

Ripples in the
Waters by Lake
Kawaguchi

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DEDICATION

Ever since I first laid eyes on Tokyo in 1995, this Asian megacity has captivated me, and I dedicate *The Tokyo Trilogy* to its vibrant urban jungle in all its splendor and turbulence.

EPIGRAPH

While Ai is a female character recurring in The Tokyo Trilogy,
Ai also means "love" in Japanese.

FOREWORD

Needless to say, the main setting for The Tokyo Trilogy is The Greater Tokyo area. Having lived and worked in the Shinagawa Ward, the author is hopelessly infatuated with this megacity and the Japanese language. Thus a few Japanese expressions have found their way into the novels, and while I hope they will enhance the illusion of actually being there, I realize that they will likely be unfamiliar to most readers. Despair not, however. I have strived to make all fragments of Japanese contextually transparent, and interested readers can reference the official author website, www.jakob-halskov.com, for more information on this fascinating language and a semi-exhaustive glossary.

CHAPTER 1

"Matane, matane!" Yumiko waves goodbye to her classmates by the wrought iron gate marking the entrance to the exclusive, international high-school, Kokusai Academy in Meguro. Wild and withered ivy has a firm grip on the gate, but the ivy on the walls of the school is lush and green, almost to the point of looking artificial. Her head is still swirling from information overload, mainly about the periodical system and the mock exam in Chemistry she will need to prepare for. It is not exactly her favorite subject and this time, no collaboration is allowed, so she cannot rely on Yoko or any of the other girls from her class. Like your typical teenager, she is almost sleep-walking her way on the sidewalk with her eyes completely absorbed by the phone display, skimming through the latest messages in her LINE app.

It is summertime in Tokyo, hot and humid, and the buzzing sound of the omnipresent cicadas creates an oppressive atmosphere. All she can do on days like this is rush from one small cool zone to the other. From the air-conditioned school classrooms to the train carriages, stopping by a convenience

store for a quick refreshment before finally escaping the heat for good when returning to her apartment, putting the A/C on full throttle. Yumiko is wiping beads of sweat off her forehead with the sleeve of her blazer, dexterously avoiding getting any black eyeliner on her white shirt. The school uniform, especially the tight tie, is a straitjacket, making her feel like a mental asylum escapee on a desperate hunt for some civilian and more comfortable clothes.

She is writing a long message for her best friend when a black Nissan President with tinted windows pulls over in front of her. A car window rolls down and for a few seconds, a crew-cut guy with sunglasses is staring intently at her uniformed shape scurrying along the sidewalk. The luxury sedan then accelerates and pulls away from the curb into the heavy traffic on Kobamadori. Yumiko looks up, catching a glimpse of the crew-cut man. *Hmm, what a creepy guy.* She frowns but continues her text to Yoko.

Why don't you drop by my place tonight and hang out? My dad is traveling abroad again.

Yumiko takes a shortcut to the station through the park behind the high school. While trotting past the school tennis court, a familiar voice shouts her name.

“Hey, Yumiko! Let’s hit the bar again this weekend!”

Turning her head, there is no doubt as to the source of the voice. *Ah, that’s Matt.* A lean boy with short blond hair is practicing his serve in the tennis court, and as always, he is wearing white shorts and a matching polo shirt imprinted with the school logo. His dad is an American diplomat stationed in Tokyo for the time

being. He is cute, even if he can be a bit pretentious. When she talks boys with Yoko, he is a frequent topic of discussion, and last weekend they went on a double date in Roppongi Hills. First the cinema, then a few soft drinks in a bar. Had Yumiko's dad learned anything about the bar visit, he would have freaked out, so she kept that a secret, of course. Fortunately, he had been away on yet another business trip to California, so she had been home alone that weekend.

You're lucky you can do whatever you want. That is what Yoko thinks, but Yumiko would gladly give up all that freedom if it could somehow magically bring back her mom. Despite her best efforts to suppress them, memories of that horrible afternoon nearly two years ago resurface now. *Yumiko, the principal wants to see you in his office.* She had left her desk in the middle of an English class and opened the door to the principal's office with sweaty palms. *Your mom has been hit by a car. She has been hospitalized and is badly wounded.* The room started spinning, and she had to sit down to maintain her balance. While she had been given a glass of water and some comforting words, the earth-shattering message itself had been served with no warning and little empathy. Why did mom always insist on riding her bicycle when doing the grocery shopping? If only she had taken the car on that fateful day.

“No, not this weekend, Matt. My dad is coming home on Friday.” While rejecting Matt's offer, she is struggling to shake off the somber memories of her mom's death.

