

CHAPTER 38

I SWUNG AROUND and walked down the alley to the back of Sterling Promise's boarding house, strategies crowding my head. When I turned the last corner, I saw Chin holding Sterling Promise in front of Harry.

Harry pulled back his fist. It was past time for strategies; it was time to fight. I ran at them. No one saw me until it was too late. I lowered my shoulder the way Neil had taught me and rammed it into Harry. His fist was already in motion, but it only grazed the side of my face.

"What are you doing? He helped us," I shouted.

"I am not listening to his lies," Harry said, glaring at Sterling Promise.

"I told you to stay out of this," Sterling Promise said to me, his teeth gripped tight.

"Get out of the way, Fire Horse," Chin said, shoving me into a wall of bricks. "This doesn't concern you," he challenged. "Does it?"

All Sterling Promise had to do was tell them who I was, and their anger would switch over to me. "Tell them the truth," I begged him.

"I don't tell the truth," he said, staring at me.

"Please, Harry," I said. "You made a deal with him."

"You can't make deals with cheaters," Harry said. His eyes burned with the fire I knew so well.

"Don't do this. You are too angry."

"Get out of my way," he growled. Harry pulled back his fist. I tried to grab his arm, but one of Chin's men seized me. I struggled as Harry punched Sterling Promise in the mouth. Sterling Promise turned his face and spit out a mix of saliva and blood.

"I am going to kill you for what you did to my brothers of the tong, to my father," Harry shouted. I saw fear flash across Sterling Promise's face, but he did not open his mouth. Harry pulled back and let loose another punch to his stomach.

"Stop it," I cried, wrestling myself free.

But Harry heard only the furious pounding of his own anger. "You tried to take away any chance I had of winning my father's respect. He will respect me after I rid Chinatown of you." He punched Sterling Promise again, this one landing on his jaw, knocking his head to the side. Sterling Promise was slumped over now in Chin's arms, his breath coming heavily through his nose. Harry's fist reared back again. Chin had a satisfied smile on his face.

"He did not do any of that to you, Harry."

"Stay out of this," Sterling Promise said.

"I sent the girl to the mission home," I announced.

Every face turned toward me.

"You're lying," Chin growled. "You're just protecting him."

"You know," I said to Harry. "You caught me there the first time."

"But you were checking for the missing girl," Harry said.

"I was checking *on* the missing girl," I said.

The anger broke from his face and a deep hurt filled the cracks it left. "You . . . you . . .," Harry stuttered.

"You know it is true, Harry," I said. "I did this to you."

Harry looked at his feet.

"I knew we couldn't trust you," Chin said. He let go of Sterling Promise, who collapsed to his hands and knees. "So it is you we should kill." He stepped closer, reaching inside his jacket.

My body tensed, and my feet found the stance Neil had made me practice thousands of times. Harry made a small automatic motion to stop him, but he didn't finish it.

Sterling Promise rose to his feet and leaned against the building. "You can kill her, but it would be a cowardly thing to do," he said, loud exhales between each word. "You will be the laughingstock of Chinatown. People will think you didn't know."

"Her?" said Chin. The smile fell from his face.

"Her?" repeated Harry. His eyes searched mine.

My heart trembled, and I started to feel cold.

"Of course you knew. I would have told you sooner, but I knew it was impossible that she was fooling you." Only Sterling Promise could find the single thread to pull in this wreckage. "I am simply concerned for your reputations," he said.

"A girl?" Harry's face was all confusion and shock. "Impossible!"

"It's just another of his lies," Chin said. He grabbed at the shirt I wore under Sterling Promise's suit and ripped at the button. It gave way, and he pulled his hand back. In it was a fistful of my wrappings, wearing thin after months of use.

Chin dropped the strip of material like it was a snake. I pulled my shirt closed again and held it there.

"My name is Jade Moon," I said, letting my voice return to the

octave where it belonged. The fighter in me pushed off its final mask, and I felt the pressure in my chest release.

Chin shook his head. "This doesn't change anything. We should still kill him . . . her." His voice was a little unsure. "Women have been killed before."

Harry's face was drawn tight. I had never seen him look so much like his father. "I . . . I'm not . . ."

But Harry's hesitation only fueled Chin's old anger with me. "I'm in charge of protecting the tong, and she is a threat." He reached his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. I started to choke on the air around me.

"Harry, this isn't who you are," I tried.

Harry pressed his lips together. "I swore I wouldn't let my father get cheated again." He nodded at Chin.

Sterling Promise lifted his head. The curtain over his eyes that I had seen many times was dropped yet again, hiding all his emotions. "Wait." He pulled himself up. His shoulders relaxed. "I'm not saying you can't kill her. Of course you can. I'm saying you shouldn't. There is another solution."

Harry turned to Sterling Promise. "What do you mean?"

"You lost one girl. Now you've found another."

Harry stared at him, weighing each word.

"Maybe you can earn your father's respect after all."

I looked at Sterling Promise. "What . . . ? No." The world had shifted so quickly; it seemed to be spinning. He didn't look at me.

"She has no family here," Sterling Promise continued. "She's alone, belongs to no one." He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his lip. "It is certainly a more complete revenge. You could hold your head up as you walk the streets."

Chin smiled. He called to the two men guarding the alley. They were there before I had a chance to run.

"You can't," I shouted, struggling against the hands that suddenly gripped me.

"You can go tell your boss that we have a new girl for him," Harry said to Sterling Promise. He was forcing every word past his lips, like they stung.

"Harry, no! You can't do this to me."

"You stole from my father," he said. "I have to."

"I didn't steal anything," I said. "The girl was never his! You hate this life as much as I do. You know it's wrong. You said —"

Harry shook off my words. "Don't tell me what I hate." He looked at Sterling Promise again. "She lied to you too, didn't she?"

Sterling Promise looked away and stuck his hands in his pockets, mimicking Harry's easy stance perfectly. "She's a Fire Horse. She will destroy all of us to survive."

His words were like a punch in the stomach; they pushed all the breath out and left me scrambling for air. "I know you must hate me, but this?"

He took a step closer. "I warned you to stay away," Sterling Promise said. "But you didn't. And now you leave me no choice." He looked at me as if I was supposed to understand something. "I am tricky, remember."

For a second the curtain rose and I glimpsed a deep sadness in his eyes, but I didn't know anymore what was real and what was pretend.

Chin's laughter broke his gaze, and Sterling Promise's face hardened. "You *are* tricky, my friend," Chin said. "The tong has work for people like you."

"I do find myself looking for work," Sterling Promise said.