

*Love's Tender*  
**WARRIORS**

2004 EDITION

*by*  
**RADCLYFFE**



2004

CHAPTER ONE

Sean Gray knelt alone, eyes closed, in the center of a whitewashed Cinderblock room. Her hands rested gently, palms down, on her thighs. It was one of the hottest nights of an already oppressively hot summer, and despite the slowly churning fans in the small rectangular windows just below ceiling level, the air in the fifty by sixty-foot room was still and heavy. Her wavy, dark hair was held back by a white silk headband tied around her forehead, but sweat had already dampened the stray tendrils that wisped just above her collar. Her white uniform was immaculately pressed, the jacket tied over canvas pants with the red belt that denoted her rank.

She was the senior student in the class, not just in rank but also in age, and she was about to test for the black stripes that would signify her first step toward the rank of *chodan*—first-degree black belt. It had taken her four years, training five times a week, to reach this point. She had pushed herself physically when she was too sore to practice another kick, dragged herself to class after a long work day when all she wanted was a drink and a warm bath, and forced her exhausted mind to focus and concentrate and believe that the rigid discipline would somehow set her free.

*Breathe, Sean. Feel the air fill your lungs. Empty your mind. Let your body and spirit join.*

As she settled her nerves, centering herself, and waited for the test board to convene, other women entered and knelt along the sides of the polished wood floor, careful to keep their voices hushed in an effort not to disturb her concentration. Somewhere in the recesses of her consciousness, though, she was aware of their presence. She understood that every one of her fellow students looked to her as an example. They would feel each blow she took and each strike she delivered, knowing that, eventually, they would

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reach this same moment of truth when skill and training and desire were distilled into an intense few hours of endurance and pain.

Sean welcomed their support, but consciously, she thought only of her breath flowing in and out, holding only that in her awareness, clearing all other images from her mind. Her face was composed, reflecting her mental calm even as physically she prepared for battle.

When she finally opened her eyes, the deep emerald irises presented a striking contrast to her dark hair and honey rich complexion. Her features were finely formed, but far from fragile. There was strength in her face, and now, a relaxed awareness—alert but not tense, sharp but not anxious. What would happen here in the next few hours was beyond her control; there was no longer time for nerves or self-doubts. What she was called upon to do, she would do.

She was ready.

“Face the door,” a student called as the black belted test board gathered at the entrance to the *dojang*.

“*Chariot! Attention!*” came the command, and as one, the students snapped to attention with hands at their sides, feet together, facing the instructors.

“*Kung Ye. Bow.*” In unison, the class complied.

The three black belts, led by the *dojang*'s chief instructor, Master Janet Cho, bowed in return and moved to stand in front of the long table where the test forms were piled. Each of the women was dressed in a formal white uniform, the arms and legs of the crisp cotton bearing stripes of black to indicate their black belt level, or *dan*. Cho, in her mid-forties but appearing at least a decade younger, was small and compact; the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman in her late twenties, who stood to Cho's left, was a head taller and the school's other regular instructor. The third woman, a sharply handsome, blue-eyed blond and the tallest of the three, was a stranger.

The class faced them, hands clasped behind their backs, feet shoulder-width apart, eyes fixed forward. Sean stood at the right end of the first row, the position of the highest-ranking student. The room was completely silent except for the faint humming of the fans.

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“Tonight is a special night for all of you,” Master Cho, the senior of the three-member test board, began. She was a first generation Korean-American and spoke with the cadence of her ancestors, her tone gentle but commanding. “Tonight Sean begins a year of work and study that will culminate in her final test for black belt. Much will be expected of her in the coming months, for this will be a year not only of growth, but also transition. As she moves forward, she must necessarily move away from all of you.”

Cho met each face in the class as she spoke, and ten strong women gazed back at her. When her eyes met Sean’s, they lingered a moment, warm and steady.

“She must learn to teach, by her example, the responsibility of the rank she seeks, and part of that responsibility will be to guide you on your own path. Sometimes that will require criticism—criticism that comes from a place of caring, but still a difficult gift to give. She can no longer be your friend; she must become your teacher. You will gain much more than you imagine you are losing, because all of you have helped her reach this point. Without you, she could not have practiced as hard nor had the support she needed to overcome her own obstacles. Each of you should be proud of yourselves.”

Sean was totally focused on the magnitude of her teacher’s words, unmindful of the sweat that dripped into her eyes. The soothing sound of the soft voice erased the last remnants of her anxiety. Whatever happened, pass or fail, she was among friends.