Yumiko turns her back on Matt and breezes through the rest of the park towards Kobama-Todaimae Station. As she exits the park and is about to cross the street, a black car with tinted windows is edging around the street corner. Moving like a slug

with a cramp. Is that the same car, and why is it going so slowly? *Is it following her?* A shiver runs up her spine, and she hurries across the street and starts running down an alley leading in the direction of the station. From now on, she instinctively sprints down the narrowest passageways she can find. Surely, cars of that size will be unable to follow her there. She reaches the station building within minutes, breathing as heavily as if she had just completed the Tokyo Marathon. Thank God! As the name suggests, the station is located right in front of Tokyo University, specifically in front of the Faculty of Arts at Kobama campus. *Tokyo University is the right place for someone of your caliber, Yumiko. You should go to law school or medical school.* While she didn't flatly reject her dad, she is keener on studying foreign languages and cultures. The look and feel of Kobama campus are perfect. Becoming a lawyer or a doctor is not on her radar at all.

The LED light on the ticket gate flashes green as she briefly places her wallet with her Pasma card on its sensor. The gate opens, allowing her just enough time to pass through it and ascend the stairs leading onto the platforms. While waiting for the next train, her breathing is normalizing but the beads of sweat on her forehead and around her neck are turning into an icky sheen. Scanning the platform for any crew-cut men with sunglasses in her vicinity, Yumiko boards the first train arriving. Her heart is still racing, and her thumbs are working the phone display as she is texting Yoko yet again.

Yoko, R U coming 2nite? I think someone is stalking me :-o

The train is taking her to Shibuya, and from there she can get on the Hanzomon metro line which will stop in Aoyama near her home. Aoyama is one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Tokyo, and Yumiko lives with her dad in the residential complex

called Aoyama Daiichi Mansions. The posh apartments are situated right along Omote-sando, another facet of Yumiko's life Yoko has expressed envy about. They have often gone on shopping sprees in the luxury outlets along the famous boulevard. How can her dad afford this luxurious lifestyle? Of course, he is the CEO of a company developing mobile apps, but as far as she can gather, they are still struggling to get their apps released on the market. Her dad has always had a special charisma about him, so she assumes he is just good at making investors see the great, untapped potential in his business plans. At least he is regularly traveling to California to meet with business angels from the Silicon Valley circles.

Walking on autopilot through the dense crowd of busy commuters in the pedestrian crossing outside the massive Shibuya Station, vibrations in her pocket bring her back to reality. She takes her phone out of her school blazer and opens the latest unread message.

Yumi-chan, OMG :-O BRT. Take care! Huggz / Yoko

A wide smile appears on her lips. What would she do without her best friend? She hurries along the moving sidewalk connecting the JR part of Shibuya with the underground metro lines in the opposite end of the station. It is late afternoon, and a whole throng of people are headed to or from the metro lines. Is anyone in that dense forest of people stalking her? With darting glances, she presses on through the endless hordes of commuters. It had clearly been the same car, first accelerating from the curb when she looked up and next driving very slowly as if on the lookout for something or someone.

CHAPTER 2

Like a centipede on drugs scaling the uneven surface of a LEGO cityscape, the Yamanote line carriage is whisking Tomoko through the dark maze of illuminated high-rise office blocks. While struggling to maintain her balance on her high heels in the moving train carriage, Tomoko is smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress and trying to ignore a balding, middle-aged office worker ogling at her over the top of his newspaper. She is in transit for Shinagawa Station, but her mind is stuck elsewhere, grappling with the implications of what just happened. Not an hour has passed since she left the room in that love hotel near Gotanda Station and thinking about it still makes her pulse quicken. How unreal that she went ahead and did this. A few days after creating her profile on the dating site, scores of male users had already contacted her. Ryo was one of them, and they had agreed to meet up by the western exit of the station. The secret rendezvous had taken place early in the evening, so that she could make it back home in time before her husband. Tomoko had described her looks and her outfit to allow Ryo to easily recognize her.

There she is, standing outside a Lawson convenience store with a pounding heart, scouting the streets for a young guy in his mid-twenties wearing sunglasses and a khaki-colored shirt. Suddenly, he turns the corner right in front of her with a mischievous smile on his lips and his hands in his pockets. "Tomoko-san?" She nods and starts giggling like a teenage girl. Not ten minutes later they find themselves facing a nondescript counter with a sliding shutter only leaving space enough for the anonymous exchange of money and key cards. The front desk clerk assigns them a room on the second floor. 80 minutes. Not exactly the most romantic of set-ups. *What a strange place!* On her way up the stairs, Tomoko is almost having second thoughts about the whole affair, but the guy's smile is charming, much as she has imagined him to be. He takes off his sunglasses, and his glance also has a calming effect on her. There is something reassuringly innocent and boyish about his behavior. He is slim, borderline skinny, and the bottle of white wine she drank before leaving her apartment is still coursing through her veins imbuing her with an uncharacteristic vitality and devil-may-care attitude.

