



QUIET TEACHER

A XENON PEARL MARTIAL ARTS THRILLER

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AUTHOR OF *THE CUTTING SEASON*

1

I am an insubordinate puppet in the pitiless hands of karma, and try as I might I cannot cut the strings. Day in and day out I struggle among the ten thousand things, pulled one way by the desire to shun the world and another by the need to save it. Back and forth I go, sometimes exercising suture and scalpel, other times heeding a dark and terrible call. I want to be a better man, but my violent compulsions stay me. I am never more at peace than when I am cutting; I am never more tortured than in cutting's red wake.

My new stepsister, police detective Wanda Berkowitz, knows nothing of my inner turmoil. Although she could see easily enough that nearing the prison sent me into a toxic swoon, she could not know that it was because a thousand lifetimes worth of judgments and sentences fill my head. As she propelled me toward the penitentiary door, I unconsciously rooted myself to the floor.

"Oh no," she said, taking my elbow. "You're going through with it, buddy boy."

"Please," I said.

"You're not out of the woods yet. There are still charges floating around and people waiting to pounce if you slip up. Any and all reminders of prison life are good for you and even better for our family."

Two control room guards watched our dance with mild interest. Wanda pressed her badge to the bulletproof window. "Detective Berkowitz," she said.

"Everything under control, detective?"

"You better believe it."

The guard opened the security drawer. Wanda dropped in her badge and reached back somewhere for her cuffs. Then she loosened

the jacket of her gray suit and pulled her duty Sig-Sauer .45 from a nylon shoulder web.

“Holster those eyes, doctor,” she snapped.

I didn’t. “Watching a woman undress has never been quite like this,” I said.

“Shut up and give over your knife. I know you’ve got one.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“The metal detector will find it.”

“There’s nothing to find.”

Holding my eye she feigned a cough and magically came up with another, smaller gun. I managed a smile.

“And where’d that come from?”

“Kahr PM40,” she said. “Forty-caliber death puppy. Nothing flatter, nothing finer.”

The guard pushed out a clipboard for us both to sign.

“Chaplain’s office,” said Wanda.

“All the way down the hall, first right, second left.”

Once before Wanda had tried to scare me straight by taking me to the Broward County Main Jail. It hadn’t worked, though I still remembered the terrible stench of sweat and disinfectants and toilet. Up here in South Bay on the lower edge of Lake Okeechobee, smack in the middle of what used to be magnificent Everglades and was now chemically polluted sugar country, all I got was a whiff of burning cane. The hallway was brightly lit, and the orange and yellow color scheme said school as much as maximum security.

We found the chaplain’s office and Wanda introduced me to a man whose shopworn face revealed a faith still strong after much testing by rapists, murderers, child molesters, and punks.

“It’s really quite astonishing to get a renowned brain surgeon to come to prison to lead a meditation,” he said, seemingly unable to stop staring at my ponytail. “Do many of your colleagues do this kind of work?”

“I don’t know any others who do,” I said. “And I wouldn’t exactly say I’m renowned.”

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Wanda said. “There’s a prisoner I have to interrogate. Zee, I’ll meet you at the car in an hour.”

She left and the chaplain stared at me in fascination. “Tell me about your meditation techniques,” he urged. “A Zen master has been doing a monthly session here for about five years, but I’m sure he doesn’t have your technical qualifications.”

“Sounds like I don’t have his,” I said. “Meditation is just an escape for me.”

“And for the men,” the chaplain smiled. “The only escape, or so we hope. Shall we go see them?”

He led me down another hall to a little windowless room where barefoot men in fatigues waited cross-legged on the floor. A statue of Buddha stood on a draped bookshelf at one end and there were prayer flags, two tiny incense cauldrons, and a stack of inspirational books.

The chaplain made a few remarks about me being a celebrated surgeon and meditation master, describing an impressive man who did not sound the slightest bit like me. Then he slipped out of the room and left me alone with the inmates. I made it a point to shake everyone’s hand. The group’s leader was tall and gangly and ruddy and thin. His ID tag said Irwin. I figured he was there for the same reason as the other men—to break the monotony and find an incorporeal route past the barbed-wire fence and the cameras and fences and guards.

“We got a few sick brains in here, Doc,” he said in a Southern drawl. “Probably all the neurosurgery in the world won’t help.”

I started to chuckle but saw he was serious. I motioned for the men to rise. “I have a few exercises to calm the body and make meditation easier,” I said.

“*Jing to qi, qi to shen,*” said a man standing front and center.

