



## PROLOGUE

*San Francisco – August 24, 1929*

**T**hirteen-year-old Akira Omura swallowed hard, unable to grasp the reality that Mama was sending him away to Japan with his younger brother Tad. So what if his parents were born there. He was an American and didn't want to leave his friends, his home, and the sandlot baseball games he loved so much.

Angst twisted his gut like a wrung-out washcloth, and stinging tears burned his eyelids. He trudged up the gangway of the *Tokyo Maru*, its steel stairs clacking with each forced step. Pivoting, he viewed the San Francisco waterfront against a backdrop of hills dotted with tall buildings and colorful houses. Screeching seagulls soared in circles under a brilliant blue sky.

He looked back at Tad, whose face looked calm. How could he be so emotionless at a time like this?

“Hurry Akira. You're holding everyone up.” Uncle Tetsuo propelled him forward with a shove on the back of his head.

Akira stumbled and gritted his teeth to keep from saying something that would draw stronger wrath. The thought of having to live at his uncle's house soured his stomach.

His six-year-old brother, Danny, sidled close to Mama and brought up the rear.

“Come on, the ship will be sailing soon.” Uncle Tetsuo brushed past Akira to an open area on the deck and briskly waved his hand, beckoning them to come.

Mama stooped next to Akira and Tad. “Be good boys and mind Uncle and Auntie. Say your prayers daily,” she said in Japanese. Her voice cracked, and a tear streaked down her powdered face.

Akira blinked, amazed to see Mama cry for the first time ever. A bit of hope flared like a lit match in his heart. “We don’t have to go if it makes you sad.”

His mother drew him into a hug. “It makes me very sad, but I’ve already told you that I can’t support all three of you boys.”

The match snuffed out. The sweet fragrance of her lilac perfume loosened his control, and fresh tears cascaded down his cheeks, soaking her soft silk kimono. She released Akira and pulled Tad toward her.

Tad moved away from her. He covered his eyes with his fists and started bawling.

“You’re not a baby. Tadao, you’re ten years old.” Mama straightened and looked at them. “Akira, Tadao, boys must be strong. Don’t cry.”

Papa had told Akira that many times as well—the last time on his deathbed with eyes reflecting the excruciating pain of stomach cancer. The memories threatened to cause new tears, but Akira beat them back. He wouldn’t dishonor Papa anymore. His father expected him to set a good example for his younger brothers, so he blurted out to Tad, “It’s going to be okay.”

Tad stopped crying and sniffled a few times.

The ship’s whistle blasted. Over the loudspeaker, a man requested all visitors to prepare to leave.

Akira wished he could trade places with Danny. The little squirt would get to stay here and even had an American first name, while he and Tadao were stuck with Japanese names. He once asked his mother why, and she said Papa had planned to return the family to Japan one day. But a few years later, Papa decided America was home, so the last child received an American name.

It wasn’t fair, none of it, but it was no use thinking about that now. Akira reached into a bag he carried aboard, and he pulled out a small wooden box, which he handed to Danny. “You can have it.”

Immediately Danny opened the box and peeked inside. His jaw dropped. “Baseball cards! You’re giving them to me?” He beamed as if he’d hit a home run.

“You don’t have to give them to Danny,” Mama said. “You love those cards.”

Akira didn’t look at her. He also loved listening to the games on the radio, and he wouldn’t be doing that either. The way the 1929 season was shaping up, his beloved Yankees would have a tough time catching the Philadelphia A’s anyway. “Danny can have them. I won’t have anybody to trade with over there.” The words flew out sharper than he had intended, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Mama wince.

“Gee, thanks.” Danny thumbed through the cards with a glint in his eyes. His chubby fingers would fray them in no time.

Akira shoved his hands in his pockets to keep himself from snatching the cards back.

Tad hovered over Danny’s shoulder and shot a glance at Akira. “You’re even giving him your Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig cards?”

“You don’t like the Yankees, so I’m giving them to him.”

Tad reached for the wooden box. “You better not lose them like you—”

“I won’t lose them.” Danny jerked away from Tad.

