

LESLEY DOWNER

**'A magnificent, sweeping
tale . . . No-one writes about
Japan with more mastery'**

Katie Hickman

*An epic tale
of love and war in
nineteenth-century Japan*

*The Samurai's
Daughter*

About the Book

In the brave new Japan of the 1870s, Taka and Nobu meet as children and fall in love; but their relationship will test the limits of society.

Unified after a bitter civil war, Japan is rapidly turning into a modern country with rickshaws, railways and schools for girls. Commoners can marry their children into any class, and the old hatred between north and south is over – or so it seems.

Taka is from the powerful southern Satsuma clan which now rules the country, and her father, General Kitaoka, is a leader of the new government. Nobu, however, is from the northern Aizu clan, massacred by the Satsuma in the civil war. Defeated and reduced to poverty, his family has sworn revenge on the Satsuma.

Taka and Nobu's love is unacceptable to both their families and must be kept secret, but what they cannot foresee is how quickly the tables will turn. Many southern samurai become disillusioned with the new regime, which has deprived them of their swords, status and honour. Taka's father abruptly leaves Tokyo and returns to the southern island of Kyushu, where trouble is brewing.

When he and his clansmen rise in rebellion, the government sends its newly-created army to put them down. Nobu and his brothers have joined this army, and his brothers now see their chance of revenge on the Satsuma. But Nobu will have to fight and maybe kill Taka's father

and brother, while Taka now has to make a terrible choice: between her family and the man she loves ...

Based on the true story of the 'last samurai', *The Samurai's Daughter* is a novel about a nation divided and a love that can never be.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Map

Part I: The Black Peony

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Part II: The Weaver Princess and the Cowherd

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

Part III: North and South

Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Part IV: No Turning Back

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Part V: Across a Magpie Bridge

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Part VI: The Last Samurai

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Afterword

Bibliography

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Lesley Downer

Copyright

The Samurai's Daughter

Lesley Downer

To Arthur

<i>Haru no yo no</i>	On a spring night
<i>Yume no ukihashi</i>	The floating bridge of dreams
<i>Todae shite</i>	Breaks off:
<i>Mine ni wakaruru</i>	Swirling round the mountaintop
<i>Yokogumo no sora</i>	A cloud drifts into the open sky

Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241)

The Gion Temple bells toll the impermanence of all things; the sala flowers beside the Buddha's deathbed bear testimony to the fact that all who flourish must decline. The proud do not endure, they vanish like a spring night's dream. The mighty fall at last like dust before the wind.

The Tale of the Heike (compiled around 1371)



PART I

The Black Peony



1

Tenth month, year of the rooster, the sixth year of the Meiji era (November 1873)

A SAVOURY AROMA seeped through the curtained doorway and around the window frames of the Black Peony, the most famous restaurant in the entire city of Tokyo. Taka gripped the rim of the rickshaw to stop herself shooting forward as it jolted to a halt and the boy dropped the shafts to the ground. She sat back in her seat, closed her eyes and took a long deep breath. The smell filled the air, akin to the tang of grilling eel but pungent, oilier, richer. Beef, roasting beef: the smell of the new age, of civilization, of enlightenment. And she, Taka Kitaoka, at the very grown-up age of thirteen, was about to have her first taste.

Fujino, her mother, had already clambered down from the rickshaw in front and disappeared through the doorway with a shiver of her voluminous dove-grey skirts. Aunt Kiharu bobbed behind her, tiny and elegant in a kimono and square-cut haori jacket, like a little ship after a huge one, followed by Taka's sister, Haru, in a pale yellow princess-line dress, her hair in a glossy chignon.

Taka too was in a western-style dress. It was the first time she'd ever worn one and she felt proud and self-conscious and a little nervous. It was a rose-pink day dress with a nipped-in waist and the hint of a bustle, brand new and of soft silk, specially commissioned from a tailor in Yokohama. She'd told Okatsu, her maid, to pull her corset so tight she could hardly breathe, and had put on a jacket

and gloves and a matching bonnet. She lifted her skirts carefully as she went through the vestibule, past rows of boots smelling of leather and polish.

