



His Beautiful Samurai - 1

His Beautiful Samurai

Copyright © 2006 by Sedonia Guillone

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78650.

ISBN: 978-1-934166-13-0, 1-934166-13-8

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / September 2006

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78650.
www.torquerepress.com

PROLOGUE

Musashi Province, Japan, 1848

“Akira, no!” Kenji hurried along the riverbank after the other *samurai*, the lover to whom he’d sworn his heart and soul. From the first moment he’d seen Akira, he’d wanted no one and nothing else. *Bushido*, the warrior’s code and all it entailed, meant nothing to him if he and Akira were to be separated.

The other *samurai* strode ahead, his topknot of sleek ebony hair bobbing with his movements. Kenji knew Akira was pretending not to hear him. Akira’s strides were long and Kenji, a head shorter than the other man, took two steps for his every one.

“Akira, you mustn’t marry!”

More silence. The afternoon sun shimmered off the blue silk of Akira’s *kimono*, nearly matching the blazing summer sky. His *daisho* tapped against his strong thigh with each step. Kenji glanced at the two weapons, the short sword and the knife, in their scabbards corded to Akira’s belt.

“I beg you to listen!”

Akira halted, nearly causing Kenji to collide with his tall frame. Kenji watched his friend turn slowly. He wasn’t sure what part of his plea had inspired Akira finally to stop, but he didn’t care. Akira’s impending marriage signaled to Kenji the beginning of the end of his own life.

Akira’s large, brown, almond-shaped eyes gazed down at him. His expression, which Kenji had expected to show anger, conveyed only sorrow. “Why must you make this worse than it has to be?” he asked, his voice soft.

Kenji heard his own heartache mirrored in Akira’s tone. His heart slammed against his chest. “I’m not the one making it worse,” he replied, just as quietly.

Akira squared his broad shoulders, his dark eyes blazing. It was that very indignation that had first made Kenji desire him. Setting his heart and soul on Akira from the first, Kenji had refused to enter into *shudo*, man-love, with anyone else. He’d pursued Akira, who’d continued to refuse him until Kenji was well past his coming of age. Kenji had been a full-grown man before Akira had accepted him.

The taller man heaved a deep sigh. “Our time of *shudo* has long since passed, Kenji. The code of *bushido* dictates that each *samurai* does his duty. You, too, will marry some day.” He reached out a hand, placing it on Kenji’s shoulder. The warm strength of Akira’s touch heated his skin right through the silk of his kimono. “You know we are sworn friends until the day we die. This change will not affect that.”

Kenji pushed back tears. Akira might as well have pulled his *wakizashi* from its scabbard and run it through his lover’s heart, for his words were every bit as cutting. Didn’t Akira realize the

crime he was committing? “How many times you have told me you never wished what we have to end, Akira! And now you do that very thing!”

Akira’s large, brown eyes misted over. Kenji knew his friend’s heart could never harden to him. It had to be. He put his hand over Akira’s, which still rested on his shoulder.

“You knew this time would come, Kenji, didn’t you?”

Kenji stared into his lover’s eyes. From the first time he’d ever looked at Akira, Kenji had lost the ability to reason. With Akira, he was reduced to a beating heart that only wanted its love. “No. I have always hoped we would become *ronin* and live by our own law.” The vision of him and Akira as rogue *samurai*, roaming the countryside together, pledging their fealty to no one but each other, was his life’s dream.

A look of desire passed through Akira’s eyes, just as quickly replaced by fear. In spite of Akira’s love for Kenji, Akira had always held other ambitions in his heart. Kenji was the less conventional of the pair, willing to shun the *samurai* code if it hindered his love.

A light summer breeze captured the fan of Akira’s topknot. Kenji’s hand itched to pull out the tie and let Akira’s thick ebony hair tumble down so he could sift the tresses between his fingers. After a seemingly interminable silence, Akira slowly shook his head. “I’m sorry, Kenji. As much as I love you, I cannot do that.”

Kenji bowed his head, avoiding Akira’s gaze. He didn’t want his lover to see his impending tears. But Akira hooked his fingertips under Kenji’s chin and bid him to look up. Kenji didn’t resist, for he couldn’t refuse Akira anything, and never had.

“Kenji, if I make this marriage, I will have status and wealth that I could never have as a *ronin*. If you love me, you’d want those things for me.”

To his humiliation, Kenji felt his bottom lip quiver and his sight blurred from the sting of tears. His hearing, however, was perfect, and he could hear that Akira was lying. Akira loved him every bit as much as he loved Akira. Countless times, in the heat of loving, Akira had sworn to Kenji his undying love.

“You’re lying, Akira. You know you’re lying.”

Akira bowed his head. “Please, Kenji. Let me lie. It’s the only way I can live with myself.”

Akira’s words wrapped around Kenji’s heart like a silken *kimono*. In the next heartbeat he put his arms around Akira and rose up on his toes, taking Akira’s sweet, full mouth in a kiss. He felt Akira melt in his arms, soft lips parting for Kenji’s seeking tongue.

Kenji pressed the length of his body against his lover’s. Akira’s erection, already full, pushed with demand against him. Akira’s desire for him elated Kenji’s heart, mending the tears Akira’s earlier words had caused. He took Akira’s full lower lip, tugging it between his teeth, suckling it like a babe at the breast. His hands caressed Akira’s back in wild circles, hungrily taking in the dear, familiar ridges of muscle. He knew exactly how and where Akira liked to be touched and

he slid his hands to his lover's hips, massaging them until Akira panted into their joined mouths, his own hands yanking open the sash of Kenji's kimono.

Kenji felt Akira's passion take over. Akira pulled Kenji's slimmer, shorter form against his wide, muscled body, lowering them both to the ground. Akira's eager hands pulled open Kenji's kimono then smoothed over his bare chest. He followed his touch with his mouth. He, too, knew Kenji's pleasure and obliged him with a zealous tongue swirled over each nipple until Kenji pushed up Akira's kimono, his hands stealing under the loincloth. He groaned at the contact of his palms with the smooth hard orbs of Akira's buttocks.

"Kenji, I love you," Akira breathed in his ear.

Kenji drew in a breath when Akira tugged Kenji's earlobe between his teeth, nibbling it the way he liked.

Kenji squeezed Akira in his arms. He parted his legs, eager to feel Akira's hard length buried deep inside him. Nothing else in the world mattered to him but to be that close to his lover. If he died in such a moment, he would consider death in Akira's arms as the most noble.

A shadow passed over them, blocking the sun. In his love-induced haze, Kenji thought a cloud had covered the sun. Too late he saw the glint of steel raised above his and Akira's entwined bodies, the light in his eyes blinding him as to who stood over them.

Akira screamed out, his body jerking violently. Kenji stared, his grip tightening on Akira's back. A sharp, blinding rip of pain passed through his own middle. Akira slumped onto him, just as every bit of strength drained from Kenji's body.

The shadow passed away, leaving the warm sun shining on them. Kenji realized what had happened, felt his life ebbing from him. He was getting the death he'd always wished for. His head fell to the side and he saw his blood mingling with Akira's, the red stream slipping down the riverbank. And then blackness...

CHAPTER ONE

Tokyo, Japan, Present day

Toshi stared down at the fresh corpses. Around him, the flashbulbs of the crime scene photographers went off like tiny fireworks. “*Shimatta!*” he cursed under his breath. He’d failed again and now stood, helpless, staring at the victims’ grisly fate.

What a horrible way to go.

The lovers, their naked, stiffening bodies still intertwined, had been skewered. The weapon, as with the other victims, a *samurai’s wakizashi*. His stomach churned, as it never failed to do when he found the *Ronin* Killer’s victims. What kind of monster came upon his victims when they were at their most vulnerable? Murder was hideous enough, but these crimes smacked of the most virulent hatred, as if the killer’s twisted emotions had leaked all over the crime scene.

Natsuka, his partner, covered the victims with a white cloth. He let the cloth drape down and then approached Toshi, shaking his head sadly. The *wakizashi* tented the white cloth in the most macabre way. “Are you ready for them to go to forensics?”

Toshi sighed. His hand went into the inner pocket of his jacket, rummaging for the cigarettes he’d made the mistake of trying to quit the week before. He tapped one out and put it between his lips. Natsuka, a veteran refusing-to-quit smoker, was at the ready with his lighter. Toshi touched the cigarette tip to the flame, puffed and then nodded. “Go ahead. The bodies will tell us more after an autopsy.”

Natsuka nodded and went to give the order.

With his mind ticking off the ways he’d failed to prevent yet another killing, Toshi took drag after drag on his cigarette, letting the Identification Division people finish up. When the cigarette had burned down to a nub, he flushed it down the hotel room’s toilet and pulled on a pair of latex gloves to begin his investigation of the crime scene.

Needing to eliminate suspects as soon as possible, he sent his partner to round up the hotel staff and to have the manager contact off-duty employees to come in for questioning. He called for backup to assist with the fingerprinting to try and find a match for those that would be found on the sword.

Toshi watched the sheet-covered stretchers being carried out of the room, blood staining the white material. He shook his head, fighting down a wave of nausea. The sick feeling was as much from frustration as from horror. As usual, the crime scene revealed no apparent clues. No visible sign of break-in; no sign of struggle, as if the murderer walked through walls or some shit like that.

The only possible connection to the murders was the series of suicides that occurred around forty-eight hours after each murder. Aside from that and the word “Naomasa” written on the suicide victims’ foreheads, everything turned into dead ends.

His cell phone rang. Toshi pulled off a glove and retrieved the phone from his pocket. “Genjin.”

“Keibu Genjin. Finding anything this time?”

Toshi recognized the Superintendent’s gravelly voice. Absently, Toshi registered that if he didn’t quit smoking, he’d one day sound like the keishi.

Toshi exhaled. “Not yet.”

The chief’s irritation radiated through the phone line. “It’s been six months. We’re not doing anything to promote the citizens’ faith in Tokyo’s police force.”

Toshi gritted his teeth against the not-so-veiled insult and raked a hand through his hair, badly in need of trimming. Hunting a serial killer did not allow one time for such trivialities as personal grooming. Or sleep. “This is not the first time a serial killer has eluded the police.” In his research he’d read plenty about Son of Sam, the Boston Strangler, and Jack the Ripper among others who’d managed never to get caught. It was a terrible response, but the only one he had in the moment. He, himself, lived in this area and had a vested interest in keeping it safe. He’d often wondered how long it would be before a victim would turn out to be one of his neighbors.

Keishi Ito grunted. “Finish up there and come in. I have something to tell you.”

Toshi sighed. “I’ll be there soon.” He flipped his phone shut, dropped it into his jacket pocket, then pulled off the other glove. With the crime scene now secured, he’d have to come back in and search the place in the morning. Which was really only a few hours away. Good thing there was a Starbucks right by the station. Green tea just didn’t cut it at times like these.

Natsuka was at the doorway of the room, looking at him. “They’re still looking for all the off-duty employees. They’ll have them here in a couple of hours, they said,” he told Toshi.

Toshi thanked him and told him what the chief had said. Natsuka grumbled and clapped a friendly hand on Toshi’s shoulder. “Come, Toshi-san, I’ll run interference for you with the press.” The press had been swarming around the entrance of each crime scene, ever since the *Ronin* Killer had begun his rampage through East Tokyo.

Toshi nodded. His partner for the last four years had become a good friend, more like the father and well-meaning older brother he’d never had in his own family. His own father still seemed to believe he was a *shogun*, apparently forgetting that the *samurai* in their family had been centuries earlier. Apparently, some people agreed with him, including Natsuka, who, in spite of his equal rank of keibu, deferred to Toshi in their partnership.

“Thanks,” Toshi murmured. He followed Natsuka down the hall, into the elevator. Halfway down to the lobby, he realized his body had already begun to tense, bracing himself for what the chief would have to say. It couldn’t be good.

Boston, Massachusetts

“In other world news tonight, in Tokyo, Japan, a serial killer has been terrorizing the eastern portion of the city for the last six months.”

John reached out to switch off the set, but something held him back.

“The killer has been dubbed the *Ronin* Killer by Tokyo Metropolitan Police because of the use of a *samurai* sword to spear his victims.”

John sat at full attention, uncertain whether it was the military man in him, or the empathic psychic. Old habits didn't just die hard, they went kicking and screaming. He stared at the screen. Police were loading sheet-covered corpses, apparently two bodies together, into the medical van outside of what appeared to be a fancy hotel. The top of the sheet protruded upward, attesting to the sword. It was obvious the killer had skewered his victims together. Damn, those poor people had probably been making love. *Christ...*

“The *Ronin* Killer, so named after the masterless samurai warriors of Japan,” the anchorwoman went on, “refers to the manner in which the killer chooses his victims, seemingly at random, and then murders them with a *samurai* weapon. Police have been frustrated in the efforts to capture the *Ronin* Killer before his next strike. Their only clue is the manner in which two victims are killed at once, either in an embrace or during sexual intercourse.”

“Christ,” John murmured, a sick feeling rising in his gut. He continued to watch the footage.

“Police Inspectors Natsuka Yamamoto and Toshiro Genjin of the Criminal Investigation Bureau have been on the case since the first victims appeared six months ago. They refused to comment on the string of murders.”

The cameras zoomed in on the two men. They were leaving the building. A middle-aged, shorter man walked in front of the other detective, seeming to shield him, but the cameras managed to catch glimpses of the second detective. A few seconds sufficed for John to see that the younger man was slim and handsome. John's heart sped up slightly. The detective's ebony hair framed an angular face in feathery wisps, curling over his collar.

John watched the screen, his gaze glued on the taller figure of the young detective until he was no longer visible. The segment ended and John switched off the set. He shook his head. There was a time when he would have immediately booked a flight to Tokyo and turned up at the police station, offering his services to catch the killer. Hell, that Japanese detective was good-looking enough to almost pull him from his rest cure. However, his nerves were still shot from the series of cases he'd worked on with police over the last few years. Four months hadn't proved to be enough of a vacation. His hands had only stopped shaking in the last week.

No. He pushed the image of the Japanese detective from his mind, fighting back the nagging spirals of heat whispering about in his long-neglected groin area. John Holmes – no relation to the fictitious English detective – filled his days with walks in the park, some squash, and whatever leisure and athletic activities would keep him fit between reading trashy detective

novels and staring into space. No antique stores for him, nor any place where the lives of the dead could crash in on him. No touching other people so he could experience all their grief and anguish and learn their deepest secrets. He didn't even take his reading material from the library or get it at used bookstores because he'd sense the lives of the people who'd touched the book before him. John Holmes was resting – until his own soul told him he was ready again.

His phone rang. The private, unlisted number that only his agent, Dick Watson – the irony of Holmes and Watson wasn't lost on either of them – had, not even his own family. Even though he was pretty close with his folks and siblings, he'd needed to reduce the number of times the phone rang. It had also been worth John's mental peace to spend the extra money on an agent to run interference with police stations, press and general curiosity mongers and tire kickers.

John's stomach fluttered with a touch of premonition. He picked up the receiver. "Dick? That's you, I pray."

"No worries, mate." The Aussie's cheerful voice gave John momentary relief. "How are you?"

John sighed and leaned back in his chair. He propped his slippers up on the glass coffee table. "The same. How's the wife?"

"Sandy's fine. She wants you to come to dinner soon."

Dick and his family were the only people John allowed himself to socialize with since Brett had left. The pressure of a post-traumatic stress disorder suffering psychic as a lover had been too much for Brett.

"That would be great." John stared up at the ceiling. He definitely appreciated when someone else did the cooking. Baked beans from a can got awfully tiresome after a while. "Is that why you called?"

Pause. Dick cleared his throat. "Um...well...no."

The flutter in John's gut kicked up again. "Don't tell me...a murder."

Sigh. "John, I really debated hard on this one. It's the first call I've contacted you about in four months."

John could only imagine how many calls Dick had actually turned down for him and he appreciated every damn one. Dick was shrewd and prudent and John trusted him implicitly. "All right, shoot."

"Good man. Have you started watching the news again?"

"A bit here and there."

Dick cleared his throat again. This was going to be a doozy. "Maybe you've heard about the serial murders in Tokyo? They're calling them the *Ronin* killings, after the *samurai*?"

Holy shit. John felt his pulse throb in his wrist. This was too damn weird. “I just saw the clip a second before you called.” *I saw that hot detective who’s on the case.*

“Yeah, well, this latest murder just happened yesterday, taking into account the time difference. And about five minutes ago, I got a call from the superintendent of that district, asking, no pleading, for your services. They’re desperate to get this guy before he kills again.”

“Naturally.” John’s heartbeat quickened slightly. Why had he just felt glad that his passport was in order from the last case he’d helped with in London?

“Of course the airfare, lodging, et cetera is all taken care of. I’ll take care of briefing the police on what you do and what to expect when you examine a crime scene, although the superintendent I spoke with says he’s read about you in their police journals.”

“How nice. I’m famous.”

Dick chuckled. “Better than infamous, I suppose, mate.”

John joined him in the laughter. “Yes, I suppose.”

The moment of humor passed and they were both silent. John sensed Dick’s hesitation on the other end.

“If you want to take some time to decide, mate...”

John’s pulse raced. He sat up in his chair. He had nothing to motivate him to do this except for the fact that if he refused, he would blame himself for the next victim. Well, there was one other motivation...

He sighed. “No. I don’t need time on this one. I think I’ll be able to handle it.” Funny how in one flash his soul was telling him: ready!

“You’re a good man, John. Are you sure?”

John nodded even though Dick couldn’t see him. “I’m sure.”

“Are you ready for the briefing?”

“Shoot.”

“Just the bare facts. The victims are found slain with the sword. Roughly twenty-four to forty-eight hours later, a man or woman is found, having committed suicide, their fingerprints matching the fingerprints on the murder weapon.”

John whistled. “That’s freakin’ gruesome.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Anything else?”

“Just one thing. The word *Naomasa* is written on the forehead of the suicide in ink. So far the police have not been able to establish a connection. No cults or religious groups that would be engaged in such activities. Nothing.”

John sighed. “That’s why they called me, I suppose.”

“That’s right. Anyway, I’ll have your ticket for you this evening when I pick you up for the airport.”

“Dick, you’re the best.” Seriously, John didn’t know how he’d cope with his situation without his agent’s help.

Dick chuckled. “So my wife is fond of telling me. See you tonight, mate.”

Tokyo, Japan.

Toshi stared down at his shoes. He was still trying to decide if he’d heard the keishi correctly. “Sir? A psychic?” He raised his gaze again to the superintendent.

Keishi Ito stood with his hands on his desk. He heaved a deep sigh. “This investigation is going nowhere. We need outside help. His name is John Holmes. I’ve seen articles on him in *The Journal of Police Science* several times in the past few years. He recently solved a crime in London, a killing that had gone unsolved for months.”

Toshi gritted his teeth. In the time it had taken him and Natsuka to finish their inquiries at the hotel and return to the station, Keishi Ito had placed the call to the United States, secured the psychic, and arranged his travel.

Toshi felt the heat of indignation burn inside him. He remained silent, letting the emotion simmer. He wondered briefly if this was the superintendent’s way of telling him, ‘You’ve had your chance.’ In other words, that Toshi was not cutting it as an Inspector and had only made it onto the force because he came from a wealthy Edokku family who could trace their roots to the Edo *shogunate*, the last of the *samurai shogun*. They both knew that Toshi had spent his time in the *koban* boxes on the streets and studied for his exams just like everyone else on the force, but for some reason his privileged background caused the keishi to have a hard-on for him. And not in the good way. If they hadn’t been standing in the wake of a fresh, grisly murder, Toshi would have been positive of the message. However, he, too, felt desperate to solve this case as soon as possible.

The superintendent gave Toshi the psychic’s flight information. Toshi jotted the information on his notepad and bowed again. Beside him, Natsuka also bowed. They turned to leave.

“Inspector Genjin—“

Toshi turned back around at his chief’s call. “Yes, sir?”

“I would like it if you would let him stay with you. If you’re needed on emergency, we can’t lose time fetching him at a hotel. Nor do we want to attract the unnecessary attention and cost.” He sighed. “Besides, you speak English.”

Toshi bowed. “Of course.” A houseguest was no matter to him. He had a spare bedroom. Besides, he did nothing more in his apartment than grab a few hours of sleep and a shower. Psychic John Holmes would not have much more opportunity than he to do these things.

Outside the keishi’s office, Natsuka followed Toshi through the maze of desks to where theirs sat side by side. Toshi lowered himself heavily down in his chair and stared blankly at the manila file on his desk. Nothing, nothing, nothing. He had no suspects, no motives, no leads on any of the *samurai* swords that had gone missing from Japan after the Second World War. Not one of those swords could be traced to someone who may have possessed them after the war, as if they’d materialized out of thin air.

To make matters worse, there seemed to be no pattern to the selection of victims, other than that they were couples in the act of...sex. Another thing he never had time for anymore, even with a fiancée at his disposal. There wasn’t even a pattern to the orientation of the victims. The couples who had been killed had been heterosexual, gay, and lesbian.

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair, absently listening to the phones ringing and voices murmuring in the station around him.

He looked up, catching Natsuka watching him, a look of sympathy in the deep-set eyes. Natsuka had just turned fifty and already had bags under his eyes, not from age but from stress. This case was draining them both.

Natsuka reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cigarettes. He held the pack out toward Toshi. “Perhaps you’ll quit another time, my friend,” he said softly.

CHAPTER TWO

The plane was beginning its descent into Tokyo's Narita Airport. John straightened his seat and drained the last of the coffee from his cup, his stomach tightening with anticipation.

In a very short time he'd meet the handsome detective in person. John hadn't anticipated this much anxiety about the meeting. He was grateful for having gotten some rest. With the help of heavy sleep aids in the form of white pills, he'd had been able to dull the psychic vibrations of his surroundings and get sufficient rest on the plane. A veteran of murder investigations at this point, he knew how to get the rest he needed and knew what to expect when he landed. There was no time to spare. Undoubtedly, the first place the detective would take him after leaving the airport was the most recent crime scene.

When the plane landed, John pulled his small, leather flight bag out from under the seat in front of him and waited patiently for the moment the passengers could deplane. His anticipation mounted as he filed off of the jet, collected his one other piece of luggage, and moved through customs. He knew that in spite of the gravity of his reason for flying to Tokyo on a moment's notice, the bulk of his nervousness was of a more...well...personal nature. Since he'd seen the detective on the television the image of the handsome slim man had haunted him.

No sooner had a customs agent stamped his passport and released him into the general portion of the airport than John recognized the two detectives from the news clip. The two men, dressed in dark suits with white, tie-less shirts, stood off to the side, waiting, scanning the lines filing through customs. The older man held a sign with John's name on it. He needn't have. John knew exactly who they were.

As he approached them his heart rate increased rapidly. The younger detective, a head taller than his companion, was even more striking in person. Up close, John could see details about him that the camera hadn't shown. The dark golden hue of his skin, the soft fullness of his lips. The angular jaw and chin lent him an aristocratic air, even though his clean-shaven jaw was dark with stubble. The wispy frame of coal black hair looked sinfully luxurious and John hoped the man would never cut it, at least not while John was around him.

John forced his gaze not to linger on the man's eyes, almond-shaped under a thick fringe of lashes. The dark circles of exhaustion under the man's eyes and the slightly unkempt look of his clothing didn't fool John. He felt fairly certain that when the detective was relaxed, he was probably nothing short of radiant, even though he didn't give the impression of being someone who relaxed very often, if at all.

John came to a stop in front of the two men, afraid that at the last moment the power of speech would fail him. He hadn't felt quite this way since his first high school crush, blond swimming god, Tom Gaines.

"I'm John Holmes." He prepared himself inwardly for his customary explanation of why he wouldn't be able to shake their hands.

The handsome detective cleared his throat. "I'm Inspector Genjin and this is my partner, Inspector Yamamoto." He turned to his partner and translated the introduction.

So, Genjin was the one who made his heart flutter. He also spoke perfect English.

Inspector Genjin proffered his hand.

John's heart thumped. How was he going to explain why he couldn't shake their hands without coming off like a freak? His business here was strange enough already and he sensed Inspector Genjin's skepticism already. What should he say? *I'm sorry, I can't touch you because the lightest contact with another human being opens me to all their deep secrets and sins.* The words froze on John's lips. Inspector Genjin's hand looked large and strong, the nails neatly trimmed and manicured.

Before John's mind could offer an objection, he set down his suitcase and accepted the offer of a handshake. He braced himself for the psychic reverberations of his first human contact in nearly a year.

Inspector Genjin's hand enveloped his, squeezing him with just the right amount of pressure, as if he instinctively understood.

John held his breath, his gaze momentarily captured on their joined hands. For one moment...nothing. However, no sooner had he remembered to breathe than waves of warmth traveled up his arm, radiating outward through his chest. Inspector Genjin's inner psyche emitted no screams, no cries, revealed no dirty secrets he shouldn't know. Only heartache. Longing. A child's whimpering for a love lost, the grief stuffed down in a place that John sensed Genjin had no awareness of.

John's breath hitched in his throat. He released Genjin's hand. A flash of something passed through the man's dark eyes. For one brief moment he appeared ruffled, then visibly gathered himself, his shoulders squaring.

Pulling his attention from Inspector Genjin, John turned to the other man. With Inspector Yamamoto, John chose the greeting he'd seen used in Japanese films: he bowed. To his relief, the older man smiled and returned the gesture.

"I hope everything went smoothly on your flight?" Inspector Genjin wore a polite mask, but John sensed tension behind it.

"It did, thank you."

The handsome detective picked up John's suitcase and took a step. "We were hoping you would have been able to rest enough to be able to begin immediately."

John hitched his flight bag higher onto his shoulder. He nodded, falling into step between the two detectives. "Yes. I expected we'd go straight to the other night's crime scene," he said. "Best to try and pick up the vibrations from the most recent occupants of the room."

Toshi nodded. The warm sensation of the psychic's handshake still spiraled through his skin. He stole a sideways glance at the man walking beside him.

John Holmes was short for a *gaijin*. Dressed in a simple, button down shirt, open at the throat, and a suit jacket and jeans, he looked more like a tennis instructor or some sort of athlete than a psychic. Not that Toshi knew exactly how a psychic should look. Well, maybe he'd been expecting a gypsy kind of person with a kerchief around his head and a gold hoop through his ear. Not a golden god with eyes the color of the brilliant Tokyo sky outside the large airport windows.

He reminded Toshi very much of his first lover, back when he'd attended college in San Francisco. Those four years had been his parents' attempt to let him sow his oats before returning to his respectable *samurai* roots and living by the code of *bushido* in its modern form of national consciousness. Toshi had been given his opportunity for *shudo*, a relationship that had a proscribed beginning, middle and end. Toshi had actually cared very much for Michael, but he had been unable to rebel and had bowed to the family pressure to return to Japan.

He'd established his career on the force, holding off the next phase of his life, marriage and the producing of offspring, as long as he could instead. He had taken lovers for brief periods of time, but never anyone with whom he could get truly close. Now, to his own self-disgust, he was giving in to his family again. Toshi knew that Keiko didn't want their marriage either. She was an independent, modern woman, who had been in love with their mutual friend Aoki for half of her life, but fulfilling their "duty" would silence their parents, so the impending marriage stood.

Frightening how one fleeting moment such as a handshake could cause him to regret having a fiancée.

Returning his attention to the discussion at hand, he looked at John Holmes. "Can you explain *vibrations*?" he asked.

"It's hard to explain, but when I'm at a crime scene, or anywhere for that matter, I somehow pick up the energies of the people who've been in that space, their thoughts, emotional state, et cetera. Sometimes I even have visions. Faces and settings. Things like that."

Toshi nodded. He glanced past John Holmes to Natsuka and translated the exchange, watching Natsuka's face for a reaction. But his partner wore his usual courteous expression as he listened, nodding his head as if Toshi was explaining something totally mundane. Toshi wondered whether the older man believed in what they were doing. Whether he did or not, he had remained politely silent on the subject since the superintendent had brought John Holmes in on the case.

"You seem skeptical, Inspector."

Toshi's gaze snapped to John's voice.

His lips curved into a small grin. "I don't blame you," he said, amusement lightening his tone. Toshi found he liked the gentle tenor of the man's voice. "I was a sergeant major in the United States Army and you couldn't have gotten me to spit on someone who claimed this woo woo stuff." His grin faded and he looked directly at Toshi without breaking his stride. "I was made to

believe when I could no longer pick up a used book in a bookstore without knowing all the mental and emotional states of the people who'd read it before me." His voice conveyed distinct sadness.

Toshi felt sufficiently chastened, even though he sensed that this was not John Holmes' intention. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"No problem. Our main concern isn't whether or not we agree ESP is real. It's if we can catch this murderer before there are any more victims."