His nametag read Neptune, and he bristled with the kind of hard, shiny muscle only endless hours at the weight rack can bring. His ears were as perfectly formed as a young girl’s, and his look said he was working the angles, always monitoring how he struck

others and how he could use whatever impression he made to his best advantage. His gaze was intense and challenging. He looked at me as if he knew what I was hiding. I found myself holding my breath.

“There’s a saying in Mandarin Chinese,” I explained, giving myself a chance to recover. “*Jing to qi, qi to shen* means transforming essence to energy, energy to spirit. *Qi* is the operative word. It means life force or energy. Meditation, together with the exercises we’re about to do, uses this life force to transform your essential fluids into a deeper spirit. The exercises are called the Eight Pieces of Brocade.”

“They are martial arts exercises, yes?” Neptune said. “What’s a doctor doing bringing martial arts to prison? You know that’s not allowed here. Why are you even practicing if you’re a healer? This inmate wants to know.”

“I’m a martial artist, but these are not martial exercises,” I said. “The set is just for health.”

They were the first movements my teacher, Wu Tie Mei, shared with me during the years she taught me *gongfu*, medicine, energetics, and philosophy. A superbly trained fighter, Tie Mei (Chinese people put their given name last, family name first) was a Chinese Jew rescued by my maternal grandfather’s rabbinical congregation in a 1970s international outreach. Most people don’t know there are Jews in China or that they cluster in a city called Kaifeng at the end of what was once the Silk Road. Kaifeng’s Jews have no connection to world Jewry, but they engage traditional practices such as eating unleavened bread on Passover and resting on Friday night to honor the Sabbath.

“Oh they’re martial,” Neptune went on. “You can fool them but you can’t fool me.”

His persistence made me uncomfortable. I wished Wanda hadn’t left me alone. I wished the chaplain had stuck around. I tried to focus on the exercises.

The first movement in the Brocade sequence had the men

reaching for the sky or, more precisely, the fluorescent lights nine feet above our heads. Looking up, I saw dead moths and flying roaches trapped behind the plastic covers by their lust for the light. I wondered about their reincarnation cycles. Perhaps they had already come back as men, had tested the laws of karma, and were on their way here to serve prison terms as inmates; perhaps they were already buzzing around outside again.

The second movement was called the archer because it separated the arms in a bow-stretching action.

“Gotcha,” said Neptune, lining up his imaginary arrow with my forehead.

The third movement was a big spinal twist. Mercifully, Neptune had nothing to say about it. The fourth movement was similar. The fifth was a low circle that worked the belt vessel—good for weight control because it stimulated the metabolism. Bending low, Neptune aimed his fist at my groin, striking the air just inches from me.

The next movement was a toe touch. The one after that was a tensed punching exercise. Neptune lined himself up with my face and went through the motions with grimacing and grunting and harsh breathing and a murderous look in his eye softened only by a humorous glimmer. “For your health, of course,” he said, his curled thumb just inches from my nose.

He kept his counsel for the last movement, which entailed rising to a toestand and then dropping down onto the heels.

“That’s it,” I told the group. “Now we do our meditation. We stand rather than sit because standing does a better job of encouraging the flow of your life force through all your meridians. The Chinese believe that these meridians carry energy to all parts of our bodies. On our feet, we open the channels for circulation and energy and nourish the vital organs, appendages, and bones. Sitting closes off some of those channels.”

“Appendages,” snickered someone in the back.

Chuckles spread in a wave, chaos and violence lurking beneath

like shark and rocks, but then the group settled down, hands folded over navels.

“Feel the energy come up from the ground,” I said. “Imagine it coming into your feet and up the back of your legs and following the line of your spine to your head, rolling up over your crown and back down the front of you to collect behind the navel in what the Chinese call the *dantian*.”

After ten minutes of standing, I came out of my reverie long enough to check on Neptune. He appeared to be deep in meditation, but the moment my gaze settled on his face, his lips turned up into a smile that said he knew I was watching. Irwin began to rock back and forth. Another inmate, a Filipino man with a stocky build and youthful features, sobbed quietly, his hands still in place, tears rolling down his face.

I went back to my own practice and tried to remember my past lives. I wanted to see images from the Song dynasty or the Ming. I wanted to smell the battlefield or, better yet, a long-lost lover. I wanted to see a panoply of flowers laid out for an imperial celebration, to recall a feast of dumplings, to see snow on a pristine mountaintop before there was acid rain to stain it or strip mining to gouge holes in its profile. I wanted to get to know my cohorts, those people whom Chinese metaphysics said traveled with me during the transmigration of souls, making pit stops at the way station, the bardo, for the purpose of signing new contracts in the seemingly endless cycle of living and learning and dying and living again.

