

The Bodyguard

Murata studied the gun. It was a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum, its polished chrome gleaming as the figure in front of him turned it over in his hands. Most of the firearms he had seen were either U.S. Army issue, stolen from one of the many bases throughout Japan, or made from parts in shacks in the Philippines. This one, with its polished wooden handle, had come from the American mainland in a shipment of frozen pig carcasses.

"A beautiful piece," said Kakuta, squinting down the sight. He opened the cylinder. "Blow a man's chest out at close range." He paused to glance at Murata. "With these," he continued, taking six dum-dum bullets out of his jacket pocket. One by one, he slipped them into the chambers. There was a sharp click as Kakuta pressed the cylinder back into place. He very deliberately slipped his finger around the trigger and took aim at a large vase in the corner.

Murata watched in silence.

Finally Kakuta lowered his arm. "Here," he said, leaning forward and placing the pistol on the intricately carved teak coffee table, handle toward Murata, "Get the feel of it."

It was heavy, at least three pounds. The cylinder turned with a soft whirr, as if purring. The last time he had handled a weapon like that was in the Philippines, when he and three of Noguchi's men had accompanied a group of local gun smugglers out to a quiet lagoon and spent the afternoon blowing coconuts to smithereens. He could still see the husks exploding in the sunset.

"Nice gun," he replied perfunctorily, laying it silently back on the coffee table.

The man seated next to Kakuta unfolded his hands from under his chin and carefully reached into his coat pocket. He lit a cigarette, sucking the flame from his black Dunhill lighter into the tobacco. "I have a favor to ask of you, Mr. Murata."

Murata waited, glancing occasionally around the large Western-style sitting parlor. The two men silently facing him were seated in Louis XIV chairs. On the mahogany walls behind them hung a number of oil paintings, some of which Murata recognized, and a huge set of African elephant tusks. To the right was an authentic Western fireplace, the first Murata had ever seen.

The man studied Murata, the pause growing longer. His grey hair went well with the voice—calm, yet full of authority. His name was Haraguchi, one of the six most powerful underlords in the Yamaguchi-gumi, Japan's largest and most feared crime syndicate.

It was Kakuta who broke the silence. "Mr. Haraguchi would like to enlist your services. He needs a bodyguard."

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Nine months earlier. Kyoto. 7:30 on a hot night in July, 1978. The sidewalks were tight with businessmen. The backs of their white shirts were dark with sweat, faces glistening in the summer heat and neon as they jostled their way past the Bel Ami club in the city's Gion entertainment district.

Inside, a limbo dancer on stage was nearing the climax of her act, fifty guests applauding in anticipation. Among them, surrounded by five bodyguards, sat Kazuo Taoka, the capo of the Yamaguchi-gumi and overlord to twelve thousand yakuza throughout the Japanese islands.

Not far away, a young man in a summer sports jacket rose from his seat and slowly made his way past several tables toward the stage where Taoka and his retinue were enjoying the show. He stopped some fifteen feet from them—as if he had forgotten something. His hand disappeared into his jacket. It reappeared with a .38 caliber pistol.

Six shots rang out in rapid succession, women's screams soon following in the confusion as customers thronged toward the exits. Taoka's bodyguards swept chairs away as they elbowed their way into the crowd, their guns held above their shoulders, but the man had vanished. When they returned they found their godfather slumped forward over the table, blood spurting from the bullet hole in his neck.

Taoka survived, but the attempt on his life would change the face of Japanese underworld society. For centuries, the yakuza credo had dictated that disputes among rival gangs be settled outside the realm of legitimate society; it was part of the image of the noble gangster never to involve common people in gang business.

The Osaka War, as this conflict came to be known, brought gang rivalries into the open. Gangsters fought gangsters in broad daylight, attacking each other on the streets and raiding each other's

offices. Scores of yakuza from both Yamaguchi and rival Matsuda families, including Taoka's would-be assassin, were murdered in the bloody retaliations that followed, many in plain view of innocent bystanders.

The Japanese, outraged at the unprecedented open violence and disregard for custom, demanded action. Under this public pressure, police launched a much-heralded eighty-day battle to end the gang war, fielding eleven hundred officers in what was then the largest mobilization in postwar history. During the first two months of the crackdown, authorities rounded up over two thousand gangsters, including over five hundred senior members of the Yamaguchi-gumi. Equally painful, the war was costing millions of dollars in lost revenue, and godfathers on both sides were already talking about putting an end to hostilities.