The whistle blasted again, and through the loudspeaker, a final announcement was made, this time asking all visitors to disembark immediately.

Akira checked his wristwatch, the one Papa gave him for his twelfth birthday. He would always treasure it as the last gift from his father. It reminded him that his time in America was rapidly dissipating like the smoke billowing from the ship’s stacks.

He would always remember the good times he had with Papa. They used to play catch at the neighborhood schoolyard, fish for smelt in the sloughs that flowed into the bay, or challenge each other at *Go*, Japanese checkers.

His mother bowed to Uncle Tetsuo. She and Danny turned back toward the gangway.

Akira leaned over the foredeck rail and followed them with misty eyes. He wanted to be as strong as Papa, but when Mama turned around and waved again, he flailed his arms frantically. “Good-bye, Mama! Bye-bye!” His throat hurt as he yelled his farewell over the din of the well-wishers.

Crepe paper streamers were distributed to passengers, who threw them to the crowd below. Tad’s green one cascaded through the air and floated on the gray water lapping against the dock. Akira clutched his blue streamer in his balled fist but refused to throw it, as though keeping the crinkled paper meant holding on to a last piece of America.

Mighty engines rumbled and onboard motors whirred as crewmen unlashd the ropes and secured the gangway. The ocean liner eased away from the dock with colorful flags fluttering on the rigging. At the end of the pier, two tugboats chugged in, ready to guide the ship out of the harbor.

Akira and Tad abandoned their uncle and rushed to the back of the ship to wave their final good-byes. Akira’s eyes tracked the figures of Mama and Danny until he could no longer distinguish them. As he turned toward the front, the cool, salty air of the bay whipped against his face. In the distance, a blanket of thick fog started to roll in, as if it were welcoming him into the new, unknown life ahead.

He peered over the side of the ship as it cruised toward the Golden Gate. White sheets of water washed away into the wake, reminding Akira of leaving behind Mama and everything he loved so much in America—perhaps forever.



## Banzai!

*Kumamoto, Japan – December 8, 1941*

Could the rumors be true about Japan bombing Pearl Harbor? In the twelve years Akira Omura had lived in Japan, he couldn't recall a more dreadful day. It was as if he woke up this morning in a different universe.

He chided himself for not returning home to America with Tad seven years ago. Now he'd be stranded in Japan indefinitely.

Americans wouldn't stand for such an attack on their soil, not without fighting back. Granted, California was some distance from Hawaii, but if the war spread to the mainland, Mama, Tad, and Danny would be endangered. Akira's stomach churned like a turbulent sea as he strode past high school boys in black paramilitary tunics and girls dressed in dark-blue sailor uniforms.

"*Ohayo gozaimasu, Sensei.*" The students greeted him with warm smiles.

"Good morning." Trying to mask his dismay over the attack on Pearl Harbor, he forced a half-smile. "I'll see you in the auditorium."

Three girls waited for him and winked at him coquettishly. Although it flattered him, he had told them to pursue boys their own age—not a twenty-five-year-old teacher like him. "Go ahead of me," he said. Today he didn't want to mingle with anyone.

A chill snaked up Akira's back when he spotted a new wall photograph of Emperor Hirohito bedecked with medals—a symbol of the new, militaristic Japan.

A queue of students, faculty and staff waited to file into Kumamoto Senior High School's auditorium. Girls scooted over, making an opening for him in line, but Akira politely declined. Animated discussions broke out about Pearl Harbor. One boy pantomimed diving airplanes with his arms, making a buzzing sound and mimicking explosions. "*Bokan! Bokan!*"

It reminded Akira of the time last summer when he had coached a baseball team at a ballpark near Ariake Bay. In the distance, the deep-throated drone of engines quickened to a high-pitched whine. He shielded his eyes from the sun's glare as six silver flecks dropped from the sky toward the glimmering waves of the bay. The diving warplanes flattened their trajectories and zoomed in. Red sun insignias were painted on the tops and bottoms of the wings and on the fuselages. They whisked toward four large barges docked at the end of the harbor. Players and coaches from both teams stopped to observe the aerial ballet unfolding above them, pumping their fists and shouting, "*Ganbare!*" as if the pilots could hear their encouragements. When the planes came within two hundred meters, they gained altitude and banked toward the sea. The next flight of six descended to attack the mock targets.

