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COURTENAY

*The
Scarlet
Kimono*

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TRADE WINDS

The Scarlet Kimono

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Prologue and first chapter

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PROLOGUE

Northern Japan, May 1611

The old man sat cross-legged on the small verandah outside his house, contemplating the tranquillity of his rock garden. The last lingering rays of the dying sun burnished his leathery face. They cast the innumerable wrinkles into relief and made his high cheekbones appear more prominent than usual. A breeze stirred his long white goatee beard and rippled the sleeves of his silk robe. Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back to catch the sun's warmth and then he let the peace flow over him and through him. His breathing became deep and even.

In the distance, he could hear the voices of the other inhabitants of the castle compound, but they were far away, unreal in the stillness of his haven. The only other sound was the gurgle of a small waterfall, which gushed its way across moss- and lichen-clad stones down into a pool filled with tiny goldfish. Occasionally one of the fish would make a small splash by flipping its tail fin too hard near the surface of the water, but the noise didn't disturb the old man. His mind drifted off into another realm and he let his thoughts roam as they wished.

He never actively sought the visions, but simply gave them the opportunity to come. Sometimes they did, sometimes not. This time, however, when an image did appear, he was almost startled out of his trance by the unfamiliarity of the scene he beheld. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. A woman stood by the railing of a ship; a strange ship, large and clumsy, with many masts. The wind caressed her hair and sent it flying out behind her like a flapping sail. And such hair – the colour of a fiery sunset and strangely curved as if it were composed of a nest of writhing snakes. He shivered, imagining himself entangled in that coppery mass, burning from the heat of it, strangled by its tentacles.

She was approaching, although where she came from or how far she had travelled, he had no idea. As she looked towards him, his heart stuttered, sending a shock wave through his body. Her eyes were the colour of the sky and as clear as the water in his pond. To someone who had never encountered anything but dark eyes, they seemed empty and cold and he felt as if he could see right through her. The old man shuddered and lost the vision abruptly out of sheer fright. His heart beat became a frantic tattoo and it took him a while to realise that he wasn't alone any longer.

'Yanagihara-san, what's the matter?' Taro Kumashiro, the young lord of the castle, was bending towards him with a solicitous look in his amber eyes. 'Have you had a bad prophecy?'

'I, I ... perhaps, Kumashiro-*sama*.' The old man blinked, but the image of the red-haired woman lingered in his memory. 'I saw a woman, coming towards me.'

The younger man's handsome face broke into a smile. This transformed his normally stern features, making him look happy and carefree. He nodded. 'Ah, my prospective bride. She should be on her way here very soon.' He sat down next to his old retainer, suddenly serious again. 'But why did you look as if you had seen a ghost? Was she that bad? I was assured by her father that she has a pleasant countenance and much grace.'

'No, no, I didn't see your bride, my lord, but a *gai-jin*, a foreigner.' The old man clutched his master's sleeve in agitation. The fear churning inside him made him forget to whom he was speaking, but Lord Kumashiro was always more indulgent with his old mentor than with others. He gently tugged the delicate black silk away without making any comment.

'A female *gai-jin* you say? I saw foreigners last time I went to Nagasaki, but only men. You're sure it was a woman? I didn't think they were allowed.'

'Oh, yes. She was dressed strangely, but I couldn't be mistaken. And she had long, shining red hair.'

'Red?' The young man laughed. 'No wonder you were so scared, you probably took her for an evil spirit. *Kami* usually have red hair, don't they?'

Yanagihara shuddered once more. 'Perhaps I thought so at first, but she was no spirit. She was real, and I believe she represents a threat to us. There were none of the usual indications, but why else would I see her? The foreigners have been coming in greater numbers recently. This must be a bad omen. The *Shogun* should never have let them stay.'

'Come now, how could a foreign woman possibly be a threat to me? I'm a *daimyo*, a lord with thousands of men at my command.' Lord Kumashiro drew himself up to his full height and crossed well-muscled arms over his chest. Even excluding his gleaming, black top-knot, he was taller than most of the men in the castle. He was also a formidable fighter. Yanagihara knew no one would challenge his lordship lightly, least of all a woman, but that was beside the point here.

'I didn't mean to you personally, my lord, but perhaps our entire nation. What if she is their empress?' The old man added after a moment, 'She had very strange eyes. Horrible, in fact.'

His young master raised his eyebrows, still looking sceptical. 'Oh? In what way?'

'They were blue, like pale sapphires, and clear. That was what frightened me. I could see right through them into her very soul and I'm not sure I liked what I saw.'

