

SAMURAI CAPTIVE

Barbara Sheridan

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Dedication

To Tiffany and Anne for putting up with my bouts of writerly insecurity.

To Armen for being the “go-to guy” when I had questions on samurai and nineteenth-century Japan .

To Barb Marshall, who is the coolest editor ever. ^ _ ^

And I can't forget Victoria (aka child number two) for introducing me to this corner of history I'd overlooked in my Western-centric nonfiction travels.

Author's Note:

The samurai names are presented in Japanese order of surname, given name.

Chapter One

1863

“Go on, stare at the barbarian,” Hannah Connolly muttered while watching the throng of curious onlookers crowding around the red-slatted front window of the brothel in the Yoshiwara district in the Japanese capital of Edo .

She'd been “on display” for a week now, and you'd think that every person in the country had the urge to traipse by and see what a foreign woman looked like. It would be her stinkin' luck to be in service to a man who was setting up in trade now that the bloody Yanks had forced open Japan 's ports.

Her employer's friend, a businessman by the name of Richardson , had been cut down months ago for not showing the “proper respect” to some high and mighty samurai overlord. She'd been injured as well and left for dead by the side of the road. The woman she'd been riding out with that day, the sister-in-law to one of the blokes, had managed to escape, but of course no one cared about the fool servant, 'cept for some Japanese farmer who'd carted her home and had his missus tend her wounds.

She thought them living saints as they nursed her back to health. Of course, it would also be her luck that they'd go and sell her to this whorehouse as soon as she was well again. And of course it wasn't like the British officials gave a fig. And she knew they had to have heard. After all, comin' to gawk at her seemed to be the hit of the male social season.

Hannah breathed a sigh and looked around her cagelike room. *Oh, Mamma, you worked so hard to*

give me a better life and look where I am -- right back in the kind of place where I was born and raised .

She looked back toward the window at the beady, hungry eyes of the men vying for a glimpse of the merchandise they were apparently too afraid or too poor to sample. She couldn't make out a lot of the language, but she had picked up enough in the year she'd been in Japan to understand that much.

They gaped at her like they hadn't ever seen a woman in their lives. Of course they probably hadn't seen a white woman, that was for sure, and they probably wondered if her being so different from them made her unusual in her womanly parts too. All it would take was one with enough coin and big enough balls to get over any fear he might have about her and see for himself if she had the cunny and tits like any other woman, and she sure as hell didn't want that. Once one took up the challenge, the rest were sure to want to follow to prove themselves.

Hannah decided that she might as well let them see that there wasn't nothing so different or special about her. She undid the buttons of her bodice and jerked the top down to expose her fair shoulders and the swell of her chemise-covered breasts. She unpinned her auburn hair and shook it free to cascade over her bare shoulders, then slid her hands along her midriff, skimming over her breasts, squeezing, stroking herself through the soft cotton of her garments.

She heard her "audience" murmur, and a few groaned. It spurred her on to be even bolder. She slipped off the bodice, leaving only her thin chemise, and shivered when the cool outside air wafted through the window and puckered her nipples. With a flick of her fingers, she undid the little ribbon bow at the neckline of the chemise and opened it just enough for her breasts to be visible. The murmurs grew louder, and Hannah arched her back, threw back her head, and began to massage herself in earnest, freeing first one breast and then the other, pinching, tugging on her erect nipples until they tingled and ached.

"You blokes want some of this, do ya?" she teased, lifting her heavy breasts with both hands and licking as close to the nipple as she could.

The men nearest the window clamored and called out for the house madam.

Hannah heard the clink of coins and feet scurrying up the stairs in the adjacent hallway. They wanted sex after her little show, but they preferred to get it from the native born whores.

That was quite all right 'cause she didn't want none of them pawing at her.

The madam came in and began yelling for "More! More!"

"Yeah, why not," Hannah said, standing to unhook her skirt and the one voluminous petticoat she still had. She wasn't quite sure where the other slips or her metal crinoline had gone, but then she didn't miss their bulk or weight.

Hannah pranced around the perimeter of the small front room in her chemise and lace trimmed pantaloons, pausing often to stretch, arching her back and letting her breasts jut provocatively. She turned her back to the window and bent over, giving her audience a glimpse of her soft, round arse and a peek at her cunny, barely concealed by the center slit in her drawers.

She turned and laughed at the sight of the men trying to reach through the barred window.

"Oh, so now you're not afraid, since you see that a woman's a woman no matter what color they are,

eh?" The smile slid from Hannah's face. "Dream on, you foreign bastards."

* * * * *

Sanada Katsuhiro had always considered his taller than average height to be a major asset in terms of his fighting prowess, but he had never truly appreciated it until just now, for it gave him a wonderful view of the red-haired temptress closeted within the front room of the *Ichino-ro*.

He'd grown hard the minute she pulled her big breasts free of her clothing, and his balls grew tight and heavy when she pranced about the room and bent over. Even her hair down there had that fiery glint. And he wanted more than anything to shove his cock into her glistening depths. Unfortunately, he had to meet with his superiors. But he would be back for more.

Soon.

* * * * *

Hannah spent the remainder of the afternoon alternately ignoring then "performing" for the onlookers outside much in the same way as she had earlier. After a while she got to thinking that maybe she was working them up to wanting more, and that "more" sure as hell wasn't gonna be her body if she could stop it. When the madam brought her a light meal, Hannah asked if one of the other girls could come and keep her company a while. Hannah winked, and the madam grinned from ear to ear.

"Yes. Yes."

The woman who joined her was Omitsu, who Hannah judged to be the oldest whore there. Mitsu, as they called her, didn't seem to have many customers, though she was taken home every so often by an older gentleman who always promised to buy out her contract and take her home permanently.

Right. As if that would ever happen. It was the same old song she'd heard as a girl growing up in the East End of London. The hoity-toity uptown gents would make all sorts of promises to her mother as long as they had that hard-on to ease, but in the cold light of day it was *'ere's yer coin, see ya some other time*.

The madam excitedly promised to give both Hannah and Mitsu a cut of whatever profits they drummed up with their little "show," and the two women exchanged a knowing smile. They could certainly make all the waiting cocks hard as a rock.

Hannah decided that she wasn't going to give all her secrets away quite yet, so once she'd finished her meal, she leaned over and kissed Mitsu, then took her by the hand and led her to the center of the cagelike room. She slid her fingers up and down the silky sleeves of the other woman's kimono, caressing her neck and white powdered cheeks, and circled her like a cat eyeing up a tasty little bird.

She tugged on the wide obi that held Mitsu's kimono closed and slowly walked round and round, unwrapping it from her petite body. She let it fall to the floor then peeled off the thin silk kimono like a fruit connoisseur might gently peel a grape.

Mitsu murmured when Hannah glided her palms up and down her bare arms and over her small, pert breasts. Hannah saw her shiver when she unwrapped the thin silken underskirt that was left. Hannah stood behind her and squeezed her breasts, smoothed her hands over the Japanese woman's small hips, then let her fingers fluff the tuft of dark hair between her thighs.

“Not so fast, luv,” Hannah whispered when Mitsu parted her legs and arched forward for more.

Katsuhiro’s erection swelled harder than ever when he returned from his meeting to find the red-haired whore fondling one of her housemates. He pushed his way to the front of the crowd and watched in rapt fascination as she led the other woman closer to the barred window and coaxed her to lie down with her legs splayed for all the men to see her wet sex.

The redhead surely must have been a prostitute in her homeland, because no innocent girl could have moved with such calculating precision. She knelt beside the Japanese whore, giving the onlookers a clear view as she licked and kissed her way down the right side of her companion’s body then up the left.

The Japanese woman writhed and softly begged the redhead to touch her throbbing cunt, but the redhead just laughed and instead laved over her breasts while teasingly dancing her thin fingers over the tops of the other woman’s thighs, coming close but never touching where the prone woman needed it most.

Katsu tore his gaze away a moment to watch the house proprietors take in customer after customer as soon as those already done easing their loads came down the stairs. He turned his attention back to the open barred window when he heard the Japanese whore whimper.

So the little barbarian wasn’t only a tease. He slipped one hand inside the side slit of his *hakama* trousers to rub his aching balls when the woman settled herself between her companion’s thighs. Like a seasoned professional, she placed the prone woman’s legs on her shoulders and bent forward.

The redhead’s rear was high in the air and her knees parted for better balance, giving him a fine view of her own secret treasure. Her cunt lips were swollen, the soft reddish hairs clinging here and there to the wet folds.

He signaled to the man at the door and tossed some money his way, then knelt before the barred window and reached in.

Hannah went stiff when large male hands clamped themselves on her hips and pulled her closer to the window. She tried to see what the man was doing, but Mitsu had a hell of a grip on her long hair.

She jumped when she felt his hand slide over her slit, and she instinctively moved her hips to increase the delicious friction. She heard a low chuckle and cursed him, whoever he was.

“Please, please...” Mitsu said, squirming before her.

Hannah sighed when the man began to rub her throbbing clit, and she knew she was lost when she felt her juices ooze out to coat his thick, rough fingers.

She rocked back and forth when he slid in one finger then another. She’d only been had by a man once, a customer who had taken advantage of her when her mother passed out from too much drink, and it was that incident that had gotten her sent into domestic service where she’d be “safe.”

The slow, seductive rhythm with which he penetrated her was opening up sensations that she'd never quite dreamed of. The feeling was similar to the one she got when she touched herself, only ten times greater, and she greedily lapped at Mitsu's throbbing cunny while the desire built within her own body. After Mitsu came and released her hold on Hannah's hair, Hannah eased herself back and continued to rock on her knees as the unknown man fucked her with his hand.

She groaned when he slid his dripping fingers out of her cunny and sighed when he began to rub and prod her arsehole. She tensed when he inserted one finger into her there, but when he used his other hand to plunge back into her cunny she forgot about the slight burning pain.

"Yesss, yesss," she chanted, as the pleasure built and he finger fucked her front and rear. And when she came it was like nothing she could have imagined, all hot and cold and wave upon wave of bodily delight.

She collapsed when the last wave passed but then turned quickly to see who the mysterious man was.

But all she could see was a dark shape disappearing into the night.

"Thank you, luv. Do come again," she whispered.

The madam came in and hurriedly closed the shutter-like doors over the front window. She seemed quite pleased by the profits the little display had brought. They had more men than the girls could handle for the rest of the night. And when she grabbed Hannah by the arm and tugged her to her feet, Hannah protested.

"No. No, I don't want to screw them nasty little blokes." She struggled to force her brain to translate the Japanese words the woman was rambling.

"No. You go. Someone buy you. Lots and lots of gold he pay. Go now."

Hannah jerked away. "No! I'm not going to screw one of your men! I won't do it!"

The house boss boxed her ears, and Hannah tried to kick him in the balls, only to be sent flying to the straw mat by a vicious shove. He shouted to one of the young servants, and she ran upstairs then back down again. The boss threw her only belongings -- her torn and mended British dress and shoes at her.

"Get dressed. You go like the filthy foreign pig you are!"

Hannah's further refusal was met with a sturdy bamboo cane across the shoulders and arse. She was near to tears from the stinging pain by the time she'd gotten her things on and was unceremoniously shoved outside. She stumbled, fell face first to the ground in front of two servants sent to fetch her.

Picking herself up, Hannah brushed the dirt from herself and glared at the men sent to carry her to their master in the small enclosed palanquin. "Fuck you," Hannah said with a sneer before breaking into a run. She'd just rounded the corner of the whorehouse three doors down when a man stepped from the shadows and grabbed her from behind. Hannah struggled, but was no match for the grip of his strong arms.

"You belong to me," he said in accented English before tossing her over his shoulder with enough force to momentarily knock the wind out of her.

Recovering, Hannah tried to struggle again, this time crying out to those in the streets entering and leaving the various brothels and teahouses. Though they all stopped and stared, no one bothered to come to her aid.

He tossed her into another palanquin and sat half on top of her to prevent her from trying to escape. She couldn't really see his face, but caught glimpses of it in the bobbing light of the lanterns outside the man-powered carriage. He had those striking high cheekbones so many of the other men here did with not a speck of facial hair to mar or hide his features.

Hannah looked away from those piercing black eyes of his that seemed to stare straight through her. She gasped when he roughly cupped her chin and made her face him once more. "Let go of me."

"I own you."

"The hell you say," Hannah muttered. Still, she couldn't deny the little pulsing tingle that hit her low and hard at the sound of that deep, accented voice claiming ownership of her. He was the one. He was the one who'd diddled her so thoroughly through the whorehouse window.

Hannah racked her brain to come up with what she hoped were the right Japanese words. "Why did you buy me?"

"Many reasons," he answered in English.

He shifted, pulled her onto his lap. One arm thrown across her chest, he squeezed her breast with strong fingers like he was testing the ripeness of a melon in the Spitalfields Market. She felt her cunny get wet at the memory of what he'd done before, and she decided that it might not be so bad to be his personal whore. Unless he was a brothel master himself or worked for one.

Hannah made herself whimper and stroked the samurai's forearm. "Strong hands you got here, luv. I bet the Japanese ladies like you touching them all over." She stroked his arm some more, teased his fingers with hers then lifted his hand to kiss it. "Oh yeah, these are real nice, strong hands," she cooed. She kissed his fingertips, swirled her tongue across the calloused skin built up from years of sword training.

She wiggled a bit on his lap, heard his sharp intake of breath, and smiled to herself as they jostled along, carried swiftly by the men bearing the palanquin. She focused on his thumb, licked the tip, and sucked it all into her mouth, pretending she was sucking his cock. He liked that real well, and she kept it up until she was certain his guard was down.

Suddenly, she bit down hard enough to draw blood, then jabbed backward with her elbow. She lunged at the little sliding door and threw herself out onto the ground. Startled, the men carrying the palanquin dropped it, and it tipped sideways. The samurai's loud shouts were all the encouragement Hannah needed to pick herself up and run off the road through the high brush and toward a stand of trees.

Her foot caught on a rock or root -- something hard enough to send her crashing to the ground, and pain shot up to her knee. Still, she hauled herself up and hurried forward as best she could, the shadowy trees in the moonlight a safe haven in this scary foreign land.

But he was behind her. She swore she could hear that damned sword of his being drawn.

You gone and done it now, girl. If he catches ya, yer as good as dead.

The clouds parted a little more than they had been, and the bright full moon shone down on the trees so close yet so far, taunting her as the sound of the angry samurai came closer.

The skin on Hannah's neck prickled. She was certain he was going to grab her any moment, but nothing happened and she rushed on. The trees were so close now, the pounding of her heart dulling all other sounds in the night.

She ran the last of the way with arms outstretched, and she almost shrieked when her hands touched the first slim tree trunk. She ran to the next and to the next, finally stopping and sliding around to face the way she'd come. The tree bark scraped against her palms, and she tried to contain the sound of her harsh breathing lest the samurai find her.

It was so dark in here, the moonlight barely penetrating, but she couldn't make out any moving shadows. She sank forward, leaned her forehead on the tree, and struggled to catch her breath. Hell, her lungs ached, and her knee was surely starting to swell.

She had to keep moving. She had to or he'd kill her. She pushed herself away from the tree, and her back collided with the hilt of the samurai's swords tied to his waist. She whimpered when he grabbed her hair and jerked her head back. In his other hand, he held a short dagger-like sword that caught the waning moonlight and glinted before he pressed it against her throat.

"You have the heart of a tiger but the strength of a mouse."

"Kill me and get it over with, you bastard."

"Where is the fun in that?" he whispered in her ear. The tip of his tongue, hot and moist, slid along the curve of Hannah's ear, and she steeled herself to prevent a shiver that would surely cause his knife to gash her throat. He untangled his fingers from her hair and slid them to the place where her neck met her shoulder, and the world went black.

Chapter Two

Hannah came to when buckets of water were thrown over her. She pitched upright, coughing out the water that had gone down her throat. As she blinked her eyes and pushed the sopping hair away from her face, she heard the samurai bark orders. She shrieked when two women began grabbing at her clothes. She slapped their hands away and struggled to her feet, her sodden skirts weighing her down.

The bastard smirked at her as he stood some distance away, his arms folded within the wide sleeves of his loose silk jacket. Beside him, another man watched her with ravenous eyes.

"Don't fight. Bath."

Hannah swiped more strands of hair back with an angry flick of her wrist. "Yeah, so you an' him can watch and yank yerselfs off, I s'ppose."

Both samurai gave her a questioning look, and she made the motion with her hand. The Japanese maids stifled giggles and looked away while the men smirked back at her. The shorter one said something to her captor that made him smirk wider and nod.

Her captor slid that knifelike sword from the waistband of his clothes where his two swords were fastened. "You wash or die."

"Bastards."

The samurai motioned to the servant women, but Hannah slapped their hands away again and began to undo her own clothing. "You want a fucking show I'll give it to ya."

Katsuhiro watched in amusement as this spirited little tiger peeled off her wet garments and dropped them to the slatted cedar floor of the bathhouse. He could barely contain his amusement when his servants' eyes grew wide at the sight of the gaijin's breasts, huge in comparison to theirs.

