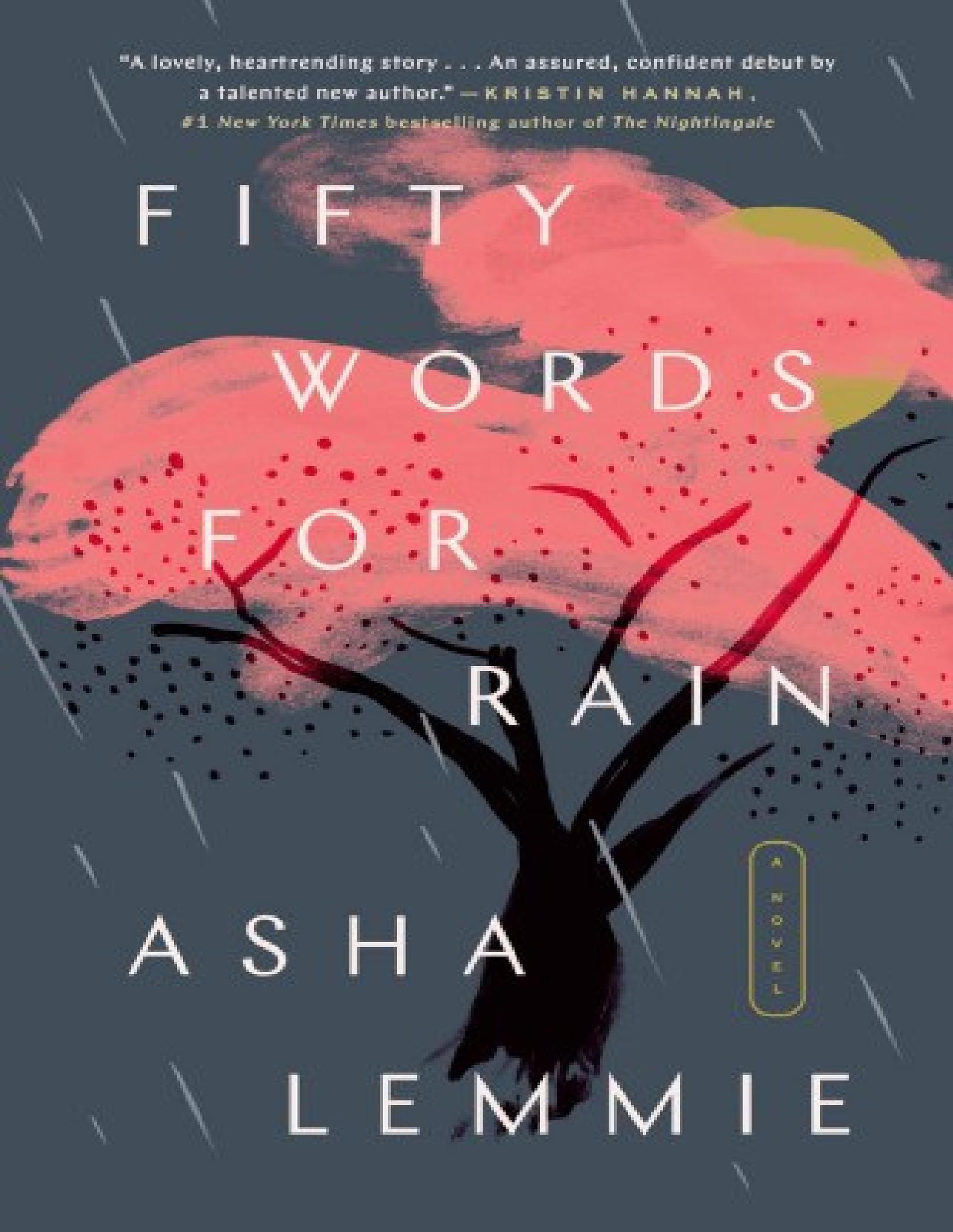


"A lovely, heartrending story . . . An assured, confident debut by a talented new author." —KRISTIN HANNAH, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale*



