

Silk Tiger

Julian Winter

508-904-8319
PO Box 331
Framingham, MA 01704
www.julianwinter.com
julian@julianwinter.com

FADE IN:

EXT. MIST-SHROUDED MOUNTAINS - DAY

Mist creeps down a mountain, a fog tiger stalking the slopes. Mystery prevails. From the mist a slip of silk materializes and undulates in the moment.

EXT. A TIGER PRESERVATION ZOO - DAY (U.S.)

A young ASIAN GIRL watches a pink balloon bob to and fro. The BALLOON VENDOR hands it to her.

EXT. VIEWING PLATFORM OVERLOOKING THE TIGER EXHIBIT - DAY

The girl joins her FATHER and TWIN SISTER, who watch the tigers below. Her twin begs for a balloon, too.

FATHER

(to daughter with balloon)

Stay here.

The two leave. The girl's balloon tugs at her hand.

INT. ASIAN MASSAGE PARLOR ROOM - DAY (U.S.)

Darkness, shadows vie with the light. CHANGMI, 30's, Asian eyes on Aphrodite, straddles a CUSTOMER. Chopsticks pin her hair in place. Their entwined bodies strain for the finish.

BACK TO TIGER EXHIBIT

The balloon slips from the girl's hand. It lingers over the stone railing. She scampers up to retrieve it, tigers below.

BACK TO MASSAGE ROOM

The customer pants with exhaustion. Changmi forces him on.

CHANGMI

Keep going. I'm not ready.

CUSTOMER

I can't.

She leans toward his ear, her voice silken.

CHANGMI

Yes, you can. Do it for me.

TIGER EXHIBIT, ON THE STONE RAILING

On tiptoe, the girl clutches for the string, just beyond reach. A tiger watches her from below.

MASSAGE ROOM

He clenches Changmi's hair. She slaps his hand away.

CUSTOMER

Rose, I love you.

CHANGMI

I know.

TIGER EXHIBIT

The girl stretches, only inches from the string. It surrenders to her grasp. The tiger paces, patience waiting.

MASSAGE ROOM

Changmi finishes with him and closes her eyes for one delicious moment. He lies spent beneath her.

The moment gone, she swings her leg over to dismount and hops down, shooting him a look of disdain.

TIGER EXHIBIT

The girl teeters, the mistake evident in her eyes. Both she and the balloon disappear over the stone railing. The balloon reappears and floats skyward, leaving her behind.

MASSAGE ROOM

Changmi slips her gown on and buttons his shirt. His eyes cling to the already fading memory.

CUSTOMER

Can I stay a minute?

CHANGMI

Time's up.

(squatting to tie his shoes)

Others are waiting. Maybe next time.

TOP OF the STAIRS

Changmi extends her cheek for the customary kiss and some mumbled promise. He descends, stumbling.

AJUMA, house mama, young once, scowls at her. Changmi pulls the chopstick from her hair, and defiantly tosses her mane.

TIGER EXHIBIT, AT THE STONE RAILING

AINSLEY, late 30's, Native American, wearing a baseball cap, watches the balloon rise, then looks down to the girl. Her long hair lies sprawled about as if arranged for a pose.

A crowd gathers in terror. The father screams for help. Her twin peeks at Ainsley, oblivious to the commotion.

He puts a finger to his lips telling the girl below to lie still. He places his cap on the stone railing, revealing shoulder-length hair. He tenses to jump over the railing.

An overweight GUARD and an ASSISTANT race up with rifles.

GUARD

You're not going in there?

Ainsley glances toward him, dismissive.

GUARD

We need to put 'em down.

He places a cartridge in the chamber.

AINSLEY

Shoot, before I tell you to, and I'll rip your throat out.

The guard drops the cartridge. The assistant peers over the railing and clutches his stomach. Ainsley crouches to jump, but an off-duty COP with handgun drawn, grabs his shoulder.

COP
(flashing a badge)
He's right. I'm shooting the one
nearest her.

AINSLEY
That's Nicté. If you don't kill her
with the first shot, the girl will
be dead before you pull a second.

COP
Who the hell are you?

GUARD
Her only chance.

The cop backs off, unable to match Ainsley's intensity.
Ainsley grabs the stone railing and sees,

EXT. MOUNTAINS, BIRDS-EYE VIEW - DAY (AINSLEY'S MIND'S EYE)

An eagle flies over the mountains. The view swoops down to
an INDIAN MALE standing on a butte, gazing into the depths.
The Indian swan dives as Ainsley jumps into the exhibit.

