

AN EXCERPT FROM THE PRICE OF COMPASSION:

Book Four in the Golden City Series by A.B. Michaels

Mrs. Liang was fit to be tied.

“I tell him leave but he no leave,” she fumed to Tom as he washed up after seeing his last patient of the morning. She had stormed into the examination room as soon as Lau Bo Jing left and shut the door firmly so that others presumably couldn’t hear her tirade, except that her voice may as well have had a megaphone attached, it was so loud and strident.

“Calm down, Mrs. Liang,” Tom admonished in softly spoken Cantonese. “Who and what are you talking about?”

She pointed at the door. “That salesman. That Mr. Dunkee. He come around two, three times, I tell him no. We no want. But he come back now and say he not leave until he talk to you. He say it have to do with man parts.” She huffed. “Man parts. I no think he has any man parts.”

Tom wiped his hands while suppressing a smile. “That I don’t know about, but I’ll get rid of him for you.”

The intruder in question was sitting in the waiting room, a small leather suitcase by his side. He was a wiry man, barely taller than Mrs. Liang, and wore a blue pinstriped suit. The hair he had left was brown and valiant but lay like a pelted skirt around the back of his head. A pencil-thin mustache adorned his upper lip. Upon seeing Tom, he rose and extended his hand.

“Jeremiah Dunkley at your service,” he said. “You can call me Jerry.”

“Do you need some help, Mr. Dunkley? Because we are quite busy here.”

The salesman looked around smugly at the empty waiting room—always in that state during the noon hour because Mrs. Liang shooed everyone out for lunch. “Well sir, it don’t look that busy to me. However, I am here to fix all that.”

“Mr. Dunkley, I—”

“No, no. Don’t thank me yet. Wait until I show you how you can double, triple, no, I mean *quadruple* your business. Ten minutes of your time, sir. Just ten minutes and then I’ll let you shower me with gratitude—and don’t forget to call me Jerry.”

With a final indignant glare, Mrs. Liang left for her own midday meal while Tom mentally counted to ten. Men like Dunkley had to earn a living, too, he told himself. They had families, they had mouths to feed. Hopefully “Jerry” got paid per demonstration and not per sale. “All right, Jerry. Ten minutes. But then I really must let you go.” He ushered the man into the first exam room.

The next ten minutes—which stretched to twenty—would have been entertaining, had Tom not been increasingly horrified by what the man was peddling.

“We all know the scourge of neurasthenia that’s sweeping the country,” Jerry began. “I’m sure you’re treating patients left, right and center for it—even if they are of the yellow race— because this disease don’t care who you are. White, yellow, young, old, male, female, rich, poor—but mainly rich, if you get my drift. Am I right, sir?” He started to count off on his fingers. “You got your headaches, your skin rashes, your nervous twitches, your dyspepsia, your sciatica ... your problems down *there*, if you know what I mean.” He winked. “No matter who you are, it leaves you flat and flaccid, drained and debilitated, weak and worn out.”

Continuing his patter, Jerry removed several odd contraptions from his suitcase and laid them out on the examination table. “But help is on the way.” He picked up what looked like a red wool cummerbund with copper and other metal discs attached. The discs were connected to each other by a thin wire, one strand of which dangled below the belt and ended in a small noose.

“It’s a good thing you’re a medical man,” Jerry continued, “otherwise I’d have to spend hours and hours talking to you about the many wonderful effects of electrical stimulation on all parts of the body. But no doubt you’re aware of the enormous transmogrification properties inherent to the Voltaic Galvanic Principle.” He presented the belt to Tom. “Now this here is Doctor Bell’s Premium Voltaic Health Belt. Only eighteen dollars—easily worth two weeks of a working man’s pay, as you’ll see. Once it’s soaked with the doctor’s proprietary battery accelerator”—he handed Tom a small bottle—“your patient merely wraps the belt around his waist so the gentle current can reinvigorate all of his ailing internal organs, leading to relief of the kidney, bladder, liver, heart, lungs, and stomach, to name just a few.”

Tom’s eyebrows were in danger of taking flight. “You don’t say.” He pointed to the hanging loop. It couldn’t be what he thought it was. “What does that thing do?”

