



The Path of Dreams
Eugene Woodbury

Published: 2008

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): japan paranormal romance "religious fiction" "lds fiction" mormon "interracial romance"

Chapter 1

Snapshots

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

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

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

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

Sister Summers turned pale and changed the subject.

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

Abstinence made sense to her. What she didn't get was this incredible paranoia over *losing* it. To be sure, Sister Summers wasn't paranoid. Only timid and easily embarrassed. Now Brother Collins, Elly's Seminary teacher, *he* was paranoid. Every lesson on morality came down to *us*

versus *them*. Her honor and good name hung in the balance. *They* were going to get her, like the dumb girls in the horror flicks always running *up* the stairs instead of *down*. One scream of regret. Disgraced for life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shower was a solar-powered contraption. It consisted of a black metal tank exposed to the scorching summer sun, a coil of PVC hose, a

valve, a showerhead, and a blue plastic tarp stretched around a crude two-by-four frame. Elly was rinsing her hair in the thin, lukewarm stream, her back arched, her head flung back, when she heard the *click* of the shutter.

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

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

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

"That's *not* funny."

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

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

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

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

A few hoots from the boys at the back of the recreation hall. Some applause from the girls in the front. Unlike the boys, the girls were not amused by the prospect of running around for a week like feral children. No one else had thought of taking a picture of the shower. *How very clever of her!* Elly's thumb pressed down on the button of the remote. *Wait a minute, had she thought of taking a picture of the shower?* The carousel clicked forward, the slide popping up from the lens housing, the next one falling down into the cradle.

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

Becky had.

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

"Hey, we already saw this one!"

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

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

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

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

Late that night, Elly sneaked her father's slide projector into her room. She locked the door, pulled the blinds, and closed the curtains. Why had she believed Becky? Then it occurred to her: *the Photomat at Smith's Grocery!* Some pimply-faced kid manning the developing machines had seen *everything!* She'd never go there again.

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

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

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

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

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

Elly hid the slide where no one would find it.

But that moment haunted her—her thumb resting on the button of the remote—when her family honor and good name hung in the balance. Foresight was not her forte. Hindsight wouldn't have helped at all. It was only sheer dumb luck that she'd stopped it in time. Sitting in church, she

relived that moment over and over. Her heart pounded in her chest. Sweat trickled down her back. Teen angst meets post-traumatic stress syndrome.

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

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

Chapter 2

The Nakamozu Nankai

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

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

Then the southbound local arrived and they were gone.

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

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

Connor rarely dreamed and rarely remembered what he dreamt, which was fine by him. Most times the cigar was just a cigar. Yet he recalled this dream with a specificity that crossed the line between reality and imagination.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nakamozu?" said Chalmers *Chourou*. "Nobody's assigned to Nakamozu. The closest district is Kishiwada."

"That'd be Packard and Goto."

Chalmers Chourou corrected his companion. "Goto's not in Kishiwada. She got transferred to Nara last month. So it'd be Packard and Eliason."

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

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

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

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

Two nights later the dream came again. It wasn't the same dream. But it was about her, the girl on the Nakamozu Nankai. And it ended with their making love with a passionate intensity that resonated deep within his soul. When he awoke the following morning and she was not there beside him, he felt a profound sense of loss. The dreams had awakened a hidden part of him, revealed the existence of something whose absence he'd never missed until now.

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

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

Curiosity won out over guilt. He wished for the dreams to return and they did, though unpredictably. In the dreams Connor and the girl never

spoke. The people in the dreams had plenty of things to say to each other, though he was deaf to them. After that moment of breathless ecstasy, he forced himself awake and forced himself and *away* from her. And then lay on his futon and wondered—wondered *who*, wondered *why*, wondered if this was what an intimate, physical relationship was really like.

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

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

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

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

"Dating anybody new?" The bishop asked the question lightly, meaning that Connor ought to be, but he wouldn't hold it against him if he wasn't.

