

Can you spot the killer in the crowd?

unknown male

NICOLÁS
OBREGÓN

PART ONE

1. Tokyo, Somewhere

Mr Sato glanced around the carriage as he nibbled off the nail from his little finger. Confident that nobody had seen him, he plucked it out from between his lips and dropped it into his breast pocket to be with the rest. Keeping them was his little habit, his little secret.

The train was heading south, past the airport, out towards the fringes of the city. Not that Mr Sato knew where Tokyo started and ended any more. The carriage jolted in the warm evening, a mobile sauna, so tightly packed the passengers swayed as one. Unlike the others, however, Mr Sato did not crane his neck for a view out of the window or a glimpse of newspaper. He simply looked at his shoes and accepted the journey, occasionally closing his eyes.

Mr Sato was of medium build, of middle age. His hair was neatly cropped and his shirt impeccably pressed. Tie: seasonal. Watch: functional. Suit: bland yet elegant. Everything about him said mid-range. He had no birthmarks, no scars, no distinguishing attributes. His face was ordinary. His only unharmonious feature was his eyebrows, at once sparse and long, like the hair on a spider's legs. He had a habit of blinking too much, his irises two flies trapped in a web.

Mr Sato worked in the corporate headquarters of a confectionery conglomerate that specialized in chocolate bars, dairy products and dietary supplements. He had joined the company straight out of university and had never worked a single day anywhere else. For the first ten years, each spring,

an innocuous little slip of paper would arrive on his desk announcing a raise in salary without any kind of explanation. When Mr Sato's wife became pregnant, he swore he would redouble his efforts and aim for top management.

But in the following years the pay rises diminished and while his 'classmates' were promoted Mr Sato was quietly farmed out to his current dead-end division. Soon he found himself lost in a quagmire of sleepless nights and stress.

His wife told him not to worry, things would work out, they would be okay. Hard times were just part of life. After all, *stress* was the most common English loanword in Japan.

Mr Sato tried everything. He went to mind gyms to relax with special light goggles and soothing music. He visited stress-relief salons for aromatherapy sessions in vibrating cubicles. Bars where he paid a small fee to smash plates. Even IV drips at a fashionable new clinic. When the new-fangled failed, he fell back on the more traditional methods: massages, hostesses, drinking with old friends. Nothing helped.

The economy contracted yet again. There were rumours the company had hired downsizing consultants. At his lowest, Mr Sato considered ending it all.

But then one day, his father spoke to him. From beyond the grave, on the car radio. He didn't say anything special – it was the usual – stop whining, stop daydreaming, knuckle down. *And while I'm at it, when are you going to put things right in the village? Your own father, shamed. You're just going to leave things the way they are? You were born in Okuromori.*

Mr Sato worried at first; he had to be losing his mind. But when it happened again a few days later he admitted to himself how comforting it was to hear the old man's voice

now and then. His father began to speak to him more and more frequently. Mr Sato simply accepted it. After that, as if by magic, the stress vanished.

By then, he had been working at his company for over twenty years. If Management had forgotten about him, then he would respond in kind. They paid his salary. He fed his family. Put gas in his car. He refused to worry about needing anything more. For the first time in his life, Mr Sato swore to be his own man. Swore to put things right in the village.

The train gave off a low moan as it trundled over narrow tracks, a tiny ventricle in the never-ending Tokyo heart. It ran past the backs of apartment buildings, dirty billboards, and offices now operating on unpaid overtime. There was a brief stop at an elevated station and a few commuters got off, free of the heat. Along the sagging telephone wire above an unkindness of ravens huddled, throwing up their throaty *keraa keraa* calls at the deepening dusk.

A woman in a sleek grey pant suit boarded and apologized quietly as she brushed past Mr Sato. Admiring her silk scarf, he thought of the boutique nearby that his wife loved. It would probably still be open. He gauged the amount of bodies in his way while juggling thoughts of what kind of present he would even begin to look for. But as he wondered whether a voucher would make for an anticlimactic gift, the doors hissed shut. *Tomorrow, maybe.*

The little train rose high over the streets, then down through level crossings, where flocks of home-bound bicycles gathered. Not a single person in the carriage knew another; not a word was spoken. The sky was a soupy orange, the last of the sun flaring through the apertures in the cityscape.

