Part I – Flight

Chapter 1

Amakusa Island, Kyushu, Japan – October 1904

The young girl teetered atop the grassy cliff towering over the rapid currents ripping through the Nagashima Straits. Directly across from her, Mount Unzen smoldered, a fiery god beckoning. Nickel-plated clouds waltzed low in the sky. Damp winds made her shiver, or maybe it was fear. The girl rocked back and forth on the rain-drenched edge.

Ash-black mud oozed through her *zoris*, sandals she had woven from rice straw. Drizzle dripped from her *minogasa,* a broad, cone-shaped hat, plaited from the same material. A tabby-furred cat nuzzled her ankles.

She stared down at the white-capped waves. Haru closed her eyes. *Better this*, she thought, *than a life as a* karayuki *in Borneo.* Her name meant "spring," but she called herself "*Uso*-Haru"—false spring. She thought back to yesterday when she discovered the true meaning of karayuki and her parents' deception. She had been walking along the dirt path that ran parallel to the trickling Machiyamaguchi Kawa.

"*Yaaaack-eee eee-mo*!" The sweet potato vendor's falsetto voice banked off the homes lining the river. He pushed his wooden-wheeled oven to the middle of the weathered Gion granite bridge. The wind blew the lush aroma toward Haru. She felt lightheaded. *If only I had ten sen*, she silently lamented, *just one tenth of a yen, I could . . .*

"Haru-*chan*!"

Over the bridge, Haru spied a woman clad in a green silk kimono wiggling a turquoise parasol painted with yellow chrysanthemums. Behind her stood the village's only two-story building, the redbrick Gion Jinja, or Shinto shrine.

Haru knew Natsu, the karayuki recently returned from Sandakan, the British lumber port in northern Borneo. Natsu's getas clack-clacked to the *yakiimo* vendor where she plucked a coin from her blue drawstring purse and exchanged it for two sweet potatoes wrapped in newspaper. Natsu waved the sweet potatoes in Haru's direction.

Haru hurried to the bridge's midpoint.

Natsu held out a sweet potato. "Here."

At first bite, Haru's saliva flooded her cottony mouth. She bowed toward the hilltop Buddhist temple dedicated to Odaishi-sama, the legendary eighth-century monk who had devoted his life to working among the poor.

"Yes, Haru-chan, give thanks to Odaishi-sama and pray that your saint tells you to accept my advice. I saw you talking to your father."

"Yes, it's time I joined you."

Craning her neck so her face nearly touched Haru's, Natsu hissed, "No, child, it's time you ran away."

Haru stepped back, shaken, her eyes transfixed on Natsu's. Whatever those eyes had seen had robbed Natsu of her soul.

"I was only nine when my parents sold me as a . . .," she spat out the word, "maid. In Sandakan, I washed linen in a brothel from the moment I awoke until I fell asleep, more exhausted than your child's mind can imagine. When I became a woman and knew my true

karayuki time had arrived, I ran away. But they caught me." Natsu's bitter eyes bored into Haru's. "I can still taste the blood, feel the bruises."

Haru's potato lost its sweetness.

"With your beauty, you are not going to Sandakan to clean rooms; you will spread your legs so men will shove their spear between them within days after your first bleeding."

Haru blushed, averted her eyes.

"Oh, child. Already?"

"Last week," she whispered.

"When ships are in port, men will stand at your door waiting their turn. You will wash yourself with antiseptic so strong you burn your private parts, never knowing when you might catch the itching disease."

Haru stood speechless, her face desolate. She grabbed the stone railing.

"Yes, go to Sandakan. On the first day, Mori will march you to the Japanese consulate where a leering official will register you as a prostitute."

"It would have been better if my parents had practiced *mabiki*," said Haru. Though the word once meant the thinning of rice stalks, it now referred to the practice of parents leaving a newborn child on the side of the mountain.

Two blocks away, a heartbroken woman had stopped pedaling her Singer sewing machine as she watched the scene from her window. Fumiyo Osawa, the wife of the Buddhist temple priest, could not hear the exchange between the innocent girl and the karayuki. But she knew. If only she could save one, she told herself.