His friend, Sato Masato, nudged him. "Does that fire in her hair down below make her hot inside?"

"Why do you think I bought her?"

Hannah glared at the laughing men as they turned to exit the bathhouse. "Bastards," she muttered. She shushed the maids, who jabbered and rubbed her with the scratchy little sacks filled with rice hulls that they used instead of soap, before pointing to the stepstool beside the high wooden tub.

She had to admit that the warm water made her knee feel better, but she cursed at the maid who stood on the stool and tried to comb the tangles out of her wet hair. Snatching the comb away, Hannah did it herself and wondered what the samurai had in store for her.

After the bath, the maids gave her one of those thin sleeping kimonos to put on -- a *yukata* -- and a pair of woven sandals then led her outside. They crossed through a small courtyard, and in the light of the paper lanterns strung here and there, Hannah could make out a rather large house. It didn't seem like no brothel, but more like one of them fancy places the men her late employer dealt with lived in. Like high and mighty lackeys of the tycoon who spoke for the emperor hidden away in his Imperial city to the west.

They took her into the kitchen where other maids were. They all chattered like little magpies, and Hannah made out enough to know she was the interesting topic of conversation. An older woman gave her a tray with some tea and balls of rice and some little grilled fish that reminded her of the kippers her mother would sometimes buy her in the market on Mondays when one of her weekend gents was especially generous opening his purse strings.

When she was done and her hair was dry, they tried to slather it with the flowery oil they all used to keep their own hair in those poufed styles, but she refused. Instead, she made a high braid, coiled it up, and tied it in place with a strip of cloth and one of the hair combs they had for her.

They chattered some more and shook their heads, and then a girl gestured Hannah to follow her through a maze of quiet rooms and narrow corridors to a room at the far end of the house. The girl knelt, tapped on the wooden frame of the papered door, and gestured for Hannah to kneel too.

Hannah shook her head and folded her arms. "No."

The girl jabbered in a harsh whisper, but Hannah simply turned her nose up.

The door was shoved open from inside. Hannah's samurai captor grabbed her by the wide sash holding her yukata closed and yanked her inside before dismissing the startled maid with a growled command.

Katsuhiko dragged the woman toward the low lacquered table where Masato still sat quietly sipping warm sake, an amused grin playing upon his face. Katsu sat, tugging down on her obi, dragging her down too. Her round rear hit the tatami mat with a thud, and she swore at him.

"Serve," he ordered in her native tongue with a sharp gesture to the pot of sake.

She said nothing but made a clicking sound with her tongue as she did so. He felt his cock throb with anticipation, wondering what that tongue and those full pink lips of hers would feel like sucking him.

She stumbled in Japanese to ask, "What do you want with me?"

Masato laughed and grabbed the front of his hakama, receiving a fierce look from the woman in return.

Katsu drank down the small *ochoko* of sake and gestured for her to refill it. "You teach me more English."

"And if I don't?"

"I kill you or sell you back to the Yoshiwara."

"After fucking you," Masato added.

The woman glared at them both, the suspicion heavy in her unusual green eyes.

"So that's all you want? Me to teach you blokes English?"

"Yes," Katsu said.

"And to fuck you," Masato added again.

Katsu shot his friend a look. "You sound jealous, my friend," he teased back.

Masato drank down his sake. "Why should I be?"

Katsu smirked. "True. I've fucked with you before. I'll have you again."

Masato laughed. He laughed harder when the woman spoke and said, "Hey, now. You two done it? Together like?"

"Perhaps," Katsu said. He stood and hauled her up by the arm. The flash of anger in those catlike eyes of hers sent another rush of blood to his cock. It swelled against his *fundoshi*, the silk of the undergarment like a soft caress over the sensitive swollen head.

She tried to pull away, but he held fast and stared down at her. "Your name."

“Hannah.” She gave her chin a defiant tilt. “That’s *Miss Connolly* to you.”

He smirked. “Hannah-chan.” Grabbing her arm, he took her into the adjoining room and then into a third room. “You stay here.”

“Fine,” Hannah said as she scanned the room where a futon had been rolled out and placed in the corner. Katsu watched her attention stray to the shoji door at the opposite end of the room. He pulled her around to face him, then reached beneath his *haori* and pulled out the length of rope he’d had tucked into the back of his obi.

Hannah struggled. “Hey, now. Stop that.”

The samurai held both her wrists in one hand and looped the rope over them. Hannah was struck by the feel of the rope. It was made of silk and wasn’t anything at all like that coarse hemp that had scraped her skin raw when she’d been taken to the whorehouse by the couple who’d “rescued” her after the Richardson group was killed.

Still, she tried to pull away, tried to kick her captor, only to find her own legs swept out from under her in a deft move that left her flat on her ass, and him kneeling over her.

“Come on, let me up. I won’t try to escape. You can’t leave me like this. The bloody bow on this sash is digging the hell out of me back.”

“No, you won’t escape,” he said quietly, pulling the daggerlike *tanto* from the waistband of his hakama.

Hannah sucked in her breath. “I’ll help you an’ your friend.” She struggled to remember the name the servant women had called him. “I’ll teach you right proper English, I swear, Sanada-san.”

Still holding her bound wrists in one hand, the samurai used the dagger to slit open the front of the obi securing her yukata. Once it was slit, he jerked it out from under her.

“Better?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Hannah mumbled as he pulled her to a sitting position. The front of her yukata gaped open, and she watched his dark penetrating gaze fall on the swell of her tits between the gap of the fabric. He stood and pulled her with him, the thin garment falling all the way open.

He brushed his hand over the hair between her legs and made a guttural sound that sent a chill down Hannah’s spine.

“The color of fire,” he murmured as he looped the silken rope around her waist. He’d left enough slack so she could partially lift her arms, and he took the remaining ends and secured them behind her then brought the rope up between her legs.

Hannah wasn’t sure how the bastard had done it so quickly, but he made an intricate knot before bringing the rope up again to loop under the piece at her waist. Hannah gasped when he jerked her hands up and the knot pressed against her clit in just the way to send a tingle through her.

He wound the rope ends around each thigh, weaving it so that it stayed in place without slipping. He

added the last bit of rope at the top of her thighs to that fucking knot between her legs.

“Walk,” the samurai commanded.

Hannah could move her legs freely enough, but the way he’d tied the rope was a sweet torture that left no doubt that she wouldn’t be able to make it very far before someone caught up to her.

Each step tugged the silken rope, rubbed it back and forth against her skin so that it swiftly worked its way between the swelling lips of her pussy. The fucking knot nestled itself close enough to her clit that each and every movement rubbed against her, making her weak in the knees and wetter by the second.

“Come back,” he ordered softly.

Hannah paused once she turned, her heart pounding, her blood racing as much from the sensual experience as from the samurai’s lustful stare.

“Come here,” he said with a more commanding tone.

Hannah moved slower than before, but that made things so much worse yet so exquisitely thrilling that she had to close her eyes and try to keep the feelings from overwhelming her. The rubbing of the rope felt like his hand had back at the brothel, and she longed to feel his fingers, his cock, anything filling her to accompany the sweet pressure building within from the rubbing of the knotted rope.

“Look at me.”

Hannah gasped. The samurai -- Sanada-san, she reminded herself -- had approached and was directly in front of her. He grabbed her shoulder and slid those strong calloused fingers around and up the back of her neck to tangle in her unbound hair.

He jerked her forward for a kiss, a hard kiss, his mouth fairly crushing hers, and yet she felt no sense of violation because she felt too damned aroused by the restraints he placed on her. Surprisingly, the forcefulness of the kiss eased into a definite seduction that made a moan vibrate deep in Hannah’s throat as Sanada-san’s tongue stroked hers, claimed hers in ways she’d never imagined.

The hilt of his tanto prodded her bare belly, but the discomfort was forgotten the moment he moved his free hand down and slid his fingers past the rope to invade her burning cunny.

Sanada-san broke the kiss and pulled back enough to stare down at her while he slowly and perfectly fucked her with his fingers. He kissed her neck, nipped at the sensitive flesh, then slid his hot tongue along the curve of her ear. “You are wetter, tighter than any whore I’ve had.”

Hannah jerked her head back. “I’m no whore. I’m not.”

Sanada-san tugged her hair till her scalp hurt. “You are *my* whore.”

Hannah’s protest was cut off by another kiss, and her anger at him was soon dulled by the steady fucking of his fingers. Oh, God! Her pussy was on fire with the rubbing of the silk knot and the thrusting of his hand. She pressed closer, moved her hips, trying for deeper penetration. She was breathing hard, almost surprised by the echo of her own moans in the quiet room. She was so close...

The samurai pulled away. He wiped his wet fingers on the shoulder of her open yukata and stepped

back. He stared at her with a fucking self-satisfied smirk on his face, then strode across the room and exited with a sharp bang of the shoji behind him.

“You bastard,” Hannah muttered.

Sato Masato tipped out the last of the sake as Katsu reentered the main room of the house. “Took you long enough. If you were going to fuck her, you could have given me a turn.”

Katsu gave his friend a quizzical look. “I didn’t fuck her. She damn near fucked herself.” Katsu crouched down beside Masato and moved his fingers just beneath Masato’s nose before tracing the outline of his friend’s pursed lips. Masato grabbed his wrist, drew Katsu’s fingers into his mouth, and licked them.

He dropped Katsu’s hand, then downed the last of his sake. “You taste better, but then it’s been so long I can’t quite recall.”

“You are jealous,” Katsu said with a grin.

“Of the gaijin woman?” Masato snorted. “I wasn’t jealous of your late wife -- why should I be jealous of a whore?”

“She’s not like any whore I’ve ever known.”

Chapter Three

Hannah was still on edge as her body pulsed and burned with a desperate need to be fucked long and hard. She sank down onto her knees on the thick futon mat, the silk ropes tugging and rubbing against her flushed skin making her torment that much worse. The bloody ropes around her wrists wouldn’t let her move her arms enough to diddle herself properly, but at least she could touch where it counted.

The big silk knot was wet with her juice, and she rocked back and forth, her fingers rubbing the knot in small fast circles over the throbbing nubbin beneath. A thousand little tremors pulsed through her pussy as the sweet tension built, and she closed her eyes, dying to feel Sanada-san’s hands on her, in her, again.

The lips of her cunny were swollen with desire, the hairs slick and matted as her juice coated them more with each movement of her fingers. God, she’d never felt like this, never wanted any man to take her more than she wanted that Japanese brute to do now.

She froze as she heard voices, familiar male voices in the adjacent room. She was both afraid and hopeful that Sanada was coming to finish what he’d started twice before. The voices stayed a little distant, and Hannah’s body cried out for some release, any release possible. Yet she couldn’t get the thought out of her head that those two blokes fucked with one another.

Still on her knees, Hannah shifted, the knotted rope pushing against the throbbing nub. Awkwardly, she crawled forward, each small, slow movement sending sparks of pleasure through her. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and a cool sweat began to form on the bridge of her nose and between her breasts. She had barely gotten off the futon mat when the steady stroking of the silken knot took her over the edge and

sent her pussy into a wave of spasms. Hannah toppled onto her side and rubbed her hands over her cunny harder, trying to prolong the orgasm. Each pulsing of her inner walls made her that much wetter, and the rope between her legs was soaked through by the time her thudding heartbeat slowed to normal.

Bloody Christ, who'd a thunk being held prisoner could feel so damned good?

Hannah made her way back to the futon and collapsed down upon it, her swollen pussy now aching from the friction of the rope on her sensitive flesh. She fell into a brief sleep and woke with a raging thirst. Once her eyes adjusted to the dim light cast from the small floor lantern in the corner, she looked around. There it was -- a small water jug on the low lacquered chest near the door that led to the other room she'd been brought through.

"Shit," she muttered as the crawling made the blasted rope rub against her again. She sure as hell hoped the little wooden jug had water in it, or Sanada-san had better be prepared to hear her screaming for a drink. The jug definitely had something in it. Cautiously, Hannah dipped one finger in and brought it up under her nose. It didn't smell like anything. She licked it. It sure seemed to be water. "Here goes nothin'," she whispered, before grasping the jug and taking a sip.

It was water. Not cool as she'd have liked, but it was heavenly nonetheless. She didn't drink too much, though, because she wasn't sure how she was supposed to take a piss. *Sanada-san may be getting that late night screaming after all*. Hannah's thoughts broke off as sounds came through the thin walls. She crawled closer to the rice-papered door and leaned in.

No. It couldn't be, could it? Were Sanada-san and that friend of his having a bit? They were! Hannah had heard enough of men's muffled moans growing up to know that sound. She sucked in her breath as a gentle pulsing went through her cunny.

She could see the flickering light of candles on the rice paper panes of the shoji, and she wondered if she could get a peek without them seeing. Hannah held her breath a moment and listened to the men. She didn't know a whole hell of a lot of their language, but she knew the sex words from being at the brothel.

"*Motto!*" Sanada's friend whispered hoarsely, demanding more.

Hannah eased the shoji open just a tick. "*Irete,*" Sanada's friend begged as the samurai thrust his finger in and out of his friend's arse. "*Irete!*"

I don't blame ya for wantin' more an' begging to have that cock in ya, Hannah thought as she remembered the feel of Sanada's fingers buried in her. She'd wanted more too, and she was wanting it all over again.

His friend writhed on the futon when Sanada pulled away. Hannah's eyes followed him every inch of the way as he crossed the room in the dim light. God, but he was a handsome devil. He wasn't as tall as some men back home, but he was bigger than a lot of the men here and his body was well toned from the sword training they all seemed to do. The firm muscles of his back and shoulders glistened with a sheen of sweat, and Hannah wanted very much to lick it off and taste the salt of him on her tongue.

His arse was firm and rounded, his thighs muscled, but not too thick. He moved with the grace of a big wild cat she'd seen at a traveling carnival once, and Hannah very much wanted to roll over and be his prey.

When Sanada crouched down to root in one of the drawers, she could see his cock and balls. He was

only half hard, but he had more than enough to fill her and she had to bite her lip to keep from calling out to him to do just that. He got a little jar and carried it back to the futon where he dropped it, and when he bent to retrieve it Hannah got a nice look at that lovely arse and those heavy balls.

She wanted him badly. She wanted to be his whore.

Katsu smiled to himself when he caught the faint intake of breath from his pretty captive. So she appreciated the view he gave her.

"We have an audience," Masato muttered when Katsu returned and knelt beside him.

"I should have her join us."

"No," Masato answered sharply as he sat up. "Tonight you're mine."

Katsu was more than a little surprised by the tone and the way his friend grabbed a handful of his unbound hair and dragged him forward for a kiss. Katsu groaned into Masato's mouth when his friend opened the container of camellia oil and slid his oiled fingers up and down the length of his cock then captured his mouth in another hard kiss.

"I want you, Katsu. Fuck me."

Hannah couldn't have stopped watching even if she'd wanted to. She'd seen plenty of men and women fucking, but this was like nothing she could imagine. The passion between the two samurai was like nothing she'd ever seen. Their kisses were hard and intense, brutal yet beautiful in a way she'd never be able to describe.

She wanted to twist her fingers into Sanada's thick black hair and pull him down on top of her the way his friend was doing. She wanted to feel Sanada's teeth clamp around her tingling nipples, wanted to have him grab her knees and lift her legs and slam that glorious cock of his deep into her the way he was doing to his friend.

Her gaze was glued to that firm, perfect arse of his as he pumped in and out of the other man with slow, hard strokes. The tight muscles of his back and shoulders were tense, the skin glistening in the candlelight as he began to perspire. Hannah shifted, gently rocking as she knelt to let the silken ropes rub against her tingling flesh. Without warning, Sanada pulled out of the other man's body. In an instant he was slamming the shoji open.

Hannah shrieked and fell back. She tried to scramble away, but the samurai reached down and seized her around the waist. He carried her into the other room and dumped her on the floor near the futon. She hit with a dull thud, her arse scraping against the woven grass floor mat. She'd barely caught her breath when Sanada snatched his tanto from the sword rack near the futon. His angry friend made a move for one of his own swords, but stopped when Sanada muttered something to him.

Tears welled up in Hannah's eyes, and she clasped her bound hands in front of her. "I'm sorry for watchin'. I didn't mean no harm. I'm sorry! Don't kill me, please!"

“Quiet!” Sanada growled. He unsheathed the sharp dagger and seized her wrists.

“Please --”

“Don’t move!”

Hannah clamped her eyes shut and held her breath, waiting to feel the sting of the steel at the throat. There was nothing but a faint rush of air as the samurai made a few swift cuts and the silk ropes fell away.

She shrank back and gasped when Sanada’s friend lunged at her, his hand raised to strike. The man stopped when Sanada barked an order at him. Cursing, the other samurai reached for his clothing, but again Sanada stopped him. His tone was softer this time, and he knelt beside his friend and drew him into a kiss that sent a chill through Hannah. The two men tumbled down to the futon once more, Sanada on top and his friend bucking his hips up.

Sanada pulled away and stared at Hannah as he reached once more for that jar and dipped his fingers inside. He ran his oil slicked fingers over his cock then reached for his dagger, rubbing oil over the black lacquer scabbard. He shoved it toward Hannah.