Practice had become reality.

Inside the auditorium, Akira set his briefcase under his chair in the faculty section and greeted the other teachers. A large map of Asia hung at the center of the stage next to a military flag with sixteen rays emanating from a red sun.

Principal Kurosaki stepped behind the podium with a high-voltage smile. He raised his hand and lowered it when the crowd grew quiet. "Early this morning, our brave naval aviators struck a decisive blow to the American navy at Pearl Harbor. At least a dozen battleships, cruisers, and other vessels have been sunk or severely damaged."

The principal's words confirmed Japan was officially at war with America. Nausea swirled in Akira's stomach. He wanted to gain three years of teaching experience before moving home to America in a few months. It would improve his chances of getting a teaching position back home, which was tough for Japanese Americans. He

had already purchased his passage home aboard a ship. Now, Akira had no choice but to stay.

“Our forces have also launched multipronged offensives against Hong Kong, Malaya, Guam, the Philippines, and other islands in the Pacific.” Principal Kurosaki tapped the map with his pointer. “For years, the British and Americans have kept us from our rightful place among the nations. They colonized major areas throughout Asia and took the spoils. But when we assisted the Manchurian government against the greedy Chinese warlords, the West cut off our supply of iron, rubber, and petroleum.”

A murmur reverberated throughout the auditorium.

The principal’s depiction of America contradicted what Akira remembered—a land of liberty, freedom, and justice.

When the crowd quieted, Kurosaki continued. “Early reports from the battlefronts indicate we are trouncing the foreigners. Once again, we have proven our soldiers are far superior!” he shouted, raising his volume to a crescendo. “The great crusade to rid Asia of the Western invaders has begun. Asia for Asians!”

On cue, everybody rose from their seats with arms raised above their heads and roared, “*Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!*”

Not wanting to be conspicuous, Akira stood up, raised his hands, and moved his lips.

At the conclusion, he exited the auditorium with a heavy heart. The moment he saw Hiroshi Yamada, a political science teacher, he wheeled around in the opposite direction. Akira couldn’t understand why his colleague always seemed to be competing with him—on the athletic field, in faculty meetings, or at social gatherings. Everyone knew Hiroshi came from a rich family, graduated from a top university, excelled in sports, and had a muscular physique. What else did he have to prove?

With a quickened step, Hiroshi caught up with him. “Good morning, Omura-sensei. Wasn’t that absolutely grand?”

“Good morning, Yamada-sensei.” If Akira didn’t respond soon, the situation could become awkward. He forced a neutral expression. “Yes, it was.”

“At the rate we’re winning battle after battle, we’ll be in San Francisco within a few months.” Hiroshi broke out into a grin as wide as his ego.

*San Francisco?* He had kept his American roots a secret from Hiroshi and his other colleagues. “Do you think victory will be that easy?”

“Of course. Western soldiers are no match for us.” Hiroshi smiled smugly. “We proved it against the Russians forty years ago.”

Akira couldn’t let Hiroshi spew out such nonsense. “America isn’t like Russia was back then. The government has the support of its people, unlike the way it was with the Russian czar. It would be a mistake to think this is the same situation.”

The grin on Hiroshi’s face gave way to a frown. “I’m surprised you underestimate the samurai spirit of our brave soldiers. Look how we crushed the larger Chinese army when they encroached upon our Manchurian allies. You sound so unpatriotic.”

Akira’s neck muscles tensed. He needed a quick recovery, and he had to be careful about what he said. People informed on each other to the *Kempeitai*, a very harsh military police that enforced the Peace Preservation Laws and arrested dissenters for *thought* crimes. “I’m just saying we shouldn’t underestimate the Americans.”

Hiroshi’s nostrils flared. “If I were you, I’d watch what I say.”

