

The Godfather

The court clerk adjusted her dark suit jacket as she rose to face the witness. "Do you swear to tell the truth, and not to lie?"

The frail, gray-haired woman looked apprehensive, bowing as she quietly replied, "I do."

The three judges sat lifelessly at the raised wooden dais overlooking the proceedings. Murata had seen American courtroom dramas at the movies. There, the defense had latitude in introducing evidence, could make impassioned pleas to the jury. Here, there was no passion, no drama, no jury. Prosecutors and defense attorneys asked their questions as if reading prescription labels, then the Three Stooges at the bench recited their foregone conclusions. In Japanese courts, the outcome of a criminal trial was, almost without exception, decided in advance. He felt like a fly in a spider's web.

"State your name and profession."

"Fumiko Kunihara. I clean rooms at the Obama Dai-Ichi Hotel."

"Be seated, Mrs. Kunihara."

The prosecutor rose to begin his line of questioning as the old woman settled into the chair.

"Now, Mrs. Kunihara, were you on duty on the morning of May fifth?"

The old woman nodded. "I was cleaning the rooms on the second floor."

There was motion in the gallery, people leaning to whisper. Kazuko didn't take her eyes off the aging witness.

"And on that morning, did you clean Room Two Thirteen?"

"Yes."

"Would you describe what you saw?"

"Well, I knocked, but there was no answer. So I opened the door with my pass key and began making the bed." The old woman paused, glancing at the police captain sitting behind the prosecutor.

"That was when I saw the gun sticking half way out of a black leather bag on the table."

Murata could still remember every word of testimony, every detail in the courtroom that day. The lying old bitch, the cops in the courtroom looking smugly at each other. He just might pay the old girl a visit once he got back to Obama. Now, his eyes drifted to the wall, moving leisurely over the framed certificates. "Warden of the Month." "Model Prison Award." "Ten Years, No Escapes."

The warden was on the phone, cradling the receiver with one shoulder. He motioned Murata into the chair in front of his desk. Tonight was his last night in Toyama Federal Penitentiary. His sentence, sixteen months for possession of firearms, would be up in a matter of hours, at midnight, June seventeenth, 1977.

The cleaning lady had found Murata's gun, but not by accident and not while "straightening up" the room. No way. He and Kazuko had checked into the Dai-Ichi the previous afternoon and he had left it in his suitcase under the bed, and Kazuko had taken her handbag with her to breakfast when he went out to see a friend that morning. The cops had either put the old bag up to it or been there with her. They barged in on Kazuko an hour later, before Murata returned, and went directly to the suitcase under the bed. When they came up empty handed, they searched her handbag, pulled out a .38 automatic and took her into custody. Murata turned himself in.

The warden replaced the receiver in the cradle and pointed to the plastic bag on his desk. "Your things." Murata opened the bag without a word. In it were his suit, shirt, tie, watch, sunglasses and other personal effects. He signed the release slip and pushed the bag back.

The warden moved around the desk and sat down on the edge, using the height to his advantage. "You're a two-time loser," he began. "You get sent up again and it's five to life."

Murata sat in the straight-backed wooden chair, staring at the wall. No need to start something now. This was a ceremony, a ritual, both of them playing their parts. The warden didn't want trouble; he wanted Murata out of his hair. Murata didn't want trouble; he'd been in the goddamn joint sixteen months.

The warden slipped off the desk and began pacing back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. "Isn't it about time you started making a contribution to society instead of preying on it? Haven't you learned by now there's no percentage in it? You break the law and we'll get you. You're still young. You want to spend the rest of your life in here?"

Murata continued inspecting the pasteboard, the warden's monologue fading into background noise. It sounded pre-recorded, like he gave the same rap to every departing con. Five minutes. Ten. It didn't look like the old fart was ever gonna wear down. He kept pacing, as if he enjoyed listening to

himself. Did he have a bug up his ass? Old lady not giving him any? Murata hadn't had any in almost a year and a half. He could see the warden on top of the old girl, eyes shut, neck muscles bulging.

He forgot himself and smiled.

The warden looked at him like an undertaker at a corpse who'd just winked at him. Then he scowled. Fucking thug laughing at him. "What the hell's so funny?"

Murata didn't answer.

"You fuckin' chinpira are all alike," growled the warden, the sparse little stumps of hair standing out like antennae. "Think you're hot shit 'cause you're a big, tough yakuza, eh? Gotta be in a fuckin' gang to push people around 'cause you don't have the balls to do it alone. You're *nothing*. No, you're worse than nothing. You're *shit!*"

Murata looked straight ahead. It was his own fault. He had turned a milk-toast sermon into a fucking tirade. The liver spots on the warden's forehead stood out against his red scalp. It would take a little longer now, but keep his mouth shut and he'd be out of here soon enough.

The warden stalked behind the desk and leaned on it with both arms. His face was livid. "You think you're different? You and all that giri ninjo bullshit? You're a fuckin' joke! And that godfather of yours—Noguchi or whatever the fuck his name is? He'd sell you down the fuckin' river soon as look at you."

Murata's eyes narrowed.

"When the fuck you gonna wise up?"

Murata rose deliberately, his eyes on the short, pudgy man. "You little piece a shit," he growled, menacing but calm, his voice under control.

The warden straightened, jerking both fists off the desk. "Guard!" he bellowed nervously, "get this scum outta my sight!" Then he sat down, putting distance between himself and Murata. "You'll be back," he said, the voice more assured, "And the next time you are, you'll find out what hard time is!"

Murata shrugged and turned to face the incoming uniform. So much for ritual.

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The skeleton keys jangled as the guard unlocked the iron bar doors. "Here," he sneered, tossing the plastic bag with Murata's things on the bunk.

Murata picked up the bag. He had been transferred to a solitary cell the day before, a precautionary measure to prevent contact with inmates who knew he was getting out. They had a habit of asking favors, doing errands or getting messages to people on the outside.

He changed and stuffed the navy prison uniform into the now empty bag. He didn't ever want to see one again. "Okay," he said, "Now, get me the fuck outta here."

Murata followed the guard into the long gray corridor, two hundred-yard rows of vertical iron bars separating his cell and the door to the yard and the outside gate. In between were six iron-bar doors. At each station the guard unfastened the ring of keys from his belt, unlocked the door, led Murata through, locked it behind them, then returned the keys to their place. Murata wanted to grab his billy club and hurry him up. He didn't have to stay here; he could go home every day, get laid, eat hot home-cooked meals. Murata's mouth watered just thinking about it.

The guard's heavy leather soles echoed on the gray cement floor. Murata's gray sharkskin suit hung on him in loose folds. He had lost twenty pounds, solid muscle now. The guard looked at Murata as he opened the last door, but said nothing.

