

CHAPTER 32

AFTER A LONG, RESTLESS NIGHT, the memory of Sterling Promise still crawled through my every thought. I replayed the moment I saw him in my head, my memory shifting his expression from sad to angry and back until I was dizzy with emotion.

Still, I found myself pulling his suit on over my bindings that morning. The New Year would begin in two days, and I did not want to start it sharing a house with Mr. Hon and his cruelty. I would leave today, I decided, taking only the things I had brought.

Mr. Hon was on the phone in his office. "What do you mean she is not in the jail? Where did they take her? She couldn't disappear. Someone has her. I bet it's the Sen Suey Ying boys. Dig them out of any holes they crawled into and find out what you can. Let our boys know that I am willing to pay for information."

The house had the hushed feel that often surrounds deep, thick anger. Neil was back in his chair. "You have more enemies than Hon," he said, continuing to read his paper.

"Is Harry back?"

Neil shook his head.

"I need to get out of here," I said.

He lowered the paper. "Ah, maybe you have a little brain in that head of yours after all."

"Hon's just sent soldiers to search for hatchet men from Sen Suey Ying. If you tell him that I'm looking too, I could sneak away."

"They could follow you. If you lead them to the mission home, then disappear, it would raise suspicions. You put the girl at risk."

"I'll be careful."

"Jaysuz. Wouldn't that be grand." Neil gave me directions, and I left the Hon house.

In the bright sun of the morning, I made my way through the city. The mission home was not far in distance, but it felt worlds away. Chin and his men patrolled the streets, but they were not looking for me, so their glances slipped past me as I climbed the street that led to the mission home.

The facade was plainer than much of Chinatown, with flat sides stacked with windows, lacking the flourishes of curved iron balconies or brightly tiled rooftops that decorated the rest of the neighborhood. It reflected the hard reality of the place more than the illusion.

When my hand knocked against the door, a voice behind me commanded, "Stop right there!" in English followed by rough Chinese. A pale-faced woman marched up the street, her heels clicking under her long, dark skirt. She'd gathered her wild hair into a chaotic bun, but strands of it still flew across her cheek. "Go away. I'll call the police," she said in the most polished Chinese I had heard from someone with a pale face.

"I want to see a friend," I tried in my best English, hoping to convince her to trust me.

"And take her back. I can spot a hatchet man a mile away." Her frown heaped accusations on me.

"No, I . . ."

She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the street. I jerked away and ran toward the door. In two long steps she had my arm again. I was thinking through the moves I could use to escape her grip when I heard a familiar voice.

"Jade Moon!" Spring Blossom threw the door open.

"Stay there!" the woman and I both called. I was terrified she would step into the street and be seen.

Spring Blossom froze in the shadows of the doorway. "Miss Donaldson, this is the girl I was telling you about. The girl who sent me in her place."

The woman's face softened as she studied me curiously. "Extraordinary." She released her grip on my arm and held out her hand. I looked at it suspiciously, but she held it steady, waiting, so I reached to shake it. "I'm Miss Donaldson. I've been looking forward to meeting you." She led me through the front door and shut it behind her.

She turned to Spring Blossom. "I would like to talk to your friend. I will bring her to you shortly," she promised.

Spring Blossom smiled at me. "I'm glad you're here."

Miss Donaldson took me into her office and sat down behind a heavy desk. It never occurred to me that a woman would have a study full of dark furniture, as many ledgers as Mr. Hon, and as many papers as my father. I sat down across from her. Her face was a mix of angles, and everything was just a little too sharp and wild for beauty — her pale skin too fair for her dark eyebrows, her face too thin for her large, bright eyes. But at the same time, those

features demanded admiration. She looked like a woman who decided things, who molded the world around her instead of letting it push against her. She had the calm determination of those who feel right, deep in their bones, so they have no need to prove it to anyone.

"You are a brave girl," she said. "Imagine my surprise when another girl who needed rescuing showed up on my doorstep. I should have known you would do something bold like that, considering the pride Neil takes in you."

"I could not bring anything with me. I hope you can give me some clothes."

She waved my words away with a flick of her small hand. "Spring Blossom told me your story. It was wonderful what you did, sending her here in your own place. The girls are all talking about it."

"It was not much," I said, looking down at the jacket I was wearing. I wanted so badly to peel it from my skin, and with it, the past five months.

"Don't diminish its value with your false modesty," she snapped. I jerked my head up. Was she *angry* with me? The steely taste of outrage settled on my tongue.

"If I could just change into something else," I said, the binding around my chest cutting into my skin.

"You know, there are girls all over Chinatown who cannot escape the brothels. I have spent decades trying to rescue these girls from prostitution. Do you know what their lives are like?"

I shook my head.

"I hope you never find out. Some of the tongs are desperate for the power that is slipping from their hands. Thirty years ago they

ran these streets. Now we are slowly taking them back. But the more desperate they get to survive, the harder it is to find girls."

"The girls should find you," I said.

"How would they?" she said, her voice rising. "How would Spring Blossom have found me without you?" Flashes of anger gave more of an air of wildness to her features. I watched, waiting for her to yell. But she didn't; her face settled into strength. "Most girls are never allowed on the streets, and if they are, they are told terrifying stories about me and the police to keep them away from those who would help them. I can only rescue girls if I know where they are. And information rarely leaks through the wall of silence that the Chinese have built. I have lost friends to the cause. Community members, the police risk their lives for every favor I ask."

She measured me. "You probably want to stay here, but I have another proposal. I think you might be able to find those girls."

"Me?" I said.

"Yes, you. You are uniquely placed. Mr. Hon must know the addresses of all the brothels in Chinatown. You can find them out for me. Bring the addresses here. I will take care of the rest."

"Why can't Neil do it?" I demanded. Freedom from one cage only seemed to bind me into another.