Inside the Black Peony it was hot and steamy and full of extraordinary smells and sounds. Smoke from the cooking meat mingled with the fug of tobacco that blanketed the room. Above the hubbub of voices and laughter, slurps and the smacking of lips, there were hoarse shouts of 'Over here! Another plate of your fine beef!' 'The fire's going out. Bring more charcoal, quick!' 'Another flask of sake!' As a well-brought-up young lady, Taka knew she was supposed to keep her eyes modestly fixed on her mother's skirts, but she couldn't help it. She simply had to look around.

The room was crammed with men, big and small, old and young, sitting cross-legged around square tables, each with a charcoal brazier sunk in the centre, dipping their chopsticks into cast iron pans in which something meaty sizzled and bubbled as if it were alive, changing hue from red to brown. They were dressed in the most extraordinary fashions, some like traditional gentlemen in loose robes and obis, others in high-collared shirts with enormous gold timepieces dangling from their breast pockets and with stiff-brimmed hats and furled black bat-wing umbrellas laid on the floor beside them. Sheets of paper were pinned along the walls with words brushed in the angular *katakana* script which marked them as foreign: *miruku*, *cheezu*, *bata* - 'milk', 'cheese', 'butter' - words that anyone with any hope of being seen as modern had at least to pretend to be acquainted with.

Taka had never before been in such an exotic place or seen such an assortment of terrifyingly fashionable people. She gazed around in wonder then flushed and quickly dropped her eyes when she realized that the men were staring back.

'Otaka!' her mother called, using the polite form of Taka's name.

Picking up her skirts, Taka raced after her down the hallway and into an inner room. It was filled with heavy wooden furniture that cast long shadows in the flickering light of candles and oil lamps. Maids slid the door closed behind her but she could still hear the raucous shouts and laughter. She settled herself on a chair, smoothing the swathes of fabric, trying not to reveal how awkward she felt with her legs dangling instead of folded under her in the usual way. Her mother had spread herself over three chairs to support all the ruffles and layers of her tea dress. Maids fanned the charcoal in the braziers then carried in plates of dark red, shiny meat and laid slices on the hot iron griddle. As the smell of burning flesh filled the air, Taka wrinkled her nose in dismay.

‘I don’t think I can eat this,’ she whispered to Haru.

‘You know what Mr Fukuzawa says.’

Taka looked admiringly at her sister’s gleaming chignon, envying the way she was so perfect and never had a hair out of place. Two years older than Taka, Haru seemed grown up already. She was always smiling and serene, ready to accept whatever came her way. She picked up her chopsticks and leaned forward.

‘We have to eat meat to nourish our bodies if we’re to be tall and strong, like westerners.’

‘But it smells so ... so peculiar. Will I still be able to pray to Buddha and the gods if I eat it? Won’t it make me smell like a westerner? You’ll be able to smell it wherever I go.’

‘Just listen to you girls,’ trilled Aunt Kiharu, putting her dainty fingers to her chin and tilting her small head. ‘Haven’t you read *Cross-legged round the Stew Pot?*’

‘Of course not,’ said Fujino primly. ‘They don’t read such nonsense. They’re well-brought-up young ladies. They go to school. They know far more already than you or I ever will. History, science, how the earth began, how to talk properly and add up figures ...’

'Ah, but, my dear Fujino, I wonder if they're acquainted with the important things - how to please a man and entertain him and make sure he never leaves your side!'

Fujino folded her fan and tapped her smartly on the arm, clucking in mock disapproval. 'Really, Kiharu-*sama*. Give them time.'

Aunt Kiharu was Taka's mother's closest friend. They had been geishas together in Kyoto and Taka had known her ever since she was a little girl. Now she tipped her head coquettishly and gave a knowing smile, then pursed her lips and recited in a high-pitched lilt:

*'Samurai, farmer; artisan or trader;
oldster, youngster; boy or girl;
clever or stupid, poor or elite,
you won't get civilized if you don't eat meat!
Meat for the winter months - milk, cheese and
butter, too;
Scrotum of bull will make a man out of you!'*

Fujino hooted with laughter. She dipped her chopsticks into the simmering pan, lifted out a slice of greying meat and placed it neatly in Taka's bowl. 'We don't want to turn you into a man, but we certainly want you to be civilized!'

