

*The esteemed and married pastor loves the Lord but also loves a woman who is not his wife. His world has become a paradox of freedom and bondage. How can he bring peace to the souls of others when his own soul is at war with itself?*

## **The Wages of Love**

By J. Arthur Bankston

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J. Arthur Bankston

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# Chapter 1

## Finding “Miyoshi”

Nathan stood on the narrow Juliet balcony where a gust of wind pelted his face and rippled his hair. He witnessed the crashing of a mighty tide before heeding the sound of its roar and fixed his gaze on a bevy of seagulls dipping their wings in celestial bliss. He looked to the beach where couples were sunning, surfers paddled from the shore, and children formed castles of sand. The barking of sea lions could be heard in the distance, the ocean scent new and yet familiar. Monterey today was as it was yesterday and as it would be tomorrow.

Stepping back into the sanctum that was rife with treasured memories, he beheld Sumiko’s beauty. She was a portrait of womanly splendor worthy of Monet and Renoir. Her jet-black hair was long and flowing,

giving a graceful accent to dark, shaped brows, curled lashes, and full tender lips painted in red.

Looking all about room four-twenty-seven, he pondered its meaning in their story of romance, a romance given sanction by the red string of fate. Before the sun gave way to the moon, he would go to bended knee to utter the vow written by his hand, and the couple would at last wear their rings of oneness. But for now, he would summon to remembrance the telephone call that changed their lives and set in motion their appointments with destiny.

Her voice found accord between sultry and refined. "Good morning, this is Sumiko Jennings. How may I help you?"

A long deep breath. Then another. "Good morning, Sumiko. My name is Nathan Whitehurst. I'm going to be in the market for a house fairly soon, and if you're willing, I'd like you to be my agent. I'm sure I'll need a lot of help navigating the process."

Holding the receiver to her left ear, Sumiko placed her hand over the right ear and sought to foil the office chatter. She closed her eyes. There was something about the inflection in the caller's voice; it was strong yet humble, virile yet gentle, and seasoned yet innocent. Only seconds had passed, but the pounding in her chest was rapid and vivid. It was exciting! And perplexing. "Yes, of course, Mr. Whitehurst; I would be delighted. Are you planning to purchase in Pacific Grove?"

The bundled nerves were assuaged by Sumiko's amiable tone, permitting Nathan to relax and seek the etiquette of choice. "Before we go any further, either I call you Mrs. Jennings or you call me Nathan. Which do you prefer?"

The giggle he would come to adore made its debut. "There is no Mrs. Jennings. Not anymore."

Maintaining calm wasn't easy. The fist pumped the air with a jubilant force like a silent scream of triumph! "So that means I can call you Sumiko and you can call me Nathan. Do we have a deal?"



Again, the giggle. "Yes, we have a deal. Nathan."

"Excellent. With that settled, I suppose you'd like an answer to your question?"

"I would."

Nathan rummaged through his thoughts. "I have to say that I'm open to Monterey or Seaside; I have family in both. But I'd kind of like to stay here if possible."

Without knowing the reason, Sumiko crossed her fingers for luck. "Will I be meeting with you *and* Mrs. Whitehurst?" The quelling of sound was deafening. Had they been disconnected? "Hello. Nathan?"

The mind was vacillating. "I'm sorry," he replied with a part sigh and part murmur. "I'm just thinking how best to..... I'm not quite sure how to....."

The crossed fingers squeezed ever so tightly. Sumiko broke his ramble and probed more directly. "Is there a Mrs. Whitehurst?"

Delay followed delay. Nathan was floundering. "Before I respond, I'd like to know if there is any kind of .....oh, how shall I say it? Maybe, professional protocol?"

Sumiko's question required a simple yes or no. Why the dawdling? And why did he answer a question with a question? Should she feel encouraged, or dismayed? "There are various protocols, of course, but I think you're asking about a professional code of ethics."

Nathan slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Yes, of course. That's the term I was looking for."

"Then, the answer is yes. Whatever should be public will be public, and whatever should be private will be private."

The shoulders sagged with relief. Nathan braced for his reply. So did Sumiko. "In that case, I will tell you that there *is* a Mrs. Whitehurst, but she won't be meeting with you and she won't be buying with me."

Sumiko felt chills running through her body; the grip on the telephone tightened. "Am I to understand that you're going through a separation? Or divorce?"

This time, no dawdling. "It will be a divorce. My wife and I are living at the same address but only until we work through the details."

The smile and mood were electric, the expression of sympathy not remotely sincere. "I'm very sorry, Nathan."

There was a pause to consider his private revelation. "Can you believe it? I've told you something in our first conversation that people in our orbit, people we've known for years, don't begin to suspect. Because of that, the most difficult part is finding a way to tell the church."

A cloak of haze with the strength of a gale enveloped and muted Sumiko. *Church! Did he say church?* The awkward silence demanded disruption. She cleared her throat uneasily. "Will divorce mean that you have to

leave your church? Is that why you're having such difficulty?"