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For Hannah, with love, and for all the outcasts, here's to tomorrow

CONTENTS

Prelude

PART I

CHAPTER ONE *Water Song*

CHAPTER TWO *The Boy with the Violin*

CHAPTER THREE *Hikari (Light)*

CHAPTER FOUR *“Ave Maria”*

CHAPTER FIVE *Delphinium*

CHAPTER SIX *Ame (Rain)*

PART II

CHAPTER SEVEN *Exile*

CHAPTER EIGHT *Tree Song*

CHAPTER NINE *Impasse*

CHAPTER TEN *Sonata*

CHAPTER ELEVEN *Fear No Evil*

CHAPTER TWELVE *The Only Thing Immortal*

PART III

CHAPTER THIRTEEN *Traitor’s Requiem*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN *Night Song*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN *Aurora*

PART IV

CHAPTER SIXTEEN *Skin*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN *But Home Is Nowhere*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN *Chrysanthemum*

PRELUDE

Kyoto Prefecture, Japan
Summer 1948

The first real memory Nori had was pulling up to that house. For many years afterward, she would try to stretch the boundaries of her mind further, to what came before that day. Time and time again, she'd lie on her back in the stillness of the night and try to recall. Sometimes she'd catch a glimpse in her head of a tiny apartment with lurid yellow walls. But the image would disappear as quickly as it came, leaving no sense of satisfaction in its wake. And so if you asked her, Nori would say that her life had officially begun the day she laid eyes on the imposing estate that rested serenely between the crests of two green hills. It was a stunningly beautiful place—there was no denying it—and yet, despite this beauty, Nori felt her stomach clench and her gut churn at the sight of it. Her mother rarely took her anywhere, and somehow she knew that something was waiting for her there that she would not like.

The faded blue automobile skidded to a stop on the street across from the estate. It was in the traditional style, surrounded by high white walls. The first set of gates was open, allowing full view into the meticulously arranged courtyard beyond. But the inner gates to the house itself were sealed shut. There were words engraved at the top of the main gate, embossed in gold lettering for all to see. But Nori could not read them. She could read and write her name—*No-ri-ko*—but nothing else. In that moment, she wished she could read every word ever written, in every language from sea to sea. Not being able to read those letters frustrated her to an extent she didn't understand. She turned to her mother.

“Okaasan, what do those letters say?”

The woman seated beside her let out a stifled sigh of frustration. It was clear that she'd been a great beauty in her day. She was still gorgeous, but her young face was beginning to reflect the toll life had taken on her. Her dark, thick hair was bound behind her head in a braid that kept attempting to unravel. Her soft gray eyes were cast downwards. She would not meet her daughter's gaze.

“*Kamiza*,” she answered at last. “It says *Kamiza*.”

“But that's our name, isn't it?” Nori chirped, her curiosity immediately

piqued.

Her mother let out a strangled giggle that made the hair on the back of Nori's neck stand up. The driver of the car, a man Nori had never seen before this morning, shot them a startled glance in the rearview mirror.

"Yes," she responded softly, eyes alight with a strange look that Nori's limited vocabulary did not have the means to name. "That is our family name. This is where my mother and father live, child. Your grandparents."

Nori felt her heartbeat quicken. Her mother had never before made any mention of relatives or family. Indeed, the two of them had drifted along in solitude so long it seemed strange to Nori that they could actually be anchored to a tangible place.

"Did you live here once, Okaasan?"

"Once," her mother said dryly. "Before you were born. A long time ago."

Nori scrunched her face up in a frown. "Why did you leave?"

"That's enough questions now, Noriko. Get your things. Come."

Nori obeyed, biting her lip to refrain from inquiring further. Her mother did not like questions. Every time Nori asked something, she was met with a disapproving glance. It was better not to ask. On the rare occasions Nori was able to please her mother, she was given a dry half smile in return. Sometimes, if she was especially good, her mother would reward her with some candy or a new ribbon. So far, in eight years of life, Nori had a collection of twelve ribbons, one for each time she'd been able to make her mother happy.