Then he was outside, in summer morning air. The iron door of the gate clanged shut behind him and the guard ambled back toward the main building. Murata took a deep breath.

A yakuza's release from prison usually occasions a family ceremony much more solemn than any warden's sermon. Senior soldiers can expect to see fifty to one hundred family members waiting outside the gate, and fat cash envelopes for their trouble on behalf of the family. High-ranking godfathers, on the other hand, are often met by thousands of *gokudo*¹ and fellow oyabun from all over Japan, lined up in a dramatic procession up to the gate, black Mercedes 500SEs and stretch limos backed up out of sight along the road.

¹ *gokudo* A member of a Japanese organized crime syndicate. "Gokudo" can be used interchangeably with "yakuza."

The prison walls rose behind him, gray and ugly in the morning mist as he walked out to the empty street. Murata hadn't let Noguchi know the date of his release. He had never been one for rituals. Now he lit his first cigarette in sixteen months and sat down at the bus stop to wait.

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Murata flicked away the butt from his new pack of Short Hopes. He stood on the Kobe sidewalk, bag in hand, looking up the short flight of stairs at the door. The sign still said "Sansho Trading," simple white background with plain block lettering. "Importing and Exporting Specialists. Phone 075-832-5643." Inside, the office fit the part. Headquarters had never looked like a yakuza business office. Noguchi wanted it that way, furnished the place to pass for an accounting firm.

On the first floor was a coffee shop where one of his girlfriends used to work. He wondered if she was still around. Shit, he was horny. He walked up the stairs and through the door without ringing the bell.

The sofa and reception set were in the same places, three desks had become five. Other yakuza headquarters boasted photographs of oyabuns, family crests. Noguchi's still didn't have anything on the walls. If anything, it looked more like a regular company now than when he left. A number of familiar faces were at the desks.

They hurriedly stood up to bow. "*Okaeri nasai.*" Welcome back.

But something was wrong. They looked at each other uncomfortably as Murata walked into the room. One of his old soldiers was working a ledger showing receipts and disbursements. A second was on the phone quoting . . . the price of silver?

"What the hell you guys doin'?"

They stopped and looked up from their desks. "Our jobs," one volunteered.

"And what the fuck is that?"

"Metals, precious metals," another replied, getting back to his books.

"What's going on here? Where's—"

Murata fell silent as Noguchi appeared in the doorway of the inner office. His face looked older, the mouth flat. The silence deepened as the two stood scrutinizing each other.

Finally Noguchi spoke. "Why the hell didn't you let someone know you were getting out?"

"What *is* this?"

Noguchi looked away.

Murata glanced at Noguchi's hands. The little finger of the left one was missing. Noguchi raised his eyes again, as if in apology.

Suddenly it all made sense. "Why?" he asked.

"It was a dirty business."

It was all right in front of Murata the minute he walked in; he just didn't want to see it. What had happened? Trouble with Sasaki or another family in the organization? Hell, if Noguchi didn't know it was a dirty business, who did? Only details were irrelevant now; either way, there was no place for him here. He remembered the warden's tirade from the night before. Whatever had gone down, he was out of a job.

Noguchi had gone straight.

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Murata sat on the long, thin veranda, gazing out onto the rice paddies. Off to his right he could see Aya's father and mother bent over planting seeds in the vegetable garden. A hundred yards of irrigated young green rice plants away, an occasional car swept down Route 303. He had been back from Kobe a week and was still watching cars go by.

Murata had moved in with Aya's family when he was twenty, an immensely unpopular decision with her parents. Aya's father was a civil engineering contractor, a civil servant, and a young hoodlum in the family was not what his career needed, especially in conservative, rural Kaminaka.

It wasn't the illegitimate baby they objected to, the illegitimate baby born the day after Murata's release from his first prison term. After all, Aya was their only child, and they wanted her children to take over the house and lands. No, little Takuya was welcome; he was listed in *their* family register under Morita, his mother's maiden name.

Murata was the problem. He had no claim to their home; Aya and he weren't legally married. The parents had told him repeatedly he'd have to leave. Until, one day, he grabbed a knife off the kitchen counter and threatened to use it on them if they didn't shut up.

That was almost ten years ago. Now he had two sons and some serious thinking to do. Several years before he had turned down his own family in Sasaki's group to stay with Noguchi. Today he was out of a job and faced with two choices—join another organization or start his own.

On the evening of his arrival in Kobe that first day out, most of his old men showed up to welcome him back with a night on the town. Some were still working in Noguchi's office. Most had left to continue their trade in other syndicates. Many were dissatisfied with their current situations.

They all agreed things had been better back then. These days, they complained, you couldn't trust anybody, not even your own godfather. Work your ass off, risk your fucking life and then, when you need them, they don't know you. They asked him his plans for the future. When he said he didn't know, they said that if he got back in business, to count them in.

During the course of the evening, four of them approached him individually. They told him they wanted to work for him again. Told him they'd been waiting for his release ever since Noguchi left the syndicate. Told him that included following him to Obama if necessary.

Murata turned his head at the sound of the telephone, then footsteps in the hall. Aya appeared in the doorway. "There's a phone call for you from Kobe, a Mr. Sasaki."

He rose slowly and ambled into the big tatami living-dining-recreation room, reaching for the receiver on its side on the television. "Hello."

"Noguchi said you got out the other day." The voice on the other end of the line had a ring of expectancy. "Welcome back."

"Thank you," Murata replied politely. "Good to *be* back."

"How you doing?"

"All right, I guess."

"No problems in the joint?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Listen, I wanted to ask, what you planning on doing?"

Murata cradled the receiver in his shoulder as he fished in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "I've been thinking about it. Haven't made up my mind yet."

Noguchi had quit the organization six months before Murata's release, but his men didn't know why and Murata could persuade Noguchi to reveal nothing. They said he had seemed preoccupied for several weeks, but otherwise there had been no previous warning. One day it was business as usual, and the next, work for him in precious metals or move on. Had it been trouble with the man now on the other end of the line?

"Why don't you come down to Kobe. We could talk. I'd like to show you a couple of new things we're moving into. Maybe take a drive up to Arima. Sit in the springs for a couple of days. Do you good."

Murata looked through the open latticed paper doors out to an eighteen-wheeler churning for Kyoto. The vertical exhaust pipe behind the cab belched black smoke as the driver changed gears, built up speed. To work in the city, he'd need an organization behind him.

"You there?" asked Sasaki.

"Uh, yes. Let me think about it. I still have some things to take care of around here. I'll give you an answer in a couple of days."

The voice hesitated. "Remember, there could be a lot in it for you."

Murata hung up the phone and returned to his seat on the veranda. He lit a cigarette as Aya appeared with a cup of Japanese tea and pears. He had been putting off a decision. Now he had to make a choice.

