

A close-up photograph of a man with a serious expression, wearing a dark blue kimono. He is holding a katana with a dark green scabbard (saya) that has white decorative patterns. The background is a blurred interior with a window.

HISTORICAL
ROMANCE
SET IN 1876
JAPAN

Forbidden

HEATHER HALLMAN

Forbidden

Chapter One

December 23, 1876

Tokyo, the foreign quarter of Tsukiji

Emmy Thurlow was numb. Surrounding her in the Grand Oriental Hotel's dining room, guests offered toasts, conversed merrily, and sang snippets of holiday songs in French, English, Italian, Russian, and German. They sucked down oysters topped with sea-salty salmon roe and chewed on roasted wild boar with apple and juniper chutney. Unattached men filled every seat around the oval bar, their uproarious conversation raising the din to unbearable heights.

It was a grand bacchanal of Yuletide joy, and Emmy felt none of it.

Winnie leaned forward. Golden curls bobbed and brushed her peachy cheeks. The

daughter of an American missionary and Emmy's brother Clarence's betrothed, she was always leaning, swaying, and jiggling. "Emmy? Will you be joining us?"

Clarence washed down his boar with a gulp of blood-red Australian wine. "You will join us, won't you, Emmer?" The familiar, desperate edge filled his voice.

You will give Roderick a chance, won't you? You will think about what's going to happen after Winnie and I marry, won't you? You understand our circumstances are changing, don't you?

Practically from the moment Clarence had proposed marriage to Winnie, Emmy had been grinding her teeth at his desperation.

Now she had to join them ... where exactly? Of course, at the ball. "I'll certainly be joining you," she replied.

Pieces of their conversation had wafted through her veil of grief. They'd been talking about the annual Tsukiji Women's Society's New Year's Eve Ball. This year's theme was flora and fauna. She couldn't decide between going as a rotted-out ginkgo berry or a disemboweled goat. Either way, everyone in the foreign quarter would take pains to avoid her.

She forced a smile at Clarence and Winnie, then presented another to Roderick Battersby, seated beside her. Presumptive heir to the viscountcy of Palmersford and the last member of their quartet, he had impeccable manners, a charming disposition, and an irrational hatred of beets, something she happened to share. "I wouldn't miss it."

It wasn't as though she could plead a headache and avoid the affair entirely. Clarence would accuse her of not making an effort, and Winnie would insist upon staying home to observe her condition. Then Clarence would fret about Winnie having to play nurse and tell Emmy she was being selfish.

Winnie clasped her hands. "The ball will be perfect for their debut." She glanced back and forth between Emmy and Roderick.

“Whose debut?” Emmy asked with utmost innocence, although she knew the answer, and everyone around the table knew she knew the answer. But she had to ask, because playing naïve demonstrated how ill-inclined she felt toward making this debut.

Roderick cocked his head in that boyishly irreverent way that made the young women in Tsukiji swoon.

Winnie schooled her features into a doe-like expression. “Why Emmy—”

“—our debut, my dear Emmer,” Roderick interrupted with his unreasonably appealing sloppy grin.

Yet, she found herself flinching, and not because of the word *debut*. It was his calling her Emmer when her given name was Emmeline Louise, even though cousins had decided she’d be Emmy, which was how she was usually addressed. Only Clarence called her Emmer, as had her parents before they passed away.

She should have told Roderick months ago just to call her Emmy like other close associates in Tsukiji, as was the tradition in the foreign quarter, where one dispensed with formalities earlier than one would in one’s home country. Especially, if that home country happened to be England. But she hadn’t thought he’d become a fixture in her life, and she rarely considered his effortlessly debonair, aristocratic existence except when he was right before her or Clarence forced her to.

Sachio was the one who possessed her thoughts.

But his luggage was aboard ship, and that ship would depart Tokyo in the morning. She ought to be inclined to Roderick for that very reason. Instead, she found herself not giving a fig if she offended Roderick by making her feelings abundantly clear to Clarence and Winnie once and for all: she wouldn’t be deposited at the feet of the first available diplomat, even if he was the best catch in Tsukiji and probably the entirety of the British diplomatic services.

There were other ways to get rid of her. By simply shipping her back to England, for

instance, while they went on their merry way to whichever foreign posting came next.

As it happened, Sachio would be in England.

Meeting Roderick's admiring gaze—why must he look at her so?—she tempered her vexation. “Roderick, there are some things I'd prefer you understand...”

Winnie rose from the table with a loud bang and jangle of glass and silver. Sweet, clumsy chit must have hit her knee. “Emmy.” Her voice rose three octaves in the single word. “Shall we gather...ourselves...for some fresh air?” Sucking in a high-pitched breath, she rubbed her leg. “On the terrace?” she finished with a light groan.

“Please sit and allow Clarence to tend to your leg,” she scolded Winnie, because the slip of a woman was five years her junior and behaved like a child half the time.

Clarence looked down at his betrothed's bundles of silk skirt, and his cheeks did their finest imitation of two ripe tomatoes.

Emmy turned to Roderick. “We're not going to make a debut,” she said gently. “You're a fine man with a good head on your shoulders. There are many women who desire your company. I'm...” She couldn't say “not one of them” as that would be rude, and he didn't deserve rudeness. “Not interested in courting. I hope you take no offense.”

Roderick, well-trained in the manners of the diplomatic services, barely clenched his facial muscles, which meant he was indeed disappointed. “I apologize for any misunderstanding. I'd thought since Clarence....” He gave Clarence a pointed glance. They were both members of the Eton clique, so an expression of mild exasperation in public was forgivable. Then he returned, softly and accommodatingly as always, back to Emmy. “I'd hoped you were considering my suit. I do beg your forgiveness.”

She held up her hand. “Please. You mustn't apologize. I believe it's time for me to be going.” She gathered her gloves and reticule, then stood. Roderick and Clarence rose quickly from

their seats. "I'm not feeling well, so I'll head home now. Please enjoy your meal."

"Emmer, this is unacceptable." Clarence hissed, then quickly eyed the guests at nearby tables as though checking whether he'd disturbed their meals. A diplomat wouldn't dare make a scene. "You cannot possibly return home unescorted."

Their home was down the road from the Grand Oriental, a five-minute walk in inclement weather. Tonight was bone-cold, and every star in the sky had been visible on their way to the hotel. She tugged the edge of her glove over her wrist. "I'll have a footman escort me."

"Allow me to escort you," Roderick said. "It's the least I can do after the, ah, misunderstanding."

Naturally, he offered. But she didn't need his assistance. "That's unnecessary—"

"What a wonderful idea," Winnie said as though Emmy hadn't just made her feelings about his suit abundantly clear.

She was such a stubborn little dolt.

"Thank you, Roderick. Much appreciated." Clarence sat back down and stroked Winnie's hand.

"As you wish." Emmy attempted to cover her irritation with a kind smile because Roderick was indeed being gentlemanly, but she struggled to get the edges of her mouth to do more than twitch. "Good evening, then," she announced and turned toward the door as Clarence and Winnie wished her a good rest.

While the hotel maid gathered her cape and Roderick's coat, Emmy maintained her barely-there, strained smile, although it probably did little to fool an astute diplomat like Roderick.

