

THE GIFT OF
RIO

THE GIFT OF THE ELEMENTS SERIES
BY C.S. ELSTON



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The Gift of Rio

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For my beautiful bride, the kindest, sweetest and

most naturally good person I know. Andrea, you are the greatest gift God has given me besides Himself.

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*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.*

- Isaiah 43:2a

CHAPTER ONE
The Month Of Mei

The first few months of 1972 had been particularly difficult ones for sixteen-year-old Mei Akagawa. She was a good girl. A good daughter. A good person.

She was barely five feet tall and very thin, giving her an almost fragile appearance. Mei was quiet, shy, and even a bit timid. She always obeyed her parents, followed the rules and generally did what she was supposed to do. Unfortunately, this meant that she had never even begun to build a life of her own. She didn't have any close friends and she only showed interest in the things that she knew would make her mother and father happy. Until 1972, she had been content to make pleasing her parents her primary goal. But, what her father had asked of her this time had, so far, made 1972 the most challenging year of her young life.

Mei's father, Eito, worked at the Tanaka Corporation in the

Kita Ward of Osaka, Japan. Mei wasn't sure what the company did or even exactly what it was that her father did for them. Work was one of the many things that Eito kept to himself. But, Mei knew that the Tanaka Corporation was quickly becoming an important fixture in Umeda which was the major commercial and business district in Kita-ku, Osaka where the Tanaka Corporation headquarters was located. Now her father had asked her to marry the son of the company's founder. It would be good for her father's career. She understood that. And, he wasn't forcing her. Legally, he couldn't. But, the pressure she felt was immense.

So, as she usually did, Mei eventually obeyed her father's wishes and was soon engaged to someone she had met only twice. Sota Tanaka was a nineteen-year-old man who Mei found physically attractive enough. And, she could tell that he felt the same way about her. But, emotionally, he was as cold as she was shy and the combination made it very difficult for them to get to know one another. Their first two meets had involved very little conversation. In fact, the way Mei remembered them, she spent most of the time looking down at her hands and Sota was virtually expressionless, speaking in shorter sentences than anyone she had ever heard before. These meetings and the circumstance surrounding them were causing Mei a severe amount of anxiety. Had she not already been such a naturally

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discreet girl, her parents would probably have been able to tell that she was quickly slipping into a deep depression.

Awaiting their third encounter, Mei was sitting on a park bench near the Osaka North Port Marina, staring out at the Yodo River and feeling as though her world was crumbling around her. She was nervously anticipating Sota's arrival just moments before the unexpected event that would change her life forever. Instead of Sota arriving and taking a seat, an elderly woman nearly startled her into leaping off the bench as the woman seemed to appear out of nowhere and take a seat next to Mei.

"Lovely," the elderly woman spoke calmly to Mei in Japanese without taking her eyes off the river. "The water is just lovely, isn't it?"

"It is," Mei spoke back, also in Japanese, as she tried to slow her heart rate back down to a normal pace.

"It's no wonder God chose to cover most of the planet with the stuff," the elderly woman continued. "Just lovely."

Mei nodded her head as if she agreed but she was barely paying any attention to what the woman was saying. However, she did notice that the woman spoke with a warmth that seemed unique and inviting. But, what Mei was really doing, as she nodded her head, was trying to gain the courage to inform the woman that she was meeting someone at this bench and

that her seat was being saved for him.

As if the woman knew exactly what Mei was thinking, she suddenly reassured her. “Don’t worry, Mei.”

The woman’s use of her name startled Mei as much as her sudden appearance had. But, what the elderly woman said next truly shook Mei to her core.

“I’ll be gone just a few moments before Sota arrives.”

“What?” Mei asked. She was so stunned she couldn’t form full sentences. Only individual words. “How?”

“I know things about you, you don’t even know yourself. At least not yet.”

Mei stood up as if she was going to leave. Instead, she plucked out one of the many questions that were zipping around her brain and asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m no one of great consequence, Mei. Just a humble messenger.”

“A messenger? Then who exactly was it that sent you?”

“The only one who can, my dear.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“You will. Eventually. What’s important now is the message. You need to hear this so that you can prepare appropriately.”

“Prepare for what?”

“You will ultimately have two children. All children are

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special in the eyes of loving parents. But, your firstborn, your daughter, will be truly remarkable and you will come to realize that she's not just a gift to you, but to everyone."

Mei stared blankly at the elderly woman for what felt like minutes. Finally, she took her eyes off the woman and turned briefly to look back out at the river. What the woman was telling her sounded ludicrous. But, she had known her name and the name of her fiancé. Yet, as far as Mei knew, the woman was a total stranger.

She spun around again to ask the woman how she knew all of this but the woman was gone. She had vanished without a trace and the surrounding area left nowhere to hide. She hadn't disappeared into a crowd of people. She wasn't hiding behind a building or a tree. And, Mei had not taken her eyes off her for long enough that the woman getting up and walking out of sight would have been remotely possible. *Was she a spirit?* Mei wondered to herself. She could think of no other explanation.

Mei forced herself to sit back down and try to appear as if nothing had happened. She did not want to act or sound like a crazy person when Sota arrived. That could only complicate matters. But, to be fair, what this woman had told Mei would affect him, too. Surely, he would be the father of the children that this woman claimed Mei would have. Should she tell him about the encounter?

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She decided she couldn't. At least not yet.

That was precisely the moment Sota stepped in front of Mei, startling her even more than the elderly woman had. She quickly stood and composed herself as they bowed in greeting to one another. She forced a smile for the man she didn't know but was engaged to marry and, with whom she would apparently, have a very special daughter.

CHAPTER TWO

Secrets & Lies

Although the religious lines had blurred in Japan since World War II, both the Tanaka and Akagawa families continued to identify themselves as practitioners of Shinto, the ethnic religion of the Japanese people since before Buddhism came over from the mainland in the sixth century. While the engagement between Sota and Mei was the result of an arranged introduction, a somewhat outdated method of finding a partner called “*omiai*,” the couple still honored the common three-year courtship period.

Mei was not sure if she believed the elderly woman she had met briefly on the park bench. But, during her courtship with Sota, Mei decided that she could not risk having a child with him. Not if it was going to be this daughter that was a ‘gift to everyone’ as the woman had put it.

Sota was cold and calculated. His greatest concerns were

for his own success in business. Sota wanted nothing more than to rise to the top of his father's company, ultimately making it more successful than it had ever been. He suffered from an unhealthy competitiveness with his father. It was something he kept hidden from his family but Mei had observed enough privately to recognize that a child could become a dangerous weapon in the hands of such a man. Particularly if that child was special in some way. So, she never told him about her encounter with the elderly woman. In fact, she never told anyone.

Mei felt trapped in the engagement. There was no way to escape without suffering consequences that seemed unbearable to her. But, there was a way that she could protect her unborn child. Unfortunately, the only way she could come up with was to never conceive the child at all. So, she illegally purchased birth control pills on the black market and began to take them about five months before the wedding ceremony. Every three months she would take the bus into Japan's largest slum, Kamagasaki, and purchase them from a man who called himself Yamashita.

Thirty-eight months, almost to the day, after meeting the elderly woman near the Osaka North Port Marina, Sota submitted the required family registration sheet with the city hall registrar to change their marriage status and legally give Mei the surname Tanaka. The ceremony was held in the main building

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of the Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine, approximately sixteen kilometers from the park bench where Mei had received the prophecy. Family members, very close friends, and strategic business associates of the Tanaka Corporation were in attendance. Mei was elegant, painted white as a sign of purity before the gods and dressed in the same type of black kimono, patterned with colorful flowers, once worn at weddings of the nobility during the Edo period some two to three hundred years earlier. Sota, too, looked very handsome. He wore a black crested haori jacket and loose, skirt-like hakama with a vertical stripe. The kannushi performed a ritual purification for the couple and announced their marriage to the gods called the kami. The bride and groom took three sips each from three cups of sake in a ritual called “sansankudo.”

The dinner reception and after-party was held in the banquet hall of Hotel Granvia Osaka, about 5 kilometers away from the Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine. Extended family members, more friends, and additional business associates attended, making speeches before offering gift money in a special envelope. It was everything Mei could have wanted. Everything except for the fact that she had a very deep secret she was hiding from everyone in her life. Not the least of whom, was the man she had just married. A man she knew she didn't love. Even worse, a man she couldn't trust to be the father of this

special baby girl that she desperately wanted but was fighting not to have.

Newly married and surrounded by family and friends, it was the loneliest Mei had ever felt in her nineteen years of life. She continued to feel lonely long after her wedding day. Family and friends went home. Her husband remained emotionally cold, having little time for anything that wasn't work related.

Mei slowly became quieter and more internalized. She put on a happy face whenever her husband had to take her out in public for a dinner with people he needed to impress or spent an afternoon or evening with family. But, otherwise, she mostly stayed home by herself. The one exception was the quarterly bus trip to Kamagasaki to purchase more birth control pills from Yamashita.

As the months passed, Sota grew angry over the fact that Mei wasn't getting pregnant. When a full year had come and gone he told her she was embarrassing him by not giving him a son to carry on his name and his business the way he was doing for his father. He tried to force her to see a doctor but she refused. He didn't understand why she wouldn't go and she declined to explain it to him.

Sota's emotional cold front turned into a volatile storm of cruelty in the year that followed. He never physically abused Mei in the first two years of their marriage. But, one night, that

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changed. He came home drunk and began interrogating her over her inability to get pregnant and refusal to see a doctor about it. He made her sit in a chair at the kitchen table and would push her back into the chair if she tried to stand. He yelled at her until tears were streaming down her cheeks. Finally, he began to slap her across the face as he demanded answers that she would never give him. The interrogation lasted almost an hour. And, when it ended, it was only because Mei couldn't hold herself up in the chair anymore. He finally let her collapse onto the floor. And, once she did, he stripped her of her clothes and forced himself on top of her as he told her she would give him a son if it killed her.

Six weeks later, Mei discovered that she was pregnant.

CHAPTER THREE

Escape

Mei wasn't devastated or even really all that surprised. Although she had never missed a single dose of her birth control, deep down, she always knew this was coming. The revelation of her pregnancy did, however, immediately send her into full-fledged panic mode. Her top priority, as it had been since her one and only encounter with the elderly woman who Mei now believed to be a prophetess, had always been the protection of this daughter whom she had been told would somehow be special. Now that the baby girl was on her way, she had to figure out how in the world she was going to keep her away from Sota.

Luckily, she was home alone at the time she learned of her pregnancy. If she hadn't been, her frantic walking in circles would have caused almost anyone to call for an ambulance and a straight-jacket. After sitting still for a few minutes, which was

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forced by a short dizzy spell, she left the house and spent several hours at the bench overlooking the Yodo River, asking out loud for the return of the elderly woman. She needed guidance. And she needed it badly. But, unfortunately, guidance never came. At least, not in the form of the prophetess.

Forty-eight hours later, the crazies had subsided, and a plan started to develop in her mind. Perhaps, wherever it was coming from, this was the guidance she had been looking for all along. Either way, it was the only plan she had.

The plan began to develop from the realization that if she wanted to escape her current situation, she had already been given the means to pay for it. Sota was so focused on his one-sided competition with his father in the business world that he had placed Mei in charge of all their personal finances. That meant, she had access to every single yen that Sota brought home. Even better, that included all the assets purchased with those yen.

So, a couple of weeks before she needed to, Mei made her quadrennial trip to visit Yamashita in Kamagasaki. But, this time, instead of purchasing birth control pills, she sat him down and laid out a plan that involved changing her identity, cleaning Sota out of every yen that he was worth, buying a plane ticket to America under her new name, and taking every yen she could wire transfer or fit in a suitcase along with her.

Yamashita was astounded at the meticulous and devious plan hatched by the typically shy and seemingly naïve young woman. It made him smile for the first time in the years they had known each other. He told her that he could help make her plan a success, for a twenty-percent fee. Feeling more confident and audacious than she ever had in her life, Mei got Yamashita to knock his fee down to ten percent. The deal was in place and the execution of the plan had begun.

