

The Path of Dreams

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I run to you
 ceaselessly
on the path of dreams
Yet no night of dreams
could ever compare
to one waking glimpse
 of you

Ono no Komachi
c. 833–857

Preface

The Buddha's Disciple

After New Year's, *Obon* is the most important of Japan's national holidays. Also known as the Feast of the Lanterns or the Festival for the Dead, *Obon* is the time set apart for the veneration of our ancestors. The time dedicated to the restoration of familial and generational ties. The time when we remember the dead.

The Japanese is an abbreviation of *Urabon*, a phonetic reduction of the Sanskrit *Ullambana*, meaning "to hang upside down." It represents the suffering of those "hungry ghosts" whose sins have forestalled their reincarnation and consigned them to the torments of Hell. On the final day of *Obon*, the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (according to the old calendar), the Ruler of the Earthly Realms grants forgiveness to all such benighted souls and thus upon all humankind. For none of us pass from this life pure.

The Festival finds its beginnings in the *Urabon Sutra* and the story of *Maudgalyayana*, a disciple of *Shakyamuni Buddha*. Soon after his mother's spirit passed from this life, *Mokuren Sonja* (as the Japanese pronounce his name) discerned her to be suffering the tortures of *Ullambana*. Water boiled upon touching her lips. Everything she ate turned to ash.

In despair, *Mokuren* sought out the wisdom of the *Buddha*, who told him that his mother's bad karma was the consequence of a life given over

to petty greed and stinginess. To merit her release from hell, Mokuren had to practice *dana*, or selfless giving, on her behalf. He was commanded to summon the ten sanctified priests from the Ten Worlds to his temple, tend to their material needs, and entreat them to perform for his mother a proper memorial service. Mokuren was further instructed that he must sincerely thank his mother for all she had done for him during her life, her failings and shortcomings notwithstanding.

This gratitude he expressed and these rites he performed. Because of his filial piety, his mother's soul was reborn into the Pure Land. Mokuren lit bonfires to show her the way and danced with joy at the knowledge of her redemption.

All these elements of the first Obon remain with us to this day.

In the modern era, the festival is celebrated from August thirteenth to the fifteenth. We light small ceremonial fires, welcoming the spirits to our hearts and homes. As Mokuren served his elders, we too leave offerings of food, flowers, and incense upon the house altars. The dance of the *Bon Odori* brings friends and neighbors together as we celebrate the harmony of all creation made possible by the disciple's example.

On the evening of the final day, the *okuribi* bonfires burn like stars on the mountains, lighting the way to heaven. We cast paper lanterns upon the waters to guide the spirits of the dead back to the Pure Land. As they slip from this mortal realm, dancing along the paths of the ceaseless currents, the words of the Buddha are not lost from our thoughts, reminding us always:

The weight of obligation we owe our ancestors is as boundless as the heavens.

Chapter 1

Snapshots

Elaine Chieko Packard had a guilty conscience. *Dreams*. She felt guilty about dreams. But dreams so real she could almost believe she was not dreaming at all. One simple fact reminded her that these fantasies existed only in her mind: she was a *missionary*, for crying out loud.

Good girls—especially good girls who went on missions—didn't have dreams like this. Good girls didn't do a lot of things. They didn't open their mouths when they kissed. They certainly didn't go *all the way*. They didn't get to the on-ramp, or even leave the driveway in the first place. *Other* girls did, the girls passed around like a wad of used chewing gum. And how gross was that?

As a teenager, Elly sat in church and listened to the lessons on morality and chastity, mesmerized by the images her imagination could conjure up. The slasher movies of moral peril. It was like watching the last scene in *Time Bandits* over and over: “*Don't touch that! It's pure evil!*”

The subject was petting. Sister Summers approached it with half a dozen euphemisms and half a dozen frightening quotes from dead General Authorities before Jennie Howell finally blurted out, “But it's okay once you get married, isn't it?”

Sister Summers turned pale and changed the subject.

Elly considered the whole thing a pointless exercise. The girls who *did*

fool around weren't listening. They weren't in class. They were sleeping in Sunday morning after a late night spent doing everything the rest of them were being told not to. The girls who weren't going to weren't going to. She'd known since puberty that she'd never stand anywhere but squarely in the wasn't-going-to camp.

Abstinence made sense to her. What she didn't get was this incredible paranoia over *losing* it. To be sure, Sister Summers wasn't paranoid. Only timid and easily embarrassed. Now Brother Collins, Elly's Seminary teacher, *he* was paranoid. Every lesson on morality came down to *us* versus *them*. Her honor and good name hung in the balance. *They* were going to get her, like the dumb girls in the horror flicks always running *up* the stairs instead of *down*. One scream of regret. Disgraced for life.

The problem was, Elly never felt gotten to, pursued, tempted. She felt, well, left out. Men were supposed to be the sex with sex on the brain. But women's magazines were obsessed with it. At the supermarket, she'd mosey over to an empty register and sneak a *Cosmopolitan* off the rack. What *does* a man expect of a woman in bed? She had no idea. How *can* you have the best sex ever? Ditto. Is *he* your sexual soul mate? Not a question that would ever come up in a temple preparation class.

The occasional boy who kissed her awkwardly at the end of a date didn't arouse her to any breaking point. Didn't arouse her at all. But deep inside herself, she desperately wanted to believe she *could* be propelled to a soul-shattering act of wantonness—that it could overpower her *completely*.

"Don't you wonder what it's like?" Jennie Howell whispered to her one day after Seminary. They were walking back to the high school, textbooks clasped against their chests like body armor. Elly shrugged as if she never gave it a second thought. She had a closet full of second thoughts.

"I mean," Jennie went on, "I know *for a fact* that Karen Andersen *did* it with Jeff Clark, and they were both in church on Sunday. I mean, if you *killed* somebody you wouldn't show up in church the next Sunday."

Jennie thought too much about these things. So did Elly. She just didn't make it a matter of public conversation. The subject was too hypothetical, too imaginary. Like a travel brochure to a distant, foreign land.

She stood at the back of the Barnes & Noble, the fat romance paper-

back in her hands. Curiosity, that's all. Yet she lingered over the words as she read. She saw in her mind's eye, like a voyeur at the rear window, the man's hands slipping inside the woman's blouse, their lips parting—

Elly cast her eyes about furtively, as if the pictures in her mind were being projected in Technicolor on the high walls of the bookstore.

She knew about pictures—the time at Girl's Camp when Becky Hoggan took a picture of her in the shower. Becky was not a good girl. Becky was the kind of bad influence they warned her about in church. But Sister Johannson looked upon her as a lost sheep worthy of being fellowshipped back into the fold.

The shower was a solar-powered contraption. It consisted of a black metal tank exposed to the scorching summer sun, a coil of PVC hose, a valve, a showerhead, and a blue plastic tarp stretched around a crude two-by-four frame. Elly was rinsing her hair in the thin, lukewarm stream, her back arched, her head flung back, when she heard the *click* of the shutter.

She glanced over her shoulder with a doe-eyed expression in time to catch a flash of sunlight off the camera lens. Without her glasses on, several blurry seconds passed before she realized what was going on.

“Becky!” she squealed, crouching down and covering her breasts with her arms.

“Just kidding. You're out of film.” She held up Elly's little Olympus.

“That's *not* funny.”

Becky laughed. The corner of the tarp flapped back into place.

A week later, Elly showed her slides at Mutual. Anyone who'd brought a camera to Girl's Camp had to. Witty, self-deprecating asides helped. Incriminating photographs helped too, as long as they weren't *that* incriminating.

Elly had neither. She clicked through her slides with sparse commentary. *This is the campsite. This is the lake. This is Jane and Sister Johannson.* Good grief, why hadn't she sorted through these slides first? *This is Becky in her fatigues.* A pretty good picture.

“This is—” Elly had to stop and say, “Oh, this is the shower.”

A few hoots from the boys at the back of the recreation hall. Some applause from the girls in the front. Unlike the boys, the girls were not

amused by the prospect of running around for a week like feral children. No one else had thought of taking a picture of the shower. *How very clever of her!* Elly's thumb pressed down on the button of the remote. *Wait a minute, had she thought of taking a picture of the shower?* The carousel clicked forward, the slide popping up from the lens housing, the next one falling down into the cradle.

She hadn't thought of taking a picture of the shower.

Becky had.

Elly hit the back button. A purely instinctual reaction. The gut to the spinal cord to the tendons to the fingers. A blur of peach and blue flashed on the screen, followed by a moment of white. The picture of the shower snapped back into focus.

"Hey, we already saw this one!"

"Uh, it jammed." Elly leaned over the projector, her body blocking the light. She pulled off the carousel and stepped into the shadows behind the bright cone of light.

"Um, I guess that was the last one." Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe. Sister Johannson stepped toward her. She was going to reach out her hand and say, *All right, Elly, hand it over.* Then the bishop was going to take her to his office, shaking his head with profound disappointment. He'd summon her father. Then her *mom* would find out. Elly would claim it wasn't her fault. Who knew what Becky would say, but no one would believe her either.

Elly eased herself into the closest seat, holding the carousel against her chest the way a drowning man clings to a Mae West. Sister Johannson said cheerfully, "Who's next?"

LaRae Cordner sprang to her feet, a slide carousel in one hand and a boom box in the other. "I am!" LaRae could turn five minutes of kindergarten show-and-tell into a Broadway production. No one would remember Elly's slides afterward. That suited her just fine.

Late that night, Elly sneaked her father's slide projector into her room. She locked the door, pulled the blinds, and closed the curtains. Why had she believed Becky? Then it occurred to her: *the Photomat at Smith's Grocery!* Some pimply-faced kid manning the developing machines had seen *every-*

thing! She'd never go there again.

The image pulled into focus. Elly exhaled in surprise. She'd seen herself naked before in the mirror. Coming out of the shower. In passing. The human body didn't offend her. She could look at Leonardo's *Venus de Milo* or Michelangelo's *David* without blushing.

But this was different. To begin with, it was *her*.

She tipped the projector so the image displayed unbroken on the ceiling. The lack of shame in the display, the casual innocence in her nudity, that's what made it so—*different*. Wasn't she supposed to be embarrassed, mortified, chagrined? She wasn't. She didn't know this person. *Yet this is who I am*.

She lay back on the bed and stared at herself. The dark cascade of her hair, the supple muscles of her back and belly. The concave slope at her waist. The smooth curve of her breasts set against the vibrant blue.

She wasn't unattractive. Really. It was an extraordinary revelation.

Elly hid the slide where no one would find it.

But that moment haunted her—her thumb resting on the button of the remote—when her family honor and good name hung in the balance. Foresight was not her forte. Hindsight wouldn't have helped at all. It was only sheer dumb luck that she'd stopped it in time. Sitting in church, she relived that moment over and over. Her heart pounded in her chest. Sweat trickled down her back. Teen angst meets post-traumatic stress syndrome.

That moment came back to her at the Barnes & Noble. She looked at the glossy book cover, the bare-chested Fabio look-alike, his hugely muscled arms wrapped around a buxom, raven-haired woman about to burst out of her décolletage. It was the wrong book. She'd picked it up by accident. Good girls didn't do things like that.

She put the book back on the shelf and strode to the remainder racks. That night, Elly Packard decided she would go on a mission when she turned twenty-one.

Chapter 2

The Nakamozu Nankai

Connor had seen her only once, on the Nankai station platform in Nakamozu. He'd been waiting for the Osaka express, northbound. It was late in the morning, still cool in the shade, the sunlight bright on the steel tracks. He glanced across the gap. Two sister missionaries were standing next to the kiosk under the Arrival/Departure sign. He didn't recognize them. They didn't attend the church in Abeno. Maybe they'd come up for a zone conference from one of the districts around Wakayama.

The one with the sandy blonde hair said something to her companion, the one with the dark mane falling down her back. She turned and looked over her shoulder at him. Their eyes met momentarily. She was Japanese, yet not quite Japanese. She was too tall, her hair a dark mahogany brown.

Then the southbound local arrived and they were gone.

She would have thought little or nothing of him. Another expat adrift on the Kansai. Besides, he hadn't shaved since Winter semester let out. Nothing about him said Returned Missionary or even Mormon. He didn't give the brief encounter a second thought.

Except that he dreamed about her that night, the Japanese-American girl on the Nakamozu Nankai.

Connor rarely dreamed and rarely remembered what he dreamt, which was fine by him. Most times the cigar was just a cigar. Yet he recalled this

dream with a specificity that crossed the line between reality and imagination.

The dream began with the two of them walking along a quiet street in the early evening. Perhaps a town on the Nankai Koya line, maybe Hashimoto. They were enjoying each other's company, though he couldn't hear what they were saying, even when the point of view merged with his own.

They entered a townhouse. A typical Japanese 2LDK (two bedrooms, a living/dining room, and kitchen). The kitchen opened onto the bedroom through a pair of wood and paper sliding doors. Outside the bedroom window, a dark green valley followed the steep slopes down to a winding mountain stream.

The polished *tatami* floor mats smelled faintly of cut bamboo. They got the futons out of the closet. He noticed that she was wearing a track suit. The lettering over the left breast said, "Koya Women's Junior College."

He went into the bathroom, filled the *o-furo*, replaced the covers, and turned on the water heater.

In the bedroom, the woman—she must be his wife—had changed into a short *happi* negligee. She bowed her head and lifted her hair from her shoulders the way women do. Then she looked up and smiled. She put her arms around his waist and lifted her mouth to his.

He *felt* it, like nothing he'd felt before in his life. The first physical sensation in the dream. A kiss warm and soft and electric. They kissed again, sinking down on the futons. Her velvet skin brushed against his lips. She buried her face against his shoulder, her body trembling in his arms.

It was too real. The smart stagecoach driver always hugged the mountain wall. How many times had he heard that analogy? Connor didn't skirt the edge. He never got close enough to fall. Keeping his distance was a hard habit to break.

He retreated into the netherworld of waking sleep. As he pulled away and the dream dissolved, a look came to her eyes. The eyes of the girl on the Nakamozu Nankai. Asking him who he was and why he was leaving her *now*, after what they'd *done*.

Connor sat up, fully awake, his heart beating madly. He felt the dampness in the sheets around his groin. He swore in Japanese: "*Shimatta.*" Wet dreams were such a bother. Great while the dream was real and reality was

the illusion. But what a mess afterward.

That Sunday after church, Connor caught up with the missionaries at Abeno station. He said in an offhand manner as they waited for the subway, “I saw a couple of sister missionaries the other day at the Nankai station in Nakamozu.”

“Nakamozu?” said Chalmers *Chōrō*. “Nobody’s assigned to Nakamozu. The closest district is Kishiwada.”

“That’d be Packard and Goto.”

Chalmers *Chōrō* corrected his companion. “Goto’s not in Kishiwada. She got transferred to Nara last month. So it’d be Packard and Eliason.”

Connor was relieved. After all, what would he say if they ever met?

He skipped his stop and rode the Midosuji to the end of the line. At Nakamozu he transferred to the Nankai and continued south. Past Nakamozu the metropolis ended. Past Sayama the suburbs ended. The sleeper communities appeared farther and farther apart, tiny villages tucked into the corners of the terraced mountain valleys. If he ever moved back to Japan, this is where he would live. His dreams knew him well.

He got off at Hashimoto and hiked a klick into the hills above the town. He didn’t recognize the bend in the river he’d seen in his dream. Maybe it was a station along the Wakayama JR line. What was the name of the college on her sweat top? He stopped a pair of junior high school girls in matching tennis outfits and carrying matching tennis racquets. “Could you tell me where Koya Women’s College is?” he asked in Japanese when they stopped tittering.

“Maybe Kudoyama?” one of them guessed. They didn’t know. So he spent a few more minutes impressing them with his Japanese while they practiced their terrible English.

Two nights later the dream came again. It wasn’t the same dream. But it was about her, the girl on the Nakamozu Nankai. And it ended with their making love with a passionate intensity that resonated deep within his soul. When he awoke the following morning and she was not there beside him, he felt a profound sense of loss. The dreams had awakened a hidden part of him, revealed the existence of something whose absence

he'd never missed until now.

Connor hypothesized that he was suffering a delayed Freudian hang-over. His libido was simply doing a bit of postpubertal catching up. The problem was the amount of detail in the dreams. He knew he didn't know what he seemed to know. Not about Kudoyama. Not about her (whoever she was). And certainly not about sex. Nothing in his personal experience—not even Billy Bragg's embellished accounts of the backseat romps in his cherry-red Camaro—could have provided him with the substance of these dreams.

Connor was still a virgin. Common enough among Mormons his age.

Curiosity won out over guilt. He wished for the dreams to return and they did, though unpredictably. In the dreams Connor and the girl never spoke. The people in the dreams had plenty of things to say to each other, though he was deaf to them. After that moment of breathless ecstasy, he forced himself awake, forced himself *away* from her. And then lay on his futon and wondered—wondered *who*, wondered *why*, wondered if this was what an intimate, physical relationship was really like.

Two weeks before he left Japan the dreams faded. When he left Japan they ended.

More than the dreams, he missed *her*. Her warmth and presence. But ultimately he was relieved (or so he told himself) when the dreams did not return. He put it down to some sort of long-delayed returned-missionary-stress-syndrome, and so becalmed the vexations of moral Calvinism stirring in his Mormon soul.

Connor began Summer term comfortably settled into the BYU bachelor life of the thoroughly chaste. The girl he'd dated on-again, off-again his senior year had gotten engaged to somebody else during his absence. He was enormously relieved.

Even at the time, she'd been a good Mormon girl, he'd been a good Mormon boy, and they'd permitted themselves at most a spark of light petting. Bishops, Connor knew, possessed an olfactory sensitivity to pheromones. They could smell sex, and Connor rested assured he smelled like buffed linoleum.

"Dating anybody new?" The bishop asked the question lightly, mean-

ing that Connor ought to be, but he wouldn't hold it against him if he wasn't.

Connor replied with a self-deprecating grin.

The bishop walked him to the door. "I don't want you to think I'm getting on your case. Truth is, the best things often come when we're not trying so hard to get them."

Connor wasn't trying at all. Not trying was easy too.

But the night after he renewed his temple recommend with the stake president, the night before Summer term began, the dreams returned. He sat up in the darkness, dazed by an acuteness of sensation that was almost painful. Japan had never been like this.

He hadn't mentioned the dreams in his interviews. He wasn't into confession. Bringing up the dreams would only make things worse. *What did you do?* they'd ask him. Because every problem had a cause.

But he couldn't explain what he didn't understand himself. *I looked at a girl on a station platform in Japan. That's all. Swear to God.* Still, he applied all the remedies prescribed in situations like this. Because every problem had a solution.

1. Prayer.
2. Cold showers.
3. Reading himself to sleep with scripture.
4. Reading *The Miracle of Forgiveness*.
5. Watching late night television (*Nightline*, last half of *Letterman*, first half of *Conan O'Brien*) until his mind was as blank as a test pattern.

God, Connor was certain, would develop a guilty conscience reading *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. To be sure, he hadn't broken any *major* commandments while under Billy Bragg's tutelage, though he'd thrown rocks at a few. But when the dreams came, they came no matter what. Not much of a chance of keeping sin from the door when it had directions and the key.

Only after climaxing could he tear himself away. Panting, soaked with sweat, fiercely angry at this loss of control. Yet grasping again for that

welcome and wonderful unreality.

The scent of her hair, the salt in her sweat as he kissed the smooth rise of her breast, the traces on his skin where her body pressed against his—lingered like a gentle sunburn. Hours later, studying in the library under the frigid blast of the air conditioning vents, he'd have to go outside and stand in the hot Utah sun and seek out an equilibrium of body heat.

Chapter 3

Senior Companion

A knock and the bedroom door opened. A shaft of light spilled into the room. Melanie asked, “Elly, are you all right?”

Elly sat up as if shocked by a cattle prod. She touched her cheek. Her skin was damp with tears. Yes, she was awake. She was in her bed, in the condo on Ninth East she shared with Melanie Crandall, her once and forever senior companion. Elly put her hand on her chest and felt her heart pounding inside her rib cage. She took a deep breath, exhaled.

Melanie stepped into the room. “I thought I heard you moaning, like you were sick or something.”

Elly’s face flushed red hot. Thank goodness Mel hadn’t turned on the light. She looked at Mel’s blurred figure silhouetted there in the doorway. “I—I’m fine. It’s just that—I don’t know—for a minute I guess I forgot where I was. You know, still in Japan.”

Melanie smiled. “Yeah, jet lag. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m okay, Mel.” She repeated herself in Japanese for emphasis, “*Heiki desu.*” Saying it aloud did make her feel better.

“I’m going jogging. Want to come?”

“No. And I don’t want to tomorrow either. Really.”

“Hmph,” said Melanie. “Not all of us *gaijin* are blessed with those skinny genes you Japanese girls have.”

“*A-kan-beb*—” Elly said, sticking out her tongue. “Anyway I’m *haafu*.”

“Then you got the half that counts. I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Put on a couple of eggs when you get up, would you?”

“Yes, *senpai*.”

A year and a half ago, Melanie Crandall had been her first senior companion. Her *senpai*. And in Japan, once a *senpai*, always a *senpai*. Not that Elly minded the relationship playing out that way. Two weeks after her mission ended, she’d flown back to Utah to start Summer term at BYU. It was too much change in too short a time. But Melanie had taught her how to be a missionary. Now Elly hoped Mel could teach her to be a normal person again.

After the past several months in Japan, she was looking forward to a large dose of normality.

There were the dreams, to start with. At the end of the long, hot days, she found herself looking forward to the dreams. She looked forward to them, even knowing that in the morning she would be left haunted and alone, plagued with guilt, wondering in what deep, dark well of sin these dreams had been born.

And then there was Susan.

Pairing up with Susan Eliason, her last companion, had been a “favor” to the mission president, President Takada, which only proved that no good deed went unpunished. A year into her mission, Susan had been Dear Jane’d by her fiancé, who had the gall to write that he was sure it was an *inspired* decision.

Elly knew that if God had anything to do with it, God would have told the jerk to wait another three months.

So instead of being assigned a greenie to train, Elly’s task was to persuade her companion to see things through. Their first week together, Elly had to restrain herself from smacking her and yelling, “Snap out of it!” like Cher in *Moonstruck*. But she didn’t figure that was what President Takada had in mind.

She tried empathy instead. Susan was delighted when Elly told her that she’d hardly ever dated before her mission (true). She certainly didn’t have anybody waiting for her (true). But Susan chalked Elly’s abstention up to an iron will and concluded they were kindred spirits. Elly didn’t bother

dissuading her. Yes, men didn't deserve them. Yes, men were pond scum. Yes, their brains were in their pants. A pox on all their houses.

Elly didn't tell Susan about the dreams. She had a hard enough time telling herself. And then her mission ended and she went home to Kobe, where her father was the mission president. (Somebody in the Missionary Department must not have compared notes.) Traveling from the Osaka Mission Home to the Kobe Mission Home was all of a forty minute train ride. But the dreams haunted her less.

And then they stopped.

Now they were back.

Somehow, when she was in Japan, she'd never cried out in her dreams. The feelings and the intensity had never been as strong as now. *Shimatta*. Where had she picked up that expression? But her heartbeat quickened even as she cursed the beautiful, intoxicating dreams.

The front door opened and closed. Melanie trotted into the kitchen. Her hair was fashionably disheveled, her face streaked with sweat. Still, she looked great. Melanie could run the Boston Marathon and cross the finish line looking like she'd jogged around the corner to get a quart of milk. She tossed the *Daily Herald* on the table, peeled off her sweat top and draped it across the chair back.

Elly couldn't understand why Melanie was always teasing her about her (lack of) weight. The only fat Elly could see on Melanie's body was right where it was supposed to be, tightly contained within her sports bra. She had a chest that Elly envied, breasts that actually got noticed.

One day while they were proselyting Melanie said to her, "You know what I like about being on a mission? I don't have to spend an hour every morning preparing to face the world. All that time wasted getting ready for dates—what a relief!"

"But you look great now!" Elly exclaimed. It was a good thing Melanie didn't make herself up, or she'd draw a crowd for entirely the wrong reasons. Japanese schoolgirls constantly asked her, "Are you a model?"

Melanie shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose." She rarely resorted to false humility. "But girls like me attract the sort of men who expect us to look like this all the time. I guess I got used to living up to their expectations."

Melanie had taken a more realistic measure of men's expectations since her mission, and had modified her vanity schedule accordingly. Simply having a pulse, she exceeded the expectations of most men.

Elly drained the water out of the saucepan, added cold water, and set the pan on the table. "*Mugi-cha?*"

"Please."

She poured two cups of barley tea, then sat down at the table and took a sip. "Mel," she said, "mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"*Dōzō.*" Melanie pushed aside the paper and picked up an egg. She hit it once on the table and rolled it between her palms.

"Have you ever, you know, with a boy—"

Melanie flashed her a look of mock horror. "Elly, how could you think such a thing! I'm not that kind of girl!"

"No, no, no. I didn't mean *that*. I meant, like, when you were in high school—"

"You mean, making out?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's just that, all those Young Women's lessons, they were always so abstract. I wasn't very socially active in high school. I'm not saying my Christmas Cake is going stale tomorrow. Well, maybe it is. But even in Japan, girls don't start panicking when they turn twenty-five anymore, and—"

Melanie allowed herself a wistful smile. "To tell the truth, Elly, I *was* that kind of girl. Okay, not *that* kind of girl. But I was in the ballpark. If not on the field, then in the stands keeping the box scores. Salt and pepper, *kudasai*."

Elly slid the shakers across the table. "I followed the rules. Most of the rules. The important rules. I didn't start *really* dating until I was sixteen. I did date non-Mormon boys. And allowed them a few more liberties than I should have. But I kept it above the waist." She smiled again. "It wasn't hard drawing the line in high school. Teenage boys are *so* immature. Being an early bloomer makes the contrast *so* obvious. And I promised myself that I would only marry a returned missionary."

She passed the salt and pepper back to Elly. "The only time I really let myself be tempted was during my sophomore year. I had myself an honest-to-goodness returned missionary. Shawn Nance. A real nice guy. Mar-

rying him wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world. I got his wedding announcement on my mission. I was very happy for him."

"How tempted?" Elly asked a bit too breathlessly.

Melanie shrugged. "Let's just say that on more than one occasion we were rounding second base, headed for third. I'm sure it looked like an in-the-park home run."

Melanie was a Physical Education major. She'd played fast-pitch softball in high school.

"But you didn't—"

She shook her head. "You see, all those Young Women's lessons, they were custom-made for me. Like giving me my own third-base coach saying: *Hold up, hold up*. The cut-off man's got a strong arm."

"What's a cut-off man?"

"The guy who relays the ball from the outfielder to the catcher. Anyway, the moral scold in my head made me pause and say to myself, Mel-baby, home plate is still there. It's going to be there tomorrow. It's going to be there the day after. Don't rush it. So, I went on a mission. I know bishops aren't supposed to encourage girls to go on missions, but Bishop Broadbent was *convinced* that sooner or later I would be the downfall of some good elder. He was more than happy to see me off to anyplace-but-here." She finished her egg. "Pretty lame reason, no?"

"Better than mine."

Melanie shrugged. "Guys don't need a reason, they just do it. It's a *giri* thing. I say, any reason a woman's got is better than your-girlfriend-won't-marry-you-unless-you-do."

Elly smiled. She'd long ago resigned herself to the fact that she'd never have a body like Melanie's. But common sense didn't depend on genes or fashion sense.

Melanie read her thoughts and shook her head. "You're a lucky girl, Elly. You're smart and you're real cute. But you don't walk around with your own portable klieg light shining on you. You don't have to wonder whether the boy who falls for you hasn't fallen in love with the thought of how good he looks with you. With me, men begin with this and these." She pointed at her nose, Japanese fashion, and then at her breasts. "And I can only let them down when they get to the other categories."

Elly said, “I really don’t think they care.”

“I know. That’s the problem. I think living *up* to somebody’s expectations is ultimately easier than living *down* to them.” She disposed of the egg shells and plucked her sweat top off the chair. “See you in class, girl,” she said and marched off to the shower.

Chapter 4

Sex Education

Connor's sex education started at the age of twelve. He was taking maturation at a leisurely pace. With four sisters ahead of him, this was uncharted territory. His parents felt no need to rush things along either. Still, he couldn't do anything about turning twelve. Twelve was the age at which well-bred Mormon boys became deacons.

Before becoming a deacon, he had to have an interview with Bishop Hodgson, a friendly though timid man about the same age as his father. Bishop Hodgson greeted him with a big smile. "How're you doing, Connor?" He shook Connor's hand, patted him on the back.

"Okay," Connor said, with a shrug.

Everything went along smoothly until Bishop Hodgson asked Connor if he had a problem with masturbation. Except what he actually said was, "So, Connor, you, um, you got a problem, um, with, um, self-abuse?"

Connor had no idea what the nice man was talking about. It sounded like something painful you did to your thumb with a hammer. He hesitated. The bishop grew distinctly discomfited. The way he asked the question, Connor figured it was something he wasn't supposed to do, so he said he didn't.

The bishop's relief was palpable.

On the other hand, Connor's deacons quorum advisor took to the task

of moral education with a breathtaking enthusiasm. Evan Bushnell saw the enemy and the enemy had breasts, an attitude that made priesthood lessons thoroughly engrossing in a gross sort of way.

Example: The high school basketball team is going to the state championships, and they're staying at this motel. The coach leaves to take care of some business. So they're all alone. And the cheerleaders drop by. THE CHEERLEADERS! They're GIRLS! That means DANGER! But do these poor slobs recognize the wolves in sheep's clothing? NO. Just a bunch of heathen gentiles with their hormones on overdrive.

He had a half-dozen deacons on the edges of their seats. *Well? well?*

THEY ALL HAD SEX!

No kidding!

EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!

That's incredible!

BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I'M TELLING YOU
RIGHT NOW!

Would it have made a difference?

THIS IS A WARNING!

Warnings usually came like that in priesthood, fast balls to the chest. *Oof!* Knocked the breath right out of him. The moral of the story had to. Because once he started thinking about the details, he came up with questions like: *What high school basketball team around here ever made it to the state championships?*

Despite Brother Bushnell's apocalyptic stories, Connor soon learned that women were unlikely to throw themselves at him unless he first exerted a significant effort in their particular direction. Disappointments in life came like that—in the absence of high drama.

At any rate, nobody cared that Connor was Mormon either, except for the one day after history class when all the guys decided that maybe polygamy wasn't such a bad idea after all. "Hey, Connor," they asked, "how many moms have you got?"

"Just one," he told them. "But my great-great-grandfather had three."

His ancestral past left them in awe.

Scotia-Glenville High was a more conservative place than Provo, Utah. Connor was pretty sure they were still using textbooks from the late 1950s

in the Health Education courses. His first sex education class took place in the fifth grade, and everybody had to bring in signed permission slips to view what turned out to be a video about The Facts of Life that was less explicit and entirely less interesting than what he could observe on any given episode of *Nature* or *National Geographic*.

The chief topic of conversation among the guys was that the girls got to attend a separate assembly all by themselves. An affront to equality and fair play. They all filed back to their classrooms. The school nurse came in and stood next to Mrs. Van Duren, their homeroom teacher, and asked if they had any questions. After a long, pregnant pause, Jimmy Wilson raised his hand. “How does the sperm get to the egg in the first place?”

Half the class burst into a fit of giggles. The other half stared at him. Was he being serious? Did he really not know? Or was this a joke? If it was a joke, it was a good joke. Should they laugh *at* Jimmy or *with* Jimmy? It was the day’s most serious quandary.

When the nurse was finished she took Jimmy with her. Jimmy returned twenty minutes later looking a bit ashen. After the class finally returned its attention to Mrs. Van Duren, he leaned toward Connor, in the next row over, and whispered, “What she told me—she was just kidding, right?”

Connor was happy to discover that when it came to sex, he wasn’t the dumbest kid in the class, after all.

Connor learned about the birds and the bees the novel way—by reading novels. Starting with the first half of *Hawaii*, he worked onward and downward from there, all the way to Anaïs Nin. He never brought Anaïs Nin home from the library. There were times when it was better not to test his parents’ respect for the First Amendment.

Yes, his parents were supposed to be the ones leading him by the hand. But Connor was glad they didn’t try very hard. Bishop Hodgson was bad enough. His parents no doubt figured that if they could count on common sense and upbringing to impart the principles of good grammar and proper etiquette, they could count on parental osmosis to impart other lessons as well.

They counted pretty much right.

Not that he hadn’t been tempted by the dark side. There were the *Play-*

boy magazines his best friend Billy Bragg smuggled out of his granddad's room. Perhaps the quality of smut in upstate New York was wanting back then. Or Billy's granddad had dated tastes. But Connor couldn't remember coming across anything half as good as what was in his mother's art books, except that the *Playboy* nudes were markedly less corpulent. As far as he was concerned, Billy Bragg's dirty magazines were another big coming-of-age nonevent.

Leaving home didn't change things much, even as a freshman in the BYU dorms, where sin lieth not only at the door but walked in and introduced itself. Or arrived courtesy of the United States Postal Service.

Bart Lowe, who lived down the hall, spent spring break in Hawaii with his father (attending a Nu Skin convention). When he wasn't surfing, Bart killed time catching rays on the beach and mailing postcards (in tightly sealed envelopes) of unclothed Polynesian lasses back to Provo, where the snowpack was still heavy on the mountaintops.

Connor got ratted out. On his way to class, the dorm mother stopped him and gave him a "you ought to know better" lecture. That was one of the dangers of living in BYU on-campus housing: informants everywhere.

Admittedly, Bart was leading them astray with pretty tame material. Bart might have been a gentile, but he was a conscientious gentile. He had taste, in other words. Howie Bradshaw had not so much.

Howie was one of three guys Connor shared an apartment with during his sophomore and junior years. Howie worked on the janitorial crew, and said that when the crew was on the dorm rotation, they'd find a couple of *Penthouse* magazines in the trash every Monday morning before room inspections. The dorms had apparently slid further downhill since Connor lived there.

Trevor Phillips had just gotten engaged, and Howie thought he knew how to warm the waters a bit. So he snagged a *Penthouse* when his supervisor wasn't looking and used half a roll of transparent packing tape to fasten the centerfold to the inside of Trevor's closet door while he was at class.

"Got you a wedding present," Howie said. "It's in your closet."

Trevor thought that was the funniest prank Howie had pulled in ages. Once his fiancée found out, she wanted to see it too. Howie told his girl-

friend and she wanted to see it. The only person who didn't take a gander was Connor's roomie, Roger Hollingsworth. Roger wasn't going to take a step inside Howie's room while that thing was in view. They all respected Roger's wishes. Roger was a clean-living, clean-thinking Mormon boy if there ever was one.

The Roger Hollingsworths of this world made the Brother Bushnells of this world very happy.

Of course, Roger hadn't become a Mormon until he was twenty-three, and had gotten his riotous living over with during his undergraduate days at the University of North Dakota. Besides alcohol and sex, he observed, there hadn't been that much else to do all winter. "When I joined the Church," he told Connor, "chastity was the tough one."

Roger got married at the end of Winter semester. Roger was twenty-six, long-overdue by BYU standards, and well on his way to an MBA. He was eligible as hell. As the Apostle Paul said, better to marry than to burn.

Pretty much the prevailing attitude at BYU. Provo had more married students than any other university town in the known universe. Utah Valley Regional Medical Center boasted the busiest maternity ward in the country. Connor did not think he would be contributing to these statistics anytime soon.

Because for some people, chastity wasn't the tough one, after all.

Chapter 5

Dr. Oh

The first day of class, Summer term, Elly walked into room 2047 in the Jesse Knight Humanities Building, Japanese 301. She stopped and stared in amazement. The classroom was thronged with men, and she knew half of them on sight. This wasn't so much a Japanese class as a missionary reunion. The first thing a returned missionary did at BYU was pick up his advanced language credits. Still, she felt as if she'd walked into a flippin' missionary *zone conference*.

She was even thinking things like *flippin'*.

Melanie had already arrived, and was surrounded by a small flock of admirers, mostly guys from other missions who didn't know she was just good ol' Sister Crandall. Melanie was talking to a lanky, familiar-looking guy with short brown hair and bright blue Paul Newman eyes.

"Chalmers Chōrō!" Elly practically shrieked.

Greg Chalmers looked around. His face lit up in a welcoming smile. "Hey, Packard *Shimai! Hisashiburi!*"

She managed not to shake his hand, and gave him a vigorous hug instead. He said, "I meant to tell you before I left, but sorry about Eliason. If I knew she was going to become unglued like that—"

"It's okay. It wasn't really her fault. Really. That ex-boyfriend of hers, though, is dead meat if he ever crosses my path." She whacked him on the

shoulder. “You know how it is, Chōrō. *Shikata ga nai*. I survived.”

“And how is Eliason these days?”

“Still hates men, last time I checked.”

“I figured that. So what are you doing in this class? You’re *pera-pera*. You’re going to wreck the curve.”

“I can speak fine but I’m not so good at reading. Uncle says I’ve got to learn my *kanji*.”

“Uncle? That’s right. Oh Sensei is your uncle.”

On cue, Professor Oh strode into the room. He was a perpetually jovial man, a tad shorter than Elly and thin as a stick. “A bamboo shoot wearing glasses and a grin,” as Elly’s mother put it.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed. “Too many tall gaijin in here!”

Anybody not at a desk found one.

“*Konnichi wa!*” Oh Sensei said with a bow.

“*Konnichi wa!*” the class echoed.

“Japanese 301,” Oh Sensei announced. “If you’re here to add the class, we have, let’s see, four slots left. Thanks to the wonderful complexities of the Japanese language, 221 is a prerequisite, even if you are an RM.” He took note of Elly’s presence and added, “Except if you attended elementary school in Japan.”

Elly rolled her eyes.

“Two midterms, weekly quizzes. I don’t grade on attendance, but if I call on you for a reading and you’re not here, *batsu!*” He sliced the air with an invisible samurai sword.

That elicited a laugh.

“You think I joke? You write kanji many times! Wax on! Wax off!”

Someone asked, “What about extra credit assignments?”

“Extra credit? Hmmm.” He tapped the end of his mechanical pencil against his chin. “Okay, you get engaged to my niece, automatic A.”

“Uncle!” Elly exploded in Japanese.

The expression of pretend-innocence on her uncle’s face said, *What? What?* Elly realized that he hadn’t mentioned her name. *Oh, for dumb.* The boy at the desk in front of her (because even at twenty-one they all looked like boys to her) turned around and smiled shyly.

She said tersely in Japanese, “Forget it. I’m twenty-three.”

Being honest about her age had its uses.

They started the first reading. Oh Sensei paused before the bell to take care of adds and drops. At the beginning of the second hour, everybody had to stand up and introduce themselves—where they were from, what mission they'd gone to. They were all returned missionaries.

When it was Elly's turn she said, "I lived in Hiratsuka and Yokohama until I was nine, but I mostly grew up in Salt Lake and Provo. I went on a mission to Osaka. Melanie was my first senpai," she added, nodding at her roommate.

"Yeah," Melanie said, "that's why she speaks Japanese so well."

Elly went to sit down. "Ah, ah, ah," Uncle said, "you didn't say when you got off your mission."

"Two weeks ago."

"Can anybody beat that?" Nobody could. "The greenie award goes to Eri!"

Everybody applauded.

Melanie met her roommate at the end of the aisle after the bell rang. "You've got the next period free, don't you? Let's do lunch."

"Eri-*chan*," her uncle said.

She was convinced he didn't pronounce the *L* on purpose. And why her parents had given her a first name with an *L* in it was a matter she'd have to bring up with them one of these days. They'd done the same thing with her sister. Though it was the diminutive *chan* that really bugged her.

"Don't call me that in front of everybody," she said under her breath.

"Oh. Sorry. Eri *Sensei*."

Elly rolled her eyes.

Uncle said, picking up his papers, "Come to my office." He started toward the door.

"What about?"

"So many questions, so little time, my little niece."

From her half-inch advantage in height, Elly gave her uncle an exasperated look. But family was family. She got Melanie's attention. "I have to go with Uncle," she said. "I shouldn't be long."

"Okay. I'll meet you at the Cougareat."

His office was two flights up and down the hall. Uncle asked, "How

are Sam and Emily?”

“Emily wants to get an apartment in Sannomiya, closer to the Kobe University campus. At least that’s what she and Mom were fighting about when I was there. Sam has spent less time in Japan than any of us, but all he *does* is speak Japanese. Mom makes him speak English at home.”

“How old is he now? Eleven, twelve?”

“Eleven. You should put him in one of your language acquisition studies.”

“Speaking of which, did you ever meet Connor McKenzie? He was in Osaka Spring term helping your Uncle Nobuo with that big translation contract for the SDF. I thought you might have run into each other.”

The image of a dark-haired gaijin standing on the Nakamozu Nankai station platform popped into her head. The brief look that had sparked between them. She shook her head to clear away the memory.

Her uncle interpreted it as a no. “It was a thought.” They stopped in front of his office while he unlocked the door.

“Wait a minute, this isn’t something Mom put you up to, is it? Did you tell this guy about me too?”

“I don’t know if your name ever *specifically* came up.” Uncle shrugged. “Hey, all I’m saying is that he’s a nice guy.” He dumped his books on the desk. His office wasn’t all that big to begin with, and made all the more cramped by a pair of filing cabinets and the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining each wall.

“Is he even at BYU anymore?”

“He’s in the master’s program, linguistics.”

“Oh. Whatever. Is *that* what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“What? Oh, no. Have you ever thought about teaching, Elly?”

“Teaching? Well, I have *thought* about it.”

“Good. I’d like you to take over a section of 101. It’s Monday through Friday, two to four.”

“Japanese 101? You want me to teach a *class*?”

“Sure. Right now, your Japanese is more up-to-date than anybody else’s on the staff.”

“But I don’t know how to teach!”

“What do you mean, you don’t know how to teach? You’ve done no-

thing for the last year and a half *but* teach! You taught *Eikaiwa*, didn't you? Church English classes? Language is language. Look, the lesson plan is outlined section by section, hour by hour." He handed her a three-ring binder. "Here are Noriko's notes."

"Who's Noriko? Why can't she teach the class?"

"Noriko's having a baby. Stay a chapter ahead of the class and you'll do fine. In a pinch just keep on speaking Japanese. They won't understand you anyway."

"Well—"

"I'll do the first week with you. You'll be the student teacher. You'll get the hang of it by then. It'll be easy. You'll see."

Easy for him to say. "Oh women," her mother maintained, "are the samurai in the family. The men provide the comic relief." Elly took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Okay? Only okay? Say 'Okay!' Exclamation points!! It'll be fun, you'll see. Room number 3090, two o'clock."

She was sure she would *see*, all right. She wasn't sure what.

Elly got an employment authorization form and faculty schedule card from the dean's secretary. She descended to the basement floor of the JKHB where the TAs had their so-called offices. Room 1054, Asian Languages, was a squashed box of a classroom partitioned into a maze of tiny cubicles. She found Noriko's carrel, placed her books on the narrow shelf, and sat down. Then lowered the chair a good six inches. She pulled out the yellow faculty schedule card and examined it.

Office hours. It made her feel so—*grown up*. When was the best time to have office hours? Probably right after class, four to five. Then home for dinner. That had a very white-collar feel to it. She filled in the boxes, went back out to the hall where the schedule cards were fastened to the corkboard next to the door, and replaced Noriko's card with her own.

She remembered the time and hurried over to the Wilkinson Center.

The cafeteria at the Cougarreat was packed. During the summer, every department on campus ran a camp: music camps, sports camps, computer camps. Roving packs of teenagers outnumbered college students. The scene was kind of creepy—it gave her flashbacks to high school.

“Over here,” Melanie called to her, waving.

The guy she was sharing the table with wasn’t happy to see Elly walk up. She’d have to get used to being the spoiler. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No matter,” Melanie said in Japanese. “You can tell me all about it.”

Elly got sweet and sour over rice at the Chinese concession. When she returned to the table, the boy had left.

“What happened to your boyfriend?”

“Him? *Pub-leez*, an opportunist.” Mel lowered her voice and said in a fake baritone, “Hey, mind if I sit here? By the way, what’s *your* major?” She finished her strawberry yogurt and licked the plastic spoon. “It finally dawned on him—I measure their IQ by how long it takes—that he wasn’t going to get my undivided attention.”

“Not on my account—”

“Girl, if I wanted him to stay, he would have stayed. I didn’t want.”

Elly laughed. “You’re so ruthless, Mel. If a boy paid that much attention to me, I’d feel obligated to jump into his arms.”

Melanie shook her head. “It’s a buyer’s market, Elly. Like in Japanese baseball, you never swing at the first pitch.”

“Or the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth.”

“Nine innings, that’s twenty-seven at bats. Either way, a girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do. You should hang out in the Asian Collection at the library. All the RMs do there is hit on the Japanese girls. And vice versa.”

“Not once they find out I’m really American and twenty-three.”

“So bat your pretty brown eyes at the grad students. They’ve got a steeper earnings curve. What did your uncle want?”

“He asked me if I knew some old student of his.” Elly shook her head in disbelief. “It was like he was trying to set me up. McKenzie-something. Nobody that I know.”

“*That’s* what he wanted to talk to you about?”

“No, no, no. One of the Nihongo TAs is having a baby. He wants me to teach a section of 101.”

“Really? You’ll be a great sensei. Hey, that means if I visit you during office hours, you’ll have to help me with my 301 homework.” Melanie grinned. “Any rules against dating your students? Maybe your uncle’s still

trying to set you up.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. But any boy taking 101 is probably a freshman. And eighteen is *so* young.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Well, it’s a thought.”

“Not a thought I’m having.”

Melanie laughed. “I swear, Elly, your uncle’s got the right idea. If you don’t hire yourself a go-between soon, you’ll never get yourself hitched.”

Chapter 6

Dinner Invitations

Elly arrived home six hours later. “*Tadaima.*” she called out.

“*O-kaeri,*” Melanie answered from the kitchen.

Elly collapsed on the couch. Her roommate appeared in the doorway. “How was work, dear?”

“The longest three hours of my life.”

“Isn’t it a two-hour class?”

“Not counting office hours. Thankfully, no students to meet with yet. But Uncle told me to plan out tomorrow’s class. I somewhat panicked.”

“He’s not going to make you start teaching tomorrow, is he?”

“He *promised* he wouldn’t make me teach all two hours. But knowing Uncle, I’ll end up teaching one hour, fifty-nine minutes.”

“Sounds like being a junior companion all over again.”

It was *exactly* like being a junior companion again. And like observing her senior companion, she’d caught onto her uncle’s methodology quickly enough. It involved simplifying the elements of a dialogue so that the students could grasp the meaning without explanations in English.

Thankfully, the entire Japanese 101 class wasn’t devoted to the immersion approach. Reading and writing lessons took up the balance. Except for one or two of her students—in particular, a kid named Bradley—the rest hardly knew any Japanese at all, other than *sushi*, *karaoke*, and *origami*.

“You’ll get better at it,” Melanie said encouragingly. “Junior companions eventually turn into senior companions.”

The phone rang. Melanie darted back to the kitchen. She returned to the living room and tossed Elly the phone. “Your General Authority.”

“Hi, Grandpa.”

“Elly!” his voice boomed over the phone. “How’s my favorite granddaughter?”

“You’ve got a dozen grandkids, Grandpa. You can’t fool me.”

“Oh, but you’re the cutest.”

As a teenager, Elly had many times cast the requisite suspicions on her grandfather’s effusive nature. In a moment of adolescent pique, she once asked her mother, “Why does Grandpa pretend he likes me so much?”

Her mother answered with a cross look. “He isn’t pretending. He only wants you to have no doubts about his affection for you.”

When she grew older, Elly came to appreciate the attention he lavished on her.

Her grandfather said, “We haven’t seen you since we picked you up at the airport. Why don’t you come for dinner on Sunday? You can bring that pretty roommate of yours along too.”

“Sure, Grandpa.” Elly covered the mouthpiece and shouted, “Mel, do you want to have Sunday dinner with my grandparents?”

“Sure!”

“Okay, we’ll be there, Grandpa, around one or so.

“Maybe we’ll have a few other guests over as well.”

She knew right then he was winking at Grandma. Elly sighed to herself. But she wasn’t dissuaded. “Okay, Grandpa, see you Sunday.”

He said goodbye. Elly returned the phone to its cradle in the kitchen. “You know they’ll be inviting the most available bachelors in their ward to dinner.”

“I know. Eating dinner with your grandparents is like getting a fortune cookie *before* the meal. And you have to admit, your grandma does have good taste in men.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You don’t appreciate what it’s like to have interesting relatives, Elly. I mean, the Ohs aren’t just Japanese, they’re *interesting* Japanese.”

“In other words, they’re odd.”

Melanie checked the rice cooker. “Take your Grandpa Packard, for example. He makes growing old look like a ton of fun.”

“I think it’s a curse. *May you have interesting relatives.*”

“At least yours are around to *be* interesting. All of my grands are on the cruise ship circuit: *Hi, Melanie. Bye, Melanie. See you at Christmas, Melanie. By the way, married yet?* That and the occasional postcard recommending another honeymoon spot. *Hint, hint.*”

“That sounds just like Grandpa and Grandma Packard. Except it’s the CES and Education Week circuits. And they’re *always* asking when I’m going to get married.”

“Yeah, but they *mean* it. I don’t mind buttinskies as long as they take the job seriously.”

“Then I’m surrounded by professionals.”

“That’s what PE is all about: a degree in telling people what to do, and then making them feel guilty when they don’t do it.”

“Sounds just like Grandpa’s job.”

A half mile east across Kiwanis Park, a block up the East Bench, Connor was setting the table as Aunt Wanda got the tuna casserole out of the oven. She said, “Connor, your cousin invited us to dinner Sunday.”

Connor reminded himself again that one of these days he was going to write a paper about how word usage determined familial boundaries and group inclusion. If his aunt had said, “My daughter,” that meant that she was invited to some event confined to her nuclear family. “Your cousin” meant both of them, and any number of other relatives.

“Your cousin” was somewhat problematic as well. As the youngest son of a youngest son, the pedigree of his extended family slipped a generation. His nieces and nephews were more like his cousins, his cousins like his aunts and uncles. On top of that, growing up in New York meant he didn’t know his cousins very well, which put another degree of separation between them.

And then there was the house. His grandfather’s house. He couldn’t do anything about that. Anyway, a meal was a meal, and Lynne and Glenn and their kids (one teenager, Mike, still left at home) were good company.

Uncle Martin (his father's and Wanda's older brother) would be there, and Connor liked Uncle Martin too.

"Sure," he said.

"You're usually finished by one, aren't you? I'll let Lynne know."

Aunt Wanda took off her smock and they sat down to eat.

Chapter 7

Nebraska

That Sunday, Connor and the second counselor finished the tithing count by 12:45. The walk home from the Crabtree Technology Building (every lecture hall on campus doubled as chapel space) took ten minutes. He removed his tie. Aunt Wanda got the dinner rolls out of the oven, and they were on their way by one.

They drove down from the East Bench to the family home on Fifth North, four blocks east of University Avenue. Lynne, Wanda's oldest, had inherited the house. The old house required the close attention of a craftsman equal to the man who'd owned the place for sixty years. Lynne had married her equal in that department.

Connor parked the Camry under the canopy of the white maple shading the front lawn. The sound of Mike playing the guitar floated from the living room window: Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven."

Lynne and Glenn completed the restoration of the porch over Spring term. They'd put it off for six years, the six years since the old man died. Connor knew why. Rebuilding the porch was a big job, a *This Old House* kind of project. The corner posts had rotted away at ground level. They had to pour a new foundation and reframe the entire deck.

Connor had helped tear it down at the end of Winter semester. That's when Lynne told him, "Grandpa pretty much gave up on the house the

last few years of his life, after Grandma died. That's when we knew. When he gave up on the house, he wasn't long for this world."

The front steps no longer teetered. The floorboards were powdered with sawdust, the smell of cut pine like a light perfume. The scent brought back memories as vivid as a photograph. Whenever his family journeyed west on vacation, Connor had camped out on the porch.