'This is most intriguing.' Lord Kumashiro smiled again. 'I shall have to see her for myself. You're sure she is coming here? To our shores?'

'Well, I believe so, but be careful, my lord. Don't do anything rash.'

'Don't worry, Yanagihara-san, I only want to look at her. Besides, if she is a threat she'll have to be dealt with. If I am the one to thwart her evil plans it would surely enhance my status. Perhaps I'll even earn the personal gratitude of the *Shogun*.'

'No, I really don't think it wise to ...'

'I shall send some men to keep a lookout for her. If she exists, she'll have to come to the trading station at Hirado, won't she? The foreigners aren't allowed to enter any other port so it should be easy to spot her. Thank you for telling me.'

'She might not arrive for some time, perhaps even years.'

'No matter, my men are patient.'

'Yes, but ...'

Yanagihara had seen many things in his life, received warnings and advice both from the gods and spirits, and naturally it was gratifying when someone believed in his prophecies. More often than not, the people who were told of these visions didn't listen and so they were for nothing. Usually it didn't bother him. It was his opinion that each person had to make up their own mind and he could do no more than relay the message he had been given. Today, however, when his lordship had trusted every word, Yanagihara would rather have been ignored. He had a very bad feeling about all this.

Lord Kumashiro was already halfway through the garden though when the old man called after him, 'Please, my lord, have a care. Who knows what calamities this woman brings? She might be very powerful.'

'You worry too much.' Lord Kumashiro laughed. 'After all, you and my father taught me well. I'll be on my guard.'

Before the old man could protest further, his lordship strode off and Yanagihara was left to wonder what he had set in motion. Still, it was too late for regrets. Only fate knew what lay before them.

CHAPTER ONE

Plymouth, Devon, 1st June 1611

'A plague on it!' Hannah Marston exclaimed in unladylike fashion and threw down her graphite pencil in disgust. It landed on the floor and rolled out of sight, but Hannah didn't bother to pick it up. There was no point, she wouldn't need it now.

Sitting on the window seat of the little room she shared with her older sister Kate, she'd been half-heartedly sketching the view of Plymouth harbour. This could be seen from her vantage point on the third floor of a house high up on a hill facing the quay, which could be glimpsed in the distance. It wasn't the result of her efforts that annoyed her though, but the clatter of feet that could be heard on the stairs outside. The peace and quiet she had enjoyed in her sister's absence was rare in a household which normally teemed with people, and the solitude had been very welcome. She only wished it could have lasted longer.

She should, of course, have made her presence known the minute Kate and another girl hurtled into the room, giggling in a slightly hysterical manner. Instead she shrank back even further into her corner and tugged surreptitiously at the curtain, hoping to remain undetected. Perhaps, with a bit of luck, her sister wouldn't stay for very long.

'You're not going to believe this,' Kate whispered and slammed the door shut. 'I was wandering round the main deck of the ship with the captain when father inspected the cargo and after a while I feigned a swoon. The captain had to pick me up, of course, and take me to the main cabin and he held me very close while carrying me. It quite sent shivers down my spine.'

'Heavens,' hissed the other girl, Kate's best friend Eliza whose voice Hannah recognised immediately.

'Yes, but wait, that's not all. Listen,' Kate lowered her voice, but it was still perfectly audible to Hannah, 'he put me down on his bunk and when I pretended to recover and opened my eyes, he was kneeling very close to me. It was unbelievably thrilling, and the expression on his face ... Well, then he whispered that he wants to meet me in the garden on the night of my betrothal feast. Father has invited him, you know.'

Hannah gasped, but because Eliza did too, her sister didn't hear her. Hannah clapped a hand over her mouth to stop any further noise from escaping inadvertently.

'But Kate, what about Mr Forrester?' Eliza protested. 'You haven't forgotten your betrothed, surely? How can you meet another man at such a time?'

'Oh, Henry.' Kate's tone dismissed him as being of no importance whatsoever. 'He won't suspect a thing if I'm careful. Perhaps I shall develop a

sudden headache. Yes, or I'll tear the hem of my dress and have to make repairs. Henry will be well in his cups by the time supper is over. I've seen it happen before.'

'Kate!' Eliza sounded scandalised and behind the curtain Hannah gritted her teeth. Headstrong and self-centred, Kate was a master at getting away with behaviour Hannah could only dream of, but this? This was a different matter altogether, Hannah thought. Her sister was definitely going too far this time.

'I don't understand,' Eliza added. 'Why are you marrying Mr Forrester if it's Captain Rydon you want?'

'For social advancement, of course.'