They unlock the door to the room, and Tomoko hardly has time to take off her high heels or breathe in the atmosphere of the place before Ryo embraces her, letting his hands explore her tight-fitting one-piece dress. Such sweet words and soft caresses. Tomoko forgets all about the location of her high heels and whether they remembered to lock the door behind them or not. It has been so long since she last felt desirable and truly aroused. How often has she not made dinner for her husband and waited in vain for him to come home from work? Or caressed him when he finally did come home, only to be rejected with the excuse that he was too tired? Over the course of time, disappointments and rejections have become the rule rather

than the exception, and what little love and respect she had for her husband have crumbled away.

The carriage suddenly decelerates, causing Tomoko to lose her train of thought.

CHAPTER 3

"Densha ga mairimasu". The train is speeding towards the platform. His heart is pounding like a hammer in his chest and his shirt is drenched in sweat. *Is he really going to do it?* He is on the receiving end of a soul-piercing look from an old lady in a classic black kimono standing next to him. *Can she tell what he is up to?* Weeks have passed since his last day at work. Yet every morning, Takeda-san has put on his suit and tie, kissed his wife and kids goodbye, and boarded the Rinkai line taking him downtown from their 3-bedroom mansion on the 32nd floor of the posh residential complex near Aqua City at Odaiba, the artificial island in Tokyo Bay. After having lost his job, it no longer makes sense going to Shinjuku Park Tower where he used to work in a start-up developing mobile apps. Instead, he goes to his favorite parks in Tokyo, finds a bench with a nice view, drinks a cup of coffee, and simply observes people around him while reflecting on his life. In particular, he likes Yoyogi park near Harajuku. He enjoys watching the foliage around the trees, the fountains, the many people jogging, the uniformed and giggling high-school students with white leg warmers. Even the

foreign tourists and the noisy activist college students. Every day provides him with a new experience.

For a while he has almost forgotten the impending monthly payment on his mortgage but time flies, and it will soon be the 27th. There will be insufficient funds in his Mitsubishi UFJ account. A written reminder will find its way into their apartment mailbox, his wife will demand an explanation, and he will be in a tight spot. The shame will be unbearable. How will the neighbors react? How humiliating it will be for his wife to break the news to the other moms. To explain why their kids suddenly have to drop out of their international school in the fashionable Akasaka neighborhood and instead enroll into a regular public school. She will undoubtedly divorce him and relocate to her childhood home way up in Aomori Prefecture. In the local community, the word will spread like a wildfire that she has left her husband because he was unable to provide for her. The financial embarrassment of having to start over in life will be insufferable. Worse yet, as a middle-aged divorcée and mother of two she will likely be unable to remarry. He will only be allowed to see his kids at special occasions. The smiling faces of Yurika and Kenji bring with them a ray of light into his darkened mind.

CHAPTER 4

Tomoko gets off at Shinagawa Station, walking the few hundred meters through the shopping arcade and past the izakaya which, at this late hour, are packed with hordes of drunken office workers. The last suburbia-bound trains depart Shinagawa around midnight, so the intensity of the drinking is now climaxing, and Tomoko dodges one businessman after the other shouting “kampai” in her direction. Her path takes her down to Kyu kaigan-dori, the old coastal road, heading towards the canal. She lives in a small, two-bedroom mansion in a residential complex right by the canal. The apartment is nicely situated with an unobstructed view of Tokyo Tower from the balcony, and she knows her husband is working hard just to pay the monthly rent. She nods at the receptionist on the ground floor with a quick “konbanwa”, scans her keycard, and crosses the lobby. Click-clack, click-clack. That is her high heels touching the opulent marble floor, and she shrugs apologetically in the direction of the receptionist as she heads for the elevator.

“Shitsurei shimasu.”

Though uncalled for, the excuse is habitual. She presses the button taking her to the 14th floor. Tomoko and her husband never started a family, so she has always had a lot of leisure time in her adult life. While she does have a college degree in European languages, she has never put it to any professional use. Before her career really had a chance to take off, she met her husband. He is about 10 years older than she is, and when they met as colleagues, he already held a permanent position with the company. They quickly got married, and he did not want her to work full-time, so she became a housewife. Although they have tried to have kids for years, they just never succeeded, and Tomoko suspects it may be her husband's unhealthy lifestyle which is the root cause.

She opens the door to their apartment with another keycard. Everything is so high-tech these days, even in residential complexes. In the entrance, there is a screen connected to a ground floor camera allowing you to see exactly who your guests are before you let them in. Akito is still at work, and Tomoko throws herself tired onto the living room couch. She really ought to prepare a meal for him now, but she is not done digesting the events at that love hotel in Gotanda.



“So how old are you really Tomoko? It didn't say on your profile.”

