

**Chapter 1**

In Tokyo, inexpensive apartments are as rare as geisha sightings. So while snow flurries hurled at the windshield like angry moths, I worried in the back seat of a cab. I was late for an apartment showing. A dead phone battery left me unable to text or call, and I was desperate for a cheap apartment. As we drove along in an area I didn't know, I found nothing to orient myself. Tokyo is like that. A never ending sea of flatness, with different sizes of concrete buildings lining the streets, punctuated here and there with tall structures like the Roppongi Tower or the occasional shrine.

My Japanese comprehension was very basic, so I didn't understand when the cab driver turned onto a narrow street muttering unintelligible phrases, and eased off the gas until we all but inched our way up the street. Then and there I knew I was in trouble. Cab drivers mutter when they're lost. I empathized. Tokyo's address system is frustratingly quirky. Instead of sequentially numbered houses, they're numbered by the date a house was built, so a two could be next to an eighty seven. The cab driver gave up, unrolled his window, and hailed a middle-aged woman trudging down the street struggling with a bag of groceries. A dusting of snow covered her hair, and after a brief flurry of verbal back and forths, she pointed north. We continued down the narrow street, finally stopping in front of a traditional, one story, wooden house, the type rarely seen in today's Tokyo. Buildings as old as this one were either destroyed by the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake or burned by World War II carpet bombings. Lichen laced the roof where more than a few mushroom-gray ceramic tiles were missing. Maybe it was an optical illusion, but the structure seemed to list slightly on one side. Clearly, the post and lintel building needed repairs.

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While I stood at the front door, the cab driver shifted gears and took off. Watching him drive away, I had a sinking feeling. Should I have had him wait, just in case? Nervously, I smoothed my skirt and ran fingers through my unruly brown hair, and wondered, would the landlady even bother to see me? My appointment was at 1:00 p.m. and it was already a little after 3:00 p.m. After repeatedly knocking, a minute passed, then a couple more. Finally the door opened to reveal a tiny woman, with a face full of wrinkles, and a dowager's hump staring up at my five-foot-six inch height. Although I tried to make myself smaller by stooping, I still towered over her.

“Mrs. Ito?”

She shook her head no.

“I’m Mona Marshall,” I said, introducing myself in halting Japanese. “I have an appointment with Mrs. Ito.”

She indicated where to leave my shoes and motioned to follow her down a long hallway. As we walked on, I suppressed a shiver because of the cold. Not that it should have been a surprise, older houses rarely had central heating. We passed a tansu, a large wooden chest with forged iron hardware. So deep was the patina that the grain in the red stained wood gleamed, mirror-like. In the olden days they provided storage for kimonos and other clothing items, but now they’ve been largely replaced by cabinets and bins. I wondered if the ornate iron emblems on the tansu indicated her family crest. We passed a room full of canvases in various stages of completion.

I couldn’t help myself from stopping. The paintings ranged from bold mountain scenes to delicate grasses and flowers, and were all done in black ink. An art major myself, I recognized a talented artist when I saw one and wished I had time to look them over. I caught up with the elderly woman who zipped ahead at a surprisingly fast clip. Near the end of the hall we stopped

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at a shoji door where the translucent paper offered both light and privacy. After opening it, the woman left. I looked around.

It was a room of minimalistic elegance. The Japanese require a strict following of the seasons when it comes to things like flowers, scrolls, kimonos. A summer scroll put up in winter or spring tulips in a fall flower arrangement would be wrong. The scroll and flower arrangement suited the current winter season perfectly. In the alcove, a chrysanthemum and wild-grass flower arrangement thrust upwards from an intricately woven, honey-colored bamboo basket. Above it, hung a scroll of a windswept pine peppered with snowflakes. The lone nod to anything modern was a kerosene heater pumping out welcome warmth.

When I entered, two faces swiveled my way. Because of the house's age, I wondered if the kotatsu table they sat at was the old-fashioned kind with charcoal burning in a recessed pit. A man in his thirties wearing a dark suit with a hair cut more appropriate for a man in his fifties sipped tea. Next to him was an older woman with bamboo straight posture who appeared to be in her early eighties. A thickly-padded lavender kimono decorated in a geometric and crane pattern hung on her thin frame. Unless it's festival time, it's rare to see anyone wearing a kimono, so my feeling of having stepped into a much earlier time heightened. With a gentle wave of her hand, she motioned me over, then indicated where I was to sit. When I neared, I saw that her eyes were not the dark brown of most Japanese, but a strange, golden color like fossilized amber. The man's deferential manner toward the woman made me think that she was the alpha in the room. The man started the conversation by introducing himself in excellent English as Mr. Yama.