Hannah recognised the words her father had used to persuade his eldest daughter to accept the match. At the time, Kate had been inclined to turn down Mr Forrester's offer, pouring scorn on her suitor. He wasn't exactly the kind of man a young and beautiful girl such as Kate would ever look twice at. However, Kate was nothing if not mercenary and when the advantages had been pointed out to her she soon changed her mind. Hannah's lip curled. She would never have let herself be swayed by money and a title if her heart belonged to another. A man such as ...

'Captain Rydon, well, he may be all that a woman wants in certain respects,' Kate continued with another giggle, 'which I'll grant you Henry is not, but most of the time he's away at sea and there is no guarantee he'll come back. I'd be bored to tears for months on end. And if I marry Henry I'll be Lady Forrester as soon as his father dies, whereas if I married the captain I'd be no better off than I am at the moment. This way I can enjoy both.' She laughed out loud and danced around the room. 'Faith, Eliza, I can't wait until the feast. Isn't this exciting?'

'You haven't agreed to meet him, have you?' Eliza's question came out in a breathless whisper.

'Oh,' Kate did another twirl, 'not precisely, but I might venture into the garden by mistake and who knows what will happen?'

Hannah heard the front door shut and glanced out of the window and down onto the street. The object of the discussion sauntered away from the house with a self-assured gait, his fair hair glinting like gold in the sunlight before he put his hat on at a rakish angle. He must have returned to the house with her father for a business discussion, but now Captain Rydon didn't appear to have a care in the world. And indeed, why should he, Hannah wondered, when there were women as stupid as her sister around to pander to his every need. If he had asked Hannah, she'd never have agreed to meet him alone unless they were at least betrothed. That was going too far.

She stifled a sigh. She had to admit he was a fine figure of a man. Those sparkling eyes of his did strange things to a girl's insides, and when he smiled at you, it was impossible not to admire him. Just thinking about it made her heart rate increase.

'You are so wicked.' Eliza sounded almost envious, but also slightly disapproving.

'Not really. I'm sure I can keep the captain at arm's length for a while. After all, it's the thrill of the chase that excites men, isn't it? Then perhaps nearer the wedding, well, we shall see.'

'Have a care, Kate, there are several months to go before your nuptials, remember? You wouldn't want Mr Forrester to become suspicious. I mean ... are you sure your husband won't notice anything during your wedding night?'

'No, I'll make sure he has plenty to drink beforehand, then he won't remember a thing and I can assure him I did my duty.' Kate sounded well pleased with her own cleverness. 'All brides know it's wise to bring a small vial of chicken blood in any case. You know, to make sure the sheets are properly stained.'

Hannah was very happy that her sister was marrying at last and leaving the house, since the two of them weren't exactly the best of friends. Kate had always been the acknowledged beauty of the family, with her shining blonde tresses and curvaceous figure, while Hannah's wild bright red hair and slight build fell far short of such perfection. She'd tried not to feel jealous of her sister's looks, but it was a tall order, especially when their parents seemed to favour their older daughter at all times. Hannah now began to feel extremely sorry for the unfortunate Mr Forrester too though. He would have to put up with Kate instead and she wondered if he knew what he was letting himself in for.

Righteous indignation on his behalf, as well as envy of her sister for having caught the captain's eye, filled her to such an extent that she forgot her determination to stay hidden. She flung the curtain aside and stepped out. Eliza let out a little shriek of fright, while Kate just blinked in surprise.

'Really, Kate, you can't do that, it would be utterly wrong,' Hannah protested. 'I'm going to tell Mother this instant.'

Kate looked her up and down as if she were nothing more than a tiresome little flea. Her eyes narrowed and she put her hands on her hips. 'Oh, no you won't or I swear I'll make your life a misery.'

'You already do and it's not right. Poor Mr Forrester will be a cuckold before he's even married. Not even you could sink that low.'

Kate's face turned an angry puce. 'How dare you tell me what I can and can't do, you little gudgeon? What do you know of such things anyway?' Mercurial as always, she suddenly drew herself up and assumed an innocent

expression. 'Besides, who said that I was going to do anything other than *speak* to Captain Rydon in the garden? Where is the harm in exchanging a few words with him?'

'That was not what you were implying.'

Kate's face changed yet again and became smug. 'I know what it is – you're jealous.' She turned to Eliza. 'Hannah is infatuated with the captain just because he spoke kindly to her once. She gazes at him whenever he's here, like an adoring puppy with a new master. I doubt he's noticed though. Why would he?' She laughed and glanced pointedly at the unruly copper curls escaping from under Hannah's cap. Eliza tittered.

