

## CHAPTER ONE

Shug Arai didn't have any shoulders, or at least it looked like he didn't have any. So when Mas Arai peered into the satin-lined casket to gaze at the body of his second cousin, one of the few relatives that he had in the United States, he was startled to see that someone—most likely the country mortician—had completely stuffed the top of Shug's suit jacket à la Jack LaLanne. "*Mah—okashii*," Mas's late wife, Chizuko, would have exclaimed under her breath if she were there at the viewing at the Watsonville mortuary. Funny looking. She would have been right. Even as a young man, Shug had been stooped over, bicep-free. But whatever was missing from his frame was in his brain. Shug was about the smartest man that Mas had known in both Hiroshima and California.

"I wanted the casket lined with strawberries, but the family wouldn't hear of it." A rough-hewn voice boomed behind Mas. "In fact, I thought he should be buried in his strawberry plot."

The familiar voice belonged to a familiar face. Rectangular like a television set, piercing eyes and thick lips. Deep lines were on the forehead and the hair had thinned out and become the texture and color of fishing line. But Mas still could make the ID. "Oily?" he asked.

"Fifty years later, and I still can pick you out from across the room. Glad you were able to make it." Oily grabbed Mas's

head and hugged it to his chest like a pigskin football. Mas normally wouldn't have tolerated such behavior, but he was back in his birthplace and the town where he spent his early adult years. He'd allow Oily one hug for old time's sake. But only one.

"Everyone will be here tomorrow. Everyone. Be a mini-reunion of our time in the Stem House. How long did you live in the house, anyway?"

"Three year. But not straight through. I'zu go ova to Texas, pickin' tomatoes. And San Francisco, schoolboy, before they kick me out."

"Then you made your way to L.A. You diversified, just like Shug. The rest of us homebodies, we just stayed here."

Mas couldn't put himself in the same category as Shug. Mas was a no-good gardener in L.A., while Shug was a famous breeder, the father of new strawberry varieties, informally referred to as Dr. Ichigo, or Dr. Strawberry. Shug was wanted in places, like France and Chile, just for his horticultural expertise. After he circled the world a few times, he had plopped back here in Watsonville, California.

"I was surprised, too, that he decided to retire here. But he told me he had some unfinished business in Watsonville."

Mas scratched the back of his right ear. *Unfinished business.*

Oily nodded. "Who knows what that meant? Maybe he knew that strawberry yellows was going to hit Watsonville again."

"*Ya-ro?*"

"Yeah, yellows. A disease as mean as you can get. Stunts the growth of the fruit, for one thing, and also the leaves

start curling up, get spotty and yellow. Worst yet, it spreads all over the place—not only to the second generation, but back even to the mothers. Nasty business. Practically wiped out strawberries in California in the twenties. And now it's taken up here again."

Oily was obviously still involved with strawberries, but Mas had heard that he was no longer with Sugarberry, one of the town's oldest cooperatives.

"You'zu not wiz Sugarberry no more?"

Oily shook his head. "Everbears, the new kid in town. You know what these young people are into these days. Organic. But also high-tech. It's run by a guy who made his millions on the Internet. He's from around here, Monterey. Wanted to retire as a gentlemen farmer, or should I say boy farmer. He's only thirty."

Mas raised his eyebrows. Thirty didn't make this CEO a boy, but a baby.

"Hey, this company has potential. Really. Even Billy has come on board."

Billy was Shug's only son. There had been some talk—Mas couldn't remember how he heard—that the two hadn't been getting along, especially when Billy had taken a job with a new strawberry . . . outfit, the outfit apparently being Everbears.

"Billy's doing good. Coming up with a new variety to fight strawberry yellow. Daddy was doing the same, too, or so I heard."

"Shug's no-finish bizness?"

"Don't know if that's what he was referring to, but he wasn't able to finish it, for near that I could tell . . ." Both

Oily and Mas glanced back at the casket. Next to it on an easel was a blown-up photo of Shug, probably taken in the 1990s, mounted on foam core. Typeset on the bottom of the image: **Shigeo “Shug” Arai, 1929–2004.**

Oily turned back toward Mas. “Anyway, the whole gang, well at least the ones who are still alive, can’t wait to see you. Remember Evelyn? She had a mean crush on you back then. Some of us joked that she was the reason you ran away to Los Angeles.”

Mas bit down on the right side of his dentures so hard that the left side almost became dislodged.

“Yep, she was excited to hear about you coming. She lost Hank a couple of years ago. You haven’t remarried, have you?”