Haraguchi was one of those favoring a negotiated settlement over continued bloodshed. Finally, in February of 1979, after eight months of warfare, he took action. When a family business trip took him to Kyushu, he arranged to stop in Hiroshima at the headquarters of a Matsuda family to discuss the possibility of putting a stop to the violence.

His meeting with the enemy, however, came to Taoka's attention a month later, so infuriating the Don that he summoned Haraguchi to Kobe, demanding the last third of one of his little fingers and ordering him confined to his own headquarters for an unspecified period of time. Not only did such maneuvering behind the scenes constitute a serious breach of authority during a state of war, but Taoka was suspicious that Haraguchi's motives involved more than just an end to the conflict. Haraguchi and his entire family of over three hundred soldiers were on the verge of expulsion from the Yamaguchi organization. Even this, however, did not satisfy some of the more hawkish Yamaguchi underlords, who put out a contract on their former partner in crime.

Under Haraguchi were eight lieutenants who supervised family operations and stood at the head of his formidable army. However, once word began circulating that their oyabun had been targeted for termination by his own organization, they went underground, as did many of Haraguchi's regular soldiers.

The possibility of open hostilities with other Yamaguchi families rising while his own fighting force dwindled, Haraguchi's only alternative was to try to make peace. To do this, he had to convince Taoka and his fellow godfathers that he had nothing at stake but the best interests of the house of Yamaguchi at his meeting with the other side. Haraguchi, then, had to confront the very people who had placed a price on his head.

Under normal circumstances, Haraguchi would have brought his most trusted lieutenants as insurance. In the world of the yakuza, a godfather goes nowhere by himself, especially to a meeting with people who want him dead. But his lieutenants had disappeared.

In the absence of a lieutenant Haraguchi needed a bodyguard, but for more than just protection. It was also a matter of face, which he would lose if he showed up alone, and in this business face was a kind of protection in itself. A godfather incapable of mobilizing a bodyguard was worthy of neither fear nor respect, and might be eliminated with no thoughts of retaliation. At the same time, the quality of the bodyguard reflected the status of the godfather; an oyabun of Haraguchi's rank required a professional. Just as important, he had to *look* it.

The problem was finding one. Haraguchi couldn't trust any of his own men; Taoka's discovery of his meeting in Hiroshima pointed to security leaks in his own organization. He certainly couldn't "borrow" a bodyguard from the enemy. And recruiting someone from another Yamaguchi family would be inviting a set-up. Haraguchi contacted a number of underworld figures he still counted as allies, but none knew anyone of that caliber for hire—and they weren't about to let their own men go on a suicide mission.

He finally phoned Kakuta, a business associate of long standing. The Tsuruga boss didn't have an extensive standing army at his disposal, but he knew just the man for the job.

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Sudo leaned forward and squinted through the windshield, the wipers slapping noisily against the huge droplets of rain pounding Highway 27. Murata drummed the armrest of the passenger's seat. At this rate it would take hours to get to Ono. Dozing in the back seat were Fukuda and Morioka, his highest ranking senior soldiers.

The squall lifted just past Takahama. Sudo floored the Jaguar to Maizuru, past the Naval Yard until they turned left onto Route 33 for Ayabe. Murata looked out the window, at the trees and rice paddies backing the sparse clusters of houses. What was so important that he had to drop everything? He was going to prison in four weeks. But Kakuta had sounded urgent. He said he had a job only Murata could do, but wouldn't go into detail over the phone.

It had been five years since he had been to Ono. He had come to collect ten thousand dollars in damages from a rig driver who rammed an Obama sanitation truck then refused to pay. He located the driver's parents in a small village outside the city, only to walk in on an old couple in a dilapidated house without furniture or heat—their possessions taken by bill collectors and yakuza in return for their son's gambling debts. Murata called a meeting of their relatives, from whom he extracted an signed agreement to pay the necessary damages, then left the trembling couple two hundred dollars for food and gas.

Murata almost didn't recognize the town now. A sprawling Kintetsu Department Store and Fuji Bank building towered over the Jaguar as Sudo maneuvered through the narrow maze of streets surrounding the station.

He sat forward and pointed. "Take a left at that Nippon Rent-a-Car sign." A parking lot came into view just around the corner. "There."

A black Toyota President sat just beyond the gates, four men inside. Sudo braked the Jaguar, pulling up to the curb across the street. Murata saw the driver of the Toyota nod. The car crept out of the lot.