Nathan was resolute. "No, not at all. I could never do that. Not uninvited, anyway. But I'm agonizing over which is worse: embarrassment or shame." His voice turned quiet before acknowledging the need to confess. "There's something I must tell you, but I'm not sure I can. It feels like it's stuck in my throat."

Sumiko wondered what was next. She tried to put his mind at ease. "Don't forget my professional code of ethics. Whatever should be public will be public and whatever should be private will be private."

"I haven't forgotten but thank you for reminding me." The exchange was suspended for more than a minute. Sumiko waited patiently and could sense his readiness to speak. "The thing is.....the thing is....." A long inhale and exhale followed. Then, the dreaded confession. "Sumiko, I'm the pastor!" Nathan marveled at how quickly his secret had been unwrapped. He imparted a confidence befitting only Holly and her

family. “I hope you can appreciate my unusual predicament.”

Peering blankly at an abstract mural mounted to the office wall, Sumiko skirmished with her feelings, beginning with why she was having feelings in the first place. She was dizzied by the roller coaster she boarded at the ring of her telephone. She scaled quickly to the top of the mountainous track, but now was plunging to its depth.

Her thoughts were irrational. Nathan was a client. A random client. Had another agent taken the call, she would know nothing of him. Married. Divorced. Pastor. What difference did any of it make? A client is a client. A sale is a sale. It was vital she regroup and pull herself together; she was obliged to be adroit and detached.

“Yes, Nathan, I *can* appreciate that you’re in an unusual predicament. *Quite* unusual!” If he only knew what a bond they shared! But why was it merely *difficult* for him and *disqualifying* for her? Were they reading different Bibles? “Is your church in Pacific Grove?”

“It is.”

“May I ask the name?”

The question was inevitable but nonetheless vexing. Might she think him a source of reproach to his church and his calling? The mind was in disarray but he knew his heart would tell the truth, and it gave its consent to speak. “You may,” he replied. “Misty Pines Fellowship.”

Sumiko’s mouth was agape as if startled by a shadow in the night. “Are you *Doctor Whitehurst*?”

Since he was speaking with a real-life Miyoshi, Nathan knew they had never met; he would not have forgotten. “Yes, I am. But how .....?”

The interruption was exultant. “The Gallaghers are close friends of mine!”

“Oh, my goodness!” were the words that came from Nathan’s lips while “Oh, my God!” were shrieking from within. What was he to make of her friendship with the elderly couple? Would it be a Pandora’s box or an unwitting bridge to affinity? “They’re charter members,”

he said. "As you probably know, George was a deacon for many years but his hearing got so bad that he resigned. Tell me how it is that....."

Yet another exultant interruption. "They're my next-door neighbors, and they love Misty Pines! Especially you! They've recounted many of your sermons to me."

The pastor allowed himself a smile. Their endorsement couldn't hurt, though he didn't want her sharing their newfound acquaintance. The Gallaghers couldn't know that he was planning to buy a house without Jolene. "So, they've recounted some of my sermons. That's good. But have they invited you to any of our services?"

"Yes. Many times. But I've always made excuses."

"Really? Why the excuses? Are you of a different faith?"

Sumiko demurred. "It's something personal, but I'm not a member of your church, so it's not anything I

should be bothering you with. You called about buying a house, and that's what I want to help you do."

His quip had emphasis. "Now, hang on just a second. Since I've shared something personal with you, it seems only fair that you do the same with me."

A slow "Hmmm" ensued. "Nicely played, Nathan. But we haven't talked about price ranges, interest rates, types of houses, neighborhoods, none of those things. You need to let me do my job."

A breakthrough opportunity was at hand, one that Nathan would seize. "Given that we'll be working as client and agent, we'll have to schedule an in-person meeting as soon as possible. We can go over all those details then. But for now, you need to let me do *my* job. I'm sensing you'd like to clear the air about some genuine concerns and could use a caring ear."

He was right. She said it was personal but that could mean anything. Nathan realized it was something deeper. Much deeper. Were their minds already that



attuned? Or maybe their hearts? He made her feel more than comfortable; he made her feel safe and protected.

Her resistance would be feint. "I'm not sure what to do. You were worried about embarrassment or shame. So am I."

The reaction was immediate. "But I still told you, didn't I? Please understand that pastors also abide by a professional code of ethics. Whatever you say will be between us. No one else will know."

The burden she carried was onerous! Too onerous to leave strapped to her mind, at least in its entirety. She wanted to talk. She *desperately* wanted to talk. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm sure."

Sumiko closed her eyes again, this time to allay anxiety. "I can't believe what I'm about to do, but you asked for it. This is your last chance!" she declared. "Speak now or forever hold your peace." Silence. "All right, but I'm going to make it fast, so hold on tight."

“I’ve got my crash helmet in place,” Nathan answered, tongue-in-cheek, “and I’m all buckled up. Go ahead. Hit the pedal.”

“Now, don’t forget that you asked for this!”

“The pedal! Hit the pedal!”

Sumiko was both flustered and thrilled. She could almost hear the rapid and vivid pounding that began with the sound of his voice. She had come too far; there was no turning back. Nor did she want to turn back.

“I grew up in Japan, a city called Zama. Most of my friends were Shinto or Buddhist, but my parents were Christians. Devout Christians. They were very loving but also very strict. To them, the message of the Bible was as black and white as its pages.”