“Ah,” Jerry said with a knowing air. “I can see where your mind is headed, doctor, and you are perfectly right. An overwhelming number of neurasthenic cases can be laid at the foot, or should I say the *hand*, of excessive manual stimulation, leading to the depletion of productive—and virile—nervous energy. Any related pathologies, such as impotency or general lack of manly vigor, can be immediately cured with the simple insertion of the weakened organ into the stimulating loop, and —”

Tom held up his hand. “I get the picture.” He took the stopper out of the bottle of “accelerator” and sniffed it. “This smells like capsicum.”

“Well, that is one of the proprietary ingredients, yes sir.”

It took Tom a moment to put it all together. “You basically have men wrap themselves in pepper oil so when they start to sweat, it burns like crazy. That’s the buzz they get. There’s no electrical current involved here at all.”

Jerry sniffed with disdain. He began to carefully fold his “health belt” and put it away. “I don’t know what you’re implying, sir.”

"I'm not implying anything. I'm telling you flat out that what you're selling is complete flummery." Tom glanced at the inside of the salesman's case and saw several bottles. He picked one up and read the label. "'Dr. Hardee's Florentine Liniment—apply liberally to affected area for instant relief and remedy. Good for combatting hair loss, stomach troubles, rheumatism, sprains, bruises, wounds, bee stings, chilblains, ear aches, sore throats, cramps, blood and liver complaints, bronchial infections, and insect, frost and snake bites.'" He looked at Jerry. "What do you charge for this?"

Jerry smiled. "Your cost, sir is minimal—thirty-five cents per bottle wholesale. You can easily get two dollars per bottle retail."

Tom stuck the bottle in his pocket. "I think I'll keep this."

"Certainly. Certainly." He finished packing his case and looked back at Tom with an oily grin, no doubt thinking he'd salvaged a sale from a near miss. "Just let me know how many dozen bottles you would like to order, sir, and I shall be happy to oblige."

Tom walked him through the empty waiting room and to the front door. "Mr. Dunkley, I'm going to keep your bottle and show it to every one of my patients—just before I warn them that under no circumstances should they *ever* purchase anything that looks even remotely like your quack patent medicine. And I'm going to ask my orderly—who is about twice your size, by the way—to kindly remove you from the premises the next time you set foot inside this clinic."

Dunkley puffed up, an offended pigeon. "Well, you don't have to be rude about it. Good day to you, sir." He nearly slammed the door on the way out.

Tom was still chuckling over Dunkley's explanation of "excessive manual stimulation" when the door opened and Fung Hai entered the clinic. He carried a small sack.

"I saw Mrs. Liang down the street and she asked me to deliver this," he said. "I think it is your lunch."

Tom peeked inside. Sure enough, his office manager had procured some pieces of fried chicken, a wedge of cheese, and an apple—not her favorite food, but his. She must have felt bad leaving him in the clutches of Jerry Dunkley. "Thank you, Hai."

"I have other special news," he added.

"Spill it." The young man frowned and Tom added, "It means, 'Tell me.'"

Fung Hai grinned. "Ah. Do you mean like, 'Spit it out'? Well, Miss Cameron told me to tell you that we have all been invited to wish Miss Mandy a happy eighteenth birthday, only she is not to know about it."

"A surprise party, huh?"

"Yes, at The Grove. We are to travel there on the Saturday after next and jump out all at once to wish her well."

"That sounds grand," Tom said. "Thanks for letting me know." He held up the bag. "And thanks for delivering this."

After Fung Hai left, Tom sat at his desk with his feet up and contemplated the party invitation while he ate his lunch.

A party.

A party where Katherine, Mandy's former guardian, would most definitely be.

The coward in him wanted to pass; it would be easy to plead too much work and avoid having to deal with the woman and the way she made him feel.

But another side of him argued the opposite. Mandy had grown from a charming girl into an exceptional young woman. He truly wanted to help celebrate her entry into adulthood. Besides which, he'd heard wonderful things about The Grove. It'd be a perfect opportunity to check the place out. And Mandy had a lot of friends. Who knows, the party could be so big that he might not even cross paths with Katherine Firestone at all.

Then again, he might.

And that possibility intrigued him more than anything.