

ANGEL ISLAND
SEPTEMBER 14, 1923

CHAPTER 17

FOR WEEKS, I HEARD no further news. Sterling Promise did not ask to meet me again. New women arrived; other women left. Snow Lily did not come back. One day, First Wife was allowed to land. She bragged about her husband and her sons and how they would fuss over her even though they shouldn't bother, but her lips trembled slightly as she said good-bye. Other than that, nothing changed, until everything changed. Perhaps that is how it always is in prisons.

We had watched the ferry pull away from the window and then returned to the sitting room when the guard entered. "Sung Jade Moon," he called. The women's faces jerked toward me. My stomach tightened into a fist. I waited for him to say I could land, or to frown and give me the letter that sent me back to China. I was surprised when instead he signaled for me to follow him.

The guard led me through the doors of the administrative building, his boots clicking along the tile floors with quick determination until he stopped at one of the waiting-room doors. He slid a key

into the lock, and the door clattered open. Sterling Promise and Father sat across from each other in the center of the room.

I entered, then heard the lock click into its slot behind me. Sterling Promise, elbows resting on his knees, held his head in his hands. My father sat still and straight, staring at the wall across from him.

"This is a bad sign," Sterling Promise said in a low voice as I sat down beside him. "If we passed the interrogation, the guard would tell us. They would not need to bring us here."

"But if we failed, wouldn't they have sent a guard with the letter?"

Sterling Promise nodded. "And if they were going to question us further, they would never put us together like this."

Father pressed his hands flat on his thighs. Sitting, it was hard to tell, but I might have grown taller than him over the past three months.

"How are you, Father? Are you well?"

"I want to go home," he mumbled. "I am tired of this prison that calls itself a country." His face was thin and his hands seemed more delicate. Even his skin looked more transparent.

The metal door rattled as it swung open, and the guard gestured for us to follow. He led us into a small, dimly lit room with wooden walls and a heavy table in the center. An immigration official in a suit sat at the head of the table. The young official from my questioning sat next to him. A translator situated himself across from us. I stole a look at Sterling Promise and was surprised to find him staring at the older official. He gave Sterling Promise a small nod. Sterling Promise relaxed back into his chair.

The older official began speaking in that rolling English, a language that makes it difficult to tell good news from bad. I gripped one hand in the other, trying to hold the panic inside my skin. But I was too jittery to decipher enough of the words to understand.

Finally, the translator began. "We have reviewed your answers in your interviews and compared them to the transcripts of your relatives' interviews. Two of you" — he looked at me and Sterling Promise — "gave satisfactory answers. But you, sir . . ." He looked at Father. "You claim to be a legal citizen, but your answers were incompatible with the others'. You don't know any of your business associates or even your own address in San Francisco. We cannot confirm that you are Sung Feng Hao as you claim."

He paused to shuffle some papers. We stared at the man. My heart was pounding, and pressure gathered in my head.

"Despite this, we have decided to admit Sung Sterling Promise. He seems a suitable immigrant with merchant connections."

"What?" I said.

The young official turned to the older one and said a few words that weren't translated. The older one shook his head, his face tightening.

"This doesn't make any sense. Why would he be allowed in, but not us?" Father demanded.

"You have not proven any relationship to the Sung family," the older man said through the translator.

"But I have papers," my father protested.

"Papers we can't confirm are yours," the official pointed out. "And we cannot allow your daughter in if she is not under your protection."

The young official leaned forward. "You can appeal our decision if you think it is unfair," he said, looking directly at me.

"Yes, I was about to mention that," said the older official.

"We need to discuss this," Father said. The translator nodded and said something to the Americans.

"You may talk over your situation here," the older official said.

After the men filed out of the room, I turned to Sterling Promise. "What did you do? How did you get them to let you land?" I asked.

"I answered their questions correctly," he said, but his finger had started to tap his leg. I looked at it. Sterling Promise covered one hand with the other.

"No." I shook my head slowly. "You did something. You took advantage of an opportunity."

"I warned you that it would be difficult," Sterling Promise said, staring at the shiny surface of the table. "I am staying. I have business to do for Master Yue. And I have nothing to go back to."

"But our agreement," Father said, glaring.

"I will honor our agreement. I will return to China in one year."

"Hmph," Father grunted, turning away.

"Are you talking about the marriage?" I asked.