“Tsk tsk. Don't you know it's impolite to ask a lady her age? Let's just say I was in middle school when *Tonari no Totoro* hit the cinemas.”

His gaze becomes unfocused while he is doing the math, but the results of the equation quickly bring him back with a wide grin on his face.

“You could be my mom, haha!”

Having only just enrolled in college, Ryo is 21. On the dating site, Tomoko has not minced her words when it comes to her targeting the young men. They are just more playful and fun, and the age difference is such a thrill. In very direct terms, her secretive profile tells all men above 25 to refrain from contacting her. Still, she has had to block dozens of middle-aged or elderly male profiles who simply refuse to respect her rejections or keep sending her vulgar content.

Ryo, however, is a different story altogether. Even if he is still young, he is clearly a far more cultivated person. Perhaps a bit on the nerdy side, but in a sweet way. He has discreetly asked her what turns her on, and they have exchanged a bunch of messages with progressively erotic narratives in the days leading up to today’s rendezvous. She has described her sexual fantasies in exchange for his. In the beginning, it had taken her well out of her comfort zone, but she has gotten bolder and bolder, and now she has realized that it turns her on to simply describe her fantasies in writing. Ryo happens to be highly eloquent, and he appears to be doing a degree in linguistics or some kind of communication studies at college. They have been chatting quite extensively before their first meeting, and one time the content got so hot that Tomoko started playing with herself and ended up climaxing violently. This experience left her wanting more of the same. For many years, there has been very little action in the bedroom with Akito. She has become what is known in Japan as *sekuseresu*, sexless, but now her sex drive is revving up

putting her back in the driver's seat like a hormone-addled teenager.

Tomoko throws a glance at the phone display. 10:55 pm. Hmm. Yet another night waiting in vain for Akito to return from work. He will most likely spend the night at a capsule hotel near the company in Ueno. He did warn her there might be a nomikai tonight, due to them having to entertain potential clients from Nagoya, but why can't he simply let her know whether to prepare a meal for him or not? Tomoko tightens her grip on the phone, and her muscles tense up. She takes a deep breath and puts it away. Her first rendezvous with Ryo. Wow. When she closes her eyes, she is back at the love hotel with Ryo standing right next to her again.



"So you grew up like... without smartphones? No Internet? No Google Maps? Awesome."

"Hey, don't look at me like I'm a dinosaur!"

Tomoko is sticking her tongue out at Ryo who clearly finds her maturity exotic. He pulls her close. Their warm bodies meet in a tight embrace. With sparkling eyes, his piercing gaze is completely focused on her. Her heart is throbbing, and her breath is taken away. *This is crazy.* The age difference between them, all their naughty chats about what exactly she would like him to do to her, and simply the electrifying proximity between them just now. Even if the room lights are dimmed, she can make out a little more than just his silhouette against the light filtering in through the window from the hotel back alley. He is still wearing all his clothes. *Is that a faint bulge in his pants?* She is

wearing a sexy and tight-fitting burgundy one-piece, and for the first time in many years she has not put on a bra. Skating on thin ice. If there were such a thing as an adrenaline rush competition, she would win the trophy ahead of any adolescent schoolgirl on her first date. Most of her afternoon was spent picking just the right outfit and putting on makeup in front of the mirror. The way Ryo's hands are eagerly exploring her body, it would seem that he is satisfied with all her efforts. They slowly slide down across the front of her one-piece dress.

"Tomoko, you naughty girl, you're not wearing a bra!"

He is letting his thumbs circle around just the right spots. Her dress does little to numb the sensation, and her body responds hungrily. Her nipples harden and must be visible through the thin burgundy fabric.

"Ryo, are you sure you are only 21? I sense that you know your way around a woman's body."

"Well, I'm still learning about the anatomy of dinosaurs in college, but I'm doing my best."

"Ha ha ha. And I'll have to enroll in *Dealing with Brats 101* to get a handle on you."

Her one-piece is his next target, and he deftly pulls it off her, leaving Tomoko in front of him only wearing her black panties. Ryo quickly takes off his own sweater and t-shirt, letting them drop to the floor and revealing a muscular torso. Tomoko bites her lip and lets out a faint gasp. He might have looked a bit skinny when clothed, but the young, bare-chested man in front of her is not a brat, and he appears quite fit. Far more so than

her chubby husband, Akito. She daringly lets her fingers probe his smooth and muscular chest. She has not had this much wine in a long time, and the effect of the alcohol lingers.

“Let me give you a hand with this.”

Her fingers find his belt buckle, and she successfully opens it even if the mechanism is a bit unfamiliar to her. Ryo pulls down his own pants, facing her wearing nothing but his tight boxers. How extremely sexy to be standing here with a half-naked stranger who is less than half her age and visibly aroused. Tomoko is beaming like a lighthouse.

“Everything you hoped for Madam Dinosaur?”