I had visions not of past lives but of this one. I saw my blade, Quiet Teacher, flutter over a woman’s eyebrows and I saw her tiny hairs shower down. I saw my sharp steel slice a mulberry-sized mole from a man’s neck. I saw that inescapable steel sever an arm from a shoulder, and then I saw it hack a body into bits for easier disposal. My eyes jerked open to find Neptune’s lips at my ear.

“You’re a fake,” he hissed. “The dark and the light all confused and running to gray. You’re a healer, yes, but an avenger too, and

you've got a bill of goods to sell us. You're a hustler of the spirit, a doctor of deception with no goddamn right to preach."

My eyes snapped open like blinds with springs run amok. Irwin clapped the gong signaling the end of the meditation. The men came out of it with slow breathing and peaceful expressions, but the scorpions in my belly nearly bent me over with their stings. I avoided Neptune's gaze as I shook hands all around and answered a few questions. The men noticed my agitation, but I was in no condition to explain. I left as soon as I could.

Outside at the car, Wanda seemed pleased by my wan expression.

"So maybe the life of crime really *isn't* for you," she grinned.

2

On the way back to Fort Lauderdale, the air inside the SUV grew chilly. I wasn't dressed for it, but Wanda was logy from the donut she stopped for just outside the prison and said the car heater would put her out. My offer to drive got me only a hard stare.

"You want to tell me about it?" she asked.

"It was fine. The men were interested. I think they got something out of it."

"If it was so fine, how came you came out looking like you were going to puke?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?"

"There was one guy got under my skin a little."

"Tell me his name; I'll look him up for you."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "He didn't really do anything."

"Oh, he did something. Maximum security always means a rough crowd. That's where violent offenders end up."

"I mean he didn't do anything to me."

"Then why are we talking about him?"

I shrugged and we drove in silence for a few minutes. I reached casually below the seat, found the knife I had left there, slipped it into my pocket, and shivered.

"Aha," Wanda crowed. "So you did have one with you."

"Keep your eyes on the road, will you?"

"I didn't have to look. I could smell the steel."

"You're ridiculous," I said. "Have I mentioned that?"

She smiled and played piano on the steering wheel. "Been exercising your sword lately?"

I looked out the window. There was a hard line of clouds to the west.

“Zee?”

“Not much.”

“A little is too much. We had a deal.”

“I’ve been using a machete, okay? Stainless steel, twenty-three inches, made in El Salvador. Good and cheap.

“You’ve been cutting trees?”

“Trees, bushes, saplings. There’s a park in Lighthouse Point, near the Intracoastal. The hurricane damaged it last year. I’ve been doing my own private cleanup. Park workers saw me and told me I should be paid.”

“You know cutting is a sickness with you, right?”

“I thought you’d love this news,” I said. “No people, just wood. Nothing illegal. I’m performing a service.”

“How often?”

“Now and then.”

“How often, Zee?”

“When I feel like it.”

“And how often is that?”

“Give it up.”

Friday was winding down and traffic was heavy. By the time we reached I-95 in West Palm Beach a light rain had begun to fall. It wasn’t enough to require wipers, but I could tell the road was slick. Since I get around by motorcycle, I pay particular attention to a road’s coefficient of friction. I know that after a long period of dry weather in South Florida this light rain was bringing oil and gas up out of the asphalt and turning the interstate into a roller rink.

Wanda seemed not to notice. “How long has it been since you’ve worked?” she asked as we passed southbound through Delray Beach.

“I go to the office.”

“I mean operate.”

“Five months.”

“Does someone like you get rusty?”

“I hope not.”

“When are you going back to it?”

“As soon as they’ll have me.”

“Broward Samaritan isn’t the only hospital around,” she said, referring to the fact I’d been suspended for operating on my own girlfriend—a clear violation of policy—and for other more violent transgressions against hospital regulations and rules.

“The hospital district runs as a unit,” I said. “The administrators talk to one another.”

“Don’t they need you? I thought there was a shortage of brain surgeons.”

“There *is* a shortage and they *do* need me, but I pissed them off. My office is still open for existing patients, but they aren’t sending me any new ones. They’re strangling me slowly.”

Her look said that she thought I had gotten exactly what I deserved. “Word has it the DEA is looking at you for writing too many prescriptions for pain killers.”

I was startled and tried not to show it. “How do you know about that?”

“I’m a good cop. Besides, you’re family now.”