Holmes' blue eyes regarded him with warm sincerity. Whether the man's ability was real or imagined, Toshi could see that Holmes truly believed in it himself. Hell, maybe it didn't even matter if it actually was real, as long as the power of belief could lead them to the killer... "You're right, Mr. Holmes."

"John, please. Mr. Holmes makes me feel like my first name should be Sherlock and I make no claims to such intellectual prowess." He smiled.

A tendril of warmth snaked through Toshi's body. He found his own lips cracking a smile. Damn, the first bit of levity he'd experienced in...well...far too long. A tiny voice deep inside him told him he already liked this man. Not just liked him - was attracted to him. What was more, he sensed that his attraction to John Holmes was very possibly mutual. Perhaps he wasn't psychic himself, but he was familiar enough with the heat of attraction, the tiny impulses that passed invisibly through the air between two people. "John," he corrected. "If you're able to provide any lead, even any sense of the possible motives, I would be most grateful."

"I'll do my best, Inspector."

"Thank you." Toshi led John Holmes and Natsuka through the glass doors of the airport to the curb. Natsuka went to bring the car around, leaving Toshi alone with their guest. If his friend had tuned into the undercurrent passing between himself and John Holmes, the older man made no sign of it. Toshi sighed inwardly. He probably had. Natsuka didn't look like a sharp man on the outside, but he didn't miss much. His reticence was because he was a gentleman, a man of honor who would never say anything to Toshi he thought might cause embarrassment.

Toshi stole a glance at Mr. Holmes. In daylight the American's hair glinted gold. It was very short around the sides, a bit longer on top, the silky looking wisps in gradations of gold tones, like a field of wheat ripening in the sun.

"Tell me something, Inspector."

John Holmes' voice pulled him from his furtive enjoyment. "Yes?"

"Does everyone in Japan speak English as well as you?"

Toshi shook his head. "No, not even remotely. As you may have observed, my partner does not speak English at all. I went to university in the States."

John's eyebrows rose. Toshi had already noticed their delicate arch and soft golden color.

“Really, where?”

“University of California, Berkley.”

“Great school. What did you study?”

“Business and philosophy. The perfect preparation for law enforcement.”

Holmes chuckled. “I can understand that. Just like a tour of duty in the Persian Gulf prepared me to use ESP for crime-solving, huh?”

Toshi smiled again, the second time in less than five minutes. It remained to be seen whether John Holmes could help to find the *Ronin* Killer, but one thing was clear - the man did have a gift for empathy. Natsuka did as well, but unlike Natsuka, John Holmes was effusive and humorous. Natsuka was reticent. With John Holmes, Toshi had a feeling he wouldn't have to dig into the man to find out how he felt at any given moment.

Natsuka pulled up at the curb. Toshi put John's suitcase in the trunk and waved him to the back seat, then took his own place in the passenger seat. Natsuka pulled smoothly out into the flow of airport traffic, navigating toward the exit signs that would take them back into the Ryogoku area, to the newest crime scene. Toshi had been back to the hotel room earlier, before leaving for the airport, and his search by daylight had yielded nothing. He prayed that this time, with the psychic's help, there might be at least some clue.

Toshi stared out the window, his hands itching for a cigarette, or better yet, another handshake with the handsome man in the back seat. No, better just to smoke a cigarette than to entertain such thoughts. Or was it? For the first time since he'd returned to Japan the longing he'd suppressed for so long really pushed at him.

He sighed and leaned back in his seat, pulling out his cigarettes. Before anything else, they had to catch the killer, before any more lives were lost.

CHAPTER THREE

The Crest Hotel was an impressive piece of modern architecture. Tall windows blended around the sides almost seamlessly, giving hotel patrons impressive views of the Sumida River and the mazes of buildings and gardens beyond.

John followed the detectives into the lobby. Inspector Genjin showed his badge to the concierge at the desk. A brief exchange in Japanese followed from which John surmised he was explaining their purpose. The young woman bowed, her brow furrowed, apparently an indication of the stress caused by a gruesome murder having been committed on the premises.

In the elevator, John stood between the two detectives, careful not to touch them. Already he had slipped into the mode of concentration he needed for receiving impressions of a crime scene. The sensation was always strange, as if he weren't quite all the way in his body.

"We've been meticulous about making certain that no one has entered the room since the murder," Inspector Genjin explained as the elevator ascended smoothly up to the tenth floor. "Natsuka and I were here earlier this morning, but aside from that the room is exactly as it was. As I explained on the ride from the airport, we've questioned and fingerprinted all the hotel employees save for one. We have men on the street, searching for him. In any case no one else, guest or employee, heard or saw anything suspicious."

John nodded absently, already registering the influences of energy in the small elevator. Nothing horribly intense. Residue of the tension and frustration of the detectives; a drunken man who'd thought about taking his own life but was too afraid to do it; a young couple on their way to their room, already hugging and kissing in the elevator. Not the couple who was murdered.

The doors opened. Plush, dark carpet absorbed their footfalls. John saw the yellow tape across a door just up ahead. He braced himself. Inspector Genjin opened the door for him, pulled the tape off the doorpost, and let John go ahead of him.

John stepped into the room, dimly aware of the two detectives hanging back in the doorway.

A king-sized bed sat mid-way along the wall of the elegantly furnished room. The all-white bedclothes were in disarray and sported an ugly stain of crimson in the center. Beyond the bed the victims' clothing - slacks, a dress, shoes and underclothes - were strewn about in the sitting area under the large picture window.

A wave of nausea gripped John. He fought it down, forcing his attention onto the energy in the room. At first, he gathered wisps of anticipation. A man and woman's laughter. The intensity of physical attraction and emotional turbulence rose up, strengthening, pulling John's chest tight like a band. The two people had waited to see each other, jubilant that now they were together. They had been drinking champagne, laughing and dancing each other around the room. The laughter and dancing soon gave way to passionate kisses, desperation, hunger. John sensed everything as if it was happening to him. The crispness of champagne on his tongue, the taste of kisses, the whisper of caresses across his skin, the compelling tug at the heart.

“The man was married,” he murmured.

Behind him, he felt Inspector Genjin’s energy. The taller man soon stood a few feet behind him. “They were husband and wife?” he asked softly.

John waited a few seconds, sensing the couple. He shook his head. “No. *He* was married, but not to her. She...” he fell silent, hearing their laughter ring in his mind. The laughter disintegrated into the ragged breathing of passion, the murmurs of two people wildly tasting each other. “She wanted him completely.” He heaved a deep breath, his chest tightening a bit painfully. “He was torn.”

Behind him, John heard Inspector Genjin moving, then heard the quiet scribble of a pen on a pad. The other man didn’t speak again.

John approached the bed and stood looking down at the bloodstain. Gingerly, he reached out and pressed his fingertips to the sheets. A force of energy entered his hand through his fingertips. Flashes of heat followed by a push that nearly sent him stumbling back. In small echoes, he heard the wild creaking of the bed. Moans and sighs. The man and woman had wanted far more from their lovemaking than sexual gratification. They’d wanted it to bond them together, beyond the strictures of their daily life...holding them in each other’s hearts when they couldn’t be together.

John’s breath hitched sharply. Another energy made itself known. The couple were in the throes of lovemaking. They were oblivious to the fact that there was someone in the room with them. John closed his eyes, listening, feeling the intruder. He sensed some of the same emotions he had with other killers in the past. Rage, justification, fear, conviction. Yet, there was something else, something he’d not come across before in a killer’s psyche.

John took a deep breath, letting the new insight come to the fore. His throat now tightened in concert with his chest and perspiration erupted on his body, heated like a fever inside his clothing. “He’s not killing for his own purpose,” John said, his voice rasping out in a near whisper. Speaking was difficult, almost painful. “He feels that he’s doing it for them.”

“For the victims?” Inspector Genjin’s voice was quiet, respectfully low.

“Yes. For the victims. For their sakes.”

“Is it a ‘he?’”

“I’m not certain.” John waited, but the sex of the killer was not clear to him. His heartbeat raced and the room tilted. He stumbled backward.

Strong hands closed around his arms. “I’ve got you.”

Inspector Genjin was behind him, like a wall of strength. “Perhaps you should stop now.”

The killer’s energy was free-flowing through him. The force he’d put behind the sword, raising it and then bringing it down with enough strength to impale two bodies at once. The killer had

known exactly the spot that would bring instant death. Pain stabbed through John's middle, a searing heat that passed right through him, exiting out his lower back. His body jerked violently, but Inspector Genjin's hands tightened on his upper arms.

Genjin stepped in closer to him. "You won't fall," he said.

John started to gasp, as if his lungs were closing. One more burst of knowledge clouded his vision, but his mind couldn't register it for the lack of air. The killer was receding, leaving him to experience the death of the victims, to feel their life force draining.

"Natsuka!" he heard Genjin call.

A second pair of hands closed on one arm. A mild jolt of energy coursed into his arm, but nothing bad and John registered vaguely that Genjin's partner was helping lead him from the room. Genjin's arm was across his shoulders and then the partner released him. John felt safe. Somehow, the other man's touch reassured him that the constriction of his breath would pass. He sagged against the detective.

A few more steps and John felt himself being lowered into a seat. Soft cushions absorbed his weight. He remembered seeing a small seating area of red plush loveseats near the elevator. Genjin's hands were gentle as he settled John back against the pillows. John felt Genjin's energy shift. The detective was moving, sinking onto the sofa next to him, one gentle but strong hand still resting on his shoulder. In the haze of his mind, John sensed that it was Genjin's touch alone that was bringing him back, calming and comforting him.

John heaved a deep breath, letting his head tilt back. Genjin's touch receded from his shoulder. The lack of gentle pressure made John feel almost mournful. He sensed the other man's gaze intent on his face. Concern emanated from the detective, making John feel almost...held.

"How are you feeling?" The inspector's voice was soft, full of the same concern as his gaze.

John turned his head slowly. Large dark eyes watched him. The detective's full lips were pursed. Lines creased his brow where it was heavily drawn together. Geez, if every doctor and nurse were this caring, they'd have their patients healing like crazy all over the world. He managed a smile. "I'm all right. Thank you." He exhaled. "You helped a lot."

The elevator doors whooshed open just then. John glanced up, seeing Natsuka return with a cup in his hand. He, too, held a look of deep concern. The other man approach and handed John the cup, making certain his hand was steady before releasing it. As John lifted the cup to his lips and let cool water slide into his mouth his one thought was that these were good men.

Toshi watched John slowly drink the water, pausing to take a deep breath between each sip. He noticed the quality of the hand that held the cup. Strong, rugged, capable were the words that came to mind. The fingers were wide and thick with golden hair on the back of his hand and first joints. A brief, ghostly image of that hand raking through his own hair passed through his mind. He pushed the image away, forcing his concern for the other man's welfare to take precedence. "Perhaps this was too much so soon after your long trip," he said softly.

John's blue-eyed gaze fixed on his. "Thank you for your concern, but really, it's all right. I'm a veteran in more ways than one."

Toshi nodded. He wanted to put his hand back on John's shoulder, but refrained. He'd planned to take John to other crime scenes tonight, but seeing the effect this one had had on him, Toshi now thought it best to wait. He felt guilty enough about the victims. He didn't need John's welfare on his conscience as well. "We're finished for tonight," he told John. "The killings have had roughly a month between them. We have some time."

Truth be told, Toshi needed a bit of time himself, to absorb what had just happened. Apparently, in spite of all Toshi's doubts and misgivings, John was for real. What John had said about the marital status of the victims was true, a fact he hadn't been briefed on before coming onto the case. Toshi felt some of his skepticism vanish, replaced with a measure of gratitude. The psychology of the killer was invaluable to the investigation, something that he'd been absolutely unable to evaluate until John had entered the crime scene.

Toshi asked Natsuka to bring the car out front. When his partner had bowed and gone back into the elevator, Toshi turned to John. "You're staying with me," he told him. "I hope you don't mind."

John looked at him. His deep blue eyes appeared more relaxed, his breathing regular again. He seemed to have recovered from his visions. "I don't mind at all. I just don't want to impose."

Toshi was actually happy for the company. "Not an imposition. Whenever you're ready, we'll go."

John nodded. "I'm ready now." He took a deep breath and slowly stood up.

Toshi rose along with him, ready to reach out for him if he seemed unsteady.

John paused, as if testing the strength of his legs. He took another deep breath and moved from the sitting area toward the elevator.

Toshi pushed the 'down' button and stood next to John, waiting. He tried to ignore the flutter of anticipation the thought of this man's staying with him brought. He couldn't believe this was happening, wild attraction in the midst of a murder investigation. For months his mind had been full of nothing but trying to prevent the next killing. And now...

The elevator doors slid open and Toshi followed John inside. Toshi pushed the button to the lobby, still keeping an eye on John to make sure he remained steady on his feet. The way the man's visions had caused his body to jerk violently and closed off his breath had been frightening.

"Inspector?"

Toshi looked at John. "Toshiro," he said gently, "My name is Toshiro."

John's eyebrows rose. "Like the actor...from those great *samurai* flicks?"

Toshi nodded. "That's the one. Toshiro Mifune. I was named for him. Although I lack the magnificent presence and abundant talent he had." The handsome actor had also been his first crush and Toshi had spent many hours of his youth staring at his namesake on the television screen. Uncle Musashi had indulged him on every birthday and holiday with gifts of videotapes of the *samurai* films with the actor he loved in them.

John stared at him. "That's quite a criticism of yourself," he said. "I doubt your evaluation is true."

Toshi's heart did a flip. "You're very kind."

John grinned. "Just honest."

Toshi's body tingled and tightened in many places, not the least of which was his groin. That flirtatious energy he'd sensed in the airport was now flowing between them again. He bowed his head. "I was rude not to ask you to call me by my name earlier. Toshi....if that makes it easier."

"Toshi. That's a nice name."

Toshi bowed. "Thank you." He looked ahead as the doors to the elevator opened onto the lobby. "And thank you for providing the first real insight into the case we've had." He stepped out.

John fell into step beside him. "You're welcome. But there's more to what I told you. I just couldn't register it all before it took my breath away."

Toshi stopped and turned to him. He retrieved the small writing pad from his pocket. "Can you tell me any more of it now?"

"Yes, of course." John paused and Toshi watched the other man's face. He had a rugged quality to his features and heavy whiskers. His bow-shaped lips pursed in the act of retrieving the knowledge. Finally he nodded. "Yes, there was one more thing that came to me before I hit overload. You know how I said the killer believed he was murdering for his victims?"

"Yes."

"Well, the motive goes deeper than that. I felt it when he raised the sword. He...was killing them so they could be together. At least that feeling was in the room."

Toshi's blood chilled. His mind ran over the victims from the first to the most recent. The victims of the other night had been carrying on a secret love affair. According to John, the woman had wanted to be more to her lover than a mistress. The man had loved her just as much but was torn between her and his family. The killer had made certain that they could be together in death. If one believed such a thing. "There's something I don't understand, though."

"What is it?"

"Of all six killings, not every one has the same circumstances. The second victims, a lesbian couple who were found in a park, were not having an illicit affair. They were partners, according

to one of the women's roommates." He fell silent and watched John's brow crinkle, noting the gradations of tan to the skin where the fine lines drew together.

John heaved a deep sigh. "Well, the only thing I can think of was that, perhaps, one of the partners was thinking of breaking up, or maybe was going to be separated for a long time from the other. In whatever way the killer knew these people, he certainly knew enough about their lives. He wanted to prevent their separation, I'm pretty sure of that."

Toshi thought back to the inquiries he'd made about those women. The parents of one of them had wanted their daughter to take a job in the States, something that would have separated the lovers. According to one of the victim's roommates, the woman's parents had been unhappy about their daughter's sexual life. When it came to parents, he certainly could relate.

Toshi's heartbeat quickened at how swiftly John had stepped into the case and had immediately identified a pattern that wouldn't have come out otherwise. As they made their way through the lobby, Toshi related his knowledge of the other victims' lives.

The pattern fit in each case.

As he got into the passenger seat of the car, Toshi held back tears, both of relief and gratitude. For the first time in six months, because of John, he felt like he had a chance to prevent the next murder.

CHAPTER FOUR

The sun had long since set when Natsuka turned the car out of the hotel parking lot. Toshi turned to John. “You must be hungry.”

John had completely forgotten about food and he suddenly realized he was starving. He usually was after an experience as intense as the one in the hotel room. “I am.”

“So am I.” Toshi looked at his partner. “Natsuka, *onakasuitano?*”

Natsuka nodded. “*Hai.*”

Toshi smiled, glancing at John. That makes three of us.” He turned to Natsuka. “*Tampopo,*” he said to him.

Natsuka nodded again. “*Hai.*”

Toshi looked back at John. He was still smiling and John found the way Toshi’s lips curved and the smooth whiteness of his teeth utterly transfixing. This man’s face belonged on a movie screen or billboard. John dared to wonder if the rest of him was as enticing. He felt certain the answer was ‘yes,’ if the pulse kicking up in his groin area was any indication.

“*Tampopo* means butterfly,” Toshi explained. “It’s a place nearby that makes great *ramen.*”

John smiled back at him. He sensed that Toshi was as glad as he for some levity after what had just happened. He also had the impression that Toshi rarely smiled. Understandable, considering the man had been working his ass off on a case that had yielded no results while the killer eluded him to kill again and again. The thought made John’s heart ache for Toshi as much as for the victims and he wished he could give Toshi every reason *to* smile.

Natsuka turned a corner and soon they were moving along the road that followed the river.

Toshi was still turned in his seat, looking at John. Unfortunately, his smile was fading. “May I ask more about what you saw?”

John nodded. “Of course.” He watched Toshi pull out his little pad and a pen and prepare to write.

“Were you able to sense whether the killer knew his victims personally?”

“I think so. I didn’t get the sense they were friends or even acquaintances, really, but he had definitely seen these people and knew something about their lives.” He sighed and glanced out the window. Natsuka had turned off the river and was navigating the streets past apartment buildings and shops. “I got the feeling he spent a lot of time spying on them, like a voyeur, rather than interacting with them in any direct way. It’s not clear yet. Perhaps when I’ve been to more of the crime scenes I’ll be able to piece it together.”

John waited while Toshi translated what he'd said to his partner. He wondered briefly if the other man, quiet and courteous as he was, believed him. He'd run into plenty of suspicion from detectives in the past, ranging from mild skepticism to all out hostility. His heart skipped when Toshi turned back to him.

From the lights shining into the car, John saw Toshi's brow furrow. "I don't wish for you to suffer the way you did back there," Toshi said softly.

"Don't worry," John assured him, "I know how it looked, what I went through, but I'm pretty sturdy." He studied Toshi's expression another moment. He had to admit, it felt damn good to have someone worry about him instead of being frightened of him and running scared. "Thank you for your concern, though. It's much appreciated."

Toshi bowed his head. "You're welcome."

After a quick supper, Natsuka dropped them off in front of Toshi's apartment building. Over John's protests, Toshi carried his suitcase inside for him.

Upstairs, Toshi opened the door of his apartment for John and stood aside. "Please, come in."

John stepped inside with the habitual sense of caution he'd developed when entering unfamiliar places. The first thing he noticed was how starkly modern the décor was. Dark redwood floors and sparse, black leather and stainless steel.

Toshi removed his shoes, leaving them by the door. John followed his example, taking care not to let his socks cause him to slip on the highly polished wood floors.

The kitchen was off to the left, a galley-style room that didn't leave much space to move around, but which was ultra-modern, immaculate, and sporting fancy stainless steel fixtures and appliances. The apartment displayed wealth with an understated sense of taste, yet also the inability to feel at home in the place. Toshi's restlessness saturated the immaculate dwelling, as did the man's sadness and longing.

Toshi's yearning enveloped John as he moved further into the depths of the apartment. The lack of personal items, photographs or knick-knacks that usually personalized a place, only confirmed the impressions he was receiving.

Large picture windows ran the length of the living room, through which John could see the Tokyo night skyline. Down below, moonlight shimmered on the tranquil water of the Sumida River. On a small table in front of the window stood one photograph. John leaned over and glanced at the image of an older man with a kind face. John saw vulnerability and pain in the man's eyes. He sighed and stood back up, continuing to watch the beautiful view from the window.

John stood watching the diamonds of light on the water. In the background, he heard Toshi replaying a message machine. A young woman's voice was saying something in Japanese. John

sensed that there was some sort of connection between her and Toshi, but couldn't distinguish exactly what. Although he didn't understand the language, he did hear that the tone in which she spoke didn't sound particularly affectionate. The woman's message was followed by two others, both men's voices. The first voice sounded stern, the second, gentler.

John continued to gaze down at the water, absently registering the clicks and beeps of the machine. From what he had gathered so far of Toshi's life, there did not appear to be much that one could consider joyful or lighthearted. Not that his own life was exactly a day at an amusement park. But whose life was? Everyone suffered. He supposed it was just a matter of having someone with whom to share the burden and to give and receive affection and comfort.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here." Toshi's voice sounded quietly behind him.

John turned. Toshi hung back, watching, as if he were afraid to intrude. John smiled at him, touched by his thoughtfulness. "I already am." He gestured toward the window. "I was just enjoying the beautiful view. You have a very nice place." He'd already figured out that Toshi was from a wealthy family. He couldn't imagine that a detective could afford an apartment like this on salary alone. He didn't have to live in Tokyo to know that it was one of the most expensive cities in the world.

"Thank you." Toshi sounded a bit embarrassed. He still hung back in the doorway that connected the foyer to the living room.

John wanted him to come closer and cast quickly about in his mind for an excuse. "These boats that are tied to the pilings, what are they exactly?" The long, low craft with curved bows bobbed gently in the water.

Thankfully, Toshi took the bait. He came to stand beside John. "The river boats," he said. "They're basically water taxis." Toshi stood a couple of feet away, but John felt the energy coiled inside him. The same longing that filled the apartment now intensified with Toshi standing closer to him.

"I see." John stared out the window, wanting to move closer to Toshi, but not daring to. What if he was making more of the energy between them than what was really there? After all, he'd heard the woman's voice on the answering machine. She hadn't given the impression of being a lover, but you never knew. He'd feel awful if he made an unwanted advance and ended up embarrassing Toshi and himself.

"I put your suitcase in your room," Toshi said, cutting the silence. "Please make yourself at home."

Something about the way Toshi said *home* sent a pleasant shiver through him. Rarely did John ever question the accuracy of his impressions from people. He was doing it now, probably because he was so attracted to Toshi and because something about the man sparked off the same longing in himself that he had picked up in Toshi the moment he'd shaken Toshi's hand. "Thank you very much."

He turned and looked at Toshi. The light from the lamp in the living room cast a soft glow on Toshi's skin and hair, as if he was in some sort of dramatic photograph. John couldn't begin to

imagine that Toshi walked down the street and didn't have talent agents hounding him. "Please, don't let me keep you," he said, "just because I'm here. You had phone calls." He was fishing and he knew it, but couldn't help himself.

Toshi sighed and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "You're not keeping me." His voice sounded sad. "My father, my uncle." He reached down and picked up the photograph. "This is my uncle, Musashi." There was definite affection in Toshi's voice for the man.

John nodded. "I noticed that picture. He looks kind."

"He is. Very." Toshi set the photograph back down. "Anyway, they know how busy I've been with this case." Toshi seemed to join him in staring at the river. "The third message was Keiko, my fiancée."

John didn't have to be psychic to hear the utter lack of enthusiasm in the statement. He looked at Toshi, tamping down the sense of relief he felt about that revelation. "It sounds like maybe 'congratulations' is not exactly the appropriate thing to say."

Toshi's lips curved in a grim smile. "You're correct." He sighed again. "Neither of us wants the marriage. Our parents are friends. We're doing it to quiet them down. We're fulfilling our duty." The word 'duty' fell off his lips as if it tasted like dog shit. He turned to John, a surprising level of openness in his brown eyes. "We're not in love. Not even a little. We keep each other's secrets."

"Oh. I'm sorry it's not different." *But I'm not sorry at the same time.*

Toshi shook his head. "No, I'm the one who's sorry. You just traveled halfway across the world on a moment's notice to find a killer and instead you have the detective spilling his guts to you."

John smiled gently, resisting the powerful urge to run his fingertips down the smooth plane of Toshi's cheek. "I don't mind, really. I'd rather that I was here for that." He turned fully to Toshi. As long as it was confession time... "Listen, talk all you want. I haven't had real human contact with anyone for almost a year. Not even a handshake...until we met in the airport."

Toshi's enchanting sloe-eyes widened. "Really?"

John nodded. "Really. I swear it. I had to stop touching people. It got so I was learning all these secrets I didn't want to know. And if I wasn't learning unwanted secrets, I was just feeling everything that was going on in whomever I had contact with, even from a brief handshake. It got to be too much."

Toshi looked a bit alarmed. "I hope nothing bad happened to you when I shook your hand. Or when I grabbed onto you in the room."

A flush of warmth spread through John's chest. The sensation traveled up his neck and infused his cheeks. He wished he could tell the other man exactly what he'd felt in both instances. "No, don't worry. Nothing bad happened at all. It was...good."

Toshi looked uncertain.

“You can believe me, Toshi,” he went on. “If I’d minded, I wouldn’t have accepted your handshake.”

Relief softened the other man’s features. “Would you like to see your room?”

John smiled. “Yeah, thanks.” He followed Toshi back through the living room into the foyer. Off to the left was a tiny alcove with a door on either side.

“This room on the right is mine,” Toshi pointed, and then indicated the room to the left. “Each has its own bathroom.”

The bedroom had the same expensive yet stark look. A red bedspread covered the futon-style bed. More picture windows looked out to the opposite side of the building, providing more city skyline, twinkling multicolor lights against the darkness.

Toshi went to the windows and lowered the blinds, white, Venetian style, in a soft material that had no open slats.

John set his flight bag on the floor at the foot of the bed. “Thank you again,” he said. Looking at the bed, he realized that in spite of the rest he’d gotten on the flight over, the episode in the hotel so soon on the heels of a globe-covering journey had left him drained.

Toshi bowed. “You’re welcome.” He hesitated, giving John the sense he was reluctant to leave.

Truthfully, John was reluctant to have him leave, but just as truthfully, didn’t see a way to get him to stay without feeling pushy.

“See you in the morning,” Toshi said softly.

“Good night.”

Toshi retreated, closing the door gently behind him.

Damn. John sighed. It was probably just as well. He shrugged out of his jacket and laid it on the bed. He went into the bathroom, opening the glass shower doors to turn on the water. The marble countertop had a deep, oval-shaped basin, seamlessly carved so that the counter and sink were all of one piece of stone, topped with a swanlike, shiny chrome faucet. Every detail of the place was smooth and classy, yet still cold. Cozy was the last adjective one could use to describe Toshi’s apartment.

John unbuttoned his shirt, watching his reflection in the mirror. For thirty-seven, he thought, he still didn’t look bad. Brett had once told him he had that Val Kilmer from *Top Gun* look about him, especially from that scene where the pilots were playing volleyball, shirtless in the hot sun. John smiled to himself, feeling sheepish for caring so much how he looked. At the time that Brett gave him the compliment, it had put him over the moon. Brett was gorgeous and John had never quite gotten used to the fact that his attraction to Brett had been mutual.

A cloud of steam rose from the shower. Not wanting to waste the hot water and be a terrible houseguest, John finished undressing quickly, laid his clothes and socks on the counter of the vanity, and picked up the toiletries he'd brought with him. He stepped into the shower, letting the hot water and steam envelop him. He always forgot how important the little comforts were when he had an episode of channeling victims and perpetrator.

For what felt like a long time, he let the hot spray massage his body, then lathered himself up with soap, washing away the long plane flight and the psychic channeling that had followed soon after. The only thing he didn't wish to scrub off was the feel of Toshi's handshake, or of those hands on his arms, strong and gentle, holding him up so he wouldn't hit the floor.

John squeezed his eyes shut as the shampoo rinsed from his hair, the suds streaming down his face. Behind his closed eyes, a vision smacked him. The force of it pushed him back. Adrenaline kicked in and his hand shot out, grabbing the chrome handrail.

Unable to open his eyes, John's inner sight scanned the scene, a countryside...honing in...a river pushing lazily downstream...a breeze rustling the leaves of surrounding trees...the green grass of the riverbank.

John's body jerked again. Something was moving inside him. The sensation made his insides fuzzy, as if his very soul was shifting around inside him. He dragged in a breath. He wasn't alone.

Suddenly, he knew perfectly where he was. In the countryside outside of Edo. The warm air wafted around his skin. He looked down at his body wrapped in a silk kimono. A short sword and a knife hung at his hips, corded into the sash of his kimono. A man stood before him, taller, handsome, his large, dark eyes unhappy. He, too, wore a silk kimono, weapons dangling from his belt. His raven-colored hair glinted in the sunlight, its thickness pulled up into a topknot, the tail of which spread like a small delicate fan.

