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FIFTY

WORDS

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# FIFTY WORDS FOR RAIN



A Novel

ASHA LEMMIE



DUTTON



DUTTON

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

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# 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."*