“Tonight is also a special night for me,” Master Cho continued with a smile. “Each time one of my students begins this journey, I am reminded of why I do this work. Your gains are a gift to me for which I thank you. I am especially honored tonight to have with me on the test board Master Drew Clark, who was one of my first students. After attaining her black belt, Master Clark left Philadelphia for the US Marine Corps, where she has taught hand-to-hand combat and martial arts for ten years. *Sabum* Roma and I are pleased to have her back in Philadelphia and back in the Golden Tiger Kwan. Please face Master Clark and welcome her to your school.”

The students again snapped to attention, eyes riveted on the blond visitor. The woman was sinewy and lean, her features angular

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and chiseled. Her bearing was military, her expression intensely serious; everything about her radiated confidence and power. Despite the fact that she had not moved since taking her position next to her former mentor, there was a tension about her that was reminiscent of a great jungle cat, coiled and ready to spring. Her deep blue eyes never wavered as she also smartly brought her hands to her sides. The class bowed, and she returned their bow.

“Thank you,” Master Clark said, her voice deep and firm.

“Be seated.” Master Cho led the other black belts to their places behind the table, and the class returned to kneel along the side of the room. Only Sean remained standing.

“*Chun be*. Ready position,” Master Cho commanded, and Sean assumed a shoulder-width stance while bringing her fists and outstretched arms in front of her. The test had begun.

“Straddle stance, left punch out. *Hut*.”

On this command, Sean sank into a low stance, feet widespread, thighs low and parallel to the floor, her weight evenly distributed on each leg. As she punched her left fist straight out, her breath exploded from her chest in an audible *kiyap*.

“Waist level punches. *Hut*.”

For ten minutes by the clock, in a room completely silent save for her own regular expulsions of air, Sean alternately punched her left and right fists forward, holding the deep and perhaps most difficult karate stance without moving. By the end of the exercise, her quadriceps trembled and sweat streamed down her neck. Ignoring the discomfort, she concentrated on keeping each punch centered on the solar plexus of her imaginary opponent. It was not enough that she perform the required movements; there must also be purpose and focus to her punches.

“*Koman*. Halt.”

Sean stepped back into her ready stance, awaiting the next command, her eyes fixed on the far wall as she focused on keeping her breathing deep and regular. She wasn't winded, but she knew that the stress of the test could sap her strength as easily as the exertion. *Breathe in slowly, hold, and out. Breathe in slo—*

“Right back stance, knife hand block. *Hut*.”

For the next twenty minutes, Sean executed foot and hand techniques—kicks, blocks, strikes, and combinations—all designed

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to test her stamina and form. She moved decisively from one position to the next, back straight, knees bent, in the deep linear stances typical of Tae Kwon Do, the Korean style of karate. Sweat soaked her uniform now and ran freely in rivulets down her cheeks, dripping from the well-formed angles of her jaw.

Without a break, she was next ordered to perform self-defense maneuvers against several of the higher-ranking students who acted as her opponents. For each simulated attack, she was expected to demonstrate a variety of defensive counters, again using combinations of blocks, hand strikes, and kicks. Methodically, she worked through the drills she had practiced hundreds of times until the moves had become second nature to her.

An hour elapsed before Master Cho called a halt. "Thirty seconds for a water break. Everyone, get on your sparring gear."

Sean gulped down half the bottle of sports drink she had packed, then quickly strapped on her foot and hand protectors, slipped in her mouth guard, and reached for her head-gear. The most challenging, and potentially most dangerous, part of the test was about to begin.

She stole a quick glance at Master Cho and the others. Cho and Roma were making notes on the test forms. Drew Clark's intense blue eyes were focused solidly on her. For a second, Sean hesitated, her arm outstretched, as she returned the other woman's gaze. It was hard to read anything in Clark's expression, and that very fact held her attention. Ordinarily, she was very good at reading what lay unspoken in others, and she found herself intrigued by the woman's carefully guarded countenance.

Cho's voice jerked Sean's attention back into focus. She rapidly pulled on her protective helmet and stood ready, the piercing blue eyes now just a shadow in the back of her mind.

"You will spar each student in the class, beginning with the white belts."

Each match would last three minutes with thirty seconds between. During the competition, each woman attempted to score a hit by kicking or punching her opponent anywhere on the torso above the belt. Head contact for ranks below black belt was not allowed.