He glanced down the long driveway at the garage—a squat, A-frame cabin set apart from the house. He was almost surprised when he didn't see the metallic blue 1966 Mustang GT Coupe parked there. But not even his grandmother's Ford Taurus. Only an Odyssey minivan. Connor had to grin. *You've got a Honda parked in your garage, old man.* He wondered, who'd snagged the GT? Who'd plucked the apple of his grandfather's eye?

Inside the house, though, in the shadowed corners, there were times when he still thought he saw—in the flicker of a failing light, out of the corners of his eyes—his Grandpa McKenzie sitting there hating the world and Connor in particular.

Mike let them in. He was holding his Takamine Concert Classical. "Hi, Grandma," Mike mumbled and returned to the couch.

"Hello to you, too, Michael," said Wanda.

Connor got Mike's Gibson off the stand and sat down on the piano bench. Mike started back on Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven*. Connor knew the song. His repertoire had slipped considerably since high school, but he could hit the chord changes and fill in the bass line.

Neither of them sang, though Connor hummed the words to himself. Aunt Wanda came back into the living room and said, "That's really nice, boys." At which point both of them stopped playing. They ducked into the kitchen under the pretense of making themselves useful, though with the intent of grabbing something to eat.

Uncle Martin arrived in his Ford F150. The hoist and crane assembly was still bolted to the bed behind the cab. When her ALS got too bad for Aunt Irene to move on her own, he'd rigged up the contraption to swing her and the wheelchair into the cab where the passenger's seat used to be. He hadn't put the passenger's seat back in. The only company he kept these days rode around in a horse trailer.

Glenn got home from church about the same time. He greeted Martin,

and Connor joined them on the porch. Martin was having Glenn tell him about the recent work he'd done.

"Yeah, we had to underpin the whole front of the house and jack her up while we ripped out the old foundation. You remember that, eh, Connor? That was a bunch of mud-in-your-eye work."

At the mention of Connor's name, Uncle Martin turned to his youngest nephew. "Been a while, Connor," he boomed. "Been wondering what you were up to." Even at seventy-five, Martin was a hearty, big-chested man. His perpetually sunburned face was shadowed by a broad Stetson. He was a large-animal veterinarian, retired a decade now. He took off his hat and combed his fingers through his snow-white hair.

"I spent spring term in Japan. The brother of my Japanese professor needed help on a translation project for the Self-Defense Forces."

"That's right. I remember your mom saying something about that in one of her emails."

Mike poked his head around the screen door. "Mom says it's time for dinner."

They trooped into the dining room. "There you are." Lynne motioned to Glenn. "Come get the roast."

"Anything else need hefting in there?" Martin asked.

"Why don't you get the mashed potatoes? Connor, here." She handed him a basket of dinner rolls.

Uncle Martin placed the bowl on the table and sat next to Mike. Connor made room for the rolls. Mike reached over and grabbed one. Connor helped himself as well and moved around the table. He took the chair farthest away from the doorway, his back to the west wall. Where his grandfather always sat, he realized. But it was too late to move.

Elly's grandparent's house in South Jordan was the one constant in her life. Everything else changed. After her father quit GE, they lived in Salt Lake for a while. And then settled in the north part of Provo near Rock Canyon. Her father lectured at the BYU business school and consulted for his old employer. He was off to Asia at least once a month. When the mission call came, her mother confided to her, "It'll be nice to have your father stuck in one place for a change."

But her grandparents' house was still there, a block south of Bingham High School. Her grandfather had been the seminary director there before being called as a General Authority. The suburbs had grown up around them. The house stood out on its now-enormous acre lot. The barn was the size of a small house. The long backyard was divided into a pair of paddocks, the picket fences tracing neat, white lines on the alfalfa green.

"I see they haven't gotten rid of the horses," Melanie said.

"They're not the same horses, I don't think. It's just to keep the zoning variance."

Melanie turned into the long driveway and parked her Accord next to a ruby red Z3. "So," she asked, "did your grandfather decide to chuck it all and rocket across America in pursuit of his misbegotten youth?"

"Knowing my grandfather I wouldn't be surprised. But no."

"Then they're *he—re*," Melanie said in her *Poltergeist* voice. "And somebody's *ri—ch*."

They entered the house through the kitchen door and were immersed in a bouquet of baking chicken and homemade whole wheat bread not long out of the oven. All the memories of the old homestead were suddenly fresh in Elly's mind.

Her grandmother was on her way to the dining room with the salad. She was wearing the ICHIBAN #1 GRANDMA apron Elly had given her years ago.

The gift of the apron was one of Elly's earliest memories. It went back to the time when her grandmother babysat her after Emily was born. Her father had gone to Japan to get the house in Hiratsuka ready before they moved. Elly was considered a "handful" at the time, so her grandmother took her off her mother's hands.

Two years later they were back in Salt Lake for Christmas. When it was Elly's turn, she gave her grandmother the package she'd wrapped and said, "It was Mom's idea." She was *not* happy about *not* spending the holidays with her friends in Japan. But her grandmother humored her, as all grandparents humor their grandchildren's churlishness, disciplining them not being their business, after all.

She opened the present with the requisite enthusiasm and cooed over it the way grandmothers are supposed to. But then she glanced at Elly's

mother and smiled. Her mother responded with a nod, almost a bow. Elly didn't think anybody in the family saw the bow but her. She knew it meant a lot more than a stupid apron. She didn't understand what until Sam was born and she was stuck doing much of what her grandmother had done those several weeks.

Her grandmother placed the salad bowl on the table. She greeted Elly with a hug. Melanie got a hug too. Missionary companions were as good as family.

Her grandfather's stentorian voice boomed out, "The two most beautiful co-eds in the world!"

"Hi, Gramps." Elly threw her arms around him. He enfolded her in an embrace that lifted her up on her toes. Her grandfather smelled as he always did, of fresh hay and aftershave. Melanie didn't get a hug from Elly's grandfather. It was a mutual thing, Elly had noticed. Melanie made married men nervous. The ones she didn't make nervous she didn't trust.

The two other dinner guests joined them from the living room. Elly retreated next to Melanie. Her grandfather said, "This is Kevin Whitaker and Sean Jeppson. They're just back from their missions as well."

Sean took the initiative and stepped forward, hand extended, a broad smile on his face. "Hi, you must be Elaine."

Melanie said, "No, I'm Melanie."

Grandma didn't let the confusion last. But in the split second before she rescued him, Elly saw Kevin wince. Kevin knew who was related to whom. Kevin didn't own the Z3. A stereotype, to be sure, but a reliable one in her experience. Kevin must have seen the family photographs on the living room walls. Sean only saw Melanie. Id conquered superego.

Grandma said, "Why don't you help me with the chicken, Sean? Here, use the hot pads."

Sean was eager to demonstrate his domestic talents. Kevin was given care of the asparagus greens. Grandpa escorted Elly and Melanie into the dining room. Their role was to be waited on, and the role of the young men was to impress any potential in-laws with their husbandly qualifications.

Melanie said, "Elly's already got herself a teaching position at BYU."

"One section of a 100-level class," Elly quickly added.

Her grandfather beamed, and she could not resist basking in the glow of his approval. “That’s great, Elly! Teaching runs on both sides of the family. You’ve got yourself a double dose.”

With a bit of surprise, Elly realized he was right.

Her grandparents didn’t let them clean up after dinner either. With some small measure of guilt—abandoning Melanie to Sean’s seductions—Elly escaped to the backyard. The bay colt ambled across the paddock.

“Hey,” she heard Kevin say behind her, “Sister Packard said he’d like some of these.” He held up a handful of carrots.

The horse did. “Hiya, boy. Kevin patted the colt’s neck. He said to Elly, “You ride?”

Elly shook her head. “Well, a few times when I was younger. But I’m afraid only because Grandpa insisted.”

“I never rode a horse until I went on my mission. Never got within a hundred yards of one.”

“Where was your mission?”

“Nebraska.”

“I think they have cars in Nebraska.”

He laughed. “Riding horses was definitely against the rules. The family we were living with in Broken Bow—great name for a town, don’t you think?—they couldn’t believe I grew up in Utah and had never ridden a horse. Days of ’47 and all that, figured we must all be pioneers here in Utah.” He said, “You went on your mission to Japan, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, Osaka.”

“You probably expected to.”

“Osaka was a bit of a surprise, my dad being mission president in Kobe and all. That’s about as far apart as Provo and Salt Lake.”

“Mission president? Oh, that’s right. Your grandpa said. Well, when I got my call I looked it up: eight hundred miles from Salt Lake City to Omaha. I didn’t expect to go on a foreign mission—not good enough at the language stuff—but Nebraska? I could practically walk there. It wasn’t exactly an inspiring moment for me. But Nebraska wasn’t anything like I’d expected. Okay, no matter where you go, cities are cities and suburbs are suburbs and shopping malls are shopping malls. What’s different are the

places in between.”

“I think that’s true no matter where you go.”

“Anyway, this one time we were driving back from a mission conference in Omaha, headed north on Route 2. It was getting late, the wind was kicking up, whiteout conditions. And we were running on fumes. We spotted a gas station and pulled off. We had no idea where we were. But I remember that they still had Christmas decorations around the store window. And there were two cats curled up under the Budweiser sign. So we called it Two Cats, Nebraska.”

The horse snorted and nuzzled his hands. “Sorry,” Kevin said. “Out of carrots.”

“Two Cats, Nebraska,” Elly said.

“Yeah. Now that’s what I tell myself whenever I start to second-guess a place I’ve never been without going there first and seeing for myself.”

Elly nodded. *Nebraska*, she repeated to herself.

Melanie’s Accord hummed over Point of the Mountain and down into Utah Valley. Melanie glanced at Elly. “Kevin didn’t look like a jerk.”

“He was nice. He figured out who I was related to right off.”

“See, you always get the smart ones. I end up with the jock prowling for a trophy wife.” Another look. “Girl, sometimes I can read you like a children’s book. Other times you’re a cipher.”

“I’ve never been to Nebraska.”

“What?”

“Kevin went on a mission to Nebraska. He was telling me about how it wasn’t like anything he’d expected. He had that look in his eyes, the same vibe I get from gaijin missionaries in Japan. Chalmers Chōrō has it. All those RMs who show up for 301 do. They’ve stumbled into this world they never knew existed. I think a lot of it comes from never having lived in a really big city before. But it’s the culture, the language, the geography, everything that is so not Idaho or Utah or Arizona or California. And then getting transferred to some little town where the people have never seen a real live white guy before.” She said to Melanie, “How about you?”

“It was different and it was interesting.” She shrugged. “I know what you’re talking about, Elly. But I think it’s more a guy thing. Every guy

wants to boldly go where no one has gone before. El Dorado is out there, and he'll be the one who finds it. That's why they buy SUVs to commute to work in."

Elly nodded. "Still, someday I'd like to go to Nebraska. Metaphorically speaking."

Melanie laughed. "Elly, if you really want to go where no man has gone before, you can always get yourself married and get pregnant."

Chapter 8

Brief Encounter

Connor had the basement apartment of his Aunt Wanda's cottage to himself. He was responsible for his share of the utilities, he mowed the lawn in the summer and shoveled the driveway during the winter, and took care of the odd jobs that were bound to pop up in an old house. A broken light switch here, a leaky faucet there.

He was handy at things like that. *Like your grandfather*, practically every one of his relatives had told him at one time or another.

Good with gadgets. Not so good with people. "You do take after my dad," Wanda observed. "Makes me wonder if sharing a name—both of you being named Connor—means sharing character or personality. That's what the old country Celts believed, you know."

Connor didn't care to know and the feeling must have shown.

So Wanda pointed out that his mission had polished his rougher edges and brought him out a bit. Made him more personable, pleasant even, to have around.

"Not that you weren't before," she added when Connor laughed. "But your mother worries about you living alone."

"I don't mind," he said.

"I know that. I told her you would get all the sociality you required at the student ward. In your case, more than enough."

Connor also enjoyed access to his aunt's Toyota Camry with similar provisos. If they were both headed in the same direction, he was to chauffeur. But since the house was only a mile from campus, he usually walked.

Monday after lunch, Connor headed to the library to study. Passing through the security gates, he saw Larry Jackson running up the stairs from the periodicals reading room. "Hey, Connor! Good. I thought I'd find you here."

"Hey, Larry. What's up?"

"I've got to register my car or I can't get a parking sticker. Karen's in no mood to be walking to school these days."

"Pretty soon, huh?"

"Yeah, six weeks. Listen, can you take my shift for an hour?"

"Not a problem. I've got a class at three, though."

"I'll be back by then. How about I close for you Thursday afternoon?"

"Sure, that works for me."

Connor continued on through the atrium to the JKHB. He jogged up the steps, pausing to grab a *Daily Universe* out of the newspaper box.

He could walk the route in his sleep. He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder. Loaded down with Kenstowicz's *Phonology in Generative Grammar* and the thousand-page Seidensticker translation of *The Tale of Genji*, it was like hauling around a boat anchor. He unfolded the newspaper and glanced at the headlines. The polished aluminum handrail came up on his right. He took the steps two at a time.

"Watch out!" The warning rang out behind him.

A girl in a hurry had turned onto the landing and started up the second flight of stairs, hugging the railing. She raised her head a split second before they collided—he saw only her wide, brown eyes—then lowered her head. His weight was already off his back foot. He couldn't stop. She was still moving forward. Her forehead thumped lightly against his chest. In a single motion, he dropped the newspaper, put his arms around her, and carried her backwards down the stairs to the landing.

They froze in the pose, as if waiting for the slow dance music to begin. She had a binder and folder under her right arm. The collision had jarred them loose. When Connor relaxed his grip, gravity took over.

The binder seesawed over his forearm. She managed to grab it. The folder caught air and sailed away. Connor missed the folder but snagged most of the contents. A handful of sheets fluttered down the stairway like falling leaves.

By now they were both laughing.

“Sorry about that,” Connor said. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“That’s okay. I’m used to driving on the left.” They stepped apart. “*Oh—*” she said. She recoiled, her eyes dark and wide, her face flushed against the peach tan of her skin.

Connor felt himself physically start, as if touched by an electric spark.

A guy came up the stairs and handed her the folder. “I think you dropped this.”

The girl took it wordlessly, her eyes still locked on Connor’s.

The bell rang. They both flinched. She spun around and ran up the stairs.

Connor stood there on the landing. Finally his brain kicked out of neutral. He sprinted after her, two steps at a time, and raced into the lobby. She was nowhere.

He walked back down the stairs, picking up the scattered sheets of paper. He looked at one of them. Gibberish. His higher cognitive functions were fried. She was the girl on the Nakamozu Nankai, and he knew when he looked into her eyes that she dreamed his dreams.

Connor walked into the Writing Center, still flying on automatic pilot. He paused at the counter to catch his breath and give his cerebral cortex time to start producing rational thoughts.

“Hey, Connor,” said Alicia. Louder: “Connor!”

“Hey, Alicia.”

“You’re not on now, are you?”

“What? No. I’m taking Larry’s shift. He had to register his car.” He perused the sign-in sheet. “You’re not on either.”

“I’m taking Eddie’s shift.”

“He’s going to graduate in August?”

“That’s the plan. Amazing how biology can motivate the male mind.”

She patted her stomach.

“You’re pregnant *too*?”

“You didn’t know? Oh, yeah, you’ve been out of town. I finish my course work in December. The little bundle comes out a month later.”

Connor shook his head in disbelief.

Alicia said, “If you’re subbing for Larry, you’ve got the desk.”

He walked around the counter and sat in the swivel chair behind the supervisor’s desk. He dumped his backpack on the floor and placed the crumpled papers on the desk in front of him.

“Um—” A student approached the counter. “Is this where you get help with assignments and stuff?”

“Yeah, sign up there, on that sheet.”

“I got it, Connor,” said Alicia.

“Thanks.” Connor returned his attention to the papers he’d pick up off the stairs. Quiz sheets. A simple *kana* test. Twenty questions, phonetic readings only. He fished a pen out of the desk drawer, shrugged, told himself, *Why not?* and filled in the blanks.

The phone rang. The caller wanted to know the difference between a colon and a semicolon. After a brief explanation, Connor referred him to Section 38 in the English 115 textbook: “End Punctuation.”

He returned his attention to the kana quiz. Japanese 101. Then she must be a Japanese TA. The Japanese TA office was right down the hall. That’s why she’d been coming up the steps. Connor glanced around the room. Alicia was still working with her student. He walked to the doorway and looked down the hall. Nobody was coming. He set off at a brisk walk.

A handwritten sign on the door said, “Nihongo TA Office.” He scanned the list of faculty schedule cards posted next to the door: Murata, Packard, Kasamatsu, Nakamura. *Packard?* The name sounded familiar. He checked her card. One section of Japanese 101. Mon–Fri 2:00–3:50.

So it *was* her.

Packard, he repeated to himself. He hurried back to the Writing Center. Xiaojing from the English Language Center was waiting for him. She had to raise her TOEFL score to 550 to get into BYU, and her grasp of the definite article was still definitely wanting.

Connor worked with her for the rest of the hour. Xiaojing had to meet

a friend at the library. He returned his attention to the kana quiz. Elaine Packard, the faculty schedule card said. Unusual name for a Japanese girl. He rocked back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. Then it came to him: the Kobe Mission president, President Packard. His wife was Japanese.

Holy cow, Connor whispered to himself.

The quiz sat there on the desk, the line for his name still blank. He wrote: “Connor McKenzie.” Larry should be showing up any minute now. He added: “1010 JKHB.”

Classes were letting out. He strolled with the flow. The door to 1054 was propped open. He walked in and began checking the nameplates on the partition dividers.

“Can I help you?” an older Japanese woman asked him. The nameplate on her cubicle said Tomoko Kasamatsu.

“I’m looking for Packard Sensei’s cubicle.”

“Elly’s got Noriko’s carrel.”

“Thanks.” He circumnavigated the room and ended up at the cubicle across from Kasamatsu Sensei’s. The nameplate said “Noriko Tsuruoka.” A Japanese 301 text sat on the upper shelf. A sheet of paper was wedged under the cover. He lifted the cover and recognized one of Oh Sensei’s kanji tests. At the top of the page, “Elaine Packard.” She’d made one mistake, used a *sanzui* radical when she should have used a *ninben* radical.

The three o’clock bell rang. Connor jumped. Then remembered that Japanese 101 was a two-hour class. Palpable relief. He left the quiz sheets on the desk, shook away his second thoughts, and returned to the Writing Center.

Larry was twenty minutes late.

Chapter 9

Grammar Lessons

Elly sighed like a properly exasperated schoolmarm. Her head hurt. She'd spent the last two hours trying to keep two thoughts in her head at the same time. Actually, she'd only been trying to keep one thought in her head—the lesson plan—but the other one kept barging in.

It wasn't possible.

If she let her mind wander for a moment, she'd start replaying the scene over and over like a close call in a football game. The next thing she knew, she'd be gazing blankly out the window until one of her students piped up and said, "Um, Packard Sensei?"

It was just a dream.

Darlene said, "I'll turn the assignment in tomorrow."

Elly had only four years on the girl but suddenly felt middle-aged. The I'm-disappointed-with-you attitude that took the average parent a decade to master, she'd gotten down in a matter of days. "Okay, she said. They'd been-there-done-that and nothing was going to change as far as she could see. Right now it simply wasn't worth the grief. "Tomorrow."

Just her imagination. Just a random coincidence.

Darlene looked sorrowful enough. As long as she kept up the act until she was out of the classroom, Elly wouldn't hold it against her.

Think about something else, she told herself.

Darlene belonged to the group of students drawn to the *idea* of studying Japanese, but not so much to the hard reality of *learning* it. Or had boyfriends on missions in Japan, hence the initial motivation. And the lack of it, now that the shine was off. Elly wished they *would* drop the class. Less work and worry for her.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the students who were only too happy to be there. They weren't necessarily the smartest and didn't always get the best grades. She'd seen the same thing on her mission. Every zone had a couple of slacker missionaries who got the most baptisms. And a couple of diligent true believers who never got off the ground. There was something profound in that fact, though she wasn't sure what.

She should exploit her authority as *sensei* to challenge the slackers like Darlene, for their own good. Next time, she'd run things like a Japanese high school classroom, establish that aura of absolute authority around herself. Maybe the proper cultural context would bring out some of the *Ob-ness* that the males in the family (on both sides) had in spades.

Among her star students was one Bradley Preston, an anime devotee who had become a groupie of all things Japanese, including herself.

Bradley followed her down to her office, his palmtop PC at the ready. "*Sate, komatta koto ni natta,*" he said.

He recited the line fluently enough that Elly almost replied, "What has?" And then realized he was reading off the screen. Bradley had found a bilingual script of *Princess Mononoke* on the Internet and was working through the grammar. She'd agreed to help him as long as he understood that other students' needs had precedence.

He asked, "But isn't *komatta* the past tense?"

"Yes, but it's being used as an adjective."

There was a stack of papers on her desk. At first she thought, *shimatta*, yet another late assignment. Did they think leaving overdue homework on her desk would make her any more forgiving? Unfortunately, it probably did. "Your students will figure you out quicker than you'll figure them out," Uncle had promised her.

"So it modifies *koto*," Bradley said.

She nodded. No, not homework, but the quizzes she'd dropped in the

stairwell earlier. She looked again. One of them was filled out, and not by a student in her class. The hand was practiced but gaijin. She glanced at the name. “Connor McKenzie.” He wasn’t in the class.

She realized Bradley had asked a question and was waiting for an answer. “Sorry,” she said. “What was that again?”

“It’s translated here as a *worrisome situation*.”

“Yes, that works.”

Deep in her brain, who Connor McKenzie was and how he’d gotten hold of the quiz flashed through her mind. The blood drained from her face. Her breath caught in her throat. The scene rushed back to her—the few, fleeting moments when it was funny, struggling for balance on the landing, wrapped around each other like a game of Twister. And then his face, his eyes staring into hers, the familiarity of his touch—

“Bradley,” she said faintly, “I need to get started on these quizzes.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “*Ja, ashita*, Packard Sensei.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

She collapsed into the chair and hyperventilated until her head swam. Her pounding heart gradually washed the panic from her veins. She rested her forehead on the white Formica and examined her shoes. There wasn’t any doubt in her mind. He was the man standing on the Nakamozu Nankai station platform on that bright summer morning. The man in her dreams. But he was supposed to be a *fantasy*, a symptom of some deeper sickness.

She raised her head and rested her chin on her hands and stared at the quiz. Under his name he’d written, “1010 JKHB,” the room number of the Writing Center at the end of the hall. So their meeting had been less coincidental than inevitable. A small bubble of anger grew in her gut. So this was all *her* responsibility? She was supposed to go see him? She returned to the examination of her shoes. To be honest, if he walked into the room right now, she’d freaking die.

How like him, she thought. A man she’d *slept* with should know better. She groaned aloud. *No! He’s just a dream!* She slammed her fist on the desk, and then stopped and listened, praying that no one else was in the room. *Don’t do this to me*, she said to herself, conscious of her sudden familiarity with him and all the more embarrassed because of it.

Elly stuffed the quizzes into the folder and the folder into her backpack. She left the TA office, heading away from the Writing Center. She did not look back and was prepared to run if she heard her name called.

She walked home, her shock and disbelief evaporating in the hot summer sun. She sat at the kitchen table and graded the quizzes. At the bottom of the pile was Connor's. No mistakes. She wrote "100" next to his name in red ink and added a *very good* in Japanese before she could stop herself.

When Melanie got home, she found her roommate at the kitchen table, head in her hands, examining the tabletop.

"That kind of day, huh?"

"You have no idea."

Later that night, Elly lay in her bed, afraid of what sleep would bring, and equally afraid that it would bring nothing. This affair had begun with a chance meeting—should it not end with one?

It did not.

After he left her in the deep of the night, she awoke and cast bitter imprecations into the silent darkness. She'd never known a solitude emptier than the loneliness she felt in the arms of a lover who laid total claim to her body, but withheld his soul.

Chapter 10

O-miai

Connor sat at his desk and stared at the Osaka Metro subway map thumb-tacked to the wall, following the red line of the Midosuji down to the Nakamozu Nankai interchange. He'd gone to Sakai to get something for Nobuo. He couldn't remember what. Elaine Packard had been standing maybe twenty meters away—he couldn't possibly have recognized her from a single encounter. He recognized her because he slept with her, in dreams that could not be dreams.

Panic settled into his synapses like a cold, white fog. What if—what if they—what if *somebody*—

Moral panic permitted every possibility, entertained every extreme, and dredged up extra helpings of guilt just to make sure. Connor dug out the microcassette recorder he hadn't used since his mission. He scavenged a pair of batteries from his MP3 player, flipped the voice activation to high, and set it on his bed stand. After he got into bed, he secured his left ankle to the bedpost with a stout piece of nylon twine. He'd never known anybody in his family to sleepwalk, but this wasn't the time to find out.

He fell asleep thinking winter and ice—awoke to the urgent demands of their shared passions—unexpectedly feeling a tremor of fear course through her body as he—and the dream—disappeared.

In the morning, Connor climbed out of bed, took a step, and crashed

to the floor, his foot nearly wrenched off. When he finally realized what had happened, the knot was seized so tightly he was reduced to groping around until he found a pair of nail clippers and released himself. He collapsed on the bed, clutching his ankle and laughing hysterically. The playback revealed the wail of a distant police siren, the yip and yowl of a cat spat on the patio, a long monologue by the next door neighbor's German shepherd, and then a muffled expletive and the stupid thud of his body striking the floor.

His only consolation was that he didn't snore.

Alicia was at the desk when he walked into the Writing Center. "Hey, a girl left a note for you."

"A girl?"

"Kinda cute." She smiled slyly. "I put it in your slot."

Alicia leaned back against the wall as he retrieved the envelope. *Mind your own business*, he mouthed. "Connor McKenzie, 1010 JKHB," was the address on the envelope. He slit the seal and pulled out a folded piece of paper. The quiz. He smiled at the grade. He turned it over. "Terrace Court," it read. "Second floor mezzanine, above the clock. Five P.M."

His head buzzed. *Deep breath, take a deep breath*. He folded the paper and tucked it back inside the envelope.

"Well?" Alicia asked.

Connor answered with a no-big-deal shrug. "When did she come by?"

"This morning around ten. I think she's Japanese."

He *knew* she was Japanese. Her handwriting betrayed that fact. Except that she was also half-American, if she was *that* Elaine Packard. She must have attended elementary school in Japan.

Alicia reveled in his discomfort. "This could make things interesting. You are in the pool, after all."

"The pool? Oh, *that* pool."

"Any inside tips, Connor? I'll make it worth your while. I know for a fact that Thom and Natalie—"

He gave her a look. "There are no inside tips to give."

Her expression said she didn't believe him. "This definitely changes the line. I'll have to discuss your status with Chloe."

Connor rolled his eyes.

“I was betting on a perfect game. No engagement, no date, no marriage. Winter semester, you had me worried there for a few weeks. But I held firm. Now, though, you’re being—mysterious.”

“I am not being mysterious.”

“And evasive.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re exactly the sort of person I’d expect not to look like he was in love when he *was* in love.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.”

A student came in with an English 115 paper. Xiaojing stopped in an hour later with her Barron’s TOEFL workbook. That kept him busy for another hour. He found himself free at 4:45.

“Mind if I take an early break?” he asked Alicia.

“Give yourself enough time to pick up some flowers.”

Connor didn’t bother to respond.

He crossed the Quad to the Wilkinson Center and walked up the stairs to the second level mezzanine overlooking the Terrace Court. The clock hung dead center on the skirting below the west walkway. Connor paced back and forth in front of the windows and pondered what to say. Something obvious like, “Weren’t you a missionary in Osaka?”

The afternoon sun streaming through the glass made him squint. He turned around and looked across the courtyard. She was standing on the east mezzanine concourse, no farther away than the northbound platform of the Nakamozu Nankai station. She stared across the wide gulf of empty air. Whatever he did, she could escape before he could catch up with her.

This was her meeting, her *o-miai*. He sat down on the bench above the clock and waited. He didn’t see her again until she stopped at the railing next to him. She stood, poised, while Connor got to his feet.

Then she said, quietly, reproachfully, “*You always leave.*”

Connor had no idea what she meant. Yet he flushed, feeling a palpable guilt from the weight of her indictment.

She glanced away. “It *was* you, at the Nankai station in Nakamozu.”

“Yes.”

“We hadn’t met—or seen each other—before then?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did my uncle tell you about me?” She looked at him, an angry glare

returning to her eyes.

“Did he tell me about you?” Connor echoed. “Your uncle?”

“Oh Sensei.”

He resisted whacking himself on the forehead. *Of course!* Nobuo was Oh Sensei’s brother. Sayaka was his sister. Sayaka Oh Packard. The pieces began to fall together—except for the big one, the iceberg mostly buried beneath dark water.

“He didn’t try to set us up?”

“Your name might have come up now and then. But not in that context. Should I have?” he queried.

“I suppose not. It’s just that my uncle—you know the way he is.”

Connor smiled and so did she. She was quite pretty. The dreams didn’t lie. But then, desperately searching for some way to continue the conversation, he made what he believed at the time was a mistake. Though later, and for the rest of his life, he knew it was not.

“What do you mean, *you always leave?*”

The smile vanished. Her face turned ashen. “You *do*,” she said, her voice suddenly hoarse with anger.

He felt her reaction like a blow to the chest. It frightened him, how much he cared about what she felt. She wasn’t filling the atmosphere with kind feelings. He said, “Do what?”

“You leave. You always leave.”

She was talking about the dream. Sweat prickled on his skin. Suddenly she closed the distance between them, creating a private, intimate space in which she could place all of her anger.

She said, articulating each word separately, “*You. Leave. Me.*”

Subject. Verb. Object. She could have jabbed a forefinger in his sternum, but the grammar was sufficient. He took a step back. His voice rose. “*This isn’t my fault. I saw you at a train station in Nakamozu. That’s all that happened. I’m not the one causing these dreams!*”

Her eyes were sharp as knives. “But you *act* as if you *are*.”

She whirled around and walked away. He didn’t follow her. Then he wished that he had.

Chapter 11

Precautions

Elly didn't have Japanese 301 Wednesday morning. That meant she didn't have to be at school until two o'clock to teach her Japanese 101 class. The success of her plan depended on one other variable. At breakfast she said to Melanie, "There's something I have to take care of in Salt Lake. I was wondering—"

"Need the car?"

"Only for a few hours."

Melanie mulled over the request. "Nope, my schedule's open." She got the keys and tossed them to Elly. "Going to see Kevin?" She grinned.

"Who?" and then, "*No*," with a how-could-you-think-that expression. "I should be back before noon." She grabbed her backpack and left with a "See you later."

"Alligator," Melanie replied.

Elly didn't volunteer an explanation because she didn't want to lie, and no way was she going to tell the truth. She blamed that kid Kevin, the RM from Two Cats, Nebraska. And she blamed Melanie. *If you really want to go where no man has gone before, you can always get pregnant.*

The possibility hadn't occurred to her before. Now it occurred to her like crazy. She had no desire to test Mormon belief in immaculate conception. Not when her father was a mission president, her grandfather was a

General Authority, and her uncle taught at BYU.

The night before at the library, she'd Googled "birth control" and got back fifteen zillion hits. *Good grief.* She eventually ended up on the Planned Parenthood website. But even narrowed down, there was more information on the subject than she knew existed. Starting with: "Eighty-five percent of women who don't use a contraceptive during intercourse become pregnant each year." Well. That ratcheted up the fear factor. Though she couldn't help wondering, *What's the pregnancy rate for intercourse that takes place in an alternate universe?*

Still, she reasoned, since she only *imagined* she was having sex, couldn't she *imagine* she was using a contraceptive? Except that she couldn't shake the distant but vivid memory of Girl's Camp and the snapshot that almost ruined her life. She wouldn't be so lucky twice. *Better safe than sorry.*

Never had she imagined, not in a billion years, that she'd visit Planned Parenthood. But she sure as hell wasn't going to the BYU Health Clinic.

She set up the appointment from a payphone. *Drug dealers must feel like this.* Calling Salt Lake was long distance and she didn't want it showing up on the phone bill. The part she'd dreaded most was borrowing Melanie's car. She could take the bus, but worried about making it back to Provo on time.

The hard part turned out to be the easiest.

The clinic was located two blocks east of Trolley Square. Elly drove around the block, reconnoitering the scene of the crime. Planned Parenthood wasn't on anybody's evil-protesting radar screens that morning. Mormons were not by nature the protesting type, and the official Church position on birth control was one of those things everybody was sure about but nobody could articulate. The refrain, "It's between you and the Lord," covered a lot of ground.

If the Lord wanted different, He would have done something about her dreams.

She drove back to Trolley Square and returned to the clinic on foot. No hesitating, no second thoughts—she walked in as if she worked there.

And discovered that a waiting room is a waiting room. "I'd like to get a prescription for birth control pills," she told the receptionist, who re-

sponded so nonchalantly Elly almost expected her to say, “You want fries with that?” She handed Elly a consent form to sign and a medical history to fill out.

Elly found a seat. She dug a pen out of her backpack and adjusted the forms on the clipboard. Did she smoke? No. Did she have high blood pressure, angina, or heart disease? No. Ever had a stroke? No. A bleeding or blood-clotting disorder? Breast, uterine, or any other hormone-related cancer? Liver disease or a history of jaundice? Abnormal vaginal bleeding? Migraines? Asthma? Seizures or epilepsy? *No, No, No, No, No, No, No.*

Checking off all those boxes made her feel much better about the state of her own health. She signed and returned the forms. The nurse escorted her to an examination room. Height, weight, blood pressure, temperature. More questions: Diabetes? No. Surgeries? Just wisdom teeth. Ever been pregnant? No. Any sexually transmitted diseases? Definitely *No.* (She left out the “definitely.”)

The nurse made the necessary notations and said, “Doctor Starley will be with you presently.”

Elly sat on the examination table, trying not to crinkle the white paper. The door opened and the doctor walked in. A woman, and how she was grateful for *that.*

“Elaine Packard? I’m Doctor Starley. Mary, if you wish. Now, you said you’d like to get a prescription for birth control pills. Have you ever used contraceptives before?”

“No.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“Not yet,” was the answer that came out.

Mary smiled.

I have BYU written all over my face, Elly thought. And suddenly she was on the verge of bursting into laughter. What was she thinking? That she was going to get pregnant from a *dream?* How dumb was that? So what was she doing here? *What am I doing here?*

Dr. Starley said, “You know that oral contraceptives don’t prevent sexually transmitted diseases?”

“It’s to keep from getting pregnant.” She hardly hesitated a beat. “I’m getting married.”

“Congratulations.” Mary handed Elly a pamphlet that described the hormones used in oral contraceptives, dosages and regimens, and ranked the common brands. In the end, they decided on Yasmin.

Mary opened a drawer and retrieved a sample blister-pack, four rows of seven tablets. “Take the first pink pill the Sunday after your period begins. The last row of white pills you take during menstruation.”

“They’re placebos, right?”

“Yes. Try it for two months and see how you react, menstrual flow, tenderness in the breasts, and any other side effects. It takes about two months for the body to adjust to the hormone levels in an oral contraceptive. I can give you a one-month prescription. You’ll have to get a pap smear before getting it refilled.”

“Thanks,” Elly said. “I will.”

At the back of her mind—perhaps because of the association with female reproduction—she had made a connection between Planned Parenthood and Relief Society. The difference was, Planned Parenthood only cared about Elaine Packard, here and now. Nothing else. Her soul was her own business. And so the unexpected answer came to her in this atmosphere of nonjudgmental amity, so casually that at first she thought she was lying. But she knew she couldn’t lie that glibly.

An hour ago, she couldn’t have explained what she was doing there. Now she knew *exactly* what she was doing there, and for that she was truly and deeply grateful.

“You’re welcome,” said Dr. Mary Starley.

Elly arrived back in Provo a little after eleven. The entire adventure had taken less than three hours. In her room, she took the cellophane-wrapped box out of the white plastic bag. Begin the Sunday after her period started—the Sunday after next. They’d get married in August then.

Connor spent Thursday morning at the library. He didn’t go home for lunch. He ate at the Cougarreat, something he rarely did. He didn’t see Elly. Afterward he went up to the mezzanine. She wasn’t there either.

He paced the walkway, watching the summer camp kids mill about the courtyard. *I didn’t cause this*, he said to himself again. *I didn’t do anything wrong.*

But you always leave. As if leaving was all his fault. As if they *were* doing something wrong.

But it *was* wrong. *Dammit*, now he was contradicting himself. He got up and walked down the steps and across the Quad to the JKHB. He had to get to work. Besides, he knew a better place to wait.

In so many words, Darlene said she'd had a change of heart. Elly wasn't convinced, but she couldn't resist the call to redeem the prodigal. Maybe Darlene had multiplied a 2.0 times a four-hour class and didn't like what the arithmetic told her. Whatever the reason, she was eager for extra credit. And that meant more work for Elly.

So now Darlene *and* Bradley followed her down to the basement of the JKHB. Bradley was asking her why the continuative form of *iku* wasn't "going," as in, "I'm going to the store." She was letting him talk because her answer was: *Just because*. It was difficult keeping a chapter ahead of the class when some of her students kept racing to the end of the book.

They filed into the TA office. Someone was sitting at the carrel in her cubicle. It was Connor McKenzie. "What are you doing here?" she asked in Japanese. Tomoko peered over her carrel. Elly realized that this was the one place where Japanese provided no more privacy than English.

Connor answered in Japanese, "I wanted to talk."

"So call me."

"You're not in the book."

The student directory, he meant. She said to Bradley and Darlene (in English), "This won't take long," and walked out.

He caught up with her in the hallway. "Hey," he said.

"Not here." She shook her arm free.

He let go as if he'd grasped a hot iron. He followed her up the stairs, out the doors into the hot sunlight.

"So, *talk*." She continued down the sidewalk to the triangle of lawn at the north end of the Quad, pulling him along in a wake of repressed fury.

"Look, I'm just trying to figure out what's going on, okay?"

"What is there to figure out?"

"What's *not* to figure out? You think this is *normal*?"

"I didn't say that."

“The other day, it sounded a whole lot like you were blaming me.”

“I wasn’t blaming you.”

“Do you want me to leave? Put enough distance between us—”

“I didn’t say that. That isn’t what I want.”

“Then what are you saying? What do you want?”

“*I don’t want you to leave me.*” She spoke with enough emphasis to attract the attention of passers-by.

Connor leaned in close, an effort to create a small sphere of privacy between them. “I’ve never even *dated* you, so how can I *leave* you?”

“You *do*, every time. You leave me *every time.*”

Now her meaning was obvious. He flushed and stepped back. “What alternatives are there? Don’t you want this to stop?”

The silence that ensued betrayed a mutual uncertainty about the honest answer to *that* question. Elly said, “It’s not about *stopping* anything. It’s about what you are trying to *prevent.*”

“You *know—*”

“I don’t *know*, Connor. Whatever is happening between us can’t be undone. *I have to know what comes next.*” She came close to shouting at him. “You must have given that question future *some* consideration.”

The look on his face made it clear he didn’t have a clue. “Forget it,” she said, pushing him away from her. “Just forget it.”

He stood there, a statue rooted in the green grass.

She stopped in the lavatory before going back into the TA office. She splashed cold water on her face and stared at herself in the mirror. She reached deep down in her gut and found the anger. At him. It wiped away the confusion, smothered the pain. *There, that’s better.*

Now back to work. Darlene and Bradley were waiting.

Brilliant job, genius, Connor told himself. Two steps forward, a thousand miles back. What did she want? And how in the world was he supposed to give it to her?

Yeab, you’re giving it to her, Billy Bragg’s alter-ego barged in.

Shut up.

But wasn’t that exactly the point? How could he *leave* her? They had never been *together*. What did she think this was, an arranged marriage?

The girl he'd pretended to be in love with Winter semester—Julie—when he figured out that a bunch of warm feelings didn't mean he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, he'd ended up in Osaka. Maybe love could conquer all, but it could also fool him pretty good. Get far enough away and he realized that. But running away wasn't the right solution this time around.

He headed back to the JKHB, praying that his schedule would be booked. Or at least busy enough to keep Alicia off his case.

Chapter 12

Grumpy Old Fart

Connor's experience was that most conflicts could be avoided given sufficient time and distance. His family put a big premium on avoiding conflict. At worst, the women fumed and the men (well, his father) retreated to the Cave.

"It wasn't so bad," his mother told him once, referring to his dad, "after I figured out that he never got mad at *me*. In my family, a silent man was the uneasy calm before the storm. A silent McKenzie is a man waiting for the storm to blow over. And McKenzie men can wait a long time."

But according to Billy Bragg, the whole passive-aggressive thing was preferable to the yelling and the crying and the hard objects bouncing off the walls.

His parents left Utah thirty years ago, that was time and distance. As a consequence, they had to trek west once again every time a relative died. His father was the youngest in his family, and his mother second to last among her siblings. So Connor's grand-relatives died off at a brisk clip.

His mother's father attended Connor's blessing. Connor was a month old in the photograph, cradled in the man's spotted, spidery arms. At Brigham Young University, his maternal grandfather had been a professor of some small renown, the chairman of the chemistry department before

he retired. In the photograph, his face was drawn with age, his shoulders bent with osteoarthritis, his eyes bulbous behind thick lenses.

Connor was seven years old. They were gathered around the kitchen table eating dinner when the phone rang and his mother learned that her father had died. He had never seen his mother cry before. Two days later, his parents and his oldest sister Diane flew to Utah to attend the funeral. He didn't go with them. Neither did Judith, Margaret, or Sara Beth.

His sisters stayed with the Hunsakers. Connor got sent to the Durants. He pleaded, "Why can't I stay with Billy?"

"They already have Billy's grandfather living with them," his mother pointed out. She killed that idea pretty quickly, which was too bad, because Connor really liked Billy's grandfather.

He called himself the Grumpy Old Fart. "That's me, kid," the old guy gleefully confessed. "The GOF. I calls 'em like I sees 'em."

Connor and Billy giggled. The GOF chomped down on his cigar and grinned broadly, reveling in his indecorous character. "Here, have a Slim Jim," he'd say, and launch into one of his war stories. "Boys, there was so much blood in the water wading ashore at Tarawa, it stained my skivvies pink. And I was in the third wave. Or I wouldn't be sitting here, kid."

That was the moral of every story: had it been any different than the way it was, he'd be a corpse under a cross in Arlington.

The time Connor told him he was a Mormon: "Yeah, I seen God too, just like that Joe Smith guy. We were off the coast of Okinawa and this Zero kamikazes into our port side. If he'd hit us amidships, I wouldn't be here talking to the two of you. But the aft triple-A sawed off his left wing at the last second and he corkscrewed into the bow. Half my platoon had a come-to-Jesus meeting right then and there."

He paused to take a puff. "Still, nice place, Japan. Even with all that B-29 urban renewal. I was there the first year of the Occupation. You ought to go there sometime, kid. I hear it's really changed. I think you'd like it."

Connor promised him he would.

The GOF didn't care that Connor's family was Mormon. If he didn't care, Connor didn't see why his parents should care. It was the smoking, he figured. Even Billy's mom sent the GOF to the back porch to light up. In the dead of winter, he'd sit out there blanketed in a white cloud. He

smelled terrible all the time. Connor'd wear the smell home on his clothes, like after a week at Scout camp. But the GOF had a seemingly infinite supply of Slim Jims and stories. Connor liked his stories. He was a pretty good guy as far as GOFs went. He'd trade grandfathers with Billy any day of the week, cigar smoke and all.

The Durrants had just moved into the ward. They were nice enough people, but they were still complete strangers. Their boy, Jason, was a year older than Connor. Neither of them was inclined to get to know each other better at the time (and never really did). But there weren't that many Mormons in upstate New York. A family of believers couldn't afford to be choosy.

His parents and Diane flew off to Utah on a cool Saturday morning in October. Connor went home with the Durrants.

At the age of seven, he learned that there was no solitude emptier than the loneliness he felt in the company of well-meaning strangers. And because all people were at some time strangers to each other, those seeking the greatest security found it always within the shell of the self.

It was the way of all McKenzie men.

The only grand-relative left by the time Connor was old enough to care was his Grandpa McKenzie. He lasted until Connor's freshman year at BYU, the day after Thanksgiving. The doctors said he died of a heart attack. But Connor knew when somebody's *that* pissed off at the world, there's no silent treatment like the silence of the dead.

But this business with Elly Packard—silence wouldn't work. She didn't mind giving him a piece of her mind. He couldn't keep up. *I don't want you to leave me.* How was he supposed to respond? *What happened can't be undone.* What was that supposed to mean anyway?

You know what she means, the voice in his head responded.

Ah, so his superego was cruising for a little Socratic smackdown, was it? He saved the email he was composing to Nobuo (his weekly list of terminology entries for the SDF translation database). He pushed away from the desk and spun lazily around. Why *did* he leave her? Because the only intimate connection they shared was purely physical. If anything was wrong, that was. Right?

Except that leaving her didn't change anything. He left her because of the next logical step. *Marriage*. He caught his breath and let it out. Yes, the ol' fear of commitment. Well, why not marriage? He rolled the chair back to the desk, brought up Word on his laptop, stared for a minute at the blank, white window, and typed:

Elly McKenzie

1. Pretty (very).
2. Smart (sensei).
3. Nisei/haafu (+ pretty!).
4. Intimidating parents!
5. Less neurotic than I am.
6. RM (definite plus).
7. No shrinking violet.
8. Doesn't like me.

He frowned. Something was wrong with the list, besides the sheer childishness of it. No, McKenzie pragmatism! *Compare, contrast, analyze*. Consider all the options! Look before you leap! He scanned the list again.

Elly McKenzie

He pounded the up-arrow key, deleted, and typed: Elly *Packard*.

Connor sighed. This was all so *stupid*. The computer dinged out a *beep-boop*, indicating incoming mail. He switched to Outlook and clicked on the message. It was from Elly.

"I got your email address from Uncle Nobuo," she began. "He hopes you'll come back next summer. He promises he'll be able to pay you this time. So, *yoroshiku*." In the next paragraph she wrote, "You're right. We should talk. How about Monday at five? Same place, above the clock. I promise not to yell at you this time."

Connor replied, "Tell your uncle I'm looking forward to working with him next year. See you Monday."

Chapter 13

Meetings at Five

Elly sent the email Saturday evening before leaving the library. She considered waiting around to see if he replied. But he must have better things to do on a Saturday night. The fact that *she* didn't spoke volumes about her social life. Try as she might, Melanie was making little headway in reforming her roommate's cloistered ways.

The problem was, no social life could compete with her dreams, could satisfy the longings that flared up inside her. Out of nowhere, she'd find herself thinking of Japan and the long summer nights they spent together in that nocturnal neverland. How the sweat welded their skin together. A fierce blush rose from her chest to her neck to her face.

"*Stop it, stop it,*" she lectured herself. She was already nurturing second thoughts—not so much about how Connor would react—but about the likelihood that her casual request for information would spread to the immediate family. Not that *they* would object. Their enthusiasm might spook the prey.

Elly smiled to herself. They were like two samurai in a Kurosawa picture warily encountering each other on a dusty road, asking with a raised eyebrow, *friend or foe*. A muscle's twitch from *fight* or *flight*.

She went to the dresser and extracted the small box from the back of the top right drawer. She popped it open and pulled out the origami-like

lump of manufacturer's instructions. "Warning, warning, warning, threat, threat, threat," she mumbled to herself, scanning the tiny text.

Then she pulled out the blister pack of pink and white pills.

Welcome to Nebraska. The whole state stretched out in front of her, the interstate vanishing over the curve of the distant horizon. There were still so many things she did not know, so many things to be afraid of, including her own passions. So many places where guilt could worry its way in.

Yet Sunday night she dreamed a different dream.

Elly had long ago given up trying to direct her dreams one way or another. But as she fell through the warm currents of semiconsciousness, that inviting place rushed toward and then *past* her. She felt a wash of confusion, realizing he was not there with her.

The diversion aroused a flurry of suspicions in her mind. The puppet masters in the Bunraku theater, though dressed in black, were visible to the audience. The audience chose *not* to see them, chose instead to believe in the willful souls of the puppets. Yet when the puppet master placed the puppet in some improbable position, would not the puppet wonder how she got there?

Gliding along the path of her misdirected dream, Elly arrived at last at the end of the detour and lit gracefully upon the ground. The vista around her cleared. The compelling physical reality of the dream replaced her questions with curiosity. She stood on a broad, residential street. The sunlight shining through the canopy of maple and cottonwood danced in her eyes. She was wearing a snow-white kimono, dazzlingly bright in the late morning sun.

The street was empty of automobiles. Elly glanced around. She recognized the rectangular cut of an irrigation canal along the shoulder of the road. The houses were set far back from the street behind generous front lawns. An eclectic mix of Cape Cods and faded Queen Anne facades, plus a few brick-faced bungalows. This was Provo, she realized. Somewhere in the older part of town, east of Academy Square.

She tucked her hands into her sleeves as she walked along. She was not entirely used to the short strides that kimono required. Her lacquered *geta* sandals clicked against the asphalt.

There, at last, across a shadowed lawn, were signs of human life. Three men gathered around an automobile. She continued on several more yards until she came to the end of the driveway. The car was parked facing the street. She recognized the insignia of a galloping horse attached to the radiator grille plate, but could not remember the model. The car's hood yawned open. The two men on the left were well into middle age. On the right was an older man, old enough to be their father. He held an automotive part in his left hand and pointed at the engine with his right. The part glistened with streaks of oil.

"Hello?" she called out.

They did not hear her. She caught a flicker of motion farther back in the shadows. She looked up at the front porch of the house. The screen at the end of the porch was open. A boy, eight or nine, leaned over the railing so far he was almost balanced on his stomach. He stared at the scene below with the intensity of a medical student observing an operation.

"Hello?" she said again.

The boy slid off the railing and turned until he was looking straight at her. His head tilted to the side, wondering at what he was seeing. A patch of sunlight flickered through the screen, etching a delicate grid of lines across his face. The old man glanced at the boy, saw where his gaze was directed, and then looked at her.

The boy raised his hand and beckoned to her.

The dream ended.

Monday afternoon Connor was immersed in *Genji* when Elly arrived at the second floor, west mezzanine of the Wilkinson Center. She sat beside him on the bench. He smiled at her. The warm chord that played in her heart alarmed her. She shrugged it off with a toss of her head. She asked, indicating the book, "How doth the Shining Prince?"

"He's a man with one complicated love life."

She played her schoolmarm role. "And what lessons do we draw from his example?"

"I shall have only one wife and no mistresses."

"Your bride will appreciate knowing that." Their eye contact lasted a moment too long. She abruptly turned away. "The other night," she said,

staring across the courtyard, “you didn’t dream about me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“What did you dream about?”

“It was strange. I was late for something, late for a class. The bell’s ringing and I’m running down the hall. I’ve got a *furoshiki* package under my arm, like you’d get at an upscale Ginza department store. I don’t know what it is, but I’m scared to death of losing it. Finally I get to the classroom. Standing at the head of the class is this older Japanese man. He reminded me of Pat Morita. He looks at me and says, ‘Where’s Chieko?’ And I say I don’t know, because I don’t. The only Chieko I can think of is Chieko Baisho, the actress. Ever see *Cry of the Distant Mountains* with Ken Takakura? Great movie.”

“What did he say next?” Elly tried hard not to gasp when she asked the question.

“‘Go find her then, and make sure she gets that.’ He meant the package I was carrying. And then he says, ‘We can’t begin without her.’” Connor gave her a blank look. “Whatever that means.”

“My grandmother’s name is Chieko.”

“Really? I met her once at your uncle’s. Huh. Course, they just called her *Obā-chan*.”

“My name is Chieko.”

“Your name’s Elaine.”

“My middle name is Chieko, after my grandmother. It’s what my Japanese relatives call me. My mom too, when we’re in Japan.”

Really? his eyes said. “It still doesn’t make any sense.”

A thought struck her. “Studying Genji and all, you know about *yobai*, right?” His face went scarlet. Elly smothered a grin at his reaction. “We’ve been together more than three nights.” He nodded. But arguing that they should consider themselves engaged after spending three nights together was too direct. She tried a more subtle approach. “The package you were supposed to give to me—do you know what it was?”

He shook his head.

She pressed, “Was there a kanji on the *furoshiki*?”