"It is good for a woman to learn silence," her mother always said. "If a woman knows nothing else, she should know how to be silent."

Nori stepped onto the pavement, checking to make sure she had all of her things. She had her little brown suitcase with the straps that were fraying apart and her purple silk ribbon tied around the handle. She had her blue satchel with the silver clasp that she had gotten for her last birthday. And that was all she had. Not that Nori thought she needed much more than that.

For the first time since she'd been roused at dawn that morning, Nori noticed that her mother was not carrying any bags. The woman stood as if her pale pink satin slippers were rooted to the unnaturally white sidewalk. Her bright eyes were fixed on a spot Nori could not follow.

Nori took note of what her mother was wearing: a short-sleeved, baby blue knee-length dress. Tan stockings. Around her neck she wore a petite silver cross with a little diamond in the center. She had her hands clasped in

front of her chest, so tightly that tiny blue veins had become visible beneath the delicate skin.

Nori reached out a hesitant hand to touch her mother's arm. "Okaasan . . ."

Her mother blinked rapidly and unclasped her hands, arms falling to swing limply at her sides. Her eyes, however, did not move from their perch.

"Noriko," she said, with such unusual affection saturating her tone that it left Nori in near disbelief, "I want you to make me a promise."

Nori blinked up at her mother, doing her best to look pretty and obedient and all that her mother would have her be. She would not spoil this moment with her clumsy tongue.

"Yes, Okaasan?"

"Promise me you will obey."

The request caught her off guard. Not because it was unlike something her mother would say, but because not once in her life had Nori ever disobeyed. It didn't seem like something that needed to be requested. Her confusion must have been evident because her mother turned and knelt down so that they were nearly eye level.

"Noriko," she said, with an urgency Nori had never heard before. "Promise me. Promise me that you will obey in all things. Do not question. Do not fight. Do not resist. Do not think if thinking will lead you somewhere you ought not to be. Only smile and do as you are told. Only your life is more important than your obedience. Only the air you breathe. Promise me this."

Nori thought to herself that this conversation was very odd. A thousand questions burned her tongue. She swallowed them back.

"Yes, Okaasan. *Yakusoku shimasu*. I promise."

Her mother let out a ragged sigh, caught somewhere between relief and despair.

"Now listen. You will go inside the gate, Nori. Your grandparents will ask you your name. What will you tell them?"

"Noriko, Okaasan. Noriko Kamiza."

"Yes. And they will ask you how old you are. And what will you tell them?"

"I'm eight, Okaasan."

"They will ask where I have gone. And you will tell them that I did not tell you. That you don't know. Do you understand?"

Nori felt her mouth begin to go dry. Her heart fluttered against her chest,

like a little bird trying to escape a cage. “Okaasan, where are you going? Aren’t you coming with me?”

Her mother did not reply. She stood up, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a thick yellow envelope.

“Take this,” she urged, pressing it into Nori’s sweaty palm. “Give it to them when they ask questions.”

Nori’s voice began to scale up in panic. “Okaasan, where are you going?”

Her mother looked away.

“Nori, hush. Do not cry. Stop crying this instant!”

She felt the tears that had begun to well recede inside her eye sockets with frightening speed. It seemed that they too were bound to obey.

“Noriko,” her mother continued, tone softening to a whisper. “You are a good girl. Do as you are told and everything will be fine. Don’t cry now. You have no reason to cry.”

“Yes, Okaasan.”

Her mother hesitated, searching for words for several long moments. Finally, she decided there were none and settled for patting her daughter twice on the top of the head.

“I’ll watch you go. Go on. Get your things.”

Noriko picked up her belongings and proceeded slowly towards the gate. It towered over her. Her steps grew smaller and smaller as she approached it.

Every few steps she’d peer over her shoulder to make sure that her mother was still watching. She was. Noriko swallowed.