"That's a fine log they found," he said with a nod at the impressive Yule log that had been laid out before the lobby's enormous fireplace.

"A very fine log," she agreed, and to her own ears, at least, she managed to sound

agreeable.

After accepting her cape and hat from the maid, Emmy crossed the lobby with Roderick at her heels. Relieved to be finally heading homeward, she nodded at friends lounging on the plush wingback chairs, conversing, sipping their drinks, and smoking their pipes.

Had they known love? Had it shredded their souls?

A Japanese footman heaved open the lobby door against a swirl of cold gusts. “Have a pleasant evening, Madame,” he intoned in nearly flawless English. “And a happy Christmas season.”

“You as well,” she called back to the footman and made haste from the carriage port eaves. Outside the protective shelter of the Grand Oriental’s entrance, she secured her bonnet with one hand to keep it from careening toward Tokyo Bay. With her curls thus squashed and tears brimming from the stark wind, she must look a mess. Hopefully, Roderick wouldn’t be offended. Or, even better, be so offended that he’d allow her to return home alone.

The diplomat in question brushed her side as he joined her on the pathway to the hotel gate. “It’s a clear night,” he observed with a glance upward.

If Sachio was beside her, he’d translate the Japanese names of the constellations and tell her about the crescent silver moon. He’d know if it was waxing or waning and talk about how his countrymen had used the moon to mark the passage of months before their adoption of the Western calendar.

A sudden tug on her arm brought her attention back to Roderick. “Might you allow me?” he asked as he pulled her elbow to his side.

Had he ever taken her arm before this? Yes...once, at the chrysanthemum festival in the Imperial Gardens. Still, it seemed quite intimate for a walk home in the dark when they weren’t exactly friends of any duration and she’d just rejected his suit. “Perhaps,” she began with her

thousandth forced smile of the night, “we ought to walk separately. It is nighttime, after all, and I wouldn’t want to give a false impression.”

“That would be fine?” He sighed. “No, it wouldn’t.” His tone was edgy, very unlike Roderick. “I think it best I take your arm. I’ve been tasked with taking you home safely.”

The chilly night air penetrated her gown and snaked across her bare skin. “I feel safe enough without your taking my arm.” She pulled back, and he clamped down on her glove. “*You should let me go.*”

Apparently, her protest didn’t reach his ears, because he didn’t look in her direction, but nodded at the footmen at the Grand Oriental’s front gate as they passed through and crossed the street.

She’d never known him to exhibit coarse behavior, and forcing her on his arm when they’d never joined arms, qualified as such. “I’d really prefer—”

“It’s cold,” he interrupted. “You’ll be more comfortable on my arm.” He sounded like a staid diplomat, hardened by negotiations and not willing to budge an inch.

“I’m not comfortable.” She tugged at her arm to no avail.

“I told Clarence I was escorting you home, and I will escort you home.”

Acid slid up her throat, and her mind went muddly. Did Roderick have intimate designs on her? Well, he’d been under the impression they were courting. Clarence, apparently, had given his blessing. So, yes, Roderick had designs on her. But he wouldn’t carry out those designs against her will, would he?

Was he already?

The sturdy neckline of her dress cut into her décolletage where perspiration had collected. In her mouth hung the tang of fear, but she put one foot in front of the other and kept her arm braced within his grip because it remained possible, however unlikely, this unusual display of

aggressiveness was part and parcel of her imaginings, and he was simply being overly considerate and would leave her by the front gate of her home as a gentleman should.

He's Roderick. Everyone loves him. He's a member of the diplomatic services. He's not going to hurt you.

They passed the ornate gates outside the Romero's sprawling home, then the Janssen's home with its Japanese-style tiled roof and the Martinezes,' aglow with what sounded like early Yuletide revelries. Finally, the white trim of the Thurlows' first-floor bay windows came into sight. But she felt none of the relief of having returned to her abode, only the pressing need to put as much distance as possible between her and Roderick.

"Thank you for escorting me home," she said as they drew up to the wrought-iron front gate. This was the appropriate place for them to part. He must know that.

Even so, he tightened his grip on her hand. "Allow me to walk you to the front door." Before she could object, he went right ahead and opened the front gate.

"But aren't they waiting for you at the table?" For the first time since this ordeal had begun, she let weakness and fear fill her voice. She might as well have announced she was at his mercy. And doomed.

Gusts swept the front garden. Laurel leaves seemed to clap in resistance, while spiny holly scratched and clawed at the darkness. He walked her up the few stairs of the portico. By now, the maid, Mitsu-*chan*, should have heard the front gate and already opened the door.

Where was she?

"They'll wait." He searched her face, his lips curled in what looked like contempt. Had her rejection smarted so? "Will you be alone inside?"

Thank the good Lord, no. He couldn't follow her inside and beat her or rape her or enact whatever sick ideas flooded his lunatic mind. "Mitsu-*chan*, our maid. You've met her before. She's

inside.”

Where was she?

“You may return to the hotel.” Emmy kept her voice strong and steady. Laughter, conversation, and music from the Martinezes’ pianoforte mingled with winds rushing toward the quiet Thurlow home, dark save for the front parlor and kitchen. Mitsu-*chan* must be in there somewhere.

He followed her gaze to the Martinez home and back, then, finally, blessedly, released her arm. “I’ll return to the hotel once you’re inside.” He smirked, but she didn’t care how rude he chose to be, as long as she was allowed entrance to her home.

Even so, she hesitated to turn her back on him. Stepping backward with her arm outstretched, she fumbled for the doorknob and managed to grab it on her third attempt. To her immense relief, it twisted, and she pulled open the door. “I’m going in now. Please tell my brother and Winnie I’ve arrived home safely.”

“Good night, *Emmer*.” He must know she hated him calling her that or he wouldn’t have given it that emphasis. He was downright cruel.

She backed inside. Expecting him to place a hand between the door and the frame, she slammed the door shut and turned the lock. At last, she was home. And safe. She hadn’t been assaulted and compromised by Roderick, with whom she planned to never cross paths again. How would she explain his behavior to Clarence?

“*Help*.” Mitsu-*chan* called. Her voice echoed through the empty foyer.

Already covered in a layer of dried perspiration, Emmy broke out anew at the sound of her maid’s cry. She hurried across the foyer and stopped at the parlor’s threshold, her gaze arrested by the sight. “Sachio.” His name tumbled from her lips.

He was always the first person one noticed when entering a room, not only because he was

a head taller than everyone else, but because he had the distinct bearing of a modern man born into a samurai family, one who'd spent his childhood training in the arts of war only to find his adulthood unfolding in a world where a samurai's skills were less desirable than the bureaucrats.' He dressed in Western clothes and comported himself like a well-mannered diplomat, but within his dark gaze lingered the peculiar Japanese devotion to the sword's edge of life and death.

When he and the other Japanese diplomats rallied against the fellows from the British Legation in games of cricket, she hid behind a back parlor curtain facing the garden and took in the breadth of his shoulders under his crisp white linen shirt. His vest created a distinctly masculine angle between his taut waist and sturdy hips, and his trousers seemed unable to refrain from embracing his generous buttocks and thighs. Flushing wantonly, she imagined running her fingertips along his cheek, around the sharp angle of his jaw, and over the tender flesh of his lips. To keep her throbbing quim from wetting her thighs, she pressed her legs together as she sank deeper behind the curtain and allowed herself to wonder what would become of her virtue if she found a way to ignite the warrior's desire.