ON THE GROUND OF THE TIGER EXHIBIT

NICTÉ growls, but backs up. Ainsley touches the grass and
takes in the beauty of the moment. A good day to die.

He examines the girl. A dying autumn leaf circles in the
breeze and lands on her cheek. He lifts it off.

AINSLEY
You all right?

She nods yes.

AINSLEY
Listen, I'm taking you out of here.

She nods again.

AINSLEY
What's your name?

She touches her throat and shakes her head. Three tigers

join Nicté. His stare halts their advance, but one roars.

OVERHEAD AT THE STONE RAILING

The twin watches. The guard aims at Nicté, sweat drips into his eyes. Ainsley looks to the guard.

AINSLEY

Not this way.

The guard relaxes his aim and wipes his eyes.

ON THE GROUND

Ainsley lifts the girl and heads toward a side gate. Nicté lets him pass, but the other tigers charge.

A flute melody (SO), like a hawk screech, creates a silence.

WITHIN THE SILENCE

Therein, the wind, leaves, the crowd and the tigers move in slow motion. Only Ainsley moves at normal speed. He lowers the girl to confront the tigers.

He sees each tiger's movement before they do and steps aside. So it goes, like a Tai Chi exercise. As he tires the swipes edge closer. One finally cuts his shoulder.

He eyes Nicté. She brushes against him to engage the other three. He grabs the girl and strides toward the side gate.

BELLA DONNA'S LAIR IN THE TIGER EXHIBIT

BELLA DONNA, a stunning black jaguar, emerges from the shadows of a cave. She locks gaze with Ainsley, ready to charge him, but pauses.

SIDE GATE OF THE TIGER EXHIBIT

GILANA, early 30's, a willowy woman, holds the gate open.

The tigers lope toward Ainsley, but he doesn't rush. Gilana slams the gate as he exits. The tigers snarl at the bars.

GILANA

My God!

Ainsley holds the girl tight and rubs her back.

YOUNG GIRL

(mouths with sign language)

Thank you.

The guard appears with PARAMEDICS. Ainsley looks into her eyes before kissing her forehead. Paramedics whisk her away.

GUARD

That was reckless. What if Gilana hadn't opened this gate?

AINSLEY

(meeting Gilana's gaze)

It never occurred to me.

The guard shakes his head and leaves the two.

Ainsley grabs the bars and peers toward Bella Donna's lair. She's gone. An expanding red circle runs down his shoulder.

AINSLEY

How'd you know?

GILANA

It's what you would've done.

The flute music (SO) pierces the silence. He grips the bars.

INT. MASSAGE PARLOR ROOM - NIGHT

Ainsley tips Ajuma as she closes the door, leaving him alone. A massage table, covered with ivory satin, dominates the room. He lies on the table and closes his eyes,

FLASHBACK: FOGGY MOUNTAIN VALLEY - DAY (15 YEARS AGO)

Ainsley walks alone deep in the mountains. A form takes shape within the fog. A tiger steps out and advances, in no hurry. It strikes him hard to the face, but without claws.

He loses consciousness.

BACK TO THE MESSAGE ROOM

Changmi caresses Ainsley's cheek. She wears a pink gown with her hair pinned up. An old, romantic song pines away.

She examines him as a hawk does prey. His eyelids flutter open, he pushes up, but Changmi pushes him back down.

CHANGMI

Lie still, Tiger.

She massages his fingers with a hot towel.

CHANGMI

No one's ever fallen asleep waiting.

AINSLEY

Why call me tiger?

CHANGMI

It came to me. Do you like it?

She helps him up and slides the baseball cap off, revealing the length of hair held neatly in a ponytail. She cradles his hair in her palm and strokes it a few times.

CHANGMI

Are you for real?

AINSLEY

Indian?

CHANGMI

Yeah.

He nods. She studies his face.

CHANGMI

We're wasting time. Let me help you with these.

She squats at his feet to remove his shoes and socks. She unbuttons his shirt and pauses to study a rough stone pendant in the shape of a rose, hanging from a leather cord.

CHANGMI

May I?

He nods. She touches the stone and inhales sharply,

FLASHBACK: BESIDE A TALL STONE WALL - DAY

A young ASIAN GIRL tends a single pink rose that has grown underneath the wall. She inhales the fragrance.

BACK TO THE ROOM

Eyes closed, Changmi moans.

