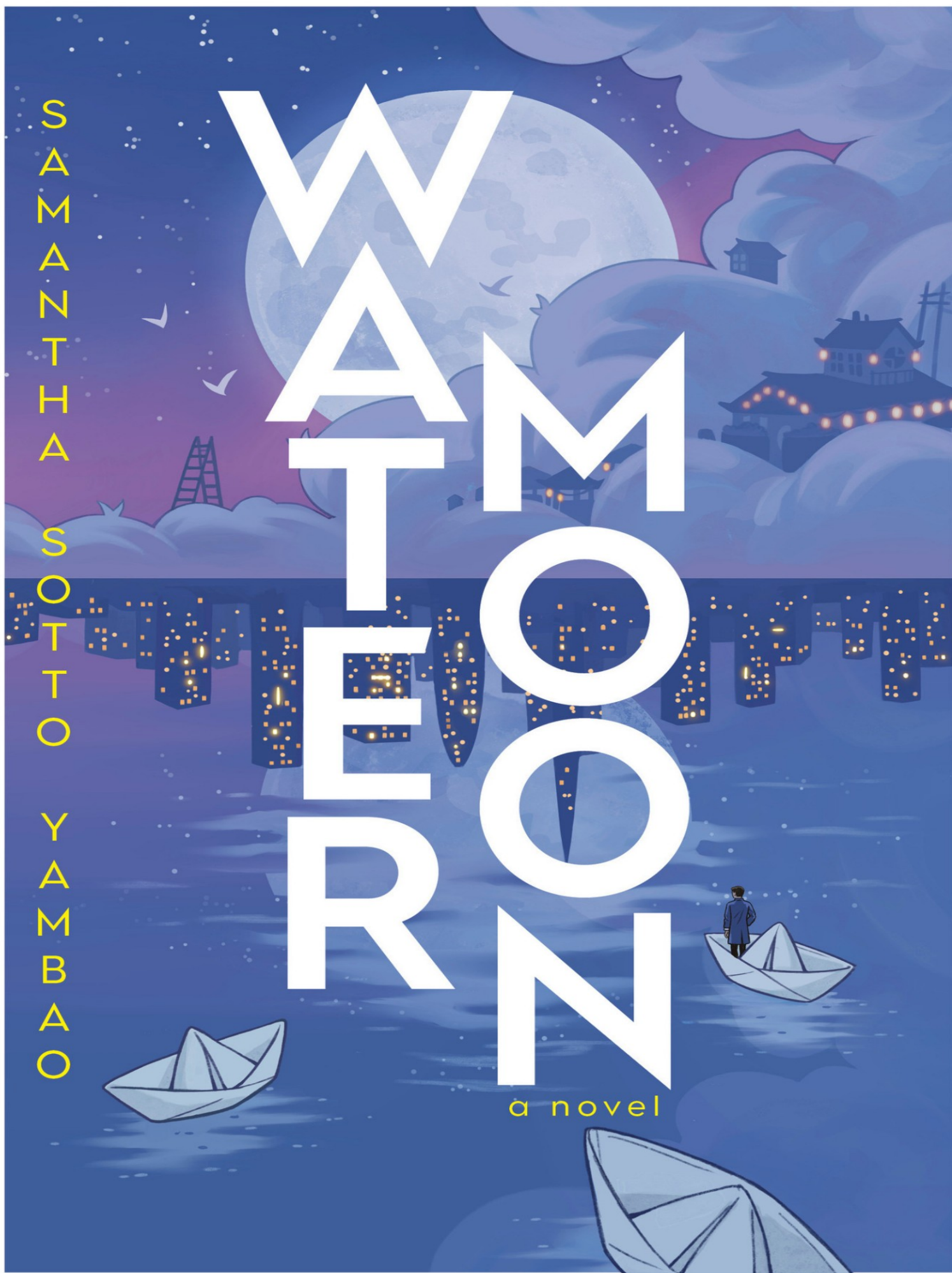


SAMANTHA
SOTTO
YAMBAO

WANT TO EARN

a novel



BY SAMANTHA SOTTO YAMBAO

Before Ever After

Love and Gravity

A Dream of Trees

The Beginning of Always

Water Moon

ウォータームーン

WATER
MOON

A Novel

SAMANTHA
SOTTO
YAMBAO



NEW YORK

Water Moon is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sotto, Samantha, author.

