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CITY OF GHOSTS

KELLI STANLEY



City of Ghosts



Also by Kelli Stanley

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MIRANDA CORBIE SERIES

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City of Ghosts



Kelli Stanley



Minotaur Books

New York



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*For Tana, who makes the sun rise.
And for the memory of my parents,
Van and Patricia Stanley,
whose unconditional love and support
made everything possible.*

Acknowledgments

*

City of Ghosts was a difficult book to write and would never have been completed without the support, understanding, and help of friends and colleagues.

I was in the middle of the first draft when I lost both of my parents to cancer within a month of each other. I'm an only child with no close extended family and my parents were my best friends. Learning to live with the grief, despair, and health complications generated by their loss necessitated that I set the book aside for a while.

Fortunately, my publisher—Andy Martin at Minotaur Books—is a very understanding man. I thank him and the rest of the team at St. Martin's—Sally Richardson, Sarah Melnyk, Hector DeJean, Talia Richardson, indefatigable production editor Elizabeth Curione, and my esteemed editor, Matt Martz, for their patience and support while I learned how to write and live all over again. A special thanks as well to Marcia Markland and Kat Brzozowski.

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At the end of the day, of course, I thank you, the reader. You complete the book; it would not be possible without you. I hope you enjoy it, whether you're new to the Miranda Corbie series or have been waiting eagerly for *City of Ghosts*. I think you'll find that it marks a transition for Miranda, and my hope is that we will walk down many more streets together.

And, as always, I thank my partner, Tana Hall, for all the love, support and care. This book—and indeed, my every breath—would not be possible without her.

City of Ghosts





Act One

*

Bait

God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, scene 1



One

*

Miranda watched as the thin arm, pocked and dotted with needle points, snaked under the dirt-gummed bars of the pawnshop.

Swan dance, like a prima ballerina. Except the fingernails were chipped and filthy, the muscle wasted from too much hop. She nodded to the pawnbroker, his chubby stomach still quaking, eyes darting from her to the arm. The Chinese was as rapid as his breath.

Hand froze, jade necklace still dancing in its grip.

She prodded the proprietor with her shoe and his eyes came back to her, wide and scared. He bit his lip, tucking small feet behind the dented stool he perched on, while she threaded her way past a scarred wooden counter loaded with cameras and musical instruments, the sleeve of a moth-eaten beaver jacket thrown carelessly over half a plate of chow mein.

Hoped she'd remember how the hell to get out of Yick Lung, Chinatown pawnshop, hoped she wind up somewhere near the small, almost invisible side door used by the embarrassed customers. The Chinese didn't like to show their faces to a pawnbroker. Too much shame.

No shame for Mr. Kwok. Just a fat bank account he could spend in Quentin if he didn't play along.

Dark, uneven warrens, sound of her footsteps lonely, with occasional shrill laughter from an upper story and the smell of damp kitchen slop and cooking rice drifting up from below.

Right then left, up a small incline, walls crooked and peeling, right again . . . light coming faster, past the green door, whatever lurked behind it, and back to

the shiny brass knob and wide-mouth lion guarding the home of Mr. Leon Kwok, pawnshop owner and fence.

Air. Sunlight. Chinese violin ached a rendition of "Red River Valley," the smell of spent firecrackers blending with sandalwood and incense. Her stomach growled at the thought of a fried sesame ball, and she could use a goddamn Chesterfield.

Miranda took a deep breath. No time.

She walked quickly around the corner to Spofford Alley and the side entrance to Yick Lung. Men with dead eyes threw dice against a joss house, rubbing hands on worn pants, threadbare shirts. They looked away from the entrance and back again, drawn like moths, their fingers rattling the change in their pockets, dice to determine who would pawn what to keep throwing, keep alive the chance to win.

A black Buick hurtled down Washington, riding the brakes, radio cranked high with Glenn Miller and Ray Eberle, punctuated by the tinny horn.

Fools rush in . . .

Miranda leaned against the brick wall, out of sight of the door, next to a poster advertising Southern Pacific Weekend at the Fair.

