

CHAPTER 37

I HAD ALL THE LOCATIONS of the brothels tucked inside my head, along with as many secret panels and trapdoors as the owners had shown us. Miss Donaldson could rescue more girls than the mission could hold. Gathering addresses was all I had agreed to do, so I turned toward the mission home.

As I moved down the streets, I told myself that Sterling Promise would be fine. He would have left me in the same circumstances, right? He could talk his way out of this. But I knew that Chin wasn't much for talk. Then the irritating reality that Sterling Promise had helped us, just as he promised, tunneled itself into my head and refused to leave. And behind it came another shock — I didn't want him hurt. He was not the same Sterling Promise who had tossed aside my dreams and broken my heart.

I was so distracted that about two blocks from the mission home, I almost ran straight into a giant of a man.

"I have been looking for you," Neil said. "When I came to see that you'd made it to Clara's" — he cleared his throat — "Miss Donaldson's, she told me the bloody foolish errand she had sent

you on. I should have known better than to put the two of your heads together."

"She didn't make me do it. It was my choice."

"Oh, I blame both of you."

I grabbed Neil's newspaper out of his hand and scribbled a quick map of Chinatown, adding a few landmarks to help orient Miss Donaldson.

"I have to help Sterling Promise," I said, continuing to draw.

"The guy you hit at Lo's."

"Chin and Harry think he is responsible for the missing girl. They are searching for him. I can't let him take the blame for what I did." I marked the spots where the brothels sat, with the street numbers if they had them, and handed the paper back to Neil.

"Like hell you can't. You get back to the mission home."

"Take that to Miss Donaldson. I'll come right back."

He reached for my arm, but I had always been quicker than Neil. He'd taught me that if we ever fought, my only choice would be to run away.

I buried myself in the endless alleys of Chinatown. Without Harry's guidance, I made several wrong turns, but I still caught Mr. Lo just as he was closing the outside door to his building, his shoulders bent. He looked at me, surprised.

"If you have come for money for Hon, there isn't any." He shook his head, his hand pressed to his forehead. "That Donaldson woman came here with the police today and took my girls. I don't know how she found me. I'm ruined."

I pressed my lips together. So Miss Donaldson had already started her raids, with the one address I gave her when I saw Spring Blossom. If I had a moment, I would have enjoyed that news, but I was racing against Harry, Chin, and Mr. Hon's many eyes. As soon as Miss Donaldson raided the other addresses, Sterling Promise would be in even more danger. "I am looking for Sterling Promise, the young man who works for you."

"You're the one who beat him up," he said, turning to go.

"I'm not here to hurt him. He needs my help."

He waved his hand and started walking. "I have lived in Chinatown longer than you have been alive. Some things have changed, but the hatchet men have never been known for helping people."

I put my hand on his arm gently. "I am not a hatchet man." I willed him to see past his assumptions. "Please, I need to find him."

Mr. Lo looked at me for another moment. "He lives in a boarding house two blocks from here," he said, pointing down the street. "I don't know the room, but someone there can tell you. If you find him, you might as well tell him about the raid. Yue cannot complain about the money I send him anymore."

The air inside the boarding house was thick from too many people breathing it. Sleepy-eyed men squeezed past one another down the narrow hall. I knocked on the door that one had pointed to when I asked for Sterling Promise. When it cracked open, I pushed past Sterling Promise and shut the door.

"What are you doing here?" His shirt was open, and he hurried to button it.

"I don't have time to explain." I grabbed at the things scattered around the room and dumped them on the blanket covering his small bed.

"What is all of this about, Jade Moon?"

"I am getting you out of here," I said, tying the blanket into a bundle before holding it out to him.

"I'm not going anywhere until you explain why. Does this have to do with Harry?"

I stared at him, wondering if I could knock him out and drag him away, but I knew that was not the way to help him. What would help him was the truth. I sat on the cot, hugging the bundle filled with his things to my chest.

"What have you done?" he said slowly, standing over me. His eyes were serious, not plotting, just waiting.

"I rescued the girl we've been looking for. Actually, a policeman rescued her, but I might have helped."

"I knew you didn't want to find that girl! Why would you do something so reckless?"

