

## CHAPTER 30

MR. HON WAS ON THE PHONE, shouting into the mouthpiece. “We have gotten people out of jail before. Call our contacts in the police! See what you can find out.”

He slammed the phone down and switched to English for Neil. “Mr. Lo wants the girl tonight. He has been anxious for months. There were too many delays getting her off that island. You are both coming with me. We have to make some excuse until we can retrieve her.”

“There is no reason for the boy to come. I can handle it,” Neil said.

“This is part of the business.” He pounded his fist on the desk. “Fire Horse, you will watch and learn. If my son can’t handle these affairs, you will have to. You’re the only piece of good luck we’ve had lately. You will be more than Harry’s brother. You will be my son. It will be easier to control fire than create it.”

Neil tensed. It sounded like the promise of something I once wanted desperately — a family who valued me, a place to belong. But I wasn’t the fool I used to be.

Mr. Hon unlocked the front door and led us through the dark streets.

The yellow lights of windows stared down from above. Chinatown shut its doors as soon as the evening shopping was done. The windows at street level were covered with boards to keep out the bullets that sometimes still flew from tong guns.

We had walked half a dozen blocks when Mr. Hon stopped at a door, knocked, and spoke a few words to a face behind it, then waited impatiently as fingers struggled to pull the thick wood open. He led us up a narrow flight of stairs to a hallway. Then we walked through a second and third door that had only another long hallway and a watchman between them. From there we entered a large room lined on two sides with a series of curtained doorways. Men and women sat on couches, resting in the shadows. Hushed voices trickled into the room through the limp fabric, punctuated by high-pitched, lifeless laughter. Mr. Hon reached for the only door in the room and pulled it open.

A man, stooped-over and gray, looked up from behind a table covered with scattered papers. "My old friend, welcome." Surprise flickered across his face when I came through the door, and a flash of fear when Neil followed. "I'll get the tea. One of the girls just brought a fresh pot." He shuffled to the corner of the room, where a teapot rested next to cups in a basket. As he poured the steaming tea, his elbows poked at the worn spots on his faded robe. He held the cup out to Mr. Hon, who did not move.

"Mr. Lo, there was a problem," Mr. Hon said, his voice calm and steady.

Mr. Lo raised his head. "A problem? With the Americans? You

said she would be off that island today," he stammered, his friendly tones pulled tight.

"She arrived this afternoon as promised. She is here in Chinatown."

"Fine. Then bring her here."

Mr. Hon cleared his throat, but continued in a strained voice. "We do not have her to bring to you."

Mr. Lo dropped the cup, letting it clatter and spill. Tea pooled on the table, steam rising from it. "You sold her to someone else after promising her to me!"

"No, of course not, my friend. She was arrested."

"Impossible! She arrived today. She did not have time to get arrested!"

"It is not a problem. I can deal with the police. Though perhaps you don't want her. She was too thin and brown. She would have brought shame to your establishment."

"She would have brought *money* to my establishment. Now I have to wait months for another girl — *years*, with all the rules the Americans are making." He put his face in his hands.

"We will make this right," Mr. Hon said. The strain of the night made his face heavy with emotion it was not used to holding.

"You have had many chances to make this right," Mr. Lo said.

"I am sure we can come to an agreement."

Mr. Lo shook his head. "There can be no agreement."

Mr. Hon's voice hardened. "Do not say words you will regret."

"I will say whatever I want. The police will close my business. That Donaldson woman will take my girls while you watch through your silk curtains." I glanced toward Neil when I heard the name of the woman he wanted to send me to, but he refused to look at

me. "The tongs don't want to protect Chinatown anymore. The young are too busy dying, and the old are counting their coins." He leaned on the table, gripping its sides.

Mr. Hon faced him, his lips pressed tightly together. "What are you saying?"

"Someone has to pay for the trouble this has caused," he said, ringing a bell on his desk.

"You are threatening me. You are wasting your time."

"I don't think so. I am not the only one in Chinatown unhappy with the way you do business. I will complain to the tong. They will decide who is in the wrong." Mr. Hon put up his hands in protest, but Mr. Lo ignored him and continued. "The Sen Suey Ying boys have been offering their help getting girls. If you will excuse me, I have letters to write."

A curtain hung across a door pulled back.

As soon as I turned, a figure filled the door frame, and a familiar pair of eyes locked on mine. They belonged to Sterling Promise.