Taka chewed the morsel thoughtfully, turning it round and round in her mouth. It was stringy and there was something rather nauseating about the taste but she would have to get used to it if she was to be a modern woman. She thought of the rickshaw boy waiting outside, smoking his pipe, and the grooms squatting in the antechamber. It was a shame they would never have the chance to be civilized, but that was just the way it had to be.

That year Taka's body had changed more than she could ever have imagined possible. She'd grown long and slender like a young bamboo, she'd seen breasts swelling under her

kimonos, she'd had her first bleed - she'd become a woman. If she'd stayed in the ancient capital, Kyoto, where she was born, she'd be finishing her geisha training by now and preparing for her ritual deflowering. But instead here she was in the bustling city of Tokyo, learning to be a modern woman.

For the world was changing even faster than she was. She'd spent the first years of her life in the geisha district of Gion in the heart of Kyoto, in a dark wooden house with bamboo blinds that flapped and creaked in the breeze and a flimsy door that wobbled and stuck in its grooves. Her mother was a famous geisha there. When she strolled the narrow alleys of the district, the passers-by inclined their heads and sang out, 'Good morning, Fujino-*sama*, how are you today?' in high-pitched geisha lilt.

In the daytime the plaintive twang of the shamisen echoed through the house as Fujino practised the performing arts that were her trade, for geishas, as everyone knew, were entertainers, artistes; the two characters *gei* and *sha* mean 'arts' and 'person'. In the evening she and her fellow geishas appeared at parties. They served food, topped up sake cups, performed classical dances and songs, teased, told jokes and stories and played games. Some of their customers were merchants, old and jowly, others young and handsome samurai. But whoever they were, if they had worries the geishas were ready to lend a sympathetic ear. They were the men's best friends and some were also their lovers.

From when she was a little girl Taka helped out at geisha parties, absorbing the geisha ways, running around with trays of drinks and listening to the geishas' witty chat, learning to speak their special dialect with a coy Kyoto lilt. Her mother and Haru taught her to warble geisha songs and dance prettily and play the shamisen. Her older brother, Ryutaro, had been sent to live with their father and learn how to fight. He had been killed in battle, so long ago

that she barely remembered him. But the younger, Eijiro, stayed with the family and was always around the house, tormenting her.

Ever since she could remember the streets had been full of samurai, milling about, brawling. There were regular clashes between men of the southern clans who were determined to depose the shogun and his government and the northerners who formed the shogun's police force and supported him. When she was very small, samurai of the southern Choshu clan had set fire to the imperial palace, where the emperor lived. One of her earliest memories was of standing in the street, gazing in excitement, while smoke billowed and people ran about in panic, afraid that the fire would spread through the wooden city.

More than once the shogun's police had come hammering at the door, demanding to see her father. She'd be bundled off to the back of the house and would watch open-mouthed, her heart pounding, through the crack in the sliding paper doors while her mother barred their way, swearing he wasn't there, though Taka knew perfectly well he was.

She'd always known that her mother and her geisha friends loved the men of the southern clans and that the shogun's police and the northerners were the hated enemy. Every night southern samurai congregated in the teahouses to discuss and plot or just talk and laugh. Her mother played the gracious hostess while they drank and argued, keeping an eye out in case the shogun's police suddenly appeared. And of all the gallant, brilliant samurai, the most gallant and brilliant of all was her father. People addressed him as 'General Kitaoka'. Big and bluff and rather serious, he presided over the gatherings. He'd sit quietly, then start to speak and the others would fall silent and listen. Taka felt proud to be the daughter of such a man.

He was often away. Sometimes she would find her mother weeping and guess that he was at war and that she

was afraid for him.

When Taka was eight there was a huge battle right outside the city. She could hear the boom of cannons and smell the smoke that drifted across like a cloud.