Sasaki was giving him a second chance at his own family in the organization, the same rank Noguchi once held. An established family behind him gave him greater credibility, which made work easier to come by.

What were his alternatives? Obama? Everything pointed against it. The location was bad, a mountain range and miles of winding roads separating him from the urban Pacific side. Many times the

crucial factor on a job was being somewhere at a moment's notice. Kyoto, the nearest city, was two hours away. Kobe, three.

Then, Obama was small. Both of Murata's busts had gone down there, not in the city. Everyone knew what everyone else was doing, including the cops. And every officer on the force knew Yasunori Murata. If they wanted him, chances were they could get him again.

Which all added up to the bottom line; with the cops breathing down his neck, it would be difficult to put together a network capable of generating any serious income. The Obama Police Department might close its eyes to nickel-and-dime shit, but if people started complaining, or if he began getting *too* successful, they'd come down hard.

True enough, but Obama had its advantages, too. He already had an office and people here. And knowing most of the town worked both ways. An inside line on who owned what, who owed how much to whom, which companies were in danger of folding and when was often the same as money in the bank. He'd just have to be a little more careful. Besides, he didn't need that much money.

There were other considerations, too, less practical ones. Joining an organization meant swearing loyalty to another godfather, something he wanted to avoid out of respect for Noguchi. That and the possibility that had made him refuse Sasaki's sakazuki the first time it was offered—that in a case of conflicting interests, he might be called upon to go up against his former oyabun.

Then there were family matters—*real* family. His mother, four sisters and brothers, lived in town. His own family was growing. For the past five years he'd been in Kobe when he wasn't in jail, visiting his wife once, twice a year. Murata had been striking out on his own since he was sixteen, but he always came back. Obama was one thing no city would ever be. It was home.

Murata picked up the receiver and dialed a Kobe number. "Kikkawa, that you? Yeah? Well, call Morioka, Kawabata and Tanihara and tell 'em to get up here. Time to go to work."

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The thugs stood in a desultory line in the middle of the gravel parking lot, Murata a step in front. Their eyes were trained on the door, tilting heads right, then left.

"Looks good to me, Boss."

“Yeah, I like it, too.”

“Got character.”

The signboard was almost half the length of the door. It measured over a yard, each of the three characters in bold, sweeping brush strokes a foot high—“Murata-gumi.”

Not that family headquarters itself was all that fancy. Two three-room apartments, one directly over the other, in a small apartment complex just off the main street. The ground floor apartment served as the office, the second floor the gang dormitory. Some soldiers had their own apartments, but most slept with the Boss at headquarters.

Murata already had a loosely organized following of local toughs, some who worked out of the Mizutobi office. Now, with Noguchi’s men who had joined him from Kobe, the roster board showed sixteen full-time members: six senior soldiers, or *shatei*, and ten junior soldiers, or *wakashu*.

The junior soldiers took care of day-to-day operations, cleaned the office, answered the phone, cooked the food. (There was always something on the stove for those eating at headquarters.) They went with Murata as expeditors or enforcers or in his place on jobs. They also served as bodyguards, and did the actual fighting in gang disputes.

Murata-gumi’s primary source of income derived from gambling. The family ran *bakuchi*² games and maintained a network of four local bars, where customers could place bets on baseball and horse, bicycle and boat racing. They also collected protection money from bars, saunas, restaurants, construction companies, pachinko parlors, loan companies and other establishments in the area.

Membership fees and monthly dues from local car and motorcycle gangs was another source of family income. In addition, his organization supplied pornographic videos to inns and love hotels in the area, and established a loan company. Then, somewhat ironically, one of Murata’s main money makers was an area most Westerners would consider the province of the law.

In America, if someone passes a bad check, the receiving party probably goes through the proper legal channels to recover his or her losses. In Japan, most people don’t. The Japanese are loathe to

² *bakuchi* Traditional Japanese gambling, including card and dice games. Itinerant gamblers from the 1700s to the mid-20th century were one of the forerunners of the modern yakuza.

have their personal affairs known. They don't like lawyers or courts. These are the channels through which private business becomes a matter of public record, and most Japanese would rather eat a loss than have their dirty laundry hung out for all to see.

That's where yakuza come in. Being unrestrained by due process, they often get results—recover debts or other monies—the courts or collection agencies can't, and in a fraction of the time. More important, no one is the wiser.

Bankrupt companies represented another lucrative source of profits. Murata's local connections let him keep abreast of the financial status of the major firms in the area. If one was in danger of imminent failure, he ascertained the names of its creditors and arranged a business meeting. After detailing the company's financial difficulties, he explained their alternatives, emphasizing that, if the firm did go into bankruptcy, they stood to lose their entire investment.

Only that didn't have to happen. They could entrust him to recover what monies could be salvaged—for a fee of fifty percent of what he recovered. The arithmetic made sense; something was better than nothing. And he was in a better position to do it. He had the know-how, the experience, the manpower and the connections. Only first he'd have to have their stamps giving him power of attorney to liquidate their interests in the corporation. To make everything legal, of course, just in case.

Once he had stamped documents, Murata went to work. He turned solid assets like machinery into liquid assets. Sometimes it meant showdowns with other yakuza families who wanted a piece of the action. Other times it involved kidnapping the company's CEO and forcing him to stamp papers saying all transactions involving immovable properties like buildings or land go through Murata-gumi.

This completed, how much money he passed to the creditors was entirely up to him. To local residents or personal acquaintances, he might return the agreed-upon fifty percent. Others frequently got nothing at all. There was nothing, after all, that said he had to. If the creditors went to the police, there was their personal stamp verifying his claim that all decisions were in his hands.

There were a number of features which made Murata's family something of an oddity in the yakuza world. First, Murata-gumi was unaffiliated, unprotected by a parent organization. It maintained

friendship ties with other families, of course, but no formal arrangement with an umbrella syndicate to which it owed money or allegiance.

Lack of affiliation—not taking on another oyabun—was, in part, a sign respect for Noguchi. But it was Obama's diminutive size that allowed him the luxury of actually running his family that way. There was little need for protection against bigger syndicates; national organizations saw the profit margin as too low to justify the time and expense of muscling in. There had been groups of ruffians in the old days, back when Obama was a busy port, and isolated toughs who had taken up residence there in the decades after the war. But no major organization had established a successful family in Obama.

At the same time, in such a rural setting, lack of affiliation was the only way to make crime pay, the one *modus operandi* that made his work practicable. Formal family ties meant protection money in the form of dues paid to the parent syndicate. Godfathers in urban and suburban areas, for instance, collected a monthly sum from their men, took one cut for the family coffer and one for themselves, then passed the remainder on to their own godfathers to swell out the parent organization's treasury.

