

WALKERS

C.B. Williams



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for Sensei Richard Pietrelli

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CHAPTER ONE

“*Ieh!*” Kate’s wooden training sword cut a perfect diagonal from left to right. She stepped forward, sinking low into her stance, “*Tō!*” The sword cut an opposite diagonal, the street lamp glinting off the polished wood. She paused briefly, then cut again.

Caught in the rhythm, Kate had long since lost track of how many *kesas* she had cut in the chilly pre-dawn of an early March day. Sweat beaded up on her forehead, ran down her back, her front. Her shoulders and forearms burned. She shook the damp bangs from her eyes. Sucking in gulps of air, she stepped, exploding into a *kiai* and a simultaneous cut. She loved the feel of her muscles moving and her breath coming fast and sure. She cut again and again, one cut blending into the other in an endless flow of motion. It made her feel alive. It made her feel strong. In this arena, she could still be good. In this arena, she was still quick.

Kate jumped when the egg timer went off. With a sigh, she picked up the towel she had slung over the back of her parents’ car and wiped her face and the back of her neck beneath her long red-gold braid. She stood,

momentarily transfixed by the beauty of the pink and yellow dawn, as her breathing returned to normal. The harsh caw of a Jay pulled her from her reverie.

Kate hastily gathered up her training sword and *naginata* and headed towards her front door, towards the shower, towards breakfast, towards school and, it being Wednesday, towards her favorite little person, Joey.

On Wednesdays Kate babysat ten-month-old Joey Sullivan. She really wasn't that keen on kids, let alone babies, but there was something about this little guy that had gotten under her skin. She actually looked forward to the three to four hours she spent with him while his parents went out and "reconnected," as they called it.

First of all, Joey was a beautiful baby—all pink and white with chubby little legs and midnight curls. And his eyes were an extraordinary shade of green, like beach glass, pale and translucent. Then there was his disposition. Alert, happy, full of life. His smile was contagious. Joey was the proverbial bouncing baby boy, and Kate loved to bask in his sweetness.

And so, to Kate, Wednesdays were perfect days. Her classes were all her favorites, with a study hall right before lunch, which meant she could leave the high school campus for almost two hours because of her good grades. Which meant that she could go home and watch her favorite soap while eating lunch. This particular Wednesday, her best friend Gina was going to join her. And after school she had a private sword lesson with her *Sensei*, followed by a sword class which ended just in time for her to drive over to the Sullivans' home to watch Joey.

* * *

"Come with me to class," Kate begged. "Gina, you'd love it. I know you would! Then we could practice together." She circled her *bogato* into *mugamae*, the stance of nothingness, and cut a *kurai tachi*, narrowly

missing a lamp.

Gina glanced up from where she was sitting in the Johnsons' study putting on her shoes. They were about ready to go back to school for Theatre, their last class of the day. She pushed her glasses back up her nose. "You know, Kate, your mom would have a fit if she saw you swinging that wooden thing in here."

"Good thing she's not here then, huh?" She feigned an attack on one of the trophies lining a bookshelf and scowled. "I wish they'd get rid of all those things. Maybe they like to torture me."

Gina stood up, grabbed her backpack and lightly touched Kate on the shoulder. "They're just proud of you, Kate."

Kate rolled her eyes. "The voice of reason. Yeah, I know. I just don't see the point, and all it does is remind me."

"Well, it *was* your choice," Gina said softly.

Kate sighed. "I know." She looked down at herself, spreading her arms. "This stupid, traitorous body. I *hate* it!"

"You're not too tall for all the events."

Kate flared up. "Gina, have you *ever* seen a gold medalist my height? No, you have not. And why not? Because tall women aren't for gymnastics. Look at me! I'm five feet, ten inches. That's nearly six feet tall! Why couldn't I have stayed small like you?"

"But, you love gymnastics. Why can't you just do it for, you know, just for the fun of it?"

"Because I've wanted to be in the Olympics for so long that every class I take would just remind me that I can't. It's not fair."

Kate waved her hand. "This is getting old. We'd better head for class. Let me grab my gear bag and I'll meet you at the front door."

The two walked in a comfortable silence for a while,

enjoying the sun, a rare sight in coastal Northern California, where overcast was the norm. A soft gust tousled Gina's short hair. She tucked the amber strands behind her ears and pushed her glasses up.

"Kate?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's okay. Just don't bring it up any more."

"Okay then." She paused. "What is it about your sword class that you like so much?"

"I dunno, exactly. There are lots of reasons. It's empowering, for one. And challenging. I can transfer my skills from that *other* sport, so all's not wasted."

"You could say the same for your jujitsu classes."

"True. Look how fast I've gotten my rank advancements. All those years studying routines made it easy for me to remember techniques and combine them in different ways." She paused, choosing her words. "But sword is different. It's mental... like chess. I know people say the same about other martial arts, but—" She hesitated. "Oh, maybe it's just the idea of commanding a weapon. It's so different from anything I've ever done. And swords are just so cool!"

Gina glanced at her then up at the sky. "You still don't like to talk about it, do you?"