Title: Water moon: a novel / Samantha Sotto Yambao.

Description: First edition. | New York: Del Rey, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024029832 (print) | LCCN 2024029833 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593724996 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593725009 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR9550.9.S68 W38 2025 (print) | LCC PR9550.9.S68 (ebook) | DDC [FIC]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029832>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029833>

International ISBN 9780593974087

Ebook ISBN 9780593725009

randomhousebooks.com

Endpaper illustrations by Haylee Morice

Origami design and instructions by nickorigami.com

Book design by Fritz Metsch, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Regina Flath

Cover illustrations: Haylee Morice

ep_prh_7.1a_149834119_c0_r0

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For everyone in search of new beginnings

落花枝に帰らず
破鏡再び照らさず

PART

ONE

—

*The fallen blossom
cannot return to the branch.*

*A broken mirror cannot
be made to shine.*

—

CHAPTER ONE

The Pawnshop of Almosts and Ifs

Time has no borders except those people make. On this particularly cold autumn day, Ishikawa Hana fashioned that border out of the thinnest layer of skin. Eyelids were useful that way. Because as long as she kept her eyelids shut, she could keep the two halves of her life apart: the twenty-one years she had lived before she opened her eyes, and all that was going to happen next.

She pulled her blanket over her head and pretended that her hungover first morning as the pawnshop's new owner had yet to begin. It didn't matter that she was now wide awake, that the last of a tangled string of dreams she could not remember had unraveled more than an hour ago. Her head felt heavier and her mouth drier than usual, but she figured that this was less on account of the alcohol she'd had the night before than on what awaited her.

In a few moments, her father, Toshio, was going to knock on her door to start their day.

Hana insisted on clinging to the tiny hope that the unwise amount of sake they had celebrated his retirement with was going to keep him in bed a little longer. This hope—if it indeed could be called hope given its size—was smaller than a mossy river pebble and just as slippery.

In all the years that the pawnshop had been in Toshio's charge, there were only two occasions when it had not opened on time. On both those days, it had not opened at all. But Hana and her father didn't talk about those two days. Ever.

If their pawnshop were like other ordinary pawnshops that traded in diamonds, silver, and gold, the Ishikawa family, who had run the pawnshop for generations, might have had the luxury of sick days and weekends. But Toshio had trained Hana to appraise far more valuable treasure.

They found their best clients when summer ended and the nights grew colder and longer. Melancholy was good for business. It didn't matter that their little shop, tucked along a quiet alley of Tokyo's Asakusa district, didn't have a name. Those who required its services always managed to find it. But, if anyone was curious enough to ask Hana what she thought the pawnshop should be called, she had a ready answer. *Ikigai*. There was no other word that suited it more.

Hana was a little more than a year old when she learned to walk on the shop's dark wooden floors, and every step she had taken since then had been toward taking over the shop when her father retired. He was a widower, and she was his only heir. The pawnshop was her life's path, her singular purpose. Her *ikigai*. But not once, in all the time that she had played as a toddler at her father's feet or worked by his side as a young woman, had any of their clients bothered to inquire what the pawnshop's name was. They had far more urgent questions darting behind their eyes when Toshio welcomed them with a polite bow. The first was almost always about where they were, and the second about how they had gotten there.

After all, no one expected to find a pawnshop behind a ramen restaurant's door.