Connor replied with a self-deprecating grin.

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

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

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

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

But he couldn't explain what he didn't understand himself. *I looked at a girl on a station platform in Japan. That's all. Swear to God.* Still, he applied

all the remedies prescribed in situations like this. Because every problem had a solution.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Senior Companion

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

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

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

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

Melanie smiled. "Yeah, jet lag. You're sure you're okay?"

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

"I'm going jogging. Want to come?"

"No. And I don't want to tomorrow either. Really."

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

"*A-kan-beh*—" Elly said, sticking out her tongue. "Anyway I'm *haafu*."

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

"Yes, *senpai*."

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

her how to be a missionary. Now Elly hoped Mel could teach her to be a normal person again.

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

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

And then there was Susan.

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

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

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

She tried empathy instead. Susan was delighted when Elly told her that she'd hardly ever dated before her mission (true). She certainly didn't have anybody waiting for her (true). But Susan chalked Elly's abstinence up to an iron will and concluded they were kindred spirits. Elly didn't bother dissuading her. Yes, men didn't deserve them. Yes, men were pond scum. Yes, their brains were in their pants. A pox on all their houses.

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

And then they stopped.

Now they were back.

Somehow, when she was in Japan, she'd never cried out in her dreams. The feelings and the intensity had never been as strong as now. *Shimatta*.

Where had she picked up that expression? But her heartbeat quickened even as she cursed the beautiful, intoxicating dreams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please."

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean, making out?"

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

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

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

She passed the salt and pepper back to Elly. "The only time I really let myself be tempted was during my sophomore year. I had myself an honest-to-goodness returned missionary. Shawn Nance. A real nice guy. Marrying him wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world. I got his wedding announcement on my mission. I was very happy for him."

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

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

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

"But you didn't—"

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

"What's a cut-off man?"

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

"Better than mine."

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

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

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

Elly said, "I really don't think they care."

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

Chapter 4

Sex Education

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

And that meant an interview with Bishop Hodgson, a friendly though timid man about the same age as his father. The bishop greeted him with a big smile, a handshake, and a "How's it going?"

"Okay," Connor answered with a shrug.

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

Connor had no idea what the nice man was talking about. It sounded like something painful he might do to his thumb with a hammer, and not on purpose. He hesitated. The bishop grew distinctly discomfited. The way he'd posed the question, Connor figured it was something he wasn't supposed to do, and so he said that he didn't.

The bishop's relief was palpable.

On the other hand, Connor's deacons quorum advisor took to the task of moral education with breathtaking enthusiasm. Evan Bushnell saw the enemy and the enemy had breasts, an attitude that made priesthood lessons thoroughly engrossing in a gross sort of way.

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

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

THEY ALL HAD SEX!

No kidding!

EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!

That's incredible!

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

Would it have made a difference?

THIS IS A WARNING!

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

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

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

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

His ancestral past left them in awe.

Scotia-Glenville High was a more conservative place than Provo, Utah. Connor was pretty sure they were still using textbooks from the late 1950s in the Health Education courses. His first sex education class took place in the fifth grade, and everybody had to bring in signed permission slips to view what turned out to be a video about *The Facts of Life* that was less explicit and entirely less interesting than what he could observe on any given episode of *Nature* or *National Geographic*.

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

Half the class burst into a fit of giggles. The other half stared at him. Was he being serious? Did he really not know? Or was this a joke? If it

was a joke, it was a good joke. Should they laugh *at* Jimmy or *with* Jimmy? It was the day's most serious quandary.

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

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

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

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

They counted pretty much right.

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

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

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

Connor got ratted out. On his way to class, the dorm mother stopped him and gave him a "you ought to know better" lecture. That was one of

the dangers of living in BYU on-campus housing: informants everywhere.