Nathan was more than delighted. If he were to fall in love, something he already imagined, he could never explain a Shinto or Buddhist wife to his Jesus-loving congregation. “So, that means we worship the same Lord!”

The nagging qualms had to be confronted. Sumiko scoured her will for courage. “Yes, we do. Or we did. You see, there’s a catch. I’m divorced.” She waited for a reaction. A groan. A gasp. Anything. But there was nothing. “My parents didn’t approve of Kirby, my now ex-husband, but they instilled in me that once a Christian is married, divorce is out of the question unless adultery can be proven. If he was ever unfaithful, I didn’t know it, but nothing was going to stand in the way of my ending our marriage. I shut my mind and ears to everything. My parents. My church. The Bible. I just wanted out. So you see, I disobeyed the Lord. Openly and deliberately.”

Sumiko could feel the pangs of a slow burn. She was angry with herself. Why was she admitting to disobeying the Lord, and doing so openly and deliberately? Didn’t the divorce speak for itself? Was she taking herself out of Nathan’s life before she had a chance to enter? But how was it she was thinking of entering? Why did she want to be there? Why did she assume he wanted her there?

How did she get from “hello” to being part of his life so quickly? This was all so confusing!

She tried to convey a buoyant closing thought. “There, we’re even. Now I’ve shared something personal with you that no one else knows.”

Having listened intently, Nathan was at a loss. “Why did feeling that you disobeyed the Lord keep you from coming to a service with the Gallaghers?”

For Sumiko, it was self-evident. “Because I’m unworthy to worship or call myself a Christian. How can I profess to believe if I only pick and choose what suits me, as if I’m filling my plate at a buffet?”

Nathan scratched at his cheek in thought. He knew that many Christians “eat from buffets” day in and day out. “So, you think believers are always obedient to God’s word and God’s plan?”

Sumiko wondered how it could be any other way. “If they weren’t, they wouldn’t be Christians. That’s what my parents taught me.”

Nathan was reminded of the church he attended in his youth. Though many of its members labored to read, they insisted the Bible was inerrant and made no allowance for disobedience, other than their own.

They would parcel Bible verses to support what they espoused. Not *books* of the Bible. Not *chapters* of the Bible. *Verses* of the Bible! Context didn't serve their purposes. If they could quote it, that settled it. They took the fear of the Lord literally, convinced that He was watching every move with a vengeful eye, staying at the ready to pounce on those who failed His will. No dancing. No movies. No games of chance. It was "fire and brimstone" or "Thank you, Jesus," and nothing in between!

For Nathan, a quandary. Persuaded that divorce left her stranded in a godless wasteland, Sumiko wouldn't worship at Misty Pines. Yet here he was, the *pastor* of Misty Pines, proclaiming *his* intention to divorce! What must she be thinking? He broached the quandary with candor. "Now that I know what you were taught, you must be disappointed in me."

Sumiko was astonished! She expected *his* disappointment in *her*. Maybe his wife had been unfaithful and *he* had biblical grounds for divorce. She didn't. But instead of judging, he was bordering on an apology. "Not at all. I don't know anything about your circumstances," she replied. "Besides, you know what they say about people who live in glass houses."

The home of Nathan and Jolene was a fortress of veneer; a glass house would seem honest and freeing. "I do, indeed. But it can also be said that people who live in glass houses have nothing to hide. I want you to hear me, Sumiko. With all due respect to your parents' loving guidance, I promise you will find that the Lord is forgiving. When it comes to divorce and countless other principles of Scripture, black and white give way to gray."

Sumiko was cautiously hopeful. "Are you saying I can be divorced and God will still love me for who I am? Just how forgiving is He?"

The easy laugh lent Divine assurance. “He is forgiving beyond our comprehension. God loves you, married or divorced. If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you *will* be saved. No ifs, no ands, no buts. He won’t withhold His mercy. Not for divorce. Not for robbery. Not even for murder.”

Sumiko’s voice was stifled, her body feeling an onset of paralysis. Did she hear Nathan correctly? “If He’ll forgive murder, He’ll forgive anything! Are you sure? How can He be *that* forgiving?”

“He can be that forgiving because there’s no limit to His compassion. Whatever our sin or state of mind, the blood of Christ is sufficient.” Nathan quoted the Apostle Paul: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Sumiko’s eyes were giving way to tears. The passage was consoling. So was Nathan. The prospect of reprieve was enveloping her heart. Might the chains that tethered

unbearable guilt fall harmlessly to the ground? “You mean it doesn’t matter that I failed to meet the standards of Jesus’ teachings for divorce. Or for anything?”

Nathan’s examples would leave no doubt. “When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, she’d been married to five men and was living with a sixth. She didn’t meet the standards of Jesus’ teachings, but she met the standards of His mercy.

There was the thief on the cross who asked not to be forgotten when the Lord came into His kingdom. The thief was told that he would be with Jesus in Paradise. He didn’t meet the standards of Jesus’ teachings, but he met the standards of His mercy.