“Even better, Ryo.”

While chatting on the dating site, they have agreed that he is going to pamper her and cater to her every need, so she is not expected to do anything. The criterion for success on this first meeting of theirs is simply for Ryo to give her an orgasm. This has only happened to her maybe a handful of times in her life. Early on in their marriage she did have regular sex with Akito, but it had always been rather repetitive, tedious, and not given Tomoko much satisfaction. When he had had his way, he would simply roll over to his side of the bed and fall asleep snoring loudly, leaving her in the dark, alone and neglected.

They are in a close embrace now, the hard bulge in Ryo’s boxers brushing against the fabric of her panties. Ryo, who is perhaps half a head taller than Tomoko, bends down and scoops up her trembling and lithe body, carrying her towards the bed. *What is he going to do next?* Tomoko is both a little shorter and lighter than

the average Japanese woman, so carrying her and throwing her onto the colorful bedsheets requires a minimum of effort on Ryo's part. The love hotel has lots of theme rooms ranging from classic BDSM themes to various popular Hollywood movies. Tomoko and Ryo have opted for a simple standard room, though.

The dullness of the nondescript white ceiling above her stands in glaring contrast to the intensity of the activity beneath it. Ryo pulls off her panties in one quick go, leaving her completely naked on the bed. She closes her eyes. Ryo has parted her legs with his hands, and something warm is exploring her lower belly area heading downwards. *Is that the tip of his tongue?*

"You smell good! For a prehistoric lady..."

Tomoko goes limp, turning into jelly in Ryo's hands. She took a long bath in her tub as part of her afternoon preparations for their meeting. While soaking in the tub, she had held her phone in one hand reading through all their chat messages getting goosebumps on her legs and arms from the graphic content. She is trying to form words and reciprocate his cheekiness, but nothing audible is crossing her lips.

"Did the cat get your tongue?"

It certainly didn't get yours. Ryo's tongue is getting close to that special place without making direct contact just yet. *Go lower, don't be such a tease!* This boy must be way more experienced than he has been letting her on. The tip of his nose is now taking over and moving in little circles around the most sensitive part of her body.

“Ryo, I’ve never...”

A soft moan interrupts her response. The sensation is tantalizing to say the least, and her goosebumps return as something slowly slides inside her. *A thumb?*

“You’re wet.”

Ryo’s thumb joins forces with his tongue and his efforts are taking Tomoko to uncharted territory on that largely unexplored globe of passion. *What a heavenly sensation!* She has completely forgotten how it is to be with a man who takes his time and whose focus is on maximizing her pleasure rather than his own. Before long, Tomoko starts climaxing. Her entire body is trembling violently, and in an almost sobbing tone of voice, she begs Ryo to stop.

“Yamete...”

He ignores her and instead tightens his grip, having his long arms wrapped around her thighs and his face firmly positioned between her legs. *Don’t stop. Keep going.* Like an Everest mountaineer having the summit in sight but sensing that her grip on the rocks is about to loosen, she refuses to let go and take that freefall down the steep mountainside. No way she is going to pull the plug now over a little breathlessness. Ryo is letting his warm, slightly coarse, tongue run slowly back and forth. Tomoko is squirming in his grasp, trying to escape by pushing herself backwards on the bed, but his grip on her is too strong for her to overcome, and his response is simply to increase the speed and continue relentlessly. Even if she wanted to, she does not stand a chance of escaping.

"I'm coming. I'm coming, Ryo!"

As the last gasp escapes her mouth, the orgasm detonates inside her head, and the explosion causes waves of pleasure to roll over her like a tsunami of hot water. Every muscle in her body is tense, and orgasmic electricity is tingling all the way to her fingertips. The intensity recedes, and the last wave of pleasure washes her ashore to a warm and comfortable sandy beach. There she is, delightfully exhausted, lying on a dune side by side with a young smiling man.

"How was it?" The young man's question is accompanied by a wink in the eye.

"You've tried this before, Ryo. You can't fool me, hehe."

"Yes, I may be young, but I'm not completely wet behind the ears. You know what, next time I'll bring my girlfriend."

The statement is given in a casual tone, but it causes Tomoko to widen her eyes. Ryo knows very well that this is one of her greatest fantasies. They have chatted for a couple of weeks in the run-up to this rendezvous, and she has revealed quite a few intimate details about her various sexual fantasies and even experiences she had as a young woman before settling down with Akito. The key fantasy being the one about the girl who had had her romantic attention in high school. Things had never worked out with Erika. Tomoko had been way too shy to make a pass on her, and it had been far more of a taboo back then to have a crush on someone of the same gender. Erika had had the most beautiful almond-shaped eyes, a seductive smile, and Tomoko had, just like most of the boys in her class, paid particular attention to her long, slender legs. Legs which were

always conspicuously visible thanks to the short skirt being part of the mandatory high school uniform.