Then there was rejoicing. The southerners had won. A few months later the shogun was overthrown. His capital, Edo, was taken and Edo Castle, where he had lived, handed over to the southerners, who were to form a new government in the name of the young emperor. Her father was one of the leaders. A few months later news came that the emperor would leave Kyoto and move to Edo.

Taka and her family had to move too, to join her father, and suddenly her life turned upside down. She'd never left the geisha district before, let alone been out of the city, certainly never travelled in a palanquin. Now she spent twenty days on her knees in a cushioned box jolting along the Eastern Sea Road. When she peeped out of the small window or stepped out to stretch her legs, all she could see was an endless line of people and palanquins escorted by attendants and guards and porters and horses laden with baggage. She crossed forests and mountains and saw the sparkling waters of the ocean for the first time.

Edo, their new home, was the biggest, richest, most exciting city in the world. Not long before, it had been a place of daimyo palaces and samurai residences, of narrow streets crammed with artisans and merchants, depicted in innumerable woodblock prints. With the emperor here, it became even more exciting. It was declared the new capital and given a new name: To-kyo, 'the Eastern Capital'. Kyoto had been just 'the Capital'.

Even now Tokyo was barely five years old. It was a young city, bursting with noise and energy, where people hurried about, gazing at the extraordinary new buildings rising around them. When Taka first arrived, the Ginza, where the Black Peony was, had been a nondescript neighbourhood of shabby wooden shops selling chests or

cabinets or fabric. The previous year there had been a huge fire and the district had completely burnt down. Now it had risen again. It was a magical place lined with splendid brick and stone buildings, with colonnades and balconies where men in Inverness capes and ladies in voluminous western dresses gazed at the rickshaws and horse-drawn omnibuses careering by, as if the whole world had suddenly come to life.

People said, and perhaps it was true, that for the first time ever they felt they could change their destinies. Under the rule of the shoguns, everyone's clothing and hairstyle had been decreed by law. A man of the samurai class had to dress as a samurai, a man of the merchant class as a merchant. But now, if they had the money, anyone could don the costume of the new age, and no one would have any idea what class they had once belonged to. The new government positively encouraged it. If people wanted to be really modern, all they had to do was eat a little meat.

And now there were westerners walking the streets. Taka's mother had told her how when she, Fujino, was a child, before Taka was born, Black Ships had steamed into Edo Bay, bringing pale-faced barbarians with grotesque features and huge noses and terrifying weaponry. Now they were everywhere, installing western-style buildings and lighthouses and telegraphs, though people still stared wherever they went.

Taka often saw them on the streets. There was even a barbarian who came and taught her English. They looked very strange, barely human, in fact, but she knew they were to be admired, for they held the key to civilization and enlightenment. The government encouraged men at least to dress western style, eat meat as the barbarians did and learn western languages so that Japan could join the outside world and be the equal of the western nations. Fewer women took up the new fashions but geishas had

always been trendsetters and Taka's mother in particular was always ahead of the times.

Even the calendar had changed. The previous year had been the fifth in the reign of Emperor Meiji, a yang water monkey year according to the traditional calendar, which should have been followed by the sixth, a yin water rooster year. But then the government had made the extraordinary announcement that the year would end on the second day of the twelfth month. The following day was to be known as 1 January of the new year, numbered 1873 by the western calendar.

The old calendar had made sense but the new one made none. As far as anyone knew, 1873 was just an arbitrary number. After all, who could possibly remember one thousand, eight hundred and seventy-three years ago or have any idea why the calendar should start then? Most people simply ignored the official calendar and continued to use the old one, just as they ignored the new name, Tokyo, and thought of the city as Edo and themselves as Edoites.

The only practical change was that New Year had come too early. It felt completely wrong to be observing New Year rituals and enjoying New Year dishes at the height of winter, rather than when the plum blossoms were coming into bud. In previous years the children had gone out to play battledore and shuttlecock and watch the strolling players but that year it was far too cold.

Taka's father had been there when the calendar changed. His work often took him away but she loved it when he was at home. She was a little in awe of him. He was huge, as big and tall as a sumo wrestler, and round like a bear – like Fujino, he was larger than life.

