

CHINATOWN
AUGUST 7, 1924

CHAPTER 40

THE GIRLS WERE SCATTERED around me on the floor, their skirts tucked under their knees. "What happened next?" our newest girl asked. She had come to the door this morning, wide-eyed and scared, and was the reason I was treating the other girls to the story they begged for.

"I stayed here, with Miss Donaldson and Spring Blossom," I said. "Neil still comes by to make sure I haven't joined the army or run off with the circus."

The little girl next to me stopped twisting the braid that trailed over her shoulder and announced, "He brought me ice cream."

I smiled and pulled her into my lap. "Yes, he did. He is very taken with you, isn't he?"

"I could never do what you did. I would never be bold enough," the new girl said. It was the most words she had strung together since she arrived.

"Of course you could. Did you think that girl who fell in the mud eavesdropping on Auntie Wu would do anything brave?"

The girl giggled and shook her head.

"One more story," one of the older girls begged.

"That's enough for now."

"But Cowherd and Weaver Girl meet tonight. You have to tell their story."

"The one where she throws things," said another girl, clutching her hands to her chest. "Please, Jade Moon."

"Why don't you tell it to the others?" I said, smiling at her. "You know it by heart."

The young girl blushed.

Spring Blossom walked through the doorway. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," I said, lifting the girl from my lap.

She twisted around to look up at me. "Are you going to see Mrs. Ying?"

"We are." I cupped her chin with my hand.

"She said she could find a husband for me. A nice man, like Mr. Ying," one of the older girls said.

"That would be lucky, wouldn't it?"

"Last time we had a wedding here, the whole house smelled like flowers," a girl explained to our new arrival.

"And cake!" said the little girl with the braid. She turned her excited eyes on me. "Who will you marry?"

"Whoever suits me best."

"Me too," she said, smiling. "I'll marry Neil."

"Good choice. I guess I will have to keep looking." I rose, brushed my skirt with my hands, and followed Spring Blossom out of the room.

We stepped out into the evening. The night was a gray one, but the lights on the street bounced off the mist, giving the darkness a

sort of glow. A figure pushed from the shadows across the street and walked toward us. The brim of a hat pulled low over his brow hid his face.

I put my arm on Spring Blossom's to pull her inside. The tongs had left us alone after Sterling Promise's stories of the bad luck I brought tore through Chinatown. Truthfully, they were leaving everyone alone, too busy trying to destroy each other. Had Mr. Hon escaped that cycle of retaliation long enough to get his revenge on me?

"What's wrong, Jade Moon?" Spring Blossom asked. The smell of a summer rain lingered in the air. The figure lifted his head a little, and I could see his chin and the bottom of his mouth.

"I think it's . . . It can't be." I watched the movements of his walk. He took one hand out of his pocket and started to tap his fingers nervously against the side of his leg. "Sterling Promise."

I dropped Spring Blossom's arm and turned to escape inside. When I was halfway through the door, her small hand grabbed my wrist.

"I can't," I said, my wild eyes pleading with her calm ones. "He doesn't want to see me."

"Then why would he be here?" she asked.

"Good evening," Sterling Promise said, walking up the steps to us.

His presence had hung in my heart for months. I watched the fireworks light the sky for the New Year, thinking he might also be looking up at the explosions and remembering that first night when he had shown us his fireworks. I would hear notes of his voice on the street, then turn to find a stranger. For a week, a month, four, five, I thought he would come to the mission home. Then I remembered how much trouble I was and knew he needed to stay away.

He was smiling nervously at Spring Blossom but stealing quick side glances at me. "I am Sterling Promise, a friend of Jade Moon's from China."

"I know who you are," Spring Blossom said. "I am Spring Blossom, Jade Moon's friend here."

"Are you going out? Could I walk with you?"

I felt my head shaking back and forth, but Spring Blossom said, "Certainly." She looked at me and then back at Sterling Promise. "Well, we better go." She turned and headed down the street, leaving me on the porch, avoiding Sterling Promise's stare. I followed her, and he matched his steps to mine.

"You . . . You . . .," I started, shaking my head.

"Tried to sell you?" He looked down at the ground. "Jade Moon, I would have never let that happen. I went all over Chinatown trying to make a sale impossible. They wanted to kill you. I had to do something."

