

CHAPTER 24

AFTER BREAKFAST, HARRY AND I stepped into the front room. The man called Neil sat in the entry with a newspaper across his lap, looking even scarier than he had the night before. I was heading for the door to the street when Harry stopped. Neil stood, his chin lifted, bright green eyes set under wild, dark brown eyebrows shot through with strands of gray.

"Neil is going to teach me to fight?" I hissed to Harry, who nodded.

"I can stay to translate for now," he offered.

I smiled at Neil, hoping my good luck getting along with people would continue. It didn't. "He doesn't look happy about this," I whispered.

"He's not," Harry said.

"Should I bow? Shake hands?"

"I don't think he likes it when people look at him."

I dropped my gaze to the floor. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked Harry.

Neil circled me with his arms crossed. He reached out and lifted

one of my hands, yanking my arm out to its full length as he studied it. He said something in English, and I shook my head. Only a few of the words sounded like anything I had learned on the ship or on Angel Island. I looked at Harry. "Is he going to hit me?" I asked.

He shrugged.

Neil spoke again. My stomach started churning.

Harry nodded. "He wants you to do a few exercises to see how strong you are. I'll show you." He got down on the floor and showed me how to push my body up on my hands. I lowered myself obediently and began. After just a few repetitions, my arms burned with the effort. I completed as many as I could, but Neil did not look pleased.

Then I had to lie on my back and sit up, bringing my head to my knees over and over again. I was better at this one, but still not good enough to pull the smallest amount of satisfaction from Neil's face.

When I stumbled to my feet, Neil strode over. He shook my arms, which were still burning. He slapped my stomach with his giant hand, and I jumped back. Finally, he sat down and put the newspaper in front of his face again.

"That was the lesson?" I asked Harry, a little lost.

"I'll explain what he wants you to do later. Come on," he said, opening the door to the street.

"So what do we do now?"

"We continue the exercises and run numbers for the lottery."

Running numbers was perfectly named. It involved following Harry as he raced through alleys to the back doors of groceries and laundries. He would disappear inside a store for a few blissful

seconds while I leaned against the wall, struggling to gulp air into my lungs. Then, too soon, he would push open the door, tuck a packet of papers inside of his jacket, and take off again.

The soles of my feet ached, my lungs burned, and the muscles down my legs throbbed. I cursed the angles of the streets, which rose to sharp peaks, then fell only to rise again. We ran up and down alleys guarded by brick walls and high windows. When I was a few steps behind Harry, which was most of the time, I could see his fluent, easy pace in front of me. His body seemed designed to run through the alleys — his long legs stretching over the pavement, his arms swinging effortlessly at his sides. Sometimes he would look to make sure I was still behind him, and I could see the light in his face. It seemed he could run forever, and I thought he might, when he pulled to a stop at a nondescript door.

“Are . . . we . . . done?” I said, my heart pounding heat into my face.

Harry stood next to me, his breath already starting to steady itself. He smiled and patted my shoulder. “You did well.”

I tried to glare at him, but it was too exhausting.

Harry knocked on the door. A small panel slid open. “Morning, Sam,” Harry said. A bolt loosened inside the door, which cracked open just enough to let us slide through. Harry led us up a flight of stairs and down a dark hallway to another door, where another pair of hands opened another bolt. Harry opened the final door into a narrow room. It was a dark, dusty space, empty except for a long table that stretched the width of one side. Four men stood behind it, protected by a wire screen. Harry took the packets from his jacket and handed them through a thin gap in the wires.

"You're later than usual," the man said to Harry as his fingers unwrapped the packets and flew through the papers inside. The man wrote a figure on a piece of paper, which he passed back to Harry.

Harry jerked his chin over his shoulder at me. "I had company."

The man nodded. "You're still the first one here." He peered over his glasses at me. "So he must have made you run."

"We don't have to run?" I said.

"It's actually discouraged, because it might draw attention. Harry knows every inch of the alleys and basements in Chinatown. If you weren't with him, the police would have picked you up and searched you."

"We're not *supposed* to run?" I repeated, glaring at Harry. "We could get arrested for running?"

Harry handed the man a pile of bills and stuffed the remaining ones in his pocket. "True, but now we have time for lunch before we pick up the results."

He led me down another flight of stairs, across a different alley, and into a noodle shop. We sat down.