He furrowed his brow. Then his expression brightened. “*Tai*,” he said.

“*Obi*,” she corrected him.

He wrote the character on his palm with his finger. “Right, it’d be *obi*.” He nodded. “That makes sense. A half-decent obi can cost a few grand—not something you’d want to be hauling around like a bag of groceries.”

Elly began to smile. “I know what you were wearing in your dream.” She didn’t wait for him to challenge her on this assertion. “*Haori bakama*. Formal wear for the medieval samurai.”

His obvious surprise was replaced by a look of caution. “I know what a *haori bakama* is.”

She waited for him to get it, but he obviously wasn’t going to. “What do you know about *yui-nō*?” she asked, a bit impatiently.

“It’s the traditional engagement ceremony.”

“And what gifts do the bride-to-be and bridegroom-to-be exchange at the *yui-nō*?” She felt like she was conducting an anthropology exam. “It’s obi and hakama. You were supposed to give the obi to me.”

Ob, said the shape of his mouth. She saw in his eyes that he was contemplating possibilities that for the first time were being articulated aloud rather than merely thought. Against her better judgment she said, “You have thought about it?”

“About what?”

“About *marriage*.” She refrained from adding, *You idiot*.

He conceded he had with a no-big-deal shrug. “I have *thought* about it. Emphasis on *thought*.”

“And what have you concluded after all this thinking?”

“I haven’t concluded anything.”

“So you plan on staying safe and single for the rest of your life?” It was a low blow. She almost winced when she said it.

He sat there silently for a while. “Exam’s over, okay?” He shoved *Genji* into his backpack and stood up.

Elly jumped to her feet. “Where are you going? We’re not finished.”

He didn’t appear to care. “If you really knew me,” he said, as he strode toward the stairs, “if you knew my grandfather, if you knew how much I’m like him, you wouldn’t think rushing into marriage with me was such a good idea. As it says in the Bible, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.””

“No quoting scripture. That’s cheating.” Elly quickened her steps to

keep pace. “At your age I’d think you’d have had plenty of time already.”

He turned to face her. “Well, maybe I’m just screwed up enough that it’s going to take a bit longer than the statute of limitations allows around here.”

She hit him in the chest with the palm of her hand—more a shove, but hard enough to knock him off balance. She hadn’t intended to hit him or shove him—she’d simply acted before the impulse reached her brain.

“*Om*,” he said, though he looked more startled than hurt.

Elly stepped in closer, ready with the words to accompany the blows. “Don’t you say that, *not* to me, *not* knowing what I know about you.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough. You hold the trust and respect of both my uncles, and that’s no small thing.” She switched into Japanese, a language more appropriate to the subject. “Don’t pretend that the esteem they hold you in is the result of you pulling the wool over their eyes.”

He met her gaze. “Point taken, but I was referring to myself.”

“So you’re really a jerk in private? I don’t buy it.”

His face flushed with anger, but he didn’t respond. He straightened the backpack on his shoulder and disappeared down the staircase.

Fight or flight. He’d taken the latter option. She was left without an opponent. The adrenaline drained from her muscles. Elly slumped back to the bench. She sat down and held her face in her hands. What kind of a crazy person was she turning into? Crazy enough to push him across a line she shouldn’t have. Now she knew she could punish him indefinitely and he would never respond in kind, something no man should ever have to reveal to another person.

Connor was only glad she’d aimed for the rib cage and not the stomach, else he’d be puking his guts out. Worse, he knew exactly what had prompted it. “Passive-aggressive” wasn’t supposed to make the *other* person aggressive. When he retreated, the other person wasn’t supposed to *follow*. She wasn’t playing the game right, dammit. Didn’t she understand the well-honed qualities of Being Careful and Being Practical and Not Taking Chances? He’d been desperate enough to say he was *like his grandfather*. In any argument between his parents, that was his mother’s coup de

grâce: “You’re just like your father!” And Elly hadn’t batted an eye.

She obviously didn’t know the rules.

He composed an email to her. No quoting scripture, she’d said, and he could respect that. Bible bashing was a truly pointless exercise. But he wanted to explain himself, and the references were in his rhetorical quiver.

His arguments went back to that whole Corianton business in Alma 39, from which the Brother Bushnells of the Mormon world got their reasons for tossing sex into the abominable sin category (though it seemed obvious to Connor that Alma’s remonstrations had less to do with the going-after-the-harlot part than with the forsaking-the-ministry-and-generally-being-a-bad-example part).

He stopped typing. He was talking himself out of his original argument. Exactly what sin was he supposed to forsake? He didn’t *lust* after her. They were married in the dream. Didn’t that count for something?

Then why didn’t he leave before they made love, why only after? Because the dream wouldn’t let him. Because the dream wanted him to *choose*. Choose *her*. And he wouldn’t, because he resented like hell having to make the choice in the first place. He reserved the right to wait until the time was *right*, however long that took.

He caught his breath and let it out. *No*. Enough with the self-analysis. When at the bottom of a deep hole, the first rule was: stop digging.

Alicia was hanging around the front desk when Connor arrived at the Writing Center on Tuesday.

“What?” he said. He checked the time. “You’re off.”

“You got another note.” She pointed at the break room. Connor retrieved the envelope from his slot. Alicia said, “It was that cute Japanese girl again.”

Connor didn’t reply. He extracted the note, facing Alicia so she couldn’t peek over his shoulder. It was from Elly. “I still want to talk,” she wrote in her unmistakable handwriting. “I promise not to yell at you *or* hit you. The dragon lady will behave. Promise. Wednesday, same time and place, okay?”

“Ah, and he smiles,” said Alicia.

“Don’t you have a class to go to?”

“I believe I do. Say hello to—what was her name? You didn’t say.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, say hello for me.”

After Alicia left, Connor went back to the computers and logged into his mail account and confirmed that, yes, he’d be there.

It was a cloudless afternoon. The early evening sun burned through the mezzanine windows. Elly was seated away from the bright glare, the sunlight setting afire the auburn highlights in her hair. Connor stopped in his tracks. A sound, a chime, sweet and poignant, rang inside his soul. At moments like this, frightening moments, the haze lifted from his brain and he realized, as if being shown a private glimpse of heaven, that she was the most beautiful woman in the world. He couldn’t comprehend how he could exist in this life without her in it.

The smell of baking bread wafted up from the pizza concession in the food court below. It was an almost intoxicating combination. She looked up and saw him and smiled.

“Hi,” he said.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He clapped his right hand against his chest. “Nice right hook.” He sat down opposite her and saw the mortified look on her face. “No problem,” he assured her. “Only my ego got bruised.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. But—” She began again, “You know the scroll that hangs in Nobuo and Yuki’s living room?”

“*Resolute in learning, reluctant in wrath.*” He’d memorized the classical Japanese text. “Your great-great-grandfather did the calligraphy, as I recall. I never did get an explanation about what it meant.”

“There are actually two scrolls. The one my mother has reads: *Reluctant in learning, resolute in wrath.* The one describes how Oh women are born, the other what they should become. We’ve always been a volatile lot, apparently. Though *reluctant in learning* seems a chauvinistic dig. Mom said he penned them to admonish his daughters. There’s a time to be resolute and a time to be reluctant.”

“What, did you get into fights a lot?”

“No—well—yes, I did get kicked out of kindergarten. Mom says it was

for beating up the other kids. In my own defense, they were teasing me because I was *haafu*. My hair was a lot lighter back then. I think they enrolled me in a Japanese public school so I would learn to behave myself.”

“I do have a hard time seeing you as a bully.”

“I’m not, I’m not. It’s just that my way was always the right way.” She grinned. “More likely because I was always the tallest kid in my class, until I started attending the International School in Yokohama. Japanese elementary school socialized the aggression right out of me, the way it’s supposed to. The thing is, now that it’s showing up again out of the clear blue, I don’t know how to deal. I’m doing things I never dreamed of, like hitting people and yelling at them. I’ve never done that before.”

“Until you met me.”

“Well—” she conceded. “I didn’t mean it like *that*.”

It was Connor’s turn to smile. “I know where you’re coming from. I can usually figure out why I do the things I do, but way after the fact. Even when I know the *why*, I have a hard time keeping myself from doing it again. Like this passive-aggressive business. It’s a guy thing, to begin with. It’s a McKenzie guy thing to the *n*th degree. Give me the best advice in the world and I’ll find a reason not to do it because it wasn’t *my* idea. If nothing else, McKenzie men have always prided themselves as masters of their emotions. Which means getting as far away from them as possible. We’re so good at running away, I often wonder how my grandfather and father ever got married.”

Elly laughed. “My roommate Melanie says the same thing about me. She says if I don’t get myself a go-between I’ll never get married.”

“My Uncle Martin once warned me that the older and smarter you get, the more good reasons you can come up with for *not* getting married. It’s his ‘logic defeats evolution’ theory. He’s a veterinarian. My Aunt Wanda, though, I have the feeling if I gave her the slightest opening, she’d take to matchmaking in a New York minute.”

Elly inquired softly, “But don’t you think we’ve already got one, a go-between, I mean?”

Connor looked away and fumbled with the clasp on his backpack.

Chapter 14

Freud's Couch

In her dreams that night, Elly returned to the house in Provo. She was dressed as before in the white kimono. The sun shone down on the empty street. The driveway was a straight, clean line of asphalt, recently swept. The car crouched like a pensive cat inside the garage, the silver mustang on the grille plate gleaming from the shadows.

It was only after she started up the walk that she saw the boy. He was sitting by himself atop the porch steps, engrossed in a large manual that covered his lap. He glanced up, blue eyes under dark brows, and seemed not at all surprised to see her there.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

He held up the book: *Chilton's Ford Mustang/Cougar 1964–73 Repair Manual*. At the same time his head snapped up and to the left, the way a grazing deer freezes and flicks its gaze about at the sound of a breaking twig.

Elly glanced over her shoulder. A tall man strode up the walk. The boy's grandfather. He was thinner than the Connor she knew, showed a higher forehead, his silver hairline receding. But she couldn't miss the resemblance. There was a hard, determined look in his eyes. The look of a man who felt he'd been disrespected, even if on a matter of no great moment. He extended his right hand. The boy held out the book, shrinking

as far away from his grandfather as was physically possible.

The man reached to take the book from the boy. As his hand extended, Elly seized the old man's wrist. "No," she said.

He cast a puzzled look at his arm and then at her, for the first time acknowledging her presence. Then everything dissolved away, and there was only the two of them, bathed in the stark light. He finally spoke, his voice gruff, annoyed. "I never touched the boy. He's got no cause to fear me."

"Yes," Elly said, speaking the words that suddenly echoed in her mind, that were not her own but became her own as she said them. "What you *never did* could fill the ocean. Yet all that nothing would never be enough."

They agreed to meet again on Friday, and Connor made another stab at composing his thoughts in an email. If his fate before the court depended on oral argument, he'd never stand a chance.

The night before, he'd journeyed back to Kudoyama. He ended up at a bar in an alley off the main drag. To make things that much weirder, Pat Morita had an American cowboy tagging along with him—a burly man decked out in jeans, a Stetson, and cowboy boots—the whole John Wayne outfit. The two of them wanted to know what he was doing there without Chieko. How should he know? These dreams weren't his idea.

Connor stared at the computer screen. He typed, "The older you get, the more invested you get in your *tatemaie* (what the rest of the world can see) and the more you hide your *honne* (that which is privy to you alone). Easy enough to do when you're single, especially when you're single *and* Mormon. What's frightening is contemplating what's going to happen when somebody finds out how immense the gulf is between your *tatemaie* and your *honne*."

He clicked the send button before he could talk himself out of it.

Connor leaned against the mezzanine railing watching the little soap operas playing out in the Terrace Court. He didn't hear her come up behind him until she said, "First of all, Connor, everybody's screwed up." She pressed on, not giving him time to respond. "Second, you haven't got much of a *tatemaie*. You're pretty much *honne* all the way down. What I see is what I get. You don't know how reassuring that is."

She was right, he didn't know.

"Third, it *is* scary, and I've done nothing but show you the worst side of me. But I don't want to live my whole life being scared." She turned to him. "Connor, let's not have this argument, okay? Forget about getting married. I shouldn't have brought it up like that. Just don't leave me. *Please*. Stay with me till we wake. That's all I want. I've given you no reason to trust me, but trust me this once. Don't be afraid of me."

His expression softened. "I'm not afraid of you, Elly."

She clasped his hand, a firm yet gentle touch. Then she walked away.

Nobuo's terminology lists arrived (as they always did) Friday morning (Friday night, Japan time). Connor checked the attachments but didn't get around to reading the cover message until that evening. Nobuo had added a P.S.: "My daughter and wife have been debating whether you and Chieko are dating. I try to keep out of such matters, but they insist I ask."

Good grief, was his initial response. How did they know? Because Elly had asked for his email address. And dating? Were they? That was a good question. Not really. Fighting, yes—dating, no. He'd think of a better answer when he mailed back the corrections.

Connor went outside and watched the sun setting into the mountains beyond the flat plate of Utah Lake. He was making this all too complicated. Why not just stay *in* the dream? She asked him to stay. It obviously meant a lot to her. If there was going to be sex, shouldn't there be affection as well? Even if there'd never be any physical contact between them, wouldn't that make a difference?

Something—someone—had wove the threads of their individual lives together, creating a binding cord between them. In this span of days between *Tanabata* and *Obon*, between the Bridge of Birds and the Festival of the Dead (the time of year at once occurred to him), whose graves had stirred? Whose spirits had returned during this haunting season? Did he have to ask what they wanted? The dreams lacked all subtlety. But he wouldn't have listened otherwise.

Be *practical*, he told himself. He was a McKenzie. He was good at being *that*. He knew he'd been offered something extraordinary, the best thing that had ever happened in his life. But he *was* scared. *If a man would give all*

the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned. He might as well invite in the wrecking crew. Loving her would change *everything*.

For the first time in his life, he found himself contemplating a possibility antithetical to the McKenzie mind: *surrender*. Not to fate (though that was a tough one for those ornery Celts). But a surrender of the pride that masqueraded as character, yet in the end revealed itself as little more than dumb stubbornness in disguise.

It was all about Newton's First Law: *A body in a uniform state of motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.* It had been his father's family vacation transportation strategy: plot the straightest navigable line between where they were and where they wanted to end up in eight hours, and *drive*.

Ever since that distantly-remembered death when he was seven years old, Connor had been running straight ahead and in one direction—*away*. An external force had now been applied to his trajectory. It was time to stop and turn around and take the path less traveled, and that might make all the difference.

Chapter 15

The Weaver and the Herdsman

The *Tanabata* festival, adopted from the Chinese “Night of Sevens,” commemorates the union of two celestial lovers, the stars Vega and Altair. In Japanese they are called the Weaver (*Orihime*) and the Herdsman (*Kengyū*).

The lovely Orihime was the daughter of the Heavenly Emperor, a vain ruler jealously fond of the gorgeous cloth his daughter wove on her loom. Yet watching from his throne on the Pole Star, even his cold heart could not ignore his daughter’s despair as she spent day after day weaving together the threads of starlight. A prisoner of her loom, all her wondrous fabrics could not mask the darkness of her solitude.

So her father arranged a marriage with a loyal retainer of the court. His name was Kengyū, and he tended the royal herds in the meadows across the River of Heaven. The marriage proved a most propitious union. The two were devoted to each other from the start, so deeply in love that their other cares and responsibilities faded from their attention. The Emperor’s admonitions were ignored by the young couple. The loom gathered dust and the cattle roamed far and wide on the astral plains. In a fit of rage, the Emperor banished Kengyū to the distant shores of the Milky Way.

Only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month (*Tanabata*), does he repent of his anger and permit the ferryman to cast off from the harbor of the Moon and carry Orihime across the River to her beloved’s

arms. Even so, if she has not completed her weaving to his satisfaction, he will forbid the ferry to cross. When that happens, we must call upon the magpies to fly up to the stars and weave a Bridge of Birds over which the princess can cross, else the rain of her tears will flood our homes and farms and put us all at peril.

Because peril has always been the price of true love and devotion.

Chapter 16

Night Train

Multistoried floats danced through the thronged streets like junks sailing through rough night seas, masts emblazoned with lights. Like burning box kites anchored to the earth with Lilliputian mooring lines, threatening at any moment to break free and fly into the dark sky. Gangs of sweating bearers, wearing short happi coats decorated with the crests of their merchant sponsors, surged to and fro calling out guttural encouragements to their companions.

Yoisho! Korasho! Yoi korasho!

Yoisho! Korasho! Yoi korasho!

Red, green, blue, and gold streamers rippled from the telephone poles. Leafy bamboo branches arched over the streets. From the green stems hung thousands of *tanzaku*, folded strips of colored paper inscribed with a wish or poem. In her dream, Elly reached up and added her own to an overhanging branch. *What did I write?* She smiled at Connor. He wore a gray yukata. She had on a bright summer kimono, too colorful for a married woman, but she was young and in love.

They continued ahead of the procession to the river. The water's surface was alight with Chinese lanterns, bobbing in the currents on their little rafts. The taiko drums pounded like distant thunder. Flutes and fifes trilled, calling to the magpies. The sky above was clear and shot through

with stars. Everyone knew the lovers would meet this night.

The parade reached the river and spilled out along the levee, the bearers mixing among the barkers and carnies. Cheers arose as the first rocket rose on its comet's tail, rising to meet Vega and Altair high above, and exploding in the night sky.

She leaned against him and gazed up at the sparkling bouquets, wanting the night to go on forever, Orihime to never leave her lover again.

They rode the train back to Kudoyama. She recalled the Sada Masashi song about a girl leaving home to get married against her father's wishes. As the night train takes her farther and farther away, the girl counts the passing stations, numbering every fear, concern, and second thought that crosses her mind.

Elly's present distress was not shared by her future self, who snuggled against the shoulder of this dark-haired, blue-eyed gaijin. *What did you do?* she wanted to ask. This dream, for all its magic, seemed more real than the others. *How did you cross the bridge?*

At Kudoyama station, a taxi zipped around to collect them at the curb. The walk was no more than a kilometer, but too far in kimono and geta. The driver dropped them off at the front gate, bid them a good evening, and careened back down the hill.

Inside they followed their familiar routines, throwing open the windows to let in the cool mountain air and taking out the futons. But first she had to get out of the kimono. His expression broke into a grin. She must have made some indelicate quip about how getting out of a kimono wasn't something you did by yourself. He began to untie her obi. She twisted around and kissed him impatiently, impertinently.

She's teasing me, Elly thought, a tad annoyed.

Returning to the bedroom after a soak in the o-furo, she extinguished the light. He was standing at the window. She wrapped her arms around his waist. He hugged her closer. The valley glowed with starlight. A bottle rocket flew low over the canopy and popped like a faraway flashbulb.

The throbbing drone of the cicadas filled the night. He smoothed away her bangs and kissed her forehead. The stinging in her eyes—the look of concern on his face—told her she was crying. She was not *sad* but *overcome*. The emotions were nestled deeply inside her, connected to every part of

her being, and yet she could not understand them.

She raised her mouth to his, tasted him, *his cheeks as a bed of spices, his lips like lilies, the roof of his mouth like the best wine*. He lowered her to the futon. She welcomed the cool breath of night air on her skin, the warm caress of his hands across her body.

She pressed against him, wanting to feel his weight, wanting to be as close to him as physically possible. *His left hand under my head and his right hand embracing me*. She smiled at him. *I sleep, but my heart waketh. It is the voice of my beloved saying, Open to me my love, my dove, my undefiled*.

A soft kiss, and they glided back to earth. The gentle breeze cooled her skin. The tears dried on her cheeks. She rested her head on his chest. Yet in the falling afterglow Elly felt him waver, she felt his fear, felt the magical world grow distant and dim and uncertain.

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn. I sought him, but I could not find him. I called him, but he gave me no answer.

She whispered to herself, *No*.

In that flickering, transparent moment, as Connor pulled himself out of unconsciousness, he hesitated. He wanted her to take hold of him and make him stay. But she would not *make* him. *Don't let go*, he told himself. Yet he knew that this *other* self lived in a world *more* real than the one he now occupied alone. So he let go and fell back through the darkness.

He hit the ground hard and stared up from the depths of the abyss. All at once he no longer saw darkness, but welcome light. A vision of intimacy and beauty ravaging safe solitude in ways he could not have believed. The light descended and she was with him. She said nothing and she did not leave. He lay back on the bed, unconsciously shifting to one side, as if she truly slept there beside him.

And when he closed his eyes she was there, the girl on the Nakamozu Nankai. Then and all through the night.

Chapter 17

Fast Sunday

Elly awoke. The dream vanished and she was alone. The curtains glowed with the gray light of dawn.

She threw back the comforter. The chill valley air nipped at her arms and legs. Every time she closed her eyes, remnants of the night just ended filled her with unsated desire. She found her glasses and pulled on her yukata and padded down the stairs to the living room. Curling up on the couch, she gazed through the window at the brightening watercolor sky over Y Mountain.

Did I know it would be like this? Elly laughed to herself. She'd prayed for him to stay. *You leave me*, that had been her accusation. What had she expected when he stayed? She felt a tear on her cheek, caught it on the tip of her forefinger, and examined the glistening bead in amazement. *I've got to stop doing this.* She didn't want to become some morose, weepy woman.

"*Ohayo*," came Melanie's sleepy voice. "What are you doing up?"

"Watching the sunrise."

"You watching the sunrise? Since when?" Melanie drew closer. "Elly!" She leaned forward and pulled off Elly's glasses. "You've been crying."

"I'm okay." Elly grabbed her glasses back.

A closer examination followed. "You do look—well, you look *happy*."

"I am happy."

Melanie plopped into the armchair. “All right, girl, out with it.”

Elly shook her head.

“El-ly.”

She bounced to her feet. “Is there a BYU directory around here?”

“In the drawer next to the sink. Why?” Melanie followed her into the kitchen and peered over her shoulder as Elly flipped through the dog-eared pages. “Okay, you’re looking for somebody whose last name begins with M.”

Elly danced away from her. *McKenzie, Connor C. 1131 Cherry Avenue.* Her eyes widened. That was right across the park.

“*Ab!* You had somebody waiting for you and you never told me! The Eleventh Commandment, Elly: Thou shalt not withhold the juicy details of a personal relationship from thy roommate.”

“It’s not like that at all.”

“Right. You are so not the teary type, Elaine Packard.”

Elly pouted. “I’m allowed now and then.”

“Well—”

“In time, Mel. I’ll explain everything in time.”

“Promise?”

“Um, well, not *everything*.”

Melanie growled. Elly ran upstairs to shower and change and get ready for church.

“You know,” Melanie said, as they walked across the law school parking lot, “that we’re expected for family home evening dinner after church? Allan and Roy and Quinn? Two condos over? No need to ask for directions?”

“Oh. Aren’t Jessica and Sharon next door going to be there too?”

“Nice try. Was that, ‘Oh,’ as in, ‘Oh, I just remembered,’ or ‘Oh,’ as in, ‘Oh, I’ve got to come up with an excuse real fast why I can’t come?’”

“I’ve got things to do and people to see.”

“The mysterious Mr. M. He can’t wait?”

“I thought you liked Allan and Roy and Quinn. With me not there, it’s three-on-three.”

“I’m thinking of little unsociable you, my dear.”

Elly shook her head. Having set forth on this course of action she had to reach the end as quickly as possible. Attending church was an excruciating enough delay. “One-thirty, right? If I’m back by two I’ll come right over. If not—”

“Something tells me I won’t be expecting you.”

Elly left as soon as fast and testimony meeting had concluded. Back at the condo, she stood in front of the dresser mirror. Melanie said her blue dress brought out the auburn in her hair. She blotted her lips against a square of Kleenex. She was operating on a lot of assumptions. First, that he lived there. Second, that he’d be there. Third, that he wouldn’t mind her barging in.

He probably wouldn’t even notice what she wore.

Her heart pounded. Elly wrung her hands together, let her arms fall to her sides. *There, okay, don’t overdo it.* She went downstairs, paused for a mental checklist, closed and locked the door behind her.

I will rise now and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth.

The narrow sidewalk between the condos and the Wasatch Elementary parking lot ended behind the backstop of the baseball diamond. It was going to be another one of those hot August afternoons. But the park was empty. Even the tennis courts were unoccupied. A lone SUV sat next to the covered picnic pavilion next to the parking lot.

She crossed Birch Lane and climbed Apple. Y Mountain loomed high above, a monument of ragged khaki and conifer green that all but closed out the sky. When she came to Cherry Avenue, she paused and looked back. The park below, the arboreal borders of the campus beyond, the far horizon topped by the ridgeline of the mountains west of Utah Lake, a clean blue sky above. Blue was her color today.

The avenue dead-ended at a chapel parking lot. She turned left and checked again. The second house on the west side of the street was 1131, a white brick cottage with dark green shutters.

“Brooks,” the mailbox said. Many families in the Tree Streets rented basement apartments to BYU students. “Okay,” Elly said. She summoned the last few ounces of her resolve, took a deep breath, rang the doorbell,

and stepped back.

The *bing-bong* chimed through an open window, followed by the sound of footsteps. The door opened. An older woman stood there, a curious expression in her sharp blue eyes. She was white-haired and spry of build. A dishcloth was flung over her left shoulder.

“Yes?” she said.

“I’m—um—” Elly stammered. Another breath. “Is Connor home? I mean, does he live here?”

The woman answered with an expression of undisguised delight. “He’s still at church. Why don’t you come in?” She unlatched the screen door.

It was blessedly cool inside the house. The woman explained, “He’s the finance clerk in his student ward. He should be back soon enough. You’re welcome to wait.”

They were standing in the living room. Elly nodded her head.

“I’m Wanda Brooks. Connor’s aunt.”

“Elly—Elaine Packard.”

“Will you be staying for dinner?” Wanda headed back to the kitchen.

Elly had no choice but to follow her. “If it’s—”

“Of course it’s not too much trouble. We have too few guests for dinner these days. I hope you’re agreeable to meatloaf, Elly.”

“Meatloaf’s fine.” The smell from the oven made her mouth water.

“Now, Elly, not to presume upon stereotypes, but perhaps you could prepare the rice? Connor usually takes care of it.” She took three plates from the cupboard over the sink and started to set the table.

Elly found the rice cooker next to the toaster and a ten-pound bag of Calrose Botan behind the breadbox. “How much should I make?”

“Two cups.”

“That’s an awful lot for two—three people.”

“Connor saves the leftovers for lunch.”

“Ah.” She measured two cups of rice into the pan, took it to the sink and rinsed the rice thoroughly. Japanese rice had not been milled with talc for years, but rinsing remained an ingrained practice. She lowered the pan into the cooker, replaced the lid and pressed the switch.

Wanda pulled out a chair and motioned for Elly to join her at the table. “Now, your name has a familiar ring. My late husband Walter Brooks—he

taught accounting—knew a young man named John Packard. Lectured on international relations in the MBA program. Worked for General Electric, as I recall.”

“Yes!” Elly exclaimed. “That’s my dad.”

“And we would’ve thought each other complete strangers not half an hour ago. I met your mother a time or two at the odd department soiree. Smart as a tack, was my impression.”

“As a tack, she is.”

Wanda got up from the table. “I see you’ve inherited her good looks and something of your father’s height to boot.”

Elly opened her mouth to protest the compliment and blushed instead. Wanda retrieved a salad bowl from the refrigerator and popped the lid. “It doesn’t look too wilted.” She paused. “Didn’t a Packard get called recently as a Seventy?”

“My grandfather.”

“How about that.” Wanda put the salad bowl and a bottle of Italian on the counter island. She flipped the faucet to the left-hand sink and began filling a water pitcher. “Though I’m afraid you’ve put our pedigree at a bit of a disadvantage.”

A door opened and closed somewhere else in the house.

The rice cooker clicked off. Wanda said, “I never can remember—should we do something about that?”

“No, it’s best to let it steam.”

Elly carried the salad bowl and the dressing to the table. Wanda set the pitcher on the counter. “The McKenzies, I’m afraid, are best known for their several black sheep. But to speak well on my nephew’s behalf, his *mother’s* father, Hugh Pedersen, chaired the chemistry department for many years.”

Footsteps on the stairs.

“He came to the Y from Southern Utah State.” Wanda looked up and said, “There you are, Connor.”

Elly turned and there indeed he was, looking stunned. She didn’t have the slightest idea what to say. They stood, rooted, for some indefinite period of time. And then she did the only thing she could think of doing—she put her arms around him, closed her eyes, and breathed in his familiar

scent, because so many things about him were now so familiar to her.

Their hold on each other at last relaxed and she looked up at him. He kissed her forehead, the way he had the night before in the piercing, aching beauty of that wonderful dream. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Tears filled her eyes. The only thing she could do was hug him again. By the time they’d parted, Wanda had changed out of her dress into a pair of slacks and a cotton blouse.

“Looks like the meatloaf will be done in another ten minutes,” she said, as if this sort of thing went on in her kitchen all the time.

Connor said grace and the food was passed around the table. Elly took a bite of the meatloaf. “This is quite good,” she said.

“Thank you, Elly. Though it’s a recipe very difficult to get wrong.” She said, addressing both of them, “A more important question: how do you two know each other?”

Connor said, “We met in Japan. Briefly.”

“Yes, briefly.” A smile flashed between them.

“As it turns out, I was working for Elly’s uncle.”

“And Connor was one of my other uncle’s students last year. Professor Oh—he teaches in the Asian languages department.”

“Good heavens, you’re connected right and left. You see, Connor, Elly and I were talking before, and wouldn’t you know, Walter knew her father.” To Elly: “Where is he now? I forgot to ask.”

“He’s the mission president in Kobe.”

“More and more impressive. Not that the McKenzies were ever anything less than respectable middle-class artisans, mind you. But they always lacked the necessary manners to rise in society.”

Connor said to Elly, “Aunt Wanda missed her calling as an anthropologist. Margaret Mead McKenzie, Uncle Martin used to call her.”

“The high school librarian’s eye is an observant one.” She addressed Elly, “One thing you should know about McKenzie men, my dear. They may seem fickle as tomcats when it comes to human relationships, but only because they have such binary minds. Every decision is viewed as an all-or-nothing proposition. Half a commitment is worse than none, so none wins. The lukewarm is spewed out!” She emphasized the next point

with her fork: “But once they decide on a thing, you can’t fault them for their loyalty.”

“Aunt Wanda makes us sound like a breed of dog.”

“With a little training they fetch and carry quite nicely.”

Elly had to laugh. Though the conversation bordered on the uncomfortably personal, judging from Connor’s reaction, it seemed a familiar facet of the old woman’s character. And yet so divergent from his own. In this family, *Ob-ness* must be carried exclusively on the X chromosome.

Chapter 18

Vitae

They cleared the table. Wanda apologized for the lack of dessert. “Connor hasn’t much of a sweet tooth, so I’ve gotten out of the habit.”

Another idiosyncrasy to note and file away.

Connor said, “I blame it on a bad *abn* experience.”

Elly laughed. Wanda asked what *abn* was. Connor said, “Think refried beans with a chocolate bar thrown in.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Do you like it?”

“Well—”

“And it’s worse when some ward member offers you what looks for all the world like a chocolate Fudgesicle and you bite down and—well, my palate has never recovered from the trauma.”

Elly giggled. “They do that on purpose. Greenies are such easy targets.”

“Yeah, *now* I know.”

They returned to the table. “What mission did you go to?” Elly asked.

“Tokyo South.”

“Were you ever in Hiratsuka?”

“No, but we always arranged for zone splits the second week of July.”

Elly’s eyes lit up. “Isn’t the Hiratsuka Tanabata matsuri so incredible!”

A silence followed. Connor cleared his throat. Elly said, “I lived in Hiratsuka till I was eight. My father was the corporate liaison at a power plant GE was building in Yokohama.”

“Your handwriting is a dead giveaway. Japanese kids have to practice their penmanship.”

“You’re not kidding. After we moved to Yokohama, I was happy to attend the International School. And then we moved back to Utah. Sometimes I think my entire life can be explained by my having a third-grade Japanese education.”

“I think the key to my life is that I’m the youngest son of a youngest son. The only son of a youngest son. My whole life’s a generation off.”

“I’m the oldest. I get to be looked up to. But being the only son still makes you *chōnan*, the eldest boy.”

“With all of the responsibilities and none of the perks.”

The conversation sank into a moment of quiet. Connor said, “Are you going to the fireside tonight?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve got to worry about class tomorrow.”

“Prepare, don’t you mean?”

“I prepare, then I worry.” She checked her watch. “I should probably get going.” She didn’t have to and didn’t especially want to. But she didn’t want to push a good thing. They got up from the table together.

“Do you live nearby?”

“I’m right across the park, on Ninth East. Melanie—she was my first senior companion—her parents got her the condo.”

“It’s faster if we go out the back,” he said, leading her down the stairs to the basement.

Elly stopped on the landing. The house was a split level. To the left, a door exited onto the back yard. To the right was a living room of sorts. A couch was set against the stairwell at right angles to a well-worn armchair. Between the armchair and the couch was a coffee table. Along the west wall (beneath the window) a bench served as a desk. A laptop and printer and a collection of textbooks. Decorating the wall separating the living room from the bedroom was an Osaka Metro subway map. A *soba shop noren* curtain hung from the top of the doorframe to the bedroom. The bedroom door was open, revealing the foot of a queen-sized bed.

The east wall (below the upstairs hall) separated the rooms from the rest of the basement. Against the wall were two bookcases, a boombox, and CDs that filled two shelves of the bookcase. On the wall next to the television was a framed Hokusai print.

“You can’t complain for lack of space.” She scanned the CDs: Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Amii Ozaki, several Enka collections. She picked up an Off Course CD, *Back Streets of Tokyo*. “I loved this album when I was a kid.” A row of Joe Cocker, another of Sada Masashi. “Queen?” she said aloud, “Pink Floyd?”

“You can thank Billy Bragg, the token bad influence in my life. He really wasn’t that bad of an influence. It was the contrast that mattered. In my house, Neil Diamond was considered hard rock. Instead, it was the Metropolitan Opera every Saturday afternoon on the radio.”

The second shelf was devoted to Puccini and Mozart operas. She never would have guessed. What’s this—?” She picked up a toy sports car parked next to the *Turandot* CD case.

He said in an offhand manner, “A Mustang GT Coupe. I’ve had it ever since I can remember.”

“A Mustang,” she repeated to herself. She examined the front of the car. Gracing the tiny grille was a galloping silver horse. She felt goose bumps on her arms. She carefully placed the model car on the shelf and joined Connor on the landing. He opened the door for her. The blast of light and heat made them both wince.

Connor said, pointing, “You follow the path to the Olsen’s driveway, then down Apple to Birch.”

She took a hesitant step. Was he giving her directions? He stayed by her side. She almost sighed in relief and resisted grabbing hold of his arm. She said, “Your aunt mentioned something about black sheep in the family. That’s too intriguing not to ask about.”

“That’d be the first Connor McKenzie.”

“Good heavens,” she said with mock alarm, “there’s more than one of you? Does that make you a junior then?”

“Technically, the third. But I’m Connor Carroll McKenzie. The first two Connors were just Connor, and they skipped a generation each time. So the first Connor was my great-great-grandfather, the second was my

grandfather.”

“And the Carroll?”

“The first Connor’s third wife, Katherine Anne Carroll.”

“He was a polygamist? There are a few in our family on the Packard side. Though my great-great-grandfather Oh was rumored to have a mistress or two. What made him a black sheep?”

They came to Birch Lane and filed down the walk to the park. Though still nearly empty, the park showed some signs of life: a family decamping from a minivan to the picnic area—a guy and a girl playing tennis—sun-bathers on beach towels painting bright splashes of color on the grass—a couple making out under the maple tree.

“Hard to say what made him that way. He has an amazing biography. He emigrated from Scotland in 1844, joined the Mormon Battalion in Nauvoo, and walked all the way to Utah by way of San Diego and Sacramento.”

“That is hardly a disreputable resume.”

“The disreputable part comes later. According to the version I was told, he was running a dry goods establishment in Springville and buying into a larger store in Provo. Unfortunately ZCMI was founded that same year, 1868. I remember the date because—”

“—it was the year of the Meiji Restoration.”

“ZCMI promptly put him out of business. For a good capitalist Scot, it was an injustice of apocalyptic proportions.” Connor clenched his fist and struck a defiant pose. “The story seems funny now, but it must have been devastating at the time. We’re such a not-cause-driven bunch, maybe because of Connor-the-First’s example. At any rate, he didn’t just inveigh against ZCMI, but against the entire Church hierarchy, especially Brigham Young. He eventually got himself excommunicated.”

“Really? Excommunicated?”

“There’s a happy ending. As it turned out, the Carrolls hailed from the Isle of Man, and Katherine Anne’s father was a friend of George Q. Cannon, the Apostle, whose parents were also from Man. I guess Elder Cannon had no little experience with obstreperous Celts. He was sympathetic to the plight of the late Connor McKenzie. Posthumously, Elder Cannon had his temple rites restored.”

“That is an amazing story.”

“If you’re going to kick against the pricks, it pays to be on good terms with a General Authority.”

They stopped to watch a guy playing Frisbee with his collie.

Elly said, “Your Aunt Wanda gave me the idea there was more than one black sheep.”

“My grandfather, she meant, the second Connor. Not that he spoke or did anything against the Church. I don’t think he was ever active enough to care. But from what I knew of him, he was a real—”

Son of a bitch, Elly thought.

“—*kareta otoko*,” he said instead. *A dried up old man*. “But that’s being ungrateful. After Grandma died, he sold the house to Lynne and Glenn, and split the proceeds among the grandchildren. It paid for my tuition.” Connor brightened. “How about your great-great-grandfather? The one with the mistresses? He sounds a lot more interesting.”

They reached the backstop. Elly said, “Here’s the sidewalk.” She led the way. Melanie’s place was located between the second and third row of condos.

They stood in the slanting shadows. Elly was beset by self-consciousness, and at the same time filled with a painful longing. She wished for him to sweep her into his arms and kiss her. What if she kissed him first? How would he react? Could she even bring herself to do such a thing?

She caught his arm. “Oh, thank your aunt for me. I left without saying anything. That was rude of me. I hope I didn’t inconvenience her.”

“I got the impression that as long as you’re the one inconveniencing her, Aunt Wanda wouldn’t mind being inconvenienced every day of the week.”

“I do like her.” She smiled. “Though she thinks I’m tall.”

“You’re not short. How tall are you?”

“Five-five.”

He took a step closer and put his hands on her shoulders. Elly caught her breath in anticipation. He frowned. “I’m five-ten. You can’t be more than three inches shorter than me.”

“Okay, I’m five-six. And a half. Hey, you try growing up in Japan with a dad who’s six-two.”

“How tall’s your mom?”

“Five-three. Not short for a Japanese woman, but definitely shorter than my dad.”

“One of my companions, Elder Bunderson, was six-six. He practically knocked himself out a couple of times running into door frames.”

“Dad’s gotten good at ducking.”

Connor laughed.

Elly would have stood there exchanging small talk for the next hour if she believed there was any chance of the being-swept-into-his-arms part happening. It was a totally irrational expectation and it annoyed her, yet she could not rid herself of the desperate hope.

She backed to the front steps of the condo and raised her hand in a half-wave. “*Mata.*”

“*Asbita,*” he replied.

Mata asbita. Again tomorrow. A smile lit up her face.

Chapter 19

Elly in Love

Melanie pounced as soon as the door closed. “His name?” she demanded.

Elly brushed by her. “Connor McKenzie.”

Melanie followed hard on her heels. “Rank? Serial number?”

“He’s a first year grad student.”

“And you met where?”

“In Japan.”

“On your mission? Oh, how Happy Valley is that?”

“He wasn’t a missionary when we met.”

“Obviously, if he’s a grad student. Did you meet at church? When you were in Japan, I mean.”

Elly strode through the living room to the kitchen, arrived at the stove, had no idea what she was doing there, spun around and paced back to the living room, nearly colliding with Melanie coming after her. She was giddy and afloat, high in every sense of the word. All revved up and no place to go. She ran her hands through her hair and locked her fingers across the crown of her head.

“Elly, will you stop!”

Elly stopped in the hallway between the kitchen and living room and leaned her forehead against the closet door.

“What’s *up* with you?”

She didn't plan on saying what she said next, but couldn't help herself:
"I'm *in love with him*."

"Good grief. When did *this* happen?"

"Around one-thirty."

"You fell in love with him at one-thirty?"

"Give or take."

"Okay, okay. Calm down and think this through. Does he love you?"

"He loves me. Good heavens, but he loves me."

"Do you love him?"

"I said I was *in* love with him."

"You're *in* love with him, but you don't *love* him?"

"I love my Mom and Dad, and Grandma and Grandpa, and Uncle Oh and Aunt June. I'm not *in* love with them. Give me a break. I've never done this before, okay?"

"Really? Never? Not even a steady in high school? Have you told him that you're in love with him?"

Elly turned and shook her head and leaned back against the door. She felt exhausted.

"Well, don't. Toss out information like that on a first date and most guys panic. The rest take advantage."

"It wasn't exactly a *date*."

What else do you call having dinner at a guy's apartment? I take it you did have dinner?"

"We had dinner with his aunt."

"He lives with his aunt? Huh."

"It's not like that. He has an apartment in the basement. And as far as aunts go, she's pretty cool."

"Well, relatives first, in-laws second." She returned to her previous question: "And you're sure he loves you?"

Elly nodded.

"I don't know what to make of that." She sighed. "You're not going to the fireside?"

"No, I'm going to take a nap."

"All right, but no pining into your pillow."

"I don't pine."

“No, you become unhinged.”

In her room, Elly closed the curtains and lay on the bed. The dark, warm air gathered like a blanket around her. *Once they decide on a thing*, Wanda told her, *you can't fault them their loyalty*. Did she say that to every girl Connor dated? She doubted it. Like everything else about this curious relationship, the message had been custom delivered.

When he got back to the house, Connor found his aunt in the living room, reading the Sunday paper. “Elly said to thank you for dinner. She didn’t mean to leave without telling you.”

Wanda glanced at her nephew over the rims of her reading glasses. “It was quite my pleasure. Elly is a very nice girl.”

Connor nodded.

She said, not looking at him, and with no added inflection to her voice, “You know she’s in love with you?”

Connor let the full weight of the question sink in before he answered. “Yeah, I know.”

“Just so’s you do,” she said, with a small, satisfied smile.

Elly sat up, stretched, yawned, and rubbed her eyes. She couldn’t see a thing. “Blast,” she said, groping around on the nightstand for the eye-dropper to unglue her contacts from the insides of her eyelids.

It was six-thirty. The house was quiet. Melanie must have left for the Marriott Center (with an escort or two) to attend the fireside. Elly turned on the bedroom light and extracted the Yasmin box from the back of her underwear drawer. *I’m getting married*, she’d told Dr. Starley. She might have come to that conclusion first, but she wasn’t the only one.

Hoisted by my own petard. She hadn’t been playing fair when she brought up the *yobai*, the Heian engagement tradition. Recalling Connor’s reaction, she couldn’t help smiling. But the smile soon vanished. It wasn’t the third *night* the lovers spent together that sealed the engagement. But the third *morning*. That morning he’d stayed with her in their dreams—until the moment she woke up.

So now all he had to do was ask, and all she had to say was yes.

She punched the pill into the palm of her hand. In the kitchen she ran

a glass of water and swallowed the capsule without a second thought. She gave more consideration to what she was having for dinner.

Connor emailed the terminology lists to Nobuo Sunday night (Monday morning Japan time). In his P.S. he wrote, “Yes, we’re dating.”

Walking to class Monday morning, Elly found herself searching for his face in every crowd she passed.

Melanie said, “So, when do I get to meet him?”

“I’m sure the time will come soon enough.”

In Japanese 301, Elly now paid as much attention to *how* her uncle lectured as to the subject. Mentally outlining her 101 class at the same time left no time for the frivolous business of being-in-love.

Lunch with Melanie, then to her office to prepare for her class. On the way, she stopped at the Writing Center. “Is Connor in?” she asked.

The guy behind the desk checked the schedule. A short brunette sidled up to her. She at once defined for Elly the living personification of *perky*. “Hi,” she said, “I’m Alicia.”

“Elly.”

“Connor’s got Tuesdays, twelve to six, and Thursdays, two to six. If I see him, I’ll let him know you stopped by. Elly, right?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

She would have stopped by the Center after class, but with two weeks left in the term, Bradley and Darlene weren’t the only ones vying for her time. Even Sonia and Jane—her best students, *best* because they did their best while burdening her the least—showed up at her cubicle in the TA office. Elly told herself again: *No more extra credit assignments!*

Bradley was still hung up on the progressive forms of *to come* and *to go*. Or rather, that they didn’t have progressive forms, definitely a 300-level subject. He was still waiting at the end of the hour. He’d have to talk fast on her way out of the building.

Bradley got the door for her. There, leaning against the wall, was Connor McKenzie.

“Connor!” she said, quite aware how her face broke into a broad smile.

And here was a straightforward resolution to the problem: “Why don’t *iken* and *kuru* have progressive forms?”

A question he hadn’t been expecting. “Because they’re stative verbs. Stative verbs describe states of being. Nonstative verbs describe actions or processes.” He paused to come up with an example. “Consider *learn* and *know*. *Know* is a stative verb. You can know a lot or not much, but in static amounts. On the other hand, *learning* is a process, as in, ‘I’m learning new things every day.’ Since *kuru* and *iken* are stative, they communicate the *state* of coming or going, not the action. That makes the progressive more akin to the perfect aspect.”

Elly said to Bradley, “You get that?”

“Yeah, I think so.” He said to Connor, “Thanks,” though the expression on his face did not communicate thankfulness.

“No problem.”

Bradley headed north up the hall. Elly and Connor headed south. Connor said, “He didn’t look pleased with my explanation. Too grammar-geeky?”

“I suspect he’s not pleased with *you*. I’m afraid the boy has a crush on his teacher.”

They came to the Center. “Hey, Connor,” said Alicia. She was locking the outside door to the Writing Center. The Center closed early on Mondays in deference to family home evening.

He stopped. “Hi, Alicia. This is Elly.”

“Hi, Elly. We met earlier.”

“Then it may be too late, but I’ll warn you that Alicia is an annoying person, and always with the ulterior motives.”

Alicia took Elly by the arm and said, sotto voce, “I’m annoying even when I’m not pregnant.”

Elly smiled.

“See you two around,” said Alicia, and returned to the Center.

“She’s an interesting person,” observed Elly.

“She’s a bookie. She runs the office pool: who’s getting engaged and when, married and when, with side bets on getting pregnant and date of birth.” They climbed the stairs to the first floor.

“And what are her odds on you?”

“She’s bet against me so far.”

Elly laughed. “In other words, you don’t date much.”

“In other words.”

They pushed through the doors and walked into the hot August afternoon. On the steps down to the sidewalk her hand brushed his. As the motion of their steps brought them together again, he opened his hand and clasped hers, a touch as sweet as a kiss.

Is Alicia betting against you, now? she wanted to ask. She had to suppress the bubbly, effervescent impulse to skip along singing: *I’ve got a boyfriend, I’ve got a boyfriend.*

They arrived at the crosswalk outside the Wilkinson Center and waited for the light to change. Elly leaned against him. They crossed the street and wended their way through the maze of cars crowding the Law School parking lot. She asked, “Ever been engaged?”

“No.”

“Close?”

“I dated a girl off and on last year, but it was a dead hypothetical. Alicia had no worries.”

“A dead what?”

“It’s a theory—well, rationalization—I concocted, based on the many-universes hypothesis: that for every decision presented to you there exists a universe where the choice you didn’t make is played out. But some decisions, I’ve concluded, have no hypothetical, no alternate universe of possibilities. There may be a fork in the road, but the road not taken was a dead end all along. Some facet of who you are, or who they are, or the basic nature of space and time, simply precluded that choice having any life of its own. The ‘what if’ is dead.”

“You’re right, it does sound like a rationalization.”

“But it’s better than fretting about the past.”

“I do my fretting in the present. My roommate Melanie is as much a busybody as Alicia, and very protective. She was my first senior companion, you see.”

They crossed Ninth. Elly said, “You’re at the Center Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“I go there to study a lot or use the computers if I didn’t bring my lap-

top. I've got phonology mornings and Japanese lit. afternoons, Monday, Wednesday, Friday."

"I'm taking Japanese 301, besides teaching. I know. But like I said, it's thanks to my third-grade Japanese education."

They stopped at number 30. Elly hitched her backpack strap higher on her shoulder. *Invite him in*, she thought. But then do what? Other than what she was dying to do. She said, "Walk me home tomorrow?"

He smiled. "You know where to find me."

A long moment followed, the uncertain actors on the stage. He leaned forward and kissed her, lightly—politely—at first, and then with a growing insistence that betrayed a deeper hunger. His hands rested on her hips, her hands on his shoulders. Their lips parted. She flung her arms around his neck and raised her mouth to his once again, pressing her body against his.

Behind them Melanie said, "Ahem."

They flew apart—the poles of the magnet suddenly reversed. With a practiced air of nonchalance Melanie strode up the steps. She opened the front door and said over her shoulder, "As you were."

They looked at each other, grinning sheepishly like teenagers caught making out on the front porch. Connor said, "See you tomorrow."

"Yes. Tomorrow."

She let him go. They drew apart, reaching out till fingertips slipped from fingertips. He turned down the walk, and with a final glance, a smile, a wave, disappeared out of sight.

But hardly out of mind.

Chapter 20

An Old Man and a Car

Elly stopped at the Center the next day. Alicia was at the desk. “Connor’s back at the computers. Want me to get him?”

“Not if he’s busy. Tell him I’ll come by after my office hours.”

Connor had taken Alicia’s place at the supervisor’s desk when she returned at five. He was busy with a Chinese girl.

She sat down at a table across from the counter and got out the day’s kana quizzes. At this point she could predict the distribution of grades, just as she could predict that Bradley would attempt the kanji for all the vocabulary items (even if not required) and get most of them right.

The Chinese girl left. Elly went to the counter. “*OM*,” she said.

“Howdy to you too.”

She saw the delight in his eyes and her own face warmed with pleasure. “Can I come back there?”

“Is anybody waiting?”

Elly glanced around and shook her head.

“Come on down. There’s an aisle between the end of the counter and the reference bookshelf.” Elly found her way in and sat in the chair next to the desk. He asked, “How’s your class going?”

“I just finished grading the last kana quiz. Now all that’s left is finals.”

A student rushed into the Center. “Hey,” he wheezed, “how late are

you guys open?”

“About forty more minutes. Sign your name on the sheet there.”

Elly got up. “I’ll wait. I’ve got kanji to study.”

Connor worked with the student till five after six. He turned the key in the lock and kicked out the doorstep. “Who’s left?” he called out.

“I am,” Eddie yelled from the computer carrels.

“Door’s locked.” He replaced the key in the desk drawer, ducked into the break room for a minute and emerged with his backpack. Elly reached out her hand and he took it.

They were leaving the Center when Alicia rushed up. “Hold the door! I assume Eddie’s in there? Hi, Elly.”

“Hi, Alicia.”

Alicia disappeared inside the Center. The door closed and locked.

The early evening sky was filled with clouds. Elly asked, “The dream you had about the samurai at the school in Kudoyama—who did you say he reminded you of?”

“Oh, you mean Pat Morita, from *Karate Kid*. Yeah, the next dream was even weirder. It reminded me of *Soleil Rouge*. Ever see that movie? A western with Charles Bronson and Toshiro Mifune.”

Elly shook her head. “Do you think it was your grandfather?”

“McKenzie? He wouldn’t be caught dead wearing cowboy boots.”

“Tell me about him, your grandfather.”

“Not much to tell, except I didn’t like him. The feeling seemed to be mutual. I can’t remember him ever calling me by name.”

“But how would *you* describe him?”

“A package of distilled McKenzie-ness.”

“Which is?” she pressed.

“A large measure of introversion. An inability to suffer fools at all, let alone gladly. Passive-aggressive to the max. Probably the product of those long winter nights on the Orkney Islands. When my parents retired, they moved to Peaks Island in Maine. As the joke in the family goes, Dad is trying to prove that a man is too an island.”

They crossed Ninth East. Elly asked, “And on the plus side?”