'I am *not* jealous. I don't care what he does,' Hannah shot back, but she felt the tell-tale colour flooding her cheeks and Kate raised her delicate brows.

'Perhaps I should let him in on the secret,' she taunted. 'I'm sure he would be very amused to find himself the object of your affection. After all, he is used to grown-up women, not little girls.'

'I'm seventeen, I am not a child.'

'Well, no one would know it to look at you,' Kate smirked. She glanced at Hannah's thin figure before running her hands down her own, well-rounded one. Hannah gritted her teeth. It was true her body hadn't yet matured into Kate's generous proportions, and she was well aware most men would certainly prefer her sister, but that didn't make her a child.

'Captain Rydon knows perfectly well how old I am and ...' Hannah broke off. There was no point arguing about this after all.

'Actually,' Kate said to Eliza, turning her back on Hannah as if she was no longer in the room, 'Hannah probably wants Henry too, seeing as how he's such a good match. She can never hope to equal it.'

'What are you talking about? Why should I want your betrothed?'

Kate whirled around, her eyes dancing with suppressed amusement.

'Because he is so much better than the man father has in mind for you, of course.'

'Father hasn't even thought about my marriage yet, he's been too busy arranging yours.'

'That's where you're wrong, sister dear. I heard him discussing the subject with Mama only two days ago and the name Ezekiel Hesketh came up in the conversation quite a few times.' The smirk appeared on Kate's features again as Hannah felt the blood drain out of her face.

'Ezekiel Hes – No, you're making that up. I hate you!' Hannah headed for the door with angry steps, but her sister reached it before her and pinched her upper arm viciously.

'Ouch!'

'Not a word to anyone, do you hear? Or you will be very, very sorry,' Kate hissed. Her threat was accompanied by a look that promised dire retribution, but Hannah was long past caring about that.

'I'll do as I see fit,' she replied through gritted teeth.

'You will not!' Kate raised her hand, no doubt to administer another pinch, and Hannah put her hands up to defend herself. Unfortunately Kate moved forward at the same time and Hannah's knuckles accidentally connected with her sister's perfect little nose. Blood spurted out, running down onto Kate's Cupid's bow mouth.

Kate immediately began to screech at the top of her shrill voice and stamped her feet for good measure, like a toddler having a tantrum. Hannah watched these antics with disdain for a moment, but then her heart sank. *Now I've done it.* As if to confirm this thought, rapid footsteps were heard coming up the stairs, the door was thrown open and their mother arrived, slightly breathless from rushing.

'What is going on here, pray?' she asked, taking in the scene through narrowed eyes.

'Oh, Mama, just look what she's done.' Kate burst into noisy tears and threw herself onto her mother's ample bosom. Mistress Marston sighed and shook her head at Hannah, then pointed towards the door, an expression of deep irritation on her face.

'To the kitchen with you. If you can't behave like a well-brought up young lady, you can help the scullery maid for the rest of the day. Honestly, I despair of you ever growing out of your hoydenish ways.' With the other hand she cradled the back of her older daughter's head, stroking the lovely fair hair in a soothing motion. 'Let me see, my love, it might not be as bad as all that.' She raised Kate's face and peered at the red nose with a concerned expression.

Hannah bit her lip. 'But Mother, she's going to –,' she began, but was cut off almost immediately.

'Not another sound out of you. Upon my word, I am seriously beginning to doubt you will ever learn any sense. How could you? And with your sister's betrothal feast so close. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

'That's not fair! It's Kate who has no shame.' Hannah swallowed hard, trying to contain the tears of frustration that threatened to spill over.

'Go I say, or you'll be doing kitchen duties for the remainder of the week.' Again the imperious finger pointed to the door and Hannah turned towards it with a sigh. She had known it would be no use. If only she'd controlled her temper she might have had a chance to convince her mother of Kate's perfidy, but now it was too late. Her sister had won yet again.

In a last act of defiance Hannah slammed the door as hard as she could, then leaned against the wall outside rubbing absently at her new bruise. She clenched her fists in impotent fury.

'Why?' she whispered. 'Why does she always have things her way?' She knew that it went against God's commandments, but in that moment she hated her sister as never before.

And Ezekiel Hesketh? Surely her parents could never contemplate such an alliance? The man may be a widower and a respected lawyer, but he had five badly brought up children and was old enough to be Hannah's father. Well, almost. Hannah shuddered violently and began to run down the stairs as if all the demons of hell were after her.

'I won't marry him,' she muttered. 'They can't make me.'

But she knew that they could.

* Ends *

To be continued ... released 1 March 2011. Pre-order now at [Amazon](#) it may arrive early!