"Emmy?" Sachio now regarded her with a tender gaze, a stark contrast to the violent, awful tableau spread out before her.

A single sconce lit the parlor, and the fire had been banked. Sachio, his thick, long legs spread wide, held *Mitsu-chan* by the waist and leaned over her like a rutting horse.

The fine threads of Emmy's composure broke. Her beloved maid: her foremost confidante, the one person who'd glimpsed the connection between her and Sachio and hadn't issued even the slightest hint of rebuke or warning against the illicit regard between the Japanese diplomat and British diplomat's sister. *Her* *Mitsu-chan* had allowed Sachio, a man whose character and whose regard Emmy had obviously misjudged, to grab her by the hips and plow his way into her.

A maelstrom of disgust and indignation propelled her around the marble-topped table and past the settee to the two traitors in the middle of the room. With all the scalding hurt coursing through her veins, she raised her flattened hand and slapped Mitsu-*chan* across the cheek.

Chapter Two

Sachio

Sachio had assumed the noises outside the Thurlow home had been coming from the Martinez family next door, as they were engaged in some rousing holiday fête. He and Mitsu-*chan* had been discussing where to place the Yule log he'd brought for the Thurlows when someone opened the front door. In her haste to place the log just right for her employers to find their gift, she attempted to lift the log herself, which was preposterous given the log's width and heft. She pleaded for help to keep the log from landing on her feet, and help he did. With most unexpected consequences.

He hadn't expected to see Emmy tonight. Or ever again, for that matter. Knowing she and Clarence were having supper at the Grand Oriental, he'd planned to leave the Yule log with Mitsu-*chan* and return to his family home for his final night in Japan. He hadn't wished to cause Emmy pain.

He'd sensed that much like him, her gut had been twisted around the thick knot of their inevitable separation. Over the past weeks, dark circles, resembling those he bore, had formed under her eyes. Her cheeks had grown shallow. Like him, food hadn't been the object of her

cravings.

He should have cut ties between them when he'd seen these changes. But he was a pile of horseshit who couldn't bear staying away. So, he'd become a nuisance to the Thurlows in the preceding weeks, visiting under any pretense he could devise, and here he was, yet again. This time, he'd brought a log to make Emmy happy.

The crack of her hand against Mitsu-*chan*'s cheek was an unequivocal sign of his failure.

Mitsu-*chan* jerked free from his arms and fell to the carpet before Emmy. "I'm so sorry. So terribly sorry."

Emmy ran her gaze up and down the front of him. "You're fully clothed."

"I wouldn't visit without first getting dressed." As soon as he uttered the flippant comment, he regretted it. But he wanted her to realize the scenario she'd encountered had been innocent, even humorous.

Tears pooled in her eyes. "I thought..." She let her mouth fall open, then covered it with one hand. "What have I done?"

"I'm so sorry." Mitsu-*chan* sobbed, her face still pressed into the carpet.

He raised his hands in surrender. "This is my fault. I brought the Yule log. Mitsu-*chan* was helping move it and almost dropped it on her feet. I was trying to brace it in her arms."

Emmy bit down on her lower lip. "I've made a terrible mistake. I should have paid more attention to what was happening."

Just as Emmy reached down as though to console, Mitsu-*chan* rose from the carpet. "No, it's my fault. I upset you." She ran past Emmy and out the parlor door.

Emmy twisted toward the door. "I have to go after her."

As she stepped forward, he grabbed her wrist between the kid-leather glove and the sleeve of her dress. "Let her go. Then, when you apologize for...well, for hitting her, she'll have

something to apologize for as well.”

“What will she apologize for?”

“For leaving before she finished her apology.”

Emmy’s wrist stilled in his grip. At once, they looked downward to where they were joined. It was the first time he’d touched her bare skin. She was delicate softness over hard bone, a trapped bird awaiting flight. He wanted to lead her by the wrist to a haven where he could remove her shackles and soothe her wounds.

But he wasn’t ready to let her take flight.

Yes, he loved her back.

“I’ve loved you for a while now,” she’d confessed when he’d selfishly, belligerently demanded to know her feelings. Overwhelmed by what she’d brought herself to say, he’d turned away and left her on the pathway next to the stone *toro* lantern that set the red maple leaves ablaze against the starry night.

Here in the Thurlow parlor, she met his gaze with the swirling grays and browns of the typhoon seas that colored her irises. “I thought you were...with her.”

“Never.” He ground out the word and planted it between them. There would *never* be another woman for him besides Emmy.

Keeping hold of her wrist—would he ever let go?—he closed the distance between them. Her sweetness and endurance, the waft of her floral soap and her wicked, womanly scent filled him, and still it wasn’t enough. Knowing full well he was taking liberties he oughtn’t even dare to consider, he raised her wrist to his face and inhaled. Tasted her, drank her, brimmed with her, and silently begged her to remain on his lips and nose. He would remember her scent when he was aboard ship, longing for her, suffering guilt for driving her to confess, for causing her to slap her maid, for letting him take liberties with her wrist. He was no good for her, and she was the finest

person he'd ever met.

He released her wrist.

Bringing the hand to her side, she shuddered a breath. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"I didn't mean for you to see me again."

Earlier that day, in the unrelenting sunshine, Emmy and Clarence had accompanied him to the ship, where he saw to the storage of his luggage. They said their final farewells on the dock while their carriages waited street-side in front of rows of homes and shacks selling fishermen's supplies, and kiosks where one could sit down and have a cup of sake and roasted potatoes or a bowl of fish cakes in a hearty broth.

He was headed to his family's home. The Thurlows were returning to Tsukiji for an evening meal with Clarence's betrothed and Roderick Battersby, the man who was going to have the unparalleled pleasure of calling Emmy his wife.

"Spend one day with Henry, and he'll introduce you to half of London," Clarence said of the Thurlow cousin Sachio was supposed to contact as soon as he arrived.

Still unable to look at Emmy, who must think him rude for having mostly ignored her throughout the afternoon, he nodded at Clarence. "I'll write to Henry on my first day."

A man of cultivated expressions, Clarence pressed his lips together and let out a mournful sigh appropriate to the grief of bidding a friend farewell and heartfelt wishes for the friend's future. He offered his hand. "You're going to make your nation proud."

Sachio shook his hand. "Because of your guidance." For the past few months, Clarence, often with Emmy's help, had tutored Sachio in British manners and customs as part of his preparation to lead a group of Japanese diplomats to their London posting.

Finally, Sachio turned to Emmy. Not wishing to linger on her features and draw attention

to the intensity of his feelings, he allowed himself only a perusal of her forehead's fine slope, a glimpse of the windswept seas inhabiting her eyes, a passing look at the gentle arc of her nose and the wide, generous expanse of her mouth.

Over the past months, he'd watched her collapse on the settee in exhaustion after they'd spent the day exploring every nook and cranny of Ueno Park or touring Tokyo's new museums or dining at the first restaurant outside of Tsukiji to serve beef. He'd seen her give coins to street urchins, a shadow of pity darkening her gaze, and he'd seen her overcome with side-splitting laughter after she'd fondled a begging monk's arm, thinking him a statue.

