

Prologue

“Hello?”

“She wouldn’t budge. Make it look like an accident.”

“Gotcha.”

Click.

Chapter One

Alice Chieko Matsusaki died last week. It should have caused rejoicing in every corner of the San Francisco Bay area.

It was making Erika Fong's day miserable.

"Focus!"

The bark in her ear snapped her attention back to front and center, to Larry Gonzales' meaty face. His left jab crunched into her protective headgear like a two-ton battering ram.

Erika staggered back. Stars.

In her mind's eye, her aunt's blood-red smile mocked her. Alice had had it coming to her.

Erika pivoted and shot her foot at Larry's lowered head. The blow drove his body down in a half-curl. She advanced with a right jab at his head.

So why did Erika feel even a sliver of guilt for feeling so relieved?

Larry straightened and sprang sideways. He threw a right blow that hit her shoulder like a bowling ball. Erika's fist slackened as it connected with his collarbone. Her wrist collapsed. Fiery pain lanced up her forearm to her elbow.

Dummy! Her thumb throbbed, and she flapped her hand.

It's not like Erika had wanted AuntAlice to die. It had been her time. And none too soon.

"Erika! You okay?" Her trainer J.D. Martinez stood outside the ring but leaned toward her. Stubborn man would always see her as a poor-little-rich girl whose skin bruised like a Japanese peach.

No, she wouldn't let him stop the spar. She needed more. She needed to pummel this stupid guilt out of her somehow. "I'm fine." Erika raised her gloved fists and filled her vision with Larry's ugly mug.

Erika swung her own roundhouse.

Larry stepped into her and slammed his elbow into her face.

Black pain. Erika's shoulders impacted the floor, then her back slapped the mat. Her spine creaked. White flashes swam behind her closed eyelids while a jackhammer pounded her forehead. A vise squeezed her sinuses shut, but it didn't block the dusty, moldy smell of the ground. She cracked her eyes open. The dim ceiling swam above her like a flopping tent flap

"I told you to focus." J.D. undid her headgear and his fumbling fingers jabbed between her eyes.

Erika slapped him away. "I'm fine. Let off."

Larry's gargantuan hand wrapped around her forearm and hauled her to her feet. The throbbing in her head jumped ten-fold. *Oooh*. The blood pounded, trying to break out of her skull, drowning out her hearing. She swayed a second before finding her balance. At least the air smelled better up here.

Larry stripped off his other glove. "Sorry, Erika."

She waved an impatient hand and dabbed at her face. No blood. She thought she'd have a crater in her forehead.

"At least I missed that pretty nose."

Erika gave him a sick smile. "Very funny." But she admitted to herself that she preferred the red-hot stabbing behind her eyes to the bitterness in her mouth.

Why should she feel guilty about her reaction to the news? It wasn't as if the world had lost a vital member of the population. Alice would never have been caught for her crooked business deals. Her death did society a favor.

A part of Erika knew her bone-numbing relief was wrong, but she couldn't make herself stop that little blip of joy whenever she realized she'd never have to see Alice again.

Not even in heaven.

God help her, she couldn't even come up with a rice-grain of remorse.

"Didn't you say you needed to leave early today?" J.D. jabbed a thumb behind him at his new digital atomic wall-clock.

Rats! Erika needed to change into her dress and be at the Buddhist *Hongwanji* temple. She smelled riper than her locker, but there wasn't time to shower.

She didn't believe in Buddha, so he wouldn't mind.

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The monotone chanting from the priest drifted from the ornate Japanese temple as Erika pulled into the parking lot. The funeral service had already started.

Erika swiped at the sweat beading on her skin and liberally spritzed on a fruity body spray her sister Miriya had given her last Christmas. She bundled her tangled hair into a clip and dashed from the car.