And what about the woman who was caught in the act of adultery? The pious mob brought her to the Lord for stoning. But he challenged the accusers, saying the first among them without sin should cast the first stone. But no stone was cast and she was forgiven. She didn’t meet the standards of Jesus’ teachings, but she met the standards of His mercy.



None of us, not you, not me, not any human being meets the standards of Jesus' teachings, but we meet the standards of His mercy. The Cross fills the void between the Law and our sins. And that's why every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Sumiko spoke past the lump in her throat. "You have no idea how much you have touched my heart. I can't wait for that in-person meeting you were talking about."

"Nor can I," Nathan replied. As a servant of the Lord, he gave thanks that Sumiko's heart was touched. But, what of his personal motives for calling? He knew he wasn't ready to buy a house; he just wanted to meet the woman whose image was embedded in his mind, the woman he contemplated holding, kissing, and loving even before hearing her voice.

For the whole of three days, he'd been battered and tossed in a whirlwind of emotions. Was his arduous journey coming to an end, or was another lying in wait? Would he finally open the door to "Miyoshi" or close the door to tranquility? Might he fall prey to self-deception

and wrongly insist that *his* will was now the will of God? He could feel the tugging of uncertainty, which would mean a testing of his faith.

For all his questions, the uncertainty would be placed to the side and addressed with the Lord at a later time. He had to meet Sumiko. Soon. Very soon. "By the way," he said, "I've seen your picture and it doesn't appear that you give a whole lot of thought to food. But there's bound to be a day or two a week that you take the time for a meal. Any chance tomorrow is one of those days?"

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, Sumiko checked her calendar. "Wednesday, April twenty-seventh," she mumbled, still speaking past the lump in her throat. "Well, what do you know, it *is* one of those days!"

The smile was giddy and the spirit aroused. "Gee, what are the odds? It must be kismet!" He couldn't have known that Sumiko was thinking the same. "Have you been to the Pelican Bistro?"

“No, but I know where it is. I go to the Laridae for real estate seminars.”

Nathan was feeling squeamish. “Look, I know it’s inside a hotel, but you have my word that I’m a gentleman. We’ll meet at the door of the bistro, have lunch, then go our separate ways. You won’t have to fight me off or call hotel security. I promise.”

One last giggle. “I can already tell you’re a gentleman. But I haven’t had the luxury of seeing *your* picture, so I look forward to putting a face with the voice.”

Nathan knew the appeal of humility. “Trust me when I tell you that putting my face with my voice will not be a luxury.”

“Ah, something tells me that your modesty is equal to your charm.” Sumiko wanted to meet within the hour. The next day seemed too distant a time. But she knew the suggestion would sound forward and tactless. “Will eleven-thirty be convenient?”

Nathan wanted to meet for dinner that evening, not lunch the next day. But asking her to dinner would have sounded too aggressive. "Eleven-thirty will be perfect! I think you'll enjoy the ambiance."

Sumiko enhanced his optimism. "I'm pretty sure your company will be all the ambiance I'll need."

Nathan mouthed the word "Wow!" and set a foundation on which he could build: "I already know how beautiful you are, but after speaking with you, I can tell your beauty goes well beyond your skin."

Sumiko reveled in the flattery. She had long given up on the red string of fate. Could it be that she had done so in haste? Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

## Chapter 3

### The Red String of Fate

Nathan was mesmerized! Totally and helplessly mesmerized! There she was, the woman on the sign, tall, slender, and ravishing. The magenta, mid-calf dress, sheathed in lace, hugged and exposed her exquisite goddess-like figure. She was Miyoshi stepping from the arms of Jude to the lobby of the Laridae. If she so desired, he was already hers for the taking.

Sumiko's vision of Nathan's six-three frame donned in a navy-blue suit, body straight and chiseled with blush blonde hair showing hints of gray at the temples, spurred a muffled moan of desire. She wondered why his picture wasn't on the church website. If it were, every woman in Pacific Grove would convert.

He casually extended his hand. "Hello, Sumiko."

Try as she may, her voice was stymied. The lips were moving but absent any sound. She was mortified! Where was her composure? She was a grown, mature woman doing nothing more than meeting a client for lunch. It didn't matter that with only two words and a gentle handshake, she thought him the most consummate man to ever share her space. The dithering was unseemly, the mind in reprimand of self. *You're not a little girl. You're a professional! Act like it!* Finally, the sultry and refined found their way out. "Hello, Nathan. It's a pleasure to meet you."

In a moment that revealed and defined, both were enfeebled, yet empowered, acceding to the long-held yearning that love at first sight was possible. Each wanted to kiss the other; the prospect seemed so natural as if they had kissed before, but what might *she* think or what might *he* think? Surely, one would see the other as ill-bred.

Once in the foyer, they were greeted by Renzo, the jovial maître d,' his rounded paunch bulging through the

bright red, three-button vest. Pursuant to Nathan's entreat and incentive, he escorted the couple to a quiet corner table.

Sumiko reached for the high-back, velvet-padded chair. "Please, allow me," Nathan said, sliding out the chair from the opposite side.