Kate wagged her finger at Gina. "You're bringing it up again." She sighed. "Look, I've tried to explain to people how I feel. Nobody understands why I feel so betrayed. Maybe that's the wrong word." She looked sideways at Gina. "Even you don't understand, Gina. No, don't deny it."

Gina smiled sadly at her friend. "But I'm *trying* to understand. It just seems like such a waste. You were so good and you still are! You could go far."

"But not far enough, Gina. That's the point. Look, I really don't want to talk about it ever again. I just want

to forget about it all.” Kate looked down at her training sword strapped to her gear bag. “Sword helps me, you know. When you’re sparring with people, or receiving others’ attacks, you have to be so *there*, so in the moment, that nothing else has any importance. It’s one of the things I loved the most about gymnastics. I’m glad I didn’t have to give that part up, too.”

They were nearing the high school theater. “So, do you want to come to my class this afternoon? You can just sit in on it,” Kate asked as they approached the door. “There are only four teachers in the whole United States who instruct in Kashima Shin Ryu, and we’ve got one of ‘em right here in Eureka! You’d be foolish not to take this opportunity to learn from a master instructor. And he’s such a great teacher. You’d like him.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “I know, I know. It’s not like this is the first time in the past three years that you’ve bugged me about this, you know!” She paused, her hand on the door handle, and looked hard at Kate. “This is really important to you, isn’t it?”

Kate was thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess it is. You know how much we liked working out together when we were in gymnastics. I thought if you got into sword as much as I am, then it’d be like old times. I miss that. We hardly see each other anymore.”

Gina looked at her friend and smiled. “Well, I can’t promise anything. But I can watch one class. I have to admit, I am curious.”

“And afterwards, do you want to go over with me to the Sullivans’ while I sit with Joey? They won’t mind.”

“If I do, I can’t stay too long. I’m meeting Ben at eight. We’re working on the *Macbeth* scene together.”

“Ahhhhh, Gentle Ben.” Kate winked. “I bet that’s not all you’ll be working on!”

Gina blushed and punched her in the arm. “Cut it out, Kate.”

* * *

Kate bowed off the mat and crossed over to the bench where Gina was sitting, her eyes sparkling.

“You looked good out there,” Gina said.

“Yeah? Thanks! I had fun. Come on. If we hurry we can stop off at the Tokyo Express before I have to be at the Sullivans’. I’ll buy you a California Roll.”

Kate gathered up her gear and the two left the dojo.

“So, Gina, what’d you think of the class?”

“Really interesting. What was that really long weapon you were swinging that curved at the end?”

“A *naginata*. If it had been real, that curved end would have been a really sharp blade. The foot soldiers used them in battle against the infantry to cut the horses’ legs off, among other things. Isn’t that *sick*?”

“Yeah, pretty gross.” An impish smile crossed Gina’s face. “Hey, you didn’t tell me that Trevor was taking that class.”

Kate shrugged. “You never asked.”

“You should see the way he looks at you. It’s obvious he still cares.”

“We’re friends, that’s all.”

“But he is so perfect for you,” Gina responded. She began to number off her reasons with her fingers. “For one, he’s into what you’re into. Second, he’s nice, kind, respectful, funny. And three, he’s such a *hottie*. ”

Kate gave her a sidelong glance. “Sounds to me like Ben’s got a little competition.”

Gina laughed. “Kate!” She ran her hand through her hair. “Seriously, I never bothered to ask you why you two stopped seeing each other.”

“That’s because you and I never hang together anymore. If I weren’t such a magnanimous friend, I’d be jealous of Benny-boy.”

Gina looked contrite. “I’m sorry, Kate. I hate it when girls ditch their friends just because they’ve got a guy. Now, I realize, that I’m one of them! Arrrrghhhh! Shoot me, will you? Just shoot me!”

“Nope, too loud and messy. I’ll use a sword.”

Having reached her truck, Kate tossed her gear bag into the bed and unlocked the passenger side for Gina. “Sushi still okay?” she asked as she went around to the driver’s side and climbed in.

Gina nodded. “It’s okay with me. Hey Kate, why don’t you just move to Japan?” she teased.

Kate laughed. “Actually, I may go there this September instead of starting college.”

“Really? When did you decide that?”

“Today, during my private lesson with Sensei. He was telling me about some people he knows in Japan I could stay with. It’d be a great opportunity to train at the Kashima Shin Ryu dojo, visit the shrine, get to know Japan. Do some traveling,” she said dreamily. “I’ll have to see what Mom and Dad think about it.” She adjusted her seat belt, pulling her braid out of the way. “Maybe if I went with a friend,” she mused. She started the engine, drove the truck out of the parking lot and into the street.

Gina was silent. Kate looked at her. “What?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about graduation. Next fall is going to be so different with everyone going off their separate ways. It’s *big*.”

“Yeah, it is big. But I’m so ready, Gina! I want my life to begin! I want an adventure!”

“I just want Ben,” Gina replied.

“Girl, you’ve got Ben. Now, let’s get some food!”

* * *

“It’s seven forty-five, Kate.” Gina got up from the