AINSLEY

You all right?

Unsteady, she rubs her temples, but nods yes. She notes a symbol etched in the stone.

CHANGMI

Devotion.

(turning it in her hand, still dizzy)

It took much work to create this.

You mean very much to someone.

AINSLEY

It's not mine. I'm holding it for a friend.

Changmi lets it slide from her hand, breaking her reverie. She spins him around to remove his shirt. He tenses.

AINSLEY

Wait. I need to tell you-

CHANGMI

What we do here is our secret. What you do outside, I don't care to know.

AINSLEY

You don't understand.

She slides the shirt from his back and gasps, stepping back.

CHANGMI

(in Korean)

My God!

AINSLEY

Tried to warn you. It scares the girls.

She beholds a massive scar, four vertical gashes neck to waist. She shudders, then ventures a touch.

CHANGMI

Does it hurt?

He shakes his head. She heads for the door. He picks up his shirt, putting it back on. She turns.

CHANGMI

Don't worry. I'm coming back. Take your clothes off. Put on that robe.

He looks to her, composing a question. She notes it.

CHANGMI

Call me Rose.

AINSLEY

I'm Ainsley.

CHANGMI

Sure you are. Classy name, anyway.

She closes the door.

EXT. THE SILK TIGER RESTAURANT - DAY

Ainsley hesitates outside the entrance. A melancholy autumn breeze stirs the leaves.

He looks to the restaurant sign, a painting of a fierce tiger emerging from the mists. Beside the Korean name is the translation, The Silk Tiger.

Overhead, in the leaden sky, a large feather swirls, then falls at his feet. He opens the door to the sound of chimes.

INT. A BOOTH IN THE RESTAURANT - DAY

Ainsley waits, rolling the feather between his fingers. A pink rose graces a bud vase.

Water slides down a floor-to-ceiling waterfall. A massive

growth of bamboo dominates the room.

The waitress, SEUL KI, shy, early-teens, Asian, brings a sizzling stone pot and tea. She wears a long pink gown and pins her hair up with chopsticks.

She hands him a hot hand towel. He sniffs the tea aroma.

AINSLEY

I didn't ask for this.

SEUL KI

(bowing in apology)

I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it.

He continues to inhale the scent,

FLASHBACK: A BUDDHIST TEMPLE, STONE BALCONY- DAY (15 YRS AGO)

A YOUNG MONK pours tea for Ainsley, who has bandages on his back. The monk wears Ainsley's stone pendant.

YOUNG MONK

Drink this, it's good for the blood.

BACK TO THE RESTAURANT

Concerned over her error, Seul Ki removes the tea.

AINSLEY

Leave it, please. Where you'd get it?

SEUL KI

It's the owner's special blend.

Ainsley eats and gazes at the waterfall. A pair of eyes watches him from the kitchen.

INT. MASSAGE PARLOR DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Looking into a mirror, Changmi sings as she applies makeup to her eyes, her hair flows over her shoulders.

AJUMA (OS)

Changmi, you have a horse waiting.
He asked for you.

AJUMA (OS) (CONT.)
(in Korean)

Hurry up!

Changmi pins her hair in place and sighs.

MASSAGE PARLOR HALLWAY

Changmi glides down the stairs, entering the twilight that is her life. She's ever a queen, no matter her court.

SHEILLA, late 30's, attractive five years ago, staccato puffs a cigarette at the side door. They exchange smiles.

Changmi halts outside the room, hand to the doorknob, and frowns. She reaches to her temple,

FLASHBACK: BESIDE A TALL STONE WALL - DAY

A young Asian girl tends a single pink rose that has grown underneath the wall. She inhales the fragrance,

CHANGMI INHALES

And turns the doorknob to enter the room. Her hand slides to the dimmer switch, bringing the comfort of darkness.

INSIDE THE ROOM

Ainsley sits on the table.

CHANGMI

Back so soon?

AINSLEY

I, uh...

With a knowing smile, Changmi acknowledges his reply.

CHANGMI

What are we doing today?

AINSLEY

A favor. May I give you the back rub?

CHANGMI

You know it doesn't work that way.

AINSLEY

What I know— your days are long,
the nights are short. You're tired.

She considers his request.

CHANGMI

Why?

AINSLEY

No business today. Just talk. OK?

CHANGMI

(via a sideways glance)

As you wish.

She disrobes and lies on the table. He turns up the light.

CHANGMI

Lower the lights. It's too bright.