The thoughts in Mr Sato's head were unremarkable – his work, the village festival he was organizing, his son. He was a good boy. A little quiet, a little wide-eyed, but a good boy. Thinking about him made Mr Sato's chest feel like a cuckoo clock, as though at any moment his secret pride could burst out. He inhaled deeply, tasted the sweat hanging between the bodies, the stench trying to hide in perfume and colognes. But Mr Sato didn't mind smells.

Mr Sato arrived home a little after 8 p.m. He ate a pleasant dinner with his wife and son then helped out with the homework. Afterwards, he sat with his wife to watch the news while she read her book. Another government reshuffle was expected. There was a time when current events would have provoked some feeling in him. That time was long gone.

At 11.30 p.m, Mr Sato tried to kiss his wife, but she turned him down.

'I'm sorry, I just don't want to shower again.'

'It's okay.'

'If you want I can use my hand?' She marked the page in her book.

'It's okay,' he smiled. 'Another time.'

Mr Sato got up and went into the kitchen. He climbed on a stool and took out a maroon-coloured Thermos from the highest cupboard.

'I forgot to ask,' his wife called out. 'How are the arrangements for the *matsuri* coming along?'

'Fine,' he called back. 'I found a good recipe for venison stew.'

'Controversial choice!'

'Yes,' he laughed. 'The village will be talking about it for years.' Looking over his shoulder, he opened the Thermos.

A viscous pork smell escaped. He slipped his hand inside his breast pocket, dropped in his nail clippings then quickly fastened the lid again. Wafting the smell away, Mr Sato washed his hands and returned to the living room.

‘I’m going back into the office,’ he said apologetically.

His wife looked up from her book with a sympathetic pout. ‘You have to?’

‘Afraid so. Deadline approaching.’

‘Please rest a little during the day.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Will you make the last train?’

‘I still have time.’

‘Good.’ She nodded at the Thermos under his arm. ‘What’s that?’

‘Just some tea.’

‘You get through so much these days!’

‘We all have our vices.’ Mr Sato said goodnight and left.

Outside, instead of turning right for the train station, he headed for the small parking lot. Getting into the family car, he flipped through digital albums on the dashboard before settling on Céline Dion’s *The Power of Love*.

It took Mr Sato ninety minutes to reach the winding Ibaraki mountain roads, his car like a stray firefly in the darkness.

By the time he was cruising along the narrow country lanes north of Lake Ōkuromori, it was a strain to contain his excitement. But he soon spotted the familiar sequence of chinquapin trees followed by the unmarked turning. Mr Sato loved the slow, crackling, popping sound of his tyres over the twigs and dead leaves. It made him imagine himself as a giant worm, slithering through the warm earth.

He parked in the usual dense grove and got out. Mr Sato

swapped his shoes for rubber boots, then he took the tarp sheet he'd hidden in the nearby tree and covered the car. Now he was ready. With his keyring torch, he found the old path.

The low buzz of crickets was constant, a triggered burglar alarm. There was a chilly current through the trees, branches screeching gently. Beneath it, the sound of little animals bolting away in the blackness. The woody tang of the forest smelled like life. Mr Sato filled his lungs with gusto.

After a while the path gave on to a secluded lake. He squelched his way along the muddy shore to the jetty. There he texted his wife to tell her he hoped he hadn't woken her but that he was making good progress at work. Then he crept along the rickety jetty and lowered himself into the old boat that had belonged to his father.

Mr Sato began to row, his intrusion rippling out across the water. Sleeping birds flapped out of low branches, grazing the surface of the lake. He heard his father in the creaking of the oars. *It's good to see you're finally taking things seriously, son. Even if it did take you all these years.*

The islet was about 400 metres away. There was nothing special about it to the eye, simply a patch of inaccessible trees in the middle of the lake. But Mr Sato knew what lay beyond those trees. His heart hammered for the knowing.

He was sweating by the time the boat scraped on to the shore of the islet, steam rising off his icy shoulders. Carefully climbing out, he steadied his breathing and luxuriated over the exquisite commingling of nerves and anticipation. Then he raised his torch and made his way through the thick knot of cedars.

On the other side of them Mr Sato saw what he had

come for at last: a simple A-frame cabin, little more than two telephone boxes in size. The country air was strikingly fresh on his lips. He licked them.

Feeling the key in his pocket, he recalled what his father would say whenever he asked for chocolate as a child: *Look at you, your hand is reaching out of your throat for it.*

He worked the locks briskly and the chain fell to the grass. The soundproofed door opened. From the darkness, a woman screamed.