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

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

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

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

Trevor thought that was the funniest prank Howie had pulled in ages. Once his fiancée found out, she wanted to see it too. Howie told his girlfriend and she wanted to see it. The only person who didn't take a gander was Connor's roomie, Roger Hollingsworth. Roger wasn't going to take a step inside Howie's room while that thing was in view. They all respected Roger's wishes. Roger was a clean-living, clean-thinking Mormon boy if there ever was one.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

Dr. Oh

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

She was even thinking things like *flippin'*.

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

"Chalmers Choro!" Elly practically shrieked.

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

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

"It's okay. It wasn't really her fault. Really. That ex-boyfriend of hers, though, is dead meat if he ever crosses my path." She whacked him on the shoulder. "You know how it is, Choro. *Shikata ga nai*. I survived."

"And how is Eliason these days?"

"Still hates men, last time I checked."

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

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

"Uncle? That's right. Oh Sensei is your uncle."

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

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Too many tall gaijin in here!"

Anybody not at a desk found one.

"*Konnichi wa!*" Oh Sensei said with a bow.

"*Konnichi wa!*" the class echoed.

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

Elly rolled her eyes.

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

That elicited a laugh.

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

Someone asked, "What about extra credit assignments?"

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

"Uncle!" Elly exploded in Japanese.

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

She said tersely in Japanese, "Forget it. I'm twenty-three."

Being honest about her age had its uses.

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

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

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

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

"Two weeks ago."

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

Everybody applauded.

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

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

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

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

"Oh. Sorry. Eri *Sensei*."

Elly rolled her eyes.

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

"What about?"

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

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

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

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

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

"How old is he now? Eleven, twelve?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is he even at BYU anymore?"

"He's in the master's program, linguistics."

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

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

"Teaching? Well, I have *thought* about it."

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

"Japanese 101? You want me to teach a *class*?"

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

"But I don't know how to teach!"

"What do you mean, you don't know how to teach? You've done nothing for the last year and a half *but* teach! You taught *Eikaiwa*, didn't you? Church English classes? Language is language. Look, the lesson plan is outlined section by section, hour by hour." He handed her a three-ring binder. "Here are Noriko's notes."

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

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

"Well—"

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

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

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

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

Elly got an employment authorization form and faculty schedule card from the dean's secretary. She descended to the basement floor of the JKHB where the TAs had their so-called offices. Room 1054, Asian

Languages, was a squashed box of a classroom partitioned into a maze of tiny cubicles. She found Noriko's carrel, placed her books on the narrow shelf, and sat down. Then lowered the chair a good six inches. She pulled out the yellow faculty schedule card and examined it.

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

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

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

"Over here," Melanie called to her, waving.

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

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

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

"What happened to your boyfriend?"

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

"Not on my account—"

"Girl, if I wanted him to stay, he would have stayed. I didn't want."

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

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

"Or the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth."

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

"Not once they find out I'm really American and twenty-three."

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

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

"*That's* what he wanted to talk to you about?"

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

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

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

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, it's a thought."

"Not a thought I'm having."

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

Chapter 6

Dinner Invitations

Elly arrived home six hours later. "*Tadaima*," she called out.

"*O-kaeri*," Melanie answered from the kitchen.

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

"The longest three hours of my life."

"Isn't it a two-hour class?"

"Not counting office hours. Uncle told me to put together the lesson plan for tomorrow's class. I somewhat panicked."

"He's not going to make you start teaching after one day, is he?"

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

"Sounds like being a junior companion all over again."

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

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

"You'll get better at it," Melanie said encouragingly. "Junior companions eventually turn into senior companions."

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

"Hi, Grandpa."

"Elly!" his voice boomed over the phone. "How's my favorite granddaughter?"

"You've got a dozen grandkids, Grandpa. You can't fool me."

"Oh, but you're the cutest."

During her teenage years, her grandfather's effusive nature only made Elly roll her eyes. Once in a moment of adolescent pique she'd asked her mother, "Why does Grandpa pretend he likes me so much?"

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

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

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

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

"Sure!"

"Okay, we'll be there, Grandpa, around one or so."