She cringed at her social faux pas. How was she to know? In sixteen years of marriage, Kirby never made such a gesture. He thought nothing of sitting while she was standing or placing his order before the server could ask for hers. But Nathan wasn't Kirby; it was obvious she was going to learn what it was to be treated like a lady.

The small talk and laughter were surprisingly easy, and the mood was relaxed and alluring. Both were persuaded that the urges they were feeling could not be one-sided but knew that presumption could impede endearment. When the salads were served, Nathan requested permission to ask God's blessing on the meal.

With his prayer's conclusion, Sumiko's smile was tepid, remorse invading her mind. "I don't remember the last time I thanked Him for my food, or for anything. But I do remember my father asking: 'What would we have today if we only kept what we thanked God for yesterday?'" Looking away in the distance as if seeing her father's face, she answered his oft-posed query: "I'm afraid for me, it would be nothing. I hope the Lord knows I'm not ungrateful."

Nathan's voice was warm and serene. "Those who are truly ungrateful never give it a second thought. Be patient with yourself; you've been estranged from God because you felt unworthy, but after our talk yesterday, you know that none of us is worthy, except through His son. Think on this, pray on this, and give what is *new* time to become *normal*."

Sumiko's eyes were sparkling. "Everything about you is kind and uplifting. You inspire me. Will you help me do a better job of showing Him I'm grateful?"



Nathan welcomed the beseech. *Helping* her would mean *seeing* her. He would strive to bring her closer to God, to ensure her walk in the faith was alive and enduring. But he owed himself honesty. He wanted to make love to Sumiko. If they were alone and she was willing, he would take her in his arms and carry her upstairs to a Laridae room. Now! He knew his desire, or was it his intent, was un-Christian and un-pastoral! But he also knew it was true and very human!

He could not deny that he was weaving his way from dubious to perilous. How could he follow two points of light that shone from rival spheres? The fitting answer was plain, albeit inconvenient. He knew he must gird himself for the looming battle of faith.

Resting both elbows on the table, Nathan clasped his fingers and placed them under his chin. "Please, tell me about your life. From the beginning. Don't leave anything out."

Sumiko was living alone in a country that was not of her birth, yet no man had inquired about her past or what

she envisioned for her future. Women, yes. Men, no. But it was apparent that Nathan was in a class unto himself. He wasn't asking for morsels; he was asking to know everything! His welcome attentiveness aside, she felt it appropriate to take issue. "Oh, no you don't! We're here to talk about you buying a house, not listen to me read from my diary."

The laugh was immediate. "What can I say? When you're right, you're right. I must tell you, however, that I find you so intriguing, I don't want to spend our time discussing prices and neighborhoods." Surprised by his own daring, he was heartened to see Sumiko blush.

"Me? Intriguing? I don't think of myself in that way."

"Of course, you don't, and that's one of the reasons you are."

Sumiko smiled bashfully. "If I tell you my story, will you tell me yours?"

The look of rumination was sly, and ended with a firm, "Not today. Maybe some other time."

Sumiko cocked her head, displaying her own rumination. "Really? And how is that fair?"

"It isn't."

"It isn't? That's all you've got?"

A playful smirk appeared. "Pretty much."

She was digging in. "I'm not letting you get away with that. You need to explain to me..... correction, you need to *convince* me why I should talk to you about *my* life, but you don't need to talk to me about *yours*."

The tenor was jocular, but Nathan was sounding a clarion call. He was thinking of the female psyche. He watched women. He listened to women. He studied women. He knew of their tedium on first dates when a man would speak volumes about himself but ask little or nothing about the woman. Men talked about their careers and then their families. Women talked about their families and then their careers. Men were invested in tasks. Women were invested in relationships. Men cared about toys. Women cared about commitment. Men

wanted to date. Women wanted to be courted. Men were seeking sex. Women were seeking romance. Sumiko needed to know that Nathan was different; he was uncentered, unselfish, and sincere. "I don't find my life all that interesting," he humbly conceded.

The opportunity for turnabout presented itself. "Of course, you don't, and that's one of the reasons you are."

Nathan pursed his lips and rolled his eyes. Remembering their telephone conversation, he declared, "Now, it's my turn to say, 'well played.'"

Sumiko's giggle was for victory. "All right. I'll tell you about me, you'll tell me about you, and then we can talk about buying a house."

Nathan acted out a look of disbelief. "Our main course hasn't been served and already you've got us buying a house together?"

Sumiko wagged her finger. "You know that isn't what I meant." Her face was playfully dismissive, but not her heart. While whimsical by any standard, if he were

to ask, she was willing to say yes. What was going on? This was more than whimsical; it was bizarre! How were such feelings possible? She would never be able to explain them to anyone, not even herself. But they were real. They were *so* real! “Anyway, since you asked first, I’ll begin, but then it will be your turn. Agreed?”

Nathan nodded. He knew he was putty in her hands. He could never conceive of telling her no. “Agreed.”

“Okay, here goes. My father worked as a groundskeeper at Serizawa Park. We didn’t have a lot but we never went without. There was always food, clothes, and a roof over our heads. I can never remember a time my mother wasn’t there when I came home from school. I think Anzu and Takara would say the same.”