Joining them, I sat on a floor pillow, lifted the blanket covering the kotatsu, which keeps in the heat, then let my legs dangle until my feet touched the floor well. A small hole cut under the

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kotatsu allowed for a small sub floor. Immediately, I felt a rush of warmth from the charcoal brazier.

“I am her grand-nephew,” he said to me. “She speaks no English, so I’ll translate.”

I bowed. “I apologize for being late. But a teacher was sick right before class and I was the only one available who could take it.”

“You were right to do so. It is the duty of an employee. American?” He asked.

Well that made me feel better, at least he understood. “From Washington State,” I answered. Actually, because of my mom’s gypsy lifestyle I was from all over the place.

“How did you find out about the rental?”

“A notice on the teachers bulletin board.”

“How long have you been in Japan?”

“Six months. I teach at a language school.”

“Where do you live now?”

“Near Tabata. My roommate unexpectedly left, and I can’t afford it by myself.”

“Have you considered taking another roommate?”

Sure I had, but immediately gave it thumbs down. After Cindy’s flakiness, the last thing I wanted was to rely financially on a complete stranger to pay for half the rent. What if she refused to pay? Then where would I be?

“I prefer living alone.”

Just then the woman with the dowagers hump returned with a tray. She placed a cup of tea and small cakes before me, refreshed the other’s drinks, then bowed her way out. After about twenty minutes of small talk and tea sipping, Mrs. Ito nodded to Mr. Yama and small talk gave way to the business at hand.

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He finished a wagashi, a sweet made from bean curd, and said, “Great-aunt likes to rent to young foreign people. She thinks they have good energy.”

I smiled. At twenty six, I certainly counted as young. “So the apartment’s still available?”

“She hasn’t decided on anyone yet. Seven others have viewed it over the past two days. It’s not exactly an apartment, you’ll see when I show you.”

Jeez, I thought. Here I was number eight, and others probably had appointments after me. What did Mr. Yama mean by saying it wasn’t exactly an apartment?

“I saw the canvases when I came in. They’re beautiful. Are they your great-aunts?”

“She is a sumi-e artist, famous especially for camellia blossoms. She and her servant live alone here together.”

What an odd couple. Mrs. Ito with her strange golden eyes and the woman with the hunched back. “I like to paint too, but don’t have the time now.” I answered.

All the while we were talking, Mr. Yama translated.

“Great-aunt asks what do you paint?”

Mrs. Ito then looked intently at me, and those amber eyes held mine.

“Animals, especially horses.” I answered. “I used to live on a ranch.”

Mr. Yama stood up. “I’ll show you the apartment now.”

Mrs. Ito then looked intently at me, and those amber eyes held mine and Mrs. Ito gave a slight smile.

Mr. Yama stood up. “I’ll show you the apartment now.”

After bowing goodbye to Mrs. Ito, we retrieved our shoes, stepped out onto the long veranda where a handful of bonsai, mostly twisted pines, grew in pots, then proceeded down a short flight of steps into the garden.

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“It’s outside?” I wrapped my muffler tightly around my neck and wondered what could be out here: a lean-to, tent, shed? Was that why it was so cheap?

“It’s an old, renovated tea house.”

Fresh snow squished under our shoes as we walked down a path of pea gravel. By Tokyo standards, the garden was large. The bordering wall, dry stacked with river rock was about six feet high with ivy cascading over it. A screen of maples hid much of the wall from view, and I imagined that in the fall the changing leaves must be spectacular.

Surrounded by modern Tokyo, the garden emanated an other-worldliness. An ancient willow tree, gnarled and moss covered, anchored the northeast end, and close to it a small pond reflected the snow laden clouds. Mounds of what I assumed were azalea bushes ringed a viewing rock. At one time this compound must have been well tended, but now it was overgrown. I liked that the bones of the garden created a screen of privacy from the main house.

“Long ago,” Mr. Yama said, his breath coming out as swirls of fog, “many years before great-aunt’s birth, plum trees in this garden were famous for their blossoms. Around late winter, guests would stroll around the garden to view them. Back then the property was much larger, but with time..... the famous haiku poet, Buson, many centuries ago, wrote, ‘Amid white plum blossoms night turns to dawn - the time has come.’”

I looked around, searching for the trees. “Where are they?”

“A typhoon uprooted them. The house was also damaged, but repaired.”

I felt this strange sadness for long dead trees. I could almost picture them standing faint in the distance.

As the wind picked up, it moaned and whistled through the vegetation. “Doesn’t the wind sound human? Like it’s speaking to us. I said.”

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Mr. Yama threw me an intense glance and for a moment looked thoughtful, then with a seeming reluctance said, “You appear sensible. So I will disclose this to you, because the last woman who lived here moved out because she was afraid. If you are chosen, you must not believe stories about this house and garden. There’s no truth to them. Just silly gossips spreading ancient rumors.”

“What rumors?”

“About the ghost.”

