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*Secrets of the
Apple*

PAULA HIATT

To my parents who gave me wings,
and to Seth who always encouraged me to fly.

Chapter One

She looks like a gift, Ryoki thought, rapidly appraising the young woman who paused mid-step before approaching him: mid-twenties, dark hair confined in a twist, brown eyes, pale olive-toned skin, even features, the full, pouty mouth of a lipstick model—a vanilla beauty. His attention flicked back to her eyes, large and intelligent, slightly almond-shaped. Disney eyes. With her head thrown back and a couple of open buttons, she could probably pose for the cover of a romance novel. He focused on her pink plaid suit—attractive maybe, but in his opinion too much like wrapping paper to be taken seriously in this particular office. Couldn't be a regular employee. He decided to keep his business card in his pocket.

She smiled. “You must be Ryoki. I'm Kate, your assistant while you're here. Welcome to San Francisco.” She put out her hand.

He held back half a beat too long, still trying to categorize her office status, then shook hands, dipping his head the barest fraction, marking her low rank.

“Tanaka,” he said.

Because he was touching her hand, he felt rather than saw the shift, a sort of stiffening. She drew back slightly, her expression unchanged. A door clicked shut nearby, surprisingly loud in the silence.

“Ahh,” she said, studying him with the clinical expression of a doctor. “I’ve heard the Japanese use last names. You caught me off-guard. I expected a shorter guy with more silver hair, but I suppose you’ll do.” She started to turn, but added over her shoulder, “Have a seat and I’ll let Brian know you’re here.” She disappeared almost as suddenly as she had come. Thrown off by her casual rudeness, he stood for a full ten seconds before sitting down rather gracelessly. He waited another nine and a half minutes, wondering why the receptionist hadn’t informed Brian Porter at once, rather than first announcing his arrival to an underling. Maybe Brian was in a meeting.

Finally the young woman reappeared and led him down a marble tiled hallway to an empty office with walnut wainscoting, deep burgundy leather furniture and wide, creamy moldings, all the decorative clichés of stability and power, intended to leak the secret that the law firm of Porter, Smith and Randall was enormously successful, that is to say, rich.

“This will be your office until you head down to Brazil. I’ve been asked to act as your assistant and interpreter. I speak Portuguese and Japanese and will serve as your liaison to this office. I should tell you up front that I’m not a professional secretary. I do not make coffee or tea, but I know people who do. Do you have any questions?” She looked at him expectantly, gesturing to the modern black and chrome chair behind the desk, the only piece of furniture that didn’t seem to belong.

Ryoki crossed the space in swift, purposeful strides, unfastening his brief bag and tugging at his documents as he dropped into the chair. “I’m going to *Ahhhhhyelpsqueak—!*” Head askew, legs splayed, arms floundering in the diabolical clutches of his bag’s English tobacco leather strap.

Finding his feet, he popped up like a man stung and whirled to face the chair, a gargoyle's malevolence instantly surging to the surface, rouging his skin and heating his face. The chair held its ground—leather, chrome, neutral, inanimate.

He took a deep breath, closed his prickly red eyes and settled his face into a more politic mask as he cautiously lowered his heavy bag onto the seat. Once again the whole contraption lurched hard to the left, nearly dumping papers everywhere. He turned to look at Pink Suit, one eyebrow cocked, waiting for her to laugh and tell him the odd chair had been one of Brian's jokes, possibly caught on hidden camera.

"Fast reflexes," she said, her face blank.

He paused for her to apologize or to offer him a different chair, but she remained silent. "This chair's a little uncomfortable," he said.

"It's a revolutionary design, guaranteed to align your spine and strengthen your back. Brian ordered it specifically for you."

"I think it's broken," he said.

"It has personality, just lean to the right as you sit and it won't buck you off." She popped her hip, leaning sideways to demonstrate.

"Will you have it replaced, please?" he said patiently.

She smiled vaguely, acknowledging she'd heard him.

Annoyed, he decided to skip the usual opening pleasantries and began his barrage of official questions. A little brusqueness was permissible in English; English speakers expected it. In his heart, Ryoki preferred the American directness, but it was a skeleton he kept buried deep. "How much do you know about the acquisition of The Melo Group by my family's company?" Ryoki was going to be really pushed on this project. For some unfathomable reason, his father

had chosen to send him without his team, and he desperately needed efficient help. Pink Suit here appeared to have been chosen exclusively for her language skills. Surely there was a linguist somewhere in the city who didn't consider it beneath her to pass him a cup of tea.

She had opened her mouth to answer his question, but was interrupted by a knock and a familiar "Hey there, how are you, boy?" in the languid, blurred accent of the polished Southern gentleman. Ryoki never tired of listening to Brian Porter. He smiled, feeling the first real stretch in his lips all day, nearly calling him "Uncle" as he had as a child when he believed it to be a biological fact. Brian greeted him with hands outstretched, the two men ending in an odd handshake/backslap/Japanese bow/man-hug combination that would have made no sense except that it grew from an overflow of mutual warmth and genuine gladness.