“A pragmatic view of the world. A minding of one’s own business. An attention to detail. And yet some growing self-awareness. I’ve watched my

father fight those negatives all my life. Every generation, that McKenzie-ness gets a bit more diluted. Compared to *his* father, my dad's an outright extrovert. Though you'd never guess it from being around him."

They turned down the path from the sidewalk. Elly said, "Let's go to the baseball field. Melanie's probably with her kids."

The field was aswarm with children. Melanie was setting up the T-Ball stand in front of home plate.

Connor said, "After Grandma died, it was like he sank into a black hole. He'd sit in the study with his headphones on, listening to his opera, tuning everything out for hours."

"There must have been something he cared about."

Connor agreed emphatically. "The car."

"The car?" Elly's attention sharpened to a fine point.

"A 1966 metallic blue Mustang GT. My Mom called it his late midlife crisis car."

"And—"

"I don't know. I got to ride in it two, maybe three times in my whole life, and then only because Grandma insisted. 'Hands off the car, kid,' was the longest sentence he ever spoke to me. He died the day after Thanksgiving, my freshman year at college. He was sitting there with his headphones on and just stopped breathing. One moment he was here, the next he wasn't. We called 911 and the cops showed up and then the EMTs. All I could think was, *Wow, just like on TV.*"

He paused. "Though I suppose that says more about me than him."

The T-Ball game got underway. Connor said, "Your roommate, she's sort of like a sheep dog."

"A sheep dog? Unkind!"

"In a good way. Keeping all the chaos in order."

"Melanie's very pretty, don't you think?" She used the Japanese word *bijin*, more specific to her overall physical attractiveness.

Connor gave her an examining look and said, "You're prettier."

Elly stared back at him. He voiced such opinions in that unadorned McKenzie manner, as if stating that two plus two equals four. It foreclosed any reply on her part.

Chapter 21

Sammob

Connor asked, “How do you know when a game of T-Ball is over?”

“Search me. I’ve never watched one all the way through. You hungry? There’s some *shabu-shabu* in the fridge.”

Elly stopped by the dugout. “Mel, have you had dinner? We’ll warm something up.”

Melanie checked her watch and yelled back, “We’ll be done by seven-thirty at the latest.”

“I’ll leave the leftovers on the stove.”

Connor examined the gray keel of the cumulonimbus hovering above them. “They may be calling the game a little early.”

Back at the condo they dumped their backpacks on the couch and continued into the kitchen. She held onto his hand, refusing to let go. So he put his arms around her and they swayed back and forth to the silent music. She looked into his eyes and he kissed her. She encouraged him not to stop.

Thunder rattled the windowpanes.

They both jumped. Elly laughed. “You’re right about the rain. Mel may be home earlier than expected.”

She got the shabu-shabu while Connor tended to the rice. Ten minutes later the front door banged closed. Melanie poked her head into the kitch-

en. “Look at you boring two,” she said in a faux disappointed voice. Her hair was damp, her sweats streaked with rain.

“Yeah,” said Elly, “we already made out.”

Connor’s ears reddened. Melanie said, “If you don’t marry her soon, she’ll become downright unbearable.”

Melanie had her there. Elly hadn’t gotten over the sophomore pride she took in having a boyfriend. A decade after the fact, she finally understood what had obsessed her idiot girlfriends back in junior high and high school.

The rice was done by the time Melanie returned, her hair turbaned in a towel. Elly set the shabu-shabu pot on a hot pad. Connor retrieved the rice cooker.

“Well, this is domestic,” Melanie said. She gestured to Connor. “When in doubt, fall back on patriarchy.”

He gave her a peeved look but pronounced the blessing on the food. Dinner commenced. Melanie asked, “So, Connor, where are you from?”

“New York. Though I guess I’m from Maine now. My parents moved after I got back from my mission.”

“How long have you two known each other?”

Connor and Elly exchanged glances. Connor said tentatively, “Three months. Almost four.”

Elly nodded. It was true enough. Melanie gave her an accusing glance. “You were on your mission four months ago.”

“Connor was in Osaka. He was working for my Uncle Nobuo.”

“When did you ever find the time to date?”

“Ha! Missionaries don’t date.”

“I’ve known a few.”

“With Susan Eliason as my companion?”

“Good point. I take it you exchanged the occasional pleasantries?”

They both shrugged, caught the spark in each other’s eyes at the same time and smiled. Melanie fumed, “No private moments at the table.”

“Yes, Mel,” Elly said, bowing her head with exaggerated penitence.

The thunderstorms swept north, leaving the darkening sky aglitter with stars. The sidewalks were damp with rain.

Elly asked, “I can’t imagine you ever dating on your mission.”

“No, but I ended up with a few companions who had.”

“Really? I was kidding.”

“I guess the mission president believed I exuded some sort of fraternization-killing mood.”

“Not anymore.”

And he proved her point, cupping her face in his hands and pressing his lips against hers. The moist, warm connection made her heart jump. She knew she could do much more than kiss him, and he could do much more than hold her in his arms.

“What time are you going to school tomorrow?”

“I have a class at nine. I’ll be by about eight-thirty.”

“Okay. Eight-thirty.”

He insisted on walking her to her door. She welcomed another chance to kiss him good night.

Since Tanabata, since that breathtaking night, they hadn’t made love in their dreams. Elly suspected they would not, unless their perverse guardian angels grew impatient with the course of their courtship. Still, she hated waking up alone. The moments of transition between shared sleep and the lonely darkness of her bedroom had become as unbearable as the guilt and confusion that had haunted her before.

She’d always believed herself to be a “together” person. Susan Eliason had taught her differently. Connor had taught her differently. *Reluctant in wrath*, her great-great-grandfather had lectured his volatile daughters. Oh women were the samurai in the family, and Elly was her mother’s daughter. Even Aunt Wanda said so. That meant her mother probably felt about her father the same way Elly did about Connor—all those roiling emotions so tightly contained. She’d have to consider her mother in a whole new light.

She’d told Melanie that she didn’t love Connor. She didn’t know what it *meant* to love another person like that. But did she ever get infatuation. Did she ever get being *in* love. She loved kissing him—in their dreams she’d loved making love. It must be the sublimation catching up with her—all the boys she’d never dated, all the boys that never copped a feel,

all the boys she'd never necked with.

Melanie walked into the kitchen after her morning jog. "Connor seems like a nice boy."

"I'm glad you approve." Elly asked, "Do you know who Pat Morita is? Some *nisei* actor." She paused to remember, "*Karate Kid*."

"In the movie? He's the super at the apartment complex where Ralph Macchio and his mom live. Ralphie's getting picked on by the neighborhood bullies, but it turns out that Pat Morita is this incredible martial arts *sensei*. He teaches Ralphie how to kick butt by having him wash his cars. *Wax on, wax off*, as your uncle likes to say."

"Oh!" exclaimed Elly. "*Best Kid*. That's the title in Japan."

"I didn't think your pop culture IQ was that lacking. This is important how?"

"Yeah, he does look like my great-great-grandfather. Thanks, Mel. This really helps." She bounced to her feet and scampered up the stairs.

"How? How does it help?" Melanie shouted after her, "You're getting to be an irritating person to have around, Elly Packard!"

Connor was on time. Elly ran out the front door and into his arms before he rang the bell. Her eyes brimmed with excitement. "I know who he looks like. Pat Morita, I mean. Sammoh!"

"The guy in the Hong Kong action movies?"

"No, Sametaroh Oh. My great-great-grandfather. My brother Sam was named after him."

"Sametaroh Oh."

"Last name usually goes first—the American contingent must have come up with it—but yes. And he does look like Pat Morita. See, it makes sense. If *your* great-great-grandfather got together with *my* great-great-grandfather—"

"It makes *sense*?"

She playfully whacked him on the shoulder. "As much sense as anything. What classes do you have?"

"Phonology at nine, Japanese lit. at two. How about you?"

"Yesterday was the last day of class for 301. I have my kids at two and that's it."

She escorted him to the JKHB. Kusanagi Sensei came down the hallway from the north wing staircase. “Hello, Elly.”

“Auntie,” Elly replied, with a polite nod. Kusanagi Sensei continued into the classroom. “Oh Sensei’s sister-in-law,” she explained in a loud whisper. The bell rang. “I’ll be at the library, fourth floor.”

She left him with a brief, sweet kiss. For the first time in a long time, he gave serious thought to skipping class.

By “fourth floor” Elly meant the Asian collection. She was filling out a form when he arrived. “C’mon,” she said, jumping to her feet.

She led him through the stacks to Special Collections and handed in the form. Five minutes later, the librarian emerged from a side door with a boxed set of books. Elly extracted the first book in the set and handed it to Connor.

It was hardbound in black leather, a hundred pages or so. Connor flipped to the title page. “*Instructions in American English: Volume I*,” he read, “by Oh Sametaroh.” The text was typeset in *tategaki* format—top to bottom and left to right—which meant he had to turn the book sideways to read the sentences. He turned the page and said, “That’s way wrong.”

“The *katakana* phonetics?”

“No, the explanation of the grammar.”

“It’s fairly horrid throughout. As Uncle says, Sammoh was a businessman first, a linguist second. But he did get some things right. Like specializing in *American English* at a time when the sun never set on the British Empire.” Elly turned to the frontispiece. “There,” she said, pushing the book across the table. “That’s him, Sammoh.”

A black and white print of a middle-aged man dressed in the garb of a Victorian academician. The Meiji elite had been quick to adopt the style. The two swords and the crest on the wall behind him signified his samurai heritage. And he did look an awful lot like Pat Morita.

Connor shook his head in wonder. “He’s the guy.”

“Told you. That means the other man in your dream must be your great-great-grandfather.”

“Why’s he showing up in my dreams?”

“Sammoh might have been at the cutting edge of societal evolution in

his time, but I imagine he'd be pretty traditional by modern standards. If he wanted to get us together, arranging it with your great-great would be the honorable thing to do."

"Did he know how to use those swords?"

"Probably used them to open crates of books. Or hocked the real ones and put some cheap knockoffs on the wall for show."

"But you're from an honest-to-goodness samurai family—"

"Cool, huh? Though whatever conflicts they got themselves into, I suspect the Ohs preferred to talk their way out of them."

"*The sword is the warrior's right hand; his letters, the left.* Letters in the poetic sense, of course."

"Who said that?"

"Lord Hojo Soun of Odawara. I was there on my mission. This affinity between English and Japanese and teaching goes a long way back in your family. Like it's bred in the bone."

Elly gave Connor a curious look. "What?" he queried.

"It's just that my Grandpa Packard says the same thing."

Chapter 22

Last Call

That night in his dreams, Connor rode the Nankai line through the terraced countryside to Kudoyama. Up the hill from the station, two blocks past the Post Office, around the corner and down the alley, he stopped in front of the tavern. The curtain hanging over the entranceway was decorated with a *sake* kanji. He stepped inside.

“Aye, laddie!” a voice called out. Connor turned around. The speaker waved to him from one of the café tables. “Could use a third.”

He approached the table. A Stetson sat on the empty chair to the man’s right. Connor said, “You Connor McKenzie?”

“That’s me, son.” He spoke with a thick Scottish brogue. The Scotsman plucked the Stetson off the chair. “Take a load off.”

Connor set the *furosshiki* on the table—he still hadn’t managed to rid himself of the thing—pulled out the chair and sat down.

“Sam here’s dealing.”

Sametaroh Oh smiled a small, knowing smile and dealt five cards three ways. Connor picked up his hand. Four aces, queen high. No one had anteed or bet, so he laid the cards down on the table, face up.

“Well, hell,” his great-great-grandfather said. “No sense betting against that hand.”

The samurai scholar gathered up the cards, shuffled, and dealt again.

This time Connor collected four aces, king high.

The elder McKenzie said, “A man’s got to wonder about the point of this game.” He gave the younger Connor a wink, tipped back in his chair, and laced his fingers together behind his head. The third round of cards slid across the table. As Connor went to gather up the cards, the Scotsman leaned forward, chair legs thumping hard on the floorboards. He said in a low voice, “E’s dealing you nothing but aces, son. When ye getting in the game?”

Connor fanned the cards out in his hand. A royal flush, this time, in hearts. These guys weren’t subtle.

He sat on the weight bench next to the water heater and stared at the unfinished drywall. Working with Glenn had motivated him to tape and plaster the kitchen walls before leaving for Japan. He really should prime and paint them one of these days.

What’s the rush? Always the McKenzie question. *Think it over, take your time, analyze, evaluate.* And then ask for a second opinion.

All this dithering and second guessing must strike his ancestors as so much nonsense. Sametaroh Oh had established a family legacy during the dissolution of the Tokugawa regime and the burgeoning days of Japan’s Pacific empire. Connor’s great-great-grandfather journeyed six thousand miles from the windswept Orkney Islands to follow after a strange American religion with roots in the New World no deeper than his own.

These were *carpe diem* kind of guys. He wasn’t.

But the fact remained: he didn’t really have any decision to make. He possessed all the forensic tools a four-year education had bestowed on him, could dissect the syllogisms and factor down the transforms to their atomic constituencies. And it didn’t make a particle of difference.

What mattered was how often he turned to say something to her and realized she wasn’t there, how every morning he woke up expecting her by his side. He could no longer imagine living without the vibrant expectation of her smile, the light in her eyes, the touch of her hand, the intimate warmth of her body.

The only real question was: *Why wait?*

Connor went to the kitchen nook and ran a glass of water. It was

Reading Day. He'd promised to pick up Elly at eight-thirty. He had the morning shift at the Center, and the rest of the afternoon to study for finals on Friday.

After lunch, Melanie came to the library to cram for the Japanese 301 final with Elly. At 3:50, Elly's watch beeped. "Office hours," she said in a librarian's whisper.

Connor accompanied her to the JKHB and then camped out at the Center. When he returned to the TA office at five she was still busy with her students.

"Another half hour," she told him.

She collected him at twenty past. "What was your major when you first came to BYU?" she asked him on the way out.

"Engineering, like my dad."

"That's quite a shift, engineering to linguistics."

"Left brain to right brain." He traced a line across his skull from one ear to the other. "You didn't go to the MTC, did you?"

She shook her head. "I was deemed sufficiently fluent." At Ninth East she said, "It's too nice to go in right away. Let's walk through the park."

They crossed the outfields and found a cool, shaded place on the slope beneath the cottonwoods. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. The life of the park played out before them as if on a giant, outdoor stage.

"I met your great-great-grandfather again last night."

Elly smiled and squeezed his arm. "I thought maybe you did. I missed dreaming about you. What did he say?"

"He just dealt cards. My great-great-grandfather McKenzie was there too. He did all the talking. He didn't like the way I was playing. I kept ending up with these winning hands, four of a kind, aces, right off the top of the deck. Finally he wonders aloud when I'm going to raise the ante."

"I'm not up on my poker metaphors."

"You know what Aunt Wanda says about McKenzie men, how it takes us forever to make up our minds—"

"You can't make up your mind?"

"No, I've made up my mind. It's deciding what to do *next*, which I suppose is the same thing. To bet the house, as the metaphor would have

it.” He turned to face her. “I’m being obtuse. I know what they’ve been saying all along.” He looked into her wide, brown eyes. “I haven’t ever done this before,” he apologized. “So it’s going to come out all wrong—”

Elly raised her hand and pressed her fingers against his lips. “No,” she whispered, “not now.”

Connor froze. Then he nodded.

Elly averted her eyes, embarrassed by her cowardice. “I’d better go home,” she said. “Melanie is expecting me.”

Chapter 23

A Song to Sirius

It was a lie. Melanie was, in fact, sitting on the couch flipping through her *Kinesiology & Bio-mechanics* PE text. A Sada Masashi CD was playing on the stereo. The room smelled faintly of reheated pizza, slightly burned.

“*O-kaeri,*” said Melanie.

Elly mustered a lackluster “*Tadaima.*” She dropped her backpack in the armchair. In the kitchen, she held a glass beneath the faucet and ran the water cold. An incessant rattling drew her attention. Her hand was shaking so hard the glass was bumping against the side of the sink. She set the glass aside and forced herself to calm down.

The roaring in her ears died away. Music drifted back into her senses. She recognized the album, *A Time of Zephyr Dreams*. The last cut on the CD began.

In the song, a solo voice accompanied by acoustic guitar tells the story of a girl leaving home in the middle of the night, full of worry and a growing sense of distress. Outside the train window, she sees Sirius, the Dog Star, following faithfully along with her. She wants to speak to her father, but can only address herself to that distant, steadfast point of light.

Elly stood in the hallway between the kitchen and living room, leaned against the wall, and closed her eyes. As she listened to the music, she found herself repeating the same words: *Papa, I never thought I'd love another*

person as much as I love you.

She felt the tears on her cheeks. She was crying and didn't know why. It was ridiculous to weep over a simple folk song she'd heard dozens of times before without batting an eye, but she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. And then, almost ready to fall apart, she felt Melanie's strong arms around her. Elly wept, it seemed, forever, until those deep reservoirs of loss and regret and longing had finally spent themselves.

Melanie gently let her go. Elly kept her eyes downcast, mortified at the emotions she'd unburdened on her roommate. When she'd at last gained some measure of composure, she gave Melanie an uncertain smile to reassure her that the worst was over.

"Elly, what's the matter? I've never seen you like this before."

Elly tried to laugh. It came out as a wet snuffle. "I'm just being majorly premenstrual." She took a breath, grew more serious again. "Connor was going to ask me to marry him. I wouldn't let him."

"This is a bad thing? Do you want to marry him?"

"No. Yes." She shook her head emphatically, spilling tears out of the corners of her eyes. She nodded. "I want to, with all my heart I want to. I've wanted to marry him all along. It's just that—it's just that—" She felt the tears welling up again, so she breathed until that wave ran up on the beach and vanished into the damp sand. "I've never left home, Mel. I've been *away* from home, but I've never *left*. I didn't think there was a difference. I've lived in so many places, but *place* isn't what matters. I've always been *aneki*, the eldest daughter. But from now on I'm going to be *okusan*, Mrs. Connor McKenzie."

"No, you're going to be Elly Chieko McKenzie. Or Elly Packard McKenzie. Or Elly Packard-McKenzie with a hyphen."

This time Elly did laugh. She said in a quieter voice, "Listening to that song, I suddenly realized that even half a world away, I hadn't left home. When you marry in Japan, on the census, they move your name from your parent's family register to your husband's. Connor isn't Japanese, but metaphorically—"

"That's what weddings and receptions are for, silly. So they can play that song, you know, the one from Ephesians: *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife—*" She hummed a melody

Elly didn't recognize. Mel gave her a cross look. "Girl, you obviously haven't been a bridesmaid often enough."

"I haven't ever been."

"Then the first time's the charm. You *are* going to marry him?"

"Of course I am."

"If he hasn't formally asked you, you still make him."

Elly nodded. They hugged and Melanie said, "Remember what I told you before—no pining into your pillow. That's what my shoulder is for."

Melanie gave her another hug and returned to her studies. Elly went back to the kitchen and opened the oven door and found two slices of pizza left on the cookie sheet. After thirty seconds in the microwave, the pizza tasted just fine.

Chapter 24

The Lady Poet

Connor repeated the mantra to himself: *she didn't say no*. Still, that one small ray of hope couldn't erase the fact that he'd been an idiot. Trusting the advice of a couple of century-old geezers wasn't all that sane either.

C'mon, he lectured himself, *you just don't blurt out marriage proposals like that. You're supposed to woo. That's why the word's been in the lexicon so damned long* (usage noted before the twelfth century: Middle English, from *women*; Old English, from *wogian*).

Not to mention, his acerbic inner voice continued, *if you're going the direct route, get it out, man, in a coherent interrogative*. Four words: an auxiliary, two pronouns, a verb, and a question mark.

Instead, he'd done a good imitation of road kill: *Whap! Thump!* It was disgusting.

Around eight-thirty he remembered that he hadn't eaten and went upstairs and nuked some leftover casserole. A few minutes later, he caught himself standing at the sink, wondering what Elly was going to make for dinner on Sunday. Aunt Wanda insisted that she come over and Elly insisted on cooking every other meal in turn.

He watched the first ten minutes of the nine o'clock news, and then put on *La Bohème*. A tragedy about doomed love, yes, but like Shakespeare, Puccini could convince him that the world was a better place with a

little tragedy in it. And since he didn't understand more than a dozen words in Italian, it was easy to ignore the plot.

Except that he'd read the libretto, and when Mimi and Rodolfo sang *O Soave Fanciulla* ("Oh, beautiful maiden"), the most beautiful love duet ever written, he had to turn it off.

The last thought on his mind as he faded off to sleep: *she didn't say no*.

He awoke without her, and being without her was wrong the same way he knew the world was round. They hadn't made love since the night of Tanabata, but she was with him every night. Awakening rent apart the slender, silver thread binding their hearts and minds.

Connor sat on the edge of the bed, cold and alone, waiting for the sludge of sleep to drain from his skull. Deep in his brain, a thought flitted along a neuron. He tilted his head to one side, as if to trap it like an air bubble in a bottle. *Paths*. Something about paths, or roads, or a journey on a road. Walking, no, running—running along a road, a path. A *waka*—he could remember reading it, could picture the side of the page in the book it was on. But what was it?

A shower didn't stir his memories, except to remind him that *she hadn't said no*, which also reminded him that neither had she said *yes*—there being no squishy ground when it came to a Packard *yes* and a Packard *no*.

He was quite insane, he reminded himself. They'd been together barely two *weeks* in the real world. But he felt as if he'd known her for years. And somehow, counting backwards from the future past, he had.

He scanned his library. Basho, perhaps? Basho was a traveler, familiar with paths and journeys. But he didn't think *romantic* when he thought about Basho. Sei Shonagon was the right era, though she was more an essayist. His Japanese Court Poetry text? A quick look and he put it aside. Not *Genji*, but a contemporary of Murasaki Shikibu? *Think, brain, think*. He should know this.

He didn't have time to think. He had a phonology final in half an hour. He brushed his teeth and checked his backpack and left feeling like a person troubled by hard evidence of early senility.

Nobody was at the condo. Elly and Melanie had already left for their 301 final. He arrived at the JKHB at exactly eight. No time to sit around

and fret. Professor Geary was ready with the exams and Connor was armed with his blue, medium-tip Bic. All the anxiety with exams was about the leading-up-to, not the taking. He could be induced to confess, under sufficient duress, that he *enjoyed* taking tests, zoning everything else out and channeling the contents of his brain into that Zen state for two hours (plus or minus).

He handed in the exam an hour and three-quarters later. Elly wasn't in the TA office. She wasn't at the library. But once he was there—he found Mitsutani's *Practical Guide to the National Language* in the stacks and checked the literary timeline for the Heian Period. Starting with Murasaki Shikibu, eleventh century, he worked backward through the Fujiwaras, to Kyokai, Kukai, Komachi. Ono no Komachi. She was ninth century, not exactly a contemporary of Shikibu (that was Sei Shonagon). So where was his Komachi? He'd lent his Hirshfield translation to Aunt Wanda.

Knowing the *who*, he needed only five minutes to find the *waka* poem in an annotated collection. He jogged over to the bookstore and bought a card and headed back to the Writing Center. He practiced writing out the five lines before committing them to the card. The intensity of the moment focused his mind and the results were satisfactory.

He left the card on Elly's desk and ran up the stairs and down the hall, just in time to deliver himself to Kusanagi Sensei's examination.

Ninety minutes later, he placed the completed exam on her desk. She glanced at him and said with an air of inscrutable professorial nonchalance, "You're dating Elly?"

That unexpected question left him stumbling for an answer. A good thing she hadn't asked him before the exam. He mumbled an affirmative response.

"Oh," she said. "Makoto thought otherwise."

Returning from the Cougareat after a quick lunch, he remembered that Makoto was Oh Sensei's first name.

Xiaojing stopped by the Writing Center for one last review before her TOEFL exam on Saturday.

Twenty minutes later he heard someone calling his name. He looked up. At the counter, Alicia gave him a "Who, me?" expression and pointed

to her right. Elly stood just inside the doorway, a stack of exams clasped against her chest.

“Elly—”

She said in Japanese, “The question you asked me—that you were *going* to ask me yesterday—ask me again.”

Connor froze, a deer caught in the headlights. He’d never addressed another person using “marriage” as a transitive verb, let alone in Japanese. The words at last fell into place, the question sounding indelicately direct in his ears: “Elly, will you marry me?”

“*Hai!*” she answered, with an unequivocal nod of her head. “Finals,” she said in English. “I’ll see you at four,” and disappeared down the hall.

Connor blinked. An immense and sublime stillness surrounded him. He could hear his heartbeat, the rush of blood in his ears.

“Connor—” somebody said again.

He sat down and swiveled back. This time Alicia, auditioning for the role of Cheshire cat, pointed to her left. Xiaojing was waiting with a quiz-zical expression on her face. “That was—” He focused his attention on her workbook. “Um,” he said, keeping his voice low, “that was my fiancée.”

“Oh, when are you getting married?”

Good question. And there was an even better one, the one Elly had posed so long ago: *What happens next?*

A student wandered into the Center wearing a look of desperation Connor was familiar with at this time of year. When they were done and he checked the clock again, it was five after four.

“Hey Larry,” Connor said to Larry Jackson. “Can you take the desk? I’ll be back in a sec.”

Students streamed toward the stairwells. He didn’t see Elly until she was only two yards from him. She smiled and flung herself at him. He loved the way she did that. He caught her around the waist and lifted her up, her lissome body light as a feather. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Tell me the *waka*.”

“The waka? Oh, the waka.” He had it memorized by now:

I run to you
 ceaselessly
on the path of dreams
Yet no night of dreams
could ever compare
to one waking glimpse
 of you

He added, as he had on the card, “I do agree with the lady poet.”

She kissed him again, a kiss that lingered longer than the rules governing public displays of affection at BYU generally allowed. As they parted, Elly teased, “I never suspected you were such a romantic.”

“I worried maybe I wasn’t doing enough wooing.”

“I should do more to encourage it then.”

“More encouragement like that and I’ll have a nervous breakdown.”

“I’m the one having the nervous breakdown. I decided to marry you last night. Okay, I didn’t *decide*—I knew I was going to marry you all along. I just freaked when everything switched into reality mode. Then Melanie told me about this song: ‘A man shall leave his mother—’”

“*The Wedding Song*, by Paul Stookey.”

“You know it too?”

“Four older sisters, remember? Four wedding receptions.”

“The *leaving home* part is harder than I thought.” She held onto him for a while longer. “Do you have work?”

“Yeah, I probably should get back.”

“Me too.” She laughed. “Bradley is waiting. My star pupil. Come and get me when your shift ends.”

They kissed again. She smiled at him in a way that made walking away difficult.

“Hey, Connor,” Larry said, when he walked into the Center, “could you take the computers?”

“Sure.” Connor sat down at the computer sign-up desk at the back of the Center. Alicia walked over and gave him a bemused look.

“What?”

Alicia returned a minute later with a Kleenex. She leaned forward and

daubed at his mouth.

“Hey!” Connor jerked his head back.

“Lipstick.” Alicia held up the Kleenex as proof. “And he blushes. That’s so cute.” She resumed making him presentable. “Now the only question is the *date*. Hmmm.” With a wink she walked away.

Connor rested his forehead on the desk. Einstein said that time slowed down as one approached the speed of light, and Connor could believe it. He’d done a year’s worth of normal living in the past two hours. At this rate, he’d be hitting retirement by Fall semester.

Larry took over the computers at five.

Connor said, “Hey, Larry, see you in the Fall.”

He went to the break room and cleaned out his locker. Alicia was at the front desk. He paused at the counter. “How are you spending the break, Alicia?”

“At Lake Powell with Eddie’s folks. I figure it’s the last time I’ll look presentable in a swimsuit before I blow up like a beach ball. How will you two be spending the next three weeks, pray tell?”

“Hard to say. I’d have to ask Elly.”

“Remember, when it comes to the wedding, your job is to do whatever she says. See you, Connor.”

“See you, Alicia.”

The door to the Japanese TA office was propped open with a door-stop. The only sound inside was the squeak of a red felt tip against paper. He tread softly to Elly’s carrel, put a hand on her shoulder and kissed the crown of her head. She placed her hand on his and said, “Almost done.”

He heard her counting deductions under her breath. She wrote a grade on the cover page. “Okay,” she said. She stuffed the remaining exams into her backpack and hefted it onto her shoulder.

“So,” Elly said, as they walked back down the hall, “what made you decide on Komachi?”

“I don’t know. For some reason I woke up this morning and couldn’t get it out of my head.”

“The things going on in your head fascinate me. Oh, Melanie invited Chalmers Chōrō over for pizza and a video. It’s our end-of-finals party.”

“What’s the movie?”

“*Shall We Dance.*”

“Good movie. Who’s Chalmers Chōrō?”

“My old zone leader. Mel’s got her eye on him. And she should.”

“So now you’re ready to play the go-between.”

“I’m an expert about being in love with *you*, which I naturally extend to everybody I know.”

As they exited the JKHB, Connor remarked, “Alicia figured it out already. Now she’s ruminating about the date. There are three weeks left until Fall semester.”

“So, around the thirtieth?”

“That’s awfully quick, even by BYU standards.”

“I don’t want to wait. To be honest, I never thought I’d think *that* before.” Connor laughed and Elly said with feigned crossness, “I’m sure *you*, Mr. Stoic, could persevere for years.”

“No, no, I agree. My will is but Jell-O in your hands.”

And thus, Connor noted, does an indicative statement, when spoken by an Oh woman, become a fact. But he felt compelled to point out the obvious: “You know, this is going to cause some problems.”

“Yes, quite a few.”

She must have considered several, because worry and concern creased her brow. She leaned closer and tightened her hold on his hand.

Chapter 25

Figaro's Overture

Connor recognized Greg Chalmers from Japan. “We were both in Abeno ward when I was working for Nobuo.”

“Only you had a beard then,” Greg recalled. He snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that’s right. It must have been Elly you were asking about that one time.”

“Connor asked about me? What one time?”

“When was it? That’s right—you saw a pair of sister missionaries in Nakamozu and were wondering who they were.”

So? Elly’s expression said to Connor.

“Your last name threw me. I was expecting a Japanese name.”

Melanie interrupted, “Are you two officially engaged or what?”

Elly grinned.

“You’re engaged?” Melanie practically shrieked.

“Set a date?” Greg asked more calmly.

Elly looked at Connor and said, “The thirtieth.”

Melanie choked on her Diet Coke. “Of August?” Melanie said to Greg, “They’re both *pah*.” She made the plosive motion with her fingers next to her right ear. “I’m definitely going to stick around and see what happens *now*.” She mouthed again to her roommate, *the thirtieth?* Elly nodded. Melanie said aloud: “What are you going to do, *elope?*”

“There are a few strings I think I can pull.”

“Ah,” said Melanie.

The two men looked at each other and shrugged.

Later that night, after the pizza and video, Connor and Elly wandered across the baseball diamond. They stopped at second base and exchanged kisses that tasted of tomato paste and popcorn. Music from a car stereo reverberated across the park.

Elly asked, “Do you know how to dance?”

“I took social dance,” Connor said. “My senior year, a girl in my family home evening group wanted to audit the class, and a girl can’t audit social dance unless she brings a guy along. So now I can foxtrot to anything.” He swung her around by the waist. “Slow-slow, quick-quick. That’s all you have to remember.”

“Easier if you just pick me up and carry me.”

So he did that, and set her down on the grass. They watched the moon rise over the mountains. Elly said, “I just realized something. Obon ends on the fifteenth too. Don’t they light the Y on the mountain for graduation? We can pretend it’s the *okuribi* bonfire.”

“There do seem to be a few of our ancestors’ spirits wandering about. Perhaps it’s time to send them on their way.”

“The right intentions but a questionable grasp of the means? It was a different world back when they were our age.”

“Does that mean the ends do or do not justify the means?”

“I haven’t any complaints about the ends.” Elly nestled into the crook of his arm.

A playful shriek echoed across the park. Cold water pelted down. “The sprinklers!” They leapt to their feet and hurried to the safety of the parking lot. Jets of water arched across the dark lawn, throwing off a halo of rising mist that sparkled icy white in the glare of the distant streetlights.

Elly asked, “Can I come over tomorrow?”

“Not tonight?”

“I’m too frazzled. And feeling a bit too randy for my own good. Not a healthy combination.”

“Afraid I might take advantage?”

She draped her arms around his neck and smiled coquettishly. “You’re too honorable a fiancé to try something like that. And I’d be disappointed if you didn’t. Our great-grands really knew what they were doing. Though I keep thinking there’s something else they were after.”

“You mean getting married?”

“Something more than getting married.”

When she got back, Melanie and Greg were sitting on the couch talking. He didn’t have his arm around her yet. But seemed inclined in that direction. Elly knew better than to barge in, so she went upstairs to her room and lay on her bed.

We haven’t gotten to the ends. She was chock full of cryptic wisdom these days. There was so much more they had to do. She closed her eyes and saw again the image of an old man and a young boy and a car. There was so much more *she* had to do. She was determined to marry Connor. She was convinced that they belonged together forever, and that absolutely no good would follow from their being apart. She was so desperately *in* love with him, yet she still could not say that she *loved* him.

What is love? she asked herself. From a long-forgotten AP English class, the lines from *Twelfth Night* crept into her thoughts:

’tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What’s to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty;
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.

Tears welled up in her eyes. *Patience*, she recalled her mother lecturing her so many times. Elly smiled despite all her fears.

The next morning Connor met her at the back door of the basement apartment with a drawer under his arm. Classical music was playing in the background. Elly recognized the music only as an opera.

She looked at the drawer. “What’s that?”

“It’s from the bureau. The bottom panel is split.”

He led her through the doorway adjacent to the stairs, past a weight bench, the water heater and the furnace. Her attention was drawn to the kitchen alcove. A pair of naked hundred-watt bulbs glowed in the ceiling fixture. A microwave, a refrigerator, a set of cupboards over a counter and sink.

“No stove?”

“Never ran the wiring and Aunt Wanda thought a gas stove was too much of a risk with her previous tenants. Always use the kitchen upstairs. The washer and dryer are down at the other end by the stairs.” He indicated the spackled drywall. “I’m getting around to all this.” He set the drawer on top of the bureau. “A little beat up, but it’s in pretty good condition.”

Elly nodded.

“There’s a mirror that goes with it.” He rooted around in the closet beneath the staircase. “Here it is.” He held up the dusty, walnut-framed mirror.”

Elly nodded again.

“The question is where to put it. The bureau, I mean. I was thinking against the wall next to the window. But facing east or north?”

She followed him into the bedroom. “This way,” she said, pointing toward herself.

“Linens and towels are here.” He indicated the closet next to the bathroom door.

Elly turned around and took a step. Her foot struck something hard and heavy. She glanced down at the corner of the bed and lifted the edge of the comforter. The frame was elevated on four cinderblocks, which in turn sat on a plywood pad. She couldn’t see what kept the whole thing from rocking over.

Connor explained, “I put two-by-six blocks under the mattress frame, and dropped quarter-inch lag bolts through the angle irons into the cinderblocks.”

Elly bit her lower lip and scrunched up her cheeks.

What?” Connor asked.

“Nothing.” But she was beginning to giggle.

Connor looked hurt. “It’s a quite efficient design.”

Elly burst out laughing. “It is, it is. I’m sorry.” She managed a moment of self-control. “It’s all very practical.”

“Yes, it is.” He pouted.

She kissed him to make up for her teasing. “What’s the opera?”

“Mozart. *The Marriage of Figaro*.” He led her into the living room, hit stop and then play. “It has one of the greatest overtures of all time.” She noted how his right hand moved as if conducting the orchestra through the exuberant, opening bars. “During the overture, Figaro is measuring his apartment for a new bed.”

“How appropriate.” Her eyes sparkled.

“I thought so too.” He extracted a booklet from the CD case and turned to the libretto. “Here it is.”

That was indeed how the opera started: Figaro marking out a space for the bed the Count had so generously provided.

Elly nodded. “I think you should fix the drawer, *Danna-san*.”

“That I will, *Okusan*.”

Chapter 26

Aunt Wanda's Advice

Elly didn't hear Aunt Wanda coming down the stairs until the old woman knocked and said, "Hello there, Elly."

She swiveled around in the chair. "Hi, Aunt Wanda. Connor's in the kitchen fixing the bureau."

"Yes, the third drawer in that old oak bureau has a split bottom." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She turned down the hallway. Elly heard her say to her nephew, "I see you're fixing that bureau."

"Just the drawer. Otherwise it's in pretty good shape."

"So I see. And you're about ready to start painting as well."

"Did you have any particular color scheme in mind?"

"Oh, I think Elly's tastes are preferable to mine in this case."

The washing machine started up, drowning out the rest of the conversation. Elly finished marking the exams, checked them again to verify her arithmetic, and then got out her grade sheets. She ducked into the kitchen and asked Connor how to get on the Internet.

"The laptop's on. Just hit the spacebar to wake it up and click on the browser icon."

The screen lit up when she tapped the spacebar. He had a mouse in addition to the touchpad. Maneuvering the mouse, she noticed a minimized Word file and opened it. It was Connor's to-do list:

1. Fix bureau
2. Closet space
3. Finish kitchen (next 2 wks)
 - sand
 - paint
 - new light fixture
4. Parents?
 - Wanda, Lynne, Martin, Bishop Ferguson, Alicia (not here), Melanie, Oh Sensei
5. License
6. Temple date

It was a good list, she had to admit. And what about their parents? *Oh, no*, she thought. There was no way her parents could arrange to come on such short notice, especially during Obon. Eloping was cowardly, but she knew her mother would insist on putting the marriage off till Christmas. Even at the age of twenty-three, Elly had no confidence in being able to stand up to her mother in a match of wills.

She smiled grimly to herself, minimized the window, and brought up Internet Explorer. She logged onto the humanities department server and entered the final exam scores. The computer calculated the grades. Bradley made an A. Good. He deserved it.

Connor clamped the drawer together and daubed off the excess glue oozing from the split in the wood. “Computer work okay?” he asked.

She nodded and said in a rush, “What about our parents? We can’t tell them, we *can’t*. Not beforehand.” She paused and said more tentatively, “Do you think your parents are going to mind?”

Connor shook his head. “I honestly don’t think so. In your case—”

“Yes, in my case, very much a big deal. A big enough deal without making it an even *bigger* deal, which is what it would become if my parents got involved. And no reception. That’s got to be a plus. I mean, I don’t feel a pressing need for a crystal punch bowl and a china gravy boat.”

“Well—if you can do without a china gravy boat.”

Elly took a deep breath. It was crazy, but she had a plan. Perhaps an impossible plan, but even a doomed plan was preferable to no plan at all.

“Hungry?” Connor asked. “It must be after twelve by now.”

They went upstairs to the kitchen. Connor poked around in the refrigerator and came up with bagels and deli meat.

Aunt Wanda walked in carrying a pile of dish towels. Elly whispered to Connor, “Should we tell her?”

“What’s that?” said Wanda.

Connor said, “We’re getting married.”

“Good for you. Have you set a date?”

“The thirtieth,” they said together.

“The thirtieth? Of this month, you mean?” She raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t leave yourselves much time.”

Connor said, “That was sort of the point. Seeing how it doesn’t give us a lot of time, and our parents live pretty far away—”

“Really far away,” Elly said. “*Really*.”

“So you plan to elope?” She said dryly, “How practical.”

Elly confessed, “It was more my idea.”

“I don’t see much point in waiting once you’ve made up your mind. But you can’t simply present your marriage as a *fait accompli* and damn the consequences. I recommend involving as many of your relatives in the next three weeks as possible.”

“But if someone tells, if they find out—”

“And how will they not find out, Elly? However right it might be, don’t pretend that what you are doing won’t profoundly affect everyone you know. The more allies you win to your cause, the better.” Wanda resumed folding the dish towels into the drawer next to the stove. “Have you thought of where you’re going to live?”

Connor said sheepishly, “I assumed—”

“Have you asked Elly? Not assumed?”

Connor looked at Elly. “Well, no, I—” He took her hand. “Would you like to live here after we get married?”

“Yes,” Elly said, grinning. “I’d love to.”

“And I’d greatly enjoy having you.” Wanda finished folding the towels and slid the drawer closed. She paused at the doorway. “I am no great fan of receptions, but you are required to send out announcements. Regardless of how one gets there, a marriage should be formally acknowledged

by the participants. You might as well wait so you can send out a decent photograph. And that means you've got to look at least half as nice as she does, Connor." She said to Elly, "If he groans, hit him."

Connor groaned. She hit him.

The next morning, Elly attended church with Connor. Melanie tagged along. Bishop Ferguson was in the lobby of the Crabtree Building greeting students and the occasional parents who'd arrived in Provo for a son or daughter's graduation.

"Oh, Connor." He dug around in his suit coat pockets and produced a handful of receipts. "Here we are. I'd like to settle the last of the ward accounts before summer break."

"I'll take care of these after church."

The bishop glanced inquisitively at Elly and Melanie. Connor said, "Bishop Ferguson, this is my fiancée, Elaine Packard."

"Your fiancée—" He recovered quickly. "What a pleasant surprise!"

Melanie said, "And I'm the soon-to-be-abandoned roommate."

He smiled and shook hands with them. As he walked away, he took a three-by-five card from his jacket pocket and made a note. The note came into play as the bishop opened services. He welcomed the visiting parents and families and then added, "I was just informed that Connor McKenzie and Elaine Packard are getting married." He looked out over the congregation. "Connor, why don't you stand up and show us your lovely bride-to-be—"

Melanie chortled under her breath. "You forgot about that part, didn't you? Now you're an *officially* engaged BYU couple."

After finishing the tithing count with the first counselor, Connor took care of the bills from the closing social (that he hadn't attended). It was his Radar O'Reilly routine: "Sign here, initial that."

The bishop stopped him on his way out the door. "Will you two be moving when you get married?"

"We'll be living with my aunt, same address."

"We like to keep a few married couples in the single wards, you know, as ballast. I was hoping you'd consider staying on."

“I’ll ask Elly. I think it’ll be fine with her.”

It was fine with Elly, though she laughed. “I’m not sure I’m qualified.”

“You don’t want to be a role model?”

Melanie said, “It’d be hard to recommend *your* courtship as a model for anyone, even at BYU.”

They walked back to the condo. Elly remembered to tell her roommate that she was eating Sunday dinner with Connor’s cousin. “Off to the in-laws, eh? Well, I shall be enjoying lunch with my *loyal* family home evening group.” She tromped into the kitchen.

Walking across the park to the Tree Streets, Connor asked, “Is Melanie mad at you for some reason?”

“I don’t think she’s *mad* at me. But she does feel betrayed in a way. I’m sure she had plans for us over the break. And next semester. Organizing people is Melanie’s thing. PE is a degree in telling people what to do—that’s how she describes it. Plus, now she’s got an empty slot to fill. I can even imagine that she thought *she’d* be my go-between and find the right guy for me. But then I went ahead and did it on my own.”

Elly was quiet for a moment. “Worse, I took away her last good excuse. I think that’s why Melanie went on a mission. I mean, the deep-down reason. People assume there must be a positive relationship between attractiveness and wanting-to-be-married. Like, ‘She’s pretty, I wonder why she isn’t married yet?’ Like it’s a personality defect. Worse, when your roommate gets engaged, the question everybody asks is, ‘So when are *you* getting married?’ That’s the question everybody’s going to ask Melanie now.”

They walked for a few more minutes in silence. Then Connor said, “So why did *you*?”

“Why did I what?”

“Go on a mission?”

She answered him with a smile.

Chapter 27

Aunt Zariah

Elly had been there before. As it is written in the Epistles, *Whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell.* And neither could she. In the dream, the boy had waved to her from the porch. When she approached, he opened the screen door and invited her into the house.

Through the doorway on the left was the study, and that was where the boy led her. In the far corner of the room, an old man sat in an armchair. His eyes were shut and he had on a pair of Koss headphones, closing out the world.

The boy beckoned to her. He crossed the room and stood next to the armchair. He repeated the gesture and pointed at his grandfather, a universal sign language that said, “You speak to him for me.” The request made, he stared up at her, his eyes large and blue.

She asked instead, “Why don’t you talk to him yourself?”

He shook his head. They couldn’t talk to themselves in their dreams. The thought occurred to her that this was simply a reflection of their real lives—their own selves couldn’t say what they didn’t yet know. *Here is a page from my life,* he was saying. *Tell me what it means.*

She feared she would have to read the entire book first.

The old man opened his eyes and took off the headphones. Notes of music escaped into the air like fireflies released from a bottle. It was the

last act of the opera. Susanna is masquerading as the Countess—and the Countess as Susanna—exposing the Count’s attempted infidelities. The other day, Elly had skimmed through the libretto. She remembered only the verses from the very end, when everything is reconciled in a tender duet: “*Contessa, perdono,*” the Count sings. “My Countess, forgive me.” To which she replies, “In kindness, I shall say yes.”

The old man reached up and grasped her hand and held it tightly, much as she had held his once before.

Connor said, “Elly—”

She started, wondering how long she’d been standing there. “I was—thinking about something.”

“My grandfather’s study,” Connor said with a sweep of his arm.

The same armchair, the same double-pedestal rolltop desk. She ran her fingers across the scarred surface. Her attention was drawn to a framed photograph in one of the cubbyholes.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Connor said. “Uncle Martin, my dad, my grandfather.”

The three men leaned against the fender of the Mustang. The boy sat on the hood between the father and grandfather. His small arms were folded against his chest just as his grandfather’s were.

“You were a cute kid,” Elly said.

“All eight-year-olds are cute kids.”

Aunt Wanda poked her head into the study. “There you are. Quit hiding and come meet the rest of the family.”

Wanda had already broadcast the news of their betrothal, eliminating the need for embarrassing proclamations on their part. Elly, though, felt like a debutante arriving at a cotillion. “Isn’t she a pretty one,” said an older man she recognized from the photograph as Connor’s uncle, albeit carrying an extra fifty pounds and a shock of snow-white hair.

Mike greeted her with a laconic, “Hey.”

“You must have met in Japan,” said Lynne.

“When I was working for Elly’s uncle in Osaka,” Connor said. This explanation struck a sufficiently plausible chord.

“Dinner smells wonderful,” Elly said.

Honey-baked ham was the main course, along with gravy and string

beans. The meal commenced as soon as Glenn got back from church. As the food was served and passed around the table, Wanda filled in everybody about the particulars of Elly's biography. She clearly enjoyed boasting about her nephew's fiancée.

"You're embarrassing Elly," Lynne finally objected.

"An aunt's prerogative," Wanda rejoined.

"Well," Martin said, "a McKenzie with a General Authority in the family, that'd be a switch."

Lynne asked Elly, "You lived in Japan when you were little?"

"A small town—well, small in comparison—called Hiratsuka."

"I do wonder sometimes what it'd be like to live all over the world."

"I used to wonder what it'd be like to live in one place," mused Elly.

"Be careful what you wish for," Wanda cautioned. "Once a McKenzie gets rooted, he's plenty hard to get moving again." She said to Connor, "You could have knocked me over with a feather when your parents sold the house in New York and moved to Maine. I guess some leopards do change their spots. Still," she said to Elly, "best to keep the rock rolling while it's still in motion."

"Nothing wrong with being rooted," countered Martin. "You build a strong house on a firm foundation."

"And I've seen many a foundation waste away for lack of anything substantial to hold up. Muscles atrophy when not used. The better a life is exercised, the better it is lived."

"That's enough, you two," said Lynne, as if scolding a pair of contrary children. She turned to Elly and said with a wink, "One last tired question and we'll leave you alone: What's your major?"

After dessert, Glenn left for a bishopric meeting. Mike got mustered into busboy duties.

"Aunt Wanda—" Elly said, as they passed their plates around so Mike could collect them at the end of the table. When Wanda turned to her, Elly asked the question that had been on her mind all that afternoon. She recalled the boy pointing from her to his grandfather and had begun to guess that it meant more than the relationship between the boy and the man. It was an inopportune question, to be sure, but she thought it better

to ask the whole family.

She said, “Connor’s grandfather, was he a member of the Church?”

“No,” Wanda answered.

“I just thought he went inactive,” said Connor, clearly surprised.

Martin shook his head. “Goes back a long way.”

Wanda said, “Goes back to him and his sisters being orphaned. After his father was killed in a slide at Bingham Canyon mine, his mom moved the family back to Provo. Then two years later she died during the 1918 influenza epidemic. After that, the family was divided up among the relatives—that’s how it was done in those days—and Connor was taken in by his Aunt Zariah.”

“That’s the whole problem right there,” Martin said, in a tone of voice that revealed his low opinion of the woman.

“She was her father’s daughter. And as stubborn.”

“True, but it wasn’t her grievance. A grievance ought to die with the man who brung it upon himself. Zariah had no cause dragging our dad into it like it was the second battle of Falkirk. When being stubborn didn’t get her what she wanted, the woman got plain mean.”

Elly cringed inside. Wanda, though, ignored her brother and continued with the story. She said to Connor, “Now, you do know what got your great-great-grandfather excommunicated?”

“I’ve heard the story.”

“And George Q. Cannon was right about him, everything he said at his funeral.” This statement was directed at Martin, another volley in an argument skirted but not conceded. “He was a cantankerous Celt through and through. Worse when he got too much cider in him—the Word of Wisdom not being in those days what it is today. He’d marched with the Mormon Battalion and no doubt saw himself as William Wallace hemmed in by the conniving English. It would have been enough if he could have apologized afterward, but once the thing was said, it gained for him a whole new veracity in the saying, and defending it became a matter of principle, impossible to retract.

“He may have been done an injustice,” and again, this opinion she aimed laterally at Martin. “But I think even he would have admitted it was all pride and stubbornness that got him excommunicated in the end.

George Cannon knew that as well, which was why he had his baptism and temple blessings restored.”

Martin said, “And if Zariah had simply let the matter drop, let those dogs lie, the matter would have ended right there.”

“Zariah is certainly culpable in the matter,” Wanda retorted. “She was young enough at the time to see only the best in her father, to idealize the injustices done him, real *and* imagined. She nursed them long after his reputation had been rehabilitated.”

“The woman wasn’t even married,” Martin said with a snort of disgust. “Don’t know what qualified *her* to raise our dad.”

“Don’t be a chauvinist, Martin. She had means. That’s what mattered. And she never stood in the way of our father getting baptized—”

“And did nothing to encourage it.”

Wanda explained to Elly, “In those days they didn’t have the church youth programs we have today, or home teachers. Or computerized membership records, for that matter. When Aunt Zariah and our dad moved to Salt Lake City, they fell through the cracks. You know that old Jesuit saying? *Give me the boy till he is seven, and I will show you the man.* He was seven when they left Provo. The die was cast.”

Martin grumbled something that drew a sharp expression from Wanda. Elly felt as if she’d made an illegal U-turn, resulting in a multi-car pileup.

The phone rang shortly after they got home. “That’s mine,” Connor said and hurried out of the room. Wanda put the plate of leftover ham on the table. Elly went down to the basement to see what Connor was doing.

The bishop, he mouthed. He was describing some aspect of the church financial software.

Back in the kitchen, Wanda was making a place in the refrigerator for the ham. Elly stood there for a minute in quiet apprehension. Finally she said, “Aunt Wanda, I’m sorry about this afternoon. I didn’t mean to start an argument.”

“Heavens-to-betsy.” Wanda laughed. “Start them as often as you wish. It greatly improves the after-dinner conversation.”

“But Uncle Martin—”

“Martin, *psshaw*. No offense taken, none given. I’ve been goading Mar-

tin my entire life, so believe me when I tell you that he enjoyed the exchange as much as I did. You know a McKenzie man is taking an argument too seriously when he *doesn't* grumble and he *doesn't* answer back. To tell the truth, we both know that Zariah was as much at fault in the matter as Martin says. Still, she was always my favorite aunt. She was a librarian at the University of Utah for many years. Her hard work and support made it possible for my dad to get his engineering degree in the middle of the Great Depression. It was thanks to her that education became such a priority in our family."

Connor came into the kitchen. He explained, "The bishop needed to print out a tithing reconciliation for a student moving out of the ward."

Wanda said, "We've been talking about your great Aunt Zariah."