“A ghost? Who was he or she?” I asked.

“All this talk because of a long ago affair here which ended tragically. Naturally there is no ghost!”

Of course I was dying to question him some more, but I could see by the set look on his face that the ghost topic was done with.

I merely added. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

He nodded.

At an enormous rhododendron bush, we rounded a corner and arrived at a small rectangular building topped with a thick layering of thatch, and bookended with clumps of bamboo. The bamboo stalks, heavy with snow, bent toward the ground like exhausted ballerinas.

Mr. Yama fumbled with the key, then slid open the frosted glass shoji door. The sweet aroma of newly laid tatami mats, woven of green rice straw, floated up. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes for a moment and pictured myself in the countryside. In Japan the size of a room is determined by the number of tatami mats, one mat equaling about 16 square feet. Counting the mats, I estimated the unfurnished space at about 400 square feet. Compared to back home this place seemed closet-sized, but as I studied the layout, the more appealing it became. When I first

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arrived in Tokyo I was shocked by how unlike those travel posters of cherry trees and beautiful temples it was, so this old tea house really appealed. Wooden rafters, thatch, and rough hewn walls oozed a nineteenth century rusticity. The wooden poles holding up the structure gleamed with a golden patina. There was an alcove where I could display a scroll or picture and in nice weather I could open the shoji door to enjoy the garden. Although it might not be to everyone's taste, it was to mine. As I looked around, I thought, what's not to like? It also offered a tiny kitchenette, and bathroom. The commute to work would be shorter, it was affordable, and of course, there were no such things as ghosts.

"I'm really interested in renting it," I said.

"Regrettably, I have no say. Great-aunt decides, but I'll let you know one way or the other."

Mr. Yama led me to the back wooden gate and provided directions to the nearest bus stop.

He bowed his goodbye. "I must return to great-aunt."

As I exited the compound and entered an alley-like street, I popped a cough drop into my mouth. The few sweets at Mrs. Itos' only whetted my appetite and if I didn't get some food soon I'd be gnawing bark off of trees. The snowfall intensified, and as I bent my head into the wind, a tail-less cat scurried behind a shrine fronted by a vermillion torii gate. By now I knew a torii, two tall posts with a cross beam on top, indicated a Shinto shrine. I stopped for a moment. This shrine though was different from what I was used to. Never had I seen foxes at a shrine before. Large, moss-covered, stone lanterns, intricately carved, led to the entrance, and a handful of old pines arched over most of the site. Guarding each side of the gate, sat two alert-looking stone foxes decked with red bibs sitting on plinths. As I slogged past, their gray eyes fixed on me and I wondered not only about the meaning of the red bibs, but the mysterious ghost Mr. Yama refused to talk about.



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I found the bus stop, but the wait was misery. Recently, I'd been feeling homesick. If I didn't get the teahouse, should I call it quits and go back to the States? Three full buses drove past splashing up slush and snow and by the time one stopped, I barely felt my toes. Inside, we stood packed like steers in a feed lot and by the time we reached the train station, I could have eaten anything. I found a soba shop, ate a bowl of oden noodles and eel in a steaming broth, then went home wondering about my odds of getting that teahouse.

Around 8:00 p.m. on the following night when my iPhone rang, I found out.

"Ms. Marshall?"

"Mr. Yama?"

I held my breath.

"Good news. Great-aunt chose you." he said.

I did a few mental cartwheels then asked, "I hope I'm not being impolite, but I'm curious, why me?"

"You paint horses."

## Chapter Two

Moving Day. Thank God, it'd stopped snowing. The sun shone down in a wintery light chasing away the gloom of the inky clouds. I hadn't a lot of stuff: a rolled up futon which was more like a bedroll, a few books, bedding, dishes, pots and pans, laptop, heater and clothing, but even so, it took two cab rides to transport it all. Standing in line at the taxi stand, surrounded by cardboard boxes, I got more than a few curious glances. A driver pulled up, then realizing that I was his fare, made a face. Japanese cab drivers usually don't like picking up expats because of the language barrier or because some are just plain xenophobic. Maybe my cab driver was neither, and was just having a bad day. The last thing put in was my futon, which he shoved into the back seat, while huffing his cheeks in and out in irritation.

When I first entered the teahouse I noticed a scroll of camellias propped up inside near the door. I'd never received a gift from a landlord before, and was touched. I took a moment to admire the subtle strokes of the snow covered camellias and the delicacy of a lone bird flying above the branches. I carried the scroll to the alcove, which is where Japanese hang their scrolls.

