

THATCHER
ROBINSON
**BLACK
KARMA**

A WHITE GINGER NOVEL



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To my wife, Susan Noguchi

chapter 1

“I need friends,” Bai declared.

The knife flicked into the air to arc gracefully before falling into her outstretched palm. She tossed the blade again—a slow, repetitive ritual, like a silent chant.

Exhaust fumes, along with the scent of five-spice, wafted through the open window. On Grant Avenue below, horns blared as traffic came to a standstill. Voices clamored for attention over the bustling din.

“You have friends,” Lee replied. Tall, lean, and muscular, he wore tan slacks and a blue cashmere sweater. His long torso reclined on a red leather couch as he read a magazine. Looking up, he added, “You have me.”

“Friends—as in plural, meaning more than one,” she said. “I lack the ability to make friends. There’s definitely something wrong with me.”

He put down his scientific journal and turned to look at her. “You dress like an undertaker. You’re surly, impatient, and sarcastic. You scare people.”

She leaned back in her chair to reflect. “Are you sure you’re my friend? Don’t you want to mention any of my good qualities?”

“Friends tell you the ugly truth whether you want to hear it or not.”

“If that were true, my bathroom scale would be my best friend.”

An alarm buzzed in the adjoining lobby to let them know someone had entered their offices. Lee stood to confirm the identity of their caller while Bai slipped her knife into the sheath sewn into the sleeve of her black leather jacket. When the door opened again, Inspector Kelly of the San Francisco City Police Department stood in the entry.

Grizzled, fat, and over fifty, Kelly nearly filled the doorway. Eyes hollowed by dark rings stared blurrily from a pale, round face. A veined nose bearing a striking resemblance to a baby squash dominated his features. In one hand, Kelly held a four-pack of coffee; in the other,

a grease-stained paper bag. He spoke in a graveled voice. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Nothing important," she said. "I was just being insulted."

He walked across the room to place the tray of coffees and the bag on her desk. Picking up one of the large paper cups, he said, "Have a doughnut and get over it."

What might have once been a tan raincoat covered his bulky frame while rumpled tweed pants with high-water cuffs exposed white socks tucked into a pair of scuffed brogues big enough to require parking permits. Without further fanfare, he walked around her desk to plop down on the couch with a thump. A shudder ran through the floorboards as leather cushions screeched in protest.

Lee closed the door to the lobby to lean with his back against the frame and silently observe.

"Make yourself at home," Bai belatedly suggested as she uncapped a coffee and rummaged in the bag to find a chocolate-glazed sinker. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

"This is just a friendly visit."

Kelly pulled a pint of Jameson's from inside his coat. Trembling fingers twisted off the cap while a fat, splotchy tongue slid over his lips. His eyes fastened greedily on the bottle as he poured a healthy shot into his coffee.

Bai watched him with a wary expression. "A friendly visit suggests we're friends. I was just telling Lee I have *way too many* friends."

San Francisco's finest didn't make a habit of policing Chinatown. Black-and-whites cruised the streets should a perpetrator get a sudden, inexplicable urge to surrender. But, for the most part, they left the Chinese community alone. The arrangement seemed to work well for everyone, which left Bai to wonder what the inspector wanted.

He ignored her remark and held out the bottle. "Care for a taste?"

"I'm good," she replied, waving him off with a doughnut.

The inspector shook the bottle at Lee, who declined the offer with a curt shake of his head.

Kelly put the pint carefully back inside his coat before taking a sip.

“Ahh . . .” A smile spread across his face. “Nothing like a little Irish to start your day.”

Her brows lifted. “I can only assume you’re referring to the whiskey.”

His eyes narrowed as his face squeezed into a jaundiced grin. “Either one would put a smile on your face.”

She frowned. “It’s really sad when you can’t tell the difference between a smile and a grimace.”

He stared at her a moment before shrugging off the comment. “I’d rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy.”

“Seems a little late to change your mind,” Lee observed.

Kelly turned to squint at Lee before shaking his head and turning away again. He leaned back into the cushions to sip his morning cocktail, his eyelids slowly unfurling.

“Why are you here?” Lee asked.

Kelly opened his eyes slowly as a scowl pulled at the corners of his mouth. He turned to Bai while making a point of ignoring Lee. “There’s nothing I enjoy more than having a morning libation with a beautiful woman. But, truth be told, that’s not entirely why I’m here.”

He leaned slowly back into the sofa cushions again to drink his coffee with a look of trepidation.

“If you have something to say, Kelly, just say it,” she said.

“What happened to that Oriental patience you people are famous for?”

She spoke slowly, as if addressing a child. “A rug might be Oriental, or a lamp, but not a person. I’m Chinese, and I have little tolerance for racists. So unless you have something to tell me, our time together, though memorable, has come to an end.”