Over the next four weeks, Mei Tanaka made sure that she saw the most important people in her life, in between trips to a few different banks, charities and Kamagasaki, of course. She never let anyone, other than Yamashita, in on her plan to disappear from Japan forever. So, her family had no idea that they were seeing her for the last time or that what seemed like a typical sayonara actually meant goodbye for good.

The burden of her secrecy was particularly hard on Mei where her parents were concerned. She had spent most of her life trying to please them and she knew this was going to break their hearts. However, the responsibility she felt to protect the child growing inside of her at all costs superseded everything else.

Finally, the day had arrived. Mei got ready, packed her bags, and walked out the door of the house she had lived in with a man she had never loved and had sadly grown to hate. She

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climbed in the taxi and breathed a sigh of relief while looking out the front windshield as they pulled away.

Forty-Five minutes later, Mei was sitting in the terminal at the Kansai Airport while a local charity moved every stitch of furniture, clothing, dishware and linens out of their house. When Sota got home that night, he wouldn't have so much as a toothbrush waiting for him.

As she finally boarded the plane, she was greeted for the first time as Toki Uchida. It felt good. It was a clean start. She had chosen the name Toki because of its meaning: "time of opportunity." That is exactly what this was for her. And, she was seizing it.

Toki loved Japan and she would miss it. She had done some research and chosen her new home because it would be somewhat familiar. It was also not as far away from Japan as if she had chosen to go all the way to the mainland of America. In fact, it was only 3,850 miles away. Toki would have had to travel an additional 4,900 miles just to get to the coast of California.

She was off to start a new life on another island. This one was called Hawaii. Of course, it was about seven percent the size of Japan. But, it was as close as Toki could get to Japan in America. And, it represented safety for her child. So, it would be enough. She was flying into Hilo and, from there, had no idea where she was going. The freedom she felt as a result,

overwhelmed her.

She beamed as she looked out the window while the plane was lifting off the ground. She stared at the water and was thankful that she would have a similar view when she landed in her new home. It was at that moment that she named the daughter that was growing inside of her. The daughter that she had been trying to protect since the elderly woman had prophesied her coming. The daughter she now knew was finally going to be safe. The daughter who was a gift to her and to everyone. And, the daughter she already loved.

Perhaps the voice inside that had been guiding her steps for the last four weeks was the one who named the girl for her. Perhaps it was just the lovely sight of the water out of the airplane window. Whatever it was, her daughter's name became official on that plane ride from Osaka, Japan to Hilo, Hawaii in the United States of America.

The gift growing inside of Toki, would forever be known as Rio.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hilo & Rio

Toki was relieved to find that a woman who worked at one of the rent-a-car counters at the Hilo International Airport spoke Japanese. They had a conversation that convinced Toki that she'd earned some self-indulging. So, she rented a bright red, 1977 convertible Ford Mustang and drove to a four-star inn that the woman had recommended, just outside of Hilo, on twenty-two lush acres of tropical paradise. She spent forty-eight hours being pampered in the spa, staring at the gorgeous waterfalls that fed into the Waiau River, and thanking the strange elderly woman whom she couldn't see but hoped could hear her. She did know, however, that she had never felt better in her entire life.

The inn had an Asian flare and even featured an extensive bamboo garden. She felt right at home. But, on the third day, she woke up and decided that it was time to begin the rest of

her life. She needed to explore the island and find a place to call home for herself and the baby girl who would be arriving in a little more than six months.

She fell in love with the area of Kona but quickly realized that the Japanese population was denser back on the other side of the island in Hilo. So, she found a house on a hill that overlooked Hilo Bay. Because she was paying cash, she got a good price for it which gave her a small sense of pride. Toki turned her rental car in and took a taxi to a Ford dealership because she had enjoyed her rental car so much. She bought a 1978 Ford Mustang II King Cobra. This time, Toki chose a beautiful blue color and got the "T Roof" design. Again, she got a good deal because she paid cash and her sense of pride continued to grow.

Toki settled into the new house and got it ready for Rio. The pregnancy was a relatively typical one. Other than the fact that Rio was very active in the womb, which Toki particularly noticed when she was in the shower, there really were no complications of any significance. The most unusual part of the process was something that Toki chose to do. At the suggestion of her new friend, another Japanese woman and next door neighbor, Nyoko, Toki chose to do a water birth in a private setting near Rainbow Falls on the Wailuku River. The birth process turned out to be an expensive one but it all went

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smoothly. She was soon home with her daughter and already anxious to find out what was going to make her so special. Besides, of course, the fact that she was already incredibly special to Toki.

By the time all of the bills associated with giving birth to Rio were paid, Toki realized that the money she had taken from her previous life would eventually run out. Fortunately, her friendship with Nyoko, who had two little boys of her own, had quickly blossomed. Nyoko's youngest was only a year older than Rio and she agreed to watch Rio if Toki found a job.

Soon, Toki did exactly that. She took a job in the administration building at the University of Hawaii, helping Japanese students adapt to college life. Toki's English improved greatly in this job because she often found herself forced to translate from English to Japanese and, just as often, from Japanese to English.

It was also at this job that she met Anthony Marlow. He was an astronomer working as a researcher at the University. Anthony sat next to her while they were both eating lunch. And, yes, it was on another bench. Their conversation was immediately easy, fun, and warm. He was the first African-American that she had ever met. And, before long, he became the first man she had ever fallen in love with.

The Marlow family was officially born when Toki and

Anthony were married just before Rio's second birthday. It was a good thing, too. Toki needed the help. Rio was a handful from the start and it never stopped. It took three adults to raise that little girl: Toki, Anthony and Nyoko. Each of them felt like it was a full-time job. But, they all loved Rio and Rio loved and truly appreciated all of them.

Even after an early entrance to kindergarten, to which Rio adapted flawlessly, she wouldn't stop throwing herself into new situations. She made daring climbs on playground equipment and found new ways, almost daily, to prove she was just as tough, fast, strong and brave as any of the boys. The most important boy in her life was her little brother, Hani, who was born ten days after her fifth birthday.

Toki was consistently amazed at how different Rio was from both Sota and herself. Emotionally, Rio was an easy child. She was thick-skinned and as friendly as any child in the school. The only problems that arose came primarily when her impermeable attitude permitted activities that were impulsive and occasionally dangerous, like taking Toki's Mustang for a joyride, at age twelve, with seven-year-old Hani riding shotgun. In that instance, she didn't get very far. In fact, she was stopped about forty feet from her driveway when she accidentally put her mom's car through Nyoko's fence. Although she got into a lot of trouble for it at the time, and spent the rest of her

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summer babysitting and mowing lawns to earn money to repair the fence, Toki gave the sixteen-year-old car to Rio when she got her driver's license. Toki bought herself a 1994 Acura Integra. She got her T-Tops again but, this time, she chose the color white.

Rio was a smart girl and always got good grades in school. However, her swimming coaches had higher praise for her than her teachers did because her bold mouth was occasionally an unwelcome distraction in class. Rio was quick to correct her teachers when they made a mistake because she was focused on the task at hand. However, she was completely at peace in the water and typically quiet as a result. In both settings, she worked as hard as anyone else.

Her hard work paid off when it came time for college. Those good grades and her stamina in the pool earned her a scholarship to the University of Hawaii, where her mother and her step-father both worked. She considered going to a different school but, she already knew the coaches at the University because they had been attending her meets all throughout high school. Ultimately, it was an easy transition and, the thought of her parents not being able to attend any of her meets would have been unbearable.

All in all, Rio had a great, albeit relatively uneventful, childhood. Toki rarely ever thought about the fact that the

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prophetess had told her how Rio would be special to everyone. Of course, it did occasionally cross her mind and, if it hadn't been for the woman's accuracy about everything else, she might have dismissed it completely. As a result, she still had never told anyone about the prophecy. But, that was all about to change.

CHAPTER FIVE

Major

Rio didn't have the typical long arms, broad shoulders or long torso that the rest of the swimmers on her team had. In fact, she was the smallest person in the pool. Having been a swimmer pretty much her whole life, she had developed a tiny waist and powerful but slender legs. She wasn't the fastest swimmer on the team, either. Therefore, she didn't swim any of the sprints. What made Rio one of the best swimmers on her team, was the fact that it seemed she could swim forever without even slowing down. She didn't have to pace herself like everyone else who swam the distance races did. She simply went all out from the beginning and didn't stop until the race was over.

That had been the case from the time Toki and Anthony put her in a body of water bigger than the bathtub. They had spent a Sunday at the Wailuku River State Park when Rio was

two years old. They walked her down the river bank and let her dip her toes in the water. They expected her to yell or laugh, maybe even turn around and run back up the bank. Instead, Rio simply closed her eyes and smiled, as if she was feeling the warmth of the sun for the first time.

When Anthony picked her up and walked further into the water, he held her in front of him and told her to start paddling with her hands and kicking her feet. As he loosened his grip on his step-daughter, she ignored his advice and did a full breast stroke. And then, another one. Suddenly, Anthony was scrambling to grab her as she swam away. Panicked, he and Toki started chasing after Rio but she just swam in a circle around them. They stopped and watched in amazement as their daughter, at two years old and having never taken a swimming lesson, calmly swam around them in about three feet of water.

Toki, of course, was quickly reminded of Rio's consistent reaction to the shower from inside of her womb. She began to wonder, for the first time, if her daughter's affinity for water had anything to do with the prophecy she had received from the elderly woman. But, she continued to keep that to herself. Instead she just started laughing and clapping as she and Anthony looked on in awe.

Rio was enrolled in swimming classes less than twenty-four hours later. Her instructors were as astonished by the child's

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quick taking to water as her parents had been. Not that it is uncommon to get children into the pool at that age. Some parents have their children in the pool and getting comfortable with a swimming environment before the age of one. However, Rio took so naturally to the water that no one could believe she hadn't previously been taking lessons. Even if she had, she was already well ahead of other kids her age.

They had her competing as early as they could, which was at the age of five. She swam in a variety of events at first. But, as she got older, kids got faster and her consistent winning became, well, less consistent in the sprints. But, no one could beat her in the distance races. So, by the time she was a freshman in high school, the distance races were all that she continued to compete in.

As a sophomore in college she was facing the stiffest competition of her young life. She did well, but she didn't qualify for the Olympic trials the year before. It was tough for her when she came up short but, Rio was a pretty resilient girl. She got right back to training and had just finished up a strong season in March of 1997.

Instead of celebrating her personal best time of 15:38:24 and third place finish in the 1650 Free at the NCAA National Championships, Rio's coach found her in the pool the day after their return from Indianapolis. He squatted down, above the

fifty-meter-long and twelve-yard-wide pool, and sat back on his haunches in front of her lane. As Rio swam toward him, she spotted him, touched the wall and put her right arm over the side to hold herself up as she removed her goggles with her left hand.

“Hey coach,” she said.

“I’d ask you what you’re doing in here but I’d be lying if I pretended to be surprised,” he responded before moving on to the order of business. “If I told you I got a call from your academic advisor, would you be able to tell me why?”

“She’s on me about choosing a major.”

“Right,” he agreed. “I’m assuming she explained that it’s school policy you have to have a major declared by the end of your sophomore year if you want to participate in the athletic programs your junior year.”

Rio nodded in agreement.

“You got that covered?”

“Not yet. But, I will.”

“If you want to talk through anything, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, coach.”

“Of course. Now, get out of that pool and go have some fun.”

“This is fun, coach.”

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“I mean real fun,” he said as he reached a hand down. She grabbed it and he pulled her out of the pool. “Get out of here.”

Rio went to the locker room, dried off and changed into street clothes. She was on her way home when she got an idea. She turned off Highway 19 onto Waianuenue Avenue and drove straight to the Wailuku River State Park. She parked the Mustang at the back of the parking lot so she'd be less visible, climbed into the back seat and changed into a dry bathing suit.

Three minutes later, Rio was swimming again. But, this was even better. The only thing that felt more wonderful than being in the pool, was being in water that had no chlorine in it. This was the closest Rio ever got to 'getting high' on a drug. But, this was so much better than Rio could imagine any drug being. Instead of clouding her mind, it gave her clarity. It gave her energy. It made everything feel more spectacular. And, it was exactly what she needed as she pondered her future and prepared to make a major decision.