Come out, come out to Treasure Island, celebrate the City's one hundred and sixtyfourth birthday, grand old lady, dirty old dame, naughty and bawdy, still flirts like jail bait. You want the real thing, mister, try Pickles O'Dell down on Pacific. Don't know 'bout virgins, mister, ain't got many left in San Francisco . . .

She shook her head. Meant to find out why Pickles was pushing babies, not the dried-up B-girls she was known for. Too busy since May. Too busy trying to make money. Too busy trying to find her mother.

Miranda's gloved hand crept up to the left side of her cheek. Scar still there, small, under the makeup. Little souvenir from the Musketeers, one for all and all for one. Heil Hitler.

Just a month ago. She knew all about fools rushing in, almost rushed in to a lobotomy.

Her breath was coming out quicker, shorter, and she stared at the door, shutting out memory. Couldn't shut it down at night, couldn't push the images out of her mind, Technicolor, nude girls and dead gangsters, brain splattered on a bathroom wall. Spain and Johnny and red-orange sunset, violin strings up and out, no *Gone With the Wind*, no Tara, no tomorrow was another fucking day.

Miranda shook herself and reached into her handbag. Drew out a Chesterfield and lit it with the Ronson Majorette, one click. Thought of the woman who hired her, cool and immaculate, husband in the Bohemian Club, eyes like dry ice.

Jade parure. Missing from her home. Houseguests? Three friends up for the weekend, for the Fair. Family? Daughter and a son. Husband? Absentee. Lover?

She remembered how the woman's eyes flickered, the thin white parchment skin on her lids veined blue, eyelashes black and bristled.

Everything insured, of course, no scandal, nothing public, but she'd like them back, whether the daughter sold them out of spite and jealousy or the friend needed a temporary loan to pay expenses. Whether her friends weren't her friends, and her lover wasn't her lover. She wanted back the jade. For sentimental reasons, of course. That, and the fact that it was worth fifty thousand dollars.

The rich don't like to part with their money, especially if it's old and has been in the family a long time. Jeeves the Butler and the bank account. Both deserved a little loyalty. The lady was new money, studied elocution at a Los Angeles soda fountain by way of Schenectady. But her husband was as old as sin in San Francisco, and he might start asking questions.

St. Mary's chimed her bell. *Son, observe the time and fly from evil . . .*

Goddamn it, something was wrong.

Miranda pinched out the cigarette with her fingers. Carefully turned the tarnished brass of the doorknob.

A too-skinny man in traditional garb, loose-fitting brown silk and smock, held a knife to fat Kwok's throat, his back to Miranda. The pawnbroker's arm was already bleeding from one cut, dripping on the wooden floor, held out stiffly to his right. His pudgy body pressed against an antique cherry wood wardrobe, his face contorted in a silent scream.

The skinny man didn't hear the click behind him, so Miranda stuck the .22 in his back.

"Drop the knife, Randolph. Your mother wants her jade back."



Took her half an hour to calm down Kwok and pry Randolph off the floor. He lay in the corner, drool drying at the corner of his mouth, mouth open and mewling, looking for a pipe to smoke or a tit to suck. Scion of the rich and powerful, progeny of old money and a new shipment of heroin.

The fence wanted reparations, to his arm, his person, his shop. His reputation.

Miranda handed him three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills, pale scent of Narcisse Noir still clinging to the fibers. Not much hope for his reputation, she told him, but if he wanted it repaired, she could take it up with the bulls . . .

She finally left with a miniature red granite dragon the suddenly eager-to-please Kwok pressed into her hands, toothy smile, bits of bok choy still clinging to his teeth. Jade necklace—and the matching bracelet and earrings Randolph had already pawned—were in her jacket pocket. Her fingers gripped Randolph's arm. He wiped his mouth and grinned vacuously, eyes empty.

She walked him past the herbalist and the grocery shops, down Washington Street and Waverly and the Twin Dragons nightclub, "Make-Believe Island" floating from a radio, Mary Ann Mercer and the Mitchell Ayres Orchestra sounding faraway and blue.