Resentment crowded out Akira’s desire to be civil. He hoped it didn’t show on his face. He glanced at his watch. “I have to prepare for class. Good day, Yamada-sensei.”

A thin smile stretched across Hiroshi’s lips. “Good day.” He turned and stalked away.

On the way to his first-period classroom, Akira considered his predicament.

*Am I Japanese, or am I American?*



## A Day of Infamy

*Mountain View, California*

**T**he RCA Victor radio on the shelf whined and crackled as Tad rotated the tuning knob for the best reception. The important broadcast would begin any minute now.

Danny crowded in from behind. “Try KGO or KSFO. They’re the clearest.” He bumped Tad into the walnut cabinet, rattling the Japanese doll case.

“Hey, watch it!”

“Come on. It’s going to start soon.” Danny hovered over Tad’s shoulder.

Tad swallowed his words and resisted the urge to fire back. Yesterday’s news had put everyone on edge.

The melodic NBC chimes sounded. “This is KGO San Francisco, bringing you the president’s speech from the House chamber in the Capitol building,” an announcer’s deep voice blared. Indistinct rumbling and murmuring came through the radio speaker, then abated.

“Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives.” The president’s voice came through crystal clear over the airwaves. “Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.”

Tad’s nerves revolted at the opening words of President Roosevelt. They could only mean one thing—WAR.

His stepdad, Mas, hurried into the living room with Mama, and they settled onto the couch. Minutes later, his wife, Lily, plopped onto the other sofa.

Throughout the previous night, a centrifuge of anxieties and misgivings whirled about in Tad's mind. The attack on Pearl Harbor could spark a violent backlash against the Japanese community and his family. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling, faint moonlight sneaking in through the venetian blinds. The country of his ancestors had provoked a war America would fight, quite possibly against his relatives—maybe even against his older brother, Akira.

President Roosevelt continued. “. . . the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace . . .”

The indignation in his voice seared Tad's heart like a red-hot branding iron. Now, the entire nation was aroused against Japan.

“I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost . . .”

Tad buried his face into his hands. All of his hopes for living the American dream vanished in an instant. He dropped his hands and listened as the president continued the indictment.

“. . . since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.”

Thunderous applause echoed throughout the House chamber with President Roosevelt's call to war—confirmation of what Tad feared.

The commentator broke in with a reprise of yesterday's events. Lost in his thoughts, Tad barely caught snatches of the report.

“. . . sneak attack . . .”

“. . . over fifteen hundred Americans dead . . .”

“. . . outrage . . .”

“. . . Japs! . . .”

His stepdad's voice broke his contemplation. “Tadao, please translate for us,” Mas said in Japanese.

Tad translated the gist of President Roosevelt's speech.

Tears squeezed out of Mama's closed eyes. “Akira's there. I must telegram him to come home immediately.”

Danny shook his head. “Mom, there’s no way he’ll be able to leave Japan. Not now.”

“Akira shouldn’t have stayed there. I feel sick to my stomach.” Mama’s voice faltered.

“Japan and America at war is like your mama and papa fighting each other,” Mas said.

Tad’s eyes traveled to the cross hanging above the fireplace mantle, then shifted to a family portrait below. Mama and Mas stood in front of the farmhouse, she in her formal, dark kimono, and he in a three-piece suit. Mas had married Tad’s widowed mother, and they settled in the sleepy, agricultural town of Mountain View at the base of the San Francisco Peninsula. Life had been difficult for them—Issei—first-generation immigrants from Japan.

Next to Mas in the photograph, Lily stood in her favorite Bette Davis-style dress with her hair curled into a fashionable hairdo. Tad wore a tweed sports coat with dark slacks, and he held Lily’s hand. In his high school letterman’s jacket, Danny posed proudly with his arms folded. Akira was the only family member missing.

As a Nisei—second-generation Japanese in America—Tad considered himself to be every bit as American as anyone else born in this country. Occasionally, the *Hakujin*—Caucasians—spewed racial slurs like Jap, Nip, Chink, or Chinaman at him. Yet he had many *Hakujin* friends in the community. Whether they were still friends was an open question.