Until recently, Haru had attended Fumiyo's reading and writing classes for a nominal fee of five yen a month, a fraction of the grammar school tuition her parents could not afford. When Haru's army brother tasted Hiroshima's port vices, the money he had sent home stopped, and so did Haru's schooling.

Fumiyo wanted to allow her brightest student to continue, but her husband forbade it.

"The lessons are tolerated only because the government no longer subsidizes Buddhist priests' salaries," he told her. "Giving girls free lessons would be viewed as currying favor for our temple. With the rise of Shintoism, it is best to avoid the attention of the authorities."

Fumiyo watched a slump-shouldered Haru walk from the bridge. Assuming Haru was going home, she returned to her sewing and missed Haru's turn at the goat trail.

Chapter 2

Still staring down at the roiling abyss, Haru swiveled her head right for a last look at a thatched-roofed hovel near the water's edge. Her home since birth. She caught some movement there. A man wearing a Western jacket walked into her home as if it were his own. She envisioned Mori paying the procurement money to her parents.

Haru flashed back to three days ago. Her mother, preparing her for Mori's visit to negotiate her contract price, had piled her hair high and then applied beeswax to add sheen and hold the strands in place. Inspecting the process, her father glowed, "You are special. A maid's job is easier work than your sisters' spinning Niigata's silk looms."

She stopped her rocking. Her hopeless plight was her parents' hope. They had raised her, fed her. What would happen to them without the payment for selling her? She had *giri*, an obligation.

Haru stepped backwards, picked up her meowing cat, and scratched under its chin. Once feral, the animal had adopted Haru after she had left out scraps for many months. Now Susano curled up to Haru nightly. Occasionally, the proud cat would present Haru with a kill. The mice were discarded; the birds a welcome addition to the family pot.

Haru plodded down the goat path to her home and fate. When Susano squirmed out of Haru's arms, she took off her *minogasa*, flipped the straw hat upside down, and gathered wet twigs. She wouldn't be there to spread the sprigs to dry, but her mother would.

Upon reaching level ground with her hat full of brushwood, Haru turned left and followed the river home. She thought of her father's tales of Amakusa's golden age and its subsequent fall.

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"Haru-chan," her father said, "you wouldn't believe all the Portuguese ships bringing silk and spices from Macau in exchange for Kyushu's bone china. Shortly after, the great Lord Nobunaga became shogun, ending the civil wars. And who do you think helped him?"

"Soldiers and rifles from Amakusa," Haru answered by rote.

"When the second shogun died," her father continued, "a great battle took place between those favoring the family of the second shogun and those loyal to his best general, Tokugawa Ieyasu."

"Sekigahara," said Haru knowing the battle in 1600 settled the fate of Japan for the next two and half centuries. "Then the bad days began. We backed the losing side."

"Yes. Taxes were unbearable. When grumbling peasants whined about how the unpredictable weather and poor soil left them with no rice bags to pay the exorbitant tariffs, the tax collector showed no sympathy. 'Sell whatever assets you have,' he would say, 'but pay your taxes.'"

Haru asked, "Why didn't our islanders become fishermen to pay the taxes?"

"Few fish come close to shore. If we go to where the fish are, the tides and currents are dangerous. You are never sure of coming back."

Haru's father skipped telling her that brothel procurers followed the tax collectors, ready to pay cash for daughters. Nor did he understand why the peasants' hopes for reduced taxes were not realized when the 1868 Meiji Restoration replaced the Tokugawa shogunate with the emperor as effective head of state. The high taxes, now to be paid in cash instead of rice, not only funded military modernization but had the added benefit of forcing peasants off their postage-stamp-sized farms into factories. Parents discovered a new option for the centuries-old practice of selling their daughters into the pillow trade.

Their daughters could become a karayuki-san, originally meaning "going to China" because the first women leaving Japan went there. Twelve-year-old Haru knew the word but not the consequences. By her time, karayuki-san meant a Japanese prostitute from Shimabara and Amakusa who filled the brothels of Sandakan, Singapore, Penang, and Manila.

