



CHAPTER 25

IT TOOK ME only a few days to discover the rhythm of the Hon house. It ran to the beat of rules and schedules designed to ensure safety and compliance. Harry taught me how to read the clocks that hung in every room — their circles of long and short lines — so that I could work myself into the household's pulse. The front door was unlocked at precisely seven in the morning, when Neil arrived. Neil came ten steps inside, newspaper in his hand, and sat in a chair across from the door. Meals began and ended at specific times. He rose to leave at ten at night. Mr. Hon then locked the door with a key he kept on a chain and tucked into his pocket. Nothing would open it until Neil's coming in the morning.

Every morning I would go down to the entryway and do as many of Neil's exercises as I could. Then Neil would point at the door, and Harry and I would go out to run the numbers, have lunch, then wait for the winning numbers to be drawn and pinned to the board at the lottery house. The numbers were hand-copied and passed out to the runners. We took them back to the shops to share with the ticketholders, and then returned to the Hons' house

at the precise moment we were expected. Harry spent the rest of the afternoon in his father's office and the evenings with me, teaching me English.

Harry was an excellent teacher. He helped me organize the words floating in my head. I started to fit them together. A table could be a large, heavy table. A book could be a thick, leather book. Eventually, I could say that the thick, leather book sat on the large, heavy table. If I made progress linking more and more words together, Harry would teach me some of the colorful phrases Neil used.

“‘You're doing it arseways.’”

“What does that mean?”

“He usually said it when I was messing up. So I heard it a lot. And ‘bollocks.’ I think it means stupid.”

“Bollocks,” I repeated, rolling the word on my tongue.

“He doesn't like ‘gits.’ And if he's really mad, he yells, ‘Stop acting the maggot.’”

“I like that one.”

“Wait until you hear him say it.”

I did more of Neil's exercises in my room at night until my body collapsed in bed. Sometimes I was too tired even to undo my wrappings, and I would wake up with deep impressions of them along my chest. I liked the drained feeling Neil's training left inside me, almost as much as I hated the smug look on his face when he sent me away each morning. I was determined to prove to him that I could learn to fight.

Days passed. Then weeks. Enough time for the days to shorten and cool in Chinatown. Enough time for Father to return to China and plant his feet firmly in the dark soil of the terraces again. Enough

time for Sterling Promise to move his life back on a path that didn't include the inconvenience of a Fire Horse girl. With the household's customary efficiency, his suit had been cleaned, pressed, and placed in the wardrobe that I drew my clothes from. I buried it under as many of the Hons' shirts and pants as I could.

I got used to being locked inside at night. I got used to the windows that were nailed shut. I even got used to deepening my voice. The rules and schedules were like the thin string that Nushi had used to mend patches in our clothes. One thread was easily broken, but when you wrapped one on top of another, on top of another, suddenly you couldn't move. I had found only misery at the end of the paths I blazed myself. It was easier to take a path that was laid out in front of me, so I followed every plan Mr. Hon made for me.

One morning, I did my exercises for Neil, rose, and headed for the door. Neil said something in English that I didn't understand. Harry tugged on my arm to stop me.

"What?" I said.

"I believe Neil thinks you're ready."

Neil said something else, but I only caught the word "fight."

"I understood a couple of words, but . . .," I said to Harry.

"I'll translate," he said.

Neil stomped his feet on the floor, planting them firmly. I stared at him. He stomped again, looking like an angry bear. He threw his hands in the air and pointed at his feet, then pointed at mine. Eventually, he reached down toward my feet. I took a step back, but his long arms pulled my feet farther apart and planted them on the floor, his giant hands covering them completely as he muttered a string of angry English.

I exchanged a glance with Harry. "Under your shoulders," he translated. I nodded.

Neil started to bounce on his feet, moving quickly, gracefully, his weight shifting, his body cutting different angles in the air. After a few seconds of watching, I tried bouncing around a little myself. I could feel the new muscles from the exercises I had done spring to life.

Neil twisted up his face like something smelled bad, settled both feet on the ground, then lazily swung an open palm at my jaw. There was only a fraction of his strength behind it, and I jumped back, but my neck still snapped to the side on impact, and a throbbing began along the lower edge of my cheek. As I rubbed the sting, anger pricked at my skin.

"What was that?" I demanded.

Neil said something.

