



## CHAPTER 28

MR. HON DISMISSED CHIN and me from his office. It was time for my training with Neil, so I followed Chin to the front entryway. Neil glared over his newspaper as Chin stomped into the room, spun around, and put his face close to mine.

"I should have let those guards take you back to China, Fire Horse," he said, the words washed in a bitterness that made the back of my neck tingle with warning. "It's just too easy for you."

"Easy? You think this is easy?" My voice rose, filling the room.

"Everyone falls over themselves to help you." His lips curled up with disgust. "Harry, the son of one of the most powerful men in Chinatown, chases you down. Then his father takes you in." He jerked his thumb at Neil, who set his paper in his lap and stared. "Gets his monkey of a guard to teach you to fight."

"You may want to choose your words more carefully," I said, stepping forward. "I've taught Neil a little Chinese."

Chin looked at Neil and lowered his voice. "I'm watching you, Fire Horse."

I longed to punch Chin. But willful, reckless action had gotten me to the place where I was today. If I was trapped, it might be because I had burned bridge after bridge getting here. I stood and let him shove his shoulder into mine as he walked past me.

"You better keep both eyes on that one," Neil grumbled, lifting his paper again and turning a page. "What did Mr. Hon want?"

I moved to sit in the chair beside Neil. Mr. Hon wanted to tie me up into his routines, his schedules, his plans. He wanted to make me into something hard. He wanted to take away all the possibilities I had risked everything for. Neil had taught me to calculate, to look for the possibilities. Maybe he would know what to do.

"He wanted to give me a . . . I think you call it a job," I said. "Neil, do you . . ." I searched for the word for a moment. "Do you trust Mr. Hon?"

"No," he said, keeping his eyes on the paper.

"Do you trust Harry?"

"Harry is nothing like his father."

I turned to him. "Do you trust him?"

"No."

"Do you trust me?"

"I trust you'll get to the point soon, or I'll knock it out of you."

I took a deep breath. Neil might be the only person in this house who didn't want anything from me. He might even want me gone himself, which might be the kind of help I needed. "And you? Can I trust you?"

Neil folded the paper and placed it in his lap. He leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his knees. "Say what you want to say."

I hesitated, forming the words. I hated the stickiness of this life. It was like walking through spiderwebs. I could not shake the feeling of the lies even when I wasn't tangled in them. "I am not who you think I am."

He sat up straight. His mouth hardened.

"I . . . I came here as someone else."

Neil's face relaxed. "Of course you did. That's what all the Chinese do."

"Yes, but I didn't just lie. I stole someone's . . ." I picked up the newspaper and shook it.

"Papers. I'm sure you did. This isn't confession. And if it was, the priest would be half-asleep." He stood, pressed one hand into the other to pop his knuckles, and walked to the center of the room in three long strides. "Take your stance. We're wasting time."

Neil threw slow punches at me, letting me loosen the stiffness left from yesterday's practice and find my rhythm.

"That's the brilliance of fighting," he continued. "There's no deception in a good, clean fight. Just one man standing in front of another man. Everything that matters is in front of your face." He began a series of fast jabs. I raced to block them until the last one made contact, rattling my jaw and sending sparks into my left eye. Neil slowed the rhythm of the punches again, but widened their range.

"What if one of the people fighting isn't who they say they are?" I asked, moving my head to avoid an uppercut to my chin.

"It doesn't matter. Rich or poor. Irish or Chinese. Cop or criminal. You can change the story a thousand times. You'll still be using the same two fists and the same two feet God gave you." He blocked my left jab.

The air was thick with the smell of two fighters, blended breaths, sweat, skin. "What if one of the fighters is a girl?"

"Why would you be fighting a girl?" he said, faking a punch to my ribs to try to get me to drop my hands.

"*I'm* not fighting a girl," I said, looking at him through the tunnel between my fists.

Neil stopped. It was the first clean shot he had ever given me.

"Is it joking you are?"

I dropped my fists and shook my head.

"A girl?"

I nodded.

"You're not. . . . You can't be. . . . All the punches you've taken." He blinked a few times and took a step back. "The shirt that Chin gave you?" He pointed to his chest.

"Chin didn't give it to me."

"Ah, Mother o' God!" He grabbed my arm, then dropped it like it burned him. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" His pale skin had gone paler.

"I had no choice."

"Fire Horse . . . ," he said, shaking his head.

"Jade Moon."

"What?"

"My name is Jade Moon."

"Your name will be on a headstone if Mr. Hon finds out about this." Neil rubbed his hand over his face. "Chinawomen have those little feet. They're quiet. They stay at home."

"Not all of them."

He pushed me toward the door.

I started to pull back, trying to ignore the embers of fear that Neil's reaction was stoking. "I want to leave. I want to stop. But as a girl, I am . . ." I searched all the English words I'd learned for the right one. "Cursed?"

"Cursed?"

"I think it means no luck."

"I know what cursed means. I'm Irish!" I could see red veins pushing from under the skin on his forehead. "If you have any bad luck, it's only because you're determined to find it."

"I was a joke in my village. My father is so ashamed of me, he tells people I'm dead. The man I loved . . ." I struggled to keep the tears out of my voice. ". . . tried to leave me on Angel Island."