The woman before him with her chin lifted bravely and her forced congeniality made him wish for a thousand deaths.

He'd done this to her. He'd broken her.

Summoning the bold resolve of a man headed to a life of his choosing in the modern, Western world where men forged their own paths, he faced her. "I wish you a happy Christmas."

By then, he'd already made arrangements for the Thurlow's Yule log. She'd told him wistfully about the family's tradition of burning the log into the new year and how their father had surprised them each year with a larger log than the year before. The one Sachio had purchased didn't match the dimensions of the logs in the Thurlow family lore, but he'd wanted to give her something that would remind her of home, of England, where he was headed. Or maybe he'd just wanted to remind her of him.

Most likely of all, he'd wanted to demonstrate how well he knew her heart and how tenderly he'd treat the possession were it his.

Emmy glanced down at the log resting diagonally in the middle of the parlor. "Thank you for bringing our Yule log." Her voice trembled even over so simple a pleasantry.

“I’m afraid I made a mess of it.”

“We can move it later.”

A slam from the back of the house riveted his attention to the parlor’s door.

“Mitsu-*chan* left.” Emmy deepened the pleat between her eyes.

Her hurt made every muscle in his body clench. “You can explain everything when she returns. She’s a bonny lass if there ever was one.”

Emmy twitched the corners of her mouth. “You think she’s pretty?”

Oh the gods. Bonny meant pretty, and he’d never call another woman pretty in Emmy’s presence.

“I meant...she’s...kind.” Once again, he’d mistaken his words, but the mistake had made Emmy smile. “*No one* is as pretty as you.” The declaration seemed to cocoon them in warmth.

She let her shoulders fall and searched his gaze.

He knew damn well what she sought.

He never should have left her under the maple trees that night. But he’d raged. She loved him, and fate had spurred him to suffer what could never be.

Placing his hands on her slight shoulders, he ignored the warning bells in his head, telling him this was neither the time nor the place. They were alone. Temptation would ensue, and they could not be caught. Clarence would forbid her marriage to Battersby, who was an excellent match, and he’d rescind his support for Sachio’s posting in England.

This posting was his life’s goal. He’d been educated for diplomacy and selected for England because of his talent with the language and his vigorous understanding of the country’s history, government, and international aspirations. Were he to destroy his relationship with Clarence Thurlow, he wouldn’t be ruining merely his own reputation. He’d be ruining an opportunity for his countrymen to better understand a mighty foreign power, to better position

themselves vis-à-vis the European nations, to better meet the colonial challenges posed by the West.

He adored Western ways, arguing against his fellow countrymen who considered the Western powers an unequivocal threat to their small island nation. Regarding the West, he saw nations flush with wealth, power, glorious inventions, and right ways of thinking, all of which Japan could claim for herself. His countrymen were ingenious and crafty, men of the sword and of the land. Already, they'd taken Western innovations and tailored them to their uses. One day, sooner than anyone in Japan or the West believed possible, they'd have the best factories, railroads, and guns in the world.

While they'd never adopt Western, or rather, Christian, ideas about the divine and the mundane, about life and death, about the relations between family, friends, and foes, his fellow countrymen benefitted when they understood themselves, as he did, as men endowed with a basic freedom to fulfill their destinies. In the West, a man wasn't forced into submission. He didn't have to bend to the whims of his parents, teachers, peers, superiors, and nation. A man chose the path he determined to be righteous and just.

At this moment, his path was Emmy. And he wanted to join with her in the most basic, Western way. He wanted her kiss.

They wouldn't get caught. Not from a single kiss. One kiss to confess. One kiss to bind them. One kiss to let her know she wasn't alone in love.

He pressed his fingers into her shoulders as though to bar her flight. "I love you, Emmy."

She parted her lips in a light gasp.

Cradling her gaze, he basked in the sensation of a thousand needles grazing his skin. Even in near darkness, he found the clouds and rain gathered in her irises and the meadows covered in dew. Then he drew nearer and let his eyes fall shut for the precious moment they met in a kiss.

A tear fell between their lips. Her pain, her sadness. He hummed at the bite of salt and licked another luscious drop from the corner of her mouth, then trailed a line of kisses down her cheek in another's wake. This taste he'd take with him, too.

He ought to regret having made her cry, but he was too glad she'd cried, too pleased to taste her. Were his pleasure at her pain a ticket to hell, as the Christians would say, then to hell he'd go, all the while thanking the gods for whatever had brought her home without her brother. For whatever had kept him from simply delivering a holiday log.

He kissed with light, unassuming presses as her tears abated, and she found her way into the kiss. This should be enough for him. He'd gotten more than he'd ever dreamed possible. Which made him selfish to growl with satisfaction when she slanted her head and raised her chin, and treated his mouth to harder, longer presses. Unlike his unassuming kisses, hers contained all manner of assumptions about what she wanted and what she was prepared to give and what would happen if they allowed their passion to have its way.

Which they could not.

But before they broke the embrace, he had to further atone.

"You're the only woman I've ever loved." He spoke into her mouth, because ending their kiss at this moment would violate what felt like an unspoken agreement not to part until their parting became inevitable. "The only woman I'll ever love."

"I know." Whimpering, she made furtive movements under her cape.

Before he discerned their meaning, she placed her ungloved hands on either side of his neck. The tentativeness of her bare fingertips was that of an innocent, a woman who knew nothing of how to touch a man but would push through her ignorance to get what she desperately wanted. And it drove him deeper into need.

He moved his hands to the small of her back, bringing her closer, willing her to deepen her

touch into the flesh of his neck. She did, and within this conversation without language, she made a request by rising to her toes and weaving her fingers through the hair at his nape. The movement upward stroked his swollen, aching cock. She wanted him delirious.

Behaving like the lecherous beast he'd become, he licked at the seam of her lips. With a light gasp, she opened. And he entered as though he'd been there before, like its contents were his, like there was no force in the world that would question the rightness of him being inside her. Even so, at the same time he moved inside her luscious mouth and found her velvet tongue, he wondered if she'd merely opened her mouth in shock at his lick and whether she'd intended to invite him inside.

He eased away to ask if he'd overstepped and found her gaze aglow with lightening and the clap of thunder.

“Make love to me.”

Chapter Three

Emmy

Sachio's imminent departure from Emmy's life had brought on heart-rending, indescribably awful grief, but it'd played no role in her asking him to make love. Their joining wasn't meant to be a farewell present, a token to store alongside other memories of their time together. Over the past several months, he'd visited her home daily. He'd taken her and Clarence to every temple, shrine, park, concert, festival, and theater show of note. They were flush with memories. One more memory, however powerful and divine it might be, wouldn't make him any more important to her than he already was.

 Their loved had etched itself onto her soul.

 Nor had she been seeking proof of the enormity of the bond between them. Their feelings didn't require he penetrate her quim to prove their existence. Her desire for him, and his for her, were as real as the Yule log in the middle of the parlor.

 Nor had she asked for sex because she preferred that he, and not whichever diplomat she married, be the one to take her virginity.

Nor had she been so overwhelmed by desire that she'd coyly permitted herself the bold proposition.

