

Ghosts

A Benjamin Wright Mystery

Philip Delves Broughton

Whistler Publishing – New York

Copyright © 2010 by Philip Delves Broughton

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the author.

For information: Philip@philipdelvesbroughton.com

ISBN: 978-0-557-12812-2

January 2010

1.

Wright bent double and clutched his knees. He could taste blood in the back of his mouth. Two schoolboys dressed in grey shorts, white shirts and grey caps stared up at him. He managed a faint smile. But then he heard it. The whine of the motorcycle.

Behind him rose a bridge, arched like the back of an armadillo over Tokyo Bay. Its ugly struts were barely visible against the cloudy sky. It was rush hour. But this being Japan, the rush was orderly. Cars waited patiently at the lights, refusing to honk. Streams of pedestrians walked briskly towards the office buildings of Ginza without so much as a shove or a sharp word.

Wright had no time for such civility. He had to run and keep running, as far as possible from the maniac on the bike. Across the road he saw a guard standing listlessly beside an open gate. Wright wiped away the sweat which was stinging his eyes and glimpsed the chaos of the Tsukiji market.

He veered to the left of the crowd surging across the street and sprinted past the guard. He could lose himself in here. Easily. A tour guide holding up a large colorful umbrella was giving advice to a group of American visitors: "This is a working market. Please do not do anything to interrupt the work of the people

working here. You can take pictures, but stay close. There is a lot of moving traffic, cars, scooters, as well as people carrying sharp knives and trays of product.”

Wright joined the back of the group, trying to look inconspicuous. Except that he was the only one of them not in shorts, T-shirt and trainers with a camera around his neck. A two-piece blue worsted wool suit from Huntsman and a bespoke Sea Island cotton shirt was hardly the ideal outfit for visiting a fish market on a humid Tokyo morning.

His pursuer had stopped at the gate and was talking to the guard, who was suddenly much more animated than he had seemed to Wright. The two of them were looking into the vast parking lot in front of the market. If Wright did not move, they would spot him in a few seconds.

All around the market, the vendors rode yellow, motorized carts, scooters with six foot flat beds, loaded with fish packed in ice. The drivers stood at the front and steered using a large wheel which lay flat in front of them like a roulette wheel. They wove quickly through the narrow lanes of the market, barely missing each other. As one of these passed, Wright leapt onto a low runner between the wheels and crouched down. The driver turned to look back down at him. His face was gnarled and teak brown. Thin wisps of grey hair lay across his forehead. A self-rolled cigarette had settled into a well worn slot on his lower lip. Wright looked up at him imploringly. The driver smiled and kept on moving, out of the car park and into the market itself, a vaulting, iron structure, blackened with use and cacophonous.

Close to the exit, a line of carts waited to use the ice machines, sets of primitive, clattering pipes which disgorged bucket-loads of ice every second. From every

side came the beeping of trucks as they backed into the loading areas, shouts as a scooter shot past a little too close, and the incessant, high-pitched grind of blades being sharpened.

Wright jumped off the cart as it was still moving. The driver did not even look back. Wright looked down. He had landed in a fishy puddle and a rubbery streak of something now clung to the right cuff of his trousers. He glanced out towards the car park. He could see the man running along the side of the market, squinting into the darkness. In America or Europe, Wright could so easily have vanished amidst so many people. But not as a six foot white man in a Japanese fish market. Here he stood out like a bloodstain on a clean white sheet.

He turned down one of the narrow alleys which ran down away from the entrance. The soles of his leather shoes slipped awkwardly on the wet cobbles. He wished he was wearing rubber boots like all the men who worked here. The air was thick with the smell of fish, cigarette smoke and strong coffee. Wright passed piles of crimson octopus, lobsters the deepest purple scurrying pointlessly in deep plastic trays. Shrimp lay in translucent heaps, headless eels writhed in bloody pools of water. The vendors picked them up and squeezed them, as if wringing out a pair of wet socks. There were buckets of prickly sea urchins, red snapper staring up with their inquisitive black eyes, stacks of long, sharp crab claws.

Wright was now stuck behind a group of three men, all smoking and staring down at a three foot slab of tuna, skinned and deep red, like the haunch of some giant human. They were waiting for the seller to carve off slivers with a long knife, a foot and a half long, and serve them up on small paper plates. Wright glanced down to see a blue bucket full of blood-encrusted tuna heads,

scraped clean of flesh, their eyes staring up, dead and alabaster white.

For all the human chaos and foreign tour parties, the fish market remained a place of butchery, of knives ripping through bone and flesh, tearing off skin and scales.

From behind him, Wright heard a ripple of voices and the muffled crash of Styrofoam boxes falling to the ground. He turned around. 20 feet away, the man was surging towards him, clearing his path with a three foot tuna carving blade. He was smiling dementedly as he came.

Wright pushed at one of the men staring down at the tuna, forcing him to spill his searing coffee onto the precious, raw flesh. His ankle turned on the wet stone, sending a bolt of pain up his leg. He cursed, but pushed on. He looked down the alley at the crush of people. If he kept going, he would soon be caught. He noticed a wooden gallery running along the top of the shops, where the shop owners stored boxes and hung signs. He grabbed hold of a narrow wooden ladder running up towards it and climbed, his feet slipping on the damp wood. Down below in a small hutch tucked at the back of a store, he saw a woman pausing from counting the day's takings under a long, fluorescent light to scowl at him.

In a moment, Wright was standing on the gallery. He unhooked the ladder and threw it to the ground. His pursuer swiped at it as it fell, slashing easily through one of the steps. The walkway was much narrower than it had looked from the ground. Wright would have to shuffle along as if he were on a narrow mountain path, pressing his back up against the boxes.

He could see the vendors had moved away, gathering at each end of the alley, watching and talking as

if this were some gladiatorial spectacle. Wright half expected them to start placing bets. 10 feet above him, he could see a curving strut, one of several which arched in like the legs of a spider towards a large, circular light fixture. From that, a single pole ran up another 20 feet to an opening onto the roof. Turning in the narrow space, he found a tight path through the boxes. It might buy him some time.

He edged his way through to the other side of the gallery. He could hear the clatter of metal on stone. His pursuer slashed his blade on the ground in frustration as he realized he would have to run all the way to one end of the alley and come down the other side. It gave Wright a moment to think. Teetering over the shop below him, was a heavy wooden sign, six feet across and four feet high, painted with the owner's name. It was held by two ropes, tied to iron hooks. Wright yanked at the knots, pulling away years of encrusted filth. When they were loosened, he gripped the ropes, grimacing at the weight of the sign and bracing his feet against the gallery's ledge. He could hear the man panting below him. He waited until he was sure he was standing right below then let go.

The huge slab of teak fell forward, bringing down a string of lights and crashing onto the fish and boxes below. The men at the end of the alley screamed with delight. Wright leaned over, hoping to see the feet of his pursuer poking out from one end, like the Wicked Witch of the East.

Instead, a splinter of wood flew up, just missing his face. He saw the man's blade surging through the sign like a missile launched from out at sea. And then the sign came to a rest, on two wooden sawhorses, three feet off the ground. Wright heard a grunting sound and then his pursuer's Mohawk emerging from beneath it.

For Christ's sake.

Whichever way he went now the man could follow him. He was trapped up here like a man up a tree with a bear prowling beneath. There was only one way out.