Kelly appeared perplexed by her indignation and raised a hand defensively. “Give me a chance to explain,” he said gruffly. “I’m here on official business. That’s to say, I’m here to ask for your help on behalf of the City of San Francisco. But if anyone were ever to ask, I was never here.”

“Would that be too much to ask?” she said impatiently as she leaned back into her chair.

Kelly's eyes darted around the room. He took another gulp of coffee and seemed to draw courage from it. "You heard about that little altercation in the SOMA yesterday?"

The SOMA, an area wedged between the Business District on the north and the Tenderloin and Mission Districts on the south, had once served as a warehouse district. Warehouses gave way to the building of a new stadium in a dramatic transformation that made South of Market a trendy district showcasing stylish nightclubs, restaurants, and high-priced condos.

She offered a guarded response. "Are you referring to the *little* altercation that left three dead, one of them a policeman?"

"That would be the one. And," the inspector raised his index finger for emphasis, "let's not forget about the wounded. The papers dubbed it 'THE SOMA SHOOT-OUT.' Reporters love to lay it on thick, don't they? The truth isn't nearly so dramatic. Only a dozen shots were fired, and it was just pure dumb luck some of them proved fatal." The inspector let out a sigh and seemed to reflect. "But that's beside the point."

"What does any of this have to do with me?"

"I'm getting to that," he said, taking another sip from his cup. "The bust was a sting operation. Our officers were there to buy drugs. Shots were fired, and when the smoke cleared, the drugs were gone and so was the bag of money our officers carried. Three stiff's were on their way to the morgue, and another half-dozen injured were on the way to City General. The mayor is fit to be tied, and the chief is looking for someone to blame. On top of that, the relatives of the perps are threatening to sue, claiming the cops executed their dearly deceased. It's a clusterfuck of massive proportions."

Bai shrugged. "I still don't see how that's my problem."

"There's more," Kelly stated while raising the cup to his lips. His eyes lidded as he drank. "A Chinese by the name of Daniel Chen, at least that's the name he uses, was involved. It seems he might be an illegal. Our best guess is he's hiding here in Chinatown."

"We don't work for the police," Lee interjected.

The inspector's somber gaze fixed on Bai. "You're a *souxun*, aren't

you? Finding lost people is what you do. We have an officer down, and the reputation of the department is at stake. We want you to find Chen. There's a ten percent finder's fee for any money recovered."

She studied the inspector while he stared back at her with dulled eyes. "I really don't think I can help you."

Kelly shrugged. "If SFPD brings Chen in, it might be in a body bag. A cop has been killed. Tempers are running hot. You'd probably be saving a life if you were to get this guy into lockup before SFPD can find him."

Bai looked at the inspector for a clue to his motives. She wondered why Kelly wanted her involved. The more she thought about the situation, the less she liked it. Still, if she could save a life, the selfless act would boost her karma, which currently flushed in a counter-clockwise direction. She'd taken two lives while rescuing a girl from slavery. As a Buddhist, her prospects for advancement on the astral plane had taken a sudden and precipitous nosedive.

"Do you have a picture of Chen?"

Kelly rummaged inside his raincoat to pull out a piece of paper. The sheet held a grainy image of a man standing on the street, a candid shot showing only his profile. The face in the picture appealed to her. She'd guess him to be in his late twenties or early thirties with a strong, straight nose and full lips.

"It's not much of a picture, but it's all we've got," Kelly said. "The picture was taken in the Mission District where Chen's been making a name for himself on the local fight circuit." Pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket, he held it out before him. "This is the address of the gym where he trains."

Kelly turned his attention to Lee. "I understand you used to be something of a legend in the fight clubs."

Lee stepped forward to take the paper from Kelly's outstretched hand but didn't respond to his comment.

"Pretty face like yours," Kelly observed, "it's a cinch you didn't lose many fights. Me, on the other hand," he said, reaching up to feel his misshapen nose, "well, it's pretty obvious my talents lie in other areas."

“Hidden talents, no doubt,” Lee said.

Comprehension seemed to elude the inspector as he stared at Lee with pursed lips.

Bai drew Kelly’s attention away. “How much money was in the bag? What kinds of drugs were being sold?”

He hesitated as if ordering his thoughts before replying. “A million dollars in pure China White—at least, that’s what I’ve been told. The same in cash.”

She looked up to meet Lee’s gaze. If heroin from Asia traded hands in San Francisco, *Sun Yee On*, the resident triad, would know about it.

“All right, Kelly,” she conceded. “We’ll look into the matter.”

“Your assistance will be greatly appreciated,” Kelly noted. The inspector stood, wadded up his empty paper cup, and tossed his garbage out the open window. He dropped one of his business cards on Bai’s desk in passing. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

As he lumbered toward the door, Bai addressed his back. “Sure. What are friends for?”