“Your sisters?”

“My sisters. I’m the oldest. There’s a year between Anzu and me, and five years between Anzu and Takara.”

Hours after rock cod had been served, and both life stories selectively disclosed, Sumiko realized that for at

least thirty minutes, she'd been the only one talking. Nathan was hardly blinking, his simper fixed in place, the eyes filling with adoration.

He felt himself standing at a crossroads. There was risk with temerity and risk with timidity. He couldn't grasp so hard that she squeezed through his fingers, but nor could he leave her carelessly unclaimed. Where was the balance? He could never turn back to what was known. He must roll the dice for a different tomorrow, one that promised a bounty more enriching than diamonds and gold.

When Sumiko asked if everything was okay, he realized he had gone beyond the moment to another place in the universe. He was seeing more than beauty; he was seeing every dream that ever took root in his soul. He couldn't spend the rest of his days with echoes of *Why didn't I try?* or *If only I had asked*. Preparing for boldness that was counter to his nature, Nathan sighed. "I'm sorry if I seem like I'm somewhere else, but for what it's worth,

you are there with me. I don't think I have the words to explain."

Sumiko was feeling a fire that couldn't be doused at a restaurant table. Her inner voice wanted to pray, but how could she pray in Jesus' name for a married man to become her lover? After talking the day before with Nathan, she felt spared from the wrath of God's justice. Yet, she was ready on this day, *because* of Nathan, to imperil the blessing of His gracious pardon. Had she learned nothing from her fear and anguish? But there were plans for divorce, a divorce in which she played no part. Did this grant her a license or a pretext? Was the answer hers to render?

What was it he couldn't put into words? She had to know. "It would mean a lot to me if you tried," she said.

Nathan moved past misgivings and called upon his heart. "The fact is that I could have phoned any number of real estate agents. But I saw your picture on a for sale sign in the yard of a house on Hillcrest. I couldn't believe my eyes, so I drove around the block and parked in front.

I sat in my car and stared, and then stared some more. I was riveted. Looking at you gave me goosebumps, and I've never felt so many butterflies parading through my stomach."

The hush seemed frozen in space! Had he said too much? If umbrage were taken, where could he go from here? The dice had been tossed; he must watch them roll to a stop. His tenseness withered with Sumiko's beam.

"When you called and said you wanted me to be your agent, and didn't mention a referral or us ever having met, I couldn't understand why seemingly out of the blue, you chose me. Now, I know."

Nathan's boldness was increasing. "There was just no way to release you from my mind. It may have seemed out of the blue to you, but it took me three days to get up the nerve to call. I actually wrote out my introduction just in case I forgot my name."

Sumiko dabbed at her moistened eyes with the cloth table napkin. "I can honestly say that I've never felt more



special as a woman. But I can't help but think that my picture held symbolic meaning. Why couldn't you believe your eyes? Did I remind you of someone?"

It was time for the "twelve-year-old" to speak with the timbre of a man. "When I was just a kid, I watched a movie called 'Sapporo Sunrise.' I've seen it fifteen, maybe twenty times since. With every viewing, I fall in love all over again with Miyoshi, the movie's heroine.

I remember a scene where she was dressed in all white. Her dress, her shoes, and even her earrings. When I saw your picture, *you* were dressed in all white: your dress, your shoes, and even your earrings. So, yes, your picture had symbolic meaning; you brought to mind the woman who for thirty years has epitomized, to me, what *every* woman should be."

It was happening all over. Nathan was making Sumiko cry. First, on the telephone as a counselor and now in person as a man. She would speak once more past the lump in her throat. "Nathan, I've seen 'Sapporo Sunrise.' I know the story very well; the once-in-a-

lifetime love of Miyoshi and Jude, and the tragedy of Koshima and Junpei. I've also read the novel, which had a very different ending."

Nathan reached across the table and put two fingers on her lips. "I read the novel, as well, but only once. I prefer to choose my endings."

Sumiko took his hand into both of hers. "As do I."

A torrent of passion was sweeping two hearts from a quiet corner table to an undiscovered island. Nathan's voice choked with emotion. "I've dreamed of Miyoshi, by whatever name, appearing in my life and bringing with her my purpose and fulfillment. And now. You."

Sumiko harkened to her mother's promise that this day would come. "You will know that he is your destiny, and he will know that you are his."

There was a longing for his answer to the question of a lifetime. "Nathan, do you know what is meant by the red string of fate?"

The meaning was sewn into the fabric of Nathan's being but had never escaped the silence of his lips. Thus, the smile was one of confidence. "Yes, I do."

Sumiko could almost feel her mother's touch. "Would you mind sharing it with me?"

The expression was soft and genial. "The red string of fate is a Japanese legend that proclaims two people are united at birth by the tying of a string to their wrists. It is a string that will never be broken by time, distance, or circumstance, even when crossing mountains, oceans, and continents. The gods decree that the people to whom the string is tied will one day find each other, share each other, and love each other. They will know they are one another's destinies."

Try as she may, Sumiko couldn't contain the tears; nor was there a need. "I've never known a man who could....." She stopped in mid-sentence, her eyes entranced in his. "Could it be?"