He moved into the middle of the piles of packing cases, where he was invisible to the crowd below. He placed his left foot on a stack of boxes. They wobbled beneath him. He brought up his right foot. He shuffled his feet around until the boxes stopped moving. Then he reached up and grabbed the strut. His fingers could not grip the metal. If he tried to jump, the boxes would topple away beneath him. He stood on the tips of his toes and just managed to wrap his right palm around the strut. He pulled himself up and got the left palm around it too. Then he swung his feet up until he was dangling like a monkey from a branch. Then with a final effort, he pulled himself up and over until he was straddling the beam. He caught his breath. Above him ran a taut cable. He raised himself to his feet and seized it. Within seconds he had pulled himself along to the central light fixture.

He leaned forward and grabbed the pole rising up to the roof. Thick rivets offered support for his hands and feet as he shimmied his way up. His long arms quickly reached the opening at the top. Wright pulled himself up towards the rectangle of hazy sky and with one final heave, he had his elbows wedged on the rooftop and was able to lever himself out into daylight.

He barely had a moment to catch his breath before he heard the clatter of the metal staircase which ran up the rear of the market building. Seconds later, he saw his pursuer. The demented smile had been replaced by an angry, snorting snarl. His face was smeared with fish

blood. He smashed his long blade into the metal roof, sending off sparks.

Wright could now hear sirens wailing towards the market. This was precisely what he had been warned not to do. Alert the police to his presence here in Tokyo. But someone, any one of hundreds of eye-witnesses must have called them. And now they would all be witness to his ignominious death.

Wright stepped backwards, glancing for a moment to see where the edge of the roof was. The killer twisted the blade in circles, now in the air, now scratching it against the roof. One swipe of it could easily decapitate a man.

Seagulls flew low overhead, fleeing a storm far out beyond Tokyo Bay. Wright could now make out the intricate tattoo which covered the upper part of the man's face, a swirl of concentric circles curling around his eyes. His Mohawk was gelled into a hard ridge which stood immune to the strong wind. He wore a black silk shirt, the sleeves rolled up to expose brawny, scarred forearms and a heavy gold watch. He spat, but the wind caught his spittle and blew it back across his chin. He wiped it away with his arm.

Several police cars were now pulling up in front of the fish market. The faint chatter of radios and barked orders reached the two men up on the roof. But the killer seemed unfazed. He was focused on one thing: his orders to murder the gaijin now edging gingerly away from him. Everything else would be taken care of.

The roof was large, the size of a football field at least. But there were only two obvious ways off. Back down the way Wright had come up, or by the stairs. A twirling three foot sword lay between Wright and both options. Behind him, the drop was 40 feet at least onto

concrete or a fast moving scooter. Wright waited for the man to make a lunge, anything which might put him off balance. But the killer was patient. They could hear the police running around the market, the first steps on the metal staircase.

Wright glanced backwards for a fraction of a second, all the time he could risk. It was all he needed. He turned sharply and ran straight off the roof.

2.

He expected the landing to be firmer than it was. Instead, he found himself sinking, sucked into a mass of rotting fish heads and bodies. He fought to keep himself from being drawn downwards, flapping his arms as if he were trying to take off. He could find nowhere to rest his feet. He pointed his foot downwards, searching for the bottom of the refuse container being driven away from the market, but he couldn't find it.

He was a like a child venturing for the first time out of the shallow end of a swimming pool, panicking the moment his toes could not touch the bottom. The smell was repulsive, but it barely registered against his fear. Blood, entrails and the sticky remnants of thousands of skinned and gutted fish clung to Wright's face and hair.

He felt a large splash followed by a large, strong palm pressing down on the crown of his head. The killer had landed and grabbed hold of the back of the truck. He was wallowing in the garbage, but unlike Wright, he had traction. Enough to drown his victim. He thrust violently downwards until Wright's head disappeared below the surface.

Wright was blinded. He could feel the scratch of bones and fins against his face. The filth was seeping into his shirt, up his trousers, enveloping his entire body. He had managed one large breath before being forced down.

He pulled himself forward as if doing the breast-stroke to escape the hand pushing him down. He surged up a couple of feet away and found his right hand curling around a shell. His left hand found the side of the container. The killer began to edge his way round, holding onto the sides. Wright could feel the truck bumping along, stopping at the gates to the market while the driver checked out, and then pulling out onto the wide road leading south, away from the city center.

He could hear the killer's breath now, heavy and rhythmic, like an athlete deep into a race. He could sense his confidence, his certainty that in a contest like this, when men's lives depended on nothing more than their endurance and physical strength, he would win. He came ever closer and then suddenly raised his fist, bringing it down hard, crushing Wright's fingers against the metal truck.

Wright screamed and whipped his right arm out of the sludge. He drove the sharp end of a conch shell into the man's temple. It sank in as easily as a pin into a cork board.

The killer's hands slipped from the side of the truck as he slumped backwards, blood dribbling from his temporal artery. The rotting mass swallowed him up with a wet slurp.

Wright pulled himself up as best he could, wincing from the blow to his left hand. He pulled his legs up over the side of the moving truck and dropped down onto a running board and edged his way along to the driver's cabin. The truck was driving quickly now, along a freeway heading to a dump 50 miles south of the city. Wright reached the passenger side door and yanked it open. The driver pulled sharply over to the side of the road and began shouting at Wright to get off.

Wright reached into his inside pocket and pulled out his slime covered wallet. He produced a business card, showing the address of the British Embassy in Hanzomon, across the road from the Imperial Palace in the center of Tokyo and a 100,000 yen note. The man took the card and the money. And then held up two fingers. Wright produced another 100,000 yen note. Then man jerked his head, beckoning him in.

He knocked a pile of pornographic manga comics off the seat to make room for his passenger. Wright nodded his head in gratitude and fell with a squelch onto the leather seat. As the driver pulled away, a single thought went around Wright's throbbing brain.

The things people do for money.

3.

The monks arrived at the Senso-ji Asakusa temple in northwestern Tokyo as usual shortly after dawn. They stopped at the water fountain to rinse their hands, forearms and mouth. Then they walked slowly across the gravel towards the heart of the temple, where two, languid statues of the bodhisattva Kannon loomed under a wooden roof. The aroma of barbecued meat lingered in the air from the fairground just beyond the temple grounds.

Each man went about their duties, tidying up the area where people could leave prayers, opening up the small stores which sold devotional poems and religious trinkets, sweeping the area around the shrine.

The hum of the waking city seemed distant. Along the narrow streets leading to the shrine, the souvenir shops were still closed. In a few hours, they would be thronged with visitors from all over the world, some seeking understanding from the local Buddha, others merely wanting a statue of a golden cat with her paw raised, a trinket supposed to bring wealth to its owner.

The senior monk raked the gravel in front of the main shrine into neat rows. He then stowed the rake beneath a flight of steps and took out a broom to begin his slow, daily sweep of the shining black floors in front of

the Buddha himself. He moved the broom in small circles, cleaning out every crack in the floor. The task of sweeping 2000 square feet would take him an hour. A less diligent sweeper could have done it in 5 minutes.

As he moved closer to the shrine, he stopped, lay down his broom, clapped twice and bowed his head in prayer. When he was finished, he clapped once more and for the first time that morning lifted his eyes up to the shrine. The oil lamps had not been lit, so it was still dark. But something was not right. Years of attending to this shrine with the same methodical precision and reverence told him so.