The other man jerked upright and complained, but Sanada only laughed and pulled his friend into another kiss. Sanada’s friend reared back, gave Hannah a disgusted look, then pulled Sanada with him as he sank back down to the futon. Within minutes, they had picked up right where they had left off before Sanada dragged Hannah into the room.

Hannah whimpered, and Sanada looked over his shoulder at her as he drove his glorious cock into the other samurai’s body.

“Take it,” he said glancing at the tanto on the floor beside her. “Do it.”

Swallowing, Hannah kept staring at the samurai and reached out to run her fingers along the cool, oil slicked wood. It’d be real easy to stab him and make a run for it, but she could tell from his expression that he knew she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t because she couldn’t. She wanted to be here, wanted to watch him fuck his friend, needed him to fuck her.

“You bastard,” she whispered when he smirked as she took hold of the sheathed dagger. She shrugged her arms out of the yukata and lay back on it, then drew her knees up and stroked her fingers across her pussy. She was still swollen to the touch and hot from the flush of blood coursing through her.

She dipped her fingers inside, stroked her wetness over top of the oily coating on the tanto scabbard, then parted her pussy lips and slid the sheathed weapon inside.

The lacquered wood was cool against her burning inner walls, the tiny iron cap at the tip sending shivers through her as it bobbed up against the mouth of her womb.

Listening to the sound of the men, she began fucking herself, imagining it was Sanada’s hard cock sliding in and out of her.

Katsu could smell the English woman’s arousal on the cool night breeze that drifted through the airy house. He imagined it was her hot body gripping his cock and bringing him closer to the edge with each

swift stroke.

“Harder. I’m almost there,” Masato choked out. Katsu kissed him to silence him and retain the illusion that he was plunging in and out of the white woman’s body. He reached down and jerked Masato’s cock until he stiffened and came, the hot semen splatting against Katsu’s sweaty chest. Katsu pulled out of his friend immediately and knelt beside Hannah-chan.

She gasped when he kissed her and moaned into his mouth when he slipped her hand out of the way and stroked his thumb across the swollen bud nestled high in her wet folds. He pulled the tanto from within her, his cock jerking at the obscene wet sounds her body made as it slid free.

She grabbed his arm. “Please don’t. Please let me come. Please fuck me.”

“I will,” he murmured. “But not now.” He kissed her again, possessed her mouth with his tongue, then moved over her. He lifted her heavy, rounded breasts and stroked the pads of his thumbs over the large dusky nipples. He bent down and suckled one, loving the way she moaned and ran her long, thin fingers through his tousled hair. She squirmed beneath him, rubbed her wet sex against his thigh.

He scraped her nipple with his teeth as he pulled away and slid down. Nestling himself between her legs, he raised her hips and stroked her slit with his tongue, lapping up her sweetness like a parched wanderer.

She moaned his name, scraped her fingers against the tatami, and arched her back, begging him for more. He fucked her with his tongue then laved over her hard bud until she cried out, jerked upward, and shuddered in his grasp as tremors shook her body. Hannah-chan collapsed and struggled to catch her breath.

Katsu kissed her mound and inner thighs before sitting back on his heels and licking the taste of her from his lips. Masato was glaring at him. Before he could question his friend, the other samurai threw on his kimono, grabbed his other clothing and swords, and stalked out of the room.

Chapter Four

“I wonder what got his knickers in a twist.”

Katsu looked at her. “Explain.”

“Your friend is angry, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” he answered quietly before reaching to pick up his kimono from the floor. “Get dressed and come with me,” he ordered as he slipped his long sword into the belt tied at hip level.

Hannah frowned and wondered what he was up to, but she decided she didn’t have all that much choice. She pulled on the yukata then followed him. The samurai only glanced back once as she trailed along behind him through the quiet house then outside along the long veranda. Hannah’s spirit took a hit with the high and mighty attitude his lack of concern conveyed.

He may be a handsome and powerful bastard, but where did he get off acting like she was his little puppy that’d follow him blindly? She considered trying to make a run for it just to show Sanada what for, but of course that foolish notion didn’t last but a second. Where the hell was she going to run to, looking

and smelling like she just escaped from a whorehouse?

“Woof woof,” Hannah muttered under her breath.

The samurai stopped dead, and she nearly ran into his broad back. “What?”

Hannah gave a dismissive wave. “I didn’t say nothing; just get on with your business.”

Sanada led them to a privy that was definitely a cut above the nasty little slop holes she’d grown up around. She had to give it to these Japanese -- they sure did have a certain style. She doubted anyone less than the queen herself did her business in a place with such nice little carvings, colorful wood on the door, and the spicy scent of incense masking the usual smells.

“You wait,” Sanada told her before he stepped inside to do his business.

Hannah turned and “wagged her tail,” then sat on the edge of the veranda and waited.

When he returned, the samurai gestured for her to relieve herself, but she waved him off. “I’m good for now.”

“Then come,” he said, stepping out of the shoes they left outside to be worn in the privy only, then back into his own wooden sandals.

Wouldn’t mind coming for ya again, Hannah thought with a smile as she followed once more.

This time they made their way back to the bathhouse, and Hannah found herself exhaling a sigh. The samurai turned and stared at her. “Don’t mind me none. I was just feeling homesick and wishing I had a little cake of some lavender soap.”

“Explain.”

Hannah thought a moment, then as best she could, used what Japanese words she knew to get the point across.

“This soap, it smells like flowers?”

“Yeah. It’s real nice.” Again she used what little of the language she knew to explain that even though she grew up dirt poor, her mother always found a way to get them some good soap from the West End markets. To use for special occasions over the cheaper stuff they relied on most of the time.

“You mourn her, your *okaasan*?”

Hannah nodded. “I guess she weren’t the best mother, but she weren’t the worst either. She tried to do right by me. I just wish I could have grown up to be a proper lady the way she wanted. Maybe I’d have stayed in London and done my best to do that if she’d lived.”

Katsu didn’t understand all of her foreign words, but he could tell from her tone and the tear that slid down her fair cheek that Hannah-chan was longing for many things of her old life. Perhaps once she’d done as he required, he’d turn her over to the gaijin in Yokohama to be taken back to England where she

belonged.

“She died of illness?”

The sigh she exhaled was an unusual one, containing hints of both sadness and disgust.

“In a way, I suppose. Sickness brought on by her wanting the opium more than anything those last couple years.”

Katsu paused and studied her in the pale moonlight. The British and the opium. They’d destroyed and conquered the Chinese with it and wanted to do the same here. Taking a deep breath to control the anger that threatened to boil within him, he turned and continued on.

Stepping inside the bathhouse, Katsu waited until Hannah had entered behind him before he gestured for her to fill the two buckets with warm water from the larger cedar tub. He shrugged off his kimono and left it on the floor, then began to wash away the sweat and residue of sex with Masato. “Wash yourself,” he told Hannah, who lingered quietly beside him.

She did, and Katsu was unable to keep his gaze from watching her well-rounded body in the dim light from the small lantern on the wall. Her pale skin flushed as she rubbed her arms and legs with the small rice hull filled sack. She took one of the cloth squares that he handed her and dipped it into the bucket, then looked away as she began to rub the cloth over her erect pink nipples then down between her legs.

Katsu’s cock grew stiff even before he rubbed the cloth over it, his attention focused on the way Hannah-chan slid cloth-covered fingers into herself to clean away her own residue. He licked his lips, remembering her dusky taste and the soft, moist heat of her body gripping his fingers. Without warning, he reached out and pulled her into a tight embrace, his mouth covering hers as his hand slid down her wet back to cup her firm, round rear and mold her body to his. She squirmed, her soft skin rubbing his cock against her lower belly and making it harder still.

She responded to his kiss with abandon, boldly sliding her tongue against his and weaving her fingers up into his hair. When Katsu broke the kiss, he peered down at her and smiled at the rosy flush on her face and the quickness of the little pulse point at the base of her throat. But it was the look in her pretty eyes, her tigress like hunger that touched him, stirred his own body and propelled him to lead her over to the small bamboo bench. He sat and tugged her down, positioning his cock with a light touch so that she sank onto his shaft.

Hannah-chan was so soft inside, so wet, her pulsing folds so snug that he had to close his eyes and savor the delight. To his surprise, she kissed him again and began to move, riding him with a taunting slowness. She threw her head back and sucked in her breath when he lifted her heavy breasts and rubbed the calloused pads of his thumbs across her nipples before bending to suckle and nip at each one.

She shuddered and whimpered when he slid his hand down to rub his thumb across her hard little bud. She rode him harder, crying out when his touch pushed her to her climax, and she collapsed against him, her head on his shoulder, her breasts bobbing with the quickness of her breathing, her hot body coating his and throbbing around his cock that ached for its own release. As if she could read his mind, Hannah-chan moved to kneel before him, taking his cock quickly and deeply into her mouth.

She licked her wetness from him with slow, teasing swipes of her tongue, her slim fingers stroking and fondling his balls and massaging the base of his cock. She pulled back, kissed his swollen cockhead, then teased the slit with the tip of her tongue before closing her lips around him and creating a soft sucking

pressure as she pumped his length with her hand.

Katsu tugged her hair and she looked up with alarm, but he smiled and caressed her cheek. "On your hands and knees."

Hannah pulled her discarded yukata over, then got on all fours as he instructed, hoping to hell that he didn't go shoving his cock up her arse without the benefit of whatever he'd used with his friend. She closed her eyes as he knelt behind her and braced herself for the worst when he ran his fingers down between the mounds of flesh. But nothing happened. Nothing painful anyway.

Hannah lifted her head and looked over her shoulder. Sanada-san made a motion for her to keep quiet. He took the clean yukata and obi from the hooks on the wall and tossed one of each her way, then quickly donned his, tying it closed low on his hips before retrieving the sword he'd brought with him from the house.

It was then that Hannah could make out the sounds of hushed voices and the rustle of garden foliage outside the steamy bathhouse. Images of that awful day with the Richardson party sprang up in Hannah's mind. There'd been so much blood. She began backing up and slipped on a wet patch of flooring. For a moment the water on the cedar planks looked like the blood that had coated the ground beneath her and the dead that day, and she felt a scream well up in her throat. Sanada turned and glared, looking every bit as fierce as the samurai who'd tried to kill her that day. Hannah scooted back until she was between the wall and the backside of the big tub.

All hell broke loose then with men yelling outside and the clash of steel ringing in the still night air. Two men, dressed head to toe in brown -- only their eyes uncovered -- broke through the thin walls of the bathhouse, and Hannah screamed again. Their short knives flew through the air, embedding deep in the wood of the walls, floor, and tub. Flecks of cedar flew out as the metal struck the walls, pelting Hannah's exposed skin, shooting perilously close to her eyes.

More masked men appeared outside beyond the broken walls, and she caught sight of samurai entering the fray. A clang of metal hitting metal caught Hannah's attention, and she jerked her head around to see Sanada-san still taking on the two who'd broken in.

One dark assassin swung a chain to wrap around the blade of Sanada's sword. He tugged, trying to disarm the samurai, while the other lunged with a long knife.

Distracted by the blade nicking his throat, Sanada lost his grip on his *katana*. He dropped to the floor and snatched up a broken wooden plank to fend off the new attacker. The one with the chain turned his venomous gaze upon Hannah.

Fear paralyzed her, but instinct propelled her to bolt up and throw herself through a gaping hole in the wall. She hit the ground as the masked bastard's chain swooshed though the air and scraped her upper thigh. Crying out, she pushed to her feet and ran, praying to every saint she knew to keep her moving.

Samurai and more assassins clashed around her as Hannah darted through the only clear path and toward the trees and high shrubs that bordered the garden area. That bloody chain whistled in the air close behind.

Branches caught Hannah's hair and she stumbled, tripping over a rock and falling to her knees. The chain whooshed over Hannah's head. She closed her eyes, her body trembling in anticipation of the attack. It seemed like forever until warm liquid brushed against her toes, and she was certain that her

head was filled with some dying fog and it was her own blood washing against her. She shrieked when a hand touched her leg.

“Hannah-chan. You’re safe.”

Still hugging her knees, she cautiously opened her eyes to see her handsome samurai captor alive and well and looking back at her with what could only be concern.

Behind him lay the assassin with the chain, his head severed cleanly from his shoulders.

Sanada moved to block her view of the corpse and held out his hand. She clutched his strong fingers like a lifeline and let him pull her up. Oh, she knew that the Japanese didn’t put much stock in showing any kind of affection or emotion, ‘specially with others around, but right then Hannah didn’t give a flying fig that Sanada’s friend Masato watched and others were there dragging off the dead attackers and talking amongst themselves about what had brought it all on.

She threw her arms around Sanada’s neck and clung to him with all her might until he pulled away. He barked some orders, then led her back into the house and handed her off to the maids who’d taken care of her when she arrived.

Chapter Five

The days that followed were interesting. There wasn’t any of the deadly commotion that greeted Hannah her first night at the samurai’s estate, and Hannah saw precious little of Sanada-san and his friend as her days were filled with mundane household chores much like her early years in service had been.

Just like clockwork after the evening meal had been eaten, she was sent to Sanada’s quarters to serve him some after-dinner sake. Some nights he had a friend along. They mostly ignored her, unless the guest was that Sato chap who liked shooting her nasty looks from the corner of his eye, although most evenings Sanada-san was alone.

Hannah liked those times best, when it was just the two of them. He never spoke to her except to say “more” or even just gesture to the sake cup for her to refill it, but the air of the room took on a certain cozy-before-the-fire hominess that made Hannah long for a quiet country life back home.

As she whiled away the evenings in the comfortable quiet watching the samurai read or write reports or something, she found her thoughts wandering to the imaginary country house where she sat before a fire mending socks or embroidering linens with a strong shadowy husband at her side and a couple playful kids rolling around the floor.

The peaceful mundanity of it all would end though, and it would turn annoying when Sanada motioned that it was time for her to go to her room where he’d truss her up in the silk ropes like he had that first night. She swore he took great delight in roaming his hands over her skin, easing her higher and higher, then leaving her there with those damn big knots pressing in all the most frustrating places so she had no choice most nights but to wiggle herself around and touch where she could to make herself come and relieve the maddening pressure.

And though she couldn’t prove it, she thought he felt up the ropes when he cut them away in the mornings just to see if they were damp or stiff with her dried wetness.

“You don’t need to do that you know,” she said one morning. He seemed a bit surprised, and she knew her theory of him trying to judge how hot she’d gotten herself was right. “I ain’t gonna run away. I mean, come on, where ‘ave I got to go? I got a roof over my head and a job helping tend this place and all your friends or whatever they are. You don’t need to tie me up.”

“Perhaps.”

“So what is it? You like the thought of me rolling around on the floor trying to diddle myself? Maybe you watch, is that it?”

“Did dell?”

Hannah smirked and rubbed herself. “Yeah, diddle.”

“Perhaps I do watch, Hannah-chan. Or perhaps I only listen to those soft moans of yours and how your breath goes quick.”

“Why don’t you do more than watch, then? Why don’t you just take me?”

Sanada gave her a long, hard stare, and Hannah didn’t know if she’d angered him or not, but then he took hold of the hand she’d just touched herself with and licked the lingering wetness from her fingertips.

He left without another word, and he didn’t summon her to his quarters that evening to serve him. He also didn’t come to truss her up. Her mind kept running with unanswered questions of what he was up to, but no answers ever came and her samurai captor never appeared.

The thick candle in the heavy floor lantern had burned halfway down when Hannah heard the hushed voices of Sanada and his friend in the adjoining room. She held her breath and listened for the sounds of them having sex again, but none came. She heard the soft sliding of a door and then nothing until her own door slid open just a touch.

“Hannah-chan,” Sanada called softly.

Hannah rose up on one elbow and stared across the way at him, wanting to hate herself for loving the look of him in the pale, flickering light. He said not another word but held out his hand, and she clambered to her feet and trotted to his side like an obedient pup.

She felt more like a cherished lover than a simple captive whore when he swept her into a tight embrace and covered her mouth with his for a long, slow kiss, his tongue lazily stroking across hers, his strong, rough hand slipping into her robe to rub across her nipple and send a thousand little shivers through her. He pulled away long before she was ready, then led her back to the bathhouse that had already been set to rights.

They hadn’t been in the little bathhouse for a minute when Sanada pulled the robe from her and pushed her to her knees. She didn’t need to be told what to do when he moved behind her. She leaned forward and spread her knees wide, her body already quaking in anticipation.

And she cried out when Sanada-san gripped her hips and drove himself to the hilt into her dripping cunny.

She could swear he was every bit as hard and thick as the scabbard of his dagger, but oh, he felt so much better, 'specially when he began to play with her tits. God, how she loved the feel of them hands on her, the slight scratchiness of the rough parts of his skin when he brushed them over her nipples.

When he stopped fondling her and grasped her hips, Hannah lowered her head to the floor. "Fuck me hard," she whispered, groaning when he granted her wish. She pushed back, matching each of his forward thrusts, his powerful hips and thighs sending jolts of pleasure through her when their flesh collided.