CHAPTER SIX

Decision

The Marlow family was enjoying a rather typical dinner of casual conversation and a feast of rice, pickled cabbage, mahi mahi and miso soup at the dining room table. But, Rio was about to supercharge the conversation. It had been years since she had so much as asked a question about her biological father. And, when she had brought it up in the past, she had typically done it quietly with only her mom. Therefore, when she finished blurting out the following sentence, the collective shock was severe.

“I think I’m going to talk to my professors and see if I can take my final exams early this year so I can spend a long summer in Japan looking for my biological father.”

It was as though God had just hit the pause button on the entire room. Everyone but Rio was frozen with their eyes locked on her. Hani had a piece of mahi mahi resting on a fork,

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which rested on his lips, as he tried to process what his sister had just said. After all, the subject of his sister having a different biological father than he did hadn't come up in at least ten years.

Anthony finished setting his glass of water down, swallowed, and waited for his wife to speak or Rio to add some additional thoughts to the conversation she had started. He truly loved Rio and thought of her as his own to the point that he rarely thought about the fact that there was another man on the planet who was physically responsible for her existence. So, the idea that she wanted to go and find him wasn't completely shocking to Anthony. But, it still stung a little.

Toki simply folded her hands in her lap and looked at her daughter in bewilderment. She was stunned that Rio had brought this up to anyone but her. And, even if they were the only two in the room, the fact that it was such a drastic, intense statement was both surprising and depressing to Toki. The long pause felt like it lasted minutes but was only a few seconds.

"What?" Rio questioned, honestly stupefied by the reaction.

"Why?" Toki finally asked.

"Why not?" Rio responded with a little bit of attitude.

"Because you don't understand what it is you're asking," Toki stated as her hands and her voice began to tremble. It wasn't because she hadn't argued with Rio before. This was a

loving family. But, nearly all families experience a few arguments and fights. Especially during the children's teenage years. This family was no exception. Toki was upset because the thought of Sota learning about Rio was devastating to her.

"First of all," Rio began to retort, "I didn't ask a question. I made a statement. And, second, I think I know exactly what it is that I'm saying."

"I'm sure you do think that. But, why don't you tell me why it is you suddenly want to find Sota?"

"Maybe because of the fact that his name is Sota and you and he were both from Japan is nearly all I know about the man who is half of the reason that I exist. I think it's fair that I want to know where and who I come from."

"That does sound fair," Anthony chimed in, surprising Toki.

"Anthony is your father," Toki stated emphatically.

"Anthony is my dad," Rio agreed. "Nothing is ever going to change that. I love him and he is the man that raised me. But, I'd still like to know a little bit about the man that I share DNA with."

There was a long silence. Toki knew the time had come for the truth. She excused her fifteen-year-old son from the table. Hani argued briefly but then took his plate to his room and finished his dinner there.

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Toki told the whole story for the very first time. From the elderly woman to the night she was beaten and raped by her husband, she left nothing out. Rio was devastated and sobbed harder than she could remember ever sobbing before. She felt terrible about what her mom had endured. Even Anthony welled up with tears as he held his wife. He knew Sota had been abusive but, he didn't know anything about the prophetess nor did he know the extent of Sota's abuse. Rio got up from her chair and they all hugged. Of course, Rio had about a hundred questions for her mom. Most of them, Toki simply couldn't answer because she didn't know how to. But, when it was all over, it didn't change Rio's mind. She was about as stubborn as anyone and Toki knew that this was going to happen with or without her blessing.

Rio scooted her chair around the table so she could stay on their side and continue the conversation. "What he did was awful, Mom. I mean, it was about as awful as anything someone can do. So, I'm not making excuses for that. But, in all fairness, he never knew the truth. So, he didn't really have a chance to respond to any of this. He not only didn't know about the woman in the park or the birth control, but to this day, he doesn't even know he has a daughter. I'm old enough to take care of myself now. I want to confront him and give him the chance to respond."

Another moment of silence. This one was even longer than the first.

“You’re right,” Toki finally spoke. “I didn’t trust him. So, I kept you from him. To protect you.”

“Of course you did,” Anthony chimed in to stick up for his wife.

“Absolutely,” Rio agreed. “I’m not second guessing that at all. I’m thankful you did what you did. You’ve given me a great life. You both have.”

Rio grabbed one of each of their hands in hers. “This isn’t about undoing anything. Just the opposite. I’m trying to figure out what the rest of my life is going to look like. In order to do that, I just feel like I need to know the rest of the story that tells me where I come from. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Toki admitted. “But, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t scare me to pieces.”

“I know. But, it’ll be okay. I’m sure of it.”

Toki invited Hani to come out of his room as she told them where she came from. She told them all about her family and Sota’s, giving Rio every bit of information she could think of that would help her daughter go do what she needed to do and then get back home as quickly as possible. And, Rio, of course, took copious notes as if she was in class and the professor was giving out answers to the final exam.

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Rio appeared before the academic board and got permission to take her exams early on the grounds that this trip was going to be educational. She agreed to make a presentation when she returned and they were even going to give her elective credit for it. It didn't hurt that her parents were faculty or that she was such a good student and a star on the swim team.

Of course, the board also insisted that she finally choose her major. She picked marine biology and told herself she could change it later if she decided on something else while she was gone. But, at least this appeased the powers that be, for now and gave her academic advisor something to do when it came time to helping her schedule her fall classes.

So, just over two decades after Toki fled Japan to save her daughter's life, Rio was going back to try and figure that life out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A New Vision

Rio had set out everything she was taking with her the night before. And, she didn't have to be at the airport, which was less than fifteen minutes from home, until about 9:30am. But, she still had to set an alarm because she needed to make sure she had plenty of time to get ready, put everything into her suitcase and backpack, and eat a hearty breakfast. Flying to collegiate swim meets had taught her to eat before she boarded because airplane food was generally not worth eating unless it was truly an emergency.

So, when the alarm went off at 6:30am, Rio's eyes popped open and she gave them a quick rub before springing out of bed. She picked up the outfit she had laid out to wear and took it with her into the bathroom. The shower felt particularly good that morning. Perhaps it was because she knew it would be her last shower at home for a while and she was trying to enjoy it as

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much as she could without wasting too much time. Or, perhaps it was just a really good shower.

When it was over, per her usual routine, she finished drying off, got dressed, and immediately put her contacts in before doing her makeup. A few minutes into the makeup process, she noticed that she was developing a headache and it felt like her eyes were constricting.

Wondering if she accidentally switched her contacts and put them in the wrong eyes, she held her right hand up and covered her right eye as she stared at her toothbrush. Then she repeated the action on the left side. Neither eye looked the way it normally did. So, she took her contacts out and put them in their case again. Blinking a few times and scrunching her nose, she finally opened her eyes and looked around the room. She was shocked to realize that her vision was suddenly better than she remembered it ever being without wearing glasses or contacts. She decided to leave her contacts out and wait to see if the room grew blurry again. But, instead, as her eyes readjusted, the headache went away and her vision became significantly clearer.

The whole thing was truly confusing. In fact, it seemed to be impossible. But, it was happening and she wasn't about to tell her mother who might use a trip to the optometrist as an excuse to cancel her summer in Japan. So, she finished her

makeup, did her hair and packed everything up. She even included her contacts and solution, just in case it turned out that her miraculous optical healing was only temporary.

Rio had never been an over-packer. Still, she went out of her way to be efficient for this trip. She wanted to be light and particularly mobile on this journey because she really didn't know exactly what it would entail.

The truth is, Rio had very little planned. Heading off to an unknown place with virtually no itinerary would terrify most people. It certainly scared Toki, who had tried to convince Rio to let her tag along. But, Rio refused. She didn't want to put her mother through that after hearing about her daring escape decades earlier. And, Rio felt in her heart that this was something she needed to do alone. Besides, she was too excited about the possibility of finding her biological father to worry about any of the potentially negative outcomes.

Of course, the fact that he might reject her had crossed her mind. So had the possibility of not finding him at all. But, she had pretty much dismissed those concerns and focused instead on the positive possibilities. She also knew that her plan was to find the places her mom had described, and in some cases circled exact locations on a map, and then to just start asking questions of the people she found there. But, exactly where their answers would lead was unpredictable. The truth was, as

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long as those answers ultimately led her from her landing in Osaka, Japan to Sota Tanaka, Rio really didn't care about anything in between.

She was completely ready waiting, with her carry-on suitcase and a backpack, by the front door at 7:45am. Rio went into the kitchen and helped her mom make her favorite breakfast. They sliced two papayas in half and hollowed out the middles. Then they mixed banana slices, chia seeds, granola, slivered almonds and blueberries into coconut yogurt and poured the mixture into the papayas. This, too, was something Rio would miss while on her quest to find Sota Tanaka.

As they gathered around the table, the different culinary tastes of each family member were evidenced by the type of beverage chosen to go with their papaya boats. Toki had black tea, Anthony had coffee, Hani had orange juice and Rio consumed the only thing she ever drank: water. From the time she was a little girl, nothing had really quenched her thirst like a good old fashioned glass of water. When she was hot, she wanted it as cold as she could get it. And, when she was cold, she would heat it up. But, she never added anything to it. Not so much as a squeeze of lemon. Just plain water was perfect for Rio. And, if it ain't broke, she figured, why fix it?

Conversation was close to non-existent. Rio was trying to downplay her enthusiasm so she didn't make anyone feel bad.

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Toki was too upset to talk. Anthony stayed mostly quiet because he understood how both Toki and Rio felt and he wasn't sure how to engage one without making the other feel bad. Hani knew he would miss his sister but didn't want to admit it.

So, they all enjoyed their papaya boats and various beverages without more than a few words spoken. The things that were said were primarily small talk about how good breakfast was and how everyone had slept. And, when they were all done and the dishes were clean, it was finally time to take Rio to the airport, say goodbye and send her off to Japan.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Goodbye

The short car ride to the airport started out as quiet as breakfast had been. But, that ended quickly when Toki finally started to break down. She sat in the front passenger-side seat and kept her face forward for fear of truly losing it if she turned around to face Rio. Through tears, she begged her daughter to let her buy a ticket and go with her.

“We’ve already talked about this,” Rio insisted. “I can’t put you through that, Momma.”

“Letting you go alone isn’t any more bearable,” Toki contended.

“It’s going to be fine. I’ll be back in a few months. Maybe sooner. And, I’ll call at least once a week.”

It briefly went quiet again. The only sound heard over the road noise was Toki’s sniffles. Anthony looked over at his wife, then at Rio through the rearview mirror, and then at his wife

again before returning his eyes to the road. “That is what we agreed to,” he said softly to Toki.

“I know but Sota . . .”

Anthony looked over as Toki lost it. The tears were overpowering her.

“She’ll be okay,” he offered as comfort. He placed his right hand on her back as he continued to speak and he glanced back and forth between his wife and the road.

“Rio can take care of herself. You know how I know that?”

“How,” Toki managed to ask through the tears.

“She’s your daughter.”

The comforting words helped but the tears didn’t stop. They arrived at the airport and Rio insisted that they leave her at the curb rather than coming inside and prolonging the difficult goodbye. As it was, the moment took so much time that a police officer had to tell them to move things along. Clearly, the event was hardest on Toki. But, even Anthony and Hani were fighting back tears. And, although she was excited to go, it wasn’t easy for Rio to leave her mother in such emotional distress.

Still, the time had come to do exactly that. Toki slowly made her way back into the car, staring at her daughter as if trying to memorize every square inch of her face, and waving profusely as Rio finally disappeared into the airport. That’s

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when Toki's tear ducts maxed out their workload capacity and flooded her face.

Both Anthony and Hani knew it was going to be a long ride home and an even longer day once they got there. Everyone in the car missed Rio already. But, no one missed her more than Toki.

Rio, on the other hand, felt bad for her mother and immediately missed her family. But, those feelings subsided quickly as she got checked in and started walking toward security. The excitement stirring inside of her overwhelmed the rest of her emotions and soon she was practically skipping as she entered the security line. She put her bags on the conveyer belt and walked through the metal detector. When her enthusiasm boiled over, she tried to start a conversation with a TSA agent by asking if he'd ever been to Japan. The agent sighed as he said he hadn't and Rio was immediately aware that he was annoyed by her. So, she attempted to stifle her delight long enough to get her bags back and start her walk toward the gate.