I stood to face him. "You saw what happens to those girls."

"Jade Moon . . ."

I pushed my face closer. "No one should have to survive that way — suffocating inside life. You and I know that." I grabbed his shoulders, using him as an anchor in the chaos I had created. I needed him to believe that I had not destroyed everything for nothing.

"But the risk," he said weakly.

"I know. I am not any different here."

"No, you're not," he said. He hung his head, and I dropped back down onto the bed. He sat next to me, balling his fists on his

knees, the muscles across his back tightening under his shirt. While I had spent five moon cycles getting used to the closeness of men, I could feel every inch of Sterling Promise's leg as it pressed against mine.

"We have to get you out of here," I said. "Mr. Lo's girls were taken today. And Harry thinks you're responsible for it. Mr. Hon's hatchet men are looking for you."

His fists gripped tighter.

"I should have never gotten you involved," I stammered.

Sterling Promise raised his head and studied me. "How much danger are we in?"

Tears swelled in my eyes.

He took a slow breath, then he seemed to decide something. "Go to Mrs. Ying."

"You have seen her?"

"Of course. I went straight there when I came."

I stared at him, my mouth open.

"To find you. To make sure you were safe."

I shook my head.

"Forget Harry. Please. He cares for you, but not as much as he should. I would know." He stood up and pocketed a few more items without looking at me.

"Harry lied to me," I said. "He was supposed to bring me to the Yings, but instead he took me to the wrong place on purpose." My chest tightened. "Look at me. The Yings won't want me. I'm a hatchet man now. I am just as stuck as I was the day you saw me in that mud."

He did look at me, and it made my heart jump. "No, you have become yourself. You . . . you are as captivating as the flame that

dances in a fire. And just as destructive." He resumed packing. His face had darkened with an anger I had never seen him allow himself. "I'll get myself out of this," he said, his mind far away. He opened a drawer, fumbled for something, then stuffed a piece of paper into my hand. It was a laundry slip with the Yings' name and address on the top. "Dress as a woman again and no one will ever know."

"Let me help you," I said.

"I don't want your help," Sterling Promise said, grabbing my hand.

"Because I'm unlucky?"

"Because you're dangerous." He squeezed my hand and gave me a small smile.

"You can't bribe or talk your way out of this. Chin, Mr. Hon's hatchet man, is going to want to fight. It might help to have someone dangerous on your side."

Sterling Promise shook his head, dropping my hand and lifting his to touch my face before turning toward the door. He picked up the bundle. "No, Jade Moon. I never want to see you again." Then he lowered his voice. "I'm not lucky enough for you."

"You don't mean that," I said, but he slipped away from me into the hallway, leaving me standing among the things he left behind.

I was no longer trapped on Angel Island. I was free from the locked doors and nailed windows of Mr. Hon's house. I had gotten the addresses Miss Donaldson needed. I had earned my place here. I should have felt light without all these chains. But I did not. Even leaving Sterling Promise on the shore of Angel Island had not felt this final. "Never" meant no second chances, no change of heart. And part of me knew that I deserved "never." I had stolen

away his dream, and when he helped me anyway, I had taken everything else.

After a few seconds, I made my way to the front door and stepped into the street. Chinatown stood in the shadows of the evening. A group of children had gathered in animated conversation at the mouth of an alley, one holding the handle of a bright red wagon. They looked every inch American with the wide sweeps of their gestures and enthusiastic voices.

I crossed the street and looked back at the house Sterling Promise had stayed in. A man leaned against the corner of the building where an alley emptied into the street. His suit was dark enough to hide him at night. His jacket was loose enough for guns, knives, and a little padding. My heart started to beat faster. Was I imagining danger because I had lived with it for so long? I scanned the storefronts and saw another figure in dark suit and a low-set hat stop in front of a grocery facing the same alley. A woman quickened her steps as she passed him. He was one of Chin's men. If Chin's men were here, there was a chance that Chin was here. If Chin was here, Sterling Promise was in danger.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to erase the men, and started to walk toward the mission home.

Sterling Promise doesn't want my help. He never wants to see me again.

Then my feet stopped.

When had I ever done anything he wanted?