Americans will never understand the Chinese. The lottery is an excellent example. They call it immoral." He shook his head. "It is part of the Chinese character to seek good fortune, to hold it in your hand. We give men the chance to master a piece of the unknown. You came here seeking fortune, seeking control over your fate."

I nodded. So had my uncle. So had Sterling Promise.

"Of course you did. Everyone does. Then you find out that no one wants us here. The lottery is chance to pinch off a tiny fraction of the luck we are all seeking. Why take that away from people?"

A series of chimes rang through the house. Harry and his father rose.

"Good night, Fire Horse. Tomorrow, we will find you employment," Mr. Hon said, disappearing into another room.

My eyelids were heavy, and I had to drag my arms and legs up the stairs to my room. Harry shuffled beside me. "My father will certainly help you," he said. "You are just what he wants me to be."

"My father would prefer you," I said.

"Maybe fathers are destined to be disappointed by their sons. "

"Or daughters." The words spilled from my mouth before I had measured them, but Harry's face kept the same easy expression.

“With daughters it doesn’t seem as important. They don’t carry the weight of the family on their shoulders.”

I could have told him about the burdens daughters bear, but I was too weary from carrying them. At my door, Harry shrugged. “I am sorry we did not find your friends, but I am glad you decided to stay with us,” he said.

He started down the hall, but before he slipped into his room, I called, “Harry!”

“Yes?” he said.

“Thank you.”

Harry smiled and closed his door.

I undressed and unwrapped the bindings that Spring Blossom had helped me with that morning on Angel Island. It seemed like a lifetime ago. I rolled the thick cloth and tucked it under the pillow, then pulled on the loose shirt and pants that had been left on the bed by invisible servants. These servants had also taken away Sterling Promise’s suit. Fire Horse was glad it was gone, but Jade Moon, who stubbornly had not abandoned me, missed that token of her old life.

I washed my face and hands in the basin in the corner and lay down on the bed. My hands settled over my stomach so that I could feel it rise and fall, and know that I was in there somewhere, inside all the fragments of lies and stories I had built around me. Images of Father with his back turned and Sterling Promise’s defeated shoulders on the dock flashed through my head. I reached into the collar of my shirt and pulled out Nushi’s red pouch with the jade inside. Gripping it in my hand, I tried to squeeze her wisdom from it. She’d said that jade was sharp without cutting, but I seemed to be doing a lot of cutting lately.

Maybe because I wasn't Jade Moon anymore. Jade Moon did not get to speak at dinner. She was not allowed to land in America. Jade Moon did not have a place to stay or any friends here. And I did.

I went to the window to throw out this last piece of my old life, but when I tried to pull it open, it wouldn't budge. I jerked at it until my fingers ached and sweat gathered on my forehead. I ran my hands along the edges, and that is when I felt them. Under the top of the curtain, boards were nailed into the frame, holding it shut and trapping me in the room.

Strange. Hon could be keeping his many enemies out. But I knew prisons, and this felt a little like a prison. I guessed I was not as far away from my old life as I had hoped.

I closed my fist around the jade and collapsed into the bed. When I woke the next morning, my fingers were numb from clutching it all night.

At the first rumbles of activity in the house, I pulled the wrapping out from under the pillow and stared at it for a moment. I wasn't supposed to be wrapping it around me today. I was meant to be at the Yings. I would do this again today, and maybe tomorrow. Then what? I wondered how long Mr. Hon would let me stay.

Mr. Hon and Harry were already at the table for breakfast, untouched bowls of rice in front of them. I stood in the shadows of the doorway. They did not notice me.

"Do not embarrass me."

"No, Father." Harry returned his hand to his lap and tucked his chin down.

"To be cursed with such a son. It is very lucky, this arrival of Fire Horse."

"Yes, Father," he said.

"It may allow you to take more responsibility. Perhaps you will not waste everything I worked for after all."

I had heard versions of this conversation in my own home in China, and I did not need to spy from corners anymore, so I stepped into sight. Mr. Hon straightened his back; Harry lifted his head, one side of his mouth beginning a weak smile.

"Come, have breakfast. My son and I were just discussing the lessons that I arranged for you today," Mr. Hon said, rising to leave. "We were discussing your bold stand against the Sen Suey Ying boy last night."

"Rat Face?" I said as I took the bowl of rice Harry passed me.

Harry and Mr. Hon stared at me. Jade Moon was not the only one who said rash things after all. My cheeks reddened. But out of the silence exploded a sharp, rusty laugh. Mr. Hon slapped his hand on the table, and delight spread across his face. Harry shrugged.

"Rat Face. Yes, that is very good." Mr. Hon rubbed the white hairs that sprouted from his chin. "Oh, to have that youthful outrage in my blood again! I arranged for fighting lessons for you first thing this morning. Then you will run the lottery numbers with Harry. Afterward, Harry will help you with your English."

Fighting lessons? English lessons? What for? Things had never landed in my hands easily. But I just said, "Thank you, sir."

He nodded. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. "Your anger is good, but it must be focused and correctly executed if it is to be of any use."

I wondered who would use it.