When she finally reached the gate, she paused, unsure of how to proceed. It was open, and yet she was quite sure that she should not be entering. She waited for her mother to instruct her, but the woman remained on the sidewalk, watching in silence.

Step by step, Nori inched up the walkway. When she was halfway up, she paused, unable to continue any farther. She turned in desperation to her mother, who by now had made her way back to the car.

“Okaasan!” Nori whimpered, her previous calm leaving her in one terrifying moment. She wanted to run back to her mother, but something kept her pinned to the spot.

That something held her there, relentless and pitiless in the strength of its grasp. It did not let her move, nor breathe, nor cry out as she watched her mother give her one last, strangely bright gaze before getting back into the car and shutting the door behind her. She could not so much as blink as she

watched the car speed down the street, around the corner, and out of sight.

Nori was not quite sure how long she stood transfixed. The sun was high in the sky when she finally resumed her slow march up the walkway through the courtyard. Still in a trance, she raised her tiny hand to knock lightly on the gates that obscured the house, leaving only its upper floors and looming roof visible. No one answered. She pushed, half hoping they would not open. They didn't, and they were far too heavy for her to make another attempt.

She sat. And she waited. For what, exactly, she was unsure.

A few moments later, the gates opened, moved by an invisible force. Two large men in suits emerged, peering down at her with disdain.

"Go away, little girl," the first one said. "No beggars."

"I'm not a beggar," Nori protested, finding her feet. "I'm Noriko."

They both stared at her blankly. Nori extended the envelope her mother had given her with a trembling hand.

"Kamiza Noriko desu."

The two exchanged an indecipherable glance. Then, without another word, they disappeared back behind the gate.

Nori waited. Her head was spinning, but she forced herself to remain standing.

After another long moment, the first of the men returned.

He crooked his finger at her. "Come on."

He snatched up her belongings and marched ahead, leaving her to rush after him. The house was beautiful, more a palace than a house, but Nori's attention quickly focused on the figure standing in front of it.

An elderly woman, with her mother's eyes and streaks of silver in her neatly coiffed hair, stared down at her in utter disbelief.

Because there was nothing else to do, Nori did as she was told.

"Konbanwa, Obaasama. My name is Nori."

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

WATER SONG

Kyoto, Japan
Summer 1950

It came quickly, the pain. It arrived with startling fanfare. Nothing could stop it once it had set on its morbid path.

The pain came quickly. It was the going that took longer.

Nori almost welcomed the onset of the pain, knowing that it was the best of what was to come. First there was the tingling, like a little feather tapping out a jig on her skin. Then there was the slow burn. One by one, every nerve in her body began to scream until they were screeching in unison, forming a chorus of protest. Then there were the tears. Nori had learned in her younger years not to fight the tears, as it only made them worse.

The fight would lead to her gasping for air, sucking it in through her nose in ragged spurts and feeling her rib cage squeeze tight. Snot would dribble from her nose and mingle with her tears, forming a sickening brew that too often dripped into her open mouth.

It was better to accept the tears, with as much grace and dignity as could be mustered. They would fall silently down her cheeks, constant and cool like a babbling brook.

There was some self-respect in that, at least.

“We’re done for today, Ojosama.”

Nori forced her stinging eyes to focus on the speaker: a maid in her early thirties, with a round, jolly face and a warm smile.

“Thank you, Akiko-san.”

The maid gently helped Nori rise from the porcelain bathtub, offering an arm for the ten-year-old to lean on as she stood.

The sharp gust of air on her naked body made her let out a little cry, and her knees buckled. Akiko stopped her from falling and, with strength that was surprising for her petite size, bodily lifted Nori from the tub and into a waiting chair.

Nori began to rock slowly back and forth, willing the constant motion to steady her shaking core. After a few moments, the pain had subsided just enough so that she could manage opening her eyes. She watched as Akiko washed the mixture of warm water, bleach, and murky specks of almond-

colored skin—her skin—down the drain.