Nathan kissed the tops of her hands, then turned them over to kiss the palms. "My heart is telling me yes."

The lips and voice quivered. "And mine is doing the same."

Come early evening, the couple made their way through the Laridae lobby to a breathtaking sunset of orange. They came to meet strangers but were leaving with their destinies. Nathan reminded her of his solemn promise: he was a gentleman and she wouldn't have to fight him off or call hotel security.

Long, tender fingers stroked his face. "I never learned how to fight, and I don't know the number to hotel security."

## Chapter 10

### Wrestling with God

Nathan pondered the image of Sumiko's naked body, warm, luscious, and waiting to be touched any place of his choosing, which was *every* place. Only a handful of days had passed, yet in some ethereal way, she was part of who he was and who he had always been. Still, he could not ignore the onslaught of guilt that God was clamping on his soul. He refused to accept Divine prosecution without making a case for his defense. What began as a civil debate was advancing to spiritual warfare. Why had the Bible become his accuser? Was he expected to believe that he was treating Holy Scripture as nothing more than fable?

- *Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

- *Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?*

The room was devoid of sound, but a battle of wills was seething. The word of God became a minefield of explosions, the ears punctured by its volleys, the eyes blinded by its glare, the heart seared by its flames. Nathan answered the call of war as one ready to die for a cause greater than himself. He challenged the Lord for bringing to his world what could have been prevented by Heaven's command.

He and Sumiko were born to different nations; one welcomed the tides of an ocean's west, and the other the tides of its east. She didn't have to meet and marry Kirby. She could have stayed in Japan and married a man of her country and culture. Such was the case for Anzu and Takara. Why not Sumiko? Nathan would never have known her, and thus there would be no longing for her, no falling in love with her, and no making love to her.

With Army recruiters coast to coast, why Monterey? The Lord had to know that Sumiko would fulfill Nathan's yearnings. Why must a child be censured for something his Father could have stopped? How was this fair?

What about Jolene? She slept with two other men. Did she not pledge to love and honor all the days of her life? Did the marital pain she inflicted count for nothing? Sumiko wasn't happy in her marriage, and Nathan wasn't happy in his. Did God prefer they live as Willis and Maxine Hoyt, and merely *stick it out* to the end?

Nathan believed that too many Christians built their faith on life after death as if sitting in a doctor's waiting room and listening for their names to be called. But what about the here and now? Finding happiness in *this* life? Finding meaning in *this* life? Finding love in *this* life? Why was everything about tomorrow, and nothing about today? What was the point of our existence?

It was written of King David that he was a man after God's own heart. Why wouldn't he? He was handpicked by the Lord to lead the Chosen People and carry the

scepter of triumph, even when the victory was foreknown. To him was bestowed the power of trust, the glory of preeminence, and the bounty of great riches. Yet, when it came to his love for a woman, God's blessings were met with contempt for the Law and human dignity.

David stood at a window and watched Bathsheba bathing on the roof. Why did he not turn his eyes or spend the time in prayer? Did he seek God's heart before or after his perverted gawking? Or was it during? He beckoned her to his palace, just as one would beckon a whore, so he could freely partake of her body. Can there be a whore without a whoremonger? Had there ever been a whore after God's own heart? If not, then, why a whoremonger?

The king didn't care that she was the wife of Uriah, a gallant soldier and patriot, who was fighting for the nation that housed David's throne. He made another man's bride his paramour, but when he learned that she was with child, he sought to conceal his wrong. He ordered the return of Uriah, so the husband could lay with his wife and believe the child would be born of his



seed. No loyalty to Uriah. No loyalty to Bathsheba. No loyalty to the child. *David's* child! *This* was the man after God's own heart? *This* was the man handpicked by God? The same God who was ready to charge Nathan with adultery?

Unlike David, Uriah acted with virtue, refusing the pleasure of Bathsheba while Hebrew blood was spilled on distant sands. His virtue was rewarded with a royal decree that Joab, the king's commander, was to place Uriah at the front of the war line, withdraw from him, and leave an army of one to face an army of many. Did David seek God's heart before or after he ordered the cold-blooded killing of Uriah? Or was it during?

Bathsheba married the man who murdered her husband and gave birth to a son conceived out of wedlock. Because the Lord was angry, the child soon would die. Not the king. Not Bathsheba. The child. What wrong had their baby committed?

Though David would later repent of his sin, he wasn't required to surrender Bathsheba. Why must Nathan

surrender Sumiko? He had the right to divorce Jolene, and the right to marry again. So, why all this guilt? All this reproof? All this contrition? Nathan and Sumiko pined for each other and cherished each other. God knew they would see their love as destiny, so why didn't He change that destiny? Why wasn't the red string of fate tied to other wrists? To Kirby's? To Jolene's? If *Nathan* knew to ask these questions, why didn't God?

The most profound of Nathan's fears was eternal Hell, something of which the Lord was fully aware; he trembled at the image of screaming and terror that would never cease or fade. For all its ignorance and credulity, the Brizendine church implanted the horror of a flaming abyss into the core of Nathan's being. No peace. No escape. No mercy. Was Nathan willing to burn without end? Was the here and now more urgent than all of forever? But another question had to be asked: should fear be the catalyst for salvation?