"Maybe we'll have a few other guests over as well."

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

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

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

"Yeah, I suppose."

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

"In other words, they're odd."

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

"I think it's a curse. *May you have interesting relatives.*"

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

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

"Yeah, but they *mean* it. I don't mind buttinskies as long as they take the job seriously."

"Then I'm surrounded by professionals."

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

"Sounds just like Grandpa's job."

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

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

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

And then there was the house. His grandfather's house. He couldn't do anything about that. Anyway, a meal was a meal, and Lynne and Glenn and their kids (one teenager, Mike, still left at home) were good company. Uncle Martin (his father's and Wanda's older brother) would be there, and Connor liked Uncle Martin too.

"Sure," he said.

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

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

Chapter 7

Nebraska

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

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

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

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

Connor had helped tear it down at the end of Winter semester. That's when Lynne told him, "Grandpa pretty much gave up on the house the last few years of his life, after Grandma died. That's when we knew. When he gave up on the house, he wasn't long for this world."

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

He glanced down the long driveway at the garage—a squat, A-frame cabin set apart from the house. He was almost surprised when he didn't see the metallic blue 1966 Mustang GT Coupe parked there. But not even

his grandmother's Ford Taurus. Only a Honda CR-V. Connor had to grin. *You've got a Honda parked in your garage, old man.* So who'd snagged the GT? Who'd plucked the apple of his grandfather's eye?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glenn got home from church about the same time. He greeted Martin, and Connor joined them on the porch. Martin was having Glenn tell him about the recent work he'd done.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They entered the house through the kitchen door and were immersed in a bouquet of baking chicken and homemade whole wheat bread not

long out of the oven. All the memories of the old homestead were suddenly fresh in Elly's mind.

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

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

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

She opened the present with the requisite enthusiasm and cooed over it the way grandmothers are supposed to. But then she glanced at Elly's mother and smiled. Her mother responded with a nod, almost a bow. Elly didn't think anybody in the family saw the bow but her. She knew it meant a lot more than a stupid apron. She didn't understand what until Sam was born and she was stuck doing much of what her grandmother had done those several weeks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where was your mission?"

"Nebraska."

"I think they have cars in Nebraska."

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

"Yeah, Osaka."

"You probably expected to."

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

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

"I think that's true no matter where you go."

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

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

"Two Cats, Nebraska," Elly said.

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

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

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

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

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

"I've never been to Nebraska."

"What?"

"Kevin went on a mission to Nebraska. He was telling me about how it wasn't like anything he'd expected. He had that look in his eyes, the same vibe I'd get from gaijin missionaries in Japan. Chalmers Chourou has it. All those RMs who show up for 301 do. They've stumbled into this world they never knew existed. I think a lot of it comes from never having lived in a really big city before. But it's the culture, the language, the

geography, everything that is so not Idaho or Utah or Arizona or California. And then getting transferred to some little town where the people have never seen a real live white guy before." She said to Melanie, "How about you?"

"It was different and it was interesting." She shrugged. "I know what you're talking about, Elly. But I think it's more a guy thing. Every guy wants to boldly go where no one has gone before. El Dorado is out there, and he'll be the one who finds it. That's why they buy SUVs to commute to work in."

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

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

Chapter 8

Brief Encounter

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

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

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

Connor didn't care to know and the feeling must have shown. So Wanda pointed out that his mission had polished his rougher edges and brought him out a bit. Made him more personable, pleasant even, to have around.

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

"I don't mind," he said.

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

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

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

"Hey, Larry. What's up?"

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

"Pretty soon, huh?"

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

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

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

"Sure, that works for me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

By now they were both laughing.

"Sorry about that," Connor said. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, Connor," said Alicia. Louder: "Connor!"

"Hey, Alicia."

"You're not on now, are you?"

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

"I'm taking Eddie's shift."

"He's going to graduate in August?"

"That's the plan. Amazing how biology can motivate the male mind." She patted her stomach.