"I was wondering," Connor said. "If Grandpa wasn't baptized when he was alive, why haven't his temple ordinances been done for him?"

"He expressly forbade it in his will."

"Why would he do something like that?"

"It is curious. My dad respected my mom and her convictions more than many men who've spent their whole lives in the Church. When she was a temple worker, after her eyesight got too bad for her to drive herself, he'd take her up there every morning and pick her up every afternoon." She shrugged. "I'm sure he had his reasons. I hope to live long enough to find out what they were. That part of his will was sealed."

"Sealed? How does that work?"

"With lawyers," Wanda observed, "anything is possible."

Wanda's assurances hadn't completely calmed Elly's concerns. She asked as they walked back across the park to the condo, "Do you think I upset anybody, bringing up that business about your grandfather?"

Connor responded the same as his aunt had. "Dad says that when he was growing up, Wanda and Martin used to go at it like cats and dogs, Martin too often ending up the one treed." He said, "Why did you?"

Elly hesitated. She hadn't told him about her dreams. They seemed to her another part of his grandfather's sealed life, and not her prerogative to reveal. "It's just that the things you've said about him—I wondered. I mean, your grandmother and grandfather must have loved each other."

“All my life, they were Grandpa and Grandma, two old people who lived at the same address.” He paused and said, “I never heard him say a cross word to her. Everybody else, yes, but not to her. And she’d holler at him. The thing is, I don’t ever think she took him seriously, not the whole brooding, Celtic thing. She saw through his tatemaes.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“I was a kid who took *everything* too seriously. I think that’s why hanging out with Billy was so relaxing. He didn’t take anything seriously.”

“Then I won’t take you seriously.” She kissed him. “I’m going to ask my Grandpa Packard to marry us. It should go a long way toward making things right with the rest of the family.”

“The General Authority, you mean.”

“Yes. He’s great. You’ll love him. I’ll have to tell Uncle as well. Did you know he once suggested that you and I should date? No doubt he’ll take credit. Though only after the dust settles. He’ll be ducking and covering in the meantime.” She grinned. “There’s a little Aunt Zariah in all of us.” She frowned. “And a lot of my mom in me.”

Chapter 28

The General Authority

Monday morning Elly checked her email at the library before heading to the JKHB. There was a message from her mother. It was the usual account of a week-in-the-life-of-a-mission-president's-family her mother periodically sent to their friends and relatives. Though this message was addressed to Elly alone.

The addendum at the bottom made clear why. "Yuki mentioned the other day that you were dating Connor McKenzie. They've vouched for his character, so I'll treat this as welcome news. But I want to remind you again how important it is that you finish your education. Don't be *reluctant in learning*, as your great-great-grandfather wrote. Persevere at your teaching, as I believe you have both a God-given and an inherited talent for it."

Elly smiled at her mother's ability to assume the worst and see the best in her simultaneously. *Don't get married and get pregnant right away*, she meant.

I am getting married. But I won't get pregnant right away. She didn't write that. Instead, she chattily outlined the history of the relationship, starting with the day they "met" on the Nakamozu Nankai. She left out anything that might possibly point to their impending marriage.

"I shall be *resolute in learning*," she concluded. "I'm getting my degree in teaching Japanese, as Uncle will no doubt be overjoyed to hear."

Uncle was in his office. His black gown hung in a dry cleaning bag on

the inside door hook. She said, “I thought you’d be at graduation.”

“One of the benefits of no longer chairing the department. I’ll have enough to do at the college convocation this afternoon. Did you get your grades turned in?”

She nodded. “Uncle, I have something important to tell you.”

“It wasn’t that bad after all, was it?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I was hoping to get a 101 section Fall semester. I’ve decided to major in teaching Japanese.”

Oh Sensei’s countenance lit up like a hundred-watt bulb. He rummaged through the stack of papers spilling off the end of the bookcase. “Your mom wasn’t sure about you plunging back into academic life—she worried about you getting overwhelmed—but I knew it was just the thing. Here we are—” He pulled out a manila folder, glanced at it, and handed it to her.

Elly read the cover sheet: *Teaching Japanese Course Outline for Native Speakers*. “So, you think I qualify as a native speaker?”

“Once you finish the kanji courses. Was that what you wanted to tell me? It certainly is good news.”

“Yes and no. There’s something else that’s a bit more important. And you can’t tell Mom. Not right away. Not until I say so.”

“Not tell her what? About changing your major?”

“No, I already told her about that.” She took a deep breath. “You know Connor McKenzie—?”

“Yes, of course. Did you—”

“We’re getting married.”

Uncle stared at her.

“We’re getting married,” she said again.

“But—I thought you didn’t know him.”

“It turns out that I did. We met in Japan, like you said, when he was working for Uncle Nobuo.”

“You’re getting married,” Uncle said. “To Connor.”

Elly nodded.

“That’s not a bad thing.” He chose his words carefully. “I told you before I thought you’d like him. So why can’t you tell your mom?”

“We’re getting married right away. Like, at the end of the month.”

“At the end of *this* month?” A long minute passed. “Seriously? Why so soon?”

“It’s complicated—” she started to say. She shook her head. “No, it’s not complicated. It’s what we’ve decided to do.”

“But the end of *this* month?”

“Connor’s not telling his parents either. Getting too many people involved will just mess things up. You know how Mom is.”

“Yes, I know how your mom is. Your mom’s going to kill me.”

“She’s not going to kill you. Not if you don’t tell her.”

“Do you know how often Tokugawa court histories talk about disgraced officials being *ordered* to commit *seppuku*? Not so much the honorable option *voluntarily* taken.”

“Oh, you’re being dramatic.”

“You can be my second. Be kind to my severed head.”

Elly said, “I’m going to ask Grandpa Packard to marry us.”

Uncle sagged in his chair. “If—*if*—your grandfather agrees, we just might weather the storm.” He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “This situation is starting to have a very familiar ring to it—” He straightened his chair, planted his feet on the floor. “We’d better have you and Connor over for dinner.” He brightened. “Yes, June can decide what to do.”

“It *is* the right thing to do,” Elly insisted.

“I’m sure it is.” He got to his feet and put his hands on her shoulders, a rare expression of concern on his part. “Are you sure?” he asked her, his voice quiet and serious.

“Yes, I am.”

He sighed. “Do the two of you even have a place to live?”

“With Connor’s aunt. She has a basement apartment in her house in the Tree Streets. It’s quite nice, and so is she.”

“I suppose we’ll all get to know each other eventually. Is Wednesday okay for you?”

“Wednesday’s fine.”

The next day Connor borrowed the Camry for the drive to Salt Lake City. It was a quiet drive. Elly still hadn’t decided what she was going to say. She couldn’t imagine how her grandfather would react. But she kept

these thoughts to herself as well.

She scheduled the appointment with her grandfather's secretary. "It's been a whole year and a half," Carol observed when Elly called. "Your grandfather says you just got off your mission. Back to school already! How are things going for you?"

When Elly mentioned making an appointment, Carol told her not to worry about it. "You can come up anytime, Elly. He's always happy to see you."

But Elly insisted, and they settled on Tuesday at eleven. "And don't tell Grandpa it's me. It's—a surprise."

"A surprise?" Carol echoed.

"Nothing bad," Elly hastened to add.

"Of course not," Carol said knowingly.

Downtown Salt Lake City was crowded with tourists. The annual BYU Education Week (Bible camp for adults) had become a kind of Mormon pilgrimage, the wagon trains having been supplanted by caravans of RVs. Elder Packard would be coming down to Provo to conduct CES and Education Week workshops. Elly didn't think squeezing in a marriage among his other duties would inconvenience him too much.

Connor didn't come with her to Elder Packard's office. "I need to do this myself," she said.

He understood, and remained behind in the cavernous lobby. Before he let her go, he held his hand against her cheek and kissed her gently. That alone gave her more courage than all her strategizing.

The express elevators were thronged with tourists heading up to the observation deck on the twenty-sixth floor. Elly rode slowly and alone to the offices of the Church Education System. Carol greeted her with much maternal warmth.

"Now, what's this all about?" She grasped Elly's hands and pointedly inspected her ring finger. "I guess it's not what I thought."

Elly couldn't resist confirming her suspicions. "But I think it is."

Carol clapped her hands together. "You're getting married! I knew it!"

Elly put her finger to her lips. Carol picked up the phone and in a sober voice informed Elder Packard that his granddaughter was here to see him. "You can go in," she said, the smile still on her face.

The bright sunlight spilling through the window cast a halo around her grandfather's silhouette. "Elly!" he exclaimed. He got up from behind his desk and embraced her. "You should have told me you were coming." He checked the time. "I've got an appointment at eleven."

"I am your eleven o'clock."

"Oh, you don't need an appointment to see me, Elly."

"My request involves your official duties. So I thought it best if I made it official." She took a step back, looked her grandfather in the eyes. Her father was a tall man, and his father an inch taller. It was hard not to feel intimidated just standing there. She took a deep breath. "I'd like you to perform my marriage."

"Your marriage—" Then he laughed and hugged her again, practically crushing the breath out of her. "I'd be honored to!"

"I wasn't sure—"

"Not sure about what? It does seem rather sudden," he mused.

"We're getting married on the thirtieth of August."

"This year, you mean?" Elder Packard frowned as he walked back to his desk to check the date on his calendar. "How long have you known the boy? Do *I* know him?"

"We met when I was on my mission. He was working for my uncle."

"So you've been dating only a month or so?"

Well, *dating*. "His name is Connor McKenzie. He's a graduate student at BYU. He went on a mission to Japan too."

"Perhaps it'd be a good idea if you got to know each other better?"

"We know each other *quite* well," she said.

Her grandfather sat down on the corner of his desk. "Now, Elly, I know coming back from a mission is a considerable transition—"

Elly groaned to herself. *Now with the counseling*. Once a seminary teacher, always a seminary teacher.

Her grandfather said, "And the Church places a lot of expectations on young people to get married and start a family. But you also need to think about the practical implications."

"I fully intend to complete my education."

"That's good, that's good." He asked, "Have you prayed about it?"

The first of two questions she knew were coming. Not the question

she dreaded—*Do you love him?*—which she could not answer.

“Yes,” she said.

He waited with patience, kindness, and fatherly concern. In his lifetime, he’d been a bishop, a stake president, a regional director of the Church Education System. He’d conducted hundreds of such interviews, all with the best of intentions. She attempted a stony resolve, but felt the warmth rising in her cheeks.

“It’s personal,” she said, and had to look away for a moment.

He folded his arms and bowed his head for a moment in contemplation. When Elly spoke again she tried not to sound argumentative. What she was asking of him—what she was telling him—*was* unreasonable, *was* preposterous.

“I have a hard time believing it myself, Grandpa. But this is the least impetuous thing I’ve ever done. Yes, I am very much in love with him, but that’s not why. We’re getting married because it’s the right thing to do—right that he should be my husband and I should be his wife. Waiting won’t make it any less or more right.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I’ve had this conversation before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sayaka. Your mother.” He looked away. “To be charitable to myself, I don’t believe it was ever because she was Japanese. Only because I was too proud.”

Elly felt herself recoil. She’d heard that some General Authorities had looked askance at interracial marriages in the past. But she knew this only in the abstract, like a question on a history exam. If something similar had ever involved her parents, they’d never told her.

“We’re a conservative people. Which means we conserve the ways and beliefs of the past—well, after 1890.” He smiled thinly. “Too often I fear what we wish to conserve is the way we *imagine* things used to be, but never were. When change becomes inevitable, caution becomes the refuge of unimaginative men.”

It was, Elly realized, a confession of sorts, an attempt to reconcile the person he was now with the person he had once been. Her mind raced, with little success, trying to put all this information into context.

He returned to the subject he began with. “Sayaka, though, couldn’t

have cared less about my reservations. How did Shakespeare put it?” he asked, and said:

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.

He added, “That last line perfectly describes your mother.” He took her hands in his. “That you are your mother’s daughter is reason enough not to question the soundness of your judgment. However, if I’m going to perform your marriage, I must insist on first meeting the groom. He did accompany you here today, I hope?”

Elly nodded. Tears filled her eyes. His love for her, as always, was like a warm hearth on a cold night. Whatever had occurred between him and her mother a quarter century ago was not for her to judge. *A grievance ought to die with the man who brung it upon himself.* She wrapped her arms around him.

He hadn’t asked for forgiveness, and she had not offered it—she could not—but in her embrace a small portion was granted.

Chapter 29

The Uchikake

Elly hadn't been to her uncle's house in a year and a half. In the interim, suburban sprawl had consumed the remaining farmland bordering Eighth North in Orem. Her cousin Tom had grown half a foot and Naomi had added several inches to her chest. The house itself had hardly changed at all. The apple orchards bordering her uncle's backyard still thrived. The branches were heavily laden with fruit.

Of all the relatives on her mother's side, Aunt June was the most American. She was technically more Japanese than Elly (her grandparents had immigrated to Hawaii in the 1920s). Though her language skills were no better than the average returned missionary's.

Since moving back to Japan, Emily had resumed going by her Japanese name, Mariko. "M&M," Sam called her. Sametaroh had always gone by Sam. Compared to her relatives and siblings, Elly felt like a chameleon, adapting her cultural colors to whatever environment she happened to be in.

Aunt June was preparing the pork cutlets when they arrived. The smell of *shōyu* and steaming rice always transported Elly back to Japan. But her aunt always spoke English, and that pulled her right back to America.

June said to Connor, "I gather you're going to marry my niece. Good luck with the in-laws."

“Grandpa approves of him,” said Elly. “We had lunch yesterday.”

June gave her a bemused look. She of course meant Elly’s mother. She said to Connor, “I once thought of setting you up with Atsuko, Nobuo’s oldest. She’s attending the ELC Fall semester.”

“Atsuko?” said Elly. “She’s only eighteen. What about Emily?”

“With her attending Kobe University, that didn’t seem very practical.”

“True.” Elly nodded. “Wait a minute. When Uncle said I should date Connor, what was I, runner-up?”

“Ah,” June said, as Oh Sensei came into the kitchen. “So that’s what you’re so anxious about.”

“What?” Uncle said.

“Having to explain to your big sister that Connor and Elly’s elopement was *your* idea.”

“It was not *my* idea. They did it without *any* of my help.”

“True.” Elly grinned. “But we might not remember it that way.”

“See?” Uncle said, a comically plaintive expression on his face. “I told you I’d be taking the fall for this. Besides, they’re not *eloping*. Elder Packard is performing the marriage.”

“I don’t think that will get you off the hook.”

“I know it won’t. It’s my bad karma.”

Aunt June shrugged. “You just tell her that I told her so.”

“You’re the one that was going to tell her that.”

“Tell her what?”

“Well, Elly, when you do get around to telling your mother, be sure to tell her that I told her so.”

“Told her what?”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” June strode to the doorway and shouted, “Tom! Naomi! Time for dinner!”

After the blessing on the food, June said to her niece, “Makoto tells me you’ll be living with Connor’s aunt.”

“Aunt Wanda,” Elly said. “She knows Mom and Dad.”

“Really?” said June, “how’s that?”

Connor said, “My uncle taught accounting in the business school.”

“It’s a nice apartment,” said Elly.

“They may be rushing,” June observed. “But they’re not doing so *beed-*

lessly. They at least have a place to live.”

“I didn’t say they were doing anything *heedlessly*. I said what they were doing reminded me of my sister.”

Elly said, “Mom and Dad eloped?”

“No more than what you and Connor are doing.”

“And Sayaka never did anything in her life *heedlessly*.”

“I was only describing what *other* people said.”

“What other people?” Naomi asked.

“Never mind,” her mother said.

A moment of silence followed. Elly said, “So, Atsuko—I suppose she already has a place to live? I’m leaving my landlord a roommate down.”

“She’s staying in Helaman Halls. It’s right next to the ELC.” June said to Connor, “Did you live with Nobuo and Yuki in Sakai?”

“No, I had an apartment in Osaka two stops down on the Midosuji.”

“And now that we’re on the subject,” June said to her daughter, “with Atsuko coming here, you’ll be able to—”

“Mom—” Naomi sighed.

“No,” her mother said, refusing to concede ground. “Nobuo and Yuki think homestay is a great idea. Plus, we hardly see them anymore. We’ll fly over with you.” She explained to Elly and Connor, “Naomi is going to spend Winter semester in Sakai on study abroad.”

“I didn’t say I was going to. I said I’d *think* about it.”

“It’s a great idea,” said Elly.

“See?” her mother said.

Elly and Naomi were sitting next to each other at the table, so Naomi couldn’t glare at her cousin. She glared at her mother instead. Her mother ignored her. “They have a very nice house, don’t they, Connor?”

“It’s a nice house,” Connor agreed.

“A nice neighborhood.”

“It’s a nice neighborhood.”

“A nice school.”

“I don’t know anything about the school.”

Naomi said, “So why doesn’t Tom go?”

“Because I’m going to be a *senior* next year,” her brother responded, as if this was the dumbest thing anybody had ever said.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re a *freshman*. You’re not doing anything important.”

“Says *you*.” To her mother, “I can hardly speak Japanese anymore.”

“That’s the whole point. Elly is practically fluent.”

“That’s because Elly *grew up* in Japan.”

“All the more reason. The older you get, the harder it becomes. At any rate, we won’t be going till December, which will give the world plenty of time to end.”

After dinner, the cleaning up was left to Uncle Oh and Connor.

June said, “I have something to show to Elly.” She added, as they walked down the hallway to the master bedroom, “Have Connor tell his Aunt Wanda I’ll be paying her a visit so we can arrange the reception.”

“Oh, we don’t need a reception. I thought we could just have a dinner with the people who attend the wedding.”

“Then call it an open house. When you visit your parents over Christmas, your mother will no doubt have something extravagant planned—which you, my niece, will gratefully and gracefully go along with.”

“Yes, Auntie,” Elly said with an exaggerated bow. She asked in a more serious voice, “How mad do you think Mom will be at me?”

“She—and your dad—put their families in much the same position when they got married. Which doesn’t justify what they did. But it did establish a certain precedent.”

“Did you know they were going to get married?”

“When I transferred into the district, they’d been pretending for three months that they had a purely *professional* relationship.” June laughed. “Of course, we *shimai* knew exactly what was going on. Your mom put up with some pretty merciless teasing.”

“How? How did you know?”

“He showed her such respect. Not that he was rude to the rest of us or put her on a pedestal. I mean he took her seriously and valued what she had to say in the manner it was intended. She, in turn, saw a young man coming into possession of his convictions, learning how to make priorities and stand behind them. Your mother knew that once he made a priority of *her*, she’d never have to question her place in his life.”

June got three kimono boxes from the top shelf in the wardrobe closet and set them on the bed. She opened the smaller box. “The *kosode*,” she explained. “It has a shorter sleeve and no train. It’ll be appropriate for the temple ceremony.”

She held up the white kimono. Elly slipped into it. The smooth silk lining was cool against her arms. June said, “I had to hem it up a hand’s breadth, so it should fit you just right.” She knelt and checked the length. Then stepped back for a better look. “You should wear kimono more often, Elly.”

“That’s what Mom says.” She looked at her reflection in the dresser mirror. “It’s exquisite.”

“Now, after the temple ceremony—” With far more care, she opened the two larger boxes and took out a wedding kimono and robe.

Elly gasped. “A *shiomuku uchikake*! Where did you get it?”

“In his later years, my grandfather’s reaction to the excesses of American liberalism was to rekindle a nostalgia for the old ways he’d left Japan to get away from in the first place. So he insisted I wear a *shiomuku* and *uchikake* at my wedding reception. But once in a lifetime isn’t nearly often enough for a kimono this nice.”

Elly snuggled into the snowy *uchikake*, turning to the side so she could see in the mirror the silver cranes embroidered across the back.

“Look at yourself,” June said, adjusting the mantle across her shoulders. “No parent could stay angry at the sight of such a lovely bride.” She retrieved the obi and held the glimmering silk sash against Elly’s waist.

Elly felt as if some other girl was staring back from the glass, her chameleon-like nature already melding with the pure white wedding robe. “Can I show Connor?” she asked.

“No, you may not. Have some respect for tradition.”

She eased out of the *uchikake* and *kosode*. “When Mom and Dad got married, did Grandpa—” She paused to come up with a more tactful way of phrasing the question. “Did Grandpa object to the fact that Mom was Japanese?”

“What makes you think that?” June asked, in a manner that questioned not the truth of what Elly was asking, but how she came to ask it.

“Something Grandpa said to me yesterday. I think *he* thought Mom

told me about it. Except she never did. I didn't know what he was talking about."

June nodded. "Yes, but I don't think it had anything to do with her being *Japanese*."

"Just not white enough."

"The shock of the unexpected. She was *different*. Not the girl next door. To put it cynically, he might have worried it would hurt his advancement in the Church Education System. The proclamation about blacks and the priesthood had just come out and not everybody was comfortable with the *fact* of a racially-integrated church. Scratch the surface of any Utah ward and you'll find a redneck or two. But the most harm is caused with the best of intentions. A lot of fake concern about what the children will look like and supposed cultural conflicts. Frankly, there's a more profound cultural gulf between the East Bench and the West Valley than between a middle-class Mormon from Japan and a middle-class Mormon from Utah."

She stopped talking for a moment. Her voice was calmer when she spoke again. "But even if that *were* the case, your grandfather was yielding to public opinion, not personal prejudice. And your mother didn't help matters any. I've never known anybody so incapable of showing deference to authority, even when it was in her own self-interest."

"I think he was sorry about it," Elly said in a subdued voice.

"I'm sure they both are." A distant look came to her eyes. "I sometimes wonder if what hurt him the most was that his son and daughter-in-law simply *assumed* from the beginning that the rest of the family would object to the marriage. Go looking for conflict and conflict will find you. Your father got his MBA at Stanford. They didn't come home for two years. I think it was just long enough for things to settle."

June said to her niece, "People change. That's what's important. Not something a good man said in anger and regretted and repented of a quarter-century ago. There was plenty of blame to go around. Whatever he may have thought *then*, when you were born—they came back to Salt Lake to have you—and he held you, his first grandchild, in his arms and looked into your big brown eyes, nothing else in the world mattered."

She smiled. "You see, the reason your mother never mentioned their

disagreements was because they aren't important. Not the kind of thing people of character hold onto—*just in case*—like a knife up the sleeve.”

Reluctant in wrath, Elly reminded herself. She nodded.

“Good,” said June. “What about birth control?”

“What?” said Elly, thrown by this whiplash switch of subject matter. “I— I’m on the pill,” she stammered, her cheeks growing warm.

“So you’ve been to see Dr. Zhang?”

“Yes, I’ve been to see Dr. Zhang.” Elly had even confessed her visit to Planned Parenthood. Dr. Zhang scolded her for not coming to her first, and then complimented her for thinking ahead, observing that too many young Mormon newlyweds seemed to think that simply not *wanting* to get pregnant had the same biological effect.

“I’m only doing your mother’s job,” June said pointedly.

“Well, okay,” Elly grumbled. Though now that she thought about it, getting lectured about the facts of life by Dr. Zhang and Aunt June was preferable to hearing them from her mother.

Chapter 30

Moving In

Elly could fit everything she owned into two suitcases. “It’s pathetic,” she said, as she hung her clothes in her half of the closet. “But this is all I’ve got. Besides a change of clothes I left in Kobe, I haven’t had time to acquire much else since my mission.”

“I don’t think traveling light is pathetic. It’s more depressing discovering you *can’t* pack all of your earthly possessions into two suitcases. I think my parents moved to Maine so they’d have a good excuse to get rid of all the junk they’d accumulated over the past thirty years.”

“You should try growing up in Japan with a sister *and* a brother. I look forward to accumulating some junk.” Her other suitcase held her underwear, among other things. She didn’t need any assistance with that. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go through life with a couple pairs of jeans and T-shirts. Aunt June says I should wear kimono more often.”

“I’ve never seen you in a kimono.”

“I have a few pictures from Coming-of-Age Day. I’m just saying, a decent kimono is not exactly conducive to a minimalist lifestyle. I didn’t bring any with me.”

“Okay, excepting kimono.”

“You’ll say anything I want to hear, won’t you?” Elly stacked the rest of her vanity items on the bureau. Connor picked up the Yasmin box and

examined it curiously. Elly pretended a lack of concern. She hadn't raised the subject with him. He'd never raised the subject with her. The next few weeks were going to be interesting in that regard.

"What's it like?" he asked.

Elly said over her shoulder, as she disappeared into the bathroom, "It gives you very regular periods." She poked her head out the door, "Where do you keep your toothbrush?"

"In the kitchen. The cupboard left of the sink. According to the theory that things you put in your mouth belong in the kitchen."

"How logical." Elly took the box from him and went to the kitchen. In the cupboard, on the bottom shelf, was his toothbrush propped up in a drinking glass. She added her own. On the second shelf was a bottle of Tylenol, a box of Comtrex cold tablets, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a box of Q-Tips, and a box of Band-Aids. She placed her contact solution and lens case on the second shelf, along with the Yasmin box. She resolved right then and there to stop hiding stuff.

Connor watched from the doorway. "Elly, did you ever worry about getting pregnant? You know, from the dreams?"

"It crossed my mind. How about you? Did you worry about getting *me* pregnant?"

"I tied my foot to the bed once. I had to make sure my body wasn't getting hijacked by my id. I'd never had dreams like that before. I sort of freaked out."

"Why, do you sleepwalk?"

"No, it was your basic neurotic overreaction. In fact, the next morning I completely forgot what I'd done. When I got out of bed, I did a good imitation of a falling tree."

Elly laughed. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Pride, only."

"Well, it was a noble thought, in a strange way."

They stepped back into the bedroom. Elly glanced around, took a deep breath, exhaled. "That's everything, not counting a change of clothes for tomorrow." She mentally ticked off the items she'd need. "Oh," she said, "where is it?"

Connor retrieved the clear plastic sleeve from the desk. Their marriage

license. Elly stared at the document, examining it as if it were an ancient parchment manuscript. She said, “To tell the truth, Connor, the reason I started on the pill was because I knew I was going to marry you.”

“When was that?”

She looked into his blue eyes. “The end of last month.”

“Then you were thinking a lot clearer than I was.”

Elly put the marriage license down and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He pulled her closer. She opened her mouth against his. Her heart raced. Her desire plumbed a depth of feeling that simply hadn’t existed before that fateful day on the Nakamozu Nankai. The last of their dreams had left behind a key. Somewhere deep within her, a door began to open. If he chose to seduce her right here and now, she would willingly walk through it.

He seemed to realize this as well. He ended the kiss, both to her relief and regret. “I love you,” he whispered.

An ecstatic thrill swept through her, followed by a pang of guilt. Only minutes before, she’d resolved to stop hiding. If need be, some things she would hide forever. A little thing like not being able to say “I love you” wasn’t getting in the way of her getting married.

Before she left, she took the Yasmin box from the kitchen cabinet and put it in her underwear drawer. She was all for being open and for being honest. But she was also in favor of avoiding uncomfortable conversations that could easily be avoided with a bit of discretion.

Discretion won.

Chapter 31

A Marriage Epistle

Connor donned the morning coat. Elly grinned as she adjusted the cravat. “C’mon, admit it. Isn’t it fun getting dressed up like this?”

“Fun is not the word that springs to mind.” He glanced at his reflection in the mirror. “I look like a Japanese prime minister. Either that, or I’m about to surrender to General MacArthur.”

“I think you look quite fetching.”

“Fetching? How about a yukata? It’d be a lot more comfortable.”

“Nothing is tackier than a *gaijin* in a cheap kimono. We’ll get you a real one at Christmas.”

She kissed him until Melanie interrupted with an “Ahem.” She said, “I’ve been sent to get you two.”

Aunt Wanda’s living room was the most crowded Connor had ever seen. Melanie had come earlier with Elly. Elder and Sister Packard arrived shortly thereafter to confirm the final arrangements and get a rough head count for the sealing room.

Lynne stopped by. Glenn would go directly to the sealing, as would Bishop Ferguson. Uncle Martin bustled into the kitchen, where Wanda had laid out a buffet (and insisted that the two lovebirds *eat*. “Believe me, you *don’t* want to do this on an empty stomach”).

“How’re you holding up there, Connor?” Martin said. “My, that’s a

smart outfit you're wearing. And there's the lovely Elly."

"Thank you, Martin," Elly said, and kissed him on the cheek, which pleased the old man to no end.

Lynne observed, "You're remarkably calm, Elly. I was a nervous wreck the morning of my wedding."

"I simply have to imagine what my mother will have in store for us at Christmas. This should be a piece of cake in comparison."

Sister Packard joined them. "He cuts a dashing figure, doesn't he," she remarked to her granddaughter. "Now, where's your wedding dress?"

"My aunt has it. They're going to meet us at the temple."

Elder Packard ducked into the conversation. "We probably should be going." Never a man to refrain from leading others, he stood in the alcove between the living room and dining room and brought the congregation to order. "Brothers and sisters, I'm Elder Packard, Elly's grandfather. I'll be officiating at the wedding. The endowment session is scheduled for one-thirty. The sealing will start at three-forty. There'll be time for photographs afterwards, and then we shall repair to the home of Elly's aunt and uncle, Brother and Sister Oh, for the wedding dinner."

Elly said, "I made maps if anybody needs directions."

Her grandfather continued, "We'll be leaving shortly with Connor and Elly. There's still plenty of time. But be in the chapel by one-twenty."

Back in the kitchen, he drew aside the bride and groom. "Do you have your marriage license?"

Connor nodded.

"Good. Many a marriage ceremony has been stalled on account of that particular piece of information. Let's go."

Elly remained behind in the kitchen a minute to speak with Melanie. "Will you come and help me with my kimono afterward?"

"Of course I will."

"You're the closest thing I have to a bridesmaid."

Melanie nodded and smiled courageously.

Elder Packard held the door as Elly and Connor got into the Buick. It was a hot day, even hotter in the car. So they sat there, very still, in the sleepy contentment that warm, bright, still air will induce. Her grandfather

started the engine and turned on the air conditioner. The cool blast flooded around them.

“I would have enjoyed going to the prom with you.” Elly touched his cheek. “The fancy dinner, the limo, the whole nine yards.”

“I would have, if you’d been around to be asked. In a heartbeat.”

Elder Packard pulled out of the driveway and wended his way through the Tree Streets. They climbed Ninth East to Temple Hill Drive, and then up and around the looping driveway, stopping in front of the portico that led to the temple lobby.

Aunt June and Oh Sensei were waiting inside. June had stacked the kimono boxes on the chairs next to her. Oh Sensei said to Connor, “You look like a Japanese prime minister.”

They checked in at the recommend desk and received colored tags identifying their party.

“There you are, Jack.” A stocky man Elder Packard’s age entered the atrium.

“President Wells,” said Elder Packard. “This is my granddaughter, Elaine, and her fiancé, Connor McKenzie.”

President Wells shook their hands in turn. “Do you have your marriage license?” he asked. Connor produced the document. “I’ll get this ready for processing,” he said. “It’s pretty busy today, but there shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll notify Elder Packard of your sealing room assignment.”

Sister Packard said to Aunt June, “These must be the kimonos. Let me help you with those.” Aunt June handed her the box holding the kosode. Sister Packard said, “Come along—Elly, you too—I’ll show you to the bride’s room.”

“There’s a bride’s room?”

“For exactly this purpose.”

Connor said, “I’ll meet you in the chapel,” and she had to let go of his hand.

In the men’s dressing room, Connor changed into white slacks (kept on the shirt), white tie (replacing the cravat), and white socks and slippers. Then he and Oh Sensei rode the escalator to the second floor chapel.

“McKenzie-Packard,” Oh Sensei said to the temple worker. He pushed

Connor forward. "This is the McKenzie half."

"Oh, yes," she said, checking the tags they'd received at the recommend desk. She made two marks on her clipboard.

They sat on the pew that ran along the back of the chapel. Organ music played in the background. A couple came in and spoke to the temple worker. The woman was wearing a more conventional wedding dress. Elly finally appeared in the doorway, June a step behind her. Connor bounded to his feet.

"You're beautiful," he said, taking her hands in his. She smiled, her face aglow against the shimmering silk of the kosode.

The temple worker said to June. "The mother of the bride?"

"The aunt, in place of the mother."

Elly said to Connor, "You wanted to see me in a kimono, didn't you?"

"I didn't know how much."

Melanie and Lynne joined them. Wanda came in a few minutes later, and then Martin. Martin was so effusive in his compliments that Wanda finally shushed him.

Elder and Sister Packard were the last to arrive. Like the temple president, Elder Packard was wearing a white suit coat. Connor and Elly stood when he approached. "Now, aren't you the prettiest bride in the world," he said to his granddaughter.

A bell softly chimed, indicating that the next endowment session was about to begin. The McKenzie-Packard party filed out of the chapel.

A little over ninety minutes later, Elly and Connor sat together in the celestial room. It was a relief to sit back and relax and do nothing at all, if only for a few minutes.

Connor said, "I feel pretty married already."

"Nice try," Elly said, a twinkle in her eyes. "But I'm still going through with it."

Sister Packard and a temple worker came around to collect them. They met up with Bishop Ferguson and Glenn on the way down to the sealing room.

The small sealing room glowed with light. The velour of the altar was a rich burgundy. Their perception of the room's size changed considerably

when they entered the room. The mirrored walls reflected each other into infinity, pushing the walls out and out, creating the illusion that they were standing in the midst of a large expanse.

Elly and Connor sat closest to the altar. There was no requirement that they sit on one side or the other, but that was what everybody did anyway.

After a moment of silence, Elder Packard stepped forward. “A marriage,” he began, “is also the union of two families, and by extension, the union of their friends and relatives. Today, in the somewhat unusual case of Elly and Connor, their relatives will represent their parents. While the bride and groom know each other, many here are strangers. So let’s begin with some introductions.”

He went around the room, eliciting a few words from each person about their relationship to Connor and Elly. It was corny, but had the desired effect—that Elder Packard had no doubt intended—of loosening things up a bit. Then he clapped his hands together and said, “I once had the wedding ceremony described to me as sixty sacred seconds preceded by thirty minutes of bad advice.”

The man knew how to work a room. He continued, “Keeping that in mind, I shall endeavor to keep the bad advice to a minimum.” He paused just long enough to turn a mental page to his more serious material.

“There’s no real need for me to justify the importance of marriage—the determination of Elly and Connor to be married speaks for itself. Even the Apostle Paul—and we all know the reservations with which *he* approached the subject—was moved to write that ‘marriage is honorable in all.’ More important is what we can say about the qualities that should govern the marriage from this day forward. And so we return to Paul and the fifth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, in which he advised couples that ‘the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.’ This scripture is easily misconstrued, and to say something in Paul’s defense, he notes only two verses later, ‘Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it’—a command equal in its severity.

“But we need only turn to Joseph Smith to put Paul in the proper context. ‘No power or influence,’ the prophet Joseph wrote in the 121st Section of the Doctrine & Covenants, ‘can or ought to be maintained by vir-

tue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.’ Dispelling any other doubts, the Lord had already commanded the elders of the Church, in Section 42, ‘Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else.’

“I’d like to further examine the two verbs in that verse. First, *cleave*, meaning ‘to adhere closely, to remain faithful.’ In other words, cleave unto your wife, not to the NFL football schedule. And not even the BYU football schedule.” Another round of smiles. “*None else*. I don’t see any wiggle room in that qualifier.

“Second, *love*. As Paul instructs us in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians: ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.’ It doesn’t matter if you can speak with the tongues of angels, Paul argues. Without love we are nothing.

“But what is this love, and how do we keep it alive? Ah, poets have sought the answer to that question since the beginning of time. And I’m afraid my thirty minutes is about up. But the answer is really this simple: ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.’ So said Shakespeare, and he was right as scripture.”

He looked at the bride and groom. “One last bit of advice, and this I consider the least useless of all I have to say. Too many practical and wise men, psychologists and counselors and advice columnists, tell us that the love of courtship will necessarily fade. You cannot stay in love forever, they say. Those giddy feelings won’t last, they warn. To which I answer: Nonsense! I’ll quote Brother Shakespeare again:

Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

“Do not enter marriage expecting love to fade. Expect it to grow. You cannot know what will happen in the next year, the next five, the next fifty. No farmer plants in the spring expecting only weeds in the fall. Be-

gin this marriage with faith that a richer harvest awaits than the one you can imagine now, and work toward it with all your effort and ingenuity. That faith, I promise you, will be rewarded.”

He stepped forward and held out his arms. Elly and Connor rose from their chairs and knelt at the altar. Elly still had questions. But no doubts or second thoughts. She answered without hesitation. His response was no less resolute.

After a moment of silence, Elder Packard took them behind the altar so they were standing on either side of him, facing the witnesses to their union. After another moment he asked in a muted voice, “Do you wish to exchange rings?”

The shocked look on Connor’s face answered for him. “No matter,” Elder Packard said with a soft chuckle and a pat on the back. “It’s a nod to tradition, not part of the ceremony.”

And then Elly, her face radiant with affection, took her husband’s face in her hands and kissed him thoroughly, making it clear that no rings were necessary.

Chapter 32

Pictures of a Wedding

When Connor and Elly came out of the sealing room, the temple concourse was flooded with afternoon light.

“I forgot all about the ring,” he apologized.

“So did I. Besides, exchanging rings is one of those silly western traditions promulgated by jewelry makers. It certainly never occurred to any of my Japanese ancestors until you Americans showed up. I know who I’m married to, *Go-shujin-sama*.” She hugged him with all her might. “I see that Auntie is waiting for me.”

She reluctantly left his side, flashing a smile over her shoulder as Aunt June led her away.

Connor stood in front of the mirror in the dressing room and adjusted his cravat. He could hear the beating of his racing heart. All that suspended anxiety and adrenaline coursed through his bloodstream. He stepped back and took several deep breaths.

A temple worker straightened the back of his collar. “Thanks,” said Connor.

“Just got married, eh? Congratulations.”

Nobody but a bridegroom ever wore a morning coat to the temple. He, Oh Sensei, and Martin decamped to the lobby, where they joined Glenn.

Elly was not yet there.

Connor paced along the wall from the back partition to the reception desk. He tugged absently at the lapels of the morning coat. Elder Packard walked up to Connor and handed him an envelope. "Your marriage certificate. The temple will send you a much nicer facsimile."

From behind them came an audible gasp. Somebody else whispered, "Look at that!"

Connor spun around as Elly came into the lobby. His eyes widened in amazement, his lips forming around the word, *Wow!* She looked like she was wearing a mantle of freshly fallen snow. The fabric of the shiromuku uchikake gleamed against her dark hair, red lips, and the tan of her cheeks. The obi gathered in a tight bow high on her back. The robe spilled down to the floor in a frozen waterfall foaming around her ankles. The traditional *tsuno-kakushi* adorned her head like a white crown.

Elly was escorted by June, wearing a more muted kimono. Sister Packard, Melanie, and Lynne followed close behind. Connor collected himself and crossed the lobby. Elly turned to him. The care with which she had to move lent every gesture a particular gracefulness. He said, "You are absolutely gorgeous."

She grinned. "Then it was worth it."

"Don't scrunch anything," June said under her breath.

Somebody asked Elder Packard, in a voice louder than courtesy dictated, "Who in the world is *that?*"

"That's my granddaughter," he announced, and none too softly either.

They made their way out of the lobby, under the portico, to the curb. Connor took hold of her arm, and a few times steadied her at the shoulder. Elly laughed. "Wearing a kimono like this is more a stand-there-and-look-beautiful type of thing."

June got out her cell phone and made a brief call. A minute later, a man trotted up from the parking lot, two cameras swinging from straps around his neck. June said. "Once everybody gets here I think we'll move over to the lawn by the fountain." She nodded at the broad, sloping green before them.

A young man's voice called out, "Sensei!"

Both Elly and her uncle turned. Four missionaries strode up the walk.

The missionary in the lead beamed and waved. Her student, Bradley. His companions hung back and exchanged bewildered looks. “*Omedetō gozaimasu,*” he said, bowing a bit too deeply.

Elly responded with a respectful nod. “*Dō itashimashite,*” she said. “And how are you, Bradley Chōrō? *O-genki desu ka?*”

“I’m doing well,” Bradley bravely responded in the language. “I don’t know if I told you, but I got my call to the Kobe Mission.”

“Please communicate my regards to my father. *Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.* I wish you the best on your mission.”

Bradley bowed again, and then he and his troupe continued along the portico to the temple. Not yet out of earshot, one of his companions asked, “Who was *that?*” in tones of awe and envy.

“My Japanese teacher,” Bradley explained.

Oh Sensei said dryly, “That’s one way to get a positive teacher evaluation.”

They gathered on the grass before the fountain. The photographer (his name was Jake Kimball) positioned them for the light (from the back, illuminating the borders of the uchikake) while June mixed and matched: his hands on her shoulders, standing side by side, and lastly, gazing into each other’s eyes (“A required pose,” Jake quipped). And then various combinations with everybody else.

Elder Packard left to change out of his temple whites. Wanda said to Connor and Elly, “I’ve got to take care of something back at the house. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll see you at your aunt and uncle’s.”

“Thank you, Wanda,” Elly said, “for everything.”

“Seeing the two of you married is thanks enough.”

June bustled about, making sure everybody knew where to go next. Elder Packard returned from the temple in his business suit. They carefully bundled Elly into the back seat of the Buick. Connor got in next to her. The bow of the kimono’s *obi* pretty much prevented her from leaning back against the seat. So she rested against his shoulder. “We’re going to scrunch something,” he whispered in her ear.

“Scrunch away,” she murmured.

“I’ve taken plenty of wedding photographs in my life,” Jake-the-pho-

tographer said as he posed Connor and Elly in the Oh's backyard. "But this is my first Japanese style."

The late afternoon sun shone across the orchard canopy. The deep, shadowed, verdant green set off the glimmering white of Elly's robes. A slanting yellow ray lit up the highlights in her hair. The smell of apples lingered in the air, accented by a sharp charcoal scent as Oh Sensei started up the barbecue.

Kusanagi Sensei arrived with her husband. Several members of the Oh's ward stopped by. They soon had a small audience. Wanda showed up, having dealt with whatever had called her away.

Jake stored the Hasselblad and wandered around the party, capturing more candid moments with a digital Canon. Elly announced that she was changing out of her kimono, which brought on a final flurry of snapshots. Connor and Uncle Martin and Oh Sensei carted the teriyaki chicken out to the back porch. Naomi, as per her mother's instructions, had started simmering the sukiyaki sauce in the three electric frying pans (two borrowed from the Relief Society kitchen), and was keeping her eye on a pair of rice cookers.

Elly returned to the porch in her Sunday dress. "The carriage turned back into a pumpkin and now it's plain, ordinary me."

"Yet you still look exquisite."

June came out to the porch steps and announced the menu. "And for those who prefer a more American fare, my husband is in charge of the chicken."

Elder Packard delivered the blessing on the food.

There were settings at the picnic table, an extra folding table (also borrowed from the church), and the dining room table. As they were partial to the sukiyaki, Connor and Elly settled at the dining room table. The Packards joined them, though they resorted to more conventional utensils.

Sister Packard asked Elly, "That hooded cloak you wore with your kimono, does it represent anything in particular?"

"It's called a *tsuno-kakushi*, which literally means *hidden horns*. It hides a woman's jealous horns on her wedding day. Because if she gets jealous, she'll turn into an *oni*, an ogre." She placed her fists on her temples and

extended her forefingers. She said to Connor, “And they are sharp.”

June interjected, “Like her mother’s.”

Elly’s grandmother said, “It’s interesting the gestures different cultures come up with. When you refer to yourself, don’t you point at your nose? I’ve seen your mother do that.”

Elly held out her hand, palm down, and waggled her fingers back and forth. “You probably saw her do this when she wanted me to *come here*. It’s the opposite of how we do it.”

“How about *kuru-kuru pab?*” Melanie said. She made a fist by her right ear and flicked her fingers outwards. “It means you’re nuts. Like them.”

“And when you make a promise—” Elly held out her right pinkie and Connor locked his pinkie with hers. “That’s making a promise.” They tugged playfully back and forth. Elly’s thoughts flashed back to all the silly romance manga she’d read as a child, and the inevitable scene of childhood friends entwining pinkies and vowing never to forget each other. “*Yakusoku shimasu,*” she softly said in Japanese. *I promise.*

June asked, “Do you miss Japan, Elly? You’d lived there most of your life until you were nine.”

Elly shook her head. “Not at the time. It was a great adventure. I was the one making all my friends jealous, because I got to go to America. Funny how I thought about it from that perspective—that I was Japanese, not American. One thing about Utah, though. I miss the rainy season.”

“You didn’t when you were there,” Melanie said. “I remember: *monku, monku, monku,* complain, complain, complain.”

“It’s different when you’ve got to tract all day.”

June said, “As I remember it, your mom would get furious at you for coming home soaking wet every day after school during the monsoons.”

Elly grinned. “I was only exploiting the talent all kids have for figuring out what will annoy their parents the most.”

“Something you were very good at.”

“So I’ve gathered,” said Connor. “Though she’s been sparing with the details.”

“I’m sure her mother would be more than willing to supply them.”

“That she would,” said Oh Sensei, coming into the dining room from the porch. “It’s getting a bit late,” he mentioned in an offhand manner.

“Yes it is,” said June. “You two need to go around and thank everyone for coming. I took seriously your not wanting a cake. But you do have wedding presents to unwrap.”

“You didn’t have to get us wedding presents as well,” Elly protested.

“I didn’t,” June said. “I won’t charge your mother for the photographer. But others did rise to the occasion. It’s a wedding, isn’t it? These things go hand-in-hand.”

Sitting on the piano in the living room were several cards and wrapped boxes. The remaining guests crowded in with them. Elly first opened the card from her grandparents. Inside was a clipping of a dinette set from a Vintage Oak newspaper circular. “For your new kitchen,” Sister Packard said.

“Wow, this is so nice.” She showed the card to Connor and hugged her grandmother. She looked up at Elder Packard. “Thanks, Grandpa.” The old man beamed.

Connor said to Wanda, “They had it delivered? So that’s what you had to go home to check about?”

“Among other things.”

Lynne and Glenn gave them a toaster oven. Martin’s present was an electric frying pan. The Kusanagis’ was a four-place table setting. “Ah,” said Elly, “I’m beginning to see a pattern here.”

“Not that I don’t enjoy eating dinner with you,” Wanda said. “But I imagine you want to share a meal alone from time to time.”

Connor handed the two remaining boxes to Elly. “For you.”

Melanie’s gift was a black cocktail dress. “Oh, Mel,” Elly exclaimed.

“You did say your wardrobe was a little scant.”

“Let’s see,” said June. Elly stood and held up the dress. June quipped, “That’s what you wear when you want to get Connor’s attention off his schoolwork.”

The last box, from Wanda, was an Allison Woods pantsuit. Wanda said, “Melanie was the one who picked it out.”

“Melanie has impeccable taste,” Elly said, with a grateful smile to her roommate. “Thanks, Aunt Wanda. I didn’t expect anything like this.”

They opened the cards next. The take came to a little over two hun-

dred dollars. Her uncle pointed out, “At your reception in Japan, money is *all* you’ll be getting, and with the attendant commercial implications, especially if your dad has any plans of returning to his consulting work after his mission.”

Elly’s brow furrowed. “I’m not looking forward to *that*.”

With the last card, the open house pretty much came to an end. Elly escorted her grandparents to the door. Sister Packard said, “You can come up for church on Sunday, can’t you? We’ll have to show you off to the ward. Sacrament meeting is at nine.”

“We’ll be there,” Elly assured her.

Wanda left as well. She handed Connor the keys to the Camry. “I’ll get a ride home with Lynne,” she said. “You take your time.”

After most of the guests had left, Elly went looking for Melanie. She was alone on the back porch, arms folded, staring at the dark orchard.

“Hey, Mel,” Elly said softly. Melanie glanced over her shoulder at her. Elly asked, “Is something the matter?”

Melanie shook her head. Then she laughed to herself. “No, just a little envy, that’s all. I should be the one wearing the *tsuno-kakushi*.”

“Envy?”

“It’s my stupid, competitive nature. I wanted to be the first. I wanted to fall in love first. I wanted to get married first.”

“But you said so yourself: I’m hardly the role model for how to get married, even at BYU.”

“I said it for spite. After all, I’ve always been the one making the *other* girls jealous. It’s tough having the tables turned.”

Elly shook her head. “It’s true. I’m not a role model. I think of myself as more of a cautionary tale.” She put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “If you hadn’t been there when it counted, I would have fallen to pieces.”

Melanie laughed in self-reproach. “You sound a lot more grown up than me.”

“No, Mel, you’re my *senpai*, my senior. And that’s forever.”

They hugged for a long time. Melanie said, in a brighter voice, “You need a ride tomorrow, don’t you? Connor has to return his tux and we’ve got to get Fall semester ID stickers and books.”

“Sure. Thanks, Mel. I’ve got a staff meeting at two, so if we came over

around noon—?”

“Who knows what the lines will be like at the Marriott Center. Better make it eleven-thirty.” A mischievous glint came to her eyes. “You *will* be up by eleven-thirty?”

“Mel—” Elly said, slapping her arm playfully.

Melanie clutched her roommate’s hand one last time. “See you, Elly.”

“See you, Mel.”

And then Elly was alone on the steps. She looked up at the night sky, at Sirius shining in the deepening blue. It was true, what she’d said before: getting married was easy. Leaving friends, leaving family—that was hard.

June was at work in the kitchen. Elly felt guilty, leaving her with such a mess to clean up. “Auntie—” Elly said in Japanese. Words failed her.

The older woman wrapped her niece in her arms. When they parted, her eyes were glistening as well. “Be happy, Elly. That’s the best way you can thank me.”

Elly bit her bottom lip and nodded. A tear tumbled down her cheek.

“Good heavens,” June said crossly, “Connor’s going to get the wrong idea.” Elly had to laugh. “That’s more like it,” said her aunt. “Now go get him and go home.”

Connor and Oh Sensei were in the garage, loading the folding tables and chairs into the back of the minivan. The professor said, “To speak briefly in defense of my big sister, exaggerating the more severe aspects of her personality is something of a family hobby. I’m sure you’ve heard all the soap opera plots about the awfulness of the wife/mother-in-law relationship in Japan. My parents lived with my father’s parents until Sayaka was six. I was two when we moved back to Osaka, so my knowledge is mostly secondhand. But our grandmother apparently lived up to all the stereotypes, made worse in my big sister’s eyes by Mother’s expressions of relief when we finally moved. Sayaka’s determination not to be caught in a similar situation had the ironic consequence of making her more like her grandmother than her mother.”

Oh Sensei shut the hatch. “Add to that the family birthright. You are aware of those two infamous scrolls Samataro Oh penned for his daughters?” Connor nodded, and he continued, “My big sister is a fine woman

and a good mother, and she's got a heritage to live up to. So my advice is this, and it's pretty simple: give her the respect she's due. Feel free to disagree with her. But *never* condescend to her. That applies to the daughter as well."

Elly came into the garage from the front walk. "What applies to me?"

"Your mother's personality," her uncle said.

"Was that a compliment to me or a threat to Connor?"

"Both."

Elly tucked her arms around her husband's waist. "Auntie says we should go home."

"Good idea," said Oh Sensei. "And not to spoil your honeymoon, but we've got a staff meeting tomorrow afternoon."

He shoed them away and closed the garage door.

Chapter 33

Coming Home

Traffic was light on Eighth North as they drove east toward the gray wall of Mount Timpanogos. In the dark calm they both sighed. They'd set out twelve hours before as boyfriend and girlfriend (nominally), fiancé and fiancée (briefly), bride and groom (temporarily). They returned as husband and wife.

Connor pulled into the turn lane at 2200 North in Provo and waited for the light to change. "Didn't your parents meet on their missions?"

"Mom transferred into his zone when Dad had only three months to go. He extended it to four, which usually isn't allowed. Dad says the mission president let him stay a month longer because he was the only man Mom would listen to. Mom says he asked to stay a month longer because he was in love with her. I gather they were both right."

"So your father had to wait for her. That's a switch."

"He enrolled in the semester abroad program so he could be in Japan when she got off her mission. When I was a little kid I thought that was *so* romantic. I still do. From what I've heard, he didn't tell anybody about her. She came back with him at the end of the semester, and he said, 'Here's my fiancée.' They got married a month later. It's funny to think of your parents ever being as crazy and impulsive and in love as you."