“Some guy from the DEA came to my office thinking he knew more medicine than I did. He didn’t like it when I told him he was wrong.”

“What was he wrong about?”

“People have a strange prejudice about pain. Some think its punishment from God and they deserve it, others think it’s good for them. Easy when it’s someone else’s pain, but when it’s your own, people change their tune.”

“And junkies?”

I shrugged. “Plenty of people abuse pain meds just like they abuse booze or street drugs. That doesn’t change the sick person’s need for medicine.”

“A new cause for Zee to champion.”

I laced my fingers together in response to the jibe. “A cop sees one side of this, a doctor sees another. These people are desperate. Wouldn’t *you* be in order to agree to have a drug pump implanted in your spine or to have nerves cut so you can’t feel anything at all?”

Wanda gave me a sidelong glance. “I got the DEA guy off your back.”

“You did?”

“For now. Doesn’t hurt that you’re not operating anymore either. He seemed quite pleased at that.”

* * *

On the edge of Boca Raton, a motorcycle passed us. It caught my attention because the orange color meant it was a KTM, the exotic Austrian marque all the rage with the motorcycle press. In the forced leisure of my recent life I had been reading motorcycle magazines as fast as publishers could print them.

“Look at that guy,” Wanda said. “If you weren’t in the car, I’d pull him over right now.”

“You’d never catch him.”

Wanda tightened her hand on the wheel. I touched her shoulder. “That wasn’t a dare,” I said. “Those bikes are crazy fast. I doubt he’ll even see your lights.”

Indeed, the rider seemed possessed. The professional motorcycle racer, high-mileage tourer, or experienced motor cop uses spare, subtle motions to guide his machine; this guy sped up and slowed down and whacked his handlebars from side to side, clear evidence that he was either addicted to adrenalin or just plain stoned. “Some riders just want to die,” I said as we watched him disappear between trucks up ahead.

“But not you.”

“Nope. I just ride for the feeling—second best I know.”

Wanda screwed up her face. “Oversharing,” she said.

As we left the Boca city limits, the rider split lanes between a large tractor-trailer and a VW Bug. His speed surprised the truck driver, who reacted by twisting the wheel. The trailer fishtailed dangerously. Wanda stepped up the pace to stay with the bike.

“In California it’s legal to split lanes like that,” I said.

“Not here,” said Wanda. “Enlightenment begins in the East. You of all people should know that.”

I grabbed the dashboard as she picked up the pace. “You’ll never catch that guy.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re going to bang up this nice Ford.”

“It’s a lease truck. We got it on a HIDTA grant.”

“English?”

“High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.”

“Which means it was bought with confiscated drug money.”

Wanda grinned. “You really *are* a quick study. Don’t worry; policy says I can’t pursue him unless he commits a violent felony. We’ll just stay with him for a bit. If the road opens up, I’ll pull him over.”

We passed through Deerfield Beach at triple digit speed. The traffic and the rain were heavy, but the KTM did not slow down. A white Porsche suddenly jerked sideways out of the fast lane to let him by, then came up behind him with bright headlights flashing. The rider gave him the finger and scooted off in a diagonal that took him across three lanes of traffic. He could have stayed in his lane and proceeded on his way, but the Porsche driver set off in pursuit, making the same sweep. Brake lights turned the shiny blacktop red.

“You know the difference between a porcupine and a Porsche?” Wanda asked above the din of the big Ford’s emergency equipment.

“Joke all you want; they’re beautiful cars.”

The Porsche came up on the bike hard, and the bike darted away again, slow lane to fast. The Porsche wouldn’t let it go and set

off in pursuit, roaring past and dousing the rider in filthy spray.

“A porcupine’s prick is on the outside,” Wanda said, carefully moving to the center lane.

On the beat of her last word—later I would remember that quite distinctly—the world in front of us turned into a bloodbath. The Porsche’s tires lost their grip on the road and shot a rooster tail to the sky as the car went sideways then back to front. Out of its lane it moved into the path of a tractor-trailer that slammed on its brakes and jackknifed across the road.

Presented with a wall of metal, the motorcyclist went down. His bike slid under the trailer, tangled briefly with the wheels, and continued through. The Porsche driver regained control of his car and sped away in the fast lane. The truck rose on its passenger-side wheels and flipped over. A midnight blue Subaru Forester plowed into the overturned truck in front of us, hitting right in the V between the trailer and the cab. The truck folded around the car, squashing it into the shape of an arrowhead. Wanda screeched to a halt and I jumped out.

