

## Chapter 1 - Thirtieth Anniversary of a Nightmare

Today is thirty years to the day since that fight between Li Chong and Johnny Bagley in the 1979 US Amateur Boxing Finals. The winner was to represent the United States of America at the 1980 Moscow World Championships. Johnny Bagley was the brightest of US amateurs but that night he was getting his lights knocked out by Li Chong, the only son of an impoverished Chinese immigrant.

Thirty years has ticked by and the now fifty-two-year-old Dr. John Bagley is an orthopedic hand surgeon in San Francisco's Chinatown Hospital. It's 2009, and a day hasn't passed that he hasn't relived that moment in that fight when his Chinese brother suffered career ending brain trauma at his hands, leaving Li Chong in what the doctors called a persistent vegetative state—just short of brain death.

John finishes a surgery and hurries out of the OR. Time to scrub, change clothes, and drink.

In the changing room, John's eyes smile as he stares at the photo taped inside his locker door. It's the glowing face of his dream girl. She was ER doctor, Ling Liu, in China. Ling Bagley now. He told her there was no need to practice medicine in America.

That's fine with Ling. She has a different objective in mind, and it doesn't include checking vital signs.

John pulls an envelope from his locker. He removes an old photo he saved for today. He tapes it below Ling's. His eyes lose their smile. His face pales. It's a shot of himself with Li Chong in the gym still wearing hand wraps and boxing gear after a day of hard training. Their skin wet and glowing, their hair matted from sweating, arms draped around each other side by side. They are grinning boyish grins for the camera. They were seventeen-year-old pals at the time. They'd known each other since they were ten.

John pulls a flask of imported 62 percent baijiu from his locker and drinks. Every year on this day, memories haunt him over and over. It's the thirtieth anniversary of the worst day of his life.

A young doctor enters the changing room to unlock his bike. He sees John is in a bad way. “Are you okay, Dr. Bagley?”

John doesn't hear him or see him. Behind his glazed eyes he sees the still body of Li Chong laying on the canvas. He sees the stick-and-poke tattoo on his throat: *SCB*—the gang marking for the Suey Ching Boys. He sees the medics load Li Chong on a stretcher and carry him from the ring. He sees the blood seep from his ears.

The young doctor repeats softly, “Are you okay, Dr. Bagley?”

John shakes off his melancholy. “Fine and dandy, Dr. Vogler. And you?”

“Good work in the OR today, sir. You're the best.” Dr. Vogler gets a nod and a thanks from John and then wheels his ten-speed out the door.

John is left alone at his open locker. He takes another nip from his flask. The warm baijui sets warm memories loose. Warm memories of boyhood bloom—a kid with a coach and a mom and dad and a best friend.

It's open-house night at the gym.

“Your Johnny has an instinctive boxing IQ. I tell ya, he's got touched-by-the-hand-of-God talent,” says Coach Bailey to Johnny's parents.

Then Coach Bailey turns to Li Chong's mom. “And ma'am, your Li Chong has the heart of a dragon. No kid his age can touch his work ethic. And strong, too. He'll go a long way if he stays with us.”

While the parents are paying rapt attention to Coach Bailey, Johnny and Li Chong, both ten years old, are hanging out near the heavy bags.

“Let's be brothers,” says Johnny.

Li Chong looks in the gym mirror and points at their faces. “You’re funny, Johnny. Look at our eyes. They’re different. We can’t be brothers.”

“Well, not blood brothers,” answers Johnny.

“What kind of brothers?” Li Chong asks.

Johnny offers clarity. “Just brothers.”

“Yeah, just brothers,” agrees Li Chong.

Johnny asks, “Brothers would never fight each other, would they?”

Li Chong answers. “Never. They fight with their sisters.”

The years speed by and both boys develop their boxing skills and keep winning more and more big tournaments in their own weight divisions. The fan-mail piles up on Coach Bailey’s desk, mostly in Chinese.

Li Chong’s mom reads the fan mail and says, “Chinese admirers call Johnny Bagley and Li Chong the American dream brothers.”

John is jolted out of his childhood when another physician barges into the changing room in a hurry to get to the toilet. When the physician is out of sight, John tips his flask for a bracer. Then he locks up and eases out the door.