2. Enjoy Your Stay

Rainy season. Hot air from the south had embroiled itself with Siberian cold, burying Tokyo in a shallow grave of humid cloud. In the depths of the city snakes were slithering out of gutters. Herons nested along the concrete banks of nameless canals. And ten million plastic umbrellas were opening and closing, a never-ending bloom of jellyfish in propulsion.

In the north-east of Tokyo, purple neon letters spelled out the name of a love hotel – *Starlet*. The businesses hiding in this narrow alleyway were easy to misconceive, tinted glass doorways designed to be overlooked by those not in the know. Ordinarily, nobody but the desperate would linger. But tonight the alleyway was packed. Tonight there was a special guest.

Blue tarp cloaked the entrance to Starlet. Policemen shuffled in and out of the alley, hungry pensioners at a cold buffet. At the end of it, a squad car blocked the way, lights flashing but no siren wailing. Instead an automated female voice entreated locals to carry on about their business:

PLEASE DO NOT DWELL HERE, POLICE
OFFICERS ARE WORKING. KINDLY
REMEMBER TO OBSERVE TRAFFIC
REGULATIONS AND COOPERATE IN
THE PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS.

In another part of the city the crowd might be bigger, but few asked questions here. In San'ya, trouble was nobody's business. The rest was business as usual. Despite the police presence, the shabby sex grottos still opened their doors as the sun went down. Chinese prostitutes in sci-fi coloured wigs merely moved a few metres up the road, the strands of denim on their skirts stirring in the warm air. They seemed more worried by the threat of rain than by the law, dispassionately chirping their mantra at every passing male: *Massaji? Massaji? Massaji?*

Inspector Shingo Hatanaka had no trouble pushing his way through the half-hearted congregation. His burgundy armband identified him as Division One: Homicide. He was a large, balding man with small eyes, thick lips and a mole over his left eyebrow. His shirt collar was tight around the thickness of his neck, giving him the impression of a tortoise emerging from its shell. Though he was mid-thirties, his body was a decade ahead of him. His weight didn't exactly help.

Hatanaka swallowed another antihistamine and scowled up at the clouds. This weather always made him paranoid. He could almost hear the rustle of the dust mites, smell the mould colonies spreading through the dank interstices of this crumbling district.

Hatanaka turned his attention to the love hotel. It didn't look that old. He guessed the owners had banked on gentrification after the Olympics had been announced. But seven years had passed and the Games were now just two weeks away. San'ya was still San'ya.

It was a place that could not be found on maps. Even asking for directions would not help. Most locals would say, 'You're not too far.' It had been the Shogun's execution

grounds centuries ago, home to meat packers, tanners and undertakers, those who worked with blood, those tainted by death. Later, it became known for trouble – agitators, drinkers, prostitutes, political extremists. In the sixties it had been erased from the map by a squeamish city authority. Dissected and renamed, today – officially speaking – San’ya no longer existed.

‘What a place to die.’

Lips tingling, Hatanaka dipped his head under the blue tarp and entered the love hotel. It smelled of mildew and detergent. The cramped hallway was dim. There was nobody at reception, not that he would have been able to see anyone, given the screen. A master keycard in the shape of a star had been left out for him. Hatanaka took the elevator to the eighth floor. As he ascended, it occurred to him that a love hotel wasn’t a bad place to kill a person. *No faces. No windows. No questions asked.*

The elevator pinged open to a silent, featureless corridor. Assistant Inspector Itō, a younger detective with a quiet voice and a sober haircut, was waiting for his superior. He led the way.

‘Sir. First-responding officers have made their reports, forensics team en route, the prosecutor has been notified. Victim is female. Young. A foreigner. Pretty clear blunt-force trauma. Killed several days ago. Likely somewhere between the 7th and the 8th of July.’

‘Who found her?’

‘Anonymous tip. Responding officers discovered the body tonight at 9.30 p.m.’

‘Good. Means my crime scene won’t be too wrecked.’

The doors were all closed except for one room, 806. The plastic sign outside read: *Andromeda*. Snapping on

nitrile gloves, Hatanaka entered. The walls were painted a cartoonish purple galaxy, little electric stars projected on the ceiling via a cheap lighting system. On the radio, Tokyo 1 Gold was playing an old *kayōkyoku* song – ‘Good-night Baby’ by the King Tones.

The girl was lying face down on the floor, bare and pale, her head caved in. Her blonde hair was wine red on one side, in coils and ringlets, as though she had just emerged from the shower.