John's heart fluttered. The awareness of the shared space of his body, the heat of the sun, the trickling sound of the river, the beautiful man in front of him, sharpened, expanding to include the emotions of the one through whose eyes he was seeing. Whoever it was was hysterical, grievous. He loved the man standing in front of him, adored him. This man's love meant life or death...today it meant death, for he was leaving. The knowledge was certain. Leaving him. Shattering his heart like a broken piece of pottery.

"Why must you make this worse than it has to be?"

John blinked. The tall man had spoken to him. *Akira*. He knew his name! Of course he knew his name...he worshiped Akira. The words, spoken in Japanese, were completely understandable to him, as if he'd grown up speaking the language.

His throat tightened as if a pair of hands had wrapped themselves around his neck, squeezing life from him. "I'm not the one making it worse." Didn't Akira understand that? Lovers should never be separated. Only by death. Not even then.

"Our time of *shudo* has long since passed, Kenji," Akira said. "The code of *bushido* dictates that each *samurai* do his duty. You, too, will marry some day." Akira reached out and touched his

shoulder. The touch made John's entire body ache with longing. Deep in his shared consciousness with the man named Kenji, John began to lose his awareness of where his own heart ended and Kenji's began.

"You know we are sworn friends until the day we die. This change will not affect that." Akira had spoken again.

His words impaled John's...or Kenji's...heart like poisoned arrows. "How many times you have told me you never wished what we have to end! And now you do that very thing!" Kenji's voice rose to a near-hysterical pitch.

Akira looked so sad, yet so stubborn. "You knew this time would come, Kenji, didn't you?"

John's heart ached in his chest. "No. I've always hoped we would become *ronin* and live by our own law."

"I'm sorry, Kenji, but I cannot do that. As much as I love you."

John looked down, feeling so ashamed of the hot tears crowding his eyes. He *was* Kenji now. The pressure of a gentle fingertip bid his face tilt upward again. He complied. He never refused Akira anything.

"Kenji, if I make this marriage, I will have status and wealth that I could never have as a *ronin*. If you love me, you'd want those things for me."

"You're lying, Akira. You know you're lying."

Akira bowed his head. "Please, Kenji. Let me lie. It's the only way I can live with myself."

John threw his body at Akira's, wrapping his arms around him. Akira responded by pulling him close. Kenji was kissing Akira and John could taste the other man's full lips as potently as he felt Kenji's raw, overwhelming desire for his lover.

Akira pushed Kenji down onto the sun-warmed grass. In the dim light of his own consciousness, John felt the impact of his body hitting the floor of the shower, yet the man, Kenji, felt nothing but the hard warmth of his lover's body against his, turning him onto his back, the moist heat of Akira's mouth, the soft fall of Akira's hair as Kenji pulled out the tie of the topknot. Akira pulled open Kenji's kimono and leaned over him, laving his bare skin with hot, wild kisses.

John squirmed on the floor of the shower, feeling the slick, hard tiles under his back and the tight yearning of his erection in front. The bright sun shone down on their faces. Akira's hot tongue swirled over one of his nipples, sending icy heat through his chest. He laced his fingers into Akira's thick hair, pulling him closer, wanting Akira to be inside him forever.

He slipped a hand into Akira's loincloth, loving his smooth skin and hard buttocks. In a haze of pleasure he felt Akira's mouth working lower and lower down his abdomen, toward his erection. Akira stopped just short of pulling open Kenji's loincloth and slid back up on Kenji's body, taking his mouth again. His arms in a full embrace around Kenji's body, their entwined arms and legs made them almost one body.

Suddenly, something blocked out the light, like a cloud over the sun, causing John to open his eyes. Darkness hovered above him, broken only by the quick glint of light off of steel. Blade. Sword. The dark outline of another person, weapon poised to strike. The blade flashed. Akira's body jerked on top of him, then went limp. The most blinding slice of pain John had ever known pierced his body, straight through. John screamed and then the world went black.

CHAPTER FIVE

A scream ripped through the quiet apartment.

Toshi's blood chilled. His hand froze in mid-movement, pouring the warmed *sake* into the small decanter. *John.*

Slamming down the decanter and pot, Toshi charged out of the kitchen, barging into John's room. The bed was still made and John's suitcase was still on the floor where he'd set it down.

Toshi pulled in a breath and bounded to the bathroom door. His heart hammered so fast he feared he'd black out. The bathroom door was ajar, the light pouring out, the sound of the shower running. Otherwise, silence. Eerie silence.

Toshi pushed the bathroom door open, peering into the shower through the glass cubical. He saw only the shower spray. John couldn't have left. He looked down, his breath catching sharply. John lay naked, unconscious, in a fetal position on the shower floor.

Toshi practically leaped across the small bathroom. He threw open the glass door and knelt down, putting his fingertips to the pulse on John's neck. The beat was strong under his fingertips and he breathed a sigh of relief.

John's eyes flew open. His hand came up and closed on Toshi's wrist.

Toshi started, coiling back on instinct, but John's grip held him fast, surprisingly strong. Toshi stared down into the blue eyes. They were transfixed on him without seeming to see him at the same time.

"*Ai shite imasu,*" John said. His voice was gravelly, hoarse.

When Toshi didn't respond, John's grip tightened. There was desperation in the way he held Toshi's wrist and in the sound of his voice.

"Akira! *Ai shite imasu!*"

A cold sweat erupted on Toshi's body. John was saying, 'I love you,' in perfect Japanese, yet he'd never claimed to know the language. That, coupled with the haunted look in his eyes, made Toshi stare, momentarily unable to respond. John seemed possessed, as if there was someone else in his body. Perhaps it was a side effect of the visions he'd had in the hotel room.

"Who is Akira?" Toshi asked in Japanese, directing the question to whatever force was speaking.

John's eyes widened. "You are!"

Toshi stared.

John gasped.

“John!”

The spell seemed to have broken. John blinked his eyes several times then looked up, his face clouded. Slowly, recognition lighted the blue irises. He stared up at Toshi for several seconds.

“Are you all right?” Toshi reached out his other hand and touched John’s cheek.

John’s mouth worked as if he were trying to speak; yet no sound came out.

Toshi’s fear for him increased. He reached his arm around John’s back, the water on John’s skin soaking his t-shirt. “Try to sit up.” Toshi helped John to a sitting position in the shower, remembering at the last moment that the other man was naked, water dripping down his skin, plastering the downy golden hairs to his broad chest.

With his free hand, Toshi shut off the spray of water and yanked a towel off the bar and covered John from the waist down.

John continued to blink. His hand still held Toshi’s wrist and even in his disorientation he seemed reluctant to release Toshi.

Toshi didn’t mind. He stayed kneeling, peering at John, anxious to know he wasn’t hurt.

*

John took several deep breaths. His heart pounded and his body felt weak again, drained, just the way it had when he’d decided to take a rest cure. Make that when his body *demand*ed he take a rest cure before all the visions wore him to the shell of a former human being.

The force of Kenji’s desperation was one of the strongest emotions he’d ever channeled. He looked at Toshi, whose concerned gaze and gentle touch once again helped nudge him back into the present.

At the same time the heat of embarrassment flared. This was the second time in a matter of a few hours that Toshi had had to come to his aid. John couldn’t imagine anyone dealing with this if it wasn’t for the investigation. No wonder Brett had flown. John would probably end up scaring Toshi away, too. The poor man had just met John and already had a psychic basket case on his hands. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

He looked down, seeing his hand gripping Toshi’s wrist. He loosened the hold of his fingers and Toshi responded by slipping his hand down to wrap gently around John’s. The movement conveyed such care that John felt tears rush again to his eyes.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Toshi said softly. “Maybe you should get out of the shower. Can you move?”

John shifted his body slightly, testing his joints and limbs. They seemed all right in spite of the way he'd crashed to the floor of the shower. He had his Val-Kilmer-playing-volleyball-in- *Top Gun* muscles to thank for that. "I think so."

Pulling the towel closed around his hips, he let Toshi help him up to his feet. As he rose, he became aware of the fact Toshi had gotten a good look at him in the altogether, probably with a hard-on to boot. The fact that Toshi's shirt was now soaked and clung to the man's torso of lean muscle only made it worse. The sight brought a flush of pleasure to his distressed body and soul, reviving him enough to hope that the enjoyment was mutual.

Toshi held John's arm while he stepped out of the shower. John's body still dripped with water, but the thought of drying himself off took more energy than he had. He leaned heavily on Toshi's arm and then turned, resting his weight against the edge of the counter. The bedroom, though only a few feet away, seemed too distant. He looked down, his cheeks burning. "God, I'm weak as a baby. Toshi, I'm so sorry. You didn't need this."

"Yes, I did."

The gentle strength in his answer made John venture to glance up. Brett had certainly never responded to him this way.

Toshi's dark eyes were soft. His expression was difficult to read, but conveyed kindness. He reached for another fluffy towel. "Let me dry you off." He opened the towel and dried off John's back and arms. The material grazed John's skin pleasantly. Toshi had such a kind way about him, a level of attentiveness and compassion that belied the intense, troubled expression he wore most of the time.

John closed his eyes, drinking in the delicious feel of having human touch again. Not just any touch. Toshi was the first person he'd made physical contact with whose touch had the *opposite* effect of the usual. It calmed and comforted him instead of agitating him. How strange that it could be that way, so gentle and soothing and yet so...damned...mmm...

Toshi knelt down and toweled John's legs dry. John felt his cock stir in response. To his chagrin, Toshi didn't reach the towel much above his knees, although John had the distinct feeling he might have wanted to. Or was that wishful thinking?

Toshi stood up and set the towel aside on the vanity. "Now that you're dry, it's probably best you go to bed."

John felt a pang. Once he'd been tucked in, Toshi would probably leave him alone to try and sleep. As worn as his body felt, sleep was the last thing in the world of which he felt capable. "I suppose so," he murmured.

Toshi picked up his hand again and assisted him to the bedroom.

"Damn," John muttered, as each step felt like a monumental effort. "I feel like I've had major surgery on every inch of my body."

They'd reached the edge of the bed. Toshi reached down and threw back the covers. The soft, white sheets looked very inviting. Toshi helped John lower himself down into the bed, his towel still wrapped around his waist.

Once the covers were up to his middle, John reached in and pulled the damp towel from around his hips.

Toshi took it from him. "I'll be back in a minute," he said. He was gone before John could thank him again.

John leaned back against the pillows, letting the incredibly soft, comfortable bed absorb the weight of his tired body.

As he'd promised, Toshi was back soon, carrying a small tray with a decanter, the kind John had seen in Japanese restaurants, and two small cups. Toshi set the tray down on the nightstand and switched on the light. "I thought perhaps some *sake* would do you good. Help you to sleep, maybe." He lifted the decanter, poured the clear liquid into two small cylindrical cups, and handed one to John.

John reached out for the cup, but his hand shook too much for him to hold it. "Damn," he muttered, lowering his hand to the bed. He leaned his head back against the headboard, feeling like a jerk, and heaved a deep sigh.

"This is not a problem, John." Toshi's voice drew him from his embarrassment. Toshi lifted the cup to John's lips. "Take a sip," he said gently. He tilted the cup so a small bit of the warm liquid pooled on John's tongue.

John swallowed. The *sake* slipped pleasantly in a tingling trail down his throat. With just the first sip, his body relaxed. Toshi waited a moment, then gave John a second sip, and then a third, before he set the cup down and sipped from his own cup.

John looked at him. "Thank you," he murmured, his body now settling more languidly against the soft bedding. He felt as if he were in some kind of luxury spa, being pampered by a gorgeous male attendant. He could think of worse things that could have - and had - happened to him. He managed a smile. "You'll have me back to health in no time."

A shy smile played about Toshi's lips.

John sighed again. His hands had just stopped trembling in recent weeks. "I guess I wasn't quite ready to get back on the horse," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

John saw that Toshi didn't understand what he meant. "When you called for me, I'd been on several months rest from doing this type of work. As you saw earlier, it's quite draining. I was getting the shakes and I couldn't function."

Toshi frowned. "I'm sorry. I wasn't the one who called. If I'd known, I wouldn't have let them bother you."

John nodded. "I can see that. But you didn't know and it's not your fault. Besides, I couldn't have refused to help. I don't want any more people to die if it can be prevented." *Not to mention that I took one look at you and went ga ga.* A ripple of energy cascaded through his body. The need to have Toshi in the bed with him, their bare bodies pressed together overwhelmed him. It wasn't pure lust. John felt the yearning to be close to him, to hold him and be held. There was something about Toshi that was so familiar, so...beautiful. "Hey, thank you again for helping me."

Toshi bowed his head. "You're welcome." He took a sip of his *sake* and then brought the other cup to John's lips. When John had swallowed, Toshi set the cup down. "I didn't know you spoke Japanese," Toshi said.

John stared at him. "I don't." He remembered his poignant visions, the way his soul had seemed to splinter off, the other half belonging to a heartbroken *samurai* named Kenji. "It must have been Kenji," he said, his voice falling to a near-whisper. "He was inside me."

Toshi's brow furrowed. "Inside you? Like a vision?"

John shook his head. "No. It was more than just a vision. It was as real as what happened at the hotel. It was like a...body memory." He'd felt what Kenji felt, emotionally and physically. There was no mistaking the sensation of the other man's hair slipping through his fingers and the tongue on his skin. The ghostly memory of Akira's taste and scent teased his nostrils, causing another surge of raw need. "When I fell, it was because the other man pushed me onto the ground. We...they...were making love."

Something flickered across Toshi's eyes. "Was the other man's name Akira?"

He nodded. "I must have called out that name."

Toshi nodded. "You did."

"Akira was Kenji's lover. They were *samurai*. Kenji was desperate because Akira was about to get married. Akira loved him but felt bound to duty." Just then, it struck him. The murder. The sword. The way the lovers had been skewered. The stabbing jolt of pain. He sat up abruptly, one hand shoving through his short hair. "Holy shit! Why didn't I see it?" He looked up at Toshi. "They were murdered. Akira was on top of Kenji. A shadow passed over them, blocking out the light. Kenji looked up, just long enough to see the glint of a sword. And then the killer drove it through both of them at once." He fell silent, his chest heaving harder with the realization of the style of murder. His hand went to the spot on his abdomen where the sword had pierced him.

"Like the *Ronin Killings*," Toshi said softly.

John nodded. His hand still rested on his stomach. Come to think of it, the stab had hit the spot where his gallbladder should have been. He'd had to have it removed shortly after returning from the Gulf. "I...have a scar here from surgery," he said softly. The blanket slipped down, revealing the spot he touched with his hand.

Toshi was watching him, his lips slightly parted, his enchanting sloe-eyes questioning. “What happened to you, it sounds like it was a vision of the past or some sort of...not imagining, that’s not the right word.”

“Definitely not.” John sighed. “One thing I’ve learned these past years is to trust what I see, no matter how weird it seems.” He looked at Toshi. “Where is Edo?”

“Edo was the name for Tokyo until the Meiji Restoration in the late nineteenth century. From the seventeenth century until then, Edo was the seat of the last *shogunate* family.” Toshi paused and looked down. “I’m a descendant of that family,” he added softly, almost as if he was embarrassed about it but felt obligated to mention it.

“I see. I suppose it makes sense that Kenji and Akira were from the area. They were in the countryside, but they were near Edo, by a river.”

Toshi looked up at him. “My uncle, Musashi, used to work at the Edo-Tokyo Museum. He still volunteers there.” Toshi looked down. Something about his uncle seemed to make him sad. “My uncle tells me there are records of the Edo *shogunate* stored there so they won’t ever be lost. Perhaps he could look in there and find something that might help. There is obviously some kind of connection here.”

John gazed at him. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Toshi nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“And you don’t think I’m some kind of crackpot weirdo?”

Toshi shook his head. “No.” There was something too sincere in John’s mannerisms and speech to think he was just weird or crazy. The man emanated kindness. Not since Toshi’s love affair with Michael had he met someone so gentle, someone he’d wanted to be with, look at and talk to and not want anything else from life. “Besides, this is your job, right? To solve crimes that don’t have conventional solutions?”

John’s blue eyes clouded. “Yes. Well, that’s been my job in recent years.”

“Before that you were in the military?”

John nodded and sighed. “I was. I was over in the Persian Gulf during Desert Storm. And then I started suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and they sent me back to the States and gave me my honorable discharge.”

Toshi felt a wave of compassion for him. John reminded him of his uncle. Musashi had suffered the same thing during the Second World War. “I’m sorry.”

John shrugged. “That’s kind of you, but it could have been a lot worse.” He gestured toward the cup on the bedside table. “Mind giving me another sip of that?”

Toshi smiled. “Not at all.” He refilled the cup and lifted it to John’s lips, gaze falling on John’s throat as he swallowed. The skin there, lightly rough with blond stubble, made Toshi’s lips ache to kiss it, to taste it with the tip of his tongue. A jolt of erotic energy passed through Toshi’s body. He fought it down, disturbed by the strength of his attraction to John.

Perhaps his response to John was a result of the stress he’d been under for so long. Maybe John’s sensitivity and gentle manner were unlocking the yearnings he’d pushed away all these years, using his work as a shield from his emotions. How he wished his life was so different – that he could have the luxury of actually falling in love again. As it was, he reminded himself of the man, Akira, in John’s vision, a man duty-bound, afraid to live his own life. Being a detective was the only thing in his life that was his alone...

John smiled as Toshi took the cup away and set it back down. “In any case, I’m relieved you don’t think I’m crazy. This...gift...or whatever it is, showed up shortly after I got back from the Gulf. The stress of worrying about what people think is sometimes worse than the actual ability. Sometimes when I tell people what I see, I can’t help but feel like I must sound like a nut job to them.”

“Not to me.” Toshi watched him, noticing now how exhaustion had crept into John’s blue eyes. “I think you’re tired,” he said softly. “And I have serious misgivings about asking you to channel more impressions from crime scenes and victims’ remains. The visions seem to harm you.”

The azure color of John’s eyes seemed to melt as they looked at him. In the lamplight, the tanned skin of his face flushed. “Toshi, can I confess something to you?”

Toshi’s heart fluttered. “Of course.”

“I hope you won’t think I’m throwing myself at you. I’m not. I just really need to say this.”

“It’s all right. Go ahead.”

John took a deep breath, causing the soft glow of the bedside lamp to shift on his golden hair. “Both times this vision thing has happened since I got here, in the hotel and in the bathroom, the one thing that helped bring me back was when you were touching me.” He paused, seeming to inspect Toshi’s face for his response. “That’s never happened to me before. Usually when someone touches me, it makes the distress worse, not better.”

The fluttering in Toshi’s heart heightened. His mind flew to the day he and Michael first got together. Toshi had felt nothing short of elation, as if everything wonderful that could happen to a person was happening to him. That feeling gushed in now. What invisible force had pulled out the stopper holding it back, he didn’t know, but he was helpless to stop it. The sensations roiling inside him left him tongue-tied and his whirling mind struggled to formulate a response in words, so that he wouldn’t throw himself bodily onto the other man.

John’s face clouded, his blue eyes looked sheepish. “You’re not answering. Is that a bad sign? Maybe that doesn’t do it for you. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--”

“It does. I mean you do. I...” Toshi forced himself to shut up and raked a trembling hand through his hair. He should have had a second cup of *sake*.

“Would you prefer non-verbal communication?”

Toshi looked at him. John’s lips curved in a sideways grin. The expression was not mocking or mirthful. The look on his handsome face was...hopeful.

“Non-verbal,” Toshi repeated softly.

John nodded. “So you don’t have to think. Just feel. Shake your head for ‘no.’ Nod for ‘yes,’ okay?”

Toshi nodded.

“Did I embarrass you?”

Shake.

“Repulse you?”

Shake.

“Make you sad?”

Shake.

“Angry?”

Shake.

“Glad?”

Nod.

His eyes lit up. “Hm. That’s very good news.”

Toshi couldn’t help smiling. He nodded.

John held out his hand. He still looked hopeful.

Toshi’s heart pounded now. He reached out and took John’s hand, shifting their joined hands so he could thread his fingers with John’s. The moment their palms pressed together hot tears rushed Toshi’s eyes. His heart squeezed. The dam burst open. His chest heaved with the rush of emotion. He covered his eyes with his other hand.

CHAPTER SIX

“Hey,” John said softly, “It’s all right.” He squeezed Toshi’s fingers between his own.

Toshi rubbed the tears with vigorous motions of his fingertips. His pride was fragile enough and now he was about to cry in front of John. No one saw him cry, not even Natsuka, whom he trusted with his life.

“Toshi,” John’s voice pulled at him gently, coaxing the emotion from him. Whether John meant to do that or not, that was the effect he had.

Toshi felt a gentle tug on his hand. Before he knew what he was doing, he collapsed lightly against John, his cheek against the hard chest. To his sheer embarrassment tears slipped from his eyes, refusing to remain unshed, wetting the soft golden hairs on John’s chest.

John didn’t say anything, but Toshi felt the strong arms close around him. He felt the tender pressure of a hand cradle the back of his head. Toshi’s impulse was to spring up, not to let this man see him sobbing like a child, but he couldn’t move. Didn’t want to move. The embrace absorbed him, spoke to the part of him that had no pride, that only needed love.

A long time seemed to pass before Toshi could move. He didn’t want to be out of John’s arms, but a fear that he was pressing too hard on John gripped him and he levered himself slowly up. Thankfully, John’s arms stayed around him, loosening a bit, though keeping his hands splayed on Toshi’s back, over his t-shirt.

Toshi’s hands pressed into the mattress on either side of him and he avoided John’s gaze. His pride resurfaced, though not with the same strength as before. John’s kind look seemed to melt the hard edges.

“Toshi,” John said softly, “As much as I hate this so-called gift at times, I wouldn’t want to go back to the way I was before.”

Toshi felt like John was telling him something, but he wasn’t sure what it was. He swiped at an errant tear with the heel of his hand. John’s gaze on his face didn’t waver. “I don’t understand,” Toshi murmured. “You’re like a raw, open wound all the time.”

John nodded. “Yes. Better that way.”

Toshi understood. John wasn’t too unlike Natsuka in the way he didn’t want to embarrass Toshi. No wonder he felt so comfortable with John. But there was one important difference. When he looked at Natsuka, he didn’t want to do this...

He reached out and touched John’s cheek. John’s breath caught softly and then the blue of his eyes began to shift and darken in the lamplight. Toshi leaned down again, his body once again in John’s embrace. John’s lips were slightly parted, soft, masculine, inviting.

Toshi's heart hammered like the wings of a small bird. He was standing on a precipice, looking down. The height was terrifying, enthralling, making his blood heat, pounding alive through his veins. He'd been dead for so long.

The first brush of his lips against John's sent thrills of heat straight to his groin. His cock hardened immediately, pressing with hungry demand straight through his pants and the bedclothes.

John moaned softly. The tiny sound vibrated through Toshi's entire body, unleashing him. In one glorious instant John's scent filled him, clean soap and male skin, still soft from his hot shower.

Bracing his weight on the mattress with one hand, Toshi closed his mouth over John's completely. John parted his lips in obvious surrender, his body melting under Toshi's. Toshi felt John's hands slip under his shirt, caressing his bare skin. Each touch conveyed directly to him how much John desired him. Nothing but eager appreciation emanated from John's fingertips.

The more tenderly John caressed him, tracing the ridges of Toshi's back muscles with obvious admiration, the more feral Toshi's kisses grew. He slipped his tongue between John's lips, insistently tasting the moist insides of John's mouth. He slid his tongue along the smoothness of John's teeth and reached into every soft recess, as if marking his territory.

Toshi felt a tug down by his groin. He slipped his mouth from John's and looked down. John was pulling away the bedclothes between them. John lay before him in his naked splendor, offering himself.

Toshi's breath tightened. His gaze roved down John's broad chest sprinkled with soft golden hair that surrounded his flat, smooth, cinnamon colored nipples and then funneled in a thin trail down the center of his tight stomach. It stopped at his belly button and then resumed, lower...

Toshi sat up and pulled off his shirt, letting it drop to the floor.

John was grinning up at him. His chest rose and fell heavily and his eyes appeared dusky in the lamplight. "I like this nonverbal stuff," he said softly.

Toshi lightly dropped his hand on one side of John's chest. The hard slope of muscle quivered under his palm. He squeezed it lightly, experiencing an immediate surge of possessiveness.

John stared up at him, his eyes hooded under heavy lids, nearly disappearing under the thick fringe of golden lashes. His lips were still parted, the dusky pink color moist from Toshi's kisses. John watched Toshi, seeming to understand what was happening inside him, sensing Toshi's wild possessive streak and letting it come out. "Toshi," he whispered, "You're so beautiful."

Toshi gazed at him. *You're the beautiful one* he wanted to say, but the words remained frozen on his lips. He couldn't speak. Instead, he let his hand slide across John's chest and then down the center of his stomach, following the delicious trail of hair, pausing at his belly button. John's stomach caved and then rose again, both with breath and from Toshi's touch.

Toshi looked into John's eyes one last time before giving his full attention to where his hand lay on John's stomach. He slid it lower, his fingertips dragging through John's soft, blond pubic hair, then lightly closed it around John's cock.

John's breath caught and his hips pushed up, pressing his cock more firmly into Toshi's hand. Toshi slid his palm up the smooth, velvety skin, his fingertips feeling the veins, memorizing the curve of the shaft as it jutted from John's body.

"Toshi." John uttered his name in a hoarse whisper. John's eyes closed and his head tilted back, pressing into the pillows. One hand covered Toshi's free hand, squeezing it in a rhythmic motion that matched Toshi's strokes on his cock.

John moaned, giving himself over completely to Toshi's hands and mouth. He sensed a wild need unfurling from the other man, deep desires and yearnings that Toshi had kept bottled inside him for some reason, now able to surface.

Toshi leaned over and took John's mouth, tugging the lower lip fervently between his teeth and tongue. John reached up, curling his fingers into Toshi's glossy ebony hair, using the pressure of his fingertips to pull Toshi's mouth harder against his own. Toshi's tongue danced and slid against his, making him feel as if Toshi were trying to draw his soul out through their kisses. John answered by parting his lips as widely as he could, letting the other man plunder his mouth as deeply as he wished.

For what seemed the longest time, they remained with mouths pressed together, Toshi's hand stroking and pumping John's cock, until finally he pulled his mouth from John's. He nibbled another moment on John's lower lip then dragged the tip of his tongue down John's chin and across his throat, also sliding the palm of his hand down John's shaft and balls, squeezing the firm sac with a light but possessive touch.

Every inch of John's flesh that Toshi anointed with his tongue, John felt another inch of his flesh that Toshi claimed as his own, as if no one else could ever touch that part of John again.

Toshi covered every exposed part of John's chest with the heated swirl of his tongue, down over John's stomach and lower. John's fingers remained curled into Toshi's hair, following the downward path of his head.

Toshi's mouth closed over the head of his cock, swallowing it in a tight suction as if his cock were a delicious piece of food for a starving man. John gasped, his fingers tightening in Toshi's hair. Toshi sucked harder, taking in more of his length, deep-throating him in long, hot strokes.

A vibration quivered deep in John's balls. The ecstatic sensations built fast and hard until he slipped over, unable to stop the hot pulsing. In the soft glow of the lamp, John watched Toshi swallow every heated drop. Each spasm that closed over him was answered with a sucking swallow that only prolonged his pleasure.

John's hips arched upward. His eyes squeezed shut and time stopped. He panted, his chest heaving until there was nothing left inside him and his hips dropped onto the mattress and Toshi let John's half-hard cock slip from the heat of his mouth.

The air in the room felt cool to his damp member. His fingers moved in Toshi's hair. His consciousness floated slowly back to awareness of the room around them. Finally, he could open his eyes again. Toshi's large, velvety eyes were the first things he saw. Toshi's skin was flushed. Come gleamed on his lips and his chest heaved. He looked wild, predatory.

John slipped his hands from Toshi's hair to his shoulders, tugging him closer. "Toshi," he breathed, "Take whatever you want."

Toshi lunged forward and took John's mouth again. John tasted his own salty juices on Toshi's lips and tongue. After that one wild kiss, Toshi sat back and pulled off his pants, dropping them with his t-shirt. Turning back to John, Toshi settled his leanly muscled body down the length of John's broader frame, barely giving John a moment to appreciate the sculpted beauty of his torso, the flawless, smooth skin of his chest and dark nipples the color of chocolate.

Their naked bodies molded to each other, Toshi's hard cock nudged against John's, still limp from having been so thoroughly milked. That didn't stop Toshi from taking both of their cocks together in one hand and rubbing them with the up and down motions of his body, his knees pressing into the mattress between John's spread legs.