"What girlfriend is that?" Tomoko makes no attempt to hide her curiosity.

"Just someone from college. She's a senior now, so a few years older than me. We work odd hours at the same 7/11, baito, you know. Her name is Ai."

Even if Tomoko has just had her first orgasm in years, the prospects of meeting Ai are making her warm inside all over again. She has embarked on a genuine sexual road trip. There is no way she can backtrack now.

"Would she be into women?" Her voice is subdued.

"She's a sex bomb and has tried a bit of everything, I'm sure. Though probably not someone of your advanced age..."

That cheeky... Tomoko slaps Ryo on the shoulder, giving him a slight frown.

"Just kidding haha. You will like her. No doubt."

Tomoko looks affectionately at Ryo, her new dedicated facilitator of erotic experiences. There is still a conspicuous bulge in his boxer shorts.

"Let me return the favor."

With a wicked smile on her lips, she pulls down his shorts, exposing a part of him she has not seen before and which from

the sight of it is likely to cause her additional pleasure. She looks at her wristwatch. They still have 20 minutes left...

CHAPTER 5

Much like Hansel and Gretel followed a trail of breadcrumbs to find their way home through the forest, Yumiko follows the familiar purple color scheme through the labyrinthine underground arcades of Shibuya Station all the way to the platforms from where the Hanzomon line metro trains depart for Oshiage and Sky Tree. Just a single stop takes her to Omote-sando, and within minutes she is already walking along the famous boulevard flanked by wonderful zelkova trees. Breathing a sigh of relief, she takes the nearest pedestrian crossing and strolls past a Prada outlet, followed by a Gucci store, and finally the FamilyMart which is located right by their apartment complex. Aoyama Daiichi Mansions has 12 floors, and of course she and her dad inhabit a big penthouse apartment on the top floor. Her dad has complained that the building is a bit old, and he has aired plans of them relocating to a newer residential complex in the neighborhood, but Yumiko is infatuated with the stunning view they have from their balcony and with the location so close to the station and Omote-sando.

Greeting the receptionist on her way to the elevators, she traverses the extravagant lobby, tastefully decorated with high-end furniture in beige leather and elegant torchieres providing just the right degree of illumination. There are very few penthouse apartments in the complex, so the receptionist understands that she is the daughter of Iguchi-san, the CEO and former naval officer, causing him to bow ritualistically and put on his most ingratiating smile as she is passing by. He is familiar with her routines and knows that she is returning from school now. Of course, her school uniform gives it away this time.

“Otsukaresama desu.”

“Konbanwa.” Yumiko returns his after-work greeting.

Having ascended to the top floor, Yumiko drops herself dead tired onto the bed in her room. *What a relief!* Her school day has been long and exhausting, but it is really the incident with the black car which is the root cause of her fatigue. Just thinking about it gives her the shivers, but she can't get it out of her head. In contrast to the rest of the luxurious and tastefully decorated penthouse apartment, Yumiko's room is not that different from that of a typical teenage girl. Several fan posters with J-pop bands adorn the walls, and the floor is littered with clothes and handbags. A writing desk is covered with stacks of textbooks and sticky notes meant to remind her about important paragraphs, homework deadlines or to do lists for exam preparation. Next to the books, small bottles of nail polish, other cosmetics, and a couple of empty bottles of Pocari Sweat take up the remaining space on the desk.

Will you clean up that mess in your room, Yumiko! In the navy, that would earn you 10 push-ups!

The echo of her dad's voice lingers in the corridor like a ghostly reminder. For the last couple of months, he has been completely absorbed by his company and the travels to California, mostly leaving her to her own devices.

How was school today, Yumiko?

Another voice, this one from beyond the grave, comes back to haunt her. It is like her mom only left her yesterday, and sometimes she completely forgets what has happened, calling out for her mom at night waking from nightmares. Before she died, everything was tidy and orderly. Her mom was always at home when Yumiko got back from school. She would welcome her with big hugs and enthusiastically quiz her about school life and everything. These days, all that welcomes Yumiko is an empty apartment. Keeping the place tidy is now up to her. Sure, they have a housemaid who takes care of most chores, like doing the laundry and the groceries, but seeing as her dad typically works until very late, Yumiko usually prepares his evening meals, making sure he does not go without food for a whole day. *Why does he work such long hours?* Does he not, like, own the company? When she asks him about it, his excuse is always that he is discussing product development with his head of technology. Takeda-san, or something like that.

Yumiko tosses her navy-blue blazer onto a chair, pulls off the skirt in matching color, and puts on a pair of tight black jeans from her wardrobe. She loosens the tie and unbuttons the white shirt a bit. *Ah, how wonderful to get rid of that uniform!* The silly tie is particularly uncomfortable to wear. Her cell phone is ringing. The number of the caller is unknown to her. *Is it dad?* The number does not seem to be international. She takes the call.