As he saunters towards the physician’s parking area, he pulls out the keys to his SUV. They’re attached to a gold key ring. The engravings on the gold key ring are still clear. He stops to read the words again—he can’t help himself.

A familiar voice hails John from the physician’s parking area. “Whatcha got there, doc?” yells Joey Ma.

Joey Ma is a radiologist in the same hospital. He's also a novice boxing trainer. He and John are best friends.

They've never discussed the Li Chong fight, but Joey Ma has known about it forever. It's practically an urban myth. John doesn't know the fight is revered by the Chinese.

John tosses the gold key ring to Joey Ma. "Thirty years ago today," he says.

Joey Ma reads the tiny engraving along the top edge. *1979 United States Boxing Finals*. Then he reads the line at the bottom edge. *Johnny Bagley vs Li Chong*. Joey Ma does a quick study of John's glum face. He's got news to share if John's open to it. It's the first time John has shown him that gold key ring, so maybe Joey Ma can share the news. Joey Ma drops the gold key ring in John's hand. "I know about that fight," he says.

John says nothing. He figures Joey Ma is too young to know about that fight. Besides, even if it was a national boxing event, it was the preliminaries to the Moscow World Championships, but the US boycotted the Moscow event in 1980. So, why would anyone remember the '79 prelim's?

They get into John's SUV and head for a nearby bowling alley. They are regulars there, but neither one of them bowl.

As they drive, Joey Ma takes a chance. "I saw that fight."

John asks, "What fight?"

"You and Li Chong. I saw it last night."

"What the hell are you talking about, Joe?"

"Satellite TV for the Chinese. You had a worldwide audience last night. You didn't know?"

John goes mute. They arrive at the bowling alley and park.

## Chapter 2 - Bowling Alley Blues

Joey Ma wishes the get-together for a drink hadn't started so badly.

John is still not talking. The SUV's engine is off, but John is sitting staring at the steering wheel.

After a moment, the two old friends reach for their door handles at the same time and climb out.

Still no talk. Two pair of feet crunch gravel; they enter the bowling alley bar.

John raises two fingers toward the bartender as he walks in.

The bartender knows what to do.

They find a booth.

Joey Ma breaks the ice. "I taped it."

John ignores Joey Ma's statement.

The waitress delivers the two drinks.

John guides the chit-chat to a safer place. "Hey, how's your middleweight doing? Still on a winning streak?"

Joey Ma's phone buzzes with a text message. "Speaking of. Gotta go. He's three wins, no losses. Goin' for four, Saturday night."

Joey Ma is about to leave.

John stops him. "Save me two seats." Then he points to Joey Ma's untouched glass. "Hey, Pal, pity you don't like expensive whiskey."

Joey Ma pities John right then. “You do.” Joey Ma turns for the door.

“Yep, I do,” John says, not looking at his pal.

Joey Ma turns around and takes a chance. “You want to see your fight with Li Chong?”

John finally meets the subject head on. “Why the hell was it on TV? It’s been thirty years. Thirty years today, as a matter of fact.”

“That’s why! Chinese like their legends. What can I say?”

“Me? A legend?”

Joey Ma is glad John has opened up. “Okay, okay, a small legend. I gotta go do the mitts for my middleweight. Don’t drink and drive, doc.”

As Joey Ma starts for the exit, John’s acquiescent tone stops him.

“I’ll be fine. Ling’s going to join me in a few. She’s got her driver’s license now.”

Joey Ma stirs up some innocent trouble. “Any baby talk? Young Chinese wife no grow old without child.”

“I’m a legend, and you’re a comedian,” jokes John as he downs the last of his own drink.

Joey Ma throws John a zinger. “You ever ask yourself where Li Chong disappeared to?”

Joey Ma waits for a response. It takes a while.

With a low, indecipherable tone, John answers, “Yeah, every day.”

Joey Ma sees John has had enough and wishes he would’ve left it alone. He excuses himself.

John drains Joey Ma's cocktail, then stares glassy-eyed into the glass and sees three letters of the alphabet swirl in the ice cubes.

SCB... SCB... SCB... SCB... SCB... SCB...

He thinks back to the first time he saw the letters SCB tattooed on Li Chong's throat.