He had written a poem to mark the change of calendar and took her on his large knee and gave it to her:

*Since times long gone this has been the day we greet
the New Year.*

*How will the western calendar reach the distant
mountain villages?*

*The snow announces the coming of a fruitful year and
families treasure their elderly.*

How joyful are the shouts of the village children.

‘So Oharu’s getting married and you’ll be a grandmother soon,’ Aunt Kiharu was saying with a high-pitched laugh. Haru’s cheeks turned bright red and she stared fixedly at the glistening meat in her bowl.

‘And next we have to get Taka off our hands,’ boomed Fujino.

It was Taka’s turn to cringe. If only her mother didn’t have to speak quite so loudly, she thought, valiantly struggling with another piece of meat. It was horribly chewy but she refused to admit defeat.

Then suddenly she noticed that something had changed. The voices and clatter of chopsticks, the rustle of sleeves and patter of feet in the next room had stopped. There was utter silence, as if everyone was holding their breath, then a terrifying bellow followed by crashes as the diners scrambled to their feet and rushed for the door.

There was another sound too - footsteps, padding towards their private room. Taka felt a shock of fear. She stared around. They were trapped, there was no other way out. She rushed to the back of the room, knocking against a table as she ran. Fortunately it was big and heavy and didn’t fall over. If the glowing charcoal had spilt it would have set the whole place alight. She tried to hide behind Haru and the maids, crouching so close against the wall that she felt the sandy grain of the plaster pressing into her skin.

Her mother's three chairs crashed over. Fujino was on her feet, her dagger flashing in the candlelight. Now that she was the mistress of one of the country's leading samurai, she'd taken to carrying a dagger, as samurai women did. Aunt Kiharu was beside her and she too had a dagger in her hand.

Breathing hard, Taka watched as the door slid open and a face appeared in the dim light of the hallway, swathed in a scarf like a brigand. Black eyes glinted from between the folds of cloth. It was a man, big and burly, in shabby leggings, the wide sleeves of his jacket tied back ready for a fight. He had a sword in one hand.

Taka knew exactly what he was - a ronin, a lordless samurai, impoverished and embittered, accountable to no one. When she was little, the streets had swarmed with men like him, swaggering about, looking for trouble. Memories flooded back, memories she'd done her best to suppress - of shouts echoing down the streets, fists pounding at the door, her mother confronting angry intruders. She remembered peeking through the shutters and seeing bodies right outside their house.

Fujino stepped in front of him. Taka had often wished her mother were more like her schoolfriends' mothers - wispy, tight-lipped, nervous, not so huge and flamboyant. But now her heart swelled with pride.

'What a commotion,' Fujino said softly. It was her geisha voice, the icy tones she had used when men grew unruly from too much drink, when a glance from her narrowed eyes could make them tremble like children. 'And all for one man!' She drew out the syllables with scorn. 'I'd put that sword away if I were you. Money, is that what you're after?'

The man hesitated as if taken aback by her boldness. He glared at her defiantly.

'Where is he, that traitor?' he growled. 'I know he's here.'

He spoke in the broad vowels of a southerner. So he was a man of the Satsuma clan, like Taka's father. It was her father he was after. She knew her father had enemies, it was far from the first time someone had come looking for him. The man must have spotted the family crest on their rickshaw.

'What do you think you're doing, a Satsuma man, waving your sword like a thug? You should be ashamed. The police will be here any moment. You'd better leave quickly, while you have the chance.'

'He's here, I know he is, that traitor Kitaoka.' He spat out the name.

Fujino drew herself up. In her voluminous skirts she filled the room. The man seemed to shrink before her.

'Be careful how you speak of my husband, fellow,' she boomed. 'He's a far greater man than you'll ever be.'

The man raised his sword a little, keeping the blade pointing down.

'Your husband?' he sneered. 'You're no samurai wife. I know a geisha when I see one. You're that fat Kyoto whore, that precious geisha of his. You've certainly come up in the world since you were swanning around the pleasure quarters, haven't you, Princess Pig! Well, I'll spoil your pretty face.'