John slid his hands around Toshi's back, kneading the hard, sleek muscles, feeling them flex with the pumping motion of Toshi's body. He let his touch wander down Toshi's narrow hips, onto his buttocks, deliciously hard and round, tightening and straining with his movements.

Toshi seemed absolutely lost in the pleasure of their bodies rubbing together. He moaned, the speed of his thrusting growing harder with each second. He locked his mouth onto John's, his tongue resting against John's tongue, his breath pulsing hard and fast into John's mouth.

Toshi still held their cocks together, the friction re-igniting John's desire. His cock hardened again, rubbing deliciously against Toshi's cock, which slipped easily against his own, still damp from Toshi's mouth.

John grabbed hold of Toshi's buttocks, moving in a rhythm against him, squeezing the deliciously hard muscles in his palms. Their bodies stayed like this, locked together, sliding against each other, the pressure building again.

It had been so long since he'd known such pleasure that John went over the edge again. Toshi's body jerked and he moaned into John's mouth, coming at the same time. He pushed his pelvis hard against John's, making John feel the hard pulsing as the slick liquid pooled between them.

John sank into the bed, breathing hard. Toshi collapsed on top of him, breathing against his neck.

John stared up at the ceiling, watching the play of light and shadow on the white expanse. He listened to Toshi's heavy breathing, feeling the warmth of Toshi's body against his. Never before had he felt so transported to another world as he did right now. Perhaps it was the magical

intensity of finding the one person in the world who could touch him without hurting him. The one person whose touch made him feel safe.

His hand rested lightly on Toshi's back, following the rhythm of Toshi's breathing underneath the fine etches of sinewy muscles. Never before had another human being's breath seemed such a wonder to him. He wished the night could last forever.

His other hand slipped again into Toshi's hair. Toshi still lay on top of him, not seeming to want to move. He remained with his lips pressed to John's neck. John caressed Toshi's hair with one hand and his back with the other.

Toshi finally raised his face from John's neck. No sooner had he done so than he wished he could just stay there and never have to get up. He reached for the box of tissues on the nightstand. He kept the room equipped with everything from a telephone to tissues, even lubricant and protection in the drawer of the nightstand, even though John was the first person to ever use this room. There had always been the hope, but it had never felt right. He'd never kept anyone in his life long enough to know. Now he wanted to know. John was finally here. When Toshi had least expected him.

Wordlessly, he pulled one tissue out after another, wiping up their combined fluid. John's hand remained in Toshi's hair, gently resting there as Toshi wiped both of them off.

When he'd finished, he balled up the tissue and tossed them in a small wastebasket. He switched off the light and pulled the covers up over both of them. There was never a question in his mind that he would stay here the rest of the night with John.

John put his arm around Toshi, his fingertips whispering lightly across Toshi's skin. "Toshi," he said softly, "May I ask you something?"

Toshi put his hand over John's, gently squeezing it. He pressed in closer to John, his finally soft dick fitting comfortably into the crevice of John's buttocks. The front of his body molded to John's back as if they'd been made for each other. "Of course."

"You said I was speaking in Japanese...when you found me in the shower."

"Yes."

"What was I saying?"

Toshi pressed his lips briefly into John's shoulder before answering. The words John had cried out for the man whose memories burned inside him were words that Toshi himself had never uttered to another human being in his life, not even to his beloved uncle. Not even to Michael. How ironic that the first time he wanted to say them would be merely in translation of someone else's heartfelt declaration. He felt like a coward now, masking his own emotions in the guise of translating another's words. "I love you," he whispered against John's skin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

From the private journal of Koto Naomasa, August, 1847 (Document stored in the sealed archives of the Edo Tokyo Museum in Tokyo)

I overheard Kenji Soteki begging Akira again today to become ronin and leave our province. As usual, Akira refused. I know that Akira has other ambitions besides loving Soteki and, truthfully, I cannot help feeling satisfaction at Soteki's frustration. I have loved Akira for nearly half my life. Every samurai in the barracks has desired him, none so much as I, yet Kenji is the only one to whom Akira ever gave his heart and body.

Jealousy and envy are below a samurai and yet I harbor such feelings toward Kenji. He has won over the only man I have ever loved. At the same time, I don't understand why I have never been able to hold a grudge against Akira for rejecting me. My heart still aches for him, that beautiful, haughty man. I cannot even hate him when I hear him and Kenji on their tatami in the middle of the night, moaning and grunting their pleasure. I can hear the wet sound their lips make when they kiss.

Something really loud rang in Toshi's ear. Toshi stirred. It rang a second time. A third. A fourth. He opened his eyes, another ring slamming his consciousness into the present. Damn, it was the phone on the bedside table. He'd never slept in here and the telephone's sound was foreign and more shrill than the phone in his room.

Rolling slightly away from the warmth of John's body, he groped for the receiver just as the answering machine picked up. As he lifted the receiver the machine clicked off. "Moshi moshi," he mumbled, not trying to conceal the sleepiness from his voice.

"Toshi-san, good morning." Natsuka.

Toshi sighed, pretty much in relief. With the pressure of the investigation mounting, Natsuka had become just about the only person whose voice on the other end of the line didn't fill him with anxiety. "Hi." He sat up against the pillows and raked a hand through his hair. Next to him, John stirred and opened his eyes.

Toshi's body tingled at the view. Those blue eyes and mussed blond hair made this the first morning worth waking up in a long time. The wish that they could stay curled up in bed together all day made Toshi ache. He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "What time it is it, Natsuka?"

"Nearly eleven o'clock."

"Eleven!" Toshi's body tensed. His reaction made John sit bolt upright and watch him expectantly. Toshi tried not to stare at the rugged chin covered with dark gold stubble around those soft lips. They'd never make it out of bed if he did. He looked down. "I'm sorry," he said into the phone. "Why'd you let me sleep so late?"

Pause. “You and your guest needed time to rest, Toshi-san,” Natsuka said softly.

Toshi’s cheeks burned at Natsuka’s respectful way of telling him he understood.

“Don’t worry,” Natsuka went on, “I’ve set up our schedule for today. Everything is ready. How much time do you need? A half-hour?”

Toshi glanced at John, that ache nagging again at his insides. He promised himself only one more minute in bed and then they’d get ready. “Make it forty-five minutes.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Natsuka.” Natsuka was a good friend, always coming to his rescue.

“No problem, my friend. Oh, just one other thing. I called into the station and there is no word yet on the missing employee of the hotel. His wife has not seen him since his last shift.”

Shit. Toshi sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. “All right. Thank you.”

“No problem, Toshi-san. See you soon.”

Toshi hung up the phone and turned to John. “My partner is picking us up in forty-five minutes.” He knew he sounded mournful, but couldn’t stop himself.

He remembered the way he’d said, “I love you,” to John before they’d fallen asleep and a sudden, intense wave of shyness came over him, stopping him from reaching for John as he wished. When he’d given John the asked for translation, John had responded by pressing Toshi’s hand to his lips in the tender way that let Toshi know John was aware that his new lover was flighty as a frightened deer.

The message had been clear - John had realized the words were not a mere translation of his ghostly visitor.

John reached up, smoothing his fingertips across Toshi’s cheek. Toshi caught his hand gently and held it, pressing it to his cheek. John didn’t say anything either, but the air between them was full of invisible words and feelings passing back and forth.

“I feel terrible asking you to do this,” Toshi said softly.

John’s hand stiffened against his cheek. “To do what?”

“Go to all the places we have to go to today.”

Relief flooded John’s face. “Oh! For a second I thought you meant...this.” He gestured with his other hand in the space between them.

Toshi realized his error and bowed his head. “No, of course I didn’t mean...” He fell silent and looked into John’s eyes.

John returned his gaze, the blue irises soft and hopeful. “I’ll be all right, Toshi. When you’re there, it helps. The second you touch me, it’s better.”

Toshi’s heart squeezed. He pressed his lips into the palm of John’s hand, then held it between his. “I won’t let anyone else touch you,” he said softly, aware of the double meaning in his words. Looking down into John’s soft eyes Toshi knew that he had, in fact, meant both.

John smiled, obviously aware, also, of the two meanings. He nodded. “With the exception of needing to take impressions from anyone who associated with the victims, I gratefully accept that.”

Toshi leaned forward and kissed John’s lips, not caring that it was the first thing in the morning. The kiss was brief, but soft, conveying the passion he felt for this man. Yes, as long as he was around, no one would touch John. The possessive tremor that passed through his heart caused a chain reaction straight to his groin. John was his. And he was John’s. His cock twitched and then rose to attention, desiring its mate.

John, too, seemed okay with the fact that neither of them had brushed their teeth. He parted his lips, accepting the tongue that filled his mouth and tasted him hungrily. John’s hand palmed Toshi’s back, stroking it in long circles, from the nape of Toshi’s neck, down to his buttocks and back up again.

John moved closer. His hands slid against Toshi’s back. Instinct and need took over, melting the tension from Toshi’s body as John’s chest pressed to his and John kissed him harder, pressing him onto his back, underneath John.

John slipped a hand under the covers and laid his hand, palm down, on Toshi’s stomach. The warm touch sent spirals of heat right into Toshi’s groin. John’s fingertips skated down Toshi’s abdomen, circled his navel and slid down to his cock.

“Ahh,” Toshi sighed into John’s mouth as the lightly callused fingers closed around his erection and stroked the skin with just enough pressure to make him lift his hips off the mattress.

John moaned into their joined mouths, seeming to get aroused from Toshi’s enjoyment. He pulled away from their kiss and licked his way down the length of his lover’s torso, not stopping until he knelt at Toshi’s hips and took that cock into his hungry mouth.

The moist warmth of John’s mouth on his cock melted away his capacity for thought. Toshi closed his eyes, his pelvis grinding in light motions against the sucking of John’s lips. Toshi reached down, resting his hand lightly on John’s soft hair. John groaned, the vibration sending shivers up Toshi’s cock, making him suddenly wild to taste John again as he had the night before.

Reaching out, he anchored his hands on John’s hips, maneuvering his own body until John straddled his face from behind. Toshi smoothed his hands over John’s hard buttocks, enjoying the contrast of their paleness against the tan on the rest of his body. He massaged John’s hips and caressed the muscular slopes of John’s thighs, sprinkled with soft, golden hair.

Tilting his head upward, Toshi swiped his tongue gently across the crinkly firm skin of John's balls. John groaned and Toshi repeated the motion with his tongue, back and forth, teasing John into a frenzy until John's hips began bucking.

In a gentle yet heated rhythm, their mouths moved on each other's cocks. John moaned again, the low, deep vibration caressing Toshi's cock. The next time he rocked his pelvis upward, Toshi captured John's erection in his mouth, lifting his head up to let the whole hard shaft slide deep into his throat.

Toshi closed his eyes and squeezed his lips tightly around the satiny skin of John's cock. John tasted delicious and his light, musky scent made Toshi dizzy with heated lust. He anchored his hands firmly on John's hips and sucked with a mad pumping motion of his head, squeezing the veined hardness tightly against his tongue.

John surged against him and groaned, sucking Toshi harder with his own mouth. He slid his fingertips lightly over Toshi's balls, caressing them in a rhythm against his lips. The delicious pressure built low in Toshi's balls and spiraled upward. It had been so long since someone had sucked him off that Toshi exploded. John held onto him, mouth eagerly accepting each spurt and Toshi could feel the tiny clenches of John's throat as he swallowed.

Toshi clamped his lips hard against John's shaft just as John erupted. Hot spurts of come slipped down Toshi's throat and he swallowed as if drinking John's essence so that John could be a part of him.

John's body jerked several times in the throes of his orgasm and he went limp, taking care not to collapse directly onto his lover. He kept his mouth over Toshi's cock, letting every spasm pass, giving him every last bit of pleasure with his tongue until there was no more left. He let Toshi slip from his mouth and then turned over. With one hand on either side of Toshi's body, he rose up, bridging Toshi's body.

He gazed down at Toshi, his chest heaving, his blue eyes dark, smoldering with passion and satisfied desire. "Was that good for you?" he breathed.

Toshi returned his gaze. He nodded silently. Again, he was dumbstruck, both from the ecstasy of having found John and the guilt that he would probably break this man's heart as he'd broken Michael's all those years ago. He rose up on his elbows and pressed a kiss to John's lips, sliding his tongue against John's, letting their salty juices mingle in each other's mouths.

He pulled away and looked at John again.

Understanding registered in the deep blue pools. "Don't worry, Toshi," he said softly. "I'll try not to demand something of you you can't give."

Guilt sliced Toshi's heart. He had no business getting involved with this man this way and yet he was helpless against the tender passion he felt for John. Love was too potent a force. And he'd tried to resist it for too long. "You have every right to demand it now," he answered.

John kissed him again softly. He sighed and then glanced over his shoulder at the bedside clock. "Hey," he murmured. "We only have thirty-five minutes now to get ready."

Toshi nodded. It had been ten minutes he'd needed all his life.

“Akira, come with me. We'll be *ronin*.”

John stiffened. Kenji. In less than an instant the simple act of buttoning his shirt while sitting on the edge of the bed took on a dangerous slant. The young *samurai* was desperate. Desperate enough to invade John's body and show John his heartbreak.

John's fingers froze on the button. In the other room he could hear Toshi speaking with his uncle on the phone. Kenji's face surged in his mind again. John closed his eyes. Around him was a garden with raked stones. Trees surrounded the rock garden in the middle of which was a large stone statue. A Buddha.

John blinked. When he opened his eyes again Akira's face was before him. He and Kenji were kneeling on the ground, Akira, in reverence to the statue, Kenji, in reverence to Akira. A breeze rustled the surrounding trees.

Akira chuckled softly, a mirthless sound, the kind one makes when he senses that tragedy lies before him. “*Ronin?*” he repeated softly. “Why? Why do we need to leave? We are here together.”

Kenji's frustration pulled John's stomach muscles tighter than iron bands. “Because, then we'll be free to pledge our love to each other and to no one else.” He watched Akira's glance dart in either direction, as if the monks of the temple were spying on them. Kenji didn't care. Let them. They, too, had their lovers. He cared about only one thing.

Akira looked at Kenji and then rose to his feet.

Kenji reached out and gripped his arm, but Akira pulled back. “Not here,” he whispered.

Kenji looked down. The *samurai*'s heart raced madly, making John feel the organ pumping in his own chest. John sensed someone *was*, in fact, spying on them. John scanned the garden around the two *samurai*, realizing that, unlike the first vision, his consciousness remained separate from Kenji's. At least for now. He saw no one, although the presence of someone spying on them was strong.

Unfortunately after another few seconds Kenji's desperation began to overwhelm him again.

Akira turned to leave the prayer garden. Kenji tagged at his heels like a terrier. “Please, Akira! Promise me you will at least consider it.”

“I promise, Kenji. I will consider.” Sadness saturated Akira's voice. Kenji's longing pulled mercilessly at John's consciousness. John took a deep breath and tore his mind away, forcing himself to his feet.

The abrupt motion worked. The garden faded. Kenji and Akira disappeared. John took a shivery breath and finished buttoning up his shirt. He heard Toshi end the phone call in the other room. John grabbed his jacket and went to Toshi's room. One touch from the other man would help dispel the vision and leave him clear for the day's work ahead.

Toshi sat on the edge of his bed, a futon with a simple, dark blue spread, a cordless receiver in his hand. The room, as simply and austere as the rest, emitted a concentration of the same melancholy restlessness that John had sensed elsewhere in the apartment.

Toshi looked up, his dark eyes softening when he saw John in the doorway. "Hi," he said softly. He turned and hung up the phone. Looking again at John, his brow furrowed slightly. "Are you all right?"

John nodded. He went into the room and sat down next to Toshi. "I had another of those visions. This one was less intense, but I was also able to cut it off before it took over."

Toshi frowned. He reached out and squeezed John's shoulder. Immediately a tendril of warmth moved through John's shoulder, dispelling the ghostly residue the visions left inside him. Toshi sighed.

John looked at him. "Don't worry, I'm fine." He smiled. "When you do that, it disappears."

"I'm glad."

John sat quietly, enjoying the simple feel of Toshi's hand on his shoulder. The comforting touch enabled him to remember the vision without the threat of its returning too soon. "Someone was watching them," he said, breaking the companionable silence that had settled between them. "Watching Kenji and Akira, I mean."

"Was it the murderer?"

John sighed. "I'm not certain. I didn't let the vision continue long enough to feel the energy." He shook his head. "I hated doing that to Kenji. I feel like he's...I don't know...trying to tell me something. But I couldn't allow it today."

Toshi squeezed his shoulder. "Yes, I understand. I asked my uncle to search any records he might have, or have access to, from the Edo-Tokyo Museum archives. He's worked there as a guide and curator. He'll call me when he's found anything."

John nodded. Truthfully he wished he and Toshi could have stayed in bed. John already missed feeling Toshi's sleek muscled body molded to his.

John looked up, catching sight of a large, silk brocade *kimono* hung on the bedroom wall. Captivated by its beauty, John stared at it. The robe, suspended on a wooden rod attached to the wall by small hooks, was a deep shade of azure. Bright swirls of intricate embroidery laced its shimmering surface. It was a work of art, the only thing in Toshi's apartment that had an air of intimacy and passion about it. He pointed. "That's beautiful," he said.

“A gift from my uncle,” Toshi answered. “It’s a robe from the *Noh*, the Japanese theater. A friend of my uncle’s was one of the great *Noh* actors in Japan at one time and gave it to him after he retired from the theater. They fought together in World War Two.”

John continued to gaze at the silk brocade. “It’s stunning.”

“Yes, it is very beautiful.”

Just then the phone rang. Toshi pushed the button, exchanged a few words in Japanese and then set the receiver back in the charging cradle. “That was Natsuka,” he said, disappointment clear in his voice. “He’s waiting for us downstairs.”

John sighed and looked at him. The exchange of glances couldn’t have been clearer if they’d spoken their thoughts. John reached out and covered Toshi’s hand briefly with his. All he could hope for was that when the day was over he and Toshi could have another night like the one before.

“Where to first?” he asked, reluctantly taking his hand off of Toshi’s.

“The morgue. The latest victims are being held there for you to check before they’re released to their families for the funerals.”

“I see.” John suppressed a shiver. The morgues were often the worst part. Even the dead, a cold shell of a body without the warm soul inside, had their stories. Sometimes in a morgue they all tried to speak at once, as if clamoring for the attention of the one person who could still communicate with them.

Toshi rose from the bed, picked up his jacket, and turned to John. “Don’t worry,” he said softly, “No one will touch you.”

The protective sound in Toshi's voice sent a warm shiver through John’s chest. For the first time in years, or perhaps in his life, he had someone who made him feel safe.

“Thank you, Toshi.”

Toshi gave him a quick smile then started out the door. John followed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From the private journal of Koto Naomasa, December 1847 (Document stored in the sealed archives of the Edo Tokyo Museum, Tokyo)

If I know Akira at all after having observed him so closely all these years, he will not stay with Kenji forever as Kenji wishes. Akira has other ambitions. He is the finest swordsman in our unit. In keeping with his skill, I have fashioned the most superb weapons that have ever been. I will ensure that he remains undefeated even though I can never have him for myself. He is handsome and intelligent, one of the shogun's favorites. I have even heard rumors buzzing in the geisha houses that there is a daimyo in our province who wishes Akira for his daughter.

Unfortunately, I also know that Akira loves that little shit Kenji, almost as much as he loves his own life. I have heard him swear his eternal love to Kenji in the heat of their rutting, more than once. As much as I would wish worldly success for Akira, I would wish him happiness, that he would have his heart's desire. I wish I were his heart's desire, but I know that it is Kenji.

“Imai Sukenao and Tomoko Yorimori.” Toshi spoke the names of the most recent victims as the attendant pulled out the drawers containing the bodies.

John nodded, a tight pit of cold in his gut. He remembered all too well the clip on the television screen showing the bodies under the crimson-stained sheet. Toshi excused the attendant, who bowed and retreated.

The man's body was in the tier above the woman. Both corpses had a stab wound in the same spot in their middles. Their skins were a chalky, pallid purple and they lay unnaturally still.

John took a step toward the drawers, vividly aware of the chemical stench permeating the morgue. Looking down at the man, he stood quietly, setting aside the disbelief that always assailed him when he looked at a dead body. He never could reconcile the lifeless shell with what had once been a live human, animated by the heat of consciousness.

“Imai Sukenao,” Toshi said softly. Toshi's voice carried in a comforting wave of sound, dispelling the energies threatening to close in around John, calming him even without physical touch. “Forty-five years of age. Attorney. Married. Two teenage daughters. No criminal records of any sort. Clean.”

John's gaze roved over the victim. Imai Sukenao's eyes were closed. He looked peaceful for someone who'd been brutally murdered. John dragged in a deep breath. There was only one way to gather the impressions. Gingerly he reached out, pressing his fingertips to the dead man's shoulder.

The cold flesh remained hard under his touch, like refrigerated meat. John closed his eyes and dragged in another breath, waiting for the victim's body to speak to him in memories.

A quiet moment passed then *bam*. Visions opened up, images passing one after the other, as on a movie screen. Scenes like the one in the hotel. Sukenao and his lover smiling, dancing, walking

together, making love. The scenes shifted. John saw a house, Japanese style, with redwood floors and *soji* screens, a garden with raked gravel and cherry blossom trees. Sukenao's home. A woman, not his lover, her hair done up in a bun. She, too, was pretty, smiling at him, though with pain in her eyes. Sukenao's wife. Two pretty young girls clambered into his lap, smiling, wearing little school uniforms. Suddenly they were older.

The visions weren't forceful, meaning that John was able to remain standing, his hand pressed lightly to Sukenao's lifeless shoulder.

Sukenao and his lover again. Walking in a garden amidst other people strolling. A lunchtime meeting out in public where they'd appear to be co-workers having a chat. Then they were indoors somewhere, each gazing at a display of lifeless figures. The scene they observed appeared to be mannequins dressed and placed in a set that looked like that of the old Japanese films. An historical village of some sort. People passed by them, also looking at the scene.

The anodyne nature of the visions shifted suddenly, becoming more menacing. Someone was observing Sukenao and his lover. Watching them. Trying to learn about them. Deciding their future in his determined mind.

The force of the stalking presence forced a small gasp from John. His body tensed harshly.

"John?" Toshi said from behind him.

John couldn't answer. The menacing force, obviously of the killer, whipped the power of speech from his throat. His breathing grew ragged, the oxygen draining from his lungs.

A pair of strong hands closed on his upper arms. Toshi. In the next moment Toshi removed one hand from John's arm and closed it over his hand, pulling it off of Sukenao's shoulder.

The spell broke. John opened his eyes. He blinked several times, aware of Toshi's supporting touch on his arm. He turned and looked at Toshi. "He was there," John croaked out softly. "He'd been watching them."

"Where, John? Where was he? In the hotel?"

John shook his head, waiting another moment to regain his breath before continuing. Toshi waited, obviously suppressing his anxiousness for John's sake.

"No," John said when he was able to speak normally again. "Sukenao and...what was her name again?"

"Yorimori."

"Yes, they were in a...I don't know...a museum of some sort, I think, looking at an exhibit." He paused, pulling the image from his memory. "It was a scene of some kind, a reproduction of a village."

Toshi's eyes widened. "The Edo," he said. He turned to Natsuka and said something in Japanese, then turned back to John. "There are exhibits in the Edo-Tokyo Museum that are like what you describe." He paused, a light burning in his dark eyes. "We'll need to go there."

John nodded. "Yes. But first I must take an impression from her." He fell silent and looked down at the woman's body in the sliding drawer below Sukenao.

"John, are you sure?" As usual, Toshi's eyes darkened with concern.

"I'm sure."

Toshi sighed. He'd already released John's arm and now stepped away and pushed closed the drawer with Sukenao's body, leaving John space to take impressions from Tomoko Yorimori.

John knelt down.

"Tomoko Yorimori," Toshi said in the same official tone as he'd used with the man's history. "Twenty-five. A legal secretary in Sukenao's firm. Also no criminal history. No record of drinking, drugs, or anything out of the ordinary. Her roommate claims that Yorimori was madly in love with Sukenao and depressed that Sukenao refused to leave his wife to be with her."

John continued to stare at the woman, who'd been pretty, her youth eternally frozen. "Did she speak to anyone else of her affair?"

"Not that we know of. She worked and went home. Her only extracurricular her roommate knew of was her meetings with Sukenao."

"All right." John reached out and placed his fingertips on Yorimori's shoulder. The same hard, refrigerated meat sensation met his fingertips. He closed his eyes and waited.

And then, as with Sukenao, the impressions hit, the same kind of cinematic kaleidoscope of images. Yorimori in her apartment, eating from a bowl with chopsticks. Another young woman sitting close to her, laughing at a joke they were obviously sharing. Yorimori at her desk, watching Sukenao pass by, longing on her delicate features. Yorimori walking in the park with her lover, both wearing dark business suits and trying not to let their mutual affection show in public.

As before, the energy shifted from harmless to malevolent. John caught his breath. The scene was the same. Yorimori and Sukenao watching the exhibit, the dark energy of their killer lurking in the background, studying his victims with the practiced focus of an eagle. This time, John yanked his hand away of his own accord, dispelling the visions before they could take his breath away.

Toshi's hand settled gently on his shoulder. The man's warm touch chased away the residue of the visions. John exchanged looks with him, understanding Toshi's silent concern. Before he could respond a phone rang with a muffled sound.

Toshi retrieved his cell phone from his jacket pocket. “Genjin.”

“Toshi, it’s your uncle. Is this a bad time?”

“Uncle Musashi, hello. I’m just finishing up at the morgue. Can I call you back?”

“No need, Toshi. I’m down at the museum and I found something that might be of help to you.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I will be by as soon as I leave here.”

“Very good. I have a doctor’s appointment and won’t be here, but if you ask for the curator, I’ll leave word for him to bring you down into the archives.”

“Thank you, Uncle. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome, Toshi.”

Toshi snapped his phone shut and slipped it back into his pocket. “My uncle found something for us at the museum,” he said to John. “We should go straight there.” He repeated the summary for Natsuka, who was waiting patiently

John nodded and he and Natsuka fell into step behind Toshi to exit the morgue. As they left, Toshi signaled to the attendant who went back in to close the drawer. When they reached the car, Toshi opened the front door and slid into the passenger seat. “While we’re at the museum,” he said to John, “we must, of course, try to find the display you saw and confirm that the victims were, in fact, there.”

“Yes.” John settled back against the seat, his face showing the first signs of strain, even after two relatively mild channelings.

Toshi turned back around as Natsuka eased the car out of the parking space. He couldn’t ignore the troubled feeling that nagged the edges of his consciousness. Some of it was concern for John’s well-being. John had just told him the night before how he’d been on a rest cure because of the way these visions tore at him. The number of visions he’d had since arriving in Tokyo couldn’t be healthy for him.

Natsuka turned the corner, heading in the direction of the Edo-Tokyo Museum. Thinking about the document his uncle had set aside brought Toshi to the second concern that nagged at him. How ironic it was that the very day he asked his uncle to search the museum’s archives, John’s visions should show that the killer had stalked his victims while they visited the museum. The detective in him was used to making everyone a possible suspect. And now his uncle, by way of association with the museum, could possibly come under that category. If Musashi Genjin had been in the museum at the same time as the victims then Toshi would have to question him. And John would have to touch him for a psychic impression. The mere possibility weighed on his heart like lead.

“Toshi.”

Toshi turned around at the soft tenor of John's voice. John's large, blue eyes were looking at him, radiating sympathy. "Yes?"

"I need to take impressions from every available person who was somehow connected to all of the victims. There are no suspects until then."

Toshi nodded, hearing the compassion in John's words. "Thank you." He turned back around, fixing his stare on the road. That moment of kindness only fueled his growing feelings for the man in the backseat. The words he'd said to John the night before rose again in his mind. *I love you*. He squashed them down, certain that John would know what he was thinking. The connection between them in the previous moment made him suspect that John could read his mind as well as his heart.

CHAPTER NINE

Musashi Province, Edo, 1847

“For whom do you fashion that sword, Koto?”

Naomasa’s body stiffened from where he stood over his forge, his tongs midway to the fire. The mindful state he’d achieved from his prayer before work was broken now by the monk’s presence and he would not be able to return to his work until Shingen left. Slowly, he set down his tongs and turned to face Shingen.

The warrior monk stood in the doorway, watching Naomasa. Shingen’s muscular body, evident even under his robes, caused Naomasa’s traitorous body to pulse with a potent mixture of fear and arousal.

Shingen’s gaze raked over Naomasa’s body, making Naomasa vividly aware that he stood before the other man in only his loincloth. Desire glazed Shingen’s eyes, reflecting the same unrequited yearning that Naomasa felt for his own beloved samurai, Akira. The beautiful man for whom he was making the sword after which the monk inquired.