"What marriage?" Father demanded. He followed my eyes to Sterling Promise. "You told her!"

Sterling Promise met his glare for a moment, then looked down.

"I had no choice," he mumbled.

Father shook his head. "You will get married in China because you are coming back to China with me," he said.

My heart lurched forward. "I am not."

His voice was quiet. "Yes, you are."

I tried to calm the fury swirling inside me. "Father, I will do my

duty and marry Sterling Promise, but I will do it here in America. I am going to appeal. If Sterling Promise is allowed to land, I should be too. I can stay with Mrs. Ying. I have earned the right to stay as well."

"The right to stay?" Father stared at me. "Ah, I see. You did not tell her that part," he said to Sterling Promise, his voice sour and angry. He turned back to me. "You were never going to stay. You were going to marry and come back with me, even if we were all let in."

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I looked at Sterling Promise. "I was never supposed to stay in America?"

"Jade Moon . . ."

"Why did you bring me all this way only to take me back?" I asked my father.

"We brought you to ensure that you were married in the end. Sterling Promise had no guarantee that I would bring him to America if he married you in China, and I had no guarantee that he would come back to marry you if I took him to America first." He explained it coolly, like he was planning where to build the next terrace. "You know we can't trust him. He makes promises as easily as a mountain makes a shadow."

I blinked away the tears springing into my eyes. "You . . . you knew how much I needed to come to America," I said to Sterling Promise. "And you were going to send me home? You are taking away my only chance at freedom."

"Women are no use in America," he said halfheartedly.

My father pounded his hand on the arm of his chair. "I knew you were tricking us. You knew they wouldn't let us in."

"And you tried to keep us all out," Sterling Promise said.

"Ha! Adopted son of my tricky brother. You think I didn't know you were lying from the beginning."

"I did everything I promised to do." Sterling Promise looked at the door. "You did not have to bring Jade Moon. I told you it would only cause trouble and heartache."

"So you never wanted me to come?" I asked him.

"Lower your voices. They may still be listening."

"Why would we care if they listen? You are the only one getting to stay!" I was almost shouting.

Father crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I don't understand why the Americans did not send us all home."

"That was *your* plan!" Sterling Promise said. Father pushed his lips together. "You tried to get us all sent back. We have been stuck on this island because of you. I need to be here! And I made sure that I would get to stay."

"What do you mean, you made sure?" I said, staring at him.

Sterling Promise was silent.

Father looked at both of us. "Of course I want us to go back to China. My land is there, my father. Our ancestors. Your places are there too."

Sterling Promise turned his face away. "You don't know where my place is."

I shook my head slowly. "I will never have a place there. You know that, Father."

"Quiet! This was a fool's journey. I am returning home." Father's words clicked with resolution, just like the guard's boots. "Daughter, you will join me. Sterling Promise, if you honor your word, we will see you in a year."

I tightened my grip on my chair, trying to lock up the last of my fears. "No, Father," I replied.

"You cannot stay. I forbid it." My father waited for me to yell, to fight. Then we would both see that I could never survive on my own.

I stayed still. I kept my voice steady. "Yes, I can. The man said that I could appeal the decision."

Father snorted. "How do you plan to do that?"

I did not have an answer. Sterling Promise looked down at the table. After a few seconds, he rose from his chair. "I am going to get my papers," he said, pulling open the door. I stared at him. He did not look back.

The door shut behind him.

"I am glad we are rid of him," Father growled.

"We are not rid of him. You have arranged a marriage between us."

"Once we return to China, we will never see him again."

"Did you try to get us sent home?"

"Yes, it is where we belong. When Sterling Promise told me on the boat about the interrogation the Americans gave, I thought it would be easier to get us all sent back. Of course, this country is bad luck for Chinese. Whatever you wish for, they keep out of reach, and whatever you don't want, they thrust at you with both hands."

"Why did you come?"

"I was being a dutiful son, obeying my father."

"And in your plan, my duty was to marry and return to China?"

"After a year or two here. Enough time to have a grandson."

"Why not just tell me about the arranged marriage?"

"I don't have to tell you anything."

"I know you don't have to, but why wouldn't you?"

"Your grandfather and I knew you would make difficulties."
"Because I am a Fire Horse."

"Because you believe in love."

"I thought you did too . . . once."

Father looked down at his hands.