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Lily buttoned up her wool coat and marched down Castro Street, her heels clicking with each rapid step.

The downtown area buzzed with people, more than on a typical Monday. Near the drugstore, sidewalk newspaper racks were all empty. A familiar face appeared a few yards ahead of her. She quickened her pace and smiled. “Hello, Mrs. Miller. How are—”

“Get away from me, Jap!” The middle-aged woman slapped Lily’s face, jerked her head away, and stalked off.

Lily stood on the sidewalk stunned for several minutes, mulling over what had just happened. Mrs. Miller was so friendly when they worked together at the arts and crafts fair two years earlier. She never expected this kind of reaction, not from Ann Miller. It didn't make sense.

*Just because I'm Japanese?*

Blinking back tears, she hurried down a side street to buy material at Trudy's Fabric to make costumes for the Christmas pageant. As she approached the store, Lily peered through the window and saw Trudy Jenkins, the proprietor, glaring at her with narrowed eyes.

Trudy rushed to the door, locked it, and flipped the sign to "Closed" before Lily could turn the doorknob.

Rapping on the door, Lily uttered, "How can you be closed? It's three in the afternoon."

Trudy acted like she didn't hear or see her.

Just two days earlier, Lily had no trouble with the town's *Hakujin* people. Now, the Caucasians despised her.

Lily wanted to go home, but she had some items to pick up at the Japanese grocery market. She rounded the corner, and her heart jumped when she saw the words, "DIRTY JAP" painted across the hood of a sedan. The car was parked on the street with slashed tires and shattered windows.

Her lips quivered. How could a person do something so hateful? After a moment, Lily marshaled her inner courage and continued on. She couldn't wilt because of this.

About twenty-five feet from the Japanese market, she halted abruptly and covered her mouth. Plywood boarded the large window that normally displayed advertisements of sale items. Above it, a large sign declared, "I AM AN AMERICAN." Next to it, someone had scrawled in red paint, "GO HOME JAPS!"

Her heart caught in her throat. She stepped inside and found the store devoid of customers. Last week it had bustled with housewives—Japanese, Caucasian, and Mexican. She shuffled down an aisle where canned goods were strewn everywhere. Mr. Mori was hunched over, restocking a shelf.

He nodded at Lily and turned away with a grimacing face. “Some punks smashed the window with a brick. They came inside, stole stuff, and made a big mess. Before they left they shouted, ‘Remember Pearl Harbor!’ ”

“That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. Don’t they know we had nothing to do with that?”

“We have a Japanese face and a Japanese name. It’s all the same to them.”

She looked at the boarded window that darkened the produce counters. “It’s so unfair.”

“That’s not all. This morning I phoned my suppliers, and they’re refusing to sell to me. And it’s not because I don’t pay my bills on time.” After a moment, he perked up and smiled. “Anyway, how can I help you?”

“I’d like two pounds of pot roast, a small sack of *azuki* beans, and some *mochi*.”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.”

Before Mr. Mori returned, Lily restacked two rows of cans on the half-empty shelves.

“Don’t worry about that, Lily. My son, Dave, will be here soon. He left school early today, because some kids threw rocks at him.”

Lily gasped. “Ouch! How mean. Is your son hurt badly?”

“He has some cuts and bruises, but he’ll be okay. It’s a good thing his teacher broke up the fight.”

“From now on we’re going to have to be extra careful.”

“That’s for certain.” He bagged her purchases, gave her change for a five-dollar bill, and thanked her.

As she exited, Lily looked down the street and then back at Mr. Mori’s store. A slap on the face, an indignant glare, and the vandalism was evidence that the world had indeed changed.

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Tad squeezed his cloth napkin into a tight ball as Lily recounted her experiences. He pounded his fist on the table. “I can’t believe that woman slapped you!”

“I can,” said Danny with a deadpan expression. “Her son was on the football team with me, but he’s a year older. After graduating, he joined the navy, and I heard he was stationed at Pearl Harbor.”

“Still, for her to slap Lily for something we had nothing to do with. I don’t know, the world’s gone crazy.” Tad looked at the downcast eyes of Mama and Mas.