Shingen took several steps, closing the distance between himself and Naomasa. “You haven’t answered me,” Shingen said. The flames of the forge reflected in his large, dark eyes, making him appear otherworldly. “For whom do you make that sword? For a samurai or for a warrior-monk?” Shingen stopped directly in front of Naomasa. Sheer masculine power radiated off Shingen. His smooth skin glowed from the light of the forge, and his hair, closely shorn to the scalp, emphasized his high cheekbones and full lips. In some ways he was physically beautiful, like Akira.

Within his loincloth Naomasa felt his groin tighten with the beginnings of an erection. As much as he loved Akira, being desired in the same way by another was potently seductive.

“The *yamabushi* have their swordsmiths, too,” he muttered. “You don’t need me.”

Shingen leaned closer to him, eyes glowing. In one very significant way the warrior monk was unlike Akira. When Akira prayed at the temple, he bowed only to Buddha. Akira did not practice mantras and mudras in order to gain spiritual powers, as Shingen did.

“Why, Koto, do you spend your life pining for someone who will never love you? He will never appreciate your beautiful work as I will. Make that sword for me.”

Shingen’s face was so close to his that the *yamabushi*’s breath pulsed warmly onto Naomasa’s cheek. “You are too magnificent to go to waste, Koto,” Shingen went on, his smooth voice lowering to a husky tone.

Against his will, Naomasa's erection grew, pressing against his loincloth. His breathing deepened and he could see by the flicker in the Shingen's eyes that the monk was aware of the effect he was having.

"I love just watching you." Shingen's voice caressed him now and Naomasa began to feel heady, as if he'd drunk too much sake. Naomasa's body relaxed and he wondered if this desire was real or if Shingen was using his powers to seduce him. Not that it mattered. He and Shingen had been boyhood friends and even as youngsters Shingen's desire for him had been obvious.

Shingen reached out and brushed his fingertips across Naomasa's cheek, gathering droplets of perspiration. Bringing his fingertips to his own lips, he swiped his tongue across them. "Mmm, even your sweat is delicious." He reached out again, gently cupping the back of Naomasa's neck. The aggressive shine in the monk's eyes softened, taking on a pleading look. "Give yourself to me, just this once."

Naomasa felt himself weaken under Shingen's touch and plea. Never before had his childhood companion lowered the shield of pride for anyone. He was doing it now, probably knowing it was the one ploy that might work. Naomasa nodded slightly, but enough to convey to Shingen his acceptance. "I am not clean though," he murmured. "I've been working."

"I don't care." Shingen's eyes had widened, desire now burning in their depths. He took Naomasa's hand and led him to the corner of the building, behind the forge, well out of the sight of passersby. He picked up the *tatami* that Naomasa used to sit on during his meals and spread it onto the wooden planks of the floor. Then he stood up, gazing at Naomasa with the eager expression of a child with a new toy.

Naomasa's erection tented the front of his loincloth and he saw his friend's eyes glance down at it. Naomasa went to pull the tie of the cloth.

"Stop." Shingen said. "Let me do that." The monk stepped over the *tatami* and stood before him. He lifted his hands to Naomasa's chest, pressing his palms lightly down on the muscles.

Shingen drew in a soft breath, his eyes filling with appreciation. "You are every bit as beautiful as the haughty one," he breathed. "Perhaps more so." His fingertips skated down Naomasa's chest, his calluses lightly grazing the nipples.

The touch felt good, like icy heat igniting in his body. Naomasa's eyes fluttered closed as Shingen's fingertips slid down the taut muscles of his stomach and lower until they reached the tie of Naomasa's loincloth.

Shingen leaned closer, his lips practically touching Naomasa's. "Koto," he whispered, following the name with a brush of his lower lip against Naomasa's.

Naomasa's eyes closed. Shingen's scent, the heady spice of incense burned in the temple, invaded him. Shingen kissed him again, the tip of Shingen's tongue running along the seam of his lips. The light touch sent a pleasant shiver through Naomasa's body. It had been several years since he'd lain with anyone and his need surged, raw and hot. Before he realized what he was doing, he reached up and ran his fingertips lightly down the sharp planes of Shingen's smoothly shaven cheeks.

Shingen's eyes widened and his lips parted. A myriad of feelings passed through them, not the least of which appeared to be affection. Shingen's hand drew away from Naomasa's loincloth, strong arms embracing him, urging him down onto his back on the *tatami*. "I knew you felt something for me," Shingen murmured, half draping his muscular body over Naomasa's. With one knee Shingen nudged Naomasa's legs apart and draped his leg between them, the muscle of his thigh pressing Naomasa's erection through the soft layers of loincloth.

Shingen slanted his lips over Naomasa's, coaxing them apart with strokes of his tongue.

Naomasa let Shingen in, unable to resist the powerful maleness enveloping him. Shingen had always been the dominant one in their friendship, bending Naomasa to his will, getting Naomasa to participate in all his boyhood pranks and explorations. Shingen pulled the tie of Naomasa's topknot, allowing the other man's hair to flow loose. The monk sifted his fingers through the length of it, moaning into Naomasa's mouth, grinding their erections together.

Even through the loincloth the tiny movements sent shards of intoxicating pleasure through Naomasa's body. His hands stole under Shingen's robes, seeking out warm, smooth flesh, taut over the warrior's muscles. Each tiny ridge and bulge fueled his desire until he matched the rhythm of Shingen grinding against him.

Shingen pulled away from their kiss and feathered the tip of his tongue along Naomasa's jaw and down his neck, hands working open the loincloth. The monk loosened the layers of cloth enough to slip one hand inside, his seeking fingertips meeting with Naomasa's erection.

Naomasa groaned from the first erotic contact in so long. He lifted his hips, pushing his cock deeper into Shingen's hand, silently begging to be stroked. Shingen's obviously skilled fingers knew just how to massage the shaft, weakening Naomasa underneath him, making Naomasa's body pliant and ready. The pads of Shingen's fingertips skated over the swollen head of Naomasa's cock and around the taut ridges, back down the shaft to the sac below, which he squeezed lightly, with increasing pressure, until Naomasa clawed at Shingen's back and bucked his hips wildly, moaning and whimpering.

Naomasa slipped his hands out from under Shingen's robes and clawed at the layers of his own loincloth, which impeded the direct contact of their bodies. Frantically he worked open the loincloth and shoved it aside.

Shingen sat up and gazed down at Naomasa from under heavy lids, his dark eyes glowing from the light of the forge. Wordlessly he stripped off the layers of his robe, baring his magnificent body to Naomasa's sight. The light from the forge cast a soft sheen on the smoothly sculpted muscles of his shoulders, arms and chest. In one swift movement he lowered his body down onto Naomasa's and kissed him again, one hand caressing his *musuko*, hard and pulsing. A droplet of seed beaded at the tiny opening.

Shingen slid down and bent his head, licking the droplet off with one swipe of his tongue.

Naomasa groaned, one hand reaching to cup the strong column of Shingen's neck, softly urging him for more. Shingen looked up at him, his full lips parted, his eyes radiated hope. "I'll do whatever you wish, Koto," he whispered. "You want me to taste you more?"

Naomasa nodded, unable to speak, his breath coming in tight gasps.

Shingen lowered his face back to Naomasa's hard member and slid his lips over it, sheathing the entire length in his mouth. He tightened his lips and tongue around it and sucked, his mouth a tight hot sheath of pleasure.

Naomasa sank down on the *tatami*, his eyes unfocused, his gaze staring up, unseeing, into the dark rafters of the small building. The intoxicating pleasure of *shakuhachi* left him powerless to do anything else but experience it, the pressure building deep in his groin. He tilted his gaze downward, watching Shingen's dark, closely shorn head, bobbing with the sucking motions, his entire consciousness absorbed in what he was doing. One hand gently squeezed Naomasa's sac in a pulsing rhythm until Naomasa could no longer contain his release.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the force of his climax. Shingen did not release him, lips massaging his shaft, throat swallowing his seed until Naomasa was empty.

Shingen released him and looked up. Naomasa's seed gleamed on his lips. Shingen reached into his robes and pulled out a small vial. When he pulled the stopper, the scent of herbs wafted into the air, mixing with the scent of their sweat and musk. Shingen poured oil into his palm and smoothed it over the length of his own erection. Shingen set the bottle aside and nestled his body between Naomasa's legs, seeking his bottom with oiled fingertips.

Naomasa pulled back his legs, groaning when Shingen found his tight opening and slicked the oil over the puckered skin. Shingen withdrew his hand and thrust his hips forward, pushing the head of his *musuko* inside. He pushed with small jabs of his hips, stretching Naomasa open, the muscles of Shingen's arms flexing with his movements.

Shingen groaned and went down on his elbows. He took Naomasa's mouth in a hungry kiss as he gave one last push, sheathing himself deep inside Naomasa's tight channel. He thrust slowly at first, in long strokes, gathering speed, riding harder, his mouth never leaving Naomasa's.

Naomasa grasped Shingen's hips, pulling him deeper inside, as deeply as he could go, bucking against him, bringing him swiftly to a climax. Shingen pulled his lips from their kiss, tilting his head back, crying out softly. Naomasa felt Shingen's hot seed filling him, pulsing inside him and then the monk collapsed, large body covering Naomasa completely, breath pulsing in Naomasa's ear.

Naomasa held Shingen and stared up at the rafters, his mind hazy, his body relaxed.

"Go ahead, Koto," Shingen breathed close to his ear. "Make your sword for the haughty one. It no longer matters. You're mine. Forever."

Tokyo, Present day

John's stomach tightened as he followed Toshi up the concrete steps of the ultra-modern museum building. Just inside the entrance was a long, wooden bridge, leading into the main portion of the museum. John recognized the structure as a replica of the bridges in historical Japan. Before today, he never knew how his passion for the classic *samurai* films of the 1950s and 60s would one day serve him in his work.

Toshi turned to him. "I leave this decision up to you," Toshi said in a gentle tone, "Do we look in the archives first or go to the permanent exhibition and see if it's what you witnessed?"

John deliberated, sensing Natsuka's patient energy nearby. It was a strange decision to have to make, but he felt that confirming the location of the victims would serve Toshi much more effectively in the investigation than checking the archives. "Check the exhibit first," he answered.

Toshi nodded and began to lead him and Natsuka over the bridge. "What you described sounded like it could be in the Edo Zone of the exhibit," Toshi explained as they ascended the curve of the bridge.

As they reached the end of the bridge and went into the exhibit, John found his attention momentarily captured by the astonishing replicas of the Japan of earlier centuries. The area to one side of the bridge had been made into a river, with small sailing craft dotted across its width, and busy wharves and docks flanking the sides. Further in were small replicas of government buildings, horse-drawn carriages, market stalls and longhouses.

The attention to period detail and craftsmanship was astounding and evoked the feel of the pre-modern era. For one eerie moment John felt the ghostly presence of the people of those times, especially the *samurai* whose skills and weaponry had helped to build and protect the scenes of industry and residences portrayed in the replicas. The *samurai* had governed, contributed to the arts, and bequeathed their codes of love and honor to their country's identity.

Added to the swirl of collective ghostly whispers inside him, John sensed Kenji's presence deep in his soul, the man's suffering and longing beckoning to him, pleading with him. John knew then, without a doubt, that somehow, his visions of Kenji and Akira were directly connected to the present murders. The only question was how.

The first part of the exhibit, government building replicas, was not familiar to him from the visions. He remained close to Toshi, daring to press as closely to his lover as he could. Toshi's energy was the only thing that helped dispel the energies of the other visitors to the museum, of which there were thankfully few at this hour on a weekday.

They descended a set of steps to the fifth floor. A sudden chill snaked up John's spine when the exhibit came into view, familiar in the eerie way dreams haunt the mind. His heartbeat increased as they moved deeper into that portion of the exhibit. Halting in front of a replica of a longhouse, John stared, the memories resurging. On either side of him Toshi and Natsuka halted, too, respectfully giving him silence to do his work.

The scene in one room of the longhouse was of a family after the birth of a child. The birthmother lay on a *tatami*, covered with a blanket, while an older woman bathed the infant in a wooden tub in the center of the small room. The husband, clad in a blue and gold kimono, his forehead shaved, his hair done in a topknot, looked on while a young boy, dressed similarly to his father, knelt at the foot of the bed, watching his mother rest in the wake of childbirth.

John's breath hitched. This was the scene he'd seen the victims watching. Their killer had observed them while they looked upon this very scene. The energy of the secret lovers watching the exhibit and the darker, wrathfully passionate energy of the killer stalking them, rose up in John, threatening to drown out the present completely.

He forced himself to turn away before the visions gripped him and looked into Toshi's eyes. The dark brown, almond-shaped pools comforted him immediately. John nodded. "This was the place I saw," he said in a near-whisper.

Toshi nodded, a solemn gesture. The heaviness settling more deeply into his new lover's heart was as palpable to John as if it was his own.

John didn't need to be a detective to understand that his affirmation set off the need for more inquiries into anyone associated with the museum. This case was obviously too close to home for Toshi. "I'm sorry, Toshi," he murmured.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Toshi turned to Natsuka and spoke to him in Japanese, apparently giving some sort of instruction. Probably, John guessed, to begin inquiries into the museum staff.

"*Hai.*" Natsuka bowed then went up the stairs.

"Toshi, are you all right?" John resisted the pressing urge to reach for Toshi right there in the middle of a public place.

Toshi heaved a deep sigh. "I never feel all right," he said softly. "Last night was the first time I felt all right in a long time."

The confession, in its surprising time and place, melted John. He gazed at Toshi for several long moments. A sensation moved through him, similar to the one he experienced when Kenji had been sharing his body with him. Only this time, the movement was in his heart. The intensity shook him in a place beyond any that he reached when he channeled impressions. He'd experienced it before, only not with this strength. He knew immediately what it was.

He had just fallen in love.

"Same here."

Toshi looked at him, the liquid depths of his eyes emanating sadness. "Come," he said softly, "Let's go down to the archives."

John nodded and followed Toshi past the remainder of the exhibit.

They'd nearly reached the curator's office when Toshi's cell phone went off in his pocket. The ID on the phone showed him that it was Keiko. His stomach lurched. She never called him during the day. He put the phone to his ear. "Keiko, are you all right?"

A small whimper met his ears. He'd heard the sound of fear too many times not to recognize it. Keiko wasn't easily cowed. Something bad had happened. "Toshi, can you come to my apartment?"

"Of course." He was already on his feet. John was watching him, obviously understanding that something urgent was happening, and rose also. "What happened?"

"Someone...was here...I saw...he was in my apartment. I'm not usually home at this time, but I didn't feel well this morning and was just getting up to go to work."

Toshi's blood chilled. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. But he was...evil."

Toshi gesture to John and strode from the room, John close behind him. "Keiko, leave now and go to a neighbor, all right? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"*Toshi, hai.*" She clicked off.

Toshi pressed the button and called Natsuka's cell, telling him to bring the car around for an emergency.

John followed Toshi into the elevator of the building in which Keiko lived. Like Toshi's residence, the place was ultra modern with clean, sleek lines and lots of windows and stainless steel trimmings.

In the hallway, Toshi rapped on one of the doors. "Keiko will be here, at the neighbor's," he told John.

In moments an elderly woman opened the door, her brow creased in concern. After a brief exchange the woman stood aside, revealing a younger woman. Her sleek hair was cut into a fashionable bob. Keiko was a beautiful woman with flawless skin. Yet her dark eyes appeared haunted. Her wary gaze flickered to John then to Toshi, watching him. She stood in one spot, staring at Toshi as he approached.

John hung back by the elderly neighbor, quietly listening to the conversation between Toshi and his fiancée. In spite of the urgent, stressed tones in which Keiko spoke, which conveyed no affection, John couldn't help the sliver of jealousy that caused his gut to burn with heat. This woman was supposed to marry Toshi.

John watched Toshi, the feathers of hair falling around his face as he listened to Keiko, his head bowed, his brow furrowed in deep concern. Apparently something so frightening had happened,

Toshi'd needed to listen before even introducing John to Keiko. After several long moments Toshi nodded and motioned to John to come over.

John's heartbeat quickened as he approached Toshi and Toshi's fiancée. The young woman was a head shorter than himself and looked up at him with a strange mixture of curiosity and the residue of her fear.

"John, this is Keiko Hatari. Keiko, this is John Holmes."

John had to remind himself that this was no time for qualifiers such as "my fiancée" or "my lover." The reminder went a small way to soothing the green-eyed monster raking his insides.

John offered his hand. Better to make contact with the woman and have a sense of her essence. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Hatari."

Keiko accepted his handshake. "And you, Mr. Holmes."

"You can call me John."

Her distressed face did not relax, though she acknowledged him with a slight nod. Apparently she, too, spoke English.

Her small, cool hand came to rest in his. He glanced at Toshi, who watched him in return with noticeable distress around his dark eyes. John turned back to Keiko and waited.

Keiko's energy was mild, though distressed. Love burned in her heart, though not for Toshi. Strangely enough she, too, didn't repulse John with her touch. As he'd sensed with Toshi, he felt Keiko's yearning. An image of a man, about her and Toshi's age, rose in his mind. The man Keiko loved.

A dark energy simmered on the edges of John's consciousness. John recognized it immediately. The murderer. He had, indeed, been around Keiko and had left the residue of his psyche in hers.

John released her hand.

"Keiko told me that while she was getting dressed to go to work she sat down to put on her makeup and saw a man in the reflection of her mirror," Toshi said. "She screamed and then he vanished."

John's pulse fluttered. He looked at Keiko. "Did you get a good look at him?"

She shook her head. "Not very. His face was half in shadows. The half that I could see was very angry-looking. And...he was...dressed like a *samurai*. I told Toshiro that I never heard him come in. I was screaming so hard I didn't hear him leave."

"He didn't hurt you?" Toshi asked, his voice heavy with worry.

"No, Toshiro. He looked like he wanted to, though."

“Ms. Hatari,” John said softly, “We need to go into your apartment.” He looked at Toshi, knowing that the other man would understand his reason.

Toshi turned to Keiko. “Do you wish to stay here?”

She nodded.

The elderly woman went to Keiko’s side and led her to a sofa as John followed Toshi out of the apartment into the hallway. Natsuka was in the hallway and Toshi spoke to him briefly, after which the older man went into the neighbor’s apartment. Toshi had apparently asked him to guard Keiko.

Toshi went to the next apartment and stood by the door. He reached one hand into his jacket. John watched Toshi slip his gun from its holster, hold it up, and then push the door open, pointing his weapon through the doorway. He looked to both sides and then stepped in.

John followed him into the apartment, furnished in white, with marble floors and a wall of picture windows, like Toshi's apartment, overlooking the river with the skyline in the distance. The furniture was all leather and glass.

Toshi kept his weapon drawn, looking all around him as he moved further into the apartment. John stayed close behind him, heart beginning to pound hard. The killer’s presence was strong here, overpowering, like noxious fumes. From the force of the energy simmering in the apartment, it did not seem that the intruder had left when Keiko screamed.

Moving toward the back of the apartment, Toshi approached a half-open door and turned to the side, cautiously coming to stand by it. With his weapon in front of him, he peeked in. John’s throat tightened suddenly. An increase in the angry energy constricted his chest. He struggled to compose himself. Now was not a time to pass out. Toshi needed him to fight it.

Slowly, Toshi pushed open the door with his shoe, revealing a bedroom. The bed, a large waterbed sided in white leather, was neatly made, the room showing no evidence of intrusion. John took a deep breath, struggling against the invasion of energy. The sensation was like inhaling poisonous gas.

Toshi brandished his gun and stepped in, pointing the barrel in all directions. The room appeared empty. The two places where someone could hide were the bathroom and the large walk-in closet. John watched Toshi advance toward the closet, the door of which stood ajar. He too stepped into the room, using the doorframe as a support.

The closet was clear, as was the bathroom. Toshi approached John, his weapon lowered. “There’s no one here.”

Energy swirled nearby, the same potent force that John had experienced in the hotel room, only there was a rawness to its strength he hadn’t felt before. He shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “There’s someone here.”

Toshi's eyes widened in one second, narrowed in the next. He reached out and put his hand on John's shoulder. His touch dispelled a small amount of the energy, but not enough, like trying to bail out a sinking boat with a teacup. "What do you feel?" Toshi asked.

"Him."

Toshi nodded. He released John's shoulder and slipped past, brandishing his gun once again. With obvious caution, Toshi made his way back down the short hallway into the living room. John followed close behind. The only other room John could see was the kitchen. Toshi pointed his gun and began walking slowly in that direction.

A sudden whooshing sound buzzed past John's left ear. His body jerked to the right as if he'd been struck. The leaves of a potted ficus tree by the glass doors of the balcony rustled as if a breeze had passed through the room.

Toshi whirled around, looking for the source of the movement. It passed John again, pushing him to the floor as if blown by a cyclone. John went down on his hands and knees.

"John!" Toshi yelled. In the next instant he was kneeling beside him.

"I'm all right." The force hit him again, only this time, John felt it enter his body, like a vapor, invading his senses malevolently. It was male and it was furious. Murderously raging. John nearly vomited from the churning it caused in his gut. It moved inside him, pushing him to the floor on his back. "Naomasa!" John heard himself say in a voice that wasn't his own. "Naomasa! *Ai shite imasu!*" Dimly through the haze of pain and tension, John heard the words he'd said the night before in the shower. However, deep in his consciousness, he knew this wasn't Kenji who spoke.

With another rush of force the presence poured from his body, leaving John limp and ill. He turned over, coughing and sputtering, yet sensing the energy recede. When his coughing fit had passed, so had the murderer's presence.

John lay on his back. Above him hovered Toshi's face, concerned as usual. Toshi holstered his gun and reached out for John, helping him to sit up. "John, hey." He held John in his arms, rubbing John's back in gentle circles over his jacket.

John panted heavily, succumbing to Toshi's gentle hold. Nothing helped calm and soothe him like Toshi. All those years, all those cases he'd faced alone, left after each day of visions and channeling to retch or pass out in his hotel room in the dark. The man holding him now offered the healing love he'd craved for so long.

As his breathing returned to normal, John closed his eyes, still resting against Toshi. His lover seemed to understand what was needed and held him silently, stroking his cheek with tender fingertips. Each caress soothed away the angry energy that had torn through him. After a few moments he was able to open his eyes. "Toshi," he rasped from his parched throat and mouth.

Toshi stared down at him. "John, are you all right?"

John swallowed hard. "I'm...fine."

Toshi eased him down to the carpet. “Wait. Don’t speak yet. You need a drink.” He rushed off to what must be the kitchen and John heard the sound of water running. Toshi returned with a glass and knelt down again, helping John take a sip as he’d done the night before. “Wait until you can speak again, John.”

John held the glass for himself and took several large swallows. He set the glass aside and looked at Toshi. “It was a...possession.”

Toshi’s full lips parted in obvious shock. His fingers stopped moving on John’s cheek. “Possession? Like a spirit?”

John nodded. “Listen, I know I said those words again, like last night. But it wasn’t Kenji saying them to Akira.”

A wary shadow passed across Toshi’s dark eyes. “You said Naomasa.”

John’s heart lurched. “The name written on the victims’ foreheads.”

Toshi’s brow furrowed deeply and John felt his lover’s arms tense as they cradled him. “Yes. He was silent a moment. “What is the difference between a possession and a vision?” he asked finally.

John sighed. “Well, in my experience a possession takes place when the spirit itself enters a physical body and uses it for its own purposes. In a vision, the physical body channels the memories of the spirit but stops there.”

Toshi stared at him. John’s face went out of focus.

“Toshi?”

John’s voice reached through the fog enveloping Toshi’s mind. “Hmm?”

“I’m getting ready to apologize to you again.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel as if I’m asking you to believe all this crazy shit.”

Toshi sighed. “You haven’t asked me to believe anything.” He raked one hand through his hair. “Is it possible then that what Keiko saw was the spirit that possessed you? Because there is no physical evidence of someone else having been here with her.”

John nodded. “Definitely. I felt him the moment we stepped over the threshold.”

Toshi’s heart sped up and his thoughts along with it. In a million years he never imagined he would give credence to such things. But after meeting John... “It *does* explain the complete lack

of evidence since these murders began.” Maybe there was something after all to the abundance of horror stories and demon lore in Japanese culture. Even the brocade hanging on his bedroom wall had been used in a Noh play about a jealous wife who was possessed by a demon spirit...

Toshi’s heart lurched. As if this experience had yanked away a blockage in his mind, everything that Toshi hadn’t understood for the last six months suddenly cascaded into place, each piece fitting with stunning finality.

“Toshi, what are you thinking?”

Toshi looked down at John, his mind still swirling with the answers finding their place in the macabre puzzle that had tormented him for six months. “The kimono my uncle gave me.”

John nodded. “The one on your wall.”

“Yes. It has something to do with possession. My uncle explained all about it to me. At the time I didn’t care. I didn’t think anything of it. I’ve never been interested in the theater. But now...” He raked his hand through his hair again, his other arm still cradling John in a protective embrace. “Noh was one of the main entertainments for *samurai*. The last play this brocade was worn for was a play called *Aoi no ue*, about a woman who was possessed by the spirit of a jealous woman. Many of the plays have themes like this. Spirits who pass from one body to another through time to revisit past experiences or traumas until they’re released.” The implications rushed his mind, causing his chest to tighten. Adrenaline pumped through his veins. “Holy shit!”

John reached out, lightly gripping Toshi’s arm. “Holy shit what?”

“The key - the reason for the murders.” He looked into John’s eyes. “It’s related to the *samurai* isn’t it?”

John nodded. “The killer He murdered Akira and Kenji *not* because he hated them or because he was jealous of their love.”

“But because he loved Akira and wanted Akira to be with his lover,” Toshi finished. He let the conclusion sift deeper for a moment before speaking again. “The spirit who possessed you today, is it possible that he’s the killer? I know it’s a jump, but when you defined possession it made perfect sense. A spirit could possess any body it wished, the most convenient one. The person possessed wouldn’t even *have* to know the victim or even be aware that they’re committing murder. Is that correct?”

John nodded again. “That’s correct. A spirit possessing the physical body can get it to do whatever the spirit wants it to do and leave barely a trace because there’s no plausible connection between the killer and the victim.” John swallowed and shifted his body. He sagged into Toshi’s arms again. “I’m sorry, Toshi, I’m still weak.”

“It’s all right. Rest.” He’d hold John forever if he could. However, now he needed to find a way to end the killings.

Without another word Toshi pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed headquarters, the extension of Assistant Inspector Hayao, who often helped him with research.

Someone picked up on the second ring. “Hayao.”

“It’s Genjin.”

“Inspector, how can I help you?”

“Have there been any reports of a suicide in connection with this latest murder?”

“Not yet, sir. But I’ll contact you the moment I hear anything.”

“Thank you.” When he hung up he dialed Natsuka and asked how Keiko was doing.

“She’s fine,” Natsuka told him. “Just shaken.”

Toshi related to him the things he and John had discussed and told his partner what had happened in the apartment. “I’m praying you won’t think I’m crazy,” he said to the older man.

“I could not think that, Toshi-san,” was the calm reply.

It was a bold statement on Natsuka’s part and Toshi wondered briefly if his partner ever got flustered. He had yet to see it. “*Aurigato*, Natsuka.”

“No problem, my friend.”

Toshi looked down at John. “Do you think you’ll be able to get up soon?”

“In a few minutes. I’m starting to feel better.”

Toshi nodded, putting the phone back to his mouth. “I’ll need you to bring me and John to the station and then take Keiko to her parents’ home and guard her. You’re the only person I trust to keep an eye on her.”

“Whatever you need, Toshi-san.”

Toshi bowed his head, even though Natsuka couldn’t see him. “We’ll come by to get you in a few minutes.”

“Very good.”

Toshi flipped his phone closed and slipped it into his pocket. “Hopefully, we’ll have the answers we need by this afternoon,” he said to John.

John gazed up at Toshi, his angle of vision emphasizing the fullness of Toshi’s lips. Unfortunately, residues of the killer’s energy permeated the apartment, causing John’s heart to clench. Only Toshi’s arms around him kept the energy at bay. “Toshi,” he said softly, as an unwanted realization formed in his mind.

Toshi's hand smoothed over John's hair in a gentle caress. "What is it?"

"All of the victims have been couples who were destined not to be together as they wished."

Toshi's brow furrowed. "Yes?"

John cleared his throat. "Well, in my visions, Naomasa has stalked them, learned about their situation, and then took a body in order to kill them." He paused and ran his tongue across his dry lips. "I have to ask you something."

"Anything."

"About Keiko."

"What about her?"

"Does she...have someone? A lover?"

"Yes." Toshi's answer came without hesitation. "Aoki. We all went to school together. Aoki and Keiko fell in love when they were sixteen. They've always wanted to be together, but Keiko's parents forbade her because Aoki is not an ambitious man. He always wanted to be an artist. He's managed to eke out a modest career, but not what her parents wish for their son-in-law."