He stepped closer. He could make out a shape on the altar. He reached for one of the nearly spent candles by a statue and lit it. He stepped over the rail leading into the shrine and walked towards the back.

The man was dressed in the uniform of the salary-man, a dark blue suit, white shirt and black tie. He eyes were closed and his lips frozen in a straight line, a neutral expression. The monk stepped closer. He recognized the face. The man used to come at least once a week in the early evenings, and sit for an hour or two on the bench outside, drinking in the serenity. He never spoke to anyone, but just sat, clutching the bench with both hands and rocking back and forth.

The monk held his candle right up to the man's face, but dropped it almost instantly. A thin red line had been cut half way around the man's neck. The altar cloth beneath him was soaked with blood.

The monk ran from the scene to the entrance of the shrine where he picked up a mallet and crashed it repeatedly against a large gong hanging from the rafters.

4.

The truck driver deposited Wright as requested in front of the embassy. The Japanese guard stepped warily from his post as Wright fumbled with his wallet.

“Konnichiwa,” said Wright, all but exhausting his knowledge of Japanese. He managed to find what he was looking for, a card belonging to the First Secretary. He held it in both hands and passed it to the guard, who looked at it skeptically.

Wright brought his hand to his ear as if holding a telephone. “Please, call,” he said. The guard retreated to his post, opened the glass door and picked up the telephone. Wright had a moment to glance in at the embassy, an elegant cluster of two-story buildings set in ravishing gardens, which occupied the best location of any foreign mission in Tokyo. Typical Brits. 60 years since they last had an empire and they were still enjoying its perks.

The guard emerged and the barrier across the entrance swung open. He waved Wright in and instructed him to wait to be picked up. Wright thrust his hands into his pockets and immediately wished he hadn't. They were filled with unpleasant gloop. A minute or two later, he heard the click of heels rounding a path which curved up to the central embassy building. A Japanese woman in slim, blue trousers, white T-shirt and white jacket turned

the corner and extended a hand. Her skin was white too, though a faint trace of glitter shone around her eyes. Her soft, black hair was held by an ivory clasp.

“I shouldn’t,” said Wright, holding up his filthy hands. She nodded slightly and turned, indicating that he follow her. He kept back five paces, watching her hair bounce against her slender neck, inhaling the fresh smell of soap which trailed her. They walked up the steps into the embassy. It was still early and Wright could see that most of the staff had yet to arrive. They passed a large photograph of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, a wall adorned with pictures by schoolchildren describing the links between Japan and the United Kingdom and climbed a flight of highly-polished wooden steps.

“You stink, Ben,” said James Hardy, standing at the top of the steps. “Thank you Atsuko for dragging this hopeless creature off the street.” The woman laughed, looked back at Wright over her shoulder then turned into an office.

“Perceptive of you, James. That what the British Government pays you for? I’d have taken a shower if I’d had the time.”

“And you appear to have the entire Tokyo police force looking for you. Not quite the stealth mission we had in mind. Well, at least you came to us first. Come on in.” Hardy waved him up with a sheaf of papers and came close to throwing an arm around Wright’s shoulder, pausing only when he saw the state of Wright’s suit. “Forgive me if I don’t touch you, Ben. What the hell happened?”

“Oh, the usual. Arrive in Tokyo, pop out for a cup of coffee, end up being chased by a tattooed, sword wielding maniac through a fish market. Nothing out of the

ordinary. Thought I might take in some of the sights later.”

“Did you ever get that coffee?”

“No.”

Hardy picked up his telephone.

“Two coffees please Atusko. One black, no milk, no sugar. But very strong.” Hardy sat down, rested his hands behind his head and stared at Wright.

The windows in the First Secretary’s office were open and through them came the scent of the cherry blossoms planted all across the Embassy compound. They were in the heart of the city, but you would barely know it. A 19th century map of Japan hung on one wall and on the other was a wall of books about Japanese art.

“What went wrong this morning, Ben?”

“I survived didn’t I?”

“You know what I bloody well mean. You were supposed to come to Tokyo, dig some dirt for your rich clients in New York and then get on a plane out. Next thing we know you’re prancing around the roof of Tsukiji playing Luke Skywalker with a Yakuza. And I’ve got the US Treasury, the CIA not to mention the British government heavy breathing telling me Benjamin Wright must be protected.”

“Sounds like you know everything already.”

“We’ve had someone on you since you landed. Japan Airlines 33 from JFK, wasn’t it? First Class, of course. You spoiled bastard.”

“I didn’t intend it to happen like this.”

“So what happened?”

“You really think they were Yakuza?”

“Yes. Tattoos and no apparent fear of the police. Definitely Yakuza. They make the mafia look like amateurs. And now you’ve killed one of them, they’re

going to be doubly keen to get you. However they do it, you can be sure it won't be a nice clean bullet to the head. They like ritual, spilled guts, blood on the walls, genital mutilations. Anything to make a point. You've crossed some evil bastards, Ben."

Atsuko arrived noiselessly with the coffees in pale blue porcelain cups and set them down on the edge of Hardy's desk. She pointed to one with an upturned palm and turned to Wright, who nodded in thanks. He noticed that her red lipstick did not cover her lips but ran in a thin line down the center. When she had left, Wright spoke.

"Why are the Americans hiding behind your skirts on this one, James?"

"Very simple, Ben. We don't have the baggage your lot do. We're not Commodore Perry reincarnated. Between the Americans and Japanese, everything is a replay of 1853, when the black ships came sailing into Tokyo and ended Japan's innocence. We Brits are considered less threatening. Though in this case, I feel we may be compromised."

James Hardy was never one to hide his own erudition, and Wright liked him for it. They had met ten years ago, when Hardy was a junior diplomat with Britain's UN mission, at a cocktail party in Turtle Bay. His ambition was palpable even then, from the way he worked a room and snared his beautiful Californian wife, and it was no surprise that he had risen so quickly.

"I'm not here to fight anyone," said Wright. "I came to find out about trading irregularities," said Wright.

"Trading irregularities?"

"Wrinkles in the markets."

"All right, you've lost me already."

"I have a client in New York. A trader. A very important trader. He's spent thirty years trading stocks,

bonds, currencies, commodities in every market in the world. You name it, he's traded it. There's no imperfection, no mis-pricing he hasn't seen. But in the last three months, he noticed something strange. Activity he couldn't explain. Not something regulators would ever catch up to. Just odd fragments of data which baffled him. It seemed to be coming out of Japan."

"So he called for Ben Wright, ancient Greek pottery lover and super sleuth."

"You do love your sarcasm, you Brits, don't you? He wanted me to nose around. It's what I'm paid to do. Nose around."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing yet. I only arrived last night. Checked into my hotel in Ginza, went out this morning for one of those cold coffees from the vending machines and next thing I know there's this maniac sprinting at me with spit curling out of his lip."

"This usually happen when you visit a foreign country?"

"No. Well, there was this time in Lisbon...but that was quite different."

"If you're acting for this individual, why do I seem to have the entire financial and intelligence apparatus of the Western world telling me to look out for you?"

"As I said, he's an important man."

"How important?"

"Well, the President might still be teaching law students in Minneapolis if it weren't for him. The Museum of Modern Art in New York might be without a wing. You know how it is James. The financial regulators, the lawmakers, they're followers. They're reactive. It's the men like mine who are in the thick of it, who affect events as

they unfold. It makes them indispensable. When he says there's weird stuff going on in Japan, there's weird stuff. That simple."

