

CHAPTER 2

Greenwood crossed through the students to his office and I stepped to one side to let him in. He threw me a bottle of water from a cooler box in one corner and leaned against his desk, arms folded, studying me with a thoughtful expression.

“You know, Wolfe, I’ve seen a lot of demonstrations in my time, but that was something else. You have a way of making violence look almost...graceful.”

I shrugged, unscrewing the cap of the water bottle he’d tossed me. “Violence is never graceful. It’s just elegantly efficient, if you know what you’re doing.”

“Well that was almost like watching ballet,” he said.

“Thanks, although you don’t have to call me sifu,” I said. “I’m not an instructor.”

“Sifu means teacher,” he said. “And you’re even teaching me stuff so that qualifies. Consider it an honorary title. Where did you study your martial arts?”

I didn’t answer right away. Instead, I let my gaze wander over the cluttered office, the battered chairs, the stacks of equipment, the faded certificates on the wall. My eyes lingered on the bookcase, on the familiar spine of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*. I thought of Hong Kong, of narrow alleyways and neon lights, of the faces I’d left behind. It was a text I had lived my life by. It’s teachings I had hoped to leave behind me but had ironically needed more than ever since being back in the land of my birth.

“Eight years in Japan studying ninjutsu,” I answered finally. “And over twenty years in Hong Kong studying Wing Chun and other styles.”

“Were you born out there?”

“Born here,” I told him. “Father was military so we moved about. I came back three

weeks ago.”

“I noticed you could speak the language,” he said. “What did you say to Lee?”

“I asked him what the big guy ate?”

“What did he say?”

“Little guys.”

He finished his bottle and threw the empty into a plastic bin. “You ever think about teaching? Not just demonstrations, but really passing on what you know?”

I hesitated. The idea of settling down, of becoming part of a community, felt foreign. “I’m not sure I’m the right person for that. My past is complicated.”

He grinned. “Aren’t all the best teachers a little complicated? Besides, these kids could use someone who’s seen the world. Someone who knows what it’s like outside the safety of the dojo. It’s clear you are way past black belt. I’ve been doing this twenty years myself and you make me look like an amateur.”

I shrugged. “Let’s just say I learned a lot of extra shit along the way that they don’t give you belts for.”

“I can believe that,” he said. “You must have lived and breathed this stuff.”

“Is that your subtle way of telling me I need to get out more.”

He laughed. “There are three types of martial artist,” he began. “There’s the hobby martial artist whose seen all the kung fu movies. He goes to a class twice a week like clockwork and learns all the moves, performs his stuff at the gradings and advances until he’s a black belt. But it’s all choreography, like dancing. He trains with friends and the sparring he does is very civilized with no real aggression. He doesn’t really know how to fight and has never thrown a punch in anger. The first conflict he faces in the street results in the grim and painful realisation he’s not adequately equipped for combat. The second type of

martial artist is more dedicated. He will do competitions, maybe MMA cage fighting. He trains hard and knows his shit and can handle himself but there are still rules and boundaries. He understands the difference between play fighting, I call it, and the real thing. Then there is the third type of martial artist who uses it for real, to survive, maybe life threatening situations. Special forces and the like. Someone who knows how to kill with his hands and perhaps has.”

“And which one am I?” I asked.

He studied me, pursing his lips slightly. “I’d guess at the third.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

Before I could reply, there was a knock at the door. One of the students, a wiry teenager with nervous energy, poked his head in. “Excuse me, Mr. Greenwood? There’s someone here to see Sifu Wolfe.”

Greenwood glanced at me, eyebrows raised. “You expecting anyone?”

I shook my head, a knot of unease tightening in my stomach. “No.”

The student stepped aside, and a woman entered. She was in her early thirties, with sharp features and dark hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She wore a tailored coat, her posture rigid, eyes scanning the room with practiced efficiency.

“Mr. Wolfe?” she asked, her tone clipped but polite.

“Yes,” I replied, keeping my expression neutral.

She produced a business card and handed it to me. “Jane Weatherall. I’m a reporter for the Westbridge Chronical. I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you have a moment.”

Greenwood shot me a look, half concern, half curiosity.

“Of course,” I said. “Here, or somewhere more private?”

“Here is fine,” she said, glancing at Greenwood. “If you don’t mind giving us a moment.”

"No problem," Greenwood said. "I'll give you some space." He slipped out, closing the door behind him.

Weatherall waited until he was gone before speaking again. "I understand you were involved in an incident two weeks ago. The rescue of your niece, Janine Wolfe. We are doing a follow up on an article in last week's addition."

"Article?" I said. "I didn't speak to anyone."

"You're in England now," she said. "The capital of nosy bastards."

"Do you have a copy?" I asked.