Mas shook his head, his ears burning while he thought of Genessee Howard. Mas’s best friend Haruo referred to Genessee as Mas’s lady friend, but it hadn’t even gone that far—no, not with his three-year-old grandson Takeo bursting into rooms at the most inopportune times.

“Howsu Minnie?” Mas changed the subject and asked about Shug’s widow.

“You can ask her yourself. Family will be coming in a few minutes,” Oily reported.

“Oh, I gotsu go.” Mas tapped his Casio watch. He’d made it a point to attend the visitation an hour earlier just to avoid contact with old relatives and friends. “Gotsu some things to do,” he lied.

Oily looked disappointed. “Well, we’ll all see you tomorrow at the Buddhist church. Food in the gym afterwards. You won’t leave without seeing everyone, right?”

Mas nodded. He took care not to slip on dead leaves on

the mortuary's walkway as he returned to the Ford truck. He was staying at a nearby discount motel. Haruo, who continued to see a counselor in Little Tokyo for his gambling addiction, often spoke of something called "space." Although Mas thought counseling was purely hocus pocus, he sure found that he needed some space these days. And this solo visit to Watsonville, even though it was under very sad circumstances, had come at the perfect time.

When he went to his room, there was no crying, no arguing, in fact no sounds at all, aside from the hum of the mildewed wall air conditioner. Dozing off on the flimsy mattress was pure heaven; that is, until he heard a rapping on the door.

Mas shook his head out of its wooziness and approached the door. "Whozu dat?"

"Billy. Shug's son."

Mas pulled back the drapes and sure enough, there was the tall, thin frame of Billy Arai. He was in the plus side of middle age, and Mas could clearly see that he was taking his old man's posture. Mas sensed through the cheap glass window that Billy wasn't in his right mind tonight. But out of respect for the dead Shug, he opened the motel door.

Billy's clothing had the sour tang of beer. He was wearing a red polo shirt with "Everbears Strawberries" stitched over his heart. The last time Mas had seen Billy, he'd been a college student, with long, shaggy hair that the young people had at the time. Billy's hair was now cropped short, at least in the back.

"Oily told me you were staying here," Billy said. "I'm going over to the house, and I thought you might want to come."

“Now?” It was edging toward midnight. “Anyway, thought the house all close up.”

“But not the greenhouses. The greenhouses are still ours.”

Mas felt a pang of nostalgia. Although the Stem House was only a few blocks away from the motel, he had avoided passing by. He couldn't stand seeing it uninhabited, abandoned. The house deserved a truckload of people and children running through its rooms. To see it boarded up, essentially dead, would be painful, yet Mas was curious. He wouldn't have gone on his own accord, but now, being pushed by Billy, he found himself motivated. He grabbed the keys to his old truck and followed Billy to the motel parking lot. The full moon was bright white, like a policeman's interrogation lamp.

“I drive,” Mas insisted. He wasn't about to have Billy get behind the wheel.

“Okay,” Billy relented. “Just wait a minute.” He went over to a large pickup truck, a new model, and pulled out a six-pack of beer from the passenger's side.

Shug's son wasn't taking his father's death well. Not at all. It had been a heart attack, that's what Oily had told Mas a week ago over the phone. Minnie had been away down south in Santa Maria to babysit their grandchildren, and Billy was the one who was supposed to check in on his father. Mas heard that Shug died alone.

Billy didn't have to tell Mas how to get to the Stem House. It was second nature to travel on the familiar dirt road. There was a cluster of small houses, farmworkers' temporary housing, and then looming, like a dark giant creature curled up and taking a rest in the fields, was the Stem House.

Mas pulled into the dirt driveway and parked next to a couple of glass greenhouses.

Mas still didn't know how the Stem House was lost. Nobody really talked about it, and Mas, being a second cousin, didn't feel it was his business to ask.

Billy offered Mas a beer but he shook his head. At least one of them had to be sober-minded. Mas resented that it had to be him instead of Billy.

The silhouette of the Stem House was the same, but the details were all wrong. The wood siding was decayed and falling off, like the scales of a sick fish. The windows were nailed shut like the closed eyes of a corpse; the boarded-up door was the silenced mouth. All its grand furnishings had long since been fleeced, probably sold at pawn shops.

Mas felt almost like crying, not just about the house, but about the past and the memory of those who had once brought so much life to its rooms. Was this their fate, too? To rot, to be forgotten or avoided?