“Is it working, do you think?” she inquired, resenting the eagerness that crept into her voice. “Akiko-san, do you think it’s working?”

Akiko turned to look at the child who had been left to her care. Nori couldn’t read the look on her face. But then Akiko offered up a tiny smile, and Nori was flooded with relief.

“Yes, little madam, I think so. Your grandmother will be pleased.”

“Do you think I shall have a new dress?”

“Perhaps. If she gives me the money for fabric, I will make you a summer yukata. Your old one scarcely fits you anymore.”

“I would like blue. It is a noble color, isn’t it, Akiko-san?”

Akiko lowered her eyes and proceeded to re-dress Nori in a fresh cotton slip. “Blue would look very pretty on you, little madam.”

“It is Obaasama’s favorite color.”

“Yes. Now, run along. I’ll bring you your meal in an hour.”

Nori forced her limbs to move, ignoring the dull thump of pain. They were working, she knew they were, the daily baths. Her grandmother had sent all the way to Tokyo for the finest magic bath soap that money could buy. Nori bore the pain willingly, as she knew in time that the results would be worth any sufferings. She would stay in the bath all day if Akiko would let her, but her skin was prone to burning and she was only allowed to stay in it for twenty minutes at a time. Her left leg had a mottled purple burn on it that she had to hide with extra-long skirts, but she did not mind so much because the skin around the burn was wonderfully fair and bright.

She wanted all of her skin to look like that.

She padded through the hall, careful not to make any noise because it was afternoon and her grandmother preferred to sleep in the afternoon. Especially in winter, when it was too cold to pay social visits and the sun set early.

She scurried towards the stairs to the attic, avoiding eye contact with the staff, who seemed to stare at her whenever she crossed their path. Even after two years living in this house, they were still clearly uneasy with her presence.

Akiko had assured her that it wasn’t that they didn’t like her; it was simply that they weren’t used to having children around.

Either way, Nori was relieved to live in the attic, away from everything and everyone else. When she had come to stay here, her grandmother had instructed that the attic be cleaned out and converted into living quarters.

The attic was very spacious, and it was full of things, more things than Nori had ever had before. She had a bed, a dining table and three chairs, a bookshelf, a basket full of knitting and sewing materials, a little altar for her prayers, a stove for the winter months, and an armoire to keep her clothes in. She had a small little vanity with a stool that, according to Akiko, had once belonged to her mother. She still had her brown suitcase with the purple silk ribbon tied around the handle. She still had the pale blue satchel with the little silver clasp. She kept these two things in a far corner of the room so that she would always know where to find them at a moment's notice.

But her favorite thing, by far, was the half-moon-shaped window above her bed that overlooked the gardens. When she stood on the bed (which she was not supposed to do but she did anyway), she could see the fenced-in yard with its green grass and its overgrown, ancient peach trees. She could see the man-made pond with the koi fish swimming in it and splashing about. She could see the faint outline of neighboring rooftops. As far as Nori was concerned, she could see the entire world.

How many times had she spent all night with her head pressed against the cool, damp glass? Certainly very many, and she considered herself quite fortunate that she had never been caught. That would have been a guaranteed beating.

She had not been allowed to leave the house since the day she arrived. And it was not a terrible sacrifice, not really, because she had rarely been allowed to leave the apartment she'd shared with her mother either.

Still, there were rules, many rules, for living in this house.

The cardinal rule was simple: stay out of sight unless summoned. Remain in the attic. Make no sound. Food was brought to her at set intervals three times a day; Akiko would take her downstairs to the bathroom. During the midday trip, Nori would have her bath.

Three times a week, an old man with a hunched back and failing eyesight would come to her attic and teach her reading, writing, numbers, and history. This one did not feel like a rule—Nori liked lessons. In fact, she was quite gifted at them. She was always asking Saotome-sensei to bring her new books. Last week, he'd brought her a book in English called *Oliver Twist*. She could not read a single word of it, but she had resolved to learn. It was such a pretty book, leather-bound and glistening.