"Moshi moshi. Yumiko desu."

No response. Someone seems to be breathing heavily at the other end, but after a few seconds of silence, the caller hangs up.

She raises a trembling hand to her chest, dropping the phone on her bed. Her blood runs cold. *Is someone really stalking her?* It reminds her of *The Ring*. Those having watched the video with Sadako's evil spirit emerging from the well or a TV set always receive a phone call telling them that they are doomed and that their time is up. Invariably, Sadako will hunt them down and frighten them to death. It is probably just a harmless prank to scare her, but what if it isn't? She does not want to be alone tonight and picks up the phone to get hold of Yoko. *Answer the call, please!* Yoko does answer and is already on her way. They agree to meet up in front of the nearby FamilyMart. Yumiko needs to restock a bit before preparing a meal for her dad anyway. Still being warm outside, she leaves the apartment just wearing her jeans and the shirt.

Yoko is already waiting for her outside the local convenience store, and she waves at Yumiko as soon as she gets in her line of sight. Apparently, she has come directly from school because she is still wearing the navy-blue high school uniform.

"Yumi-chan! Nice to see you. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm just worried someone is stalking me."

There had been an incident at school with a French guy who kind of stalked her a bit. Michel was his name. He had been head over heels in love with her and unable to accept her rejections or listen to reason, he had had the unfortunate and

“coincidental” habit of appearing near cafés or restaurants frequented by Yumiko. Every time she spotted him or caught him out, he would instantly vanish. While that was creepy, what she has experienced today is scary on a different level altogether.

“It’s not like that time with Michel. I have no idea who these creepy guys are.”

“How were they creepy?”

“You know, there was this guy in a black car in front of the school. He looked like a thug.”

“Why would they be following you?”

Yumiko gives an exasperated shrug, and together they enter the small supermarket. Being on the street, she is in a vulnerable position. *Gotta get back to the apartment as quickly as possible!* Yumiko selects snacks and prepared meals at random from the shelves tossing them into her basket. Paying the cashier with her dad’s credit card, she exits the shop on her own. Yoko is browsing through the magazines near the supermarket cash register, probably looking for her favorite manga. Out of the corner of her eye, Yumiko can tell that she is flirting with the young male cashier. Perhaps this was the reason why she was lingering and browsing the comic books. Yumiko laughs to herself. How hopeless her classmate is.

She is on her way into the pedestrian crossing when the well-known black car with the tinted windows turns a street corner and approaches her at high speed. With screeching tires, it comes to a full stop right in front of her. Yumiko’s bag with groceries slips out of her one hand, her cell phone out of the

other. She is truly paralyzed, unable to move a muscle. She is fighting for control of her motor functions to escape, but it is as if time is moving in slow motion. Her legs do not respond to the commands her brain is issuing them. Two muscular, broad-shouldered men wearing black suits jump out of the car, but she is dumbstruck and unable to even scream. She hardly registers how one of the men grabs her, pressing a damp cloth against her face. It has a sweet scent to it, and this is one of the last things Yumiko's fogging mind can recall as her legs turn to jelly, and she starts losing her consciousness. Someone is carrying her and dumping her inert body onto the backseat of the car, and then she passes out. The other man is about to pick up Yumiko's cell phone, when Yoko's panicky screams from inside the supermarket shatter the silence. He gives up and jumps into the car, immediately revving its engine and accelerating down the deserted street towards Omote-sando.

Yoko runs out of the supermarket and is left baffled and alone on the sidewalk. The only evidence that something out of the ordinary happened here is the skid marks on the asphalt and Yumiko's broken cell phone surrounded by colorful snack bags from the supermarket.

CHAPTER 6

On numerous occasions, Takeda-san has been on the verge of ending it right there at the station. Every morning when blending into the horde of suited up office worker lemmings, the alluring solution to his woes presents itself. Malicious demons whisper fresh doses of negativity into his ear, taunting him and undermining his resilience. *Just throw yourself under that train, you coward.* If he can make it look like an accident, Atsuko will most likely receive his life insurance payout. It might save her from complete humiliation. He is looking at the ubiquitous flatscreens adorning the station, all showing the weather forecast just now. A train with the characteristic green color theme of the Yamanote circle line is decelerating towards his platform and for the umpteenth time, the voices in his head grow stronger and more insistent. *It's now or never – be a man and not a sisyy!* Will he become an extra number in the national railway safety statistics? As anywhere in Japan, the Tokyo train service is extremely punctual, and delays only occur in case of a jinshin jiko, or “human accident”. The vast majority of these are suicides, and without knowing the detailed statistics, Takeda presumes most

are burned out and depressed male office workers, the so-called “sarariman”, finally deciding to end their misery. It is such a monstrous act of egotism, though. Just imagine the impact it has on their families, the train drivers, and the commuters standing next to them. They will all be traumatized for life.