Billy averted his eyes from the house, as if it pained him to see it in such condition. He took out a small flashlight connected to his keychain and aimed it toward a patch of dirt next to the greenhouse.

In contrast to the dilapidated house, the plot was full of new growth. Mas saw five rows of strawberry plants, all carefully labeled with something white and thin stuck in the ground.

Billy bent down and Mas did the same.

"These are my father's test plants." The flashlight revealed small red strawberries about the size of a quarter. "And you see what he calls these—"

Mas took out the white plastic knife that was stuck in the ground and read the writing in Shug's careful script. "Masao," he said out loud, amazed. "Datsu my name."

Billy nodded. "He named this variety after you. This is his special one, the one that was supposed to take the industry by storm. He told Oily once that he owed you one." Billy then fell silent, as if he wanted to hear the reason why. But Mas could not offer one.

"Yah, well, your daddy and me got along."

"Must have been more than get along. My dad always said you two were thick as thieves."



Mas remembered when he first met Shug outside the same greenhouse. He was dropped off by a family friend who had picked him up from the port in San Francisco.

"Arai." Mas introduced himself, awkwardly sticking out his hand. He was told by his family in Hiroshima that's what the Americans did. Mas had been born in Watsonville, but he had spent most of his young life in Japan.

Shug ignored Mas's extended hand. He was wearing plastic-rimmed glasses and his hair was slicked back with oil. "I know that's your name," he replied. "Most of us are Arais here. But what's your first name? You know, first name."

Mas struggled to follow his second cousin's English. He had only gone up to junior high and languages, especially foreign ones, were never his strong suit. "Masao."

"We had a number of Masaos at Watsonville High School. You can be Mas."



Mas frowned. Mas? What kind of shit name was that? Just a few hours back in California, and these Americans were already trying to change his identity. “Masao,” he declared loudly. “My name izu Masao.”

“C’mon, Mas, come to the house.” Shug lifted Mas’s wicker suitcase onto his sunken shoulder.

Mas scowled but followed. What could he do? He’d made the decision to make a life for himself in America and he had to play by their rules, at least until he could afford his own place. He would *gaman*, grit his teeth, and put up with this new living arrangement and new roommates for now.

Anyway, he was worn out. Two weeks stuffed in the cheapest section of a boat had been suffocating. As a result, he was in an especially foul mood. So foul that he almost missed out on the impact of what stood right in front of him in the middle of strawberry fields. A Victorian two-story house of pure white, complete with a porch, round tower, and steep roof.

“Looks nice, huh? We just got it painted after we got it back from Arizona.”

“House yours?”

“Well, now it is. Had to go to court to get it back. But yes, it’s ours. Architect named Stem, so everyone around here calls it the Stem House.”

Mas had never seen a house so grand. It could have been Truman’s White House for all he knew.

“I have to warn you,” said Shug, stepping up to the porch. “We have a lot of folks living here. Actually, we had even more before.”

“Family?”

“Some are. Some aren’t. Ever since we got the house back, it’s been Grand Central Station. Mostly Poston, especially from Camp Two like us. A few from Heart Mountain and Minidoka. Even some Tule Lakers. There used to be even more.”

Mas, at the time, had no idea what Shug was talking about.

A large teenager clutching a football stood in the doorway.

“This is Ouya Takei. But we call him Oily.”

“Hey, Hiroshima boy’s here. We’ve been waiting for you. Want to hear all your stories of how you survived the A-bomb.”

“Don’t listen to him. He’s *baka*.” Shug pushed Oily aside.

Mas was surprised to hear the Japanese insult come out of his second cousin’s mouth.

“Hey, I know what *baka* means.” Oily called out as they walked through the living room to the staircase.

Standing in the second-floor hallway were three girls. Teenage girls with strange curly hair teased and tied in kerchiefs and scarves. One of them, Minnie, wore plastic-framed glasses the shape of cat’s eyes.

“Here he is. Mas. Before you all drool over him, let him relax, okay? He’s been on a boat for two weeks and needs to get his land legs back.”

“Hi, Mas.”

“Hello, Mas.”

“Good to meet you, Mas.”

The three called out to him as Oily entered one of the corner rooms.

“This will be your bedroom. You’ll be bunking with me and Oily.”

Across from a bunk bed was an unmade twin bed, sheets and blankets still tangled together. On the floor below a bay window sat a mattress, which is where Shug dropped the wicker suitcase.

Through the walls, Mas heard the laughter of girls.

“So what do you think?” Shug asked. “You think you’ll be all right here?”