They were both eighteen-years old, in the ring getting ready to spar. It was just another day at the gym.

Li Chong holds up his wrapped hands so John can tie them. John pulls Li Chong's right hand towards him to grab the tie strings. He looks up and for the first time notices a gang marking for the Suey Ching Boys tattooed across Li Chong's throat.

"SCB? You're in with the Suey Ching Boys? What's your mom say about that, man?"

"Nothin'"

"C'mon, man, don't lie. Your mom would never let—"

"She died."

John is speechless. She was like his second mom.

John and Li Chong stare each other in the eye, nothing but compassion and love going both ways.

"When, Chong?"

"Last month," he replies.

John is heartbroken for his brother. "I'm sorry. You didn't say... last month? Where you been living?"

Something draws Li Chong's attention. He watches over John's shoulder at the door.

John continues talking, "My family is your family, Chong. You don't have to be in a gang."

A fellow SCB gangster enters the gym and throws signals to Li Chong. He pulls away from John without a word, climbs through the ropes, goes to his gym bag, pulls out a baggy of marijuana, goes to his fellow gangster, and makes a drug sale.

John bounces through the ropes, makes a beeline for the gangster, pushes him toward the door. The gangster is no pushover. He pulls a knife, slips behind John, and goes for his throat. Blood squirts from John's neck. The knife blade is a millisecond away from John's carotid artery. Li Chong jumps the gangster.

Maybe that knife goes into the gangster's heart by accident; maybe not. But John is alive, and the gangster is dead.

John lies on the floor bleeding. He gets weak. He tells Li Chong to run out the back door of the gym. "I'll tell the police I did it. Self-defense. Get outa here. They'll take you to jail if they see that gang mark on you, Bro. Go on."

The sound of the sirens gets closer, and Li Chong is less-than-no-time away from being nabbed and hauled off to the Bryant Street jail.

John reaches for Li Chong, pats him on the side of the head, and, fading fast, he whispers, "Brother." Before Li Chong can respond, John's blood loss takes him to blackout.



### Chapter 3 - Heavenly Chi

Ling sashays into the bowling alley bar. She is every fifty-two-year-old man's A-ticket through a mid-life crisis. All cleavage and legs for starters, and that long mane of silky black hair—she's just the way John likes her. She turns every man's head—except Johns. His is lain down on the table next to two empty bar glasses.

John Bagley is a drunk—a full blown, functioning alcoholic.

Ling slides into the booth, picks out a half-melted ice cube from one of the glasses and gently massages it across her sleeping husband's forehead.

Ling is ready and willing to fix John. With love—family love.

There's a lot to fix besides his drinking. Is John Bagley a sexist? Is he stuck with the objectification syndrome? Was his attraction to Ling a symptom of a mid-life crisis? Does he love her? Yes, on all four counts. Is he going to grow up? Ling has no doubt that he will. She's smart and she has a heart as pure as heavenly chi. And she has a plan.

“Johnny,” she whispers in his ear.

John opens his eyes and raises his head.

Ling squeezes John's right bicep. “Dreaming?”

“Nightmaring,” says John as he picks up a glass and shakes the ice cubes to get the waitress's attention.

Ling asks, “Where's my funny Chinese brother?”

“Joe is doing his thing, sweetheart.”

“I thought you meeting Joey Ma. Sorry you be alone too long in bar.”

“He was here, but he left to train his middleweight.”

“Now, he is trainer? At hospital?”

“Boxing trainer. It’s Joe’s American dream job. A spare time adventure. He’ll be good at it someday. What are you drinking, honey?”

“No drink.”

“Yeah, my little designated driver, huh?”

“I have American dream, like Joey Ma.”

“Don’t get too American on me. I like you just the way you are, sexy girl.”

A little kiss on his cheek, then she sets the tender trap. “Come with me tomorrow?”

John has no idea what she’s talking about, but as long as she’s whispering in his ear like that, he’s happy to find out.

Sarcastic undertones often characterize American males’ way of communicating; not easily understood by many Chinese. If you’re an American guy who speaks conversational slang, there’s a good chance you won’t be understood by a Chinese who is just learning English. John and Ling have that dynamic between them, and as far as he is concerned, it’s advantageous, it’s charming, it’s the way he likes it.

In spite of his rough edge, John won Ling’s trust when he went to China to meet her. Ling knew in her heart John was the man for her. Ling doesn’t hear the smart-ass innuendo’s in John’s everyday vernacular the way an American girl might hear it. It keeps the gears of their new relationship running nice and smoothly for both of them. That is, as long as John is the boss and Ling is the young, shapely wife.

John is obviously a flawed man. Considering the load he’s been carrying the last thirty years, his hang-ups are a predictable feature of his Americana masculinity.

## Chapter 4 - Nice Person Day

The next morning, John, is still wearing pajamas, is in the den, relaxing in front of the TV. It's football time. Feet-on-the coffee-table-time. Coffee-with-a-shot-of-Kahlua-time.

Ling brings coffee to him with a couple slices of raisin toast.

John points to a liquor cabinet. "Something from the magic cabinet—can you?"

"Only one, okay, Johnny? We have appointment."

"Appointment?" John doesn't remember.

"After game is okay," Ling says.

"Ah yeah, that American dream thing, huh?"

"You should dress to meet nice person today."

"A nice person? Better make it a double shot."

The doorbell rings. "I'll get the door while you pour."

John opens the door, and a delivery man hands him a small parcel. It's from Joey Ma.

Ling watches John open the package containing a DVD and sees his mood darken. She speaks her concern. "What, darling?"

John's Kahlua-coffee gets cold as he and Ling watch the fight between him and Li Chong.

"Who are you fighting? He's Chinese." Ling isn't up on the urban myth.

After it ends, John takes some time to tell Ling who he and Li Chong were from boys to men. “I was the rich kid—the white kid, ya know? He was the poor Chinese kid. Didn’t matter. We were brothers all the way. We were normal—regular little boys. We rode double with balloons tied in the spokes of my bike. We made a hell of a lot of noise.” John’s reminiscent chuckle keeps the self-pity turned down. “Little-league season, we rubbed linseed oil into our mitts. We thought that’d break ‘em in. Every night we played catch till it got dark, then we’d go out into the neighborhood and steal valve stem caps from fancy cars and double-dared ourselves to sneak back the next night and put ‘em back. Never got caught. No one in that neighborhood paid any attention to whether their valve-stem caps were on or off. We were low-risk thieves, I guess. Swimming in a fenced-off reservoir on Kelly Butte—that was a no-no. I sliced open the side of my right leg on a nail sticking out of an old wood dock. Li Chong carried me piggy-back down the steep side of Kelly Butte, down a dirt road for what seemed like a mile, to the highway that led to a hospital.”

Ling reaches for John’s ankle and runs her fingers over old scar tissue. “There?”

“Yes, Darling. We grow up, and there’s nothing left of the good ol’ days. Except some scars on the outside of us... and some scars on the inside of us. Right? We all have ‘em.”

Ling’s searching fingers go to John’s neck. Her thumb touches the scar where the gangster long ago penetrated John’s throat with a knife. She runs her thumb over the scar and asks, “And this one?”

John removes her hand from his neck and holds it as Ling snuggles up and buries her head in her husband’s arms.

John continues, “Li Chong and I became something, I guess. Golden boys in a sport called boxing for awhile. Till...” John leaves the subject hanging, nodding toward the TV as Ling peeks up at him till he continues. “Now it seems your people have hung on to our once-upon-a-time story for some reason important to them.”

Ling sees the pain in John. “Where is Li Chong now? Was he hurt bad? They carry him away.”

John can't talk about it anymore. "Yeah, they did. They carried him away." He changes the subject. "Why am I going on about myself? Look at me. I have you. I'm a lucky guy. Come on, the nice person is waiting."

Ling knows John is in a bad way. "So long time ago. It still hurts?"

"No," he quickly replies.

Ling knows better. She goes to the phone and postpones the appointment with Dr. Angela Kwan till later that day. This morning, John needs her love. Right here, right now. She gets close to his ear. "Husband?"

John stares ahead. "You go do your thing, sweetheart, with the nice person. I need to warm up my Kahlua-coffee and relax."

Ling whispers, "No. Warm me up." She nudges John off the couch and takes him by the hand to their bedroom.