Anyone who stood in line outside the long-standing popular restaurant would tell you that its shoyu ramen was the best in the Taitō prefecture. For some, the wafting scent of steaming bowls of chijirimen noodles and perfectly braised slices of pork belly swimming in a dark and rich bone broth made waiting easier. For others, it made their time in the snaking queue feel twice as long. Still, they all drew deep breaths, taking their fill of the air's savory promise until it was their turn to enter the cramped dining room that might have been considered modern two decades ago. Yellowed walls plastered with autographed photos of the restaurant's celebrity clientele welcomed them as they weaved their way to empty seats. But, despite stepping through its door, some of the hungry did not make it into the restaurant's dining room. Instead, they were greeted by a pawnshop's dimly lit front office and the tinkling of a little copper door chime.

The memory of that chime rang in Hana's head as she curled beneath her blanket. It commanded her to rise and accept the inevitable. She clamped her palms over her ears and fought a losing battle to keep her mind from getting out of bed ahead of her. Some of her thoughts were already almost dressed, fastening the last buttons of the pawnshop's crisp black suit uniform. Others were already at the office beneath her room, imagining how her father was going to spend the first day of his retirement: hovering close, double-checking everything she did.

He would not say anything if he caught a mistake. He never did. The slightest twitch of his right eyebrow sufficed. Toshio preferred silence to words, reserving his energy and breath for his clients. Hana had become rather adept at interpreting his quiet breathing, half smiles, and glances. Her only memory of him losing his temper was of the stormy afternoon when she was ten and had misplaced a pawned antique watch. His eyes had grown darker than the clouds churning above their home's courtyard garden, and when he gripped her by her thin shoulders and lowered his mouth to her ear, her heart dropped to her toes. His voice was as quiet as the breeze, but his words howled inside Hana louder than any typhoon.

Find it.

Now.

Hana did not know what would have happened if she had not found the watch later that day behind a stack of books in the back room. All she was certain of was that she never wanted to hear her father speak to her that way again.

Hana drew a ragged breath, reeling her thoughts back to the present. An invisible weight pushed down on her chest. She had expected her future to feel heavier, or at least heavier than a well-fed cat, but instead the pile of days teetering on top of her chest felt as light as a mountain made of mere husks, each hollowed out and spent before it began. She knew every second of the days that lay ahead of her by heart. After all, she'd spent her life watching her father live them. And now her father's life was hers, and from here on, nothing was ever going to be new.

She rolled to her side. The edge of a yellowed photograph peeked from under her pillow. Hana pulled the faded photo out and squinted at it beneath her blanket. The eyes of a young woman who could have been her twin gazed back at her. “Good morning, Okaa-san,” Hana greeted the mother she never knew and tucked the only picture she had of her back into its hiding place. She pulled her blanket off and peeped through her dark lashes. A sliver of sunlight pierced her irises. She squeezed her eyes shut and pushed herself out of bed. She didn’t need to see to navigate her bedroom. This room and the pawnshop beneath it made up her entire world, and today, that world felt even smaller.

And quiet.

Hana cocked her head, straining to hear the familiar clinking of cups and bowls from the kitchen downstairs. But only silence seeped through her door. She bit her bottom lip.

Retirement, she was certain, would not be enough to keep a man like Toshio from his rituals. Though the small shrine her father kept in their home honored the spirits, the god her father really worshiped was routine. The steaming cup of roasted green tea he had every morning was sacred, no matter how much sake or whiskey swam inside him from the night before.

Hana pressed her ear to her door. There were only two possible reasons the pawnshop was this quiet, and neither of them was good.

CHAPTER TWO

Ishikawa Toshio's Last Client

❀ *The day before*

Autumn had come early, and since its arrival, the number of the pawnshop's customers had doubled.

Toshio shifted his weight, relieving the bunion on his left foot. His stomach growled twice through his black suit. He ignored it and adjusted his tie. This was not the first day he had been too busy to have lunch, but it was going to be his last. When they closed shop in less than an hour, he was going to be officially retired and would never have to work through lunch again. He had expected the thought to make him smile, but the corners of his mouth refused to be persuaded to curl the slightest angle upward. A copper bell tinkled, heralding the arrival of his last customer.

"Irasshaimase." Toshio bowed with a practiced smile, his voice smooth like warmed sake.