"Not as crazy as us."

Elly laughed. “They actually *had* an engagement, except they didn’t tell anybody. I suppose they didn’t tell anybody because they thought people would object. Though I think people objected more *because* Mom and Dad didn’t tell anybody.”

Wanda had left the garage door open. Connor parked the car and shut off the engine. He clicked the remote under the visor, switching on the overhead light. The creak and rattle of the closing door died away, and the interior of the car filled with a muted, gray light. They sat there in silence for a minute.

“Well,” Elly said, “I’m home.”

They got out of the car. Connor retrieved the toaster oven and frying pan from the back seat and Elly got her new outfits. Wanda was at the kitchen table, reading a book and sipping a cup of cocoa. She said, turning a page in the book, “Your parents sent you a wedding present. It’s downstairs.”

“Parents?” they both echoed.

“Connor’s. I’m afraid Lynne let it slip.”

Connor gave his wife a guilty look.

“What did they say?” Elly asked.

“Congratulations, of course. I told them you were going to Japan over Christmas. They said they hoped you would come to Maine in the spring. And they expect wedding pictures.” She glanced up from her book. “I’m pretty sure I heard my brother mumble something about wishing that all their children’s marriages went this easily.”

Elly pouted, “So *you’re* free and clear. No fair!”

Wanda got up and set her cup and saucer in the sink. “I’ll see you two sometime tomorrow. Good night.”

“G’night, *Oba-chan*,” Elly said.

The new table sat in the middle of their kitchen. The varnished oak gave the room—it’s freshly painted walls still bare—a welcome warmth. Connor placed the frying pan and toaster oven on the counter. Elly hung her dresses in the closet, turned around, and stopped in amazement.

“Connor!” she called out, “come see this. Your parents got us a new mattress set.” She sorted through the stack of linens perched on the bed.

“Plus a set of sheets, a comforter, and two pillows.”

“A nice make too.”

“There’s a box taped to the card.” Elly peeled off the box and handed it to Connor. He slit the cellophane tape and opened the lid. He smiled.

“What?”

“Read the card first.”

She read: “Congratulations, Connor & Elaine. Wanda tells us that Elly is a lovely girl. We wish you the best. Mom & Dad. The necklace was my mother’s. It’s about time I had a daughter-in-law to give it to.”

Elly gave Connor a puzzled look. Connor stepped forward with the box. “See?” he said.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Are those real pearls?”

“I believe so. She’s told me that story before, now that I think about it, supposedly in case I needed to bribe a girl into marrying me.”

Elly held the choker in the palm of her hand, the snowy pearls glowing in the warm, incandescent light. “Here,” she said to Connor, handing him the choker. She lifted up her hair so he could fasten the necklace. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled the back of her neck.

A few minutes later, Elly said, her voice hoarse with ardor, “We’d better make the bed.”

They tucked in the mattress pad and the sheets. Connor retrieved the comforter from the kitchen table. They shook it out and glided it to rest on the bed. He said, “This is a lot easier with two people.”

“It ought to be a custom.”

Elly sat on the edge of the bed. The bed didn’t have a headboard—the wall served instead—so she fluffed the pillows into the right angle formed by the wall and mattress. She stretched out with her head on the pillow. “It’s a good bed,” she said, patting the comforter beside her.

Connor set the pillow next to its companion. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out next to her. “Especially the cinderblocks,” she added.

“It’s a solid foundation.”

She rolled over and pressed against his side. She could feel the beating of his heart, the warmth of his body radiating against her like summer sunlight. “How’s married life?”

He answered with a kiss, his hands slipping to her sides, over her hips,

and like a ship steering through calm waters, leaving turbulent currents in its wake. By the time his hands sought harbor at the small of her back, she had abandoned any restraint or delicacy.

His lips trailed down to the hollow of her throat. She groaned with unabashed contentment. But she felt compelled to say, catching her breath, “I think we should finish getting ready for bed.”

They fell easily into the routines the dreams had taught them. Elly undressed and Connor went to the kitchen to brush his teeth. In the bathroom, Elly debated for a half-minute, then stripped off her undergarments and left them in the clothes hamper. For the first time in many years she thought of Becky Hoggan and that slide. She shook her head and had to smile. If she knew *then* what she knew *now*—but she couldn’t have known, could she? No one ever did.

Connor had left the marriage certificate on the bureau. Elly picked it up and lay on the bed. Connor came out of the bathroom and gave her a double-take. “I don’t think I’ve seen you wearing glasses before.”

“What do you think?” She tipped her head to the side and shot him a coy glance over the rims.

“You look like the sexy woman scientist in any James Bond film. You know, put horn-rimmed glasses and a lab coat on a fashion model and her IQ automatically shoots up fifty points.”

“What about a half-Japanese brunette?”

“Makes her a genius.” Connor got in beside her. She snuggled against his shoulder. He said, indicating the marriage certificate, “Your grandfather said they’d send us a fancier one.”

“Don’t you think this one has a particular air of bureaucratic authority? Though it really ought to have a big, red seal on it. There’s nothing more official looking than a document stamped by the proper Japanese government agency.”

“Can you get a marriage license in Japan if you’re already married?”

“If you want to get legally married in Japan, you have to record the marriage at city hall. Then you have the family register amended—that is, if the husband or wife is Japanese. Since the Oh family domicile is listed as Osaka, it’ll be easy. Mom will probably have all the paperwork ready

when we get to Kobe.”

“All I know about family registers is that the wife’s record gets transferred to the husband’s *koseki* when they get married.”

“Not if the husband doesn’t have an active register,” Elly pointed out, “or if it’s a *muko-iri* marriage and the wife’s family adopts the husband into their line. Then he goes on the wife’s *koseki*.”

“That means your father is listed on the Oh *koseki*.”

“Yes. We all are. You don’t mind, do you? I mean, it’s more of a genealogy-type thing, since neither of us is a Japanese citizen. But then you can officially wear the Oh family crest. You did, you know.”

“I did?”

“In dreams. You wore it in our dreams.”

Chapter 34

Better than Dreams

Elly slid the certificate back into the envelope and returned it to the bureau, along with her glasses. She switched off the light, leaving the room lit only by the soft glow of the nightstand lamp, and climbed into bed and into Connor's arms, absolutely sure of her place in the world for one of the few times in her life.

He nuzzled the nape of her neck. She undid the sash of her yukata. The traditional kimono is subtly designed to expose the back of the neck. Elly hadn't believed that such a mundane part of her body could be so exquisitely stimulated. But those old kimono makers weren't wrong.

"I love you," he whispered, nipping gently at her earlobe

"Yes," she whispered back.

Connor's hands slipped up her sides to her breasts. She gasped with sheer delight. Unable to bear it any longer, she twisted around in his arms and opened her mouth against his. He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her until she tingled inside and out.

He lowered her trembling body *on the green bed, within these beams of cedar, under these rafters of fir*. Her breath hummed out of her throat in a leonine purr. *I am my beloved's and his desire is toward me*. Lightning storms danced through her nerves. Her hunger for him surpassed anything she'd experienced before in her life.

He was breathing heavily when he once again looked into her eyes. She knew he saw in hers a wild and untamed countenance. He hovered over her. *I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.*

She nodded and closed her eyes. A small cry escaped her as they came together. The concerned look on his face told her he must have seen the tears in her eyes. She kissed him, reassuring him with her body.

For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely. The dreams had communicated that strong sense of intimacy, of closeness and belonging. But had said nothing about the intensity, the heat, the sheer, raw intoxication of his physical presence.

She heard the keening of dolphins, the sound of the ocean. The world went white. She held him tightly in her arms, lest the universe shatter and they lose each other in the cataclysm.

“Elly—” he said.

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. He swept them away and smoothed the hair from her brow.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I think that happens when I—” She kissed him and settled her head against the pillow, smiling until she felt her cheeks dimple. Every touch generated little sparks of pleasure, like blue static snapping off the fur of a contented cat. She was sure their bodies glowed in the dark.

She gazed into his eyes. “It’s much better than dreams.”

“Much better than dreams,” he agreed.

He pulled the covers around their shoulders. Elly nestled against his chest and closed her eyes. The world fell away. She floated on a warm and quiet sea. As she drifted into the embrace of sleep, a new understanding came to her—that he loved her completely, body and soul. And that was a wonderful thing indeed.

The room was dark when she awoke, the air crisp and cool. Elly retrieved her yukata from the foot of the bed and groped her way to the kitchen. She got the pitcher of mugi-cha from the refrigerator, filled a tea-cup and warmed it in the microwave, bringing her face close enough to the digital clock for her blurry eyes to read the time. Five in the morning.

She drank the herbal tea slowly, letting the liquid warm her stomach.

Connor was still asleep. In the bathroom, she shut the door and turned on the light. She disrobed and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She still had on the choker. She ran her fingers across the smooth pearls glimmering at her throat. “So now you’re a woman,” she told herself. Did she look different? More mature? Not really. She felt like a child who’d gotten exactly what she wanted for Christmas. *Mature* wasn’t the word for her state of mind.

She stored the choker in the medicine cabinet and stepped into the shower. It was a stall (no bath) with a frosted glass door that clicked shut. The knob in the center of the tiled wall was one of those contraptions found in hotel bathrooms. There was a lever on the faucet. She twisted it. Nothing. She pulled up. The faucet gurgled and cold water blasted down on her. She shrieked and hastily flipped the knob to hot.

The bathroom door opened. “Elly?”

“*Ohayo!*” she shouted over the rushing water.

“Morning!” he called back. “You figure out how that works?”

“I think so.”

“Glenn got it from a refurbishing job at the Provo Marriott a couple of years ago.” A minute later he said, “I’m flushing the toilet.”

“Put it down!” she yelled half-kiddingly, but welcomed the thump of the toilet seat. When she shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, Connor was at the sink, shaving. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her head.

Connor wiped a clear circle on the mirror. He said, rinsing the razor, “I figured since we’re going to pick up our IDs today, I’d better shave. Dress standards and all that.”

“One of these days I’d like to see your beard again. I didn’t get a very good look the first time.” She leaned closer to examine his jowls.

He stopped and shook his head. “You’re making this difficult.”

“What? You lived in campus housing, didn’t you? You must have shaved hundreds of times with people bumbling all over the place.”

“Not with a naked woman standing next to me.”

She giggled and pulled on her yukata. “When you’re nearsighted, you think the rest of the world sees you as blurry as you see them.”

“Not that I’m complaining—”

Afterward she patted his face. “You smell very manly.”

“It’s the menthol, and probably a cheap synthetic at that.”

“An aphrodisiac,” she breathed huskily, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her breasts against his back.

Connor picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. “I forgot to do this last night,” he apologized.

The bedroom was freezing cold compared to the bathroom. Elly burrowed under the covers. She reached over and turned on the nightstand lamp. “Could you get the brush off the bureau?” She unraveled her turban. He sat behind her and brushed her hair with long strokes. Elly said, “I haven’t cut it since the beginning of my mission. But I bet you like my hair long.”

“Yes, but I understand the practical implications.”

“Of course you would.”

He gathered up her hair and peeked around at her face. “You would look quite smart in a bob.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Four sisters, remember.”

Elly drew her mane over her right shoulder and lay back on the bed. She thought for a moment and decided to speak before self-consciousness overtook her. She whispered, “We’re not, um, too *loud*?”

He demurred and instead drew a line down her body, from her collarbone to her belly button, parting her yukata enough to reveal a thin line of damp skin. She smiled. Then she looked concerned. “I mean,” she said, still whispering, “loud enough for Wanda to hear?”

He pointed up. “There’s extra insulation in the ceiling. The original intent was to protect Wanda’s ears from the musical tastes of the modern college student.”

He retraced the line he’d drawn on her body, wider this time. She giggled. It tickled. He trailed his fingers across her skin to the edges of the fabric, opening the yukata like the blue petals of a flower.

The clock radio came on. *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio. A discussion about the upcoming off-year elections. Elly laughed. Making

love to political commentary was so incongruous.

“I forgot about that,” Connor said.

He leaned over to turn off the radio, then settled back and pulled her on top of him.

They proceeded from there without haste.

Chapter 35

Saving Susan

Elly opened her eyes. It was late in the morning and the curtains glowed brightly. Connor sat on the edge of the bed, drying his hair with a towel.

“Hey, handsome.”

“Hey, beautiful.”

She sat up, yawned and stretched—and realized she was quite naked. She scrambled for her yukata. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten-thirty.”

“Oh, we’re supposed to meet Mel in an hour! And I’ve got that staff meeting at two. How about your Writing Center schedule?”

“I won’t know until the meeting on Thursday.”

“I should find out what classes I’m teaching today.”

“So we’ll have some brunch and go meet Melanie.” He kissed her. “Bathroom’s free.”

Connor was quite chivalrous about her getting dressed. But her sudden bashfulness annoyed her. Not that she wouldn’t have thrown off her clothes and fallen into his arms at the drop of a proverbial hat. But they did have places to go and things to do.

Kiwanis Park was crowded with students. They wove among the picnickers and Frisbee throwers, the shirtless guys playing touch football and

the sunbathing girls coyly watching them.

The front door to the condo was open. Elly hesitated and walked in. “I’m paid up through the end of the month, so that gives me one more day.” Still, being in Melanie’s condo felt funny. The house spirits had bid her goodbye and now looked upon her as a stranger.

A girl came into the room carrying a cardboard box. “Hi. You must be Melanie’s new roommate. I’m Jill.”

“I’m her ex-roommate, in fact. Is Mel here?”

“She’s upstairs.”

Melanie was in her room, consolidating her clothes into one closet. Elly rapped on the open door. “Hey, Mel. I brought my keys back.”

Melanie hugged her warmly.

Elly said, “It’s only been a day since I left.”

“It feels like forever.” Melanie gave her a double-take. “I’ve never seen you with that choker before.”

“Connor’s mom gave it to me.” She smiled to herself, absently touching the necklace. “I guess Jill is going to be one of your roommates? I met her downstairs.”

“And Amy Perry. If I could stand living with them on my mission, I figured I could stand them as roommates. Which reminds me, you owe me a fourth, Elly. As much as I enjoy having a room to myself, the landlord in me can’t afford it.”

“I know.” She went to the bed and gathered up the rest of Melanie’s dresses. For several minutes they busied about with hangers and clothes.

“So—” said Melanie, “you know, what’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” She stopped and said, “*Really*, Mel.”

“I’m curious. So shoot me. I’m not asking for *details*.”

“You’re not getting *details*.” She pondered the question. Finally she said, “It’s fun.”

“It’s fun?”

“Yeah, it’s fun. A real lot of fun.” She broke into giggles.

Melanie reddened, rare on her part. “Fun,” she repeated, picking up the keys Elly had placed on the bureau. She walked down the hall and gave them to Jill. “I’m taking off with Elly and Connor. I should be back around two.”

“Did Amy say when she was getting in?”

“Not till tomorrow.”

“See you,” Jill said, and returned to her unpacking.

Clark’s Tuxedo was first on the itinerary. After that they stopped at the Key Shop on Second North. Connor threaded the shiny brass keys onto a key ring and handed it to Elly. “Here you go,” he said.

Elly said to Melanie, “*Now* you can consider me officially moved out.”

They drove back to the upper campus and parked behind the Marriott Center. Folding tables were set around the oval of the main concourse. Melanie got in line at A-B-C, Connor at L-M-N, and Elly at O-P-Q-R. Elly was still hashing things out when Connor and Melanie walked over. Elly pointed at Connor and said, “I’m living with him.”

“She means we’re married.”

By the time Elly had straightened out her marital status (filled out a name-change form at the Registration office, and drove downtown again to get a new Social Security card at the federal building), her staff meeting was about to begin.

Connor said, “Give me your class schedule and I’ll get your books while you go to your meeting.”

She kissed him. “I should be finished around three-thirty.”

Elly hitched up her backpack and hurried down the stairs to the main floor, out the northwest entrance, and into the hot, bright sunlight. She squinted, collected herself, and headed for the JKHB. She hadn’t gone more than ten feet when someone called her name: “Packard Shimai! Sister Packard!”

A sandy-haired woman ran up and grabbed her arm. Elly gaped at her. “Susan?”

Susan was literally jumping up and down with excitement. “I just *knew* you’d be here. I prayed about it, I really did—”

“Susan—it’s—it’s nice to see you—”

“—and here you are! I can hardly believe it! Remember how we talked about sharing an apartment when we got back to BYU? I was *so* looking forward to it.”

Elly thought: *Oh good grief!* Yes, they had *talked* about it. She couldn’t

remember the talk being all that *serious*, more like all that well-wishing her classmates scribbled in her high school yearbook: *See you at the reunion!* She hadn't been to a reunion and had no plans to attend one in the future.

Susan's tone grew more serious. "Truth is, Elly, I got here yesterday. I'm staying at my cousin's place in Salt Lake. She's going to the LDS Business College. I really don't want to commute. I was hoping—" And her hope trailed off in a cloud of unspoken expectations.

Elly swallowed hard. On the spur of the moment, she tactlessly blurted out the truth. "Susan," she said, "I'm married." Despite Susan's plight, she felt her body warm as she said the words. "I'm married," she repeated, and couldn't keep the broad smile from her face.

"Married? You're *married?*" Susan couldn't have looked more stunned if Elly had punched her in the face.

"Susan, I've got to get to a meeting. Why don't we talk afterward?" She resumed a brisk pace toward the JKHB.

Susan scampered after her. "Elly, how in the world can you be *married?* You got off your mission two months ago! I thought you said you *weren't* going to get married the second you got back from your mission, that you had plenty of other things to do with your life."

Elly remembered saying those things and shook her head in dismay.

"Two months!" Susan went on, marveling. "Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that Elaine Packard would get married in two months!"

Actually, a month-and-a-half tops. But Elly didn't feel a need to make the facts of her life any more extraordinary than they already were.

"So who is it?"

She wilted a bit under the cross-examination. "Do you remember that time we were coming back from Nakamozu and there was that cute gaijin on the Nankai station platform?"

Susan thought for a moment and nodded. "I remember that. *I* was the one who said he was cute."

"I married him."

"You *what?*"

Elly pushed open the door to the Humanities building. Susan followed her up the stairs to the third floor and down the hall to the conference room. The door was open. Her uncle tapped on his watch and said, "I

hate to interrupt my niece's honeymoon, but we do need to begin."

That got a laugh out of the room. Elly shot him a ferocious look that, when she turned back to Susan, caused her old companion to quail and retreat a step. She put her hand on Susan's shoulder. "I should be done at three-thirty. I'll explain everything then. Okay?"

Susan was still in shock.

"Okay?" Elly repeated. Susan nodded. When Elly walked into the room, everybody applauded. She gritted her teeth and smiled politely.

It was closer to four when Oh Sensei concluded the meeting. As the rest of the TAs filed out he said to Elly, "We're picking up Atsuko at the airport tomorrow. Do you mind if we bring her by to see you?"

"No, not at all."

Uncle paused before asking the next question. "Have you called your parents?"

Elly sighed. "I'll get around to it. I promise."

"Once Atsuko finds out—"

"I know, I know." She offered a brave smile. "Believe me, Uncle, everything will work out."

"I believe you. But I'd like to know *when*."

They stepped out of the conference room. Susan was sitting on the bench next to the Asian languages office. Elly motioned for her to join them. She said to her uncle, "This is Susan Eliason. She was my last companion on my mission."

Oh Sensei asked, "Are you attending BYU Fall semester? Taking any Japanese classes?"

"I'm signed up for 221."

"That's good. Elly is teaching one of the 201 labs. You should audit her section. Keep her on her toes." He said to Elly, "See you tomorrow. And remember about your mother." He disappeared into his office.

"You're a teacher?" Susan asked, clearly impressed.

"I teach a section of 101 besides the lab."

They descended the stairs to the main floor. Susan grew more subdued. She said, "I can understand why you wouldn't want to live with me, Elly. It's totally embarrassing when I think how I wiggled out those last

couple of months. I know, so you don't have to pretend and be polite. But I'm back to being normal, carefree, guy-loving me. Promise."

Elly found herself smiling. Susan probably wasn't that bad a person to hang around with, as long as she wasn't stuck with her twenty-four hours a day. She said, "I really am married, Susan."

"I didn't mean that." She asked, "The guy on the Nankai station platform? You're not kidding?"

"It's the truth, as incredible as it sounds. Connor was working for Oh Sensei's brother Spring term. We ran into each other again in July."

"So you got married after knowing each other for two months?"

"You're not the only one who's surprised. I'm still recovering. I'm meeting him right now. His name is Connor McKenzie."

They walked back to the Wilkinson Center. Elly said, "You should check the housing board in the Wilkinson Center. Contracts go up for sale all the time." She stopped and laughed. "Wait, of course!" Good heavens, but she was living in a cocoon. "Melanie! She's my old landlady. I left her a roommate short. She's got a condo on Ninth East. It's only a few minutes walk from the Law School. Did you ever meet Crandall Shimai? She was my training companion."

"Do you think it's still open? Can you call her for me? Here, use my cell phone."

Susan dug her phone out of her purse. Elly took it with some trepidation. But she'd walked herself into this corner and she might as well walk herself out again.

"Hi, Mel."

"Your chauffeuring privileges have expired, Elly."

"No, Mel. I found you a roommate. Susan Eliason, my old companion. Elly smiled reassuringly at Susan.

Mel said, "Isn't she the one who drove you crazy?"

Elly frowned to herself. This was what happened when she told tales out of school. "You'll like her, Mel. I promise."

"Well—"

"Mel—" Elly said sternly.

"Okay, okay. But if she drives me crazy as well, I'm going to send her to live with you."

“Thanks, Mel. I owe you.”

“You owe me big time, sister.”

Elly handed the phone back to Susan. “She sounds agreeable.”

Susan clapped and beamed. At least one person was happy with the arrangement. The truth was, during the last two months of her mission, Elly had interacted with Susan pretty much on autopilot. She wasn’t sure what she had or hadn’t promised. Elly knew she couldn’t have made it through the last two months without Wanda and June and Mel to lean on. She hadn’t been there in the same way for Susan. She’d been too obsessed with her own problems. It pained her now to realize how selfish she’d been.

On the second floor mezzanine of the Wilkinson Center, Connor was sitting on a bench next to a bulky pair of BYU Bookstore bags. He cast a puzzled look at Susan. Elly said, “This is Connor.” She said to Connor. “Susan was the missionary I was with on the Nakamozu Nankai. You remember her, don’t you?”

They shook hands. Susan said, “I’m sure he only remembers *you*, Elly. Where are you living now?”

“Across the park from the condos. We can stop at Melanie’s place on the way.”

“You see, Elly,” her old companion said, in the manner of a wise adult pointing out the moral of the story to the attentive child. “I knew everything was going to work out fine.”

Chapter 36

The Brass Bed

Elly knew Mel had counted on sharing her room with a known quantity—Elly—and was not eager to launch into a shotgun friendship with a person she knew only by reputation, and not a good one at that.

Worse, what Mel knew about Susan was entirely thanks to Elly, though Greg Chalmers might have added a few details on his own. Still, Melanie warmed to Susan sufficiently that Elly was encouraged to believe that her “favor” would be well received by both of them.

Susan drove them home and became their first houseguest as a married couple. “I still can’t believe you got married only yesterday!” she exclaimed. “You just *have* to show me your wedding photos the *minute* you get them.”

“Check out the wicked little dress Melanie gave me,” Elly said, showing her both outfits.

“Oh, Elly,” Susan said, her eyes alighting on the cocktail dress, “you’d sure turn a lot of heads wearing that! It’s awfully close to breaking BYU standards, don’t you think? You might make Connor jealous.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Connor said. “But I think she’d turn a lot of heads without a dress.”

“I bet she *would*,” Susan said, and both women burst out laughing.

Connor moseyed into the kitchen and moved boxes around.

Elly invited Susan to dinner, but Susan said she wanted to drive back to Salt Lake and get her luggage and move in that night. Elly understood the sentiment. Relatives' couches only got more uncomfortable the longer they were used. "I'll let you know when we get the pictures from the wedding," she promised. "We'll have all of you over for dinner."

"Oh, and you have to make sure Melanie brings Chalmers Chōrō, so he can see the new me."

They hugged and parted friends. A few months earlier, Elly had been happy to put Nevada, California, and the Pacific Ocean between Susan and herself. But now she knew her old companion was right: prayers had been answered, and in more ways than one.

Later that night, having taken the dress out to show Susan, Elly finally tried it on. "What do you think?" she asked, posing for Connor.

He sat on the bed, folded his arms, and studied her carefully. "Susan has a point."

Elly glanced down at her hemline. "I do wonder what Melanie was thinking. Maybe that I was an inch or two shorter."

"Again, I'm not complaining."

"No? You wouldn't be even a little bit jealous showing me off in public in a dress like this?"

"I don't know about showing you off. I've never dated a woman who wore a dress like that. Or looked so good in it."

She grinned and stole onto the bed. In the black dress, her dark hair falling over her shoulders, she looked like a sleek, lithe panther. She crept into his arms and nipped at his ear. He ran his hands up the backs of her thighs.

"*Meow*," she said.

The dress got a bit rumpled after that.

When Connor first moved in, Wanda insisted that they have dinner together. He'd resisted, of course, as such arrangements were contrary to the mind-set of the single college student—apron strings and all that. He tested out the "I don't want to be a burden on you" excuse, and then and only then had Wanda briefly let down her guard.

“Dining alone every day,” she retorted, “is about as depressing for a person my age as you can imagine.”

He hadn’t argued about it since. Sundays and two or three times a week they ate together. Connor came to appreciate both Wanda’s reasons and her cooking.

Over breakfast, Wanda mentioned to Elly, “That bed of yours is part of a set.”

“What kind of a set?”

“The frame is the base of a four-poster brass bed.”

Elly’s eyes lit up.

Connor groaned.

“Connor groans,” explained Wanda, “because he was the one who took it apart. Where did you put the headboard and footboard, Connor?”

He glowered at his aunt. “It’s in the garage.”

“Really? You still have it? Can we put it back together?”

“Elly,” he said, “it’s like a jigsaw puzzle, only in three dimensions.”

She jumped up from the table. “I want to see it. C’mon, let’s see it.”

Connor relented, grumbling about how it should have been carted off to Deseret Industries long ago. He finished his bagel and headed for the garage, Elly pushing him along. She stood in the empty parking space next to the Camry and turned around. “Where is it?”

Two paces to the right of the kitchen steps, a knotted rope hung from the ceiling. Connor tugged on it. A hinged ladder unfolded and slid to the floor. “That switch there,” he said, indicating the wall next to the door. Elly turned on the light.

The attic was lit by a bare bulb. The air was musty and cool. The attic floor was an obstacle course of gardening tools, a push-mower, knee-high stacks of plastic planting pots, a box of Ball canning jars, and a rack of growing lamps. Wanda had given up gardening after Walter died, and now only fussed with the flower beds in the front yard.

Connor said, “I got off my mission in time to help my parents move to Maine. You wouldn’t believe the amount of junk that went to the Salvation Army and the landfill.”

“As you know,” Elly said, “I cannot empathize.”

They came at last to a blue tarp by the far wall. Connor drew back the

tarp. The brass posts threw off a muddy gleam in the mottled light. To one of the posts he'd taped a plastic bag stuffed with nuts and bolts. He'd used duct tape and the adhesive was baked onto the metal.

"It's so pretty," exclaimed Elly.

"It's a mess," said Connor.

"Then we'll clean it."

"*Cleaning* is not the issue. What makes antiques rare is that all the rest of them fell to pieces before they could become antiques. This one is well on its way to joining them."

"If everybody thought that way, nobody would have any antiques to collect."

"Somebody's always going to win the lottery too. That doesn't mean playing the lottery is a smart idea."

Connor climbed down the ladder, growling under his breath. *This is so stupid*, he said to himself. A total waste of time. But he couldn't remember *why* putting the bed together again was so stupid, only that there *was* a very good reason.

"I had a good reason for taking it apart. This bed is just not—" and he paused, but said the dreaded word anyway, "practical."

"Practicality doesn't have anything to do with it, Connor."

"Practicality matters if you consider the hours you could be spending doing something else truly useful."

Elly rolled her eyes. "Our lives aren't exactly filled to the brim doing useful and necessary things."

At that moment, Wanda opened the kitchen door. "Oh, Connor, there you are. Could you come help me with something?"

Connor slapped the dust off his jeans and followed his aunt into the kitchen, glad for an excuse to end the discussion. Wanda set a jar of green paint on the counter. "I was thinking of touching up the shutters. You know how old paint jars can get."

The paint had glued the lid on quite solidly. He rapped it against the counter and gave it another try. The lid gave way with a scrunch of metal against glass, scattering flecks of enamel onto the Formica. He shook the cramp out of his hand. His palm was creased with the grooves stamped into the lid.

“You know—” Wanda said in an offhand manner, “you’re right about that bed.”

Connor nodded in agreement. It was good to hear a modicum of common sense injected into the matter.

“Your grandfather would have agreed with you one-hundred percent. Such trivial sentiments cannot stand up to rational examination. Interesting how these things run in the family.”

A tick of the second hand, and the expression froze on Connor’s face. Whatever response his brain was contemplating, the words never made it past his vocal cords. He stared at his aunt. She pretended he wasn’t there and stirred the paint.

When motion returned to his limbs, Connor retrieved the car keys and strode purposefully to the garage. Elly was perched halfway up the ladder steps, elbows on knees, chin in her hands. She clambered down the ladder when Connor hit the switch for the garage door opener. The door clanked open, spilling a bright band of morning sunlight across the concrete.

The noise died away. Elly said, “The bed’s not *that* important, Connor. I mean, we could get around to it anytime. She saw the car keys in his hand and said, “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to move the car,” he said, gesturing at the Toyota.

“Move the car?” Elly echoed. “Why? Where?”

“I’m just going to move it.” He got into the car, took a deep breath, started the engine, and backed into the driveway. Then he lowered the garage door and stared at the ceiling.

“What are you looking for?” Elly asked.

“One of the plywood sheets isn’t nailed down. I can never remember which one.” He got a rake and jabbed between the floor joists until he found it. He replaced the rake and brought back a coil of rope and a pair of safety glasses. “It’ll be easier if we lower the headboard and footboard rather than trying to haul them down the stairs.” He fitted the glasses over her nose.

“You mean we’re going to put the bed together?”

He answered with a sheepish grin. “I guess the bed’s not such a bad idea after all.” He examined his sneakers, until she took his face in her hands and kissed him.

“How does this work?” she asked eagerly.

“I figure I’ll lower the pieces with the rope. You make sure they come down straight and don’t scrape on the floor.”

“Got it,” she said, with a toss of her long ponytail.

Back in the garage loft, Connor set aside the loose plywood sheet. Using the crossbeam as a pulley, he lowered the headboard until Elly could catch and guide it to the floor. After repeating the process with the footboard, Elly came up to the attic and they carried down the posts.

“It *is* a mess,” she conceded. Their hands were already black from the dust and oxidation.

They attacked the glum metal with damp rags. Wanda came out to take a look. “I say, it’s looking quite handsome already.”

“How long has the bed been in the family?” Elly asked.

“Its provenance supposedly traces back to Aunt Zariah. My dad was the one who replaced the steel in the frame. You might want to try a brass cleaner. Don’t apply anything harsher. On *Antiques Road Show* they’re always talking about how important it is to maintain the original finish.”

They drove to Lowe’s and got some brass cleaner and the replacement pieces of hardware. The Brasso did a good job on the muddy patina. A little gasoline took care of the rotted duct tape. In other places they uncovered geological strata of gunk: poster paint, decades-old gum, furniture wax, and who-knows-what.

Wanda confirmed that in a previous incarnation the bed had bunked visiting grandchildren, who’d left behind this evidence of their sojourns. All told, as far as restorations of faux heirlooms went, the cost was mostly in elbow grease and a certain measure of stubborn pride.

Chapter 37

Atsuko

The Ohs' minivan pulled into Wanda's driveway around three.

"That must be Atsuko," said Elly. She took off her gloves and went out to greet them. The minivan's door slid open. A Japanese girl jumped out.

"Atsuko!" Elly called out.

"Chieko!" the girl shrieked in turn. Though a half-foot shorter than Elly, she nearly bowled her over by force of enthusiasm alone. "Aunt and Uncle told me *all* about it on the way back from the airport. I mean, *married?* Your mom is going to go *ballistic!*"

Connor walked up and Atsuko yelped, "Connor!" She perched on her toes and gave him a hug. "Auntie says Uncle was trying to set you two up all along. You know what? I even heard my mom mention it to Elly's mom once."

"Really?" Elly said, with honest incredulity.

"Yeah, she kept going on about how they had this guy from BYU working for them, and she thought you two would be great together."

Connor said, "That's the first I've heard of it."

Atsuko whacked him on the arm. "But you were working too hard to pay attention to any of *our* schemes. Still, it turned out to be a great idea, *neh?* Look at you two!"

Atsuko's American demeanor notwithstanding, she spoke in a spitfire stream of *Kansai-ben*, the rough Osaka dialect that even made Oh Sensei wince at times. At the beginning of Spring term, before sending Connor over to Japan, he'd explained the sociolinguistics of the situation thusly: "Imagine a family of Boston Brahmins (by lineage, not fortune) moving to Atlanta, Georgia, and discovering fifteen years later that their pride and joy sounded like Dolly Parton."

Wanda came out to meet them halfway through the conversation. Elly said, "Aunt Wanda, this is my cousin Atsuko."

Atsuko sobered up a bit and offered the older woman a polite bow. "I am pleased to meet you," she said, in her best grammar school English.

"And I'm happy to meet you, Atsuko."

June said, putting a hand on Atsuko's shoulder, "We're on our way to the bookstore to get her textbooks and supplies."

Atsuko switched back to Japanese. "First, you have to show me where you live. Auntie said you had the *whole* basement *all* to yourselves."

"Not *all* to ourselves," Elly corrected her.

But after the five-minute tour, Atsuko was considerably impressed. "It's a lot bigger than my tiny dorm room. Now *that's* a rabbit hutch."

June interrupted to invite Elly and Connor over for dinner. "The refrigerator is full of leftovers. And the jet lag should be catching up with Atsuko by then too."

"What?" said Atsuko.

June put her arm around her niece's shoulders and steered her toward the stairs. "What I'm saying is, you're a poster child for Ritalin. I always thought it was a mistake to send you to a private school."

"Public schools in Japan are the *worst*," Atsuko opined.

"Public school did wonders for Elly."

"Yeah, but Eri got to go to an *American* high school. I would have made the perfect American high school student."

"That's what we all feared," said her aunt.

June sent them home that night with two Tupperware bowls of sukiyaki, enough to feed them for the rest of the week. Atsuko had opted to stay the weekend with her aunt and uncle before moving into the dorms.

Getting ready for bed, Elly asked, “My aunts’ scheming notwithstanding, did you ever harbor romantic intentions toward my cousin?”

“It honestly never occurred to me.”

“Really? You must have noticed how cute she is.”

“Guys notice how cute total strangers are. And you’re the one who pointed out that she’s only eighteen.”

“Seven years isn’t that much.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I like her, to be sure, but the same way I like my sisters. I know, that’s a cliché. Anyway I love you, Elly. Telling the difference isn’t hard.”

“My, and aren’t you the man with the right words.” She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“I manage now and then.”

She tossed her head back, thought about her own question. “Atsuko is a bit too *genki* for the sedate McKenzie blood.”

“I got the idea that you used to be a bit like that.”

“In elementary school, maybe. But Atsuko’s missing that all-important gene for self-consciousness that’s supposed to kick in at puberty. Even Emily’s more feisty than I was at her age.”

“You don’t strike me as a self-conscious person.”

She laughed. “Compared to *you*. I knew Atsuko when she was in high school. She was probably a lot like your Billy Bragg or my Becky Hoggan. She really is a decent, well-mannered person underneath.”

“True about Billy as well.”

“But to hear my parents tell it, *her* parents figured that Atsuko was safer being *Atsuko* in Japan than in America. I wonder if Atsuko is what my mom was like at her age. Maybe that’s why she went on a mission, to calm herself down.”

“If so, your dad never had a chance.”

“Neither did you.”

“I figured that out soon enough.”

“And when was that?”

“The time you hit me pretty much settled it.”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hit you. I was so afraid you were going to think I was some sort of terrible dragon lady. To be honest, I am a dragon

lady, but it makes for a poor initial impression.”

“As Martin says, sometimes that’s what it takes to get a male’s attention. Though he was referring more to large farm animals.”

“I’ve got better ways now,” she said, pressing her body against his.

They made love. She fell asleep in his arms. He watched her sleep and marveled—at the warmth of another human body, the warmth of a shared bed. He wondered at the silky texture of her skin, at what it was like to be caught up so completely within the senses of another person, in her touch and taste and scent. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. A fierce expression crossed her face, and just as quickly was replaced by one of such perfect peace and gentle calm that it made his heart ache.

His thoughts flashed back to the moment in the kitchen and that needle of fear shot through him. Wanda spoke with such deceptive nonchalance as she slipped the cold steel into his entrails: *Your grandfather would have agreed with you one-hundred percent.*

Sitting in the Camry, it had taken all his self-control not to slam his head against the steering wheel. *Idiot!* What was he thinking? Drawing a line in the sand over *this?*

Interesting how these things run in the family, Wanda had said. Interesting, indeed, and terribly depressing. What was the old saying? *What’s bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.* His grandfather was buried inside him, hiding in places he didn’t even know were there.

He knew without a doubt that he would love Elly for the rest of his existence. But he had a hard enough time believing that she *liked* him. He did not for a moment doubt her friendship or her loyalty or her commitment. “*By mine honour I love thee,*” he whispered. “*By which honour I dare not swear thou lovest me; yet my blood begins to flatter me that thou dost.*”

All he could do was make her happy. He wasn’t sure how, but it was a goal worth striving toward. Her hand rested on his chest, her cuticles stained a copper oxide green. He thought of emeralds.

She stirred and opened her eyes. “Hey,” she said, sleepily, “what are you still doing up?”

“I’ve been thinking. Some old Shakespeare I remembered.”

“Oh good, tell me.”

“It’s from *Henry V*, when he’s wooing Katherine. He dispatched most of her family at Agincourt and hardly speaks a word of French, so he’s got something of an uphill climb. He tells her: *Therefore was I created with a stubborn outside, with an aspect of iron, that, when I come to woo ladies I fright them.*”

She smiled. “I think that applies more to me.”

He continued, “*Thou hast me, if thou hast me, at the worst. And thou shalt wear me, if thou wear me, better and better.*”

She raised herself on her elbows and kissed him, touching his lips with the tip of her tongue. *Thou hast ravished my heart.* The kiss eviscerated all his doubts. He turned off the nightstand lamp and they snuggled beneath the covers.

School began the day after Labor Day. Enough students had returned for the campus wards to resume on Sunday. The ward boundaries would remain in flux for another week or two, though Bishop Ferguson had won an exemption for Connor and Elly to guarantee their staying in the ward.

“I enjoyed your wedding,” the bishop said, greeting them warmly. “My family doesn’t quite understand when I try to describe your kimono, Elly. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“We’ll include a picture in our wedding announcement,” she assured him.

While they were doing the tithing count after church, the bishop asked Connor about his wife’s schedule.

“Besides her regular coursework, she’s teaching a four-hour class and a lab.”

The bishop nodded. “Then I guess I don’t want to throw a big calling at her right off the bat. But I think she could make an important contribution. So many expectations are placed on women at BYU when it comes to education and marriage. I was hoping you could sound her out—?”

“Relief Society?” Elly said dubiously, as they walked home.

“He didn’t think as president.”

“That role-model business again. I don’t think I’m the kind of example the average BYU alumnus wants paraded in front of his kids.”

“The point is, you’ve now got more experience than anybody else in

the ward. I don't think it matters how you got it."

"It'd better not. Anyway, I don't see you clamoring to get into the elder's quorum presidency."

"My calling is more like being a consultant. Like Zatoichi—you sweep into town, put things right, and then sweep out again."

"You sound like my dad, and I can tell you my mom got tired of the sweeping to and fro business."

"I shall only sweep to and fro at your pleasure, my dear."

Elly held his hand tightly. "You'd better believe it."

Monday morning they helped Atsuko move into her dorm. Her roommate was a shy freshman, who did a poor job disguising the fact that she was both intrigued and horrified at being paired with an extrovert, and an extrovert from a foreign country to boot. The average dorm room just didn't have that much room to shrink into. By the time they left, she had the look of a mouse in the care of a rambunctious kitten.

Atsuko nonchalantly declared, "She'll get used to me after a while."

"I almost feel sorry for her," Connor said. "I rather resented getting dragged off to church socials during my undergraduate days. I think it's a greatly exaggerated facet of college life."

"A good thing too," Elly said to her cousin. "That's why he was still available when I showed up."

"It's a fair deal," Atsuko insisted. "She'll teach me English and I'll teach her how to be a *real* college student."

Elly said mostly to herself, "That sounds like a familiar bargain."

They collected Oh Sensei at the JKHB and walked over to the Cougar-reat. After lunch Atsuko left to do some shopping and exploring on her own.

"I think she was happy to be rid of us," Connor said. "I told you I was too old for her."

"It's not you," Elly insisted. "It's your marital status. She knows her odds of meeting guys are exponentially diminished with her handsome in-law tagging along."

"Not to mention her uncle," Oh Sensei said. He returned to his office.

Elly and Connor walked home.

“How do you think Atsuko will do at the ELC?” Connor asked. “Oh Sensei had me bring her a TOEFL study guide last spring, but I don’t know if she ever opened it.”

“She’ll breeze right through,” Elly said. “Her English is a lot better than she lets on, and she really wants to get into BYU.”

Connor said, “I’m not saying this about Atsuko. But the vibe I’ve gotten from every other Japanese girl I’ve met at BYU is that they really want a good reason not to return to Japan.”

“Unlike all you returned missionaries who can’t wait to go back? And my sister Em?” Still, Elly nodded. “You baptized more women than men, I bet. Not to mention that a family the size of the average Utah family would bankrupt you in Japan. I like to complain about my upbringing, but I have to admit, I had the best of both worlds.”

Chapter 38

The Fortune-Teller

They spent the rest of Labor Day in the garage cleaning brass. A summer thunderstorm gathered over the mountains. The sun disappeared behind the clouds. Rain spotted the driveway and then began thumping down on the roof. Steam rose off the hot asphalt.

Elly walked onto the driveway, holding out her arms and spinning around. “I’m reliving my childhood!”

Connor watched from the shelter of the garage, an amused expression on his face. She grabbed him and dragged him into the downpour. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her back under the awning. Her arms were slick with rain, her cheeks glistening. She gave him a cool, wet kiss. “Don’t you miss the *akisame*?” The September monsoons.

“I can’t say I miss the humidity. Sweating yourself up a storm standing around doing nothing.”

“That’s why it’s so nice when it rains. Everything is so clean and new. Didn’t you ever pretend you were Gene Kelly? My mom regretted my ever seeing that movie. Though half the fun was getting her to throw me in the o-furo.” She leaned against him. “You forget how free you were as a child.”

Lightning flashed. A half-second later thunder crashed against the mountains. Elly started. Connor hugged her tighter. “Showers in Utah can

be a bit dangerous like that.” She nodded and shivered. “That’s the other problem with Utah. The evaporative cooling will freeze you to death.”

So they went inside to dry off and warm up.

Due to the scheduling of the campus devotionals, eleven o’clock until noon Thursday morning was an “open” period. Elly stopped by the TA office and checked her box. Along with an updated class roll there was a thick envelope from her aunt. Inside were proofs from the photographer. Included was a P.S. from her uncle: “Talk to your mother yet?”

Elly groaned. But she was too curious to worry about that particular problem. Feeling like a child on Christmas morning, she hurried down the hall to the Writing Center. The door was cracked open, a doorstop wedged against the jamb. She thought nothing of it—the door was often left like this after hours. She stepped inside.

And sensed a faux pas in the making. The room was crowded—everybody standing around or sitting on the desks or leaning against the counters. Their attention was directed toward the head of the room, where the director of the Center was standing. She glanced at Elly and said, “The Center is closed right now. We’ll be open at noon.”

Elly resisted her immediate instinct—to bow in apology and back out the door—and hesitated, trying to find Connor.

“Wait, wait, wait,” a voice piped up. Alicia darted forward just as Connor peeked around the bookcase. She hooked her arm through Elly’s and dragged her over to the director. Alicia whispered to the director, who smiled and nodded.

Elly managed to disentangle herself from Alicia and join Connor at the counter. “I forgot about your meeting,” she whispered.

He shrugged. “Well, now you’ve met Professor Hunsaker.”

Professor Hunsaker called the meeting back to order. “Before we resume, Alicia has requested the floor for a moment. Alicia—”

Alicia cleared her throat in a crowd-quieting manner. “At the risk that she will track me down and kill me in my sleep in good Lady Macbethian fashion, I present you with the following.” She stepped forward and declaimed in Shakespearean tones, “Now tell me, fellow tutors—” She said, “That’s such a good pun I’m going to repeat it: Now tell me, fellow *Tu-*

dors, what think you of this new marriage with the Lady Elaine? Hath not our brother made a worthy choice?”

“*King Henry the Sixth*,” a voice called out. “Who’s the Lady Elaine?”

“I’m glad you asked.” She took Elly by the shoulders. “I present to you Elaine Packard McKenzie!” There was a moment of silence. Alicia said impatiently, “She’s not his *sister*, for heaven’s sake!”

“Connor got married?”

Elly started to giggle at this point.

Connor said impatiently, “Yes, we got married over the break.”

The room broke into applause. Somebody popped open the paper punch and showered them with the little round dots. After the brief celebration ended, Professor Hunsaker ran through the rest of the agenda—staff meetings, trading hours, work schedules. “Get your requests to Stacy by Friday. And no bribery, please.”

Afterward she introduced herself to Elly. “Well,” she said, “Connor certainly does play things close to the vest.”

Connor said, “Elly is Professor Oh’s niece. She’s a TA in the Japanese department. We met in Japan Spring term.”

“Really? Hence the whirlwind romance.”

Alicia said, “Have you even sent out announcements?”

Elly said, “That reminds me. I got the pictures from Aunt June.”

“Let’s see!” Alicia escorted Elly to the closest table. Elly laid out the proofs. “Wow, your wedding dress is so gorgeous!”

“It’s my Aunt June’s uchikake kimono robe.”

The show-and-tell attracted most of the women in the room. Edward sidled up to Connor. “You do know, these kinds of things go a lot easier if you just nod and say yes. And if asked for an opinion, be sure to include the choice you know she’s *already* decided on. It’s not your opinion they’re interested in, it’s your attention.”

“Yeah, sure,” Connor said warily.

Ed shook his head. “I’m handing you pearls of wisdom, old man.”

Elly lined up the photographs on the workbench/desk in the basement apartment. “Which one?” she asked, looking at him.

He picked the second one from the right.

“Is that the one you like or the one you think *I* like?”

“I like it. Really.”

“Not bad advice, Ed’s. I would prefer having your attention over having your opinion.”

“I really do like that one.”

In the photograph they were standing, hands entwined, not quite facing each other. Jake Kimball had caught them a moment after breaking the previous pose, their expressions bright and relaxed, as if almost on the verge of pleasant laughter.

Elly said, “We should get enlargements for our parents and for us.” She glanced at the bedpost. “Are we ready to put the bed together?”

“The headboard and footboard first, I think. Once we get everything lined up, it shouldn’t take that long.”

He went up to the garage and came down the stairs a minute later with the headboard, the loose rails clanking with each step. The phone rang. He put down the headboard and answered it. “Yes, she is,” he said, handing Elly the phone. “It’s for you.”

“Hello?” She wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder and started to gather up the photographs.

A familiar voice said, “*Chieko.*”

Elly gasped and her heart skipped a beat. “*Mom.*” She put her hand to her chest. Her thoughts raced. Her parents didn’t know her new phone number—they didn’t even know where she lived. Her mother must have called Uncle or Grandfather or Melanie. *Shimatta.* She imagined Susan or Amy or Jill cheerfully telling her mother, *No, Elly doesn’t live here anymore. She got married.* What a way to find out!

“H-how,” she stammered, “how did you get our number?” She kicked herself. She sounded like somebody on the run from the law.

“I got Connor’s number from Nobuo.”

“*Thank heavens,*” she said to herself, though probably loud enough for her mother to hear.

The heavy silence swelled with the long-distance static. Her mother said, “I’ve dreamt about you, Chieko.”

There was an unexpected tenderness in her voice. Elly realized that the storm of passions she’d been bracing herself for would not be forthcom-

ing. “Mom?” she said again.

Her mother took a deep breath. “I had a most interesting experience the other day. Do you recall the Miyamae shopping district? I think we went there together once or twice after your mission. I usually stop there on my way back from Osaka.”

“Yes,” Elly said.

“You’ve seen the fortune-telling booths there?”

“Yes,” Elly said, more tentatively this time. An odd question, coming from her mother. She saw them all the time, the little booths beneath the stairwells in the subway stations or scattered among the shuttered storefronts along the high street after dark, each a tiny point of light glowing there in the falling twilight, two chairs and a folding table lit by a Chinese lantern decorated with the calligraphy that advertised the fortune-teller’s specialty.

And then passed by. Curious but not so curious as to explore further.

“It started about two weeks ago,” her mother explained. “One of the *uranaisbi*, the palmists, approached me. A little old man. I’ve never seen one so forward, though he did so with great reluctance, as if being pushed from behind. I told the little man I wasn’t interested in having my fortune told, and he seemed to accept my refusal.”

Elly smiled. A refusal by her mother was not something even a man of normal size could treat lightly.

“Yet I’d see him whenever I walked by, debating with himself, casting anxious glances in my direction. Mr. Iwakami, the greengrocer, was quite offended on my behalf. I assured him the little man had done nothing untoward. This Friday, though, he grew insistent, even frantic. ‘He wracks my sleep,’ he said. And who is that? I asked. ‘The old samurai,’ he replied. ‘His daughters are stubborn that way, ignoring what he tells them.’” She laughed softly. “You see, I dreamt of you, Chieko, in June’s *uchikake*. But I dismissed it all as a mother’s pleasant daydreams.”

Elly felt goose bumps. She shivered, despite the warm night. Connor pushed his chair over next to her and watched with careful concern. She reached out and took his hand in a tight grip. She said, “Mom, what did he say, the fortune-teller?”

“He said my daughter had gotten married that morning.”

Elly burst into tears.

“*Chieko*—” her mother said, her voice layered with maternal distress.

Elly caught her breath, swallowed the emotion in her throat. “We got married Thursday afternoon.” Friday morning, Japan time. “I should have told you, Mom. But I didn’t know how. It was me, Mom. It wasn’t Connor. I’m so sorry—”

“*Chieko*,” her mother said, speaking with gentle reproach. “We didn’t expect you to put your life on hold for another year. I can’t ask you to do as I say and not as I have done. June no doubt said, ‘I told you so.’”

Elly found herself smiling. “Well—yes.”

“And I should have seen that one coming. Was that your husband who answered the phone? He comes highly recommended.”

“I certainly recommend him.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Do you love him?”

“Mom!”

“Then I’ll pose a fairer question. Your grandfather, did you ask him to marry you?”

“Yes, we did.”

“That was good and wise of you, Chieko.”

The approval in her mother’s voice gave her the courage to proceed to the next part of her confession. “Is Dad there?”

“He’s at the mission home. I’m meeting him for lunch.”

“He won’t be mad at me, will he?”

“Don’t be silly. He’ll be a proud papa. He’ll be surprised, of course. But he has surprising children. And a surprising wife.”

Elly smiled at the thought of her father, sitting behind the big desk in the mission home office. She remembered the always-delighted look on his face when she came into the room. “Speaking of my siblings, how are Sam and Em? Are you going to let Em move into her own apartment?”

“So you heard about that little debate? *If* she can find an acceptable roommate, and *if* she convinces us she’s serious about graduating from Kobe University—and not just competing with her big sister—we may consent to it.”

“Em’s not competing with me.”

“Yes, she is. She has for some reason determined to be more Japanese

than you, which means attending a Japanese university. Unfortunately, as for *being* Japanese, she has taken Atsuko as her role model. Except that Atsuko is dying to get into BYU. You needn't remind me of the irony."