"And it's not something that can be handled between governments."

"Course not. You know how untrusting they are. It would take months, or years to get an investigation like this going. And there's no evidence anything criminal is going on. We just want to know."

"This morning would indicate there is something criminal."

Wright sat in silence for a moment. His hand was throbbing. He wanted to get out of his clothes, to escape their putrid smell. The coffee was pounding relentlessly at the front of his brain.

"Any chance of some of that cold green tea?" he said.

"How long do you need to be here, Ben? Realistically?"

"72 hours."

"How about 48? Every extra hour jeopardizes your safety, given the morning you've had."

"I'll have to work quickly."

"You do that. You owe me dinner in New York next time I'm there." He picked up the telephone and spoke quickly and impenetrably in Japanese. "We'll give you a guard and driver. You'll also need an interpreter. I'll get you the best we have."

"Thank you James."

"Don't thank me. Thank the man who hired you. We're jumping like this for him, aren't we? Certainly not to further our own interests."

"Oh, you ever know."

“I’ll hold you to that when I’m done working for the Queen and need the money.”

Wright rose from his seat. He bent his knees slightly to unglue his trousers from his legs.

“The car is downstairs. The translator will meet you at the Imperial Hotel. Check in every 12 hours at least. And good luck, Ben. You know the most fatuous saying in the English language?”

“What?”

“It’s only money.”

At the rear exit of the embassy, he found a black Toyota with tinted windows waiting for him. The back door opened automatically. Wright saw a plastic sheet had been laid over the seats to protect the white, lacy seat covers from the muck on his clothes. The driver pulled out onto the road circling south around the palace towards his hotel.

A hundred yards behind a black Toyota taxi with its occupied light on pulled out of a parking spot and followed.

5.

The wind ripping off the Straits of Gibraltar towards Tangier caught the hem of Gene Drinkwater's silk robe, to expose his large, quivering thigh to the three men in suits sitting around the table by the swimming pool. The scent of orange trees and lavender filled the air. Drinkwater finished toweling off his hair then lumbered towards his visitors.

"Why the fuck are you here?" he said, his voice as gruff and threatening as it was when he used to buy water rights from ranchers in rural Texas. "You can't fucking survive five minutes without having to come to me for a decision?" He looked up towards the entrance of his house. Two French hookers were standing in the doorway, dressed in red, silk Valentino dresses he had custom ordered from Rome. Them, a seven hour erection pill and a huge bed facing north through floor to ceiling windows towards Spain. Whoever said money didn't buy happiness had clearly never had money.

"Sir," said one of the men, a bald, middle-aged Swiss with frame-less spectacles. "It's about one of our tankers."

"One fucking tanker. How many do we have, 30? You had to fly down from Geneva to ask about one fucking tanker?"

"Sir, it's the Pacifica."

“The Pacifica?”

“It left Tokyo two days ago. For the past 12 hours, we’ve lost contact.”

“Please don’t tell me it was the Black Sea route.”

“I’m afraid so, sir. It was sailing east and was due to reach Rostov in three weeks after crossing the Pacific, Atlantic and Mediterranean.”

“We run hundreds of routes a year with all these ships and the one that goes missing is the Pacifica on this particular run? Who have you told so far?”

“No one, sir. We wanted to speak to you first.”

“Let’s keep it that way. Do you have the names of the crew?”

“Yes sir. We checked and double checked them. No one we haven’t used dozens of times before. Trustworthy men, sir.”

“Yeah, well everyone’s fucking trustworthy until one day they aren’t. Come with me.”

Drinkwater eased his bulk up and strode barefoot towards the house, a 1950 French villa clinging to the rocks amid gardens and teetering pines. As he walked he ran his hand along a row of clipped rosemary bushes which bordered the path, and held his fingers up to his nose. The three men followed in silence.

“Rafiq,” he shouted across to the kitchen. “Bring me a jug of Tom Collins. Lots of ice. I’m going to fucking need it. And water for these dipshits behind me.”

The small hallway leading to Drinkwater’s study was lined with busts of Roman Emperors, eight in all, starting with Augustus. Pinpricks of light shone down on them from the ceiling. Drinkwater pushed open a heavy wooden door and led the three men into his lair. On each side were windows, facing the Straits on one side and the gardens on the other. Below the windows were piles of

embroidered cushions, large and small. In the center of the room was a large oak refectory table stacked with books, magazines, newspapers and discarded cups and glasses. Drinkwater landed heavily in a leather swivel chair. Two screens on a bookshelf behind him sprang to life. From speakers embedded in the ceiling came the sound of Greek bouzouki music, playing on a local radio station.

The three men stood awkwardly in front of him. A young Moroccan boy in a white robe and red leather slippers arrived with a tray of drinks. He set them down besides Drinkwater who gulped down his first cocktail and immediately poured himself another. He did not bother to offer his guests their water.

“Shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits,” he said. “The seven words you cannot say on American television.” He swiveled round to look at the screens which now showed a map of the waters around Japan. “You start sailing east from Tokyo and what do you find? Nothing. Just a few piles of bird shit covered rock all the way to Hawaii. We’re assuming that if the ship had gone down, we’d have heard something. An SOS, a Mayday, something.”

“Precisely, sir,” said the bald Swiss.

“So, assuming it was moving at 30 kilometers an hour, it had been going for a couple of days, so 1500 kilometers maybe, plus the 12 hours you say you haven’t heard anything, so 2000 km’s max, about a third of the way across the Pacific. And let’s see. Nothing there. Not a fucking thing. Just water. Even if it had turned north or south, still nothing fucking there. And it was loaded, you say.”

“Yes sir. Same thing, once a year, same time. Tokyo to Rostov for our friends.”

“Our annual act of friendship. Of course we’re not insured for this, are we?”

“No sir.”

“Not even those heartless cheats at Lloyd’s would write a policy for this one.”

Drinkwater drained another glass of Tom Collins and raised his arms up behind his head. His robe loosened slightly to reveal the hairy, sunburned expanses of his chest.

“Well, we have no fucking choice do we, men? We had better find this motherfucker, because we know what happens if we don’t. And if someone else has got their hands on it, then...” he shook his head and rocked forward, resting his enormous palms on his knees. “All that steel and hardware doesn’t just vanish, does it? Find it and call me every three hours until you do.”

Drinkwater got up and walked to the door.

“Your tagine is ready sir,” said the houseboy standing in the corridor.

“Keep it for tomorrow,” he replied. Approaching the two hookers waiting on the terrace he grabbed one of them by the waist. “There’s only enough G-Force for one of you tonight.” To the other: “You can hang around for tomorrow.”

Far below him winked the lights of hundreds of ships waiting to pass in and out of the Mediterranean, the anonymous worker ants of global trade.

6.

Wright's car pulled up under the wide, low roof which Frank Lloyd Wright had projected from the Imperial Hotel to conceal its comings and goings. Sculpted hedges added a further sound barrier against the thrum of traffic. It was as if they were entering some secret mansion rather than the most famous hotel in the city.

As the car stopped, the door opened automatically. A man in a black jacket, pinstriped trousers, white shirt and black tie bowed low as Wright stepped out of his car.

"Your bags have been brought over from your previous hotel," said the hotel manager. "We hope you have a comfortable stay here with us."