Sudo followed the Toyota out of the city. Trees gradually replaced buildings. Twenty minutes, thirty. The road snaking through nothing but mountains and forests.

"Boss, where exactly we going?" Sudo asked.

Murata didn't answer. He didn't know himself.

It was almost dark now. The Toyota eased along the rim of a valley, a precipitous drop of hundreds of feet straight down. Finally the road bottomed out, another incline straight ahead. Murata spotted a break in the foliage twenty yards on the left. The Toyota's brake lights flashed, then the directional signal blinked on.

The Toyota turned onto a small, almost invisible road branching off to the left. Sudo followed, winding up a steep grade, through thick pine forests. The road was paved with smooth new blacktop. Still no signs of life. The Toyota took a sharp turn to the right. Another left and they were on level ground.

“What the—,” gasped Sudo, touching the brakes involuntarily. The four of them stared in blank amazement.

A veritable fortress. The walls towered over ten feet, with three feet of coiled barbed wire on top, flood lights at five foot intervals. The Toyota stopped in front of an iron gate, soldiers with submachine guns on either side.

The guards began sliding the long, heavy metal rod out of two iron loops in the gate. They pushed the doors open to the inside, the Toyota moving forward as if being slowly sucked in. Murata saw one of the guards raise a walkie-talkie and mutter something. He nodded to Sudo to follow, the walkie-talkie crackling in response as they passed.

The Jaguar inched into a parking lot large enough for fifty cars. A long two-story building stood on their right, one of the second-floor windows covered with thick black bars. Their own fucking jail, Murata thought. Occupying the left corner was another set of walls as tall as those outside. A group of five soldiers approached the car.

Kakuta was already walking toward them through the inner gate. He was dressed in a dark gray suit and tie, a dramatic change from his casual attire the first time the two men met. “Thanks for getting here so fast,” he said sternly, waving the soldiers away. “This way.”

The inner gate was a replica of the first, including the guards. Inside, they found yet another set of quarters, another set of walls and another cast-iron gate with soldiers. It was like a set of Chinese boxes.

The gate opened onto a picturesque traditional Japanese house, the black tile roof sloping down to carefully pruned pine trees. To the side of the entrance was a large Japanese garden and fish pond. Murata and his men followed Kakuta into the entrance, then through a maze of corridors and shoji

until they came to a pair of large Western doors guarded by a soldier holding a submachine gun across his chest.

Kakuta stopped. "Nobody beyond this point but you and me," he said to Murata, then turned to the guard. "Take them to the guest quarters and give them whatever they want."

Murata nodded to Fukuda, Sudo and Morioka, who followed the soldier back down the corridor. Kakuta opened the right of the two doors and waited for Murata to enter the Western-style sitting room. A middle-aged man was seated behind an intricately carved coffee table. Behind him a huge pair of African elephant tusks seemed to burst from out of the mahogany wall.

"Thank you for coming," the man said, rising slightly to bow, "I trust you had a safe journey. Come, sit down." Kakuta took the seat to the man's left. Murata sat down in the single chair opposite them.

There was a soft knock at the door and a young girl in kimono appeared carrying a tray with three cups of green tea. She bowed, setting down each wooden coaster and round handleless cup with solemn propriety. Then she bowed again, her slippers tapping faintly against the short-pile carpet as she padded out of the room.

"This is Mr. Haraguchi," Kakuta said, in a calm, but cautious voice.

Murata straightened at the name.

Kakuta leaned forward and opened the drawer of the coffee table. Reaching inside, he carefully took out a silver .357 Magnum.

That was five minutes ago.

Kakuta was talking now. "Mr. Haraguchi was involved in a misunderstanding with some of his business associates."

Murata responded with a small grunt of understanding.

"He will be meeting with several of them over the next two weeks, to straighten things out," Kakuta continued. "Your job would be to prevent any trouble."

Murata leaned back in his chair. He didn't get it. Nobuo Haraguchi, *the* Nobuo Haraguchi, couldn't find a bodyguard? Granted, this might be an honor, but one he certainly didn't need. He was going to jail in a month. He didn't have time for other people's disputes.

Kakuta and Haraguchi examined him, waiting. The gun was lying on the table. Had he known the purpose of this meeting, he would never have come.

He could say it wasn't his fight. And look like he was scared. A different time frame presented itself: eight years earlier, Sasaki doing the talking. Was he interested in joining the organization? He was here now, in this room with one of the most powerful godfathers in Japan's largest syndicate, because he was unable then to find a way of refusing that wouldn't make him look less of a man.