Her mom's story about the elderly woman prophesying about Rio sprang to her mind. Perhaps, this trip would be an opportunity to learn more about that as well. She didn't know how anything like that could come about. But, she figured that she had a better chance in the very place where the prophecy

occurred than she would thousands of miles away from that place.

It was hard to imagine what it all meant, but the thought of it added even more exhilaration to Rio's mood. It didn't take long and she was nearly skipping again. Sure, she was looking forward to the possibility of meeting her biological father. But, more than that, the adventure of the whole thing was really firing her up. She was going to find her family and meet people she had never met. She was going to see places that she had never seen. And, all of it was centered around discovering who and where she had come from. It was almost too exciting to fathom. She was so thrilled that she feared she might burst. Or, at the very least, break out in a song or a scream that could get her some interesting looks.

Fortunately, she managed to contain herself. But, that eagerness carried her all the way to her gate where she couldn't even bring herself to sit down. Instead, she stood just off the walkway and grinned at people as they walked by. She said hello to a few of them and most returned the greeting. Others ignored her. And, some even seemed a bit frightened by her. But, Rio didn't care. Her adventure had begun. That's what mattered. That's what drove her overwhelming enthusiasm.

Suddenly, she noticed an old woman standing across the walkway by a drinking fountain. The woman was staring at her.

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At first, Rio assumed that the woman was studying her odd zeal as she greeted strangers. But, the longer they stared at one another, the more it began to feel like the woman thought she knew Rio. Since Rio had never seen the woman before, that thought seemed ridiculous. Perhaps Rio just looked like someone she knew.

It didn't dawn on Rio that this could possibly be the same woman who her mother had met in Osaka all those years ago. The very same woman who predicted her pregnancy and declared Rio would be a special gift to everyone. But, that's exactly who it was.

The woman smiled warmly just before a man stepped in front of Rio and stopped, setting a bag down, and lifting a camera to his face that hung on a strap around his neck to take a picture of his wife and two young daughters. Rio tried to see around him but he kept moving, almost in sync with her, as he tried to frame his shot. Finally, he took the picture and the family picked up their bags and kept walking. But when Rio got a clear shot of where the woman had been standing, she was no longer there. Rio looked all around at the different people in the vicinity but the woman had flat out disappeared the same way she had done to Rio's mother some twenty-five years earlier.

CHAPTER NINE
A Fountain Of Surprises

Although Rio didn't know the woman's identity, her strange stare of familiarity and her even more strange disappearance captured Rio's attention. Suddenly, she was as curious as a kitten encountering an empty Kleenex box for the first time. Her eyes darted all over the terminal as she searched for the woman but couldn't find her. Rio bumped into several people as she made her way through the crowd, without truly watching where she was going, to the spot where the woman had previously been standing.

Where could she have gone? Rio's mind was racing with thoughts about the woman. That old lady can't move that quickly. I've never met an old person sly enough to disappear like that. What just happened? Who was she? And, why did she look like she thought she knew me?

Eventually, Rio's eyes wandered from the faces and backs

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of heads in the crowd down to the drinking fountain just to the left of her. She felt thirsty. So, she stepped up to it and bent down as she hit the button to release the water. As she got closer she watched the water start to bend in mid-stream.

Slowly, the water lifted off the stainless-steel basin and the stream turned toward Rio. As her eyes widened, she watched the stream of water straighten out and extend directly into her mouth. Panicking, she released the button and looked around to see if anyone had been watching. No one was looking in her direction. She wasn't sure if she would rather have her anonymity protected or have someone verify that what she thought had just happened did in fact happen, to confirm that she wasn't crazy.

First my contacts and now this, she thought. *What is going on here?*

She looked down at the light gray drinking fountain again. Slowly, she lifted her hand and hit the button one more time. Everything seemed normal. So, she bent down to take another drink. As she leaned in, the water began to bend again. Just like it had before, the water lifted off the basin. The stream turned and extended directly into Rio's mouth. She quickly let go and looked around the same way she had the first time. Once again, she didn't appear to have any witnesses.

Suddenly, a little boy tugged on the back of Rio's shirt. Startled, she turned around and looked down at him.

“Can I get a drink?” the boy asked boldly.

“Of course,” she quickly replied and stepped out of his way. She swiftly surmised that he was approximately eight years old before looking around for a parent. Rio spotted a man standing at the edge of the gate and the walkway. He was watching carefully so, she assumed it was the boy’s father. She looked at the boy again and he was struggling to stand tall enough to reach the water with his face. He was pressing down on the button and the water was pouring out as normal.

“Do you need some help?” she asked.

“No,” he insisted. “I’ve got it.”

It was clear the boy was never going to get there. He stood on his tiptoes and pushed his lips as high as he could, like a flower straining to reach the sunlight. Rio looked over at the boy’s father who shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *the kid insists on doing it himself*. She tilted her head and shrugged her shoulders back at him, acknowledging the truth of his unspoken sentiment.

Rio then sidestepped, folded her arms across her chest, and turned to lean her back on the wall and look down at the water. The boy was still several inches short. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut as he pushed with all of his might. Rio’s gaze shifted to the water. She wondered if she could somehow make it bend for him the way it had for her.

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Her eyes narrowed as her focus grew more intense. Rio pointed her left index finger at the stream of water. Suddenly, as she lifted her finger, the water began to rise off the basin again. She slowly pointed her finger toward the boy and watched as the water mimicked her movement. The water started to bend in mid-stream and extend out toward the boy.

When the water hit the boy's lips, his head jerked back because it surprised him. But, as his lips opened, he began to suck as much water in as he could. The slurping sounds were as loud as someone trying to get the last drops out of a soda with a straw. His face got all wet as the water bounced off his chin and cheeks. His shirt displayed the aftermath with water spots as he finally let go of the button and rolled back onto his flat feet. He stared at the fountain for half a second, then looked up at Rio, wide-eyed and sporting a huge grin. He then turned around and ran back to his Dad for high-fives.

“Dad,” he yelled. “I did it! I told you I was tall enough!”

Rio chortled as she watched. Her eyes met the boy's father's and she tilted her head and shrugged her shoulders again. This time, it was as if she was saying, *Who knew?* The man reciprocated the gesture and then turned his attention to his son, to whom he offered heaps of congratulatory praise.

Rio finally looked back down at the fountain and began to wonder, once again, what it was that was happening to her. Not

needing contacts this morning was certainly very strange. She had never even heard of anything like that happening to someone. But, this water in the drinking fountain incident was even more peculiar. She was physically seeing something take place that seemed like a scientific impossibility. Even more, she felt it happen when the water entered her mouth and quenched her thirst. Then, it appeared that she had willed it to happen to the little boy as well. None of this seemed at all possible. Yet, it had all happened. It wasn't even 10:30am, her journey barely yet begun, and this had already been the strangest day she had ever experienced in her entire life.

As if summoning her to more unfamiliar territory, that's when the boarding call for her flight came over the loudspeaker.

CHAPTER TEN

Take Off

The flying portion of the trip started off uneventfully. The flight from Hilo to Honolulu took less than an hour. Rio then not only changed planes but airlines during her almost two-hour layover. The lengthy break even allowed her time to hit Starbucks and grab a bottle of water and a sandwich to take on the flight. When the break was over and she boarded the next plane, her real adventure began.

Finally, after all the waiting, she was seated by the window, staring out at the runway, about to take off. She was minutes from leaving Hawaii and would be in Osaka in less than nine hours. Her heart was pounding.

Rio had been on airplanes before and, at times, had even traveled great distances for swim meets. But, never, in all of the trips she had taken, had she been as excited as she was at that moment about the trip she was finally embarking on. When the

idea for this expedition had hit her while she was swimming in the Wailuku River, she had instantly known it was the right thing to do. Now, barely three weeks later, she was on her way.

As Rio felt the pressure of the engines increase power and then release when the plane finally started to move, her tummy flipped and her heart continued to race but she couldn't keep her eyes off the view out the window. She felt the plane lift and watched the runway disappear. Rio continued to watch as the ground faded further and further away. Soon, it was replaced with the surface of the ocean. If her smile could have gotten any bigger, it would have. It was official. Her next stop was Osaka, Japan.

It wasn't until the captain began to talk over the loudspeaker, to announce that they were almost at cruising altitude, that Rio peeled her gaze away from the window. And, she didn't talk to anyone until the flight attendants came by with snacks and beverages. Rio, of course, just asked for some water.

That's when she finally calmed down a little and began to settle in, stirring her water with her mind and thinking about how cool it could be to take complete control of this new ability she was discovering inside of her. Even though she didn't understand the ability or know where it came from, she figured she might as well make the most of it. That's also about the time she overheard a man behind her and in the aisle seat on the

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opposite side of the plane complaining about the beer selection. The man said he was going to Japan and he wanted a Japanese beer. The flight attendant offered him Kirin but he complained that he wanted Sapporo. When she told him that they didn't have Sapporo but that Kirin was a Japanese beer that was more than a hundred years old, he said that Sapporo was even older and that's what he wanted.

Rio wondered how much Sapporo he'd already had before getting on the plane as she leaned forward and looked back across the sleeping man sitting next to her to see who the rude passenger was. The obnoxious man looked normal enough but he was getting louder and more agitated.

As Rio sat back in her seat, the flight attendant offered to buy his Kirin for him and the man begrudgingly took it, opened it and filled the plastic cup he was handed with a napkin and two small packages of pretzels. But, he apparently couldn't help himself and continued to mutter obscenities, in between sips from the leftovers in the can. The flight attendants moved their cart past him down the aisle and the woman who had been helping him began talking to another customer.

Rio thought about the fact that water had to be one of the ingredients in beer and she leaned forward again, thinking he deserved a lap full of cold liquid. But, when she did, she noticed the woman next to him crushing up a pill, scooping the powder,

and pouring it into her glass of water. Now that her vision was somehow 20/20, or perhaps even better, she looked at the label on the prescription bottle that rested next to the water cup. The woman was stirring the contents of the cup with a plastic spoon on the tray table folded down from the back of the seat in front of her. The drug was called Zolpidem but Rio had no idea what that was. Then she spotted the word insomnia and a sly grin crept up on her face.

The woman with the pills glanced around as if she wanted to make sure no one was watching her. Rio quickly looked away and reached down to her backpack so she could pretend she wasn't looking. While she was down there, she fished out her portable CD player, headphones, and one of the three CD's she had packed for the trip. She put them in her lap and snuck a peek back at the woman. She was crushing up a second pill.

Rio briefly wished she'd been given the gift of telepathy that included all objects, not just water. Then, she'd be able to send the powder straight into the man's beer. Instead, she was going to have to get more creative.

She waited until the woman had dumped the rest of the powder into the water. Then she watched as the man took another swig of his beer and she caused the remaining contents of the can to spill out and dribble down his chin. He let out a curse word and then grabbed the napkin from under his cup.

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The commotion caused the woman to let go of her cup of water and look out the window. Rio assumed that it was her way of pretending not to notice so she didn't have to talk to the man. But, while the man was distracted by wiping beer off his chin and the woman was looking out the window, Rio focused in on both cups. She lifted the contents of both out of their plastic containers and gently placed them in the opposite cups. So, the woman suddenly had the beer in front of her and the man had the water, along with the two Zolpidem pills that had been stirred into it.

Finally, the man angrily set his napkin down and, without paying any attention, grabbed his cup. In a frustrated gesture, he lifted the cup up to his lips and took a swig. However, Rio wanted him to down the whole thing before he even realized what he was drinking. So, she sent that water pouring down his throat so swiftly that the man guzzled it all. However, by the time he was done, he was in the middle of a choking and coughing fit.

"What was that?" the man exclaimed as he put his damp napkin to his mouth. He noticed his beer sitting in front of the woman next to him. He looked her up and down as he muttered a few more obscenities, took his beer and tried to drink it in between coughs.

The woman was, of course, every bit as confused as the

man was. She looked the tray table over as if she expected it to provide an answer.

Another flight attendant, who had not been unlucky enough to deal with him the first time around, hustled over to see if there was anything she could do to help. He demanded another beer but, this time, he was forced to pay for it.