No ties, naturally, meant no dues. And no dues meant no pressure on Murata and his men to take chances trying to create business that wasn't there—which, in Obama, would sooner or later have landed them in jail. Murata, in turn, collected no dues from his men. When a job paid off, he divided the profits among the participating soldiers and, if possible, the rest of the gang.

If lack of affiliation was one major factor in the way Murata ran his family, so was lack of anonymity. Everybody knew everybody else's business in Obama. Word traveled fast. Reputations came easy. You could keep getting away with the same thing in urban areas thanks to an unlimited supply of people who'd never heard of you. In Obama, once, *maybe* twice, and people stopped coming around. The locals had to fear Murata, but at the same time, they had to believe he'd abide by his business commitments. In short, the country forced Murata into some semblance of honesty.

Finally, Obama's size limited his lines of business, too. There were no companies, for instance, large enough to require the services of city yakuza called *sokaiya* hired by major conglomerates to silence dissenters at their annual stockholders' meetings. Primarily, however, Obama ruled out drugs and prostitution, the two mainstays of almost every crime syndicate the world over.

Not that there was much of a market for drugs to begin with. The few regular users chose speed, but the overwhelming majority of the Japanese rank-in-file were scared to death of dope—lumping marijuana, LSD, methamphetamine, heroin and cocaine under the single category of *mayaku*. And that fear, rational or not, made sure the streets stayed clean; anyone dealing such contraband would be swiftly informed on and put away.

The world's oldest profession, on the other hand, was a fact of life, a far more above-board institution than that found in stuffy, prudish America. Sex for sale was not outlawed in Japan until 1957, and then with what amounted to a cosmetic statute to mollify the tongue-clucking West. Tokyo still boasted the highest rate of prostitution per capita of any major metropolitan area in the world into the 1970s, when it was superseded by Bangkok—a change indicative of Japan's improving economic, not legal or moral standards.

There was prostitution in Obama, too, always had been. Not like in the old days, when the town had been a flourishing port of call, but it did exist. Ironically, in the oldest, most picturesque section of the city—*Sanjo Machi*, or “Three Block Town.”

From the late 1860s to the early 1920s, Sanjo Machi was a thriving red light district with fifty geisha houses and over two hundred women for recreational purposes. Many wives didn't see their husbands for days or even weeks once they disappeared into the quarter. Wealthy patrons spent longer sojourns there, some commuting to work from their favorite sporting house.

If any one person was responsible for ushering Sanjo Machi into its Golden Era, it was, ironically enough, none other than Commodore Matthew Perry. As the old feudal government collapsed and the caste system was scrapped, civil turmoil ensued on a nationwide scale, but particularly in Kyoto, where old ways were firmly entrenched. The result was a mass exodus of geisha in search of a place to ply their trade. Many found their way to Obama.

Obamans have never been known for welcoming outsiders, but the male population, at least, was more than up to the task of absorbing the influx of Kyoto refugees into the town's socio-economic fabric. The district swelled as new houses thrived and men greeted the new arrivals with more than open

arms—a heyday that finally succumbed only to the oppressive militarism of the 1920s and, eventually, World War II.

That was then. Today, not just anybody could just walk in off the street, lay their money down and order up saké and sex. Especially the locals. Home boys were bound to talk, and when they did, the other owners would run to the police. It took someone from out of town *and* with the right connections.

The problem was, or so out-of-town, well-connected patrons complained, it wasn't worth the trouble. The geishas were getting old, with fewer and fewer young girls coming in to take their place. These days, not many men wanted what Sanjo Machi had to offer even if they could have it on demand.

The bottom line was, salable sex in Obama was a market waiting—*begging*—to happen. The potential profit margin was immense. Local innkeepers badgered Murata with requests for young girls, assuring him they'd pay any price he named. After all, sex at seaside resorts, like hot springs, was no more than Japanese common sense.

Only it wasn't going to happen. The law made sure of that, if not quite for all the right reasons.

In typical Japanese fashion, the Obama Police Department closed its eyes to goings-on in Sanjo Machi. Prostitution, after all, was not its main line of business. The geisha houses also served as exclusive dining and recreational quarters for *geisha asobi*—shamisen, singing, dancing, drinking and conversation—without the sex.

In short, the district still did turn a profit, and there were vested interests who did not want to see that spoiled. One, the president of the geisha union, also just happened to be second in command of the OPD's Crime Prevention Squad.

It didn't take a sociologist to envision the havoc say, two hundred young, attractive prostitutes would have brought with them to sleepy, horny Obama. For one thing, it would have destroyed Sanjo Machi. Regular customers today, especially the older ones, tolerated the situation for lack of a more attractive alternative. They liked the traditional style of play, even without the traditional main event. But for sex with fresh young girls, tradition would have gone out the window in the time it took to unzip their flies.

Nor would the damage have stopped there. Husbands and, more important, their pay envelopes, would no longer make it home. The power structure would shift, as fortunes found their way into the wrong hands. No doubt about it: sex for sale, once part and parcel of Japanese society and still of the thinking, was today a recipe for disaster.

So it was a fortunate coincidence for everyone involved, himself included, that Murata refused to deal in both drugs and prostitution as a matter of policy. He liked Obama the way it was. He didn't want to see his town turn into a haven for whores and junkies. Not when he headed a baseball team which competed with banks and other hometown companies in the town league. In fact, that was one reason people who knew him said he'd never make it big as a yakuza: he just wasn't cold-blooded enough.

Which was also a fortunate turn of events for all concerned. Because when it came right down to it, in many cases the line between good and evil in Obama was drawn by the hand of convenience. While law-abiding citizens clamored for Murata's arrest when he became a thorn in their side, neither they nor the police hesitated to come to him when they needed a favor.

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The man on the other side of the coffee table looked to be suffering from some nervous disorder. "I . . . I'm sorry to . . . uh, intrude on you like this," he stuttered, gulping as if someone was turning his oxygen supply off and on. "I know you must be very busy. But I need your . . . well . . . your help."

He was a pleasant looking guy, about Murata's age, polite. Said his name was Wakamatsu, taught at Wakasa High School. He looked the part. Anyway, that could be checked easily enough. Say, Boo!, the guy'd shit his pants. Closest he's ever been to organized crime was in a movie theater. Only, what's he doing here? The don't-shoot! eyes. Says he needs help. Probably gave his life savings to some con artist with a smooth scam. Never fails. Fuckers're so greedy, hot to make it big. Beg people to take their money. Then they howl to him for justice.

Murata leaned back on the couch and crossed his legs. "Just what kind of help are you looking for?"

"Well, it's uh . . . it's not an easy story to tell."

"They never are." The guy looked ready to self-destruct. "Cup a coffee?" Murata leveled a finger at one of his soldiers. "Oooi! Cup a coffee for sensei."