Hana peeked out from the back room with this month's record book tucked under her arm. Toshio waved her back inside and turned his attention to the elegant woman who had just walked through their door. "How may I help you?"

The woman met Toshio's smile with a bewildered look. Though her porcelain features made her appear to be younger than Toshio, her hair, tied in a loose knot at her nape, shared the color of the single strand of white freshwater pearls she wore around her neck. "I'm so sorry. I made a mistake. I thought that the line outside was for the ramen restaurant."

"It is," Toshio said.

The woman glanced around the room. "This is the restaurant?"

"No. This is my pawnshop."

"Is the restaurant upstairs?"

Toshio shook his head. "It is not."

A wrinkle deepened across the woman's handsome forehead.

"You must be tired from standing in line this whole time. Perhaps you'd like to sit for a while?" Toshio gestured to a low table surrounded by a set of silk floor cushions in a corner of the room.

The woman tilted her chin and touched her thin lips. "I...I could have sworn that this was the restaurant. I watched the man in line in front of me walk through its door. I saw tables and chairs and..." She dipped her head in a small bow. "I am sorry for bothering you."

"There is no need to apologize. May I offer you something to drink? Some tea?"

"Thank you, but I—"

"Please, I insist. It is no trouble at all." Toshio walked out from behind the counter and called over his shoulder, "Hana? Will you bring out some tea? We have a guest."

—

Hana shut the record book and stood up from a desk that had once belonged to her mother. She knew her cue as well as she knew the single thought presently rolling around the woman's mind.

Tea. At this point in their conversation with her father, all clients pondered the same thing. It was a simple thought, small and as light as air, without any sharp edges they could cut themselves on. They had all drunk tea before and remembered how it washed over their tongues, slipped down their throats, and warmed their souls. No harm had ever come from a cup of tea, and they could not think of a single reason to refuse the pawnshop owner's kind offer. If anything, it would be impolite to say no, seeing as they had been the ones who had mistakenly wandered into his shop. They tried to remember where they had been headed in the first place, but the most they could recall was feeling a cold emptiness in their stomachs. Tea could soothe that. Perhaps it was tea that they had been standing in line for all along. Hana filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove.

"Tea would be nice." The woman nodded with a smile.

“Wonderful. My name is Ishikawa Toshio.” He gestured to a floor cushion. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you.” The woman settled onto a cushion that was the same shade of gray as the day outside. “I am Takeda Izumi.”

“Thank you for choosing to visit us today, Takeda-sama. I am certain that you will find that we make very fair, if not generous, offers at this pawnshop.”

“But I’m not here to...” Izumi rolled a pearl from her necklace between her forefinger and thumb, her brow furrowed as though she were rummaging through drawers inside her head, trying to find what she had meant to say next.

Hana carried over their tea on a black lacquer tray.

“Hana, this is Takeda-sama,” Toshio said.

Hana bowed. “Welcome to our pawnshop. Please enjoy your tea,” she said, setting the tray on the table.

Izumi turned to Toshio as Hana took her leave. “You have a lovely daughter, Ishikawa-san.”

“Thank you. She takes after her...” Toshio banished his next words with a stiff smile.

He anchored his eyes on their tea and poured it into small clay bowls. The bowls were the color of the calmest sea, but cracks of varying sizes crawled over their glaze. If not for the kintsugi technique used to repair them, they would have fallen apart. Gold dust and lacquer filled the cracks, streaking over the bowls like lightning.

“Those are exquisite,” Izumi said, admiring the bowls.

“Thank you. I was rather upset with myself for tripping and dropping them, but in this instance, I will admit that I am grateful for my clumsiness.” Toshio handed Izumi her tea. “Broken things have a unique kind of beauty, don’t you think?”

Izumi traced the bowl’s delicate gold joinery with the tip of a perfectly manicured finger. “Some things wear their damage better than others,” she said softly, so softly it was as if she were worried that her voice might shatter the bowl.

“I have found beauty in all manner of broken things. Chairs. Buildings. People.”