Rio let out a little chuckle, enjoying the scene as things calmed down. Then, she took the compact disc out of the jewel case in her lap and popped it into the CD player that was resting underneath the case. The disc contained the album *The Score* by The Fugees. Her favorite song on the album was “Killing Me Softly with His Song” but that was track number eight so, she wouldn’t get to that one for about a half an hour. She put her headphones on and listened to the *Red Intro* and the song “How Many Mics” before getting to the third track. And it was during this track, “Ready or Not,” that she looked back and discovered the obnoxious man a row behind her and across the aisle was sound asleep. The woman next to him was crushing up another pill.

Rio smiled with satisfaction, leaned back in her seat, and looked out the window as she mouthed the words to the chorus: “Ready or not, here I come . . .”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Serendipity

Rio's tummy flipped for the second time on the plane when the pilot announced that it was time to prepare the cabin for landing. Her enthusiasm was barely containable as she ripped off her headphones and stuffed her portable CD player into her backpack. This was the first time she had noticed the snoring. She glanced back and saw the obnoxious man sound asleep as a flight attendant put his tray table up for him but was careful not to wake him. Rio decided that was best for everyone around him.

She briefly considered the fact that she hadn't dozed off herself. It surprised her. Rio had never been one to sleep beyond the normal seven to eight hours per night, even as a teenager. But, she had typically found the monotony of a plane ride something that caused her to take naps. She chalked it up to the excitement of the expedition and quickly let the thought

escape her mind. Instead, she turned her attention to the window and searched for any sign of the land of her ancestors.

It was about 9:30pm back home but they had passed the International Date Line during the flight and it was 10:30am the following day in Osaka. Therefore, daylight was not a problem. At first, however, all she saw was water. But, the cityscape soon came into view. To Rio, it looked like a modern civilization emerging straight out of the ocean. Her tummy flipped for a third and final time. She couldn't wait to begin exploring.

When the plane finally touched down, she completely ignored the obnoxious man who jerked awake behind her. All she could think about was getting off the plane, seeing where she came from and finding the people who made up her long-lost family. The family member she was particularly excited to meet was, of course, her biological father, Sota Tanaka.

The length of time it took for the plane to taxi to the gate, for the ground crew to connect it to the jet bridge, for Rio to retrieve her carry-on suitcase from the overhead compartment and wait for all the people in front of her to get off the plane was only about fifteen minutes. But that fifteen minutes was so excruciating to Rio that it may as well have been fifteen hours. She walked in the dawdling line like a little girl doing the *pee-pee dance*. But, when the opportunity presented itself just outside of the jet bridge, she broke free like a running back in a football

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game who had picked his lane through the defensive linemen and around the linebackers with the end zone finally in sight.

Rio was walking faster than any of the little old ladies, high-priced businessmen or families headed off on vacations that surrounded her. Had it not been so crowded, she may have flat out sprinted but, that just wasn't possible. Observers probably thought she was late for a flight. The truth was, she just couldn't wait to get out of the airport and decide on her next steps. She probably needed to find a place to stay and some way of getting around. She had read about the excellent public transportation system in Japan and knew that the trains were a popular method of travel. Luckily for her, it was still morning in Osaka and she had plenty of time to get it all figured out.

As she rounded a corner, she tumbled over a guy who was bent down tying his shoe. She let go of her bag on rollers and both she and the young man sprawled out on the floor.

“Oh,” Rio exclaimed, “my gosh! I'm so sorry! Are you okay?”

Both scrambled to get to their feet and collect themselves.

“Yeah,” the man said with a noticeably American accent as the people passing by changed their course to walk around them but, otherwise, ignored them completely.

Finally, Rio and the young man locked eyes. She was surprised to see the American accent come from someone who

looked Japanese. She was even more surprised by the fact that he was so handsome. And, since most men are not all that subtle when they like what they see, she could tell he found her to be appealing, as well.

Rio grabbed her bag and they stepped toward the wall to get out of the way of other foot traffic. Just before they stopped moving, the young man finally managed more words.

“How about you? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Rio answered. “Well, embarrassed but fine.”

“You’re embarrassed?” the young man asked as if gaining a flirtatious confidence. “I’m the idiot who was tying his shoe in the blind spot of a busy walkway.”

“And, I’m the idiot who wasn’t watching where she was going.”

They shared a grin, followed by a moment of silence. Finally, Rio broke through the romantic tension with the first words that came to her mind.

“Do you feel like maybe we fell asleep on our planes and woke up in the same cheesy rom-com?”

“Well,” the young man started to answer, “I haven’t been on a plane today but I’m glad to hear you find me attractive.”

“What?” Rio exclaimed, finding herself embarrassed again but quickly trying to retrace her words to find out what she said that she shouldn’t have.

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“I didn’t say . . .”

“Sorry,” the young man interjected. “I guess I’m making an assumption. I assume you and I are the leads in this cheesy rom-com and we all know Hollywood never casts unattractive leads. So, I guess I hoped that meant you found me attractive which would help heal my bruised ego from the whole tying the shoe in a busy walkway blind spot incident. It may also help heal your ego from the whole not watching where you’re going thing to learn that I find you every bit as attractive as I’m still hoping you find me.”

Rio simply smiled. Typically, when she started to like a guy, her experience was weeks of silent glances and a game of *Will They or Won’t They* playing out in her mind. This guy had cut through all of that in about a minute and a half. She couldn’t help but join the speed dating revolution.

“Consider your ego mended,” she heard herself say but could hardly believe it. At the same time, she sensed her grin on her face growing to a point where she felt the corners of her mouth might be stretching beyond their limit. But, they surprised her and grew a little more.

The thought that followed was one that cemented a feeling she’d already been having for several weeks at this point, *Japan is going to be so freaking awesome!*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Unexpected

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah,” Rio found herself honestly answering the young man before even considering the possibility that he might be asking her out. When she finally realized what was happening, she widened her smile and finished her thought. “I am.”

“Want to grab an early lunch?”

“I don’t know you,” Rio teased.

“Getting to know each other was sort of my main motivator for asking you to go to lunch,” the young man shot back with a sly grin.

“What’s your name?”

“Luke,” he answered quickly and extended his hand.

“Rio,” she responded as she took his hand to shake it. She held on a split second longer than seemed normal because she really didn’t want to let go.

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“Better?”

“Better.”

“So, how about that lunch?”

“What’s good around here?”

“We don’t even have to leave the airport,” Luke said as he took her bag. “Follow me.”

Rio was shocked to see both a McDonald’s and a Burger King as they wandered through the airport. Luke was pointing out some of the places he liked including a Chinese place, which Rio was also surprised to see. But, the real kicker was when they passed a Starbucks. Suddenly, Rio didn’t feel so far from home. And, the final blow was delivered when Luke walked her into a little restaurant called Kona Kafe.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“Why?” Luke responded, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you know where I’m from?”

“No. Should I?”

“Of course not. But . . . Do you know where Kona is?”

“Hawaii.”

“Right. It’s on the opposite side of the same island from where I live. It’s, like, an hour and a half from where I grew up.”

“No way,” Luke said, genuinely thrilled by the coincidence. “That’s awesome. I think this place has the best coffee around.”

And, I can't find Pipikaula anywhere else. I'd never heard of it before but it's awesome and I get it every chance I have. If you're from Hawaii, you probably know exactly what Pipikaula is though, huh?"

Rio nodded her head affirmatively with a grin.

"You want to go somewhere else? There's a great noodle place . . ."

Rio shook her head and stopped his sentence by reassuring him. "Pipikaula sounds really good."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Good. Because the noodle place doesn't hold a candle to this joint."

The two sat over plates of Pipikaula, which is beef that has been dried and charred like jerky and served with sides of white rice and a Hawaiian tradition called poi. Poi is taro root that has been mashed into a sticky paste. The Pipikaula was also served with a variety of condiments like sesame seeds, kim-chee, garlic powder and honey. Rio didn't have the heart to tell Luke that, although she enjoyed the meal, she'd had better Pipikaula back home. Her guess was, in Hawaii, they stuck to tradition and dried the meat outside until it was chewy before char broiling it but, here, they had probably dried it in an oven. Ultimately, it really didn't matter. The real star of the meal was the

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conversation.

Rio asked if Luke worked at the airport since he had mentioned not being on a plane that day, he clearly didn't have to get on one since they were now sharing a meal, and he seemed to know an awful lot about the airport. But, Luke explained that he simply spent a lot of time there. He had been in and out of it several times himself but, even more, he had picked people up and dropped them off there too many times to count. The real surprise came when Rio learned why - Luke was a Christian missionary.

He grew up in the southwestern corner of Torrance, a city in the South Bay region of Los Angeles County, California. The house he lived in for his entire childhood was near a place called Rat Beach. It was wonderful that they had a love for the water and beaches in common. Luke was even a surfer. He was constantly surprising Rio.

He was third generation American and grew up in a Christian home with loving parents. Much to the dismay of his great-grandparents, Luke's grandparents had converted from Buddhism to Christianity at Billy Graham's first crusade in 1949. The crusade was held in a tent they called a canvas cathedral at the corner of Washington and Hill streets south of downtown Los Angeles. Luke considered it a privilege to be born into a family with the Christian foundation already in

place. When he learned, as a teenager, that the country of his ancestors was about 35% Buddhist, 4% Shinto, 1% other religions including Christianity and the other 60% didn't identify with any religion at all, he immediately felt called to go to Japan and share the love of Jesus Christ. But, he was determined to do it all the way. So, he finished high school and moved to Pasadena where he attended Fuller Theological Seminary. He stayed until he completed his Master of Arts in Theology and Ministry. Then, he hooked up with an organization called Christian Youth Outreach International. They put on sports camps around the world for anyone under the age of eighteen who wanted to attend. While there, the kids learned how to be better athletes. And, they also learned that there is a God who loves them. Luke had been working with CYOI for two years now and his passion for it had only grown stronger.

Rio was amazed at his story. She had never met anyone like him. And, Luke was equally fascinated with her story. He had never met anyone like her either. He didn't seem to bat an eye when she admitted that religion had never been a part of her life. She half expected to feel judged but, the judgment never came. In fact, Luke offered to be something of a tour guide and drive her around – even help her find a place to stay. They were amazed when they realized three hours had passed and quickly decided that the adventure they were going to now take

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together should not be delayed any further. With that, Luke and Rio officially left Hawaii behind and stepped outside into Osaka, Japan.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Old Church Van

Rio stopped and stared as Luke approached the silver van with black, red and orange stripes on the side. It was a 1988 Toyota Master Ace Surf that had been lowered on BBS mesh wheels. It had windows all the way around that almost made it look like a space ship in a mid-nineteen-eighties b-movie. The two sets of side windows in the back and the rear window all had curtains hanging in it that, at one time, probably matched the orange stripe on the side but had since faded with years of direct sunlight.

“This is yours?” Rio finally asked, unsure if she should laugh hysterically, show her complete disgust, or run for her life.

“Yeah,” Luke stated without thinking anything of it as he opened the rear hatch and placed Rio’s bags inside before closing it and turning to face her. “Well, it belongs to the ministry, actually. Why?”

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“It’s a little creepy, don’t you think?”

“Creepy?”

“Definitely. Like, hey kid you want some candy, creepy.”

“What? No way.”

“Yes way.”

“This is the kind of ride rock stars take on tour.”

“By that, do you mean to say, this is the kind of ride garage bands take to their first out of town gig because the drummer borrowed it from his uncle who, the day before, was asking kids if they want some candy?”

“Well, thanks a lot. The next time I pick up kids to take them to basketball camp, I’m going to feel like a complete low-life.”

“Oh,” Rio started with a silly grin that feigned shame, “I’m sorry.”

“Sure you are. Maybe you just need to hear the soundtrack.”

“The soundtrack?”

“Yeah. Audio Adrenaline plays the van’s theme song.”

“Audio who?”

“Audio Adrenaline. Christian rock band.”

“Never heard of ‘em.”

Luke walked around to the passenger side of the van, unlocked the door, and opened it for his guest. “Hop in. I’ll

introduce you.”

“Okay. But, if I get in and find a big bag full of candy I’m getting back out and running away as fast as I can.”

“Deal.”