This time the pleasantries were fully observed as they leaned on the desk, elbow to elbow. When the conversation got to Ryoki's father, Ryoki snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot. My father sent you a gift," he said, retrieving from his bag a small box wrapped in beige paper, holding it out, balanced on his fingertips. Brian accepted with a bow, tearing off the paper and opening the box to reveal a scuffed baseball covered in Japanese characters. "It's the ball from last season's opening day, signed by every member of my father's team," Ryoki said. Personally, he thought the ball should have been more appropriately mounted in an etched Lucite case, but his father had staunchly refused, asserting that a baseball needed to breathe until everyone who had played with it was dead.

Brian fingered the ball, studying the scribbled characters. "You have some fine players on that team. When we were in college, Hiroshi always said the crack of the bat brought the best luck. I knew he was either going to have to play on a team or buy one." He threw the ball up in the air and caught it before his glance rested on Pink who had remained silent for the entire

greeting. “I don’t suppose Kate needs any introduction. Has she made you feel at home?”

Ryoki smiled noncommittally. “She’s been fully informed on this project,” Brian went on. “I called her in and reviewed everything with her myself.” Ryoki took another look at his new assistant who stood looking thoughtfully at Brian. Perhaps he’d been too hasty. For all of Brian’s lazy, elongated vowels and quaint Southern drawl, he was a terror to opposing attorneys because he missed nothing. Perhaps she had valuable hidden talents. Of course, it could be that they were simply shorthanded and making do. No telling.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Brian asked.

Ryoki considered mentioning the cranky chair, but thought it might be more appropriate coming from his assistant, whom he had already come to think of as Pink. “Thank you, no. I just need to settle in.” The two men again shook hands, this time a warm four-handed shake. Brian smiled at Pink and departed.

Ryoki watched Brian’s retreating figure. He hadn’t seen him in over a year, not since his grandparents’ funeral. But that barely counted. There had been so many people and too many duties crammed into so short a time, though what it was all about Ryoki could barely remember. Even the funeral itself had faded almost entirely as Ryoki had spent most of the service imagining the spectacular blast and fountainous splashes that must have marked the passing of his grandparents and their pilot somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. Not that there had been anyone to see, to prove they were really dead.

Ryoki blinked, feeling the dry, tired sting in his eyes as he moved behind his desk, jerking and swerving mid-sit as he remembered about the chair. Recovering his balance, he took an appalled look at his watch and began pulling papers from his bag, quickly placing them in neat, precise stacks as he spoke without looking up:

“The Melo Group’s private preferred shares will be converted to Tanaka common stock and fully absorbed by Tanaka Industries in just four weeks. To begin with, I need to know how far the auditors have progressed in their due diligence, and what progress has been made in finalizing the licensing agreements to allow this new South American division to do business with the U.S.”

If she was surprised by his abrupt manner, she showed no sign and retrieved a large binder from his left-hand drawer before pulling a chair to the opposite side of the desk. “The due diligence is scheduled for completion in three weeks and the licensing agreements should be in place about four weeks after that,” she said. “If all goes well you should be in the clear about the third or fourth week of February. At this point we can’t be more exact than that.”

Ryoki fired off question after question, keeping his eyes on his papers and scribbling notes here and there as she answered—question/answer, volley/return, like a computerized tennis match. Their interaction was so automatic, it was an hour and a half before Ryoki looked up, realizing there should have been pauses and periodic rustling of paper as she searched for the precise answers he required. Inwardly he sighed; surely they’d have to start again.

“Are you certain?” he asked, careful to keep his tone even.

Pink flipped the pages like a well-thumbed book and pointed out the documentation.

“I stand corrected,” he said, though he took the binder and checked a few more answers, just to be sure.

“Brian went over everything with me, but I’m actually the one who prepared these notes,” she said.

“You don’t need to spend time memorizing all the details.” He smiled politely, privately irritated that she would waste so much time in a meaningless attempt to curry favor when there

was so much else to do. Americans never seemed to realize that the over-eager often caused as many problems as they solved.

“Why on earth would I do that?” she blurted, then pursed her lips and looked away as if she wanted to start over. “That is, after preparing the notes and then reading them through once or twice, the details stuck in my mind,” she said impassively. “We’ve already been through the bulk of this, so I’ll leave the binder with you.” She stood and smiled. “Did you have any other questions?” He shook his head, blinking. Second time she’d asked him that, as if she was in charge. “To keep things on schedule while you’re here, I’ve included your tentative itinerary in the back of the binder. The rest of your documents are filed in the lower right hand drawer. That’s my desk over there,” she said, gesturing toward a small cubicle set up in the corner of his office, completely hidden by high-paneled dividers, “but for the next two weeks I’ll be working in the vacant office next door. If you hit a snag, I’ll be in there for a couple more hours.”

He noticed she smiled when she talked, like a teacher, encouraging, with an edge of command. Almost before he could finish the thought, the door closed and once again she vanished. He paused for a moment to take stock, unable to shake the feeling he’d just been dismissed.