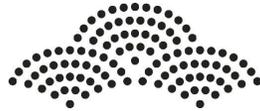
And so those were the rules. They weren't too much to ask, she didn't think. She didn't understand them, but then, she didn't try.

Don't think.

Nori crept onto her small four-poster bed and pressed her face into the coolness of her pillow. It distracted her from her skin's persistent tingling. The instinctual desire to escape from pain soon lulled her into a listless sleep.

She had the same dream as always.

She was chasing the blue car as it drove away, calling out for her mother, but could never catch it.



As long as she could remember, Nori's limbs had been prone to disobedience. They would begin to shake, randomly and uncontrollably, at the slightest hint of trouble. She would have to wrap her arms around her body and squeeze as tightly as she could in order for the trembling to subside.

And so when Akiko informed her that her grandmother would be paying her a visit today, Nori felt her body go weak. She slunk into one of her small wooden dining chairs, no longer trusting her legs to support her.

"Obaasama is coming?"

"Yes, little madam."

Her grandmother normally came once a month, sometimes twice, to inspect Nori's living conditions and personal growth.

It seemed that no matter what she did, her grandmother was never pleased. The old woman had impeccable standards and her keen gray eyes never missed a beat. It filled Nori with as much exhilaration as it did dread.

To please her grandmother was a feat that she longed to accomplish. In her mind, it was the most noble of quests.

Nori swept her eyes around her room, suddenly painfully aware of how messy things were. There was a corner of faint yellow bedclothes sticking out. There was a speck of dust on the kerosene lamp on the nightstand. The wood burning in the stove was popping and cracking, a sound that some would surely find irritating.

Wordlessly, the maid began to move about the room, tidying and putting things into their proper place. Akiko too was used to the demands of the lady of the house. She had been working here since she herself was a mere child.

Of course, that meant that Akiko had known Nori's mother. This was a curious dynamic between them: Nori always wanting to ask and Akiko always wanting to tell, but both too obedient to do either.

“What shall I wear?” Nori rasped, hating the sudden waver in her voice. “What do you think?”

Nori immediately began to rack her brains. She had a polka-dot navy blue dress, with short sleeves and a lace collar. She had a green kimono with a pale pink sash. She had a bright yellow yukata, which she could wear now that it was summer. And she had a dark purple kimono. That was all.

She began to gnaw gently on the skin inside her left cheek. “The black one,” she said resolutely, answering her own question. Akiko went to the closet and laid it out on the bed.

Nori arrived at this conclusion relatively easily. In contrast to the dark hues of the garment, her skin would appear lighter. Akiko brought the kimono over and began to dress her, while her mind began to wander to other places.

She ran an unsteady hand through her hair. God, she hated her hair. It was thick and boisterous, stubbornly curly despite her daily efforts to tame it with a brush. It was also a peculiar shade of dark brown that Nori likened to the bark of an oak tree. She could not get it to fall straight and free around her shoulders, as her mother’s and grandmother’s did.

However, if she brushed the hair hard against her scalp, it would flatten enough that she could wind it into a long braid that she would tie neatly behind her head. It fell nearly to her waist, and she bound the end of it with a brightly colored ribbon. If she did it that way, it looked almost normal.

She was wearing the red ribbon today, one of her twelve. It was her favorite one, as she thought it brought out the brightness in her champagne-colored gaze. The one thing she did like about her face was her eyes—even her grandmother remarked once, in passing, that they were “quite interesting.”

They were gently almond-shaped, just as they should be. At least there, she did not stand out so much.

Once Nori had been dressed, Akiko took her leave.

Nori made her way to the center of the room and stood, bone straight, waiting. She willed herself not to fidget. She folded her hands neatly in front of her chest, eyeing the skin with mild contempt. It was improving. Two years of the baths and she was starting to see a change. She estimated that in another two years it would be fair enough that she could leave the attic.

Unlike her grandmother, who visited occasionally, her grandfather did his absolute best to avoid her entirely, and besides, as the Emperor’s advisor he