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Haru's assumption that Mori had paid her contract money was confirmed even before she entered her dirt-floor home. Nearing the entrance, she smelled the aromas of Nagasaki *chanpon*—deep-fried noodles topped with a thick vegetable sauce. Upon entering, her mother offered Haru green tea made from fresh leaves instead market leftovers. Her father smiled while drawing on a pungent cheap Sunrise Tengu cigarette—with a filter yet—and not the usual discarded butts he scrounged.

"This month, the emperor has a new tax," he complained, waving his cigarette. "The shopkeeper said it is only a temporary tax to pay for the war with Russia. We both laughed." Still

smiling, he said, “Tonight the emperor’s most trusted advisor is giving a speech at the shrine. It will be a wonderful memory for your last night in Amakusa . . . for a few years, that is.”

Chapter 3

From all over Amakusa, they came and jammed the Gion Jinja to hear octogenarian Fukuzawa Yukichi, the sage of modernization and founder of Keio University, speak. Landowners and tradesmen sat cross-legged in Western suits, the new fashion promoted by the emperor’s edict. Their wives, wearing their best kimono, each brought a *zabuton*—a small cushion to protect their knees as they knelt, as was proper for women.

The awed Shinto priest finished reading his fawning introduction. “We are humbled to listen to Japan’s greatest living scholar review his successful advocacy of Japan’s leap to Asia’s strongest nation and to be equal to the world’s great powers.”

Fukuzawa bowed deeply. He soon got to his favorite theme.

“Japan must continue to break ties with our so-called Asian brothers. As we have seen from our victories in China, Korea, and the new war with Russia, our success requires we align ourselves with the other colonial powers. We must treat Asia the same way Westerners do.”

Most of what he was saying meant nothing to Haru. She looked at her father, enthralled at every word, and began daydreaming she would be saved from a karayuki life in Borneo. Instead, at the last minute, he would change his mind and send her to the looms of Niigata to join her sisters. Her attention snapped back when Fukuzawa stomped his cane and raised his voice.

“Japan has a grand destiny.”

The next statement told Haru all she needed to know about Japan’s new role in the world and reminded her that “hope” was a word not meant for the likes of her.

“Our ‘rich nation, strong army’ policy needs foreign money. Young men, you must leave for the plantations of Brazil, Hawaii, and Malaysia. Fathers, send your daughters to Siberia, Shanghai, and Sandakan. Young girls, the money you send feeds your family and builds your nation.”

Any childish fantasy she harbored evaporated. How could her father resist paying off his debts with the body of his daughter when told it was his patriotic duty? She dropped her head.

Five minutes into their walk home, Haru’s mother stopped suddenly. “My leg cramped. Go ahead,” she told Haru in a tone demanding obedience.

After Haru moved down the path, her mother tugged her husband’s *hapi* sleeve. “Come,” she said. She stepped toward the river to let the homeward-bound crowd pass. She squared herself in front of her wary-faced husband. “I cannot bear to send Haru to Sandakan.”

Her husband sucked air through his gapped teeth. Angry and shamed, he kept his eyes down.

“Our niece Fuyu stopped sending letters and money to my sister three months ago. You know what that means.”

“It can mean anything, *okasan*. She is just busy.” Even as he said the words, they sounded false to him. Selling his daughter to pay his gambling debts tore at his soul more than his wife knew. He had rationalized such bondage was an ancient Amakusan custom.

A furtive glance by his wife revealed no one was watching. She stomped her foot and edged a half step closer. She felt his quickened breath on her forehead. “You stone head! For three years, Fuyu never failed to have the scribe send a weekly letter home. The next letter won’t be *from* her. It will be *about* her.”

“It’s too late, okasan,” said Haru’s father, anger rising in his voice. “You know I already used the money to pay back the money lender.”

“And then what?” She spit on the ground. “In a year, we will be in debt again with no more daughters to sell.”

Withered by her gaze, he stepped back closer to the river. He heard the water tumble over the rocks. “You think I take pleasure in selling my last daughter? Do you think I don’t worry about living the rest of our lives with empty stomachs?”

“Then listen!”