She was ready to come even before the samurai worked his special magic and rubbed her clit. She was so close to the edge when he pulled out and flipped her onto her back. He loomed over her, his body supported by his forearms, his cock poised at her entrance. He slammed back into her as his lips captured hers in a slow, deep kiss.

Hannah came harder than before and gripped the samurai's shoulders tightly as the desire shook her through and through. He stiffened, and she felt him spasming within her as he came too. He stayed buried within her until he began to grow soft. He pulled out and stood, grasping Hannah's hand and pulling her to her feet.

Sanada reached for the cloth in the bucket he'd used before, but Hannah took the cloth from him and dipped it into the big tub. She squeezed the warm water over his chest then began to swab his tan skin, fascinated with the planes and angles of his slim, toned body. She began to notice some old scars here and there and couldn't help but bend down and kiss the larger one that ran across his right hip.

When she finished cleaning him, Hannah knelt and began to clean herself, only to be pleasantly surprised when the samurai pulled her to her feet and took the cloth from her. Hannah closed her eyes as the man ran his hands over her, playing her like some master musician played a pianoforte. She grew weak in the knees all over again when Sanada took the wet cloth and gently pushed it up inside her then pulled it out oh, so slowly.

"You're gonna wear me out before my time, luv," she said with a chuckle. He gave her a questioning look, but she waved it off and told him simply in Japanese, "Thank you."

He nodded then climbed into the high, heated tub and held his hand out. Hannah climbed in as well, loving the way Sanada pulled her onto his lap and wrapped one arm possessively around her as he leaned his head back and relaxed. Hannah laid her head upon his shoulder and did the same until the candle in the lantern began to grow dim and Sanada coaxed her off his lap. They dried themselves and slipped into new robes that were hanging on the wall, then went back inside the house.

Hannah was more than a little disappointed when the samurai escorted her to her own room and left her there before crossing over to his own room and sliding the door closed firmly behind him. Lying down on the futon mat, Hannah told herself that it was the incense in the air that was making her eyes water.

Chapter Six

Hannah's eyes were still puffy and sore when the jabbering little maids woke her by barking shrill orders at her after sunup. The older one poked her head out into the corridor and called to someone out there, and in a minute another younger girl scurried in with a big paper-wrapped bundle she set on the floor and began unwrapping.

“Will you look at that!” Hannah exclaimed at the sight of some proper women’s clothes -- a corset, petticoat, crinoline, and the prettiest green dress she ever did see, with all kinds of pretty tucks, little pearly buttons down the bodice, and snow white lace edging at the collar and cuffs. “Now where’d this come from?”

The soft chatter of the maids stopped and Hannah looked up. Sanada-san was there -- all decked out in what she knew was the samurai’s formal attire. Over his usual thick silk, dark kimono, he wore a blue getup, the hakama pants with a detached stiff upper part that rested over his shoulders and tucked into his waistband. He looked so damn imposing in it with those swords of his and his long hair all pulled back tight.

“Put it on,” he said looking at the dress. “Hurry. We leave soon.”

Hannah’s breath caught in her throat, and all she could do was stare at the empty doorway after he strode away. She looked down at the lovely dress and felt a tug deep inside. Was he handing her back to the English?

“Hurry, hurry,” the older maid snapped.

Hannah gave herself over to their aid, finally batting their hands away once she was able to get a hold on the foolish whims of her heart.

Sanada Katsuhiko walked slowly back and forth along the *engawa* , dismissing his friend Masato’s concerns with a stern look.

“Listen to reason, Katsu. The woman is stupid and of the lowest class. She will cause more trouble than good. If the foreigners suspect --”

“You’d rather they take advantage of the turmoil in the government and do what they did to the Chinese? There will be no opium plague in Japan .”

“But this woman --”

“She was a servant, she will be a servant again, and this time she will report what she sees and hears to me.”

“She’s *one of them* . She has no loyalty to you.”

“We shall see.”

Masato’s argument was lost in the morning breeze once the shoji slid open, and Katsu turned to watch his Hannah-chan step out of the house, the closed-in shoes he’d gotten for her held in one hand. She set them on the *engawa*, then balanced herself against the wall while slipping each foot into the shoes. That done, she boldly strode forward to meet him, her eyes alight with a tigress’s fierce determination.

Katsu glanced out to the rock garden to divert his thoughts lest he break into an amused smile.

“All right then, why’d you give me these clothes?”

“I’m returning you to Yokohama ,” Sanada-san said before shifting back to face her. “Come.”

The words were still sinking in when he and that friend of his began to stride away. Hannah rushed to catch up, telling herself she should be relieved to go back to where she belonged.

Outside the gates to the estate, men on horseback waited. Masato was mounting his horse beside which Sanada-san’s waited, pawing at the ground. There was also a palanquin on the ground with men front and back to carry it. Hannah looked from the boxlike carriage to the samurai she was reluctant to leave.

“Get in,” he said. “Running again is useless.”

Hannah took a few steps forward. “I wasn’t going to run,” she said softly. “I don’t want to go.”

Masato muttered something, and Sanada shot him sharp look then turned that cold stare on her. “Get in. Now.”

His look pushing her into submission, Hannah gathered up her voluminous skirts and obeyed. She looked out the little door and up at Sanada. “But why?”

“Because I want you to seduce a man and gather information,” he said before sliding the little door shut with a decisive bang.

“Hey, now!” Hannah tugged on the little sliding door only to find it locked from the outside. The other side was locked as well. She had half a mind to punch a hole through the papered window covering the top of the doors and unlatch it herself, but she thought better of it once the servants picked up the carriage box and took off at a quick pace.

* * * * *

“How can you not know the assassin’s clan? That alone should tell you who sent them.”

Masato came close to blurting out a reply, but took a long breath instead before speaking. “Their weapons were new and bore none of the expected markings. The only way to tell would have been to capture one alive and judge by his speech, assuming he hadn’t practiced to alter any regional dialect.”

Katsu glanced at the road ahead then turned back. “Then who do you suspect?”

Once again Masato hesitated in speaking his mind. “It could have been anyone, but --”

“Say it.”

Masato turned his gaze to the road as his friend had done a moment before. “I find it interesting that the white woman wasn’t killed.”

“She would have been, if I’d gotten there a moment later.”

Masato shrugged but said nothing. He refused to look back and see the withering look which made it quite clear that for now Katsu was more Masato’s domain superior than his friend.

They continued the journey in silence until they paused briefly while the original palanquin bearers traded places with the extras brought along to keep the journey to a minimum length.

“The whore was a servant to the white man from England,” Masato said softly.

“I know that. Everyone in Japan knows that.”

“But have you *thought* about what it might mean?”

“Of course,” Katsu answered simply. Quite a few British had relocated from China to Yokohama since the settlement began to grow, all eager to get in early on any and all trading opportunities. Especially those that were questionable at best.

Katsu reined his horse away from the main traveling party to relieve himself in one of the earthenware pots buried off the side of the road. His needs taken care of, he rode up alongside of the palanquin and rapped on the side with his iron fan.

Hannah-chan slid open the small papered window and peered up at him, her green eyes both questioning and enticing. “Yeah?”

“We’ll be stopping at Namamugi to eat before going on to Yokohama.”

“All right,” she said before settling back so he could no longer see her face.

And that troubled him more than he cared to admit.

A prod of his heels sent Katsu’s horse to a trot until he pulled up alongside Masato at the front of the traveling party.

* * * * *

Hannah was glad to get out of the cramped box carriage, but when the men carrying it set it down with a thump that jarred her backbone she was ready to cuss them out as the door slid open. She climbed out, countless curses forming on her lips, but when she saw where they were, saw the familiar narrow street with its roadside shops and cluster of drab one-story houses, a dank chill filled her as another day took form within her mind’s eye.

She shrank back against the carriage box, her fingers clawing at the thatched top. Suddenly, the samurai before her began to shout and brandish their weapons. She saw a white man cut down, and another, and then they came after her.

Hannah’s screams roused the attention of half the small town.

“Kill the whore and be done with her!” Masato shouted as Sanada dismounted and darted to the rear of the group.

Katsu barely heard his friend’s voice, for his own berated him within his mind. Of course this place would affect her. It was where she’d almost died. “Hannah-chan, stop!” he called. She turned to gape in

horror at him, her screams still coming. She clutched her throat, and when he reached out to touch her she fell at his feet in a faint.

The feel of a cool cloth rubbing across her face brought Hannah back to consciousness. "I'm sorry for acting like a..." The words died on her lips when the world came clearly into focus and she saw that some unknown serving woman was tending to her. What an arse she was to think that Sanada-san would stoop so low as to nurse a bloody gaijin, one that he was taking to go whore for him.

She sat up and dismissed the startled servant girl with an angry wave. "Go on! Get outta here, you!"

Hannah got to her feet and strode to the door of the small room and down the narrow second floor corridor. If Sanada-san thought he could turn her out to do his bidding, he was sadly mistaken. What a blinkin' little fool she'd been to not want to leave him. It wasn't as if he really gave a flying fig about her. He only cared about what she could do for him in and out of the ruddy bedroom.

He met her at the front entrance of the inn. Planting herself firmly, Hannah put her hands on her hips and pointed. "Look, you. I don't care if you 'bought' me from that 'ouse in Edo. They had no right sellin' me, and we both know it. So if you think --"

Before she could finish, the tall samurai seized her about the waist and yanked her out the door and toward the side. She tottered backward and fell on her rump when he set her down roughly and drew his sword at a man who charged out of the inn, long knife in hand and murder in his eyes.

"How dare you protect her! Because of her and her kind, my father died. They shot him when they came to reclaim their dead. She should have been one of them!" The man lunged to the side to try and get at Hannah. Sanada hit his wrist with the flat of his blade, sending the knife flying and the man to his knees in pain.

Masato appeared, barking orders for the onlookers to go about their business. He picked up the attacker's knife then hauled the man up by the back of his kimono.

"Let him go," Sanada said wearily before resheathing his sword and helping Hannah to her feet. That final kind gesture brought a scowl to Masato's lips, and he growled out something Hannah didn't understand. She didn't need to know the words to know that it didn't set too well with Sanada-san. "Go back to the room," he told her.

With her would-be assassin still giving her murderous looks as he was taken away, Hannah didn't feel much like arguing just now, so she went.

After entering the room, she took her skirt and bodice off and laid them across the futon mattress she'd been placed upon earlier. She was kneeling upon the floor, cleaning the dust off the garments from where she'd fallen, when Sanada let himself in.

"Were you injured?"

Hannah looked over her shoulder and shook her head. "I'm all right, just wanting to clean up a bit." She turned back to her task, conscious of his dark stare upon her.

She didn't hear him move, but suddenly, he was beside her, his large rough palm sliding along her

shoulder, his strong fingers brushing the side of her neck.

“Don’t,” she said, shrugging his hand away.

He seized her wrist, pulled her to her feet, and took her mouth in a hard kiss, his lips devouring hers and his tongue thrusting out to capture hers while his hand moved from her hip upward to possessively cup and squeeze her breast.

Hannah hated the way her body responded and became so hot, so wet with just this simple contact. But most of all Hannah hated the sadness she felt at the thought of leaving him even though she knew she wasn’t very important to him, certainly not in a way that counted.

She pulled back from the hungry kisses and looked into the glorious, dark eyes of her samurai captor, then fell to her knees and began to slip the swords from his waist. He clamped his hand atop hers, and she looked up. “I ain’t gonna try nothing. I don’t wanna hurt you. I just... I just want you, once more.”

Though the sound of her foreign words grated on his ears, the sweetness of Hannah-chan’s voice slid over him, tugging away his natural suspicions. He slid his weapons free and set them upon the floor while his little tigress settled back on her heels and looked up at him, her green eyes full of smoldering desire, her large breasts rising and falling with each quick breath she took, her nipples peaked and dusky through the thin fabric of her undergarment.

He continued to gaze down at her when she undid the complicated knot that fastened the long waist ties of his hakama. He let it fall to the floor, the silk rustling softly as it slid into a pile at his feet. Katsu sucked in his breath when Hannah ran her hands beneath the hem of his kimono to caress the taut muscles of his thighs, then leaned in to press her lips against his growing erection beneath the layers of kimono and fundoshi.

With the barest hint of a smile, Hannah rose and moved behind him to undo the simple knot of his thin obi, dropping it to join his hakama. She hugged him from behind, her small hands rubbing down the front of him, parting the edges of his kimono. He bit back the groan of pleasure when she smoothed her hands over his confined cock. She kissed his back, then came back to face him, her gaze locked upon his as she knelt before him once more.

For a woman who insisted she was no whore, Hannah-chan certainly knew how to drive a man to madness with her touches and the way she slid her tongue up and down his still confined cock. A sound escaped Katsu when she licked his thigh and snaked the tip of her hot tongue beneath the edge of his loincloth.

A delightful shiver ran down his spine when she slipped her thin fingers into the side of the fundoshi and slowly loosened it enough to gently pull his cock free.

Hannah glanced up at Sanada-san and wanted more than anything to beg him to fuck her, but she knew that would make it all the harder for her foolish heart to let him go. Instead, she turned her attention back to the rigid shaft before her. The thick head of his cock pushed through the skin covering it as he grew harder with each leisurely stroke of her tongue.

She teased the tiny opening, drawing out the drop of salty fluid that beaded there before planting a kiss upon the tip, and inhaled the samurai's musky, masculine scent as she slipped her mouth over him, her tongue caressing the thick vein along the underside of his cock. Her cunny was damn near dripping, and she rocked back and forth in time with the sensual pulsing of her inner flesh, remembering how wonderfully wanton she felt the night he had her fuck herself with the scabbard of his dagger.

She rocked quicker, sucked Sanada harder, until he exploded into her mouth. She swallowed his seed quickly, as if she were able to capture a piece of him and hold it deep within her once he turned her away in Yokohama. But her sad longing didn't have a chance to take a firm hold, for the samurai gripped her shoulders, pulled her to her feet, and kissed her hard, his right hand tugging up her petticoat, his thick fingers sliding between her thighs to push into her through the open crotch of her underdrawers.

It didn't take but a minute of him diddling her before she was coming so hard she had to clutch at his strong shoulders to keep from collapsing. She hated him pulling his hand free, but another wave shot through her when he traced her lips with his wet fingertips then licked his fingers clean.

Hannah expected him to kiss her, to hold her to...anything with her, but he didn't. He simply gave her a little nudge then got himself back together and slipped his weapons back into his waistband before turning to the door. "Dress. We leave in a few minutes."

Hannah dressed then went down to the main room of the inn, looking here and there, making sure no one else jumped out at her to take revenge for whatever had happened here after that awful day with Richardson. Sanada-san's friend approached and hustled her to a small table in a corner where a bowl of rice and a cup of tea waited for her. "Hurry. We're already late because of you."

Neither Sanada-san nor his grouchy friend came to tell Hannah when it was time to go. Instead, they sent one of the lower level samurai in the party to fetch her and see that she was tucked neatly inside the carriage box before setting off.

All the time Hannah was isolated in the Yoshiwara brothel she'd dreamed of getting away and getting back to the type of civilization she knew. If not London proper then at least Yokohama, but now, her stomach knotted as she looked through the small palanquin window at the gates of the guarded causeway heralding the bustling port.

It wasn't so much the fact that she'd be away from the stoic samurai who stirred her in ways no man ever had. It was more -- a touch of fear maybe that whatever he wanted her to do might end in disaster and death.

Chapter Seven

Hannah smiled when she caught sight of the sign that proclaimed the newspaper offices of the *Japan Gazette*. The sign was so large, so grand, that it damn near overshadowed the building it was tacked onto. She'd seen sturdier looking storage sheds back in Whitechapel.

Hannah quickly averted her gaze when they passed the newspaper office because she wasn't in any mood to look at the Japanese meat shop just past it. A queasy feeling took hold of her every time she had to pass the place. Oh, the sight of plucked and seasoned poultry strung up by their necks or monstrous little sea creatures in wood tubs didn't bother her none, but she just couldn't stomach the sight of those little skinned monkeys the Japanese bloke who owned the place insisted on hanging whole over

his front counter.

The first time she'd seen them she thought these people were a bunch of ruddy cannibals, and she damn near dove into the bay to make a swim for home and real civilization. Much later, once she managed to befriend his daughter who was trying to learn English, she found out the butcher had a wicked sense of humor and mostly displayed the monkeys to upset the Westerners.

Well, here we go, Hannah told herself when the traveling party started heading up to the high ground of "the bluff" where the wealthiest merchants built their fine homes.

"This is madness," Masato muttered under his breath as they neared the wide clapboard residence of the merchant Burroughs. Clearly, they were expected from the way the gaijin of the area lined up along with armed military closest to the merchant's house.

"I know what I'm doing. We will not discuss it further," Katsu told him in no uncertain terms.

He and Masato moved ahead of the lower retainers to rein in their horses at the head of the party and to the right of the residence's decorative iron gates. The carriage bearers brought up the palanquin and set it down, then assisted Hannah-chan in exiting.

Katsu took a certain amount of satisfaction in the look of surprise upon the white men's faces when they saw Hannah and especially the fine clothing he'd procured in a gesture of goodwill to show that many in high places valued good relations between themselves and their new foreign neighbors.