"I would not have returned to China with you," I said.

"We would have told you we were going for a visit. Then we would not come back here."

I remembered Nushi telling me never to return to China, all my things in that trunk, the wedding handkerchief. She knew. The women knew. Only I was doomed to blindness.

We stared at each other. The steel in my eyes reflected the steel in his. "I am not leaving," I said, my voice shaking. "I will stay here, in America."

"We are going home." Father's hands were in fists on his lap. His words bore their way through clenched teeth.

"No, Father. I can't." I thought of Nushi and the strength it took for her to pack only my belongings, the strength it took for her to tell me never to return. I thought of Spring Blossom and the stillness of her scarred arms. I thought of the jade around my neck — sharp and strong, without cutting. I had to be that.

"We will leave in two days. I will be back in my fields in time for the harvest."

He rose, but I put my hand on his arm to stop him. He stared down at it. I could not remember the last time we touched. I measured my words carefully before I said them. "Father, listen. I am not leaving. I will make my own arrangements."

The words I said terrified me. Voices in my head cried out, *How? What will you do?* My father turned toward me and paused,

half-standing, half-sitting. He searched my face, then collapsed back into the chair.

"You can't stay," he said quietly, looking at the veins in his hands.

"Yes, I can. The man said —"

"No . . . Daughter . . ." The anger had drained out of his voice. "I will be alone. You would abandon your father with no one to care for him when he grows old?" He paused. "You would leave me, just like my brother did?"

"Father . . ." I choked on the word, a sob escaping my throat.

"I know you think I am trying to bar you from love." His face softened slightly. "Did it ever occur to you I was trying to protect you from it?" He waved a hand. "You can marry whom-ever you choose. It doesn't have to be Sterling Promise or Fourth Brother Gou. Marry for love if that is so important to you. I will settle it with your grandfather." He sat up straighter in his chair and resumed his authoritative tone. "I will adopt your husband as my son. He will inherit the land. You will raise your sons where you grew up. Nushi will help you raise them. You would like that."

I would like that. In my mind, I ran with my children across the fields. I watched them spread out on the kitchen floor, playing games around the stove. We chewed on sugar cane in the morning and counted stars at night. And the five-year-old, nine-year-old, twelve-year-old Jade Moons inside me wanted the life that Father was describing. They wanted to work beside him, to talk to him over bowls of steaming rice in the evenings, to read the newspapers that drifted into town from Hong Kong. These children of my past clamored for the promise of that lost love from my father. It would soothe years of heartache.

But the new woman inside of me, the one just beginning to grow, knew that while it might heal my past, it would never give me a future. It would not open up a world where I could move and stretch freely. The children protested, *No, that would be nothing. Go back to China. You would be happy, loved.* I resisted, stuffed them down inside. I knew that I would have to sacrifice giant pieces of myself if I returned, and all the love of my father, a husband, children, would never fill the hollow shell of me that would be left.

Both of us had our heads bowed, staring at our laps. I knew that he had finally offered me everything, and for that I was grateful. But he was still asking me to give up too much. "Father, I wish you would appeal," I said gently. "You could try to stay here, with me."

"It is a prison." He spit the words out, his voice bitter and sharp.

"Yes, but so is China . . . for me. Here I can smell the freedom. It drifts in on the wind. The guards carry it in on their coats."

"You smell the sweet perfume of lies and false promises."

We sat next to each other, staring at the wall across from us.

"I hope you aren't counting on any help from Sterling Promise. He will leave you to rot here. He will certainly never marry you." My gaze dropped. "It is a bad match anyway. You are a Fire Horse, and he is a Wood Snake. You are too headstrong, and he is too selfish."

"I know."

"You will disgrace me by staying," he said. "I will have to tell everyone that you died here."

I gripped his hand, but he turned away and pushed his chair back. Rising quickly, he crossed the room and pounded on the door to be released. The guard opened the door and led Father away.

I covered my face with my hands. America, its promises, had to be worth it. I had nothing else to bargain with — no marriage, no family, no name. I had handed it all over to fate for the sake of a little air to breathe, some space to move, the chance to look people in the eye. What else could I give the Americans? What had Sterling Promise offered that I hadn't? Then I remembered what he could give them, and it made me furious.

After a few minutes, the door opened. And there, with a set of papers in his hands, was Sterling Promise.