Wakamatsu warily scanned the apartment interior as if checking for quick exits, his eyes stopping at Murata's picture on the wall, then slowly returning to the godfather himself reclining on the sofa.

"Cigarette?" Murata asked, tapping one out for himself.

"I don't . . .," he started, then cocked his head at the pack of Mild Sevens, "but yes, I think I will, thank you."

Murata lit Wakamatsu's cigarette, then leaned back into the sofa. "Okay, sensei. Tell me about it."

Wakamatsu cleared his throat. "Well, I have it on good authority that a high school prostitution ring is operating out of Obama." He coughed violently, squinted at the cigarette, but didn't put it out. "I don't know any names, or even what high schools are involved. But the story is, a group of girls made an agreement with a local car gang. The gang procures the customers, and the girls give the gang a cut of the take."

"You heard that much? Where?"

"Here and there."

"And you still don't know who's doing what? Or, who?"

"That's just it. Nobody will name names. Because then their tits are in the wringer." He looked surprised at himself. "Uh, mind if I have another cigarette?"

"Somethin' wrong with the one you got?" Murata nodded to the cigarette still burning in the ashtray.

"Sorry. I . . . guess I'm a little nervous."

"You were saying?"

"Oh, yes," he continued. "In the beginning, the clientele was mostly truck drivers and people from out of the area. But then, business started improving and they expanded. They recruited new girls,

began taking on local clients. The result, let me tell you, was some very embarrassing situations. Men began discovering the young girls they were buying lived three doors down, or that they were the daughters of business acquaintances. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that if we call in the police and the papers get hold of it, we'll be the laughingstock of the whole prefecture." Wakamatsu stopped and looked at Murata. "You're from around here, right?"

Murata nodded.

"You're the only chance we have to save our girls," he said gravely, bowing his head to Murata, "*and* our school's reputation."

Murata had heard talk of a ring. He didn't like to see young girls get caught up in prostitution, especially local girls. He also knew it would be bad publicity for the town if the paper got their hands on the story. But there was more to this visit than this Wakamatsu character was letting on.

"Not to mention your asses."

The teacher's eyes popped open. "Sir?"

Murata slid another cigarette out of his pack and lit it. "I need to know one more thing." He looked hard at the teacher.

The teacher brightened. "Sure, anything!"

"Who sent you here?"

The teacher suddenly looked like he was suffocating. "Well, I thought—"

"Bullshit me, you're outta here. Now who the fuck's idea was this?"

The teacher turned his shoes pigeon-toed on the carpet, hands in his lap, staring down. "The, uh, superintendent suggested I might see you."

He'd thought as much. If the story got out, not only would the papers have a field day, the Board of Education would have the superintendent's ass on a platter. The old fart was more concerned with saving his job than a handful of teenage hookers.

Murata rubbed his hand slowly over his chin. "I'll see what I can do."

The teacher hurried out and Murata sat back down on the couch. He wondered how something like that started. Punk's balling some dumb little crack and decides to make some pocket

change in the bargain? He'd thought about doing it himself when he was young, only he never could. He always felt sorry for the broads.

"Oooi!" Murata called to one of the men waiting in his office. "Check our outside membership register, everybody's under twenty-five and in a car gang."

Three days later, Murata had four names who had admitted to introducing high school girls to customers—for fifty percent of the take. He summoned them to headquarters and, with the four lined up at attention before him, stated flatly that all procuring and prostitution would stop immediately. Murata's word was law with the gangs. The monologue lasted five minutes—all it took to end their careers as pimps.

The girls were a different story.

They came on a weekday afternoon, the majority in their high school uniforms—navy blazers and short pleated skirts. Japanese men melted for the "sailor girl" look, many dressing adult prostitutes up in the navy blue uniforms as their favorite fantasy. Glancing nonchalantly around the room, the girls sat down on the collapsible chairs Murata had brought in for the occasion. He remembered seeing a couple in plain clothes around town.

Murata sat down on the couch facing them. He hadn't thought about what he was going to say. He intended to put them out of business, too, although he didn't plan on using the kind of language he had on the boys. Then he glanced up and found himself staring down a pair of tantalizingly cracked golden brown legs, into a triangle of white panties.

He got to his feet with a cough and walked to the corner of the room. What *was* he going to say to a bunch of high school hookers? Don't fuck, that's not nice? Save it for your husbands? He had slept with girls still in high school, though he couldn't remember paying for it. He *had* paid for it other times. Looking at his audience, he blushed at the thought of talking about sex in front of high school girls.

They followed him with their eyes.

"I called you here today," he began, "because I wanted to . . . uh, . . ." Two more steps.
"Because I . . ."

The girls looked at each other. One covered her mouth to conceal the grin. The audience was slipping away. He had to say something.

"You girls are too young to be doing this kind of thing," Murata blurted. He could feel the heat at the back of his collar. Here he was, the don of Obama, the words bottlenecking in front of high school girls. "How old *are* you, anyway?" he asked, nodding at one of them.

"Fifteen," she replied. She picked up her handbag and reached inside. "All right if I smoke?"

"Sure, go ahead," Murata said, half relieved at the break in the tension. Most of the other girls reached for their cigarettes and lighters. Murata lit one himself.

"You," he asked another. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen," she said.

"She started late," blurted a girl in a halter top. Several others giggled.

Murata glared at the girl. His lecture was turning into a circus. "That has nothing to do with it," he growled. "I said you're too young to be having sex. Especially for money. It's . . . immoral," he faltered, as if he had forgotten the word from disuse. "And what would you do if your parents found out?"

"I guess we could give 'em a percentage." Hands flew to mouths, stifling "f-f-f" sounds.

Murata advanced a step. "Shut the fuck up!"

They all jumped at once, no smiles now. Murata's words seemed to echo off the walls in the silence. So this was what it took.

"Say one more thing, you smart-ass cunt," he thundered, "I'm gonna jack up that fuckin' skirt'n beat your ass till it bleeds!" The words coming easy now. The girls' attention was focused on him, the smokers putting out their cigarettes.

"What about your classmates? They find out, they'll laugh you outta town." The entire group sat as if tied to their chairs. He paused a few more seconds. Let 'em squirm.

"So, you like turning tricks, huh? Like the idea of takin' it in the ass? Gettin' cigarettes put out on your titties? You know how many fuckin' perverts there are out there? How many whores they find

strangled in hotel rooms every week? Young ones, too. Like the idea of going blind or crazy from the clap?"

He stopped again. Some of the girls looked like they were about to cry. Who cared if the part about the clap was bullshit in the day and age of penicillin? Somebody gonna call him on it? Time to wrap it up and get them the fuck out of here.