A bachelor's degree in Christian leadership? A master's degree in biblical studies? A doctoral degree in

ministry? Disciple, apologist, and pastor? Did Nathan fashion his résumé to please the One who holds eternal keys? Was he committed to *serving* the Lord, or *averting* His wrath? Were his life pursuits wrongly founded on avoiding torture by fire? Could the same be asked of untold numbers who kneel at the altar of Christ? He returned to the scriptures:

- *And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*
- *And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell to the unquenchable fire.*
- *But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone:*

The questions kept coming. Should those who consort with women of scandal be treated the same as those who murder? Was succumbing to carnal desire

equivalent to killing a human being? Seeing no distinction, King David did both. Was *he* burning in Hell?

As for lying, when do liars *become* liars? Is it one lie per day? Ten in a week? A hundred in a year? Where does the Lord draw the line? Could a person fall one lie short of eternal flames and instead have eternal bliss? Could another have one lie too many and forever scream in unspeakable misery? Shouldn't the rules be more clearly defined?

Did Nathan deceiving Christina about speaking to Jolene carry more weight with God than building Misty Pines, teaching Holy Scripture, and feeding and comforting the homeless?

What of Sumiko? Was she being led to Satan's lair for falling in love? Was Jolene more deserving of Nathan's affection? Why? Because she was first? Should being first always matter? If so, why was Isaac the son of promise, and not Ishmael? Why was Jacob allowed to steal the birthright of Esau? Why did Jesus ascend from the tribe

of Judah rather than the tribe of Reuben? Why should we reject the Hindus, the Jews, and the Buddhists? They were here long before the Christians. So, why must meeting Jolene first make any difference? If given the chance, God knew which woman Nathan would choose. Why was the choice only offered *now* and not before it was counted as sin?

God says He is not the author of confusion but of peace. So, why the confusion? Where was the peace? David killed, plundered, beheaded, and took the spoils of his liking. When Saul demanded the foreskins of a hundred Philistines, David brought him *two* hundred. Why? Might the only answer be that he could?

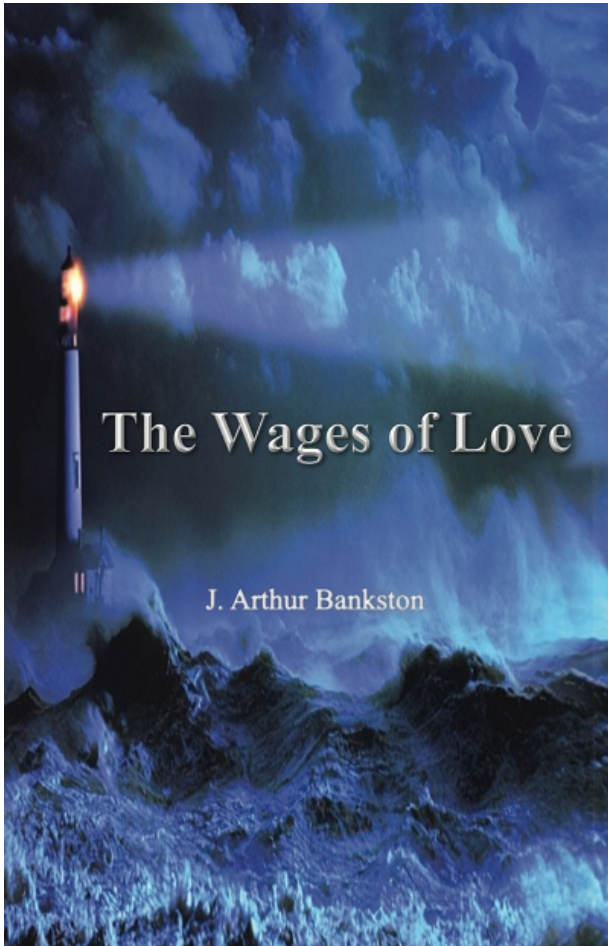
And what was gained by killing two hundred men? The hand in marriage of Saul's daughter, Michal, a marriage that brought no contentment. Why didn't God know the marriage wouldn't work? Why did He let it happen?

David was allowed many wives: Michal, Abigail, Ahinoam, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah, and

Bathsheba, the widow of the murdered Uriah. Sumiko would be Nathan's second wife. His only wife. And his last. Yet, David lived under the Law while Nathan lived under grace. None of this was making sense.

Had God abandoned His servant? Was their relationship that fragile? Were Nathan's life and ministry all for naught? Was *this* his payment for giving of himself, for striving to do for others what was good, what was fair, and what was righteous?

Nathan wasn't pursuing a married woman. He wasn't ordering the murder of a husband. He wasn't at odds with God's rules of divorce? He only wanted to love and be loved; he wanted to live his life in the ministry of the Lord. Surely, more than David, he was a man after God's own heart.



*The esteemed and married pastor loves the Lord but also loves a woman who is not his wife. His world has become a paradox of freedom and bondage. How can he bring peace to the souls of others when his own soul is at war with itself?*

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