Rio climbed inside and glanced around at the grey carpeting and matching cloth seats. She didn’t see any candy. *Good sign*, she decided as Luke shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

She briefly thought about how weird it was to be sitting on the left side of the front of the car but not be the driver. But that passed as Luke climbed inside the van, shut his door, started the engine, ejected a compact disc from the stereo and reached across Rio’s lap to open the glove box. He pulled out two jewel cases, opened a brown one called *Jesus Freak* by a band named DC Talk, and inserted the disc from the stereo. He then opened the other jewel case and removed the disc inside before closing it again and putting both jewel cases back in the glove box. Rio closed the glove box as Luke put the second disc into the stereo. She noticed that the name of the new album was *Some Kind of Zombie* by the band he had mentioned just a moment ago, Audio Adrenaline.

“Ready?” Luke asked.

“For the Mystery Machine’s theme song?” Rio fired back, flirtatiously.

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Luke did his best impression of Scooby Doo's laugh which nearly dropped Rio's jaw into her lap.

"Okay," she stated in amazement. "I did not see that coming."

"I'll take that as a yes," Luke said with a grin as he hit the button on the stereo to bump it up to track number six before hitting play.

It took a moment for the stereo to get the CD going and then catch the right track. But, when it finally did, the first twenty-three seconds of the song were all build-up. It started with an eight second, single electric guitar strum on just one string, drawn out with a slow-moving wow-wow bar. The following fifteen seconds included an up-tempo intro that Rio thought sounded almost like a mash-up of pop, rock, ska, and punk.

But, then the first vocals came in with the lyrics "Fourteen kids in an old church van . . ." and she and Luke started laughing like two old friends.

"Okay," Rio admitted. "I totally get it now."

"Good," Luke stated as if declaring a major victory.

Rio was surprised by how much she liked the music but, even more, by how much she had instantly connected with Luke. The whole thing was so unexpected but so incredibly welcome. A trip she was already thrilled to be taking had now

become even more exciting and enjoyable because of this chance-encounter with a stranger in a foreign airport. She smiled to herself as she once again thought about how it felt like a romantic comedy cliché. But, here she was, living it.

“So,” Luke began to ask, “where’s our first stop?”

The question snapped Rio out of her thought process and forced her to change gears. “Oh,” she exclaimed as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, “right. Um . . . I have it circled on this map. My mom said an address wouldn’t work like it does back home.”

“She’s right,” Luke agreed. “Most of the streets don’t have a name and the buildings aren’t numbered sequentially. Totally different system over here. Cities are all divided into Ku and Machi.”

“What?” Rio asked as she finished unfolding the map and handed it to Luke while pointing at one of the circled locations on it.

“Um,” Luke responded as he took the map, “they’re like wards.” He looked at the map for a few seconds before commenting. “Yeah, I think we can find this.”

With a wink, he tossed the map on the dash, reached his left hand down, shifted into reverse, checked the mirrors and, with a glance over his shoulders, backed out of the parking spot. As the music transitioned into a much more mellow song Luke

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said was called “Lighthouse,” the van rolled out of the airport and onto the Hanshin Expressway, headed south toward the house her mom once lived in with Sota Tanaka. The very same house in which Rio was conceived.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Details

Over Pipikaula, Rio had told Luke a lot about herself. She had even shared her reason for being in Japan. Of course, she left out the part about the prophecy and the fact that she had gone to bed the previous night with poor eyesight and awakened that morning with perfect vision and the ability to move water with her mind. But, other than those not-so-minor details, she had pretty much given him an accurate account. He knew that her mother considered her father to be a bad person but, that Rio wanted to find him and decide for herself. Luke thought that made her a brave young woman.

Rio had also learned a lot about Luke. But, now she wanted to pry a little more and find out what made him want to do what he was doing with his life.

“So, how do you know God exists?” she asked boldly.

“Do you think He doesn’t?” Luke responded, scrunching

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his eyebrows.

“I’m not necessarily saying that,” she stated, contemplating.

“Because, I think to know that, you’d have to be God yourself. Which, makes it impossible.”

“Whoa. What?”

“I mean, you’d have to simultaneously be everywhere and know everything in order to have the amount of information necessary to truly and emphatically know that God doesn’t exist. And, if you were everywhere at once and had total knowledge and awareness, that would make you God. Are you God?”

“Nope. And, that was quite the philosophical smack down you just laid on me. So, thanks for that.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Luke said with a chuckle.

“I guess I just don’t know for sure one way or the other,” Rio admitted. “I’m assuming, as a missionary, you believe pretty firmly that He does exist.”

“Correct.”

“How?”

“How what? How did I reach that conclusion?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I was raised in a Christian home. But, that doesn’t mean I was always truly a Christian. I had my time of doubt before I made a real commitment.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” Rio said with a grin.

“The things I was being taught in church and the things I was being taught in school didn’t always align. That bothered me. I wasn’t sure if one was completely true and the other was completely false or, if both had gotten parts right and parts wrong. So, I started doing some deep thinking on my own.”

“Is that how you got so philosophical?” Rio teased.

“Maybe,” Luke acknowledged with a grin forming on his face. “I did quite a bit of research and a lot of praying. I asked God to, if He was real, show me what the truth was.”

“And?”

“And, it started to slowly make more and more sense.”

“What did?”

“Well, the first thing that hit me was the question of why is there something rather than nothing. Why does anything exist at all? And, how could it be an accident when all of the details are just so.”

“The details?”

“The details. A caterpillar has two hundred and forty-eight individual muscles in its head alone. Each human eye has over two million working parts. There are over four hundred billion stars in our galaxy and something like a hundred and seventy billion galaxies in our universe. Now, obviously, most of that hasn’t been explored yet but, so far, the most complex object

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we can find is the human brain. How could all those details have happened by chance? We're no accident, Rio. And, ultimately, the conclusion I came to was that the Bible offers the best answer."

"But, what if the Bible is wrong?"

"First of all, what if it's not? Second, it is truthful in all areas open to investigation. It's philosophically consistent and all its historical, geographical and scientific claims have already been verified as factual. Even its prophecies, end-time events of course excluded because they haven't happened yet, have all come true. If it holds up in every area we can test it in, why would we assume anything other than that it holds up in the areas we can't test it in, too?"

"You're right. That does make sense. I still don't know though."

"Besides, we know from observational evidence that the universe is expanding and, therefore, had a beginning. That means it clearly isn't eternal. It had to come into existence by way of something else that existed before it. The scientific law of cause and effect also tells us that the effect can't be greater than the cause. So, whatever brought the universe into being is greater than the universe itself. This is true of everything in the physical universe. Nothing exists that is not dependent on something else for its existence. To explain the existence of the

dependent, non-eternal universe and everything in it, knowing again that it did have a beginning, there must be an independent and eternal Creator. And, like I said before, the Bible gives me the most satisfying answer for that. So, the only conclusion I could draw from there was that the Judeo-Christian God revealed in it is very real.”

Rio watched him as he talked. If nothing else, she admired his intelligence, passion and certainty. And, she could see how he arrived at the conclusion that he had. Still, she had more questions than answers. Finally, she decided to get after one of the big ones.

“So, that Judeo-Christian God is supposed to be all about love and peace and stuff, right?”

“Yep. He is perfect in love, holiness, goodness, justice, wisdom . . . I could keep going.”

“I’m sure. But, let’s focus on the part where you say He’s perfect in love. Doesn’t the existence of suffering and hatred and all forms of evil prove that perfect in love God must not be real?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Good,” Luke said with the least annoying smirk Rio had ever seen. “Captive audience.”

“No doubt.”

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“Let me start with a question.”

“Okay.”

“How do you know what evil is?”

“What do you mean?”

“We can agree that murder is evil, right? Please say yes. Otherwise, I may have to pull this sweet ride over and let you out. For my own safety, of course.”

“Have no fear. We can definitely agree that murder is evil.”

“Good. But, how do we both know that?”

“We just do.”

“Ready for me to get philosophical again?”

“Go for it.”

“For us to both know that, a moral standard has to exist beyond us. In other words, without a moral absolute that exists outside of human consciousness, we would never be able to determine right from wrong in any universal sense. Yet anthropology and sociology tell us that there is in fact a universal standard of behavior in all people throughout history regardless of religion or culture. I believe that universal moral code originated with God and He summarized it for us in the Ten Commandments about thirty-five hundred years ago. Unfortunately, there is also sin in our nature. Therefore, when we follow our own standards of behavior, we tend to do evil. But, this is more proof for, not against, the existence of God.

Because, if morality were truly relative, if it changed with culture or time, there would be no worldwide continuity. Instead, we have a God who judges perfectly what is right and wrong. He doesn't change. Therefore, our moral standard doesn't change. He is the law-giver. Evil exists because we are often law-breakers."

Rio continued to listen. It was striking a chord because he was saying things that she hadn't thought about before and it all made sense. But, that didn't make it true. This was going to require a lot more mulling over. She was so deep in thought that she didn't even realize that the car had slowed down and then suddenly came to a complete stop.

"We're here."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Stepping Up To The Plate

Rio suddenly felt like her heart was going to burst out of her chest as she looked out the window and realized she had made it. It had all started with a swim in the Wailuku River. That's when the idea for this trip had come to her. And, now, here she was. She was parked in front of the house that her mother had lived in when she was married to Sota Tanaka. The same house in which Rio was conceived. And, the same house her mother had fled when she left Japan for America.

“Oh,” she quickly started, “I'm here. I'm actually here.”

“Uh-huh,” Luke agreed. “Now what?”

“I don't know,” Rio admitted as she looked closer and began to doubt that this really was the correct house. “I guess I go up to the door. Although, this doesn't really look like the picture my mom showed me. Are you sure this is it?”

“Pretty sure. Did you bring the picture?”

“No but, this isn’t how I remember it.”

”Well, it’s the spot circled on your map. A lot of the houses in Japan aren’t built to last. Some of them are torn down every twenty to thirty years so, it’s very possible this is the same location but a completely different house.”

“Really?”

“Really. Even if your father still lives here, he may have built a new house on the same lot. Do you know whether or not he does still live here?”

“I have no idea.”

“Only one way to find out. Did you bring a gift for him?”

“No. Should I have?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why’d you ask me that?”

“Well, it’s customary, in Japan, to bring a gift when you visit someone’s house. But, I guess that’s more for like when you’re invited over for a dinner party or something. I don’t know. This scenario is pretty much brand new to me, too.”

“Like I said, I don’t even know for sure if he lives here. And, if he does, I don’t know if he’ll be home. And, if he is, I don’t even know if he’ll invite me in. As you can tell, I really don’t know anything.”

“You’re right.”

“That’s kind of mean,” Rio teased.

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“No, I mean, you’re right that you don’t need a gift. You’re good. Just go for it.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“Oh,” Luke reacted, genuinely surprised by the invitation. “Sure. Yeah. I’ll come with you. Let’s go.”

They each climbed out of the van and walked to the front of the house. They stopped side-by-side, neither sure exactly how to approach the door. Rio had been so brave and optimistic up to this point. Suddenly, she found herself unsure. But, that wasn’t about to stop her.

Rio glanced around at the white wall surrounding the property. It was only a few feet tall and had rounded, gray shingles lining the top of it. The entrance to the property was at least twice as tall as the wall and made from wood. It was covered by a roof that sloped down on either side and was also covered in the same gray shingles.

“Okay,” Rio said out loud. She had psyched herself up and Luke followed her through the gated entrance. The property on the other side of the wall had well-manicured green vegetation and the grounds all looked like they had been well taken care of for many years. Rio particularly liked the trees that looked like layers of perfectly rounded puffy green clouds.

Approaching the front door, Rio raised her hand to knock.

“Wait,” Luke said, stopping her. “If you’re going to knock,

only knock twice.

“What?” Rio asked, sincerely confused.

“In America, we tend to knock three or four times. Here, they only knock twice.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Why are there so many rules?”

Luke simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Bring a gift. Don’t bring a gift. They’re this particular on the number of knocks on their doors but they don’t care about numbering their houses sequentially? Seriously? This is absurd. Are you tricking me right now?”

“No,” Luke answered sincerely. “I promise. If you don’t want to test the waters, just ring the doorbell.”

Rio smiled and, in a display of trust, raised her hand and knocked twice. She was a little surprised when a woman about her mother’s age answered the door. She quickly decided that it would make sense for Sota to be married to another woman by now. After all, her mother had remarried a long time ago.