Haraguchi spoke again. "The misunderstanding Mr. Kakuta is referring to—"

Murata held up his hand. "I don't have to know."

"Then we can count on you?" Kakuta's eyes were tentative, his voice cautious.

Murata shifted his gaze to Haraguchi. "Just tell me what you want done."

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The steel-blue stretch Lincoln Continental had been on the road over an hour. They'd picked up the Meishin Expressway at the Sannomiya ramp, then headed past downtown Kobe and out of the city limits moving toward Osaka, the last leg of their trip. Murata faced Haraguchi and Kakuta from the jump seat, the only one smoking in the silence.

Haraguchi finally leaned forward on the white leather seat. "Nakajima will put us in the middle of the room. You keep your eyes open." Punching out the sentences in short, terse bursts. He paused for a second. "You see anything suspicious, shoot to kill."

Murata recognized the name "Nakajima" as quickly as he had "Haraguchi." Tamotsu Nakajima held the same rank as Haraguchi in the Yamaguchi hierarchy and a reputation as a ruthless warlord. He was the man most committed to continuing the war, the man most angered by Haraguchi's move toward reconciliation.

The name Nakajima almost made Murata overlook something that now began to bother him: *what* room? He assumed the meetings would be held on neutral territory.

The driver brought the Lincoln to a stop three blocks from Nakagawa Stadium, home of the Kintetsu Buffaloes. They had just signed Jerry Brewer, a Yankees third baseman, to the most lucrative contract in Japanese baseball history. High white walls with a black tile top extended fifty yards on either side of a huge iron gate. Through the bars Murata could see a three-story white tile structure surrounded by thick shrubs as the limousine eased to a stop. The soldiers at the entrance tensed, one quickly disappearing inside. Murata drew a deep breath. *This was Nakajima's private headquarters.*

It would be impossible to guard someone in a place like this. You were talking odds of fifty, sixty to one. He didn't know the layout of the house. Nakajima would have soldiers as thick as security guards at Haneda for visiting heads of state. Murata eased the pistol out of his shoulder holster and slipped it into his belt. But he knew the Magnum was useless. If this was a setup, they'd be leaving in body bags. Or pieces.

A contingent of three men in dark suits emerged from the house and walked stiffly toward the gate as Haraguchi, Kakuta and Murata stepped out of the limousine. Murata noted the camera high atop the hedge which followed their approach.

He moved close to Haraguchi as the soldiers neared the gate. The one in the middle opened it, bowing slightly to Haraguchi. These people would know each other well. They used to be on the same side.

The visitors followed their escorts into a large entrance hall lined with the Yamaguchi family crest—a black diamond with a vertical bar in the middle. After removing their shoes and donning slippers with the same crest, they continued through a courtyard with a swimming pool, then back inside through labyrinthine corridors. Finally they arrived at a palatial-sized tatami room.

Nakajima and six of his lieutenants sat waiting on cushions on the floor behind a low table. Murata recognized Nakajima on instinct. Ten soldiers were positioned strategically around the room. An attack could come from anywhere.

Nakajima motioned Haraguchi to a cushion across the table from him. Kakuta sat down next to Haraguchi. Murata walked to a spot ten feet away with a good view of the entire room and a wall

against his back. There was a low, heavy table propped on its side in the corner nearest him. In the event of an ambush, he'd take Nakajima out first, then dive and roll behind it.

The two godfathers exchanged bows. Haraguchi's was slightly deeper. Nakajima began by thanking Haraguchi for coming. Haraguchi thanked Nakajima for taking time out from his busy schedule. A pair of white-faced young girls in kimonos brought cups of hot green tea in china cups. Was this it? Small caliber pistols or knives concealed inside the billowy sleeves? Murata followed them carefully. He hoped he didn't have to shoot them.

Haraguchi sipped his tea.

"You talked to Hamada in Hiroshima?" Nakajima spoke the moment the cup touched Haraguchi's lips.

Murata swallowed; he could feel the tea burning Haraguchi's mouth. Haraguchi hastily replaced the cup on the table. "That's right."

"About what?" pressed Nakajima. Maneuvering, pressing the advantage.

"About some way to stop this senseless loss of life." Haraguchi paused. "And money."

Nakajima colored. "You call going after the scum who tried to gun down our godfather *senseless?*" Growling now.