Fujino raised her dagger.

'Coward. We're all women and children here.'

'Women and children. I've got women and children of my own to support. Shame on you, with your fancy barbarian clothes, filling your stomachs with barbarian food. We didn't fight and die to see our women aping stinking barbarians. My name is Terashima Morisaburo,' he added, tearing off his scarf to reveal a swarthy face with a scar puckering one cheek. 'You can tell Kitaoka one thing. He thinks he can take our swords, he thinks we're going to hand them over just like that and leave ourselves defenceless. He thinks we're going to stand by while he

disbands the army and recruits peasants - peasants! - to do the work of samurai. And what are we supposed to do, we samurai, how are we supposed to survive when we have no work and no stipends? Well?' The man took a step further into the room. 'Answer me that!'

He reached his sword under Fujino's skirts and jerked the blade upwards. She stepped back out of the way but Taka heard the fabric rip.

'That's what I think of your western finery.'

There was a swish as the man swung his sword. Taka gasped in horror. Fujino raised her dagger to parry the blow, but instead of the clang of steel on steel, there was a dull thud. Peeking from behind Haru's skirts, Taka saw that the man had misjudged the height of the room. The sword had lodged in the low crossbeam of the ceiling and stuck there, quivering.

Then she noticed a movement in the hallway outside and caught a glimpse of dark skin and the flash of eyes, slanted like a cat's. There was someone else there - not the rickshaw boy, not the grooms, but another attacker, even more fearsome than the first. The restaurant was totally silent. Everyone had fled. There was no one to protect them from these villains.

Sawdust showered from the ceiling and there was a splintering sound as the samurai wrenched his sword free. He raised it again, holding it in both hands, preparing to bring it down in a death blow.

Suddenly a thin arm snaked out of the shadows behind him and wound around the man's neck. Taken by surprise, the samurai stumbled backwards. His head jerked back and he grabbed at the fingers as they tightened around his neck. His face turned purple and his sword fell from his grasp. Fujino lunged forward and snatched it up. Bellowing with rage, the samurai thrashed with his elbows, prised the fingers off, spun round and started pummeling his assailant.

Taka caught a glimpse of the new arrival's face and her jaw dropped as she realized he was just a boy, a scrawny boy. His eyes were wide with fear in his sunburnt face, but he was scowling with determination. He'd had the advantage of surprise but now it was obvious he didn't have a chance against the brawny samurai.

Fujino was chewing her lower lip and frowning in concentration. She handed the sword to Kiharu, raised her dagger and paused, her arm above her head. Fearless though her mother was, Taka had never known her draw blood. Fujino took a breath and brought the dagger down, straight into the samurai's exposed shoulder. As she wrenched it out, blood spurted, staining her lavish skirts. She was quivering with horror.

The man yelped and grabbed at his shoulder; the blow had slowed him down but hadn't disabled him. Fujino jerked her head imperiously and the boy leapt out of the way, then she threw herself on top of the samurai, shoved him to the ground and plumped down on his back in all her enormous bulk. Tiny Aunt Kiharu sat on his legs. The two women were panting and their cheeks were flushed but their eyes were afire. The samurai writhed and pounded the floor and emitted muffled yells, but to no avail.

Anxious faces appeared at the door - a tubby officious-looking middle-aged man rubbing his hands nervously, and two burly policemen with stern faces and smart buttoned uniforms. In the hubbub no one had noticed them approaching. The policemen pinioned the samurai's arms and Taka heard him gasp for breath as Fujino heaved herself to her feet. She smoothed her skirts, examining them ruefully.

'So sorry, your ladyship, so sorry,' said the tubby man, whom Taka took to be the restaurant owner, wringing his plump hands. He fell to his knees, bowing again and again. Other faces appeared, peeking round the door, eyes huge like frightened rabbits - the rickshaw boy and the grooms.

They threw themselves to their knees in front of Fujino and blurted excuses, beating their heads on the ground.