He did. His wife was right. After Haru would leave, what future would they have? He looked into the desperate eyes of the loyal woman who had stuck by him throughout his blemished life.

“Let’s visit the temple.”

Chapter 4

At her home’s entrance, Haru watched the flickering of the village’s oil lamps die into blackness. Where were her parents? She was about to return to town when she saw them striding down the path with a purpose she had seldom seen. But what really caught her attention was the woman walking beside her parents, Fumiyo Osawa.

When Haru heard what the three adults had to say, she stared uncomprehendingly. “Can this really happen?”

“I will give the contract man his money back when he comes for you in the morning,” her father said with a feigned assurance.

“But the contract man will want Haru, not the money back,” said Fumiyo firmly to forestall any thought Haru might harbor that somehow she could still stay.

Haru broke into tears.

“There is no time for crying, Haru-chan,” said Fumiyo sternly. “We must make it to port before dawn.”

Haru took but a few minutes to wrap all she owned in a scarf. She bowed to her parents and followed Fumiyo out the open door. At the bend in the river, she turned around. The crescent moon broke through the clouds, illuminating her parents bent by age and circumstance like sculptured tree trunks in an outdoor museum. She felt a tug on her elbow.

“We must hurry, child,” said Fumiyo in an urgent whisper.

Haru and Fumiyo trekked throughout the night to reach the other side of Amakusa. Susano followed. The first cock crowed when an exhausted Fumiyo rapped on a heavy wooden door of a brick house fronted with a Japanese rock garden.

Although surprised by the pre-dawn visit, the young man welcomed the weary hikers. Itagaki Shigenobu made tea and listened. Fumiyo’s nephew managed a coalmine for Mitsubishi. He shipped the coal to Hiroshima, the homeport of the Japanese navy since the Russian war began. One look at the frightened girl told him why the procurers coveted her. He abhorred the Amakusa tradition of selling their children.

He told Fumiyo, “My coaling ship has been loading all night for an early morning departure. I will see that Haru is on that ship.”

Fumiyo gave Haru fifty yen and a letter of introduction to her sister, the wife of another Buddhist priest living in Hiroshima. “I must trek back now so I won’t be missed.” Fumiyo’s pitted face glowed. She had saved one.

Chapter 5

Haru’s parents had much to do. They scoured the few pots they owned. They beat their tattered futon in the moonlight and then rolled it neatly into the corner of their hut. They bathed in the river together. Haru’s mother stooped to whisk the dirt floor while her father fidgeted outside. They left the door open for the contract man to enter at sunrise.

As they hurried under the shifting moonlight, they reminisced—the relentless taxes, the poor soil, the typhoons that brought too much rain at the wrong time.

Haru’s father apologized for his gambling.

His wife gave him a gift. “Do you remember the night you came home with five hundred yen? A fortune. You took me to the hot springs. The only time we slept outside our home—if you don’t count the typhoons when we stayed in the temple.” She didn’t remind her husband he had promised to buy cement to make a real floor but lost his brief stake the next sake-drenched evening.

“That’s the night we made Haru,” the husband said, allowing a rare smile.

Then they did something they had never done in their thirty-three-year marriage. They held hands. They recalled their other daughters’ last visit during the August Obon festival. They shared worries over their misguided son.

“Do you think Haru has reached the port?” her mother asked.

While the father did not know, he returned his wife’s gift. “I am certain of it. Did you not listen to Osawa-san? By this time tomorrow, Haru will be arriving in Hiroshima. Think of it . . . our daughter living in a big temple in Hiroshima. Going to school.”

“We did the right thing,” Haru’s mother said, uncertainty tingeing her voice.

Her husband squeezed her hand. “*Arigato*, okasan.”

“Thank you?”

“Yes, okasan, for giving me a last chance to be a good father.”

They walked silently to the edge of the cliff. The wind lulled. Tiny white caps winked five hundred feet below them. Above, the clouds had cleared. The sky sparkled. They sat down back to back. Haru’s mother reached behind her and intertwined her hair to her husband’s.

“It is done, *otosan.*”

They wiggled up. Once standing, they reached behind to clutch the other’s hands and sidestepped to the edge.

They did not flinch.