

CHAPTER 35

AFTER HARRY DISAPPEARED into the back, Sterling Promise looked at the pattern of dark wood on the table. His face was sour. "I don't like him."

"Then don't help."

"I thought you hated these tricks."

"This is important," I said quietly.

"Important to you?" he asked, pushing for something.

"Important."

"Jade Moon, the game you are playing is dangerous enough already. Are you sure you want to play it with a fool?"

"Harry is not a fool," I whispered.

"Then you are an even bigger fool for not recognizing it," he said.

"If you aren't willing to help him, then walk away," I hissed.

"Why do you care so much?" he asked, lifting his gaze to meet mine.

"Because Harry doesn't see me as the burden so many others do."

Sterling Promise looked back at the table. "Your suit — is that mine?"

"Yes. You can have it back when we are done with all this. I'll be glad to be rid of it."

"I don't care about the suit anymore." He looked tired, bruised. Under his cheeks, the skin held tightly to the bone, and shadows had appeared under his eyes. He was not the hopeful young man who had showed up at our farm almost a year ago. "Are you happy here in America?" he asked.

"What would I have to be happy about?" I snapped. "Nothing has worked out the way I hoped. I thought I would be staying with the Yings, laughing over bowls of Jell-O."

"But you're not with them," he said. His confusion reminded me how far I was from where I wanted to be.

"No, I'm not. Plans changed."

He studied me, then looked down at the table. "It is harder than I thought." I knew there should be tricks behind his words, but I couldn't find them. "I am looking for more legitimate business opportunities."

"Like fireworks?" I asked.

"Like fireworks. But I have to pay Master Yue back first. I never wanted to use that money, but I had to. Now I am going to be tied to him longer than I'd hoped."

I tilted my head with surprise. It was the first time he acknowledged the bribe. "Harry might help. His father is looking for new businesses for the tong," I said.

"Mr. Hon is one of the most brutal men in Chinatown. A cold, calculating man. Everyone in Chinatown knows it."

My face reddened. "Harry is a good person."

"So you say." Sterling Promise's face hardened. "But Harry cares

most about Harry. You always refuse to see that, and it does nothing but get you in trouble.”

“Yes, it does.” I leaned back and crossed my arms. “It is a good trick — asking someone to do something they already wanted to do, to get what you want.” I pushed back from the table and stood. “Like when you offered to marry me.”

“That was not something you wanted to do,” he said softly.

Harry returned and motioned me to the back.

“Father said to do nothing,” Harry said. “He said Chin is handling it. You are supposed to go back to the house.”

“Have they found her?”

“No. But this girl has brought nothing but trouble. Maybe I *can't* do anything right.”

I couldn't let Harry quit now — I needed those addresses. With a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, I said, “It is too bad. You had everything worked out.”

“I know. We would have found her.”

“He would have been so proud when it worked.” I swallowed. “You sounded so much like him back there. You'll have to find another way to prove yourself . . . if you can.”

Harry thought for a moment. He leaned against the bricks, then came to the decision I was steering him toward. “We're still going to search for the girl.”

Back inside the restaurant, he returned to the table. “Let's talk about the first brothel,” Harry said, sliding into his chair.

“Fine,” Sterling Promise replied with a stiff nod.

Harry pulled out a pencil and a piece of paper, scribbled a list of names, then handed it to Sterling Promise, who scanned it. Eventually, his finger lingered over one.

"What do you know about Mr. Sing?" Harry asked.

"He is a friend of Mr. Lo, so I have met him several times. From what I have heard him say, it seems he used to be one of the most successful businessmen in Chinatown, but he has been declining in influence for the past fifteen years."

"That is true. I think my father has loaned him money several times," Harry said.

Sterling Promise continued, "He refuses to recognize this, and lives his life as if he had the same wealth and influence as he did before."

It was interesting to see Sterling Promise work, peeling back the layers on people. Some of the men he already knew. For others, he would pull scraps of information from Harry and mold them into the necessary key that would open the door. It was free of both the magic and the cruelty I had imagined he must possess in my weaker moments. He just knew people, the way I knew stories, the way Harry knew the streets of Chinatown.

"So how do we get Mr. Sing to show us the slave girls he has?" Harry demanded.

"Flatter his sense of importance. He should lap it up like a dog that hasn't been fed for a month."

Harry looked at him, his face still dark with confusion.

Sterling Promise's voice was weary as he tried to explain. "I will say I have heard that he is having great success, tell him that everyone is talking about how cleverly he manages his businesses."

Harry nodded. "What if he asks why my father doesn't come down himself?"

"Tell him what he wants to hear. Look down at the ground, shift your weight nervously. Say that he does not know of your visit. You wanted your new friend, who would like to set up his own business, to see an excellent example of success."

Harry nodded. He turned to me. "Do *you* think it will work?"

Sterling Promise frowned. "He won't be able to resist. You are offering him the influence and respect that he craves. People don't care if it is only a fragile bubble of success created simply by your words. If you find out what they really want, they will accept even a shadow of it." He dropped his eyes down to the table and said, "Sometimes."

I lifted my chin and looked away.

"Fire Horse, what do you think?" Harry asked again.

"It will work," I said.