



*An ancient Japanese curse traps the dead and threatens the living.*

## **The Nine-Tailed Fox**

By Willow Healy

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# THE NINE-TAILED FOX



**INDIE  
GOLD AWARDS  
BEST FINALIST MYSTERY  
WINNER**

WILLOW HEALY

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-961266-40-7

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-961266-41-4

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-304-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Healy, Willow

The Nine-Tailed Fox by Willow Healy

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026908638

# Chapter One

Tokyo, Japan—Present Day

The witch wore her age well. After a century and a half, her porcelain skin remained wrinkle-free. Her dark hair showed no streaks of silver. Rarely did she come to this compound, the former residence of her older sister, Asuka. Thrusting her arms to the sky, the witch commanded, “Yuki, yuki kuru.” The wind picked up, whipping tendrils of hair around her face. Snowfall increased and eddies of moth-sized flakes swirled around her legs. Bamboo stalks rustled against one another, their dried leaves littering the ground. She was satisfied. The storm would keep her hidden from prying eyes.

An urgency, a sense of unease that something not to her liking was about to happen compelled her visit. The old house continued to dilapidate, and the untended garden was overgrown with untrimmed bushes, wild grasses, and unruly bamboo stalks. Nothing had been done for years to upkeep the property. Memories flooded back. Late in the nineteenth century, when new, the grounds covered twice the area; the pond was full of koi, and the minka farmhouse beautifully maintained. Formerly, this area had been a Tokyo backwater, now it was part of the greater megalopolis.

The witch whistled. A bird cocked its head, then lifted off from a pine tree, edging the nearby fox shrine. With a swoosh of wings, it landed on the tall stone wall behind her. Her familiar, the messenger bird, an immense raven, was shiny and black. The thick beak, the shaggy throat feathers, and its eyes all merged, forming a deep ebony presence. Its glossy feathers mimicked the witch’s black, glossy hair.

The messenger bird kept her informed about the series of foreigners renting the teahouse within the compound. From afar she’d muttered

maledictions to drive them away. No one stayed for long. The witch desired a vacant teahouse, where only the dead resided.

“Watch for me,” she commanded the bird. “A woman will be arriving soon. Report anything unusual.”

The raven cawed its understanding.

The witch zipped up her jacket, and was gone.

## Chapter Two

I craned my neck to peer over the driver's burly shoulder. Traffic was redlined as far as the eye could see. Shifting in my seat, I stared out one side window then the other. I was late for an apartment showing, and affordable apartments in Tokyo were as rare as geisha sightings. A dead cell phone battery left me unable to contact the owner.

The taxi driver finally turned onto a narrow street and muttered unintelligible phrases. I'd learned from experience taxi drivers talk to themselves when lost. He eased off the gas until we all but inched our way up the street. Tokyo's address system is frustratingly quirky. Instead of sequentially numbered houses, they number them based on the date they were built—so a two could be next to an eighty-seven.

The cab driver gave up searching, rolled his window down, yelled at a middle-aged woman trudging down the street struggling with a bag of groceries. A dusting of snow covered her hair. After a brief flurry of verbal back-and-forth, she pointed north.

We stopped in front of a traditional, one-story wooden house of the type rarely seen in Tokyo. The 1923 Great Kanto earthquake destroyed buildings as old as this, or they were burned to the ground by World War II US carpet bombings. Lichen laced the roof, where more than a few mushroom-gray ceramic tiles were missing. Maybe it was an optical illusion—the structure listed slightly on one side. The post-and-lintel building appeared in need of major structural repairs.

At the front door, I paused as the driver shifted gears and took off. Should I have had him wait, just in case? It was an unseasonably cold day in late March and I wished I'd worn a heavier sweater. I brushed snow from my hair, smoothed my skirt. Would the landlady even bother to see me? After repeatedly knocking, and several minutes passing, the door opened to reveal a tiny woman with a face full of wrinkles and a dowager's hump. She stared upward at my five-foot-

six-inch height. Although I tried to make myself smaller by scrunching, still I towered over her.

“Mrs. Ito?” I asked.

“No,” she answered, shaking her head.

“I am Mona Marshall,” I continued. “Is Mrs. Ito here?”

She showed where to leave my shoes and motioned for me to follow her down a long hallway. It was as cold inside as out. Not a surprise, though. Older houses rarely had central heating. We passed a room full of art canvases in various stages of completion. Intrigued, I admired the range of paintings, which included bold mountain scenes and delicate grasses and flowers, most of which were executed solely in black ink.