Mama rose from her chair. “Let’s pray for this war to end quickly and that nothing bad happens to Akira or the relatives.”

The family rose and bowed their heads. In their own words, they prayed to God for solace and peace in a world erupting in death and destruction.

That evening, Tad and Mas took different sections of the *Valley Times*. Tad sat on the sofa, while his stepdad eased himself into his favorite chair.

The front page carried an oversized headline—JAPS BOMB HAWAII—with a large photograph of sinking navy ships ablaze in Pearl Harbor. The lower section contained a smaller headline—FDR CALLS FOR WAR.

Lily entered the living room and deposited herself next to Tad with a novel in her hand.

Seated in the rocking chair, Mama held her knitting needles and clicked away with a rhythmic tempo. A white-and-pink-mohair shawl began to form.

After a half hour of perusing produce ads, Mas dozed off with his head against a doily-covered headrest, newspaper neatly folded on his lap.

Danny emerged from his room, wearing his blue-and-gray letterman’s jacket. “I’m going out for a while.”

Mama peered over her reading glasses. “Danny, you shouldn’t go out.”

“I can take care of myself. Remember, I was a linebacker on the football team. And I’m a judo black belt.” He put on his shoes and left through the front door.

The truck’s engine fired up. With all the troubles in town, it’d be better if Danny stayed home, but Tad couldn’t tell him that.

Later that night, as the grandfather clock chimed eleven o'clock, rapid pounding at the front door jolted them.

“Who can that be?” Lily sprang up.

Tad rose and approached the door. Someone hammered at the door again.

“Who is it?” Tad asked.

“FBI.”



## Emiko

*Kumamoto, Japan*

Akira stared blankly out the window as the streetcar whizzed by storefronts in downtown Kumamoto. He gripped the overhead strap to balance himself as the crowded trolley trundled over crossing tracks.

People around town shouted in jubilant huzzahs, but for Akira it was no celebration. The prospect of being marooned in Japan, possibly for the duration of the war, devastated him. Worse yet, he could be drafted into the Japanese army and forced to fight his own country, maybe against his own brothers.

As the streetcar screeched to a stop, his body pulled forward with his arm tethered to the ceiling strap. Several passengers disembarked, making room for new riders.

A slender young woman with large, arresting eyes and a light complexion stepped into the tram. Her lustrous hair swept into a fancy knot. She wore a deep purple kimono with embroidered pink cherry blossoms below the *obi* sash. A cream-colored wrap covered her shoulders. In one arm, she carried a fabric bundle. He caught the sweet scent of wisteria as she squeezed past him looking for an open strap. Akira released his strap. “Excuse me, miss. You can use this.”

She flashed a winsome smile that made his heart quicken. “Thank you, but you won’t have one.”

“I’m fine. I can brace myself against the ceiling. Please, I insist.”

“Well then, thank you.” She graciously bowed and took hold of the strap.

Seeing no ring on her ring finger, he assumed she was single, but a woman like her probably had someone special. His eyes drank in her lovely features.

The purple in her kimono against her almost perfect alabaster skin was like a beautiful painting that took his breath away. Not that looks meant everything to him, but there was something special about her.

Her graceful movements combined with her captivating smile somehow caught his attention more than anyone else ever had. Despite the hundreds of times he rode this trolley line, he had never seen her before. Certainly, he would have noticed her. He wanted to speak to her again, but she faced the other way, and he didn't want to appear too forward.

The streetcar continued past several stops, but time stood still for Akira. He closed his eyes and thought about what he would say to make her smile again. The trolley jolted to an abrupt halt, and he nearly lost his balance. Akira peered through the window to see what had happened.

“*Baka!* Idiot!” shouted the driver at an errant bicyclist.

He lowered his gaze to the young woman, who was crouched down, trying to recover the items that had spilled out of her bundle.

“*Gomenasai*, I'm sorry,” she said to the people standing nearby. Passengers around her helped pick up the fallen objects. She graciously thanked everyone who was helping her.