Wright followed him through the noiseless sliding doors into the main lobby. Polished columns rose to the high ceiling and a thick carpet, beige with large purple rectangles soaked up every sound. A vast, geometric chandelier hung from the ceiling and in the center of the space was a huge dome of yellow daisies, which owed more to science fiction than nature. A few men sat on low couches reading the Financial Times as if it were some religious text. The very faintest music, with no obvious tune, burbled away. To the left was a restaurant, where the tables were set lavishly far apart, as if to prove that in a city where every inch was filled with life, the Imperial

alone had no need to pack 'em in. The restaurant's main wall was made up of rows of multi-colored glazed bricks, the colors all muted and calm, from gold to white, turquoise and dusty red, like the hues of an ancient Navajo rug. Stone planters filled with lilies were tucked inconspicuously into alcoves below the main staircase.

The manager guided Wright towards the elevators and they whooshed up to the 11th floor. Wright was aching for the pulse of a hot shower. His suite was made up of two rooms, with soft, yellow walls and impeccable French furniture. It was a dull morning, but the view onto the gardens of the Imperial Palace was still spectacular. A clean suit and shirt had been laid out on the bed, and a plate of cold, Soba noodles and a pot of tea awaited him on a side table. Wright thanked the manager and went straight to the bathroom to remove his clothes. He left them in a sticky heap on the marble floor and stepped into the shower. The fiery blast of water made him tremble. He scrubbed viciously at his body to expunge the stink of fish. He felt as if he were trying to remove an entire layer of skin, to start afresh. He could feel red blotches appearing as his flesh turned raw under the heat, but he wanted to go further to scrub everything away. But then through the din of the shower, he heard the doorbell go. Two notes, then a pause for a few seconds. Then two notes again.

Wright grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist. He grabbed another one and rubbed his hair. He walked through the room and opened the door. A woman in a black suit and white, silk shirt bowed at him and proffered her card.

“Ayumi Sakamoto,” she said. “Your translator.” Her face was unusually wide, as was her smile. She was

holding an expensive looking handbag in front of her and seemed to be waiting for something.

Wright stood to one side and waved her in, catching the strong scent of honeysuckle as she passed. She walked straight towards the window to take in the view. She paused and turned to Wright, who was staring at her.

“Perhaps we should start with you getting dressed,” she said. Wright was taken aback by her accent. She spoke like a New Yorker. “James tells me we’re on a tight schedule.”

“Absolutely,” stammered Wright. “He’s given me 48 hours. Let me put something on.” He disappeared into his room and five minutes later emerged, shaved, brushed and wearing a light grey suit, blue gingham shirt, no tie and a splash of sandalwood cologne.

“So what can I do for you?” she asked. “I am entirely yours for the next three days.”

7.

“Frank, get over here. There it is again.” Fifty two floors above 57th Street in midtown Manhattan, the two men stared at a single screen out of ten which hung from steel arms, covering the walls of a cramped back office.

“I can’t see it Ajay.”

“Right there. It comes and goes. It’s miniscule. But each time it lowers the value of our trade. Hold on. Wait. Look, we’re betting on the spread here of Russian 5 year and 30 year bonds. Along they go pretty standard. Then something happens. Let me pull up the history. Right. Here. Last month, when the government announced it was kicking out the Western investors in the big oil fields in Siberia. The spreads widen. Investors are running for safety. A few hours before, we see this happening. Our algorithm tells us that activity like this means insiders know something is about to happen and they’re trading on it, shorting the 30 year, buying Russian oil stocks. We don’t need inside information to know this. The patterns tell us. But look, right here. The moment our trading begins, the volumes we’re after start to shrink. We used to have seconds on our competition. Now we’re down to milliseconds.”

The two men sat back and stared.

“It’s not unusual to see this every now and again. We expect that. Sometimes we misinterpret the ghosts. Or

someone gets to the same conclusion by a different route. But nothing like this, Frank. It's every time. It's as if each time we throw the ball into the air to serve, someone snatches it away and we're left swinging at nothing. It's crushing us. Normally we'd be up 4 or 5% this month. This month, we're down 1%.

Frank Higgins sucked on his third Dunkin Donuts iced coffee of the morning. For a man worth more than ten billion dollars, he retained certain simple tastes in food, drink and clothes. To work, he wore only khakis and blue shirts, a uniform adhered to by his employees. If you happened to run into a group of them on the street, you would think they were a group of cell phone salesmen rather than some of the richest and smartest men in New York.

"Can't we just increase the size of our trades? Get them done faster? Get in and out before we're seen?" he said.

"You know how it is Frank. Even with dark pools and flash trading, we still need time to trade the kind of volumes which matter. Fifty million here and there doesn't move the needle for us."

"You really don't think it's Chicago?"

"No. They're still years behind us. They think they're closer than they are. No this is too good for them."

"Too good for Chicago, huh? Aren't you getting a little cocky there Ajay?"

"No."

"No. You're right. Sometimes I forget how smart you are."

"I encourage it. You taught me that Frank. Always seem dumber than you are."

"It's a good policy."

“Has your man found out anything yet?”

“Give him some time, Ajay.”

“Christ, I wish this was a technical problem.”

“I know. Humans screw everything up. Life would be so much easier without them. But then without them, who could we take advantage of?”

Higgins rose from his seat and rested a hand on the shoulder of his head trader.

“We’ll figure this out, Ajay. We’ve figured everything out before, haven’t we? Just make sure our stop-loss positions are firm. I don’t mind not making money while this goes on, but I’ll be damned if I lose any more than I have to.”

Higgins left the windowless room and stepped into the brilliant glare of his main trading floor. At 11am, it was empty but for a couple of secretaries. Off to his right, he could see several of his traders in the gym, spotting each other weights. Another group had settled into the library. When your main job was programming computers and letting them do their worst, there was no need for anyone to keep regular office hours. All those drones at the banks and other hedge funds, reading company reports, patching into conference calls with executives and trying to predict earnings and share prices. What a bunch of losers.

It was very simple. You could let the markets tyrannize you or you could learn to dance with them. You could let them ruin your life or you could learn to read their mind. Years ago as a poorly paid mathematics professor at Stanford, Higgins had decided to do the latter. And it was the best thing he had ever done.

The rewards were all around him. The Dutch oil paintings on the walls of his office, elegant renderings of cathedral interiors and dead birds. He adored their

precision, the unfussy skill poured into them. When he closed the door, pulled the blinds and looked at them, he could feel their intensity, the product of years of practice and repetition touched only at the very last moment by the genius of art. There was no pretension in their beauty.

He tried to bring a similar approach to his trading. And it had worked beautifully. Until now.

8.

Inspector Hiro took a large swig from a bottle of green tea, followed by a bite of a rice ball wrapped that morning in seaweed by his wife. Food was just about the only way they communicated these days. As he left for work, she would give him a plastic box with rice and pickles for the day and then return wordlessly to the kitchen, hoping that today would be the day their son would emerge from his bedroom. It had been weeks now since he had retreated there and refused to come out. Weeks of pain and mystification for his parents.

Hiro sat for a moment, watching the police seal off the temple and direct people away. The inside of his 10-year-old Corolla still stank of cigarettes, even though he had given them up nine weeks and three days earlier. What for, he often wondered. They had been one of the last things to give him any pleasure. But that's what adults did, wasn't it? Give things up they enjoyed and take up others they didn't. Like running. And crosswords. And talking about politics. God, life became tedious in a hurry.