Hannah-chan gave her employer the odd bobbing bow that her women did when meeting their betters. "I'm ever so glad to be back, sir."

"You have been replaced," the moustached Burroughs said flatly. "By a local woman. I have no need of you now."

Hannah-chan whipped her head around to give Katsu a questioning look, but he pretended not to notice. Things were exactly as he wished them to be, and he let the Dutch scholar who often gathered information for him act as his interpreter.

"Sanada-san respectfully wishes you to take this woman as a show of good relations between your people and his master, Prince Narimatsu. As you can see, the woman has been nursed back to health and treated exceptionally well as a favored daughter would be."

The interpreter ignored Hannah's cough and muttered apologies of "Somethin' in me throat, sorry."

Burroughs, however, stood fast. "I do not require her services, especially after she has been in a brothel doing who knows what with half of Edo."

"Hey, now!" Hannah broke in. "I didn't do nothin' with no one in that place. I didn't want to be there. I ain't nobody's whore."

Burroughs cleared his throat. "I can see that they haven't dampened your spirit, Hannah. However, I simply no longer need your services. You are free to go where you please."

Hannah glared back to Katsu, but he refused to acknowledge her.

“Now, look here,” she said, turning back to her former employer. “I done good work for you, you said so yerself how many times. Who was it that caught the tea merchant trying to fill the bottom of your tin with the cheap stuff when your back was turned? Who was it that found out about them blokes and how they planned to ruin that nice raw silk shipment of yours with sand after you paid the top price for it? And *who exactly* knows which clerk at Freeman’s to sweet talk into getting that mustard and French capers you so enjoyed last Christmas?”

Burroughs smoothed down the edges of his moustache. “You do have your sterling qualities, Hannah dear, however --”

“I’ll take her on, Georgie.”

A sandy-haired man who’d been watching from the upper window of his own home across the way swaggered past Katsu and Masato to address the stoic Burroughs.

“I can afford to hire on a housekeeper now, and I do believe that your Hannah is just the one for me. I don’t quite trust the natives who run some of the shops.”

Hannah tried not to roll her eyes. Oh, God, not Gabriel “Grabby” Grayson. She didn’t want any part of working for him. Then again, it didn’t look like she had much choice about it now, especially since Burroughs was in the street chucking her out without so much as a one line character reference.

She looked back to Sanada-san as the interpreter filled him in, though she wondered what this was all about since his English seemed pretty damned fine. *Hey, now, was that a gleam in those dark eyes of his?*

Sanada-san gave the Dutchman a curt nod, removed a small paper-wrapped packet from the sleeve of his haori, and handed it to the interpreter, who stepped up to Hannah and pressed the packet into her palm.

Hannah narrowed her eyes and gave the man a questioning look. She’d spent enough time with stealthy pickpockets and street card cheats back home in Whitechapel to notice the way he slipped another little paper under the packet just before handing it over. “What’s all this, then?”

“Oh behalf of Prince Narimatsu, Sanada-san wishes you to accept this small gift of money to replace any belongings of yours that were damaged due to the unfortunate misunderstanding with Mr. Richardson at Namamugi.”

“Gift of money. Sure,” she said before tucking the packets inside her bodice. She turned to the samurai and gave them a deep curtsy as fine as any the queen herself had ever gotten. “Thank you ever so much for bringing me home and for all of your kindness these past days.”

Hannah kept her attention upon her samurai as the interpreter repeated what she’d said. Without a word or a look her way, Sanada-san and his friend tugged the reins of their horses and led their entourage away.

* * * * *

“This was a complete waste of time and money,” Masato grumbled a short time later when they passed

through the city gates and headed their party on to Kanagawa where they'd spend the night. "Do you think that woman will do your bidding now that she's back with her own kind? How can you be sure she won't tell that Grayson what your plans are?"

Katsu let the questions fade away in to the late afternoon breeze until later when he and Masato were in a private room at the Kinmata Inn finishing their evening meal. "Hannah-chan will do as I say because I tell her to. Didn't Burroughs and Grayson do exactly as I said they would?"

Masato snorted and tossed back a cup of warm sake. "You were *lucky* they happened to do as you hoped they would, that's all."

"It was planning, not luck, and you know it," Katsu answered before finishing his own drink and waving off the refill Masato began to pour.

Masato chuckled and slid a little closer to his lifelong friend. He reached out to run his hand along Katsu's thigh, toying with two wrinkles in the fine silk of the hakama down near the hem. "You had to drop your pants and fuck her one last time before we left Namamugi, didn't you?"

"I didn't," Katsu told him before brushing the touch away. *But I wish I had*, his heart whispered before he stood and went out to walk the length of the engawa.

* * * * *

Hannah had been able to talk Grayson into letting her hurry to the shops before they closed to get herself some clothes to work in since Burroughs had so coldly chucked hers, assuming she'd been killed and dumped in some marsh by the Japanese.

She bought herself a brand new black dress, white collar and cuffs, and a linen cap and apron to use for serving any high class folk Grayson might cart home. She considered buying some spare tickets from the little playhouse run by the Japanese bloke who dressed up in ladies' clothes for his little performances. After all, the way folks was gawking at her everywhere she went, she felt that she ought to make a profit from her sudden notoriety.

They stopped their gossiping as soon as Hannah drew near enough to hear, but she decided that her miraculous escape from a gruesome death was probably taking second place to lurid speculations on just what went on with her at that whorehouse in the Yoshiwara district.

That question certainly must have been on Grabby Grayson's mind when she got home and made his dinner. She knew that when he came back into the kitchen to retrieve his dessert before she even had a chance to unwrap the little cake she'd picked up in the market.

"It's quite noble of you to carry on as though nothing happened, but you've been through such an ordeal." He took her hand in his. "Please sit and rest awhile."

Hannah wrenched her hand free and wiped it on her apron. His hands were soft and weak. "I'm fine, really. I'll bring your cake out in a tick. Would you like tea or coffee with it? I made both, just in case."

Grayson chuckled and perched on the edge of the large plank table in the center of the kitchen. "Hannah, dear, you are a treasure. How foolish of Georgie to let you go so easily. I'll have coffee, by the way."

“Yeah, well, I s’ppose Mr. Burroughs wasn’t too happy with my cheek.” She placed the cake and coffee service on a tray and brought it to the table. Grayson sat and watched as she placed the things from the tray onto the tabletop.

“I don’t mean nothing by it, you understand,” she said as she poured the coffee. “It’s just that my mother always said the best policy was to speak your mind straight out so there ain’t no misunderstandings to get in the way.”

“Your mother is a wise woman. Is she still inEngland ? Perhaps we should send for her. I may be able to build a much larger home before too long, if certain business ventures go as planned.” He placed his hand atop Hannah’s when she set down his dessert plate.

Hannah pulled away and took the serving tray, holding it in front of herself like a shield. “My mother is dead, but thanks for the thought.”

“My condolences, then.”

Hannah hated the way the man looked at her, the same way those blokes in the Yoshiwara had, only there was no fear of “foreign devils” lingering in the pale blue depths of his close-set eyes. “I can take this into the dining room for you, sir.”

“That’s quite all right. I like it in here. It’s rather cozy.” He licked a bit of cake frosting from the tip of his fork. “Please join me.”

“No thanks. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll go clear off the table in the other room and get to washing things up.”

“Indeed,” Grayson said. “You can pretend I’m not even here.”

Yeah, well, that was a lot easier said than done. Hannah felt the man’s gaze take stock of her every action, and she tensed, just waiting for him to make his smarmy little move and live up to the nickname his last housekeeper had given him before she’d up and eloped with some American sailor.

And yet, nothing happened, or rather if he’d planned to try anything with her, he was interrupted by the knock of one of his friends on the front door, a ship’s captain by the name of Tipton. Hannah had heard from that other housekeeper that the man had made a fortune by taking on a shipload of wood fromMalaya some poor bloke down there couldn’t even give away. But here the sappan wood was snatched up quicker than you could say “There’s yer uncle” at more than twenty times what Tipton had paid for it.

And from what Hannah had heard that blighter’s luck with falling into deals wasn’t a fluke at all. She had to give it to old Grabby Grayson. At least he had a knack for picking useful friends.

When Grayson left with the captain, Hannah finished her cleaning up, then took a slice of cake and a cup of tea for herself. She changed into the nightdress she’d picked up in a secondhand shop while out, then looked at the note the Dutch interpreter had slipped her earlier.

Hannah’s stomach jumped a bit when she saw the firm English letters upon the page. Sanada-san had written it, she was sure of it.

May you have good fortune with your employer and may you carry out the duties required of you easily.

We trust you bear our people no ill will for recent misunderstandings and know that the loyal retainers of Prince Narimatsu who come to Yokohama and Kanagawa on business will aid you with any difficulties if we are able should you find us in the marketplace at your time of need.

Hannah read the note again as she ate her snack.

If she was reading between the lines right, Sanada-san was telling her she'd better not muck things up and that whatever information she gathered for him she could tell to him in the marketplace here or over in nearby Kanagawa where the foreigners were allowed to travel.

Hannah held the note up and addressed it as if doing so would send her words to the man himself.

"You know, luv, it would have been nice to tell me who I'm s'posed to cozy up to and just what exactly you want me looking for."

Chapter Eight

Katsu read the cryptic note just arrived from his Dutch friend in Yokohama . It was as he thought; Grayson was the one backing the opium due to arrive on the ship owned by the man with the cold wolf's stare. Rolling the slip of paper into a long thin tube, Katsu opened the door of the garden lantern and pressed the end of the paper to the flame of the candle within.

"Keeping secrets?"

"As much as you'd keep secrets from me," Katsu said to his friend before turning. "Grayson is meeting with Tipton this evening."

Masato nodded. "As you predicted."

As he gazed at Masato in the pale glow of the lantern, Katsu noted how much Masato had changed since their days back at the samurai school in Minowa. As a boy, Masato had always been a follower, never quite timid, but certainly not the type to go out of his way to take control in any given situation.

Katsu had been the opposite, his innate self-confidence and fearlessness often propelling him to take charge whenever their teachers set them to group tasks and to helping train the younger boys in the art of the sword. Despite his usual quiet demeanor, Masato showed no hint of shyness in the dojo. He'd mastered the complicated sword style in no time at all and had even left the domain for a time to become licensed in a second style at a noted dojo in Edo .

"You're thinking of *her* , aren't you?" Masato asked with a frown.

"Not at all. I was just thinking back to when we were growing up."

Masato grinned. "Feeling old and nostalgic, then?"

Katsu laughed and folded his arms within the wide sleeves of his jacket. "If you've forgotten, you're

older by two months.”

Masato stepped closer. “And age does come with certain privileges, doesn’t it?”

He leaned in, a familiar hunger lighting his dark eyes in the pale lantern light. Katsu had always welcomed that look, that desire that heated his friend’s skin and helped ease the cold loneliness settled deep within Katsu’s soul, but tonight...

Katsu stepped back.

Masato seized the front of his haori and jerked him forward. “Do not do this. Don’t waste a moment of your time thinking about that barbarian whore. You’ve been too long without a woman, and her soft hands and warm body have muddled your senses. Don’t dare turn me away for that.”

Knocking Masato’s hand free, Katsu backed away again. “Don’t you tell me what to think or do.” He was more than a little surprised that Masato didn’t protest or follow him to the inn’s main room.

But after a time of quiet contemplation and a bottle of good sake, Katsu began to see the wisdom of his old friend’s words and the foolishness of his own lonely heart. He could have nothing with Hannah-chan beyond what they’d already experienced, and there would be no more of that.

* * * * *

When he returned to his room, Katsu found a note from Masato.

If I must pay for my pleasure tonight, then so be it.

With a shake of his head, Katsu shed everything but his kimono and loincloth then stretched out upon the futon one of the inn’s maids had prepared. Although tired from the day’s journey and relaxed from the sake, he could not sleep, so he simply stared up at the play of candlelight across the room’s ceiling and thought of the time spent with Hannah-chan today.

His cock responded to the memory of her soft lips closing around it, the heat of her mouth as he drove into it, the jolt of pleasure that shot through his entire body from the gentle suction of that sweet mouth drinking in his seed. He rubbed his hardening shaft, recalling the soft, moist heat of her inner folds when he touched her, the way her inner flesh pulsed and clung to his fingers when she hit her own peak. To be buried fully inside her again, to feel the soft strength of her lush body nestled in his arms, to be able to drift to sleep with the echo of her heart beating in time with his own was what he craved.

Katsu pulled his cock free and clamped his eyes shut, picturing Hannah-chan as he pumped himself with swift, firm strokes. He came hard and fast, his heart pounding as though he were actually with her, yet his satisfaction was incomplete. Something was missing.

She was missing.

After wiping himself clean with the edge of his kimono, Katsu donned a fresh one along with his hakama and haori. He fastened his swords at his waist, then slipped out and headed back to Yokohama.

* * * * *

Unable to sleep, Hannah paced her small room, and when that failed to cure her restlessness, she

rearranged the furniture. Before tackling the tall, narrow wardrobe, she opened the window and unlaced the neck of her nightdress to let the breeze cool her. The leaves rustled in the tree just past the window. A storm was probably blowing in across the bay.

That would be a right pisser, wouldn't it? If it stormed, she couldn't go trudging around the marketplace trying to get up on gossip from the shop clerks and try to find out whatever the hell Sanada-san wanted her to find out. And if her little mission had to do with Grabby Grayson, then the rain was apt to keep Grayson home and in the way of her finding out anything while "cleaning."

Blast it, the back leg of the wardrobe was caught up on a swollen floorboard. Hannah pushed back on the heavy cabinet then leaned a bit to the right, hoping to hop it over the rise in the board. "Go on, be a stubborn git like a certain Japanese man I know," she muttered before rocking the wardrobe back once more until its front legs were off the floor. This time when it rocked forward she tried to give it a tug too. The right front leg gave an ominous crack as the edge touched the floor.

She put up her arms to hold it back, crying out when her right wrist bent backward and the weight became too much to bear.

Out of nowhere something blocked her fall. Strong arms appeared on either side of her, catching the piece of furniture, tipping it back against the wall.

"You saved me," Hannah whispered as Sanada stepped around her and braced the legless side of the cabinet with a wooden trinket box before setting it back in place.

The samurai moved back to face her. "Fierce as a tigress inside, but weak as a kitten outside."

"Bastard," she said with a grin that mirrored his. She pressed closer, loving the way his strong arms wrapped round her. Before she could even think to ask how he'd gotten in the house, his lips claimed hers, his tongue exploring, possessing her mouth in ways that made her blood roar through her veins, and her desire for him roused a craving like none she'd ever known.

When they parted, he gazed down at her, his rough fingers caressing her cheek with unbelievable tenderness. "Beautiful," he said softly, adding something in Japanese she couldn't quite make out.

He pulled her nightdress off, then embraced her again, his lips capturing hers once more in that possessive way of his. His hands caressed her back, gliding down to her bum, cupping her, lifting her with a fluid motion and carrying her to the bed where he put her down. Hannah parted her legs and brushed her hand across her cunny, wanting to scratch the delicious itch deep inside that only the man undressing before her could.

God, but he was magnificent.

The heat of his gaze slid over her as he stood there at the foot of the bed, leisurely stroking his hand over his hardening cock. Hannah held out her hand. "Don't keep me waitin'. You know I want you," she said before parting her thighs so he could see how wet she already was.

It surprised her when he gave a little shake of his head and kept staring as if he wasn't even sure he wanted to. Well, that wasn't quite right, 'cause he was hard as a rock now, so his body wanted her for sure. Hannah rose up on her elbows. "What's wrong?"

Again he gave that little shake of his head, and she had the feeling that he was almost trying to clear it as

if he'd been drinking too much.

"What's the matter?" she asked a bit sharper.

His gaze never broke, and he spoke as he lowered himself to kneel at the foot of the bed.

"Sanada-san --" Hannah broke off when the samurai gripped her legs, tugged her down toward him, and began kissing his way oh, so slowly from her right ankle up to the top of her thigh. She squirmed when he teased the nest of feminine curls with his tongue, licking the very edges of her outer lips, but not moving deeper where she wanted him most.

He pulled her to the bottom edge of the bed, his rough fingers dancing delicately over the hot flesh of her thighs, parting them more, letting the cooler air of the room hit her burning cunny and sending a shiver through her.

"You're torturin' me."

He chuckled then slid his hands under her bum and lifted her like he was a starving man about to feast. Well, maybe not starving, not the way he was taking his own sweet time with that tongue of his, licking her here and there, teasing and teasing, making her so hot and wet she could hardly stand it.

She cried out when he finally dipped his tongue inside her then licked up with increasing pressure to work his magic on her throbbing clit. She was ready to explode when he stooped and pulled away to sit back on his heels.

Hannah sat up, too confused and wanting to speak, but she didn't have to because Sanada reached for her and pulled her onto his lap, her dripping cunny sliding right onto his long hard cock, her hard nipples rubbing against the firm, hard muscles of his bare chest. The lovely friction of skin on skin made her moan softly, but the sound was cut off by his kiss. It was deep and slow, his tongue slick and salty with her juice as he took possession of her mouth like no one ever had.