"You're pregnant *too*?"

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

Connor shook his head in disbelief.

Alicia said, "If you're subbing for Larry, you've got the desk."

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

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

"Yeah, sign up there, on that sheet."

"I got it, Connor," said Alicia.

"Thanks." Connor returned his attention to the papers he'd pick up off the stairs. Quiz sheets. A simple *kana* test. Twenty questions, phonetic

readings only. He fished a pen out of the desk drawer, shrugged, told himself, *Why not?* and filled in the blanks.

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

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

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

So it *was* her.

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

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

Holy cow, Connor whispered to himself.

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

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

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

"I'm looking for Packard Sensei's cubicle."

"Elly's got Noriko's carrel."

"Thanks." He circumnavigated the room and ended up at the cubicle across from Kasamatsu Sensei's. The nameplate said "Noriko Tsuruoka." A Japanese 301 text sat on the upper shelf. A sheet of paper was wedged

under the cover. He lifted the cover and recognized one of Oh Sensei's kanji tests. At the top of the page, "Elaine Packard." She'd made one mistake, used a *sanzui* radical when she should have used a *ninben* radical.

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

Larry was twenty minutes late.

Chapter 9

Grammar Lessons

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

It wasn't possible.

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

It was just a dream.

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

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

Just her imagination. Just a random coincidence.

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

Think about something else, she told herself.

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

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the students who were only too happy to be there. They weren't necessarily the smartest and didn't always get the best grades. She'd seen the same thing on her mission. Every zone had a couple of slacker missionaries who got the most

baptisms. And a couple of diligent true believers who never got off the ground. There was something profound in that fact, though she wasn't sure what.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded. No, not homework, but the quizzes she'd dropped in the stairwell earlier. She looked again. One of them was filled out, and not by a student in her class. The hand was practiced but *gaijin*. She glanced at the name. "Connor McKenzie." He wasn't in the class.

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

"It's translated here as a *worrisome situation*."

"Yes, that works."

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

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

"Oh, okay," he said. "*Ja, ashita*, Packard Sensei."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That kind of day, huh?"

"You have no idea."

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

It did not.

After he left her in the deep of the night, she awoke and cast bitter imprecations into the silent darkness. She'd never known a solitude emptier

than the loneliness she felt in the arms of a lover who laid total claim to her body but withheld his soul.

Chapter 10

O-miai

Connor sat at his desk and stared at the Osaka Metro subway map thumbtacked to the wall, following the red line of the Midosuji down to the Nakamozu Nankai interchange. He'd gone to Sakai to get something for Nobuo. He couldn't remember what. Elaine Packard had been standing maybe twenty meters away—there was no way he could have recognized her from that single encounter. He recognized her because he slept with her, in dreams that could not be dreams.

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

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

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

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

His only consolation was that he didn't snore.

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

"A girl?"

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

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

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

"Well?" Alicia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connor rolled his eyes.

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

"I am not being mysterious."

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

"Oh, for Pete's sake."

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

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

"Give yourself enough time to pick up some flowers."

Connor didn't bother to respond.

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

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

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

Then she said, quietly, reproachfully, "*You always leave.*"

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

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

"Yes."

"We hadn't met—or seen each other—before then?"

"I don't think so."

"Did my uncle tell you about me?" She looked at him, an angry glare returning to her eyes.

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

"Oh Sensei."

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

"He didn't try to set us up?"

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

"I suppose not. It's just that my uncle—you know the way he is."

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

"What do you mean, *you always leave?*"

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

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

"You leave. You always leave."

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 11

Precautions

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

"Need the car?"

"Only for a few hours."

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

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

"Alligator," Melanie replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hard part turned out to be the easiest.

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

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

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

And discovered that a waiting room is a waiting room. "I'd like to get a prescription for birth control pills," she told the receptionist, who responded so nonchalantly Elly almost expected her to say, "You want fries with that?" She handed Elly a consent form to sign and a medical history to fill out.