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In the early matches with the lower ranking students, especially the white and gold belt women, Sean was careful to keep them at bay with long-legged kicks and quick, light punches to the chest or abdomen that did no damage. There was no honor in defeating an inexperienced fighter, and that was not the purpose of her matches with them. When she sparred with beginners, it was more in the capacity of teacher rather than opponent. By demonstrating to them their vulnerability, she helped them learn to defend themselves.

By the time the intermediate green and blue belt students stepped up to fight, Sean was starting to fatigue. Her arms were tired, and she could feel herself slowing down. A few kicks and punches had landed, too, and although none were serious, she was sore. *Bad time for my reflexes to go south. And any one of the next few could take me down if I'm not careful.*

After shaking some of the tension from her shoulders, Sean then bowed to the first blue belt. Her opponent outweighed her and was all muscle. *Careful here. A punch from her is going to hurt.*

Fortunately, Sean had a height advantage, and she intended to allow more power in her punches, use her longer reach to conserve her energy, and force her opponent to block rather than counterpunch. At the same time, she'd keep the blue belt out of striking distance with front and side kicks, thereby preventing her from making any offensive move. The strategy worked, and when the bell rang at the end of the round, Sean almost grinned. She'd never been touched. Three more women followed, and, finally, Sean faced the final opponent.

Gail Driscoll was an aggressive, athletic college student only a year behind Sean in training but a decade her junior, and Sean knew she'd need all her concentration to avoid the quick kicks of her agile, younger opponent. As expected, Gail came off the mark with a flurry of combination punches and high spinning kicks. Sean felt every one of her thirty-two years as she blocked and counterpunched, protecting her mid-section and trying to drive Gail back with her feet.

With a minute left in the match, Sean's arms and legs were trembling with the sustained exertion of the last punishing thirty minutes, and she had to reach deep for the strength to launch her own assault. Still, her extra year of training paid off, and when the

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bell finally rang, she had gained the upper hand and was ahead on points.

Panting, both students stood at attention, waiting for the command to rest.

*Thank God. I survived.* Then from the corner of her eye, Sean saw Drew Clark lean over and murmur something to Master Cho. The senior instructor nodded her head affirmatively after a moment's consideration.

"You will finish your test with a match against Master Clark," Janet Cho announced.

For the briefest instant, surprise flickered across Sean's elegant features. She had expected to spar Chris Roma, if she sparred any of the black belts, and a current of both anticipation and anxiety rippled through her. The blond stranger was imposing, had at least a two-inch height advantage, and would no doubt beat her handily. *Destroy me is more like it. Well, I won't go without a fight.*

Sean bowed deeply, replying with the traditional form of respect accorded anyone of higher rank. "Yes, ma'am."

"Black belt rules."

Several of the students cast sidelong glances at each other. Black belt rules meant head contact was allowed, and Drew Clark was a fourth *dan*; she had to be a very experienced fighter. Excitement swelled in the ranks, along with apprehension.

Drew pulled on sparring gloves after slipping her feet into the foam foot covers that protected her opponent from the full force of her kicks, but she left her head-gear in her gym bag. Then she slipped in a mouth guard before walking purposefully to the center of the room to face Sean.

Sean looked up into a face that stared back at her without a flicker of emotion.

"Bow to your opponent," Cho instructed sharply.

Each woman bent smartly at the waist, returning again to lock eyes. Sean's green eyes were clear, her expression calm. Drew's eyes were sharp, but completely opaque. Whatever was behind them, she hid well.

"Free-spar ready positions."

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Sean and Drew each dropped one leg back, both knees bent. Now, only their forward raised fists and their sides were exposed, presenting the smallest target and protecting vital parts.

“Begin.”

Sean moved forward quickly with a front round kick to the head followed by a hand combination, hoping to take her opponent by surprise. Drew countered swiftly with a forearm block, then swept Sean’s forward leg with her foot, a move designed to break Sean’s balance. With someone less physically agile than Sean, it would have knocked her to the floor. As it was, Sean had to pivot on her rear leg to reestablish her footing, while avoiding a back fist that came perilously close to her chin.

Fighting for momentum, Sean managed a side kick that forced Drew back in an evasive move, but still Sean had not made body contact with the black belt. As she snapped her kicking leg back to avoid a hand trap that could topple her over, Sean rotated quickly into a back side kick that nearly caught Drew in the chest as the blond closed in for a strike. Sean followed her kick in, moving toward her opponent as she had been taught, attempting a jab-hook combination when Drew surged ahead and landed an upset punch to her abdomen.