Either way, it is too late. The window for jumping has closed now. Takeda boards the train which is headed for the greater Shinjuku Station. He usually returns to his family appropriately late in the evening, but today he will change his routine. He is going to visit his hometown near Kawaguchi-ko, one of the five lakes at the foot of Mt. Fuji. But he needs to come up with a story Atsuko will find credible. He might say that his boss has sent him to Osaka on an urgent business trip, and that he will be away for a couple of days. A highly realistic scenario, in fact.

Despite all the doom and gloom besetting him, Takeda is still very much alive when the train stops at Shinjuku. He gets off and starts finding his way through the crowds of commuters passing through the enormous station. It is literally a maze of vast concourses with innumerable passageways leading in all directions, interspersed with ticket gates, platforms, and underground arcades full of restaurants, bars, and small shops. Everything is intertwined and crawling with hordes of busy people crisscrossing each other’s paths. He is an ant stuck in an anthill. His mission in life is not to gather pine needles for the collective but money for his family. The weekdays converge into a single grey mass consisting of work, work, work. Yet now he has lost his job, his purpose in life, his *raison d’être*. *Or has he?*

He is going to revisit the village in which he grew up, and a smile is making a rare appearance on his lips. It seems infinitely long ago since he last saw Lake Kawaguchi. He has a special ryokan

in mind, namely that inn where he stayed with Atsuko nearly 15 years ago when they were newlyweds on a weekend trip. Beyond its famous onsen, or hot springs, the inn has something quite unique to offer. A traditional Japanese Zen style rock garden, a pond teeming with carps, and a small romantic wooden bridge. *Ah, the sweet kissing with Atsuko.* There is also a phenomenal chef there who can conjure up Japanese gourmet classics leaving even the most exclusive restaurants in Tokyo in the dust. Might he still be working at the ryokan?

CHAPTER 7

Only after a considerable time in the car, does Yumiko slowly regain her consciousness. She can move her legs again, but the rest of her body is numb. Why is it so dark? *Ah, someone blindfolded her!* She cannot move her hands to get rid of the blindfold. *They also handcuffed her!* As she is squirming to uncuff herself, the metal is biting into her wrists. It stings painfully. She screams. When she gets no response, she starts yelling for help.

“Tasukete!! Dareka!”

She tries to get up, but her head, which is still dazed, bangs against a barrier of some sort. Apparently, there is a dividing screen between the backseat and the front of the car. On top of that, she appears to have been left alone on the backseat, at least no one reacts to her tantrums. Yumiko can sense that the car is still moving at high speed. Even if she had been able to open the door, jumping out of the car now would amount to certain death. Tears start to flow from the corners of her eyes. If only she could wipe them off with her sleeve, but even if uncuffed,

her black eyeliner would instantly discolor her white shirt. *Well, that's the least of your problems, Yumiko.* She's quietly scolding herself. The car seems to be decelerating abruptly. Probably it has reached its destination, wherever that might be. Within minutes, it comes to a halt, and there are sounds suggesting the front doors are being opened and then shut. For a little while, complete silence descends on the interior of the car. *Is that her heart pounding?*

The door to the backseat opens. Yumiko is curling up in the opposite end of the backseat to stay as far from the open door as possible. That creepy guy who stuffed her into the car in front of the supermarket is not going to touch her again. Unfortunately, she cannot prevent exactly that from happening. A pair of rough hands are picking her up from the backseat, ignoring her repeated attempts at wiggling out of their grasp and moments later, she is standing next to the car on shaky legs, feeling like the ground under her feet is being hit by the aftershocks of a major earthquake.

“Will you make that brat behave?! Or else I'm gonna smack her!”

The cranky male voice has an accent. Kansai-ben as it is spoken in Osaka and the western parts of Honshu.

“Follow me and do exactly as I say, then no harm will come to you. Try any funny stuff, and you're toast.”

This voice is slightly more friendly, and it is clearly the voice of a woman. A pair of smoother hands are on her wrists now. They uncuff her, and her hands are finally free again. While they have become a bit numb, there is a throbbing pain as blood is starting

to circulate in them again. Someone, presumably the woman, takes her by the hand and guides her away from the car. *Is that the sound of traffic?* There must a street nearby. If she rips off the blindfold and makes a run for it screaming for help, she might escape. *No, Yumiko, don't be silly.* Being blindfolded and handcuffed by thugs speaking Kansai-ben. Hmm. There is no denying it. She has clearly fallen into the hands of the yakuza! Trying to escape would be suicidal. Yumiko is gripped by acute nausea and is struggling to maintain her balance yet again. There simply is no other option than following the woman.