

CHAPTER 36

AND SO WE BEGAN OUR SEARCH. The brothels were noisy, busy businesses during the day. The girls who spent their nights behind the curtains now sat like disgruntled wives, sewing buttons on jackets and cuffs on pants. Daylight hardened and hollowed their faces. The brutal women charged with controlling them tried to hurry their languid movements with loud slaps. In some brothels, silk hung on the windows, and pillows rested on rich furniture. In other places, the walls were bare, and rats scratched behind the plaster. No curtains could hide the boards nailed across the windows, and even the finest carpets only muffled the hollow sounds of trapdoors beneath our feet. Harry said they were used for hiding girls if the police came.

Miss Donaldson was right — these were prisons.

Harry cast his eyes around each place, looking for the missing girl. If any of the girls lifted their gaze to meet his, he turned away. Sterling Promise smiled and bowed to every owner, his eyes never wandering. I had only ugly looks for the owners and sad looks for

the girls, so after pretending for Harry's benefit to search for Spring Blossom, I stared past all of it.

Harry took us through the series of heavy doors and hallways that hid each brothel. I collected a string of street names and buildings in my head to pass to Miss Donaldson, while Sterling Promise doled out the right combinations of words to gain us entry: "I have heard your girls are the finest that come from China. Have you been able to get any new ones?" Or "You've lost none of your girls to the police. You must have clever hiding places." And even "Clearly, you only pay the lowest price for your girls, always getting the best side of a bargain. Tell me about the last clever bargain you struck." He took us faithfully from place to place, covering Harry's and my rough manners with a silky flow of sweet words.

Harry's frustration grew. And, yet, the more we failed, the more convinced he was that someone had taken Spring Blossom from the police. Halfway through the day, he pulled me next to him and muttered, "You were right about Sterling Promise. We can't trust him."

"He is doing exactly what we asked him to do."

"Yes, but like you said, he is tricky," Harry said, waiting for me to agree.

"He has done nothing but help us so far. He had sour Mr. Tou showing us around like honored guests."

Harry shook his head at me and led us to our next brothel, his shoulders hunched over, his fists stuffed deep into his pockets, and his long legs leaving Sterling Promise and me scrambling ten steps behind. Sterling Promise caught up to me, leaned over, and said, "He blames me for the fact that he hasn't found the girl yet."

"He is disappointed. Don't worry."

"I don't think he trusts me."

"He has seen what you can do. People have to keep their guard up when they are around you." I knew. I was exhausted from it.

"I don't care what he thinks," he said, looking hard at me. "But you should know, I'm not trying to trick either of you."

"That is a relief, until I realize that it is exactly what I want you to say. Which I know you are well aware of."

Sterling Promise frowned, but it was the hurt in his eyes that threw me off balance.

"Don't worry," I said. "Harry will look everywhere for the girl. He won't find her, but his father will be proud that he did something."

"He won't find her?" he said.

"What?"

"You said he won't find her. How do you know that?"

"I didn't say that." My breath tightened.

"Yes, you did." Sterling Promise's voice was raised. Harry turned to look at us, so he dropped it to a whisper. "I should have known," he said, bringing his fist to his forehead. "What is it about you? I can't think straight when you are involved." He turned to me. "You are going to get hurt."

"I . . . I didn't do anything," I said.

"You have no idea what you do."

I tried to swallow, squeezing at the guilt lodged in my throat.

"Harry may want his father's respect, but your influence over him is strong too. I don't know how you do it, Jade Moon. I can win influence like a chess game, with carefully calculated moves and strategies. Yours just grows like a seed. You shine your sunlight on someone and he cannot help but stretch toward you."

"I..." But Sterling Promise slowed his steps and dropped behind me. By the time I caught up to Harry, Sterling Promise was half a block behind.

"He is making fools of us," Harry whispered.

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying that I think he took the girl or at least knows where she is. Maybe he is opening a brothel of his own. Maybe he is trying to take over Mr. Lo's."

"You think Sterling Promise took her? Why would he do that?"

Harry's words sent flashes of fear through me. "Sterling Promise wants to sell fireworks. He has no interest in selling girls. He'd rather have the reward," I said.

"How do you know that?"

"I know."

"Do you? You know everything and nothing about him at the same time. You have seen the way he digs into people, becoming the person they want right at that moment. Do you really think you can know someone like that?"

"If you don't trust him, trust me," I said.

"You told me not to trust him. You said he only does favors that will benefit him. I don't think he is helping us at all." The purpose in his eyes had burned away and left only a fearful desperation.

"Harry, let's focus on finding the girl."

"What if that is impossible?"

"Then you will have tried, and your father will respect that."

"There is something he will respect more," Harry said.

"What?"

"Finding the man who took her," he said, looking over his shoulder at Sterling Promise.

This day was making me dizzy. I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, and a single gust of wind could send me tumbling to the rocks below.

We continued our search, but Harry's attitude became increasingly hostile. His back stiffened and his feet marched down streets and around corners. He barked out one-word answers to Sterling Promise's questions. By the time the afternoon had cooled, a thick cloud of disgust and frustration hung around Harry. Sterling Promise had started to tap his leg with his finger two addresses ago.