"Now," he said, taking another step toward them. "I want an end to this crap. Find a boyfriend like the other girls. Think about your parents. Study hard, do good in school. You got your lives ahead of you. You start hookin' again, even cut class, I'm gonna know about it. I catch you, your buns'll be so sore you won't be able to crack your chops for a week. You got that?"

He waited. "Well?"

"Hai," one girl nodded timidly. One after another, the others bobbed their heads.

"All right, now get outta here," he said gruffly, backhanding an imaginary frisbee at the door.

The girls were on their feet, almost tiptoeing to their shoes at the entrance. Each turned to face Murata, bowed politely and murmured, "*Ojama shimashita*³," before leaving.

Silence returned. Murata sat down on the couch, lit another cigarette and stared blankly at the black TV screen. There was a soft knock at the door as one of his men walked in to resume telephone duty. "Everything go all right, Boss?" he asked.

Murata leaned back, spreading both arms out along the back of the couch. "My wife ever has a girl, I'll fuckin' strangle her."

* * *

The detective walked across the gravel parking lot toward the apartment, his heavy black cop shoes making crunching sounds on the coarse stones. The window to the kitchen was open. Could they hear him coming? As he reached the porch, he stepped lightly up onto the bare cement, his eyes resting on the signboard next to the door. Christ, he hated this place, he thought, as he straightened his tie and knocked.

³ "*Ojama shimashita*" Lit. "(I) intruded (on you)." By extension, "*ojama shimashita*" is commonly used to express appreciation to a host when leaving his house or place of business after a visit.

The door cracked slightly. "Boss, it's Matsubara," called the soldier.

Murata was sitting on the couch. His face twisted in contempt. "You again?" he yelled. "Get the fuck outta here! Go give parking tickets!"

The detective walked in, his face apologetic. "Aw c'mon, it's work. You know I gotta do it."

"Well do it somewhere else."

The detective walked in. "Mind if I have a beer?"

Murata couldn't believe the nerve of these fucking flatfoots. For months now, this one had been coming into his office almost every goddamn day, doing nothing but sitting around watching television and drinking beer. When they went out to lunch or coffee, he tagged along and Murata picked up the tab. Murata wasn't sure which side was the good guys and which was the bad guys any more.

Matsubara strolled over to the couch, glass of beer in hand. He was a detective in the Obama Police Department's Organized Crime Task Force specially assigned to Murata-gumi. It was his job to keep an eye on things. He had known Murata since grade school. He was three years younger, had always been afraid of him, though Murata had never touched him. Now, even with the situation the way it was, Murata was all right. He blustered a lot, but he wasn't such a bad guy.

Matsubara sat down.

Murata stood up, slapped his gut. "I'm hungry," he announced, looking at his two men. "Get somethin' t'eat?"

Matsubara got up, too, setting his glass down on the coffee table.

Murata glared at him. "You stay here, answer the phone. You're getting more fuckin' expensive than one a my own."

"I'll pay for my share."

Murata sniggered. "And I'll run for City Councilman."

The arrangement was something both sides had to put up with. If Murata really told the little cop to fuck off, he could make trouble. Besides, there were times when it paid to have, if not a friend, then an ally, in the Obama Police Department.

There were two squads in the OPD's Organized Crime Division. They had the same rank, but handled different cases. (Matsubara's job was to visit Murata's headquarters every day.) Each squad's arrest record was posted on a wall in the division office. If one made a bust, the other had to do the same to avoid looking bad. A little "friendly competition" in the game of Law Enforcement.

The competition wasn't always so friendly. The cops didn't want to get busy, as Matsubara said; they wanted to go at their own pace. Only there was the occasional gung-ho asshole, usually some new detective out to make a name for himself, who had decided it was his job to clean up the streets. Not that OPD veterans couldn't handle their own, of course. If Squad A had one of these hot shots, Squad B had ways to "slow him down."

Which is where Matsubara came in. If Squad A was investigating a crime that pointed toward Murata or one of his men, Matsubara turned informer for the mob. After all, a bust for A meant he and Squad B had to come up with one, too. And being assigned to Murata-gumi and consequently having no time to investigate other crimes, he'd have to arrest one of Murata's men. Which wasn't an easy thing to do when he was having lunch with them—at Murata's expense—every day.

Murata could usually count on Matsubara—if they were under investigation, for what and when the other squad was going to raid. Murata's men walked the streets and Matsubara came to headquarters for lunch every day. The little guy had actually been very helpful. If only he wasn't such a pain in the ass.

* * *

It had been an hour since they returned from lunch, where Murata had once again picked up the tab. Matsubara sat on the couch, sipping his third beer of the afternoon, talking non-stop. Things sure were busy down at headquarters, what with everybody trying to meet their arrest quotas. Like Murata couldn't do any business as long as he kept it up.

"Quotas," sneered Murata. "I went all the way to Hiroshima to find some guy so Yasutani could keep his ass out of a sling." Yasutani, another detective, had come to him the year before looking for an offender with multiple outstanding traffic warrants, saying he needed the guy quick or he'd be in deep shit with his captain.

"Say, how many men you got on active duty now?" Matsubara asked, almost offhand.

"You taking a fuckin' census?"

"No." He laughed a nervous laugh. "I was just wondering how many you could afford to lose without feeling the pinch."

Murata stared at him; something was coming. "Keep talkin," he said.

"You've heard about the new group setting up headquarters over across the river from Mizutobi."

Murata nodded. Nagatani-gumi, affiliated with the Nanryukai syndicate out of Kyoto. Task force, fifteen men. Boss of operations in Obama, Tomihisa Ando. They had begun showing up several months before Murata got back for good, currently operating out of a temporary structure out by the Angel Line. Murata probably knew more about them than the cops. He also knew that, one of these days, he'd have to do something about them.

"Well, we've been getting a lot of complaints."

"You were expecting recommendations for Rotarians?"

"What I mean is, if these boys get settled in, then we're going to find ourselves very busy."

Murata laughed through his nose. "And you don't want *that*, now do you." Shit, he could write the rest of the script; the cops wanted Murata to get the other gang out of their hair, make it easy for them, have him do the dirty work himself. Scumbags.

"I'm just saying that if they get established," Matsubara went on ingratiatingly, "we couldn't go around arresting just them. We'd have to pick up some of your boys, too."

Murata sneered. "What with police justice, fair play and all those other noble principles you guys uphold."

"It would look bad. I'm sure you understand." Matsubara continued, as if Murata was speaking to him as an equal human being. "If things keep going the way they're going, it'll get that way."

"So you want us to get them out a your hair."

"Well, I couldn't *ask* you to do anything illegal. Even suggest it . . ."

"But . . ." Murata let the word hang.