"She always has been more like Atsuko than me."

"And maybe she'll find the one Japanese man who'll know what to do with her. By the way, what of Connor's parents? Have you told them?"

"They already found out from Connor's cousins. You know what they gave us for a wedding present? A mattress set! And Wanda had this old brass bed. Wanda is Connor's aunt. You'll like her, Mom. Anyway the bed is like a museum piece, though it's probably a reproduction—"

"I'm sorry," her mother said. "Now I *am* going to cry."

"Mom—?"

"You're *happy*, Chieko. You were so worn out and frazzled when you left. You'd been off your mission only two weeks. I've felt many times since then that you should have stayed longer, taken some time off and done nothing for a while."

"But I had to get back for Summer term. There wasn't anything for me to do in Kobe. Uncle got me my teaching job. And I met Connor."

"I have a feeling he would have found you no matter what. Is he still there? I'd like to speak to him for a minute."

"As long as you're polite." Elly covered the mouthpiece. "Mom wants to talk to you."

During the conversation between Elly and her mother, Connor's thoughts had shifted from concern to helpless confusion to relief. Now he stiffened noticeably. *Be nice*, his wife mouthed, handing him the phone.

"Hello, Connor." Sayaka Oh Packard spoke English with a recognizable but not marked accent, and in a tone of voice Connor knew from Elly's description belied her physical size.

"Ma'am," he felt compelled to answer.

"My brother Nobuo has good things to say about you. I recall even Yuki broaching the subject with me on occasion."

He stumbled over a reply. "Thanks—I mean—I've enjoyed working with him—they."

"Tell me, Connor," she said, and her voice took on an unequivocal

firmness, yet was no less tender. “My daughter, do you love her?”

“Very much so.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, what I’m going to tell you next, son-in-law, you will not repeat to Elly, nor will you ask me what I mean by it. It is simply this: *Give her time*. And don’t ever doubt the depth of her affection for you.”

“I won’t,” he promised.

“And you *are* coming to visit us over Christmas?”

“We’ll be coming over with June and Oh Sensei and Naomi.”

“Welcome to the family, Connor.”

“I’m honored,” he replied. He handed the phone back to Elly. *Well?* Elly’s expression asked.

“I think I’m hired.”

On the phone her mother said, “I gather June persuaded Naomi to accept Aunt and Uncle’s offer.”

“Well, *persuaded* by the Oh definition.”

“June will be bringing the *uchikake*, I hope.”

“Oh, yes. Mom, it is *so* gorgeous. We got the pictures back today. I’ll get Connor to email you some of them.”

“I have seen you wearing it, Chieko, but only in dreams. And I doubt dreams could begin to compare to one glimpse of you in the real world.”

Chapter 39

Breaking the Bed

The phone rang again half an hour later, Elly's father calling from the mission home. He clicked on the speaker phone. The window in his office must have been open. Elly could hear, from eight thousand miles away, the Tokaido local arriving at Rokkomichi station. A sound so distant and yet so familiar.

Her mother said, "As I was telling your father, Elly, your grandfather was as much a conspirator in this elopement as anyone on *my* side of the family."

Elly guessed from the proximity of her mother's and father's voices that her mother was sitting in his lap. She smiled, recalling the Wednesday before she left for BYU. She'd gone to the mission home to meet her parents for a bon voyage lunch and found Brother Izumi waiting in the outer office.

"Hi, Izumi Sensei," she said. He'd been one of her father's graduate assistants at BYU. Accounting, she recalled.

Brother Izumi nodded. He was either extremely shy or extremely polite. Or both. It was the ratio between the two she wasn't quite sure of. Sister Amiya saw her come in and called her over with a question about a translation. Elly asked, "How long has he been here?"

"About an hour. He's getting a letter of recommendation for his doc-

torate program. He didn't have an appointment, so he won't let me *interrupt* the president. He insists he'll wait."

She silently fumed. Sister Amiya, Elly could tell, had graduated from her mother's school of interpersonal relationship management.

"Good grief," Elly said. She took Brother Izumi by the arm and barged into the office. "You've got to be more assertive than this if you want to succeed in American academia."

And there was her father, and her mother in his lap. It was like catching the CEO playing footsie with one of the office ladies. Not that Elly hadn't seen it before (not CEOs playing footsie with the OLs—her mother making out with her father). And it wasn't like they were *making out* or anything. They were probably discussing what nice girl's college in the northern wastelands of Hokkaido they could send Emily to. But Brother Izumi nearly died from embarrassment on the spot. Even her father reddened a bit.

Her mother was cross with her, if only to assuage Brother Izumi's dignity ("Didn't we teach you to *knock* first?"), though with a twinkle in her eyes. As her father presented Brother Izumi with the letter and imparted a few minutes worth of paternal wisdom, it was all Elly could do to keep from dissolving into laughter.

Remembering that moment, Elly had to smile again. Her mother was right—she *was* happy, a happiness that only grew as she shared the reasons with more and more people. And wasn't happiness the same as love?

Friday morning Connor phoned home. His parents had known about the marriage for a week or more. Elly was amazed they'd been willing to wait until she and Connor got around to making it official. This was a family with the patience of the hills.

Connor spoke briefly with his father about how he and Elly had met, to whom Elly was related, about the wedding, which of the relatives had attended. The précis of the dissertation. Then he handed her the phone. His father had a pleasant voice, aged in the sense that she imagined wine ages, full of pride for his son and admiration for her. He didn't have a lot to say, though. Elly imagined squeezing a sponge as they approached the end of the third full sentence of conversation.

She gave the phone to Connor, and the conversation diverted into a discussion about a security setting in the latest version of Microsoft Windows—almost as if that were the real reason for the call—until Connor’s mother took over and yanked things back on subject.

“Thank goodness for you, Elly!” she said when the phone was handed to her. “I was beginning to fear Connor would never get married.”

“Twenty-five isn’t *that* old,” Elly argued on her husband’s behalf.

“It wasn’t age, it was expectations. A McKenzie man has it in him to fall in love once, I think. It’s a matter of coming to the right precipice and getting pushed off it. You sound like you were just the girl to do the job. You have told your parents by now, I hope.”

“We spoke with them last night. They’re going to hold a reception for us in Kobe over Christmas.”

“That’s right, Wanda mentioned that your father’s a mission president. I’m afraid Japan is a little far for us. Maybe we’ll come out for Thanksgiving.”

“That’d be nice.”

“Lynne says you wore the most extraordinary kimono.”

“My Aunt June’s. We’ll send you all the pictures. Oh, and thanks for the mattress set. It really was a most—unusual—wedding present.”

“I’ve always believed that a decent bed makes a good foundation for a sound marriage. That old mattress always threw my back out.”

“And we’re putting together Wanda’s brass bed.”

“You talked Connor out of those cinderblock contraptions of his?”

“But aren’t they such clever contraptions?”

“A man ought to be handy, if nothing else.”

When Elly got home that afternoon, she found Connor sitting on the bedroom floor with a socket wrench. He’d detached the cinderblock posts and propped up the frame with a section of two-by-four. Then he raised the frame and placed it on the bracket. He glanced over his shoulder. “How was lab?”

“Not bad. A lot like Eikaiwa. You wouldn’t think so many returned missionaries were signed up for 201. Even Susan showed up. “

“RMs start with 221. They’re not bugging you, are they?”

“Not really. RMs have decent comprehension but pretty bad grammar, and don’t know it. They’re my lab rats. It’s fun to experiment on them.” She tipped back the footboard. “Are you ready to attach this yet?”

“See how the frame fits on top of this lip on the post?” He stood and with a bit of jiggling slipped the fastening plates onto the joists. “Just put a little weight against the post so the plate doesn’t fall off the joists.” He leaned over and quickly tightened the bolts on each end. “There,” he said. “Looks pretty square.”

Elly agreed, and he attached the remaining four bolts. Then he held up the frame while she shoved the back two cinderblocks out of the way.

Attaching the headboard proved a bit trickier. They had to lift up the headboard and slide it down between the frame and the wall. Elly climbed up on the bed and held the top rail of the headboard while Connor lay beneath the frame like a mechanic working on the undercarriage of a car.

She knelt in the center of the bed and looked to her right and left at the headboard and footboard. “This is nice. Don’t you think?”

He flopped down on the comforter next to her. “I think it was doing it by myself the last time that left me ill-disposed. Things like this are a lot easier with two people.”

“Then I think I’ll leave you better disposed this time around,” she said, and leaned over and kissed him.

Getting into bed that night, she dispensed with subtlety and pulled off her top. Connor quickly lost interest in his Language Acquisition outline. A week and counting and she remained more than a little pleased at the effect her body had on him. He caressed her neck and throat with warm kisses until she cooed.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and wrestled him to the bed. “You’re stronger than that, even for a humanities major,” she kidded him. So he rolled her over and pinned her gently.

Something groaned. It wasn’t her. Gracious, she made more pleasant sounds than that in the throes of passion. The groan became a creak, and then a metallic grating. Followed by a sharp *crack*. The bed swayed like a raft riding in the wake of a powerboat.

It was like getting jolted out of bed by an earthquake tremor. Their lovemaking came to a screeching halt. Realization dawned on Connor’s

face. He started to laugh.

“What?” Elly asked, a bit too frantically. She didn’t see the joke.

“I just remembered why I took the bed apart.” He assured her, “Don’t worry. It’s not going to fall apart. I mean, the bolts aren’t all going to pop out at once. Pretend you’re sleeping on a boat or an airplane.”

“The only boat I’ve been in was a canoe at girl’s camp and going waterskiing once or twice.”

“You’ll get to ride the ferry when we go to Maine. That’s the biggest boat I’ve been on.” He said, “I could get the cinderblocks.”

“No, that’s okay.”

Which wasn’t true. Every time she rolled over, the whole bed swayed. But she wasn’t about to make him get out of bed at this hour and start hauling blocks of concrete around.

She didn’t sleep well on airplanes either.

Chapter 40

Home Improvement

The next morning Elly helped Connor take apart everything they'd put together the night before. It was like leaving on a trip and an hour later realizing she'd forgotten the traveler's checks, and having to turn around and go back.

Connor carried on perversely unperturbed. He detached the bedposts and carried them up to the garage on his shoulders with a hi-ho, hi-ho, off-to-work-we-go kind of attitude. Elly sat at the kitchen table, as put out about the stupid bed as Connor had no doubt been when Wanda brought up the subject. Elly had *enthusiastically* gone along with it, even though he'd said *several times* that something was wrong with the bed. Their rudely interrupted lovemaking the night before had certainly proved *that* point. She felt frustrated beyond belief.

"What's Connor doing with the bed?" Wanda asked.

"It wobbles," Elly said.

"Now that you mention it, that's why he took it apart the last time."

"I guess."

Wanda cast a wary glance at her. "I imagine you're not too happy with me at the moment."

Elly shrugged, an expression that really said, *Darn tootin'*. Thinking back to the previous Saturday, Connor's change of heart must have been

prompted by other than a sudden aesthetic awakening. She felt like an idiot for not realizing it at the time.

One thing she was very certain of: she didn't like people messing with her husband, relative or no. If she really wanted Connor to do something, she was perfectly capable of getting him to do it by her own devices, as crude as that sounded.

Wanda pulled out a chair and sat down. "Yes," she said, "I confess to sticking my oar in. But if you'll allow me to make the same mistake twice, I believe I have something useful to say on the subject this time."

Elly shrugged again but managed to stop glowering.

Wanda said, "I was seven, almost eight, when we moved into the house on Fifth North. That Sunday, Bishop Barngrover came to see us about my baptism. He was a big, jovial man, the opposite of my dad in every way. Dad was out on the porch fitting a new screen for the front door. The bishop was no doubt expecting some contrariness from him, knowing him only by reputation. But Dad didn't object to my getting baptized, which took most of the wind out of his sails. Still, the bishop was one of those well-meaning men who believed that no social visit could be concluded without a certain quotient of conversation. He looked at what my father was doing and said, 'Brother McKenzie, I think you're a little out of square.'

"It was said with every intent of making friendly banter, but Dad took a step back, and, blast it all, the man was right. Hardly enough to notice, but it was. Well, he bade the bishop a curt goodbye and spent the next *week* working on that door. He rejigged the frame, reset the hinges, tore the jamb down to the two-by-fours.

"Now, the casual observer might think something the bishop said had set him off, that Dad had something to prove and this was his way of showing the man up. People tend to read determined silence that way. Fact was, I doubt my dad even *remembered* what Bishop Barngrover had said. All he knew was that some *thing* wasn't the way it ought to be, and he couldn't let it be until he'd put it right.

"As you must know by now, McKenzie men are a laconic lot. Don't let Connor's verbosity give you the wrong impression."

Elly had to grin at that gentle dig.

“It’s easy to take what they *don’t* say personally, and this is the important point—because they won’t tell you—but it’s *things* that wear their patience thin, not people. The exception being people who won’t leave them alone when they want to be left alone. Off the top of my head, I can’t think of a *person* in my family a man ever stayed mad at past the moment. *Things*, yes. But people, no. I can tell you, fair or not, Connor will cheerfully consider that bed his mistake and his responsibility until it is fixed.”

“But it *wasn’t*—”

Wanda smiled and shrugged.

Elly went to the garage. Connor had set the bedposts on a plywood-and-sawhorse table and was examining them. He put down the flashlight and picked up a pair of needlenose pliers. “Look at this.”

“What?” Elly walked over next to him.

He held up the pliers. In its pincers glinted a small scythe of metal. “What’s left of the threads.” He shook his head. “I should have remembered this, made a note to myself.”

“I was kind of insistent. It wasn’t your idea, remember? It’s not that important. Come to breakfast.”

“In a minute.”

Wanda was waiting in the kitchen. Elly said, “I don’t believe this.”

Connor came in five minutes later with an optimistic expression on his face. “Did you figure it out?” Wanda asked.

“What I should have done in the first place.” He grabbed the phone and the phone book and flipped to “M” in the yellow pages. He ran his finger down the page to the Provo/Orem listings for Machine Shops. “Might as well start with the A’s. Let’s see, that’s American Tool & Die.” He dialed the number. “Yes,” he said, “I need to get some brackets on a bedpost retapped. That’s right, a bed. The threads got stripped. Oh, well, do you know a shop? Knudson Custom Machining—”

He looked around for something to write with. Elly found the listing and pointed to it.

“Yeah, I got it. Thanks.” He hung up. “The smallest jobs they do are engine blocks.” He looked at where Elly was pointing and dialed the number. “Hi, I need to get some machining done on a bed. A bed frame. Oh, okay. You close at three on Saturdays. Right. No, we’ll stop by in an hour

or so.” He hung up and said, “They’ll take a look at it.”

“So,” she asked, “what is this great idea of yours?”

“Drill out the old threads and tap new ones. Make it good as new.”

“So why didn’t you think of this before?” Elly teased.

“Probably because I didn’t have the tools. Then I got the idea about the cinderblocks, and *that* I had the tools for. At any rate, you’re right. I should have fixed it at the time.”

“I *wasn’t* right,” Elly insisted. “*You* were right, okay?” She kissed him on the cheek and said, “And *we* broke the bed, after all.”

Aunt Wanda was the one who laughed.

The Provo industrial park was located at the south end of University Avenue, between the golf course, I-15, and the Union Pacific tracks. Knudson Custom Machining was a hanger-like structure identified only by a sign over the open bay:

Welding and Fabrication
Lathe and Drill Work
Free Estimates

Connor got one of the bedposts out of the back seat. Looking in from the bright sunlight, the shop floor was too dimly lit to make out any details at all, except when the blue-white light from an arc welder reflected off the corrugated walls like small flashes of lightning. Inside the bay doors, a short corridor led them to a musty office. A middle-aged woman was working at a computer behind a gray metal desk.

“Hi,” Connor said. “We called an hour ago about a bed—?”

“Oh, yes. Not many calls about beds. Best you talk to Nathan.” She came around the desk and led them onto the shop floor. A yellow and black stripe on the concrete marked some sort of OSHA borderline. “Why don’t you wait here?” She disappeared into the maze of machines.

Elly cast a sly glance at her husband. “You really like this, don’t you?”

Connor took a deep breath. “Ah, the smell of WD-40 in the morning. Hardware stores have the same effect.”

“So I married an aesthete who’s really a closet gearhead.”

The woman returned with a man about her same age. “Nathan Reynolds,” the man said. He pulled off his gloves and shook Connor’s hand.

“Connor McKenzie. My wife, Elly.”

“Ma’am,” he said. “What do you have there? Looks like a bedpost. A brass-plated, sheet-metal reproduction?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The bolt plate here, the threads got stripped. My aunt says the bed used to sleep the grandchildren.”

Nathan took the bedpost over to a bench. Connor and Elly tagged after him. He examined the plate under a trouble light. He picked up a caliper and measured the diameter of the bolt holes.

“I was thinking of boring it out and tapping to three-eighths.

“Could do that,” Nathan said. “Except you’ve got five-sixteenths here already. This rolled steel is tough but soft. It can take a beating but won’t hold a thread.” He pondered the problem. “Here’s what I’d do. Take her to seven-sixteenths and insert a tapping sleeve.” He walked over to a shelf lined with small drawers and checked several till he found what he was looking for.

He handed one to Connor. Connor examined it and handed it to Elly. The gray metal was the size of a thimble, threaded inside and out. “Your basic carbon steel sleeve,” Nathan explained. “I guarantee that it will outlast the rest of the frame.”

Connor agreed. “It’s definitely the better solution.”

“So, four posts at three taps per plate?” He punched numbers into a calculator and scribbled the figures on a receipt pad.

Connor nodded. “When do you think you can have them done by?”

“We’re a little backed up at the moment. Should get to it by Thursday, latest. You got something to hold up the bed in the meantime?”

“Cinderblocks,” said Elly.

“Cinderblocks will do it,” the man said with a smile.

“Yes. They don’t wobble and they don’t fall down.”

Chapter 41

Tugboat and Barge

Sunday saw a flurry of phone calls from Emily and Sam and Connor's sisters. "Let me tell you something about my brother," Sara Beth confided to Elly. "If he knows you want something, he'll get around to doing it, no matter how much he grumbles about it. You've just got to wait him out."

All the next week Elly analyzed everything that had happened the first weekend of their marriage, when she *wasn't* willing to wait him out. Wanda had confessed her part—but *what* she'd said to Connor, Elly could only guess. Probably something about his grandfather. *You're acting just like him*, or some similar warning or admonition.

Wanda's interference irked her, but that was beside the point. What mattered to her was that brief, fragile moment when he was *frightened*. But frightened by what? That he would upset her by disagreeing with her? Hardly. No, it was his chagrined imagination whispering that she would become impatient with him, grow weary of his stubbornness—

Her eyes flew open wide in surprise. *No!* she countered.

"You disagree, Elly?" Her uncle peered across the classroom at her.

She scrambled to remember what the lecture was about. Base I passive forms? Transitive/intransitive verb pairs? "Sorry," she apologized, folding her arms across her chest and slumping down in her chair.

When the bell rang, he asked her to stay after class a minute. "So, my

niece, you don't find Japanese syntax an engaging enough subject to hold your attention?"

"I said I was *sorry*. Sheez. I was thinking about—stuff."

"No doubt. I got a call from your mother last night."

"Scheduled your *seppuku* yet? I agreed to be your second."

"Quite the contrary. She seemed pleasantly reconciled. She was thankful to June for her help. I'm curious what you said to assuage her."

"I didn't say anything. Why shouldn't she be happy for me—for us?"

Uncle smiled. "No reason. Just try to pay attention in class."

She bowed. "Yes, Sensei."

Elly walked home in a bad mood. She resumed her internal argument with her husband. "You can't *lose* me," she told him, clenching her fists in frustration. "I'm not *losable*." And yet she hadn't told him she loved him. Not *once*. Getting married was *her* very practical response to their strange dilemma. It was *he* who'd made the leap of faith, who'd decided, contrary to his nature, that he would love her, unconditionally and forever.

She could argue that saying she loved him was contrary to *her* nature. Connor would understand, intellectually at least. Samurai were not known for their professions of love. Like Rie Miyazawa and Hiroyuki Sanada in *Twilight Samurai*. The woman never tells the man she loves him, or vis-a-versa. That doesn't make their relationship any less compelling or romantic. *Everybody* knew they loved each other.

There really *wasn't* a word in Japanese she felt comfortable using. *Ai*, the common translation, had only come to suggest romantic affection in the last century. On the other hand, *suki* was what infatuated teenagers said to each other. And was how she described the flavor of ice cream she liked. She didn't think Connor would read much depth into *suki*.

She *loved* hearing him say, "I love you." And all the more so because he spoke it with such grace and conviction—never that awkward pause, expecting her to reply in kind.

So even if *he* bought the samurai argument, *she* didn't. If it was only a matter of *suki*, there wouldn't be a problem. She liked him unquestionably. She liked sex. Okay, she *really* liked sex. Now she understood why a girl would shack up with a guy, despite all the warnings about him getting

the milk for free.

That should count for something—liking doing something with someone *that much*. And not just sex. She liked living with him, talking with him, walking with him. Liked him just being *there*. Despite the fact that he wasn't a man with something to say every minute of the day.

He did his share of the chores. He put the toilet seat down—usually. He was like her father, only more laconic. (Wanda's word, and it was too perfect not to adopt as her own.) When Connor quipped about being a consultant, he couldn't know how much like her father he sounded. The only thing she'd ever heard her mother complain about was her father's business trips—which confused her when she realized that moving had always been her *mom's* idea.

She was fourteen when they moved from Salt Lake to Provo. She'd thrown a teenage hissy fit. "This is the fourth time!"

"You were three when we moved to Japan. That doesn't count."

"Why can't Dad stay in one place for a while?"

"We make these decisions *together*. Frankly, your father would be happy being a barge. Tow him to a dock and tie him up at the pier and he'll sit there until it's time to move on."

"So what are you?" Elly demanded. "A jet ski?"

"You think I'm a frivolous recreational vehicle?" (She said this in English and it was a lot funnier than she realized.)

"Okay, a tugboat."

"It's my job to push you all where you need to go."

Looking back on her life, Elly understood the reasons. They'd moved from Hiratsuka to Yokohama so she and Emily could attend the International School. They moved to Provo to eliminate her father's commute to BYU and give him back to them for two more hours a day. Always keeping the family together and keeping them around her, the way the daimyo kept his loyal retainers close to him.

Her mother could never have married a Japanese salaryman. Her husband must always put her first, before anything and anybody else.

Elly unlocked the back door. Connor wasn't there. The bright gleam of brass caught her eye, the bedposts propped up against the back of the

couch. The retooled fastening plates had been ground to a smooth shine. The flux from the solder left a golden patina around the tapping inserts.

The phone rang. “Yes?” she said.

“Is this the Connor McKenzie residence?” inquired a woman’s voice, crisp and secretarial.

Elly said warily, “This is Mrs. Connor McKenzie.” Anybody calling the McKenzie *residence* was probably a telemarketer.

“Hello, I’m calling from Evans & Thorton, a law firm here in Provo.”

“I don’t think we need a lawyer. You’re not suing us, are you?”

The secretary laughed. “No, there’s nothing to worry about. Could you hold for a minute?”

Connor’s toy Mustang had ended up on her side of the desk. She used it as a paperweight. She drove the car across the desk the way her brother Sam did with his Matchbox cars as she listened to the hold music.

The wait music clicked off. “Mrs. McKenzie?” a man’s voice said.

“Yes,” she said, putting down the toy car.

“This is Tom Thorton. I—”

“I think you should speak to my husband when he gets home.”

“In actuality, I wished to speak to you. I don’t mean to be rude, Mrs. McKenzie, but I do have to confirm that I’m speaking with the right person. Let’s see—your maiden name is Elaine Chieko Packard. You and Connor Carroll McKenzie were married on August thirtieth of this year?”

“Yes, that’s right. A whole week and a half ago. What’s this about?”

“I’m the estate executor for your husband’s grandfather, Mr. Connor McKenzie. Though I can’t address the specifics of the bequest at this time, I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about.”

“So *you* say.”

Mr. Thorton chuckled. “I’ll get back in touch with you in a week or so. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

Elly tore a sheet of paper out of her notebook and wrote down the firm’s address and number and parked the car on it.

Connor had no idea what in his grandfather’s will could possibly pertain to him or them. “When he sold the house to Lynne and Glenn and

distributed the proceeds, I assumed that was it as far as the grandchildren were concerned.”

Wanda confirmed that Wallace Evans had set up a living trust for her father when he sold the house. The firm had also executed his will after his death. “But I’m in the dark about this as much as Connor, I’m afraid.” She said, “By the way, how did the bedposts turn out? That’s what you needed the car for this morning, I assume?”

“They’re beautiful,” Elly said.

Connor nodded. “Nathan did a good job. I wish I’d thought of this in the first place.”

“Yes, but then we wouldn’t have had so much fun.”

“I promise to come up with more interesting things to do on a Friday night than put bed frames together.” When she started to contradict him he said, “Okay, more *entertaining*. Which reminds me, *After Life* is playing at International Cinema. Want to go see it Saturday?”

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

The question made him stop and think. “Yeah, I suppose so. Yes.”

She beamed. “Oh, good. It’s been years since I went on a date.”

The look that passed across his face told her he’d stumbled onto an aspect of their relationship that hadn’t occurred to him before, which he at once filed away under *things that make Elly happy*.

It was a five-minute walk from the International Cinema theater to the Wilkinson Center. Not long ago, ice cream at the Cougareat would have struck Connor as an unbearably tacky way to end a date. He’d since come up with a new rule: anyplace with Elly was a place worth hanging around.

“A pretty good date so far,” was Elly’s opinion.

“Already being married is a great improvement on the institution.”

“I gather you didn’t date much before. Not even in high school? How about when you came to BYU?”

“I couldn’t see the point of getting into a relationship when I was going on a mission in a year.”

“I do know a thing or two about the jerks who *don’t* wait for their girlfriends. Still, you waited for me. Sort of. I was on *my* mission when we met, remember.”

They walked through the Terrace Court to the Cougareat and stopped at the BYU Dairy counter.

“Though I am concerned about my reputation,” Elly grinned. “I just realized I’m going to sleep with you on our first date.”

Connor started to laugh, stopped, cleared his throat. Instead of asking for their orders, the girl standing behind the counter stared at Elly with a wide-eyed expression. Elly looked at Connor, who looked back with a very straight face, and then at the girl. “Oh—! We’re married. Really.” She started to giggle, which didn’t do her credibility any good. “A *joke*,” she said to the girl.

The girl nodded. But then her gaze fell on Elly’s left hand and her eyes narrowed. Elly frantically waved her hand as if to bat away the implicit accusation. “Connor!”

“We are married,” he said, in the serious tone of voice reserved for such declarations.

The girl looked disappointed. She said, with the sternness that eighteen-year-olds must often adopt when dealing with inappropriate behavior by their elders, “We close in ten minutes.”

So they got their ice cream and found a booth. Elly was quiet for a moment. “So,” she said, brushing aside her bangs. “What memory would you preserve if you could choose only one?”

In the movie, after the protagonist died, he was allowed to select only one scene from his life, one memory that would stay with him throughout the rest of eternity.

“This one,” Connor said. “Right now. I would memorize your face.”

“So if it all happened again, in another life, you would find me?”

“With your great-great-grandfather’s help, if need be.”

“I like Takashi’s solution about the group photograph. That way I’d remember everybody.”

“You’re right.”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t get to change yours. You only get to think about me. Which reminds me—ah, Julie, that was her name. Whatever happened to her?”

“She got married.”

“That’s nice. Were the two of you ever an item?”

“No. There wasn’t any *there* there. One of the reasons I went to Japan over Spring term was because I couldn’t think of a good way to end it.”

“That’s nice. Maybe not *nice*. But the dragon is jealous of her treasure.”

“About this dragon—”

A student wearing a blue vest with “BYU Janitorial” stenciled on the back pushed a cleaning cart past the table.

Elly said, “I think they want us to go.” She sighed. “Tomorrow I have to start being a role model.”

“Keep up with the asides about us sleeping together on our first date and you won’t be for long.”

Elly laughed. “Well, it’s *true*. A role model should be truthful, no?” She glanced at the BYU Dairy counter. “I don’t think our ice cream girl was convinced. It’d be embarrassing if she turned out to be in our ward.” She hooked her arm through his. “I’ll try not to mortify you in the future, okay?”

“I’m not mortified.”

“Then I’ll have to try harder not to.”

Chapter 42

Lab Rats

Elly sat down on the edge of the bed. “It still creaks.”

“It creaked a lot more before.”

“Before I didn’t associate *creaking* with *breaking*.”

Connor flopped down beside her, bouncing on the mattress. “Those sleeves have a tensile strength of umpteen zillion pounds per square inch. You could park a car on this bed. Anyway, you grew up in Japan. I’d think you’d get used to things shifting a bit under your feet.”

“When we were living in that old house in Hiratsuka, the slightest tremor would shake it like a stack of old kindling. I think it made me oversensitized.”

“Have you been back to Hiratsuka since then?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sentimental that way. Or maybe I’m too sentimental. Uncle Nobuo says the whole neighborhood got turned into a highway off-ramp about five years ago. Like in *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Have you been back to New York?”

“Not since my parents moved to Maine.”

“Not even for a high school reunion? Me, neither. Sometimes I feel I should care more about the kids I knew back then. But high school was such not a big deal once I graduated. I do wonder about Becky Hoggan. She was the bad girl in my ward, like your Billy Bragg, except we were

never really close friends. But she's the reason I went on a mission."

"Really? Why?"

"That's a secret. What about Billy? What's he up to these days?"

"He's in the Coast Guard. I have his address around here somewhere. We'll have to send him an announcement."

"I have no idea where Becky is. I really should thank her. If I hadn't gone on a mission, how would we have met?"

"I would have found you no matter what, remember."

"But I like that you found me *now*."

She prowled over to where Connor lay on the bed and knelt astride his torso. He undid her sash and slipped his hands inside the yukata, stroking her skin as he pulled her closer. Amidst the sudden rush of sensations, she felt an overwhelming tenderness for him. *Husband*, she whispered, crouching so their mouths could meet.

He cradled her in his arms, kissed her ears and neck and breasts. "I love you," he said.

Her whole body tingled in response. "Yes," she murmured, "yes."

On Sunday Elly accepted a calling as first counselor in the Relief Society. Sandra Barnett was the Relief Society president. She quipped as they waited for Relief Society to begin, "I heard your engagement was rather—expeditious." Then she observed that Elly wasn't wearing a ring.

"It's not a Japanese custom," Elly explained. "In the old days, the guy would give his betrothed an *obi*." She motioned around her waist. "That's the sash to a kimono. A decent obi costs as much as a ring, so we've decided to forgo both for the time being."

The truth was, except for that silly moment at the Cougareat, she hadn't thought about it at all.

Subsequent declarations of her marital status followed something of a comic routine. The reaction of the second counselor, Carol Collings, was typical: "Connor? Oh, you mean *Connor*." Then a confused look. "Connor got married?"

The Relief Society secretary, Yvonne Maynes, was new to the ward and had no idea who Connor was. Instead, she said, "Wow. Like, I was in a singles ward last semester and *nobody* was married, except the bishop."

Which made Elly feel very old.

Teaching didn't make her feel old. Teaching made her feel in charge, and being in charge had a timeless quality to it. But it wasn't something she wanted to be in all the time. Not like sex, for example. Supposedly she was going to get tired of it (sex) as she grew older and wiser, which to her mind was like saying she could get tired of chocolate. So when her desire waned, she took it as evidence of actual illness.

Connor found her standing at the kitchen sink in her yukata sipping a cup of mugi-cha. "You don't look well." He put his palm to her forehead. "I think you've got a fever."

"Just a headache," she mumbled.

He got her a bottle of Tylenol. She swallowed two caplets, closed her eyes, and leaned back against his chest. She'd almost fallen asleep on her feet when he straightened her. "Are you going to make it to class?"

"I'll be okay. But no kissing, just in case."

He kissed her on the forehead. "Want to go to the devotional?"

"I don't think I'll be in the mood to hike over to the Marriott Center. I'll come home and listen to it on the radio."

"See you for lunch then?"

At lunch she was feeling better. "The headache's gone. Now the sinuses are succumbing. I think I'm getting a sore throat."

"In other words, you're coming down with a cold."

"Coming down with a cold when it's eighty outside is just plain wrong. You should only get colds in miserable weather."

"It's probably best that our immune systems get to know each other. The equivalent of our own little chickenpox party."

"I don't like your germs." She asked, "How late are you working to-night?"

"I should be off at seven."

"I'll be at the library with Susan and Melanie. The Asian Collection."

"The Asian Collection never struck me as a place to get serious studying done."

Elly laughed and then coughed and then sneezed. She went to get a Kleenex. "I think of it as part of Susan's rehabilitation."

“Not quite fair with you *and* Melanie there.”

“Oh, once they figure out that we’re unavailable, Susan moves right up in desirability. What, you never did?”

“I only went there to use the dictionaries.”

“I have a hard time believing that.”

He denied it with a halfhearted shrug.

Connor got to the library at a quarter past seven. He found an empty chair at the table next to Elly and Susan’s. Elly was explaining something to her and didn’t see him at first. A PE text marked Melanie’s place. Connor got out his laptop. He glanced at Elly. She tossed her head back, drew out her dark mane, and retied the pony tail. She saw him and gave him a small wave.

The guy sitting to his right said, “Who’s she waving at?”

The guy across the table said, “I think she recognized you from lab.”

Guy number three said, “What lab are you talking about?”

“The Japanese 201 lab at the MARB.”

“What are you taking a 201 lab for?”

“It’s fun. That’s Susan Eliason she’s with. She’s in my 221 class, too.”

“It’s *fun*, I’m sure.” He lowered his voice a notch. “Meaning, you think she’s cute.”

“Who? Susan? Yeah, she’s datable.”

“No, the Japanese girl.”

“Yeah, she’s okay.”

Connor bristled. She’s *okay*?

Guy number two rose to her defense. “C’mon, she’s a babe. Admit it. *Your* problem is that she’s older than you and she’s a sensei.”

Well, *thanks*, Connor thought.

“But if you’re an RM and you screw up, she’ll totally ream you out.”

“Like what?” guy number three asked.

“Dummy here asks a question and calls her *anata*.” He laughed. “And she comes back with, ‘Who are *you*, my husband?’ She went off on this whole riff. It was pretty funny.”

“Yeah, hilarious.”

The kid sitting across from Connor said, “What’s wrong with *anata*? It

means ‘you,’ doesn’t it?” He was studying a Japanese 101 text. Probably a freshman. “I mean, she always makes us call her *sensei*.”

Connor explained, “In Japanese, you never use a personal pronoun to address a social superior, only the person’s title. It’s covered in Suzuki, *Words in Context*. I’m sure she’ll get around to it.”

The kid nodded.

“You’re taking her class? How do you like it?”

“It’s pretty tough. She hardly ever speaks English at all. I don’t think I get half of what she’s saying.”

“All missionaries feel the same way when they get to Japan, even after two months in the MTC.”

Guy number three leaned over the table and said, “Now, *she’s* a babe.”

Five heads swung to the left in time to see Melanie sitting down at the table. “I suppose,” said Guy number two, without great enthusiasm.

“Hey, be patriotic. We’re talking baseball, apple pie, and *blondes*.”

“Sensei’s name is McKenzie. That American enough for you?”

Guy number one said, “Anyway, I think she’s dating Greg Chalmers. Osaka Mission. He was in my MTC group.”

Guy number three pondered this new information. “McKenzie? Isn’t McKenzie president of Nagoya Mission?”

The kid said, “Her father’s president of the Kobe Mission.”

Guys one, two and three looked at him. Guy number one said, “That’s not right. Packard’s president of Kobe Mission.”

“Packard is her maiden name,” Connor offered.

“Her *maiden* name? She’s married?” They exchanged doubtful looks. “*Naw*,” said guy number two.

Connor almost laughed. He gave the kid a helpless shrug.

Guy number two said, “She isn’t wearing a ring.”

Connor looked at his left hand as well.

“*Hora*, she’s coming over here.”

The rest of them at once immersed themselves in study.

Elly put her hand on Connor’s shoulder and said to the kid, “Ready for the test tomorrow, Mark?”

The kid nodded.

“*Yosh.*” She said to Connor, “*Go-shujin-sama*, shall we go?”

Connor put his laptop into his backpack and pushed back his chair. He said to the kid, “Hey, good luck.”

They weren’t quite out of earshot when one of the guys said, “Crap, that was her *husband.*” And then: “You can scratch *her* off your list, Al.”

As they walked down the stairs to the ground floor, Elly said, “You men seemed to be having a lively discussion.”

“I think it came down to whether you or Melanie had the greater babe factor.”

“Wow, I was even in the running? What about Susan?”

“She was deemed ‘datable.’”

“Datable? The old Susan was right. Men are dogs.”

“It came out even, I think. I didn’t get a vote from your student. Conflict of interest perhaps.”

“Don’t tell me you were participating in this discussion.”

“I was a silent observer.” Connor pushed through the doors. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Sore throat. I can’t tell whether it’s getting better or worse.”

Connor searched through his backpack and produced a box of throat lozenges. “Cherry flavor.”

“You’re sweet.” She popped one into her mouth.

They walked along hand in hand in the falling twilight. Connor said, “We never did get around to exchanging rings.”

“Like I said, it’s not a Japanese custom.”

“We’re not in Japan. And when in Rome—”

“You already gave me *twelve* rings. The bed, remember? Umpteen zillion pounds per square inch of tensile strength.”

“What about wedding bands?”

She thought about it for a minute. “I can’t say I’d be opposed. So what brought this on?”

“Talking with your lab rats, your marital status came into question.”

“They thought I was born a McKenzie?”

“No less a Packard.”

“Oh, right. When I was a little kid I thought *Paakado* was a Japanese name. I couldn’t understand why there wasn’t a kanji for it.”

Connor said almost apologetically, “Exchanging rings seems like such a possessive thing to do. Like putting a fence around your property with big No Trespassing signs posted.”

“I wouldn’t worry about being possessive, husband. Not compared to me.” Elly frowned. “You haven’t been attracting the attention of comely young things, have you? *That* would be worrisome.”

He gave her a look that clearly said he had no interest in finding out how much so.

Chapter 43

The Substitute

Elly did not sleep well. She doubted Connor did either, what with her tossing and turning and wheezing and coughing and climbing in and out of bed and rooting around in the bathroom cabinet for Nyquil or some nasal spray so she could *breathe*. That was before it dawned on her that he kept such things in the kitchen cupboard.

She stopped trying to get to sleep when morning finally became inevitable. Twenty minutes in the shower barely cleared out her sinuses. She slouched into the kitchen in her yukata. “Here,” she croaked, handing Connor the hairbrush. Her vocal cords were not cooperating either.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he combed her hair.

“I’m not dead yet,” she grumbled.

“Are you going to make it to your classes?”

“I’ll sit quietly at the back of the room and scowl at Uncle when he calls on me. I have to give an exam in 101, so that’s not a problem. And 201 lab—” She groaned. “What about lab?” She clutched at his sleeve. “Teach lab with me. I know. I ruined your sleep. I used up all the hot water. I’m a terrible person. But *please?*”

Connor laughed. “Not a problem. Eddie owes me a swap or two.”

A hot breakfast and another Tylenol left her feeling almost human. The feeling didn’t last long. The postnasal faucet started dripping around

nine. Her sinuses were throbbing by ten. And her lack of sleep caught up with her before eleven. At noon she picked up the 101 tests at the JKHB copy center and walked home in the miserable heat.

She unzipped her backpack and took out her notebook. “Here,” she said, tearing out a page, “I wrote down the 201 verb forms for this week.” She went into the kitchen. “What do you take for colds? My sinuses are killing me.”

Connor searched through the cupboard and handed her a box of Comtrex. “Works like a charm. I should do an endorsement.”

She swallowed two tablets and sat down at the table. He was right. A few minutes later she felt wonderful. Because she was sound asleep.

“Elly?” Connor said.

“*Uhhnn*—” she replied. “Stop it,” she said, slapping at his arm.

“Wake up.”

She groggily lifted her head and picked up the Comtrex box. “May cause drowsiness,” she read. “*May?*”

“I never noticed.”

“You weigh fifty pounds more than me!” she wailed.

“C’mon, get up,” Connor said. “Up, up, up.”

She got to her feet and swayed like a sapling in a stiff breeze. Connor scooped her up in his arms. She nestled her cheek against his shirt. “You’re right. This is much better.”

He set her down on the bed and took off her blouse and slacks. “You know,” she murmured, “I really should be enjoying this more.” Connor kissed the crown of her head and tucked her in. “Wait, wait, wait,” she said, shutting her eyes even as she spoke. “I have to give my 101 test. It’s in my backpack.”

When he returned to the bedroom, she was fast asleep. He turned off the light and drew the curtains and closed the door behind him.

Connor got to the classroom in the JKHB just as the previous class let out. As the students filed in—among them he recognized Mark from the night before—their eyes (except for Mark’s) registered surprise.

A girl asked, “Where’s McKenzie Sensei?”

Connor said, “She couldn’t make it in today.”

She turned to the girl in the next aisle. “Who’s he?” Mark leaned into the conversation and whispered something. The bell rang. Connor stood up and the students jumped to their feet as well. He almost took a step backward in surprise. He nodded and said, “*Konnichi wa.*”

“*Konnichi wa!*” they chorused in return. They even bowed right.

Elly wasn’t kidding about imposing the discipline of a Japanese high school classroom. He’d donned a sports jacket to lend some air of authority to his brief elevation in rank. Still, he felt underdressed. He handed out the exams. For the rest of the hour he reviewed his notes on Jakobsonian semiotics, glancing up now and then to check on their progress.

Four students remained when the bell rang. He gave them another five minutes and then hurried them along as the next class filed in.

Back in the Writing Center, he gave Atsuko a call and explained the situation. “You attended *Eikaiwa* classes in Japan, didn’t you? It’s pretty much the same thing, except in Japanese.”

“Yeah, I guess I can do that. It sounds like fun.”

“You know where the Writing Center is, right? Down the hall from Elly’s office. Could you meet me here around ten to four?”

She could and she did.

He reviewed the grammar points with her as they walked over. “Sheez, this is grade school stuff,” Atsuko said.

“These are mostly students who haven’t been on missions. You speak English better than they will ever speak Japanese.”

The classroom in the MARB was shaped like a small amphitheater. Connor wrote “Japanese 201 Lab” on the blackboard. A dozen students had already arrived and were sitting in the front tier. Connor confirmed that they were 201 students. Elly relegated the lab rats to the upper rows.

The 201 students were already asking Atsuko questions. She didn’t understand many of the English grammar terms and deferred to Connor for technical explanations. The lab rats filed in as the bell rang. “*Hora,*” one said. “We’ve got a new sensei!”

That caught Atsuko’s attention. “Hey, I’m not a sensei.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

Good grief, thought Connor. Too many RMs spoke Japanese the same way they spoke English. Because most Japanese were so impressed that

they could speak the language at all, they never got corrected.

“Because I speak Japanese way better than you,” Atsuko shot back in *Kansai-ben*, rolling her R’s like a heavy in a gangster film.

That provoked a hoot. “You from Osaka?”

“That’s right. Where’d you go on your mission?”

“Fukuoka.”

“Ha! Southerners. They don’t even speak real Japanese down there!”

Atsuko wasn’t exactly elevating the level of discourse in the room. Connor thought it’d be a good idea if they got back to the task at hand. He cleared his throat. “McKenzie Sensei is a bit under the weather today, so Atsuko and I will be conducting the lab.”

He glanced at the first item on the sheet, formed an interrogative, and posed it to Atsuko, and then to the first student in the row. Atsuko soon caught on. They ran down the verb patterns as they went around the front tier, with Atsuko correcting the students’ mistakes with varying degrees of pretend outrage and teasing. One kid—Kevin was his name—kept missing on a stopped consonant (*itte-imasu/ite-imasu*). She perched in front of him and tormented the poor boy until he got it right. She rewarded him with a smile that turned his mortification into a blush.

It runs in the family, Connor thought. He said aloud, “Any questions?”

One of the lab rats raised his hand and asked, “You married?” as the guy next to him punched him in the arm.

“To Connor?” Atsuko laughed. “No,” she rattled on in Japanese, “he’s like a brother to me. We kind of adopted him, after all.”

“Atsuko is McKenzie Sensei’s cousin,” Connor explained.

“No kidding,” Atsuko said, raising her right arm to the square. “She’s like a big sister to me.” She laughed again. “I guess you and Elly can’t be my brother *and* my sister. How about half brother? Yeah, that’d work.”

Connor doubted that even the lab rats understood Atsuko’s play on words.

He worked at the Center until seven. When he got home, Elly was sitting in bed in her pajamas, reading her Linguistics 330 text. He sat on the bed next to her and put his hand on her forehead. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

She whispered, “I slept till past four. I’m feeling better. I know I don’t sound like it. How did lab go?”

“It reminded me why I never liked teaching Eikaiwa. Atsuko did okay once she slowed herself down to the level of a 201 student. Still, this ability to launch into conversation in a crowd of relative strangers is one that never fails to impress me. Especially with the intent of teaching something. It isn’t as easy as it looks.”

“Darn right. So why do you make more than me?”

“I’m a grad student. Drag your education on long enough and you can make the big bucks like me. The hard part was keeping Atsuko from flirting with the lab rats. The pubescent female wanders into the den and the young males perk right up.”

“She do any of her *yakuza* imitations?”

“She used some language I don’t think your uncle would wish spoken in polite company.”

“Yeah, but I bet she’ll keep ’em coming back for more. I’ll have to bring her along if attendance ever flags. Where are the exams?”

Connor retrieved the manuscript box. “You sure trained them well.”

“*Desbō, desbō?*” She grinned. “Too bad they don’t do the same thing in the 300 classes. Those RMs could use a bit of humility.”

“If you’re going for the high school experience, how about uniforms?”

She gave him a stern expression. “Don’t tell me you have a thing for girls in sailor uniforms.”

“I do *not* have a thing for girls in sailor uniforms. I’m just saying that if you wanted to make it an *authentic* experience—”

“The only time I ever wore a sailor uniform was the study abroad I did with Atsuko when I was fifteen. She thought about it for a minute. “You know, I probably *do* have a picture somewhere—”

Connor said, “I’m taking the Fifth.”

Chapter 44

Dragon Lady

Elly got her voice back sufficiently to teach Japanese 101 on Thursday, though she bumped up a calligraphy lesson in order to minimize the time she'd have to spend talking. By Friday, a lingering touch of hoarseness was not enough to keep her from lab.

The regular 201 students were relieved, the lab rats disappointed. She greeted both reactions with a small measure of satisfaction. "I'm afraid," she told the class, "that if your exposure to Atsuko continued any longer, your progress in the language would retreat as quickly as it advanced."

Two girls approached her after class. The one who spoke introduced herself as Jessica. She glanced at her friend and then said, in a coy voice compromised by self-consciousness, "Um, McKenzie Sensei, your brother is really cute."

"My brother?" Elly frowned. How in the world did she know Sam?

"Half brother, I mean. You know, he taught the lab on Wednesday. Anyway we were wondering if—"

Elly's mind jumped ahead to the predicate of the sentence:—*if he's available?* She bristled, a reaction she felt rippling through her muscles. "Husband," she said, her voice almost a growl, lowered another half an octave by her cold.

"Husband?" the girl echoed, her face turning red. "Your sister said—"

Elly forced a disarming smile to her lips. “My *cousin* Atsuko was no doubt being too clever for her own good.”

“Oh—” the girl said, now thoroughly embarrassed.

“We should review family relationship terms in an upcoming class.” She smiled again. The contradiction of emotions made her cheeks hurt.

The girl nodded and hurried off, whispering angrily to her friend, who hung her head in obvious chagrin.

Elly watched them leave and caught herself scowling. In fact, it was a comic scene, especially the poor girl’s expression when she said *husband*. All that courage blasted.

No, what surprised her was the visceral nature of her response. Had she been a cat, she would have laid back her ears, ready to lash out with tooth and claw. She took a deep breath and placed the back of her hand against her forehead. She had no fever to blame for this bout of insanity.

Outside it was cloudy and blustery, the air gritty with dust blown in from the West Desert. At the Writing Center, Connor was working with a student. He glanced up and gave her a wink. The smile she returned this time was genuine.

She continued down the hallway. *Husband*, she repeated to herself. She loved the way the word sounded, the way it articulated against her tongue and lips. She sat at her desk and contemplated her dysfunctional psyche. Her dream-givers did not care about her existential travails. Perhaps the dragon, having gotten what it wanted, had chased them off.

She thought about Miss Watson, her high school social studies teacher her senior year. One day she showed them a slide of Raphael’s *St. George and the Dragon* and then the Uccello rendition. Miss Watson pointed out that in the Uccello, as the knight gorily slays the dragon to rescue the fair maiden, the chain between them does not bind her *to* the beast. Rather, it is a leash around the dragon’s neck that she holds in her hand.

“Hey,” said Connor, leaning over the cubicle divider, “how was lab?”

“Aside from clearing up a few misconceptions—”

He nodded. “I wondered if bringing Atsuko along raised more issues than it settled.”

“It did enliven the conversation, and that’s not a bad thing. And Kevin seems to have mastered the stopped-consonant.” She reached up and

grasped his hand. “You off at six? Walk me home, then?”

He smiled. “Sure, girlfriend. I’ll walk you home.”

The wind had died down some, though high over the Quad, the flag rippled and snapped in occasional gusts that floated Elly’s mane out behind her like the tail of a comet. She caught her hair back beneath her jacket and said, “At lab the other day, what did Atsuko say about how we were related?”

“Someone did ask if she was married. She took it as being married to me.”

“And she said—?”

“Something like I was a brother to her. Then she went off on this riff about how *you* were a sister to her, and so *that* wouldn’t be proper. I think she concluded that I should be her half brother.”

“Ah,” said Elly.

“I doubt anybody in the class followed what she was saying. I thought I made it clear that the two of you were cousins. Why?”

“It seems a few concluded you were *my* half brother. It’s not an totally irrational assumption that if you look Asian and have a European name, you must be adopted.”

“It’s those dominant Japanese genes.”

Her eyes glinted. “Yes, they are, aren’t they?”

But getting ready for bed that night, she still hadn’t put the subject out of her mind. Could not some aspect of possessiveness or jealousy reflect the essential qualities of love? *Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave.*

“Connor,” she said, coming out of the bathroom, “you did know that Sametaroh Oh had no sons?”

He looked up from his book. She imagined him a few decades from now, graying, reading glasses perched on his nose, waiting for her to join him in bed. Her imagination made her smile.

“That must mean your great-grandfather took your great-grandmother’s surname when they married.”

She knelt on the bed next to him, ankles tucked beneath her, Japanese style. “I know I’ve asked you before, but, really, does it bother you, being

listed in our family registry? I mean, it is a muko-iri record.”

He shook his head. “It’s only symbolic. Though I have to admit that if I were in your great-grandfather’s shoes, it would take some getting used to. Not that there aren’t plenty of McKenzies in the world, but I am my father’s only son.”

“Well, you don’t have to,” Elly said. She placed her hand on his chest. “You see, husband, I take your name and gladly. But not only your name. I take you. *My beloved is mine, and I am his.*” She thought he might be annoyed by this declaration, but no.

“So I’ve gathered,” he said, and his eyes sparkled.

She scooted off the bed. “Just so’s you know,” she said. She went to brush her teeth.

Saturday night they went to see the San Jose Taiko Drummers at the Harris Fine Arts Center. She wore her little black dress. It was Connor, though, who complained about the air conditioning. By bedtime he was shivering noticeably. Elly rubbed his arms and pressed her body against his. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked, attempting a lightness of tone and not entirely succeeding.”

“It’s just a cold.”

“You don’t get *literally* cold when you get a cold.”

“I do. I’ll develop more predictable symptoms tomorrow. Promise.”

“You sure? You’ve never caught a cold from me before.”

“I never had you to keep me warm before. Fair swap.”

He was right about the symptoms. “You’re like sleeping next to a heat lamp,” she told him in the morning. He was sitting at the side of the bed, resting his head in his hands. She put her hand on the back of his neck. “You’re burning up. You should stay in bed.”