"He said you have to move faster," Harry said. "And don't look at your feet. Your feet are not going to hit you."

"He could have just said that without the smack." The hit had sent heat through my blood.

Harry put his hands up. "I am just translating."

I took my stance again. I had barely lifted my fists in front of my face before Neil slapped me a second time, turning the heat in me to fire. He said something else.

"He said that was better." Harry smiled nervously.

"He's not teaching me anything. I think this is just an excuse to hit me." I glared at Neil, hoping he saw the spite in my eyes, the shadows of anger, bitterness, and outrage. But when I met his steady glare, I knew the swirling tangle of emotion in me would

not pierce even one layer of the strength in him. That just made me angrier. I had dodged two of his swipes, so I decided to get in one of my own. I swung at Neil.

In one smooth motion, he swept my legs out from under me, pressed my face to the floor, planted his knee in my back, and let loose a string of angry words.

"He says not to do that again," Harry said.

"Harry, I'm getting the feeling you aren't translating everything," I said.

"Neil's English is tricky."

"Try," I said through gritted teeth, my face mashed to the floor.

He listened for a moment to Neil's speech. "You are all trouble and no fight. All stubbornness, no strength," he said.

"And?"

Harry sighed. "He said worthless Chinks wash over American shores like trash these days."

Neil lifted his knee and stood over me as I struggled to rise. He grumbled another string of words while I rubbed the spot in my back where his knee had been. I looked at him. He planted his feet and crossed his thick arms. I searched for the anger in him that would feed mine, but I saw only strength and disgust.

"Don't worry," said Harry. "He hates all of us, the Chinese. My father just thinks it's safer to have a white bodyguard. We'll talk to Father. He'll —"

"No, Neil's right," I said. Neil had strength — the kind of strength that made you safe. Even with his face twisted and hard, his eyes remained steady. I only had the kind of strength that made me dangerous. I cupped my hands together and bowed to him.

"I'm a git. I did it all arse-backward," I said in English.

A moment of shock crossed Neil's face, then the scowl returned. He stomped back to his chair and put his paper in front of his face.

Harry gave me a small smile and patted me on the shoulder. "I think he's starting to like you."

So the new rhythm of my mornings began. Harry did not have to translate the names of the moves Neil taught me. Neil's constant shouting of words like "jab," "straight right," and "uppercut" burned them into my memory. He was also fond of using gestures to communicate, most of which ended with a smack to the side of my head. After thousands of punches, repeating the motion again and again, my shoulders ached, my wrists were sore, and my stomach trembled — but Neil was satisfied with my form. We moved on to combinations of punches. These started quickly and then slowed their rhythm, building walls and creating holes.

I loved the fighting lessons, the English lessons, running the streets, learning the workings of a lottery. I was like dry soil getting its first rain. I soaked it all in as fast as I could, fearing it would end in a moment and I would still be thirsty. My head was full of new words to make me American. My body was filled with new moves to make me strong. Unfortunately, my mouth was still full of lies.

Every morning after my training with Neil, Harry and I still ran numbers. The air was getting colder and the running was getting easier, but even though I spent most of lunch recovering my breath, I did not ask Harry to leave his basements and alleyways again. I knew it wasn't the police or the tongs that he hid from.

But one morning, two months into my stay with the Hons, we stepped out of the alley that led to the noodle shop and saw Chin turn in at the other end. Before he could catch sight of us, Harry yanked me into a narrow passage that led to a wide street.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Chin can't know we finish running the numbers early."

"Why not? The lottery agents know. The noodle shop owner knows."

"My life is not their business. They aren't going to tell my father."

"But Chin will," I said, nodding. "Then we better hurry." I walked toward the line that separated sun from shadow at the threshold of the alley.

"Wait. I can't."

I peered over my shoulder. Chin would soon pass the opening where the two alleys met and spot us. "Look at a spot just in front of their foreheads."

"What?"

"You don't want to go in the street because of the looks people give you, right? The trick to avoiding their looks is to stare at a spot just in front of their foreheads. Their faces will blur. You won't see their gazes."

He hesitated.

"Trust me," I said, shoving him gently into the street.

We slipped between crowds of people, getting a few looks. When we were a block out of the alley, a worn leather ball rolled up a hill, came to a stop at my feet, then rolled back down into the arms of a boy just one or two years younger than me. Another boy called to him, and the first boy dropped the ball and ran it over to the other,

dancing it between his feet as he went. They entered a bright building. Big windows lined its first floor.

"What is this place?"

"The YMCA. It has sports and English classes."

"What sports?"

Harry shrugged. "Basketball, soccer, track."

"What's track?"

"Running."

"You would be good at that. Have you ever tried it before?"

"No," Harry said.

I wandered toward the window, drawn by the open smiles and easy movements of the people inside. A group of boys piled their book bags and coats in the corner, then went to join the two with the leather ball. They did not look like they had windows that were nailed shut. People probably didn't pull their children closer when they passed. It was an island of the America I'd imagined. "We should come here after we run the numbers," I said. It was difficult to imagine any tong soldiers there, squinting in the bright light, scowling at the laughter. "Does your father have eyes inside?"

Harry released a hard laugh, his warm breath clouding the chilly air. "No." He stared in the window. "This is a new Chinatown. It is a Chinatown he doesn't believe in."

I took a step closer. "I don't think this Chinatown believes in him and his tong either."

Harry's shoulders tensed.

"Harry, I know, you don't want to hear this. But look, this is what life outside the alleys looks like. They look —"

"Happy," he finished.

"And free," I added.

"People don't hammer them with scowls when they pass," he said.

"Or think they are only capable of harm," I said.

"It would be nice," he said.

"What would be nice?" Chin said, suddenly standing between us. He had crept up behind us while we were talking.

My mind scrambled for an explanation that would leave Harry his number running and freedom. There was none.

Chin lifted the collar of his jacket against the wind. "You must be done running the numbers. I'll tell your father that you can help out with more tong business. I think he will be pleased," he said.

Chin was right. Mr. Hon made the announcement at dinner. "Harry, you will not be running the numbers anymore."

"Not at all? But —"

"You will take on new responsibilities with the tong. This comes at just the moment I was hoping you could take over some business with our friend Lo and his girls."

"Who will run the numbers? Fire Horse?"

"No." He looked at me. "You will have more time for your lessons with Neil. I may have some business for you to take over as well."

"What business?"

"I will let you know soon."

"Sir, I still have a lot of trouble understanding Neil."

"My son can still translate, for a little while."

I saw the walls closing in on Harry, locking him in place. And I had the vague feeling that walls were being built around me too. I brushed the thought aside as quickly as I could.

Neil started the next morning with a series of punches that he had taught me. I swung at his meaty hands, shifting from one foot to another. I liked the motion of striking, the powerful force that started in the feet, moved through the shoulder, and sprung out through the knuckles. As we trained, I thought of Chin taking away Harry's freedom. I thought of all the laughing faces in the village. I thought of the nights I had spent in the kitchen alone, ignored by my father and grandfather. I thought of Sterling Promise and the lies that he had told me. My eyes narrowed, and I punched harder and harder at the air, little grunts escaping, baby versions of Neil's growls.

Neil said something to Harry.

"He says that you are too angry. He says you can *have* anger. Anger can focus you, make you strong. But you can never *get* angry. If you get angry, the other guy wins."

I dropped my fists down by my sides and let the ghosts around me fade. Neil dropped his hands as well and growled a few words. I was getting better at understanding him. It was a matter of finding the important words among the curses and colorful phrases and focusing on those.

"He said —" Harry started.

I held up a hand. "No, I think I understood. He said he would see if I could punch, but I thought —"

A flash of movement. Then pain exploded across the left side of

my face, and my neck snapped to the side. I swayed back and forth, lights dancing in front of my eyes, a hum in my ear, and the taste of blood in my mouth.

"He said he would see if you could *take* a punch," Harry said.

I blinked the lights away and stretched the muscles of my face. Blood pushed energy through my veins, leaving a pounding in my heart and tension in my muscles. After one last shake of my head, I balled my hands into the tight fists Neil had taught me and lifted them to guard my face.

"You're pure useless as a fighter, but at least you got the guts to take a punch," Neil said. He didn't smile, but he stopped frowning for a moment.

"Did you understand?" Harry asked.

I nodded. I looked from Neil to Harry and back again, still keeping my fists up. Neil reached out. I flinched, lifting my fists closer to my face. He brought his hand slowly to my shoulder and patted me gently with his paw.

"That is enough for today," he said and sat back down.