Their rescuer was standing uncertainly in the hallway. He was a thin-faced urchin, not much older than Taka, tall and gangly, with a long neck and prominent nose. His face was blackened as if he'd been working in the rice fields and there was fuzz on his upper lip. He was wearing a most peculiar assortment of clothes. Taka had to stop herself smiling as she realized he was wearing a girl's kimono jacket with the sleeves shortened. His narrow black eyes darted curiously. Taka looked around, following his gaze, and saw the overturned chairs and mounds of meat scattered on the floor. The tables with their buckets of glowing charcoal were miraculously still upright.

Fujino turned to him.

'You came just in time, young man,' she said gravely, settling herself on her knees. 'We are in your debt.' The boy dropped to his knees too and bowed, shuffling uncomfortably.

'Excuse me,' he said, staring at the ground. 'I didn't do much of a job.' There was a rustic twang, a hint of a dialect of some sort underlying his Edo speech. He glanced around as if he was eager to escape.

'Nonsense,' said Fujino briskly. 'You saved us.'

'He was just passing by, your ladyship,' said one of the rickshaw boys, bowing frantically and baring his teeth in an embarrassed grin. He grabbed the boy's arm and gripped it firmly. 'It was us, we stopped him. Our ladies are in trouble, we said, and told him to go for help. A robber's burst in, we said, one of those ronin, a Satsuma man by the looks of it. We hadn't dared ask any of the diners, they all looked too important. But he just pushed us aside and rushed straight in.'

'I didn't do anything, your honour,' the boy mumbled. 'There was only one of him and I couldn't even hold him back on my own. I'm sorry I failed you. Anyway, I'll be on

my way.' He bowed again and backed on his knees towards the door.

Fujino put her hand to her waist where her obi should have been, as if she'd forgotten she was wearing a western dress. She reached for her purse then looked at the boy and put it aside. It was obvious that he was far too proud to accept money.

'Your name, young man?' she asked gently.

'Yoshida, Nobuyuki Yoshida. Glad I could be of service.'

His skinny arms were like sticks poking out of his tattered sleeves. Taka could see her mother's brows knit as she tried to sum him up. He was far too shabby to be of samurai or merchant class, but he didn't carry himself like a servant either. He was impossible to place.

'Wait,' Fujino said, putting a serviette over the bloodstains on her skirts. 'Master, take this boy to the kitchens and give him some food. And provide him with a decent set of clothes, too.'

The restaurant owner's round face was shiny with sweat. He raised his eyebrows as he looked at the boy then gave a sigh, put his hands on the ground and bowed deferentially. 'Whatever you say, your ladyship. The young man certainly deserves a reward. We'll make sure we send him off with a full belly and a good cotton robe.'

'I'll be on my way,' the boy muttered again.

'What house do you belong to?' Fujino persisted.

The boy stared at the ground. 'I've only recently arrived in Tokyo, madam. I have relatives here but ... er ... I've been staying with a man called Shigehiro Inuma, a middle-ranking official from the Omura domain in Hizen. I was in service there.'

He hadn't mentioned his family.

'You were, you say. And now?'

The boy's tawny cheeks flushed. 'I'm looking for work.'

'What about your family?'

Taka cringed. Her mother was a geisha. Where others would have hesitated, she was always shockingly direct.

The boy hesitated. 'I have a father and brothers, your honour. They're far away.'

'So you have no work?' Fujino had the ability to prise information out of anybody, no matter how reluctant they were.

'To be honest, madam, I've just been to see a man. I was hoping to get a job as an errand boy. Hiromichi Nagakura gave me a letter for him. But his house is full already and he says he can't afford any more servants.'

The words came out in a rush. Taka shivered, trying to imagine a world so harsh that people couldn't even afford an extra errand boy. They had so much and he had so little and he'd saved their lives. Their house was full of people already. Surely one more wouldn't make any difference? She spoke up. 'Can't we give him a job, Mother? I need a footman to carry my books when I'm going to school.'

The room fell silent. As she squeaked out the words, everyone turned to look. Haru nudged her to tell her to be quiet but it was too late. The boy had been staring about him like a cornered bear but he too swung round.