The detective picked up the sentence as if they were playing a parlor game. "We're busy enough as it is down at the station." He thought a minute. "Maybe throwing a few punches can't be avoided, but no extremes. As long as . . ." He cut short, puzzled over how to say it.

Now Murata picked it up. "None of the good *citizens* complain. As long as we don't kill anybody or hurt any townsfolk, you'll look the other way. Right?" As long as the cops didn't have to get involved. Obamans, cops included, didn't like strangers. Even when it came to criminals, they preferred their own. This guy was ripe. "A few punches." He'd have to remember that for the men.

The detective's face looked relieved as he reached for his glass of beer. "I knew you'd understand."

* * *

Two headlight beams ricocheted off trees as the white Toyota Crown bumped up the dirt road, coming to rest on the front of a two-story temporary structure with light green metal paneling. Strands of half-inch cable crossed in the middle like Xs in a tic-tac-toe board, anchored at the base of the corrugated aluminum roof. The headlights went out and the building disappeared into the darkness.

Three car doors slammed, the same number of figures stepping out into the night. They waddled like penguins to the edge of the clearing, hands occupied with zippers. Leaves rustled as streams of urine hit the ground, steaming arcs against the silhouettes in the moonlight. The relieved trio adjusted themselves and stumbled inside. A light went on, then, minutes later, out again.

That was the last of them by Murata's count. He and fifteen men were hidden in the trees around the gang's temporary headquarters. Several hundred yards down the road was a permanent structure, not far from completion.

Twenty minutes later, Murata raised the walkie-talkie to his mouth. "Okay, go," he whispered.

Soon he could make out the crackling of small branches as two cars crept toward the front door. When they were within twenty feet of it, he pressed the button on his pen light, once. They stopped, the panels of racing headlights still dark. This time Murata flicked the pen light twice.

The lines of headlights flashed on, flooding the door.

Murata squinted into the reflection. The gumballs on top whirred, spewing red over the hut and trees. Sirens filled the night with a wailing *pee-poh-pee-poh*.

Murata now held up a loudspeaker. "This is the Obama Police Department. You're under arrest. Come out single file, hands in the air." His words echoed through the forest. Maybe it hadn't been for nothing—the raids, the busts. Never knew when shit like that was gonna come in handy. He might not make a bad detective himself.

His men crouched beside the building, baseball bats in hand.

"Everybody not out in thirty seconds, we're gonna bust it down!"

The door opened. The first man appeared, shielding his eyes from the blinding lights. More followed. Four. Five.

Murata continued firing directions. Keep 'em confused. "Walk slowly out the door. In a line. You! Keep your fuckin' hands over your head!"

The first one out the door was still squinting through his hands. "Hey, that ain't the cops!" he yelled. There was a sharp, tinny crack as a metal bat came down on his head.

Murata's men swarmed from both sides of the building. Some went after the men breaking rank in the clearing. Others poured in the front door. From inside came shouts, sounds of breaking glass. Then, a gunshot.

Murata pulled his pistol and ran to the side of the door, gun shoulder high, barrel straight up. He couldn't hear anything now. "Turn those goddamn lights off!" he shouted. If he ran in now, he'd be easy target practice in the headlights.

The night went black, quiet again.

"Everybody all right in there?" he yelled.

"Fine," came a voice. A back emerged from the door, one of his soldiers dragging a limp body by the feet.

"You shoot him?" Murata asked apprehensively.

"Nah, clubbed 'im. Fuckin' gun went off when it hit the floor."

Minutes later, unconscious forms lay in contorted poses in the headlights. Murata's men dragged them into a van, then drove to a beach near Takahama. There they dragged them out again, dumped them and left. The next day they bulldozed headquarters to the ground.

* * *

Matsubara leaned back on the couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table. "Ever find out what happened to them?" he said, then looked toward the refrigerator. "Say, mind if I have a beer?"

Murata lit a cigarette and stared at the detective. If Matsubara were one of his soldiers, he'd kick some manners into him. "Naw, but they ain't where we left 'em. I don't let my men go out alone. We'll keep a close watch for a month. If they come with reinforcements, it's your turn to keep Obama clean, enforce the law. You don't want a bloodbath, right?"

Matsubara nodded. He'd be only too obliged to pick up some easy arrests along the way. One of Murata's men set a tray with five glasses of beer on the table in front of them. Matsubara picked up a glass. "Kanpai!"

Murata extended his glass until the two clinked. Everyone had what they wanted: the citizens a return to the status quo, Murata complete supremacy in his territory, the cops no new headaches. If Obama still had its share of criminal activities, at least it was free of *outsiders*.

* * *

"Here you are, Mr. Maruyama," squeaked the office manager, bowing from his seat as he slid the passbook across the desk. "Thank you for doing business with us."

Murata silently slid the old and new passbooks off the desk and into his pocket. He slept better these days thanks to Obama Savings and Loan. He could keep up to twenty-five thousand dollars in a high-yield fixed-term account without being taxed, all at four and a half percent until maturity in five years. Now he didn't have to hold the cash in the safe at headquarters and risk getting ripped off.

The teller reached under the counter and pulled out a five-box pack of Kleenex tissues. This week he was Mr. Maruyama, last week Mr. Nishioka. He had so many passbooks and name stamps in the safe at headquarters, he had a hard time keeping them straight.

“No, you idiot,” barked the bank president, standing by the desk, “the leather schedule planner.” He turned to Murata with an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry, Mr. uh . . . Maruyama. Please accept this as a token of our appreciation. If there’s anything else we can do for you, please don’t hesitate to let us know.”

The president ushered Murata to the door, bowing as he opened it. “Always a pleasure to do business with you. Come back and see us again soon.” He looked around, then leaned close to Murata. “Any tips on this Sunday’s double?”

“Might have something in a couple of days,” Murata whispered back. The bank president was one of his regular customers. That and a valuable source of tips on which companies in the area were in financial trouble. Let ‘em hit the double every now and then and they’d drop a dime on their mothers.

Murata stepped outside and patted the passbooks in his coat pocket. He was filling them up at the rate of one a week, close to \$600,000 in six months. He was one of the bank’s most honored customers, the president rushing to greet him personally every time he walked in the door. Work was pouring in from out of the area, and his local gambling operations were flourishing. At this rate, he’d be able to begin construction on a new headquarters within the year. Maybe he’d been wrong about Obama.

* * *

Kondo threw the covers aside and squinted at the clock on the table. “What the fuck?” It was 5:00 a.m. The knock came again, like someone was trying to break the door down.

“All right, all right,” he yelled, as he stumbled toward the racket. “Who the hell is it?”

“Tsuruga Police,” came the reply, cold and clerical.