Akira stooped down and wrapped his hand around the base of a heavy, round weight with metal spikes. A couple of steps away, he picked up a pair of shears, which appeared to be used for *ikebana* flower arrangement.

He rose and handed her the items.

“*Arigato-gozaimasu*,” she said softly and smiled, while her cheeks radiated a rosy blush.

“You're welcome. I see you're interested in *ikebana*.”

“I teach it. I'm returning from an exhibition.”

He tried to think of something clever to say about being a teacher, but history wasn't anything artistic like traditional flower arrangement. He wanted to keep the conversation going, but when

their eyes met again, no words came out of his mouth. She seemed to be at a loss for words, too.

She looked up at Akira. "I'll be getting off soon. Again, thank you for your help. You're so kind."

His destination was also coming up soon. The thought of never seeing her again sank Akira's buoyant mood. He wanted to say something more but hesitated.

At the next stop, the young lady stayed onboard. Maybe she was going somewhere close to where he lived.

Soon, the streetcar eased to a halt in front of the ruins of Kumamoto Castle. The young woman moved toward the exit. *She's getting off at my stop!* Akira let an elderly couple go ahead of him, while keeping his eyes on her. As he stepped onto the pavement, Akira spotted her about ten meters ahead.

The crush of people getting off and on came between them, and he lost her in the crowd. He quickly searched the vicinity. No sign of her. He drew a deep breath. The thought of never seeing her again dampened his spirits.

Akira ambled along the boulevard toward his apartment. His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten anything since dawn. He turned down a quiet side street where several eateries came into view.

"Come on pretty girl, let's have a drink together," a man said in a slurred voice.

"*Hanashite!* Take your hands off me!"

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

"No! Leave me alone. *Tasukete!* Help!" she cried out.

Akira turned his head toward the commotion, surprised to find the young woman he had seen on the streetcar. Instinctively he charged toward them. The drunken man was tall like him but must have outweighed Akira by about twenty kilograms. Perhaps strong words would dissuade him. "Let go of her!"

The drunk sneered at him. "Mind your own business."

Akira set his briefcase down and pushed himself in between them. "Miss, run!"

The drunk released her arm and wobbled backward.

Strangely, she didn't leave. Her safety was paramount. He had hoped she would have escaped while he held off the attacker.

The drunk closed in, standing nose-to-nose with Akira, glowering at him with bloodshot eyes. "Get out of the way." He shoved Akira on the shoulder.

Akira staggered back a pace. He didn't want to get into a fight. He turned toward the woman when a hard fist caught him in the mouth, dropping him to the ground.

The woman screamed.

"I told you to mind your own business!" The drunk leaned toward Akira with clenched teeth, then reeled around and grabbed the woman by the arm again.

Akira rubbed his aching jaw. He thrust himself onto his feet and dashed toward them. Lowering his shoulder, he barreled into the drunk, causing the man to release her.

The drunk rotated and swung at him. Akira ducked. The man took another swipe and punched nothing but air.

Akira hooked his leg behind the drunk's and sent the man tumbling to the ground with a thump. Then he whirled around toward the young woman. "Come on. Let's get out of here before he gets up. Please, let me help you carry this." He picked up her bundle and his briefcase.

The woman lifted the hem of her kimono and hastened her steps. When they were two blocks away, they stopped and rested. Visible plumes exhaled from their mouths as they caught their breaths.

"Are you okay?" Akira asked, between gulps of air.

"I was so scared, but I'm relieved now," she said, panting. "Oh, you're bleeding." She pulled out a handkerchief from her kimono sleeve and dabbed the corner of his mouth.

Even though his lip stung, he smiled at her concern for him.

"I'm sorry you were injured because of me. I feel badly about this, but I'm very grateful to you for rescuing me." Her eyes sparkled under a streetlamp. "I'd like to buy you dinner as a small token of my appreciation."

"That's very kind of you, but you don't have to repay me. Please don't worry about it."

“It’s the least I can do to thank you.”

Even though custom said otherwise, he couldn’t refuse her invitation. “All right then. By the way, I’m Akira Omura.” He bowed.

