



CHAPTER 29

"THAT'S THE GIRL?" I said, my throat tight. "Are you sure?"

He looked at her for another moment. "It's her," he decided.

"Why are we picking her up?" Maybe Mr. Hon knew her betrothed.

"My father is selling her," Harry said. "To a friend. He will marry her."

"Why would your father be involved?"

"It is the way the tong supplies women to the brothels. My father explained it to me. It is very clever. That way if the woman runs away, her husband just goes and gets her and brings her back to the brothel."

"You are selling her to a brothel?" I tried to silence the alarm in my voice. "When?"

"We'll deliver her to her betrothed from here. He will marry her and then take her to Mr. Lo."

The urge to hit Harry, grab Spring Blossom, and run swarmed over me. There were dozens of streets shooting off from the docks. We might be able to make it.

Then I saw them — Chin's men. They waited in the shadows, more used to dim rooms and dark alleys than the bright sun of the docks, but their presence brought me back to my senses. Spring Blossom and I didn't have anywhere to go, and if we got lucky and made it two blocks before Harry or Chin's men caught us, one of Mr. Hon's many eyes would surely see us.

Spring Blossom looked around — confused, lost, tugging at her sleeves. She could give me away as easily as Sterling Promise could. I followed Harry toward the dock, tipping my hat lower still on my head.

I stepped behind Spring Blossom before she could spot me. Harry hesitated a moment before bowing in front of her. "Welcome to America, Spring Blossom. I will take you to your betrothed. He is anxious to make you comfortable after your long delay."

Spring Blossom must have smiled her soft smile, as Harry answered with his own warm one. I knew this was what his father wanted him to do, and I knew he was too weak to resist, but I still wanted to knock his teeth straight into his throat.

Harry turned and started to walk toward the city. I fell in step behind Spring Blossom and nudged her gently. When she saw me, her head jerked with surprise. Recognition lit in her face, but I shook my head. She lowered her gaze toward the pavement, a smile playing at her lips. My heart was wrenched with the tragedy of what they were going to do to her, but underneath that was the warmth of walking next to someone who knew me, truly knew me.

"Chin should be here," Harry said nervously.

I scanned the docks and spotted him talking to a giant of a policeman two docks away. An unsettled feeling crept under my

skin, but I still knew what I would do. I tugged at Harry's arm and nodded toward the pair. His face darkened.

"Go see what you can find out," I said. "I'll watch her."

He nodded, his face full of nervous concentration. As soon as he walked away, Spring Blossom whispered, "I wondered if you had made it. I am so happy to see you! They made the biggest fuss when you disappeared. The guards tore through your things. They yelled at us, but we did not understand what they were saying. Some of the women were angry that you caused trouble and disobeyed your father."

I could imagine the sharp clip of their words. *Willful, disobedient girl. Raining down bad luck on the rest of us.* Maybe they were right.

Spring Blossom whispered, "You still have to dress as a boy? I almost embraced you!" She giggled. "That would have been shocking. How long will you have to dress this way?"

"Not much longer," I managed.

I watched Harry pick his way down the dock, staying behind the crowds until he was just a few feet from Chin. Then Chin turned from the policeman, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Listen. We don't have much time," I said. "There is no husband."

"What do you mean?" Her voice shook on the last words.

"Your brother has not arranged a marriage. I don't know if he realized it, but he has arranged a sale."

"A sale? What has he sold?" she said carefully.

"You. To a brothel."

Spring Blossom gasped. "How could he?"

"He may not have known," I said.

She tightened her hold on her sleeves until her fingertips turned white. "He knew," she said.

The policeman spotted Harry and waved him over. Harry hesitated, then went to join Chin.

I kept my head forward and my voice low. "The policeman — he is here to take me somewhere. Somewhere safe. He has to take you instead. He will ask a question in English — who you work for. You have to answer."

"What do I say?"

"Mr. Hon."

"And I will be safe?"

I nodded. The policeman finished with Harry, and he and Chin walked toward us. The policeman would spot me next. He would come over, and Spring Blossom would escape.

But he looked right over me, then turned away. Every muscle I had tightened.

Chin and Harry arrived. "What was that about?" I asked.

"Just a brute of a policeman asking questions that are none of his business." Chin glared at me. "Scared he'll come arrest you, Fire Horse?"

"No, hoping," I muttered.

"What did you say?" he growled.

"Nothing."

Chin gripped the collar of my shirt. "I don't want to hear a word from you. I don't care how determined Hon is to have you protect his son. The sight of you makes me want to slit your belly from end to end. If you get in my way again, like you did at the laundry, I will make a ghost of you before the New Year."

I felt Spring Blossom's horror beside me but kept watching the policeman. I couldn't bother with Chin's threats. Every ounce of my will went toward forcing the policeman to turn around again. Finally, he looked over his shoulder, past Chin, to me and Spring Blossom. I held my breath until he directed his steps our way.

Chin turned to see what I was staring at. He dropped my collar and stood on the other side of Spring Blossom.

"Should we run?" Harry asked him.

"With the girl? We can't. Pretend you don't speak English," he commanded me. He gripped Spring Blossom's arm. "The police here, they take girls and lock them up. They do terrible things to girls. You don't want to go with him," he said to her. I saw fear flash across Spring Blossom's face. As the policeman got closer, she looked around the dock nervously. I prayed she would trust me.

The man stopped in front of the three of us. Spring Blossom stood like a statue, with just the slightest tension in her cheeks where the muscles clenched the teeth together.

"Who do you work for?" he said, looking straight at me.

"Mr. Hon," Spring Blossom said in a clear voice.

The policeman shifted his gaze to her. I clamped my mouth shut, holding back my tears. He didn't expect a woman who looked like a woman, but he only hesitated a second. The knowledge of where he was taking her won him over — what was the difference between a girl who looked like a boy and a girl who looked like a girl?

"You are under arrest," he said to Spring Blossom flatly. "You will have to come with me."

When he reached for her arm, Chin realized what was happening. "She just . . .," he sputtered in Chinese.

"She just landed," Harry said in English.

"Oh, so you do speak English," the policeman said. His words had the same sloping ups and downs as Neil's. "I have my orders. Or would you *all* like to come with me to the station?"

Chin's face twitched with indecision. He was not up against someone from Chinatown who he could bully and intimidate. This man was twice his size, and carried with him the confidence of having twice his rights in America. For once, I was glad. The man looked at me for a moment. I let my hand slip off Spring Blossom's wrist as he shepherded her out of our circle.

It was done. Spring Blossom was safe. Chin sent two soldiers to follow her, but they could report only that she had been taken away in a police car. A deep sadness settled inside me. I yearned to be in a car, going further and further from this life.

When we got back, Mr. Hon met us in the front entryway, anger exploding across his face. "How did you mess this up?" he yelled at Harry.

The blood drained from Harry's face. Neil appeared beside Mr. Hon. I could feel the anger rolling off him at the sight of me, like the steady, silent crash of waves in a storm.

A familiar flash of movement swung across the corner of my eyes. I jumped to block Mr. Hon's arm, but before I could, Neil pinned my arms behind my back. Then there was an even more familiar crack, and Harry was crouched on the floor, holding the side of his face, while his father towered over him.

"Father, please . . .," he begged. "I don't know what happened."

Mr. Hon's face had shifted from anger to disgust, and my heart

ached that Harry had to see it. You can't blur some faces enough. Mr. Hon leaned forward, his nose almost touching Harry's. "I don't want to catch sight of you again. Do you understand me? You are no longer welcome here. You wander your alleys. You hide in the shadows like the worthless coward you are."

Neil had had a good plan, a lucky plan. But now sparks were flying from it, burning everything they touched. I thought I saw a way through. I opened my mouth, preparing to tell Mr. Hon that it was my fault. "Mr. Hon —"

Neil jammed his giant elbow into my side, crushing the air that would have formed my next words. He refused to hit a girl, I thought, but didn't feel bad about bruising one. He said in a voice of eerie calm, "Mr. Hon, we'd better tell the buyer."

Mr. Hon arranged his jacket, masked his anger with a neutral expression, and turned and walked back toward his office. "Fire Horse, I want to see you," he said.

I stood silently by Harry as he rose.

"You should go," he said softly. "He will just get angrier." He put a hand over his face. "I don't know how it happened. I have to leave."

"I'll go with you."

"I want to be alone." He walked away. At the door, he turned around. "You don't need to make me feel better. I know I'll never be what my father wants. I'll never be you."

Was it impossible for one tie to loosen before another snapped tight? For one crack in my heart to heal before another broke open? I followed his slumped shoulders to the front door. I was about to step into the street with him when I felt Neil's hand grip my arm. He slammed the door behind Harry and spun me to face him.

"What are you doing here?" he growled, his face a red map of veins and fury.

"I had to help the girl," I pleaded.

"So you're a bit of a missionary now?" He rubbed his meaty hand over his face. "You're going to have enough trouble saving yourself."

"They were going to sell her."

"That's their business. It is long past time to fight. You need to run."

"She was my friend," I whispered. "From Angel Island."

His mouth hung open. "The girl today?"

I nodded. "I could not let them sell her."

"How many more friends do you have?" he said, crossing his arms.

"Not many."

He studied me, still furious, but he had that shallow crease between his eyes that meant he was worried. "You think you're being strong, but you're just being stubborn."

"Or stupid," I said, lowering my head.

"Crazy Chinese girls, putting their noses places they're likely to get cut off," he fumed, walking toward Mr. Hon's office. "Hurry up. This is not the day to keep Mr. Hon waiting. And you better keep your mouth shut."