She twined her arms around his neck, pulling back to give him a bit of room when he reached between them to toy with her breasts. Hannah rocked back and forth on his cock, letting the sweet pressure build up with each movement.

Sanada broke the kiss and let his hand drift down to his lap. That stare of his was magical, so fierce, yet so oddly tender in some way she couldn't explain. Hannah was at a loss to decipher it once he began to rub his thumb over her in slow circles, pushing her to the edge until she clutched his bare shoulders as her climax shook her through and through.

She'd barely caught her breath when he pulled her close and stood, taking her with him. He laid her on the bed, then moved over her, burying himself in her willing body once more. He began to take his pleasure with a calculating slowness that roused her desire once more.

He was oddly quiet, but Hannah had no doubt that thoughts were swirling in his head behind his piercing, dark eyes. She closed her own eyes and gave herself over to the desire, hugging him closely, kissing him deeply. Nothing mattered but this moment. Whatever might happen an hour from now or in the days that followed, she didn't care.

For now he was here and he was hers. All hers.

Chapter Nine

Katsu listened to the gentle sighs of Hannah's breath, felt the steady, pulsing beat of her heart as she pressed closer against him, her soft, warm body fitting so well against his own. He was...content, at peace in ways he hadn't felt in years. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and let sleep claim him, but he couldn't.

He had to leave her. He should never have come. He wouldn't have come inside at all if that furniture hadn't almost crushed her.

Her. His barbarian woman with the heart of the tiger. His Hannah-chan.

Silencing his nagging inner voice, Katsu held her a little closer and rubbed his palm along her bare arm until he reached her shoulder. He smiled as he reached up to touch his own shoulder. His little tiger woman had bitten him when she hit her peak the final time.

He kissed the top of her head and forced himself to pull slowly away. She stirred but did not wake, and as he dressed he let his gaze roam freely over her body. She was so different than his countrywomen, not only in the curves of her body that were never fully hidden by her Western garments, but also in her spirit to which she gave free rein.

He pitied the man who would take her as a wife. His Hannah would not be the docile companion, keeping an orderly house and bearing studious, disciplined sons. No, this little tiger woman would expect an equal say in household and family matters; she would demand that she alone share his bed, that she have a place in his heart.

The words of his longtime teacher echoed in Katsu's ears as he slid his swords and *tessen* into the band at his waist: "A wife will always be her father's daughter, her brother's sister. Her heart, her loyalty will always belong to them. Trust no one, but those among you here. Love no one as you would love the man beside you. It is he who will walk with you into battle, he who will shed blood to keep yours from spilling."

"Yes, *sensei*," Katsu whispered as he pulled the blanket up to cover Hannah's nakedness. He made certain her door was latched, then crossed the room. He slipped out the window, doing his best to ignore the part of himself that wanted to believe that Hannah was different. She had not been raised to think as a Japanese woman, not been raised in the rigid structure of a Japanese family. Everything about her was as unfettered as the wind. Her loyalty would remain where she placed it.

Katsu took a deep breath of the cool night air to clear his head of the foolish longings being with her stirred. He had been wrong to come here tonight. There was no future with this woman, this foreign woman whom his people would never accept as anything more than his whore. Even then they'd question his judgment in taking a barbarian to his bed. Her kind had brought nothing but strife and disease to Japan since they'd forced their way in. Even now they were trying to poison the people and conquer the land as they had in China with their opium.

Once she helped him with the necessary information he needed to stop that threat, he would be done with her. She was a means to an end, a pleasure to his body and nothing more.

Casting a final glance over his shoulder to her window, Katsu slipped into the night and put thoughts of

her behind him where they belonged.

* * * * *

Katsu strode swiftly until he'd put some distance between himself and the bridge leading from the foreign settlement. He paused to relieve his bladder in one of the roadside urns buried at intervals along the Tokaido.

Hannah-chan's sweet scent still clung to him, but he tilted his head back and took a long deep breath of the cool night air to clear his senses. It was foolish to torture himself this way, more foolish to feel anything at all for a woman who could never fit into his world, his life.

After straightening his clothing, he finally lit the rice paper lantern he'd left at the base of the tree outside Hannah's window earlier. The lantern flame highlighted the distinctive crest of his domain inked upon the ivory paper.

Rounding a bend in the road, he glimpsed a pale light signaling another traveler. The light disappeared then reappeared in quick succession as if the person up ahead were using their wide sleeve to cover their own lantern at intervals as some type of signal. The other traveler turned slightly as another man approached him from the stand of trees across the way. Katsu caught a glimpse of their lantern's crest. Was it one of his men come to look for him? Damn his impulsiveness for making him seek out Hannah. He wouldn't be pressed for an explanation by an underling, but if need be, he would claim he had been trying to speak with the local magistrate on clan business.

"*Oi!* You from Minowa han?" Katsu called, walking toward them. He'd taken only a few steps when the first man dropped his lantern, drew his sword, and ran the second man through.

Katsu had drawn his own sword by the time the samurai ahead shook the blood from his blade, resheathed his sword, then turned toward Katsu, the man's face briefly illuminated in the light from the dying flame of the lantern which ignited when dropped.

"Masato?"

"How observant."

Katsu resheathed his weapon then retrieved his lantern, which had extinguished itself but not caught fire when it hit the ground. He relit it then approached his friend. He crouched down to look at the dead man. One sword, undrawn. A peasant samurai, a masterless *ronin* from the look of him. "What happened here?" Katsu asked as he stood

"*Kiri sute gomen*," Masato said sharply as if daring him to argue the right of their class to cut down anyone of lesser rank who failed to show the proper respect due a samurai of their stature.

"Fine. I'll walk back with you to inform the authorities."

The fury in Masato's dark eyes blazed in the glow of the lantern. "He's a piece of garbage. Let him be found in the morning."

Katsu could only stare as his lifelong friend strode away. With a glance to the dead man, Katsu followed, his pace quick, until he caught up to Masato. "We'll tell them up at the next guardhouse, then."

“You can tell them what you wish. I’ve cleaned my hands of it.” With that, Masato stepped off the road and followed a path through the trees.

Katsu stared into the darkness after the glow from Masato’s lantern was swallowed by the night. He began walking again, unable to make sense of his friend’s behavior. When he reached the small structure where the road guards were stationed, he told them he’d come across the dead man’s body on his way back to Kanagawa. “The magistrate knows where to reach me should he have any questions, though I know nothing more than what I’ve told you.”

By the time he encountered Masato again at the inn in Kanagawa, Katsu’s frustration with his friend had formed an angry knot in the pit of his stomach. He grabbed Masato’s shoulder and spun him around. “Why are you behaving this way? What did that man do to you? Who was he?”

Masato’s shove sent Katsu stumbling back into the side of the building just outside their room. “I told you all you need to know, but your inquisitiveness makes me wonder what you’ve been up to tonight.”

Katsu met his friend’s fierce gaze with one of his own. “I was restless. I walked.”

Snorting a derisive laugh, Masato stepped in closer, the hilt of his long sword prodding Katsu’s abdomen. “Fucked is more like it. Her smell is all over you. It makes me want to vomit.” He sneered then turned toward the sliding door.

Katsu grabbed him and landed a punch that sent the shorter man flying off the engawa. Twisting his body to right his balance, Masato landed on one knee. He sprung up, launched himself at Katsu. They crashed through the paper paneled door to their room.

Masato landed a punch that blurred Katsu’s vision, but he struck back, landing a kick that sent his friend sprawling atop the folded futons and blankets across the room. “What demon has gotten into you?” he demanded as Masato picked himself up and advanced once more.

“You’re the one who needs to answer that question.” Masato drew his tanto as he advanced. “Perhaps I should cut the monster from your soul.”

Katsu stood, shifting his weight into a defensive stance. “This isn’t like you. What happened on the road tonight?”

“I told you,” Masato said flatly, using the dagger in his hand to gesture. “The man insulted my honor. For that, he was punished.” He stepped closer, his gaze locked with Katsu’s. “But you, my friend, dishonor your people, your rank, most of all yourself.”

He pressed the blade to the base of Katsu’s throat. “It doesn’t have to be this way.” Masato’s voice dropped to a whisper as he put the tiniest bit of pressure to the blade, enough to draw blood. “It can be the way it’s been since we were young, the way it should always be...” He lowered his hand, leaned in, his tongue snaking out as if to lap the tiny wound.

Katsu swung his right arm upward, his iron fan connecting solidly with Masato’s jaw. He threw his weight forward and toppled with Masato to the floor. Straddling his friend, Katsu stared long and hard into those dark eyes so familiar, yet suddenly so cold, so strange to him. “I know my place in the world, and I know hers. You have nothing more to say on the matter.”

“Good.”

Without warning, Masato seized him by the shoulders and pulled him down for a crushing kiss. Memories of Hannah-chan's soft, sweet lips tried to intrude, but Katsu wouldn't allow it. He gripped the sides of Masato's face and kissed him back fiercely, invaded the other man's mouth with his tongue.

"Yessss," Masato sighed when Katsu's kisses traveled to his neck. "This is what you need."

Yes, he did need it. He needed to remind himself of who and what he was. There was no point in wanting something so wrong, someone who could never fit into his life or his world. Katsu sat up, still straddling his lover's waist, and let Masato undo the knot of ties fastening his hakama in place. His swords tumbled to the tatami, the lacquered sheathes clacking together.

Katsu closed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate on the rough groping of Masato's callused fingers. He was relieved when his body responded and he began to grow hard within his tightly wrapped loincloth. Masato bucked his hips and pushed Katsu off him to deal with his own constrictive clothing.

Focusing on his lover's jutting erection, Katsu undid his fundoshi, stroked himself to full hardness, then let Masato take the initiative. He concentrated on the feel of his friend's rough hands stroking him, kneading his balls, probing the cleft between his legs. He followed suit when Masato shifted, turning onto his side, his head now facing Katsu's feet. He got back into the rhythm of touching and sucking, and Katsu did likewise, teasing the other samurai's cock with lips and tongue, lapping up the salty drop of fluid beading on the head of his shaft.

Masato came not long after they started and Katsu wished he could as well, but his body, though aroused by the other man's actions, had a will of its own. He was still hard after Masato emptied into his mouth and he wasn't sure what to feel when the other man pulled away and rummaged through their belongings until he retrieved a stoppered jar of camellia oil they used to polish their katanas.

"It's as it has always been with us," Masato said as he tipped the bottle over his palm. A tiny stream of oil puddled there. He crouched down and rubbed it along the length of Katsu's cock before pressing his slick fingers into his own puckered hole. "Fuck me, Katsuhiko. Hard," he half begged in a rough tone.

Needing to lose himself in this moment, Katsu pushed his friend, toppling him over and turning him onto his side. Stretching out behind Masato, Katsu lifted Masato's leg and plunged his cock into his friend's tight hole. He closed his eyes and let Masato's satisfied grunts fill his ears as he thrust hard and deep, taking his lover's body with the same abandon they'd exhibited in their youth.

The sex of those early days had been fast and rough, a way to work off the tension and frustration accumulated from hours in the dojo where the older students showed them no mercy and delivered blows meant to injure or kill.

Masato shivered beneath him, his inner muscles contracting as pleasure shot through him once again, and yet Katsu remained unfulfilled. He pulled his rigid cock free, grabbed his kimono from the floor and headed for the inn's bathhouse.

Chapter Ten

The sun hadn't quite come up when Hannah began to wake. She turned on her narrow bed, still flushed inside from Sanada-san's, no, Katsuhiko's lovemaking. And he *had* made love to her. It definitely went

beyond a toss in the sheets in her mind.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes with one hand and reached out with the other, but of course he wasn't there. *Maybe it weren't nothin' but a little roll for him after all.*

She pulled the blanket up over her head and told herself to stop acting like a silly little git, or worse yet, like so many of the women she'd known back home. Hating their miserable lots in life, they believed the fanciful tales of the swells who plied them with gin and bought them for a night. Even Mitsu here in Edo kept dreaming how that old gent of hers would take her home for good someday.

Taking a deep breath to fortify herself, Hannah threw off the covers and sat up. There weren't no use in being some sad little thing and pining away for what she couldn't have. What she did have was a wonderful memory, and even if Katsuhiro's feelings didn't go much beyond those hours, well, it didn't take away from what they'd shared and that was a lot more than some people had.

Right. First order of business was to wash these bed linens, clean herself up, and set to making old Grabby his breakfast. Second order of business was to get to the marketplace and while she was buying stuff for the house she'd need to see if she couldn't get herself some of the herbs they used at the house back in Edo to take care of any little complications arising from business.

Hannah smoothed her hand across the front of rumpled nightgown. Any babies Katsuhiro fathered were sure to be beautiful, but a girl had to be practical, now didn't she? Steeling her resolve once more, Hannah took out some fresh clothing and a little cake of soap she'd bought in the marketplace and got started on her day.

Grayson was waiting right outside her door and gave her such a start that she nearly drenched herself with the leftover wash water she was toting out.

"Good morning, Hannah. Sleep well?"

Oh God, he didn't know, did he? He hadn't come in and heard them, had he? "Erm, yeah. You?"

His smile was a sly one that said he knew something. "That I did," he said, straightening a small framed picture. "Good drink and pleasant company tends to relax a man."

"I wouldn't quite know about that," Hannah said, trying to step around him to get to the stairs. He shifted just enough so that she'd have to brush against him to pass. She stopped. "Now where's my manners gone, eh? You're the master of the house; you go first. So sorry 'bout that."

"No need to apologize," he said reaching out to cup her elbow and coax her forward. "Things aren't nearly as formal between servants and employers where I come from."

Hannah contained the urge to dump the water on him to cool the heat he surely had flowing between his legs. "I'll try to keep that in mind," she said as she walked past, letting him have his little thrill this time.

She expected him to hover around as she made his breakfast, but he didn't and that was fine with her. It surprised her a little that he wasn't waiting in the dining room or the small parlor. She moved through the parlor to the door at the back of the room that led to a study. She knocked once. "You in there, Mr. Grayson?" She gave the knob a turn. The door was locked, so she knocked again. "Breakfast is done."

“I’ll be there in a minute!”

“I can bring it to ya if you’re busy.”

“I’ll be out in a minute!”

“All right. All right. Sorry.”

As she entered the kitchen to plate his food a flash of blue caught her eye and she peered out the window just as something darted behind the bed linens she’d washed and hung up to dry. *You’re seeing things now, Hannah.*

Grayson looked more than a little flustered and decidedly more rumpled when he came into the dining room.

“You all right, sir?”

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

Hannah poured his coffee. “If you say so, sir. When you’re done I’m going to head off to the market to get a few things for dinner and whatnot.”

“Fine, fine,” Grayson said. He toyed with the eggs and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“You sure you’re all right, then?”

“Yes!”

“Sorry,” Hannah said, making a quick exit back to the kitchen. She had her own breakfast then headed off to the market. There was a hint of rain in the air, and she hoped those heavy clouds forming out across the bay would stay there until she was done and her laundry had time to dry.

As she walked to her first destination, Hannah wistfully hoped to see Katsuhiro milling about with the other Japanese, knowing all the while what a daft wish it was.

She ran into Yoriko, the daughter of the meat shop owner, who told Hannah she still hadn’t succeeded in getting her father to move those skinned monkeys from the front of the shop, but that she would keep trying. She also asked when Hannah could begin tutoring her again.

“I s’ppose we can start soon. I’ll have to check with ol’ Grayson, but I imagine he won’t give me a bother. I’ll stop ‘round the back of the shop and let you know.”

The girl giggled at Hannah’s continued reluctance to cross paths with the skinned monkeys her father displayed, then took her leave.

Hannah was leaving the stall that sold fresh herbs when she noticed the group of older Japanese women up ahead pause and bow their heads in deference. Hannah’s heart caught in her throat a moment when a fierce looking samurai turned the corner, but it wasn’t Katsuhiro. It was that friend of his Sato-san.

She gave him a curt nod, but didn’t bow deeply at the waist as the other women had. He scowled at her

then jerked his head away and went about his business.

Strange thing was that his business seemed to be taking place near the other shops Hannah visited. Of course it might not be so strange after all. Katsuhiro's cryptic note did say his people would be here and over in Kanagawa should she ever "need assistance."

Halfway home, Hannah decided that she might as well get that assistance. She turned around and retraced her path, trying to catch sight of Sato-san to find out exactly what it was they wanted her to look for instead of playing this pussyfoot little game of needle in a haystack.

Oh, for cryin' out loud. They would all look alike from the back with their hair all pulled up into them topknots. It was easy enough to eliminate the non samurai, even with the same kind of hair. Now what the hell had he been wearing? Something gray, no it had been blue.

Well, hell, it would be her luck that he'd gone elsewhere, probably back to Kanagawa. Hannah glanced up at the sky. She wouldn't make it there and back before those clouds came in. She took one more walk about the marketplace then headed home, taking the back ways to get there quicker.

The clatter of the *Japan Gazette's* printing press rang in her ears as she passed behind the building and almost covered the angry men's voices that echoed from around a little storehouse situated between the news office and the meat shop. Scrunching against the side of the storehouse, Hannah peeked around the building.