Cold air sharpened my mind and cold rain soaked my short-sleeve shirt. Cars were sideways all over the road and the breakdown lanes were full. The bitter smell of brake-pad asbestos filled my nose as I sprinted for the driver’s side of the Subaru. The driver was a young woman wearing sweats. Her face showed airbag burns and her neck bore a hundred tiny cuts from the glass of her shattered windshield. The front doors were completely crushed, so I took off my jacket, wrapped it around my hand, and used it to clear away the glass.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

She blinked her eyes.

“Your name,” I asked again.

Her voice wavered, but it was clear. “Kimberly Jenkins.”

“I’m a doctor, Kimberly, and before I move you I need to ask you a few questions.”

She tried to release her seatbelt. Her hand shook, and she

couldn't do it. She turned around, trying to look behind her. "Tierra," she said.

The headlight glare of Wanda's Ford Expedition made it hard to see inside the vehicle. It took me a moment to discern the car seat and the child in it. The rear airbags had deployed, both side and front. Deflated, they formed a cocoon around the little girl. She was awake and watching me. I went around and tried the side door, but it was crushed. Unlike the windshield, the side window had come away cleanly. I leaned in and saw blood on the C pillar and on the side of the little girl's head.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Tierra nodded, and reached out her arms toward her mother. "Mommy," she said.

"Your mommy's stuck right now," I said.

I went forward to Kimberly. "Did you hit your head?"

"I don't think so."

"It's going to take a little work to get you out."

"How's my baby?"

"She is injured, but she's conscious."

Tears came. "Oh no. I tried to stop, but everything happened too fast."

"You did fine," I said.

"I can't move my left arm."

The belt pulled down her blouse, and I could see a bruise developing on her clavicle. "Where do you hurt?" I asked her.

"My neck."

"Mommy!" Tierra cried again.

"I'll be right there, honey."

Wanda came up behind me. "Paramedics are on the way," she said.

"Go check on the guy in the truck."

"What about the biker?" she asked.

"I doubt there's anything we can do for him."

I turned back to Kimberly and asked her to lift her arm. She

managed but only from the elbow.

“Good. Now can you shrug your shoulder?”

She tried without success. I brought out four inches of bead-blasted stainless blade and a textured aluminum handle. It opened with a click. Kimberly watched me with the eyes of a person whose entire world has constricted to a small space where every detail shines with importance.

Wanda cleared her throat. “It’s a switchblade?”

I sliced neatly through the seatbelt. “They’re called automatics now.”

Shaking her head, she moved off. I put my jacket around Kimberly’s neck. “I’m going to wait for the paramedics to take you out,” I told her. “You could have an injury I can’t see. We’ll find out at the hospital.”

I went back to Tierra. She looked sleepy and that worried me. I asked her to squeeze my finger and found her right hand weak. Her left pupil dilated as I watched it. I smiled at her. The smile she gave me back was lopsided.

Wanda came back. “The truck driver’s trapped. He’s awake but weak. Cursed the Porsche. Doesn’t seem to realize the motorcycle slid under him.”

“The girl’s brain is bleeding into her skull,” I said quietly. “We’ve got to get her to the OR right away. There’s a clock on an epidural hematoma, and it’s ticking. Where are the paramedics?”

“They’ll be here,” Wanda soothed. “I know it feels like forever, but it’s been only a couple of minutes. Where’s that legendary surgeon cool?”

“So many variables,” I muttered. “It’s chaos out here. I don’t know where to turn first.”

“Welcome to a cop’s world. And by the way, you were wrong about the biker. He’s alive and talking. You’re not going to like the look of him, though.”

As if on cue the rider appeared, walking upright like a regular guy, his leather riding suit in tatters, a piece of his skull completely gone.

“Are you guys cops?” he asked. “Cause this wasn’t my fault. That prick in the Porsche....”

“Prick,” Wanda interrupted. “Exactly.”

The rider noticed the open rear hatch of Wanda’s SUV. “Wow,” he said. “Look at all those guns. You guys preparing for war or what?”

I took his arm. “Let’s sit down for a minute.”

“I’ll look for the missing piece,” said Wanda.

“Don’t worry,” said the rider, thinking we were talking about his bike. “My insurance company will fix it.”

The paramedics arrived in a storm of sirens and lights. I went back to Tierra.

Her eyes were closed.

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Arthur Rosenfeld is the critically acclaimed author of nine novels, two non-fiction books, several screenplays, numerous magazine articles (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Parade*), and blogs for Huffingtonpost.com and Basil&Spice.com. A thirty-year martial arts practitioner, Arthur Rosenfeld resides near Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

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