She returned the bow. “My name is Emiko Takata. I’m pleased to meet you.”

Akira turned toward the main street. “I know a little café nearby that serves great *nabemono* dishes and specializes in *yosenabe*. It’s reasonably priced too.”

Emiko let out an effervescent smile. “Hot pot food seems perfect on a cold night like this. Let’s go.”

Pleasant seafood scents wafted in the air as they entered the bustling café. The woman proprietor bowed. “Welcome!”

“Good evening, Midori-san. You’re busy as usual.”

She smiled warmly at them and showed them to a table.

Akira set down the bundle and briefcase. He held Emiko’s hand as she took a seat. Then he seated himself across from her.

The proprietor asked, “Two *yosenabe*?”

After receiving an affirmative nod from Emiko, he answered, “Yes, please.”

When the food arrived, Emiko nibbled on a piece of sea bass and some chopped vegetables. “This food is absolutely divine. I didn’t know such a place existed.” She caught the proprietor’s attention. “Madam, your *yosenabe* is delicious!” Emiko continued to eat as Midori-san bowed and acknowledged her compliment.

Akira grinned. “So, besides liking the same type of food, what else can you tell me about yourself?”

Emiko set down her chopsticks. “My mother passed away when I was eight, and I live with my father. I not only teach flower arrangement, but also tea ceremony and piano.” She let out an impish smile. “All right, now that I’ve told you about myself, how about you?”

“I’ve been teaching history at Kumamoto Senior High School for the past two years.”

“Oh, you’re a teacher. I’ve always enjoyed history. Tea ceremony, as we know it today, has its roots with the tea master Sen no Rikyu in the sixteenth century.”

“Yes, he had ties to the political leaders of that time—Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.”

“Too bad, Hideyoshi ordered Rikyu to commit suicide.”

Akira nodded. “It’s a shame to lose a genius prematurely. By the way, where did you go to school?”

“Aoyama Gakuin for high school and Tsuda College in Tokyo.”

He had heard of these private schools. Tsuda specialized in English education. Akira opened his mouth to speak some English but stopped himself.

After they finished their meal, Akira looked at his watch. “Let’s leave this crowded place.” He asked for the bill.

The proprietor placed the bill in front of him. Emiko quickly took it before he could claim it. “No, I insist. Please let me.”

He bowed slightly. “All right. Thank you.”

As they strolled along the street, Emiko asked, “Where is your family from?”

Something told him he could trust her. He scanned the area to see if anyone was in earshot. “Actually, I was born in America, and my family lives there now.”

Her eyes widened. “What? You’re an American? But you speak Japanese perfectly.”

“I learned the language in the twelve years I’ve lived here. After my father died, my mother sent my younger brother and me for schooling here when I was thirteen. I lived with my uncle and aunt until they died two years ago in a car accident.”

Her smile disappeared. “How terrible. I’m sorry to hear that. So, do you live with your brother?”

“No, Tadao returned home to America after five years.”

She lowered her gaze then looked up. “Now with the war, you probably can’t—”

“Go home?”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just have to see what happens with the war.” While the thought of not being able to see or communicate with his family saddened him, meeting Emiko exhilarated him.

She stopped in front of a large house behind a substantial stone wall and wooden gate. Her family appeared to be wealthy.

Emiko bowed deeply. "Once again, I thank you for helping me, not once, but several times today."

Akira returned the bow. "It was my pleasure." He handed her the bundle and lingered for a moment. He couldn't let her go without a promise of another visit. "Takata-san, if it's all right with you, I'd like to see you again. Perhaps for a meal, tea, or something."

Emiko gleamed. "I'd like that very much."

"How about this Sunday around two? I'll pick you up here."

"That would be fine," she said, before stepping through the gate.

He kept his eyes fixed on her until she disappeared into the house. Akira couldn't wait to see her again and his heart somersaulted. His toes and heels tapped rapidly, and he twirled around, emulating a tap dance he had once seen in a Fred Astaire movie.

Akira inhaled a deep breath of the cold night air, but the chill traveling down his throat couldn't extinguish the spark that kindled in his heart.