“I’ll feel a lot better once I take a shower. Really.”

But she checked his forward motion and tucked the comforter around his shoulders. “There’s no need for you to be traipsing around.”

“I’ve got tithing count to do.”

“I’m sure you aren’t the only one in the bishopric who can add and subtract.” She got him two Tylenol and a glass of water. “Get better,” she ordered him.

Elly hadn't gone to church alone in years. During her mission, she always had a companion. And Melanie after her mission. How was Melanie doing these days? They had lunch now and then, and sometimes studied together, and sometimes Melanie came to lab with Susan. They should have a girls' night out. She could get their opinions on the announcements. Her mother had sent over some samples from a printer in Kobe.

The bishop greeted her in the lobby. "Connor's not with you?"

"He's not feeling well."

He nodded. Elly wandered through the lobby to the lecture hall where sacrament meeting was held. She sat with Sandra. She counted Sandra as her best friend in the ward. But Sandra was still single, and that made her a different species of person. Elly wondered if perhaps she and Connor shouldn't attend Aunt Wanda's ward next semester. A normal ward. She hadn't been in a normal ward since forever.

But as much as she missed her husband, she wasn't happy to see him. A few minutes past twelve she came down the hall from the Relief Society room and there was Connor, crossing the hall to the bishop's office.

"*A-na-ta!*" she said, enunciating each syllable of the pronoun, and in a tone a voice that made everybody within a half-dozen paces of her stop and back away slowly.

Connor turned, a quizzical expression on his face. All at once, Elly saw herself—in a rare moment of true self-reflection—the way the impersonal universe saw her. She'd done something that'd make any man furious. Yet he only seemed glad to see her. In that moment of clarity, she fully realized why her mother married her father. The dragon had found a knight with flame-retardant armor. And so the scaly, green creature drew up, surprised, if not a bit befuddled, the smoky flames licking about its nostrils and making it sneeze.

"Hi," Connor said, his voice a quiet rasp.

Still, she had it all stored up so it had to come out. "What are you doing out of bed?" she demanded, though speaking now in Japanese.

"I'm feeling better."

"Then why are you whispering?"

"Because my throat is killing me."

She wanted to be mad at him. She really did. But as she stood there,

she couldn't think of any good way to justify her outrage.

Connor said, "I've got to get a few checks signed, and then we have to make the deposit."

"And then you're going home and straight to bed."

He agreed to these terms.

He didn't go to bed. He fell asleep on the couch watching football. He woke up to get a throat lozenge, slouched about like a rudely awakened bear, then returned to the couch to watch the last half of the 49ers-Rams game.

"When McKenzie men get sick," Wanda confirmed, "they get grumpy and as chatty as a chunk of granite."

Elly decided to test this assertion. Connor gamely tried to carry on a conversation with her, but after a while she felt like a child poking a sleeping cat with a stick to see if it will do something "interesting."

"Well," she concluded, "you definitely are the suffer-in-silence type."

"Laryngitis."

"My contribution. Share and share alike, no? Sickness and health and all that."

"Colds don't count."

"An inherited characteristic, I'm sure. Stiff upper lip and all that."

"I'm Scottish. Brits have stiff upper lips."

"That's right! That British explorer who froze himself to death in Antarctica so as not to burden the rest of the expedition, who all froze to death anyway. I always thought that was the dumbest thing. And Japanese are supposed to be the suicidal race. It certainly never was a popular option in our family. Have I made myself unbearably annoying yet? I have, haven't I? See, I can be like Atsuko if I try. There—made you smile."

"When I get sick, Broca's area goes first."

"Well, I know that now. You don't have to talk, you just have to pretend to pay attention to me. A little tatemae goes a long way. I think that's why the Japanese are so good at it—pack a hundred and twenty million people into a place that small, and it becomes as necessary as air."

Chapter 45

Akisame

Japanese society ran on *tatemae*. Except that Elly wasn't very good at it. She'd grasped the basic ins and outs in elementary school, like knowing to duck a wild pitch in a softball game. But that wasn't the same thing. The full powers of social conformity were formed in the pressure cooker of the Japanese public high school system and the "examination hell" that preceded college, both of which she'd happily avoided.

She could say and do what she was supposed to. She just couldn't put her heart into it. The same way she couldn't toss off an "I love you" like an infatuated teenager. But she felt that love in every fiber of her body. It was the *word* that got in the way. The *word* didn't connect to the right parts of her brain, didn't connect to the *meaning* she demanded of it.

The weather matched her mood. Far out in the Pacific, the jet stream swept north towards the Gulf of Alaska, carrying a pocket of low pressure across the Sierras and up against the Colorado Plateau, bringing gray days and rainy nights. The trees higher up the mountains turned red and gold. The bands of color slowly descended the rocky slopes as the days passed.

Elly checked her watch and collected her books together. Susan said, "Doesn't Connor usually come by about now?"

"He traded schedules when I got sick last week, so he's working late.

Oh, has Melanie told you about our get-together Saturday night?"

Susan nodded. "Where is Mel?" she asked, glancing around the Asian Collection room.

"I suspect she and Greg found themselves a more private venue."

Susan sighed dramatically. "They'll be married before you know it."

"So it would seem. Though I think Mel is going to be rightly cautious about *her* engagement, if only to show her junior companion the proper way of doing things." She slung her backpack over her shoulder. "See you in lab Friday?"

"Yeah, I'll be there."

Susan was probably right about Melanie and Greg. Elly was beginning to understand some of Mel's grumpiness about Elly's unexpected nuptials. Life was simpler when people weren't going off and changing the ground rules on her. Maybe Mel and Greg could find a basement apartment in the Tree Streets so they could attend the same ward together.

It was still daylight savings time and not that late in the evening. But the low-lying clouds created a false sense of night. The air was sweet with mist, the sidewalks spotted with puddles. Elly lifted her face toward the sky and tasted the falling rain on her lips.

The Center was mostly vacant. Connor got up from the desk and met her at the counter. "Started raining again?" he asked.

"More of a drizzle. It doesn't look too busy here tonight."

"It usually isn't this early in the semester and with the bad weather."

"Well, I'd stay, but I've got a Relief Society meeting at Sandra's."

"I'm off at eight. I'll stop at Sandra's place on my way home."

When she left the JKHB, the rain was falling harder. She hunched her shoulders and ducked her head and proceeded across the Quad at a brisk walk. She'd made it to the corner of the Harris Fine Arts Building when she heard her husband's voice.

"Elly!" Connor ran up to her, his sneakers slapping on the wet concrete. He held out an umbrella. "I remembered it after you left."

She stared at him, at the unopened umbrella, at the rain pattering on his head and shoulders. When she spoke—a sudden torrent of Japanese—the words came out of her like a tape recorder had turned on in her head and she couldn't find the switch to turn it off. "*Good grief, of all the silly*

things to do. What's the sense of carrying around an umbrella if you're not going to use it? You'll catch your death—"

And then, thankfully, the words stopped. Connor grinned sheepishly. He undid the strap around the umbrella and popped it open.

Elly put her hand to her mouth and started to laugh. She remembered running home through the drenched streets of Hiratsuka, the autumn rain soaking her to the skin—running home to a warm kitchen and a steaming bath and the kerosene scent of the old stove aglow in the tiny living room. She ran home to her mother's stern and unconditional affection, to her father's strong embrace, to a love that never failed her. She'd grown up and believed she'd left those feelings in the past. But she was wrong.

She flung herself at him, her backpack smacking against her shoulders as they collided. The umbrella parachuted unattended to the ground. "I love you." She kissed him. Her heart beat madly. "I love you." The words tasted like warm chocolate in her mouth. "*I love you.*"

He enfolded her in his arms. "I know," he said.

Elly pressed herself against his chest, her head aswirl. "Oh, my meeting with Sandra, I'm going to be late."

"The umbrella—" he said.

"You need it more than I do!" Elly flung out her arms. "It's the *aki-same!*" She darted back for a quick, wet kiss, and then set off down the sidewalk. She turned and waved back at him. "I love you!"

Connor wasn't planning on going to Melanie's condo after work. BYU housing units were divvied into multiple wards in order to bring in some demographic diversity. So Sandra's unit, facing the park, was in Connor and Elly's ward, but Melanie's wasn't.

But crossing Ninth East, force of habit took over. Susan answered the door. "Elly's not here. She had a Relief Society meeting."

"Oh, right." He turned to leave and stopped. "There is something you could help me with. You wouldn't happen to know Elly's ring size?"

"Ring size?" Susan gave him a scolding look. "That's right, you never gave her a ring."

"It was sort of a mutual thing. But I was wondering—"

"As a matter of fact, I have exactly what you want." Susan invited him

inside. She came down the stairs a minute later. “Here, catch.” She tossed him a black velvet box.

Connor popped it open. “An engagement ring?”

“My sod of an ex-fiancé never asked for it back. I figure it was his way of getting over his guilt for dumping me. Whatever. Elly and I spent many hours thinking of ways to destroy it, like taping it to the Nankai tracks and letting the train squash it flat. But I thought better of it.”

“It fits her?”

“She tried it on once, you know, to see what it was like. Believe me, Connor, girls want the ring. And I want that one back, so don’t lose it. I plan on trading it in on a washer/dryer set someday.”

“Thanks,” Connor said. “I won’t.”

He walked over to Sandra’s condo. Yvonne Maynes answered the door. “We’re almost done.”

From the living room, Connor could see Carol and Sandra at the kitchen table. Elly had her back to him. She must have heard him come in. She glanced back over her shoulder and smiled. He flushed in response, despite himself.

“That was quite the look you gave me back there,” she observed as they were walking home. “What exactly was on your mind?”

“I thought: right there is the most beautiful woman in the world, and she actually *likes* me.”

“I love you, silly.”

“That too.”

The rain let up. They stayed to the sidewalks to keep their shoes from getting soaked. Elly stopped, tugging on his hand. “I bet *that’s* what my mom told you.” He hesitated, caught in a moment of ethical conflict. Elly laughed. “I understand. A mother-in-law’s orders must be respected.”

They continued up the street. Connor added, his voice soft and even, “The words don’t always matter, Elly.” He used the Japanese proverb, “The flower says nothing (*Iwanu ga hana*).”

She stopped again. “Silence may be golden (*Chinmoku wa kin*), but eloquence is silver (*Yunben wa gin*).” She smiled. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

She closed her eyes and listened to the music singing inside her head. “Yes,” she said, “words matter.”

When they got home, the answering machine light was blinking. The first call was from Sandra (Elly had been late to the meeting). The second was from Rose Noland.

“Who?” Connor said.

“The lady who called the other day.”

“This is Rose Noland,” the message went. “I’m calling from Evans & Thorton. Mr. Thorton wondered if the two of you could come down to our offices tomorrow morning.”

Elly said, “He did say they’d call us back.”

“But still no idea what this is all about?”

“We’ll find out tomorrow.”

Chapter 46

Inheritance

The storm swept over the mountains during the night leaving in its wake bright, blue skies. It was the first real fall morning, and at nine o'clock the air was still brisk enough to require jackets.

The offices of Evans & Thornton were located in Academy Square on West Center. The directory inside the lobby pointed them to suite 221.

"Hi. I'm Rose," the receptionist greeted them. "You must be Connor and Elly. Mr. Thornton is expecting you." She led them down the hallway to his office. "Tom? The McKenzies are here."

A bespectacled man with a bushy beard looked up from a cluttered desk. He resembled a middle-aged Santa Claus. "Oh, good," he said with a beaming smile. He said to Connor, "Mr. Evans, my father-in-law, was your grandfather's attorney for many years. I know he would have liked to see this through to completion himself."

Connor nodded, though he still had no idea what this was all about.

"Do you have your marriage license?" Mr. Thornton asked.

That was the one unique item Mr. Thornton had asked them to bring, along with their drivers licenses. Elly got the envelope out of her purse.

"Dotting *i*'s and crossing *t*'s," said Mr. Thornton. "I don't foresee any problems with probate, but better safe than sorry." He glanced over the license and their IDs and handed them to Rose. "Please," he said, gestur-

ing to the two chairs facing the desk.

Rose returned a minute later. She handed the copies to Mr. Thorton and returned the originals to Connor and Elly.

“What exactly is this about?” Connor said.

Mr. Thorton undid the strings binding a maroon accordion legal folder and extracted several documents. He handed Connor a pen and slid the papers across the desk. Connor signed his name on the indicated lines.

“A stipulation in your grandfather’s will,” Mr. Thorton explained. “I was to see that you took legal ownership of the property, along with the contents of this brief—” He tapped the legal folder. “What you do with them after that is your business. Everything should be ready by next Tuesday. Is that okay with you? Around ten? Good.” He shook their hands and bid them goodbye.

Elly said, as they walked back to the car, “That was weird. What did he mean about legal ownership?”

Connor snapped his fingers. “My grandmother’s Ford Taurus. Those papers were the title and registration for a car. When her eyes got too bad for her to drive anymore, the car became the family loaner. The driver-ed car, they called it.”

“So he’s giving you that car? Wow. That’s quite the inheritance.”

“Technically it was my Grandma’s. Maybe it was in *her* will. A hand-me-down for the very last grandchild. The *Blue Book* value can’t be much more than pocket change.”

“Still, it’ll be nice not to have to borrow Aunt Wanda’s car.” They got into the Camry. Elly said, “But you had to get married, first. Who knows what would have become of you if you’d been free to go gallivanting around during your undergraduate days.”

Wanda agreed about the Taurus. “Last I heard, your cousin Joe had the car. Seemed about time to pass it on to a permanent owner.”

“So who was Mr. Evans?” Connor asked.

“Gil Evans was a good man. Your grandfather never had much need or respect for lawyers until he sold the house and set up the living trust. But Gil didn’t run around getting crooks off, and that made him respectable enough in your grandfather’s eyes. Gil died last year. I heard that his

son-in-law was running things now. Did he give any indication of when this transaction would be completed?”

“Next Tuesday. There was something about a set of papers that I was to get as well—”

“I cannot begin to imagine,” Aunt Wanda said. “You think you know everything about your parents, and then something like this happens.”

Elly spent Saturday afternoon between general conference sessions grading papers. Connor came downstairs and said he was driving Aunt Wanda to Smith’s Grocery. She said, “Oh, good. *Basu-con*.”

He nodded and disappeared into the bedroom. A minute later he poked his head out of the bedroom door. “Where do you keep it?”

“Top drawer on the right,” she said, scribbling away in red.

Several minute later, he emerged from the bedroom and headed for the stairs. “Well—?” she said.

He gave her a blank look. “Oh, yeah.” He returned to the bedroom and came out with the prescription.

“What in the world were you looking for?”

“Nothing,” he said, with far too much nonchalance. He went upstairs. She thought he’d left with Wanda, but then came back down carrying a box. “Aren’t you going to the store?”

“In a couple of minutes.”

He took down the Hokusai print, opened the box, got out a slide projector, plugged it in and turned it on. A crooked square of light lit up on the wall. “Aunt Wanda wasn’t sure it worked anymore.” He adjusted the stands until the square of light was even. Then he took a slide out of his T-shirt pocket, slipped it into the carousel and pressed the advance button one frame.

And Elly realized what he’d found in the drawer. She leapt out of the chair with a yelp and planted herself in front of the projector lens. “You can’t see that!” She folded her arms resolutely, but soon started to laugh. “I was seventeen at the time. This probably isn’t even legal.”

“I’ll let you know once I get a better look.”

Elly sighed the universal sigh of all women when confronted with the biological realities that make men *men*. But it had been six years and she

was curious. “Okay,” she said, stepping to the side with a dramatic display of reluctance.

A blur of color splashed on the wall. Connor pulled the image into focus. The suddenly familiar pastel of blue and peach reflected back at her: the crystal sparkles of water frozen into brilliant shards of ice, her hair dark and glassy, her skin aglow with sunlight and youth, the smooth arc of her back, the proud rise of her breasts.

“Wow!” Connor said.

Wow was right. When she peeked over her shoulder at him, he reacted a bit sheepishly, and that made her grin. “This is not altogether decent,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but you are *so* good looking.”

The compliment touched her. “Thanks,” she said.

“Who took it?”

“Becky Hoggan. You remember me telling you about her? The equivalent of your Billy Bragg.”

“She takes a good picture.”

“With my camera, no less. She said there wasn’t any film in it and I believed her. I was horribly mortified at the time. Now I’d like to believe that there was a kid working in the one-hour photo shop at Smith’s and I really made his day.”

“Sure would have made mine.”

“Even educated men have such Cro-Magnon minds. I’m keeping it for when I’m well past my prime.”

“You’ll never be past your prime.” He kissed the back of her neck.

“Oh, I will be, and then you will need some reminding.”

She heard footsteps. “Wanda—!” Elly gasped. Connor fumbled with the switch and then just pulled the plug out.

Wanda knocked on the wall adjacent to the landing. “Are you ready to go, Connor?”

“I sure am,” said Connor.

She leaned forward to look into the room. “Does that slide projector still work?”

“Works just fine.”

“Good.” She cast the two of them a stern look. Elly burst into giggles.

Connor looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Elly gave him a good-natured shove. "I have homework to correct. You'd better get to the store, unless you want to become a father quicker than we planned."

After Connor and Aunt Wanda left, she plugged in the projector one last time. She cast her mind back, remembering who she was at that moment, so blithely naïve, so *young*, not a clue about what life had in store for her. "You see," she whispered to herself, "it turned out right after all."

She found another hiding place for the slide. It was one of those objects made all the more valuable by its rarity and inaccessibility.

Chapter 47

Drive

The subsequent visit to Evans & Thorton proved anticlimactic.

“A lot of fuss over a car,” Elly opined.

Mr. Thorton smiled. “My experience is that the more detailed and dispassionate the will, the less the family discord during probate.”

Connor signed the last document. In exchange, Mr. Thorton gave him a Wasatch Auto Storage cardkey and a receipt. “This is yours as well.” He handed Connor the legal folder.

Mr. Thorton shook hands with them. Rose bid them good luck and goodbye.

“Your grandfather sure could keep a secret,” Elly said.

“Runs in the family. My dad used to buy Valentine’s chocolates for my mom, like, the week after Christmas to save money. He’d hide it, then forget where he put it. You never knew when or where a box of chocolates was going to turn up.”

Wasatch Auto Storage was located a block east of the Deseret Industries store at the north end of Provo. A little bell rang above the doorway when they walked in. A man wearing mechanic’s coveralls asked, “Picking up or dropping off?” The nametag over his left pocket identified him as “Boyd.”

“Picking up,” Connor said.

He showed Boyd the receipt. After checking his driver's license, Boyd went to the filing cabinet and returned with a set of car keys and a release form. "Scotty!" he called out. A kid, maybe eighteen, poked his head into the office from the back room. Boyd, Jr., Elly guessed. "Unlock 23B for these good folks." He handed Connor the keys. "A lucky man you are, Mr. McKenzie. We're going to miss her. Your father's car?"

"Grandfather's."

"You must have been his favorite." He gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Yeah," Connor said, without conviction, "sure."

Outside, Scotty jumped into an electric utility cart. They followed him through a maze of garages to 23B. Scotty unlocked the padlock and lifted up the garage door.

"There you go," he said. "We keep the tank topped off to prevent condensation. You can leave the door open when you're done." He shook his head and grinned. "Man, I liked that car." He hopped back into the cart and sped away.

"He liked the car," Elly echoed.

"There's no accounting for taste." Connor tugged the tarp back from the back bumper on the driver's side. Opposite him, Elly lifted up the cover and they slowly moved down the length of the car.

Connor undid the ties from the front bumpers. They lifted the cover off the hood, stepped to the side, and then walked toward each other, folding the tarp in half. Connor grasped it halfway up from the fold, Elly let go of her end, and he folded it over again.

She turned to look at the car. The sheen of deep, metallic blue flashed across her line of sight. A jolt of recognition coursed through her. She backed up until she was standing in a bright slash of sunlight. The sprinting silver horse gleamed brightly from the grille.

Connor stared at the car, his expression blank. He said nothing for a long time. And then muttered something under his breath in an strained, exasperated tone of voice. He slowly walked to the back of the garage and sat on an upended crate, hugging the car cover to his chest like a pillow.

Connor—" she said again.

He looked at her and said in genuine confusion, "What am I supposed

to do with it?”

“Drive it?” she said. She wasn’t trying to be flippant. She saw in his eyes the small boy sitting on the porch steps, torn by love and fear and apprehension. It was so obvious to her that his grandfather would do this, just as it was so obvious that his grandfather would loathe what he saw of himself in the boy. And yet at the same time dream that the boy could become all that he was not. Once upon a time Connor had asked for a glass of water, and now his grandfather had gone and given him Lake Superior instead.

It was so much easier to walk away from the past. But sometimes the past wouldn’t let go.

She said nothing but held him in her arms.

“I’m okay,” he said at last. There was a faucet by the garage door. He splashed water on his face, ran his hands through his hair, and blotted his face dry with the sleeve of his shirt.

Elly said, “Tell me about the car.”

Connor took a step back and surveyed what he saw. “A 1966 Mustang with a 289-cubic inch, 235-horsepower, A-code Challenger Special V-eight engine. Four-barrel Autolite 4100 carburetor. Three-speed automatic transmission and front disc brakes. White Pony interior.” He opened the door for her. She got in. He went around to the driver’s side and slid behind the wheel. “I used to pretend—” he started to say, putting his hands on the steering wheel. He didn’t finish the sentence. He put the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life. The throaty sound resonated off the walls of the garage.

Elly found herself smiling. She could almost smell the testosterone in the exhaust. Her husband really was a closet gearhead. She suddenly felt a whimsical desire to dress up in a leather jacket and a miniskirt. But she got out of the car and said, “You’d better follow me. I don’t want you getting a speeding ticket your first day behind the wheel.”

“Here you go.” He tossed her the keys to the Camry.

“Buckle up,” she said.

Connor parked the Mustang next to the Camry. Aunt Wanda stood on the kitchen steps and marveled. “Where did he hide it?” she asked.

“Wasatch Auto Storage.”

“Like your dad’s Valentine’s chocolates. None of us knew what he did with it. It disappeared a few months before he died. His not wanting to talk about it wasn’t anything new. We assumed he sold it. That explains what he and Mr. Evans were up to.”

Connor folded his arms and shifted his stance. “Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but it doesn’t seem fair.”

“That he gave it to you? I wouldn’t worry about that, Connor. The distribution of the estate was as fair as need be.”

“And there was that legal folder,” Elly said.

They sat down at the kitchen table. The bulkiest item in the folder was a book, *Chilton’s Ford Mustang/Cougar 1964–73 Repair Manual*. Connor said, “I remember this.” In the next divider were the title, registration and inspection papers for the car.

The only thing left was a white 10x12 envelope. Inside was a sheaf of papers and a floppy diskette. The floppy was labeled in his grandfather’s neat engineer’s hand: “McKenzie Temple Ready files.”

“Let me see those,” said Wanda. She stared, laughed, and shook her head in disbelief.

“What?” Elly and Connor asked together.

Wanda said, her eyes brimming, “Leave it to Dad to build himself a back door into heaven. These are his temple papers. That’s why you had to get married first, don’t you see.”

“You don’t have to be married to do temple work,” Elly said.

“True, but that’s not the way my father would have seen it, and getting his temple work done was not his sole intent.” She cast a pointed glance at Connor.

He smiled gamely, the look of a man cornered into doing the right thing, and resigned to doing it because it *was* the right thing.

Elly finished brushing her teeth. “It’s a good idea, don’t you think?” she asked, raising her voice so Connor could hear her from the kitchen.

He didn’t answer.

“Standing proxy for your grandfather and grandmother, I mean.” She came back into the bedroom. “All my genealogy’s been done already. I’ve

never had the chance to be the proxy for somebody I was related to.”

Connor sat in bed, thumbing through the *Chilton's* manual. “I would have done it whether or not he gave us the car.”

“It wasn’t conditional. Like Mr. Thorton said, it was up to you.”

“I would have done it.”

“Of course you would have. But out of duty.”

“I don’t know that it still isn’t.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You loved him, didn’t you? You must have, in some way.” She slipped into bed next to him.

He set the book on the nightstand. “Not the way I liked Billy’s grandfather. He smoked, drank, swore, and when I was a kid he was the only adult besides my own parents I really gave a damn about. He was in Japan during the Occupation. I went to see him when I got my mission call. He was in a nursing home by then, Alzheimer’s. He didn’t remember who I was. But I said I was Billy’s friend and I was going to Japan. He broke into a big smile. ‘Great place, Japan, even all blown to bits.’ I wished he was my grandfather instead—” His voice trailed off.

Elly rested her head against his shoulder. “It’s strange realizing there are people who loved us more than we ever loved them.” She said, “Your grandfather—have you ever gone to see him?”

“You mean his grave site? No, not since the funeral.”

“Where is he buried?”

“Provo Cemetery, next to Grandma.”

She sat up. “That’s only at the end of Ninth! Not in six years?”

“Cemeteries have never made sense to me. Obon does. I mean, at Obon you expect the dead to visit the living, you make plans.”

“A cemetery is the place where everybody knows you’ll turn up if you wait long enough. That’s why ghosts hang out in graveyards. They’re saying: you have my address, so come and see me sometime.”

He laughed. “I love you, you know.”

“I love you too, and I think you should go see your grandfather.”

He replied with a nod of his head. “Then I will.”

“Because you want to, or because I want you to?”

“The latter, to be honest.”

Elly thought about it. “A good enough reason,” she said. “That’s what

wives do. Perfection of the soul through constructive nagging.”

The sun was bright on the peaks of the Wasatch Mountains. The dew glimmered on the grass. Connor stopped beneath the canopy of an old Cottonwood. “Here,” he said.

The polished granite marker was set flush with the grass. “Connor & Margaret Mia McKenzie,” Elly read aloud.

“Her maiden name was Maguire. So her full name was Margaret Mia Maguire McKenzie. She led an alliterative life.”

Elly knelt and brushed away the leaves. She laid the flowers she’d brought on the gravestone. She stood, bowed, and clapped her hands together twice, the form of ritual prayer observed at Shinto shrines. Having thus alerted the *kami* to her presence, she pressed her hands together, the tips of her fingers at the level of her chin. “*Ojisan, Obasan,*” she said, “I thank you for giving me such an honorable grandson.”

She bowed, clapped her hands once more, lifted her head and smiled. She walked off, leaving Connor alone at the side of the grave.

A haunting but familiar voice behind him said, “Long time.”

Connor turned. The old man glanced away. He’d never been one to hold a look too long. Connor sat down on the cold concrete bench. He buried his hands in the pockets of his jacket. Nothing surprised him these days, certainly not his dead ancestors. He said, “Thanks for the car.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I would have liked riding in it when you were alive.”

“We worry about all the wrong things when we’re alive. You discover that clean upholstery doesn’t count for much when you’re dead.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” For a moment their eyes met. The old man almost smiled.

“I don’t get it,” Connor said. “What did you expect of me?”

“I expected you to be different. Different from what your blood made you. Different from me. Got no use for a carbon copy of a grandkid. All the problems you’ve been living with your whole life right there in living color? No thanks.”

“Nothing personal, but I never thought I was the same as you.”

“Family always makes for strange company. And it’s always personal.”

This time Connor almost smiled.

“Tell me,” his grandfather said, “because this is the kind of thing you’d know, that expression, *to thine own self be true*, who said that?”

“Shakespeare. It’s from Hamlet.”

“Well, it’s garbage. Nobody’s self is true. We fall short, some of us more than others, but all of us at one time or another. Spend all your time trying to be true to *yourself* and you’re a dog chasing its own tail.”

“So why didn’t you change?”

“I did change. Not enough for your liking, seems. But you always were a hard kid to please.”

“I was a *kid*. What was I supposed to know that you didn’t?”

“What you were supposed to do was grow up. You were supposed to figure out that the way you saw the world *then* wasn’t the way the world *is*. That’s not the way *I* was every minute of the day. Can’t say I care for the way you decided to remember me.”

“So I was slow on the uptake. Maybe you died too soon.”

“Maybe. But the point is, people all over the place are convinced that whatever happened to them at the age of twelve becomes the unalterable truth for the rest of their blasted lives. Fact is, kids don’t know much. That’s what you’re supposed to learn when you grow up. But I’m beginning to wonder.”

“You know what, I still don’t like you.”

“I always loved you.”

Connor stared at him for a long minute. He’d never heard the word come out of the man’s mouth before, for any reason, in any context. “Hard to tell.”

“Love’s got nothing to do with *like*, boy. Love’s got to do with doing the right thing, like it or not. That wife of yours, that’s what doing the right thing is all about. You find somebody who can see clean through you.” He jabbed his forefinger at Connor’s chest. “Clean *through* you. Best thing *you’ve* ever done by a long shot.”

“I know that.”

“You’re halfway home then.” He stood and hitched up the khaki slacks he always wore. Connor had never seen a pair of jeans on the man.

“You want me to do your temple work?”

“Didn’t ask anybody else.”

“How about Grandma? How do I know she wants to be married to you forever?”

The old man laughed. “That’d be up to her, don’t you think? No need to start concerning yourself about decisions that aren’t yours to make.” He stepped to the walk, looked back a last time and said, “Think about this, Connor. Maybe I was *exactly* what you needed me to be.”

“And what’s that?”

He shrugged. “That’s your problem. You’re alive. I’m dead. It ain’t half bad where I’m at. But when you get to be my age, if you’re any bit an honest man, you’ll be thinking of a couple hundred ways you could have done it better—a hell of a weight to carry into eternity. Think about *that* for a change.”

Connor watched the lanky form disappear into the bright sunlight. He rested his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. “*Shimatta*,” he muttered to himself. “What must having normal relatives be like?” His behind was cold. He got up and looked for Elly.

“Hey,” she said brightly. “I think I found some of your relatives.”

He read the marker she was examining. “Webster McKenzie. He was my grandfather’s brother, I believe.”

“What about Aunt Zariah?”

“She’s buried in Salt Lake.”

“We should go see her sometime too.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed the crown of her head. “So, wife, how long have you been a practicing Shinto?”

“I’m Shinto in cemeteries and on New Year’s. I’m Buddhist at Obon.” She glanced up at him. “Did you make your peace?”

“I don’t know. Like the blind man and the elephant, you think you’ve been holding on to the trunk of a tree when what you’ve got is a leg. And then it starts to walk away.”

“So you let go.”

“Easy to say. But it’s hard letting go of the way you *think* things were. Hard letting go, period. Still, *leaving* is preferable to being *stuck*. Once you’re stuck, the best thing you can do is start building walls. Moats and

parapets are very much in the McKenzie architectural school of thought. To put it in pop-psych terms, it's easy to confuse introversion with indifference."

"Or antagonism."

"We want the world to leave us alone and then we pout because the world doesn't care."

"I've always believed that being annoying was a positive attribute."

"I think what he wanted was a Dennis-the-Menace type that would give him something real to get ticked off about. Somebody who'd fight back. What he got was another turtle."

"He certainly came up with an interesting way of cracking your shell. And our great-great-grands were rascals enough to carry it off. Not that I'm ungrateful." She kissed him for a long time. "After all," she added, her hot breath clouding in the cool air, "you probably weren't the kind of guy who ever made out in cemeteries before."

Chapter 48

Arrivals

Aunt Wanda wasn't through playing the go-between. "I sense an opportunity to address some other oversights," she mused. "Connor's parents are going to be here for Thanksgiving. With a good six weeks to provide fair warning—"

Elly jumped up, clapping her hands with realization. "That's right! My mom and dad—well, Mom, for sure—could see me married—sort of."

Her mother was enthusiastic about the plan. She would fly in the Monday before Thanksgiving. "True," Wanda admitted, "it won't be the same as the first time around, but sometimes close enough counts."

They asked Elder Packard to do the sealing at the Provo Temple the Friday after Thanksgiving. Connor's parents sent word that they'd be in Seattle the third week of November to see Sara Beth and the grandkids, and then come down to Utah the following Wednesday.

Sayaka Oh Packard was one of those few people who, after a fourteen-hour flight, could walk off the plane in full possession of her dignity. She saw Elly and smiled a luminous smile.

Elly ran to her mother's warm embrace. "Mom—" she said, and found she could say no more.

"I forget how tall you are," her mother said, resting her hands on her

daughter's shoulders. "I fear the grandchildren will prove unmanageable."

Elly laughed. "You'll have to wait a while to find out." She grabbed Connor's hand and pulled him over next to her. "Here's Connor."

"Son-in-law," Sayaka Packard said with a nod of her head.

He answered with similar concision.

The late morning arrival meant a short wait at the luggage carousels. They took the escalator to the second level of the parking garage. Sayaka Packard regarded the metallic blue Mustang with an expression that said, *I hope you're qualified to drive this thing, son-in-law.*

"So this is the car your grandfather left you. Sam demands details."

"I'll email him some photos." Connor put the luggage into the trunk and got the door for his mother-in-law.

Elly leaned over the front seat. "Did Izumi Sensei get into Stanford?"

"He did."

"And Sister Amiya? I'd swear Izumi was making up excuses to come to the office just to see her."

"He is indeed smitten. You barging in that one time might have struck the right spark. You do remember that unfortunate episode?"

Elly grinned. "This one time," she explained to Connor, "Izumi Sensei and I caught Mom in the office sitting in Dad's lap."

"Really, Elly," her mother said. "I didn't ask for details."

"You thought it was just as funny as I did." She said to Connor, "Izumi Sensei practically died of embarrassment. He was so cute."

"Now, if Sister Amiya would only kindle the flame as I've instructed her—"

She stopped when her daughter laughed. "Connor is amused by our penchant for matchmaking. You do know, Connor, that it was Mom who set up Aunt June with Uncle Oh." She said, "Do you remember Melanie and Chalmers Chōrō, Mom?"

"The one who looks like a fashion model? I don't recall the chōrō."

"I'm betting they get married by the end of Winter semester."

Connor interjected, "You said they were getting married at the end of Fall semester."

"I hadn't adjusted for the peculiarities of my own experience. It threw off my timing."

“I’m not sure how you would adjust for that,” Connor said.

“Yes,” Sayaka added with wry smile, “the go-between’s responsibility, after all, is to prevent this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, I bet Grandpa and Grandma wished they’d employed a go-between when you and Dad got married.”

A too-long silence followed. Her mother said, “I suppose they would.” Elly thought about what she’d said and winced.

They met Elder and Sister Packard at the Church Office Building and then walked over to the Joseph Smith Memorial Building for lunch at the Garden Restaurant.

Elly observed that her mother and grandmother got on very well. Her mother’s ancient loathing for the mother-in-law relationship had long ago been ameliorated by the help and support her grandmother had provided when Emily was born.

As for her mother and grandfather—they played their parts very well. Ordinarily Elly wouldn’t have noticed anything amiss. But now she saw things she hadn’t before—the moment of hesitation, the extra degree of unnecessary politeness, the way her grandfather’s natural gregariousness dimmed in his daughter-in-law’s presence.

Her mother was more taciturn on the drive to Orem. Maybe she was thinking the same thing. Maybe it was jet lag catching up with her. Elly asked, “How are you doing, Mom?”

“Frankly, I don’t know how your father ever put up with all the travel. We may stay in Japan after our mission ends, at least until Emily graduates. Nobuo says that he could still use Connor’s help. Oh, and Elly, I ran into an old classmate the other day, Kazue Tanaka. She’s provost at Koya Joshidai, a little junior college south of Osaka in Kudoyama. She could use someone just like you for their summer English program.”

Elly and Connor exchanged similar expressions. Elly said, suppressing the excitement in her voice, “Tell Tanaka Sensei I’d love to.”

“Good.” She rested her head against the headrest, closed her eyes. “Wake me when we get to my brother’s house.”

They exited the interstate at Eighth North and drove east toward the

mountains. Five minutes later they arrived at the Oh residence. Elly rang the doorbell and opened the front door. “*Tadaima!*” she called out. She and her mother stepped into the foyer. Connor brought up the rear, lugging the suitcases.

“*O-kaeri!*—” came June’s voice. She stopped at the sight of her sister-in-law in the foyer.

“Well—” Sayaka said.

“Well—” said June. A long pause followed. “Well, Sayaka, I told you so.”

“And so you did.”

They both laughed. “Where is my little brother?” Sayaka raised her voice, “*Makoto-chan!*” Oh Sensei entered the foyer. Sayaka said in Japanese, “Hey, little brother.”

“Hey, big sister.”

They didn’t hug. Hugging was the one custom Elly had to restrain herself from when she was in Japan, and she wasn’t *that* outgoing a person.

Sayaka said, “I should take a nap. Will you and Connor be coming for dinner?”

“And Aunt Wanda,” Elly added.

June said, “Remind Atsuko that she’s expected too.”

That evening they picked up Atsuko at Helaman Halls and drove back to Orem. Wanda’s husband, Walter Brooks, had taught accounting around the same time Elly’s father was an adjunct professor in the MBA program. So Sayaka and Wanda weren’t strangers.

Sayaka said to Wanda, “From what my daughter has told me, you did your best to save them from themselves.”

“More like I found myself in the middle of an accident and got out to direct traffic.”

Elly said, “I’m not sure I like this metaphor.”

“And that’s why no one is getting married in Japan anymore,” her mother said. “No one directing the traffic.”

“*We* got married.”

“Yes,” her mother answered with a smile, “and it was a perfect wreck.”

After dinner Sayaka ejected June from the kitchen and collared Elly for

cleaning duties. She said as they worked, “Your uncle and husband get on very well.”

“They are of one mind when it comes to things academic.”

“And you and your grandfather?”

“Grandpa and Grandma were great. Once they got over the shock. But they got over it pretty quick. Grandpa approves of Connor. That helped.”

“Yes,” her mother said.

“What about you, Mom? When you and Dad got married, what was it like?”

Her mother didn’t answer for a while. Then she said, “Elly, has your grandfather said anything about the—circumstances—under which your father and I got married?”

Elly thought about the difference between what she *knew* and what her grandfather had *said*. She remembered June’s admonition. “Only that he wishes he’d handled it differently. He admires you, Mom. *She looks on tempests and is never shaken*—that’s how he describes you.”

Elly could tell she hadn’t expected this response. “I wish I’d handled it differently too. And how does Connor feel about being listed on our family register? Really?”

“He’s fine with it. Really,” Elly said, ceding to her mother’s wish to change the subject, though she suspected that this as well had been a sore point between her mother and grandfather.

“Good. He does seem a suitable companion for my eldest daughter. So, do you love him?”

“Yeah, Mom. I love him like crazy.” She said in a more subdued voice, “I believe Connor took your advice to heart.” She hastened to add, “He didn’t tell me. But he would have done the right thing in any case.”

“I hoped you’d overlook my meddling. I don’t want to be *that* kind of mother-in-law.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Elly reassured her. “It’s nice to know there’s somebody watching over me.”

“The people watching over you, daughter, have a serious command of karma. Not something I would want to stand in the way of.”

Connor’s parents flew in from Seattle Wednesday afternoon. They

rented a car at the airport and drove down to Provo.

Elly waited anxiously.

“I’m telling you,” Connor repeated. “They’re going to love you.”

They were indeed delighted to meet her. Elly wore the pearl choker. “Oh, it’s just right on you,” her mother-in-law said. “It goes perfectly with your complexion. I’ll have to do your portrait when you come to Maine.”

“Mom used to teach high school art,” Connor explained.

His father greeted her with a pleasant reserve. Meeting him and knowing Connor, she had no difficulty grasping something of what his grandfather must have been like. Connor said that height-wise he’d averaged out, and that seemed true of his personality as well. His mother was no taller than her mother and his father was about the same height as her father, though the McKenzies were a dozen years older than her parents.

June came over with Sayaka, and Elly made sure June and Wanda were accorded the praise they deserved as the wedding planners. Both mothers demanded more details, at which point Connor and his father retreated to the garage to talk cars.

Elly hung around with them for a while, but finally had to admit that she simply was not that interested in the particulars of the Challenger Special V-eight engine.

While the older women poured over the wedding pictures, Elly paged through the family photo albums Wanda had brought out. The pictures were mostly of people she didn’t know, though now and then she recognized Wanda or Connor’s parents or Lynne and her family.

And then a photograph that must have been taken the same day as the one in Grandpa McKenzie’s study. The boy stood in the foreground, his grandfather several yards behind. Both had looked up as the shutter was snapped. The camera lens compressed the distance between them. Elly’s heart ached, knowing the years it would take to close the few yards that separated them.

Yet she couldn’t help but imagine a child of their own, the same dark hair but her almond eyes, and maybe even blue.

The next album was filled with much older material. It was lying face down on the table, so she paged through it backwards. Toward the front she came across a copy of a yellowed daguerreotype. It appeared to be a

wedding portrait, a man and a woman stiffly posed in their nineteenth century Sunday best. There must be a good twenty years between them.

“Who’s this?” Elly asked, though she was sure she knew.

Micah said, “That’s Connor McKenzie and his third wife, Katherine Anne Carroll.”

“He was the one,” Elly said. “Connor McKenzie and Sametaroh Oh.”

“What was that?”

“Our go-betweens,” she said mostly to herself. She looked up and realized nobody knew what she was talking about. “Sametaroh was my great-great-grandfather. I’d like to think they’ve gotten to know each other since.”

Micah and Wanda nodded. Her mother smiled at her across the table, a private understanding. She knew what Elly was talking about, about an old samurai racking the sleep of his stubborn daughters until they did the right thing.

Chapter 49

Thanksgiving

Elly's grandparents invited them to Thanksgiving. Martin and Lynne and Glenn and Mike were included, as were the Ohs.

Representing the Packards were Uncle Grant, Aunt Karen, and Elly's cousins, Kim and Debby and Darrell. The total came to twenty, average for a Packard Thanksgiving.

The men set up the tables in the living room (including a Relief Society loaner). Before long, Connor and Grant were drawn into the gravitational well of the family room television. Connor made a point of gallantly resisting until Elly laughed. "Oh, go watch football," she said, and escorted him downstairs herself.

The game had already captured Mike and Tom and Darrell, along with Naomi and Atsuko. Atsuko planted herself in Mike's lap and was being treated to a personalized play-by-play analysis of the sport.

"You'd better watch out for this one," Elly warned Mike. "She's a little bundle of trouble."

"*Hidoi!*" exclaimed Atsuko. "Elly's being mean. I am a lot of trouble, but I'm worth it." She said pointedly to Connor, "*Neh?*"

"She's right," Connor agreed. "She's a bundle of trouble."

Mike looked like he was in the mood for trouble, and more where that came from. Elly watched for a few minutes, munched on a few potato

chips, and then went back upstairs.

It was like rising into a warm, delicious cloud. The aroma of baking bread, steaming mashed potatoes, turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie. Japanese cuisine took a holiday on Thanksgiving. The Packard, Oh, and McKenzie women busied about the kitchen and dining room like worker bees. Traditional gender roles shamelessly ruled the day.

Elly stopped in the kitchen doorway. Her grandmother, mother, and mother-in-law were gathered together at the counter. Each of them had grown up in the little island of her own family, knowing only her own language and her own kind, wary of others and the outside world. And then, at the proper time, she'd been dispatched to distant lands, seeking friendly relations with foreign peoples.

This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

Her mother turned and saw her. "Elly, why don't you and your cousins set the table?"

So she helped Kim and Debby. Glenn and Connor's father, like Uncle Oh, were immune to football. The men arranged the chairs and discussed the advantages of hot water baseboard systems versus forced air.

Back in the kitchen, Elly fished a walnut from the bowl and looked for a nutcracker. Her grandmother handed her the cranberry relish. "Put that on the table, dear."

When Elly came back she asked, "Where's Mom?"

Wanda said, "I think she went with Martin to look at the horses. You know Martin can't resist a horse."

Her grandmother added, "Your grandfather should be in the barn. Tell him to come inside and get washed up. We'll be ready to begin in another, oh, twenty minutes or so."

Outside it was cold and gray. Flurries tumbled through overcast skies. Elly turned up the collar of her jacket and hurried across the yard. She met Martin coming out of the barn. He had a coil of longe line over his right shoulder. "Hi, Uncle Martin," she said.

"Hiya, Elly. Your mom and gramps are inside."

Elly stepped into the barn. Despite the overcast skies, her eyes took a minute to adjust to the dim interior. There were two stalls on her left, a

dozen bales of hay stacked against the wall opposite. The barn was as Elly remembered it, except that it seemed to get smaller as she got older.

Her mother was standing in the center of the small riding arena. Seeing her there in her long coat, Elly was struck by the realization that she never dressed extravagantly, even when she wore kimono. She wore little make-up and no jewelry. Yet her bearing was almost regal, a stature that spoke of a long and proud ancestry. *Fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.*

Elly's grandfather was studiously straightening up the tack, the sort of thing a man did hoping others would see how busy he was and go away.

Her mother said, "Grandfather."

The break in the silence startled Elly as much as it did him. She slipped into the shadow between the stalls.

"Grandfather," her mother said again.

He seemed to sigh to himself before he turned and sat down on a hay bale. He pulled the work gloves off his hands and raised his head to meet her gaze. He nodded. Elly noted the heaviness in the gesture, the weight of old guilt that bowed his shoulders like a warp in weathered wood.

Her mother took a careful step forward. "Twenty-five years ago I was a willful young woman, sure of my own course and deaf to the counsel of others. June warned me that consequences would follow. 'One day you will have a daughter and she will grow up and do exactly what you are doing now. Then you will know how it feels.' *The apple falls not far from the tree.* I believe that was the expression she used."

She took a deep breath. Her voice grew quieter. "Now I know how it feels." She almost smiled, but it was an expression that masked pain.

"Sayaka—" Elly's grandfather started to say.

"No," she said, her voice firm again. "This has gone on long enough. You are the father of my husband, grandfather to my children. I am your daughter-in-law. That is my place within this family. No matter what else, I owed you my respect. I withheld it. You asked for my pardon. I gave it grudgingly. And now, what you have done for Elly and Connor—" Her voice broke. She paused to draw an even breath. "I cannot say how grateful I am, only that I owe you a debt I cannot repay."

There was a moment of silence. Then she clasped her hands together

at her waist and bowed.

Elly almost gasped aloud. Her hand flew to her mouth. She had never imagined her mother capable of such an act of voluntary contrition. Her eyes darted to her grandfather's face, wondering if he understood the true significance of the gesture.

But somehow he did. A glow lit up his face, like that of a man at the mountaintop welcoming the dawn. He got to his feet, an oak standing beside the willow. He pulled her to him and enfolded her in his arms. "Don't you know, Sayaka," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion, "that I've always loved you as my own daughter. Nothing could ever change that. All that stands between us has been my unwillingness to admit it."

Elly averted her gaze, her vision blurring. Her presence suddenly felt rude and intrusive. She slipped through the barn doors. The air was sharp and cold against her face. She shook the tears from her eyes, walked to the fence, and folded her arms on the rail. Uncle Martin was in the center of the paddock with the horse at the end of the longe lines. Now and then he crouched down to examine the horse's gait.

"Uncle Martin!" Elly called out. "It's time for dinner!"

He nodded. "Whoa, there," he said to the horse. He unclipped the lines and sent the horse off with a friendly swat on the flank.

She heard the barn door swing open. Her mother joined her at the railing. "Did you say it was time for dinner?"

"Yeah, Grandma sent me out to get you."

Her grandfather met Martin at the gate. "Let me put that away," he said, taking the longe lines.

"Seems to be favoring the right fore," Martin said. "Nothing more than a bruised frog, I'd say."

"Well," Sayaka said, affectionately stroking her daughter's hair, "we'd better not keep everybody waiting."

Elly nodded, then buried her head against her mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Mom," she said, her voice muffled by the coat.

"Sorry about what?"

"Getting married without telling you."

"Oh, Elly. That's nothing to be sorry about. Don't ever regret love. And just as importantly, live your life so you don't have to regret the love

you walked past time after time, but were too stubborn to acknowledge was there.” She brushed the bangs from her daughter’s face and smiled.

Grandpa Packard latched the barn doors. Elly grabbed his hand. Holding her mother’s in her right, they walked back to the house.

Chapter 50

The Hearts of the Fathers

Friday morning Connor completed the preliminaries for his grandfather at the Provo Temple. Elly attended the baptism, as did Wanda and Lynne and Connor's parents. They returned to the temple chapel at two o'clock that afternoon: Elly, her mother and grandmother. Uncle Oh and Aunt June. Connor and his parents. Martin, Lynne, Glenn, and Aunt Wanda. Plus Susan. A much larger party than had attended their wedding.

"It's not as if *I'm* getting married," Elly had argued, not wanting Susan to interrupt her vacation on her account. "And Melanie's not coming."

"Not a problem," Susan insisted, reminding her that Melanie was spending Thanksgiving in Arizona with Greg. "Meeting the *parents*. That's *way* more important. Almost like getting *engaged*."

The sealing room was soon crowded with relatives, including one grizzled old man who shook Connor's hand and said, "You know, son, always knew we'd make the som'bitch one of us sooner or later."

His wife exclaimed, "Willard! You're in the temple!"

The old guy grinned.

Elly sat with her mother. Across the mirrored room, Connor sat next to his father. Connor caught her eye and smiled. In a rush, she found herself reliving the same moment from three months before. She felt a shock of nervous anxiety and blushed.

Elder Packard walked to the altar. “We are gathered here today to seal the marriage of Connor and Margaret Mia McKenzie. We don’t usually conduct work for the dead in such a formal setting. But today’s work is for the living as well as for the dead. The sealing of a marriage and the *reaffirmation* of the wedding of my granddaughter and her husband.

“Joseph Smith taught us that ‘turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers’ was ‘the greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us.’ Christ himself declared that his calling was to ‘heal the brokenhearted and to preach deliverance to the captives.’ Those who died without the opportunity to accept the gospel, who cannot ‘be made perfect’ without us, as Paul wrote in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

“The means by which this work will be completed is described in the 128th section of the Doctrine & Covenants. To those who perform these ordinances, the Prophet revealed that ‘whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.’ That’s what we’re about today, to ‘turn the hearts of the children to their fathers,’ according to which all of us shall be made whole.”

Having completed his homily, he motioned to Elly and Connor, who knelt at the altar. On this occasion, though, as Elder Packard spoke the words of the marriage covenant, they affirmed their union on behalf of the dead, sealing the marriage of Margaret Mia and Connor McKenzie for all eternity.

They got to their feet. Elly pressed against Connor’s side like a bashful newlywed.

Elder Packard held up his hands. “A moment, please.” The room fell into a puzzled calm. “Due to the unusual circumstances of Elly and Connor’s marriage, one custom was omitted. Now would be the perfect time to correct it. Susan—”

Susan bounced to her feet, taking a small velvet box from the pocket of her temple dress.

“Oh, Connor,” Elly said, realization dawning on her.

Susan opened the box. Connor took the first of the bands and slipped it onto his wife’s ring finger. Elly blinked the tears out of her eyes. She retrieved the second band and fitted it to her husband’s finger. They

kissed and were married all over again.

“They are still man and wife,” Elder Packer concluded with a smile.

They were suddenly surrounded by family. Elly’s mother embraced her. “I’m really glad you came, Mom,” Elly said.

“My beautiful daughter,” she whispered, “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

Elly turned to her grandfather. In his face, she saw the look of a man forgiven, a man who had cast off a long-held regret. *This is what marriage should do*, she thought. *It should merry us*. She held Connor’s hand as they stood at the foot of the altar, between the mirrored walls, in the company of all their kin.

In the sliver of the eternal now, the threads woven by their ancestors had bound together countless generations separated by space and time, making cousins of those who otherwise would have known nothing of one another. They were no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the Saints, and of the household of God.

“Connor,” Elly whispered. She nodded at the mirror on their left.

And there, for a moment, glimpsed through Saint Paul’s clouded glass, appeared a mischievous samurai, a laconic Scot, a dark-haired man and woman, young and newly married. Likenesses that merged and coalesced with countless others. The shadows of all those who had gone before and all those destined to come.

Reflections of their pasts. Lights shining into the future. They were the dreams their ancestors dreamed and could not believe. And this was the burden of their lives and the weight of the obligation they owed: to dream each day anew, and to follow the paths wherever those dreams might lead.

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