Kondo cracked the door. “What the hell do you guys—”

Two suits and two uniforms pushed past him into the room. “You’re under arrest for suspicion of breaking and entering, and theft,” announced the older plainclothes dick, flashing an arrest warrant. Kondo looked up as he heard footsteps clanging up the flimsy metal steps outside. Two more officers with masks and blow torches appeared in the doorway.

The chief detective clamped a pair of handcuffs on Kondo, then turned to one of the uniformed patrolman. “Take this one out to the car,” grabbing Kondo’s elbow and pushing him toward

the door. As they stepped into the morning air, Kondo spotted three plainclothesmen coming down with Murata and five others, also in handcuffs.

The chief detective nodded toward the safe. "Open it."

* * *

The chief detective's eyes popped open. He tucked the ledger under his arm and headed for his captain's desk. "Sir, I think you'd better take a look at this."

The captain opened the cover. His eyebrows were suddenly in the middle of his forehead, the corners of his mouth turned down. He pounded the desk with his fist. "Sonofabitch!"

* * *

The building was just another faceless, dirty beige rectangular solid in the procession of nondescript monoliths from Route 27 to Obama Station and the center of town. Stacks of futons sat unceremoniously piled against the dirty third-floor windows. There was nothing to distinguish the structure except for large gray busses with screens over the windows in the parking lot and the banner hung across the second story which read, "With your help, let's stamp out violence groups." That and the large white letters over the entrance: "Obama Police Station."

Murata sat in the hallway of the second floor, in front of a door marked "Chief of Police." In his jacket pocket was a summons ordering him to appear in front of a preliminary hearing to answer questions in connection with gambling and other illegal activities. His lawyer was working on grounds for illegal search and seizure to invalidate the ledger's admission as evidence in any subsequent court proceedings.

It had been the Tsuruga cops who had made the raid, but they had brought Murata and his men to the Obama Police Department for booking and questioning. There had to be a procedure violation there somewhere. Murata had received a request from a Tsuruga client to recover losses he had incurred loaning money to a local bar owner. The bar went bankrupt, and the owner refused to return a cent. Murata and his men had broken into the bar, stripped it of equipment, interior furnishings and other movable objects, and sold them.

Only the Tsuruga cops couldn't prove shit. There were no witnesses to the actual break-in, nothing to tie them to the scene of the crime. It was the cops' word against theirs. The funny thing was, the cops should know that. There was no way they could make the charges stick. So what the fuck was the bust all about unless out-and-out police harassment?

And where was Matsubara? He hadn't been around since several days before the raid. They were picking up his men for anything these days. What good was the little fuck if the cops kept busting them every time they turned around? He'd slam the little shit in the door if he had the balls to show his face again.

Murata took out a pocket knife and began cleaning his nails. What the hell were the cops up to? He was still trying to figure out possible angles when he heard loud voices down the hall. Seconds later a figure, a gray blur, rushed past him and into the office. He saw the man from the back, leaning forward onto the desk with both fists. "That fuckin' thing looked like a Who's Who of City Hall! You put that bunch out of business," he screamed, "or you'll be out pounding a beat!"

"Now just hold on a minute, Mayor—"

So *that* was it. They'd staged the bust to get the ledger. Sawamura, the *Obama* Police Chief, had engineered the incident. From the looks of things, the mayor had been caught just flatfooted as everyone else. Besides, Murata was on not uncordial terms with the mayor; he'd drunk with the old man on several occasions around town. He'd heard from his sources in City Hall about the shit that hit the fan.

"Hold on my ass!" the mayor cut him off. "That lot of thugs has had this town by the balls ever since he came back, but this time he's gone too far!" He paused to catch his breath. "You lose anybody?"

The Chief stared past him, through the open door, at Murata looking back at him from the hall. Three City Hall employees, including a division supervisor, had already lost their jobs. Five others had been demoted or transferred out.

"You guys really on the same side?" smirked Murata from his ringside seat.

The mayor whirled around. He'd been too enraged to recognize his mother when he ran in. He thrust an unsteady finger at Murata. "You!" he bellowed. "You're dead meat!" Then he stormed out.

*

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Kondo slipped his hand over the mouthpiece of the receiver. "Boss," he called. "It's Sawamura."

Murata leaned over from the couch and took the receiver. The sonofabitch. It had cost him plenty to get himself and his men out on bail—only after Sawamura had dicked around all day with interrogation, just trying to keep them off the streets. "Yeah?"

"Murata-san? This is Police Chief Sawamura. Some weather we've been having recently. And how's business? Are you busy these days? Don't see as many of your men around the streets."

Murata sighed impatiently into the mouthpiece. "There a point to all this?"

"Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, there is. I was just getting around to that. There's a small matter I'd like to—"

"Talk."

"No, I mean in private. It's too delicate to discuss over the telephone. I was wondering if you'd mind dropping by the station tomorrow, say about three?"

Murata hung up the phone. The sonofabitch was up to something. Who or what were they after this time?

He was still trying to second-guess Sawamura the next day as he strode into the Chief's office. Sawamura sat behind his desk, his hands folded on top.

Murata sat down and lit a cigarette. "So whaddya want?" He glanced at the Squad A and B rosters, then quickly glanced again. Matsubara's name was gone.

"Well, I've got some good news and some bad news," said Sawamura with the smugness of a spider to a fly. "Which would you like first?"

Murata made a pained expression and shifted positions in his chair. "I got things to do. Cut the crap."

"All right, I'll give you the good news first," he said, pausing for effect. "The charges against you in the Tsuruga affair have been dropped."

Murata stared at him without a word.

"Now, for the bad news," Sawamura said as he picked up a brown envelop, then grinning, slapped it back down on the desk. "Joyride's over, Taaki."

"The hell you talkin' about?"

"You're under arrest."

* * *

This was the incident I heard about on the train to Katayamazu. Murata's Cadillac, which he had received from Shibata in lieu of payment for a job, was damaged beyond repair by a grudge-carrying Obaman on a drunken binge. The man had been pushed around by some of Murata's men at a bar, and one night took a sledge hammer to the Fleetwood. Murata's soldiers had caught him hanging around headquarters once too often soon after the incident and, acting on their own accord, dragged him inside. They were beating him when Murata walked in, called a halt to the violence and ordered them to take the man to the hospital.

On the stand, the prosecutor asked Murata if finding his car bashed beyond recognition had made him angry. He answered, "Yes." It was enough for Japanese "due process" to convict him. Because, as the judge emphasized in his closing statement, "Everyone knows that yakuza speak with their eyes."

On July 2, 1978, Murata was sentenced to eighteen months in prison.

* * *

Six days later, I was riding my bicycle through town about 11:30 p.m. when two yakuza on a 50cc motor scooter rode past me out of a side street, then turned around and circled back.

"Hot, ain't it," the tall one said.

I looked at him. "Yeah, dark, too."