Murata tucked his thumb inside his belt, his hand tight against the Magnum. He studied each of the lieutenants for the slightest movement.

Haraguchi reached for his tea cup but struck the side with his thumb, toppling it on its side. Bitter green liquid rushed across the table up toward Nakajima. "Sumimasen," said Haraguchi under his breath.

The two serving girls rushed in to wipe up the spill. Murata wondered if it was an intentional device to diffuse Nakajima's offensive. Haraguchi shifted his legs under the table to a cross-legged position.

"What Mr. Haraguchi meant," Kakuta began, "Is that there comes a time when enough is enough, where business takes precedence over revenge. We've been at war for nine months now. We've won. It's time to get back to business."

Nakajima looked up from the table. "Honor means nothing to you?" he countered, though without the raw edge of minutes before.

"It's not a question of honor any more," Haraguchi said, in his same, even tone. "We've shown the others what our family can do."

Nakajima once again emphasized his deep displeasure at Haraguchi's peace overtures to a hostile syndicate without proper authorization. His scowl was less pronounced now, the words calculatingly restrained. Was it an act? He stressed the importance of crushing all resistance as a warning to others if Yamaguchi-gumi was to retain its position of undisputed authority. The future of the entire organization depended on it.

Haraguchi replied that he, too, was thinking of the syndicate's future. He shared Nakajima's loyalty to Taoka, but pointed out that Yamaguchi family treasuries throughout Japan were seriously depleted. The organization was losing men in droves to police weapon searches. They had routed the enemy; Matsuda-gumi was ready, anxious, to negotiate. There would be absolutely no loss of face, or anything else, by quitting now.

Only Murata's eyes moved as he scanned the room. Nakajima's soldiers stood rigid, making his job easier. But the lieutenants at the table were smoking, occasionally whispering back and forth. He was dying for a cigarette himself.

The godfathers went back and forth for what seemed like hours, Nakajima repeatedly hammering home the point that Haraguchi had no business taking matters into his own hands. What were the terms of the proposed agreement? Haraguchi outlined his plan of a cease-fire after an unspecified indemnity to be paid to Yamaguchi syndicate headquarters, bowing as he admitted his error and pledging to support all family decisions in the future. But he staunchly disavowed any intention of personal gain from his meeting with the Matsuda syndicate.

Two of Nakajima's lieutenants rose abruptly from the table.

Murata's hand tightened around the pistol. No fast movements, not yet. Let them make the first move. He could take four, maybe five. But then, why wait till now? They didn't sound like they were

arguing. More movement from the godfather's table—Murata quickly relaxed his grip and eased his hand to his side. Haraguchi and Nakajima were bowing to each other.

The meeting was over.

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Murata continued to look back over his shoulder while Haraguchi and Kakuta climbed into the car. He kept an eye on the road behind them from the jump seat, watching the traffic. Through Kobe, into the country. It wasn't over until they were safely inside the iron gates at Haraguchi's.

Haraguchi and Kakuta seemed satisfied with the meeting. Murata was satisfied to be alive.

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The godfather who now sat in front of him bore little resemblance to the one Murata had been guarding for the past two weeks. The eyes were calm, the voice relaxed. Murata saw him smile for the first time as he reached into a drawer from behind his large walnut desk. "Here," he said, handing Murata a thick envelope. "It's not much, but thank you."

"I didn't do anything," Murata replied, extending the Magnum handle to Haraguchi.

He shook his head. "Keep it. You earned it."

It was over. Haraguchi was no longer a hunted man. The four additional meetings had gone without incident, though not without some tense moments. There had been raised voices. Several times Murata thought it was coming. The cabaret, in particular, was bad—Haraguchi wrangling with Ando, livid and pounding the table amidst the people, noise and movement. Murata could still their faces—the six highest ranking godfathers in the Yamaguchi family. Ishii, with his large jaw and furry eyebrows. Okano, the bearded, unassuming yet cunning mastermind of many Yamaguchi takeover operations. Yamahiro, the syndicate's swarthy chain-smoking, crew cut second-in-command. And the Don himself, Taoka, the most powerful yakuza in Japan.

Haraguchi had proven himself a skilled negotiator. The five lieutenants had agreed to cancel their contracts in return for Haraguchi's promise of no further peace overtures to the enemy. And after hearing the matter in front of the General Council at Yamaguchi Headquarters in Kobe, Taoka had accepted the settlement.

"Thank you," Murata said, as he rose to go.