Izumi looked up from her tea. “People?”

“Especially people. They shatter in the most fascinating ways. Every dent, scratch, and crack tells a story. Invisible scars hide the deepest wounds and are the most interesting.”

Izumi twisted one of her two large diamond rings around her finger, pulling on her skin. “That is a very unique point of view, Ishikawa-san.”

“Oh, it is more than a point of view. It is the very reason I run this business. This is a different kind of pawnshop, Takeda-sama. We are not in the business of trading trinkets. Diamond rings and pearl necklaces have no value here.”

—

Hana listened in on Izumi and her father from the back room. She had heard the same conversation carried on over tea more times than she could count.

But no matter how many times he said those words, her father always sounded sincere. For the most part, he told their clients the truth, regardless of how hard the truth was for them to believe. While what he shared with the clients, in her opinion, was not by any means a staggering revelation, it always took them a few moments to wrestle their eyebrows down. This was understandable. On the other side of the ramen restaurant’s door, up was up, down was down, and pawnshops such as this one did not exist. Her father’s special skill, as Takeda Izumi was about to learn, was to, in the time it took her to finish her tea, convince her to let go of everything she was brought up to believe and allow her mind to grasp what her hands could not.

Hana strode back to her desk and picked up a book from the pile on top of it. It was a dog-eared paperback whose pages clung to its spine by sheer will. A client named Ito Daisuke had pawned it that morning. She checked the item against the list in her record book and put a little tick mark when she confirmed that everything was in order. It was her favorite among the items that had found their way into the pawnshop that day.

Hana pulled out her mother's old gold-rimmed glasses from a desk drawer. She put the glasses on, adjusted them over her nose, and, through its lenses, saw the book for what it really was: a choice that had changed the course of Ito Daisuke's life.

Its true form was much prettier than that of a book. It had traded its pages for feathers made of wisps of light, transforming into a glowing songbird. It perched on Hana's finger, its colors constantly shifting between blue and gold.

Once, this bird had sung brightly inside Daisuke while he worked on writing a mystery novel every night for five years, after his shift as a convenience store clerk. When he had abandoned it and deleted all his unfinished drafts two years ago, the bird dimmed, grew silent, and turned as black as coal. It pecked at his gut whenever he thought about the series of fictional Harajuku murders he was never going to solve. But now Daisuke had pawned his choice, and he was free. There were going to be times when he would feel a cold emptiness where the choice had once lived, but these would pass. He was not going to remember this choice, or this pawnshop, or the man who had persuaded him to part with a battered mystery novel. Peace of mind, Toshio had told him, was worth the price of never knowing what happened after page 254.

Hana took the glasses off and made room for Daisuke's book on a shelf next to a set of house keys and a plane ticket torn in two. That evening, when the pawnshop closed, her father would take all the items from the shelf and store them in the vault, together with the rest of the day's acquisitions.

—

Takeda Izumi blinked, trying to comprehend the words that hung in the air over two cracked bowls of tea. "That doesn't make any sense. How can people pawn choices?"

" 'Sense' is relative," Toshio said. "There are things that make sense in your world that are ridiculous in mine. I have never been able to understand

the purpose of televisions or telephones.”

“What do you mean by ‘your world’?”

“You come from the world outside that door. My daughter and I are from the world inside it. Whenever anyone from your side finds their way to our pawnshop, there is always a good reason for it. Our clients have choices that have become too burdensome to carry. We take these choices off their hands so that they may return to their world lighter. Content.”

“Is this a joke?”

“I would not make jokes about such things. We do important work here.”

Izumi grabbed her bag. “I do not know what kind of game this is, but it is not amusing.”

“It is not a game, and it is not meant to be amusing. I cannot force you to stay, but I do know that no one finds the pawnshop by accident. If you had no need for our services, you would have opened that door and walked into the ramen restaurant just like all the other customers waiting in line outside.”

Izumi pulled her shoulders back and lifted her chin. “Assuming that what you are saying is true, which it is not, I still would not require your services. I do not have any regrets.”