Wonderful island . . . where broken dreams come true . . .

Miranda walked faster down the hill toward Kearny and the Hall of Justice, pushing and pulling the tall, thin man beside her.

Make-believe island, Treasure Island, where broken dreams lay dead and bloodied, an ice pick through the breast . . .

Randolph yelped, stopping in front of the Chinese Telephone Exchange. "You're hurting me!"

She needed a cigarette or even a Life Saver but knew better than to let go of his arm.

"March, Randolph. Mommy's waiting."

He made a strangled noise in his throat and she almost felt sorry for him. He dragged his feet, Chinese sandals scuffing the dirty cement.

"How much are you getting?"

"Not enough."

"I-I've got my own allowance, I can—"

Miranda threw up the arm that held her purse, flagging a Yellow Taxi dropping a middle-aged woman off at Puccinelli's Bail Bonds on Washington.

"You can't take a piss by yourself, Randolph, and your allowance is all gone. Do yourself a favor. Ask your father to spring for a doctor, and get off the juice." The taxi pulled up, dark-skinned man about fifty with black and gray stubble and a smile that was missing some teeth.

Miranda opened the door, shoved Randolph inside. Leaned in through the open window, her voice low. He was curling again, shaking in the corner.

“Hit up the old man. And stay away from the hop . . . and your mother.”

She opened her purse and gave the driver a five-dollar bill and an address in the Burlingame hills. Watched him speed up Washington Street while she shook out a Chesterfield.

*

Lunch at the Palace’s Rose Room felt like a shower. She splurged on *Poulet au Vin* with a Tomato Surprise salad, sipped an iced tea, and tried to ignore the up-and-down stares of a businessman at the bar, chin mapped with five o’clock shadow, smile full of false teeth. A traveler left a *Los Angeles Times* on the chair next to her, partial to his hometown paper despite the *Examiner* building across the street.

HITLER ENDS WAR IN FRANCE, it broadcast. Count on Hollywoodland to write a war headline that sounded like a fucking happy ending. Below the thick black letters, BOMBERS RAID ENGLAND.

She swirled the iced tea with a green glass stick, stared into the brown liquid. Vague images of a dark-haired woman, voice low and melodic, singing, warm hands, large hands.

Her hands.

The figures were melting, ice cubes drifting apart. A deep voice cleared its throat.

Miranda looked up. Businessman from the bar. He pulled out a chair and sat, tongue flicking at his thick, wet lips.

“I couldn’t help but notice you were alone . . . hope you don’t mind.”

She sat back in the chair, eyes on the watery blue ones of the middle-aged Lothario. His blue suit was pinstriped and double-breasted, gapped in the chest and hugged his hips like a grass skirt. Display handkerchief, dirty white.

Flash of false teeth again.

She said evenly: “As a matter of fact, I do mind.”

He chuckled, as if she’d made a joke. “Haven’t always been so, er, particular, have you?”

Miranda’s eyes narrowed and flashed green inside the brown. She leaned forward, her hands curled into fists on the table.

“What do you want?”

He reached into the inside of his jacket and took out a chromiumplated cigarette case. Lit a Camel, smirked at her.

“You’re a looker, all right. They said you looked like that actress, what’s-her-name, Rita Hayworth. The black and whites in the paper don’t do you justice.”

He pushed some smoke out the side of his mouth, then pulled out his billfold, imitation alligator, and shoved it toward her with a hairy finger.

“How much, baby? I know you’re supposed to be a peeper now, but I figure you might turn one or two on the side.”

Miranda froze for a moment. Then she adjusted the black velvet beret on her head, while the businessman leaned back, grinning at the movement of her breasts underneath the white blouse and snug velvet jacket. Her left hand fell into the pocket, and she touched the jade, cold and implacable.

She forced a smile and put on her gloves like a striptease. Stood up. He grinned more broadly, repocketing his wallet, pushing his chair in. The young blond waiter was walking over to the table to ask about dessert, and she caught his eye, shaking her head. He stopped in the middle of the floor, puzzled.