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

Checking off all those boxes made her feel much better about the state of her own health. She signed and returned the forms. The nurse escorted her to an examination room. Height, weight, blood pressure,

temperature. More questions: Diabetes? No. Surgeries? Just wisdom teeth. Ever been pregnant? No. Any sexually transmitted diseases? Definitely *No*. (She left out the "definitely.")

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

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

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

"No."

"Are you sexually active?"

"Not yet," was the answer that came out.

Mary smiled.

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

Dr. Starley said, "You know that oral contraceptives don't prevent sexually transmitted diseases?"

"It's to keep from getting pregnant." She hardly hesitated a beat. "I'm getting married."

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

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

"They're placebos, right?"

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

"Thanks," Elly said. "I will."

At the back of her mind—perhaps because of the association with female reproduction—she had made a connection between Planned Parenthood and Relief Society. The difference was, Planned Parenthood only cared about Elaine Packard, here and now. Nothing else. Her soul

was her own business. And so the unexpected answer came to her in this atmosphere of nonjudgmental amity, so casually that at first she thought she was lying. But she knew she couldn't lie that glibly.

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

"You're welcome," said Dr. Mary Starley.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So call me."

"You're not in the book."

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

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

"Not here." She shook her arm free.

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

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

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

"What is there to figure out?"

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

"I didn't say that."

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

"I wasn't blaming you."

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

"I didn't say that. That isn't what I want."

"Then what are you saying? What do you want?"

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

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

"You *do*, every time. You leave me *every time*."

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

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

"You *know*—"

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

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

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

She stopped in the lavatory before going back into the TA office. She splashed cold water on her face and stared at herself in the mirror. She

reached deep down in her gut and found the anger. At him. It wiped away the confusion, smothered the pain. *There, that's better.*

Now back to work. Darlene and Bradley were waiting.

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

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

Shut up.

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

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

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

Chapter 12

Grumpy Old Fart

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

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

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

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

His mother's father attended Connor's blessing. Connor was a month old in the photograph, cradled in the man's spotted, spidery arms. At Brigham Young University, his maternal grandfather had been a professor of some small renown, the chairman of the chemistry department before he retired. In the photograph, his face was drawn with age, his shoulders bent with osteoarthritis, his eyes bulbous behind thick lenses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connor promised him he would.

The GOF didn't care that Connor's family was Mormon. If he didn't care, Connor didn't see why his parents should care. It was the smoking, he figured. Even Billy's mom sent the GOF to the back porch to light up. In the dead of winter, he'd sit out there blanketed in a white cloud. He smelled terrible all the time. Connor'd wear the smell home on his clothes, like after a week at Scout camp. But the GOF had a seemingly infinite supply of Slim Jims and stories. Connor liked his stories. He was a pretty good guy as far as GOFs went. He'd trade grandfathers with Billy any day of the week, cigar smoke and all.

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

many Mormons in upstate New York. A family of believers couldn't afford to be choosy.

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

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

It was the way of all McKenzie men.

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

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

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

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

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

Elly McKenzie

1. Pretty (very).
2. Smart (sensei).
3. Nisei/haafu (and again, pretty!).
4. Intimidating parents!
5. Less neurotic than I am.
6. RM (definite plus).

7. No shrinking violet.
8. Doesn't like me.

He frowned. There was something wrong with the list, besides the sheer childishness of it. No, consider all the options! Look before you leap! *Compare, contrast, analyze.* He checked the list again.

Elly McKenzie

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

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

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

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

Chapter 13

Meetings at Five

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

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

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

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

She went to the dresser and extracted the small box from the back of the top right drawer. She popped it open and pulled out the origami-like lump of manufacturer's instructions. "Warning, warning, warning, threat, threat, threat," she mumbled to herself, scanning the tiny text.

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

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

Yet Sunday night she dreamed a different dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello?" she called out.

