

CHAPTER 31

STERLING PROMISE'S MOUTH started to move. Any word that dropped from it could give me away, but he was still staring, his mind working to link the familiar to the unfamiliar. "You . . . you . . ."

Neil froze.

"What are you doing here?" Sterling Promise finally managed.

My heart battled with the anger lingering inside it. Neil looked at Sterling Promise, clearly weighing the possibility that he knew my secret. But when I saw him ball his fists, I took two hurried steps, pulled back my arm, and punched Sterling Promise myself.

The punch felt good. Sterling Promise staggered.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Lo said.

Mr. Hon looked at me, head tilted with curiosity.

"We have history," I said. And at least Sterling Promise would not have to endure one of Neil's punches.

Mr. Hon smiled coolly, catching the scent of a fight he could win. He turned to Sterling Promise, who was pressing his palm to his face, eyes blinking in surprise. "Fire Horse has been under my

protection since he arrived here," Mr. Hon said. "Do you have a complaint against him?"

"Fire Horse." Sterling Promise let out a quick, broken laugh.

Neil moved to my side, but Mr. Hon put his hand out. "Let him handle his own affairs."

Sterling Promise was watching Neil, so it was a little unfair when I punched him again. He was starting to sway despite his efforts not to. I pushed him up against the wall.

"Don't say anything," I hissed in his ear.

Mr. Hon announced, "The tong takes care of its own — something your associate might want to remember. I won't tolerate anything that causes a member to lose face."

Neil strolled over and stood behind me. "I thought you didn't have any more friends here," he said in a low voice.

"I don't know if he would want to be called a friend," I whispered.

"You see how we protect our loyal members, Mr. Lo. You might consider that before you start doing business with the Sen Suey Ying boys," Mr. Hon said.

Sterling Promise groaned. "Who would be foolish enough to teach you to punch?"

"You have to keep your mouth shut," I said.

"What trouble have you found now?" he said.

Neil leaned close to Sterling Promise's ear. "If you don't mind your own bloody business, I'll knock every one of your teeth out and shove them up your arse."

"He agrees," I said.

Sterling Promise stared at me for another second before letting his lids drop and slumping down to the floor.

"We are done here," Mr. Hon said, strolling past me to the door.

I looked back at Sterling Promise, who had tried to abandon me. He had lied to me. Cheated me. He also would have married me and spared me all of this deception. He had loved me, in his own way, and I felt a stab of how different things could have been. My heartbeat throbbed to the tips of my fingers.

It might have been less painful to be slumped in the corner with a sore stomach and black eye. Instead I had to go out into the street and listen to Mr. Hon congratulate me for the way I handled Sterling Promise.

"I enjoyed that more than I thought I would," he said. "How dare Lo threaten me! You remind me of myself at your age." Another wave of nausea hit me. "And that young man, Lo's assistant, he has wronged you, yes?"

"We were on Angel Island together. He cheated me out of something . . . when we were gambling."

"This is exactly what I have been trying to teach Harry. You can't let people cheat you or lie to you. It takes away all your dignity."

How much dignity could I have left after all the lies I had bred and borne?

When we returned to the house, Neil took his paper and stomped out. Mr. Hon locked the door and went to his office. I had never felt so alone.