"Neil's interest in rescuing Chinese girls is recent." Her mouth pressed in a line. "And limited to ones who give him particular trouble."

"You ask too much." I shook my head, feeling her steady stare push at my defenses. "I may not get another chance to escape the Hons' house. I can tell you where they were taking Spring Blossom, but that is all. I can't go back to that prison."

"Then you leave those girls in *their* prisons."

"You are saying that it is my duty," I said, rising to my feet.

"No, it is your choice," Miss Donaldson said, her voice firm. And with that, all the walls I had imagined dissolved away.

"You can stay here. I would not ask this of any other girl," she said.

I stared at her for a moment, then sank back into the chair. I rubbed my forehead, trying to think.

She rested her hands in her lap. "Spring Blossom said that you liked stories."

"I used to. I don't find them very useful lately."

"Perhaps you just don't know the right stories. Stories are supposed to provide light when we are stumbling around in the darker parts of our lives. But eventually, we must all find our own story. Maybe this could be your story."

Nushi had told me to find my own story when I got to America. My hand went to the pouch where her jade hung around my neck. "If it was, nothing good would happen to you or the girls."

"Why do you say that? You have proven yourself to be clever and bold. You seem fearless."

"I cause destruction everywhere. I am a Fire Horse — very bad luck in China."

She leaned forward with another small smile. "This isn't China."

"I haven't managed to escape my curse yet."

"It's not a curse you are running from. It's yourself. And you will have to run much further to escape that."

"You don't understand," I snapped. I crossed my arms and broke away from her stare.

"You're wrong," Miss Donaldson said gently. "I understand perfectly. It is frightening and dangerous to be so bold. And that is

powerful. Very powerful. You let it out and it causes harm to others. You grip onto it and it pounds away at you inside. But if you use it, if you channel it for good, it does the impossible.”

She was a strong woman. I could tell because her words battled against the words of my father, my grandfather, Auntie Wu, the rest of the village. Maybe the world didn't mold itself around her. Maybe she faced it, took its blows, and remained standing.

“You won't help, and I understand that too. Few people would. But, Jade Moon, you are not trapped — not like these girls are between walls. You say your spirit is trapped? No one has the key to that. I can't release you from that prison inside you.” She stood. “Let's find Spring Blossom. She will show you your room.”

Miss Donaldson led me to a large room filled with young girls sewing. She signaled to Spring Blossom, who rose from her seat in the back and stepped past more than one girl staring openly at me. Spring Blossom took me to a small, bright room on the second floor, furnished with three beds and a dresser. Tokens of the girls who lived there lay scattered around the room — ribbons, books, needles stuck into stitchwork. Spring Blossom sat on the edge of her bed.

“I am so glad you are here. I worried all night. Miss Donaldson told me a little about the people who tried to take me. What were you doing with the Hons?”

“It is a long story,” I said.

“You know how I love stories,” she replied.

I told her about meeting Harry and Chin at the dock. About Harry taking me to the wrong laundry on purpose, letting me think the Yings had left Chinatown. About the Hon house, and the plans Mr. Hon made for me. About running the lottery numbers and learning to fight. About the laundryman and his gun. And

finally about going to the docks with Harry and Chin. "I suppose you know the rest," I said.

"How did you manage all that time? In all that danger?"

"Neil would say it was luck."

"Well, you're here now." She smiled. "It is so strange here after so long at Angel Island. The girls don't seem to have a care, even though many came from the most devastating circumstances — slave girls, beaten, half-starved. One of them used to work for Mr. Lo, the man they were taking me to."

"Oh." That was all I could manage. I was home now, I told myself, too exhausted from pretending to return.

"Her sister is still there, and it destroys her. She doesn't know where it was because he never allowed the girls on the street." Spring Blossom wrung her hands. "She cried when I told her that I did not know where it was either."

"I will give the address to Miss Donaldson," I said.

"You are so good! Her sister will be so happy."

I opened my mouth to say, "It was nothing," but I couldn't.

"I am grateful for what you did for me. Think where I would have been, what I would have had to do if you had not saved me."

That was exactly what I was trying *not* to think about. "You seem happy."

"Oh, I am. I am going to learn English, and Miss Donaldson said she would teach me to knit." She paused. "And it isn't just that, Jade Moon." She looked at me. "I feel safe, maybe for the first time. In China, I was a pawn, a daughter that could be married, a daughter-in-law that could be blamed. On Angel Island, I was a prisoner. Here, I think I can just be Spring Blossom."

I hid my face in my hands. It was exactly what I wanted, but I couldn't have it yet.

"You'll be safe now too," she said, smoothing the blanket at the end of the bed.

I shook my head.

"Why not? What could hurt you here? You don't need to pretend anymore."

"I might need to pretend a little longer," I said, standing. "Miss Donaldson asked me to help her find other girls. I have to return to the Hon house."

Spring Blossom stood and faced me. "No. You should not have to go back there. Think what they would have done to me! What they could do to you." She started to run her hands under her sleeves, the familiar shadow settling over her face. "I don't want you to do this."

"I know."

"What if something happens to you?"

"It is the first good thing I will have done," I said, reaching out and lifting one of her hands from her arm. "I can't keep being this person who people are afraid of. I want people to look at me and see something good."

"I see good," Spring Blossom said. "Because there is good. You don't have to prove it."

"I think I do."

"To who?" she said, her voice shaking.

"To myself."

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Miss Donaldson sat in the front room, adjusting a bow on the head of a small girl.

"I'll do it," I said before I had time to think of the difficulties.

She clapped her hands together, then tried to dim her excitement. She folded her hands again and rested them in her lap. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Neil will be furious. This is the second time he has tried to get rid of me."

Miss Donaldson smiled. "Maybe he's the cursed one."