"About the running," Harry said.

"Yes, let's talk about the running. Did Neil even tell you to make me run?"

Harry looked at the table. "He had me run when I trained with him."

"You trained with Neil?"

"Briefly. Until he realized I didn't have the smallest drop of fight in me. He said if I got in trouble, I should just run. I don't think he meant it badly, but Father was furious."

"You *are* fast."

He relaxed. "My father hates the fact that his son runs numbers. But he lets me because it is the only thing I seem to be good at. He wants me to learn other aspects of the business, but every time I try, I bring nothing but shame to him."

"What do you mean?"

"Last month, I was at one of the gambling houses. Father sent me to observe the dealers and watch for cheating. Rat Face and other Sen Suey Ying boys started coming. They would set down a dollar. If they won, they would reveal the ten hidden underneath. If they didn't, they slid their dollar off the table and replaced it with one that did not cover a ten-dollar bill."

"What did you do?"

Harry leaned forward. "Nothing. Can you believe it? I did nothing. Father was furious. I was the coward he always says I am, but it seemed so pointless to confront them. There were six or seven of them in the gambling house. What was I going to do? But he still blames me for his shame from that."

"It's not your fault they cheated."

"No, but it's my fault that I allowed them to get away with it. He wants me to lead the tong back to its days of glory and power." He started to pick at the table. "Chin kicked the Sen Suey Ying boys out, then sent our boys to pull the same trick in a few of their gambling houses. Father got his money back. He always gets back what is his. I swore to myself that next time, I will not stand by and let anyone cheat us. I will do something, no matter what it costs."

This world of men was a strange one, I thought. If you were wronged, not only could you do something about it, but you were *supposed* to.

"I'm sorry you hate the running," Harry said, "but it is the only chance I have to get out from under my father's scrutiny for a little while. Do something I am good at."

"You found some freedom."

"A little. My father's eyes are everywhere." He shrugged. "So if you could not mention it . . ."

"Of course." I leaned back in my chair. "What do you do with your freedom?"

"I sit here. Sometimes I explore the alleys and basements. I look for faster routes."

"Do you ever go outside the alleys? I would love to see more of Chinatown."

Harry shifted a little in his seat. "It probably isn't a good idea."

"Why not?"

"People might see us — soldiers from my father's tong, soldiers from another tong. The police," he said, but I could tell that he was tasting the idea, rolling the possibilities of it through his mind.

"We could try it, slip in and out of these alleys you are so familiar with."

He pressed his lips together.

"Don't you want to see if you can get just a little more freedom?"

Harry hesitated. "Maybe one or two streets. On our way back."

I smiled. The months on Angel Island had made me hungry for walking, for the joy of air and sun against my skin.

After our meal, we stepped from the alley into a very different Chinatown, a bright, colorful one where red lanterns danced in the breeze. The darkness and fear that had muddied my vision the night before were gone, and I could see the vibrant life that filled the streets. Leaves trailed down from balcony gardens. We passed

twisted iron gates and giant light poles with dragons coiled around the tops. Small shrines sat with sticks of incense standing up in front of them, trails of smoke lifting from their stems.

I stopped in front of a window piled high with cages of ducks and roosters. A man looked back at me from behind the cages, and I gave him a small smile. He crossed his arms and spread his stance. I turned away, not sure how I had offended, only to catch two men huddling with a man selling incense, all of them glaring at me from under the brims of their hats. Caught in their stare, I didn't see a mother coming out of a bakery. I almost collided with her. I tried to apologize, but before I could, she swept her child into her arms and scurried across the street.

I was accustomed to looks of disdain, but what were these looks doing here in America?

Harry saw my distress. "It is like my father told you. They have lost their appreciation of the tongs. Corrupted by the Americans." He stared straight ahead.

"How do they know?"

"They know who my father is. Plus, there's your suit."

"Other people in Chinatown wear suits."

"Yours is dark enough to blend at night. You wear a jacket that's loose enough to hold a gun, a few knives, maybe some padding in case you get stabbed. It's a tong suit."

I looked at the clothes I had been so grateful for yesterday.

"We better get back. We need to pick up the lottery results."

I scanned the street. These people did not look at me like I was cursed, but like I was cruel — a harsher look, where disapproval was mixed with distrust and seasoned with anger.

"Yes, let's get back," I said.