What the hell?

It was her employer, Grayson, and he was having some serious words with Katsuhiro's friend, Sato.

Chapter Eleven

"This has nothing to do with business, and you know it!" Grayson shouted. Sato-san tried to brush past him, but Grayson grabbed the samurai's right sleeve.

Hannah sucked in her breath when Sato-san wrenched his arm free and went for his short sword. Impulsively, she banged herself against the building, cried out, and fell to her knees, dropping her parcels as if she'd tripped. Cursing quietly as if angry with herself, she looked around the building as she retrieved her belongings. The samurai was gone, but Grayson was still there, looking even more flustered than he had earlier.

"Look at the clumsy thing I am today." Hannah reached for the last parcel and stood. "Fancy me trying to take a shortcut and ending up on my arse." She laughed. "You lookin' for me, sir? I was just on my way home to take in the washing before the rain comes. It looks like quite the storm is brewing, don't you think?"

Grayson raked his hand through his hair. "Get home and do what I'm paying you for," he ordered before stalking around to the front of the buildings.

Hannah brushed the dirt from her skirts and watched Grayson disappear around the adjacent building. She'd get back to work, all right, and work at figuring out exactly what he was up to.

The rain still hadn't come by the time Hannah had taken in the wash and remade her bed. Before going downstairs, she made up Grayson's room and had herself a quick look around, but failed to find anything in the bedroom out of the ordinary beyond some of those *shunga* pictures. They were like the ones her old employer picked up over in Kanagawa. Naughty little things they were, depicting men and women engaged in all sorts of sex in every place imaginable from posh teahouses to the edges of rice fields.

Each one reminded her of those lovely hours spent in Katsuhiro's arms, but she forced herself not to dwell on that right now. Finishing up in the bedroom, she dusted the few things in the upper hall. When she dusted the small picture outside her room one of the picture's nails came loose. Hannah caught the frame and eased it from the wall before it could fall.

"And what have we here?" she wondered aloud. There was a hole almost dead center but larger than the nail holes and below the ones where the hanging nails were set. He hadn't. He had! *Why, you little rotter*.

That *was* a peephole, and that rotten bastard must have been watching her wash up this morning. That was why he had been fiddling with the picture and had that sly smirk on his face. She heard the front door open and was about to go down and give Grayson a piece of her mind, but he wasn't alone. That Captain Tipton was with him, and he weren't none too pleased from the sound of it.

"Dammit, Gabriel. Things were fine last night. What happened?"

"I don't know, but don't worry about it!"

"Thousands are riding on that man's cooperation. Of course I'm worrying about it."

"I'll handle it. I'll talk to him tonight. Now be quiet before the maid hears you."

Hannah opened then shut her door loudly enough for them to hear downstairs. "That you, Mr. Grayson? I'm tidying things up. I'll be down directly."

"Take your time, Hannah. I have some letters to write."

Hannah heard the front door open then close, and a single set of footsteps crossed the narrow entry before an inner door closed. Hannah wedged the fallen nail back into its hole the best she could and rehung the picture. She went down to Grayson's study and knocked on the door, expecting him to bark at her to go away. Instead, he opened the door.

"Sorry to interrupt, sir. I just wanted to know what time you wanted your dinner."

Grayson gave her a dismissive wave. "Don't make anything. I'll be going out in a while. I'll get something."

Hannah gave him a bright smile. "Would you mind then if I went out a bit myself this evening? I wanted to visit with one of my lady friends. Yoriko from that little meat shop, you know, the one with the nasty little monkeys hangin' in the window. I'm helping her learn English."

Grayson breathed an exasperated sigh, then gave another dismissive wave. "Fine. Go. I don't care. "

Hannah bobbed a quick curtsy. "Thank you, sir. You have yourself a good evening, then." She stared at the door a moment when he closed it in her face. *Now if I can find out what you're on about and how Sato-san figures in, I'll be quite peachy.*

Busying herself in the kitchen, Hannah waited until Grayson went out then pattered around the parlor and dining room a bit longer in case he forgot something and returned. After a good hour, she let herself into his locked study, courtesy of a few tricks from her old childhood friend and expert lock picker, Ollie Moody.

The study's only window faced the small backyard, and Hannah took the chance of taking a candle with her to snoop around since what little light had been poking through the clouds was fading quickly.

She didn't find much on or in the desk except for some more of those shunga prints, these ones featuring a few scenes of men with men and women with women. Again she was reminded of last night and that time of watching Katsuhiro and his friend going at each other. *Get your mind on track, Hannah. He might come back, you daft thing.*

On track. Right. It would help if she knew what the hell she was looking for. Something that tied Grayson to Katsuhiro's friend was the best place to start, but she'd seen nothing like that so far. She looked around the room and muttered, "If I was keepin' secrets, where would I keep 'em?"

For the second time she flipped through the books scattered about the tables and in the tall slim case then poked around peeking behind the couple picture frames before getting down on her hands and knees to look beneath the two low tables and under the desk to see if anything had been tacked up there. There was nothing to be found apart from the wadded papers and pipe scrapings in a low wooden box beside the desk.

The papers were either old merchant bills Grayson had paid, letters received or ones written that had gotten unsightly ink splashes. The lone paper not to match the others in some way was a wadded up sheet with various figures written over it, crossed out then written again. It looked like Grayson had been doing some calculations and dividing the total by three then two.

Hannah copied it all down as quickly as she could, then crumpled up the original and tossed it back in the bin. She tucked the copy into her dress bodice then exited the room and headed over to visit with Yoriko. Maybe catching up on a bit more local gossip would help her figure out why Sato-san and Grabby Grayson were having words.

* * * * *

Hannah laughed and clapped her hands after Yoriko read a passage from an old copy of the *Japan Gazette*. She had trouble with some of the words and sounds of the letters but she was close to being a scholar compared to some Hannah had known in Whitechapel. "You don't need much help from me any more. Why, you'll be good enough to be one of them translators in no time at all. You'll make a boatload of money, enough to buy yourself one of them big fancy houses, bigger than Grayson's."

Yoriko flashed a brilliant smile. "I would be happy for enough to buy the pretty kimono fabric I saw long ago in Edo." She got up and scurried over to a low lacquered chest where she kept her clothing. She pulled out a little square of ivory silk and opened it to show Hannah the two gold pieces and some little coins inside. "I have translated letters for two of the ship captains."

Hannah clapped again. "You were a busy little thing those months while I was gone."

Yoriko giggled again then returned her nest egg to its hiding place. She left to make them a pot of tea, and Hannah's mind began to wander. Removing the paper from her bodice, she began to wonder what Grayson had been figuring and why he'd divided it in thirds then halves. He could be investing with one or two other blokes. Maybe that old Tipton had found himself another good trade deal like he had with that sappan wood.

Or maybe he was trading in something a bit fishy. That would certainly explain Grayson's windfall to build himself a fine new house in the short time she'd been gone from Yokohama, and it could explain the numbers he'd been working on.

And she couldn't forget Sato-san in all this.

"Oh, I really want to know what pie you got your sticky fingers into, mate."

Soon, Yoriko returned with the tea and some of those chewy *daifuku* pastries Hannah liked. "These are lemon! They remind me of the wee tarts my mother used to make."

Yoriko smiled. "I remember. When Tipton-san paid me for his letter today, he gave me some lemons that just come in."

Hannah stopped in mid bite and lowered the daifuku. "No wonder they taste so fresh and lemony. I saw Captain Tipton today too. He was talking with Mr. Grayson, and I don't think he was none too happy. I wonder if he got some bad news from somewhere. I guess that's what he needed a letter sent for."

Yoriko shook her head. "He did not send a letter. He received one."

A prickle ran along the back of Hannah's neck. "Did he now?" She laughed and finished her pastry. "I hope it weren't a love letter from a married lady. I know how randy them sailor boys can be -- even the older ones."

"Randy?"

"You know." Hannah grabbed at her skirts and both she and Yoriko dissolved into laughter.

"It was no love letter," Yoriko said as she placed another pastry on Hannah's plate. "It said ships from Nagasaki were better to trade. Yokohama ships pay many *ryo* but should show more respect to Japanese."

"Sounds to me like whoever ol' Tipton is dealing with got their knickers in a twist." Hannah reached across to the tableside brazier for the teapot to refill their cups. The pot's handle came loose just as she was bringing it to the table and doused the front of her dress with hot tea. Luckily most of it landed on her skirts and her petticoats absorbed most of the scalding liquid before it hit her skin.

Yoriko was beside herself with worry, apologizing like mad for having a defective utensil that should injure an honored guest. She brought Hannah one of her kimonos and insisted on keeping the soiled garments to clean.

"It's nothing to make a fuss over, luv. It ain't the first time I ever spilled stuff on meself."

"You must allow me. Please, Hannah-san."

“All right, then, but don’t you go fretting no more about it, you hear? It was just an ol’ accident.”

Rain was falling in a steady stream of fat drops a short time later when Hannah left to go home, and she had to borrow a oil treated jacket and parasol from Yoriko as well. Hannah was very glad to have that parasol to shield herself when a dark shape emerged from around the side of Grayson’s house. It was a man, a samurai, who hurried down the hill, his head tipped down so that his large hat caught the brunt of the rain.

Hannah almost called out Katsuhiko’s name, but stopped herself when she realized it wasn’t him. The white crest on the black hat wasn’t the same as the one adorning Katsuhiko’s clothing. But it was a familiar family mark all the same. She tilted her parasol and veered off the center of the road to make it look like she was headed to the nearest house on her right. She waited a few moments, then hurried on toward Grayson’s, going around the back herself.

A light was burning in Grayson’s study, and Hannah couldn’t help but glance in as she passed. “Blimey!” Hannah dropped the lantern she carried and it sputtered out and collapsed when it hit the damp ground. Grayson lay over his desk, shirtless and bruised, his pants bunched around his ankles. She rushed inside, dropped the parasol to the kitchen floor, and hurried to the study.

Grayson was coming around by the time she reached him, and he pushed her away when she tried to help him.

Hannah grabbed his arm while he tugged his shirt back on. “Who did this to you? Let me help you. I’ll go get the police!”

He shoved her into the wall and pointed. “You keep your mouth shut, do you hear? Nothing happened. No one did anything to me. No one.” He jerked his pants up and made for the door, stopping when he reached it. He turned and pointed at Hannah again. “Not one word of this gets out, do you hear me? If you so much as even remember what you think you saw here tonight, I will kill you.”

Chapter Twelve

Hannah stared at the empty doorway, not doubting that he would kill her or at least try if she went blabbing. Of course, he meant blabbing in a general gossip way, like to Yoriko or her other acquaintances. Telling Katsuhiko what went on wasn’t blabbing at all. In fact it was her duty. Now, she just had to figure a way to get word to him without ol’ Grabby Grayson knowing.

The rain fell through the night and kept on through the gray morning, the wind from the bay blowing the heavy drops like sopping wet sheets hung out to dry. Hannah spent her time with mundane chores and cleaning the dirt from the lower half of the kimono Yoriko had lent her. She made breakfast for Grayson, but he refused it. She figured he’d refuse lunch, too, but then dear old Captain Tipton showed up, not quite as upset as his last visit, but still not the happiest bloke around.

Grayson asked Hannah to bring them some of the soup she’d mentioned that morning and to serve it in the study. When Hannah placed the bowls and spoons on the round table, she glanced over to the desk. She didn’t get the best look, but it seemed that Grayson had been scribbling more figures.

“If you gents need anything, just give us a holler. I’ll be puttering around polishing the furniture.”

“Fine, fine,” Grayson muttered. Tipton said nothing but dug into his meal.

Hannah exited the study, pulling the door shut, but not so far that the latch clicked. There should be just enough space to let their conversation drift out to her as she worked. She picked up the container of beeswax she’d set aside when bringing the food in and took out the cloth she kept tucked into her apron and began working on the side table closest to the study door.

It was a good thing Grabby had gone all out when buying this place and had bought the fanciest furniture he could find, the kinds with lots of scrolls and carving to the wood. Hannah took her sweet time working the wax into all the little crevices of the leg nearest the door and an equal amount of time wishing those two would do more than slurp their soup and tea. Bastards. Did they suspect she was snooping about?

Or maybe they’d said all they had to say while she was getting their meal ready. Damn. She moved from the table leg up to work the wax into the scroll and flower carvings of the table apron. She’d worked her way along the table’s front edge and was starting on the far leg when Grayson finally spoke.

“You’re sure this rain won’t delay the ship.”

“It shouldn’t,” Tipton said before slurping up his soup. “The wind is with us, and the goods will keep dry enough even if we tried to unload tonight when they come in.”

He slurped a bit more, the last of it Hannah guessed. “You sure our friend is still with us? What I heard from him yesterday makes me wonder.”

“I told you I spoke to him last night after that. He’ll hold up his end of things.”

“He’d better. Men have already died over this -- some of their own even -- and I don’t want to join them in hell.”

Grayson gave a derisive laugh. “You’re the one who’s always touting the higher profits go with the greater risks.” He paused and Hannah heard the clink of porcelain. “Hannah!”

Hannah grabbed the wax and made her way across the parlor as quickly and quietly as she could. “You call me, sir?”

“We need more tea.”

Hannah went into the study and took up the empty pot, giving both men a smile and hoping they couldn’t hear the nervous pounding of her heart.

“Be right back, sir.”

Tipton smacked her on her arse. “Bring me a couple more of those biscuits of yours and some jam.”

“Straightaway, sir.”

The pounding of Hannah’s heart didn’t ease once she reached the kitchen. If anything, it became worse and a queasy feeling overtook her stomach as the sea captain’s words ran through her mind. *Men have already died over this -- some of their own even -- and I don’t want to join them in hell.*

While catching up on events, Yoriko had said some bloke had been cut down on the road to Kanagawa the other night. She'd said there'd been two others just as mysterious during the time Hannah had been stuck in Edo.

As she ladled some jam into a small dish, that attack at Katsuhiro's estate came back to her too. It took some balls to try and kill a man in his own house when he had a slew of armed men close by. And the way that was done up with their faces mostly covered said they was more than just bent on robbing a well-off samurai. They was out for blood and blood alone.

Hannah looked out the kitchen window. The rain hadn't let up. It would look more than a bit strange if she tried to do some "marketing," and since she'd seen Yoriko last night, Grayson might question her wanting to go again, though she could plead wanting to take back the kimono. Of course wanting to deliver it in a downpour seemed more than a little daft.

Besides, Katsuhiro wasn't likely to be walking around the wet, muddy streets of Yokohama today on the off chance she had information for him. Trying to get to the inn at Kanagawa in this mess wasn't very bright either.

Damn. Well, she'd figure something out.

* * * * *

Katsu stood near an upper window of the inn, arms tucked into his sleeves, his thoughts an endless circle as he gazed out at the rain pelting the broken shoji panels and bloodstained tatami mats piled at the rear of the inn.

Pulling back his kimono sleeve, Katsu looked down at the bandage on his right forearm. Three assassins had come in the dead of night, overpowering the lone guard and nearly catching him unawares while he slept, dreaming of holding Hannah in his arms once more.

The trio carried the same mark as the would-be assassins in Edo had, and just like in Edo, Masato had been slow in coming to his aid. When pressed for an explanation as to why he'd dismissed the other man ordered to keep night watch, Masato simply said he doubted there'd be any sort of trouble on such a rainy night.

"Is that why you slept through the commotion of my room being broken into?"

"I didn't sleep through anything. I wasn't in my room."

"On a night like this? And where did you go, old friend?"

"I had personal business to tend to."

"Such as?"

"Personal. Much as your barbarian whore had, I imagine. I saw her. She was sneaking around in the rain dressed in a kimono. Now why do you think that is?"

* * * * *

The rain continued on, the gray sky growing darker until the day faded into evening then night. Tipton

had stayed the afternoon, he and Grayson playing chess then cards. Hannah made them meat pies for supper, and Tipton stayed around long enough for a smoke and a couple brandies before he took off. He smacked Hannah's bottom after she helped him into his oilskin coat.

"I may just steal her away, Gabe my boy. I can use a pretty little maid like her when I retire."

Hannah forced a lilting laugh. "Oh, you go on. A young man like you retirin' soon. Don't be a tease."

Tipton gave her tit a squeeze, his eyes glassier for the drink in him. "A rich man can retire when he wants, and when you next see the sun over Yokohama Bay, I'll be that man."

Grayson cleared his throat. "You'd better go before the storm gets worse."

* * * * *

The storm didn't get worse, but it did slow to a steady drizzle, the clouds parting now and again to let the moon shine through to reflect off the puddles. Hannah pattered around, waxing the rest of the furniture and noting how many times Grayson checked his pocket watch. It was half past eleven when he set aside the book he hadn't been showing much interest in. "Why don't you go to bed, Hannah. It's late."

"Thank you, sir. This weather does tend to make me drowsy."