Consoling himself that she’d left because she was getting beyond her depth, he returned to the binder, cross-referencing the information with the documents he’d brought from Japan. He envied Pink her quick absorption of detail, but when she poked her head in to wave a perfunctory goodbye at precisely five o’clock, he decided the talent had been wasted on a flighty girl with no loyalty or sticking power, not much future in business. He sighed tiredly, wishing for the hundredth time his father had listened to him and sent him the team he so reasonably requested.

He kept hard at it until after eleven that night when most of the floor was dark and the unvarying whine of a vacuum cut through his concentration. As English and Japanese began to swim before his eyes, he realized he'd been up more than twenty-four hours. He drove to his hotel, stumbled to his room and into bed, barely pausing to fling off his clothes and brush his teeth, fully expecting to awaken too early, as he always did in an unfamiliar bed.

Knock knock

pause

Knock knock

He had just closed his eyes.

"Housekeeping."

Knock knock

pause

Knock knock

Ryoki lifted his head, vaguely aware of a singsong Spanish accent muffled behind the door.

"Housekeeping."

Housekeeping? In the middle of the night? He wobbled woozily out of bed, stubbing his toe in the pallid dark and staggered toward the door to take a look out the peephole, suddenly realizing he hadn't locked the inner latch. Panicked, he leaped forward—

Snick. Card key in the lock.

Too late.

Aborting mid-leap, he lost his balance and stumbled heavily against the coffee table, barking his shin just as the door flung open, revealing a sturdy, round-faced Hispanic woman.

Shocked fully awake, he rubbed the bleeding scrape on his shin, fury splattering all four walls with a bilingual mud pie that frightened passing tourists who picked out “philistine,” “troglydyte,” and a brand new invective questioning the evolutionary parentage of every humanoid within a ten-mile radius.

When he ran out of air, the maid opened her mouth, but her words hung fire as her eyes fixed somewhere south of his face.

His stomach clenched and acid burned his throat. Lost his temper again. So often lately, so sudden, and in front of a woman—a helpless maid, which made it worse. Ashamed, he rubbed his fingers through his hair, giving her a moment to recover and wondering when he had become the troll under the bridge. Tired, that was all, just tired, and needing a couple of antacid. He’d recover his equanimity once he’d completed the current project.

The maid remained silent, a look of blank amazement on her face. He’d been very harsh, maybe scared her. He should have remembered to lock from the inside and put out the “Do Not Disturb” sign, so yes, perhaps he bore part of the blame. He composed his face, tried to give her a benevolent look, allowing her the chance to exit with dignity intact. But she didn’t move. “Unbelievable,” he muttered under his breath.

At last she drew herself up to a dignified four-feet-nine. “It after ten, sir. When you want us come back?”

“Ten?” Mouth agape, he looked around—blackout curtains pulled across every window. He checked his wrist where his watch should have—

Oh. No.

Skimpy pink silk boxers with purple lipstick kisses, ridden up, slumber-twisted and tucked askew to resemble women's panties, extra small. Without thinking, he stomped his foot and wiggled his hips, hoping they'd straighten out, no such luck.

When he dropped the woman who'd purchased said boxers, she'd cursed him with all the venom of her soul, but he'd paid no attention, forgetting the gift immediately after shoving it to the back of a drawer. Thirty-six hours ago he happened upon them in a rush in the dark, consciously thinking, *I've got to get rid of these*. But most of his respectable pairs were already packed or sent ahead to São Paulo.

Maybe it was time to start believing in curses.

Instinctively he picked up the closest items to cover himself, a crystal candy dish and the remote. He juggled them for a moment, unable to determine the best configuration. "I'll be out shortly," he said stiffly.

"Thank you, sir." She whipped off the "Do Not Disturb" sign, hanging it on the outside doorknob as she shut the door. He heard the electronic lock click and her rapid, retreating footsteps.

Have to change hotels, he thought, tearing off the boxers and pitching them into the trash. *Better to have been caught naked outright*. Even the most sculpted abs could never compete with scanty pink man panties.

With the residual panic of a man still too exhausted to be fully calm, he picked up his cell phone and scrolled for the office number. The chipper receptionist transferred him to Pink.

"I've been unavoidably delayed," he said.

"I see that." He could hear the teacher smile in her voice.

“I’ll be in shortly for my 11:00 a.m. with Melo executives and the audit committee. I haven’t finished reviewing the proposed adjustments or preliminary internal control findings. It’s going to be close. Could you lay out everything so I can get directly to work?”

“It’s already finished,” she said.

He paused, thinking she must mean “finished laying it out.” Surely she couldn’t be capable—

“You’re ready for your meeting,” she said. “I’ve summarized the findings and gotten the management responses from Melo’s accounting department already.”

An unidentifiable quality in her tone worried him unreasonably—smugness, perhaps, or some sort of secret knowledge, as though she could see him through the phone. Instinctively he pulled a pillow in front of himself.

“Thank you,” he said uncertainly. “I’ll be in as soon as I can.” He thumbed his phone to end the call, absolutely positive she’d never been caught in her underwear. Fifteen minutes later, showered and immaculate, he paused to fish the offending boxers out of the wastebasket and shoved them into his pocket. In the parking garage he furtively crammed them into the first public trash he saw. No point exposing the evidence.