AINSLEY

I can't see your eyes.

She reaches to the dimmer and darkens the room, then closes her eyes. She moans when he places a hot towel on her back.

Clothed, he lightly massages her shoulders.

AINSLEY

Rose isn't your real name.

She opens her eyes, one of her secrets gone.

AINSLEY

House mama calls you something else.

CHANGMI

No one's ever noticed. It's Changmi,
which means rose. Easier for
customers to remember.

AINSLEY

May I call you Changmi?

CHANGMI

As you wish, my tiger.

Ainsley works her lower back muscles. She falls asleep to dream of,

DREAM SEQUENCE: EXT. BEACH - DAY

A beach, green waves and white sand. She lies face down while Ainsley, wearing only swim trunks, massages her back.

Later, as they make love she peers down at him through the strands of her hair. Then, she falls back onto the sand beside him, exhausted, and closes her eyes.

END DREAM: BACK IN THE ROOM

Changmi's eyelids flutter open. Unclothed, Ainsley lies beside her on the table. Both are sweaty and breathing hard.

AINSLEY

You all right?

She inhales and doesn't answer, then slides off the table.

Her gown lies folded neatly on the chair with a rose on top. Her shoes wait ready at the door. She snatches the gown, letting the rose fall to the floor.

CHANGMI

I'll be back.

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE LANDING - DAY

Sheilla snatches puffs from a cigarette. Changmi joins her, breathing heavy. Sheilla notes her disheveled appearance.

SHEILLA

How was he?

CHANGMI

The usual ride.

Sheilla peers into Changmi's eyes.

SHEILLA

Doesn't look that way to me.

(exhaling)

I got another friggin' asshole.
I'm letting him cool off awhile.

CHANGMI

Who needs to cool off?

Sheilla scowls and flicks the butt over the railing.

CHANGMI

Remember, path of least resistance.

BACK IN THE ROOM

Changmi backs Ainsley against the table to wash his face with a hot towel. He notes a scar inside her left wrist.

AINSLEY

Accident?

CHANGMI

Birthmark.

He strokes the scar and shakes his head.

AINSLEY

It's a cut.

CHANGMI

(pulling her wrist away)

It's nothing.

AINSLEY

Every scar has a story.

She finishes cleaning his face and softly kisses him.

CHANGMI

You're my horangee.

AINSLEY

Horangee?

CHANGMI

Tiger. You make love like a tiger.

AINSLEY

Then you've never seen tigers mate.

She straightens his collar, smoothing his hair in place.

CHANGMI

Never seen a real tiger, but you're close enough.

She buttons his shirt, leaving the stone to hang loose. He studies her pinned hair.

AINSLEY

Do you ever let your hair down?

He reaches for the chopstick, but she deflects his hand. She cradles the stone in her other hand, thoughtful.

CHANGMI

Such a butterfly. Start seeing some of the other girls.

AINSLEY

Butterfly?

She uses the stone to mimic a butterfly's erratic flight.

CHANGMI

They flit from flower to-

AINSLEY

I understand.

He reaches for his cap. She grabs it from him.

CHANGMI

You look better without it.

He puts the cap on anyway, hiding his ponytail beneath. She pushes the errant strands in place and gingerly strokes the feather in his shirt pocket. He looks to her touch.

AINSLEY

Ainsley's not my real name, either.

She looks up from the feather, waiting.

He looks down, face drawn, shaking his head, then to her.

AINSLEY
Do you ever see stars?

CHANGMI
(looking away)
I don't have time for the stars.

AINSLEY
Not that.
(touching her heart)
Didn't you feel it?

She steps back to regard this curiosity invading her domain.

CHANGMI
What are you here for?

AINSLEY
Comfort.

CHANGMI
(narrowing her eyes)
There's nothing here for a man like you.

AINSLEY
What kind of—?

CHANGMI
Time's up.

She lifts the stone pendant and drops it inside his shirt.
She pats it against his chest.

CHANGMI
I'll tell you some other day. And
you can tell me your real name.

TOP OF THE STAIRS

Ainsley, foot on the top step, pauses to eye Changmi. A
commotion starts in a room, with shouts in Korean.

She turns to listen, then frowns and pushes him to descend.

AINSLEY

Is there a problem?

CHANGMI

Just go.

At the bottom of the stairs Ajuma motions him to hurry.

ANOTHER MESSAGE ROOM

Changmi opens the door to find Sheilla against the wall.
Her breasts spill from her ripped, black gown.