

Cambridge University Press
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Sue Leather
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Death of a fighter*

‘You kill the guy with a karate punch to the left kidney. Yaku zuki – reverse punch. You step over the body lying on the wooden floor, take one last look at the face, eyes still open in an expression of surprise, and move quickly through the door of the dojo to the lift. Then down and into the cold night air. You almost allow yourself to smile as you walk towards the Underground station, your right hand still aware of the contact with Kawaguchi-sensei’s body. Then you get a train to safety.’

‘Cut the poetry, Jensen. This is a newspaper for the twenty-first century – we want facts, not fantasy.’ This was the sweet voice of my boss, Dave Balzano, editor of The Daily Echo, as he looked over my shoulder at my computer screen.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said under my breath as he moved on towards his office. Balzano was a fat, sweaty man with a bad temper. I had learnt from bitter experience that there was no point in arguing with him. I looked again at what I had written.

‘Pity,’ I whispered to my colleague, Rick. ‘I quite like it.’ Rick smiled but carried on looking at his screen.

Rick and I were both news reporters on The Daily Echo. I had been working there for about three years and Rick joined about a year after me. Like me, he had started off on a less well-known newspaper outside London, in a small town in Scotland to be exact. All we wrote about

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were new babies and marriages. I studied journalism in Manchester and, after finishing my studies, got a job with the Manchester Evening News. That was a bit more exciting, but not much.

We had now finally arrived in the big city and we both enjoyed our work.

We were working in The Daily Echo main office on Malvern Street in central London. Our desks were side by side. The only real problem with the job was Dave Balzano. He was a great editor but he had the worst temper in the world. In the three years I had been at The Daily Echo I'd never heard him talk quietly.

'Jensen!! Get the latest news from Scotland Yard and get down to that damn karate place and get an inside story!' shouted Balzano loudly as he went into his office. I smiled sweetly but under my breath I said 'go to hell'.

* * *

I thought over what I knew about Kawaguchi, or Kawaguchi-sensei¹ as he was known to his pupils. I first knew of him some years ago when I trained with Asano-sensei. They had both trained in Tokyo with the great master, Ohtsuka, and had both left Japan at about the same time, in the early 1960s. They were two of a number of teachers who brought the teachings of karate from Japan to Europe at that time. Some years later they had had a very public disagreement about technique and had started rival karate schools. In London, anybody who wanted to train seriously trained with one of them. Now Kawaguchi was lying dead in the Central Hospital, killed by a single punch.

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With Balzano's voice still ringing in my ears, I arranged to meet Jonty Adams, my contact at Scotland Yard,² in a bar in Piccadilly, our usual meeting place. A reporter's relationship to the police is never an easy one. We need them and they need us. Sometimes, though, getting any useful information out of them was nearly impossible. I was lucky that Jonty Adams liked me. He liked me and I needed him. Perfect.

Jonty was a slim, nervous guy in his late thirties with a thin moustache and terrible taste in ties. He was wearing a particularly horrible grey one with little pink pigs all over it. I tried to ignore it. It wasn't easy.

'So what's happening with the Kawaguchi case?' I asked, trying to be casual, not to make it sound that I was desperate.

'Not much progress on motive, Kate,' he said. He always moved his body a lot when he got excited and the pigs on his tie started to dance around in front of my eyes. 'Though I suppose a guy like that might have a few enemies. You know, probably punched a few people in his time. This I will say though, whoever killed him was a real karate expert. The post mortem showed there'd been just one punch, but of such a force that it killed him immediately.'

I groaned to myself. Jonty had a way of spending a long time repeating things you already knew.

'Obviously the place to look is in the karate clubs,' he went on. Christ! How did these guys get to be in the police? Then, just as I was about to go, he said:

'We took a guy called Ito in for questioning, Kawaguchi's number two – he told us that Kawaguchi had been threatened before.'

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‘Thank you, God,’ I said to myself. I left Jonty and his tie in the bar.

I went over to the Asano dojo for the last half hour of training and saw a good fight among about six black belts.³ I stood and watched the white gi’s⁴ moving quickly round the wooden floor, black belts flying. There was something beautiful about this, more like a dance rather than a fight. It made me feel sad, not to be there doing it. One of the black belts was my friend, Sanjay. While he was having a shower I went over to the Red Cow pub just behind the training hall on Clapham Common, ordered a couple of beers and waited for him. I was glad to see him; Sanjay and I had been friends for years. We started training together and took our dan⁵ grades⁶ together too. We were more like brother and sister than just friends.

Sanjay was a small delicate Indian man of about twenty-six, with the most beautiful dark eyes and long eyelashes. He came from a southern Indian family who now lived near Birmingham. His father was a surgeon in a big teaching hospital and Sanjay also qualified as a doctor two years ago. He was a gentle, charming man. You couldn’t imagine him hurting a fly, but he fought like a tiger. ‘The Indian tiger’, I called him. We took our beers and sat in the public bar.

‘Nobody can believe that Kawaguchi is dead. It seems incredible,’ said Sanjay, drinking his beer thirstily.

‘How many people do you think would be capable of that – killing someone with one blow to the kidney?’ I asked.

‘Quite a few unfortunately. Any of those guys tonight could have done it if they’d timed the punch right. There

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must be a hundred guys in London like that. Even I could have done it – even you, Kate!’ Sanjay smiled. ‘The question is, why didn’t Kawaguchi stop him? He was supposed to be one of the greatest fighters ever.’

Yes, my old friend, I thought. That was exactly the question. How did some guy – if it was a man – manage to catch Kawaguchi before the great man could defend himself? Kawaguchi was known as “the cat” and was said to be so fast that in practice he would hit you as soon as you thought of moving. These old masters got faster as they got older.

‘Yes, it’s a real mystery,’ Sanjay continued, thoughtfully. ‘And what about you Kate, are you doing any training?’ Sanjay asked the same question every time I saw him and he always got the same answer.

‘No, Sanjay, no real training. I just try to keep fit, you know. A bit of swimming.’

I had trained for about ten years in all, but a number of injuries and a doctor’s warning had persuaded me to give up. I missed it a lot, particularly when I was with Sanjay. He reminded me of the companionship I no longer had.

We chatted about our karate friends for a while and drank another couple of beers. At about 10.45 we left the pub and walked towards the Underground together. The night was cold and uninviting after the warmth of the pub. Autumn was beginning to turn into winter.

‘Goodnight Kate,’ said Sanjay. ‘Why don’t you come to practice some time? You’re getting lazy.’

Dear Sanjay, he never gave up. I suppose that’s what made him such a great fighter. He smiled his slow friendly smile as we parted to take different trains home.