The elderly woman zipped ahead at a fast clip. We halted near the end of the hall at a shoji door that had translucent paper, offering both light and privacy. The woman left after opening the door to a room full of minimalistic elegance.

Japanese require a strict protocol of following seasons when it comes to things like flowers, scrolls, and kimonos. A summer scroll put up in winter or spring tulips in a fall flower arrangement would be wrong. The scroll and flower arrangement suited the current winter season perfectly. A kerosene heater pumped out welcome warmth.

When I entered, two heads turned my way. A man in his thirties—with a haircut more appropriate for a man in his fifties—sipped tea. Next to him was an older woman with bamboo straight posture who appeared to be in her early eighties. A thickly padded deep blue kimono decorated in a geometric and crane pattern hung on her thin frame. With a gentle wave of her hand, she motioned me over, then showed where I was to sit. I saw her eyes were not the dark brown of most Japanese, but a strange, golden color like fossilized amber. The man started the conversation by introducing himself in excellent English as Mr. Yama.

Joining them, I lowered myself onto a floor pillow beside a kotatsu table, lifted the blanket covering it—that keeps the heat in— then let

my legs dangle until my feet touched the cut out floor well under the kotatsu. Immediately, I felt a rush of warmth from the charcoal brazier.

“I am her grandnephew,” he said. “She speaks no English, so I’ll translate.”

I bowed my head. “I apologize for being late. But a teacher was sick and I had to teach her class.”

“You were right to do so. It is the duty of an employee. American?” he asked.

At least he understood. “From Washington state,” I answered. Actually, because of my mom’s transient lifestyle, I was from all over the place.

“How did you learn about the rental?”

“A friend informed me about an announcement posted on the teacher’s bulletin board.”

“How long have you been in Japan?”

“Eight months. I teach at a language school.”

“Where do you live now?”

“Near Tabata. My roommate left unexpectedly, and I can’t afford it by myself.”

“Have you considered another roommate?”

Sure, I had, but immediately gave it the thumbs-down. After Cindy’s flakiness, the last thing I wanted was to depend financially on a complete stranger for half the rent. “I prefer living alone.”

Just then, the woman with the dowager’s hump returned carrying a tray. She placed a cup of tea and small cakes before me, refreshed the others’ drinks, then bowed before leaving.

Mr. Yama caught me repeatedly glancing at a large vase standing in the corner, which was about four to five feet high. It consisted mostly of oranges and blues with a sizable chunk of silver embedded near the bottom and with spidery lines of silver that crawled up one side. Why the silver?

“That’s an interesting vase. I’ve never seen one like it,” I said.

“More than a century ago it broke and was repaired using silver. It’s called the kintsugi method. In Japan, imperfections like a broken vase can be a thing of beauty too,” Mr. Yama said.

After twenty minutes of small talk and tea sipping, Mrs. Ito nodded to Mr. Yama; small talk gave way to the business at hand.

He finished a wagashi, a sweet made from bean curd. “Great-aunt likes to rent to young foreign people. For her they have good energy.”

I smiled. At twenty-five, I certainly counted as young. “So the apartment is still available?”

“She hasn’t made a decision. Seven have viewed it over the past two days. It’s not exactly an apartment—as you’ll understand when I show you.”

Jeez, I thought. Here I was, number eight, and probably others had appointments after me.

“I saw the canvases when I came in. They’re beautiful. Your great-aunt’s?”

“She is a sumi-e artist. Famous especially for camellia blossoms. She and her servant live alone here.”

“I like to paint too. My favorite medium is watercolor—but don’t have the time now.”

All the while we spoke, Mr. Yama translated.

“Great-aunt asks what do you paint?”

Mrs. Ito then stared at me with those eyes.

“Animals, especially horses,” I answered. “I used to live on a ranch.”

Mrs. Ito gave a slight smile.

Mr. Yama stood. “I’ll show you the apartment now.”

After bowing goodbye to Mrs. Ito, we retrieved our shoes, stepped out onto the long veranda where a handful of bonsai, mostly twisted

pinus, grew in pots, and then proceeded down a short flight of steps into the garden.

“It’s outside?” I wrapped my muffler tightly around my neck. What could be out here: a lean-to, tent, shed? Was that why it was so cheap?

“It’s an old renovated teahouse.”

As he led, he limped. One shoe was higher than the other to compensate for his shorter leg. Fresh snow squished under our feet as we hurried along a path of pea gravel. By Tokyo standards, the garden was extensive. The bordering wall was dry-stacked with river rock and nearly six feet high with ivy cascading over it. A screen of maples hid much of the wall from view, and I imagined in the fall the changing leaves must be spectacular.