Hatanaka crouched over her and smelled a wink of perfume. ‘Who is she, Itō?’

‘Here’s her alien residence card. Name . . . Mackintosh, Skye. Twenty-two. From the United Kingdom. Exchange student.’

In the photo, Hatanaka saw a pretty young woman with large, brown, almond-shaped eyes and a wide, conquering smile. The ID card told him she was from London and that she went to Rikkyo University, on the other side of Tokyo. It would have been her birthday the week after next.

Hatanaka took out his torch and ran his beam over the woman’s body. The backs of her knees had pale little grooves, like pink soldering on a doll belying its manufacture. Her heels were calloused. There was a small mole on her lower back, one on her right breast. The stretch marks about her hips shone like seashells.

‘I don’t see any of the usual bruising.’

‘Agreed, sir. Sexual assault not obvious at this stage.’

‘I wasn’t asking for your opinion, Itō.’

Skye’s eyes were open, the pupils a rye-whiskey colour. Despite the fact that she had been dead for several days, her forearms and calves still had a reddish tan. She had no tattoos on her body, no birthmarks.

Hatanaka returned to the main wound: a dark, deep breach on the right side of her head. He guessed perhaps just one or two blows with the weapon, but enough to cause catastrophic damage. Her small nose was smashed flat, twice its size compared to the photograph. Her forehead and cheeks were puffed up, as though inflated.

‘He beat her severely, but this looks like the blow that finished her. Hammer, or something similar.’ Hatanaka indicated the site of the *coup de grâce* with his little finger.

Itō nodded but kept his opinion to himself this time.

‘Find anything else?’

‘Not much, sir. Just her clothes in the bathroom. She’d drawn a bath.’

Grunting, Hatanaka stood back up. ‘How do you see it, Itō? Was she meeting a boyfriend or selling spring?’

‘I’m not sure, sir.’

‘How did nobody find her sooner?’

‘The room was rented for a week. Receptionist said she remembers it because that length of time stood out to her. It was paid for by –’ He referred to his notepad now. *‘A scruffy-looking man. 174 to 178 centimetres. Had buck teeth. Looked homeless.’*

‘We need to find that man. Did the girl come in with him?’

‘No, she came in alone. Looks like she ordered some takeaway pizza, but the delivery guy was up and down in two minutes. We’re looking for him right now, too.’

‘This scruffy man, he could have been waiting in the room for her.’

‘Apparently not. Reception confirms he paid then never returned. The only other people who have been up to this floor in the last five days were a couple who stayed

for an hour. And a young woman by herself. But she didn't stay for long at all.'

'Itō, this girl didn't smash her own head in.'

'No, I realize –'

'While I'm at it, do you see a murder weapon?'

'No, sir, whoever killed her must have taken it with him, but –'

'And where's the pizza box? Does the killer hate litter, too?'

'Perhaps he took it with him. Didn't want his employer to be identified.'

Hatanaka sighed and stepped over the dead girl. In the bathroom, a bra hung from the only chair, the clothes bundled. The cold bathwater was pink, its scent artificial cherry.

Through a tiny window slat Hatanaka peered out over the electric black skyline and saw the blimp that had appeared in recent days. An enormous electronic display on its side replayed the same message over and over:

TOKYO WELCOMES YOU –
PLEASE ENJOY YOUR STAY!

The screen ran through a loop of inane facts: 339 gold medals with more than 11,000 athletes participating from 206 nations! 6,000 hours of television coverage to be beamed across the world! Millions of visitors! Over ¥800 billion spent!

San'ya was only eleven kilometres from the National Stadium but there was little for the tourists here – homeless camps, gambling dens, long-closed labour exchanges, shutters slashed by graffiti. Men huddled in gaps to drink beer

from flasks, faces wizened beyond age, eyes dulled by all. Alleyways smelled of piss and cigarette smoke. In the mornings, workers gathered at the crossroads hoping for off-the-books employment, once abundant, now scarce. Along with the gambling and prostitution, what was left of the illicit day-labour trade belonged to the gangsters, themselves squeezed by an ever more obdurate government.

Along the banks of the Sumida River, plywood boxes contained the homeless in all their variety, from the elderly living out their last days to the secretly redundant salary-men, briefcases still in hand, aimlessly walking the streets of Tokyo in the day then returning to their hutches beneath the freeway at night. The hopeless wagered their last few yen on unlit street corners. Strange shouts could be heard not too far away. Shadowy figures approached abandoned buildings and tested locks. Prostitutes led clients into empty lots.