"Why hasn't she defied her parents?"

Toshi heaved a deep sigh. "For the same reason I haven't. Certain conditioning runs deep. It's not easy to break. The best either of us has been able to do is break the rules within those wider boundaries."

"So Keiko is in love with someone she can't really be with."

John watched the alarmed understanding infuse Toshi's handsome face. "No," Toshi breathed. "It can't be."

"It doesn't have to be," John said. "Not if we can prevent it."

Toshi stared down at him, caressing John's hair. The pads of Toshi's fingertips grazed John's forehead, igniting sparks of desire through his body. He stirred in Toshi's arms. Reaching up with one hand, John laced his fingers into Toshi's ebony hair and cradled Toshi's head. Gently, he pulled Toshi's face down to his. Their lips met and parted almost simultaneously.

John sighed and slipped his tongue against Toshi's, lingering, tasting him as if there would never be another chance.

Toshi's hand slipped down to John's cheek and rested there, his thumb brushing back and forth across John's cheekbone. Never before had John felt so held and so completely desired. From the first touch of their naked bodies together the night before, John had hoped fervently that Toshi would not marry Keiko. John had wished to be with Toshi every night and wake up to him every

morning. He'd sensed that even though Toshi was falling in love with him, too, Toshi would not easily follow his heart.

Now, someone was trying to make damn sure he did.

After several tender moments of kissing, Toshi finally pulled away. "We need to get to the station," he said softly.

John nodded. Toshi's kiss had healed him. He stretched his limbs and with Toshi's arms around him, helping him, he rose to his feet.

"Are you all right to walk?" Toshi asked.

John took a step away, keeping one hand on Toshi's arm. "I think so." Instead of walking, however, he remained in place, not wanting to leave Toshi's arms. "Toshi, this might be a bad time to say this, but I have to." *In case we don't get another chance.* He looked up at his lover. The mere sight of Toshi's dark eyes, under their heavy fringe of lashes and arched brows, made him weak.

Toshi watched him expectantly. "Yes?"

John took a deep breath. "I'm falling madly in love with you. I feel like you're my soul mate."

Toshi's eyes saddened, yet John sensed that, inside Toshi, his declaration had gone deep. After several moments Toshi nodded. "I love you, too."

John felt his heart would have soared but for the sad reservation in Toshi's voice. Thank God, at least the love was mutual. He stepped into Toshi and pulled him into an embrace. Toshi's solid, lean body was warm against his, the best feeling in the entire universe. He pressed his lips into Toshi's neck. John had wanted to say to him, "I know. You told me last night." He'd been very touched knowing that Toshi hadn't merely been translating the words *I love you* for him. But he didn't want to embarrass Toshi. In spite of Toshi's obvious inner strength, something about the man was fragile and gentle, worthy of adoration and care.

After what seemed too short a time, Toshi ended the embrace. His gaze captured John's and he appeared to be fighting off a spell. He cleared his throat, his hand reaching into his jacket and pulling out his phone again. "I'm calling my uncle now to see if he's home. We'll need to stop there and speak to him."

John nodded, looking at Toshi sympathetically. Toshi dialed and started to walk out of the apartment. Apparently his uncle was there and had answered. John couldn't understand the words, but he heard the solemn tone in Toshi's voice and understood the meaning behind the words. Sighing, he followed Toshi out of Keiko's apartment into the hallway.

Toshi's gaze met with Keiko's the moment he went back into the neighbor's apartment. Keiko rose from the sofa on which she'd been resting and looked at him with a wide, expectant gaze laced with fear. Toshi's heart lurched as his fear for her life and safety hit him. There were

moments a person realized how much he cared for another and this was one of them. Keiko was one of his oldest friends. She and Aoki both. “Keiko, I need to speak with you in private.”

She nodded. “*Hai.*”

With a hand on her elbow, he steered her out into the hallway. As she stood before him, Keiko looked more like a frightened girl than a senior editor on one of the swankiest fashion magazines in Japan. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m frightened.”

To his own surprise, Toshi reached out, lightly gripping Keiko’s arms. “I can’t lie to you, Keiko. There is danger.” He sighed, his mind working as quickly as he could think. If the man she’d seen had, indeed, been Naomasa, then according to the pattern, he was studying her, learning her schedule so that he could find a time and place to kill her. And Aoki. How could he explain such a thing to her? He didn’t want to frighten her more than she already had been. “Listen carefully. You must go to your parents’ home. I’ll send Natsuka to guard you at all times. You must not see Aoki for the time being. Don’t be in the same room with him until I tell you it’s safe, all right?”

Keiko looked puzzled and frightened, but she nodded.

“Call Aoki and explain to him what I said. Promise me.”

“I promise, Toshi,” she said softly.

Toshi breathed a sigh of relief. Keiko would be safe now.

After what had happened in Keiko’s apartment a few minutes before, he wasn’t so sure about himself and John.

CHAPTER TEN

At Headquarters, Toshi typed an update of everything that had happened on the case in the last two days, since John had been brought in to help. Well, not *everything*. Certainly the hot sex...no, lovemaking...and his strong emotions for John were not relevant to the investigation. Nor was the fact that he'd entertained fleeting thoughts of what it would be like actually to go back the States with John when this was all over....

Toshi's report made it into the computer. He then introduced John to Superintendent Ito and filled the *keishi* in on the leads John had been able to garner through taking impressions. Toshi realized as he watched Ito's easy acceptance of his recitation that he'd had no need to worry about Ito's believing them or not. He reminded himself that Ito had been the one to bring John in on the case to begin with. Between the two of them, Toshi had been the skeptical one and, honestly, they both came from a culture that put great stock in the existence of demons and spirits. When Toshi was finished Ito dismissed him with the most courteous attitude he'd shown since Toshi's promotion to inspector.

By that time it was nearly nightfall. There was still no word at that time on the missing hotel employee's whereabouts, so Toshi signed out a car and took John to have some dinner before they went back to his apartment.

After a quick supper at a sushi bar close to his building, Toshi drove them back. John had been quiet during the meal and worry caused Toshi to turn his eyes briefly off the road to look at John. "Are you okay?" He looked back out the windshield. It wouldn't do to get into an accident now.

"I'm doing all right, considering everything that's happened. How about you?"

It was a simple question, yet difficult to answer with all the conflicting emotions and concerns crowding Toshi's mind and heart. He felt the sudden gentle pressure of a hand on his arm.

"Don't answer that. It's all right." John took a deep breath and removed his hand from Toshi's sleeve, the lack of touch leaving Toshi feeling a bit mournful. "Hey, let's change the subject for a bit."

Toshi couldn't help feeling a bit relieved. "Okay."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Toshi glanced at him just before making a turn. "Sure." He looked at John long enough to see a sparkle of humor in those blue eyes.

"When was your...*moment*?"

Toshi furrowed his brow. "Moment?"

John chuckled. “Yeah. You know, you’re entering puberty, your body is awakening, and you found it wasn’t heading toward playing with the opposite team?”

Toshi smiled, feeling his cheeks burn a bit. His...moment...wasn’t anything he’d ever shared with anyone before. “Well, you know that movie, *Seven Samurai*?”

“Of course. Akira Kurosawa. One of the best films ever made.”

“When I was twelve my uncle gave me a copy of it on video. Remember the scene where Toshiro Mifune strips down to his loincloth to bathe in the river?”

“That scene is forever etched in my memory.”

Toshi chuckled. “I guess you could say my moment came when I rewound the tape about twenty times in a row watching that scene.”

John laughed and Toshi joined him, feeling the freest he had since he’d left the States. “What about you?” Toshi asked when their laughter had died down. “What was your moment?”

“Well, mine took longer than that. Growing up in a small town in Indiana, I didn’t even dare to think about the possibility of liking guys. But when I was a sophomore in high school and most of the guys in my class except for me were going crazy for Kitty Westfield, head cheerleader, I knew I was different. Because I felt that way about the captain of the guy’s swim team.” He chuckled and looked at Toshi. “It was really rough. I knew then I wasn’t going to be able to stick around and take over my dad’s farm. I had to get out.”

Toshi eased into the parking lot of his building. “Is that when you joined the military?”

“Yeah. As soon as I graduated. Kind of a strange choice, I know, considering the military’s gross lack of tolerance, but I just chose the first opportunity that presented itself. If I’d known what war was like firsthand before I enlisted, I’d have examined my options more carefully.”

Outside his apartment building Toshi parked in his space, turned off the ignition, and turned to John. In spite of everything that was happening with the case, he felt something he hadn’t felt since he’d been with Michael. At first he couldn’t put a word to it, his mind resting on the feeling until the word came. Happy.

Damn. When the case was over...and it would be at some point...John would leave and go back to the States. The mere thought was depressing as hell.

John unclicked his seatbelt. He turned, his gaze meeting Toshi’s. Toshi stared at him, not wanting to look away. A gentle energy hummed in the air between them, as if John was thinking the same kinds of things he was. “I’m sorry you had to suffer that way,” Toshi murmured.

“You mean in the closet or in the Gulf?” A tiny smile played about John’s lips, but Toshi saw past it.

“I mean all of it.”

John reached out and touched Toshi's hand. John's fingertips slid gently over the tops of his fingers, the touch leaving heat in its trail. "Hey, I'm sorry for you, too."

Toshi looked at him, stirred by John's words and the sympathy he sensed behind them. "I've never been to war."

"Yes, you have."

Toshi reached out and cupped John's cheeks. Briefly, he glanced through the car windows, but the parking lot was quiet. He turned back to John, brushing his thumbs along John's cheekbones. John's heavy beard, already in need of shaving, rasped against the flesh of his palms. Toshi smoothed the pad of one thumb across John's lower lip, loving the sexy contrast between rough beard and soft lips. John was staring back at him, eyes wide, face lined in the shadowy light of dusk.

Toshi let the fingertips of the same hand trail along John's jaw, the whiskers like a fine grade of sandpaper against them. He continued his touch to the underside of the jawbone, meeting the softer skin of John's neck. John's Adam's apple slid under his fingertips. "You're actually real, aren't you?" Toshi whispered. He felt like a jerk once the question was out, but saw only understanding in John's expression, the large, blue eyes soft.

"Yes, Toshi."

John's quiet voice sent ripples of need through Toshi. He leaned forward, slanting his lips over John's. John's lips parted, inviting Toshi deeper. John's scent of light musk invaded him. Toshi groaned softly, sliding one hand to the back of John's neck, pulling him closer. He swirled his tongue against John's, loving the taste and feel.

The kiss deepened, causing desire to pound through Toshi's body, demanding to be unleashed. He pulled away from their kiss, panting. "Let's go upstairs." Without waiting for an answer, he got out of the car and slammed the door shut, leading John to the garage elevators.

When the doors slid open, Toshi grabbed John's hand and tugged him inside. He pressed the button for his floor and as soon as the doors had closed he backed John gently against the stainless steel panels of the wall, grateful for, and aroused by, how John so willingly submitted to him. The blue of John's eyes was dusky and he looked back at Toshi with undisguised need. John's soft lips were slightly swollen from kissing and John reached out, grasping the lapels of Toshi's jacket to pull him closer.

Before he kissed John again Toshi reached out and pulled the 'stop' button out, causing the elevator to halt, then put his arms around John, his hands sliding against John's back under John's jacket. John's muscles were deliciously hard and warm under his palms. Need coursed through Toshi and he leaned in to John, gently tugging John's bottom lip between his lips and tongue then plunging in again to taste him.

John sighed deep in his throat and his body sagged against the elevator wall. John's hands fisted Toshi's jacket, pulling their bodies tightly together. John's erection rubbed his, sending more jolts of pleasure through his entire body. Toshi bent his knees and pushed, grinding his pelvis against John's while he kissed him. Without thinking, Toshi's hands went to the buttons of

John's shirt, working open the first few so he could feel that incredible chest, the hard muscles, soft hair and small smooth nipples.

Just touching John fueled Toshi's need for more, his longing, ignored for so many years, finally being fed. He pulled his mouth from John's and nibbled along John's jaw, sliding his tongue against the light roughness of John's beard, inhaling John's scent while he kissed a trail down the soft side of John's neck and swiveled his tongue in the hollow of John's throat, devouring the salty-sweet taste of skin.

At the same time Toshi yanked John's shirt from the waist of his pants, fingers scrabbling with the buckle of John's belt.

John's hands slid from Toshi's back. "Here," he breathed. "Let me help you." He pulled the belt open, leaving Toshi's hands free to work open the button and slide down the zipper. Toshi went down on his knees and, in one movement, slid John's pants and boxers down around his thighs and took John's cock deep into his mouth.

John groaned and slid his fingers into Toshi's hair, moving lightly against his scalp. Damn, John tasted incredible and Toshi closed his eyes, tightening his mouth on the silky skin. His lips bumped over veins as he took John in almost to the base and then slid back again to the head, licking off a drop of pre-come in the tiny opening. John pushed his hips forward and Toshi swallowed John's entire length again, his hands anchored lightly on John's slim hips. Vaguely he heard John saying his name in a throaty whisper and the sound only fueled his hunger.

He moved faster, withdrawing to the tip and sliding back down, causing John's hips to buck each time, fingers tightening in Toshi's hair. John's cock twitched and swelled in Toshi's mouth, his release was building fast. Toshi pulled his lips tighter and swallowed John up again.

John groaned and he erupted, spurting hot and salty down Toshi's throat. Toshi swallowed John, fingertips pressing hard into John's hips, mouth riding the tiny spasm until John was softening, and slipped out of his mouth, body sagging heavily against the wall.

Toshi licked his lips and slowly stood up, resting against John in an embrace. John was breathing heavily and laid his cheek against Toshi's shoulder. "Thank you," he breathed, the tone of his voice full of appreciation and love.

Toshi closed his eyes. His own body still pulsed with unsatisfied need. His hands clutched John's shirt, grabbing tight, as if letting John go would make him disappear. "Anytime," he whispered. After several moments Toshi slowly pulled away and pressed a soft kiss on John's lips. "I think we'd better finish inside."

John nodded, his blue eyes wide and soft. Slowly and quietly he pulled up his pants while Toshi did up the buttons of his shirt. When they both looked more or less put together, Toshi pushed the button back in on the panel and the elevator continued its ascent to Toshi's floor.

Back in the apartment, Toshi kicked off his shoes and pulled John into his arms, kissing his lover deeply. In little steps, not taking his lips from John's, he moved them together toward his bedroom. Toshi pushed John's jacket over his shoulders and down his arms, yanking it off him

and dropping it aside just as they passed over the threshold of Toshi's bedroom. A few more steps and they bumped the edge of the bed, falling over as one onto the mattress.

Toshi's hands went again to John's shirt, not stopping this time with the first few buttons. He wanted it *all* off, practically ripping the shirttails out of John's pants and unbuckling the belt while John opened Toshi's belt at the same time.

John's fingers brushed Toshi's erection as he unzipped Toshi's pants. Toshi groaned into John's mouth and rolled slightly to the side so that John could slip his pants past his hips. He levered up off the bed and kicked them off the rest of the way. Then he tugged John's pants down and off. He grasped John's hand and tugged him. "Come on," he said, barely able to speak above a whisper.

John stood up, shrugged the rest of the way out of his shirt and tossed it on the bed behind them. Toshi led him into the bathroom and turned on the shower. While he waited for the water to heat up, he turned to John and pulled his lover into his arms again.

"This time I'm going in with you," he said close to John's ear. He nipped John's earlobe playfully. He didn't mean to completely dominate their lovemaking, but he'd finally found someone he felt uninhibited and safe with and couldn't stem the tide of joyous freedom that poured from him. John seemed to understand and let him take over, hands caressing Toshi's back, kneading the muscles sensuously, the touch gentle and erotic.

Steam began to billow through the open glass door of the shower and Toshi gently tugged John into the enclosure, pulling him close as they stood together under the spray. Toshi couldn't stop kissing John, tasting him and holding him, intoxicated by the incredible mixture of gentleness and masculine strength that John had.

Water pelted them, darkening John's golden hair, plastering the soft hairs of his chest to the broad muscles. Toshi backed John away from the spray and took a bottle of shower gel, pouring a large dollop into his hand. He rubbed his palms together, creating a lather before smoothing it over John's chest and back, loving the smooth slide of his soapy hands against John's muscles. John's hands rested on Toshi's shoulders, moving with Toshi's movements, body pliant under Toshi's hands, letting Toshi do whatever he wanted.

Toshi rubbed the suds over John's hard stomach, fingertips tracing the definition of John's abdominal muscles before slipping over his hip, across his lower back and over his butt cheeks.

John moaned softly, water dripping from his lips and beading on his tanned skin. Toshi rinsed the soap from his hands and squeezed conditioner onto his fingertips. He smoothed his palm over John's ass, his fingers inching toward the crevice between the hard buttocks. Toshi pressed his body closer against John's and reached down, his fingertips finding the small, puckered hole deep inside. His fingertips, slick from conditioner, slid easily around the rim of John's hole. John's fingers pressed into Toshi's arms, his breath warm against Toshi's neck.

Hot need surged through Toshi's groin at the feel of John's intimate opening. He turned John around in his arms and slipped a finger deep inside, his lips pressed in the curve of John's neck. John groaned, pushing back against Toshi's hand. Toshi answered the soft demand for more and pushed in another finger, moving both around in slow, hard circles. John groaned.

Toshi pulled out his fingers, smoothed the conditioner onto the length of his cock, and pushed the head into John's tight opening. That first contact sent darts of delicious heat up his cock, but he held back from slamming hard into John. John moaned again and pushed his ass out, causing Toshi to slide in deeper. Toshi sucked in a hard breath, his eyes shut tight against the onslaught of pleasure. One more push and he slid the rest of the way in until his body touched John's.

His lips remained pressed to the curve of John's neck. He flickered the tip of his tongue on John's wet skin, inhaling the sweet flavor mixed with water. He moved his hips slowly, each thrust sending white-hot pleasure shooting through his cock, down into his balls. His hands slid around to John's chest, his fingers raking lightly through the damp hair there. Slowly, gently, he rocked his pelvis, his cock moving inside John's tight channel just enough to create incredible friction.

John moaned and panted softly. Toshi slid one hand down and wrapped his fingers around John's cock, which had gotten hard again. The wet skin let Toshi's hand slide easily up and down the shaft, his thumb smoothing over the head and then diving back down to cup John's balls.

Toshi parted his lips and grazed John's skin lightly with his teeth, smoothing over the spot with his tongue. The pressure built in his cock, but he still held back, not wanting the moment to be over. Once he came, he'd slide out and he wanted it to last as long as possible. Slowly he withdrew, just a little bit, and then plunged in again.

John gasped and sagged back against Toshi, silently demanding more. Toshi waited, his hand sliding up and down John's cock. John's body moved against his, causing the tension to build in his own groin. He held back as long as he could and then surrendered to his own need. He drove in again, moving harder and faster. The sense of freedom that John inspired in him now rose. Never before had he felt so complete. The spray of the shower thundered in his ears and battered his skin. The skin of his cock slid against the tight insides of John's ass.

John's muscles squeezed him tight and Toshi came, spilling himself inside John, his hands gripping John's hips, pulling John tight against his front. Toshi collapsed against John, his cheek on John's back. John's muscles tightened around him and John's body stiffened in his arms. Toshi felt the heat of John's climax spill onto his hand and wash away in the shower.

He rested inside John until he was completely soft and slipped out when John turned around in his arms and kissed him, hands resting on Toshi's shoulders. John's eyes were half hidden under heavy lids and a lazy grin curved his lips. Toshi smiled at John and returned the kiss, lapping the droplets of water off John's lips with tiny strokes of his tongue.

Suddenly, John gripped Toshi's shoulders, his fingers digging into the muscles. John's head snapped back, his eyes wide. He gasped.

Toshi stiffened, an icy prickle skittering up his arms and over his back. "John!" Gently he shook him. "John!"

John stared at him, eyes wild, gaze boring into Toshi's. "Stop him!" John ground out in Japanese.

It was then Toshi recognized that the same thing was happening to John now that had happened earlier in Keiko's apartment. "Stop who?" he demanded. Now was his chance, hopefully, to get a concrete answer.

John continued to stare, the spirit dominating him, crowding out the gentle lover Toshi knew. John's bottom lip quivered a moment and Toshi thought he might not answer.

"Stop who?"

"Shingen."

Toshi stared at him. This name had never come up before. "Is Shingen the killer?"

John's gaze darted past Toshi's face then back to him. "He's coming. I must go." John's body jerked and went limp.

Toshi caught John and leaned back against the marble wall of the shower, holding John tightly against him. He stared through the glass, now completely fogged from steam. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. It was bad enough these *oni* took over John's body, but did they always have to get him in the shower where he could slip and kill himself on the wet tiles?

John remained unconscious in his arms. Toshi lowered him gently to the shower floor and turned off the spray, kneeling down beside him. Toshi realized then that there must be two spirits. One, the spirit that had addressed Naomasa, who had possessed John's body this afternoon, and a second, the one who'd just spoken.

Damn. Not one spirit, but two. Finding answers was only leading to more questions.

John took a sudden deep breath and blinked. Toshi looked down at him and passed a hand gently over John's forehead. "John, are you all right?"

John breathed heavily and blinked several more times. "It happened again."

Toshi nodded, caressing John's brow. He told John what the spirit had said. "It looks like there are two of them, not one."

John took another deep breath. "Yeah. I'd say you're right. The energy was different this time. This was one was frightened, upset. But not so angry."

Toshi sighed. "Look, I do want to find the answers and get this case solved, but I care more about your welfare. This is terrible."

To Toshi's relief, John reached up and gently grasped his wrist. He brought Toshi's hand to his lips and kissed it. Then he put Toshi's hand palm down on his chest. "Just touch me," John said softly. "It always helps."

"Whatever you need."

John looked up at him. “Don’t worry, Toshi. I’ll be all right. I’m not going to stop until this is over.”

Toshi gazed down at him. He wanted it to be over. Six months ago would have been nice. Except then he would never have met John.

“Hey, Toshi.”

Toshi smoothed John’s wet hair back. “What is it?”

“Are you sure you’re going to want to deal with this?”

John’s voice held fear and Toshi understood the meaning behind his question. He rested his hand on John’s head, brushing a thumb gently across John’s forehead. “Yes,” he murmured. “Definitely.”

Relief flooded John’s face. He took a deep breath. “I hope so. I have a tendency to scare people away.”

Toshi caressed John’s hair again. “Good thing for me, then.” He sighed again, his hand resting on John’s hair. All he wanted right now was to get into bed and hold John all night. Hopefully tomorrow they’d find a way to stop this killer spirit. Or whatever the hell it was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Toshi and John went directly to the museum early the next morning.

The curator was in his office. He stood from his desk and bowed to Toshi. “Inspector Genjin,” he said, before Toshi could even show his badge, “Your uncle told me you’d be here.”

Toshi nodded, his body sizzling with tension. His uncle had once been the curator, but as his emotional distress settled over him more deeply, the spells of forgetfulness, the crying, he’d had to give up his post. Out of respect for all the good work Musashi Genjin had done at the museum, he continued to assist with the archives. The museum benefited from Musashi’s knowledge of history and his meticulous care of the precious documents stored inside.

“Yes,” Toshi answered. “My uncle said that he left something in the archives for me.” He was vividly aware of John standing close by and was attuned to the fact that he was now regularly on guard against the effects their surroundings could have on the man he loved. Glancing sideways at his lover, Toshi was relieved to see that no particular strain tightened John’s tanned, chiseled features.

The curator came out from behind his desk, pulling a ring of keys from his pocket. “*Hai*,” he said, gesturing them from the office. “Your uncle was adamant that you see this particular document.”

Toshi followed the short man, with John close beside him. He was aware that John stayed near to him because, for some reason, his touch helped to dispel the energies that John picked up from their surroundings. The honor of being such a comfort to John was both thrilling and unnerving. Since Michael he’d never allowed himself to be so important to someone, or them to him.

“Did he mention why this document was so important?”

The little man shook his head. “No. He said only that it was urgent and that as soon as you arrived I was to bring you to the archives.”

The curator’s response sent a flutter through Toshi’s gut.

The curator unlocked the door to the archives room and stood aside, allowing Toshi and John to enter before him. Toshi watched the small man go to a drawer in a large wall unit and pull out a small package wrapped in plastic. He turned around and gestured to a small table with two chairs.

Toshi nodded and seated himself at the table with John.

The curator gently unwrapped the folds of plastic and set down a small book, the edges of the yellowed pages frayed. “This was the private journal of a *samurai* who served under the Edo *shogunate*. It is one of very few of its kind that has survived from any of the *shogun* eras. You may stay here for as long as you need to examine this document, but I cannot let it be removed

from the premises. And you must wear these gloves. You understand?" He pulled out two pairs of cotton gloves and set them on the table.

"Of course. *Aurigato*," Toshi answered, his thank you serving to verbally dismiss the curator.

The man bowed and retreated from the room, closing the door behind him.

Toshi looked at John. "This is the private journal of a *samurai*," he translated.

"I see." John shifted in his chair, appearing vaguely uncomfortable.

As anxious as Toshi was to look inside the document, his concern for John took precedence. Obviously, something was happening to him. "What is it?" he asked softly.

John exhaled, laying his hands on the tabletop. "The murderer...he's been here." John's voice was nearly a whisper.

Tension seeped rapidly into Toshi's limbs. "Recently?"

"I can't tell."

Toshi placed a hand over John's forearm, the small movement immediately rewarded with relief that caused John's features to relax a bit. "Do you need to leave?"

John's blue gaze locked with his. "No." He continued to look at Toshi. "But keep your hand on me while we're here, okay?"

The request caused a pang in Toshi's heart, causing his protective streak to surge up. Toshi needed to love John, to protect him. These yearnings ran deep in his nature and he'd been ignoring those intrinsic desires for far too long. From the moment they'd met, Toshi hadn't felt as if they were strangers, but friends who had found each other after a long, torturous, lonely absence. "Of course," he said softly, squeezing the hard muscle of John's forearm for emphasis.

Toshi gave his attention to the journal and picked up a pair of gloves and put them on. Carefully, he opened the cover, staring down at the Japanese writing, beautiful calligraphy painted in columns down the yellowed paper. He knew that the only portion of the words John would be able to decipher was the date, written in Arabic numerals. 1846. The next thing he read sent a chill through his entire body.

"Toshi? What does it say?" John asked. His voice cut through Toshi's horror.

Toshi looked up at him, working to remain calm. "The *samurai*'s name is Koto Naomasa."

John's blue eyes widened. "Holy shit."

"Apparently he was a sword maker," Toshi explained, scanning the page. He read on, his heart beginning to pump a bit harder as he took in the subject matter of the *samurai*'s heartbroken rants. His blood ran cold when he saw the names mentioned. He looked up at John. "He...Koto

Naomasa... was in love with a fellow *samurai*. Akira. For whom he made the most magnificent swords of his career.”

John’s breath hitched audibly. “Does he mention Kenji?”

Toshi nodded, struggling for the ability to speak. In spite of the fact that he’d come to believe in John’s gift of inner sight, this newest confirmation of it was too eerie even for a seasoned detective. “Yes,” he finally managed. “Kenji is Akira’s lover. Naomasa is envious. He’s been in love with Akira for a long time and hates the fact that Kenji succeeded in winning Akira’s heart.” It hadn’t taken much of Naomasa’s journal for the scenario of a love triangle to become clear.

Toshi turned the pages delicately, one by one, skimming each entry. The journal entries followed the development of the relationship between Akira and Kenji. Apparently Naomasa had spent a great deal of time spying on the lovers and wrote in intimate detail of their physical relationship. Toshi dragged in a shivery breath. The page he was reading detailed almost the exact way he’d made love to John the night before.

“What is it?” John asked when Toshi stopped translating for him. He looked into John’s concerned, blue eyes. “Naomasa was spying on Akira and Kenji during one of their trysts. The way you felt we were being spied on.”

Every nerve ending in John’s body seemed to skitter around inside him. The implications grew more frightening by the moment. For several seconds John breathed deeply, unable to speak.

“John?” Toshi touched his arm lightly.

The touch brought John out of his shock-imposed trance and he looked at Toshi. “I need to touch the book,” he said softly.

Toshi slid the document a few inches toward him. John pulled on the other pair of gloves then put his hand, palm down, on the page. He braced himself just before the onslaught of images. Each scenario was the same. A strong, angry-looking man, his thick hair in a topknot, his body clad in a *kimono*, spying on Kenji and Akira, watching the lovers argue, embrace, make love, witnessing Kenji’s desperate pleas and Akira’s frightened and haughty refusals.

