

## CHAPTER 39

HARRY AND STERLING PROMISE stood shoulder to shoulder. "Take her to Lo's and lock her up. I'll talk to my father." Harry's mouth was stiff.

Chin nodded, grinning, and tightened his grip on me. "Your father will be very pleased with you."

"I don't want to hear another word from you," Harry shouted at him, his cheeks red with fury.

Chin's face darkened, but his mouth stayed shut. He and his men forced me down the street. Sterling Promise followed behind. I tried to add up my advantages and disadvantages like Neil had taught me. I had some training, a talent for getting involved in things that were none of my business, three people who I had betrayed, and a ball of outrage deep in my stomach. But Chin was stronger than me, and Sterling Promise was cleverer. Harry was just desperate.

Chin marched me to Lo's place and up the stairs to his second-floor office.

"Behind the curtain," Sterling Promise said, pointing to one wall.

Chin pulled back the curtain to reveal what looked like a paneled wall. Sterling Promise slid back two of the boards to reveal a slice of a room. I stumbled back into one of Chin's men. Chin grabbed my arm and yanked me toward the opening. I jerked my arm back and jammed an elbow into his belly. A hatchet man grabbed my arm from behind, and Chin pushed me across the threshold, slamming me against the back wall. I dropped to my knees. By the time I scrambled up, Chin was sliding the last board into place. He didn't hide the satisfied smile on his face.

The room was dark. I waited for my eyes to adjust, but even when they did, there wasn't enough light to see anything. The stale air smelled of sweat and tears, sour and sweet, the perfume of lies and broken promises — just like my father said.

"I told you that one was trouble," Chin said to the other guys.

I slammed my fist against the wall. The solid wood hummed back.

"Mr. Hon will give you to the ugliest man in Chinatown," Chin called back to me, his voice fading down the hall.

"Perhaps a drink while we wait for Harry?" I heard Sterling Promise say. Out of this mess, he would build a fireworks business.

I ran my hands over the walls. The panels were firmly in place. The other three walls were solid wood.

"This is impossible," I said to the air. "I can't just wait for them to come get me."

After making myself dizzy with pacing, I slumped to the floor, leaning against the wall. One hour passed, then another and another. The emotions tossed inside of me. If I could hurl them at someone, I might feel some release.

This was Harry's fault. He had me locked up. He was probably basking in his father's chilly pride now. But Harry did not force me to get the addresses for Miss Donaldson.

It was definitely Miss Donaldson's fault. She had sent me back to the tong. Except that I could be safe in the mission home now if I had not gone back to help Sterling Promise.

It was Sterling Promise's fault. I seethed, pulling my knees to my chest. He had betrayed me again. Except that he had told me to stay out of it.

It was my fault. The reason I found myself constantly in traps and prisons is because I went running into them. I banged my fists against the floor by my feet.

Something rattled.

I hit the floor again. The rattle came from where my feet sat. My fingers ran along the rough wood until I found it. A latch.

Most of the floor of the small room was a trapdoor. Sterling Promise had not locked me in a prison. He had given me an escape. I scrambled to my knees and put my ear against the boards below. Nothing.

I had to balance myself on the strip of floor where the hinge was attached, one hand on the door, one pushing against the opposite wall. Then I lifted the latch and pulled back the trapdoor. It opened onto the main hallway below, a few feet from the front door. I couldn't see anyone down there. I took a breath and jumped.

I scrambled to my feet and reached for the front door, but not before the knob turned and the door started to inch open. My heartbeat roared in my chest, pulsing into my head and hands. I lifted my fists to my face and took my stand. I would have to get in

the first good punch if I wanted to get out fast. One punch was probably not my best strategy, but it was all I had.

I swung with all my force. My fist made good contact with the dark figure standing in the doorway, and his jaw snapped to the side, but his feet didn't move. Then when the face came into focus, I saw why.

"Good hit, Fire Horse."

"Neil!" I wrapped my arms around his waist. He unraveled them gently. "I know you are mad at me, but Chin and Harry locked me in here. They're going to sell me. They could be back any minute with more people. You have to help me."

"Sure, now you want my help." A crooked smile spread over his face.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Chin called Mr. Hon to tell him what happened. It would have been good news if Chin hadn't been drunk."

"Drunk?"

"That is what happens when you unlock another man's liquor cabinet. Too bad I'll have to tell them that by the time I got here, you already escaped. It's like a ghost, you are," he said, ushering me into the alley.

I hesitated. "What if we run into someone?"

"I'll knock them unconscious and blame it on you."

That seemed like a good plan, so I stepped into the night.

"Apparently, you've got a bit of a curse on you," Neil said as we threaded our way through the narrow streets.

"I told you!"

"When Mr. Hon found out he was keeping a Fire Horse *girl* . . ."

Neil smiled. "I've never seen a Chinaman with such a white face."

He was blathering into the phone for hours trying to get rid of you. And he would have too — if everyone in Chinatown wasn't talking about you already."

"Why are they talking about me?"

"Someone has been telling stories about all the bad luck you bring."

"Who would do that?"

"I don't know. One of your dozens of acquaintances. I think it was the guy you knocked out the other night."

"Sterling Promise?"

"That's him."

My stomach twisted. "But . . . He . . . Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, but it sure saved your arse." Neil looked at me. "Maybe he is your friend after all."

"He couldn't be, after what I have done."

"Hmmm . . . then it is a bit of a mystery."

Only a few windows beamed their light onto the street below.

"I was so scared," I said.

Neil glanced at me before focusing his gaze back on the street in front of us. "Ah, maybe you *are* a fighter, girly," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"There are two types of people who fight — fighters, who learn from their mistakes, and troublemakers, who get themselves killed. I was half sure you would be the second."

When we got to the mission home, Miss Donaldson stood like a paper cutout against the light of the front door. She hugged me close. "I could never have forgiven myself if something had happened to you."

"I told you, I'm destructive."

"A Fire Horse."

I nodded.

"That's what all the men are talking about. Everyone has heard what a danger you are, that your father and your village sent you all the way to America to be rid of your bad luck, that you stole another man's papers." She smiled. "I'm afraid you have no choice but to stay here now. No one else will take you. You're probably the only girl I can send through the streets without worrying about you being stolen."

"She shouldn't be wandering the streets," Neil grumbled.

"I wish I had six or seven more of you. Those tongs would walk a mile around this place."

"You best wait and see if you can handle this one first," Neil said. "I'll be back, and I expect her to be here, not in some opium den."

"Where are the opium dens?" I asked, just to watch his face redden.

"This will be her home as long as she likes," Miss Donaldson said, putting her arm around my shoulders.