"How is that bad luck? You left your village. You got to America. Luck is about surviving trouble, not avoiding it. You might be the luckiest person I know."

I stared at him, speechless for a moment.

"But even you don't have enough luck to stay here," he said. "So, you'll be needing to leave."

"How?"

"Sometimes the best place to escape is in plain sight."

"In plain sight?"

"I have an idea. You'll leave tomorrow."

"Can we finish the lesson?"

His mouth dropped open. "I'm not punching you now!"

"Why not?"

"You're a girl!" he said, throwing his hands up. "I'm going to be in confession for days trying to explain this."

We heard a door open from across the next room. "Neil," Mr. Hon called. We both froze. "Neil, get in here."

Neil leaned toward me. "You keep your mouth shut about this or I'll break your face." He turned, stopped, then punched his fist into his palm. "I can't break your face anymore, but I'll break someone's face, and won't you feel sorry!" His shoes pounded against the boards of the floor as he left. I heard him mumble, "First Chinaman I can tolerate turns out not to be a Chinaman at all."

I didn't see Neil for the rest of the day.

Mr. Hon met Harry and me at breakfast the next morning. "Harry, you and Fire Horse are going down to the docks today. Chin will meet you there," he said.

Harry nodded. "I won't fail."

Neil came in, and Mr. Hon looked up.

"I need to talk to you," he said to me. He looked at Harry and Mr. Hon. "About some new drills, since we won't be fighting today."

Mr. Hon waved his hand, excusing me, and I followed Neil. He opened the door and stepped into the street.

"At the dock today, a policeman is going to arrest you," he said, his voice low.

"This is how you help me?"

"It isn't real. He will take you to Miss Donaldson. She runs a mission home that takes in Chinese *girls* — girls who have been sold to brothels or bad men. Mr. Hon won't think to look for you there."

"He'll look for me?"

"Mr. Hon always gets back what is his."

Harry had said something like that before. "I'm not his."

"I don't have all morning to stand here chatting," he said, the growl returning to his voice.

"Can't I just run? Disappear?"

"I'm not sending you to a sewing circle. Miss Donaldson is filled with as much vinegar as you are. She rescues slave girls. She stares down hatchet men. You're both lunatics."

"Lunatics?" I said.

He put his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look him in the eyes. "And fighters."

I looked at Neil. "How will the policeman know me? Do I introduce myself?"

"He knows you are going to the docks today. He is going to ask any Chinese he sees where they are employed. Chin and Harry, they'll lie. You tell him you work for Mr. Hon. That is how he will know who to take with him."

I nodded.

"If Mr. Hon thinks you are arrested and gave his name, he won't want you within a hundred yards." His voice softened. "Go back inside. We don't need anyone getting suspicious. Everyone knows I don't have two words to say to you."

"Thank you, Neil."

Neil nodded, the tight corners of his mouth melting away for a moment.

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists on the way to the dock. I pulled my hat low over my face to hide the relief of escaping the

Hon house. Each step was lighter and easier. I could feel the strings around me unraveling. It would be good to be Jade Moon again. Tomorrow, I would not have to wear Mr. Hon's tong suit. I would not have to hide a hundred truths and tell a thousand lies.

The docks stretched behind a wall of activity. Boats eased their way up to the piers and waited while men and women bundled in hats and coats poured from them. Men in immigration uniforms strolled through the crowds. Crates were stacked beside coils of rope. Stalls teetered against each other in long lines.

Harry led the way to where thick poles stood upright in the water. It was exactly where I saw him the first day I arrived. His black hair escaped from under a gray cap, while his face was tight with anxious energy. We watched a ferry pull closer. I wrapped my arms around myself to guard against the wind.

I had come here to find freedom — that rare kind of freedom that allowed you to be yourself. I had gambled everything for that chance, and I could not be sure that I had won. In some ways I could be truer to pieces of myself, my willful strength, my outspokenness, my wildness, but I was still shoving other parts into darkness. I watched the Americans move around the shore, their heads lifted, their smiles quick and easy. But I did not feel part of their world.

"What were you and Chin doing at the docks the day I saw you?" I asked.

Harry refused to look at me. "We were looking for new soldiers for the tong. It was one of the jobs my father had me try. I messed that up too." He shuffled from one foot to the other. "There is something I should tell you about that day."



"The Yings are in Chinatown. You took me to the wrong address on purpose. I know. Your father told me."

Harry hung his head. "I am sorry. I thought I had to."

"For your father?"

"Partly. And for me. You make my life . . . less impossible."

Any anger I felt toward him dissolved. He was just as trapped as I was. "What are we picking up?" I asked.

Harry kept walking, his face stiff with determination. "Not what. Who."

"Who?" I asked.

"A girl. My father showed me a picture," Harry said.

"Why would we pick up —"

But the boat pulled into the dock with a loud blast of its horn, and my head whirled into a spiral of panic and fear. It was the Angel Island Ferry.

What if Sterling Promise was on the ferry? Sterling Promise, who could ruin everything just as I was about to escape? Sterling Promise, who betrayed me. Sterling Promise, who I betrayed. I searched the faces of the men. If he was there, I wanted to see him first.

But he was not among the passengers. It was a different person who could betray me. When Harry nudged my shoulder and nodded to the final passenger stepping onto the dock, I followed his stare to Spring Blossom.