It was a far cry from Kabukichō, Tokyo's most ostentatious red-light district, where sex could look and feel and taste any way one wanted. But Kabukichō was another Tokyo altogether. And that puzzled Hatanaka. A foreigner found murdered in a love hotel was one thing – rare as that was. But a foreigner found murdered in a love hotel in San'ya? That was odd.

Not that Hatanaka cared. He was here, and he was here *first*. Somewhere, on the other side of the world, a mother's phone would ring and announce a cataclysm. But not for Hatanaka. For Hatanaka, this was something else altogether.

'An opportunity,' he whispered.

It had taken him years to finally move up from Assistant Inspector. While countless younger detectives had been

fast-tracked through the ranks, Hatanaka had drifted from station to station, fielding more rubbish bags mistaken for corpses than actual dead bodies. By the time he was promoted to Inspector it had become something of an embarrassment. No matter, he had joined Kappa Unit in Shibuya HQ, one of the most respected homicide teams in the country.

Hatanaka quickly found himself out of his depth, working under a fanatically strait-laced senior detective. But the bastard had retired at last, the decision to replace him still up in the air, and the English girl was dead on the ground.

In the alley below he saw a frail figure being helped toward the love hotel, cane out in front like a small antenna. *Commissioner Shindo? But he never comes to crime scenes.*

Swearing excitedly, Hatanaka hurried out of the room. As he took the elevator down, he ran through different responses in his head. Should he respond normally? Or with extra formality? *Relax, just let it happen*, he scolded himself. *The old man isn't going to promote you on how low you bow. Just keep your head in the game. Maybe it's not a promotion, maybe he's putting you in charge of Kappa temporarily. Either way, this is finally your chance to win the old man's trust.*

The doors slid open now and Hatanaka bowed deeply. 'Commissioner, thank you for coming.'

'Does me good to see the sky sometimes.' Isao Shindo, once burly, was now gaunt. After his stroke, one eye had drooped, his lips bunched to one side. The good hand gripped a walking stick, the back of it spotted purple.

'Commissioner, the murder of this young woman is a tragedy. But rest assured, already I have identified some promising—'

Shindo held up a finger. 'We need to talk.'

‘Of course,’ Hatanaka bowed again and hoped sweat hadn’t dripped off his forehead.

The officer who had accompanied the commissioner took his cue and left Shindo leaning against the counter. ‘That thing upstairs? That is not a tragedy, Hatanaka. It’s a *problem*. A very big problem.’

‘Yes, sir. I completely understand. That’s why —’

‘In a few hours there’ll be a circus camped outside this shithole. We’re going to be so busy we’d borrow a cat’s paw to help.’

‘Yes, I agr—’

Another raised finger. ‘The Olympics are around the corner and the eyes of the world are going to be on us. The one thing we cannot be is an embarrassment. We *cannot*.’

‘No, sir. Absolutely.’

‘We need a result here. It has to be done right.’

‘Sir, I appreciate that. Which is why —’

‘I’m transferring you.’

‘. . . What?’

‘You’re out of Kappa Unit.’

The immediate, irrevocable truth of the statement was a boot in Hatanaka’s guts. He knew Shindo was not someone to plead with. Certainly not one for changing his mind. This was happening. Hatanaka was going backwards yet again.

‘. . . Out?’ He could only murmur it.

‘I need you to work the missing prostitutes.’

‘Who will lead Kappa Unit?’

‘I’m bringing someone else in.’

Jealousy spread through Hatanaka’s chest. ‘. . . An outsider?’

‘Yes and no. As it happens, you know him.’ Shindo

coughed wet and deep, his half-frozen mouth unable to keep in the spittle. When he could breathe again he unapologetically wiped away the pink flecks from his shirt and gestured for his human walking stick to return.

Shaking, Hatanaka realized this was what passed for an explanation in the old man's mind. 'Commissioner, have I let you down in some way?'

Shindo did not face him. His sigh was long, his response considered. 'You have not.'

'So then may I ask why it's necessary —'

'It's Kosuke Iwata.' He nodded, as if that name were a statement of fact — everything that Hatanaka was not. 'This is just how it has to be.' The officer helped Shindo outside.

Trembling with anger, Hatanaka glared at his hunched back as it darkened with rain.