It seemed so recently he was playing mahjong in friends' rooms at Tokyo University. Since he had met his sweet, charming wife in the jazz club. When they had all graduated, his friends had joined law firms and the civil service. But he had wanted to be a cop. To be on the front line of crime, not cowering behind some desk. And while

they had gone on to make money, to acquire status and better apartments, he had been forced ever deeper into the suburbs.

Their son had gone to a local school where he was bullied. The boy had received no support from the school and shrunk ever further into himself until now he was unreachable, a soul lost deep inside his physical shell. It had broken his wife's heart, he knew. Everything had broken her heart. Their life, his unrelenting work and absence from home, their son. And the worst of it was that there seemed to be no way out. For long stretches of each day now, Hiro found himself thinking of those men who checked into small hotels in the outer reaches of Tokyo, and hanged themselves in the bathroom, leaving a note saying nothing but "I'm sorry".

It seemed dignified compared to the prospect of hacking through decades more of this kind of life. This feeling of weights crushing his chest, of extinguished hope. He closed his eyes, took a breath and then stepped out of the car.

He walked to the police barricade and flashed his badge. A young, uniformed officer bowed as he passed by. Even with all this commotion, the temple complex felt calm. Hiro could hear the crunch of stones underfoot as he walked towards the main temple, where several monks were milling around while the police asked questions. Hiro nodded at the officers he knew and made his way to the altar.

The victim was exactly as the monk had found him thirty minutes earlier, his head turned to the right, the blade-thin cut along his neck barely visible in the gloom. At least it was over for him.

Another officer passed Hiro a pair of gloves and the victim's wallet in a plastic bag. Hiro opened it and began to flick through the cash and cards.

"Do we have a name?" asked Hiro.

"Deguchi. Kennichiro Deguchi."

"What else?"

"Married, two children. Lived in Yoyogi Uehara."

"Lucky him," said Hiro, thinking of the charming old neighborhood of narrow winding streets in the southwest of the city.

"Worked for Mitsubishi for many years in financial services. Moved five years ago over to Meiji Bank after the restructuring."

"Meiji? Really? After the Americans bought it?"

"That's what they say. We spoke to the chief executive on the phone about 10 minutes ago. Said Deguchi was an excellent salary-man. Hard working, diligent. Never any scandal."

"It's always that way, until they're found with their throats slit on a temple altar."

The officers laughed. Even by the standards of the homicide division, Hiro was spectacularly cynical. No one, in his mind, was above the lowest kind of behavior. Provided they were human, they were capable of anything. Monks could be rapists, mothers could be child-killers and bankers, well, there were really no limit to their capacity for evil.

"Any prints?"

"Nothing yet."

"Where do we think he was killed? Somewhere else, then brought here?"

"No. He was killed where he was found. Whoever did it got him to lie down and then slit his throat. Like he

was an animal at sacrifice. No signs of struggle. He was probably so terrified, he just lay back and took it.”

“Or maybe it was a relief. I’m not sure how hard I’d struggle if someone offered me the chance of a quick death. Any of you got a cigarette? No? Good, I guess.” Hiro pulled a notebook and pen from the inside pocket of his shabby, grey suit. “Give me the name of the executive you spoke to. The one who told you how diligent the corpse was. And family? You have that?” Hiro jotted down the names. “How are the monks taking it?”

“Shocked, sir.”

“Well, at least they don’t have to go far to find someone to exorcise the place.”

Hiro walked back out into the muggy courtyard. The air clung to his face. On days like this, Tokyo seemed inescapable. The buildings, the endless concrete closed in on him until he felt as if he was being buried alive. The good news was that Meiji bank would be air conditioned. And if there was anything Hiro enjoyed more than ruining a banker’s day, he had yet to discover it.

9.

A small silver plaque etched with the words Higgins & Cie marked Frank Higgins' Tokyo office. It was on the seventh floor of a new building in Marunouchi facing Tokyo station.

The door opened before Wright even had a chance to knock. Ayumi followed him in. It was like every other private equity or hedge fund office in the world: blonde wood and frosted glass walls, small, brightly colored paintings lining the corridors, a kitchen with an expensive coffee machine. Wright imagined some upscale version of Ikea where all of these firms went when they opened an office.

A diminutive man in shirtsleeves showed them into a conference room, where ten, high-backed leather chairs were arrayed around a narrow, elliptical table. On the wall at one end hung a large flat-screen. The man said something in Japanese.

"Five minutes," said Ayumi. "The conference will start in five minutes."

"My father never made a single investment outside the United States," said Wright. "People were always saying he should. But he said that it was hard enough investing in companies where the primary language was English, let alone one he didn't understand. Did James tell you anything about me?"

“A little.”

“Did he mention my father?”

“Only that he was a very rich man.”

“Yes. I suppose that should have been on his tombstone. Here Lies a Very Rich Man. He was born. Made a stupid amount of money. And died. Sic transit gloria mundi.”

“Sorry?”

“All worldly things pass. Always easier for those who have worldly things to say than those who don’t. It’s only the rich who can trivialize money.”

Ayumi looked up into space and Wright felt foolish.

The screen crackled to life. They could see Higgins’ office, a Breughel hanging beneath a light against a dark, oak wall. Higgins himself then slid into the frame, his face blown up threefold by the screen.

“Ben,” he said, as he settled into his seat. “Can you see me?”

“Yes, I can Frank. Actually, far too much of you. Too many pixels can really destroy the magic.” Higgins laughed and ran a hand through his whitening blond hair. His right cheek bulged with a wad of nicotine gum.

“I heard you had an eventful morning.”

“Swordplay in central Tokyo. Nothing too unusual.”

“Who’s there with you?”

“My translator, Ayumi. Arranged for me by the British embassy.”

“Fine. None of this goes beyond this room, though. Clear? Ben, I’m sorry about this morning. It’s not what I imagined.”

“How the hell did they know I was here? And what I was doing?”

“We’re trying to find that out. The reason I sent you of all people was I thought you could go in undercover. Not CIA, MI6, or any of the usual intelligence firms. The last thing I wanted was some retired spook crawling around there giving everyone the creeps. I thought you might be able to go around and blow a little pixie dust at the problem. Find out who’s screwing me over.”

“I need some more leads, Frank. I’ve got so little to go on. And now I’ve been told I can only be protected for 48 hours. After that, I have to leave or I’m on my own.”

“It’s difficult. For us, it’s like having some deadly virus in our system. Either we find out what it is, or we shut down. But the only way to find out what it is is by keeping our systems trading and taking the losses. And hope we can get the bastard before he kills us.”

“And you can’t trace the source of the trades, or the money?”

“It’s all routed through so many locations and accounts we can’t keep track of it. We’ve put electronic tags on the trades, tried to track them through our friendly brokers, but it’s been no good. Whoever’s doing this knows what they’re doing. It’s like a slow-acting poison.”

“I still need a lead. Anything Frank. You think it is being run from Tokyo because that’s as far as you can trace it. This is a city of 14 million people, Frank. What do you want me to do, go house to house?”

Higgins rocked back in his chair.