"Wait a minute," said Haraguchi, picking up the bronze letter opener on his desk, turning it over in his hands. "I could use you in my organization. Would you be willing . . . ?" His voice trailed off.

Murata sank back into his chair. "I'm going to prison in two weeks."

"I know. I want you to say you're a member of my family when you're in—as my top lieutenant. Of course, you'll have your own family." He paused, looking down at the letter opener. "I'm going to be rebuilding my organization. I need good men, men I can trust. I can't have this type of thing happen again. You'd have a voice at General Councils."

Murata fumbled for a cigarette. Haraguchi was offering him the number two spot in his organization, over the lieutenants who had been with him for years—and deserted. "I'm deeply honored," he said. "But I don't know what'll happen when I get out. I'd have to talk to my men. If the offer is still good after I come back . . ."

"You don't have to decide now," he said, letting go of the letter opener. "Why don't we take a few days and go to Arima. We run some hotels up there. Give you some time to think about it."

Murata laughed nervously. He didn't like saying no to Haraguchi. On the other hand, he no longer had to worry about what anyone thought. "Sudo'll be here soon," he said as he put out his cigarette and stood up. "But I appreciate the offer. I'll keep it in mind."

Haraguchi looked up at him with a slightly amused expression. "Tell me something before you go. Why'd you do it? Most men would've walked out."

Murata lowered his eyes slightly. "You said you needed somebody," he mumbled.

He stepped out of his slippers at the entrance and into the cold March morning air. It was over. Funny, he thought, looking out at the precisely placed rocks and miniature pine trees in the garden. This was like a prison, living here, guarding Haraguchi day and night. In another couple of weeks, he'd be the one being guarded. It felt good to be free, while it lasted.

Through the gate, he saw Kakuta smoking a cigarette in front of their quarters. He seemed absorbed with something in the parking lot. "When're you goin' back to Obama?" he asked as Murata walked up. He looked different, too.

Murata cupped his hands around his lighter as he lit a Short Hope. "Sudo should be here soon. When are you heading back to Tsuruga?"

Kakuta looked thoughtful. "Got a couple more things to do here. Maybe a couple a weeks." He, Murata and Tajima, who joined them at the compound shortly after Murata's arrival, had talked very little about the job. Just playing cards, watching TV and taking turns with Tajima on guard duty at the compound. They didn't talk about it now, either. Or the feeling of relief. There was time for that later.

Murata tensed and crushed the butt under his heel. "Who's that?" he asked quietly, nodding at an unfamiliar figure passing through the gate towards them.

"Sawamura," Kakuta whispered in reply. "One of oyaji's lieutenants."

Murata buried his hands in his pockets and looked away as the man walked toward the house. The heavy white bandage around the little finger of his left hand stood out against the sleeve of his grey overcoat.

Haraguchi received seven similar visitors, each bringing the same token of apology. They came with explanations and bowed heads for running from what Murata, a stranger, had done because he didn't have an excuse handy. Within a week of Murata's departure, Haraguchi had a macabre collection over his Western fireplace—eight jars of alcohol, each containing a little finger.

Three months later, Yamaguchi-gumi called a press conference to announce an end to its part in the Osaka War. In the nationally televised address from Taoka's own home, the syndicate spokesman conveyed the family's formal apologies to the public and police for the "trouble" caused them. Haraguchi, unfortunately, did not live to see it. He died, of natural causes, thirty days before the decision was reached.

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The Palace had begun to show signs of recovery. The list of hostesses was growing steadily, and likewise the nights when I longed for an assistant at the door. Between my duties there, the constant requests to join parties upstairs and the emotional fallout from the affair with Mari, I was looking forward to the quiet of Obama.

It was March twenty-ninth. There was a steady stream of customers in and out, but I was having a hard time keeping my mind on business. The first sesshin of the year would begin in two days. Several hostesses, including Mari, stopped to give me good-bye presents. I was distracted, looking out the door. I had been trying to get in touch with Murata for ten days, but neither his wife nor headquarters knew where he was, or weren't letting on if they did. I planned to take the train back to Obama the next morning.

About 10:00, a brown Jaguar with Fukui plates pulled up to the curb. Seconds later, out climbed Sudo, Fukuda and Murata. He stopped in front of me as he walked in the door. "Bags packed?"

"Where the hell *were* you all this time?" I replied, a little exasperated.

"Friend of mine needed looking after," he mumbled as he lumbered past me and up the stairs.