Dusk settled, and after some unpacking, I felt a need to leave the teahouse and explore the neighborhood. I reached for my umbrella and slid on a pair of boots. Shutting the garden gate, I soon passed the fox shrine. Just as before, the two foxes stony gray eyes seemed to fix on me and I could almost feel their spooky stare follow me down the street. After fifteen minutes of passing gated houses and the occasional five story apartment building with plants decorating balconies, I reached the bright lights and heavy traffic of the main drag. A few pedestrians, hunched under their umbrellas hurried home. I was the crazy American sightseer. Afraid of getting lost, I

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carefully looked back to orient myself. Okay, there are the tall pines surrounding the shrine and a pharmacy. I'd recognize my street.

As I walked on, I passed by hot sake and banana vending machines. Amazed by the mind-blowing selection of vending machine offerings. Canned bread, hydroponically grown lettuce, fresh eggs, bags of rice, fermented beans, umbrellas, hot meals which were usually some sort of noodle dish. The machines were so sophisticated that if tampered with, they automatically sent a notification to the police. I watched a five or six year old boy stand in front of a vending machine, point to what was inside and tug on, I assumed, his dad's jacket. The man handed him coins and out came something. After they left, I stopped in front of the same machine to check it out. Live rhinoceros beetles. Kids loved them, and for under a \$1.00, they were cheap pets.

The rain lessened, and as I meandered along, an apothecary shop's window display drew me in. Among the pain relievers, cough medicine and antacids, was a ginger root looking like a mummified Frankenstein suspended in a jar. A bus rumbled by and caused the ginger root to bob slightly in its gelatinous goo. The human looking gingerroot fascinated me and I stopped to stare. I passed an art gallery that displayed animal photos of wolves, and bison, but most were of foxes.

After thirty minutes of staring into shop windows, I faced the Goldilocks dilemma. Where and what to eat? Each restaurant I passed appeared either too trendy, too expensive, or too intimidating for eating by myself. I was about to give up and face a box of ramen noodles back home, when a string of Japanese lanterns buffeted by the wind caught my attention. They fronted an unpretentious-looking sushi bar half-hidden down a side street. An indigo blue cloth sign split into thirds hung above the entrance and in the middle of the sign sat a white, many-tailed fox looking very pleased with himself. This neighborhood seemed to have a fox theme going on.

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I entered. A deep male voice yelled out “irashaimase” to welcome me. Behind him, an enormous wooden sign, decorated with carved fish covered the back wall. Underneath each fish were Japanese characters, none of which I understood. Images of salmon, eel, tuna, I recognized; then got stumped. To his right, I noted two men busily working in the back kitchen half-hidden by another, smaller curtain. The earthy smell of miso soup wafted up.

“I no see you before. You new here?” asked the friendly, middle aged man behind the sushi bar. Because of his roundness, he reminded me of those Dharma dolls, the ones that are all face where you paint in an eye for good luck. He was a bit shorter than most Japanese men and had a deep cleft in his chin which reminded me of a valley.

I nodded. “I just moved in today.”

“Mori,” he said with a bow. “I owner.”

I returned his bow. “Mona Marshall.”

I looked around. The restaurant which held about thirty to forty seats, was relatively empty. Mori-san seemed to want to talk, so with the help of my translation app and a few learned phrases, we chatted.

Full of curiosity, he asked, “Why you live in Japan?”

This was the first question many Japanese asked followed by how old are you, and are you married?

“To teach English,” I answered.

I didn’t add that after graduating from university all I could find were service or administrative assistant’s jobs. Hard to pay off the student loan when you’re making next to nothing, and I was the only child of a single woman also scraping by. In the University newspaper I spotted an ad for English teachers. Adventure here I come!

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“You like Japan?”

“Very much.”

“I live one year in New York.”

“Did you like it, “I asked.

“It okay, but happy be back Japan.”

“Sorry, I can’t read Japanese, what’s this restaurant’s name?”

“*Kyūbi no Kitsune*”

I looked it up on my app.

“Nine- tailed fox?”

Mori-san noticed my confusion because he said, “Fox is messenger of spirit Inari. Each hundred year they grow new tail, oldest have nine tails. Wisest foxes very old, maybe thousand years.”

“I have to ask, the stone foxes near my place wear red bibs, what’s that about?”

“Red bring luck. Like people, some foxes good, some bad. Some change into women and deceive men. Those very bad foxes, very cunning, very dangerous. You live by fox shrine?”

I nodded. “I rent a teahouse from Mrs. Ito, a sumi-e artist.”

Mori-san nodded, “Old Samurai family there.”

“Really?”

“Strange place.”

“How so?”

He shrugged his shoulders then resumed slicing up fish pieces. “Just strange. People don’t stay long.”

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I leaned forward in hopes of learning more. I felt the wind gust in and, I turned to see a group of five men enter and soon the restaurant filled with their laughter. Mori-san hurriedly bowed, then left to attend to them, and when others streamed in, I accepted our conversation was definitely over. I popped the last shrimp into my mouth and paid the bill.