“Don’t be facetious, Ben. It doesn’t suit you.” Wright caught Ayumi’s eye and stared down at the grain of the table. “Look, there can’t be that many people in the world capable of this. It took me 25 years of hiring the very best computer scientists, code-breakers and language

experts in the world to build my system, and some bastard is making it look like a kid's Lego set. Ajay says that from what they can tell, it's coming out of Tokyo. We don't know, but it's our best guess. If there are only a few people who can do this, someone there is going to know who they are. You can't hide this kind of talent for long, Ben. Someone must know. It takes programming skill, a ton of computing power and a really vicious streak. That should narrow it down for you."

"I'm sorry. You're right Frank."

"I would say take a rest after the day you've had. But there's no time, Ben. I'm sorry. We've got over \$60 billion invested and we can't seem to do anything with it right now except lose it. If anyone else were to find out about this, they'd start prizing our positions wide open and we'll be out of business in a couple of days. That's how quickly it happens, Ben. You know that. You spend years building a franchise and it can unwind in hours."

"The British told me you've got the Treasury and CIA looking out for me on this one."

"I had to call in some favors. But they know the stakes. A run on my funds would be a disaster. As bad as Goldman Sachs going down. And we know how far the government would go to prevent that. Listen to me, Ben. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with my business. You know that. Someone is screwing with me. And they're being clever about it. I need you to find out who that is so we can stop them. I need this Ben. I've never said this to you before and I hope I never have to again. I need you to sort this out for me and I'll never forget it. Let's speak tomorrow."

The screen went dead before Wright had a chance to say another word. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card.

“Do you know this place?” he asked Ayumi. She dipped her head slightly.

“Well, it’s all I’ve got right now. Let’s go.”

10.

The grey Mercedes saloon sped between the high white walls of Sidi Masmoudi. Drinkwater fiddled with the amber beads on his wrist, moving them back and forth along their leather strap. His skin was sore with sun burn and his black silk shirt stuck to his heavily moisturized back. His cell phone rang and he snapped it open. He listened for a moment.

“Still? Nothing? Call me every half hour.” He closed the phone. “Majid, pass me one of those, the sugar ones.” He pointed to a bag of sugar frosted croissants on the seat beside his driver. Majid reached in and passed one to Drinkwater on the back seat. Drinkwater took a large bite, devouring half of it in one, the jam filling and sugar spilling down his chin. He chewed three times, swallowed, and inhaled the other half. He could feel the sugar spiking into his brain. “Another.” Majid passed him a second pastry.

Tangier was coming to life. Flocks of starlings erupted out of the trees around the royal palace. The young King was spending far more time here than his father and his presence had rinsed some of the degeneracy from the old port town. But not all of it, Drinkwater was pleased to note. It was still a place where anyone with money could come and pursue his perversions in relative peace. The Europeans were mostly awful. Camp

decorators and fashion designers and their bitchy retinues. Bridge playing, gin-swilling Englishmen, many of them retired antique dealers for whom the only quality that mattered in a man was his ability to distinguish a Regency from a Georgian commode. They had been intrigued by Drinkwater when he arrived three years ago and promptly spent more money than they had ever seen renovating the house and grounds at the top of Sidi Masmoudi, but he had never played their game. All the companionship he needed, professional, conversational or sexual, could be flown in on one of his fleet of aircraft, two GV550s, a customized 757 and an S76 helicopter for buzzing around the Mediterranean, which occupied their own hangar at Ibn Batouta airport.

Drinkwater's car passed the El Minzah hotel and then turned sharply right into a car park below the hotel's main dining terrace. Drinkwater got out, hitched up his trousers and put on his Aviator sunglasses. He looked down towards the bustling port and the expanse of sea, took a deep breath and proceeded down a narrow flight of stone steps. There was only room for one person to pass down at a time, so Majid followed behind carrying a leather case. At the bottom, Drinkwater pushed at a rotting wooden door which opened onto a courtyard. From every, cave-like room came the percussive rhythm of shuttles moving across wooden looms, as weavers produced clothes and fabrics. Drinkwater walked quickly along the rear side of the courtyard until he came to a pair of wrought-iron gates in a corner. He stopped, murmured his name, and the gates clicked open. Majid followed him into a small white-washed chamber. When the gate had shut behind them, Drinkwater removed his sunglasses looked up towards a small camera buried high in the top right corner of the room. A large, oak door covered with

iron studs opened slightly and Drinkwater pushed his way into a much larger room where two men and two women sat at an X-shaped desk beneath an octagonal skylight. Two doors at the back of the room opened onto another courtyard. In the center of it was a fountain covered in blue and white tile. Four lemon trees stood sentry around it, shading four stone benches.

“Meeting,” said Drinkwater, summoning his team to the courtyard. “Coffee, Majid. And more of those pastries,” he added, waving a fistful of Dirhams at his chauffeur.

Drinkwater sat down heavily on the bench facing the main office of his trading operation. From here, he invested \$16 billion of his own money. He had abandoned so much in his life, wives, children, homes, cities, even his own country, the United States. But the thrill of making money? Never. It remained his greatest pleasure in life, especially the zero-sum combat of trading. Screw creating value or expanding the pie. He loved hogging the biggest slice he could.

“All right,” he said to his young associates. “Bring me the world.”

One of the women spoke first, a lissom Italian he had hired straight from Bocconi.

“We’ve arranged for three more debt packages against double hull tankers under construction in China and Greece,” she said. “Which brings us to 17. The terms are as usual, the merest sniff of a default and the ships revert to us. The Baltic Dry peaked again today.”

“Do they have any idea what over-capacity means?” said Drinkwater, thumping his bench. “Do they understand what happens when the global economy stops expanding? When the spot market plummets? When the Baltic Dry collapses? If this all pans out, we’re going to

have 17 super-tankers for virtually nothing. Unbelievable. Carry on.”

“We’ve secured calls on a number of shipping contracts which means that should the defaults occur, we’ll be able to start filling the tankers we acquire and transporting oil. The cost of the calls will be trivial compared to our profits on the ships and transport revenue.”

“What else?”

“We keep shorting mezzanine debt,” said a scruffy looking Algerian man in his mid-30s. He had several days growth of beard and a thick plait of hair running down his back, nothing to suggest three advanced science degrees from Paris’ Grandes Ecoles. “The only challenge is sorting the garbage from the really toxic garbage. You know we started with mortgage loans, residential and commercial property, but now we’re looking at corporate debt. Shit, Gene, if we’re right the world is completely screwed.”

“Of course we’re right, Rafiq. It’s the beautiful thing about human folly, it’s always worse than you imagine. Always. You think people are dumb, and then they turn out to be total morons. Good news for us. What else?”

“Japan.”

“Shit. Must we?”

“We just heard back from our lawyers there. The prosecution goes on. The government still wants to fine us.” Hannah Lord’s job in Gene Drinkwater’s operation was to be the sane one. To put a dampener on all the testosterone. She wore a loose, white shirt, stone linen drawstring pants and an expensive pair of sandals. Her shoulder length blond hair was held back by an elastic band, exposing a pair of ear-rings, inch-long lozenges of

dark thuya wood. If you passed her on the street, you might think she was one of the hundreds of young Western back-packers passing through North Africa on their summer travels. The last thing you would think was Stanford Law Review, clerking for the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court followed by the youngest ever partnership at Skadden Arps. And that really was another life. One she had been desperate to flee.

“Can’t they drop this thing?”