When I looked beyond the compound to all the modern houses and apartments surrounding the garden I felt this sense of otherworldliness. An ancient, gnarled and moss-covered willow tree anchored the northeast end; close to it, a small pond reflected snow-laden clouds. Mounds of what I assumed were azalea bushes ringed a viewing rock. This compound must have been well tended at one time, but now it was overgrown. I liked that the bones of the garden created a screen of privacy from the main house.

“Long ago,” Mr. Yama said, his breath coming out as swirls of fog, “many years before Great-aunt’s birth, plum trees in this garden were famous for their blossoms. Around late winter, guests would stroll the garden to view them.”

I looked around, searching for the trees. “Where are they?”

“A typhoon uprooted them, damaging the house as well. It was later repaired.”

I felt this strange sadness for the long dead trees. I could almost picture them standing faintly in the distance.

Mr. Yama continued. “Back then, this property was much larger, but with time and circumstances, much has been sold off to the size it is now.”

As the wind picked up, it moaned and whistled through the vegetation. “Doesn’t the wind sound human? Like it’s speaking to us.”

Mr. Yama threw me an intense glance and then, with reluctance, said, “You appear sensible. I will disclose this to you: The last woman who lived here moved out because she was afraid. If you are chosen, you must not listen to stories about this house and garden. There’s no truth to them. Just silly gossips spreading ancient rumors.”

“Rumors?”

His voice rose in disgust. “All this talk because of a long-ago affair which ended tragically.”

Of course, I was dying to hear more, but by the set look on his face, the topic was finished.

At an enormous rhododendron bush, we rounded a corner and arrived at a small rectangular building topped with a thick layer of thatch and bookended with clumps of bamboo. The bamboo stalks, heavy with snow, bent toward the ground like exhausted ballerinas.

Mr. Yama fumbled with the key, then slid open the frosted glass shoji door. The sweet aroma of newly laid tatami mats, woven of green rice straw, rose. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes for a moment, and pictured myself in the countryside.

In Japan, the size of a room is determined by the number of tatami mats, one mat equaling about sixteen square feet. Counting the mats, I estimated the unfurnished space at about four hundred square feet. Compared to back home, this place was closet-sized, but as I studied the layout, the more I liked it.

When I’d first arrived in Tokyo, it surprised me how unlike those travel posters of cherry trees and beautiful temples it was, so this old teahouse appealed. Wooden rafters, thatch, and rough-hewn walls had

a nineteenth-century charm. The wooden poles supporting the structure gleamed with a golden patina. There was an alcove where I could display a scroll or picture, and in nice weather I could open the shoji door to enjoy the garden. It offered a tiny kitchenette, and bathroom. The commute to work would be shorter, and it was affordable.

I unsuccessfully tried to squash the pleading tone in my voice. “I really want to rent it.”

“Regrettably, I have no say. It is up to Great-aunt, but I’ll inform you one way or the other.”

Mr. Yama led me to the back wooden gate and provided directions to the nearest bus stop.

He bowed his goodbye and said, “I must return to Great-aunt.”

He limped up the path, and I gave a last, lingering glance at the teahouse.

I exited the compound, entering an alley-like street, and popped a cough drop into my mouth. The few sweets at Mrs. Itos’s had only whetted my appetite, and if I didn’t get some food soon, I’d be gnawing bark off trees.

Snowfall intensified, and as I bent my head into the wind, I passed a Shinto shrine fronted by a vermilion torii gate. For a moment I stopped. This shrine differed from what I was used to. Never had I seen fox statues at a shrine before. Large, moss-covered stone lanterns, intricately carved, led to the entrance, and a handful of old pines arched over most of the site. Guarding each side of the gate sat two alert-looking stone foxes decked with red bibs sitting on plinths. As I slogged past, their gray eyes fixed on me. What was the meaning of the red bibs and the mysterious tragedy Mr. Yama refused to discuss?

I found the bus stop, but the wait was misery. Recently, I’d been homesick. If I didn’t get the teahouse, should I call it quits and go back to the States? Three full buses drove past splashing up slush and snow, and by the time one stopped, I could barely feel my toes. Inside, we

stood packed like steers in a feedlot. The train station felt like it took so long to reach, I could have eaten anything when we finally arrived. I found a soba shop, ate a bowl of oden noodles with eel in a steaming broth. What were the odds of getting the teahouse?

At 8:00 p.m. the following night I answered my phone.

“Ms. Marshall?”

“Mr. Yama?”

I held my breath.

“Good news. Great-aunt chose you,” he said.

I did a few mental cartwheels, then asked, “I hope I’m not being impolite, but why me?”

“You paint horses.”



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