The time had simply come for them to surrender to love's decree that those in love enact their love. And she wanted to enact their love naked and entwined in positions she'd heard existed and wanted to experience with him.

Had she known how to make love, she might have worded her proposition differently. Instead of requesting he make love to her, she'd have asked if they could make love to one another. But she wasn't entirely certain how lovers went from capes and coats to bare bodies and his swollen member inside her.

Sachio knew. When they'd passed erotic paintings on the alleyway walls in Asakusa and displayed at the bookstores in Kanda, he hadn't looked at them with raw fascination. He'd looked at *her*.

"Oh, Emmy." He pressed his lips into the curve of her neck.

Shivers from his exhale spread to her limbs. She found her nipples studded and her legs clenching as though she had the power to dam this flood of desire. A conceit if there ever was one.

He brought one of his hands to her nape and steadied her while he continued to taste the sensitive skin over her throat. "You cannot know how long I've waited to hear those words."

She had some notion of how long. They'd been building within her since her confession weeks before.

That night, under the brilliant red *momiji* maple leaves lit by lanterns along the pathways at Koishikawa gardens, Sachio had admitted to being consumed by a passionate fury, but he'd refused to give it name.

He fisted his hand on the brass knob of his walking stick and halted next to the half-frozen

carp pond. “I must hear your feelings.” Need for her to confess the truth flared in his desperate gaze, just as the tight set of his jaw begged her to deny him.

“I love you,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’ve loved you for a while now.” At the mention of time, emotion welled in her throat and hitched her voice. For so long she’d loved him. Since summer’s leaves had dried and fallen into heaps of browns, reds, and golds. Her love grew more powerful as he shared his thoughts on the fate of Japan and the Western world and demonstrated his graciousness with small gifts to her and Clarence for teaching him about England’s culture. And it gained power in the kindness he showed to *Mitsu-chan* and the brotherly affection he extended toward the younger diplomats he would lead to England.

He was loyal and brave, a hero and servant to his emperor and country. And he loved her, too. The slump of his shoulders and the way he clamped down on his lower lip told her as much. Then he walked away without saying a word, and she went numb.

The next day, he visited them as usual and apologized to Clarence for having left the park so abruptly and brought a gift of *moniji* leaves dipped in sweet miso paste for her. Yet numb from having made an open wound of their love, she thanked him, and they treated one another as though neither had trod on that fragile place between them.

Now, Emmy rested her cheek against the broad shell of his ear. The forthright scent of his masculinity centered her in his broad, sturdy embrace. He was protection and mooring in a world of too many countries and too many cultures and too much confusion for one to navigate alone. Running her hands around to his back, she burrowed herself more fully into his body’s bend. “I meant every word. I want us to make love.”

Lifting his head, he brushed his lips against the side of her cheek, then ran his thumb along the place his lips had been as though to send the kiss deeper into her skin. “I want it, too. I want

you, Emmy. Always.” Those tender words he nevertheless laced with *but*, *however*, and *it cannot be*.

No, she screamed inside and squeezed him harder. He couldn’t deny her. He didn’t want to deny her. She’d have to throw herself at his feet. “I’m yours, always.”

With a finger under her chin, he tilted her upward to meet his gaze. “I can’t have you and leave you. I can’t get on that ship tomorrow if there is a chance you’ll be carrying my child.”

“I’d love to have your child.”

He let out a guttural sound and bared his teeth. Claspings the hair at her nape, he drew her to him and covered her mouth in a hard, plunging kiss that raked her delicate skin. Punishment for her devotion. For her overwrought love. For his.

Her throat contracted in whimpering need. He dipped his tongue further inside and pushed his hips toward her. The firm length of him was there, against her cape, pressing into her belly.

Oh, how she wanted him to take her.

She moved a hand from his back to the tight velvet of his vest. Fingering the buttons, she made her way down the vest’s lower edge, then rested her hand against the side of his erection.

His groan suffused the room with a long plaintive note that somehow ended with a bang against the parlor door.

Clarence stood at the threshold with Roderick and Mitsu-*chan* behind him. “Sachio-*san*.” His yell must have overwhelmed the Martinez family’s celebrations, because an eerie silence followed.

Emmy removed her hand from Sachio’s hardness, and they both stepped away. A flash of panic shone in his gaze, then faded into something akin to resignation. He let his shoulders fall.

“What the devil are you doing with my sister?” Clarence crossed the room in long,

purposeful strides.

Emmy froze, and her brother pulled back his arm and hit Sachio square on the jaw.

Solid as an ox, Sachio took the punch.

“*Clarence.*” She’d never seen him hit anyone. Even before he’d become the most reserved diplomat in the empire, it wasn’t part of his repertoire.

He didn’t even glance in her direction but like a rabid bulldog, landed several punches to Sachio’s gut until his foe bowed at the waist and fell forward. Clarence grimaced, his countenance a mean red. “What have you done to my sister? To my family? Answer me, you joke of a diplomat from a country that barely exists.”

Emmy reached for Clarence’s shoulder when Roderick grabbed her arm. Vindication was smeared across his face.

“Stop this at once, Clarence.” Hoping she’d yelled loud enough for the Martinez family to hear, she pulled at the arm Roderick held tight.

In turn, he thrust it above her head.

“Leave her alone,” Sachio growled. “Drop her arm now.” He sounded like the devil incarnate.

Not worth a penny as a fighter, Clarence stared down at Sachio as though amazed he’d had the audacity to issue orders from his place on the carpet. Then, he was no longer on the carpet, but on his feet and delivering a chop to the run of muscle between Clarence’s neck and shoulder. Her brother fell into a heap.

Sachio grabbed Roderick by the shirt. Releasing her hand, the pride of the British diplomatic services snarled at Sachio, then shoved a knee into his groin.

Her soul’s great love contorted his face into a fiery mask of pain and crumpled into a ball next to the Yule log. “Awwwww,” he moaned.

Having risen from the shoulder blow, Clarence kicked Sachio's side. Roderick gripped her love's shoulders and shoved him against the Yule log. This gave Clarence more of Sachio to batter with his boots.

"What are you doing, Clarence?" Emmy grabbed his arm. "You're killing him. You have to stop. This isn't the sort of man Father wanted you to be. He'd never want to see you like this."

Clarence ceased kicking and turned to her, panting in sharp exhalations. "What would they think of *you*? Fondling an Oriental?" He spit onto the carpet with the last word.

"I'm in love with him. He's in love with me."

Clarence glared at her like she was no better than the manure on the bottom of his boots. "This isn't love, it's an abomination."

"Right you are." Roderick rose to standing without ceasing to glare at Sachio below him.

Still beside the Yule log, Sachio raised and lowered his shoulders with deep breaths. But she didn't see a man resigned to defeat. She saw a man devising a means to save her.

He needn't make the effort when she could save them both.

Glaring back at Clarence, she raised her chin. "I'll marry whoever you wish." She moved her gaze to Roderick. "If it pleases you, Roderick, I'll marry you. But you must let Sachio-*san* leave this house, harmed no further."

Sachio rose to one knee and clenched the side of his ribs. "You'll... not... marry." He struggled for breath. "Not Battersby." Slowly, he stood.

Clarence and Roderick exchanged glances as though unsure how to proceed.