Grayson started up the stairs while Hannah made her way to the kitchen to put away her cleaning things. She went up the narrow back staircase and to her room, leaving her door cracked open just a tad. Grayson came out of his room in a bit. He'd changed out of his fine clothes and now wore plain dark pants, high leather boots, and a short heavy jacket that he'd buttoned up to the collar. He carried a tiny glass lantern and stepped lightly as he went past Hannah's door and down the stairs.

Hannah crept out of her room, watching as Grayson bypassed the front door in favor of exiting through the kitchen. Hannah started toward the stairs then stopped and went to her room to change. A western woman wandering about at this hour might raise suspicion, but a Japanese woman wouldn't -- or at least not as much. Hannah made a mental promise to Yoriko to replace her kimono if it got ruined from slinking about through the muddy back streets.

* * * * *

The faint chimes from a big clock in one of the closed shops signaled midnight as Hannah got closer to the docks. She saw a single ship moored with its sails still unfurled as if it had just come in. Little lights bobbed in the darkness, heading toward the ship's gangplank.

Hannah stopped dead when a light reflected off a windowpane ahead and to her right. She froze, covered her own little light with her body, and shrank back into the darkness bordering the nearest building.

It was a samurai. The small crest stenciled in the center of his dark jacket proved that. But it was Katsuhiko's family crest the man wore.

Dressed all in black with his face half covered by a dark hood, Katsu peered around through the stack

of wooden crates piled at the far edge of the pier. His heart sank when he recognized the familiar gait of Masato as he approached the men awaiting their late night shipment of hidden opium.

He wasn't sure if he was more hurt or disgusted by the fact that his friend was so bold in trying to cloak his own identity that he wore clothing bearing the *mon* of Katsu's own family. Katsu flexed his right hand, gritting his teeth against the searing pain that shot up his arm from his injury. He took a deep breath and prayed for strength, knowing that whatever this night held it would be bad for them both.

Creeping forward, blending in with the darkness Katsu cast his fate to the gods.

Chapter Thirteen

Hannah set Yoriko's parasol aside and pulled her dark scarf further down over her forehead to shield her face and cover her hair. Grayson and Tipton made their way onto the boat, the samurai following. She refused to think of him as Katsuhiko. He wouldn't be up to no good in the dead of night. He wouldn't.

The samurai stopped halfway up the gangplank and looked off to his right. Though on the left, Hannah shrank back and crouched behind a tilted wagon with a broken wheel. The samurai stopped looking at whatever had caught his attention and followed the other men.

Slipping her fingers into the wide obi, Hannah gave the paring knife she'd brought a comforting pat. It wasn't much in the way of protection, but it could buy her some time if need be. Staying low, Hannah tiptoed closer to the ship, recalling her early childhood when she and the rascally Ollie Moody used to filch what they could from ships and the docks. It was quite the game to skulk about in broad daylight and get into the nooks and crannies and shinny up and down ropes and poles to lift what wasn't nailed down and could be stuffed into their clothes.

Of course, in them days she'd been a hell of a lot smaller and more agile, and she hadn't been wearing a bleeding tube of a dress that restricted her legs. Damn, of all the stupid ideas she'd ever had, dressing like this tonight was right up there.

Hannah paused to part the lower edges of the kimono and creep behind some covered sacks. As she did, she glanced to the ship and caught sight of a shadowy figure creeping his own way onto the ship. He looked like some wily monkey. A wily little monkey that had a bloody sheathed sword strapped to his back. He was making his way toward the bow, so she kept on her own path toward the stern.

She could hide around down here on the wharf and hope to hear or see something, but the real goings on were on that ship. She had to see if Katsuhiko was really involved in whatever business the others were. And how the hell did that bloke Masato figure in now?

One thing was certain: she'd have to climb like a wharf rat to do it because she sure as hell wasn't going to get aboard all wrapped up in this kimono. Hannah stripped down to her knickers and her camisole and pulled the rain jacket back on to ward off the chill. She tucked the knife into the pocket like bottom of the jacket sleeve. Inching to the ship's stern, she hoped to hell her childhood climbing skills weren't too rusty.

The flurry of activity on the ship's deck was both a blessing and a curse to Katsu as he made his way around crates and timber waiting upon the dock. The sounds muffled any that he might make, but with the crew clambering about there was a greater chance he could be seen, even though the men weren't busy near the front of the vessel where he was headed.

An odd feeling tingled Katsu's senses as he pulled himself up one of the heavy ropes mooring the ship to the dock, and he looked left in time to catch a glimpse of someone hoisting themselves over the ship's top rail. Someone with those frilly knee length undergarments Hannah-chan wore. Katsu closed his eyes a moment, praying to every god in the heavens that he was imagining things.

Captain Tipton hooked his fingers into his vest and rocked back on his heels as Grayson and a deckhand tipped a shipping crate onto its side and pried off the false bottom to reveal another smaller crate nestled inside and cushioned with excelsior to keep it from jostling against the outer wood.

Hannah silently watched and listened from her vantage point, but she almost failed to contain the gasp when the samurai turned as he was inspecting the opium in the smaller box and Hannah saw that it wasn't Katsuhiko at all but Sato. *Why, you sneaky little bastard*. Hannah had to bite her tongue to keep the words from spilling out.

A muffled sound and a flash of silver in the corner of her eye drew Hannah's attention. She looked to the front of the ship to see a sailor fall overboard before the shadowy climber she'd seen earlier ducked behind the mainmast. Her attention wasn't the only drawn. When the sailor's body hit the water, heads turned toward the sound.

Another sailor rushed to the rail and leaned over. "It's Charlie!" he called out. "His head's been half hacked off!"

Masato drew his long sword and Captain Tipton and Grayson guns. But the captain's gun was on Masato and Grayson's on the captain.

What the hell?

Tipton looked as confused as Hannah felt.

"You an' him in cahoots, now, Gabe? You planning to cut me and my boys out? His men boarding to take the ship over?"

"Only one came aboard, and he will leave dead," Masato growled as he faced the ship's bow.

The black clad samurai came up from his hiding place, and Hannah's heart leaped beneath her breast when he whipped off the dark head covering to reveal his face.

"I'll take care of him," Grayson said, taking aim.

"Katsuhiko, look out!" Hannah cried, now noticing the blood tinged bandage that wrapped around the palm of his right hand.

Masato struck the gun from Grayson's hand then launched a kick at Captain Tipton that sent the older man sprawling.

Hannah leaned on the mizzenmast for support, but before she could catch her breath Sato advanced upon Katsuhiko, his sword still drawn. He hadn't been protecting Katsuhiko; he wanted to kill him himself!

"You traitorous bastard!" Hannah sprinted across the quarterdeck, paring knife in hand, and leapt with all her might when she reached the edge. She didn't know or care how, but she hit the main deck in a crouch and sprung at Masato, catching him low in his right side with the knife.

He spun and hit her with a kick that sent her flying back against a heavy crate. The pain was still clouding her vision when Grayson yanked her up by the hair and held his gun to her head. "Drop it, Sanada, or I'll blow her head off."

"Yes," Masato added in Japanese as he advanced, a cruel smile twisting his face. "Lay down your katana and let the world see what a useless thing you are. You want to give up your life for the white whore. I can see it in your eyes. You disgust me."

Katsu gritted his teeth against the pain in his hand and arm. "I am the one disgusted to see a man I called friend and loved like a brother lower himself to become such a dishonorable animal." Moving, Katsu shifted his weight and stance as Masato approached, ready to attack him.

"My only dishonor is to have lived in your shadow all these years. Time and again I bested you in the dojo, and sensei made you head instructor. Lord Narimatsu made you his chief councilor ahead of me. He gave you his favored concubine's daughter in marriage."

Katsu circled opposite Masato's movements, his gaze never wavering even when Hannah-chan let out a yelp of pain. "Battered pride has driven you to this, Masato? Perhaps I should feel pity instead of disgust. How dare you dirty the samurai blood in your veins with such a thing?"

"How dare *you* dirty your own honor by loving that barbarian whore?"

The insult was still echoing in the night when Masato launched into the attack. The first clash of their blades sent bone-jarring pain through Katsu's arm and the cuts on his hand and arm tore open from their stitches with each successive swing of the katana and strike against Masato's blade.

Katsu knew he'd not be able to duel long, and the smirk on Masato's lips said he knew it too. Shifting the katana to his left hand was only a momentary respite when Masato came after him with power born of years of pent-up frustration and hatred.

Fighting back the pain, Katsu shifted his katana back to his dominant hand. Masato leapt forward, raining down a shower of hard, quick hits.

Hannah screamed when the last blow sent the sword flying from Katsuhiko's hand to skid across the wet deck. Her fear did not lessen when Katsuhiko defended himself against the next couple blows with the iron fan he drew from his waistband with his left hand.

She struggled against Grayson's grip. Tipton was on his feet again, and he came alongside her as

Katsuhiko rolled out from under the next slash by Masato to grab his own sword once again. Her heart pounded in time to the clang of steel against steel as the samurai fought.

“Want me to cover your eyes, pretty?” Tipton asked with a lewd chuckle and a grab of her arse.

“Fuck you!”

“You will. Soon.”

Hannah spat in his face. He hit her with a backhanded slap that had her crashing into Grayson and sent them both tumbling to the deck. Hannah scrambled to her feet first and dove on Grayson’s gun. She took aim at Masato as best she could and pulled the trigger.

Yanked back by the hair and backhanded again to crash to the deck, Hannah didn’t know what she’d hit, but she knew it was a man by the cry of pain. She just prayed she hadn’t gotten Katsuhiko by mistake.

She was dragging herself up when Katsuhiko charged forward, cutting down the sailors foolish enough to not leap over the side or dive into the hold. Hannah screamed as Tipton took aim at the samurai and Grayson reached for his gun. Both men were dead in seconds without ever getting a shot off.

Katsuhiko rushed to her, but Hannah waved him off. “Your friend. Go to him.” She pointed to Masato, who struggled to sit up. Gripping her hand, Katsuhiko took her with him.

Once they got close, Hannah saw that she’d hit him low in the back. Guilt washed over her when she saw the pain and tears brimming in Katsuhiko’s eyes as he knelt beside his friend and helped him to sit.

“He-he should lie down. I’ll get help, a doctor.”

“It won’t help,” Katsuhiko told her.

She watched helplessly as Katsuhiko held his dying friend. They exchanged words, Katsuhiko shaking his head in refusal at whatever it was until Masato pulled him for a kiss and said, “Please.”

Blinking back tears, Katsuhiko nodded. “Get that box, put it behind him,” he told Hannah as he pulled the front of Masato’s jacket and kimono open, then helped his friend unsheathe the dagger he carried.

“Oh God, no,” Hannah whispered when she realized what they were up to. She clamped her eyes shut and turned away as Masato plunged the blade into his belly, dragged it to the side, and fell forward.

She wanted to throw up when she heard Katsuhiko cry out, heard the sound of his sword slicing through the air and then the dull thud of Masato’s head hitting the ship’s deck.

Morbid curiosity made Hannah start to look, but Katsuhiko was suddenly behind her, blocking her view. “He redeemed his honor. You will not speak of him again.”

“All right,” Hannah said quietly. She sank into Katsuhiko’s embrace as he hugged her tightly from behind, her tears adding to the wetness of his rain dampened sleeves.

His hold on her tightened, and she felt him rest his cheek against the top of her head. “I miss him already,” he whispered.

* * * * *

The local magistrate's men showed up a bit after that, and Hannah couldn't help but think how like the coppers back home they were, showing up long after they were needed. Katsuhiro saw to it that she had a blanket to wrap herself up in while he and the magistrate had a little meeting about the night's events at the bow of the ship.

Grayson, Tipton and the dead sailors were covered up and carted off, but Katsuhiro took charge of Masato's body, giving orders to a couple of men who wrapped him up and carted him off to a temple.

Katsuhiro arranged for a palanquin to take them both to the inn over in Kanagawa. Hannah went to have a soak in the bathhouse while Katsuhiro filled his men in on what happened and what they'd be doing coming morning.

It was a pleasant surprise when Katsuhiro came to Hannah's room and joined her on the cushy futon. Hannah kept quiet and settled comfortably in his arms, guessing he wanted to be alone with his memories of his friend much as she'd wanted to do when her mother died.

Hannah woke to a sunny morning that did little to drive the cold emptiness from deep within her bones. Katsuhiro was gone. The maid who brought her breakfast and clean clothing said he and his men had gone to the temple for the funeral and cremation of Masato.

She was pacing slowly along the wide front porch of the inn when the samurai returned early in the afternoon, Masato's ashes in a cloth covered box pulled along on a small cart. Katsuhiro dismounted and came onto the porch, his arms folded into the wide sleeves of his jacket. "Walk with me," he said to Hannah, leading the way around to the quiet little garden at the back of the inn.

"I guess this is it, then," Hannah said when they reached the garden. She took a deep breath and told herself it was foolish to think things could end any differently between them, especially now. She remained standing when Katsuhiro sat on a narrow stone bench only to be taken by surprise when he pulled her onto his lap.

"We're leaving for Edo before dark. I'll continue on to take Masato back to bury him in Minowa."

Hannah nodded and busied herself with smoothing down the fine silk collar of his jacket and kimono. "Yeah, well, I figured as much." She forced herself to look him in the eye and ordered herself not to blubber like some silly git. "I hope you have a safe trip. As soon as I can find meself a new job, I'll repay you for buying me from the whorehouse. It may take some time, ya know, but Hannah Connolly ain't no debtor."

"So you dismiss me with no more respect than one would show a lowly peasant?"

"What?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Katsuhiro's mouth, though it was plain he was working hard to keep his expression stern. After a quick glance toward the inn, he reached up and stroked Hannah's cheek with his fingertips. "I'm feeling old and tired with Edo and the politics these days, and I may ask Lord Narimatsu to spend most of my time in Minowa."

Hannah placed her hand upon his. "If anyone deserves a rest I imagine it's you." She couldn't take his

words at face value because he looked anything but old or tired, although his handsome dark eyes did have a weariness to them from the death of his friend. *Friend and lover*, she silently corrected herself.

“So --” She was silenced by his kiss.

It was sweet kiss, a gentle one, and again Hannah felt the sadness creep up her spine. When they parted she had to take another deep breath to keep herself composed, and she looked past Katsuhiro’s shoulder to watch the play of sun upon a stone lantern a short distance away.

With a soft prod of his fingers, Katsuhiro turned her face back toward his. “I want you with me, Hannah Connolly. I love you. I want to live as husband and wife. We can’t do that in Edo. There are too many prying eyes too many loose tongues. My Lord’s position with the Shogunate is an important one. Scandal will not be good for him in these uncertain times.”

Hannah listened and took it all in. While she’d been waiting today a man from the *Japan Gazette* had come to try and get information out of her. And while she hadn’t given him so much as the time of day, he’d given her a lot, confirming what she’d pretty much figured out on her own.

Sanada Katsuhiro was a very important man who worked for a very, very important member of Japanese nobility. It was quite possible that his rank in samurai society could be elevated so that he could be the lord of his own little domain. And here he was ready to chuck it all to move out to the country just to have her by his side and live as his wife.

She knew that in this time and place they couldn’t officially marry, and Hannah was sure her mother was back in England rolling over in her grave at the thought that her only child was seriously considering being nothing much but a trumped-up mistress.

And Hannah also knew she was selfish enough not to give a flying fig. There was no way in hell she was about to give up being with this man, and if she had to spend the rest of her days chipping away at his rigid society and snooty family to get the respect as his wife that she deserved, then she was willing to give it one hell of a try.

“All right, then,” she said with a saucy smile. “What time do we leave?”

Though his eyes didn’t reflect it all the way, the brightness of Katsuhiro’s smile warmed Hannah as much as the afternoon sun spilling down upon her shoulders. “In a few hours, but first I need to test you to make certain you can serve me well in the manner I wish.”

“And I imagine that test will be taking place in your room, probably on your bed.”

“It will. You aren’t going to try and escape, are you?”

“Will you tie me up if I try to run?” Hannah asked with a wink.

“I may tie you even if you don’t.”

Laughing and feeling happier than she ever had, Hannah jumped from his lap and trotted back toward the inn.

~ * ~

Glossary

Daifuku -- Glutinous rice cake stuffed with a sweetened filling.

Engawa -- Veranda surrounding a Japanese house.

Fundoshi -- Male undergarment akin to a loincloth.

Gaijin -- Foreigner.

Hakama -- Traditional Japanese clothing mainly for men. Resembling a wide, pleated skirt but often divided like trousers

Haori -- a jacket length kimono coat, akin to a man's suit jacket.

Irete -- "Put it in."

Katana -- A long sword, the samurai's primary weapon,

Motto -- More.

Ochoko -- Sake cup.

Okaasan -- Mother.

Shoji -- Sliding door made of wood and translucent paper.

Shunga -- Erotic pictures.

Tanto -- A dagger with a blade shaped similarly to the katana blade.

Yukata -- Similar to a kimono but for casual wear, made of cotton instead of silk and unlined.

THE END

Barbara Sheridan

Barbara Sheridan is lover of Asian music and films, romantic stories, 19th century history and all things paranormal. When she can combine any of these elements in her fiction she's a very happy camper indeed.

Find out more about Barbara by visiting her at www.barbarasheridan.net.