“Never,” she said, bouncing one foot up and down and staring at a single sheet of paper. “They think you stole from them, Gene. In fact, they’ve got the whole country thinking you stole from them. You’re the big-nosed gaijin who sailed into Tokyo Harbor and robbed the Japanese treasury. This was never a legal issue, Gene. It was always political and until you give the money back or say you’re sorry or something, this is going to carry on.”

“Well, I’m not giving them their money back. We earned it. We went in there, took their piece of shit bank, sorted out their loans and sold it right back to them. Do you remember quite how fucking miserable it was? Living in those sterile apartments in Roppongi? Going in every fucking day to tell them that you can’t lend money to your corporate pals at below the official rate and expect to make a profit? It wasn’t Nobel Prize economics, Hannah. But they still didn’t get it. However much we made off that thing, it would never be enough.”

“It was the most profitable foreign investment ever...”

“And as for all the bowing. Fuck. I needed a massage every night just to get the knots out of my lower back. What can they do to us? Seriously?”

“Well, you can never go back there?”

“No problem.”

“They could try to freeze any assets you have there.”

“They’re quite welcome.”

“And they can make it very clear to anyone who cares to listen that a deal with Gene Drinkwater is a deal with the devil.”

“As if this wasn’t public knowledge.” Hannah could not help laughing. There were conventions, laws and then life with Drinkwater. After years of the former, the latter was exactly what she had needed. “Well, tell our lawyers out there to just keep on fighting. What was that case in Charles Dickens?”

“Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce.”

“OK. Let’s Jarndyce them. Drag it out till everyone’s dead. Doesn’t bother me. Should bother the Japanese taxpayer. Where are those fucking pastries. I need some sugar.”

11.

Hiro picked up a manga at random from the groaning shelf in Lawson, a branch of the ubiquitous convenience store opposite the headquarters of Meiji bank. This one told the story of a high school kendo champion with a secret girly side. He liked to bake and his best friend was a girl. Sometimes he even wore make-up. There were the usual depictions of large-breasted women with kittenish faces, sexual freaks courted by wimpy young men, and a smattering of extreme violence.

Hiro glanced up again at the entrance. He had called the chief executive's office and been told he would arrive around 10am. Hiro wanted to catch him on his way in.

He put the manga back and picked up another magazine, this one consisting mostly of pictures of schoolgirls in bikinis. Japanese couples had less sex than any in the developed world, Hiro had read in the newspaper recently. It was scarcely surprising. After just a short trawl through a convenience store, he was starting to feel more sexually exhausted than titillated.

He moved to the food shelves and picked out an onigiri, a triangle of rice wrapped in seaweed, and a can of cold, black coffee. Just as he was paying, he saw a convoy of three Toyota Imperials pulling up outside the bank. He grabbed his change and ran for the door. It was fifty feet

either way to the nearest crossing light, so he decided to run straight across. He could see the chauffeur stepping out of the middle car and moving to open the back door. A bus drove quickly towards Hiro, who stepped backwards into the path of a scooter, which swerved to avoid him. He dropped his coffee and let it roll back into the gutter behind him. As the bus passed, he could see the white head of the chief executive rising out of the car. He lurched forward again, paused, watched two cars slow down to let him pass, then bolted for the sidewalk.

He realized he was still holding the onigiri, so shoved it into his pocket. The group ahead of him pushed through a tall set of smoked glass doors. Hiro weaved his way through the crowds passing along the sidewalk and finally followed them into the building. It was as if he had left the world behind and stepped into a medieval European monastery. There were granite floors and soaring walls and ahead of him a single escalator. Two men in dark suits wearing ear-pieces stood on either side of it. To his right was a barely illuminated reception desk, behind which sat three women dressed in grey to match the stone. There was no sign of the chief executive and his group. Hiro walked slowly over towards the women, conscious of his slovenly appearance.

“I’d like to see Iwase-san,” he said, haltingly. The woman sitting in the center looked up at him and held up a card with both hands.

“Please. Fill this out.” Hiro wrote in his name, the date and under employer, “Tokyo Police: Homicide Division.” He handed it back and the woman read it over. She then held up another piece of paper and pointed with her hand to a barely visible door 15 feet to her left. Hiro looked at the paper: “Because of the recent outbreak of H1N1 Influenza A, we request that all visitors to Meiji

Bank wash their hands thoroughly and gargle.” Hiro took the paper and walked over to the door. He pressed lightly and it eased open to reveal a large, marble-tiled bathroom. He stepped up to the sink, scrubbed his hands with soap and rinsed them. Even in the dim, flattering light, he could see the red lines in his eyes, the cracks in his mental state. He wished he had shaved more closely this morning. There were two small patches of stubble, one by his right ear, the other to the left below his mouth. He was about to turn and leave when he sensed he was being watched. As if somewhere in the room, a camera was tracking his moves. He picked up a bottle of mouthwash, poured out a thimble-full and gargled. It actually felt good to wash out the stale taste of tea.

There was a large man waiting by reception when he returned, dark-skinned, in a close-fitting blue suit. He beckoned Hiro into a corner, away from the receptionists.

“How can I help you Inspector Hiro? I am the head of security here. Any police matter must go through me.”

“I’m here to speak to Iwase-san.”

“Iwase-san has already spoken to the police this morning.”

“So you know why I’m here.”

“It’s not every day one of our senior executives is murdered.”

“You think he was murdered?”

“All we were told is he was found with his throat slit on Asakusa. We assumed it was murder.”

“You’re probably right. Of all the ways to kill yourself, slitting your own throat is low down there. Seppuku, hanging yourself in the bathroom, all much more preferable.”

“Meiji Bank will of course cooperate however we can. But you must tell us what you want, Inspector.”

“I’ve told you. I want to see Iwase-San.”

“He has already spoken on the telephone with two officers. And he has a very full day.”

“Is there some reason he doesn’t want to speak with a homicide officer?”

“You realize who you’re talking about? Iwase-San can and will talk to anyone he wishes, including people with far more influence than you.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Hiro could see the man was becoming exasperated. He was obviously used to brushing people off. Meiji was used to doing exactly as it wanted. “Just call and tell Iwase-San I would like to see him. Can he have anything more important than this today?”

The guard looked away and let out a sigh.

“Don’t move from here.”

“Nowhere else to go,” said Hiro. It was like standing in the corner of a vast prison cell, with no place to sit, just bare walls and a stone floor. He leaned back, rested his head on the granite, shut his eyes and breathed deeply. This could have been his life. A cool building, stone and glass, an office, a secretary, a chauffeur, money.

There was something nagging him about what he had seen at the shrine that morning. Deguchi had been found wearing his suit, as if he had come straight from work. And yet, there was no sign of a briefcase. He must have got there late, after 9pm, when the shrine closed to the public. In which case, he would have assumed he was going home afterwards. No Japanese salary-man went home without a briefcase, a bag, something. Either Deguchi’s had been stolen. Or he had assumed he was

coming back to the office. Or perhaps he had left it with whomever had accompanied him to the shrine.

And the fact there was no sign of a struggle. Who could get a grown man to lie down on an altar in the middle of the night? The path of the blood from his neck showed he had been murdered right there. It had to have been someone he knew, someone who had such power over him, he could persuade him to do anything, either through fear or respect.

“Hiro-San.” The low, gravelly voice startled him. A short man with tortoise shell glasses stood before him, his hands folded at his waist. He was alone.

“Iwase-San,” stammered Hiro. “I didn’t expect...”

“Murder has a way of shaking us from our routines.”