"You must leave the room...now...Emmy." Sachio inhaled a quick breath that seemed to summon the fight yet brimming within him. "This is between us men."

"I cannot." Her words stuck on the emotion swelling the back of her throat.

Clarence pointed to the parlor door. "Leave, Emmy."

“Leave.” Sachio gazed at her without a shred of tenderness or desire. “I’ll not see you again.”

“No.”

“Emmy...for me.” Sachio looked down at his fist, then back at her. “I want you to leave.”

Like a wild animal, Roderick stalked toward her. She stepped backward. Was this how they’d get her to leave? Have Roderick scare her away?

Sachio, a samurai warrior and a thousand times the predator of any British diplomat, tore across the room and grabbed Roderick by the back of his collar. Flailing for the fabric in front, Roderick made a brutal, choking sound.

Sachio leaned over his ear. “Emmy will never marry you.”

Scarlet-faced, Roderick fell to the carpet as Sachio released him.

He turned to Clarence. “I’m sorry to part ways in this manner. I thought we might be able to work this out diplomatically once you’d gotten your punches in. I fully admit I deserved them.” He rubbed his jaw where Clarence had landed the first punch. “I see now that’s not possible. I only ask for diplomacy’s sake that you refrain from issuing a complaint against me.”

“Like hell,” Clarence said.

Sachio looked at him as though he could snap him in two if he so desired. “Consider the consequences.” As he passed by her on his way to the parlor door, he captured her gaze with roaring intent that left no doubt: He loved her. He desired her. Their hearts were forever entwined.

Then he was gone.

She stared at the dark space of the parlor threshold and listened to him open the front door and shut it behind him. Then she turned back to Clarence to pose the question. One look at the downward slope of his neck and she knew the answer but asked anyway. “Will you go after

him?”

Clarence pointed to the second floor. “Go to your room. I’ll see no more of you tonight.”

He wouldn’t go after Sachio. Diplomat Clarence hated making a scene.

She turned on her heel and went in search of Mitsu-*chan*, who’d disappeared when fists had first been thrown.

Emmy had amends to make, and she suspected Mitsu-*chan* also had a deed for which she wished to atone.

Chapter Four

Sachio

Someone knocked on the door to Sachio's cabin. Pain radiated from places along his back over the span of his torso. He'd turned onto his left side where his ribs had taken Clarence's beating. Several times during the night, he'd stunned himself awake with a roll, but he must have slept through the last one. He was exhausted, void of any excitement at the prospect of going to England.

Dead inside.

Turning onto his back, he felt the pain recede. "Yes," he called to whoever had knocked on his door, probably one of the young men accompanying him to England.

"Sachio-san?" Not the voice of a budding diplomat, but the voice of his dreams, every dream that had ever mattered whether he'd been awake or asleep.

"Emmy?"

"Yes." The timbre of her voice caressed the *yes* with uninhibited anticipation.

A fresh pain gathered in his chest. This one came from the stretch of muscles brought on

by shock, then elation. He couldn't rise fast enough and bit back a curse at the agony that followed.

"One moment." She shouldn't be here. Had something happened with Clarence? With Battersby? He'd left her with the two men because he hadn't thought Clarence would enact violence on his sister.

She was here, he told himself, *sounding hale and hearty*. She wasn't hurt.

But she needed him, or she wouldn't have come.

He looked down at his bruised body. He'd fallen asleep naked.

Last night, after leaving the Thurlow home, he'd gone back to his family home. Only a maid saw his poor state. He left a note to his parents, wherein he explained it was best to arrive early at the ship, and asked the maid to give it to them when they woke. He wouldn't have them worry about his relations with foreigners any more than they already did.

In the pitch-black hours, one of the ship's servants let him aboard. After stripping off his clothes, he inspected the swollen, red skin of his sides and the cuts to his cheek from the Yule log when Battersby held him against it. Then he wiped himself down with a towel and retired, too exhausted even to think about pulling a sleeping *yukata* from his trunk.

Fortunately, his family's maid had placed a *yukata* on top. He threw the cool crisp fabric over his sleep-warmed body and tied a sash around his waist. His nerves were on edge, so desperately he wanted to get to Emmy. But he had to maintain his composure. Some horror could've brought her. Whatever it was, he'd take care of it. Of her.

He pulled open the door to find her in perfect condition, at least outwardly. She wore her dark blue cape over a day dress of the same color. A flush darkened her cheeks, and in the light from his cabin, he could see the tempest of her irises raged.

The British seaman beside her doffed his hat. "Miss Thurlow requested I escort her to your room."

“Thank you,” Sachio said, unable to wrest his gaze from her.

“Do you need anything else?” the seaman asked.

“Nothing more.” *She was all he needed.* That dagger of truth pierced his heart.

“Very well.” The seaman scurried down the narrow passageway and around a corner.

She tilted her head to the side the way she had during their embrace. “I came to bid you farewell.”

Sachio leaned against the door frame, realizing, as he shifted, that he was trying to block her entrance. There was no way she could enter his quarters. The sitting area was only a few steps from the bed, and she’d asked him to make love only the night before. Now, he wouldn’t resist. He’d run his lips over every inch of her body, learn the difference between the sweetness of her shoulder’s slope and the musk at the underside of her wrist. He’d lick her pussy and suck on her breasts. He’d make love to her hard and tender and send her to oblivion, then leave her to ruin.

She had no place in his quarters.

Swallowing hard against burning hunger that would forever be for her alone, he summoned all his diplomatic poise. “What happened after I left last night?”

She pleated her brow. “Clarence and Roderick Battersby finished all the whiskey in the house. I apologized to *Mitsu-chan* for slapping her. She apologized to me for letting *Battersby-san* take her back to the hotel and report to Clarence that you and I were alone in the house.”

“How did Battersby happen to take *Mitsu-chan* to the hotel?” Sachio fisted his hand to keep from reaching for her.

Emmy glanced briefly at his fist. “He escorted me home from dinner last night. I presume he must have loitered at the home and listened for what was taking place inside. I feel bad for *Mitsu-chan*. She shouldn’t have been subjected to him. He’s not a very decent escort.”

The way Emmy clenched her jaw stoked a fire in his gut. “Did he make any advances on

you?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

He looked down at his *yukata*. He had to put on a proper outfit to turn Battersby into a bloodied mess. “I’ll need to change into a suit. Did Battersby return to the hotel?” If he was suffering the effects of the previous night’s drinking, Sachio would likely find him in his rooms at the Grand Oriental.

She placed her hand on his arm. He stilled at the feel of its perfect weight. “It’s over. I’m not going to marry him. He doesn’t want me. Apparently, I’m no longer desirable because of my association with a man of the Orient. At least, that’s what he said when he left this morning.”

Sachio had never been happier to be a man of the Orient. As one had been needed to scare Battersby away, he was glad to have played the role.

Now it was time to let her go. She’d end up with a good husband. Clarence had spoken of how much he respected his sister for maintaining their home after their parents’ passing. He wouldn’t repay her with a poor match. He’d have come to his senses about Battersby, just as he’d come to his senses about Sachio’s intentions.

Sachio had deserved every one of Clarence’s hits. He could’ve done with fewer kicks, as the sharp pain in his side attested.