"No. You never wanted to see me again."

"Oh. Yes." The back of his hand brushed mine. "Of all the lies I have told you, that was the biggest."

Spring Blossom stopped at a corner and turned to glance back at us before continuing down the street.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"I had to leave for a little while. Chin and Harry would have made life very difficult for me here. Not to mention, I didn't have a job with Mr. Lo anymore. I took a position on a steamship that travels between San Francisco and Hawaii, just to stay out of sight."

"And now you're back. Is it safe?"

"Safe enough. The tongs have bigger worries than me. I wanted to make sure that you were all right."

"I am fine. Mrs. Donaldson guards us girls like a tigress." I was trying to keep the desperation that had shadowed my heart for the past six months out of every word. "What do you want from me?"

Sterling Promise swallowed and struggled to find the words. "Nothing . . . Everything . . . I want a fresh start, as ourselves. It is why we both came here."

"It isn't that easy," I said, shaking my head.

He looked at me, and I slipped a little into the darkness of his brown eyes. "No, it is almost impossible."

I nodded.

"Jade Moon. I was blind. The whole time I was using your father, I really needed you. You show me all the best and worst parts of myself."

"You want to know the worst parts?"

"I want to know the truth. Do you remember what you said to me on Angel Island, when I refused to take you to America?"

"I said a lot of things." My face warmed with the memory of it.

"You said I was nothing but smoke and shadows."

"I am sorry. I shouldn't have been so cruel."

"It was cruel, but when the sting faded, I realized it was also true. I was only what others wanted me to be. I had lost myself. Maybe that is why I could not hold anything as my own."

"I . . . I had no right . . . I am always too bold."

"You hold tightly to things. Sometimes the wrong things, but at least you hold on. It is very brave."

"I thought you were one of the thousands of traps that I fall into." I looked up, the words huddled in my throat. I didn't want to ruin whatever this was.

"I was, but now I want to hold on to something. Something that is mine."

My heart sputtered. "That is always what you wanted. To own something."

"Not own, hold." He stopped and stared into my eyes. "I know the difference now."

Drops of rain started to wet my cheeks. Sterling Promise held his hand out to me, palm up. This is what I told Spring Blossom love should be — offered with an open hand. I set my hand gently in his. We walked silently for a few blocks. I opened my mouth a dozen times, but then the old fractures in my heart would start to ache again. I put my other hand to my forehead to protect it from the thickening rain. "We'll be soaked by the time we get there," I said.

"It's just a few lovesick tears. I can survive those."

"A day early. Cowherd and Weaver Girl aren't supposed to cry until tomorrow."

"It's their beginning. And that can cause as many tears as an ending."

I smiled. "I suppose you still say exactly the right thing."

"I suppose you are still a Fire Horse." He grinned.

"Neither one of us is likely to change."

"At least you aren't still punching everything that moves," Sterling Promise said.

"Spring Blossom rarely lets me punch anyone anymore."

"I'll have to thank her."

"I wouldn't. She may make an exception for you," I said.

"She thinks I tried to sell you?" Sterling Promise asked.

"No, she knows how much it hurts when you love someone and they don't love you back," I said, struggling to keep the pain from my voice.

Sterling Promise stopped. He turned me gently to face him, lifting my chin until my eyes met his. "It is a crippling, blinding pain."

"You know it too," I said, my voice choked with tears.

He nodded.

I raised my face to the sky, trying to keep the tears inside. Spring Blossom stood on the steps of the Yings' home, waiting. "It is a horrible match," I said. "A snake and a horse. We will do nothing but fight."

Sterling Promise squeezed my hand and took a step closer. "No one will approve."

"I'll never know what you are thinking," I said.

"I'll always know what you are thinking," he said, wincing.

I looked up at him. "Only fools would try."

He brushed his thumb against my cheek. "It will bring bad luck."

"The worst," I said.

"I can't promise you anything, Jade Moon, except that I love you. I have always loved you."

"That is a good start."

The windows above the Yings' laundry glowed yellow in front of us. When Mrs. Ying opened a side door for Spring Blossom, a beam of light poured onto the pavement, turning Weaver Girl's tears into gold.

I took a deep breath, and I could feel it, the beginning of a story.