Luke was impressed when he heard Rio properly introduce herself in Japanese by saying “Hajimenmashite, Marlow Rio to moushimasu.” He followed Rio’s lead and introduced himself as well. After the woman took her turn, Rio realized it was not Sota’s wife. In fact, after a few minutes of conversation, they

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discovered that the woman had never even heard of Sota Tanaka.

Rio and Luke walked away with Rio disappointed but not defeated. It was only the first strike and she still considered herself very much up to bat. They climbed back into the van and Luke immediately started the engine. He quickly changed the stereo to track number six and the song “Blitz” by Audio Adrenaline started to play all over again. This quickly brought delight back to Rio’s face.

“Ready to see the outreach?” Luke asked.

“The what?”

“The outreach. The ministry. Where I work.”

“I suppose. Although, I should probably figure out where I’m staying tonight and how I’m going to get around tomorrow.”

“I’ve already got you covered.”

“How’s that?”

“First of all, I’ll drive you where you need to go. And, second, we have dorms that no one’s using right now because there’s no camp. You can stay there.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I was just planning to find a hostel or something.”

“Have you seen a Japanese hostel?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to stay there.”

“Why? Is it not safe?”

“I don’t think it’s any less safe than other hostels. But, the ones I’ve seen here are like walls of double-decker rooms barely bigger than coffins that look like dryers at a laundromat.”

“That’s appealing,” Rio stated sarcastically.

“Yeah. Not really.”

“Will your co-workers be okay with me staying there?”

“Absolutely. We’re missionaries. You’re my current mission. They’ll get it.”

“That’s amazing.”

“I agree. Someone’s looking out for you, Rio.”

“Yeah, you.”

“I’m just a servant,” Luke told her as he started to drive. “The One looking out for you is a lot more significant than I am.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Spicy Beef

As Luke drove the van into the parking lot of Christian Youth Outreach International, Rio couldn't help but think that the campus looked a lot like a school back home. There were five buildings. The biggest one was used for indoor sports like basketball, ping-pong and gymnastics. There was a second building used for indoor water sports like swimming, diving and water polo. What the staff called the main building was used for administrative purposes and housed the cafeteria. Finally, there were two dorms - one for boys and one for girls. Surrounding those five buildings was a track and several fields used for sports like soccer, baseball and cricket. Rio also spotted some tennis courts. She was very impressed and even remarked to Luke that it all reminded her of an Olympic training facility. Of course, in reality, it wouldn't measure up to those standards. But, for a sports camp, it really was quite extraordinary.

Luke told Rio about how busy it gets when the campers arrive as he led her into the main building. Loud was one of the words he used. It was almost hard to imagine for Rio because it was currently so quiet. However, she had been in enough school cafeterias and on enough playgrounds to know exactly what he meant.

They set Rio's luggage down next to a table in the cafeteria and pulled chairs down from on top of the same table. Sitting down in the chairs, they unpacked the paper bag they had picked up at a local Japanese fast food restaurant on their way in. It contained two dinners. Both were beef bowls, which were basically just beef on rice, because Luke swore it was the best thing on the menu.

Rio teased him about eating nothing but beef since that's what they had for lunch. Once she tasted it, she understood and informed him that she hadn't grown up consuming a lot of beef but that he was quickly turning her into a beef girl. He took it as a compliment, picked the bowl up off the table, and sat back in his chair with a hint of satisfaction and accomplishment showing in his body language.

"Looking kind of proud of yourself over there," Rio pointed out.

"I think what you just told me is that I have really good taste," Luke said in defense. "So, yeah, I take a bit of pride in

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that.”

Rio’s face displayed full-on flirtation mode as she responded, “You do and you should, Sporty Spice.”

Playing along, Luke jabbed back, “Sporty Spice? From beef and pride to Sporty Spice? I don’t see the connection.”

“No connection there.”

“Clearly.”

“But, you’re obviously Sporty Spice. Look at what you do for work.”

“Oh, okay. Got it. Now it makes some sense. So, which Spice Girl does that make you? You don’t seem frightening enough to be Scary Spice.”

“Thank you.”

“Your hair is black so, you can’t be Ginger Spice.”

“True.”

“That leaves Baby Spice and Posh Spice.”

“Neither.”

“You have to pick one.”

“Then I’m Sporty Spice.”

“You can’t be Sporty Spice. We already made me Sporty Spice. In fact, you made me Sporty Spice.”

“Then we’re both Sporty Spice.”

“We can’t both be Sporty Spice. It’s like the Highlander. There can be only one.”

“The what?”

“The Highlander. You’ve never heard of the Highlander?”

“Guess I missed that one. What is it?”

“It’s not just one thing. It’s like three movies and a TV show.”

“Oh. Okay. Guess I missed them all.”

“Alright. Let’s say there can be more than one Sporty Spice. What’s your sport?”

Rio suddenly realized she’d gone the whole day without talking about swimming. She couldn’t remember the last time that happened.

“I swim.”

“You do?”

Rio nodded.

“Competitively?”

Rio nodded again as she spoke, “I’m on scholarship at the University of Hawaii.”

“Oh, wow. Impressive. You’ll have to check out our pool.”

“I’d love that. What’s your sport?”

“Basketball and baseball. I played both in high school. Probably could have played baseball in college. But, I went to seminary instead.”

“Also impressive.” Luke and Rio shared a flirtatious look that abruptly ended when Rio heard some loud clanging,

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followed by a squeal. She cocked her head and scrunched her eyebrows. Then she heard what sounded like a repeated thud sound, each followed by something akin to the tearing of paper. She looked at Luke.

“Are you okay?” he asked, with real concern.

She didn’t respond at first. Then she heard the clanging sound again and asked, “Do you hear that?”

“I don’t hear anything.”

Next, she heard a bigger thud, followed by the sound of air being released.

“Is someone here?”

“Maybe in the offices. Why?”

“You really don’t hear that? It’s so loud.”

“Stay here. I’ll check it out.”

As Luke stood up and walked away, Rio squinted her eyes. She was surprised to realize that his movement was excruciatingly loud. Luke’s footsteps sounded like the thud and paper tearing pattern she had been hearing but, even louder. As he disappeared from view, the volume decreased until it balanced out with the first sounds. Then she heard him open a door and walk about twelve more steps before he began to speak to someone. She could hear every word as clear as if it were happening just a few feet away.

That’s when Rio realized that what had happened to her

eyesight was now happening to her hearing. Wanting to gain control of it, she looked across the room and out a window. As she focused her eyes on a tree just a few feet outside of the window, the conversation between Luke and a man he called Isaac disappeared and it was replaced by the ribbit sound of a tree frog. Suddenly, the tree frog also came into view as if it were only a couple of feet in front of her face. Rio sat back in her chair, probably looking a lot like Luke had when she admitted he was turning her into a beef girl, when a hand on her shoulder sent her leaping to her feet in alarm.

“Uh,” Luke started with a little embarrassment showing through, “Isaac, this is Rio.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Goodnight

Rio quickly collected herself and shook Isaac's hand. "It's nice to meet you," she stated, nervously.

"Likewise," Isaac responded without a hint of skepticism. "Luke tells me you're here looking for your birth father and you need a place to stay. I hope our dorm rooms aren't too cramped for you."

"I'm sure they'll be fine." Rio lit up with enthusiasm as she realized Luke had been right. She was welcome to stay. "Better than fine. I'm sure they'll be fantastic. Thank you, so much."

"It's our pleasure to have you. He also tells me you're quite a swimmer. If you stick around long enough, we might have to put you to work as a coach."

Rio grinned as her eyes darted from Isaac to Luke and then back to Isaac again.

"Well," Isaac said as he extended his hand a second time,

“it’s nice to meet you and I’ll look forward to seeing you around. Go finish your dinner.”

“Thanks again,” Rio blurted out.

“Of course,” Isaac insisted as he turned and walked away.

Rio and Luke sat down and finished their dinner. Luke beamed as he saw how excited and appreciative she was of the opportunity she had been given to stay in the CYOI girls’ dorm. He was even more pleased when she expressed relief and even excitement when he told her that he acted as a Resident Director when the kids came and, therefore, resided year-round on the first floor of the boys’ dorm.

When they were finished with their dinner, they threw the containers away and left the main building. Luke escorted Rio to the girls’ dorm, unlocked the first door on the right side of the hallway on the first floor, and gave her the key to her dorm room. It looked a lot like the dorm rooms she knew from visiting her friends back at college. Once again, she was thrilled.

They placed her bags inside and began the official tour. Luke showed Rio where all the important places were like the bathroom and the laundry facilities before they left the dorm. He also showed her his room so she could find him if she needed anything. They walked around the campus and even went back to the main building for a more thorough tour. But, Rio’s favorite spot was, of course, the building they called the

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Aquatics Center. They agreed that a swim was likely an activity they would need to add to the calendar for the following day. However, it had gotten late and Rio wanted to call her mother before bed. So, the last stop on the tour was a pay phone in the lobby of the girls' dorm where the tour had begun. They agreed to meet in that same spot at nine o'clock the next morning. Luke said goodnight and walked out of the building. Both were sad to see the night come to an end but, knowing that they would get to have another day together when they woke up made it all better.

Rio pulled her calling card out of her wallet and picked up the phone to start dialing. Looking at her watch and doing some quick math, she realized her mom wouldn't be at home yet.

Toki was on her feet, behind her desk at the university, gathering her things and was about to start for home when the phone rang. She briefly debated about whether to answer it. Finally, she picked up the phone and answered as she usually would. When she heard her daughter's voice on the other end of the line, her tone quickly transformed into one of relief and excitement as she dropped back down into her chair.

She was thrilled to hear that Rio was safely in Japan and fascinated to learn that the woman who lived in her old house had never heard of Sota Tanaka. She presumed that meant that it had been sold at least twice since she left. Otherwise, she

figured that the woman would know the name of the man who sold it. But, she admitted, the woman's husband may have handled everything and, perhaps, she simply didn't know who they had purchased the house from. Either way, it was interesting for her to hear.

The most fascinating thing that Toki learned from Rio, however, was the story of her meeting this Christian missionary named Luke. She even joked that Rio had been in Japan for one day and had accomplished what Toki hadn't been able to do in a couple decades there - meet her knight in shining armor. She could hear the heart flutters in her daughter's voice when discussing him and how good he had already been to her. It made Toki feel good, too, that her daughter had been given what sounded like a safe place to stay and someone who knew the area to be with her on this journey. That added a sense of comfort for Toki that she didn't have when she dropped Rio off at the airport earlier that morning.

When they hung up the phone, they both felt relieved. Toki could drive home with a smile on her face. Not that all her concerns had disappeared but, most of them had subsided, at least a little bit.

Rio went to her room and got out her toiletries, took them to the bathroom and got ready for bed. By the time she climbed in, her thoughts were back on Luke. It surprised her that she

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wasn't focused on finding Sota. That, of course, was still the plan. However, this new man in her life wasn't the man she was looking for when she stepped off the plane. The idea of him had not even occurred to her until she basically ran him over in the airport.

But, her thoughts weren't about how handsome he was, how kind and warm or even how smart he was. Her thoughts were on the things he said about why he was so confident that God was real and how He had revealed Himself in the Holy Bible. What he had to say made a lot of sense but, new questions were beginning to form in her mind. She was already beginning to look forward to having the opportunity to ask them the following day. Until then, she was hoping that it was time to close her eyes and get some shut-eye. But, unfortunately, she wasn't tired at all.

So, instead of drifting off to slumberland, she continued to think about the details that Luke had mentioned as evidence for the existence of God. *We're no accident* she remembered him saying. That made sense to her. All the details that made life work, from as big as the universe to as small as a caterpillar's head or the human eye, it was too specific and too perfect to have just happened by accident. And, as she followed her brain down the rabbit trail, she thought about what was happening with her eyesight, her hearing, and her newfound ability to

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control water. She thought to herself that this must be part of what the elderly woman had been talking about when she told her mother that she would be a gift to the world. In that moment, she knew there was a plan for her life. She just didn't know what that plan was yet. But, it was comforting to think that a plan did exist. She found herself going back to what Luke had said and reapplying it specifically to herself in her mind, *I'm no accident.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Before Breakfast

Rio had never been one to sleep her life away, nor had she ever gone a whole night without sleeping a wink only to start her day feeling like she'd just had the best sleep of her life. She was completely ready and waiting in the lobby of the girls' dorm just before 8:30am. That put her at over half an hour early. True, she was excited about what the day had to offer and she was really looking forward to spending it with Luke. However, the main reason Rio had arrived in the lobby so early was simply the fact that she had never gone to sleep and, therefore, had nothing else to do.