He placed his hand over Emmy’s, and they threaded their fingers like lovers who always threaded their fingers like so. How could they understand one another so deeply? The constricted feeling in his chest returned, and the pain reminded him he might still have to cause bodily harm to Battersby. “Are you sure he did nothing to you?”

She caressed the back of his hand with her gloved thumb, which made him thrum with bitter longing for a joining he could never know. “Nothing to me, although he scared Mitsu-*chan*. She felt terrible about going with him back to the hotel. That was why she helped me find you

today.”

Sachio glanced down the passageway, expecting to see *Mitsu-chan* peer around a corner.

“She’s above deck, charming the sailors with her questions. She’s been busy this morning. First, she went to your home and learned from a maid that you’d already come aboard. Then she came back and told me, and we both came here.”

He squeezed Emmy’s light, feathery fingers. Since there was no need to punch Battersby, he could take his time in bidding her farewell. “I’m glad you came aboard.”

She stepped toward him, causing her velvet cape to brush his chest and her fine wool skirts to caress his front. Flinty sparks danced along his skin as his cock stretched and ached from her skirts’ rustles. What had been a pleasant farewell in the passageway was now an encounter replete with unrepentant lust and its partner—where Emmy was concerned—danger.

“Sachio,” she whispered and brought their clasped hands to the center of her bosom. Her soft breast rose with an inhale.

Object of his heart, his adoration. If only she was his, every year he’d find her Yule logs. Every day he’d kiss her until she went limp in his arms.

Lightly, she laid her leather-gloved fingers along the scratches on his face. “Does it hurt?”

Nothing hurt when she touched him. And everything hurt. “I’m not sure anymore.”

She traced a line to his mouth, and her gaze sparkled with desire as she pulled his bottom lip forward with the tip of her finger. He gave up the pretense of their being other than destined to express their love in bodily affection and kissed her.

She’s mine, he’d tell anyone who happened upon them in the ship’s passageway.

They kissed deeply, clasping and squeezing their hands joined at her breast, reaching into one another’s mouths as though he’d arrived home after years asea. He didn’t want to let go, couldn’t let go. He stepped backward into his quarters. This wasn’t to fulfill her request they make

love, it was to ensure she wouldn't be caught kissing him in the passageway: a British woman embracing a man not her husband, a man of the Orient, was forbidden.

They'd be only a moment inside. He'd only kiss her. Not bed her, he swore as he took another step, and she made a plaintive sound.

"We can't keep kissing here." His words landed in breaths against her lips. "And I don't wish to stop."

"Nor do I."

They stumbled into his small quarters, and he wound his arm around the small of her back to keep her balanced. The several windows on the opposite side of the room faced the port. He led them to the far corner beside the head of the bed and pressed her to him, loving how she fit into the curve of his body.

It took him a moment to realize she'd eased away from their kiss. She placed her hat and reticule on his trunk, then pulled off each glove. Watching her undo the ribbon at the top of her cape, he thrummed with lust for the opportunity to feel the swells and dips of her body.

An opportunity he'd do everything in his power to resist. This was only for a kiss.

She placed the velvet mass next to her hat. Before he could tell her she ought to leave, she rested a hand on the front of his *yukata* where the sides overlapped. Too easily, she could slip a hand inside and give him a touch he'd hold dear across oceans and foreign lands.

"You shouldn't be in here." At last, the words came out. He thrust her arms down to her sides yet kept hold of them and laced his fingers through hers. Anything for the feel of their skin together. "I shouldn't have let us in."

She glanced toward the opposite side of his cabin. "Why don't you pull the curtains on the windows?"

"I meant we can't make love." He hated saying it, but, by Jove, it was the right thing to say.

“You needn’t worry about my getting pregnant. *Mitsu-chan* gave me...” A flush sprang to her neck, and the whirlwind of seas that inhabited her gaze spun all the faster. She picked up her reticule from his trunk and pulled out a small silk-wrapped package. After undoing the ribbon, she pulled a box from inside and opened it before him. It was a small lump of what appeared to be moss. “She told me to put this inside me, and I won’t get pregnant.”

He fought the urge to crumble at Emmy’s feet. She deserved his eternal adoration for arranging a pessary and coming to his quarters with every intention of their using it. But this was something a prostitute would use and still end up pregnant or sick. “You can’t have that inside you.”

She let her shoulders fall. “You don’t wish to make love?”

“Emmy, if I could make you my wife, you’d already be on my bed. We’d have made love twice since waking, and I’d be thinking about how to make it a third. But I can’t let you put something inside you that looks like it belongs in a dung heap.” For a moment, he worried that he’d insulted her efforts, but the unbridled joy on her face erased all concern.

“You’d make me your wife?”

“Unequivocally, yes.”

“Then take me with you. Make me your wife.”

He stifled a wry laugh at her naivety. “Your brother would never allow it.”

“No, he wouldn’t, but he can’t stop me, although he may never hand over my dowry. There’s a chance we’d have to live without it, although if we were in England and since I’ve turned six and twenty, he mayn’t be able to do anything about it.” She didn’t seem the least troubled at the prospect of forgoing an income for him, which brought on an overpowering rush of pure affection.

She grasped his forearms, pulling herself dangerously close to his thorough arousal. “Would your diplomatic corps allow it?”

A picture came to mind of bureaucrats sitting around a table discussing the benefits of his foreign marriage. It was so absurd that he chuckled. “I don’t believe they’ve considered it. But if I got the sister of a British diplomat pregnant or assured them there was a likelihood, they’d be inclined to come up with all the reasons why a foreign marriage would be a boon to our aims abroad.”

As he spoke, he came to understand that the years he’d spent perfecting his English and memorizing the names and endeavors of every dead and living king, queen, prince, and political dissident had bought him leverage. He was the head of the delegation going to England. He’d earned himself the right to an English bride. “They’d eventually allow it.”

She tightened the grip on his *yukata* sleeve. “Then you’ll be my husband.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement of fact.

“You’ll be my wife.”

He placed her arms around his midsection, and she held him tight, exactly how he wished. His love, his desire, the fountain of his spirit. His wife. “May I make love to you now?”

Chapter Five

Emmy

Emmy watched the *yukata* stretch across Sachio's back as he pulled the curtains shut. Through crevices between the draping and portholes, sunlight streaked the cabin. It was almost identical to the one in which she'd stayed during her voyage to Japan. The scent of enduring timbers, lantern oils, and the sea's deep waters stirred excitement in her belly.

Home. To England. With Sachio.

He returned to her side, and she instructed him in taking off her dress. "Undo the button at the top. Release the clasp." As he undressed her, the cabin air thickened, and she grew warm with each breath on her bare skin and each caress of his broad fingers, imperfect from years of training with swords and writing with brushes.

When she stood in only her chemise, he curled his lips in a hungry snarl she'd glimpsed in fragments over the course of their deepening friendship whenever his gaze had drifted to her nape or hips. She reached between the folds of his *yukata* and ran her hands over the planes of his chest and the sprig of hair at its center. With light flicks of her tongue, she tasted his masculine saltiness.

She couldn't get enough of him. Given the chance, she'd consume him.

"I want to taste every inch of you," she confessed.