John’s breath rasped tightly, his heartbeat increasing from the strong emotions roiling through him. He was about to use the last of his strength to pull his hand away when the scene shifted. He saw the archive room. A young woman was receiving the book and setting it on the table at which he now sat. His throat tightened. The murderer was in the room with her, his energy dark and simmering. The woman looked up, smiling and thanking whoever had handed her the document. In John’s mind the room shifted, as if being filmed by a camera. The person to whom the young woman had spoken now appeared in his vision.

John flinched. The murderer’s energy stabbed him and his hand yanked back, off the book, almost of its own accord. But not before John saw Toshi’s uncle. He recognized the older man from the photograph in Toshi’s apartment. Musashi was bowing to the woman to whom he’d just handed Naomasa’s journal.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Toshi stared at John. The other man had needed a few minutes to recover from the vision, but when he had his revelation had been horrifying.

“Are you sure what you saw?” Toshi’s hand shook. Absently, he reached into his jacket for his cigarettes, not caring about the no-smoking sign posted in the room. He was painfully aware of John’s dazed stare as he lit the cigarette and took a deep, tobacco-laden drag into his lungs. He exhaled and looked again at John. “My uncle is not a murderer,” he said. “I’ve known him my entire life. He fought in the war and he’s never been the same since. But…” Toshi gestured in the air with the hand holding the cigarette. “He doesn’t have the heart of a murderer.” He fell silent under John’s gaze and inhaled another puff. The ashes fell lightly to the floor.

“I never said he was a murderer, Toshi. I’m sorry if I didn’t communicate clearly.” John’s voice was soft. Non-judgmental. “I felt the murderer’s energy in the room. The energy has the same feel as the…possession yesterday in Keiko’s apartment.”

Toshi heaved a deep sigh. “You definitely didn’t see a third person in the room?”

“I definitely didn’t.”

Toshi stared down at the manuscript while he puffed his cigarette down to a tiny butt. The same darkness he’d begun to feel about the case before John’s arrival settled over him again. He’d thought that John’s visions would lead them to the murderer, but now his impressions only led to more deeply disturbing questions. The main question was why had Uncle Musashi only told him about the manuscript today if he’d known about it all along? The fact that the name Naomasa was inside could have provided a much-needed lead and perhaps have prevented the other killings.

Toshi’s cigarette had burned nearly to the filter. He looked around for a wastebasket and, finding one in the corner, mashed the cigarette out inside it. He returned to the table where John sat quietly, his handsome face a mask of indistinct expression.

“I’m sorry, Toshi,” he murmured, not looking up.

Toshi sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. “Why do you keep apologizing?”

John shook his head. “It feels like the right thing to do.”

Toshi looked at him, resisting the urge to reach out and caress John’s hair. Even now, in a moment of great tension, his tenderness for the man welled up and the bond between them, though so new and fragile, made him feel like there was something good to live for. “Please, don’t apologize anymore. You sound like you blame yourself. You didn’t murder anyone.” He looked back down at the manuscript and pulled it toward himself. “If you’re up to it, we need to read more before I call my uncle.”

John nodded. "I'm fine."

Toshi turned the page and continued reading. Most entries were more of the same. Naomasa's spying on the lovers, chronicling Kenji and Akira's saga of heartbreak and desire. The main change that Toshi noted was Naomasa's growing anger about Akira's impending marriage. Naomasa hated Kenji, but not as much as he hated the prospect of Akira's death sentence by marriage, as Naomasa put it. All of this, Toshi translated and summarized for John.

Toshi continued reading until he reached one entry that chilled his blood.

"What is it, Toshi?" John had obviously registered Toshi's change of expression, or tension.

Toshi cleared his throat. He glanced at John. "I'll read the entire entry for you." He looked back down and drew a deep breath before starting.

"April, 1848. Akira is determined to go through with this marriage. Kenji grows more despondent with each passing day. For the first time since I have known the little shit, I feel sorry for him. As much as I've wanted Akira for myself and have loved him with every breath I take, I imagine that this is what Kenji feels as well. I have always agreed with Kenji. It is better to become a *ronin* than to suffer the permanent loss of the one thing in the world for which your heart beats. Akira is a fool. What does he think he can take with him when he dies? What will his power, wealth and influence have gotten him at the end of his life? Shit, that's what. I'm not a good man. I have murder in my heart. My soul is stained black with the things I have done. But perhaps there is one way to turn my blackness toward something good. This sword I fashioned with my own hands and which I carry at my side night and day should be used not to slay men for greed, but to keep men together, men whose hearts already beat as one heart."

The entry ended and Toshi fell silent, afraid to turn the yellowed page and continue. He glanced at John whose fathomless blue eyes stared back at him, full of understanding. The intensity of the moment had actually pushed a rim of gold around the blue color, adding dimensions of emotion to his already full expression. If words had been physical beings in the room with them, Toshi imagined the creatures would be bouncing off the walls of the little room and pounding on them like hard rain. The skin all over his body felt suddenly cold.

"Please, go on," John whispered.

Toshi nodded and turned his attention to the journal. A few more entries followed where Naomasa continued to stalk Kenji and Akira, waiting for the right moment to grant them eternal love. Toshi's heart raced. They were almost to the last entry. At the last entry he paused, deciding to go ahead and read it aloud before skimming it. He needed to share the burden of whatever was in that entry with John. Somehow he sensed that John would understand.

Toshi cleared his throat, the residue of tobacco in his mouth sickly stale.

"July, 1848. I have done it. Kenji has his wish now. He is forever with his beloved Akira. What I did, however, was not for Kenji, but for the beautiful one. For unlike Kenji, Akira would never have taken his own heart in his hands and gone with his beloved. My sword and my soul are now exonerated. The dirty blackness of both has been washed clean. My sword unites their bodies

and souls for eternity and did so without suffering. Now my sword is clean and my knife will finish my redemption.”

Again, Toshi fell silent. He kept his hands on his lap, knowing they'd tremble if he didn't. Beside him, John's breath rasped in an uneven rhythm. “He murdered them,” Toshi heard himself say. He'd barely felt his own lips move, yet the voice that spoke was his own. “Then he committed *sipukku*.”

“Yes,” John whispered. “I gathered.”

“John, if my uncle knew about Naomasa, why didn't he tell me? This was obviously a valuable clue.” He shook his head, his dread mounting. “It's not like him to do such a thing.”

John's hand came out and rested on Toshi's forearm. The blue eyes looking into his radiated sympathy. “There's only one way to find out.”

Toshi sighed and nodded. He closed the journal and pulled off the gloves. “Yes. We must go there now.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Toshi's family home was on a quiet street in a neighborhood of stately homes with manicured gardens. Natsuka pulled up to the curb to let them out. Toshi had explained to John that his partner was going to watch over Keiko and take her to Aoki. John had completely agreed, but hadn't asked Toshi what the nature of the murders meant for the two of them. In spite of the fact that Toshi had admitted his feelings, as he'd said before, family indoctrination ran deep and John wasn't so sure that Toshi would be able to surmount that obstacle.

Natsuka pulled away, leaving them on the sidewalk. Toshi looked at John. "My uncle has a small apartment behind the main house," he said. "He's my father's brother and my parents wanted him to live here because he's..."

John nodded his understanding. "They feel he's mentally not well because of the war?"

"Yes. He's been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His doctor explained that it can last the rest of a person's life, no matter how old they are."

John nodded, his eyes sad. "Yes, I know."

Toshi's cheeks burned. "I'm sorry, John. That was insensitive."

"It's all right. I've already come to terms with that part." He paused. "Anyway, are your parents here too?"

"They're actually away in China right now. Some ambassadorial function."

"Is your uncle here alone?"

"No," Toshi answered, leading John up the front steps to a dwelling that sported a mixture of modern architecture with traditional Japanese touches in the roof and walls. On either side of the front walk were gardens of raked stones, trellises, and bonsai trees. "We have a housekeeper and a driver."

Toshi led John around the side of the house to a backyard with more gardens. On the far end was a cottage, a smaller version of the house.

A *soji* screen slid to the side. The man who stood there was short and a bit stout. His thin, gray hair framed a round, gentle face. The old man's eyes lit up when he saw his nephew. He smiled, his eyes narrowing to slits as he gestured to Toshi.

When John and Toshi drew near, Toshi's uncle bowed to him and then to John.

Toshi spoke to the man in Japanese and again, though John didn't understand the words, he understood that Toshi was making introductions. John reached out his hand to offer a handshake

and to receive an impression. Considering the circumstances and what he and Toshi had learned a short while ago, there was no time to waste.

Toshi said a few words more to his uncle as the elderly man accepted John's hand. "I explained to my uncle that you were brought in from America to help with my investigation. He's pleased to meet you. I didn't tell him exactly what you do."

John nodded his understanding and looked at Toshi's uncle. "I'm pleased to meet you, sir," he said, even though he knew the man didn't speak English.

Musashi's hand came to rest in John's. His handshake was as gentle as his appearance, the skin light and dry. John's immediate impression of Toshi's uncle was of deep pain and suffering. The trauma of war still haunted him and his strong desire to spare his nephew suffering came through in his soft touch. Although there was residual anger in Musashi's heart, it was not directed at any individual that John could sense and as far as he could tell Musashi did not, indeed, have the heart of a murderer. Toshi had been right about that.

Satisfied, John released Musashi's hand and the older man gestured to the interior of the cottage, saying something in Japanese.

"My uncle is inviting us in for tea," Toshi explained, giving John a pointed look. The question in Toshi's eyes was clear. Toshi wanted to know if John felt anything that might prevent him from going inside.

John nodded. "I'd like that. Your uncle seems like a kind man."

*

"He is," Toshi answered, removing his shoes on the narrow wooden deck and following his uncle inside. He waited just inside the door for John to slip off his loafers and join them. Toshi prayed that his uncle was not a murderer.

His uncle led Toshi and John to sit on the low, white sofa with a glass top coffee table in front of it. Toshi knew that his uncle would go through an entire *obon temae* tea ceremony, simple yet ritualistic, wanting his guest and nephew to feel honored. The fact that Toshi was here to ask his uncle why he hadn't told him about the manuscript plagued him with guilt. Toshi had never had any reason before in his life to speak with Uncle Musashi with anything but respect and mutual regard. Toshi felt that he, himself, was the criminal here.

In the tiny kitchen, the teakettle began to bubble and hiss. Toshi watched his uncle kneel before the table, setting out the tea bowl, whisk, scoop, tea caddy, and a cloth for cleaning the bowls before them. Inwardly, he sighed, observing the elderly man's precise, peaceful movements.

"Uncle," he tried softly. Toshi knew it was unheard of to interrupt during the ceremony, but, then again, one didn't usually attend a tea ceremony while on the hunt for a serial killer. Especially when that killer was a ghost who'd just possessed your lover's body.

Musashi looked up at him, his concentration not seeming broken.

“I’m sorry,” Toshi said in a near whisper. “This is terribly urgent.”

Musashi nodded and remained kneeling, his hands in his lap. In the background, the water was bubbling faster and harder.

“What did the doctor tell you today?” Toshi asked.

Musashi’s dark eyes became distant. “Nothing bad, Toshi. My heart is a little irregular at times. Nothing to worry about.”

Beside him, Toshi felt John tense. Toshi glanced at him. John was watching Musashi, the expression in his blue eyes unreadable. Toshi cleared his throat. There was no choice but to forge ahead. “Uncle, I went to the museum as you said. That manuscript...there was a murder written about in it. A murder like the ones that have been happening.”

Musashi nodded and looked down. “Yes, I know. I thought perhaps it would give you clues.”

“How long have you known about the journal’s contents?”

The teakettle’s whistle moaned, the sound preparing to build to a higher pitch. Musashi rose from his kneeling position and went to the kitchen. Toshi could hear him remove the kettle from the heat. In the next moment, the elderly man returned to his kneeling position on the *tatami*, his face drawn to a troubled expression. “There is another question in your question, nephew.” He raised his sad gaze to Toshi’s.

“I’m sorry, Uncle, but I must ask.”

“I learned of the journal’s contents just before I told you about its existence.”

“How did you learn of them, Uncle?”

Musashi sighed. “I cannot answer that without destroying your respect for me.”

Toshi’s insides jumped.

“I know that you believe my mind is fragile because of the war,” Musashi went on. “My brother and his wife... Until this moment, Toshi, I thought you felt differently than they. It is an insult.” Emotional pain clouded the elderly man’s face.

Toshi bowed his head. This was one of the most difficult things he’d ever done. Musashi had always been the kindest person in his life. “I apologize, Uncle. I do feel differently than my parents. But I’m a detective in a murder investigation and I believe you have handled the journal in recent months.” Toshi braced himself for his next statement, something that came only from John’s visions. His uncle’s reaction would tell a great deal about Musashi’s guilt or innocence. “You handed it to a young woman who’d gone to the archives to do research.”

Musashi’s dark eyes lighted with recognition. “Yes, I remember that. She was writing a book.”

Toshi's blood turned cold in his veins. The woman of which he spoke was one of the lesbian couple who'd been murdered. He hadn't yet had his uncle confirm the girl's identity from a photograph, but obviously John's vision had been accurate. "That's correct."

Musashi's brows drew together and his face clouded. "I did not know about the contents of the journal at that time. I was busy with other projects and hadn't taken the time to read it. I knew only that it had belonged to a *samurai* in the Edo *shogunate*, a swordmaker. The young woman was writing a book about *samurai* and I thought it might be a helpful resource for her in that regard. That was all until..." He fell silent.

Toshi leaned forward in his seat, his heart pounding so fast he worried about his own ability to remain conscious. "Uncle, it is of utmost importance that you tell me how you learned of the journal's contents. I give you my word of honor that I'll believe you."

Musashi's eyes misted over. His lower lip trembled. "In...in a...dream, Toshi."

"What happened in the dream?"

His uncle's gaze rested on his. "The *samurai*, the one in the journal, he told me what he'd done. He said to go and read it, that I would know of his crime."

Toshi's palms broke out in a sweat. Toshi felt that John had to be sensing what was happening, even though he didn't understand the words. Toshi wanted to translate for him, but felt it would be a further insult to his uncle. He'd wait until he was alone with John to explain. "What was his name, Uncle?"

Musashi thought for a moment. Toshi knew his uncle would remember. He never forgot names. "Naomasa," the elderly man said after a few moments. "Koto Naomasa."

A chill slithered up John's spine. He'd understood none of the conversation between Toshi and his uncle, although he had guessed by Musashi's responses the questions Toshi had asked. And he certainly recognized the name of the *samurai*.

Toshi remained quiet next to him. He didn't speak for several moments. It was then that John felt the energy. The same force that had possessed him now began to fill the room. Only this time, it was different.

A shadow loomed up behind Toshi's uncle, hovering behind him.

John went rigid. "Toshi," he whispered. "He's here. The killer."

Toshi's hand went to his jacket and John recognized the automatic response of a detective. He was reaching for his weapon. John stayed him with a hand on his arm. "Don't," he said softly.

Toshi obeyed and pulled his hand out just as his cell phone went off.

He pulled it out and answered. "Genjin."

“Inspector.” It was Hayao.

“Yes, Assistant Inspector, what is it?”

“We found the missing hotel employee. It appears he, too, committed suicide, as the pattern goes. He had rented a room on the other side of the city where he OD’d on sleeping pills.”

Toshi’s gut tightened. “Go on.”

“He was a bellhop at the hotel. His last shift was during the time the murders took place.”

Toshi’s body tensed like an iron spring. “What else?”

“His fingerprints match the fingerprints on the handle of the sword.”

Toshi’s blood ran cold and his hand trembled around the phone.

“Sir?”

“I’ll get back to you. Let forensics know I’ll be down there in a few minutes.”

“*Hai.*”

Toshi flipped the phone shut and looked at John who stared back at him expectantly. Toshi told John what Hayao had reported. “John, all this time it was right in front of me.” His voice fell to a hoarse whisper. “How could I have been so blind?”

“Toshi, how could you have possibly made this connection? How would you have known without this channeling?”

John’s words were kind and soothing, but Toshi couldn’t help blaming himself. He stood up. “Are you able to take more impressions, John? I’m afraid this is the most important one.”

John rose from the sofa. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Toshi turned to his uncle, fear for the elderly man’s safety gripping him. “Uncle, you must come with me and John now. I will explain everything, but we must go right now.”

Musashi nodded. “Of course, Toshi.”

Toshi led his uncle to the car and helped him into the backseat. In moments they were on their way to Headquarters. When they arrived there, Toshi situated his uncle in the waiting room of the lobby and brought John down to the morgue.

“Hojo Kazunori” Toshi read from the file he held while the morgue attendant pulled out the drawer containing the bellhop’s corpse.

John winced at the sight, even though this time there was no horrible stab wound in the man's middle. He merely looked asleep. It was the name *Naomasa* on the victim's forehead that lent such a macabre appearance to the death.

Toshi excused the attendant. "Age twenty-nine. Cause of death suicide by overdose of sleeping pills," Toshi continued. "Lived with his wife of three years. Minor history of car theft in his teens. Nothing since then. Co-workers said he was quiet, kept mostly to himself, read the newspaper on his breaks, and went home. Neighbors said he was courteous, helpful and quiet."

John glanced at Toshi who looked back at him, a hesitant expression in those dark eyes.

"John, are you ready?"

He nodded, appreciating Toshi's concern. Toshi believed the swiftness of results in this case was due only to John's psychic abilities. But Toshi was only half-right. In the past, investigations had not brought such quick results because there had been no one to help bring John back when the visions knocked the life out of him.

John stepped forward and reached out, placing his hand, palm down, on Kazunori's shoulder. As usual, a moment passed with nothing. John closed his eyes as a shiver of energy passed into his hand and up his arm. He started slightly as the vision opened to his mind.

Quietly he watched the montage of images that always arose when he touched a body. Kazunori eating a meal at the table with a woman, presumably his wife. Kazunori dressed in his bellhop's uniform, reading a newspaper. So far, nothing out of the ordinary.

That's when it happened. The energy shifted, darkened. The next image was of Kazunori wearing an undershirt and boxer shorts, standing at his bathroom mirror, shaving. Nothing unusual about that. But the image reflected in the mirror behind Kazunori chilled John's blood as he watched. A man, broad chested and strong, clad in what appeared to be religious robes, hair shaved close to the scalp like a monk, stood behind him, watching Kazunori shave.

Naomasa? Whoever he was, his energy radiated fierce and hard, the energy of a killer, for sure. *The killer.*

John drew in a quick breath, bracing himself.

The scene continued. Kazunori finished shaving and rinsed the soap off his face. The man behind him, the monk...the killer...took several steps toward Kazunori, came right up behind him and stood there. A few seconds passed. The monk took another step toward Kazunori and disappeared. Kazunori's body jerked then straightened. Kazunori stood, staring into the mirror, and John saw the killer's face reflected.

John's chest tightened. Now he saw Kazunori walking outside at night, a shovel in his hand. He reached a spot and stopped, pushing the shovel into the ground and digging. In moments, he threw the shovel down and went to his knees, reaching into the hole he'd dug.

A sliver of energy shot up John's arm. He watched Kazunori pull out a bundle wrapped in a dirty sheet, unwinding it to reveal a sword. John exhaled, his breath coming with some difficulty.

“John?”

John heard Toshi's worried voice behind him, but couldn't answer. The answer was too close. He couldn't stop.

The vision cut to the hotel. John recognized the plush carpet in the hallway. Kazunori was inside, wearing his uniform, the sword in his hands. Step by step the bellhop made his way to the door. He pulled a card key from his pocket and slid it up the lock, pushing the door open.

John gasped. He felt a light touch on his arm. Toshi. Out of sheer reflex he shrugged off Toshi's hand. Kazunori was inside the room, looking at the couple on the bed, oblivious to anything else but their lovemaking.

John saw Kazunori raise the sword and bring it down.

John's body jerked violently but he fought the urge to pass out. There was more to see. Gritting his teeth, he moved his hand from Kazunori's shoulder to his forehead, placing it palm down across the skin as if taking the man's temperature.

Bam. Another vision. Kazunori running through the city streets, his face spattered with blood. Then he was in a bathroom somewhere, a dingy, dark place, rinsing his face, his eyes large and dazed. In the next moment he was in his underclothes again in that same bathroom, a pen in his hand. Watching his reflection, Kazunori traced the letters across his forehead. When he turned, John clearly saw *Naomasa* written on his skin. Kazunori left the bathroom and sat down on a cot, the mattress thin and worn. He picked up a bottle of pills from the bedside table and downed the entire thing, washing the pills down with a glass of water. That was the last thing John saw before the world faded into blackness.

Toshi dropped the file and lunged forward, catching John before he fell. “It's all right, I've got you.” Toshi helped John to the other side of the room and lowered him into a chair. John was breathing heavily so Toshi undid the top button of John's shirt. “Help!” he called.

When the attendant appeared, Toshi ordered him to bring water. He retrieved the fallen papers from the floor and used the folder to fan John's face. Toshi remained crouched by the chair, fanning John until John's eyelids fluttered open and he seemed to regain consciousness.

John's breathing calmed and Toshi sighed in relief. He didn't understand how John could withstand the strain this work put on his body, even with the rest cure he had been on before coming to Tokyo to help. “John, hey, look at me.”

To Toshi's relief, John opened those blue eyes fully and looked right at him. John's eyes looked haunted and far away, yet clear at the same time. “Toshi,” he whispered.

Just then the attendant appeared with the water. Toshi took the glass from him and excused him again. He gave John a sip and waited for him to speak first, even though he was more than desperate to know what John had seen.

“Toshi,” he said again, his voice less raspy from having had a little water.

Toshi took John’s hand. The skin was warm, thankfully, and John’s strong fingers closed around his. “I saw the killer this time.” John took several more breaths before continuing. “I saw him enter Kazunori’s body and kill the people in the hotel.” John blinked several times and fixed his gaze on Toshi’s. “I saw him get the weapon. The sword.”

Toshi’s breath hitched. “Holy fuck. Where, John? Did you see where?”

John shook his head. “No. He dug it up from the ground. I don’t know where he was.”

Toshi shook his head and sighed again. “Damn. That means the swords are somewhere here in Tokyo. We’ve never been able to trace them. After the Second World War the government confiscated every samurai weapon, keeping them as national treasures. There were, however, more than twenty-five swords missing, believed to have been taken to the United States by American soldiers who’d found them during their service. I’ve not been able to trace any of those missing swords. And besides, if those swords are, in fact, in the United States, then they’re not being used here as murder weapons. It’s as if they’re being pulled out of thin air.”

He looked back at John. “How are you feeling?”

John squeezed Toshi’s hand and held it. “I’ll be all right in a few minutes. We have bigger concerns now than my fatigue. Like the fact that we have a murdering spirit running around.”

A sudden wave of hopelessness passed through Toshi. It wasn’t an emotion he’d expected in the wake of having been given the answer to the murders that had been plaguing the city and his life. However, the murderer was not a flesh and blood person that he could arrest and imprison. He sighed and looked down, glad for John’s touch. “John, how does one capture a spirit to prevent him from killing again?”

John was silent a moment. “Damn good question. I’m afraid that this isn’t my area of expertise. Exorcism and all.”

Exorcism. Toshi’s gaze whipped up to John’s. “Of course. *Setsubun*. That’s a ritual cleansing of evil spirits. I’ve seen it done at festivals in the temples.” He shook his head. “I’ve always thought it was a load of crap.” He looked at John. “Now it seems like our only hope.”

John nodded. “Yeah, it would seem so. You realize that in this particular case there’s only one way to bring the killer to us, don’t you?”

Toshi’s heart lurched. He released John’s hand and stood abruptly, beginning to pace. “No. Out of the question. Absently he reached for his cigarettes, squeezing the pack in his fist. Toshi stopped and stood in front of John, looking down at him. “No way in hell. That’s a risk of your life and then of someone else’s. This killer, Naomasa, or whoever he is, would have to possess another body and try to skewer us with a sword.”

“I know. But what choice do we have?”

Toshi halted, anger roiling in his gut. He plucked a cigarette out and put it between his lips, remembering at the last second that a morgue full of chemicals was not the wisest place to light up. He took the cigarette out and held it. He knew John was right. There was no one else who could stop the killer but him and John. However, who else could be that third person, someone willing to undergo possession and go through the motions of trying to murder two people? And then, how would they perform an exorcism at the same time? He posed the questions to John.

“I don’t know, Toshi.” John’s voice was full of sympathy, conveying he understood his lover’s moral dilemma.

Toshi exhaled and stood, staring at the floor. After a moment he went to the drawer containing Kazunori’s body and gently pushed it closed. He sighed and turned around. Seeing John and the lines of exhaustion around his blue eyes, Toshi’s anger melted away. Toshi went to John and knelt down, taking his hand again. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

A tiny smile curved John’s lips. “Now you’re the one apologizing? What for?”

Toshi suddenly felt deeply sad. “I don’t know. It just seemed the right thing to do.” He resisted the overwhelming need to rest his head on John’s lap. He’d never thought that as an adult he would have found someone with whom he felt that safe again.

Only one other time in his life had he wanted to do that before, when he was a very little boy and his father had spanked him severely him for having dug up his mother’s roses. Toshi had gone crying to his uncle who’d comforted him and let Toshi rest his head on his knee.

Uncle Musashi.

Toshi looked up at John. “My uncle,” he said. “He’s the only other person I can ask to advise me on this.”

John nodded and squeezed his hand. “Come then,” he said gently, “Let’s go upstairs.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Uncle, we have to leave now.” Toshi helped Musashi from his chair and took his empty teacup for him, setting it aside.

“Where are we going, now, Toshi? Are you going to tell me what’s happening?”

The alarm in his uncle’s voice ripped at Toshi’s heart. He hated causing Musashi a moment’s unease, but it couldn’t be helped. “I promise as soon as we’re in the car I’ll tell you everything. I just can’t do it here.”

Even though the Superintendent himself had brought a psychic in on the case, Toshi was certain that Ito had not counted on the things he and John were finding. In spite of the fact that thousands of Japanese citizens went regularly to Buddhist temples for blessings to keep evil spirits from themselves and their families for various reasons, he still thought it best to keep things quiet until he had more resolution.

In the parking lot, Toshi helped his uncle into the front seat. As he went to close the car door, Musashi suddenly broke out into a fit of sputtering coughs. Toshi turned around and put a hand on his uncle’s shoulder. When the coughing stopped, Musashi looked up at him. “Don’t be concerned, Toshi. I’ll be all right. The doctor gave me a prescription for it. It’s here in my pocket.”

Toshi closed the door and went around to the driver’s side while John settled in the back seat.

“Toshi.”

He turned at the sound of his uncle’s voice.

“You’re not going to take me to a home are you, Toshi? You do think I’m crazy.” The old man looked very hurt.

The question itself made Toshi feel horrible. How often did his uncle worry that such a thing would be done to him? “Of course not, Uncle. I swear to you on my honor that I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Toshi watched his uncle’s gaze flicker to the other man. “Who is he really, Toshi?”

“I told you. The Superintendent hired him to help with this case. We’re not dealing with a regular killer and we haven’t been able to find him through regular means.”

Musashi looked back at Toshi, his dark gaze steady. “I mean who is he to *you*, nephew?”

Toshi stared back at his uncle, ashamed that he’d underestimated Musashi’s powers of observation. Through his whole life it had always been Musashi who’d understood Toshi’s true

heart and wanted for him what would make him happy. Yes, his parents knew about his orientation, his love for men, but they'd never taken it seriously. Musashi always had.

Toshi bowed to his uncle. "Forgive me," he said softly. "I've insulted you."

"No, you haven't, Toshi."

To Toshi's surprise Musashi reached up and patted his cheek, something his uncle hadn't done in many years. "If there is any way I can be of help to you, I will."

"Thank you, Uncle. Actually, there is." He started up the car, not certain of where to go. He figured the best thing at the moment was to get something to eat while they made a plan. As he drove, he explained the situation to Musashi, beginning with the Superintendent's bringing John onto the case, then John's visions in the morgue and in the hotel room, as well as his body memories of the *samurai* and their connection to the journal in the museum. He ended with their discovery of the spirit's possession of bodies to kill his victims.

"We haven't yet made the connection to Naomasa. But we know how the murders are being committed and that's all that matters. That is what I need your help with, Uncle," Toshi said. "I was hoping you would know a way to exorcise a spirit without hurting any more people."

"Hmm." His uncle sat quietly for what seemed a long time. He didn't speak until Toshi had parked the car at the curb. He helped his uncle into the same *ramen* bar near his apartment that he and Natsuka had brought John to the first night. When they were seated at their table, Musashi finally spoke.

"Please ask this man to describe exactly where the *samurai* were in his visions."

Toshi translated his uncle's question for John.

"Tell him that the first one was on a riverbank and then the second one was in the garden of a temple near a large statue of the Buddha."

