

CHAPTER ONE

真

KIDNAPPED



“Yoshi!” I call his name over and over, but the valley remains silent. Not even an echo. Yoshi is gone.

Three weeks ago, we were traveling back home from China. One morning we saw smoke rising from the White Tiger Temple, the place we’d just left. Yoshi turned back to help our friends Mei and Du Feng and the other Shaolin monks defend their home, and now I fear that he is fighting for his life as the temple burns.

I wanted to go with him, but Sensei shook his head. “Yoshi must go alone. He will attract less attention that way. Also, I know a man who can help him travel quickly, and this man owns only one horse.”

So Yoshi left and I stayed behind.

Day after day, Mikko, Kyoko, Taji, and I trudged after Sensei, heading north toward the Great Wall. But I always look over my shoulder, searching the horizon for my friend. If only I knew where he was. Sometimes it aches to have one leg missing, but without my blood brother, I feel an even greater hurt.

“Come on, Niya.” Kyoko pulls me away from the cliff side. “Yoshi will be back as soon as he can.”

“But what if he needs me and I don’t even know?”



She looks directly into my eyes and through to my heart. “You would know.”

Deep within me, the White Crane nods in agreement.

“Time to eat,” Sensei calls, and my stomach rumbles in answer.

Another long, tiring day has tucked itself under the mountain’s edge. Kyoko hands out rice rolls and fruit picked from the temple orchards, while Taji distributes the blankets.

We huddle together. Not for warmth—the evening air is cool and comfortable after a day in the sun. Not for safety, either. Samurai kids are not afraid of the night, and the back road has been empty for days. We draw together because it feels good to laugh and talk. Then sleep tugs me close, and the moon dips its weary head in my direction.



Dark shapes cover my eyes. They stick their fingers in my ears and slap their ghostly gloves in my face. The White Crane screeches in fright.

I wake with a jolt from the nightmare, but I can tell

the danger isn't in my imagination anymore. It is real now. Somewhere close by.

"Taji," I whisper. It is the middle of the night, and it's pitch-black.

No answer. How can that be? Taji has ears like the Golden Bat, and my call should have woken him. Sensei should be stirring, too.

Fear takes hold of my stomach, twisting it tight.

"Master?" I say, a little louder.

Nothing.

"Mikko!" I'm yelling now.

Mikko's strong grip circles my arm. "What's wrong?"

"Something terrible has happened," I say. "I can feel it."

Sensei's words race through my head. *It's not what you can hear that matters, but what you cannot hear. It's not what you can see that is important, but what you cannot see.*

My eyes finally adjust to the darkness and I spy Taji and Sensei asleep. I can't see Kyoko anywhere.

I panic. "Where is Kyoko?"

"I can't wake Sensei!" Mikko presses his ear against our teacher's chest. "He's still breathing, though."



"I can't wake Sensei!"

I shake Taji, but he doesn't react, either. Bending toward his face, I smell familiar traces of valerian, hops, and poppy. It's an herbal combination Sensei sometimes has his patients inhale to make them sleep deeply.

"They've been drugged," I say. "It should wear off in a few hours."

"Are you sure?" Mikko asks.

I'm not sure when they will wake but I tell Mikko what I know. "Sensei often uses the same herbs. We'll just have to wait for them to wake up."

Although I recognize the herbs, I don't know how strong the mix was. It's hard to think when my brain is crammed with questions.

Who would do this to us? Bandits often lurk along the mountain paths, but why would they want to drug us? What wayside robber is clever enough to outwit Sensei? And most important of all, where is Kyoko?

A branch snaps and I hunch closer to Mikko. He feels the same fear. His breath is short and shallow, but it rasps as loud as my thumping heart.

The moon has painted the mountain with wolf hair brushstrokes of silver, gray, and black. Even the sharp eyes of the White Crane can't see far ahead through the

gloom. Anyone could be hiding there. Maybe they are waiting for Mikko and me to go back to sleep so they can return to their unfinished business.

“We have to look for Kyoko,” I say. “Maybe she woke up and confronted the bandits. She might be lying injured somewhere. You go that way and I’ll head over there.” I point to indicate directions. I don’t really want to split up. But if Kyoko is hurt, we need to find her quickly.

“Be careful,” Mikko says. “The bandits might still be here.”

The night watches us search. Forest shadows taunt. Trees raise their arms to challenge us in ghostly sword-play. Bushes scratch my arms and knee. My crutch catches on tree roots. One branch swings to hit me in the face, and the salty taste of blood trickles into my mouth. I don’t care. All I care about is finding Kyoko.

I listen hard but hear nothing. Not even an owl hoots. How far have I walked? Not far enough, since I haven’t found Kyoko.

Then I hear soft footsteps moving toward me. I catch my breath, hoping it’s her, but it’s only Mikko.

“She’s not here,” he says. “No one is.”

I don't want to admit it, but I know he's right. Kyoko is gone.

"I think someone has kidnapped her," I whisper, not wanting to say the words aloud. As if saying them makes them true.

"Why would anyone kidnap Kyoko?"

Miserably, I shake my head. "I don't know, but it's the only explanation that fits."

We make our way carefully back to the camp and huddle close.

"I don't understand why the kidnappers didn't drug *us*. Why only Taji and Sensei?" Mikko asks.

I think I know the answer to that one. "I was having a nightmare. I must have disturbed them when I woke and cried out."

"So we were the lucky ones," Mikko says.

But I don't feel lucky, and there's no way I can go back to sleep.

Mikko can't sleep, either. There are still more questions between us. "Who could possibly sneak up on Sensei?" he wonders.

I don't have an answer this time. Not even a ninja can slip by our master unnoticed. "Maybe Sensei will tell us

in the morning,” I suggest. If Sensei knows who stole Kyoko, he will know where to look for her.

“If he wakes up,” says Mikko, looking away.

I’m glad he doesn’t look me in the eye. I don’t want him to see how worried I am. I think back through our master’s teachings, looking for something that will help us now.

“Sensei always tells us that a cockroach is hard to kill. It will take more than a cowardly band of kidnappers to defeat him,” I say.

“You’re right,” Mikko agrees. “Those bandits have made a big mistake. They have insulted Sensei’s honor by abducting his student. A samurai will never rest until his honor is restored.”

Mikko and I wait for the sun to crawl over the horizon and for Sensei and Taji to wake. It’s hard to be patient when every minute means that Kyoko is farther away.

“Don’t worry.” Mikko wraps his one arm around me. “Sensei will know what to do, and Taji’s nose can find a noodle in a haystack.”

I hope Mikko is right. Together samurai kids can do anything, and surely that’s enough to rescue Kyoko.

I just wish Yoshi were here to help.