Taka felt heat rise to the tips of her ears and lowered her eyes. Fujino frowned, then her face softened and she smiled indulgently. When she turned back to the boy she was looking thoughtful.

'Hiromichi Nagakura, you said, the ex-vice governor of Aomori? You carry a letter from him? Show me.'

The boy scowled, as if to communicate that he had no need of anyone's pity. Fujino held out her hand coaxingly. When she wanted something no one could deny her, Taka thought admiringly. The boy pulled a scroll out of his sleeve. Fujino unrolled and read it, frowning.

As her mother scrutinized the scroll, Taka saw the boy staring at the ground, shoulders hunched, struggling to maintain his look of fierce indifference. His eyes widened

and he squeezed his thin hands tightly together as if forbidding himself to hope.

‘Well, Nobu,’ Fujino said slowly, turning to him. ‘You’re obviously an honest, strong boy. We need someone like you. You’ll be better than these good-for-nothing grooms who abandon us to be attacked by madmen. We need an extra hand. Let me know who to speak to and we’ll give you a job.’

Nobu looked at her and, for the first time, he smiled.

2

IN THE ANTECHAMBER of the Black Peony darkness was closing in. Lanterns sputtered into life as lamplighters touched tapers to wicks and an acrid fug of burning tallow mingled with tobacco smoke and the powerful odour of roasting flesh.

Nobu had followed the rickshaw pullers and the grooms out and was squatting on his heels, chewing the stem of his pipe. Where he came from, good plain food – rice, tofu, vegetables, fish – was what people ate, he thought, not slaughtered animals.

Shouts and laughter boomed from the inner room. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the disturbance already. Nobu wrinkled his nose and stared under his eyebrows at the dandies in their outlandish tight-sleeved outfits sauntering in and out, waving their hands and flashing their teeth, talking at the tops of their voices. They were like creatures from another world.

Ever since he'd woken that morning he'd had the feeling that something was in the air. It might have been the icy wind blasting through the crack in the door or the squawks of the crows or the creaks of carts as vendors passed by, singing out, 'Roasted chestnuts!' 'Sweet potatoes!' 'Tofu!'

He'd been gulping down a bowl of miso soup in the Iinuma family's cramped tenement at the end of a narrow alley in the 'low city', Tokyo's run-down East End, when the master of the house, a stooped beaten-down man with a freckled pate, had told him, shaking his head miserably, that they simply couldn't keep him any longer. They could

barely afford the food to put in their own mouths. Nobu knew that was true. The house was overrun with children and they made a miserable living cutting dried tobacco leaves. He'd been moving from house to house for years now. That was what happened when you had to depend on charity.

Iinuma-*sama's* faded wife had wiped her hands on her apron, pressed a few coins into Nobu's hand and stood waving from the doorway as he set off into the labyrinth of alleys. He'd turned a few corners then, at a loss for what to do, had gone in search of Hiromichi Nagakura, the ex-vice governor of the northern province of Aomori and an old friend of his father's. Nagakura, a thin man with a gentle face and permanently bemused expression, still dressed like a samurai and did his best to live as though nothing had changed. He had fallen on hard times too but he'd helped Nobu out in the past. He'd given him a letter for a man called Tsukamoto who he said might have an opening for an errand boy.

Nobu had walked halfway across the city, tramping through piles of fallen leaves, but when he finally found the house, Tsukamoto, a heavy-browed man with a sour expression, had taken one look at him and said, 'Be on your way. There's nothing for a scarecrow like you here.'

'A scarecrow like you ...' Nobu felt the blood rush to his face and clenched his fists at the affront. The words thundered in his ears as he stumbled off, barely aware of where his feet were taking him. He was pushing his way through a crowd of people, hearing voices and laughter roaring around him, when a wild-eyed man with his face half hidden in a scarf and a couple of sword hilts poking from his sash barged past, shoving him roughly aside. Nobu recognized him straight away - a southerner, a member of the Satsuma clan, the source of all Nobu's woes.

Nobu was sure of one thing: his enemy's enemy was his friend. Whoever this fellow was out to attack, he would