Miranda kept the smile glued on, shifted her weight, and sauntered over slowly. Stood in front of the leering man with the blue suit and shadow on his chin. She looked up at him, waiting until his grin was big enough to show off the whole set of his false teeth.

A flash of thigh, while her knee came up. He bent over, his mouth an O, his eyebrows in his hairline. She threw all 124 pounds behind a right to his jaw.

The set of false teeth flew out in a spray of spittle, skidded across the floor and landed in front of a shocked dowager in sequined gray.

He toppled and fell backward, landing on his ass. The blond waiter sprinted for the maître d’. A couple of male customers were standing, sleeves tugged on by their dates.

Sit back down, Roger. Don’t you dare interfere. Shouldn’t let her kind in here. Harlot. Slut.

Whore.

Miranda knelt by her adversary’s face, his cheeks and jaw still bright red with shock and pain.

“Who did you talk to? Who, goddamn it?”

The shrunken mouth caved in on itself, breath coming in gasps, and he shook his head.

“Bianne Mwaroche.”

Dianne and her venom, southern spider, sitting in the middle of a web. Twitch it and they’ll come running back, you never escape, you’ll never be through, Miranda, unless you’re dead and buried like Betty Chow . . .

The maître d’s hand was on her shoulder. “Is there a problem, Miss?”

“Not anymore.”

She stood up, rubbing her gloved right hand. They didn't want to hear it, didn't even want to know why, just wanted her out and gone. No thorns in the goddamn Rose Room.

Miranda reached for her purse and threw a dollar on the table. Turned briefly to the short, bald maître d', his eyes pleading like a spaniel's. Dropped her eyes to the businessman, still on the ground, hand in front of his shrunken mouth.

"Remember me to Dianne."

She walked out of the Palace Hotel, left hand fingering the jade in her pocket.



The Old Taylor swirled in the Castagnola glass, pain in her swollen knuckles subsiding. Miranda pushed aside the receipts and papers, stood up and cracked the office window. Smell of gasoline and French fries drifted up from below.

Artie Shaw's "Traffic Jam" blew wild from Tascone's jukebox, and two pigeons were mating on Lotta's Fountain.

Happy 164th Birthday, San Francisco, celebrate your heritage, your Phoenix wings, your life. Throw a party on a treasure island, toast the steel monsters that spanned your Golden Gate. Masque of the red-orange death for the ferryboats, but hell . . . let's dance.

She sank into the overstuffed leather chair, hands trembling. Not whole, not yet, too soon after too many cracks, too soon after the Musketeers and Pandora Blake and Ozzie Mandelbaum. Too soon after the postcard from Westminster Abbey, from a mother she thought was long dead.

Bombs were dropping on England, last target for the steel-toed jackboots, last island for the Blitzkrieg. And somewhere in London, amid the bomb shelters and cool, ancient churches, somewhere between the chip shops and pubs and Piccadilly Circus . . . was her mother. Somewhere.

And she had to find her, help her, save her. Get her out, get her away, before the Nazis killed the only family she had.

Her father didn't count.

She threw back another gulp of the bourbon, finished filling in the report. She knew better than to give up the jade before she was paid, and the out-of-pocket expenses—including the three hundred dollars to Kwok—bit hard.

She took the job to make money. No choices, not now, she needed a ticket to Liverpool or Ireland, preferably on a ship that the U-boats wouldn't sink.

The office door rattled and Miranda looked up, eyes wide.

Not Allen, the Pinkerton was off on a case today, the Monadnock quiet, most of the city at the Fair.

Jade was in the safe. She opened the right-hand drawer. The .22 gleamed dully at her.

Her voice came out clear. "Come in."

The handle turned and Miranda held her breath. A tall man in his late thirties, dressed in a light wool blazer of conservative cut, his tie maroon, his dark brown hair oiled and immaculate, crisp brown fedora from Dobbs Brothers in one hand, a large brown envelope in the other.

He smiled at her. Walked toward her desk.

"Hello Miranda. It's been awhile."

James MacLeod. From the State Department.