She wished she'd had the keys to the pool because she would have loved to go for a swim. But, that wasn't possible. Instead, she had to settle for an extra-long shower in which she had spent some time playing with her new abilities. She had stood under the shower head and redirected the water spray all

over the sixteen-square-foot stall. The biggest kick came when she had telepathically spread the water out so it thinly sprayed everywhere and became like a mist after which she quickly funneled it into a steady stream like it was bursting out of a wide-open hose. She was practically famous for taking long showers but, this may have been her longest one yet.

With the lengthy shower having been over for more than an hour, Rio found herself waiting for Luke's arrival and time seemed to be nearly standing still. Luckily, Luke was excited about spending the day with her as well. So, she didn't have to wait too long. Luke arrived about ten minutes early and, he wasn't about to tell Rio but, truthfully, he could have been there about ten or fifteen minutes before that. Of course, they greeted each other ardently and immediately started walking toward the van. Excitement was certainly in the air.

"How'd you sleep?" Luke asked, sincerely.

"I didn't," Rio answered, honestly.

"At all?"

"At all."

"Why not? Was everything okay with your room?"

"Everything was great," she interrupted to reassure him. "I just never got tired."

"You must be exhausted then."

"I'm really not."

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“Wow,” Luke genuinely responded.

“I know. I’ll probably hit a wall later.”

“Yeah, I would think so. What’d you do all night?”

“Mostly laid in bed with my thoughts.”

“Thoughts about finding your father?”

“That was part of it,” Rio responded as they arrived at the van and Luke unlocked the passenger side door for her. She climbed in and reached across the driver’s seat to unlock his door as he closed hers and walked around to his side. Rio sat back in the passenger seat and looked out the front windshield, realizing for the first time just how close they were to a lush, green mountain.

“That’s gorgeous,” she exclaimed as Luke climbed in and closed the door behind him.

“Mount Gozaisho. Not bad, huh?”

“Not bad at all,” she agreed.

Rio finally peeled her eyes away from the beautiful view and pointed at another circle on the map as she informed him, “That’s our destination for today, by the way.”

“Okay,” Luke said as he started to look it over. “Heading a little further south and a lot further east today, I see.”

The distance wasn’t exactly a surprise to Rio since she could see that by looking at the map but, she did calculate in her mind that Luke’s statement meant this was more than ninety minutes

in the car each way since that was about how long it took them to get to CYOI from her mother's old house the previous night. She realized that it was a good thing that she enjoyed the company with whom that time would be spent.

"Yeah, I think we can find this," Luke finally said. "So, what else?"

"What else, what?"

"You said finding your father was part of what you laid awake thinking about," Luke said as he set the map down and put the keys in the ignition to start the van. "What else did you think about?"

"Quite a few things," Rio answered, reflectively. She looked out of the passenger side window as the van started to move.

"If you don't feel like talking about it, you don't have to."

"Well," Rio started with a bit of hesitation before finally going for it. "I was thinking about the conversation we had about God and the Bible."

"Oh, okay."

"How can you be so confident that your religion is the right one? I mean, isn't it possible that all roads lead to the same place?"

"First of all, in spite of the old saying about Rome, that's not how roads work. Second, there are hundreds of religions out there and they can't all be true because they contradict each

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other.”

“Okay, that’s fair. So, how do you know?”

“Well, like I said yesterday, the Bible is accurate in every way that it can be tested.”

“I know you did say that it was philosophically consistent and that its scientific, historical and geographical claims had been proven factual.”

“And, prophecy.”

“Right. But, not to sound dumb . . .”

“You don’t sound dumb, Rio. This is heavy stuff that deserves a lot of questions.”

“Thank you,” Rio said, looking at him appreciatively. “But, what does all of that really mean?”

“Well, in large part, the Bible is a history book. It provides us with all kinds of information, including the customs, languages, ethics, religions and cultures of many ancient civilizations. And, when you compare what it says on those subjects with other sources, the Bible is proven to be accurate, reliable, and factual every single time. Secular archaeologists frequently use it to determine the location of their digs and, when they do, they consistently prove that reliability all over again. The last hundred years of archaeology have been fantastic for proof of the accuracy of the Bible. Thousands of finds in the Middle East have supported the biblical record. Places and

events once thought by many to be legendary and mythological have instead been proven to be factual by archaeological digs.”

“Like what?”

“Like the city of Jericho and the Hittite civilization. The five cities in Genesis and even the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Like the fact that Israel’s ancestry is derived from Mesopotamia and all the world’s languages come from a common place of origin. Jewish captivity and their entrance to Jerusalem through a tunnel during the reign of David. All of which is taught in the Old Testament. But, the New Testament has been proven every bit as factual. Particularly the book of Acts which we now know had to be written within thirty years of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Luke was written even earlier, by the same author, which means eyewitnesses would have still been alive to refute anything inaccurate or exaggerated.”

“I don’t know anything about any of that, let alone what’s questionable and what’s not.”

“The point is that it was all considered questionable a hundred years ago and archaeology has proven that the Bible got it right thousands of years earlier.”

“Huh,” Rio pondered. “Wow.”

“Yeah. There hasn’t been an archaeological discovery yet that disproves anything in the Bible. Add to that the fact that

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there is no other religious document that provides thousands of prophecies regarding a whole host of subjects and then watches history fulfill those prophecies with total accuracy and I find it impossible not to believe the Bible.”

Luke continued talking but Rio’s mind began to drift. Her thoughts were on the things that Luke was explaining at first but, then they turned into what was happening with her. Of course, that included what she was doing there in Japan but those thoughts were also about the things that were going on with her physiologically. Ultimately, she started testing her vision abilities and trying to discover just how far off in the distance she could now see.

“I’ve got a bunch of books I can give you with tons of this kind of information if you’re interested in reading them,” Luke went on but finally stopped when he realized that he wasn’t getting any kind of response and hadn’t for quite some time. He looked over at Rio and noticed that she was staring out the window with great intensity.

“Rio?” he asked. “Did I bore you to sleep by going on and on?”

Still no response.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Makes sense after you didn’t sleep last night. I’ll try not to be offended.”

After noticing that her eyes were still open, Luke looked

past Rio and out at the green field on the side of the road to see if he could tell what had Rio so transfixed. There was nothing there. He looked further away at the water off the coastline.

They were travelling south on Route 23 just outside of Yokkaichi and Rio appeared to be staring out at Ise Bay. Luke could understand why. It was beautiful to look at. *Not unlike the person doing the looking*, he admitted to himself. But, it was more than that. Rio seemed to be concentrating, as if she was trying to figure something out. He thought he could see a dot way in the distance. Maybe a boat or something. But, it was too far away. That couldn't be it.

“Rio? Did I lose you?”

Finally, Rio responded but it wasn't at all what Luke expected. “Get down there, now!”

“What? Where?”

“There!” she yelled, pointing to the coast on their left. “He's drowning!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN
A Fisher Of Men

Luke, with heart racing, steered the van off the highway and onto a dirt road that wound its way toward the coastline as he peppered Rio with questions. “Who’s drowning? Who do you see? Where is he?”

“The man by the boat!”

“What boat?”

“The boat out there!” she said, frantically pointing.

“I don’t see anything. How can you see that far?”

Rio ignored the question as she continued insisting, “Just get down to the water.”

“Then what?”

“Then I showcase the competitive swimming skills I told you about.”

Luke glanced at Rio, surprised by her response and further surprised by the fact that she had begun to disrobe. The

combination shocked him into silence as he sped down the bumpy dirt road and made an abrupt stop a few feet away from the water. By the time he did, Rio was already opening her door.

She leapt out and sprinted into the water. Luke couldn't help but notice that she was only wearing her bra and panties. He told himself it was no different than a bikini as he climbed out of his side of the van and began praying for her safety.

Rio swam as fast as she ever had in any competition. Had she not been so focused on getting to the man by the boat, she would have taken notice of how good the cool water felt on her skin. Or, she may have noticed how choppy the waters were. Instead, she simply powered through, with a tunnel-vision-like approach, to try and save the life of someone she had never even met before.

Luke stood in front of the van, shocked by how quickly Rio was out of view. This, of course, made him very nervous. *Lord, he continued to pray, protect her. Keep her safe. And, save this man as well. Please, send your angels to bring them both safely to shore.*

That was the moment Luke noticed a woman standing about a hundred and fifty feet away. She was watching Rio just like he was. Or, was she watching the man on the boat? Could she be waiting for him to come in? Had she been there the whole time? Where did she come from? Luke didn't see any car or bicycle around her and he thought she looked too old to

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have walked from anywhere of significant distance. But, there she was, just standing, alone, watching Rio and she took no notice of him.

Who cares? He thought. Rio and the man she was trying to save were all that mattered right now. He turned his attention back to the water, even though he couldn't see Rio, and continued to pray.

Rio finally reached the boat but the man was nowhere to be seen. She dove under the water and looked around, ultimately spotting his lifeless body, about thirty feet away, as it sank directly below her. Swimming in a hard, torpedo-like dive, she raced toward the man as fast as she possibly could. Her hands shoved the water to her sides as she reached in front of her face and then spread her arms out and back to her sides to pull her body toward the bottom of the ocean with all her strength. Finally, she reached forward and grabbed the man's shirt.

Pulling the limp body with her, she kicked her feet like a dolphin tail. It was a similar motion to the one she used when she turned at the pool wall in the middle of a race, right after kicking off the wall but before resurfacing for air. Had the man been conscious, he probably would have thought he was being rescued by a mermaid. Unfortunately, he was unable to make that mistake.

When Rio finally reached the surface, she gasped for air and

pulled the man on top of her, his back resting on her chest. She noticed that he didn't breathe and quickly decided that she could be back on land more quickly than she could lift the soaking wet, heavy man up into his boat to perform CPR. In fact, she doubted that she was strong enough to get him into the boat at all, even if she had, had more time. She immediately started to swim backwards with one arm while the other held the man in place. She kicked her feet as hard as she could but the man was really slowing her down. *God, she found herself praying for the first time in her life, if you're up there, please speed this up and help me save this man's life.*

Finally, Luke could see Rio. She wasn't more than a hundred feet out. Without even thinking about it, he ran into the water to meet her. As soon as he arrived at Rio's side, he lifted the man up onto his back and rushed to the shoreline where he laid the man down in the sand.

Rio followed Luke and watched as he immediately began to perform CPR. She couldn't help but think about the fact that she felt like she had time-travelled on the way back to shore. Or, somehow, the distance out had been longer than the distance in. Perhaps, her very first prayer had been answered. If so, this man must be meant to live.

She calmly watched Luke go back and forth seven times between breathing into his mouth and pumping on his chest.

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But, it seemed, to Rio, like no progress was being made. Rio dropped slowly to her knees beside the man, opposite from Luke. She extended a hand and touched Luke's chest to gently stop his actions.

"What?" Luke exclaimed. "I'm not done. We might still be able to save him."

"I know," she peacefully replied as she placed her hand a few inches above the man's mouth and closed her eyes.

"What are you doing?" Luke asked.

Suddenly, water erupted out of the man's mouth like it was being shot out of a geyser. It hit Rio's hand and sprayed out around the man's head.

Luke sat back on his haunches and just stared in awe. He wouldn't believe it if he wasn't seeing it with his own eyes. She was telepathically pulling the water out of the man's lungs.

As the water stopped spewing, Rio placed her hand on the man's chest and pumped it five times. She then breathed into his mouth before starting to pump his chest again. On the twelfth pump of Rio's second round, the man sat up and gasped for air.

Luke continued to stare in total astonishment as the man caught his breath and then finally spoke.

"Arigatō, Rio."

THE GIFT OF
RIO

THE GIFT OF THE ELEMENTS SERIES
BY C.S. ELSTON