Sean had sensed rather than seen the blow coming, and she tensed her abdominal muscles to absorb its force. Still, the punch stung, and she tried not to be distracted by the dull ache that remained. Spurred by the adrenaline that surged in response to the pain, she swiftly blocked Drew’s follow-up strike with her forearm and, completely reflexively, whipped a backhand jab off the block that caught Drew squarely on the chin. Drew’s head snapped back from the force of the unchecked blow, and for an instant, as the impact radiated smartly up her own arm, Sean was shocked into immobility. *Oh, no! I didn’t mean to hit her so hard!*

One of the sacred rules of free-sparring was to maintain control at all times in order to avoid injuring one’s sparring partner. Sean hadn’t been in control; she’d been reacting to her own pain. She’d struck out instinctively, full force, and she’d drawn blood.

*She’s hurt.* That one second of hesitation and self-recrimination proved to be Sean’s undoing. She let her hands drop.

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Drew absorbed the blow, ignored the swift stab of pain in her jaw, and, without a break in the flow of her movements, continued forward—always forward. Only inches from Sean, she dropped to the floor on one bent knee while simultaneously chambering a side kick, the most devastating of karate kicks. From below Sean's line of vision, she extended her leg and thrust her foot upward, catching Sean squarely in the center of her unguarded chest. At the last second, Drew tempered some of the power of her kick, but it landed with enough force to send Sean sprawling backward to the floor.

Stunned more from the surprise of the attack than she hadn't even seen coming than from the actual impact of the kick, Sean lay breathless. Alarmed, Drew knelt quickly beside her. There was a small cut on Drew's lip, and a trickle of blood streamed unnoticed down her chin.

"Are you all right?" Drew's deep voice questioned, as she pressed one hand lightly against Sean's abdomen. "Take a deep breath, slow and easy."

Sean did as instructed, aware of Drew's fingers gently rising and falling with the movements of her body. Finally, with a slight quaver in her voice, she said, "I'm okay."

"Did you hit your head?"

"No...ma'am." Embarrassed, Sean blushed. *At least I managed to remember that much of my training.*

Drew removed her hand and leaned back on her haunches, gravely studying Sean's face, searching for any sign of lingering injury. The green eyes that looked back at her were clear and pain free. Satisfied, she advised, "When you have the advantage, Ms. Gray, always use it. You should have dropped me with a head kick after you landed that punch to my face. If this were a real fight, you'd be dead right now."

Sean was mesmerized by the compelling countenance of the woman leaning over her, pierced by the eyes that stared at—no—into her. "I'll remember that, ma'am," she answered softly. "Thank you."

"Good fight, Ms. Gray." Drew reached a hand down to help her up.

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Standing a bit unsteadily, Sean watched the other woman walk to the sink to wash the blood off her face. Her words echoed in Sean's mind, and the spot where Drew had rested a hand against her stomach tingled as if the fingers were still there. The encounter had left Sean shaken, but not from pain. For a moment, looking into those deep blue eyes, she had forgotten that there was anyone else in the room. She'd never experienced anything quite like that before, never been affected by anyone quite so strongly, and especially not by someone she didn't even know.

Her teacher, Master Cho, was a strong and commanding woman. *All* the women in the *dojang*, students and teachers alike, were competent, forceful women; but Drew Clark was riveting in a way that took Sean's breath away. *When she just looks at me, it's like she's touchi—*

"Face front."

The sound of her teacher's voice startled Sean from her musings. Rapidly, she came to attention once more and faced the test board. Drew had returned to join the others, a small butterfly dressing on her lip.

"Congratulations, Sean. You did well." Janet Cho stepped around the table. "I am proud to promote you to black stripe." She attached three black stripes to the tail of Sean's red belt—the highest level to which Sean could be promoted before she received her black belt. To receive three stripes after only one test was unusual, and an honor.

Sean bowed deeply and then shook her teacher's hand. "Thank you, ma'am."

When Janet Cho dismissed the class, the students swarmed Sean en masse, pounding her on the back and relentlessly pumping her hand. The silence broken, their enthusiasm filled the room with a cacophony of shouts and cheers.

Smiling, returning their hugs, Sean barely heard the words of congratulations as she looked past the group to the austere blond stranger who stood alone, watching her contemplatively.