At the last place, Harry stood like a stone while Sterling Promise listened sympathetically to Mr. Chu's complaints about the police. He was the most paranoid of all the owners, and after Sterling Promise had admired the clever way he avoided police raids, we got a peek at a few of the hidden panels that lined his walls and floors.

"So that is where the girls hide when the police come?" I said.

"Yes. The police think they are so clever, but I know they are spying on me, and I am ready," Mr. Chu said.

Sterling Promise nodded, the same wrinkle between his eyes as Mr. Chu's.

"I am sure I was being followed this morning."

"I would not be surprised," said Sterling Promise.

"So, your father thinks he can do something about the police?" Mr. Chu said to Harry.

"Do you have a new girl or not?" Harry snapped.

"A new girl?" Mr. Chu blinked, trying to recapture the line of the conversation.

"No, you don't, do you?" Sterling Promise and I looked at Harry. "Of course you don't. This has been a waste of time. The girl is far away by now." Harry spun on his heels, threw open the door, and stomped out, leaving Sterling Promise and me staring at his back.

Mr. Chu moved toward a door at the side of the room. "If you are playing some sort of trick on me, I want to know," he said. He knocked, and two men came through. Their rough faces and sleepy eyes made me suspect that they were hatchet men. Their black jackets, loose enough to carry knives and guns, made me sure. I looked around the long, narrow room. It would be hard to avoid three men *and* their guns and knives.

I nudged Sterling Promise, trying to get him to say something, but he stared forward, his finger tapping against his leg.

"What is this?" Mr. Chu said.

If Sterling Promise wasn't going to save us, I would have to. What would this man want to hear?

The two men moved closer and one reached under his coat. The truth? Everyone likes the truth, right? "We are looking for a girl," I stammered. I could hear the shaking in my voice.

"Yes, I heard. One you think I have." One of the men moved behind us, blocking the door.

"We didn't want to worry you, but this girl is dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Mr. Chu said. "What do you mean?"

"We think the girl may be working with that Donaldson woman, informing the police," I said. "That woman has always been trouble."

Mr. Chu spat on the floor and cursed Miss Donaldson's ancestors with a vigor that brought pink to my cheeks.

"The girl poses as a girl for sale. Then she finds out where the brothel is, escapes, and brings Miss Donaldson to its door."

Sterling Promise looked at me. He was nodding his head slowly. "Mr. Hon is worried, but he doesn't want any panic to hurt the business," he said. He looked at the two men. "You understand."

Mr. Chu narrowed his eyes and motioned the men forward. Words left me as the fight started to flood my veins.

"We thought she might be here because of the difficulties the police have had raiding your establishment," Sterling Promise said. He grabbed my arm and moved me behind him. I could feel the trembling of his hand, but he continued with a steady voice. "Of course, we never intended to search your hiding places, but when you offered . . . Who could resist such a treat?"

Mr. Chu paused. I gripped my hands into fists and swept my eyes over the room, calculating. Then a smile spread across Mr. Chu's face. "Ha! I predicted this. I have been telling Hon for years about the spies, but he has ignored my warnings." He waved a hand at the two hatchet men, who slipped back through the door. "Sit, have a drink."

We sat. Sterling Promise rattled off a string of perfect responses to the man's complaints, and by the time we had been served tea, I could barely see the cup shaking in my hand.

Sterling Promise rose and bowed when we had finished. "Let us know if you notice anything suspicious."

Mr. Chu nodded. "I will," he said.

After we left, Sterling Promise stopped in the hallway, leaning against the stained wall between the second and third door.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"I . . . I just need a moment." He covered his face with his hand.

"He was going to kill us."

"Not necessarily."

"He was. I saw it."

"You could have gotten out. I would have fought them."

"You should have run."

"I couldn't have left you there."

"Harry left you."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry I got you involved."

We stood next to each other, letting the strain of the danger wane. When I pushed away from the wall, Sterling Promise closed his eyes. "I knew the risk."

I opened the door to the street and took a deep breath of the fresh air.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

"I . . . I just need . . ."

"Don't worry. I'll wait outside," I said.

I had been even surer that he was going to kill us than Sterling Promise was, and my heart was struggling to return to a steady beat. Then Harry stepped from behind the door and said, "I told you we couldn't trust Sterling Promise."

"At least he didn't leave us in there to be killed," I said.

"When are you going to stop defending him?" Harry shouted.

"I shouldn't have to defend him. He is doing what we asked," I said.

Sterling Promise stomped out the door. "You can't leave like that, Harry. You put both of us in danger."

"Don't tell me what I can't do."

Sterling Promise turned to me. "Just remember, I kept my promise."

Harry's glare followed Sterling Promise as he walked away. "I am taking care of this," he said.

I held out my hand to block him. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. Are you with me?"

"No," I said warily. "Not for this. You're wrong about Sterling Promise. This isn't who you are. You aren't your father." I watched Harry's anger get buried in sadness for a moment, then resurface. He pushed past me. "Wait, where are you going?"

"If you won't take care of this, Chin will. We will find the girl. Chin will gladly convince Sterling Promise to talk. My father is going to be very disappointed in you."

"Good," I yelled after him. It was the one good punch before the sickness settled in.