Toshi repeated what John had said to his uncle in Japanese. To his surprise, his uncle's eyes widened and he stared for several moments at John before turning back to Toshi, worry creasing the skin around his eyes.

"This is a very powerful spirit, Toshi. From what you're telling me, this being has garnered the power to travel in time and then to possess one body after the other. There is the very strong possibility that this is someone who, while he was alive, misused the Buddhist mantras and mandalas. He cared not for enlightenment, but for spiritual powers." He shook his head. "Unfortunately, there have been such people as these, monks and priests who misused the path to enlightenment to strengthen their own powers."

"Are you saying that *setsun* would be insufficient to exorcise such a spirit, Uncle?"

Musashi shook his head. "No, Toshi. No spirit is invulnerable to the great mantras and to the ritual fire. However, it will take time to cause the dissolution of such a spirit and it must be trapped inside a body."

“Are you certain of this?”

Musashi nodded. “When I returned from the war I could not live in the city. I spent much time with the *yamabushi* up in the hills, the demon slayers who perform *setsubun*. I’ve learned much from them of these matters.”

Toshi sighed and raked a hand through his hair.

“Toshi, are you all right?” John’s voice cut softly into his frustration.

Toshi turned and looked at him, comforted immediately by looking into John’s blue eyes. No one in his life had ever had such an effect on him. Ever. He translated for John what his uncle had told him.

John listened and then nodded. “I’m afraid it’s very similar to what I said earlier.”

Toshi stared down into his bowl of untouched *ramen*. “I know.” He looked at his uncle. “Uncle, if the spirit is this powerful, won’t it be able to escape being trapped?”

Musashi looked at him. The elderly man’s eyes looked very sad. “Every spirit has a weakness. There are forces to which it is drawn and is unable to resist. In this case, it seems as if the force of two lovers together moves the spirit to take a body so it may kill them.”

Toshi exhaled. “*Shimatta*,” he swore. Again, he translated his uncle’s answer for John.

John looked at him. “That leaves us no choice,” he said softly.

Toshi stared into John’s eyes, wishing that he could disappear inside that soft gaze.

“Nephew.”

His uncle’s gentle voice was the only thing able to make Toshi pull his gaze from John’s face in that moment.

Musashi was watching him. “Toshi, I will help you trap the spirit,” he said. “I’ll do anything to help you.”

Toshi stared at him, momentarily unable to speak. “Absolutely not,” he said finally. “There’s no way I could put you in such danger.”

His uncle reached out and grasped Toshi’s arm. “Listen to me, Toshi. For years I have watched you. I know how painful it was for you to come back to Japan after your years in America. I know you left someone you loved behind. I’ve stood by and watched my brother demand of you that you do your duty. I did mine, for my family and for my country, and it brought me nothing. You have been the great joy of my life. I suffer to see you unfulfilled.” Musashi glanced meaningfully at John. “I want you to be happy, Toshi. I know you and I know that you will not rest until the murders have ended. Please, let me help you. I will show you how to perform the rituals of *setsubun* and you can trap the spirit in me and release him.”

Toshi fought to stay calm. His uncle's plea was moving him to tears and he didn't want to embarrass his uncle. He stared down into his bowl, feeling more trapped than he ever had. Unfortunately, his uncle was the only person who could help them. He couldn't bring in a *yamabushi*. What if the *oni*, or whatever it was, realized what they were doing and went into hiding? He sighed, his hands tightening into fists. "All right, but you must promise me that nothing bad can happen to you."

"I promise, Toshi."

Toshi looked at his uncle, knowing that Musashi could never keep such a promise. There was no possible way to know how the possession and exorcism would affect him. But Toshi was glad for the words.

On the way back to Toshi's apartment they stopped and picked up the necessary materials for exorcism. Tension coiled in Toshi's muscles and his head began to ache horribly. There were no guarantees that he, John, or his uncle would survive this night, but if they were able to trap and exorcise the spirit to prevent future murders, so be it. When he'd begun his training in law enforcement, he'd always known that there would be times when his life would be at risk. This was one of those times.

Back in Toshi's apartment, Musashi showed Toshi and John how to set up the ritual fire with the cedar sticks and how to place the beans around him when the spirit possessed him. The beans, he explained, would trap the spirit inside his body and it would not be able to leave as long as he stayed with the circle. He told them also to throw more beans around the room, just in case, so that the spirit couldn't leave the room before they finished the rituals.

When they'd finished, Musashi went into the second bedroom to rest and for the first time since the early morning Toshi was alone with John, who sat on the edge of the bed, watching him.

Toshi sank down next to him. His lover's presence took the edge off the terror he felt at what they were going to do in a very short time.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Toshi looked at him.

"Don't you know that expression?" John asked.

Toshi sighed. "Yes." Michael used to say that to him once in a while, but he didn't share that bit of information with John. "I was thinking that I don't know anything about you, I mean besides what you told me the other night. Not even where you were born. I want to know everything about you." In case they didn't make it through the night.

John's face softened and his eyes shone as if he'd just been given his heart's desire. The boyishly sweet expression melted Toshi deep inside. *Don't let me hurt this man*, he thought desperately.

“There’s not much to know, I think,” John said. “I was born to farming parents in a small town in Indiana. I have a slew of brothers and sisters and only one brother's still in Indiana – the rest of us are living all over the world. The first time I left was to go to the Gulf. I came back and stayed at the VA hospital in Boston while I recovered and never left that city. I couldn’t go back to a small town and continue to pretend I wasn’t gay.”

Toshi nodded. “I understand.” He had always wanted to return to the States himself. All his best memories were there, of him and Michael exploring the gorgeous countryside north of San Francisco and staying in a cozy cabin among the Redwood trees.

Maybe now he had a damn good reason to go back. Permanently.

Sadly, there was no chance of *permanently* anything until the killer had been stopped.

John was sitting on the edge of Toshi’s bed. He’d removed his jacket and unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt.

The bit of blond hair that showed through the open part of John's shirt stirred Toshi’s desire. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to finish unbuttoning that shirt and taste every inch of exposed tanned flesh and muscle. He sat down near John, as close as he dared, but far enough away that he didn’t pick up the radiant, masculine energy John always emitted.

However, John did reach for his hand. Toshi allowed that much, enjoying the warm touch, the light rasp of calluses. “I guess this is the time for an important talk,” John said softly. “Not like all of it hasn’t been.”

Toshi nodded. “Yes.” Defusing the killer, a spirit they couldn’t arrest and put behind bars, and the future of his relationship with John had become inextricably interwoven. “He killed because he wanted Akira to have his heart’s desire. And now he’s killing again for the same reason.”

A sudden fear for Keiko rose up in him. He pulled his phone out and pressed the speed dial for Keiko’s phone. “I want to make sure Keiko’s all right,” he said.

Keiko answered. Yes, she was fine. She was with her parents and had explained the situation to Aoki. Natsuka was with them.

Satisfied that she was safe, Toshi closed the phone. Momentary guilt assailed him that Natsuka didn’t know what Toshi was doing. His partner would never have let Toshi take such a risk with his life if he had known. Toshi would owe Natsuka a huge apology and hoped that his friend would forgive him when this was all over.

Toshi started to shrug out of his jacket and John released his hand to let him. He laid the jacket aside and looked at John. “She’s safe,” he said. Just then his cell phone rang, sending a shiver up his spine. He answered. “Genjin.”

“Inspector.” It was Assistant Inspector Hayao.

“What do you have for me?”

“We were able to speak with a friend of the writer’s neighbor.”

Toshi’s heart lurched. “What did you find?”

“Well, the day before the murder, she saw the woman. There was soil on her clothing and she told her friend she’d been gardening.”

“Why was this unusual?”

“First, she didn’t have a garden. And second, it was after ten o’clock at night that she’d been out digging, or something.”

Toshi swallowed past the lump that had formed in his throat. The way the answers were coming was eerie. And all because of John’s visions. “Did she say where she’d been digging?”

“No. She told the friend she was tired and went to bed. We found the soiled clothing in her bedroom. We’re analyzing the stains now to try and locate where she was. She didn’t drive. Her friend said she hated even to ride in a car. They frightened her. So the probability is wherever she was digging was somewhere within walking distance.”

“*Aurigato*, Hayao.”

Toshi switched off his phone. He turned to John and repeated what Hayao had told him.

John’s blue eyes widened. “My God. There’s a good chance she was digging up a sword.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Toshi slapped a hand to his forehead. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of it? All those references to the swords he made? Naomasa must have hidden weapons away somewhere. Just to have them for himself, or for...what, I don’t know. People have all kinds of motives.”

“Maybe it was even for something like this.”

“Yes. It makes sense. That would mean that Naomasa is the killer.”

But John shook his head. “No, I’m not certain of that. Naomasa told you to stop ‘him’. If he’s the killer, then Naomasa isn’t.”

Toshi nodded. “That’s true. Either way, I’m not certain it will matter once we exorcise the killer.”

“You’re right.” John sighed. “So...when do we...do this?”

Toshi looked at him. “I suppose the time is...now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

John cleared his throat. His heartbeat sped up. He'd faced life-threatening danger before and had hated it. He wasn't so thrilled about it now. The arousal that had stirred in him since Toshi had come to sit on the bed with him now receded. He'd never been one of those people for whom danger was an aphrodisiac.

The unspoken question of their relationship hung in the air. John felt it. Shit, he might as well get this over with. "If Naomasa knows that our relationship is ill-fated, he's going to come after us. He showed me that today in Keiko's apartment." He looked at Toshi, into the other man's beautiful, dark eyes, trying to read the answer in them. He could see nothing; sense nothing from Toshi in that regard. His heart slammed against his chest. Either Toshi was as good an actor as the man for whom he was named, or...his intuition was failing him. It did sometimes with people he was deeply attached to. Sometimes it was excruciating to see into the heart of someone who meant everything to you.

John looked down as if to examine the nuances of stitching on the dark blue comforter. Toshi was right, of course. But that also meant that in Toshi's heart he felt they couldn't be together in spite of the fact he'd admitted to falling in love. The killer knew what was in his victim's hearts. If they were going to trap the killer, Toshi would have to keep John out of his heart. There was no half-measure. "I know." In the wake of Toshi's silence, John pulled his gaze back up, meeting with the still inscrutable expression in Toshi's eyes. "My only question is how? I totally forgot. There's no sword and no way to get one."

"There is a sword, John." Toshi rose from the bed and went to his chest of drawers. He knelt down, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled aside folds of clothing. Reaching deep into the drawer, he pulled out something wrapped in what looked like a sheet. He rose up and laid the bundle on the bed before John. "Another gift from my uncle, years ago. It was in our family for over a hundred years. The government had confiscated it after the war, along with all the others, but gave it back to my uncle as a gift for his service to Japan." As he spoke, he unwound the sheet, revealing a magnificent *samurai's wakizashi* in its sheath. The handle was covered in an intricate weaving of leather and the scabbard was inlaid with jade and ivory.

The weapon was one of the most incredible pieces of art John had ever seen; frightening in its magnificence. "Wow," he breathed, watching as Toshi slowly slid the sword from its scabbard. The blade glinted in the light, showing the meticulous care the weapon had been given in its more than a century of life.

A shiver passed through John's body as a gruesome image of him and Toshi, their bare bodies skewered together by this sword, rose in his mind.

Toshi sheathed the sword again. "I'll set this out in the other room," he said softly.

"Toshi." John stayed him with a hand on his arm. "Does this mean...our...you and me...we're not going to work?"

Toshi nodded. He sighed and shoved one hand through his hair. The other hand held the sword. "I'm sorry, John. I don't see how. Yes, I feel the same for you as you do for me, but..."

"But what?"

Another sigh. "Like I told you before back in Keiko's apartment, the ties of family sometimes run deeper than those of the heart."

John held back tears. Damn it. The one time he wanted his empathic ability to work and it was crapping out on him.

Without another word, Toshi rose and went into the other room. When he returned he was no longer holding the sword. "I placed the sword outside my uncle's door. When he's possessed he won't know what he's doing."

"Certainly he's aware of the way the murders have been carried out."

"He is. I asked him one last time to reconsider. He feels certain that we'll be able to prevent him from...you know." With his gaze resting on John's, he unbuckled his gun holster, setting it on the chest of drawers.

John's eyes followed the weapon where he placed it.

"I refuse to shoot my uncle," Toshi murmured, as if he'd read John's mind.

Toshi's voice dragged John's gaze back to his lover. Better that way. "Hey," he said softly, his body heating again as Toshi began to unbutton his shirt. "I'm supposed to be the mind reader here."

Toshi didn't answer. His eyes no longer held a neutral expression. Something darker simmered inside them. His full lips were slightly parted.

John's heart raced mercilessly, yet his attention remained riveted on Toshi as his lover undressed. Toshi slipped off his shirt, tossing it on a nearby chair. The muscles under his taut, almond-hued skin flexed and bunched as he moved. John's gaze slid over rounded pectorals topped with dark brown nipples. Toshi was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen.

Toshi went to the nightstand drawer and pulled out a small bottle of oil, then came over and sat down facing him, those dark eyes churning with desire. He reached out and unbuttoned the rest of the shirt, slowly, deliberately, pushing it off John's shoulders. The warm slide of Toshi's hands down John's chest and back up again to his shoulders sent delicious shivers of heat through him, pushing away everything else. What he wouldn't give for there to be nothing else in the world but him and Toshi making love.

Sadly, he knew that couldn't be. For even as Toshi lifted one of his wrists and unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt, John knew that what they were doing now wasn't only from love and desire.

It was time to stop a killer.

Mmm. So hard to remember anything else. The moment Toshi's lips touched his, John's body melted, the warm press of softness, the moist intrusion of his tongue.

Toshi pulled John's shirt completely off, casting it aside. The moment John was free he put his arms around Toshi, pulling Toshi close, molding his mouth over his lover's. He didn't know if it was because he was in love, but he'd never tasted anyone so delicious as this man, Toshi's natural flavor sweet and intimate on his tongue.

He slid one hand up the sleek, muscular back, winding his fingers into that incredible hair. Every nerve ending in his body sizzled. With his eyes closed, he succumbed to the fevered haze of love the man made him feel. His other hand squeezed Toshi's upper arm, his thumb brushing back and forth across the flexing bicep.

Toshi's fingers were working open John's trousers. John felt the tiny tugs and pulls at his belt and sat up straighter, giving Toshi's hands more space. Toshi was returning his kisses with equal fervor, suckling John's tongue, murmuring and sighing into their joined mouths with such abandon, John could hardly believe they were enticing a killer to come to them.

So far John didn't sense that dark, whispering presence that told him the killer was near.

Toshi pulled away from their kiss and gently pushed John onto his back. Looking down at him with that enchanting dark gaze, Toshi slipped John's trousers completely off, letting them drop to the floor. Toshi's golden skin was flushed and his lips swollen from their kisses. The possessive sheen of lust on his sculpted features that John had seen before was there now.

Toshi stood up off the bed and stripped off his trousers. He stepped out of them and in another swift, lithe movement was on top of John, the length of his nakedness pressed to John's. He swooped down, taking John's mouth in another fervent kiss, then braced his hands on the mattress to rise up, rubbing his cock against his lover's.

John moaned, staring up at Toshi. He was swiftly losing the battle of concentration, of keeping vigil against a murderer. His hands encircled Toshi's slim hips, following the movement of Toshi's grinding motion. That alone was nearly enough to make him come. He opened his legs, replacing his handhold with the crook of his knees.

Toshi dragged in a deep breath and wet his fingers. Reaching down, he rubbed the moist tips over John's opening. The mere touch sent sparks of heat to John's balls. He clutched at Toshi's back.

"I'm safe, John," Toshi whispered through heavy breaths.

"So am I. I trust you."

Toshi pushed a finger inside him, working it gently in deeper. John's fingertips pressed into Toshi's back muscles, bracing against the intense pleasure invading him. Toshi pushed in a second finger, working them around, opening John. Preparing him. John bucked his hips against the rhythm of Toshi's fingers. Needing to have Toshi inside him, he reached for the bottle of oil, poured some into his palm and reached down, rubbing Toshi's erection, mixing it with the drop of seed that had already seeped out. "Now, Toshi, please."

Toshi groaned and kissed him. In the next moment he pushed the head of his cock into John.

John pushed against Toshi, grabbed his buttocks and pulled him in. A satisfying, hard thrust brought their bodies together. A low sound like a growl erupted deep in Toshi's throat and he took John's mouth wildly as he began to move, that primal wildness overtaking him as it had the night before.

Toshi reached down between them and stroked John's cock, alternating the slide of his hand with a deep thrust. In mere moments John felt the pressure building so deep inside him he couldn't hold it back. Another thrust that hit the sweet spot and the world splintered. His eyes squeezed shut, his body clenched.

Toshi slowed down his movements, looking down into John's face from under heavy lids. Toshi's breathing rasped harshly and his dark eyes simmered with need.

The look pierced John in a place so deep inside him he hadn't known it existed until now. John squeezed the ring of muscles around Toshi's cock and bucked against him. Toshi withdrew slowly until just the head of his cock was inside John and then plunged in again, joining them deeply. John clenched his lower muscles again and Toshi groaned and threw his head back. He gave one last deep thrust, emptying himself into his lover.

John put his arms around Toshi and pulled him down onto him to rest. He pressed his lips to Toshi's damp neck, flicking his tongue against the salty, smooth skin. God, he didn't want to live without this man. Yet that was the very thing he was afraid he'd have to do. With his hands firmly splayed on Toshi's heaving back, he held his lover, his eyes closed, his fingertips memorizing the feel of Toshi's skin, as well as every nuance of muscle and bone.

That's when it happened. The energy. The darkness slipped into the room like a whisper. John tensed and opened his eyes. It was drawing closer.

Toshi must have registered the change. He lifted his face and looked at John with that question in his eyes.

John gave a tiny nod. It was here. They looked up.

Musashi stood above them, Toshi's sword uplifted in both hands.

"No!" John yelled, adrenaline shooting through his body. He grabbed Toshi and rolled, escaping the descending blade by millimeters. The shaft of steel sliced into the mattress and was buried to the hilt.

Toshi vaulted up off John and threw himself at his uncle. An iron strength inhabited the old man's body. Naomasa. Toshi wrestled him to the floor and pinned him down.

John lunged forward and grabbed Musashi's legs. He writhed and struggled with the strength of several men and it took all of John's strength to hold his ankles. The killer's energy shot up John's arms, nearly causing him to break his hold, but John's fear for Toshi's safety drove him to hang on with all his strength.

Toshi kept his uncle in a chokehold. His uncle struggled with unnatural strength. The strength of a man possessed by a warrior's spirit. He forced his mind to remember that the spirit was inside his uncle. Otherwise his uncle could not have done this to him and he could not have kept his uncle in a chokehold. "John, the beans!"

He saw John reach out with his free hand and grab the pouch of soybeans Musashi had told them to scatter. He reached in and threw handfuls of the beans everywhere, all around them.

His uncle struggled and let out an animal-like wail, conveying great frustration. "Damn you! Naomasa!" his uncle ground out over the crook of Toshi's arm against his throat. "Naomasa! Stop them! They've trapped me in here!"

Toshi looked at John. "What is he saying? He is Naomasa!"

"I am not!"

"John, this isn't Naomasa?"

John looked at Musashi, his blue eyes widening. "My god, it's not."

"Who is it then?"

John shook his head. "I don't know." Suddenly John's body jerked and the expression in his eyes grew fierce. "I'm Naomasa," he said in Japanese to Toshi.

"*You're* the murderer," Toshi said.

Naomasa bowed John's head. "Of Kenji and Akira, yes. Not of the others. No. He is. Tokugawa Shingen. A monk from the Chomei-ji Temple. He stole my swords and buried them there."

"So I could always have something of yours."

Toshi remembered the name of the nearby temple from Naomasa's journal. It was now a tourist destination.

"He killed all those people and forced me to watch," Naomasa went on. "My punishment for my crime. I have forever suffered from what I did to Akira. I loved him."

Toshi stared at John. It was as if John weren't there. John had never detected the second presence.

John's lips trembled, conveying the *samurai's* deep, repentant grief.

Musashi struggled, but both men kept a hold on his body. "Naomasa, I loved you and you killed yourself! You have made me suffer. So I have made you suffer. These two were closing in on me, trying to stop me. They must die!"

Toshi's heart pummeled his chest. Shit. They had gotten the whole thing wrong, yet it had still led them to the killer. He searched his mind frantically for a way to get both spirits out of these bodies and gone so that they'd never kill another human being. He looked at John. "Naomasa, be with him now."

John stared at him with the eyes of another – of the man inside him.

"If you love Akira, do this...for him. You will regain your honor." He was throwing words into the air, hoping that both spirits would listen. Before he lost his own mind.

But his uncle writhed and struggled again. "Never. And have him betray me again? You're mine, Naomasa, and you'll suffer for eternity for what you did."

"No!" Naomasa said through John. "I will pay my debt for my crime and move on. The murders I committed bound Akira's and Kenji's souls and they, too, wander, unable to reach enlightenment." John released his hold on Musashi and threw more beans on the man, eliciting another strangled wail."

Before Toshi could ask what John was doing, he saw John reach for the cedar sticks and the lighter. John held the flame to the cedar, watching the wood ignite. When it was burning, he set aside the lighter, took another stick, and lit it. He closed his eyes and began to chant in a low, smooth tone, waving the burning sticks close to Musashi.

"No, Naomasa!" The spirit in his uncle's body wailed and groaned.

John continued chanting, his eyes misty and far away, the vibration of the chant that Musashi had taught them filling the bedroom along with spicy scent of burning cedar. Naomasa's spirit continued to chant through John, waving the cedar sticks in a back and forth rhythm.

Musashi's body jerked in Toshi's arms. A gurgling sound rumbled in his throat and his eyes glowed with an unearthly light. He groaned, the sound building in volume, vibrating through his whole body.

John's chant grew faster and louder and he waved the burning sticks in an arc around Musashi's body. The cry erupted in Musashi's throat. His arms flailed and his entire body jerked so violently that Toshi lost his hold and Musashi fell to the floor, still writhing. Musashi cried again and a gust of wind rushed from his body, the source undiscernible. A black cloud of smoke hovered in the air as the crying sound died away. Suddenly, the smoke vanished.

John ceased chanting. He set the burning sticks in a ceramic bowl on the dresser and stood quietly, his eyes closed. "I'm sorry. I will go now." John heaved a deep breath and the same type of gust flew from him before he, too, collapsed to the floor.

"Uncle!" Toshi leaned over Musashi, his fingertips to the old man's neck. The pulse there barely beat. A strangled sigh escaped Musashi and he went limp. The pulse stopped.

Nothing. "No," Toshi breathed frantically. He lowered his uncle gently to the floor and began CPR. He only prayed that the same thing hadn't happened to John.

Toshi did mouth-to-mouth on his uncle then pumped his chest. In between movements he looked up at John, relieved to see he was coming to without help.

John looked up, his eyes hazy, his face drained of color. "How do you call the ambulance?"

"I'll do it. Please, help him." Toshi went to the phone on his bedside table and dialed, watching John work on Musashi.

John pushed rhythmically on Musashi's chest, then checked for breathing. When the ambulance dispatcher answered the phone, Toshi gave the address even though John looked up and shook his head sadly.

The paramedics did all they could, but couldn't revive Toshi's uncle. The force of the spirit leaving him had caused a cardiac arrest. He stood by Toshi, both of them now dressed, watching the paramedics roll out the sheet-covered gurney that held Musashi's body. They'd already hidden the sword and covered the hole in the mattress. Toshi had refused to incriminate his uncle.

When they'd closed the door behind them Toshi stood, frighteningly quiet, staring at the door. "I have to tell Natsuka," he said softly.

John wished he could make the call for Toshi, but the only time he'd been able to speak Japanese was when those spirits had spoken through him. He followed Toshi into the living room where there was a phone and listened to Toshi's exchange with his partner.

Toshi hung up the receiver and slumped down onto the sofa. "Natsuka is going to file the report at headquarters." He raked a hand through his hair, his dark eyes clouded with grief. "There's a John Doe in the morgue we've been unable to identify for months. Natsuka is going to give a report and use him as the murderer." He sighed. "It's not the most ethical thing to do, I know. But how can I incriminate anyone in this case? Especially my uncle." His eyes began to glisten with unshed tears.

John sat down next to him, watching him. Toshi's handsome face was lined with grief and John's heart ached for him.

"I told Natsuka what Naomasa said about the swords," Toshi went on. "He followed up on it and they found the spot where the ground had been dug up. It only took moments to find the swords. Buried in the garden of the Chomei-ji Temple." He exhaled and kept his gaze on the floor, giving John the sense that he was embarrassed and ashamed, as well as grieved. "There were two left."

It was over.

"I'm here for you, Toshi," John said softly. His own body ached and pulsed uncomfortably as it always did after a violent channeling like the one he'd just had. But his concern for Toshi overrode everything else. He reached out and put a hand on Toshi's shoulder. To his relief, Toshi didn't pull away as John feared he might. "Just tell me what you need."

Toshi turned and looked at him, dark eyes pained. John sensed the words struggling to come out of him. But he'd gone so long not expressing himself, John could see that the words were trapped inside him.

"Do you need to be alone?"

Toshi shook his head.

Relief coursed through John. "Do you want me to hold you?"

Toshi nodded.

John's heart melted. "Come here, baby," he crooned. He moved closer and gently pulled Toshi into his arms.

Toshi fell against him and he sat back, cradling the grieving man, absorbing Toshi's quiet sobs, caressing Toshi's hair and back. John didn't need to be psychic to know that this was probably the first time in Toshi's life that he'd cried in someone's arms. That he'd let himself be seen so naked. Well, the second time. The first had been last night.

A long time passed before Toshi's tears were exhausted. He rested for several more minutes while John stroked his hair. Finally Toshi looked up.

John gazed back into Toshi's face, the tearstains on his cheeks, the red around his eyes, the deep grief clouding them. God, he was beautiful. His vulnerability only made him absolutely exquisite.

"I can't do it anymore, John," he whispered.

John's heart fell. Heartache squeezed his entire body. "Oh."

"I can't pretend anymore. It's killing me."

John's heart lurched and he felt a small flicker of hope. He smoothed back Toshi's hair. "Does this mean I should start learning Japanese?"

A tiny smile played on the corners of Toshi's lips. "No. It means I want you to take me back with you. That is, if it's all right."

John stared at him. "All right? It's more than all right. I wasn't going anywhere without you. I was prepared to learn the language and live on sushi if I had to, to stay with you. I love you."

Toshi hugged John, pressing his face into John's neck. If he could have crawled inside John, he would have. "I love you too," he said softly against John's skin.

Musashi had always wanted his nephew to be happy. If Toshi had feared his family's wrath or the dishonor of not doing his duty, none of it mattered now. The greater crime would be dishonoring Musashi's unconditional love. And the love in his own heart.

He lifted away from the embrace and looked at John. "I have one more phone call to make." He picked up the phone and dialed Keiko's parents' home. To his relief she answered the phone.

"Keiko."

"Toshiro, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Listen, there's no time to explain everything right now, but I wanted to tell you that I'm releasing you from our engagement. Aoki has stood by you all these years. That's more important than anything else. And don't worry. I'll take full responsibility."

He heard her soft intake of breath on the other end. "Toshi, are you certain of this? What about our parents?" She sounded shocked, but he detected that she was also relieved.

"I'll deal with them, yours and mine. I'm positive. I want you to be happy, Keiko." He thought of how easily that sword could have gone through him and John. "Promise me you'll be with him."

Pause. Sniffle. "I promise, Toshi. Thank you."

Toshi smiled even though Keiko couldn't see her. "Good night, Keiko."

"Good night."

Toshi hung up and turned to John. "I just ended my engagement."

John's blue eyes lit up and Toshi saw the joy in them, the fullness of which he was obviously suppressing out of respect for the loss Toshi had just suffered.

A sudden wave of sadness washed through Toshi. Musashi had had to die for him to finally live his own life. He looked down. John's hand passed over Toshi's hair again and his lover's arms opened to him. Toshi leaned against him and rested.

"It's okay, Toshi. You don't have to do anything now. Just rest."

Toshi turned his face slightly and pressed a kiss onto John's chest, over his t-shirt. He sighed and closed his eyes, his cheek cushioned by hard muscle. With a loving heart beating underneath it. "Thank you," he whispered. Obediently, he rested. Finally, he was in the only place he'd ever wanted to be.

He wasn't going anywhere.

- end -

Dedication:

To Mitch, the love of my heart and guide of my spirit.

Thank you:

To my editor, Alex Draven, and my critique partner, Ruth Axtell Morren, whose hard work helped make this a better book and me a better writer. To Mitch, for everything and for turning me on to the beautiful *samurai* films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune. And to Allyn, for being one of my best friends.