"Don't say that." Cupping her buttocks, he drew her closer. "Not until I've had you."

Moaning, he kneaded her flesh and ground himself into the soft part of her belly above her sex.

Glee tore through her. *Having her* must mean lovemaking. For that, she was ready.

From the cords of muscle at his midsection, she traced a line past his loosely tied *obi* sash to his erection pressing into her belly. Unsure how to hold him, she ran her palm down his length, then up and down again. The flex of his neck muscles and hiss of his breath spoke to a pleasure different from the sheer satisfaction one got from crisp air on a bright winter day or the scent of a Yule log burning in the hearth. It was the pleasure of sex and carnality, of love and hedonism. She didn't think she was supposed to like it this much, but she did and found that if she stroked him harder, he grew even louder in her ear and heavier in her hand, and her fingers became wet with moisture from his tip.

He placed his hand over hers and lifted it from his member to his mouth and kissed her palm. His musk filled the space between them. She inhaled deeply, taking in his essence. The scent tickled her nostrils and peaked her nipples. Her most intimate place throbbed for a presence she knew would come and wanted now. "When will we make love?"

He laughed in the carefree way he laughed when she shared a humorous tale over supper. "We're already making love."

He lifted her off the ground like she weighed no more than a feline and laid her on the soft bed. Yet standing, he brought his hands to his *obi*. "Do you mind if I remove my *yukata*?" He seemed concerned for her sensibilities. Japanese men and women were used to nudity. They bathed together fully nude at their neighborhood baths. Foreigners allowed no such baths in Tsukiji.

“Not at all.”

“Have you ever seen a man naked?”

“Only by accident.” Those incidents had been an embarrassment for all parties involved.

“Very well.” Sachio untied his *obi*, and her mouth watered for his scent, like rough pleasure, and the sight of his chest, ripe with masculine edges.

She sat up on her knees. He let the *yukata* fall to the floor, and she pulled the chemise over her head and deposited it beside his robe.

He was wide and sturdy, his thighs bulging with muscle. His erection was dark and thick. “Emmy. You are... my life.”

She was a spinster from Oxfordshire. He was one of Japan’s highest-ranking diplomats, about to lead his countrymen into a world of which he knew little. Bravery like that existed only in a precious few. His intelligence, poise, and innate charm made him rare. There was no fathomable way she could be the center of his world. “I’m not worthy of the honor.”

He raked his gaze across her breasts, which seemed higher, larger from her nipples’ thrust, then placed a finger under her chin, forcing her to meet his fiery gaze. “You are the most perfect woman in all the world. It is I who am not worthy.”

He spoke with such conviction that she weakened, the entirety of her loosening before him. She ached to submit to his touch, to his body, to the hardness she’d taken in hand.

He eased onto the bed beside her and ran a finger around her breast and over the pebbled nipple. “May I kiss you here?”

“That would be...” She had a sense it would be scandalous and divine. “Wonderful.”

His warm, wet mouth brought a flurry of sensations: of joy that collected in her throat and came out in high moans. Of tantalizing pricks that gathered in her quim and made her hips sway. Of a light, needy thrumming from her waist to her toes.

He ran a hand up the inside of her thigh. Only then did she realize how she'd leaked on herself. "My precious Emmy, I believe you're ready for us to make love."

She knew without fully knowing that her body was poised on an exquisite brink of rapture, the one that happened during lovemaking. "I am."

He fisted his full, throbbing cock, and his cheek twitched as he let out a rush of breath. A spasm of vulgar satisfaction rippled through her. She wanted to trade her hand for his and touch him like so and give him what he obviously enjoyed.

"I'll be gentle," he said, low and strained. "But I'll still be inside you."

Yes, she wanted him to be gentle, but even more than gentle, she wanted him inside her. "Please."

He released his erection and braced himself on his elbows, then pushed the tip of his member past her folds. Her entrance stretched to allow him inside. The whole matter seemed at first a bit intrusive and rude. Yet, she found her jaw loosening at the unreasonable rightness. She reached for his shoulders to bring him closer, to bring her closer; she wasn't sure which. But he squeezed shut his eyes and tensed. "Careful, my peach. Don't move. Not yet. I'll tell you when."

For a moment, they remained still, her womb full of his thickness. It made little motions inside that brought such exquisite pleasure she nearly forgot to breathe. Finally, the twitching stopped, and he opened his eyes. The grin he gave upon seeing her took away any doubts she had about her worthiness. They were meant for one another.

"Now we move."

She swayed with the rhythm of his hips, keeping her hands on his flanks, taking in the rough Japanese words he uttered into her ear. They were one, she and her husband, joined for the moment and joined for life. She soared on currents of pleasure and desire until he reached down and gently thumbed the firm bud above her entrance.

The caress brought her back to earth, back to her body, and demanded her attention. She gasped.

“May I?” he asked.

“Whatever you wish. I’m yours.”

With each stroke of his thumb, her world became a dark heaven and a blissful hell. Pressure built within her, then doubled and trebled. She clawed at his shoulders and bucked against his hips and found her throat tightening and her breath catching. She squealed, and he uttered more of his Japanese as he thrust deeper and moved his thumb faster. The boundary of her control had been breached, and she surrendered to him in a lightning strike of throbs and pulses and wetness that sent her into the most blessed storm.

With a final thrust, he tensed and growled and filled her with his seed.

Remaining on his elbows, he balanced over her for a few breaths, then gently pulled away. They lay on their backs in a moment of stillness, the calm that followed in the tempest’s wake. He drew her to his chest and pulled a quilt over them both, leaving her perfectly placed to inhale his vibrant scent.

“We can’t stay here for too long,” he whispered into the hairs at the top of her head, “if we’re going to speak with Clarence before the ship departs.”

“I was thinking of sending Mitsu-*chan* back to the house with news of our engagement.” She ran a hand over the swells of his chest, stopping at a dark nipple to finger the tip. “We can tell Clarence we’ll marry when the ship docks in Hong Kong.”

“It sounds like you’d given this some thought.” He grinned so broadly she thought to pinch herself. How could she bring him such happiness?

“I assumed all the ships docked in Hong Kong. Don’t they?”

“I believe we’ll be there for over a week. The crew wishes to celebrate the Christmas

holiday among their countrymen in the colony.” He cupped her shoulder, spreading warmth across her bare skin. “But Clarence might be upset at my not telling him before we leave. Man to man.”

He was going to be irate, but he wouldn’t do a thing about it. “He’s a diplomat.”

“Ahhh.” Sachio gave her a light squeeze. “He won’t cause a scene.”

“But we might cause a scene in London. A Japanese man and a British woman.”

“I’m sure of it. I’ll have to take pains to win people over.” He kneaded the muscles of her shoulder.

“Once they hear about the Yule log you brought us, they’ll know you have the heart of an Englishman.”

“Does this mean I’ll have to bring a Yule log to the home of everyone we know?”

She giggled at picturing him lugging logs to their friends’ homes. “That’d be a good start.”

He pressed yet another gentle, loving kiss to her temple. “Will they have Yule logs in Hong Kong? I’d like to see one all lit up.”

“If anyone deserves to see a Yule log aflame, it’s you, my love.” She took his hand and brought the knuckles to her lips. “My fire.”

“Your undying flame.”

THE END