



## CHAPTER 34

I WALKED TOWARD the building we had visited the night before. Washed in light, it blended easily with its neighbors, nothing on the outside hinting at what was on the inside. Going in didn't seem wise, so I waited half a block away in the shadow of a small balcony.

It wasn't long until Sterling Promise stepped out of the doorway and walked toward me. I watched until he was only a few feet away. A bruise was blooming around the corner of his left eye. I almost reached out to touch it. A deep hum of emotion grew in the pit of my heart. I thought I had silenced it long ago.


His face did not register any of the surprise or anger I expected. Instead he reached out and grabbed my hand. "I saw you from upstairs. Let's get you away from here. I know someone —"

I snatched my hand away — half-shocked, half-embarrassed.

"Let me help you," he said.

I tried to cool the warmth that was spreading from his touch. This was just one of his tricks, after all. "I don't need your help. Harry does. Harry Hon."

He turned his face away from me.



"Yes, you will probably not want to get involved. Harry needs to find the girl his father promised your boss."

"That doesn't concern me."

"Exactly. Say no and I'll go away."

It was there, ready to drop off his tongue, the no I needed. Then Sterling Promise closed his mouth and swallowed it. "Why don't you want me to do this?"

"What? No, *you* don't want to do this."

"You aren't telling me something," he said. "Why would Harry Hon want my help?"

"I might have mentioned that you have a talent for getting people to trust you," I said through tight teeth. Then I swallowed. "And I may have used a few of your tricks in the past to get out of trouble."

"I guess they didn't work," he said.

"Just say you won't do it."

"How did you get tangled up with the Hons?"

"I needed a friend. Harry was willing to take me in when I didn't have anyone else. How did you end up in a brothel?"

"The brothel is one of Master Yue's investments."

"I don't see how the company you've chosen is superior to mine," I said.

"It isn't any better, just less dangerous." He narrowed his eyes.

"You are very protective of this Harry."

"How would you know?" I barked.

"I can hear it in your voice."

"He is a good person, Sterling Promise. He doesn't lie about who he is like I do. He doesn't break promises like you do. And he doesn't use people like we both do." I sighed. "Still, I'm glad you made it to America."

He shrugged. "They blamed me for what you did at first. I almost didn't get to land, but . . ."

"But you had already paid the bribe, so they had to let you go."

Sterling Promise flinched. He never liked plain truth. "I will tell Harry no myself. I would not want to offend him. His father is a very powerful man." Words that should have rolled smoothly off his tongue were bitter instead, but I ignored it.

"Good. Let's go." I turned and led him through the streets.

I opened the door of the noodle house and walked to the back table where Harry sat. They bowed, eyeing each other warily. I watched for Sterling Promise to mimic Harry's loose stance, but he kept his chest lifted and his arms stiff by his sides.

"I have heard that you can help us," Harry said.

"Unfortunately, he does not think he will be able to," I said.

"Then what will we do now?" Harry said, the panic seeping back into his voice.

I patted his shoulder, trying to ease his disappointment. I wasn't disappointed. This would be simpler without Sterling Promise. "Don't worry."

Harry smiled, his genuine smile, the smile that said he trusted me and we were in this together. It stung deeply.

"I will help," Sterling Promise said.

"What!" I said, my shoulders tightening.

"Wonderful!" Harry said. "Fire Horse says you can talk your way through walls."

"I thought you didn't want to help," I said, glaring at Sterling Promise.

"I would hate to disappoint your friend, Fire Horse." He said the last two words with a little more emphasis than necessary, then

turned back to Harry. "You are trying to find the missing girl. You need me to get you into these places so you can look around." I could see him weighing what we had said.

"Yes. We need to know if they have purchased any girls recently or heard of any who are available to purchase."

"What you would like in return?" I asked.

Sterling Promise looked at me. "I don't know if I will be much help."

"My father will surely offer a reward for the return of the girl. And even more for the person who took her." Harry was eager to secure him. "My father could help a new businessman like you."

The thought of Mr. Hon getting hold of Sterling Promise made my stomach turn. I braced myself for his smile and a wave of charm, but he kept his expression blank and nodded.

"Let's start with Lo's. How do we get in?" Harry asked.

"I'll take you there now. He won't be there for another hour."

"No, how would we get in if we did not have a connection there?" Harry asked.

"Oh, how do you *talk* your way in?" Sterling Promise said. "The obvious choice would be to become a customer. Unless there is something preventing that." He looked at me, then at Harry. Both our faces reddened, mine with irritation.

"There is," I said. "Time. We need to work quickly."

"Of course, I understand. Then if you want someone to do something for you, and you don't have a good reason, you have to rely on what *they* want." His gaze flickered to me and then focused on Harry again. "Take Mr. Lo. You go to visit him, and he offers you tea. Accept his offer."

"For tea? We don't want his tea. We want to see his girls," Harry said.

Sterling Promise wore a patient look, like he was speaking to a child. "He will send one of the girls to make it. Then when she comes in with it, you can compliment her fine figure."

"But we will have seen only one girl," I said.

Sterling Promise smiled gently and shook his head. "Mr. Lo is very proud of the girls he offers. It upsets him that only the Americans come to see them. He suffers under the idea that his girls are not good enough, and he is desperate to prove that they are. So if you compliment her figure, he will feel compelled to show you another girl with a far better figure, whose eyes, you might mention, are the loveliest shape."

Harry and I stared. "Would that work?" he asked.

"Probably," Sterling Promise said. "But only with Mr. Lo, because you have asked him to do exactly what he wants to do. He does not want to show you around the building. The walls are dirty and thin. The curtains are threadbare. He does not want to talk about the trouble he has getting the girls, because it worries him day and night. But he does want to show you the beauty of his girls. When you are asking a favor, make sure it has the flavor of something they desire."

"How do we know what they want?"

"You might already know if you think about it. Or you might have to figure it out when you are standing before them, pushing gently against walls to find a door."

Harry stood and bowed politely to Sterling Promise. "I'm going to call my father. I think he will be pleased. We have a lot of work to do."