They did not hear her. She caught a flicker of motion farther back in the shadows. She looked up at the front porch of the house. The screen at the end of the porch was open. A boy, eight or nine, leaned over the

railing so far he was almost balanced on his stomach. He stared at the scene below with the intensity of a medical student observing an operation.

"Hello?" she said again.

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

The boy raised his hand and beckoned to her.

The dream ended.

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

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

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

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

"Your bride will appreciate knowing that." Their eye contact lasted a moment too long. She abruptly turned away. "The other night," she said, staring across the courtyard, "you didn't dream about me."

"No, I didn't."

"What did you dream about?"

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

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

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

"My grandmother's name is Chieko."

"Really? I met her once at your uncle's. Huh. Course, they just called her *Obaa-chan*."

"My name is Chieko."

"Your name's Elaine."

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

Really? his eyes said. "It still doesn't make any sense."

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

He shook his head.

She pressed, "Was there a kanji on the furoshiki?"

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

"*Obi*," she corrected him.

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

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

His obvious surprise was replaced by a look of caution. "I know what a *haori hakama* is."

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

"It's the traditional engagement ceremony."

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

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

"About what?"

"About *marriage*." She refrained from adding, *You idiot*.

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

"And what have you concluded after all this thinking?"

"I haven't concluded anything."

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

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

Elly jumped to her feet. "Where are you going? We're not finished."

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

"No quoting scripture. That's cheating." Elly quickened her steps to keep pace. "At your age I'd think you'd have had plenty of time already."

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

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

"Ow," he said, though he looked more startled than hurt.

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

"You don't know anything about me."

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

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

"So you're really a jerk in private? I don't buy it."

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

Fight or flight. He'd taken the latter option. She was left without an opponent. The adrenaline drained from her muscles. Elly slumped back to the bench. She sat down and held her face in her hands. What kind of a crazy person was she turning into? Crazy enough to push him across a line she shouldn't have. Now she knew she could punish him

indefinitely and he would never respond in kind, something no man should ever have to reveal to another person.

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

She obviously didn't know the rules.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" he said. He checked the time. "You're off."

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

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

"Ah, and he smiles," said Alicia.

"Don't you have a class to go to?"

"I believe I do. Say hello to—what was her name? You didn't say."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, say hello for me."

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

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

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

"Hi," he said.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

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

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

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

"There are actually two scrolls. The one my mother has reads: *Reluctant in learning, resolute in wrath.* The one describes how Oh women are born, the other what they should become. We've always been a volatile lot,

apparently. Though *reluctant in learning* seems a chauvinistic dig. Mom said he penned them to admonish his daughters. There's a time to be resolute and a time to be reluctant."

"What, did you get into fights a lot?"

"No—well—yes, I did get kicked out of kindergarten. Mom says it was for beating up the other kids. In my own defense, they were teasing me because I was *haafu*. My hair was a lot lighter back then. I think they enrolled me in a Japanese public school so I would learn to behave myself."

"I do have a hard time seeing you as a bully."

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

"Until you met me."

"Well—" she conceded. "I didn't mean it like *that*."

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 14

Freud's Couch

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

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

"What are you reading?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was right, he didn't know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Be *practical*, he told himself. He was a McKenzie. He was good at being *that*. He knew he'd been offered something extraordinary, the best thing that had ever happened in his life. But he *was* scared. *If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned*. He might as well invite in the wrecking crew. Loving her would change *everything*.

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

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

Ever since that distantly-remembered death when he was seven years old, Connor had been running straight ahead and in one

direction—*away*. An external force had now been applied to his trajectory. It was time to stop and turn around and take the path less traveled, and that might make all the difference.

Chapter 15

Read the Rest

The Path of Dreams can be read online or downloaded (free) at www.eugenewoodbury.com. The Kindle edition (ASIN: B001CGI1NY) is available from Amazon. The trade paperback (ISBN-13: 978-1438257976) can be purchased at Amazon and CreateSpace.



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind