

Chapter One



The late Sunday afternoon light shone tawny gold upon the mounds of pomelo and Chinese pears. The large old-fashioned plate-glass window was speckled with dust from the inside, exhaust fumes from the outside. Behind the store counter Gee tilted back against the wall onto the back two legs of the wooden stool. A flop of thick black hair fell across his eyes as he gazed out from behind the strands at the luminous beams of dust. His popo no longer had the energy to keep the storefront windows clean—but the dirty glass did something beautiful to the light.

Gee supposed most sixteen-year-olds would resent the boring job, especially on the weekend, but he didn't mind so much. His homework was done, and he had no friends. It had been very clear since playschool that he would never have friends. An early life of solitude had shaped him profoundly. He was never lonely. Once,

his grandmother brought home a dog, but it ran away after three days. She did not bring home any more pets after that.

Gee's longest companion, apart from his popo, had been disquiet. When he was very little he didn't know what the feeling was called, but he always knew it was there, and sometimes it would flare up with the darkest light, so much so that he'd be filled with trembling. He never knew if this trembling was fear or excitement. He did not want to look at it so very closely.

For a while, there had been Older Sister. But when he was eight she moved out, across the country, to go to graduate school. She'd visited once a year as she completed her studies, but after that she never came back. Five years, he thought, was a long time not to visit. But she must have her reasons. She phoned once a month and sent postcards when she was on archaeological digs, but really, she was a stranger to him. Sometimes he felt bad for Popo, who spoke of Melanie often, with much love and admiration, but mostly he was glad to have his grandmother all to himself.

Both he and Older Sister had been adopted by Popo—Older Sister when she was already a teenager, and Gee when he was still a baby. Older Sister had been through troubles, that was certain, but they were such Bad Troubles that they were never spoken of. As for Gee's adoption, he knew there were irregularities. His grandmother had told him he must never get in trouble with the law, because she didn't have proper adoption papers for him, and they would take him away. When Popo told him this, the disquiet inside him roared like a fire. Always serious, cautious and quiet, Gee had stared intently into his grandmother's resolute eyes and nodded. He was very, very careful.

The bell on the door jangled as a customer came into the store. It was Ms. Carlson, the librarian from the community centre.

“Hullo, Gee. Good to see you helping your grandma,” Ms. Carlson said. She said the same thing every time she saw him at the counter. Gee ducked his chin, a kind of greeting, and reached for his sunglasses.

Oh—he’d left them upstairs, on the dining room table. He let his long dark hair fall over his eyes. Maybe his best friend was disquiet because of his eyes. With his irises as dark as his pupils, almost everyone’s reaction to them lingered somewhere between fear and disgust. What with his pale, pale skin and his dark eyes, he knew he repelled people somehow. And this knowledge had formed him, too.

Ms. Carlson had known him since he was a child. She was always careful not to show her distaste. He could hear her open the sliding door to the refrigerator. The motor hummed louder as she decided between fresh tofu or deep fried. Popo hated it when customers kept the refrigerator door open too long. “Do they think Rainbow Market is here to pay for their indecision?” she would snap, loud enough for them to hear.

It always made a small smile twitch upon Gee’s thin lips.

Something white flickered in the corner of his eye. Low to the ground. Gee swung his head toward the darker recesses of the store where the stairway to their upstairs home was located.

Nothing was there.

Must be sunlight reflecting off a passing bumper, Gee thought.

Ms. Carlson finally let the fridge door slide shut and moved toward a basket of ginger.

A Neo Goth girl stood nearby, reading the information on the packets of different miso brands. Gee had never seen her before. He would have noticed. She wore heavy black boots with numerous silver buckles that jangled like Santa's reindeer. Black fishnet stockings on skinny legs. A torn white T-shirt and a black skirt fluffed out with layers of red crinoline underneath. Jagged black hair. Eyeliner.

Gee shook his head. He didn't understand why some of the kids tried so hard to stand out as different when they could just blend in with the other ducklings. How they would go out of their way to draw attention to themselves. Gee didn't have that option. His clothes were nondescript. Jeans. Black T-shirt. A loose, dark-grey jacket. But his clothing could not mask his features.

At first the Neo Goth kids at school had been drawn to his striking looks. They'd thought he was one of them until they realized that his white skin wasn't makeup, but was his natural complexion, and that he wasn't wearing contact lenses. After a few awkward starts at conversations they had pulled away, as if they couldn't stand to be around him. Like he gave off a kind of smell. He was avoided by everyone thereafter.

The doorbell chimed wildly before ending with a bang as two teenage boys burst into the store. A boozy cloud roiled outward as they began to guffaw.

"Oops!" one boy said, before they burst into drunken laughter again.

Gee's lips twisted. They looked familiar—had they been in his Phys. Ed class in grade ten?

Winston Chang and Tad Rivera.... Gee lowered his chin. They were trouble in school, and he didn't want their trouble in his grandmother's store.

The boys, pushing each other and laughing, approached the counter.

“Uh—a pack of matches and, uh, filter papers. Oh, and, uh, one BonusFun 50/50 Chance for Life! ticket,” Winston demanded, a waft of booze escaping his lips. “Buddy,” he added, for friendly effect.

Gee did not look up to meet his eyes. “You have to be nineteen in order to buy a lottery game ticket.”

Winston fisted money out of his pocket and threw the bills on the counter. Tad snickered at his elbow. “I’m paying for it, just give it to me. That’s your job, boy,” Winston said.

Darkness unfurled in Gee’s gut and he grew very still. He breathed carefully. Slowly. He did not want to become angry. Gee could sense the Neo Goth girl approaching the counter, an aura of indignation flaring from her body.

“It’s against the law for us to sell lotto tickets to anyone who’s underage,” Gee explained. “Unless you can show me some I.D.”

“Can you believe this shit?” Tad, shrugging dramatically, turned toward the girl. “We’re paying customers!”

“Heeeey.” Winston peered at Gee’s downturned face. “You go to our school! You’re that freak who doesn’t talk! Are you a Re-tard?”

Winston and Tad laughed, batting at each other’s arms as if they’d just told some wonderful joke.

“Why don’t you leave?” the girl snapped. Her cheeks were flushed with feeling. “Go on!” She thrust out her chin. “You’re not welcome here!”

“Get a load of the dyke!” Winston sneered. “You’re the one who isn’t welcome!”

“Do you know where you *are*?” the girl shouted. “This is the

gay area of the city, you stupid fuck! This store is called Rainbow Market, moron!”

Gee observed them as if they were part of a social experiment. The young woman was so marvellously angry. He wondered coolly at her passion. What must it feel like, he thought, to be able to let yourself go like that? He'd always known that he must never, ever lose control.

“That’s enough of that.” Ms. Carlson used her librarian voice. “Boys, I think it’s time for you to move on.” She sounded calm, but her eyes darted from side to side.

She was right to be nervous, Gee thought. The air quivered with tension, and he almost smiled. Instead he frowned beneath his flop of hair. None of it was funny, of course.

The Neo Goth girl seethed with anger and outrage. She was practically crackling with it. Winston Chang’s hands on the glass countertop were turning into fists.

“Time for you to go,” Gee said in a low, quiet voice. He did not raise his head, only stared at his own pale, slender hands. “Now.”

“Not even man enough to look me in the eyes, you little faggot,” Winston whispered. He reached across the counter and grabbed the lapel of Gee’s jacket.

You fool, Gee thought, raising his chin. You have no idea.

He deserves everything he gets, a dark voice inside him crowed. You didn’t do anything, but he came asking for trouble!

Gee began to smile. He opened his eyes wide and stared into Winston Chang’s startled hazel eyes. You see, Gee thought, you think you have someone figured out, but really you know nothing about them at all....

Winston's hand fell from Gee's lapel. His Adam's apple bobbed, a muscle twitched in his jaw, but he could not break his gaze.

Gee could almost feel the expressions morphing across Winston's face. Micro-seconds of emotions. Confusion. Anger. Uncertainty.... Social experiment, Gee thought. It's all a social experiment.

"What the hell are you staring at?" Winston hissed, testosterone tinged with fear.

Tad, confused, darted glances between Gee's and Winston's face. Time was stretching, elastic slow motion. Gee could sense Ms. Carlson raising her hand, palm outward, as if she were trying to stop traffic. The Neo Goth girl dug into her bag, rummaging around for something.

What will happen now? the dark voice inside Gee crowed. *Something bad....*

I should stop staring. Gee's thoughts felt as if they were coming from far, far away. I should stop staring. But beyond Winston's pupils, from deep inside him, something would begin to rise to the surface and Gee didn't want to miss it....

At high school, Gee always walked away from trouble. But not in the store. Because Winston had entered *his* world, had he not? *Why should you be the one to look away?* the dark little voice inside him whispered. The voice he never spoke aloud. The one he must control.

"Come on," Tad laughed, but there was something forced to the sound. "Let's get out of this shit store."

Gee continued staring. And Winston could not tear his eyes away. There, Gee thought, almost tenderly. There. The edges of the boy's own darkness. Everyone had it inside them. What you could do with that power. What—

“What’s going on!”

Gee blinked. Shook his head. His grandmother charged toward them, a field hockey stick in one hand. Ferocious.

“Awesome!” the Neo Goth girl breathed.

Fingers shaking, Winston retrieved his money from the counter and shoved it back into his pocket. “Come on,” he said to Tad. He glared at Gee with loathing. “See you at school, faggot.”

Popo raised her field hockey stick ever so slightly. “Homophobia is unacceptable. Get out of my store. Never come back!”

The two boys began to laugh once more as they shoved each other through the door. “Old dyke bitch!” one of them shouted before they roared away in a retro Hummer.

Gee wanted to kill them.

The bright glint in Popo’s eyes dulled, and she seemed to deflate. The field hockey stick fell to the floor with a clatter. She rested her hand on the counter and closed her eyes.

“Popo!” Gee cried, and ran to slide his arm around her back.

Popo flapped her hand in front of her as if batting away a fly. “Popo is fine. Popo is just a little dizzy from running and all the excitement.”

Frowning, Gee guided her behind the counter so that she could sit on the stool. A puff of air escaped her lips. It was almost a sigh.

Gee stared at his beloved grandmother’s face. Her eyes were closed and something twitched in her temple. He gently placed his slender hand on Popo’s forearm.

“It is nothing, child,” she said quietly, without opening her eyes. “Popo just feels a little tired today. Please get some water.”

Gee knew she didn’t mean a bottle of water from the store. Without bothering to remove his downstairs shoes he ran up the

steep, narrow back steps, taking three at a time, to their living space above the shop. In the small neat kitchen he half-filled an empty jam jar with lukewarm water from the kettle.

Popo's hands trembled, ever so slightly, when she raised them. Gee watched the thin skin in her neck move as she swallowed the water. The lines upon her cheeks, the wrinkled ridges on the bridge of her nose, the corners of her eyes. The slight tremor in her hands....

Something torqued inside his chest.

She was old.

Gee took a step backward. How could he not have seen it before? How long had she been this way? Something bulged and twisted, an emotion he could not name—only that it was unpleasant, and that he didn't like to feel it. He quickly quashed whatever it was and returned to the grey neutrality he preferred.

"Those ignorant boys." Ms. Carlson shook her head as she set down soy milk and tofu on the counter. "Are you all right, Ms. Wei?" The kind librarian's voice quavered. "Are you okay, dear? They were just dreadful!"

Gee's popo waved her right hand, letting it flap up and down. "Ms. Wei has seen far worse. Ms. Wei only feels a stitch from running." She managed a fierce smile before closing her eyes.

That odd little emotion spasmed inside Gee's chest once more.

"We can call the cops!" the Neo Goth girl said indignantly. "There are anti-hate laws! We don't have to just take it. We can—"

"No police." Popo's voice was resolute.

The Neo Goth girl scowled. "How can you let them treat you like that? How can you just let them win?" She glared at Gee as if it were somehow his fault, but he kept his face averted. "They'll

just do it again with someone else. Unless they're stopped. Unless they're taught a lesson!"

No one responded.

Shaking her head, the girl marched out of the store, the many buckles on her boots jangling loudly. She closed the door so hard that the plate-glass window shook.

"Oh dear," Ms. Carlson sighed. "Such an afternoon it's become." She shook her head sadly and peered at his popo's face with something like compassion. Something like pity. And then her gaze turned toward Gee's face. The moment she caught his eyes, she jerked her head the other way.

Gee rang her purchases through the till. "Five dollars and thirty-five cents, please."