Out the window was a view of two greenhouses and beyond that, straight rows of strawberry plants. Mas finally smiled. “I like.”



Billy had stepped away from the test plot, so Mas couldn't help but sneak in a taste of the Masao. He pulled off one of the larger berries. It was firm, a meaty chew with a sweetness that tasted familiar. He remembered the berries developed early by the University of California, the Shasta and Lassen. This one wasn't that different from the Shasta, he thought. What was so special about the Masao?

*Ban! Ban!* The clattering of wood hitting wood.

Shug's son was on the porch of the Stem House, pulling off the slats over the door with his bare hands.

Mas frowned. Had the boy gone *kuru-kuru-pa*? He moved as quickly as possible in the darkness. The decaying stairs creaked under his weight, the top one almost collapsing.

“Whatchu doin’?” Mas hissed, even though there was no one around. “Not your house no more.”

Billy tugged at an especially stubborn three-by-five. “Don’t worry. Nobody cares.”

Mas picked up the flashlight from the porch so he could get a better look at what Billy was trying to do.

“Youzu bleedin’.”

Billy didn’t stop. “You gonna help me then?” he said, as the door frame seemed to moan in pain.

“*Chotto, chotto.*” Mas cursed, first at Billy and then at himself. Whatthehell was the boy thinking? Why did he agree to come in the first place?

Taking the flashlight with him, Mas stumbled back to the Ford and pushed the front seat, a junkyard find, forward. He grabbed hold of a hammer, saw, and crowbar and then felt the floor for another flashlight.

He presented his finds to Billy, who had collapsed on the porch, sweat running down his face. He was gulping down another beer. “My dad was right. He said you were always prepared for anything.”

Together, with the tools, they easily completed the extraction. Billy, of course, entered first. Mas, clutching his flashlight and the crowbar, followed.

The inside of the house smelled awful. A mixture of piss and mold and body odor. Billy immediately began to sneeze, and Mas attempted to breathe out of his mouth.

There was still some old furniture left in the house, some even old enough to be from Mas’s day. But it was all beaten down and soiled, no use to anyone.

“They found vagrants sleeping inside the house. Almost set the house on fire. Boarded it up. Some of them have since moved into the greenhouse. There was even talk of a

dead body found in here once.”

Mas didn't doubt it.

The house was terribly rain damaged. Mold had grown and died in every crevice and corner.

“We needsu to get outta here,” Mas said, hearing some kind of noise upstairs.

“Don't worry. It's probably just a rat.”

Mas didn't understand why Billy wanted to come inside the house. It almost seemed as though he was looking for something. But what? What good could come out of this mess of a house that wasn't taken already?

Before Mas could stop him, Billy was climbing up the staircase, which obviously wasn't in the most stable condition.

“I'zu leavin',” he declared, but that didn't stop Billy. *Maybe I can call someone for help. Oily?*

But Mas had no cell phone and there was no working phone that he could see.

*Shikataganai.* Mas could only follow Billy up the stairs like a good-for-nothing sheep.

He saw Billy disappear into the corner room, the round room where Mas had slept when he lived there. When he walked in the door, he saw that Shug's son had collapsed on one of the beds, clutching a couple of his leftover beers.

Sonafugun. Mas shook Billy, but he obviously was out, at least for the night.

Mas shivered, hearing something moving in the corner of the room. What now? If he left the drunken man and Billy fell down the decrepit stairs by himself, Mas would be haunted for the rest of his life.

No, once he opened the motel door to Billy and had

driven them both to the Stem House, he had made a commitment to see this thing through. He chose the mattress (it couldn't have been the same mattress from the 1940s, could it?) on the floor by the window. Zipping up his windbreaker so no stray bugs or rodents could gain entry, he lay down and willed himself to sleep. Everything will be all right in the morning, he told himself. He'd go to the funeral and then get into the Ford and be on his way back home. As he drifted off, he apologized to his daughter, grandson, and even son-in-law. In spite of the all the *monku* that he'd expressed silently and not so silently about them, life with them was a picnic compared to this.



Sirens, not his grandson's cry, roused Mas from his sleep.

Sunlight came through the slats of wood hammered over the windows.

He looked at the mattress where Billy had been sleeping. It was empty.

The sirens, meanwhile, were getting louder and louder. Mas pressed his face to the slats, feeling splinters burn his cheeks. First he saw the police cars. A few minutes later, a white car with an emblem proclaiming the Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner's Office pulled into the dirt driveway.