“I apologize if I have offended you, Takeda-sama.” Toshio bowed his head. “But I have been doing this job for a very long time. I can tell when people are happy and when they are not, regardless of how well they are dressed or how bright their smile is. Happiness has little to do with what you have, and everything to do with what you do not.”

Izumi tightened her grip on her bag. “You do not know anything about me.”

“Perhaps. But what I do know is what I have learned from the collective experience of the generations of my family who have run this pawnshop. Every client who has passed through our door has insisted that they stumbled into our little establishment because they were lost. And they were right. Losing your way is oftentimes the only way to find something you did not know you were looking for.”

“I know perfectly well what I was looking for today. Ramen.”

“There are many good ramen restaurants in the city. Why were you looking for this restaurant in particular?”

“I used to live in this neighborhood when I was younger. I ate at this restaurant all the time.”

“But surely you must have had better ramen since then?”

“Yes, of course, but—”

“And I am certain that a woman such as yourself could easily afford an establishment with better ambience.”

Izumi twirled her pearls around her neck, her eyes fixed on her tea.

“But this restaurant isn’t like just any other restaurant, is it?” Toshio said.

Izumi looked away.

“Do not worry, Takeda-sama. I have no intentions of prying. I do not need to. I already know why you decided to visit the restaurant today.”

Izumi’s thin brows shot up.

“You said that you used to frequent this restaurant when you were younger.” Toshio clasped his hands over the table. “People revisit the past to relive pleasant memories, chase away bad ones, or both.”

“Since you seem to think that you know me so well and are unwilling to accept my simple desire to eat ramen as my only explanation for being here, would you care to share which of these reasons you believe is mine?” Izumi said.

“You came to the restaurant to dine with a ghost.”

“That’s...” Izumi’s voice caught in her throat. “That’s nonsense.”

“So you were joining a friend for a meal, then?”

“Well...I...no. I was going to eat alone. I like coming here by myself. I visit at least once every autumn.”

“But no one ever really dines alone, do they?” Toshio said. “Our thoughts share our meals with us. They keep us company whether we invite them to or not and are especially noisy when they are the only ones at our table. They chatter about all the things we cannot say aloud. In your case, I would guess that they like to reminisce about a time when you were not the

woman you are today, a time, perhaps, when you liked to share your table at the ramen restaurant with someone else.”

“Stop.”

“You argue with your thoughts and insist that they are wrong, but they keep on going until your ramen turns cold. But that does not stop you from coming back whenever you have the chance, because a cold bowl of ramen still tastes better than any hot meal in your home.”

“Stop.” Tears welled in Izumi’s eyes and streamed down her pale cheeks. “Please, stop.”

“I’m sorry. You asked me a question and I answered it. There are many things that I wish I did not know, but after spending a lifetime at this pawnshop, I can read the stories of my clients as though they were written on their faces.”

Izumi dried her eyes. “I am not your client.”

“You are correct.” Toshio laced his fingers. “I have not yet decided if what you wish to exchange is of any value.”

“Enough. I’m tired of your games.” Fresh tears filled her eyes. “Who are you?”

“I am simply a man who offers a unique service to those who require it, a man who can tell that you are crying not because you are sad, but because you are angry. But not at me. You wish you were, but you are not. You were furious even before you set foot inside this pawnshop.”

Izumi glared at him, color rising over her neck. “Of course I’m angry. I hate that I have every reason to be happy and yet all I feel are the cracks spreading inside me each time I force myself to smile. Is that what you wanted me to say? Is this what you want me to pawn? A broken smile patched with gold like one of your tea bowls? Because if you will take it, I will give it to you right now.”

“So you believe what I have told you about the pawnshop?”

“Prove it. Make me believe.”

“Very well. Show me your choice and I will tell you what it is worth.”

“Show you? How? A choice isn’t something you keep in your pocket or purse.”

“You carry around all the decisions you have ever made in your life, Takeda-sama. This choice is no different,” Toshio said. “And I think that you already know exactly where to find it.”