Weatherall opened her briefcase, pulled out a newspaper and handed it to me. There it was in all its monochromatic glory. *Richard Wolfe, freshly arrived from Hong Kong, rescued his kidnapped niece from a biker gang house and in so doing uncovered a conspiracy to defraud several businesses in Watford.*

The article went on to mention those involved; Frank Slater a local entrepreneur and Sydney Finnigan, a thug and drug dealer with illusions of grandeur. The newspaper piece worried me. Keeping a low profile was proving to be difficult. I was not eager to advertise my presence here. There were people in Hong Kong who were eager to find me.

"There are some inconsistencies in the stories we've received," Weatherall said.

"Obviously, we are eager to get our facts right. It is claimed you acted alone, but others mention accomplices. And then there's the matter of the injuries sustained by the men at the scene. Some of them are still in hospital, and there was at least one fatality."

I met her gaze. "I did what I had to do to get my niece out safely."

"Understandable," she said, making a note in her pad. "There are rumours about your involvement with certain criminal organizations in Hong Kong, and I believe there was a conviction for a stabbing. Would you like to comment?"

As I looked out through the grubby, rain-streaked window, the city lights of Westbridge blurred into memory. My mind drifted back to Hong Kong, to a night that had shaped me in ways I still struggled to understand.

I was seventeen, lean and restless, my hair longer then. I'd spent the evening training at a cramped kung fu school, the instructor's voice echoing in my ears: "Control your fear. Use it."

But fear was a constant companion in Hong Kong. That night, it followed me as I left the school. I was almost home when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned, heart pounding, and saw three figures closing in. They were older, tougher, faces hard with intent. I recognised one of them from another martial arts school, the other two from a street gang.

One of them, a wiry youth with a scar across his cheek, stepped forward, brandishing a knife. The blade caught the streetlight, glinting cold and sharp. He barked something in Cantonese, words I barely understood at the time, but the threat was clear.

I remembered Sun Tzu's teachings, the lessons drilled into me since childhood. Never underestimate your opponent. Looks can be deceiving. But fear threatened to overwhelm reason. My hands shook as I squared up, adrenaline flooding my body.

The knife man lunged, slashing at my midsection. I twisted, feeling the blade graze my shirt. The other two circled, shouting encouragement. I knew I couldn't outrun them. I had to fight.

I feinted left, then darted right, grabbing the man's wrist as he swung again. We grappled, bodies pressed against the grimy wall. He was stronger, but desperation gave me an edge. I slammed my knee into his stomach, forcing him to drop the knife. It clattered to the pavement, and in that instant, I snatched it up.

The world narrowed to the glint of steel, the pounding of my heart. He came at me

again, fists flying. I reacted without thinking, thrusting the blade forward. It sank into his stomach, blood blooming dark and sudden. He screamed, stumbling back, shock and pain etched across his face.

The other two hesitated, fear flickering in their eyes. I stood over the wounded man, the knife trembling in my grip. For a moment, I saw myself reflected in the blade; young, scared, changed forever.

They fled, leaving their friend writhing on the ground. I dropped the knife, hands shaking, and ran. I didn't look back.

It was a replay of the lesson I had just taught to the students in Greenwood's school. The difference was twenty years and a whole lot more experience.

I was arrested the following day. The wounded man had survived the attack and been taken to hospital, so my punishment wasn't as harsh as it could have been. Even taking the plea of self-defense into account, I still spent the next two years behind bars. The place my true education began.

Back in Westbridge, I blinked away the memory, the rain tapping softly against the glass. Wetherall was looking at me. Waiting for me to answer. I felt a flicker of irritation.

"This is the point I say no comment," I said. "I don't want any more articles printed about me."

She shrugged and closed her notebook, her expression softening slightly. "I understand, Mr. Wolfe. But you should know that people talk in a town like this. Things will be said and exaggerated and enhanced like Chinese whispers, which is ironic considering where you've come from. I simply want to present the truth before the fiction emerges."

I nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

She paused at the door. "If you want to share anything else, you know where to find

me.” She pointed to the business card still in my hand.

With that, she was gone, leaving me alone in the cramped office, the weight of old ghosts pressing in around me.

I was no longer a shadow moving through crowded streets of Hong Kong. Here I was a name in the local paper, a story whispered over pints in the pub. I slipped the business card into my pocket. Greenwood returned, his expression cautious.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“Reporter wanting to do a follow up story on my niece’s rescue,” I replied, forcing a casual tone. I passed him the newspaper.

He read the article and handed the paper back to me. “Fame at last,” he said. “Are you going to frame it?”

“I wish it hadn’t been written in the first place,” I said.

He nodded. “That’s the thing about small towns. News travels fast.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“You know, Wolfe, if you ever need anything, a place to train, someone to talk to, you’re welcome here. We look after our own.”

I managed a smile. “Thanks, Dave. I appreciate it.”